

# **Increasing Accountability Measures in Government Acquisition**

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Nicholas Smith  
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Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
Nicholas Smith

Approved \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
S. Travis Elliot, Department of Engineering and Society

## Abstract

Accountability is imperative to any production, and its impact on teamwork has been researched extensively. Studies show a positive correlation between proper accountability and production in the workplace. Furthermore, perceived accountability raises external trust in an organization's productivity. However, implementing appropriate accountability measures requires additional time and resources. Since accountability in the government is measured through an individual's experiences, it is hard to rely merely on user input to provide feedback on accountability measures. This study aims to ensure that accountability is primarily trained as a virtue that is supplemented with the mechanical configuration of accountability. The research observed cases from the government and tangential bodies to compare the results of accountability as a virtue and as a mechanism. Overall, accountability measures increase behavior in the direction intended by the implementor, however, the user experience with accountability differs depending on the virtue, or mechanical approach.

## **Increasing Accountability Measures in Government Acquisition**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this paper is to build upon research exploring the difference between accountability as a mechanism and accountability as a virtue, and the impact it has on society through the government. Accountability as a virtue influences the behavior that drives an individual's actions. Accountability as a mechanism is an institutional relation or arrangement in which an agent can be held to account by another agent or institution (Bovens et. al 2019 p. 11). This research focuses on accountability beginning with the United States government and ends with each individual living in the United States.

The government seeks thousands of civilians to conduct jobs of varying length, to supplement government operations (Nissen 1997 p. 87). Civilians reach an agreement with the government to fulfill these duties through government contracting. The government contracting industry was responsible for 560 billion dollars being spent in the fiscal year 2018, according to the US Government Accountability Office ("Federal Government Contracting for Fiscal Year 2018," 2019). These government contracts result in goods and services being provided to citizens from the government hiring a third party. Government contracting has been proposed as a superior alternative to traditional bureaucratic production of collective goods and services (Lowery 1982 p. 517). To initiate the process for a small business or corporation to fulfill a government contract, a request for proposal (RFP) must be documented. An RFP is a request from a government entity to public contractors, for a specific project, product, or services (Wiedman 1977 p. 714). Throughout the process of a contract being awarded, issues are surrounding the legacy systems, lengthy documents, and specificity of contract requirements. Both the government and civilian employees recognize the difficulty in the acquisition process,

but due to bureaucracy and lack of accountability, little progress has been made to better the acquisition process.

This STS research focuses on accountability using Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and evaluating how this theory fits into the government acquisition process. Throughout this paper, examples of accountability provide insight into teamwork and self-reflection within a larger network. For the technical report, accountability is implemented through an application that transcends the two dimensions and serves to remind the user, rather than prosecuting them. This research is provided to assist government training, to prevent previous pitfalls in the acquisition process from continuing.

### **Problem Definition**

The government acquisition process is rigid and upgrade resistant (Brown & Brudney 1998 p. 341). Many steps are necessary and vital for an RFP to be filed and a good to be delivered. This is due to the multiple layers of bureaucracy and the need for confidentiality in certain documents (Brown et. al 1998). Therefore, poor habits, such as accountability in submitting documents, have grown old. The government is not immune to this progression and the need for training. Berrios presents the conundrum in his article stating, “Accountability in contracting presents a Catch-22: The biggest selling point for contracting-out is saving money, but to achieve greater accountability and effective oversight typically requires additional resource investment.” (Berrios & McKinney 2017 p. 567).

Accountability is important to keep constructive conflict over issues from degenerating into dysfunctional interpersonal conflict, to encourage managers to argue without destroying their ability to work as a team (Eisenhardt et. al 1997 p. 78). To improve accountability, there must be an understood definition of the word in the context of government acquisition.

Accountability is the buzzword of modern governance (Bovens et. al 2019 p. 11). Every organization wants to have a good accountability system to promote enhanced performance. However, accountability is a difficult concept to grasp, especially when it leads to conflict with peers. This conflict leads to disgruntled employees and additional money needed to provide an equal good. As time progresses more money is being spent on how to handle the inevitable conflict that will arise in the workplace. In a poll of 2,313 organizations with more than 100 employees, 56% reported providing diversity training, compared to 40% in 1995 (Ferdman & Brody 1996). This training was set up to reduce the conflict that arises based on cultural differences. At the current moment, the only check on accountability in the initial stages is market competition (Hansen 2003). This market competition forces companies to elaborate on tangible mechanisms they will maintain to win the contract. Once a contract is awarded, there is a lack of monitoring. With the current government contracting system, the real accountability is a retrospective adjustment rather than a proactive adjustment. To enact proactive adjustments, proper training on accountability is necessary for actors going through the network that is the government.

