

**Improving Decision Making  
Through  
Responsibility Charting**

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ORGANIZATIONAL CONSULTATION AND APPLIED RESEARCH

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## Introduction

Responsibility Charting is a tool for improving decision-making. It also:

- Improves accountability and sharpens patterns of delegation;
- Provides a shared, effective language about authority and responsibility, and;
- Clarifies roles amongst individuals, units, departments, or divisions.

Especially as organizations become more complex and fluid, traditional organization charts are often unable to describe how people actually need to work together — they do not capture the nuances and particularities that accompany specific issues. Responsibility Charting addresses the question of who needs to be involved — and at what level — for specific decisions or projects.

Misunderstandings or incomplete information about who has what kind of a responsibility is a major source of failure in the decision-making process. Responsibility Charting can also surface and resolve many conditions that impede effective decision making. When people have different “mental maps” of how decisions are made, conflict and confusion arises. Ambiguous or shifting roles can produce serious problems. Responses can be slowed and resources wasted when efforts are duplicated or left undone.

## The Elements of Responsibility Charting

Decisions often involve multiple people, participating in various ways, at different points in time. Often the language used to describe different ways of participating is limited or ambiguous. For example, saying that someone is "responsible" for a decision is vague: is that person responsible for initiating the decision-making process; for signing off on a specific recommendation or alternative; or for implementing the decision once it is made?

Responsibility Charting provides a vocabulary and structure to think carefully and precisely about how decisions are made and about what role people play in them. The three major components of Responsibility Charting are:

- **Decisions;**
- **People or Actors, and;**
- **Types of participation.**

These three elements are combined when an actor is assigned a particular type of participation in a specific decision.

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	A	C	T	O	R	S
Decision 1						
Decision 2		Type of Participation: A, R, C, I				
Decision 3						
Decision 4						

## The Process of Responsibility Charting

### Step 1: Defining the Decisions & Actors

First, decisions and actors are defined. Care must be taken because confused, overly general, or compound decisions will diminish the usefulness of the results. An example of a poorly defined decision is: "Make changes in the budget." Should all or only some line items be changed, and what should the magnitude of those changes be, etc., etc? A less ambiguous wording would be: "Revising budget allocations based on mid-year revenue projections." Best is to choose 10 or 12 representative decisions to start with, making sure that they are defined clearly and that those participating understand them the same way. Working with too many decisions produces ungainly amounts of data and tedious repetition. As new issues arise decisions can be charted separately.

People may not agree about who is, or who should be, involved in a decision. This tool forces managers or groups to confront the question: Who is involved in the decision and what is the nature of each individual's participation? Questions about whether a person, a unit, or a department should be listed on the chart are first addressed here. In general, it is better to start with an inclusive list of actors.

### Step 2: Defining Types of Participation in Decisions

1. The following table defines four distinct types of participation in decision making. <sup>a</sup>

### Basic Vocabulary of Responsibility Charting

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<sup>a</sup> Sometimes this list is tailored to us a vocabulary that more closely matches the tasks and operating style of an organization. Complex engineering projects often involve more codes.

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Symbol	Definition
A	<b>Approve:</b> Final decision authority. Must sign off, veto a decision, or select from options developed by the “R” role. Accountable for the quality of the decision.
R	<b>Responsible:</b> Takes the initiative for a particular decision, develops the alternatives, analyzes the situation, makes recommendations. Ensures the right people are involved. Can consult anyone to improve decision, but <b>must</b> consult those with “C.”
C	<b>Consult:</b> Has a <b>right</b> to offer input before decision is made but has no veto power.
I	<b>Inform:</b> Is notified of decision <b>after</b> it is made, but <b>before</b> it is announced; needs to know the outcome but not to be involved in making it.
X or Blank	<b>No Role:</b> No role in the decision.

**It is essential that everyone use the symbols for participation in the same way — otherwise pre-existing confusions will be imported into the tool, echo through its use, and outcomes will be distorted by the very same confusions that the tool is aimed at clarifying.**

### Step 3: Allocating “Decision Authority”: using the codes across decisions

People are then assigned a code, or role, for each decision in which they are involved. Actors may sometimes have more than one type of participation in a single decision. For example, someone may be consulted - “C” - prior to the making of a decision and may need to be informed once it is made -- an “I” role. If multiple codes are needed for describing decision-making situations, then no more than two codes is recommended. Plus, some combinations make no sense, such as A/C because the meaning of “C” is embedded in any “A” role. On the other hand sometimes people do carry both “A” and “R” responsibility, so they would be listed as “A/R”

Depending on the specific use of the Responsibility Chart (see below), it will be filled out by an individual or group, possibly with an “as is” and “ought” chart. Once the charts are populated, the results can be aggregated and analyzed.

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## Understanding the Results

Responses can be analyzed in many ways. Most often, the patterns of participation and consensus that are found to be most useful are:

- **Differences between the viewpoints of team members** – their "internal mental maps" of how decisions are made (and/or ought to be made);
- How a **particular person (or role) is utilized** across a set of decisions;
- How **specific decisions are made**; and
- Comparing **current and desired** roles in decision making.

