

GATHER THE PEOPLE

Community and Faith-Based Organizing and Development Resources

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WORKSHOP ON *INTRA-ORGANIZATIONAL* ACCOUNTABILITY & CONFRONTATION*

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THOSE OF US WHO HAVE BEEN WORKING IN COMMUNITY AND CONGREGATIONAL ORGANIZING AND DEVELOPMENT KNOW THE TACTICS OF POWER-ORIENTED CONFRONTATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY.

- We have a tradition of building power and using it by targeting decision-makers, to bring about changes in government and corporate policies, practices, and resource allocations.
- Grassroots organizers and leaders are trained and experienced in such tactics as a matter of course.
- We're familiar with a variety of accountability-action scenarios, from a delegation of a half-dozen members to an assembly of thousands, confronting decision-makers for the sake of accountability.

DQ: BUT *WITHIN YOUR OWN ORGANIZATION OR GROUP*, HOW DO YOU PRACTICALLY HOLD INDIVIDUALS ACCOUNTABLE FOR THEIR COMMITMENTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES?

- **DQ:** What are some situations in your organization when it's necessary to hold people accountable?
- **DQ:** Which people in your organization take on the job of confronting the person who has to be held accountable?
- **DQ:** What are some of the ways you've seen accountability confrontation handled in your organization?

AT ONE TIME OR ANOTHER, EVERY ORGANIZATION AND WORKING GROUP IS COMPELLED TO OPERATIONALIZE INTERNALLY THE PRINCIPLE OF ACCOUNTABILITY.

- In response to the nonfeasance or malfeasance of individuals, it becomes necessary that they be required to account for their planning or lack of it, their action or inaction, and the presence or absence of particular

relationships and, when failing to do so, that they be subject to appropriate consequences.

- **DQ:** How do community and congregational organizing and development projects commonly ensure accountability among their members?
 1. They promote the practice of asking for “collectible commitments” to operationalize accountability.
 2. Individuals are asked in open meetings to make specific commitments that are to be fulfilled within specified timeframes.
 3. When the specified time has passed, the individuals are asked in open meetings to report whether they have fulfilled their commitments.
- Much of what takes place in organizational life, however, does not permit or facilitate promoting accountability in open meetings.
- Accountability often must be promoted through individual leadership initiative that is exercised extemporaneously in response to unanticipated situations and conditions.
- **DQ:** How many leaders in your organization or group are trained and experienced in *constructively* confronting others and holding them accountable?
 1. It’s a common problem in organizational life that many leaders are *not* trained and skilled to hold others accountable individually.
 2. The common obstacle is that such leaders are neither practically skilled nor intellectually or emotionally prepared for the *confrontation* that is an essential aspect of holding someone accountable.

DQ: THE OBVIOUS QUESTION IS, WHAT'S TO BE DONE ABOUT THIS SITUATION?

- **DQ:** How many leaders does an organization or group require to ensure accountability throughout its ranks?
- **DQ:** Should an organization rely on its *formal* leaders to ensure accountability or should it also develop a “culture of accountability” that is promoted and acted out by a wide circle of *informal* leaders?
- **DQ:** As a practical matter, what’s the main task involved in holding people accountable? [SOMEONE HAS TO CONFRONT THEM]
- **DQ:** What's the biggest obstacle to holding people accountable? [MANY PEOPLE WANT TO AVOID CONFRONTATION]

DQ: WHY DO SO MANY PEOPLE WANT TO AVOID CONFRONTING OTHERS AT ALL COSTS?

- **DQ:** What do you think and feel when you believe it might be necessary to confront someone?

- **DQ:** What's your fantasy about what will happen if you hold someone accountable by confrontation?
- Feeling fear and anxiety at the prospect of having to hold someone accountable is natural.

PS: MANY OF US THINK AT ONE TIME OR ANOTHER THAT WE'RE THE ONLY ONES WHO ARE INTIMIDATED AND IMMOBILIZED BY THE PROSPECT OF CONFRONTATION TO HOLD SOMEONE ACCOUNTABLE.

- In 1965 I was student body president at my college.
- I was invited to attend the Annual Presidential Prayer Breakfast in Washington, D.C.
- After the breakfast, a couple of hundred student body presidents met with a panel of a half-dozen congressmen who were up on a dais at the front of the room.
- For about 20 minutes the congressmen looked down on us and gave us an uninterrupted fundamentalist Christian diatribe critical of mid-1960s student life in particular and society in general.
- My blood was boiling, but the room was as silent as a cemetery—no one even whispered a word in opposition to what was going on.
- Finally, sitting near the back of the room, I raised my hand, stood up, and openly protested what was going on.
 1. I said that I was Jewish, that some of my fellow student body presidents, such as the one from San Francisco State, were Muslim or mainline Christians—Catholics, Methodists, Presbyterians, etc.
 2. I said that I didn't appreciate being propagandized by fundamentalist Christians as part of what was supposed to be a *non-denominational* prayer breakfast.
 3. At that point, the room—which had been totally silent—broke out in thunderous applause.
 4. After the meeting was over, a couple of dozen student body presidents enthusiastically thanked me for speaking up.
- What's the point of this story?
 1. Even *student body presidents*, the students we would imagine to be the most outgoing and least intimidated by the prospect of speaking up to hold someone accountable, found themselves intimidated and immobilized in a situation they privately felt to be intolerable.
 2. So it's commonplace to be fearful or anxious about confrontation.

