

Don't Mistake Shadow for Substance:

Real-life responsibility *

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Abstract

Previous management-control studies have regarded responsibility accounting as the assigned formal authorities of individuals underpinned by other organisational structures. The financial success of, for example, projects, is evaluated through various business ratios extracted from accounting figures. Also, performance feedback to individual managers who are held responsible is crucial to this view. However, what being responsible means is not clarified. This paper reports on a yearlong study of project management at Ericsson Microwave Systems AB in Sweden. The study is of an ethnographical character and is based on a series of interviews with members of a project team and on observations of their meetings. Within the paper the following question is addressed: *How is responsibility constructed within companies, and what is the role of accounting information in this regard?* The purpose of the study is to enhance the understanding of what types of responsibility constructs organisational members develop, and the role of accounting figures in this respect. A distinction is made between correlated and superimposed control in order to clarify the decisive difference between formal authority and responsibility. The findings indicate greater complexity than mainstream research attributes to accounting and its link to responsibility. By means of a number of illustrations, we show how constructs of responsibility reflect a tension between expectations of (1) what one wants to do versus what one ought to do, (2) responsibility versus formal assigned authority, and finally (3) co-ordination of one's own needs with the needs of others versus securing one's self-interest. Contrary to mainstream ideas, in our case accounting figures played a secondary role in project management. However, accounting is an important point of reference for peoples' actions and for their responsibility. Our conclusions are not in line with previous claims about legitimating and dominating being the most significant aspects of accountability situations. Instead, we add the trust-creation aspect to the sense-making aspect.

Key words: *accounting figures, responsibility, norms, trust, trust carrier*

Setting the Scene I – the Ericsson Microwave Systems AB

Ericsson Microwave Systems AB is located in Mölndal, a few miles from Göteborg. It is a fully owned subsidiary of Ericsson AB, and employs about 2,000 workers. The company is a world leading supplier of radar sensors and information networks primarily acting on the defence market. The study was carried out at a product unit employing about 230 persons and covers one project team involving 11 persons.

Ericsson Microwave Systems AB has for some years used a common model for “project management in a multi-project organisation” (PROPS) in all companies in the Ericsson group. The model is based on two important concepts: commitment and responsibility. Commitment means taking on personal responsibility for an assignment. Responsibility includes accepting the assignment, carrying it through, and delivering an outcome, as well as making sure that the receiver has accepted the outcome.

Each project manager (the customer orders are processed in the project organisation) puts together a master budget and signs an internal contract with the concerned line organisations. Within the line organisation, a sub-project manager is appointed, who is responsible for each line’s commitment – i.e., allocation of resources to the project (such as adequate manpower, locations and material) – within the framework of the line’s cost budget. To achieve the profitability that the order was initially estimated to generate, it is essential to keep costs within the original budget limits. In circumstances where there is a risk of late deliveries and cost overruns, negotiations with the customer are initiated regarding the requirements agreed upon.

The project studied is above average in profitability and the accomplishment of the study was assisted by a question asked by management, i.e. whether the good profitability could be explained by project conditions that were less complicated than usual, project management, or a combination of both. Initial contact with the company was established in fall 2001, and since January 2002 the authors have spent on average two days a week at the product unit. The study has been inspired by an ethnographic research approach. Data has been collected at three main levels: observation of project meetings, interviews with project members, and informal talks with organisational members. The collection of data has been carried out in three different ways: by observing meetings, interviews¹, and sociograms². The main aim of meeting observation was to get to know the project members and to become familiar with the project itself. By observing the communication at meetings – 42 in total – where the project was discussed, we can describe how actions were explained, and the role of accounting information in this regard. Meeting observations were recorded in diaries, with a focus on the participants asked to produce accounts, the requests, and the responses to these requests. Meeting observations were complemented by three series of interviews, and in all, 41 interviews were held with top, project, and sub-project management.

In the first series of interviews we tried to gain an understanding of matters such as project organisation, the background of project members, and project characteristics. The

¹ See Appendix 1.

