

Operationalizing Accountability: The Domains and Bases of Accountability

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DEFINING THE PROBLEM

The Anti Domestic Violence Batterer Intervention Program movement has had conversations about accountability from the beginning. Many of these focused on how to hold batterers accountable, this usually involved the community; probation, the courts, religious institutions etc. In more recent years the discussion has evolved into how men can **BE** accountable. This concept we have termed 'personal accountability'. Many programs and professionals operated under the "I'll know it when I see it" principle. This is hard to teach and even harder to sustain. Additionally, many of the of accountability discussions were singularly focused on whether or not the participant had been violent or physically abusive towards their partner despite the fact that that there was general agreement that abuse encompassed more than just physical violence and that much of the worst abuse wasn't physical at all. Underlying all this is the presumption that abusive men didn't know how to be accountable.

Early on in our program development we incorporated self reports from participants of how they felt they had been accountable or unaccountable in the previous week. Often group members would give responses like: "I wasn't accountable this week", "I didn't get angry about anything", "I don't have contact with my wife/partner so I couldn't be accountable" or "nothing happened in my life this week". We knew this was impossible because everyone has multiple opportunities to be accountable every day. It became clear that many participants felt that they could only be accountable if something 'went wrong' in their life or they got angry or upset. Many also felt that accountability only involved their partner or victim (whom they may or may not have been able to be around).

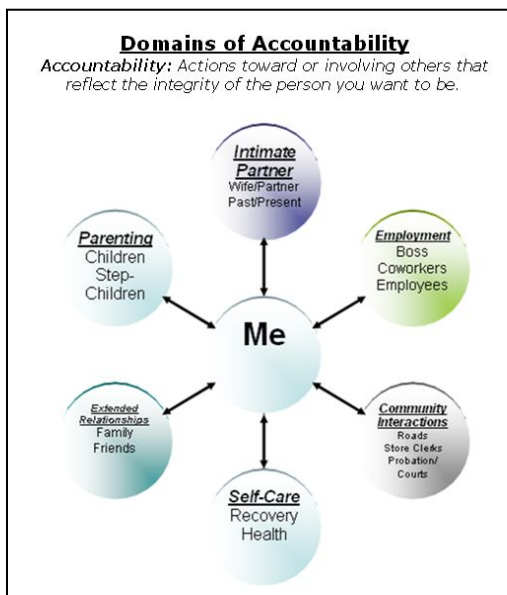
In our programming we strive to develop an analysis regarding everything we teach that is simple, clear and can stand up to scrutiny. Accountability as a concept, was not just difficult to teach, but utilizing the "I'll know it when I see it" standard was impossible for group participants to conceptualize, personalize and integrate. This led us to the realization that we had to develop a way to explain personal accountability that was both theoretically sound and user friendly.

We started with the idea that we had to create a definition of accountability that could be operationalized the way we wanted it to be used in the program. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, accountability is defined as: the quality or state of being **accountable**; *especially*: an obligation or willingness to accept responsibility or to **account** for one's actions. This fit in perfectly with the external consequences many of our participants had experienced (probation, separation from their partner or family, divorce, etc) but was clearly not sufficient for our purposes. What we wanted to focus on was internal or personal accountability. After several false starts we created the following definition.

Accountability: Actions toward or involving others that reflect the integrity of the person that you want to be.

This definition incorporates several key components. First, it emphasizes that action is a critical part of accountability. Second, it sets a standard that is both individualized and strength based. Our experience is that men who participate in our programs have an image of who they would like to be that is usually quite high and reflective of socially appropriate values. The inclusion of the word integrity was to highlight the need for the action to run true or be consistent with their personal standard. Third, the definition was short, specific and clear which helped participants understand what was expected of them.

THE DOMAINS OF ACCOUNTABILITY



Once we had a working definition for the word and concept of accountability, the next step was to examine *where* one can be accountable. Working from a systems perspective we not only were aware that accountability was a part of interactions in all areas of a person's life but that most of our participants had experience being accountable somewhere in their life. This allowed us an opportunity to build on an individual's strengths in order to help them expand accountability into a purposeful and intentional part of their life. We knew there was a problem with having accountability limited to intimate partners because it kept them focused on the instant offense and did not open the door for discussions on their ability to be accountable in other areas of their life. An intimate partner, usually the victim of the instant offense, is often the primary focus for the service participants of

BIPs and to a certain extent the BIP as well. We wanted service participants to think beyond the instant offense into areas of their life that existed before their involvement with the legal system and would continue after. We thought about the areas where people have an opportunity to be accountable and categorized them to help make it easier for participants to focus and understand. This was a trial and error process as group participants helped us identify omissions and refine who was included in each domain. This led to the creation of the Domains of Accountability.

