# Building a culture of accountability in our organizations – Sinan Eden

**§0.** This note is a brief introduction to accountability, written in the Portuguese context, with the climate justice movement in mind. I strongly doubt that it would be worth-a-read outside of this context, as much better articles abound in English.

It is also mostly introductory by nature: although I do give examples of accountability, I would not dare claim structural coherence nor completeness of the examples.

**§1.** This note exists because accountability does *not* exist in Portuguese. Seriously, the word itself does not exist in the language. (Even Wikipedia in Portuguese uses the English word.)

*Prestar contas* is the first guess, but that refers to someone else asking you to account for what you did; accountability is used more like an adjective: people/organizations themselves are accountable or not; that is, **they themselves account for their actions (or inaction) without anyone asking for it**.

*Responsabilização* is a good approximation but still doesn't reflect accountability's meaning. *Responsabilizar* is something someone else would do to you, it's not a characteristics of a person/organization. On the other hand, *responsável* generally brings to mind someone who says they will do something and then delivers it (in contrast to "irresponsible"). Accountable has a stronger emphasis on **taking account of the consequences**.

In short, accountability doesn't exist in Portuguese vocabulary and, to be honest, that's a bit too obvious in the culture: when the word is not available, it's quite hard to circulate the concept itself.[1]

**§2.** There are two aspects to accountability in an organization:

1) Accountability *within* an organization: interpersonal relationships, delivering tasks, commitments, burden sharing, internal communication etc.

2) Accountability *of* an organization within the movement: assuming collective responsibility, relationship building between organizations, roles in joint campaigns and actions, external communication, etc.

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1   For all practical purposes, this note should have been written in Portuguese. But I wouldn't know how to do that without the central term.

**§3. Activism is about assuming historical responsibility to change the way things are.** It involves [organizing](#), [analyzing the problem](#), [strategizing](#), and [taking action](#).

At each of these steps, sometimes we fail, sometimes we succeed, many times we make mistakes.

For each of these steps, accountability is about

- To whom do we report back?
- From whom do we ask for feedback?
- How do we process the feedback we receive?
- With whom do we draw lessons?
- Who takes responsibility for the consequences?
- What do consequences mean in practice for us? What does taking responsibility for the consequences mean?
- What is the process to change our behaviors or structures to avoid similar mistakes in the future?
- Where does the power to change our behaviors or structures sit?

Let's explore these questions a little.

**§4.** To whom do we report back?

In fact, there is an implicit question here: Do you even report back? Too many times I saw someone or some organization saying they would take care of a certain task, and never reporting back unless explicitly asked to do so. Creating a culture where people and organizations ***proactively*** deliver concise reports on their pending or completed tasks is an essential part of accountability.

Inside the organizations, I heard way too many times "It was nice. There was a journalist too. The public reacted well." kind of feedback from actions and protests, which is extremely useful and others can further comment with their of reflections. What is missing in this descriptive feedback is *analysis*: Was the protest strategically relevant? What (political or organizational) mistakes were made? What are the underlying reasons for those mistakes? (Are they structural?) Were they avoidable? (If so, why weren't they avoided?)

There are loads of questions you can ask yourself after each action.

And then the real question comes in: To whom do you report back? There are many options here. You can report back

- to a coordination team (if such a thing exists in your organization),

- to the entire action team,

- to the entire organization,

- to other organizations,

- to the followers of your organization (if you have some kind of a newsletter set up),

- to the public.

You can choose a combination of the above and have several loops of reporting back and forth. For each layer, you can choose what kind of analytical report you want to deliver. My main point is that we *always* make these choices. When there is no evaluation procedure, that is *a choice* of having an unaccountable organizational culture. When we openly acknowledge our mistakes to others, we are *choosing* to create vulnerability in order to build a trust relationship with them.

**§5.** From whom do we ask feedback?

A similar implicit question exists here too: Do we even ask for feedback?

Do we actively go to people and ask "What did you think? What was good in the action that we should remember to repeat? What was bad in the action? Do you have suggestions for improvement?"? This barely happens within organizations, never to mention between organizations or with the public.

Accountability is about proactively asking for feedback from people that we *actually want to listen to*. Perhaps you made a solidarity action: consider ask feedback from the struggle you showed solidarity to. Perhaps you wrote a press release for the first time: ask feedback from a more experienced press person; also consider asking feedback from a journalist. Perhaps you gave a training: you may want to receive feedback from (some of) the participants. Perhaps you finalized a campaign recently: you may ask feedback from all other organizations involved, as well as from the target audience of your campaign.

