

Accountability in Cross-Cultural Partnerships

By Daniel Rickett, Partners International

Cross-cultural partnerships simply don't work without accountability. You may have a compelling vision, a congenial relationship, and plenty of resources, but the rapport won't last if you don't have an accountability system in place. Regardless of the type of ministry or its size, every partnership needs to maintain accountability. It is the foundation for safeguarding credibility and building trust. Partners with clear systems of accountability are better equipped to handle the inevitable mistakes and misunderstandings that occur in cross-cultural partnerships.

Certainly accountability is no panacea. It doesn't eliminate cross-cultural confusion, it doesn't do away with poor performance, and it doesn't overcome personality conflicts. But while accountability cannot ensure a trouble-free partnership, it can keep the relationship on an even keel.

Accountability is easy to understand, but it is difficult to implement. To use it effectively, partners must have a common commitment to it, a clear understanding of what they are accountable for, and a shared set of ground rules.

Develop Commitment to Accountability

There are three steps to developing a common commitment to accountability:

Step 1: Check the way you think about accountability.

Somehow we tend to think of it as a one-way street. Accountability is something we get, not something we give. Test yourself to see if you fall into this trap: What did you think of when you read the title to this booklet? Was your first thought, "This is about how to get the 'nationals' to be accountable"? Rarely have I heard someone ask how to make him or herself accountable to a partner ministry. It's always about how to make the other guy accountable. So the first principle is that accountability is a two-way street. This is the difference between partnership and paternalism.

Step 2: Discuss accountability with your partners.

The necessity of accountability is so widely recognized that we tend to assume that everyone understands it. To avoid this mistake, make it a subject of discussion early on in the partnership. Start by asking your partners what accountability means to them. Discuss how it works in their culture and how it works in yours. Work through the following questions together:

- What is the purpose of accountability?
- How is it usually practiced?
- What are the benefits of accountability?
- How is it abused?

Step 3: Write a joint definition and purpose of accountability.

After you have reached some mutual understanding, define accountability and state its purpose for the partnership. This exercise leads naturally into identifying what it is you will be accountable for.

Identify Confidence Factors

Confidence factors are qualities or conditions that give you confidence that your partners will be able to fulfill their responsibilities to the partnership. What essential qualities or characteristics give you confidence that the partnership is healthy and productive? What do you need to know that makes you feel good about the relationship? (It may help to put it in the negative: What would cause you to lose confidence in your partners? What conditions or behaviors would threaten the relationship?) Each partner should do this exercise independently, then share their lists.

At Partners International, we start with a list of six confidence factors developed by Alex Araujo.(1) Over the years we have learned that when a ministry has the following characteristics, we can have confidence that they will fulfill their commitment to the partnership.

1. A reliable accountability structure.

Does the ministry have an accountability structure, such as a board of directors or the equivalent? Everyone needs to be under authority. Just as churches need elders, organizations need a board of governors who take seriously their responsibility to safeguard integrity, and steward resources, and to shepherd the leaders and staff of the ministry.

2. Clear goals.

Does the ministry have clear, measurable, and achievable goals and objectives? In a small ministry where everyone knows intuitively what they have to accomplish and why, it's possible to operate without written goals and objectives. But the moment you introduce a foreign partner, that is no longer sufficient. Partners have to get specific, especially cross-cultural partners. Clear goals and objectives tell the partners what to do, when to do it, and how to measure progress.

3. Written policies.

Does the ministry have written policies and procedures for managing money and personnel? This can sound bureaucratic, especially to a rural ministry in an oral society. It may also present problems in places where Christian activity is restricted or illegal. Still, we prefer to work with ministries that have fiscal policies and procedures. The policy does not have to be lengthy, but it does have to be formalized and the staff should be familiar with it.

4. Capable personnel.

Does the partner have the right number of personnel with the right skills to carry out its plan? Ministries are notorious for overestimating what they can accomplish. And they attempt to compensate by working harder rather than smarter. The result is a chronically overworked staff, people in the wrong jobs, deterioration in work performance, and, eventually, burnout. Under these conditions the partnership may be at risk. A good partner has to have the courage to point this out and a willingness to help solve the problem.

5. A good reputation.

Does the ministry have credibility among local Christians? If local people feel good about an organization, chances are you can too. But assessing a ministry's reputation cross-culturally can be tricky business. It's important to talk to several people who stand in different relationships to the ministry and to one another. At a minimum, this should include local and regional ministry leaders, companies with which the ministry does business, the board of directors and employees, and the constituents or people served by the ministry.

6. A favorable track record.

Do they have a history of keeping their commitments? Ask your prospective partner for the names of clients, suppliers, and other ministries with whom they have worked for at least two or three years. Contact these clients and ask how the ministry has handled its commitments. Ask about the ministry's track record over a range of issues such as paying bills, meeting deadlines, communicating with donors, and reporting results.

Other confidence factors might include fund-raising practices, publicity techniques, and financial self-reliance. Few areas raise more concerns than financial practices. In fact, it's fair to say that the entire issue of accountability is driven by suspicions about finances.(2) For example, suspicions arise when partners make unilateral decisions that affect the partnership. The problem with unilateral decisions is that the other partner may not be prepared to—or even desire to—follow through. When this happens, it is generally with respect to money. By offering aid, resource rich Western agencies can unwittingly become paternalistic. The receiving ministry may find it difficult to refuse because they don't want to embarrass the Western partner, or because they feel they really do need the money. Conversely, receiving agencies can obligate their funding partners by soliciting their partner's donors without prior agreement. You can avoid mistakes like these by conferring with your partners before you make any decision that might obligate them in some way. A confidence factor might well make a statement to this effect.