² See Appendix 2.

second interview series aimed at capturing the responsibility constructs within the project team. Before these interviews, an e-mail setting forth nine responsibility constructs was sent to the interviewees, asking them to look through the constructs before the interview. The responsibility constructs were produced using quotations from the first series of interviews, and theoretically imprinting them on two dimensions, one referring to the centre of responsibility (utility, duty, or virtue) and the other to the type of task performed (professional, administrative, or social). The third and last interview series was conducted in order to depict trust relationships within the group by drawing a sociogram, and included questions about performance evaluation. The sociograms illustrate the trust each member of the team has for the other members. To ask the interviewee to reveal such delicate information requires great trust in the researcher. Since trust building takes time, both the time span of this study and the demonstration of how material from the previous two series of interviews was used were important in making interviewees comfortable with drawing the sociograms.

Altogether the project team involves 11 people³: a project manager, responsible for external contacts, including with customers; a deputy project manager, responsible for internal project management; one person working with quality and configuration management; six sub-project managers; and two other project members. Five members of the group are under 35 years old, three are between 35 and 50, and three are over 50. Five group members are female. Almost all were educated at universities of technology. Five project members were new to the roles they had in the project.

Setting the Scene II – the research context

Accounting information has been shown to be, despite its limitations, the most practical system for recording, classifying, and summarising a myriad of business activities. For this reason, accounting information is assumed to be critical to organisational success. The importance and value of accounting systems has, however, been questioned, and the many recent financial scandals have accentuated the ethical aspects of accounting. Part of the criticism is based on observations of narrow-minded ideas of individual responsibility in society (Shearer, 2002).

Within the accounting literature, responsibility has mainly been assumed to be a prerequisite for the success of various management control devices. Responsibility as in the case of “responsibility accounting” is looked upon as a formal authority of individuals underpinned by various organisational structures, for instance accounting (Anthony, 1965). Financial success and efficiency is evaluated through various business ratios that are extracted from accounting figures. Also, performance feedback to the individual managers who are held responsible is crucial to this view. However, what being responsible means is, strangely enough, hardly ever explicitly discussed or clarified; instead its meaning is taken for granted (Johansson, 1998, Olson et al., 2001).

To understand how accounting systems affect responsible action, merely understanding the technical characteristics and formal rules of accounting systems is insufficient. What is needed is instead an understanding of the processes of accountability, where claims and

³ Besides the project team, we have interviewed the top management at the product unit (two people).

giving reasons for actions are the most important social function of accounting. To demonstrate responsibility, one must be able to produce accounts that make sense (Czarniawska, 1996). The concept has been a focus of research in recent decades, which has resulted in the identification of various types of accountability – however without demonstrating accountability in action, that is, the responsibility that emerges while giving accounts.

Another crucial aspect of accountability that is considered in the literature is its effect on people's relationships and individual identities. A relationship is established when parties agree to be accountable to each other. A relationship can be prolonged, which implies that expectations and demands have been made explicit, accepted, and proven to be realised. A relationship assumes commitment toward the relationship as such, as well as commitment toward the other party (Giddens, 1991). Accountability can both emerge through voluntary acceptance and can also be enforced, morally and/or legally. Voluntary acceptance is based on a symmetry of expectations and demands between parties. Both responsibility and accountability in business relations is characterised by strong enforcement and explicit sanctions if not accomplished.

Communication between parties that are engaged in a relationship can contribute to the establishment of their individual identities or can tear it down, depending on whether the confirmation of the self-image is positive or negative. A risk of negative confirmation is always involved in communication. This uncertainty can be met by either trying to dominate the other party, thereby avoiding honest reactions, or by avoiding any kind of action. Both ways are self-defeating and lead to distorted self images. The solution can be found in trust. To establish an identity, i.e., a socially confirmed self image, there is a need both to trust the environment and be trusted by the environment (Jönsson, 1996).

