



In conversation with Ann Muraya and Kelly Clements

To debate how to transform accountability action within organisations and across the aid system, Ann and Kelly exchange their views on cultivating cultures of accountability.



Ann Muraya

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Q. What is your reaction to our findings – do they resonate with your experience?

KELLY: *I find what is outlined here to be really important. Back in 2016, UNHCR published the results of a survey on mental health risks for UNHCR staff, which found that work-related stress was having a profound impact on our people.⁴¹ Since then, pressures have only increased as our staff have tried to do their part on safeguarding, addressing social injustice, adapting to a pandemic, responding to emergencies from Kabul to Ukraine, and more.*

I believe strongly that we need a much deeper examination of how we exhibit our values, beliefs and behaviours in our day-to-day work as humanitarians. It's not just about what's written in policies and procedures. It's about how we run our meetings, the tone of our emails, the way we manage teams, and the opportunities we take to approach someone on our team we feel might be struggling.

For me, it also hits home that the culture of an organisation is set from the highest level. I always try to keep front and centre my commitment to tackle abuse of power and be held accountable for my actions. In my town hall meetings with staff, for example, I try to show that I care about their well-being, and I can empathise with the amount of pressure they are under.

All of us – and I agree, this starts at the top – must scrutinise the environments of our teams and within our organisations. It's hard, but we all need to look at how we as individuals lead, how we manage, and the values we promote. This takes time and space. In UNHCR, we've created dedicated opportunities for staff to reflect on their personal values and how these align to UNHCR's values.

ANN: *I really appreciated how this chapter talks about the whole: in terms of cultures of accountability, the whole system of an organisation. Too many times we don't look at the whole of an organisation, a team or even a person. Yet every single part affects all the others. Working on important concepts like accountability in a fragmented way means that we can be trying really hard, putting in the time, energy and even money 'implementing activities' – looking like we're doing a lot, but not really achieving what we need.*

Q. What is one key behaviour change you'd like to see within organisations and within the sector as a whole?

KELLY: *Personally, I think we need to see more leaders speak explicitly on organisational culture. For them to talk about the how underlying values and beliefs of individuals affect behaviours and organisational actions, as well as the policies and procedures. For them to role model the kinds of behaviours they want others to replicate. For them to walk the talk. I think culture can get deprioritised among the myriad pressures and more formal necessities. Its intangibility makes it easy to overlook but is also why it can have such an outsized impact.*

ANN: *Leadership self-awareness and modelling is critical. Exhibiting the behaviours leaders want reflected in their organisations builds up a strong culture of accountability to the people that an organisation is trying to support – collaboration, compassion, integrity. **The biggest part of setting the tone is what you do – I love the saying "I can't hear what you're saying, because what you're doing is speaking so loudly."***

There are so many different aspects of accountability – the system we work in is multi-layered and historically complex, how do you break down the negative legacies of power imbalances in aid, unless leaders understand and model these? As a first step, leaders need to work on themselves to become self-aware of their own personal biases and vulnerabilities, we're all human after all. This isn't just about self-improvement – if you are triggered by certain things, or have a blind spot, you are not in a position to model certain behaviours. For example, you can have zero tolerance to a behaviour as an organisation, but you have to be able to notice that behaviour as a leader, in order to address it. The things we don't recognise, or understand can be trivialised to the detriment of the organisation.

Q. How can we support this behaviour change collectively?

ANN: *We must support our leaders more. We require so much of them, but who is supporting them? They're holding the space for so many things. Leading within the aid system has unique challenges, leaders don't just grapple with what they do as an organisation, but also the culture, more so than in other sectors, especially in 'field offices'. In the aid system, leaders are often dealing with never-ending fires. Demands are always time sensitive; decisions really can be life or death. The latest crisis take precedent and so tackling the culture of an organisation can be left by the wayside.*

There's also the pressure to focus on performance, on what gets measured, which at the moment is the what, not the how. For leaders to perform better on culture change – they need to be supported to prioritise the measurement of behaviours and values, alongside the more tangible aspects of a response. People can think this is impossible – behaviours are invisible right? But they're not actually – they show up in systems, processes, and results of an organisation so can be measured and improved with technical frameworks.

But, as I said, this performance measurement should come with support. I remember a recent programme for leaders of civil society organisations. Within a peer-cohort, leaders openly shared their experiences on how to pass on values. As they listened to each other they picked up the answers. Peer support groups are invaluable, they are a safe space. Being with peers who are going through the same things helps leaders to discover for themselves what could work best for their organisations, which is a powerful motivator.

KELLY: *Ann is so right, despite our differences, many organisations are facing the same challenges. By being more open and vulnerable about our own attempts to do better, we can inspire and support others. There is power in numbers after all. I want to see more exchanges across organisations about our common challenges, more chances to inspire each other with good practice, and ways to build solidarity in an ecosystem that is all too often seen as competitive. I want us to bring the "human" back into the "humanitarian" sector.*

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Ann Muraya, Director of Organisational Health, Thrive Worldwide