

Responsibility in Business: A Simple Definition

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Philosophers have killed many trees trying to enlighten society about responsibility. If the management of Enron Corporation and WorldCom, Inc. are indicative, then most of those trees died in vain. Perhaps philosophers' obtuse treatises have muddled people's grasp of responsibility. Instead, a workaday definition of responsibility, as it pertains to business, may reduce the likelihood of future business scandals. Hence, this humble attempt to define responsibility in simple terms.

Consistent with a business context, responsibility may be defined in several ways.

- *As the act or course of action that is demanded of one's position (i.e., line of duty; proper sphere or extent of activities), custom, law, philosophy, or religion.* Under this definition, asking people to act responsibly means "demanding that they fulfill obligations, obey the law, and otherwise be good people" (Moran 1996, p.65).
- *As the obligation to perform one's job.* When delegated, this obligation is successively divided and transferred to others. However, the delegating party retains ultimate responsibility.
- *As the social force that binds people to their obligations and courses of action demanded by that force.* Binding social forces mean that responsibility is tied to others' expectations. "The connection to expectations...[means] that the stance of holding people responsible involves a commitment to moral justifications, which support the obligations we expect people to comply with" (Wallace 1994, p.12).
- *As accountability for one's actions and their consequences, for which a moral agent could be justly punished (blamed) or rewarded (praised); the obligation to answer for an act and to repair any injury caused by that act.* Moral agents are liable for their actions because *obligations arise from considerations of right and wrong.*

All these definitions consider the notion of obligations to others. The first definition indicates acceptable creeds for assigning blame or praise. People assessing other people's blame/praiseworthiness is acceptable because such efforts permit the creation of moral sanctions, which "are not meant to deter only the agent at fault from future wrongdoing, but to serve as an example that will deter other agents as well" (Wallace 1994, p.56-7). Jointly, these definitions

imply that responsible people (1) take their duties seriously, think about them, and make serious efforts to fulfill them; (2) conform to expectations linked with their position; (3) worry about and do what ought to be done; (4) evaluate and weigh consequences properly, especially the benefits and harms to others; and (5) formulate and act on their own rationally made judgments (Haydon 1978).

Words that dictionaries and similar sources relate to responsibility could be grouped as follows:

- (1) burden, charge, commitment, constraint, contract, duty, encumbrance, engagement, imperative, incubus, incumbency, liability, must, obligation, onus, and pledge;
- (2) authority, capableness, capacity, and power;
- (3) accountability, answerability, blame, culpability, fault, and guilt; and
- (4) conscientiousness, dependability, faithfulness, firmness, loyalty, maturity, rationality, reliability, restraint, sensibleness, soberness, stability, steadfastness, trust, and uprightness.

As sequenced, these four groupings suggest that people are responsible when they (1) incurred an obligation, which may have been difficult or inconvenient to fulfill, (2) had the ability to alter an outcome related to that obligation, and (3) are accountable for that outcome and could be judged blameworthy by reasonable others. Furthermore, people who are judged responsible are thought to have positive character traits associated with maturity, reliability, and trustworthiness.

People modify their judgments about other people's blame/praiseworthiness based on mitigating circumstances (Moran 1996). Ignorance is often an acceptable excuse (Weiner 1995). In contrast, forgetfulness, negligence (i.e., doing something a prudent agent could not do, or not doing something a prudent agent would do, under a set of circumstances), and following standard practices in a given society (i.e., *everyone else was doing it*) are unacceptable excuses (Schlossberger 1992).

Responsibility assumes freedom of choice (Wallace 1994). If people's behaviors are pre-determined by their essences, histories, and current circumstances, then holding people responsible for their actions is unfair. Similarly, coercion and duress prohibit assignment of responsibility because agents precluded from alternative actions by constraints and/or molding forces are non-responsible. Responsibility requires thoughtful, adult reflection; thus, small children can be non-responsible but not irresponsible (Wallace 1994; Moran 1996). Also, responsibility differs meaningfully from mere causal connectedness; an example of the latter is *above average rainfall this year is responsible for the current lushness of my lawn*.

Thus, the previous exposition suggests that a simple, business-consistent definition of responsibility could be *the uncoerced obligation and accountability to do right by society*. Perhaps managers armed with this simple definition will find it easier to be responsible.

References

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Moran, Gabriel (1996). *A Grammar of Responsibility*. New York, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company.

Schlossberger, Eugene (1992), *Moral Responsibility and Persons*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Wallace, R. Jay (1994), *Responsibility and the Moral Sentiments*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

In addition to the works listed above, this article was informed by the following online sources:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Responsibility>

http://encarta.msn.com/dictionary_/responsibility.html

<http://thesaurus.reference.com/search?q=responsibility&x=0&y=0>

<http://webster-dictionary.net/definition/responsibility>

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