

Accountability for Church Leaders

LEADERS & STAFF



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Practical Ministry Skills: Accountability for Church Leaders

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ACCOUNTABILITY FOR CHURCH LEADERS**Leader's Guide**

How to use "Practical Ministry Skills" by BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS in your regularly scheduled meetings.

Welcome to BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS: Your Complete Guide to Leadership Training. You've purchased an innovative resource that will help you develop leaders who can think strategically and biblically about ministry. Selected by the editors of Leadership Resources and Christianity Today, the material comes from respected thinkers and church leaders.

"Practical Ministry Skills" is completely flexible and designed to be easy to use. Each theme focuses on a practical area of church ministry and comprises brief handouts on specific aspects of that ministry. The handouts give a succinct and practical overview of the issues most relevant to your goals. You may use them at the beginning of a meeting to help launch a discussion, or you may hand them out as brief primers for someone new to a particular ministry.

This specific theme is designed to equip your leaders in the areas of integrity and ethics through accountability relationships. You may use it either for a training session or to give individually to key people in need of the encouragement and support of these kinds of relationships. Simply print the handouts needed and use them as necessary.

For example, to consider the importance of accountability, see "Counter-Cultural Accountability" (pp. 3–4). For an example of how one leader sets expectations, read "Establishing Boundaries" (pp. 5–6). To see accountability at work in the lives of friends, read "Developing Accountability Friendships" (pp. 9–10) and "Pursuing Accountability Within Friendships" (pp. 11–12). For practical tips on setting up an accountability group, read "How to Form an Accountability Group" (pp. 13–14).

We hope you enjoy this theme as you pursue holiness and integrity on your leadership team.

Need more material, or something on a specific topic? See our website at www.BuildingChurchLeaders.com.

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ACCOUNTABILITY FOR CHURCH LEADERS

Counter-Cultural Accountability

Western culture discourages accountability, but the gospel demands it.

Galatians 6:1–3

Individualism, narcissism, loneliness, value-free decisions—these are all key elements in the decline of mutual accountability in Western churches. Where once believers stood watch with each other, we are increasingly willing to wink at questionable ethical choices. The practice of ministry, however, always involves making, fulfilling, and keeping covenants. Accountability, mutuality, and interdependence in body life are what we are about in “being church” with one another.

Among the factors in our culture that discourage accountability in the ministry, seven are present in almost all ministries.

- **Individualism.** Individualism sees the self as an island of autonomous experience distinct from every other human being, a view that is unimaginable to most of the world’s population and has been for most of the world’s history. The individualist assumes that he or she lives in a private, protected territory where one is “free to choose,” to undertake projects of personal expression, and live a private life with a personal history separate from all others. Choices are defended as “my own business.”
- **Narcissism.** With the increase of individualism that grounds identity in self-esteem, there is the inevitable rise of narcissism. The classic characteristics of narcissism are an inability to make appropriate attachments to others, an inflated concern for one’s own interests, and self-centered moral processes.
- **Isolation.** Shrinking personal networks have come to characterize Western life. The healthy person needs from 20 to 30 significant relationships—five or so each drawn from family, church, work, play, neighborhood, and relatives. These are partially interlocking, yet richly varied networks of friends with commitment to intense, positive, reciprocal relationships with history and continuity. Many church leaders are hard pressed to name more than a few friends who are truly mutual and reciprocal. The constant temptation to be a helper in nonreciprocal and non-accountable relationships leaves a caregiver impoverished relationally, with less community than is necessary for healthy functioning.
- **Value-free society.** Contemporary society, in its commitment to pluralism and tolerance, avoids expressing moral judgments about people’s choice of religious beliefs or sexual habits. The capacity to rationalize questionable choices (excusing oneself) or tolerate immoral behavior (ignoring one’s neighbor) is central to socialization for life in a pluralistic society. The sense of being imbedded in moral realities that must be honored before God and others is not as assimilated in the depths of the psyche as it would be in settings where central commitments of faith are core beliefs that integrate life.
- **Decentered faith.** Christians used to say, “I believe, therefore I know.” Their faith was the essential beginning point of thought and action. That approach to faith has become, “I know empirically, therefore I can believe.” This rationally based, scientifically grounded Western approach to knowledge leaves little room for central commitments that spring from faith. Thus religious belief takes on different roles: as an additive (contributing an enriching dimension to life), as integrative (helping one make sense of difficult experiences), or even as the fulfilling completion of life. But when faith is no longer the source from which everything else springs, it becomes weak and decentered.
- **Superficial reconciliation.** Together these factors remove the possibility of deep reconciliation for those who are estranged by sin, prejudice, power politics, or old-fashioned feuding. Forgiveness becomes equated with tolerance, acceptance, and “love.” Repentance becomes a desirable consequence of forgiveness—rather than an essential ingredient in this difficult process. One individualist, with narcissistic tendencies, isolated from many genuine relationships, will set values aside, adjust faith commitments, and “forgive” another individualist’s shortcomings without working through injury and pain to authentic reconciliation.

