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3.1.5 Compassionate Accountability

It can be tricky to figure out how to respond to sexist or violent language, attitudes, and behaviours in ways that are productive. While publicly 'calling out' harmful behaviours can help to shift social norms,* that approach can be counter-productive in the context of a relationship-based, engagement approach like the one outlined here. Compassionate forms of accountability are critical to developing safe learning spaces where men can explore new ideas and grow their capacity to positively shape their environments.

“[S]ome research shows that engaging men and boys in ways that are shaming or humiliating can be ineffective. These studies indicate that feelings of shame, fear and guilt act as barriers, and can provoke denial and other defensive reactions from men. [...] In fact, some studies found strategies that shame and humiliate may even provoke or increase aggression in men and boys who feel entitled and who have a narcissistic sense of self. This suggests strategies that evoke negative emotions rather than positive ones are less effective in engaging men in prevention work, and also less effective for interventions with men who perpetrate violence.”¹⁹⁶

➔ *Why this Matters*

- Over the past few years, the idea of 'calling in' has grown as an alternative to 'calling out',¹⁹⁷ in part, because of the alienating effect that calling out can have. Because calling out is usually public and declarative, it often triggers feelings of shame and humiliation in the person who has been targeted. People who are publicly humiliated can become very defensive and are likely to withdraw or shut down – neither of which is conducive to what we're trying to do. Calling in, on the other hand, is not as likely to trigger strong feelings of shame or humiliation because it provides a way of “address[ing] the behaviour without making a spectacle of the address itself.”¹⁹⁸ (For a comparison of calling out to calling in, please see Table 2 below.)

* The public nature of calling out helps to send signals to the group about the standards we wish to hold ourselves to – so it can be an effective tool for those working towards social change. But the approach has its limitations and needs to be used discerningly. For a good discussion of when 'calling out' is appropriate see: Ahmad, A. (August 29, 2017). When calling out makes sense. Retrieved from <https://briarpatchmagazine.com/articles/view/when-calling-out-makes-sense>

- Accountability to higher standards of justice, equality, and non-violence is critical in the context of this approach. After all, we can't expect men to challenge sexist remarks or violent behaviours if we're not willing to do so ourselves. And when we call people to higher standards in a compassionate way – one that promotes ongoing learning and growth – we model the behaviours that we're hoping to see in the men we work with.
- Accountability that involves public humiliation or shaming can look a lot like bullying, whereas compassionate accountability is central to healthy relationships – something we're trying to model and promote.
- The risks associated with calling in are lower because they are less likely to provoke strong feelings of anger and resentment. Therefore, this approach is less risky for the men you're working with (i.e., when they themselves try challenging sexist and violent behaviours).

➔ *What it looks like in practice*

People who engage in compassionate accountability...

- **Check their assumptions.** Instead of assuming bad intent, they recognize that “the majority of boundary crossings are accidental”¹⁹⁹ and try to understand where the comment or behaviour came from.
- **Focus on the behaviour and its impact.** They stay away from speculations about the other person's character or motivations and focus on the behaviour itself. Furthermore, they explain *why* the behaviour is harmful, rather than assuming that people should be able to figure that out for themselves.* And they provide concrete examples of how the same situation could be approached differently.
- **Understand that it is a *process*, not a one-time event.**²⁰⁰ Compassionate accountability is based on dialogue, creates space for clarifying questions, and potentially involves follow up and ongoing support. For these reasons, it is usually best done in-person, so that there are opportunities for two-way communication, clarification, and expressions of support.
- **Ground themselves in inquiry.** They don't assume that they have nothing to learn. They ask questions and are not invested in being right.
- **Reinforce relationships and connection.** Some forms of accountability serve to distance the offender from the community and create 'power over' dynamics. Compassionate accountability is about

* It's hard to move towards true equality and justice if people only learn the 'rules' for acceptable behaviour and not the rationale. When we don't explain the 'why', we miss a significant opportunity for growth – and not explaining is more common than you might think (perhaps because the why seems obvious to us). For example, our Prime Minister's recent '[black face' scandal](#) generally focused on the fact that the behaviour was wrong, but most of the coverage failed to explain *why* (i.e., What harm does that behaviour create?), thereby missing a key opportunity for learning and potentially creating resentment about 'political correctness'.

deepening community connection (hence the term ‘calling in’). Our commitment is ultimately to learning and growth; it’s not about blame and shame.²⁰¹

Table 2: Calling Out vs. Calling In	
Calling Out	Calling In
One-way communication; an accusation or declaration	Two-way communication; a conversation
Tends to be public	Tends to be private, with an emphasis on face-to-face communication
Often punitive and based on the assumption of bad intent	Focuses on healing and repair, and is based on the understanding that most people do not intend to harm others
An event that typically begins and ends with a call for accountability (i.e., doesn’t usually help to outline a reconciliatory path that would help the accused to know how to make things right)	A process that typically <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involves active listening • Offers space for clarifying questions and discussion • Offers options for alternative ways of behaving • Involves follow-up and support
Typically reactionary; can be done in a moment of anger	Thoughtful; requires calming yourself first and thinking about the best way to proceed
Often serves to isolate or exclude people from the community	Is about deepening the person’s connection to the community by helping them to engage in ways that are less hurtful or alienating for others
Typically based on the assumption that the other person is the only one of the two of you who has something to learn	More humble by nature, and based on a goal of mutual learning as you try to better understand the dynamics that gave rise to the behaviour
Information in this table was drawn from the following sources: Ahmad, A. (August 29, 2017). When calling out makes sense. Retrieved from https://briarpatchmagazine.com/articles/view/when-calling-out-makes-sense/ ; (Mariposa, M. (May 29, 2016) A practical guide to calling in. Retrieved from https://theconsentcrew.org/2016/05/29/calling-in/ ; Ferguson, S. (January 17, 2015). Calling in: A quick guide on when and how. Retrieved from https://everydayfeminism.com/2015/01/guide-to-calling-in/ ; and Make Sex Easy. (n.d.). Calling in. Retrieved from http://www.makesexeasy.com/calling-in/ .	

➔ *Cautions & Considerations*

- Compassionate accountability requires a lot of emotional energy, patience, and persistence. “Calling out” is faster and easier.
- While calling in tends to be a more productive avenue of accountability, it doesn’t always work. The other person may not be able to move beyond their dominant frame of reference, or they might be dealing with their own trauma. Be patient and understand that compassionate accountability is not a time-limited event – it’s a process that can take years.
- It’s difficult to do this well if you are in a heightened state (i.e., highly triggered by the person): “Most often these conversations are easier if we are not personally experiencing trauma as a result of the other person’s actions, or if we are a more neutral third party acting in a role of advocacy. Do not attempt to call someone in if you yourself are feeling traumatised by their actions. Do not attempt to Call In if you are feeling raw or triggered about the person or their actions or their effects on others. Reach out for support and ask someone else to have the conversation on your behalf.”²⁰²
- Often calling in is a private conversation, but there will be times when you will need to gently challenge someone in a group situation. As an example, we had someone in EMC who made a comment that many people found offensive. We worked through it largely by using the same methods outlined here (i.e., being genuinely curious, asking questions, not assuming bad intent, managing our own reactions, practicing empathy, and assuring the member of his place in our learning community). When we explored his comment with him in a compassionate manner, he was able to articulate his concerns in a way that the group could better understand, and everybody learned from the experience.
- These kinds of conversations can be really difficult. “Embrace the clunkiness.”²⁰³