Encouragement of personal involvement in work implies a greater propensity to take action and fulfil commitments, even in sensitive or risky situations. Consequences of action in a relationship are characterised by interdependence. When commitment is accomplished, trust increases; this in turn infuses a feeling of security and inclusion within the organisation with regard to the expression of creativity, diversity, and communion (Johansson & Baldvinsdottir, 2003). However, further research is needed into this cyclical process of engagement, interdependency, trust, and openness in general and into the role of accounting figures in such processes. This paper focuses on how accounting figures can be used to foster responsibility, and how this may in turn affect the use of accounting figures. By reason of this, our purpose is to complement the claims made by Ahrens and Chapman (2002). They observed that formal systems, such as accounting systems, shaped and were shaped by accounts of what were issues of significance, what kinds of behaviours were legitimate, and, in the case of disagreements between members of the operational hierarchy, who came to dominate whom. Performance measures were taken seriously but the ways in which this happened depended on the situation. However, we believe that they miss the point somewhat, since they do not recognise the most important role of accounting, i.e., the role of trust creation and “who came to trust whom?” Throughout this paper, we will claim that accounting figures are used in accordance with responsibility constructs within the organisation in order to create trust.

Points of departure

Ethical issues everlastingly fascinate humanity, presumably because they touch upon the human condition, the human environment, human relationships, and individuals' relationships to themselves. Ethical issues seem different today because the implications of new technology have more and farther-reaching consequences than before (Jonas, 1991). Today, human life is strongly influenced by institutions, which makes it especially important to study the ethical issues people face in their professional work and their boundaries for responsible action. Following we will introduce the central concepts of our discussion. These focus on the connection between the objectives and the type of work done in professional fields.

Responsibility

We used two dimensions in attempting to capture “constructs of responsibility”: the centre and direction of responsibility. Our intent was to allow diversity to be reflected while not omitting the possibility of comparing different conceptions of responsibility. We were encouraged to do so by reading Hällsten (2001), who presents an overview of classic works on ethics that serves our research purpose.

The first dimension identifies utility, duty, and virtue as possible centres for responsibility. By placing utility at the centre, the value of actions is determined by their positive results/consequences. This focus is taken within micro-economics, for example, where consequences are measured in terms of money and product preferences are assumed to be dependent on prices. Rather different is the ethics of duty. In this case actions are judged by their correspondence with obligations, commandments, or rules that can be referred to. The ethics of virtue emphasise the disposition of acting according to what is demanded in a specific situation. The capacity to act appropriately demonstrates the character of a person. A wise person is capable of performing the right action at the right place at the right moment.

By introducing the second dimension – direction of responsibility – we wanted to differentiate between working tasks. This was done in order to enable all project members to choose the responsibility constructs that best described their specific working situation. The categories of tasks chosen were professional, administrative, and social. By professional we mean tasks that correspond with education and professional experience; administrative tasks are routines performed to support professional tasks, and social tasks were performed to support togetherness and help create a good working environment. Combining the two dimensions, which contain three categories each, produced a matrix with nine responsibility constructs (see Figure 1).

	Utility	Duty	Virtue
Professional	No. 1 I use my competence to achieve solutions with a focus on the customer's utility.	No. 6 I have X education and use my competence to achieve the company's goal – that is my duty.	No. 5 I appreciate it when I can use my own acquired practical professional competence.
Administrative	No. 9 I create effective solutions for the customer – something that implies good planning.	No. 8 I perform my tasks in accordance with job descriptions and internal contracts.	No. 2 I am satisfied when I can use my own experience to solve administrative problems.
Social	No. 7 I always do my bit in situations where it is demanded that everyone make an extra effort for the customer.	No. 4 I always co-operate, even in conflict situations – it is expected of me.	No. 3 I support other people within the company by communicating instructive experiences.

Figure 1. Matrix of responsibility constructs. (The constructions were mixed when presented to the informants and the dimensions were excluded).