DQ: WHAT HAPPENS, *GENERALLY*, WHEN WE FAIL TO HOLD

PEOPLE ACCOUNTABLE?

- **DQ:** What do people do instead when someone needs to be held accountable but no one is willing to confront the person; how is the problematic situation handled?
- **DQ:** What are some examples of situations in your organizational experience when *you* were not being held accountable?
- **DQ:** What were some of the negative consequences from the failure of others to hold *you* accountable?

DQ: WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF MEMBERS OF YOUR ORGANIZATION OR GROUP FAIL TO CONFRONT AND HOLD ACCOUNTABLE OTHERS WHO AREN'T LIVING UP TO THEIR OBLIGATIONS AND COMMITMENTS?

- **DQ:** What are the most likely, predictable results in the present circumstances?
- **DQ:** What will those outcomes mean for the organization or group of for individual members, both those who have done their jobs and those who haven't?
- **DQ:** Are any of the following outcomes likely?
 1. Failure to achieve instrumental, structural, and process objectives
 2. Embarrassment and possibly even ridicule from others
 3. Loss of self-respect, self-worth, and self-esteem
 4. Loss of self-confidence that may affect future performance

DQ: DO CERTAIN PEOPLE NATURALLY HAVE THE CAPACITY TO CONFRONT AND HOLD OTHER PEOPLE ACCOUNTABLE—LIKE THEY'RE BORN TO IT?

- I imagine some of you may think that you know such a person.
- Some people have told me that they view me that way, although nothing could be further from the truth.
- **PS:** Back in the early 1970s I was the drug abuse coordinator for Los Angeles County
 1. I had begun working with community-based programs to support and strengthen them.
 2. And I had been openly critical of the Board of Supervisors for failing to allocate funding for the community-based programs.
 3. Finally I had my chance to meet privately with the Chairman of the Board of Supervisors when he summoned me to his office on the top floor of the County Hall of Administration.
 4. I thought it would be my opportunity to tell him directly what I

- thought the Board should do and why—in effect, to hold him accountable for the failure of the Board to support community-based programs.
5. What happened in fact was that I found myself standing in front of his desk with my teeth chattering and my knees shaking so badly I could barely speak, while he read me the riot act for publicly criticizing the Board.
- We're not born fearless of confrontation and holding others accountable.
 1. But professional maturity demands that we *learn to overcome our fears*.
 2. If we don't get beyond our fears, we never become competent as professionals.
 3. And our organizations and groups are always stunted in their achievements because of our fear-driven incompetence.
 - In professional life we are forced to confront people or pay a very high cost for avoiding confrontation.

DQ: WHAT KEEPS US FROM DEALING WITH OUR FEARS OF CONFRONTATION?

- Sometimes we immobilize ourselves and fail to hold people accountable because of some early conditioning or traumatic event in our learning history.
- **PS:** I knew a great rabbi, with an international reputation, who had shown that he was fearful of confrontation and holding people accountable.
 1. I had observed him for the better part of a year working with members and leaders of his congregation.
 2. Repeatedly I saw that he was allowing serious problems to fester and become destructive in the life of the congregation because he refused to confront people and hold them accountable.
 3. One evening when we were alone in his office, I raised the subject and asked why he never confronted people and held them accountable.
 4. He thought about my question for a minute or two and then answered.
 5. He said that when he was a boy, he saw his father caught up in a confrontation with someone.
 6. His father lost control of his bowels and soiled himself.
 7. And so his son, by that time a nationally recognized and respected rabbi, was too intimidated to confront people and hold them accountable.
 8. On some deep emotional level, he too feared that he might lose control of his bowels and soil himself in a confrontation.