What is crucial here is being genuine in asking for feedback. Do not ask for feedback from someone whose opinions you don't value. Be selective in asking for feedback.[2]

To remind, you may choose to ask feedback from:

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2   Be selective in receiving feedback, too: it's worth acknowledging that there is a lot of "unsolicited dick pic" culture too, where middle class white men approach organizers to give their opinions and suggestions without anyone asking for it.

- a coordination team (if such a thing exists in your organization),

- the entire action team,

- the entire organization,

- other organizations,

- the followers of your organization (if you have some kind of a newsletter set up),

- the public.

**§6.** How do we process the feedback we receive?

My problem is that feedback seems to be something that *happens* and not something people *do*.

Many times, we ask for feedback after an event or an action. This feedback takes place in plenary sessions, in meetings or maybe through online forms. What happens to that feedback? Does it get analyzed? Does it get published somewhere? Who has access to the feedback you received?

I guess what I mean is: Do not ask for feedback if you did not allocate resources to process them. It is not useful for you, and it may frustrate those who gave feedback if they don't see any follow-up.[3]

**§7.** With whom do we draw lessons?

Let's pretend, for the sake of argument, that, you reported back, you received feedback and you have a process to draw lessons from your mistakes and take stock of what went well.

Who can make suggestions? Who decides on those suggestions?

**Accountability is about actively letting yourself be influenced by others.** If you made a mistake and you need to repair it, you can do it by saying "I'm sorry." or by a public statement. Or, you can actually talk to the people or organizations that you may have hurt, and discover (with them) ways of repairing the harm. If during a campaign you identified space for improvement in your organization, you can take care of it on your own or you can ask partner organizations to suggest improvements. Depending on the relationship you want to build with them, you may want to include

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3  Acknowledging, at the same time, that not all feedback will result in follow-up. Feedback needs to be evaluated and will sometimes be considered not relevant. We definitely have an option of rejecting certain feedback, and this is definitely a difficult balance to get right.

them in the decision making about the suggestions. These apply also at interpersonal level.

**§8.** Who takes responsibility for the consequences?

As a Turkish activist in Portugal, I notice a major difference in two cultures: Social movements in Turkey tend to put the responsibility on specific individuals, and thereby avoid accountability as a collective. Social movements in Portugal tend to put the responsibility on the collective, blurring who was wrong, not specifying who is supposed to clean up the mess, and thereby avoid accountability as a collective. The result being the same, one side avoids accountability by blaming (or scapegoating in worst cases) and the other side avoid accountability by diluting the mistake in "horizontality".

Accountability is about taking responsibility for the consequences of our actions. This is not just taking the blame, but actually identifying what particular behavior caused what problem, and what structural or personal reasons underlie that behavior. Sometimes it's an individual who needs to do *mea culpa* (in a meeting or perhaps in public), sometimes it's a working groups, sometimes it's the whole collective. Whichever it is, the assumption of the consequence should be explicit.

**§9.** What do consequences mean in practice for us? What does taking responsibility for the consequences mean?

On 13 May 2014, an explosion at a coalmine in Soma, Turkey killed 301 miners. After massive public reaction and protests denouncing the miserable working conditions to which the unions had already alerted one year ago, on 17 May, the Minister of Energy and the Minister of Labor and Social Security held a press conference. They said they assume the responsibility of the disaster and that they would make sure justice would be served.

That press conference was the last thing they did on the Soma massacre.

In the rush of our daily activist routines, many of us and many of our organizations fail to face their mistakes. And when they do, it is too frequently reduced to a "We made a mistake, sorry.". Accountability brings in the next question: So if you were wrong and if you assume you were wrong, what now?

The climate justice movement is still largely dominated by middle class white folks. They come with a culture of auto-entitlement, and therefore apologizing for your mistake is seen as a major favor. When you question them after the apology, they get

quite defensive (from the softer interpretation "I apologized for it, what else do you want from me?" all the way up to "I already apologized, let go already!" and beyond). This attitude is then represented in the organizations too.

I am not referring to serious political mistakes only. In fact, those are rather obvious and in those cases the public or the participants demand reparation and compensation. I want to focus on the tiny little cultural details:

There is a difference between "Sorry but I cannot print the posters tomorrow." and "There is an unexpected overload in my schedule and I cannot print the posters tomorrow. However, I contacted another friend who will take care of it. I am really sorry for letting you down."

There is a difference between "Oh, I forgot to include your comments into the press release." and "I am sorry for not including your comments in the text. I will now edit the posts in our website and social media accounts so that at least it is visible in public. I will also call the spokesperson to remind your remarks."

