



Accountability as Covenant: The Taproot of Servant Leadership

by Ann McGee-Cooper, Ed.D & Duane Trammell, M.Ed

Why do we monitor, rather than mentor people?

Why does accountability end up last rather than first in our priorities?

As leaders in a research team, we are working with our Clients to find meaningful solutions to these and other questions.

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Brief Summary

Servant Leadership creates a new paradigm of accountability called “Covenant.” Whereas the old model of accountability focuses on one person answering to another person in authority, the new paradigm of accountability as covenant is based on creating a shared responsibility supported by collective vision, mission, and values. In this new model of servant-led accountability:

- While working on assignments, there is a two-way conversation that encourages on-going feedback.
- Ownership of tasks is shared with the individual performing the work, rather than only “the boss” monitoring.
- Individuals define their own life purpose/vision, connect to the shared organizational vision, and an intrinsic, self-and-shared accountability is created.

Practical Applications

EDUCATE TEAM MEMBERS ABOUT “VICTIM MENTALITY”

To shift to Servant Leadership Accountability, individuals must give up victim behaviors such as entitlement, blaming others, bashing groups, co-dependence, and feeling sorry for themselves.

ESTABLISH A 2-WAY COMMUNICATION MODEL FOR ALL ASSIGNED WORK

When performing work tasks, servant leadership moves accountability into on-going, two-way feedback conversations. The supervisor makes a safe space for questions and constant recalibration. Likewise, the one performing the work makes it safe for supervisors to offer feedback for work performed. This is done all throughout the job, and not just at the end. The supervisor offers support, resources AND “running room” so that the individual’s creativity is encouraged throughout the assignment.

When an environment for safe communication is established, examining substandard performance takes on a neutral tone. Assume goodwill; no one intentionally sets out to fail. Focus on what can be put in place to prevent the same mistakes from happening in the future.

ENCOURAGE AN ENVIRONMENT OF INTERDEPENDENCE/ COLLABORATION

When open communication feedback loops are established, there is much greater opportunity for collective intelligence. Asking questions, offering suggestions, recalibrating plans, experimenting with new ideas...all of these can expand from just the supervisor and responsible individual to peers, direct reports, and others who

might have input to improve the project and results. Rather than seeing feedback as an irritation, in the servant-led accountability model, team members welcome these additional ideas.

SHARE OWNERSHIP OF ASSIGNMENTS WITH INDIVIDUALS PERFORMING THE WORK RATHER THAN BEING IN THE ROLE OF “MONITOR”


In the old paradigm, it is easy to fall back into old habits. Supervisors can micromanage and see their role as checking up. Individuals can wait until asked about work before starting it. In the paradigm of servant leadership, team members work from their own sense of ownership creating intrinsic motivation. To accomplish this, provide training experiences for team members to identify their own life purpose/vision, values, and how these connect to organizational work.

WORKPLACE EXAMPLES: SOUTHWEST AIRLINES

Jeff Lamb, EVP for People explains that for accountability to occur, it is essential to clarify the playing field, establish scorecards so we know if we are winning, and create an environment where dialogue can occur.

CARROLLTON POLICE DEPARTMENT

Matt Kosec, Lieutenant relates an example of how he used two-way accountability and did not recommend one of his officers for a change in position because of lacking performance. Sometime later, this same officer wrote a letter of recommendation in support of Matt prior to his promotion to Lieutenant, because of the coaching he had given him around his lack of performance. This officer was eventually selected for a specialized position after performance improved.



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by Ann McGee-Cooper, Ed.D & Duane Trammell, M.Ed

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Why do we monitor rather than mentor people? Why does accountability end up last rather than first in our priorities? Why do we spend less time with those who we expect might “miss the mark” while giving those we expect to succeed our full attention? Is accountability as concerned with a person’s development as with what they produce? As leaders in a research team working with many corporate clients, we have been both curious and concerned in pursuit of meaningful solutions to these questions.

In this current climate of accelerating change, we are surrounded by shifting paradigms. One of these is accountability. The “current reality” of boss controlling and judging defines accountability as an obligation to account for and give an explanation of one’s actions and to bear the consequences for those actions.

However, a new paradigm is emerging which deepens and broadens the definition of accountability into something that begins with covenant. By creating a shared vision, agreeing upon core values and mission, the covenant becomes the shared map of where we want to go as a team. Accountability then becomes the rudder to keep us on course. If it is mutually created up front through the process of establishing Servant Leadership, a whole new paradigm emerges of what accountability means. Our deepest sense of self defines this new relationship. We lay out the role of each of us...how each can best support the other in achieving this shared vision. Both will be leaders AND followers, both will answer to the other upholding the promises made. Failures will be explored as opportunities to learn and grow. Each will expect to unlearn and change.