INTIMATE PARTNER: This domain includes all of the intimate partners in their lifetime. The manual states: This is anyone who you have been with, with the intent of building a relationship that may or may not have included sex, anyone you had sex with, whether or not you were in a long term relationship. This includes past and present partners.

We were careful not to limit the definition by using words like wife or girlfriend because we wanted this domain to be inclusive of all women they were involved with intimately. In wanting the scope to be bigger we included both sexual partners of any type and anyone they were involved with where the intent, however short or long, was to build a relationship. This

delineation serves the dual purpose of expanding participant's understanding of intimacy while eliminating group discussions such as "how many times do you have to have sex with a person, before you consider them to be an intimate partner?" In spelling out that this included both past and present relationships we eliminated the obfuscation tactic of men who wanted to remove their past partners or ex-wives from this category. Basically once someone is in this domain they cannot be removed.

COMMUNITY INTERACTIONS: This domain focuses on the area that everyone is involved with on a daily basis and one service participants talk about regularly in batterer intervention groups, the community, which includes but is not limited to drivers on the road, store clerks, people at concerts or movies, the courts, etc. The manual states: This includes people you interact with that you do not have a personal relationship with (store clerks, other drivers, etc) or institutions you have a relationship with like parole, police, or the courts.

Participants specifically share a lot about their interactions with probation and the court system, which is included in this domain. The key here is these are individuals they may or may not know the name of but interact with as member of the community. This is also the domain that is often easiest for them to get the concept of their personal accountability and one in which many of them regularly demonstrate accountability.

EXTENDED RELATIONSHIPS: This domain includes anyone the participant has a personal relationship with that is not an intimate partner or children. It includes friends and neighbors, in-laws, parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents and other relatives. The manual states: This includes your extended family; brothers, sisters, parents, aunts, uncles and friends.

This domain is also one where participants may have had a lot of experience being accountable. A word of caution, this is the category where service participants want to move past intimate partners, this is an attempt to distance themselves from the intimacy and sometimes is a way to diminish the significance of that person. As stated before, intimate partners should always remain in the same domain and do not change.

PARENTING: This domain includes relationships with children regardless of custody issues, step-children any other child where the participant's role may be that of a parent. The manual states: This includes your children whether you have custody of them or not, stepchildren or any other child where your role is primarily parental, a niece or nephew where you are the parental figure.

This domain focuses on the role of parent as opposed to the legality of such a relationship. This is an area where many participants are motivated to be accountable. It is often in this domain that they discover that being disrespectful or hurtful to their child's mother is unaccountable to their children.

EMPLOYMENT: This domain focuses on interactions that occur in their role at work or school. The manual states: this includes anything related to work or school. This includes co-workers, employers, employees, customers, teachers, etc. The inclusion of school in this domain was in recognition that many young men came into the programs and school was their primary focus.

Experience had shown us that many men were often accountable in this domain and were able to recognize how and when this occurred. Sometimes participants get confused between this domain and community interaction. For instance if the individual works at a coffee shop and does not know the customers personally; but is reporting accountability in their interaction with a coworker and/or customer, they may label it as community interaction because they work with the public. However, because they are acting in their capacity as an employee when the interactions occurred it falls under the domain of employment.

SELF CARE: This domain originated in the understanding that many service participants were struggling with substance abuse issues and that anything they did as part of their recovery was accountable. The manual states: This includes anything that impacts how you feel about or care for yourself; recovery, health care, spiritual involvement, etc.

The original intent of this domain was specific actions aimed at personal care. This evolved as the program participants began to see self care as an element in many of the interactions (accountable and unaccountable) that they had in other domains. One caveat on this, many participants want to short cut through the accountability process and say “it is always self care” but, they must know and be able to articulate how it is accountable in this particular domain.

