



Lessons on Interpersonal Accountability

Accountability has become a common theme in our programs—specifically, interpersonal accountability to group expectations, responsibilities, and commitments. Many of the groups we work with struggle when they need to respond to a plan breaking down, or to someone breaking their word.

Groups are less resilient to shifting politically when they don't have the muscle-memory of accountability practices that work for their specific internal culture.

Past unhealthy or exploitative experiences with accountability are often a driving factor in this difficulty. Many of us come to the work having been “held accountable” in families, work places, or broader communities in punitive, shaming ways that we never agreed to. In response, we might resist being held accountable in our organizations or fear that we're reenacting harmful patterns when we hold others accountable. It might feel like holding someone accountable risks breaking relationship and pushing them away. Or, it can feel like we can't tolerate the possibility that some people will be “in” and others “out” if we hold everyone accountable to expectations.

We've been experimenting with three key interventions on this pattern.

1. Distinguishing Between “Healthy” & “Unhealthy” Accountability

We need ways to explore our experiences of holding—and being held—accountable. Then we can distinguish between what supported our growth and power, versus what made us feel shamed, controlled, or isolated. From there, we can begin to build a vision of accountability that aligns with our values and supports us to achieve our purpose.

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Wildfire has supported groups to do this kind of reflection and align on qualities of healthy accountability vs. the qualities of unhealthy accountability. They often share some key themes:

Qualities of Unhealthy Accountability

- Punitive; Driven by an explicit or implicit motivation to make someone hurt or “pay for what they’ve done”.
- Transactional; focused solely on product/outcome in a way that ignores circumstances that caused the breakdown and the work of maintaining relationships.
- Reactive; accountability only comes into play after someone has broken their word/acted out of integrity, with no support systems beforehand.
- Over-accountable (a term from generative somatics); sacrificing personal boundaries or looking to hide through appeasing.
- Under-accountable (also a term from generative somatics); avoiding, disappearing, becoming non-responsive, or shrinking away from accountability.

Qualities of Healthy Accountability

- Consequences & impact over punishment; The goal is not to make someone hurt because they messed up, but to face the natural consequences required to repair impacts on the work and each other.
- “You did something bad” vs. “you are bad”; faces the impact of someone’s behavior without making them fundamentally wrong.
- Relational; about deepening relationships and growing in community, not just producing outcomes.
- Grounded in the wholeness, complexity, and context of each person’s life.
- Shared purpose & values; rooted in collective work to achieve the group’s purpose and live into shared values, not random, arbitrary, or bureaucratic rules or whims.
- Driven by curiosity over judgement.
- Good faith; cultivating and assuming good intentions.
- Long-term/over-time; a culture of practicing accountability consistently, not just after a breakdown, that includes clear process and expectations and ongoing follow up/follow through.
- Collective responsibility; every member of a group has a role in maintaining an accountable culture.

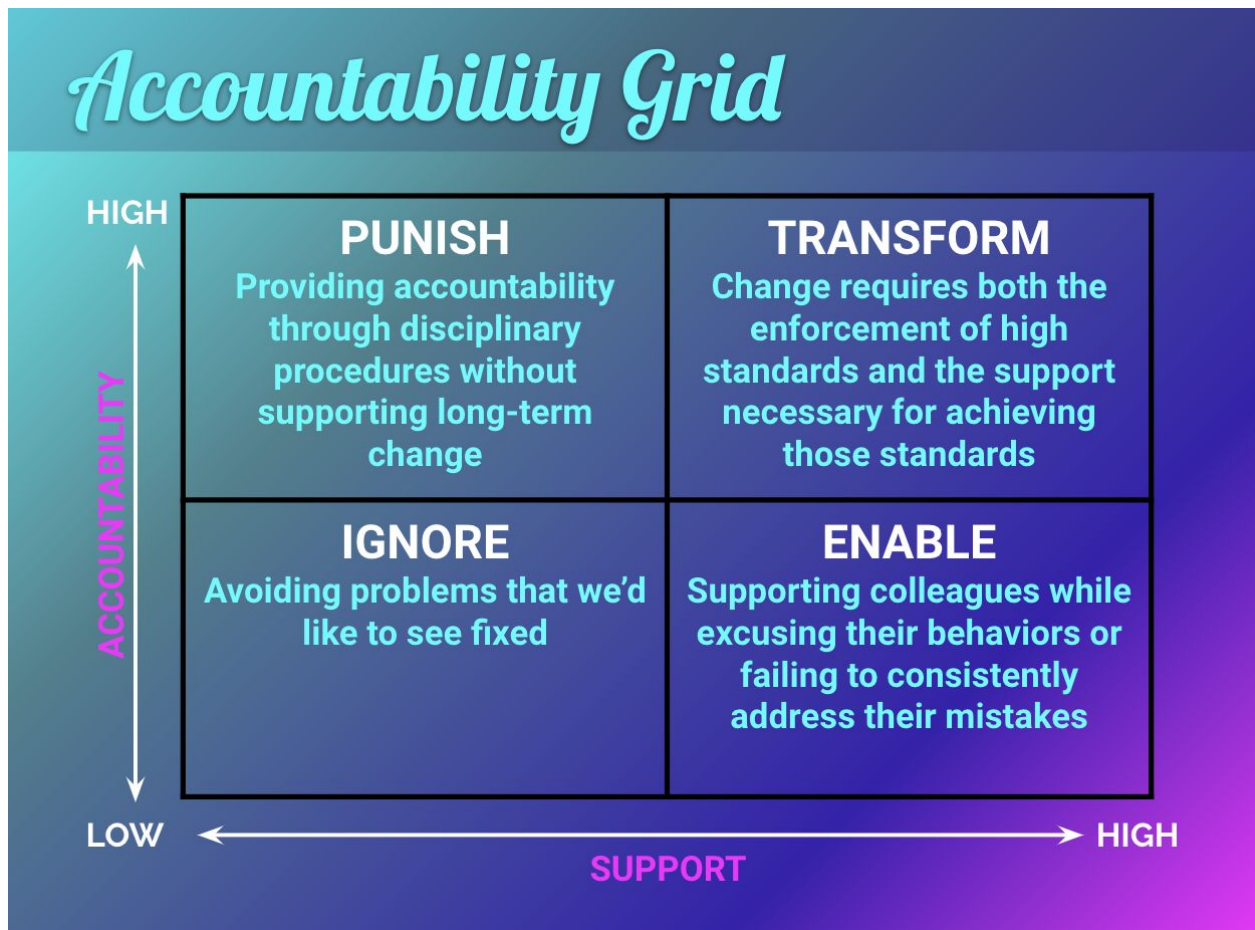
This alignment on the *values* that drive a group’s vision of accountability (particularly when rooted in reflection on group members’ own successes and struggles with