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- **Confused authority.** An egalitarian society has led us to discard vertical models of authority, but it has not provided alternative models for distributing authority in community. Horizontal models of authority may require us to limit our individualism, to adjust our narcissistic self-realization, to commit ourselves intentionally to building personal peer networks with integrity, and to make increased commitments to values, core faith positions, authentic repentance, and renewal of relationships.
- **The Mark of maturity.** Accountability is essential, central, and definitive of life in the community of the Spirit. Who will confront the patterns of individualism, self-absorption, and isolation if not pastors and leaders who choose to create rich networks of relationships to teach by lifestyle what personhood-in-community means? Who will model mutual accountability in the church if pastors will not? We must model spiritual maturity by entering accountability relationships and becoming exemplars of life in community.

—DAVID AUGSBURGER; excerpted from our sister publication CHRISTIANITY TODAY, © 1987 Christianity Today. For more articles like this, visit www.ChristianityToday.com/ct

Discuss

1. Which of these seven characteristics have you observed in your own life of relationships?
2. Can you think of any other cultural barriers to accountability that the author did not mention?
3. Are leaders responsible for modeling accountability relationships to their churches? Why or why not?

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Establishing Boundaries

Determine how—and to whom—you need to be accountable.

Proverbs 15:1

A leader's accountability can be difficult to structure, as it sometimes opens him or her up to damaging criticism, especially if the leader is pastor or other high-profile servant. In order to think rightly about accountability, I find it helpful to remember my legitimate spheres of accountability.

To God

Being accountable to God means being obedient and faithful. Knowing when and how to obey begins with maintaining a strong devotional time with God. Thus I consider my "quiet time" my first priority each day. I also try to spend one day a month in prayer and fasting, studying the Word, and just being quiet before him. Such times give me perspective and help me sort out the varied advice that comes my way and respond to those who offer me healthy accountability.

To the Members of the Body

I am accountable to the church for a number of things: leadership, pastoral care, administration, and modeling the Christian life, to name a few. Above all, I have a responsibility to feed God's flock and nurture his people. That means I have to give myself to serious study in preparation for teaching and preaching.

To Other Church Leaders

I choose to be accountable to other church leaders both in the execution of my professional duties and in the conduct of my personal life. Specifically, this includes living up to the elder's qualifications outlined in 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, as well as fulfilling the specific areas outlined in my area of responsibility.

To My Family

Accountability with my family begins with my taking a weekly Sabbath. Not only does the Lord command his people to take a regular day of rest, but our ministry, family, and church have been enhanced and enriched by our Sabbath observation.

I've also found it helpful to ask my family to hold me accountable for my ministry. For instance, I make sure my family feels a call from the Lord before we move to a new ministry opportunity. Including my family in this way has prevented me from feeling alone during crucial decisions. Their support and feedback encourages me and helps me discern God's leading.

To the Larger Church

One of the major challenges pastors face is the Lone Ranger syndrome. Many pastors act as if they are "in charge" of their ministry. That attitude invariably leads to conflicts, divisions, and resentments, not only within their ministries but also without. In my opinion, such pastors are out of line and need to be called to accountability, as their conduct denies the Spirit of Christ and his prayer for unity. For that reason, whatever position I've been in, I've always given some of my time and energy to promoting cooperation among churches.

