Roles and Responsibilities Unclear? Do This

Based on article by Ben Bradley (<https://www.thoughtfulleader.com/roles-and-responsibilities/>) March 2020



Does your team suffer from having unclear roles and responsibilities? Team members might end up doing a lot of work, but is it the \*right\* work? Are some team members doing work that other members are already completing? Or are your team members confused about what they really *should* be doing?

If the answer to any of these questions is “maybe” or “yes!”, you can improve this situation by **clarifying the roles and responsibilities of your team members**.

Why Clear Roles and Responsibilities Are So Important

Having well-defined roles and responsibilities is important in a team. Without them, you’re likely to experience some challenges.

Here are some examples challenges unclear roles and responsibilities can cause:

* **Team members don’t understand how they fit into the team.** It can be hard to find [“task significance”](https://www.mbaskool.com/business-concepts/human-resources-hr-terms/13554-task-significance.html). Task significance is what helps people feel like their job makes a difference. They understand the value of the role they play.
* **Time may be wasted.** Perhaps team members are working on things they shouldn’t be. Maybe they are doing work that other people already have on their list instead of work that needs to be accomplished.
* **Team members can’t tell if they are doing a good job**. If roles and responsibilities are unclear, it’s hard to be certain about where to focus your effort.
* **Conflict and frustration occurs.** When work is forgotten and needs to be done in a rush, or multiple people are trying to do the same work at the same time, the natural outcome is frustration and conflict. Before long, people might start playing the blame game.

Teams need to make sure that everyone understands the roles and responsibilities in the group. Everybody needs to be on the same page. This will help team members be productive and to feel valuable and motivated.

A Word of Warning: Rigid Roles and Responsibilities Can Reduce Motivation

Clarifying roles and responsibilities is important. However, be careful not to go too far. If a team’s roles and responsibilities are defined in minute detail, the team may have a problem.

One of the most important factors in motivating team members is being able to provide them with autonomy. That is, they need some ability to control the way they work, without needing to follow strict instructions. How detailed roles and responsibilities are will depend on the work that the team does, and the level of experience team members bring to the table.

Use caution. While it may be tempting to develop a super-detailed set of roles and responsibilities, this can stifle the creativity and independence of the team or have them feeling bored about their work.

How to Fix Unclear Roles and Responsibilities

1. Clarify Roles in the Team by Finding the Responsibility Gaps

Sometimes it can be a good idea to work out the difference between what team members are doing, and what they really *need* to be working on.

Start by listing out the tasks team members need to be performing. Next, write down the tasks that they actually **are** performing. Is there a difference? If so, this is the gap between the role they to play and what they are *actually* doing. Chances are, this has happened because roles and responsibilities are unclear.

Fixing the Gaps

When roles and responsibilities are unclear, the team is vulnerable. After all, if people don’t know any better, they may simply choose to focus on the tasks they enjoy most (which might not be the ones they need to work on).

For every gap, clarify the role and who should actually be performing the work. Use the list of responsibility gaps as the starting point to have some conversations to get everyone on the same page.

2. Clarify Roles in Your Team by Creating a RACI

Consider clearing up unclear roles and responsibilities by developing a RACI matrix to define the roles in the team. RACI stands for:

* **R = Responsible:** The team member(s) actually doing the work.
* **A = Accountable:** The team member who will be ultimately held accountable for the work, or approve it.
* **C = Consulted:** The team member(s) who should be consulted for their input about the work.
* **I = Informed:** Team member(s) who should be informed of the outcome or progress of the work, but shouldn’t really have a say in how the work is done.

Create a table and write a list of the team members/roles at the top, and the tasks or functions of the team on the left. In each entry in the table, put one or more of the RACI letters, as shown below.



A Sample RACI Matrix

Important Notes For Fixing Roles and Responsibilities With Your RACI Matrix

* **Each task should only have one “A”.** Only ***one*** person should be accountable for something. *Hint: If everybody is accountable, nobody is accountable!*
* **You can have multiple “R” entries for a task.** This means more than one person actually performs the work, which is quite common.
* **You can have an “AR”.**This means that the person who is accountable is also doing the work.
* **“C” is for consultation only.** This means the person doesn’t perform the work. Instead, you just ask for their input and feedback.
* **Try not to have too many “I”s.** There is a temptation to inform everybody about everything, but concentrate on the people who really *need* to know.

Once the RACI is created, make sure that everyone understands what it means. Ask for feedback and see whether any adjustments need to be made. Refer to the RACI consistently to track the team’s progress!

3. Clarify Roles in Your Team by Getting Feedback

It’s a good idea to openly communicate across the team to test thinking when trying to fix unclear roles and responsibilities. Provide time for team members to ask questions and clarify understanding. This will improve performance, result in greater satisfaction, and reduce frustration and conflict.