Who Does What, With RACI

Idea In Short

Map every project's stakeholders against its activities with RACI before confusion sets in. Start with the single accountable owner, add the responsible doers, ration the consulted and inform the rest by email. A few hours of executive clarity prevents weeks of field-level frustration.

Many Clients, Different Roles

Every engagement involves a lot of different people on the client side, some doing the work and others merely curious. Once more than a handful of people are involved, confusion about who does what arrives quickly, and the chain reaction is predictable: confusion breeds frustration, frustration kills adoption and dead adoption means failure. Successful projects need sufficient client input and buy-in, and the goal is emphatically not involving everyone throughout, which would exhaust all parties while nothing got done. The delineation question, who needs to be how involved, has a classic answer.

The Four Letters

RACI, sometimes extended to RASCI, abbreviates the four roles.1 Responsible identifies who does the work. Accountable identifies who has the final say and who gets in trouble if it fails. Consulted identifies who is smart on the topic and worth hearing. Informed identifies who needs updates, and who might get annoyed discovering news the wrong way. The mechanics are equally simple: stakeholders down one side of a table, activities needing ownership across the other, and the grid filled with letters, blanks permitted.

Sequence matters when filling it in. Start with the A, the accountable owner of each process, the person who must make sure it gets done, the one throat to choke, and enforce the cardinal rule that only one person can hold it. Add the R next, the people doing the hard work of change, where more than one is fine because complex work needs many hands. Add C selectively, because over-consulting creates a bureaucratic nightmare when the purpose is driving action rather than convening committees. Add I last and lightly, since most informed parties are served perfectly well by an email or a status update.

A Landlord's Example

A rental property illustrates the grid without any corporate baggage. The business has five major steps: find a property, find a tenant, collect the rent, keep the tenant as long as possible and replace them when they leave. The landlord is accountable throughout, holding final say on tenant qualifications and rent levels, and does almost none of the work. The realtor is responsible for finding the property and sometimes the tenant. The tenant is responsible for paying rent. The property manager is responsible for tenant placement, and the contractor is responsible for fixing the sink and the air conditioner that keep the tenant renewing. One accountable owner, a distributed cast of responsible parties and a business that runs, which is precisely the pattern corporate processes should copy.2

Where the Tool Goes Wrong

Consultants sometimes go too far, producing RACI charts of fifteen activities by ten stakeholders, 150 boxes that nobody can keep up with. Simplification usually beats completeness: identify just the accountable owner and let that person quarterback the rest of the grid by setting their own team. The deeper value hides in the difficulty, because determining the A often takes real thinking, and part of the tool's beauty is forcing an organization to find the one person who is genuinely accountable. Where accountability has been comfortably vague for years, the debate is the deliverable.

Two further calibrations keep the grid honest. Make sure the R is right by thinking hard about who really does the work, listing multiple people when the work demands it and using specific names rather than generic titles when ownership needs teeth, because the tool exists to drive ownership and action. And refuse to litigate the blurry line between consulted and informed, since it is enough to know you must speak with the person; sometimes they will have good advice and sometimes they will not, and the grid survives either way.

Keeping the Grid Alive

A RACI chart drawn once and filed dies within a month, so build maintenance into the practice. Revisit the grid at every phase transition, since ownership that made sense during analysis often shifts for implementation. Update it when stakeholders join or leave, because inherited letters carry no commitment from people who never agreed to them. Reference it in status meetings when confusion resurfaces, pointing to the agreed letters rather than relitigating ownership from scratch. And publish it where the project team actually looks, in the shared workspace rather than an appendix nobody opens. A living grid keeps paying for its construction hours; a filed one merely commemorates them. The test of the tool is not the workshop where it was built but the Tuesday six weeks later when someone asks who owns the data migration and the answer takes ten seconds.

Cheap Hours, Expensive Confusion

The tool works. It drives conversation and consensus on how the work will actually be done, and while the exercise can be laborious, a few good hours making ownership clear among executives prevents enormous confusion in the field.3 The economics resemble every other form of prevention: clarity purchased in a conference room costs a fraction of the misunderstandings it forecloses, and the lean effect on inefficiency and miscommunication compounds across every subsequent week of the project. When a project feels tangled, the odds are excellent that nobody has drawn the grid, and the fastest untangling starts with a single question: who is the A?

- 1Responsibility assignment matrix
- 2Property management
- 3Accountability

Summary

RACI converts stakeholder sprawl into a grid of ownership: one accountable throat to choke, named responsible doers, selectively consulted advisers and gently informed watchers. Resist 150-box monsters, let the accountable owner quarterback the rest and spend the hours up front. It works.