



Community The Structure of Belonging

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Author's Bio: Peter Block is an author, consultant and citizen of Cincinnati, Ohio. His work is about empowerment, stewardship, chosen accountability, and the reconciliation of community. Peter is the author of several best-selling books. The most widely known are *Flawless Consulting: A Guide to Getting Your Expertise Used* (1st edition 1980, 2nd edition 1999); *Stewardship: Choosing Service Over Self-Interest* (1993) and *The Empowered Manager: Positive Political Skills at Work* (1987).

Author's big thought: *Community* as used here is about the experience of belonging. The word belong has two meanings. First and foremost, to belong is to be related to and a part of something. The second meaning of the word "belong" has to do with being an owner: To belong to a community is to act as a creator and co-owner of that community. The work, then, is to seek in our communities a wider and deeper sense of emotional ownership; it means fostering among all of a community's citizens a sense of ownership and accountability. To offer structures with the promise of creating community gives leaders relief from the common story that leadership is a set of personal qualities we are born with, develop, or try on like a new suit to see if they fit.

Introduction: The Fragmented Community and Its Transformation

- The essential challenge is to transform the isolation and self-interest within our communities into connectedness and caring for the whole. The key is to identify how this transformation occurs.
- We begin by shifting our attention from the problems of community to the possibility of community. We also need to acknowledge that our wisdom about individual transformation is not enough when it comes to community transformation.
- So, one purpose here is to bring together our knowledge about the nature of collective transformation. A key insight in this pursuit is to accept the importance of social capital to the life of the community. This begins the effort to create a future distinct from the past.

Part One: The Fabric of The Community

Chapter 1: Insights into Transformation

- Social fabric is created one room at a time. It is formed from small steps that ask "Who do we want in the room?" and "What the new conversation that we want to occur?"

- In community building, we choose the people and the conversation that will produce the accountability to build relatedness, structure belonging, and move the action forward.
- A series of core Insights informs us how to answer these questions. These insights include ideas on focusing on gifts, on associational life, and on the way all transformation occurs through language. Also critical are insights about the context that governs the conversations and the willingness to speak into the future.
- Two additional strands in the fabric of community explored here are the need for each small step to capture a quality of aliveness and the need for it to evolve in an organic way. There is an established method for accomplishing this aliveness that values all voices in the room, uses the small group even in large gatherings, and recognizes that accountability grows out of the act of co-creation. The essence of creating an alternative future comes from citizen-to-citizen engagement that focuses at each step on the well-being of the whole.

Summary; Overall Premise

- Build the social fabric and transform the isolation within our communities into connectedness and caring for the whole.
- Shift our conversations from the problems of community to the possibility of community.
- Commit to create a future distinct from the past.

Chapter 2: Shifting the Context for Community

- The context that restores community is one of possibility, generosity and gifts, rather than one of problem solving, fear, and retribution. A new context acknowledges that we have all the capacity, expertise, and resources that an alternative future requires.
- Communities are human systems given form by conversations that build relatedness. The conversations that build relatedness most often occur through associational life, where citizens show up by choice, and rarely in the context of system life, where citizens show up out of obligation.
- The small group is the unit of transformation and the container for the experience of belonging. Conversations that focus on stories about the past become a limitation to community; ones that are teaching parables and focus on the future restore community.

Summary: Operating Guidelines

- 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.
- Each step has to embody a quality of aliveness, and strategy evolves in an organic way. The essence of creating an alternative future comes from citizen-to-citizen engagement that constantly focuses on the well-being of the whole.
- We have all the capacity, expertise, and financial resources that an alternative future requires.
- The small group is the unit of transformation and the container for the experience of belonging.

Chapter 3: The Stuck Community

- 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.

- Possibility thinking and associational life are marginalized, relegated to human interest and side stories in the media.
- The corporate model is the modern ideal, and the economy is the center story. The story in the stuck community defines the role of the media as framer of the debate.
- In community building, we need to realize that what the media reports is a reflection, not the cause of the conversation that citizens currently hold.