Accountability and Trust

Accountability has long been considered as referring to the requirement or duty to account for or justify one's actions to whomever one is answerable to (e.g., Roberts and Scapens, 1985). This definition is rooted in economic agency theory, which asserts that agents are prone to opportunism if they are unchecked by regulation or other social controls (Swift, 2001; Hosmer, 1995). Trust is time and again mentioned as a remedy to opportunistic behaviour (e.g., Ring and Van de Ven, 1994), and strong accountability claims are inevitable in relationships characterised by little or no trust (Gray et al., 1997). Apparently, trust (or distrust) is essential to the debate, but the concept is only hastily mentioned in the accountability literature (Swift, 2001). At its core, traditional accountability research ignores the possibility of relationships based on trust. Instead, it is presupposed that agents (subordinates) cannot be trusted to act in the best interest of the principal (managers/owners) in possible states of conflict. To overcome this, formal agreements and structural controls have become substitutes for trust in many situations (Swift, 2001).

Even though differences between various perspectives of trust exist, all perspectives agree on predictability; that is, if we are certain with regards to others' behaviour, we will trust them. However, perspectives vary as to how goodwill is emphasised. Some ignore the goodwill aspect and look only upon predictability (e.g., Zucker, 1986). Others combine predictability with goodwill, i.e., some kind of shared interplay between common goals, values, understanding, and the willingness to forgo opportunistic behaviour (e.g., Mayer et al., 1995; Hosmer, 1995). Swift (2001) makes a valuable contribution when she links the concept of trust to the concept of accountability. She questions the traditional adjacency pair, distrust/trust, and stresses the importance of

distinguishing between distrust and lack of distrust⁴ on the one hand, and lack of trust and trust⁵ on the other. She links the former adjacency pair (distrust/lack of distrust) to the traditional accountability concept, which she calls “true accountability”, and the latter pair (lack of trust/trust) to a widened definition of accountability, which she calls “soft accountability”. She means that true accountability is only a stand-in for trust, is based upon the duty of the agent to account to the principal, and is characterised by the range of suspicion that exists in the relationship. Soft accountability, on the other hand, is based on interdependent relationships between the parties involved in the relationship, and is characterised by the range of vulnerability to which the parties are willing to expose themselves. Soft accountability is essentially based on discretionary or voluntary disclosure, in contrast to true accountability, which is mainly based on formal or legal rights to information.

Constructs of responsibility – the project members’ view

The paper continues by examining the dominant responsibility constructs found within the project team. The aim is to show in more detail how project members describe responsibility and norms or responsibility.

The dominant construct within the group

The most frequently chosen statement within the group is, “I use my competence to achieve solutions with a focus on the customer’s utility.” This statement characterises the professional/utility view, and is represented by repeated references to problem solving on behalf of the customer, to keeping product improvements in line with what the customer actually requires, to making sure time is not spent on unnecessary matters, and to ensuring that technicians are not tempted to make improvements not required by the customer.

There is no inherent value in the work we are doing. The value arises first when someone uses our products. This is the reason why the customer always has to come first. I think this is what we all see, in a way, within the organisation: that the focus lies in the customer’s utility. [...] As a technician, one can be tempted to make product improvements along the way. However, the customer does not always require all the improvements – they have to fulfil a need. The customer’s approval of what he gets from us, that’s what is most important for us.

This quotation captures the essence of the dominant construct within the group, and professional and utility considerations seem to direct the conceptions of responsibility. However, the focus on customer satisfaction should not be interpreted as implying that there are no financial limits. Quite the reverse: it is essential for the success of the project that customer satisfaction be in parity with what is paid for – neither more nor less.

⁴ Distrust = assumption that the agent will pursue self-interest with guile.
Lack of distrust = reliance on the predictability of the agent’s behaviour.

⁵ Lack of trust = ignorance as to whether the other is trustworthy or not.
Trust = confidence in the goodwill of the other’s intent and behaviour.

