Project Managers' RACIsm Problem [1]

By Timothy Grayson

Project managers are RACIst. Stereotypically applying RACI where it's inappropriate should be recognized, reported, and restricted. If not only for the sake of your career progress, do yourself a favour and learn the limits of the model.

RACI (Responsible, Accountable, Consulted, Informed) is a good tool. Maybe too good. Like every good tool, it gets overused. After all, value in some places must mean value everywhere, right?

Does it though? RACI is a *circumstantial* model. Change the circumstance and the value changes. Besides, models are like metaphors: useful to a point, then—pushed too far, not so much. Models always break down, becoming harmful.

In many quarters where, by training and use, RACI is as comfortable as a college hoodie, the model gets applied irrespective of circumstance. I have observed R-A-C-I leaned on even to make ultra-fine grain distinctions to executives. The people doing so, having realized the *value* of RACI in their day-to-day, suddenly encounter its corresponding liability.

Aware of it or (often) not, project managers hoping to ascend to senior ranks are negatively affected by these situations. For development, everyone who learns about, uses, and abides by RACI charts should also be trained not only in the application but the appropriate usage environment. Let me expand.

Learning the Limits

For the sake of discussion, let's assume the RACI is an organizational *law*—a fact, if you will, that reflects a certain bounded reality. The operative word is bounded.

"Bounded" points to how and why the model's artificiality breaks down. By identifying roles and assigning to them specific actions, rights, and—dare I say it—responsibilities, the RACI model reflects the narrow environment of a project or other restricted operational milieu. Within the conditions of a self-contained group (team) with readily and clearly delineated parameters of responsibility and accountability, the model holds.

One can say, "You have to do this… but won't pay the price of it not being done." (Responsible) Or, alternatively, "You may not actually do it, but make sure it's done." (Accountable) The buck stops somewhere, and within a self-contained—bounded— environment, it's easy to identify where.

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When the glass walls are cracked, reality is *un*bounded and the logic of its RACI *laws* changes with the scale. Even in an open, broader environment, responsibilities remain fairly easy to parse. Responsibility, as practical action, ends at the point of somebody *doing* something. It's harder with accountability because, as Bob Dylan knew, everybody serves somebody. Accountability is a *state* that, through the magic of hierarchy, is ever-expanding like the universe. While responsibility sinks to a resting place; accountability floats to its terminal limit.

Ever-Expanding Accountability

Is a project manager accountable? *In* the project; but probably not *for* the project. What about the Divisional Director who owns the project budget and benefits, to whom the project manager reports? Obviously… but is it him or his boss, the Regional VP, that the CFO holds *accountable*? Hint: the budget slice and choice of Divisional Director to "own" the initiative rests with the VP. It's turtles all the way up—so to speak, with *all* accountability eventually belonging to the CEO.

Surely not for the purchase of pencils, you say. Not directly; that would be ridiculous. But in the logic of hierarchies, with their delegations of authority and so on, sadly and ultimately the answer can only be yes. Of course, a workable threshold of materiality goes into wielding this logic: No CEO will ever be fired over pencils. On the other hand, if it turned out a quarterly loss and market humiliation was caused by overzealous, organizational pencil hoarding as a result of an employee engagement program gone awry, the Board may opt to remove or sanction the CEO because, ultimately, isn't she *accountable* for the business *in their eyes*?

Fortunately (for some), when heads roll RACI can be rapidly inverted too. Except in egregious circumstances, those heads don't often belong to the so-called accountable person. That, of course, is because accountable people rely on responsible (and probably accountable within smaller bounds) people below them. They may be held to account for bad judgment, maybe shoddy oversight. The decapitated bodies, however, will belong to "Whoever the hell is *responsible* for this…" (That a mid-level executive in HR will fall ought to be a foregone conclusion. Unless you're a cynic and know it will all be pinned on the contracted "empowerment" vendor.)

RACI is quite agile. The idea that only "R" and "A" people can suffer is proven misguided without even much imagination. A body or department designated "C" or "I" can still suddenly find itself in a world of "R" when the RACI reality is unbounded. When the output hits the oscillator, "oversight" that was just to be *Informed* or Legal that was *Consulted* can quickly find itself *Responsible* for not having prevented something stupid and damaging. (It's the parental gold standard admonition: "But you know better….")

All this is to say the RACI model does not always travel well. So what? What take-away makes all this valuable?

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Know When Not To Be RACIst

Within the day-to-day of the project manager's job—to efficiently and effectively shepherd a group of independent people to accomplish an objective that demands mutual interdependence, there is nothing wrong and everything right about RACI as an organizing tool.

But I assume that among project managers reading this, at least some are called to participate at the higher, or highest executive tables.[2] "Participate" means expected to contribute to a broader discussion *not* just provide the dashboard report's audio track. Some—maybe all—those people may have ambitions of rising to greater organizational heights. (Good for all of you.)

Presumably you recognize these audiences as outside the project's bounded reality. It is particularly important to remember that *in this circumstance* your role is to *translate* and *communicate*. To communicate, you must speak the language of the realm. The first part of this essay ventilated the limits of RACI logic in this environment. So let go of RACI. Put it in your pocket and leave it there. It may not serve you well.
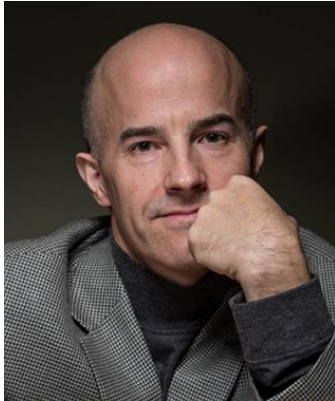
You are expected to be on top of your project; in control of it. Knowing everyone's role and how/where to squeeze for impact is your job. RACI, the tool, helps with that. But when you're in a senior executive situation and talk turns to responsibility, your very fluency and dedication to the micro model (RACI) is more likely to cast you as "competent but not promotable." Why? Promotables show the business acumen to distinguish the value differential of *precision* and *accuracy*, and choose appropriately between them in the circumstance. Read the room: are they really after your RACI precision? Is it really important to clarify responsible and accountable for the COO?

To be clear, I am not suggesting anything wrong with RACI. I am decidedly not suggesting to abandon it or that participants in any matrix delivery environment not be more than familiar with the approach. I *am* saying your career advancement could depend on context-sensitive, selective ignorance.

Next time we can discuss when to forget how a coffee maker works.

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[2] This advice applies equally to both Project Manager and other leaders similarly charged.

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Timothy is the driving force behind Institute X, an advisory serving private sector and government clients. These organizations recognize the complexity of the real digital transformation that's affecting them and seek assistance. From Ottawa, Institute X serves clients around the world. Contact Timothy at http://institute-x.org/ .