

Foundations: re:flexing

Please enjoy this sample module from ICAAD's [Foundations: re:flexing Advocacy Essentials course](#).

Accountability

Accountability is one of our [five re:flexing skills](#). It's not about being perfect. It's about how we stay connected to our values, our people, and the work we're committed to when things go wrong.

This skill area is often one of the hardest, not just because conflict can be painful, but because systems like white supremacy and capitalism have taught us to avoid discomfort, hide mistakes, and shut down when we feel shame.

At its core, accountability in *re:flexing* is about being honest with ourselves and others, starting by accounting for what's been done. It means learning to notice when harm has happened, doing the work to understand the conditions that led to the harm, and responding in ways that prioritise the relationship, not just the optics. It's less about conflict resolution and more about orienting to relationship repair.

What We're Practicing

This week, we'll explore how this tool, alongside the tool of [making good apologies](#), in some scenarios. The quest for perfection in any area of our lives can lead to burnout and anxiety. When it comes to expectations of moral purity, the focus on the perfect action or perfect thing to say can get in the way of us preparing ourselves to mess up.

We know that we have unique social identities and experiences that lead to gaps in our knowledge. We also know that our proximity to power within systems of oppression varies in different spaces and can mean we've been insulated from accountability at different times. While we work to minimise and avoid harm as much as possible, it's also important that we prepare ourselves for what to do when we mess up, even when we have the best intentions.

In the words of Alexis Shotwell, author of ["Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times"](#):

"It doesn't do us any good to aim for individual purity. When we start doing that... we become very focused on our own personal little thingy and that means that we don't aim to make systemic, bigger changes.... as soon as we mess up, and as soon as someone points out that we're actually still connected and implicated, we might be tempted to give up at that point."

"What happens if messing up is not the worst thing that could happen? We say, 'I'm going to work on this thing and I'm definitely going to make a mistake. I'm already part of a really messed up situation, so I'm not going to be able to personally bend the arc of the universe toward justice. But I might be able to work with other people so that all together we can do that.'"

For a range of reasons, messing up can send us into a shame spiral. Our expectations of never causing harm can be linked to the idea of individual "goodness" which can lead us to believe that when we do a bad thing we are inherently a bad person, and we'll be judged and cut off from others. When those feelings get stuck in our bodies, it's difficult to move to accountability. Shame breaks our ability to connect with one another.

☐ [Video: How Shame Can Block Accountability](#)

Tool: Naming the Tension

In order to work through tensions with others, it can be helpful to define what the tension is, so we know what may be required of us in taking accountability.

Often, we collapse definitions of conflict, misunderstanding, mistakes, abuse, and critique in a way that makes it difficult to be right-sized in our approach. Still, when honing in on the kinds of tension we're facing, it's important to remember that all have the potential to cause harm or otherwise negative impacts and that they all are likely infused with dynamics of systems of oppression. These definitions have been offered by adrienne maree brown in their work, ["We Will Not Cancel Us and Other Dreams of Transformative Justice."](#)

Abuse: behaviours (physical, emotional, economic, sexual, etc.) intended to gain, exert, and maintain power over another person or within a group

→ We might respond by: seeking professional support, creating space, and setting boundaries.

Conflict: disagreement, difference, or argument between two or more people; can be personal, professional, and/ or political; likely systems of oppression shaping the dynamics; can direct and named or indirect and felt

→ We might respond with: Honest conversation 1) naming the differences, 2) the impact of the differences, and 3) the root of the issue.

Mistakes: When someone just messes up. They might say something offensive or triggering, mishandles something, be dishonest, or otherwise have a negative impact in spite of positive intentions. If not addressed, can result in conflict.

→ We might respond with: an authentic, informed, and right-sized apology.

Misunderstanding: Incorrectly interpreting or not understanding what is being communicated. If not addressed, can turn into conflict.

→ We might respond with: a clarifying conversation

Critique: An assessment of someone's work or practice, critical feedback

→ We might respond by: taking from the critique what can help us grow and keep moving

Journal Activity

- ☐ Think of a time in which you made a mistake. Or a time in general in which you hurt someone. What did it feel like in your body?
- ☐ Looking back on this experience, what would have helped you create more flexibility to process those feelings and move to accountability?
- ☐ Write a sentence or two that this wise version of you would tell your younger self after the mistake you wrote about.

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