ANT presents a framework to analyze the social, cultural, and political aspects that can be influenced by proper accountability training. ANT is a methodical approach to analyze actors and networks that interact with one another to uncover information through observations. Venturini discusses the power of observations in “Diving in magma: How to explore controversies with actor-network theory”. Throughout the essay, he covers principles established by Bruno Latour that validate the importance of ANT. Bruno Latour describes his style of ANT as, “just look at controversies and tell what you see” (Latour 1996). This approach is used to take these different samples and provide the user to see an unbiased perspective of a network.

Observations in this sense help the actors navigate controversies in a socio-technical system due to the evidence-based observations.

Accountability as a mechanism directly impacts networks by establishing a system to hold its actors responsible for their actions. The mechanism promotes accountability through enforcements and expectations. These expectations introduce the possibility of precedents, loopholes, and puts the enforcement in the control of a few actors. Whoever determines the terms for the expectations or the individual who serves in a judicial position are the primary actors who determine what accountability means in a network.

Accountability as a virtue influences the actors of a network. Hursthouse and Pettigrove define virtue as, “It is a disposition, well entrenched in its possessor—something that, as we say, goes all the way down, unlike a habit such as being a tea-drinker—to notice, expect, value, feel, desire, choose, act, and react in certain characteristic ways” (Hursthouse & Pettigrove 2010). Virtues impact an actor at their most core level to behave in a certain manner. Using accountability as a virtue gives each individual two extremes which they navigate between. For any virtue, there is the deficit and the excess. In society, everyone operates between the deficit and excess extremes based on our wisdom and experiences. A virtue is a purposive disposition, lying in a mean that is relative to us and determined by a rational principle, by that which a prudent man would use to use it (Aristotle 2009). This idea from *Nicomachean Ethics* introduces a concept of a golden mean in between the deficit and excess that actors should strive for. In terms of accountability, this mean lies between indulgence and strictness. Proper accountability training can assist actors within a network to continue progress towards this golden mean.

Training accountability as a virtue will increase government production. Accountability as a mechanism provides structure, but virtue allows each actor to take individual responsibility

for their behavior in a network. This is supported by Aristotle's work in Nicomachean Ethics, Berrios, and McKinney discussing the economic impacts of accountability. While accountability as a mechanism provides a tangible system to uphold values, proper training beforehand creates a culture in a team that reinforces accountability in every action. The resolution in my research and technical project focuses on the training aspect of accountability to solidify the virtue.

## **Methods**

The research was conducted on acquisition personnel that work on contracts for the government by the author. They were selected due to their knowledge of teamwork throughout the RFP stage. Everyone has their narrative on the importance of accountability and group work. Interviews gave feedback that was recorded to document the prominent shortcomings in the acquisition process. Additionally, extensive research was done on actors that are impacted by government decisions. Stakeholders outside the immediate scope of the government must be still in the conversation. Especially since the government is using their tax money to operate. When working with the participants for this research, a focus was on their teamwork and accountability as a virtue and mechanism in their life.

To ask appropriate questions and drive the conversation productively, research on accountability in the workplace was necessary. The questions were anchored in three main subjects: the current form of accountability, the shortcomings that each actor experiences [in accountability], and the new system in which they hope for. Paul Slovic's article, "Risk Communication" eludes to interactional conflicts that make accountability difficult to maintain. Slovic goes in-depth on how perceptions of risk tend to be inaccurate, and this results in frustration (Slovic p. 51). In the workplace when co-workers hold each other accountable, this may present a false perception of intention. This, in turn, reduces the chance that employees are

courageous enough to speak about their peers' missteps. Slovic then alters his work to focus on obtaining user buy-in and the impact of presentation on controversies. When a controversy emerges, the delivery of the conflict can influence the other party's response. If the delivery is too harsh, then the individual blocks out the true intention. Slovic also has a section that details how naïve views are easily manipulated by presentation format. This research is useful in interpreting whether the participant's feedback is about the presentation of accountability or the accountability shortcomings themselves.

