

REDEEMING ACCOUNTABILITY

BY MATTHEW FROST

Sarah was exhausted. The 'usual' pressures of church leadership were overwhelming. Finances. Safeguarding. Motivating staff and volunteers. People's expectations. Her own expectations of herself. Whilst church attendance seemed healthy, nobody really had any idea whether the church was making progress towards its vision – 'making whole-of-life disciples'. She began to wonder whether she was really cut out for this. And there seemed to be no-one to talk to and learn from – 'I'm their leader and pastor - they look to me for leadership, wisdom, direction... strength' she told herself.

Organisational life, whether in our churches, hospitals, schools, offices or factories, far too often drains life, undermines identity and damages relationships. There are countless symptoms we might point to: half-hearted staff/volunteer engagement; fragile and mistrustful inter-personal relationships; pre-occupation with status, titles and roles; a paucity of innovation and learning; bureaucratic, controlling systems and processes; a lack of transparency. I'm part of a growing movement that seeks to address this, rethinking the whole way we design and lead organisations. One of the critical staging-posts on this journey is reimagining accountability.

We all have experiences of being held to account, or of holding others to account. For many these are not positive: such as being chewed out by a boss, trying to broach a difficult subject with a volunteer or employee, or feeling undervalued. So we understandably shy away from these encounters.

Yet I'm convinced that as leaders and disciples, we should both hunger after and seek out opportunities to be accountable, in our personal, work and church lives. Not because we've been told to, or because it's good practice, but because we've discovered that doing so is central to our own growth and fruitfulness, and that of the people we lead.

This is not accountability as we have known it. The practice of accountability needs serious reimagining. From an instrument of control, to a means of learning. From presenting our strength/success, to a willingness to be vulnerable. From defending our egos, to deepening our identity in Christ.

I've worked in all sorts of organisations both large and small over the years and I've rarely seen accountability done well. Leaders generally describe one of two contrasting realities.

DRAGON'S DEN EXPERIENCE

The first is the 'Dragon's Den' experience, prevalent in commercial organisations. Hierarchical authority



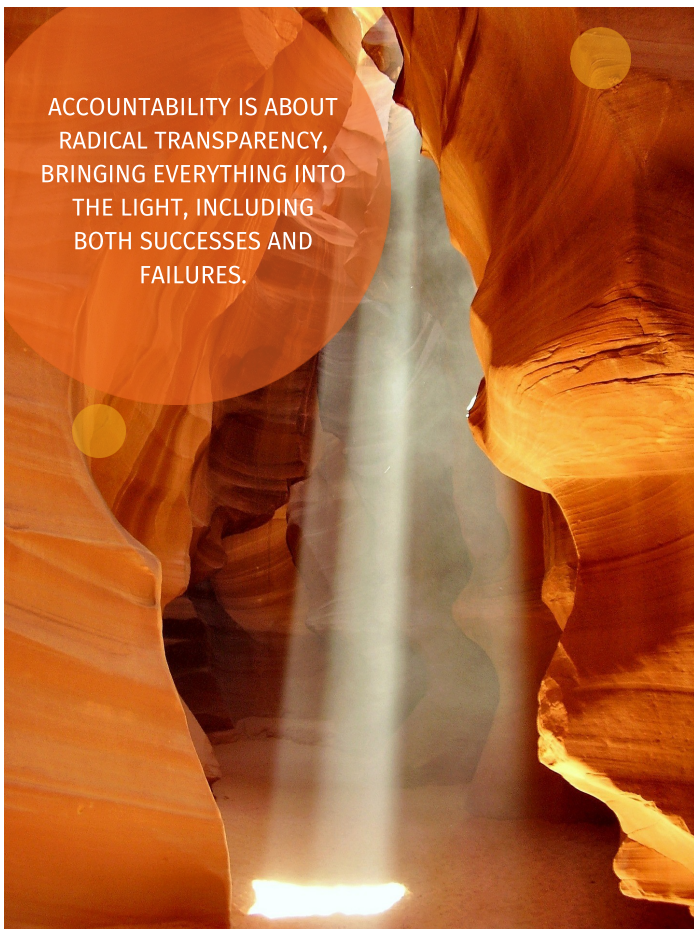
structures distort and co-opt accountability for their own purposes. Leaders describe mechanistic, soulless processes that seek to exert control, make judgements, check-up on narrowly defined performance and apportion blame. Unsurprisingly, leaders encounter life-draining emotions such as fear, trepidation and anxiety.

SOFT AND FLUFFY EXPERIENCE

The second reality is the 'Soft and Fluffy' experience, common in Christian organisations. Here accountability processes become toothless affairs, marked by dollops of polite, generalised affirmation. We avoid conflict, tough conversations, hearing and speaking truth, facing harsh realities. We fear what others think of us. People don't want to hurt our feelings or undermine our self-esteem, instead preferring 'niceness' over 'speaking truth in love'. We deny ourselves and others these precious opportunities to grow. After I joined Tearfund I found that the written summary of most annual reviews described colleagues exclusively in glowing terms. Yet many, I knew, needed to address significant issues. In most instances these had either been swept under the carpet or were alluded to so vaguely that people had no clue there were issues to address.

Neither experience reflects accountability at its best.

So how, as leaders, might we redeem the practice of accountability, ensuring that it leads to learning, growth and fruitfulness? Inspiring our passion and focus? Here are eight steps that have helped me.