EXPLORING THIS NEW PARADIGM— A NEW WAY UNFOLDS

We all know well the old paradigm of not being personally responsible or accountable. Our American culture is saturated with a “victim consciousness,” entitlement mentality, and codependence. Simply turn on the television and see the amassing of talk-shows dedicated to giving those who have been “dumped on” a voice and a million-viewer audience, feeding on this belief system. Examine the leaflets and billboards encouraging you to file a lawsuit. Listen for “bashing” of polarized groups used as negative humor, or “politically correct” discounted as a social tool to avoid consequences rather than acknowledgment of the need to correct past unfairness. Note the strategy of dirty politics, labeling, and blaming with sound bite slurs and innuendoes...short-term thinking, finger-pointing, and projecting blame on others rather than looking inward for solutions. “They are doing it, so we will too” is seen as the way to get ahead and those who stick to the high road are labeled naïve.

Yet, when all is said and done, there is still ultimately accountability. Talk-show hosts become accountable as witnesses in murder trials for the outcome of public “surprises” which explode into violence; voters become accountable to vote “yes” or “no” on tort reform; consumers become accountable for the kinds of

businesses we support with our dollars. We may not see our participation in the bigger picture and thus think of accountability in a much smaller context of one person answering to another. Yet stepping back to consider the connections, how one’s behavior impacts another can open profound new possibilities and awareness.

In the old paradigm, “bosses” periodically judge the performance of each Employee, controlling when, how, and even if these so called performance reviews happen. Calling someone on the carpet, checking to see that each person is performing, and measuring and monitoring progress was seen as the job of the manager.

We have begun to learn that one MANAGES things, but not people. It takes LEADERSHIP to inspire the best and most effective performances within people. And this comes from the new paradigm, which is two-way, open ended, and on-going. The Servant-Leader asks to be coached and given honest feedback as well as offering the same to those served. Making it safe for team mates to be honest and being accountable to change, grow, communicate, and resolve differences in a spirit of mutual respect is the foundation of this new paradigm. Either party can initiate accountability, seen as skillful discussion or dialogue. “Help me understand....” or “Could we get curious together about why or how....” is the

In a recent meeting of our Servant Leadership Learning Community, hosted by Southwest Airlines, our good friend, Jeff Lamb, EVP for People, said, "We LUV accountability at SWA. And then he offered this example:

Clarify the playing field. You can't hold someone accountable for generalizations. "We want you to have that Southwest Spirit" is an example. We first had to create a picture of SWA Spirit. Warrior Spirit is working hard, not doing the minimum; being innovative, persevering, etc. A Servant's Heart is putting others first and embracing your SWA Family, and having a Fun-LUVing Attitude is not taking yourself seriously, and being a joy to work with. This is what we mean by Living the Southwest Way. When Employees have a clear picture of expectations, they can embed them into EVERYTHING, which allows for accountability, through increased performance coaching.

Secondly, Employees are happier if they know they are winning. Everyone knows "what gets measured gets done". So combining these two thoughts helped us create simple, Employee-created scorecards for almost every aspect of our business (including cost per learning hour, which was 1/4th of the cost in 2004). You can also see the results in the best Customer Service ratings of all time and #1 in On Time performance.

Lastly, our practice of accountability would confirm the work of Lencioni in "5 Dysfunctions of a Team". Trust and Conflict (debate and dialogue) are essential before accountability can be achieved and ingrained into the Culture. Trusting your Leader enough to disagree creates better outcomes or results. One of my favorite quotes on this subject..."If I have 8 people telling me the same thing, do I really need 7 of them?"

Jeff Lamb, EVP People, SWA



spirit of this new mutual dialogue.

Coaches ask,

What am I doing that helps you succeed?

What am I not doing that could support your success?

Where and how am I micromanaging?

What am I doing that you would like to do?

When and how do I shoot the messenger?

By becoming accountable to ourselves and our team members in all directions, we signal a new level of shared trust and INTERdependence. Strength through difference begins to take root. And, a collective intelligence (listening collectively for answers which emerge from very different perspectives) begins to replace a competition or hierarchy of singular intelligence (putting the "smartest" person in charge or competing on each issue for who has the "right answer"). In either case, much is lost because building on collective intelligence will consistently achieve beyond what the single brightest individual might propose.