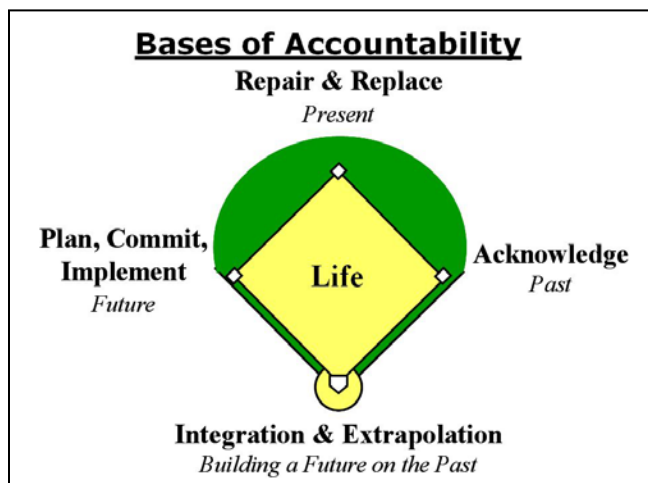
THE VISUAL DIAGRAM:

The diagram is designed with the person (me) at the center. Then the arrows, which point in both directions and connect to each domain. Having the arrows point in both directions is intentional. It is meant to demonstrate that there is a healthy reciprocity between individual and the various domains.

In a codependent relationship the diagram would look the same, except all the arrows would point away from the individual toward the domains. This signifies that the individual is giving a lot but accepting/receiving little if anything from others. Conversely a person with narcissistic characteristics has all of the arrows focused from the domains toward the person in the center... “It’s all about me”. This individual expects and is often receiving from all domains but feels no need to give back.

The underlying message: Healthy relationships are interactional, dynamic and systemically reciprocal.

THE BASES OF ACCOUNTABILITY



The Bases of Accountability was developed after the creation of the domains. We had helped participants see that accountability was a way of life and occurred in many domains. The next challenge was expanding the understanding of the process of being accountable. The need for this was made clear to us as many participants used language depicting a continuum of accountability, such as, “I was more accountable this time” or “I was less accountable this time”. The program staff also reinforced this by asking questions like,

“how could you be more accountable”, “what could you do next time to be more accountable”, etc.

One of the initial struggles was dealing with the “absolutist” concept of an action being either accountable or unaccountable, with no gray area. Additionally many participants and staff determined accountability based primarily on the outcome of the situation without factoring in the process. The concern about this is that short-term outcome based thinking is exactly how many participants choose to be abusive. In group discussions we were increasingly aware that the service participants were really pushing us on the conceptualization of accountability. We knew what we were talking about, but we were not transmitting it in a way that was helpful to others in their pursuit of accountability and to individually evaluate how they were doing. We have found that the use of metaphors and analogies can be very helpful in developing an understanding of difficult concepts. So we began to experiment with different analogies involving escalators, elevators, yardsticks and others. When we put them into practice in groups it was clear that there were inherent problems with our choices. Escalators and elevators allow a person to skip floors and we believed that the process of being accountable required following certain steps that could not be skipped. Yardsticks gave the impression that once a person had reached a certain point they were always at that point and never moved backward. None of them accounted for each situation being considered separately or had away of addressing unaccountability.

Analyzing what was wrong with other metaphors and refining what we felt were the key features of accountability, led us to baseball as a metaphor. Baseball as a metaphor had a lot of the components we needed. Most of the time in baseball, runs are scored not because of a home run but as an RBI (runs batted in), which requires the help of others. We believe that participating in group can help someone move from where they started by receiving some additional information from other group members (team) or facilitators (coaches).

Baseball also has rules about moving from one base to another. The rules require a person to touch each base, even for a fraction of a second before being able to move onto the next. It doesn't count if a player goes to second base without touching first. This matched our belief that there is a process to accountability and to move forward one has to touch each base.

In the middle of the bases we have 'Life' as the pitcher. In baseball, batters can not say to the pitcher... "Listen up here... I don't do curve balls". They have to be able to hit whatever the pitcher throws at them. Good baseball players use their strength and skill to be able to consistently connect with the ball and get on base. They practice and get feedback from coaches in order to improve their skill. This fit perfectly with our belief that in life a person needs to be able to manage whatever life throws at them. Participants need to practice looking at the situations in their life and utilize feedback from group members and facilitators to improve their accountability skill. There is no trick to being accountable when things are going the way a person wants. Just like there is no trick to hitting the baseball when a pitcher is throwing easy balls right to you. The trick is being able to handle a variety of pitches/life situations even when they are unexpected or difficult.

