One of the more common statements I hear contractors make is, “I want the people who work for me to be responsible.” What they really want are people working for them who always get the job done, no matter how impossible! What they say they want are people willing to answer for their individual obligations. They bemoan the “lack of responsibility” of people today; they see responsibility as a moral or social quality—and believe they have to somehow find responsible people to hire.

Let’s look at the word “responsible.” One interpretation of what it means is “able to respond” — response — able. Someone who is able to respond has the authority to take action that affects the outcome of the task. For instance, if your superintendent is responsible for the jobsite schedule, he or she has the authority to take actions necessary to keep the job on schedule. “Able to respond” has another side to it: It also means that if I am “able to respond,” others are not “able to respond.” That is, others don’t have the authority to take actions or make decisions that affect the outcome of a task without my input and agreement. The superintendent can’t be “able to respond” to keep the job on schedule if the project manager has the unilateral authority to make decisions that have a negative impact on the schedule. If the project manager has that authority, then it is the project manager who is “able to respond,” the project manager who is responsible for the schedule. In practical terms, what this means is that if someone is responsible for the outcome, then he or she has to be “able to respond” in every area that impacts the outcome of the task.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

A word listed in the dictionary as a synonym for “responsible” is “accountable.” There is a shade of difference, however, between the two words. If responsible means “able to respond,” what does “accountable” mean? You’ve probably guessed, it means “able to account” or “able to count”—accountable. A person who is accountable is in a position to count (or account for) something. Your accountant counts money, and is “able to account” for all the money that flows through your company (or you better get another accountant!) But an accountant may not be “able to respond” regarding how the money is made or spent. The accountant may not be responsible for the decisions regarding the money, only to account for it. People, in the office or in the field, who are accountable can tell you everything regarding where you are, and why; but they may not feel responsible for the outcomes.

Responsible people are generally accountable: accountable people are many times not responsible for results. If you tell Joe he is responsible, but you don’t give Joe the authority to make the decisions necessary to ensure the outcome; or, you allow other people to make decisions that impact Joe’s area of responsibility without Joe’s input; or, you make decisions — without Joe’s input — that impact Joe’s area of responsibility, then Joe can easily stop feeling responsible, and start feeling accountable — “It’s my job to know where we are.” Then when you ask Joe...
what’s going on. Joe responds, “I can 
tell you where we are, and why, but it’s 
not my fault.” Then you get frustrated.

Usually you don’t want your people to 
be just accountable (although I’ve met 
a few contractors who would love to 
just know where they are on the job!), 
you want them to be responsible for the 
outcome. To develop responsible peo-
ples, in the field or in the office, follow 
these seven steps:

- Define the task or area of responsi-
   bility
- Make one person/group responsible.
- Make sure that person or group has 
  the authority to make all the decisions 
  necessary-make sure they are “able to 
  respond.”
- Make sure nobody else (including, 
  maybe especially, you!) makes decisions 
  that impact that task or area without 
  consulting with the responsible person 
  or group.
- Determine quantifiable or qualita-
tive measures you will use to evaluate 
  results, and make these clear to every-
  one at the start.
- Follow up regularly to measure 
  progress and provide coaching and 
  feedback.
- Evaluate the results upon comple-
tion, and take the time to develop both 
  success stories and lessons learned.

WHO’S IN CHARGE?

Having responsible people is not just a 
hiring issue-it’s a development issue.
If too many of your people are account-
able but not responsible, it’s usually 
because you haven’t taken the time to 
develop the structures and practices 
that encourage responsibility You’re 
hoping you can hire people who will 
seize responsibility from you, rather 
than providing an environment that 
encourages people to be responsible.
The usual end result is one or more of 
the following:

- A lack of defined tasks (“Everyone 
  around here does whatever 
  it takes to get things done.”).
- Many people with authority in 
  many areas (anyone who sees some-
thing wrong just fixes it).
- Some people accountable in some 
  areas (“Here are the results, and I can 
tell you exactly who messed up.”).
- Nobody responsible in any area 
  (“It’s not my fault.”).

 Except in the end, someone is always 
responsible. You. And now that you 
know, you can be response-able for 
changing it.

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