Making money

When we split the group into “management” and “others” it became apparent that management also focuses strongly on the statement, “I have X education and use my competence to achieve the company’s goal – that is my duty.” This statement represents the professional/duty view and can be illustrated by following quotation:

[...] strictly speaking, this isn’t a question of just education, but of education and experience. Obviously, I use both in achieving company goals. The harsh reality is that the company goal is only financial, especially now. But in a way, this is always number one: that what we do be profitable enough, although one has to look upon it from both a more distant and a closer perspective.

Within the management group it is significant how good financial performance is emphasised as a part of each person’s responsibility. It is also clear that achieving the financial goal of the company is the most important goal for them, and that this is regarded as obvious. Management also expressed the hope that other members of the organisation regard their responsibility in a similar way, since every company’s survival is dependent on acceptable long-term profitability.

Learning by doing

When we look at the “others”, it is evident that the focal point has shifted compared to that of the management. Although statement No. 1 is still significant, it is statement No. 5, “I appreciate when I can use my own acquired practical professional competence”, that emerges as the leading construct. The professional/virtue aspect characterises this responsibility construct, and the following quotation can be used to illustrate it:

[...] it doesn’t have to mean that someone else can take particular advantage of it. But I have chosen it because it brings great satisfaction when one gets to do something that is in line with one’s knowledge.

To use one’s practical skills is mentioned as being the motivation in day-to-day work. Although company goals are not mentioned, it is regarded as important to understand that an individual’s acquired practical skills are useful and thereby generally contribute to achieving organisational goals.

Doing more – performing better

When it comes to what responsibility construct is rejected, there is no difference between management and the others. Both groups reject more or less totally the administrative category. The administrative/duty construct, “I perform my tasks in accordance with job descriptions and internal contracts”, is in particular rejected. To perceive one’s job as merely a duty is unacceptable within the company. This construct is regarded as everyone’s minimum level, and therefore as uninteresting in relation to responsibility.

It goes without saying really that this is the bottom level of one’s performance. That is doing the task one has been assigned, nothing more and nothing less.

Norms of responsibility

In the first interview series⁶ we were unable to identify any norms specific to the project team. From the comments the project members made in interview 2⁷, a number of themes emerged that will be used to present the norms expressed by the project members. First, there are norms pertaining to what one ought to do, which may run counter to what one wants to do. Second, there are norms pertaining to what formal authority is assigned to contrast to norms pertaining to responsibility. Third, we identified a distinction drawn between responsibility for one's own needs versus responsibility for the needs of others.

What one wants to do versus what one should do

Starting with the first theme, many comments were made in interview 2 which pertained to the difference between what people want to do versus what they think they should do. The following statement both illustrates the potential conflict and the interviewee's awareness of it:

What gives me the greatest satisfaction is when I feel that I can do something that is in line with my knowledge [...] if I do something I have knowledge of, someone else will [also] benefit from it.

Responsibility versus formal assigned authority

To illustrate the second theme, we have chosen the responses of two people. What can be seen here is the apparent need to tell people what to do, while at same time trusting their ability to act independently. Further, the statements indicate the complexity of the issue, since the solution assumes both self-confidence and trust in others.

How much responsibility one takes on, so to speak. Well, we are probably different in this. There are probably many who sit and wait for someone to say to them: Hey you – can you do something about this or that?

If one wants to have responsibility one can have it. It is rare that someone assigns one's tasks and responsibilities. One has to elbow one's way a bit, but it is possible if you want it. Having said that, not all of us are capable of delegating [...] even when it is possible to lay out more responsibility and trust people.

To co-ordinate one's own needs with the needs of others, versus securing one's self-interest

The third theme is linked to the norm of communion within the group, and is illustrated by the following response:

⁶ The questions asked appear in Appendix 1.

⁷ The questions asked appear in Appendix 1.

[...] I try to [...] support those who may not have worked here for so long. I try to weld the lot together.

In fact, this view of engagement of self is more common than the opposite, i.e., a view indicating a degree of self-interest.

