Why responsibility splits are counterproductive

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One thing we love in our business is responsibility splits. We often deal with complex processes where a series of internal and external players are involved. Clarity is key, so making a list and deciding who does what naturally seems like a great idea, right?

In my experience, most responsibility splits end up being counterproductive and we should more or less stop doing them. Why? It's in the term itself. They "split responsibility". Don't get me wrong, of course we need clarity on who is doing what. We have tons of things to handle and who does what *is* important.

But responsibility splits are most often implemented in a way that defeats the very purpose. What are we trying to achieve? To ensure that things are taken care of, that everything is completed, that nothing is forgotten, that there are no issues, problems, no overlap or redundancies. What we do however, in our ambition to clarify everything, is list *tasks* instead of responsibilities. I think we do this because it is easier, more concrete and since we are afraid something will go wrong, and we want to be able to say *"Now we have our tasks: you do yours, I do mine, everyone has their own list, and nothing can go wrong. We are safe"*.

But we still get problems. Things fall between two stools: something was unclear; someone did something without considering someone else's aspect; something came up that was not on the list.

Then, what do we do? We repeat. We detail out further; we add the tasks that were missed; we split the ones that were unclear into smaller pieces. We might even do a full RACI (Responsible, Accountable, Consulted, Informed) typically with documents, possibly with decisions, but *not* with responsibilities or accountabilities.

Yet we *still* get new problems. Why?

Because this approach drives a series of counterproductive behaviours. Our world is complex and dynamic. We *need* **ownership and accountability** – for the end result. We *need* to be **focusing on what it takes** to get us to where we need to be and **to do things that are not on a list**. We *need* to **involve each other, to be proactive, to handle the unexpected, to do something new.**

Instead, the responsibility splits encourage us to spend significant amounts of time on list management and this results in an attitude of *"I do my tasks and I'm good"*. The outcome? Communication stops and the responsibility for what *really* is important (the stuff NOT on the list) goes down the drain.

So, what do we need to do?

We need to be better at assigning objectives, ownership and "true responsibility": ensuring alignment and that aspects from other roles and players are considered, including communication and the involvement of others.

Split less, share more. Do what it takes, not what's on a list. And do it together.

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