To the Community

Because of Jesus' command to render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, leaders of local churches are accountable to the local authorities, as long as their relationship doesn't compromise the integrity of the gospel.

When people from different spheres each make legitimate demands of me, I seek the Lord's will in prayer and ask a board of church leaders for their perspective.

How to Foster Legitimate Accountability

We need to take positive action to encourage helpful and healthy accountability in each of these spheres. Here are four ways I've done that.

1. Welcome it. I try to maintain an open ear for feedback and a willingness to honestly evaluate suggested counsel. If I get tense, everybody gets tense, and that makes accountability all the more difficult.

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2. Model it. Holding others accountable requires a willingness to confront others with difficult truths in a spirit of love. This also models to others how they can hold us leaders accountable. It's a form of the golden rule—treating others as we would want them to treat us.

3. Use any confrontation as an opportunity to teach about accountability. Christ used conflict and misunderstandings as a stage for instruction. Following his example, when I confront anyone, I say, “The reason I’m going through the discomfort of bringing this to your attention is that I want your best. We all have blind spots, and if no one loves us enough to tell us about them kindly, we suffer unnecessarily all of our lives.”

4. Never question people’s motives. Accusations are like chemical weapons: they poison the atmosphere. Early in my ministry God taught me to never question another person’s motives. When I wonder what’s driving someone, I approach them about it instead of jumping to conclusions. I might say, “I may be wrong, but it looks to me that so-and-so happened. Tell me how you’re feeling about it.” When I refuse to question other’s motives, they are less likely to question mine.

Accountability is absolutely essential for all Christians, especially Christian leaders. When we belong to Christ, we belong to each other.

—PAUL CEDAR; Copyright © 1990 Christianity Today. Excerpted from *Mastering the Pastoral Role*.

Discuss

1. Which of the above spheres of accountability do you ignore or avoid? Which do you find most essential?
2. Which of the four steps of encouraging healthy accountability do you find most challenging? Why?
3. How have you seen your leadership blessed by having accountability relationships in place?

ACCOUNTABILITY FOR CHURCH LEADERS**Creating Opportunities***Actively seek avenues for constructive accountability.*

Ecclesiastes 4:8–10

Near the ten-year anniversary of my ordination, I was foundering. I felt isolated, weary, and on the edge of that overused but apropos term “burnout.” During the day, my energy level sagged, and the simplest tasks, such as returning phone calls and cranking out another adult education brochure, became chores. I awoke at three o’clock in the morning with a mile-long list of gnawing worries. I read the want ads and studied college brochures, trying to discover if there was anything else I could do to make a living.

With the help of a therapist, I came to see I was so busy taking care of everybody else, that I wasn’t taking good care of myself. I began to make changes: I took more time off and developed interests outside the church. Then a new call came. I packed up my life and journeyed 1000 miles away from my family and growing sense of community and began the process of starting over in a new church setting. This time, I had a chance to do things differently.

In an effort to avoid burnout, I’ve sought four avenues of support and accountability.

A Friend

First, I have cultivated a friendship with a person who is not a member of my church but is a committed Christian who understands church. Our conversation is no-holds-barred and runs the gamut from sidesplitting laughter to heart-wrenching tears. Her questions don’t allow me to get away with anything.

One blue Monday, as I bemoaned the lack of congregational feedback, she made a direct hit: “Why is affirmation so important to you? How much of your ego is wrapped up in your preaching?”

A Sounding Board

I have also been meeting monthly with a small group of seven denominationally and theologically diverse women pastors. We rarely talk theology, and we don’t pray together. We simply talk shop.

I confided in this group about the hurt and frustration I felt when long-time members of my new congregation announced that they were leaving the church, because they didn’t believe that a woman could be a senior pastor.

We laugh together, and we wonder aloud about how women pastors do ministry differently than men. We talk about how to get a life outside the church. We talk about problems in our churches and how to lead effectively. This group is unique, a sounding board where we share our vocational lives. When I share out loud, I see in the eyes of one or more of these sisters the bright glint of recognition.