Once you've identified the confidence factors that make sense to you and your partners, you can move on to formulating ground rules.

Establish Ground Rules

Here are some ground rules to help you implement accountability. They are most appropriate for partnerships in which a foreign partner provides financial subsidy to a local ministry.

- 1. State your expectations in writing.**

To what will you hold one another accountable? Write it down. Whether you plan to use the six confidence factors above or a different list, put it in writing. Understand that this is not the same as insisting on a contract. The purpose is not to ensure compliance, but to avoid miscommunication and false assumptions. The problem with expectations is that they tend to change over time without our realizing it. If they are written out, however, we can always come back to that objective point of reference.

- 2. Share all relevant information.**

This rule requires that partners share all of the information they have that might affect the way they solve a problem or make a decision. Sharing ensures that all partners have the same data, including information that may reflect poorly on the partnership. (This means all information that pertains to the partnership, not necessarily all information about each ministry.)

- 3. Focus on outcomes, not intentions.**

For a ministry to navigate through the shifts and surprises of an ever-changing world, clear expectations are crucial. In the end, however, expectations are little more than good intentions. It's what actually happens as a result of ministry activity that is important. Accountability works best when each partner's performance is assessed on actual outcomes.

- 4. Review confidence factors often.**

The typical review process involves scheduling interviews to discuss where each ministry stands in relation to the confidence factors. Better partnerships meet annually. The best partnerships bring key personnel together twice a year. In any case, there is no substitute for face-to-face discussions about the issues that can make or break the relationship.

- 5. Resolve conflicts immediately.**

Partners working across cultural, economic, and geographical distances are bound to have conflicts. It's a given. It is unrealistic to attempt to keep conflicts from occurring. A better solution is to set up the relationship in such a way that disputes are resolved immediately. Immediacy is important because, when faced with a difficult problem, people tend to take the easy way out. Given the options of facing up to differences of opinion, resolving disputes, or avoiding conflict altogether, partners will likely choose avoidance unless they have agreed ahead of time to confront conflict and work through it to a resolution. It is surprisingly liberating to acknowledge that conflict is part of partnership, and that it can be used as a means of learning and growing.

For ground rules to be useful, everyone must understand them, agree on their meanings, and commit to using them. Partners should agree to use a specific set of ground rules only after they have carefully discussed them.

Once partners have agreed to follow ground rules, they must develop ways to ensure that they do so. One way is to refer to the ground rules when they review confidence factors and during other meetings. They might also critique themselves at the end of a review meeting to see how well they are using the ground rules and which ones they need to work on.

If you have worked out the ground rules in a negotiated manner, have not asked your partner to do something you are not willing to do, and consistently hold yourself to the rules, it shouldn't be difficult to get your partners to use them, too.

Twelve Ways to be Accountable

You have heard it said that people don't listen to what you say; they watch what you do. One of the most powerful tools at your disposal is your example. What do your partners see in your accountability? How are you accountable to them and to other important stakeholders?

To evaluate your own accountability, ask yourself the following questions:

1. Am I accountable to an informed and involved board of directors?
2. Are my goals for the partnership clear, measurable, and achievable?
3. Am I as concerned about good results as I expect my partners to be?
4. Do I earn my partners' loyalty by giving them mine?
5. Can I be counted on to fulfill my promises?
6. When I ask my partners to incur some loss or give up a benefit, do I lead the way by taking at least as heavy a hit?
7. Am I diligent in reporting back to my donors?
8. Can local Christians say that I won't mislead my donors or feed them half-truths?
9. Can I properly account for my trusteeship of funds?
10. When I ask the partners for a financial report, am I ready to share mine with them?
11. Am I compassionate with partners in difficulty?
12. Do I ask my partners to tell me when they think I am off the mark? When they do, do I respond positively?

It can be difficult to jointly identify confidence factors and establish ground rules. Intercultural partners need a lot of time and discussions to develop appropriate accountability. Such shortcuts as mailing out surveys or evaluation forms do not make for effective accountability. On the contrary, we espouse a relational approach that may involve more work than you expected. But you are certain to find that the results are well worth the effort.

The above article is adapted from *Building Strategic Relationships: A Practical Guide to Partnering with Non-Western Missions* by Daniel Rickett, Partners International, 2000.

Daniel Rickett is the Director of Partner Development and Strategy for Partners International, a ministry that works closely with non-Western missions in the least Christian regions of the world. Daniel is a co-founder and current member of the Coalition on Support of Indigenous Ministries (COSIM), an auxiliary group of the Evangelical Fellowship of Mission Agencies (EFMA). Daniel is a graduate of Michigan State University (Ph.D., Adult and Continuing Education) and Wheaton College Graduate School through Daystar University (M.A., Intercultural Communications).

(1) See "Confidence Factors: Accountability in Christian Partnerships" by Alex Araujo in *Kingdom Partnerships for Synergy in Missions*, ed. William D. Taylor, (Pasadena: William Carey Library, World Evangelical Fellowship Missions Commission, 1994) 119-130.

(2) See "Hindrances to Cooperation: The Suspicion about Finances," first published in *Co-operating in World Evangelization*, Lausanne Occasional Papers, no. 24, Wheaton, IL: Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, 1983, and reprinted in *Supporting Indigenous Ministries* edited by Daniel Rickett and Dotsey Welliver, Wheaton Billy Graham Center, Wheaton College, 1997.