

Finding Accountability Partners Takes Time

"Okay. I've found a guy, or couple of guys, that have (reluctantly) agreed to try this 'accountability thing.' What do we do now?"

Let me remind you, right off the bat, that accountability does not just happen. And it may not come quickly or takes time, often a long time, to develop the relationship necessary for meaningful accountability. You may want to phase it in as you build the trust, and as you get comfortable opening up to each other. For instance, you may start by being accountable in "safe" areas, such as prayer and Bible study. More serious issues will come out as you get to know each other.

Perhaps the guys you have selected are close friends already. Congratulations! You are the 1 in 10 men who has a close friend. Most of us do not. Not even Christian men. *"Most men could recruit six pallbearers for their funeral, but hardly anyone has a friend he can call at 2 a.m."* For this article, I will assume that you do not know each other very well—yet.

Even if you have been friends a long time, remember that accountability is not automatic or even natural. Vital relationship accountability comes almost exclusively from deliberate and intentional effort. You have to go after it in order to achieve it.

What follows is not the "right way," or the only way to develop vital relationships. It is a compilation of ideas from my own, as well as others' experiences with accountability. What works for some may not work for others. You must be open, flexible and patient. (Of course that eliminates most of us already!)

The Playing Field

At this point, I want to introduce the “The Baselines” from Promise Keepers. It is useful in describing the relationship-building process. It is also helpful in understanding the development of small groups:

Obviously, the ultimate goal is to reach home: Christlikeness. But, just as in real baseball, you must “round the bases” to get there. You start out as acquaintances, develop a friendship, become brothers and, if all goes well, achieve Christlikeness. This can be a long, slow process, with pitfalls and setbacks along the way.

Before we go any further, let me restate the purpose and goal of accountability: To reach our full potential as men of God, and to grow toward Christlikeness; A better family life. Help with the issues of being a man in this world. Getting stronger in resisting temptation. Knowing that you do not have to face these struggles alone; that one or more men will stand beside you and support you, and encourage you, and pray for you. Striving together *“to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.”* (Ephesians 4:23-24)

First Base—Acquaintances

First, you need to get to know each other. You must form the relationship. It sounds easy enough but, remember, we are talking about men here. “Football and the weather” will only take you so far. Here is a typical guy conversation that takes place thousands of times a day:

Joe: “Hey, man! What’s up?”

Mike: “Not much. How you doin’?”

Joe: “Pretty good. How ’bout those Bears?”

Mike: “Really!”

Joe: “Cold enough for ya?”

Mike: "Yeah! No kiddin'!"

Joe: "Well, see ya later!"

Mike: "Later, dude!"

Joe and Mike both walk away satisfied, having had a "great conversation," and some "male-bonding."

Men tend to be most comfortable when the conversation is light and we do not have to reveal anything "deep" about most men are much more task-oriented than relationship-oriented. We worry so much about getting from Point A to Point B, that we forget to enjoy the journey. Relationships often do not get the priority and attention they deserve.

So, the first step is to just spend some time out. Have lunch. Talk on the phone. Do whatever it takes to get to know each other. Do you enjoy each other's company? Do you have similar interests? Are you at similar stages of life? Are you the same level of spiritual maturity? *"But it is you, a man like myself, my companion, my close friend ... "* (Psalm 55:13) In a way, it resembles the dating process. (I realize some of you married men may not remember what that was like. Let me refresh your memory—it ain't easy!) Developing any relationship takes an investment of time and effort. Be patient. *"But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently."* (Rom 8:25)

Rounding Second—Friends

If you made it to First Base (Acquaintances), you are well on to friendship as you head toward second. This is where the storm moves in. As in most relationships, inevitably conflicts will arise. After all, wouldn't it be boring if we all agreed on everything? Issues may surface as you get to know each other, and disagreements are part of the process.

Some adjustments in expectations and styles may have to be

made. This may involve a few “fair fights,” which will help bring about a certain level of honesty and respect. However, if you are committed to the relationship, you will be able to work through these issues as they come up. *“Keep on loving each other as brothers.”* (Hebrews 13:1)

This will build the foundation and strengthen the bonds between you. Keep in mind that not everyone who gets to first base makes it to home. It is always possible that you may not want to pursue the relationship further. It happens. But at least you have developed a friendship.

I would love to give you some guidelines about how long it should take to reach each base, but the truth is I cannot. It depends on how well you know each other when you start, how often you meet, your personality types, and many other variables.

Remember: Enjoy the journey! Do not expect the other guy(s) to be the same as you. Some of us open up easily (me, for instance), while many others, probably the majority of men, take a while to get comfortable enough to share anything personal. Do not get discouraged if you feel like you are not progressing quickly enough. It will most likely take a while to reach the point where you are comfortable revealing anything deeply personal to each other.

In the meantime, begin to put some accountability in place, either informally or formally. *“Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.”* (Ephesians 5:21) Informally, you can follow up on things that were shared previously, such as: “I’m having a hard time dealing with this person at work.”

The next time, you could ask: “How’s it going with that person at work?” Formally, you can develop a list of basic areas of accountability which you agree to discuss regularly. In the beginning, these should be safe, non-threatening areas which will not pose a risk to the men in the group. They must be

agreed upon unilaterally. Perhaps you begin with one or two things to which you are accountable. As you progress, you can add to the list, and eventually increase the level of openness and transparency.

Suggestions for Initial Areas of Accountability:

- Prayer life
- Bible reading/study time
- Integrity issues
- Spending time with the family
- Laziness
- Work issues
- Harboring anger or resentment
- Exercise, dieting
- Things shared previously

One of the benefits of accountability is that often you will find that you are not the only one who struggles in a particular , knowing you are not alone, you can help and encourage each other. *“Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.”* (James 5:16)

An additional benefit of accountability is that you will have one or more men who are willing to listen as you talk about what is going on in your judgment. Without the fear of gossip. With love. With acceptance. With patience. And you will have the benefit of feedback and godly counsel from your brothers in Christ. *“Perfume and incense bring joy to the heart, and the pleasantness of one’s friend springs from his earnest counsel.”* (Proverbs 27:9)

All scripture quotations are taken from the New International Version (NIV) of the Bible, except as noted.

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