

# Accountability Part 3: Why Second Best Just Isn't Good Enough

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It is my sincere hope that you have not experienced first hand what **No Accountability** does to an organization (see [Part 2](#) of this blog series). What is more likely is that you have spent most of your career in a setting that exists at the second level of accountability: Mutual Accountability.

When I was on Active Duty in the Air Force, I heard a story about a senior enlisted member who broke the rules. One of his duties was maintaining control of the unit's government vehicles. He handed out the keys, collected the keys, and kept the vehicle logs. One weekend, he was seen driving around in one of the vehicles, running personal errands. He had been placed in a position of trust and violated it. The person who witnessed the dishonest behavior did the right thing and reported it to the chain of command. When this report was investigated, it became clear that this was not a one-time offense. This individual was punished, to include being stripped of rank. It was important that all in the unit understood that this type of behavior would not be tolerated.

This is mutual accountability in action. And it works – sometimes. It worked in this case, as the unwanted behavior was caught and ceased. Although it's absolutely necessary in an organization, mutual accountability isn't the be-all, end-all for businesses that want to be incredibly successful. Here are three reasons why maxing out at mutual accountability is for those organizations who want to only be second best:

1. **Application can be inconsistent.** Some organizations have cultures that make it risky to call others out for bad behavior, and people end up getting punished for it. Even if the culture encourages holding others accountable, some individuals can remain uncomfortable with it. You can rely on some people to buy in, but you'll often have gaps. The most effective leaders overcome this by setting clear expectations, creating a culture of open, productive feedback, and being consistent with consequences.

2. **Checking a box can masquerade as accountability.** I was on a committee one time that was evaluating an organization's performance appraisal and feedback process. Forget that the whole process involved one sheet of paper. Forget that the employees were evaluated on a three-point scale, which really limits rating choices. Forget that these ratings were in no way related to promotion decisions. The worst thing about them was the following instruction: "Ratings other than two require comment." As you can imagine, ratings fell into a predictable pattern across the organization – most people received a 2 rating on all the categories, and the comments sections were all blank. Performance appraisals are an example of mutual accountability, but this had become merely an exercise in checking the box with no connection whatsoever to employee development. The best leaders ensure that systems of accountability are intimately linked to employee development.
3. **It can be a big drain on resources.** Think for a moment how much money is spent in our economy on mutual accountability: police departments, federal law enforcement, the judicial system, auditors, security systems – both for physical items and data protection, tracking devices, and on the list goes. The collective drain on our national economy and our personal pocketbooks is immense. Imagine the good that would result if we could refocus this money into something more productive than stopping or preventing bad behavior. The primary reason the cost for mutual accountability is so high is the tendency to punish or restrict the group for the behavior of one or two, creating cumbersome bureaucracy. The most effective companies are lean in their bureaucracy and effective in management of individual situations without knee-jerk reactions.

Mutual accountability is essential in organizations. Without it, companies will devolve into chaos, as described in [part 2](#) of this blog post series. This second level of accountability works to solve the chaos, but presents its own set of problems, as described above. The good news is that the best teams don't stop here, which I'll be discussing in my next post. I'm interested in hearing your techniques for creating an effective culture of mutual accountability in your organization. Please let us know on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#), and share this post with others who might find it helpful.