One of the other things we felt was key is that in baseball every time a player comes up to bat they have a new chance to score. While their previous times at bat might have an influence on their skill level it does not predetermine how they would handle the next pitch. The same applies to accountability. Each situation a person is faced with allows them the chance to be accountable and while their previous experience may influence their perception and skills they start fresh each time. This was especially important to us as many participants felt that because they had handled a situation poorly in the past they were doomed so why even bother or if they had handled it well there was no need for them to put any effort in as they were already safe.

Baseball players get better with practice and coaching. They also have to learn their idiosyncrasies, strengths and weakness in order to improve their skills. Participants in the programs need to understand what skills they have and learn how to use them in order to improve their accountability.

One of the things we learned from the participants in the programs is that any action can be accountable or unaccountable. Actions are neutral. Changing the context of any action can make it accountable or unaccountable. Understanding that the context of an action can make it un/accountable helps in exploring and utilizing the bases of accountability.

Another issue that many programs get stuck on is that in order for something to be accountable it has to be different than what the person did before. This is problematic for two reasons. First, it implies that the participant never did anything accountable before and doesn't allow the individual the opportunity to learn from his positive past. Second it implies that all change is good. Many times in groups service participants will state that I used to always do _____ and now I do something different. Simply doing something different is not accountable. If a service participant used to always slap his wife when she challenged his authority and now he spits on her, that is different, but it is certainly not accountable.

FIRST BASE: The first base of accountability is to acknowledge what one has done; this could be an apology, remembering what they've have done in the past, etc. First base is focused on the past. It is what the individual has already done and can not change. Acknowledgement may take place out loud, as a thought to ones self, with or without others. In many programs this is where accountability stops

SECOND BASE: Second base is either changing the behavior and/or repairing the situation. Second base is always focused on the present, the here and now. It requires some action.

THIRD BASE: Third base is where things become more complex and often comes with the erroneous assumption that "if I was at second base last week, then this week I should be at third base." Not recognizing that every time the baseball player gets up to bat, it is different than it was the last time. Third base is future focused and requires action that is rooted in a plan the individual has both committed to and implemented.

HOME RUN: A home run is integrating the change into a person's life or when they can extrapolate from one situation to another. The home run is building the future on the past; I know where I've been, I know what works for me and now that has become a part of my life. Often a person who hits a home run will report not realizing it until after the situation is over or until someone else commented on the change (often partner or child).

Putting it into Practice

The opportunity for building on the baseball metaphor is rich with options. It is not necessary that one be a baseball aficionado in order to make dynamic use of this in a batterer intervention group. In fact, neither of the writers of this article possesses any particular or special knowledge of the game of baseball. The service participants of our groups quickly began to educate us as to the myriad options for improvising with the metaphor. We learned about a "pickle". A pickle is when the runner is between bases, for example the runner has overrun second base, yet can't quite make it to third base. The pickle is what often happens to participants when they are changing their behavior but really have not committed to a plan or they have a plan but no commitment.

Second base and third base can often look very similar because the action may look the same. What is different is the process. This is where the art of learning to listen to what the person is sharing is critical. One of the ways to differentiate between someone being at second base or at third base is in how they tell the story. If they are on second base they will focus a lot of the story



Spilling The Milk

A man walks into a room and is not paying attention to his surroundings he happens to be talking with his hands and knocks over an open container of milk.

First Base: This is the acknowledgement of stating, "I'm sorry, I was the one who spilled the milk." At this point the only thing that has been accomplished is the acknowledgement of what has been done.

Often times this is the point that many BIPs stop and say "eureka he's got it!"

Second Base: In addition to saying I spilled the milk, I clean up the mess. I also go out and buy more milk to replace that which lost due to my actions.

Third Base: My plan is that I will always put the top back on the milk once I am done with it. I will also plan to be more conscientious of my hands when I talk.

Home Run: I will be more conscientious of my space in relation to others and objects. I will also put the tops back on anything I use to prevent future accidents (waiting to happen). I will do this with pop, milk, water, paint, oil, etc.

on what they did in the past. If they are on third the focus will be on what they are working toward in the future.

An example would be; a person is speaking about a driver on the road that did something they didn't like. They share "in the past I would have honked my horn at them, given them the finger, raced my engine as I sped around the other driver nearly cutting them off, etc. But this time I told myself that it is not that important, I'm going to get where I'm going eventually, the roads are slick, my kids are in the car, I don't need to cause any problems...so I backed off and went on my way." This is second base, because it is present focused on this particular situation on this day and a lot of the thinking is directed at what he has done in the past.