- Sometimes we immobilize ourselves by rationalizing our fear, telling ourselves that confronting the individual in question won't do any good.
- **PS:** I learned a lesson about such self-defeating beliefs many years ago when I was working as a project director for a national public administration consulting company.
 1. We had a \$250 thousand dollar contract with the New York State Department of Mental Hygiene.
 2. The contract would be worth a couple of million in today's dollars.
 3. We had completed half of the contract and had collected \$125 thousand in fees.
 4. The Commissioner of Mental Hygiene, the top man, called us to a meeting in Albany, the New York State capitol.
 5. A half-dozen of us sat down around the conference table in the Commissioner's office—my boss, who was the president of our company, the Commissioner, several of the Commissioner's aides, and me.
 6. With only a few words of preliminary explanation to the effect that although we had done a good job, his department was facing a budget crisis, the Commissioner announced that the Department of Mental Hygiene was canceling the remainder of our contract.
 7. We would lose \$125 thousand in fees.
- I instantly had two thoughts:
 1. First, “that's it—I'm out of a job as a project director.”
 2. Second, “there's nothing we can do about this—it's a done deal.”
 3. At that moment I was convinced that nothing anyone could do would change the outcome of that meeting.
- But my boss never skipped a beat:
 1. Without hesitating more three or four seconds, he began talking to the Commissioner about the issue of “*fairness*.”
 2. I must tell you that I was in awe, literally, of what my boss was doing.
 3. He looked the Commissioner in the eye and asked whether he thought it was *fair* that many of our company's employees would be laid off, lose their incomes, and be unable to support their families if the contract was canceled.
 4. He asked whether the Commissioner thought it was *fair* to cancel the contract when our employees had done such excellent work for the Department of Mental Hygiene.
- By confronting the Commissioner and holding him accountable to a standard of *fairness*, my boss saved a \$125 thousand contract.

- **DQ:** Is the issue of fairness ever relevant to the work of your organization or group and, if so, how?
- Often we're intimidated by the idea of confrontation because we were never taught us how to confront someone *constructively*.
 1. Learning to deal constructively with conflict makes us better and more desirable employees.
 2. It can significantly improve our prospects when searching for a job.
 3. Part of learning to deal constructively with confrontation is by creating a "*culture of accountability*."

DQ: WHAT IS A "CULTURE OF ACCOUNTABILITY"?

- **DQ:** What would you create ideally in a culture of accountability?
- **DQ:** Would your culture of accountability include any of the following?
 1. Recognizing that mistakes are inevitable
 2. Recognizing that *repeating* mistakes is not inevitable
 3. Recognizing that professionals can't afford the luxury of wasting time on guilt and embarrassment for their mistakes
 4. Recognizing that we have to keep focused on meeting and overcoming challenges
- **DQ:** Why should anyone fear developing a "culture of accountability"? [SOMEONE MAY HOLD US ACCOUNTABLE]

DQ: SO WHAT MIGHT IT MEAN IF SOMEONE CONFRONTED AND HELD *YOU* ACCOUNTABLE?

- **DQ:** Is it likely that you would be made to feel uncomfortable, possibly embarrassed and even ashamed, at least momentarily?
- **DQ:** Is there anything worse that can happen than making you uncomfortable if you're not confronted and held accountable?
- **DQ:** What might you *gain* from being confronted and held accountable?
 1. You would almost certainly learn something important that would be useful to you professionally and even personally.
 2. You would almost certainly become more productive and more valued by your co-workers and colleagues.
 3. You would almost certainly be given support to deal with situations that ordinarily were sources of frustration and failure for you.

DQ: WHAT ARE THE IMPORTANT THINGS TO DO WHEN YOU'RE HOLDING SOMEONE ACCOUNTABLE?

- To hold someone accountable, the role requires *leadership*.
- When it's necessary to demand accountability through confrontation, we are called to act as *leaders*.

- Leadership in this situation can be helpful if it does three things, all of which are also aimed to inculcate leadership qualities in the person being held accountable:
 1. Leadership offers *support* at the outset
 2. Leadership poses *challenges* that are gauged to the resources and experience of the individual being held accountable
 3. Leadership provides *accountability-mentoring* when time has passed and it's clear that a challenge has been met or not met
- The critical element in this three-step process of holding someone accountable is *challenging* the person:
 1. The challenge should be made using very specific language.
 2. The challenge should be in the form of a question, offering a choice, so as not to rob the individual of dignity.
 3. The challenge, if accepted, should direct the individual to specific, practical action.
- An example of this three-step process in the present circumstances might sound something like this:
 1. *The support step*: I know that one-to-one visits can be difficult, and I want you to know that several of us want to help you.
 2. *The challenge step*: Would you be willing to work for an hour this week with one of us to strengthen your one-to-one knowledge and skills?
 3. *The accountability-mentoring step* (when the week has gone by and the individual has worked with someone on the one-to-ones or not): It looks like your one-to-ones have improved, but what do you think might make it possible for you to increase the number you do?
- **DQ**: What assumptions should you make if the person you're holding accountable doesn't respond to the challenge? [NONE]
 1. What might be some possible explanations for why an individual fails to respond to a challenge although having had adequate time to do so?
 2. How might you determine what's actually going on with that person?
- **DQ**: What should be your attitude and tone of voice when you confront someone for the sake of accountability? [RESPECT AND KINDNESS]

* Key: DQ = discussion question; PS = personal story.