

Community: The Structure of Belonging

by Peter Block

Notes on the book

We need to transform the isolation within our communities into connectedness and caring for the whole by building the social fabric.

Social fabric is created one room at a time, the one we are in at the moment. It is formed out of the questions "Whom do we want in the room?" and "What is the new conversation that we want to occur?"

The key to a new future is to focus on gifts, on associational life, and on the insight that all transformation occurs through language. The small group is the unit of transformation and the container for the experience of belonging.

The existing community context is one that markets fear, assigns fault, and worships self-interest. This context supports the belief that the future will be improved with new laws, more oversight, and stronger leadership. The new context that restores community is one of possibility, generosity, and gifts, rather than one of fear, mistakes, and self-interest.

Citizens become powerful when they choose to shift the context within which they act in the world. Communities are human systems given form by conversations that build relatedness. The conversations that build relatedness most often occur through associational life, where citizens are unpaid and show up by choice, rather than in large systems where professionals are paid and show up by contractual agreement.

Citizens create leaders, children create parents, and audience creates the performance. This inversion may not be the whole truth, but it is useful. The inversion creates conditions where we can shift from:

- A place of fear and fault to one of gifts, generosity, and abundance
 - A bet on law and oversight to one on social fabric and chosen accountability
 - The corporation and systems as central, to associational life as central;
 - A focus on leaders to a focus on citizens
- Problems to possibility.

Leadership is convening and held to three tasks:

- Shift the context within which people gather
- Name the debate through powerful questions
- Listen rather than advocate, defend, or provide answers

Each gathering needs to become an example of the future we want to create. The small group is the unit of transformation. Large-scale transformation occurs when enough small groups shift in harmony toward the larger change. The small group produces power when diversity of thinking and dissent are given space, commitments are made without barter, and the gifts of each person and our community are acknowledged and valued.

Questions Are More Transforming Than Answers

The skill is getting the questions right. The traditional conversations that seek to explain, study, analyze, define tools, and express the desire to change others are interesting but not powerful. Questions open the door to the future and are more powerful than answers in that they demand engagement. Engagement in the right questions is what creates accountability. How we frame the questions is decisive. They need to be ambiguous, personal, and stressful. Introduce the questions by defining the distinction the question addresses, namely what is different and unique about this conversation.

We need to inoculate people against advice and help. Advice is replaced by curiosity.

The five conversations for structuring belonging are possibility, ownership, dissent, commitment, and gifts. Since all the conversations lead to each other, sequence is not that critical. Create conversations in ascending order of difficulty, with possibility generally an early conversation and gifts typically one of the more difficult. There are three elements of a question:

- The distinction that underlies the question
- An admonition against advice and help and in favor of curiosity
- The question itself, stated precisely

The Possibility Conversation

The distinction is between possibility and problem solving. Possibility is a future beyond reach. The possibility conversation works on us and evolves from a discussion of personal crossroads. It takes the form of a declaration, best made publicly.

The Questions

What is the crossroads you are faced with at this point in time?

What declaration of possibility can you make that has the power to transform the community and inspire you?

The Ownership Conversation

It asks citizens to act as if they are creating what exists in the world. The distinction is between ownership and blame.

The Questions

For an event or project:

- How valuable an experience (or project, or community) do you plan for this to be?
- How much risk are you willing to take?
- How participative do you plan to be?
- To what extent are you invested in the well-being of the whole?

The all-purpose ownership question:

What have I done to contribute to the very thing I complain about or want to change?

The questions that can complete our story and remove its limiting quality:

- What is the story about this community or organization that you hear yourself most often telling? The one you are wedded to and maybe even take your identity from?
- What are the payoffs you receive from holding on to this story?
- What is your attachment to this story costing you?

The Dissent Conversation

The dissent conversation creates an opening for commitment. When dissent is expressed, just listen. Don't solve it, defend against it, or explain anything. The primary distinction is between dissent and lip service. A second distinction is between dissent and denial, rebellion, or resignation.

The Questions

What doubts and reservations do you have?

What is the no or refusal that you keep postponing?

What have you said yes to that you no longer really mean?

What is a commitment or decision that you have changed your mind about?

What resentment do you hold that no one knows about?

What forgiveness are you withholding?

The Commitment Conversation

The commitment conversation is a promise with no expectation of return. Commitment is distinguished from barter. The enemy of commitment is lip service, not dissent or opposition. The commitments that count the most are ones made to peers, other citizens. We have to explicitly provide support for citizens to declare that there is no promise they are willing to make at this time. Refusal to promise does not cost us our membership or seat at the table. We only lose our seat when we do not honor our word. Commitment embraces two lands of promises:

- My behavior and actions with others
- Results and outcomes that will occur in the world

The Questions

What promises am I willing to make?

What measures have meaning to me?

What price am I willing to pay?

What is the cost to others for me to keep my commitments, or to fail in my commitments?

What is the promise I'm willing to make that constitutes a risk or major shift for me?

What is the promise I am postponing?

What is the promise or commitment I am unwilling to make?

The Gifts Conversation

The leadership and citizen task is to bring the gifts of those on the margin into the center. The distinction is between gifts and deficiencies or needs. We are not defined by deficiencies or what is missing. We are defined by our gifts and what is present. We choose our destiny when we have the courage to acknowledge our own gifts and choose to bring them into the world. A gift is not a gift until it is offered.

The Questions

What is the gift you still hold in exile?

What is something about you that no one knows?

What gratitude do you hold that has been gone unexpressed?

What have others in this room done, in this gathering that has touched you?

Final Comment

The important thing about these questions is that they name the agenda that creates space for an alternative future. The power is in the asking, not in the answers.