REACTIVE VERSUS PROACTIVE

In a punishment/reward mindset, accountability is a "have to." It can be seen as unnecessary with good performers and something distasteful to have to do with lesser performers. But still, it is seen as one-way and done reactively, looking back on the

Accountability Paradigm

Hierarchy, Boss as Judge over Employee

Top down, one person judging
 “boss” controls “when”, “how” and even “if”
 accountability happens
 REACTIVE
 Punishment/reward
 Accountability a “have to”
 Seen as judging failure rate
 Win/lose
 Based on Distrust
 Legalistic
 Monitor
 Expectations Fixed

 Accountability as excuse/Justification

 Extrinsically driven

Servant Leader Coach/Mentor

2-way, open ended
 INTERdependent, teamwork
 Open flow created proactively
 PROACTIVE
 Celebration/Fail Forward
 Accountability a “want to”, “get to”
 Seen as discovery process
 Win/Win/Win
 Based on Trust
 Holistic
 Mentor
 Expectations in constant flux
 (growth & change anticipated)
 Accountability as dialogue to raise
 level of “Collective Intelligence”
 Intrinsically driven

performance of one person by another.

In the new paradigm, this process flows daily, as partners create shared goals, celebrate shared accomplishments and harvest “lessons learned.” Each so-called failure is seen as an opportunity to learn and used to “fail forward.” What does this teach us? How can we each benefit and leverage our collective resources to become more successful? In place of a hierarchy, each person’s role is defined as needed by the current circumstances. Though the Servant-Leader may initiate this process, if it is truly successful, soon any team mate will call for an accounting **BECAUSE IT IS REWARDING AND SAFE TO MEASURE PROGRESS, CELEBRATE, RECALIBRATE**

AND LEARN FROM MISTAKES. Identifying problems early brings valuable lead time for all. Problems can quickly be turned into opportunities because the focus is on solving rather than blaming. And, because the coach is seen as a resource rather than a judge, s/he is invited in early and often or as needed.

WIN/LOSE VERSUS WIN/WIN/WIN

If accountability is seen as searching out failure or level of success, a person’s self esteem is directly proportional to how much success is acknowledged. However, if accountability is seen as a mutual discovery

process, then each person is recognized as highly important to the process before it begins. In the new paradigm, high self esteem is continually nurtured. Within this context, a leaderful team works together to create a win/win/win. Rather than competing for who gets a raise, bonus or other rewards, why not work collaboratively so that each gets what they identify as important to them personally? If this happens, not only do these primary partners win, but the customers, families, team mates and community will most likely also benefit. This is the true definition of synergy where the whole is worth more than the sum of the parts. In win/lose situations, there is always distrust because the assumption is that only one party can win. If I win, you lose. However, in the new paradigm, we commit to stay engaged until we find a way for all to win. This calls for “thinking outside the box,” for discovering paradigm shifts, for making creative leaps. “Grow the pie instead of merely dividing an existing pie.”

LEGALISTIC VERSUS HOLISTIC

In the old paradigm there is an adversarial relationship. “I am the boss and it is my job to make you honor your commitments.” A contract implies that each of us will only honor the specifics as spelled out. Loop holes are painstakingly sought out. Distrust underlies this paradigm.

In contrast, holistic thinking tells us that the whole can be no stronger than the weakest link. If we invest major energy trying to “cover our backside” or litigating differences rather than searching out more imaginative solutions, we all lose. In the first situation, expectations are fixed and we assume that we are only accountable to the letter of the law. However, in this new time of fast change and in this new paradigm, we know that we need to operate at the level of covenant, by developing a high level of mutual trust. We establish a broad definition of shared goals and individual roles and responsibilities. Knowing that the situation will be in constant flux, we expect to renegotiate our needs and solutions as the situation changes. In this paradigm the level of shared trust is key. No person or party can be seen as more important. Each person is a potential leader of that about which they know the most. Yet simultaneously, each must equally be a follower of all others, synergizing and supporting the areas where others lead and know most. This is precisely why Robert Greenleaf’s concept of Servant Leadership is so powerful!

He challenges us with,

“Anybody could lead perfect people---if there were any. But there aren’t any perfect people. And the parents who try to raise perfect children are certain to raise neurotics.

It is part of the enigma of human nature that the “typical” person--immature, stumbling, inept, lazy---is capable of great dedication and heroism if s/he is wisely led.

Many otherwise able people are disqualified to lead because they cannot work with and through the half-people who are all there are. The secret of institution building is to be able to weld a team of such people by lifting them up to grow taller than they would otherwise be.