Finally, we would like to mention that project members did not think their choices of constructs were influenced by their work at Ericsson Microwave Systems AB. Instead, they emphasised how responsibility was introduced during their childhoods. Another opinion held by the members of the project team is that while differences in choice of responsibility constructs are likely, unanimity of choice would be desirable. What we have seen here is quite the reverse: we see strong agreement on using competence to achieve solutions with a focus on the customer's utility. However, this construct appears together with all but one of the other constructs. This means that the constructs of the group involve much more than is covered by the superior goal of serving the customer's utility.

Responsibility in action

This section will provide explanations as to why and how the view of responsibility becomes taken for granted and embedded within day-to-day activities. The third interview series was carried out in order to review the trust relationships within the group. This approach was taken since our point of departure is that trust carriers within organisations will establish the norms of action. We have not examined trust in general, but trust in relation to the success of the project.

Trust relationships within the group

The trust gained from others and the trust placed in others within the group is shown in Figure 2⁸. Figure 2 is based on a measure where the placement of each individual is dependent on the overall amount of placed and gained trust. Individuals that are placed close to each other place trust in each other.

⁸ The procedure for producing the individuals' sociograms is shown in Appendix 2. The weighted sociogram for the group was made by Leif Grönquist, Department of Linguistics, Göteborg University.

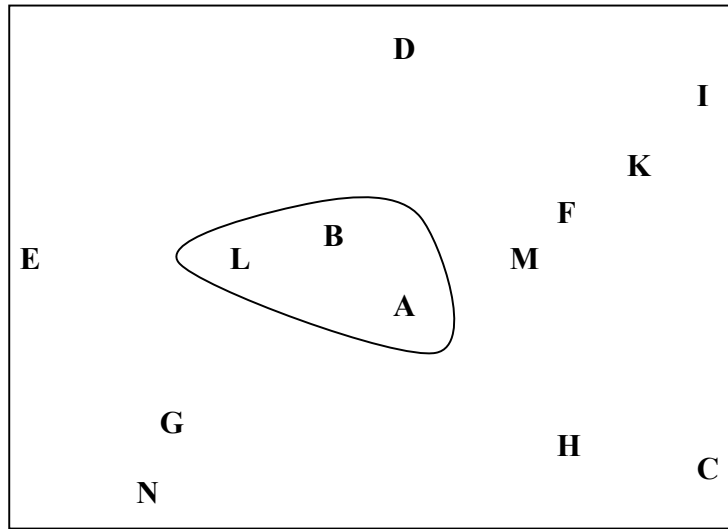


Figure 2. Sociogram: The mutual trust relationships within the group

The figure indicates that there is an inner circle of three project members (A, B, and L) who have strong trust in each other’s contribution to the success of the project. We have identified these persons as the trust carriers of the group.

To become a trust carrier one must continually act responsibly, thereby demonstrating and guarding norms of responsibility. Two stories were told to illustrate how responsibility is constructed, one dealing with trust at the individual level and the other at the group level. The first story involved two of our informants, A and L, both included in the inner trust circle. The story illustrates the demonstration of existing norms. The second story tells what happened at a meeting in which one of our informants, F, was involved. This story illustrates the safeguarding of norms within groups.

Story 1 – Demonstrating responsibility norms

A has been appointed as a new sub-project leader (SPL) for the production line of a long-running project. A has been asked by L, who is the project leader, to produce a report on the financial situation of A’s part of the project. L also wants a meeting to discuss the report with A. Before the meeting, A finds it difficult to explain all the costs and is unable to complete the entire report. A decides to send what he has managed to produce anyway, hoping that the meeting with L will resolve the remaining questions.

A: Hi, my name is A. I am here to see L.

Receptionist: I’ll let L know you’re here...

She calls L.

Receptionist: L will be with you in a minute.

A walks toward the door expecting to be let into L’s office. The door opens and L steps out into the reception area.