The same incident in third base would sound like... "somebody cut me off, I recognize that I was getting upset...in the past I might have given this person the finger, but I am working on the fact that I need to look at other peoples perspectives and I thought...I don't know this guy, I don't know where he is coming from and I thought it doesn't really matter, it is not going to take that much longer to get where I am going, so I took a deep breath and said to myself, maybe I need to stay away from this guy." In this second example, the actions are very similar. What is different is the future focus and the implementation of a plan that goes beyond this single situation. He is identifying that he is working on looking at things from others' perspectives which can go beyond this single traffic incident.

Third base requires three things; a plan, a commitment to the plan and the implementation of the plan. Sometimes there is confusion in third base between a goal and a plan. The chart to the right can help clarify.

A plan requires behaviorally specific actions; 'I will take a deep breath, count to 3, ask someone for advice, etc, 'A goal is a general idea of an outcome but no specific details are attached; 'I want to be a better father 'or 'I want to stay married'.

Particular	General
Learned	Outline
Actions	Action
Necessary	Limited

In a home run, using the traffic example, it might sound like: "Someone cut me off in traffic, I used to get upset at that sort of thing, I have been working on remembering I don't have control over what everyone is doing and how they are doing it. I swerved to move out of the driver's way. I really barely noticed what happened, but my five year old said to my wife "Mommy, look how nice daddy was to that crazy driver".

Often when someone hits a home run they don't recognize it until after the fact. This can be a sign that the individual has incorporated this new behavior to the point that an alternative to the behavior now seems like the exception to the rule. This is a good measure of integration. Extrapolation is when the individual recognizes that "if I can do this differently on the road, at work, etc...I should be able to do things differently at home. I can take what I have learned in one area and apply it in another. Some people are concerned about the use of the words 'integration' and 'extrapolation' because they feel they may be too difficult or intimidating for program participants. Our experience is that participants like when we teach up. They enjoy learning new words and how to use them appropriately.

The baseball metaphor continues in addressing unaccountability. There are two ways to be unaccountable in this metaphor, a strike out or a foul ball. A foul ball is when the story sounds like it is going to be accountable and then by the end of the explanation it ends in foul ball territory. An example of this is: “Mary asked me to drive her to work because her car was in the shop. I got up and drove her to work which I don’t usually do”...sounds good so far... “but all during the car ride I was yelling at Mary, you are darn lucky that I’m giving you a ride today and you better not complain when I go out with my friends tonight...because I got up early this morning to drive you to work.”

In baseball, a player could get to first or second base but then the ball is caught or lands out of bounds. The person is still out even though they tagged the bases. In accountability a participant may share something that appears to be accountable but exploration reveals that it is actually unaccountable. An example; “Annabelle wanted me to paint the living room. I have been putting it off for weeks. Last weekend I finally decide to paint it and I got the paint and painted the room. Annabelle was happy” after some exploration the participant shares that he did this because he expected Annabelle to be grateful and have sex with him. While he did change his behavior in the end because of his expectation of sex it ends up in foul ball territory.

A strike out is usually very clear, there is no attempt at accountability “Mary asked me for a ride to work and I yelled get your own damn ride I’m tired and rolled over and went back to sleep”.

There are an infinite number of behaviors that can be abusive or accountable. Knowing how to differentiate the two in order arrive at a correct answer is just as important as knowing the correct answer. In some ways it is more important to know how to get to the right answer than it is to know the right answer. We often use a math metaphor to illustrate this. In order to get full credit in higher level math the person has to have the right answer and be able to “show their work”. The process of knowing how the right answer was derived is critical if the person wants to be able to replicate the process with a different number. So it is with accountability. The process by which the participant arrives at their behavioral choice is often more important than the actual choice they make. It needs to be a sound process that will allow someone to be able to be consistently accountable.

Accountability can often be confused with either a good deed or a responsibility. A person may say “I was accountable because I paid the bills.” Paying the bills is a responsibility not an act of accountability. How he paid the bills may be the act of accountability not that he paid the bills. Accountability might be, “I organized all my bills so I could pay them on time” or “I made sure I had enough money to pay all the bills”. A good deed or a favor might be “I saw a guy on the side of the road with a flat tire and stopped to help him’ this is a nice thing to do but is not necessarily accountable. Accountability would again be connected with the thinking process. Expanding on the previous situation, “I saw a man on the side of the road with a flat tire, in the past I would have driven by but this time I thought ‘if I was on stuck on the road I would want someone to help me and I have the time’ so I stopped and helped change the tire.”