### How particular roles are authorized

This type of analysis compares responses between how people define decision-making. Different understandings about how decisions are made creates confusion, conflict, inactivity, and often mistrust. A chart often shows difference between how people see their own authority and how others see it. Many misunderstandings arise when these "pictures" differ, such as those that are listed in the following table:

You See Your Role As	Others See It As:	Interpretation & Consequences
A	R	You are waiting to make final decision while expecting others to develop alternatives; others expect you to take the initiative. Potential lack of action in this situation, with you blaming others for not delivering when they in turn are looking to you.
R	A	You want central role of developing the alternatives; they see your role as final "sign off." You are not involved as early as you desire.
C	I	You want to give substantive input to the decision; others think you only need to be informed afterward.
I	C	You want to know the outcome but do not want to be involved; others will draw on your time, expecting input when you desire no involvement. Delays can result when others wait for your response.

Significant issues are often revealed that require renegotiation and discussion to ensure that people understand what is expected of them.

### *How specific decisions are made.*

This analysis looks at the responses from all those involved for a specific decision. The chart below shows this kind of analysis. It illustrates how authority for a decision is distributed among actors. It may reveal low consensus, potential sources of poor coordination, missed opportunities for useful

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consultation, and gaps in communication. For example, poor coordination often results from confusion about who is supposed to initiate, who is supposed to approve, and who is in charge of implementation. When two or more actors are seen to have the same role, accountability is often diminished.

## Analysis of Roles Across Decisions

For Individuals	Possible Consequences
Many R's	Person plays initiating role for too many decisions. Can the person stay on top of so much?
No R's or A's	This may be a weak role that could be enlarged or eliminated.
Many C's	Actor is seen as key resource for information. Are demands excessive? Is more active role desirable?
Many A's	Actor has major role. Is authority too centralized? Could some be delegated?
Low Consensus	Participants are confused about a particular actor's role. Clarification is needed.
Compared to Person's Style	Does pattern fit style of actor (i.e., either too little or too much involvement)?

## Analyzing How Particular Decisions Are Made

Response Pattern	Possible Consequences
No R's	Job may not get done; everyone is waiting to approve, be consulted, or be informed. No one sees own role as taking initiative.
Multiple R's	Is it clear which "R" has lead role to ensure action on decision?
Multiple A's	Diminished accountability. With so many people signing off it may be too easy to shift blame. Initiatives can languish – "bureaucratic inertia."
Multiple C's	Do so many <i>need</i> to be consulted? Have costs of consulting in terms of delay and communication time been weighed against benefits of more input?

### ***Discrepancies between how decisions are made and how people think they ought to be made.***

Still another type of analysis compares current and desired roles for actors. Is/Ought analysis illustrates how individuals or groups are dissatisfied with the current situation and it can point to areas that might benefit from renegotiation.

## Delegation and Responsibility Charting

Effective delegation depends on clear communication about both the **substance of the task** and the **nature of the authority** being delegated. Responsibility Charting can establish a shared language that enables people to discuss and agree upon the roles that they will play in particular decisions or projects. The following table illustrates some delegations using Responsibility Charting language.

"Delegator"	"Delegatee"	Meaning
A	R	"Gather all the necessary facts, consult the necessary people and outline our options. Then bring me a recommendation for final review and decision."
C	A/R	"This is your decision, but I want you to get my input before deciding. However, you are not bound by my advice, though you are accountable for the decision."
A/R	C	"Let me keep the decision and manage the fact finding and the analysis of options, but give me your best thinking on the issue."
I	A/R	"This is your decision, but I need to know the outcome before it is announced."

## Conclusion

Responsibility Charting has been used in numerous ways, including: guiding organization redesign; expediting program planning and evaluation; facilitating the entry of executives into new positions; as a structure for group problem solving; and for analyzing the content of particular jobs.

There are many approaches to use Responsibility Charts and consequently different ways in which it can be helpful (i.e. group setting, consultant analyzed, etc.). Among its many uses: in negotiations between a superior and subordinate about their roles; as a planning tool to help managers clarify the delegation he or she wishes to make; for groups examining how people are involved in the decisions – or how they think people "ought" to be involved; and balancing workloads for a team or among staff. Because it has many uses it can be used in a variety of settings, depending on what one wants to accomplish. It can be used for design, conflict resolution, training, job analysis, or research.

Responsibility Charting creates many opportunities, including:

- Enabling people to be clear and precise about how decisions are to be made;

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- Creating a shared vocabulary for describing the types of participation expected of people in decisions;
- Providing a basis for renegotiating responsibilities and roles, and;
- Producing information from members of a group or organization about their understanding — an internal "picture" — of which actors have what kind of responsibility for certain decisions.

When the information is used to clarify patterns of delegation and accountability it leads to a more effective, better coordinated decision-making process.