



## Who is Accountable for the Healing Environment?

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The Virginia Department of Corrections has made significant strides in creating a Healing Environment, and surveys confirm that the staff is well aware and supportive of the initiative. The Council for the Healing Environment defined the Healing Environment in the following way:

*The Healing Environment is purposefully created by the way we work together and treat each other, encouraging all to use their initiative to make positive, progressive changes to improve lives. It is safe, respectful and ethical – where people are both supported and challenged to be accountable for their actions.*

From this it is clear that we are all responsible for creating the Healing Environment by the way we work together. Over the past year we have been exploring the issues of safety, respect and positive change through open communication, and I have been contributing a series of articles in support of this. This article is about the aspect of accountability within the Healing Environment that is mentioned at the end of the definition. By this definition, everyone is charged with the responsibility of supporting and challenging their colleagues to be accountable for their behavior. What does that mean? To me it means that when we notice someone behaving in a way that is not conducive to a Healing Environment, we don't ignore it, or talk about it behind their backs, but we talk with them directly about the impact of their behavior. Without this, we will never have a fully-developed Healing Environment.

So how do we support and challenge people to be accountable for their behavior? It all depends on the situation, and there is a useful Accountability Progression that is currently being introduced to Unit Executive Staff (and some supervisors) through the Dialogic Coaching Training (DCT) that in time it may be available to all staff. It shows four levels of support and challenge in order to hold people accountable for their actions, namely: disciplining, holding to account, coaching and Dialogue.

### Disciplining

When someone's behavior is not compliant with the law,

or they are acting in a way that threatens safe and secure incarceration, or is contradictory to decency, honesty and so on, disciplining is necessary for everyone's safety and well-being. There cannot be a Healing Environment without compliance with the rules and regulations that govern operations. This disciplining is done through a legal disciplinary procedure, which is the most rudimentary way of holding people to account. Fortunately disciplining is relatively rarely needed in the Department. Evidence of the development of the Healing Environment will include a decline in the number of disciplinary procedures that are undertaken in the Department.

### Holding to Account

There are usually signs when something is not quite right that can lead us to support and challenge a colleague before he or she gets into difficulty and the possibility of being disciplined. So rather than waiting for evidence of non-compliance, we would prefer, obviously, to be more proactive. This is a situation when someone should be held to account through some kind of face-to-face conversation. Although this may sometimes need to be followed up in writing, there are many occasions where this may not be necessary. When you hold someone to account you aim to help that person to understand his or her responsibilities and how to carry them out correctly. If you are a supervisor then it may be about making clear what you expect of people, and what they should expect of you. In this case it may be like the referee on the soccer field showing a yellow card to warn a player that they will be penalised if they infringe the rules of the game again, by being shown a red card and having to leave the field of play. Holding someone to account should be done respectfully, and with the purpose of being helpful to them, and to the Healing Environment. It may feel uncomfortable holding people to account, but not doing so effectively condones poor behavior and lack of challenge weakens the fabric of the Healing Environment. Rather than ignoring irresponsible behavior, weakening the Healing Environment and letting colleagues get into difficulty, you can take the initiative to challenge them to think about the consequences of their actions, and encourage them to become accountable for their actions.

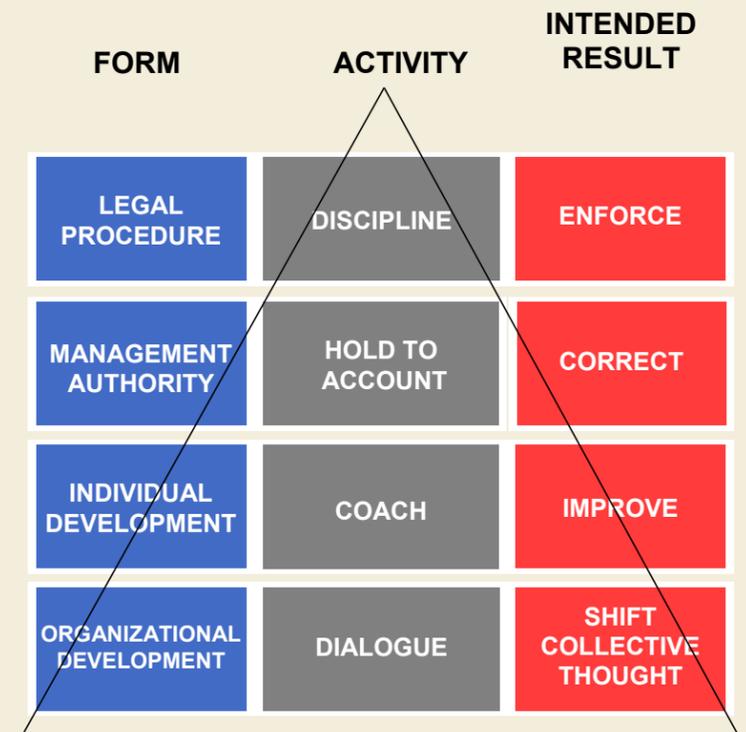
### Coaching

A yet more proactive step is to coach people, and the more coaching is provided, the less often people will need to be held to account or disciplined. Rather than opposing poor behavior, coaching is a way of helping individuals to develop good practice. Some people coach by telling others exactly what to do, but this keeps people in the role of a follower and does not encourage people to take initiative or think for themselves. The stronger way to coach people is to look with them at the options for managing the various situations for which they are responsible, and the consequences of following each of the different options open to them. This leaves the responsibility for the decision and the accountability with them, and encourages people to take their own initiative and thereby become leaders. Every person is different, and you need to coach each person to find his or her own way of getting their job done well. This varies according to their personality, sense of humour, confidence, level of experience and how articulate he or she is. There may be advice to offer, but generally it is better to think with people rather than telling them what to do.

### Dialogue

Dialogue is another way of developing accountability, and Dialogue is particularly important for addressing organizational development and culture. This is because people will often do what their colleagues do - consciously or unconsciously copying their behavior. That is the nature of culture. In a culture where people are late to meetings and miss agreed deadlines, it is easy to do so oneself. Where rules are known but seldom applied, it is easy to tolerate non-compliance. So we need to shift the culture by thinking together, often in larger groups, about our collective disposition to our responsibilities and how to discharge them well. As an example, some might think offenders come to prison *for punishment*, whereas others think them come *as punishment*. These are two very different dispositions that lead to different thinking, decisions and behaviors. Dialogue has a key role in achieving a resolution of these differing views. So Dialogue provides an important

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forum for us to think through together the consequences of our collective actions, and to shift our expectations of each other .

### Who is accountable for the Healing Environment?

The answer is that we all are accountable for the Healing Environment - and also that you are your brother's keeper and responsible to support and challenge your colleagues to be accountable for their behavior. Taking the initiative to do so in this regard may be counter-cultural at the moment for some, but it will make the most significant contribution to the development of the Healing Environment in the coming year. Once the Healing Environment is fully developed, it will be obvious to everyone to take fiscal accountability for the right use of public funds, operational accountability for the safe and decent incarceration of offenders for temporary public safety, and community accountability for lasting public safety.

Submitted by Peter Garrett