A common pitfall is using the outcome of the event as the primary criteria for determining accountability or unaccountability. Sometimes something turns out well but in looking at the process it is actually unaccountable. An example; "I lent Karen money to buy a car. We agreed on a repayment plan and Karen has been paying me monthly. Last week I saw a notice that Karen's license was suspended for an unpaid parking ticket. I went to Karen and said "if you want you can skip paying me this month and pay the court instead, but if you do that you have to bring me the receipt from the court. If you don't bring me the receipt you will need to call your sister or your mother and borrow the money from them to pay me" Karen agreed so that is what we did. In the past I would have wanted my money no matter what." On the surface this may seem accountable and in fact the participant intended it to be accountable but in examining the process it is apparent that he still made the decision alone and that he imposed conditions on his partner. This is actually a foul ball in the domains of intimate partner and self care. It might have been accountable if he had talked with Karen and seen what she wanted to do and what conditions she thought were appropriate. They might have ended up in the same place but the process would have been different.

Conversely sometimes something doesn't work out well but the person handles themselves in an accountable way. An example; Janelle and I got an apartment together. We spent 2 weeks moving in and I paid a penalty to get out of my apartment lease. Two nights ago Janelle told me that she wanted me to move out and she wanted me to leave right away. I felt myself getting angry and thought 'why did you have me move in if you were going to change your mind?' Then I thought 'I can go to my brother's for the night' and I left. The next day I called Janelle and she said she definitely wanted me out and didn't want to be with me any more. I started thinking 'who the hell does she think she is?' Then caught myself and thought I can't make her want me and I better find a place to live. I called my brother to see if I could stay with him for a while and I called a storage place for my stuff. I called Janelle and asked when it would be okay to come get my stuff. She said she'd get back to me. In this case the person did not get what he wanted and the situation is unresolved but he did act in an accountable fashion. This would be a second base in the domains of intimate partner, extended relationships and self care.

Another permutation is when an action is on different bases in different domains. Example: "My boss came and told me he needed me to stay late at work. Usually I would make an excuse and leave but I needed the extra money so I stayed." This appears accountable but after some exploration he reveals that he did not call his wife and let her know he was staying late and he missed his son's soccer game. In this case it would be second base in the domain of employment, strike out in the domains of intimate partner and parenting and split decision in self care.

Sometimes group participants are anxious to get to third base or a home run. Here are a few more baseball facts to address this. In baseball if a player consistently gets to second base he is considered to be an excellent hitter. So too in the bases of accountability, if a participant is consistently making it to second base he is doing a good job of being accountable. While everyone wants to hit a home run when they go up to bat that is not the norm and the same is true for accountability. It is okay to have the goal of a home run but the reality is that there will be very few home runs at least during the time someone is in the program.

Some participants will attempt to use jargon to make it appear that they are third base when they are really at second. This usually sounds like ‘I had a plan and was committed to _____,’ but they can’t identify what the plan is or how they implemented it. It is also usually a situation specific behavior not something that could be used in multiple situations.

In choosing what to share regarding accountability participants may use anything that happened in the preceding week, but are not allowed to use the group as part of their accountability. This is explained to them. The purpose is for them to learn how to be accountable in their life in the domains that will be a part of their lives after they complete the program. They need to practice recognizing this in order to facilitate their understanding of accountability in ways that will be useful to them in the future.

Participants often start out sharing examples of accountability in the domain of community interactions, often probation, but as they gain confidence in themselves and the group they will move into more significant areas like their partners or children. The group members will often challenge each other when they feel someone is playing it safe and only sharing superficial accountability. One of the most surprising things is that participants who seem to understand the concepts and appear to want to make change often choose to share how they were unaccountable so they can process how that happened and get feedback on other options.

The domains and bases provide a solid theoretical framework for understanding and opening dialogue about accountability in a way that engages participants and allows for exploration of the complexity of accountability.



END NOTES:

We consider this article to be a “work in progress” and we welcome and encourage your critical feedback, suggestions, refinements, analysis, etc.

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We plan to finalize this article after 12-31-2009, so if you plan on giving us your input we must have it by this date. We will acknowledge everyone who participated in giving feedback in the final version.