A Spiritual Director

I consciously stepped outside the comfort zone of my tradition and sought a spiritual director. She has helped me to listen to my life, look at my fears, own up to my mixed motivations, and slow down long enough to hear what God is saying. She takes God seriously, and she takes me seriously.

She has reminded me that there is a huge difference between working for God and being with God. She has likewise helped me learn to confront and find victory over my greatest sins.

A Peer Group

I recently covenanted to meet monthly with three other Presbyterian pastors, all of whom happen to be men. Our ministries are fairly dissimilar: one is a pastor of a new church development; two are solo pastors of smaller churches; and I pastor a large, multi-staff church. Yet we desire to support each other because (1) ministry can be so incredibly isolating, (2) we’re all relatively new to the area, and (3) we’re more or less neighbors. We help each other answer questions such as, “Do you have a food closet?” “Can we build a Habitat for Humanity House together?” “How did your stewardship drive go this year?” “Our budget is behind several thousand dollars; how about yours?” “What do you do for officer training?” “What session [board] member is driving you up the wall?” “Do you have any good counselor referrals?”

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Our hope is that we can talk openly about our joys and struggles in the church, even to debate theological hot potatoes, and, perhaps most important, to pray together. I am looking forward to our partnership.

—HEIDI A. HUSTED; Excerpted from our sister publication Leadership journal, © 1996 Christianity Today. For more articles like this, visit www.Leadershipjournal.net

Discuss

1. How have you been active in seeking accountability?
2. Which of the above forms of accountability are you most in need of? How can you foster this sort of relationship?
3. What accountability opportunities are available to you in your current situation?

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Developing Accountability Friendships

Work an intentional accountability relationship into your schedule.

Proverbs 27:17

Following a session at a ministers' conference, one pastor confessed to me, "I've never had a best friend. I've been so busy working for the Lord that I've never found the time."

I could hear the loneliness and longing in his voice. I could also feel it, because ten years ago I'd felt the same way. I was considered a successful youth leader and teacher, and I was trying to live the Christian life as best I understood it. Yet I felt lonely. Things weren't rotten; I wasn't in a state of desperation. But something inside me said, *There has to be more to the Christian life than this.*

Then I met a guy named Rob. He was a young, rising business executive from the right side of the tracks; I grew up on the wrong side of the tracks. He was single; I was married. We didn't have a lot in common, but I soon discovered that Rob's concept of life was similar to mine: focused on friendship with God and being himself with others. We started jogging and playing racquetball together. I began to look at him as a friend, and after a while I started relying on him as a sounding board. Eventually we began to talk about our spiritual journeys, some of our struggles, the dreams we had. We discovered that both of us were lonely.

Making Time for Accountability

Rob and I enjoyed getting together, but our schedules were so crazy that we could go for weeks and never talk. Then one fall afternoon we decided we would try something: once a week we would get together just to talk about our highest ideals and our deepest needs, and we would pray for each other regularly. At the time it seemed funny that we had to be so intentional about developing a friendship, but we both recognized that with the pace of life, if it weren't on the calendar, it wouldn't happen. Before we began meeting, we established some guidelines for our relationship:

- We would never share more than we felt comfortable talking about.
- We would not offer advice or criticism unless asked.
- We weren't each other's therapists; we were friends who would help each other in the spiritual life.
- We wouldn't try to change the other person but would work together on changing ourselves.
- We'd try meeting for a year and then consider whether to continue. If we stopped the weekly meetings, we'd still be friends.

The guidelines took away my fear of meeting with Rob, because I knew I wasn't going to come out feeling beaten up.

Tackling the "Big Three"

Only with a special kind of friend can you talk about the three issues with which we all struggle: money, sex, and power. Most Christian leaders I've encountered have no one, including their spouses, with whom they can talk candidly about these kinds of struggles. That fall afternoon, Rob and I agreed we would try to talk honestly about those areas.

