

A Graduated Series of Consequences

It's especially painful for communities when someone consistently violates agreements or behavioral norms, or refuses to make changes repeatedly requested by others regarding behavior or communication style. One remedy is to agree on and implement a graduated series of fair, compassionate consequences, from mild to increasingly serious, that treat the person with respect while inducing them to make necessary changes. When all else fails, this kind of respectful pressure can give that person a needed inducement to change.

Here are the graduated series of consequences used by a community in Vancouver if someone seriously violates behavioral norms or repeatedly breaks community agreements. These consequences treat members with respect, yet are effective.

- (1) One person talks with the member in question about the problem and asks him or her to make changes.
- (2) If this doesn't work, four people meet about the problem—the first two and a trusted friend of each, again, requesting that the person make changes.
- (3) If this doesn't solve it, the person meets with the Accountability Committee to resolve the problem.
- (4) If this still doesn't solve it, the Accountability Comm. creates a 5-month contract with the member that outlines how he or she will make the necessary changes, and meets with the member monthly for updates. The purpose of the contract and meetings is *not* to punish or humiliate the member, but to encourage and support their making the changes.
- (5) If even this doesn't work, the whole community meets specifically to decide what action to take, which may include asking the person to live somewhere else for a while, and possibly also revoking his or her membership. The member can participate in this meeting, but has no blocking power.
- (6) If most members want to take this action but one or more people block it, the committee meets with the member in question and the those blocking the proposal to seek resolution together.

The number of consequences a group has, and how far it goes (a whole-group meeting? expulsion?) will depend on the size of the group and how deeply connected people feel—often a function of how long they've been together.

Isn't it drastic to put a member back on provisional membership status, or ask them to live elsewhere for a while, or worse, to permanently leave the community? Yes, it is drastic. And sometimes, when the violation is severe enough or the conflict too wrenching, it's the only way to protect your community from breaking up altogether.