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Reconstructing Civility after Wrongdoing: A Place for Restorative Justice

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One of the challenges of being in community with people is that, sometimes, people hurt each other. We might say something to someone in a way that's seen as disrespectful, we might do something that someone finds offensive. How do we respond when people hurt one another? How should we respond? Is there a way to respond that satisfies people's needs in a conflict situation, that is fair to all the parties involved, and that enhances civility in our relationships and communities?

The short answer is, yes, there is a way to respond to offensive behavior in a way that upholds expectations of justice, accountability, supportiveness, and civility. But we don't always see those responses in conventional ways of responding.

Often, conventional responses to wrongdoing involve bringing a complaint to an authority figure (ombudsperson, resident advisor, manager) to have that person manage the situation for us. That response is understandable – it conforms to our bureaucratic ways of thinking about power and authority. That supervisor, judge, ombudsperson then has the responsibility of talking with the wrongdoer, essentially delivering our message to the wrongdoer without us having to deliver it to the person. Moreover, that person can punish the wrongdoer for their actions, giving us a sense of legitimacy and justice. This response can feel safer, less risky, and more likely to have done what we want to see. (That authority figure has more power than we do.)

Sometimes, that conventional approach is appropriate. Depending on the offense and the offender, it may be unsafe to talk to the other person, we may believe that talking with the offender will do no good, we may need some space to process.

But organizations and communities have been utilizing a practice rooted in restorative justice that uses dialogue between the person hurt and the person who did the hurting to bring about *restorative* outcomes for all the parties and for the wider community. These restorative outcomes aim to help victims and offenders recover, learn, and grow from the situation. Rather than resorting solely to punishment, restorative justice practices aim to help the offender accept responsibility and show accountability for their actions by acknowledging the harm and repairing the harm in ways that the victim needs. Restorative justice practices include victim-offender mediation, peace circles, family group conferencing, and other related practices.

As the use of restorative justice practices grows, researchers and practitioners are exploring new opportunities for growth, confronting new concerns about growth, and evaluating the effectiveness of that growth. There is an opportunity to cultivate a sense of community by using restorative practices in appropriate situations in our families, our workplaces, and our

communities. Doing so can enhance our sense of civility and our sense of belongingness, providing a constructive response to wrongdoing when it occurs.