A: Hi, I'm A. Pleasure to meet you.

A extends a hand and smiles – L overlooks it.

L: I was expecting us to have a report to discuss.

A: No, but I thought we could discuss that.

L: I don't have time for this. Don't show up here again until you have your figures under control.

Saying nothing else, L returns to the office and shuts the door. A leaves the building, visibly shaken.

Today, L holds great respect for and trust in A and vice versa. That can be explained by how A handled the relationship after this incident. A immediately compensated for the failure of the meeting with L by producing the correct reports. A also appreciated being informed of – although the experience was somewhat brutal – the kind of responsibility demanded by L.

Story 2 – Guarding responsibility norms

F is an SPL and is responsible for testing equipment for customer X. F is attending a meeting with 20 other members of the production line, with some ten members not present. The meeting turns to the issue of how to allocate access to premises to the various projects. Specifically, the test rig is a limited resource for which many of the projects on the line compete. Earlier that week F had been allowed access for project X by the project leader of the project Y, as testing for the latter project was completed. F had been given access on the condition that F, in the capacity of SPL, would be responsible for dismantling and placing in storage the equipment for project Y. Working under time pressure, F's team caused some minor damage to the equipment. This damage did not affect the function of the equipment. When the project leader for project Y found out about the damage, an e-mail was sent to F's line manager, the quality manager and a number of other people he thought should be informed of the event. In the e-mail, the project leader heavily criticised the handling of the equipment. F only learned about the e-mail from one of those who had received it, as F was not included as a recipient. This e-mail caused some talk among various members of the organisation.

Line manager: As you all know, the project leader for the Y project sent out an e-mail last week, quite strongly criticising our way of handling their equipment in the test rig this week.

The line manager looks around and all nod knowingly; F is quiet.

Line manager: There are few things here I find important to say in this respect. First, criticism should not be delivered like this, neither from the point of view of content nor the point of view of its dissemination.

F breaks in.

never talked about, but are embedded in the practical day-to-day actions of the organisational members.

Looking back to the view of responsibility held within the project team, we can see that financial thought is emphasised in the choice of responsibility constructs. Although accounting is not explicitly mentioned when the members talk about responsibility, a properly functioning accounting system is taken for granted. The bottom line of responsibility is the balancing of customer value and product improvements, i.e., how profitable the company is. This is something all organisational members can agree on. Management expresses this more distinctly, and stresses the obvious point that the goals of a commercial company are financial. The others are aware of the necessity of good financial results, but their focus is on how they themselves can contribute with their professional experience. For both groups, management and the others, accounting numbers are used as benchmarks for orienting ones actions toward common goals. Similar financial awareness is expressed in the two stories.

The first story illustrates how even though one may have the sub-project under control, it is extremely important also to have the accounting figures under control and to be able to demonstrate this on request. The story makes it clear that people should not turn up unprepared: one can answer questions, explain actions, and, when needed, defend one's actions. It is worth noticing that this type of "straight talk" colours the communication between two trust carriers. This incident shows how the SPL is given leeway to account for the financial situation. However, if the SPL had not been in control of the sub-project, it is doubtful that the same leeway would have been given, i.e., the shadow is not mistaken for the substance. The second story illustrates how organisational members have to act immediately and make rapid judgements regarding, for example, who is first in line and how much time should be spent on packing. Taking on the task, and risking reprimands for minor damages, illustrates responsibility in action. The story also illustrates how the line manager guards the norms of "full freedom within the limits of responsibility". Criticism in this way is inappropriate, since it harms trust relationships and thereby impedes peoples' ability to act.

To sum up, in this project the project members are never praised or criticised for keeping to the budget. Instead, it is taken for granted that all contracts in need of adjustments (up or down) will be negotiated and adjusted in line with changed conditions. It is also taken for granted that accounting figures should be correct and not questionable. What is important is the product and what is measured is the substance, i.e., the radar – its function and its features. Good financial results – the shadow – are the outgrowth of the successful radar product.