To conduct these interviews, it was important to maintain uniformity in the process and ensure limited bias. For each candidate, the following definitions were read, "Accountability as a virtue influences the behavior that drives an individual's actions. Accountability as a mechanism is an institutional relation or arrangement in which an agent can be held to account by another agent or institution" (Bovens et. al 2019 p. 11). Then the following three questions were asked:

1. Within your workplace do you think accountability is realized more as a virtue, or a mechanism? Describe why you chose either answer.
2. What shortcomings do you see within accountability in your workplace?
3. Ideally which form of accountability do you favor: virtue or mechanism? Ideally, how would this impact your workplace to be better?

These questions aided in gathering insight towards a resolution in training and supporting the initial claim that accountability as a virtue is critical to the workplace. Each question addressed either the past, the current shortcomings, or the idealistic future. The questions were also open-ended enough to obtain input on how accountability measures are broken. This methodology helps use acquisition personnel's knowledge to inform our resolution for our socio-technical solution.



## Results

Throughout the literature review and interviews, common themes emerged promoting accountability as a virtue to supplement any underlying mechanism established by an organization. Without any accountability mechanisms, individuals are allowed to act based on their internal prerogatives. This could give way to anarchy and chaos. However, a society that operates solely on the mechanism risks a totalitarian state where every action is eligible for prosecution. Like a virtue, there is a golden mean between the two forms of accountability that networks must balance to promote the productivity of their actors.

Accountability as a mechanism establishes a common set of expectations among a network of actors. These expectations form guidelines on behavior and quality of work within the network. Organizations may use these guidelines to form a set of precedents to enact performance reviews. Precedents can facilitate successful coordination within groups by reducing strategic uncertainty, but they may lead to coordination failure when two groups with diverging precedents must interact (Fehr & Dietmar 1970). A common example of an accountability system is the United States judicial system. According to [sentencingproject.org](http://sentencingproject.org), African Americans are incarcerated in state prisons at a rate that is 5.1 times the imprisonment of whites. In five states (Iowa, Minnesota, New Jersey, Vermont, and Wisconsin), the disparity is more than ten to one. This data shows that systems built to enforce accountability still allows bias to permeate based on the actor that decides how to enforce the mechanism. Accountability as a mechanism has the potential to be good but still is not an unbiased system due to a subset of actors deciding the application of the mechanism.

The virtue form of accountability affects a set of personal behaviors for each actor in a network. This approach puts the responsibility on everyone to perform self-reflection on their

actions. Additionally, it mitigates conflict that may arise from being forced to interact with another peer about their work. Driven by the twin imperatives of self-efficacy and quality of work, employees of the state can create a culture of positive teamwork. However, a lapse may occur in everyone's golden mean that they have established for their virtues. This can arise from differences in culture, ethics, and values. With proper training, the team may become aware of their co-workers' golden mean and ensure there is no communication roadblock for future work. Accountability as a virtue provides acquisition personnel the opportunity to take proactive measures to prevent conflict and raise the quality of work.

“Between friends there is no need for justice, but people who are just still need the quality of friendship; and indeed, friendliness is considered to be justice in the fullest sense. It is not only a necessary thing but a splendid one” (Aristotle 2009). Accountability as a virtue is critical to any network and is imperative to shaping a network's culture. To increase government productivity, managers should provide additional accountability training to adjust the golden mean to supplement their performance review mechanisms within the workplace. Government officials are increasingly faced with a contradiction between the need for accountability and the need for trust. It is important for government officials to out scope and analyze what messages they are sending to their employees on this front. Because at the end of the day, actors need to be cognizant that they define what progress means for a network. That progress starts within everyone's values and their virtues provide the greatest inspiration for improvement.

## **Conclusion**

“Accountability systems themselves do not directly “cause” schools to increase the quality of student learning and academic performance. At best, they set in motion a complex chain of events that may ultimately result in improved learning and performance” (Carnoy et. Al

2003 p. 187). The research done here focuses on teaching accountability as a virtue rather than strengthening the system with the chance to set in motion a complex chain of events that may ultimately result in increased productivity. Furthermore, research reinforced the idea accountability has an external and internal factor for an individual and that organizations should emphasize training the intrinsic accountability while sustaining a set of mechanisms within the organization's network. Both forms of accountability contribute to a team's ability to be productive. If accountability measures are increased in government contracting, then the contracting timeline to produce a new good can be reduced. The American government would benefit from my research to ensure that the 2.1 million government workers are all attempting to perform to the best of their ability. At the end of the day, people are the most essential asset, and proper accountability training prioritizes the people. This would allow the government to spend significantly less money on administrative fees and reallocate that money to healthcare, welfare, and the prosperity of America.

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