

## **This Is What Accountable Relationships Look Like**

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*People who are targeted by systemic injustice know far more about that injustice than those who are granted unearned privileges by that same system. Therefore, anti-racist practice necessitates that White people listen to, learn from, and be accountable to People of Color as the primary source of knowledge about racism, White supremacy, White privilege, and anti-racist action.*

*The statements presented here are gleaned from conversations we have had over the past 12 years of working together as anti-racism educators. These statements have also been informed by the wisdom of other educators and organizers. We especially want to acknowledge and express gratitude to our mentor, friend, and colleague Monique Savage. Some of the written sources that have informed our statements are listed at the end of this document. We share these insights as a work in progress knowing that as we continue to learn and grow, these statements will be amended and expanded. – Dionardo Pizaña and Melanie S. Morrison*

### **Preface: Foundational Principles for Partnerships of Accountability – Dionardo Pizaña**

#### **Grounded in Trust**

Partnerships of accountability must be grounded in trust – both in a moment and over time. There are many individual and systemic reasons why Black, Indigenous and other People of Color may not trust White people, so it can never be assumed that trust is present or will be sustained. There must be a clear understanding that one of the byproducts of racism is mistrust and that trust with one member of a racialized group does not necessarily transfer to trust from every member of that group or community. Trust can be built through individual interactions and can be strengthened as relationships deepen and grow. Trust across racial differences can also be built through equity based actions, individual integrity, critical self-awareness and humility. Building trust across our racial differences can provide a strong bridge to exploring how we can build trust across all of our other social identity realities (e.g., gender, gender identity, class, disabilities, sexual orientation and other human differences).

#### **Moving toward Interconnectedness and Mutuality**

In what ways do White people see their lives inextricably interconnected or mutually linked with Black, Indigenous and other People of Color who are part of their lives, partnerships and communities? Racism is upheld by the White supremacy values of individualism, fear of complexity and paternalism. These ways of being can negatively impact the ability of White people to gravitate toward connectedness, especially when the “going gets tough,” or when the default is “the way (or the perceived right way) that we have always done things.” The emptiness of the proclamation from White people that “they see everyone as humans” rings hollow when the day-to-day negative impacts and outcomes on the lives and bodies of Black, Indigenous and other People of Color continue. Moving toward interconnectedness and mutuality across our racial differences is not seeing everyone as the same. It is centered on a greater awareness and understanding that my thoughts, beliefs and actions are of significance and should be informed and guided by racially different individuals and groups.

### **Developing Critical and Compassionate Self-Reflection**

One of the important skills that each of us can develop as we move toward partnerships of accountability across race is to build critical and compassionate self-reflection. If you are White, how often do you look internally at the ways that you may be, intentionally or unintentionally, supporting, colluding with or upholding racism at all four levels – personal, interpersonal, institutional and cultural? Opening oneself to critical and compassionate self-reflection, day to day, can help move White people away from initial reactions of fear, protection, judgment and disconnection. Self-reflection can happen by noticing when you begin repeating unhelpful behaviors in your relationships across racial differences, asking for feedback on your behaviors or language or becoming curious instead of reactive, when emotions are high. Self-reflection is not about “going inside” to avoid difficulty or hard situations/interactions; it is about building emotional resiliency to hold oneself with compassion and accountability, to seek out important feedback for growth and to recognize that personal change helps to positively inform changes at the interpersonal, institutional and cultural levels.

### **Developing and Nurturing Relationships of Accountability** – Dionardo Pizaña and Melanie S. Morrison

**Dionardo:** Accountability is not a static reality and it is not inherently punitive. Accountability will change and evolve with increased trust, vulnerability, and the investment of time needed to better understand how power and privilege are present at the personal, interpersonal, institutional and cultural levels.

**Melanie:** As a White person in a relationship of accountability to a Black person, Indigenous person or other Person of Color, I need to enter with humility, deep listening, and critical self-reflection while also showing up with agency, authentic engagement, and a willingness to bring my whole self to the relationship.

**Dionardo:** Developing and nurturing relationships of accountability requires an investment of time, energy, and commitment. Black, Indigenous and other People of Color have many reasons to doubt that White people will be willing and able to show up with the consistency and commitment necessary to build authentic accountability.