CHAPTER 4: The Restorative Community

- Restoration comes from the choice to value possibility and relatedness over problems, self-interest and the rest of the stuck community's agenda. It hinges on the accountability chosen by citizens and their willingness to connect with each other around promises they make to each other.
- Restoration is created by the kinds of conversations we initiate with each other. These conversations are the leverage point for an alternative future. The core question that underlies each conversation is "What can we create together?"
- Shifting the context from retribution to restoration will occur through language that moves in the following directions: from problems to possibility; from fear and fault to gifts, generosity, and abundance; from law and oversight to social fabric and chosen accountability; from corporation and systems to associational life; and from leaders to citizens.

Summary: The Context for a Restorative Community

- The existing community is the 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.
- The future hinges on the accountability that citizens choose and their willingness to connect with each other around promises they make to each other.
- Citizens have the capacity to own and exercise power rather than defer or delegate it to others.
- We reclaim our citizenship when we invert what is cause and what is effect.
- 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.

CHAPTER 5: Taking Back Our Projections

- Citizens become powerful when they choose to shift the context within which they act in the world. Using the language of context rather than culture puts the choice into our own

hands. It acknowledges that our mindset, even our worldview, is subjective and therefore amenable to change.

- To choose a context conducive to citizenship, we first need to understand the idea of communal projection. Projection is the act of attributing qualities to others that we deny within ourselves. It is expressed in the way we label others and then build diagnostic categories and whole professions around the labeling.
- The shift away from projection and labeling provides the basis for defining what we mean by authentic citizenship—which is to hold ourselves accountable for the well-being of the larger community and to choose to own and exercise power rather than defer or delegate it to others.

CHAPTER 6: What It Means to Be a Citizen

- Choosing to be accountable for the whole, creating a context of hospitality and collective possibility, acting to bring the gifts of those on the margin into the center—these are some of the ways we begin to create a community of citizens.
- To reclaim our citizenship is to be accountable, and this comes from the inversion of what is cause and what is effect. When we are open to thinking along the lines that citizens create leaders, that children create parents, and that the audience creates the performance, we create the conditions for widespread accountability and the commitment that emerges from it. This inversion may not be the whole truth, but it is useful.

CHAPTER 7: The Transforming Community

- Conventional thinking about communal transformation believes that focusing on large systems, better leaders, clearer goals, and more controls is essential, and that emphasizing speed and scale is critical.
- The conventional belief is that individual transformation leads to communal transformation. Our explorations to this point lead instead to the understanding that transformation occurs when we focus on the structure of how we gather and the context in which the gatherings take place; when we work hard on getting the questions right; when we choose depth over speed and relatedness over scale. We also believe that problem solving can make things better but cannot change the nature of things.
- Community transformation calls for citizenship that shifts the context from a place of fear and fault, law and oversight, corporation and “systems,” and preoccupation with leadership to one of gifts, generosity and abundance; social fabric and chosen accountability; and associational life and the engagement of citizens.
- These shifts occur as citizens face each other in conversations of ownership and possibility. To be more specific, leaders are held to three tasks: to shift the context within which people gather, name the debate through powerful questions, and listen rather than advocate, defend, or provide answers.

Part 2: The Alchemy of Belonging

CHAPTER 8: Leadership Is Convening

- This is not an argument against leaders or leadership, only a desire to change the nature of our thinking. Communal transformation requires a certain kind of leadership, one that creates conditions where context shifts:
- From a place of fear and fault to one of gifts, generosity, and abundance
- From a belief in more laws and oversight to a belief in social fabric and chosen accountability
- From the corporation and systems as central, to associational life as central

- From a focus on leaders to a focus on citizens
- From problems to possibility
- For this shift in context to occur, we need leadership that supports a restorative path. Restoration calls for us to deglamorize leadership and consider it a quality that exists in all human beings. We need to simplify leadership and construct it so that it is infinitely and universally available.