Both of us travel at times, so I found it helpful to know that when I returned from a trip, Rob might ask me about my sexual thoughts. Knowing I was going to have a chance to talk about it helped free me from temptation in bookstores and movie theaters, and freed my mind from sexual thoughts.

Once, after talking about budgeting, Rob and I went home and talked to our spouses about working out a household budget. We then shared it with each other to help identify how our budgets reflected our priorities. We've also used each other as a third-party perspective on major purchases.

Another time, Rob helped me identify ways I was contributing to an unpleasant relationship with another member of the church staff. Following our conversation, I apologized to my colleague. That conversation didn't remove the tension in the relationship completely, and we never became best friends. But it helped to disarm our competition for power and end the subtle hostility that was moving us further apart.

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Rob and I are now in our ninth year together. The longevity of our relationship is one of its strengths, because each of us now has a historical view of the other person's life. We're able to say, "I remember how you dealt with this before, and you have really grown."

We're also less able to con each other. Most of us, when we have a problem, cast ourselves in the best light and blame circumstances or other people. But Rob and I know each other well enough now to keep each other honest.

I discovered this "spiritual discipline" didn't have to be grim, hard work. Our time together is not just a spiritual review but also a relaxing time of recreation. We sometimes skip the lunch and play racquetball. After all, we weren't looking for therapy or Bible study. We were looking for a friendship that would help us both minister more effectively.

—GARY W. DOWNING; Excerpted from our sister publication, LEADERSHIP journal, © 1988 Christianity Today. For more articles like this, visit www.Leadershipjournal.net

Discuss

1. What factors prevent you from pursuing an intentional accountability relationship?
2. Can you think of someone with whom you would like to intentionally develop an accountability relationship?
3. Do the "big three" cover every necessary area of accountability, or are there other issues that you face as a church leader?

ACCOUNTABILITY FOR CHURCH LEADERS**Pursuing Accountability Within Friendships***How three busy leaders prioritize their no-holds-barred friendship.*

Proverbs 18:24

Pastors Scotty Smith and Scott Roley and musician Michael Card share a friendship of resolute accountability. They discussed the dynamics of their friendship with LEADERSHIP journal, diving into what accountability looks like in their busy ministry lives.

What unique strengths and challenges does each of you bring to your relationship?

Scotty Smith: One thing Mike brings to our relationship is brutal honesty. He doesn't fake things well. Scott brings the passion. He is a radical, passionate encourager, and God has given him a unique gift that translates not so much into answers, but into presence.

Scott Roley: Scotty brings devotional strength. In fact, one of the glues in our relationship is the gospel that Scotty introduced me to: that it's in our brokenness, weakness, and repentance that we will grow.

Concerning challenges, Mike's a doer, and he can be a loner. He is gifted in a lot of different things and can hide in them. As for Scotty, I've never met anyone who makes as quick a decision—and is right most of the time—as Scotty. The gift makes him a great pastor, teacher, and counselor, but it can also rob him of the need for others.

What do you consider the foundation of your accountability relationship?

Roley: We have mutual respect for one another. We have, I think, points of disappointment and frustration with each other. But we come to the table thinking, *We're here together for the rest of our lives.* So that's settled.

Michael Card: That respect is important. Often my motivation for not deceiving these guys is not personal righteousness; it's because I don't want to be caught by Scotty or Scott. They know me best, and they'll catch me first. They're the two guys I respect most in the world, the two people I don't want to disappoint.

Smith: The pain of love is stronger than the pain of legalism. If this were just an accountability group that had a list of things to check off, we could say, "I blew it," and move on. Accountability groups have to constantly monitor legalism and moralism, because if they're not driven by the grace of the gospel, they become idol factories.

Would you share something with these friends that you would not share with your spouse?

Smith: My wife and I don't keep secrets from each other. But I can discuss dynamics of life with these guys that only guys who are married can really understand, which propels me back into Darlene's life to love her more faithfully.

Roley: My wife, Linda, pushes me out the door, saying, "Go be with Scotty and Mike. You always come back better. I don't necessarily want to know all the details."

How do you hold each other accountable in the area of sexual purity?