**Melanie:** Being accountable as an anti-racist White person means moving out of White spaces into places where we are not in control. It means becoming involved in organizations and movements that are led by Black, Indigenous and other People of Color, respecting the priorities they identify as strategies for change, and sustaining our engagement over time. It means learning about the ways Black, Indigenous and other People of Color have resisted racism long before I arrived on the scene.

**Dionardo:** Accountability that is authentic and life-giving cannot be one-sided communication. To assume that Black, Indigenous and other People of Color understand racism in more profound ways than White people is not the same as assuming that White people are inherently untrustworthy or less-than-equal partners in the accountable relationship.

**Melanie:** If White people believe we are less than equal partners in accountable relationships, we will likely seek personal validation and worth from Black, Indigenous or other People of Color, stay stuck in guilt, suffer from a chronic sense of self-deprecation, and distrust our own deepest wisdom.

**Dionardo:** Accountability cannot be one-sided because all of us have target and non-target identities. In accountable relationships that are authentic and life-giving both people are engaged in critical self-examination and learning from each other as we seek to understand and confront the privileges we carry.

**Melanie:** Accountable relationships are mutually enriching but they do not always result in friendship. If I enter into a relationship of accountability with a Black person, an Indigenous person or another Person of Color and it develops into a friendship that can be a wonderful gift for both of us, but there is no guarantee that developing a solid and sustainable relationship of accountability will result in friendship.

**Dionardo:** As a Person of Color in accountable relationships with White allies and accomplices, I expect those White people to show up in solidarity alongside me. I do not expect that they will speak for me or other People of Color but rather speak from their own racial experience and understandings.

**Melanie:** Being in accountable relationships with Black, Indigenous or other People of Color does not mean relinquishing my critical sensibilities or ignoring my deepest wisdom. It means a willingness to consistently check in with and learn from people who are the targets of racism and have the most at stake in the struggle for racial justice – namely Black, Indigenous and other People of Color.

**Dionardo:** As a Person of Color, I am willing to engage as an accountability partner with White people who have demonstrated through their words, actions, and persistence that they are committed to the long-haul struggle for racial equity and full inclusion. They earn my trust not because they do it perfectly, but because they continue to show up with all their imperfections and act from a stance of understanding that our lives are interconnected.

**Melanie:** Being accountable as an anti-racist White person means that I must listen to and learn from Black, Indigenous and other People of Color as the primary sources if I want to understand racism, White supremacy, White privilege, and anti-racist practice. I can also gain knowledge and guidance about racism, White supremacy, White privilege, and anti-racist practice from White people who have developed a healthy anti-racist White identity and who are engaged in critical self-reflection and sustained anti-racism work with Black, Indigenous and other People of Color.

**Dionardo:** From a place of accountability, I trust that you care about me and understand what causes me harm well enough that you will “have my back” even if I am not present.

**Melanie:** There will be times when I must speak and act to interrupt racism before I have the chance to check in with Black, Indigenous and other People of Color or with White allies, but accountability means that I am open to being corrected and to apologizing when my words, actions, and good intentions have caused harm.

**Dionardo and Melanie:** Accountability has to do with developing and nurturing relationships that are authentic and life-giving for both parties. The ultimate goal of accountability is to build strong and healthy partnerships that undergird and sustain the life-long work of dismantling systemic racism and White supremacy.



Dionardo Pizaña is the diversity, equity and inclusion specialist for Michigan State University Extension. He is a nationally recognized, highly sought-after multicultural consultant, speaker and trainer with more than twenty-five years' experience developing, teaching and facilitating diversity education programs for non-profit, governmental and educational institutions.



Melanie S. Morrison is executive director of *Allies for Change*. She is a seasoned anti-oppression educator, activist and author with thirty years' experience designing and facilitating transformational group process. In 1994 she founded *Doing Our Own Work*, an anti-racism intensive for White people that has attracted hundreds of participants across the country.

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In developing these ideas, we are indebted to these sources: *Accountability and White Anti-Racist Organizing: Stories from Our Work* by Bonnie Berman Cushing with Lila Cabbil, Margery Freeman, Jeff Hitchcock and Kimberley Richards; "Powerful Partnerships: Transformative Alliance Building" by Shelly Tochluk and Cameron Levin, AWARE-LA; "Appreciation and Accountability" by Tim Wise.

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