Concluding remarks

Real-life responsibility is discretionary responsibility that is constructed and practised in everyday situations and based on judgements. It cannot be formally regulated, and thus mainstream notions of responsibility can be rejected. It is a contradiction in terms to say that responsibility "is...". Responsibility cannot be defined, since it has different meanings in different situations. Responsibility is embedded in its context.

There are several things to learn from the case presented about the relationship between accountability and trust. If there is an atmosphere of trust and tolerance there is much to lose by not performing up to expectations. What we have seen supports Swift's (2001) claim that accountability and trust are positively intertwined. Soft accountability in an organisational context assumes tolerance, freedom within limits of responsibility, and voluntary disclosure. Suspicion is not included in this view. Instead it presupposes two main components, i.e., personal mutual trust, and systemic trust in accounting.

What has been said previously supplements Ahrens and Chapman's (2002) focus on sense making, legitimating, and dominating as important aspects of accountability. We complement their claims by emphasising the role of accounting in the trust-creation process. This means that we do not agree that legitimating and dominating are the most significant aspects in accountability situations; instead, we would like to add the trust-creation aspect to the sense-making aspect.

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Interview Guide 1: General questions about the informants and their work

1. Can you briefly describe what you did before you were employed at Ericsson?
2. What year were you hired? How did this come about?
3. Can you briefly describe an ordinary working day? An extraordinary day?
4. What dimensions are important in securing the success of this project?
5. What creates difficulties in this respect?
6. What can go wrong? What must not go wrong?
7. How do you recognise good performance within the project? In general?
8. Who do you communicate with within the project team? Why? About what? How?
9. If you have any problems concerning the project, to whom do you turn? Why?

Interview Guide 2: Responsibility constructs

Questions with reference to above [Appendix 1] (2nd series of interviews)

1. What three statements have you chosen and in what order of preference?
2. Why?
3. Is there any statement you immediately dropped?
4. Why?
5. Does your answer reflect how you look upon “responsibility” in general, or does it only reflect upon your work at Ericsson Microwave Systems AB?
6. Do you think the other project members reflect on their “responsibility” in a similar way?
7. If following scenario came about, how would you try to solve it?

Scenario: You are confronted with a situation in which the customer has a critical problem you can help to solve. However, it is unclear what resources are needed to deal with the problem. How do you act?

8. Who do you mostly communicate with within the project team at the moment?

Collection of data regarding trust relationships in 2003

Instructions for drawing the trust sociograms:

All informants were given the same pattern on the computer with the small circle in the centre representing themselves (the pattern that project member A started with is shown below in Figure 1). They were then asked to pull the other circles, representing the other members of the project team, toward themselves and to place the member they trusted most in a position closest to themselves, and so on. In doing so they were to consider the question, “How much do you trust each member of the project team, in terms of their contribution to the success of the project?”

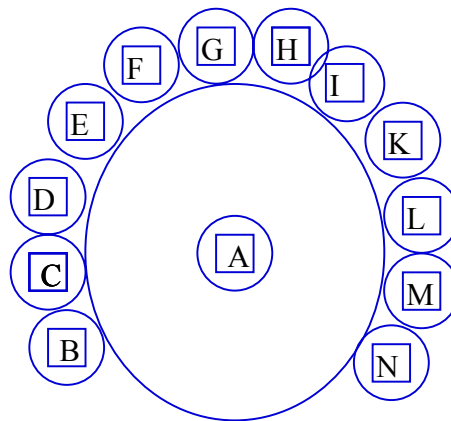


Figure 1. The basic pattern for the trust sociograms.

Interview guide 3 – Performance evaluation

Questions put to the informants after they had drawn their sociograms

1. Who evaluates your work and your performance? What kind of basis is used?
2. Whom – if anybody – are you evaluating? What kind of basis do you use?
3. Are “punishments” used in case of poor performance?
4. Are “rewards” granted in case of good performance?
5. Do you have any bonus system?