Roley: I have said to these guys, "Here is the name of a woman I'm sexually attracted to. If you see me talking to this person longer than 'Hi, how are you?' then you need to bust me. Throw your arm around me and say, 'Scott, what's the scoop?'"

Smith: Several years ago a woman I was counseling was being unduly forward, sharing a lot of intimate information about her bizarre sexual lifestyle. It felt as if she were coming onto me. I didn't name the person but said, "Guys, I'm not beyond being really stupid. This is what is going on." I think we all know ourselves well enough to realize that for us a physical affair would happen only after certain compromises. So in this instance, these guys needed to hear my confession to see if there was an emotional shift within me that would make me more vulnerable.

In the end, though, we're probably more committed to holding each other accountable for believing the gospel than simply the specifics of what we do. Issues such as sexuality and power are ancillary.

Do you monitor each other's busyness?

Card: Scott's the main one. "The need is not the call"—that's our motto for Scott. But I used to tour all year long—150 concerts a year. Scotty saw that and said, "This is sin." So I now tour in the spring and fall and perform about 60 concerts a year.

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Roley: Part of our friendship is helping Mike to make right decisions so he doesn't burn out.

How have you held each other accountable in the area of money?

Roley: Mike has a job with the potential to earn a ton of money. Yet he has a desire to care for the poor. I oversee our urban ministry, and one day we needed a van. I said, "Mike, here's an opportunity for you to give," and he gave. We're also building a school for the poor. I called him and said, "Here's an opportunity for you to give," and he gave.

On the other hand, Scotty has helped me get my finances in control so that I can give. Also, if I keep saying, "Man, I'm broke," they can say, "Why? Where are you spending your money?"

Card: Christian psychologist Larry Crabb, who's had an impact on all of us, told the young men he has disciplined, "If you ever get in a place where there's this or that temptation, remember my face." Whenever temptation comes, I remember these two guys' faces. One thing community does is it gives us a face.

What has your group not done right?

Card: The only regret I have is that at times we've been too busy. I remember in particular there was a season of a month or two when I didn't talk with these guys.

What has your friendship taught you about accountability?

Smith: The strength of community is tested by what questions come to the surface.

Roley: These two will never know everything about me. I'm just too big a sinner for Scotty and Michael to know me fully. Yet these two know me well enough that if I said, "I have a deep secret," they would know exactly what it was without my confessing it. In some ways, they know me better than I know myself.

Card: It's a myth that accountability can occur outside of community. Accountability does not come before community.

Roley: Also, I don't think you can love well if you say, "I'm here to keep you from doing something."

Card: But our friendship is a way for dealing with our sin when it does happen—and it's going to happen.

Smith: We're not watchdogs; we're watchmen. And there's a big difference.

—Excerpted from our sister publication LEADERSHIP journal, © 1996 Christianity Today. For more articles like this, visit www.Leadershipjournal.net

Discuss

1. Do you currently have friendships you could develop into an intentional accountability group?
2. Scotty Smith warns that accountability groups can become "idol factories." Do you agree or disagree?
3. Which of the above insights into accountability do you find the most refreshing or encouraging?

ACCOUNTABILITY FOR CHURCH LEADERS**How to Form an Accountability Group**

Follow these steps for establishing an accountability group.

James 5:16

An accountability group exists to help the people of God stay pure and faithful in their walk with him. In other words, it provides a context in which to live out James 5:16: “Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.”

There are many benefits and blessings that come with an accountability group. Here are three:

1. The group helps each member submit every part of life to God’s will, because it keeps its members accountable to acting in a holy way. As each member continually submits her life to God, God grows her character and she matures in her walk with Christ.
2. Group meetings provide a regular time of encouragement and prayer for each member.
3. The group builds strong friendships between brothers and sisters in Christ.

The following principles can help you develop a successful accountability group.

Decide Whom to Invite

It is best to form the group according to gender. It is often difficult for coed groups to hold each other accountable to sexual purity. As you pray about whom to invite, consider these criteria:

- Each person you invite should seek to follow Christ faithfully, care about their character, be able to keep a secret, and not belittle others when they fail.
- No one who gossips about others should be invited. The effectiveness of the accountability group will be limited by how vulnerable its members are willing to be. Vulnerability will be destroyed by gossip.
- You need to know those you invite well enough to know that they fit the above criteria.

