

Accountability Going Well – Part 1

A small meditation community has had ongoing issues of touch and sex-related consent incidents for years. Some are more minor issues, while others are serious and repeated criminal-level issues. Nobody has ever had any idea how to deal with it and so nothing has ever really been done other than to occasionally ostracize someone. However, one year, Ethan, a prominent meditation teacher and leader, is accused by 5 different people of almost the exact same consent violation. They all claim that he used his position of power in order to cause harm.

An investigation is done, everyone harmed is interviewed, and witnesses and those close to those involved give information they think may be helpful. The community's organizers understand that real harm was caused and that the position of power was a factor but not the only cause.

Leadership offers ongoing support to the people harmed and gives them extra say in rewriting the codes of conduct, influence on event planning, and also allows them to bring supportive friends to events for free. Leadership also gives and facilitates apologies and amends-making.

Leadership tells Ethan that he is no longer allowed to have a position of leadership within the community, he will not be hired to teach classes anymore, and he is barred from attending events for at least a year. He is also asked to set up an accountability pod, seek therapy, and if possible and wanted, assist with paying for the therapy of those harmed. Leadership says that the ban will be reviewed after one year and will only be lifted if Ethan can demonstrate real accountability and change, and if they feel it is appropriate for them to return.

Leadership holds themselves accountable for the structural aspects that contributed to the harm. They decide to create a second code of conduct and standard of ethics for those in positions of power. They create rules around people in leadership sleeping with students and attendees, set up a safety team, and create more ways for people to easily report harm.

The community holds themselves accountable for the ways they have created a culture of “rock star teachers who can do no wrong” and for not prioritizing consent. Additionally, they hold themselves accountable for the ways that they have reacted to disclosures of harm with suspicion and blame. They work together to start hosting consent classes, make announcements about consent before and during events and classes, and put up signs encouraging consent practices at event spaces. Leadership facilitates all of this, and also hosts some town hall style meetings to discuss how they as a community could respond better and more supportively to harm when engaging with anyone involved.

Accountability Going Well – Part 2

Ethan is angry at first when the accusations are brought forward. He feels that he trusted the wrong people and that he is being “cancelled”. He writes his own public posts giving his side of the story. He says that he is sorry if he hurt anyone and that it would have been a pure misunderstanding. Some people in the community who are not close to the situation praise him for being so open about what happened and decry cancel culture. Others call him out on his post or call him in by pointing out the patterns of behavior he has that caused harm and helping him see the importance of focusing on impact over intent. Ethan feels overwhelmed but starts to take it seriously.

Leadership calls a meeting with him and he joins and hears their perspectives. They give him a large anonymized report of their investigation findings and he sees that many people report feeling harmed by him and his “arrogance and entitlement” in various ways. He doesn’t identify with those words but starts to understand that people can experience him in that way even if he isn’t intending to act in those ways. He understands that he was irresponsible with his power, resulting in people feeling pressured to engage with him more intimately, and that he needs to change. He also accepts the ban from events but is upset by losing his position as teacher, as he loves teaching and the extra income was really helpful to him.

The leadership explains to him the precedent it would set and the culture it would reinforce if they continued to hire him to teach, that it would make it seem like his behavior was okay because he is popular, and that after he goes through a process there are other ways he can be a part of the community and contribute, just not from a position of power and esteem. Ethan doesn’t love this but accepts it as what is being asked of him. Over time, he comes to understand it better and accepts that it is best for the community. After he goes through his process, he starts to run a small men’s support group to talk about consent and harm, openly discussing the harm he caused and the steps he took to be accountable.