Individuals grow taller when those who lead them empathize and when they are accepted for what they are, even though their performance may be judged critically in terms of what they are capable of doing. Leaders who empathize and who fully accept those who go with them on this basis are more likely to be trusted.” (pg. 13 “The Servant as Leader,” published by the Robert K. Greenleaf Center. Copyright 1970)

Extrinsic Versus Intrinsic

In the old paradigm, accountability contributes to an extrinsic definition of self worth. “I am valuable if my boss and my company or others in authority (teacher, parents, critics, etc.) think I am.” In the new paradigm, accountability encourages each person to begin with unconditional love and acceptance of self and others. Intrinsic definition of self worth causes each person to be guided by personal values, then

personal and shared vision. Because each is free to speak openly and honestly, accountability is about asking, “Are we on course?” If anyone has information that the ship is headed in the wrong direction, a storm is coming up or the sails need mending, early discovery is celebrated and acted upon by all. The goal is a successful journey and great joy and satisfaction comes from shared progress. Consequences impact all and are shared.

This is dramatically different from the old paradigm, which leaves all internal partners essentially competing with each other for power, position, rewards and recognition. In this new time of fast change, collaboration is replacing competition. We may compete for clients and markets but still, our behavior must be collaborative. Our competitor for *Job A* may become our partner as we team to perform in high risk markets on *Job B*, where neither can afford the level of risk alone. In this new paradigm we are reminded that our resources of air, water, earth and biodiversity are shared no matter what. Awakening to this implication demands a new and more complex awareness of shared accountability.

In the old paradigm, accountability involves laying blame and offering excuses; whereas, in the new paradigm, accountability is more often centered on dialogue to raise the level of “collective intelligence”

and therefore to create more fruitful options. It is more about learning together and changing synergistically. Rewards are more about collectively achieving something of tremendous intrinsic value than they are about money, profit, or bonuses. Dollars, profit, and bonuses are the result of intrinsic accountability but not the motivator.

THE CORNERSTONES OF THIS CHALLENGING NEW PARADIGM ARE SHARED LEADERSHIP, SHARED VISION, AND PROACTIVELY ANTICIPATING CHANGE

Everyone must become both Leader and Follower, taking full responsibility for what they know best and the unique talents and perspective belonging to them. Meanwhile respecting that those balancing talents and perspectives of all others must be considered and integrated. It is fascinating to discover that within teams who know how to dialogue, creating much richer shared meaning, their collective intelligence rises to become much higher than the brightest member of their team. However, in teams where individuals compete to be right and have the last say, the collective intelligence falls below the level of the least bright team member because the brighter members begin to cancel each other out with power plays and intimidation. Others duck and choose not to surface their insights because it is not safe to do so. Information is

often withheld because information is power. So all the “pieces” are not available for all to see or know. Negative humor is often used as a power tool to coerce and control. Teams who use or allow negative humor will stay stuck in the old paradigms and may not realize why.

Creating a shared vision is primary and central to all else. As noted by Peter Senge in *Fifth Discipline*, creating a personal vision must precede the creation of shared vision. If not, the power of a compelling shared vision will co-opt those who have not defined themselves with a personal vision. They will eventually feel coerced by the group because of the void of self identity and personal meaning. However, once each has clearly created and aligned personal vision with a shared vision and purpose, this alignment becomes a powerful motivator and energizer. Now great energy comes from being accountable to this passionate shared vision. And with something magnificent to achieve, even people’s immune systems become engaged and stronger, based on internal bio-chemical changes triggered by the commitment to something inspiring. This fascinating connection first emerged in *Man’s Search for Meaning*, a true story written by Dr. Viktor Frankl, a prisoner in a World War II Nazi concentration camp. Dr. Frankl observed that those who carried a burning purpose in their lives were far more likely to survive than those who may have been

younger, stronger or in better health but lacking this strong personal vision or purpose to survive.

WHAT RESULTS CAN BE EXPECTED? WHAT ARE THE OUTCOMES FROM THE NEW PARADIGM?

Most of us thrive on and relish meaningful challenge as we grow stronger, more capable of managing risk and stretching personal performance when being supported by committed partners. It is not only much harder for most to perform alone in fast change, but we pay the price for our blind spots by learning of them too late. When we each proactively and intentionally partner with opposites and balance weaknesses with strengths, we each have enormous opportunities to change and grow positively. In today's world, if you DON'T change, you get left behind and that's far more painful and damaging. As leaders, if we don't give the people we serve every opportunity to grow and change, we are hurting them more. We are also betraying our sacred trust as leaders, not only to those we lead but also to those we collectively serve.