The size of the group is also important. If you calculate five minutes for each member to share and be prayed for, a one-hour meeting time will be sufficient for a 12-member group. On the other hand, the larger the group, the harder it is for members to build friendships with each other. For example, if someone in an eight-member group knows five people well but doesn’t know the other two, he probably won’t be as vulnerable during meetings as he would if he knew everyone. So use discretion concerning how many people to invite. If you have 11 people you want to invite, consider asking one of them to start a group himself, making two six-member groups.

Send an Invitation

Once you have finalized a list of people to invite, write an invitation with the following guidelines in mind:

- Include a short explanation of the purpose of the group.
- Indicate that accepting the invitation requires a commitment to attend regular meetings and invest in the lives of the other members.
- Ask the recipient to pray about whether God wants him to join the group.
- Ask the recipient to respond by a given date, usually around four weeks after the invitations are mailed.
- Include a page upon which they can write questions about the group.
- Don’t include details about when and where the first meeting will be. Only those who commit to being members of the group should be invited to the first meeting.
- Don’t mention the names of the others whom you are inviting. The recipient’s decision to join should be between him or her and God, and not dependent upon who else is in the group. Also, if someone decides to decline the invitation, his decision should be respected and kept confidential.

Determine a Meeting Time and Place

You can officially launch the group when you have everyone’s final response. Start the group even if only one person is interested.

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Next, consult with the other members and set a time and place for your meetings. The place needs to be private, somewhere everyone in the group feels safe from intrusion.

The length of your meetings will depend on everyone's schedules and on the size of your group. Here's an easy way to determine the appropriate length of each meeting: multiply the number of members by five (or seven) minutes. Using this method, an ideal meeting for six people is 30–35 minutes. This only works, of course, if everyone is always on time. Multiplying by a larger number of minutes allows a little extra time for chatting.)

I strongly recommend having weekly meetings, as it will be difficult to maintain effective accountability if you meet less frequently. Once you have these logistics figured out, you need to prepare for the first meeting.

—CHRISTOPHER EASLEY; Copyright © 2006 Christianity Today/BuildingSmallGroups.com

Discuss

1. Can you list any other benefits or blessings of accountability groups not mentioned by the author?
2. How do you feel about the author's criteria for choosing group members?
3. How much time do you think it is necessary to allow for an effective accountability group meeting?

ACCOUNTABILITY FOR CHURCH LEADERS**How to Conduct an Accountability Group***Ensure that your group includes the necessary elements.*

James 5:16

Accommodate Confession and Prayer

There are two elements essential to an effective accountability group meeting: confession and prayer.

During the time of confession, each member should share the temptations he has faced and how well he has resisted those temptations since the previous meeting. One way to facilitate this time of confession is for the leader each week to ask the following four questions of each member:

1. What temptations did you face since our last meeting?
2. How were you delivered from those temptations?
3. How did you give in to those temptations?
4. Are you unsure if any of your actions, thoughts, or words since our last meeting were sinful or not? If so, which ones?

Another way to conduct this time is to establish at the first meeting what each member will share each week, and then let them share, without asking them these questions, each week.

Someone may confess a sin of which they appear to be ashamed. If you observe this to be the case, ask him if he has been able to receive the Lord's forgiveness for his sin. If he says he still doesn't feel forgiven, lay a hand on him and say, "You are forgiven in the name of Christ." It is important to affirm that we have been forgiven for our sins when we repent of them. You may be tempted to respond, "That's okay," but this is neither true nor helpful. Rather, confirmation of forgiveness is the truthful response to a confession of sin.

Remember to ask the members how they fared concerning sins and temptations they mentioned at the previous meeting. It may be useful to take notes that you refer to during the prayer time and at the next meeting.

After everyone shares, the leader of the week can ask if anyone would like to be kept accountable throughout the week outside of the group meetings. For example, someone may want to be telephoned during the week and asked how she is doing. This is the time to determine how each member can get the accountability he or she wants and needs.