1. Reframe the purpose of accountability.

The primary purpose of accountability has nothing to do with control, checking up, monitoring or judgement (see Matthew 7:1-2). Think about the word for a moment. Accountability is about giving an account of what I have done in the loving, truth-speaking presence of others – in order that you and I might learn, grow, continuously improve and flourish. It's what I think the twelve disciples did after being sent out by Jesus in Luke 9: 'When the apostles returned, they reported to Jesus what they had done. Then he took them with him and they withdrew by themselves...'

2. Choose to be accountable.

Accountability is ineffective when we see it as something done to someone. Instead we need to make a personal choice to be accountable. Most of us have a bias to suppressing inconvenient truths, avoiding difficult conversations, finessing reality to spare people's feelings and so on. Our ability to deceive ourselves is greater than we think. We all need the objectivity, affirmation and challenge that good accountability brings - space to scrutinise our decisions and actions in the company of friends and peers.

3. Measure what you are aiming for.

Accountability is hard to do without clarity of goals and of purpose. Well defined time-bound goals and measures enable learning conversations. They allow us to review progress and impact with shared objectivity. Two things to note: firstly, measurement is for our local learning, not for reporting up the hierarchy; and secondly, we need far better measures that actually reflect the fruitfulness we long to see. In a church setting, income and Sunday attendance are poor proxies. Rather we should focus on, for example, the degree to which people are growing as disciples, and the quality of our relationships. By the way, it is possible to set measures for these intangible goals.

4. Invest in relational skills.

The quality of accountability conversations is directly related to our 'relational intelligence' (see James 1:19). I'm still surprised how little we focus on core relational skills such as: listening; giving and receiving feedback; managing conflict; practicing forgiveness; asking great questions; thinking the best of others; inviting vulnerability; reframing conversations; and so on. In one organisation that I served, 85% of colleagues had never learnt how to give/receive feedback or how to listen actively, so we introduced a 'Relational 101' programme to raise our collective capability.

5. Embrace transparency.

Accountability is about radical transparency, bringing everything into the light, including both successes and failures – what's worked and what hasn't worked. Inevitably transparency requires leaders who are willing to

be vulnerable, who are confident in their identity as disciples, loved and accepted by God. In my experience accountability conversations produce the greatest fruit when exploring my failures, struggles and set-backs.

6. Be accountable to your peers...

Most formal accountability conversations are with people more 'senior' in the hierarchy. However, I often find that the most fruitful accountability conversations are with my peers. For over ten years I meet each quarter with two former CEOs. We spend 24 hours together sharing our professional, spiritual and home lives – the good and the bad. We ask questions, we challenge, we encourage, we pray (see Hebrews 10:24-25). We would all say that this time together is foundational to our fruitfulness.

7. ...and to those you serve.

Whilst leading Tearfund I experimented with many ways to be accountable 'downwards' to staff, to our local partners and to people living in poverty. Some of the deepest insights about organisational leadership flowed directly from these conversations.

8. Find somebody to coach and mentor you.

This is a brilliant first, safe step into the territory of life-giving accountability and the authentic vulnerability this demands of us. Find somebody who you trust to mentor and accompany you. Invite them to ask you the difficult questions. Receive their wisdom and encouragement.

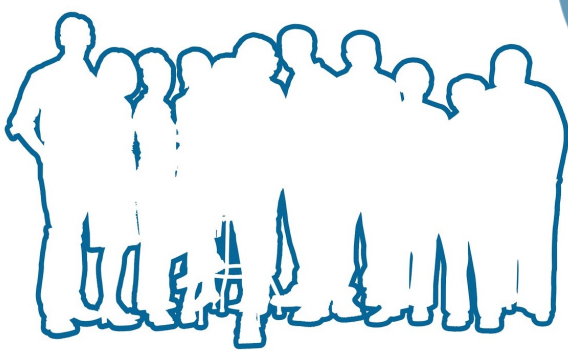
Running through all of this is a single recurring idea. Knowing that we are chosen, accepted and loved by Jesus gives us the courage to travel the uncharted path of authentic vulnerability. With this in mind, I'd say that the single most neglected leadership attribute is 'vulnerability'.

Frustrated with existing accountability processes, Sarah sought the advice of a friend, who suggested she meet a retired vicar in a neighbouring town. He agreed to mentor her. As she opened up about her anxieties she began to experience the liberating power of vulnerability.

Back in the parish, she took a risk and told others on the PCC about her fears, struggles and the loss of her missional hopes. Unbelievably (to her) people told her how awed they were by her, how self-sufficient she seemed, and that they had assumed she didn't need help. From then on people began to step forward with proposals to tackle the issues she had raised and practical ideas for new mission initiatives.

One of the lay leaders proposed making use of the 'Natural Church Development' survey as a way of reviewing progress towards the vision. The resulting conversations engaged the whole church and generated a wave of creativity and ownership that surprised Sarah. At a deanery chapter meeting she suggested to two other women priests that they start an accountability group - this quickly became a great source of support and mutual learning. At their last gathering, they asked her what had led to so much fruitful change. 'Discovering that a leader's willingness to make herself/himself vulnerable first is the key to redeeming accountability' she replied with a smile, 'and I guess I shouldn't be so surprised...'

FIND SOMEBODY WHO YOU TRUST TO MENTOR AND ACCOMPANY YOU. INVITE THEM TO ASK YOU THE DIFFICULT QUESTIONS. RECEIVE THEIR WISDOM AND ENCOURAGEMENT.



FOR REFLECTION

1. In what ways are you accountable to others? Do you practice accountability to be a life-giving or life-draining experience?
2. Which of the eight ideas for redeeming accountability might you give priority to? What first steps will you take?
3. What fears and anxieties hold you back from making yourself vulnerable to those you lead? How might you address these?
4. As a leader how might you encourage those you lead to reimagine accountability?