

# Cooperative Accountability

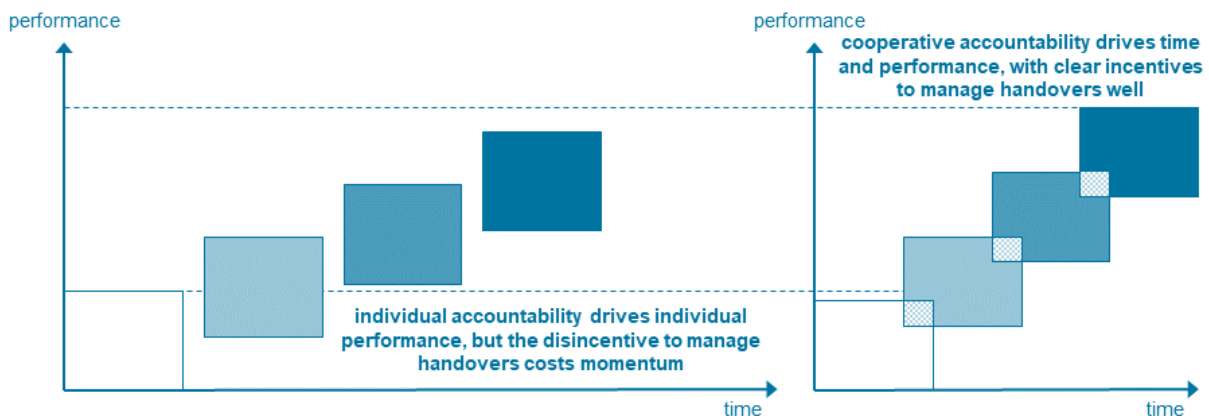
Accountability frameworks in publicly funded organisations tend to emphasise individual roles, reinforced by formal delegations and performance management. Most work that creates significant public value, however, is done by many individuals passing a baton of shared accountability. Reinforcing individual achievement can, perversely, encourage people to prioritise simple individual metrics over collective performance and fumble the handovers.

Most people are motivated to demonstrate the value of their work, and most publicly funded organisations measure that value based on individual contributions. Most management tools focus on individual work, breaking complex work and lengthy processes into individual capabilities and tasks. Delegation manuals tend to give authority to individuals, and performance management emphasises individual accountability.

Collective or fuzzy responsibilities, such as smooth handover processes and respectful relationships, can be harder to measure at an individual level and are therefore less likely to be managed systematically. These shared responsibilities, however, are powerful drivers of productivity that feature in many of the statements organisations use to describe themselves.

Few activities that generate profound public value are small enough to be delivered by just one person, which means that handovers are part of almost everyone's work. Handovers take effort from all parties, and bad handovers reduce productivity. If the person receiving a handover is not briefed well, it takes longer to get up to speed. If prior work needs to be revisited, that takes more effort without improving results.

But the work to ensure a smooth handover is rarely recognised or celebrated. The focus of each individual is on 'their bit', rather than the end-to-end process, and they are incentivised to maximise performance where it will be assessed – individually. This means everyone can deliver their individual accountabilities flawlessly, while the work takes two steps forward and one step back at each handover.



Individual efforts are important, but are most efficient when they are integrated into a coherent whole. Most organisations that recognise and reward the time and effort that individuals contribute to supporting the work of others, as well as their individual accountabilities, will get more done, more quickly than organisations where people compete as individuals.

This means thinking about transitions as well as actions when planning, delivering, and reviewing performance. Managing performance should highlight contributions to shared goals and support shared accountability for shared responsibilities. Individuals who see their contributions to shared results being recognised and appreciated will invest more energy in organisational success, rather than individual success.

Creating public value is a team sport. We achieve more when the team is collectively accountable for success, not just individually accountable for doing 'their bit'. Leaders should acknowledge and manage shared accountabilities for fuzzy but critical domains like information sharing, collaboration, and handovers.

Organisations need systems and processes to manage the work, including collective responsibilities, not just to manage individual people. Teams that incentivise interpersonal, cooperative performance can make critical paths shorter and transitions smoother so that they reach shared goals faster. The work moves faster when the team takes responsibility for getting every contributor up to speed before they take the baton, than if everyone runs their own race.