The differences above are qualitative. When we pay attention to what our errors can cause and try to mitigate the consequences, we are building a trust relationship.

Acknowledging a mistake verbally can be considered honest. But it does not produce a culture of accountability unless connected to an active repair effort.


**§10.** What is the process to change our behaviors or structures to avoid similar mistakes in the future?

Several times, I would end up doing tasks for which I didn't have skills (like preparing an online poster or writing a formal statement). I wouldn't really like to do those tasks but there was no one else available. I would generally procrastinate until the day before the date and deliver *something*. Others would be disappointed by the low quality and would try to improve my work with last minute patches. The result would be frustration of everyone involved. I would apologize for incompetence; they would nod.

Then I noticed something: if I am not good at this (yet), maybe I should send a draft version some days in advance, so people can make suggestions or at least adjust their expectations. The result was surprisingly good: people commented on it, many times others took the lead and made better proposals; we were all relatively okay with the end result.

This applies to entire organizations too. Even when they apologize publicly, due to lack of internal restructuring they end up repeating similar mistakes.

So the interesting questions are: What happens *after* you acknowledge a mistake and *after* you mitigate its immediate impacts? Do you move on? Do you stop and consider? Do you document the mistakes? Do you revisit what errors you committed and what lessons you drew?

In fact, I have worse news.

Recall that in paragraph §3 I talked about organizing, analyzing the problem, strategizing and taking action. So far, I referred to mistakes in actions or at most in strategies. However, many of our mistakes derive from the underlying analysis and organization. Maybe our theory of change is wrong and we implement wrong strategies. Maybe our organizational culture is toxic and reproduces hierarchical power relations. No single mistake will directly point out to a root problem in our organization. We can discover them only by carefully analyzing the mistake and changing our patterns.

**And it's not just that our strategy or our processes may be structurally wrong. It's worse: Identifying such weaknesses takes work and resources.** You would need to spare time and energy to attend these issues. Therefore, accountability is also about learning and growing, consciously.

**The worst of it all is that processes and strategy cannot be departmentalized.** In an organization, if you separate people who act in the field and who decide what strategy is followed, you create not only a hierarchy but you also go against accountability: errors of some people imply consequences for other people. Similarly, a process group consisting of people who are not actively involved in the processes themselves will not address the burning issues as they are alienated to the reality they are trying to influence.

So, we not only have to question our behaviors and establish ways of changing them, we not only have to allocate resources to update or change our strategies and internal processes, **we also have to create space for the most active among us to spare time and energy to address these issues.** This is only possible if core people in your organization are not constantly overworked.


**§11.** Where does the power to change our behaviors or structures sit?

Lastly, I want to talk about individualism. I want to talk *against* it, of course.

The standard liberal discourse says you should be freely deciding on what you want to be. Inasmuch as this means "Don't let social structures determine who you are." or "Question the authority of those who want to impose their values on you.", I agree

with this bumper-sticker. However, freedom is not a self-contained property of the individual. It is constructed socially.

**Accountability is about exposing ourselves to others, creating spaces where we learn and grow together, creating vulnerability, and receiving support.** This can be done only on relationships based on trust, and relationships based on trust can only be achieved through gradually creating vulnerability.

At a personal level, this is very tricky. At organizational level, it may be less scary: If two organizations want to build trust and solidarity, it may be relatively easy to let them discuss your structures. If you want to build actual comradeship with them, you may let your organization be directly influenced by their comments.

If this sounds a bit abstract, consider intersectional work or outreach work: If you are an anti-coal activists, you may look for a coal trade union that you trust politically, and let them have decisive role in the planning of your actions (instead of post action apologies or reparations). If you are climate group, you may want a feminist group directly influence your gender discourse. You may want to build processes that allow other organizations to structurally influence you. This work will definitely be very confusing, but done genuinely can increase your accountability drastically.


**§12.** Before closing, I want to remind that all of this works *only when*

- there are *conscious choices*: you proactively ask for feedback from people and groups you trust and with whom you want to build trust, and

- *sufficient resources are allocated*: you create time and energy to address accountability.


**§13.** After twelve paragraphs, I realize that I never addressed the basic question: Why do we need accountability?

The fact is that you don't.

You may like accountability from an ethical point of view but that's irrelevant because it begs the question of *why* you like it in the first place.

However, you may need comradeship, you may need friends, you may need strong alliances. In that case, you would need accountability *strategically*. To build trust and power, you would need a culture of accountability surrounding you. Otherwise, you or your organization don't need any of the above.