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accountability) often enables the group to release fear and resistance that have been blocking them from building an accountable culture.

2. The Path to Transformation

Here is an example of a framework we have adapted from *Just Practice* and developed for use in our slides during online facilitation. It shows a spectrum of how attempts to create “accountability” play out in contexts of high and low support, and the conditions for transformation to occur:



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3. Reframing Accountability as a Path to Growth, Healing, & Purpose

The above framing of healthy accountability allows us to enter into accountability in service of transforming our world and ourselves. Our thinking on accountability has been shaped by Transformative Justice movements led by women and trans people of color, Marxist practices of criticism/self-criticism/summation, and the organization generative somatics.

We know that, when it's done right, accountability offers individual opportunities to:

- Let ourselves be *seen* and *related to* authentically, even and especially when we've made mistakes.
- Build our capacity to trust ourselves and our relationships.
- Be held to our purpose, values, and growing into who we long to become.

Similarly, healthy accountability offers groups opportunities to transform.

- Every time a group breaks its word and doesn't address it, the group loses trust in itself. Practicing collective, healthy accountability can help a group move from doubt, shame, and avoidance to believing in itself. Sometimes we imagine that believing in the group is what drives action, that if the mission and vision are compelling enough, people will reliably participate. But it can actually work the other way around: when a group does what it says it will do, members often come to believe its vision and mission are possible and worthwhile.
- Though many of us fear that holding each other accountable will break our relationships or make people leave, healthy accountability actually does the opposite. It brings groups into deeper, more trusting and reliable relationship. In fact, healthy accountability is vital to authentic relationship. Part of holding each other is holding each other accountable.
- Healthy accountability helps a group become a place where its members can let themselves be seen, whole and complex. In the work of showing up accountably, we have to learn to really listen to ourselves, feel our boundaries, and communicate our needs. These are all things trauma and oppression work to take away from us. Accountability becomes a fundamental component of healing these wounds. It's an essential part of building groups where we transform ourselves as we work to transform the world.

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Guilt vs. Shame*

A distinction that often comes up in accountability work.

- Guilt - I did something bad.
 - Healthy response to acting outside our values. Believe that we can right the wrong and recover.
- Shame - I am bad.
 - Does not move us into accountability. Usually comes with a deep desire to hide (sometimes with a strong push away/fight). Often tied into trauma, mapping unresolved past struggles with self-worth onto the present moment, where they may not be at play.
- We often cycle between under and over accountability because of shame (i.e. over-commit and then disappear). Both are ways of not being seen.
- Often a response to punitive, unhealthy accountability in our past.
- Healthy accountability is not driven by shame. It is actually a central component of healing shame.

**We're using one set of definitions from the field of psychology because of its precision in Wildfire's context. There are other ways of defining guilt and shame that are also useful, which discuss various cultural/moral frameworks that exist around the world (for example, the guilt culture vs shame culture distinction from cultural anthropology), but we are not trying to engage those here.*

Some Example Practices

- As soon as you notice the work's been impacted:
 - Name what's happened with the people responsible.
 - If needed, ask what barriers came up for them and if they need support.
 - Ask them to name the impact (how does this affect our base? Our plans for the next week, month, year?)
 - Ask what choices they'd make differently next time.
 - Ask them to make a new plan with a new deadline.
- Debriefs
 - All major events/projects.
 - Even a 15 min debrief is **infinitely** better than no debrief.
- Regular evaluations 3 times/year @ meeting dedicated to assessment
 - How are we doing on our goals?

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- What lessons are we learning?
- What needs to shift in our plan?