The second essential part is group prayer for each member concerning what he or she has shared.

A short opening prayer helps focus everyone on God and signals that the meeting has officially begun. When we close our meeting, we pray in a circle, asking each person to pray for the person on his left or right.

Feel free to experiment with formats. The goal is to have a format that provides a comfortable context for the confession of sins and group prayer. You might find it helpful, then, to have the leader of the week prepare a get-to-know-you question. It is hard to start a meeting by immediately sharing deep, personal problems and difficulties, even if everyone knows the purpose of the meeting. Beginning with a warm-up question can build trust among members. Whatever you decide to do, try one format for a couple of meetings, and if it doesn't accomplish the goal, change it. You want to find a format that works and then stick with it.

Leadership of individual meetings can rotate from person to person. Once you've settled on a familiar format for meetings, ask the other members if they would like to lead the meetings once in a while. The leader of the week would be responsible for preparing discussion questions or devotional thoughts for the meeting. That is, the leader of the week should do anything you would do as the leader.

ACCOUNTABILITY FOR CHURCH LEADERS

Assess the Health of Your Accountability Group

Periodically assess the health of your group. A healthy accountability group will display the following qualities:

- **Vulnerability:** Each member is honest about how he has failed. What is shared in the group stays in the group.
- **Acceptance of God's love and forgiveness:** Each member accepts God's forgiveness, trusts him, and rejects feelings of guilt and shame.
- **Validation and support:** Regardless of what temptations a member struggles with, he should be accepted by the group and loved, not judged or ridiculed.
- **Commitment to prayer:** The members of the group together ask God to strengthen them as they face temptation, forgive them when they fail, and help them live as "more than conquerors."
- **Accountability:** The group holds members accountable in godly ways, in order to help them overcome sin.
- **Ownership:** Each member is consciously engaged in the group's meetings.
- **Fellowship and friendship:** The members build healthy friendships with each other as brothers and sisters in Christ.

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Discuss

1. Do you agree that confession and prayer are the two essential elements of an accountability group? Why or why not?
2. What format do you think might most successfully encourage trust and vulnerability?
3. Reflect on an accountability group you have been a part of. What insights from this article may have improved that experience?

ACCOUNTABILITY FOR CHURCH LEADERS

Further Exploration

Resources to help you and your leaders hold each other accountable.

BuildingChurchLeaders.com. Leadership training resources from Christianity Today.

- “Safeguarding Counseling” Church Law & Tax
- “Working with the Opposite Sex” Practical Ministry Skills
- “Integrity” Training Theme & PowerPoint
- “Sexual Integrity” Training Theme & PowerPoint

LeadershipJournal.net. This website offers practical advice and articles for church leaders.

The Ascent of a Leader by *Bill Thrall, Bruce McNicol, and Ken McElrath*. Performance-based skills aren’t enough; true leadership also requires character. The process for integrating values like integrity, honesty, and selfless service into the fabric of our lives, organizations, and cultures (Jossey-Bass, 1999; ISBN 978-0787947668).

Being Holy, Being Human by *Jay Kesler*. How can church leaders admit doubts, temptations, and sin without harming their ministries? This book shows how to live with the tension of living with God’s call while expressing and fully enjoying one’s humanity (Word Books, 1988; ISBN 978-0917463174).

Leading with Integrity by *Fred Smith Sr.* “The greatest defense of the gospel we can give is to personify it, not to argue it” is just one gem from this treasure of experienced wisdom on how to minister authentically (Bethany House, 1999; ISBN 978-1556619717).

Making the Most of Mistakes by *James D. Berkley*. From bungling a building plan to living in sinful deceit, church leaders share the facts and feelings of making those mistakes, as well as how God uses our stumbling to bring recovery and build character (Word, 1987; ISBN 978-0917463150).

When Roosters Crow: A Fresh Approach to Christian Accountability by *Lori Salierno and Esther Bailey*. This practical book outlines accountability relationships and equips leaders to deal with the challenges of them. (Warner, 1997; ISBN 978-0871628138).