When people are empowered to achieve shared goals, accountability takes on a new meaning of purpose and commitment. At the conclusion of a recent meeting, one of our close colleagues asked the group in a Servant-Leader style, "What kind of accountability do you want to create?" The CEO did not impose

her ideas or give a hard date when results were due. Rather, she deferred this decision to her team. The surprise was that they wanted accountability and imposed an ambitious timeframe on themselves even though all were at a very busy time with other work. "If we don't put this up front, it won't get done. It's too important to let slide. Let's commit to completing this by the end of December (six weeks hence)." Because the vision was shared, because this team created and owned the plan, because the purpose and outcome was believed to be pivotal, this team chose to hold themselves and each other accountable for results. The CEO/Servant-Leader was asked by the group to circulate the results on the agreed upon date. Roles were defined and consequences spelled out.

We begin in life confronted by the challenge of learning to be accountable to oneself. Until that is mastered it is far more challenging to participate with others. Think of accountability as the taproot which reaches deep into soil and rocks, drawing precious nutrients and life quenching water while anchoring the plant against wind and storms. Is this not the role of accountability in our lives? Without this process, dreams, goals and promises go unfulfilled, which may discourage further dreaming. But by closing the loop and choosing to learn from all that happens, whether pleasing or disappointing, we send a taproot

deep into the soil of shared experience. With each accounting we learn and grow stronger.

“The best test, and difficult to administer, is: do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to

become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will he benefit, or, at least, will he not be further deprived?”

(pg. 7 “The Servant as Leader,” published by the Robert K. Greenleaf Center. Copyright 1970)

Matt Kosec, a member of our Servant Leadership Learning Community and a Lieutenant with the Carrollton Police Department, provides an example of how accountability is a two-way street with expectations placed upon the constituent *and* the leader who must serve the constituent by sharing information and setting goals. Here’s his story:

During 2003 I was serving as a night shift Patrol Sergeant responsible for seven Patrol Officers. A seniority shift bid system meant that the night shift was mainly composed of young, new officers. One officer, however, had come from another police agency. He lacked formal tenure with the department, but he had many years of law enforcement experience. This veteran officer was well respected by his younger peers and exerted a great deal of informal leadership on the rest of the shift.

After about six months on the shift a Crime Scene Officer position became available. The Crime Scene Officer positions rarely become available since the positions are limited. A supervisor recommendation is needed for an officer to apply for the position. My veteran officer applied for the position and requested my recommendation.

While the veteran officer was respected by his peers, his performance was lacking. The officer was not meeting expectations in terms of self-initiated activity. More importantly, he was not practicing community policing that was valued by the Department. I viewed the attainment of a position outside of Patrol as a major accomplishment and believed that recommendations should only be given to those who exceeded standards. I did not recommend the veteran officer for the position. I knew the officer had the ability to exceed expectations but he was not performing to that level. I discussed the issue with his previous supervisors and they used the words “lazy” and “burned-out.” I knew I could not tell the officer this is why I was not recommending him. I felt as though an

explanation was owed to the officer if I was going to deny him the position. I conducted an analysis of the officer's past performance so that his below-standard performance would be concrete and visible. I also conducted an analysis of officers who were exceeding expectations to show expected standards. I went back several years to look for patterns or problems.

I had never refused to recommend an officer for a position, so I was nervous when I called him in. When I told him that I was not giving my recommendation he initially looked concerned. However, after I showed him the documentation he actually began to agree with my recommendation. He had not realized that he had been performing so poorly and he took full responsibility for his actions. He cited a disagreement with a past supervisor and acknowledged that his reaction of shutting down was not acceptable. He took responsibility for his actions and stated he would strive to work towards my expectations. We now both had a target: Working to a higher level so a recommendation for a future position could be attained. I took this event very seriously, but later I discovered how important it was to the officer. Just prior to my promotion to Lieutenant the officer wrote a private email in support of my promotion to the Chief of Police. In the letter he wrote:

Some time back when there was an opening in Crime Scene I put in for it. Sgt. Kosec denied my application because of my past activity over the previous two years. But he didn't just say you can't be in the process, he compiled all of my data from the previous two years to show me why he did what he did. I was amazed that he would actually take the time to do this. He did not have to prove anything to me or show me what information helped him make his decision but he is the kind of person that takes an interest in people and an interest in his work. I had never in my eight years as an Officer heard of a supervisor doing anything like this.

The Chief shared the officer's letter with me. It was a stark reminder that accountability is a two-way street. Expectations are placed upon the constituent, but the leader must serve the constituent by sharing information and setting goals. A leader's service to others can be accomplished in many ways, including accountability.

As a postscript, the officer improved his performance and was eventually selected for a specialized position. He is now one of our best detectives and is contributing enormously to the organization and the community.