CHAPTER 9: The Small Group Is the Unit of Transformation

- The future is created one room at a time, one gathering at a time. Each gathering needs to become an example of the future we want to create. This means the small group is where transformation takes place. Large-scale transformation occurs when enough small group shifts lead to the larger change.
- Small groups have the best leverage when they meet as part of a larger gathering. At these moments, citizens experience the intimacy of the small circle and are simultaneously aware that they are part of a larger whole that shares their concerns.
- The small group gains power with certain kinds of conversations. To build community, we seek conversations where people show up by invitation rather than mandate, and experience an intimate and authentic relatedness. We have conversations where the focus is on the communal possibility and there is a shift in ownership of this place, even though others are in charge.
- 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.
- We structure these conversations so that 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.
- Each gathering needs to become an example of the future we want to create.

CHAPTER 10: 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. The way we introduce the questions also matters.
- Introduce the questions by defining the distinction the question addresses by stating what is different and unique about this conversation. We give permission for unpopular answers, and inoculate people against advice and help. Advice is replaced by curiosity.
- We need to inoculate people against advice and help. Advice is replaced by curiosity.
- We can now be specific about defining the conversations that open community to an alternative future. We seek conversations that create accountability and commitment.
- The traditional conversations that seek to explain, study, analyze, define tools, and express the desire to change others are interesting but not powerful. They actually are forms of wanting to maintain control. If we adhere to them, they become a limitation to the future, not a pathway.
- The future is brought into the present when citizens engage each other through questions of possibility, commitment, dissent, and gifts. Questions open the door to the future and are more powerful than answers in that they demand engagement.

Summary: Leadership and Transformation

- Leadership that engages citizens is a capacity that exists in all human beings. It is infinitely and universally available.
- Transformation occurs when leaders focus on the structure of how we gather and the context in which the gatherings take place.
- 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.

Midterm Review

- Before the author makes these ideas more concrete, here is a quick overview of the larger story we are creating: powerful questions give us the means to initiate a community where accountability and commitment are ingrained. They are a key to understanding the means and architecture for gathering people in a way that will build relatedness, which in turn creates communities in which citizens will choose accountability and commitment. This is what overcomes our fragmentation and reduces our tendency to demand change from people who are essentially strangers to us.
- The thinking follows this logic: The strategy for an alternative future is to focus on ways to shift context, build relatedness, and create space for a more intentional possibility.
- This strategy gives form to the idea that if you can change context and relatedness in this room, you have changed the context and relatedness in the world, at least for this moment.
- The way we change the room is by changing the conversation. Not to just any new conversation, but to one that creates a communal accountability and commitment. And this new conversation is almost always initiated in the form of a question.
- We are avoiding conversations that are just talk. Certain conversations are satisfying and true, yet they have no power and entail no accountability. For example:
 - Telling the history of how we got here
 - Giving explanations and opinions
 - Blaming and complaining
 - Making reports and descriptions
 - Carefully defining terms and conditions
 - Retelling your story again and again
 - Seeking quick action
- These are the conventional conversations and are often conducted through conferences, press releases, trainings, master plans, and the call for more studies and expertise. They are well intentioned and have face validity but don't change anything. Most of what we want to see changed has been explained, complained about, reported on, and defined for decades.
- "Just-talk" conversations can help us get connected or increase our understanding of who we are, but we endure them mostly out of habit, for they are so ingrained in the social convention of our culture that if we didn't have them, we would miss it. They do not, however, contribute to transformation,
- Here are the conversations that produce something more than just talk:
 - Invitation
 - Possibility
 - Ownership
 - Dissent
 - Commitment

- Gifts
- Each of these conversations leads to the others. Any one held wholeheartedly takes us to and resolves all the others. When any of them are absent, it is just talk, no matter how urgent the cause, how important the plan, how elegant the answer. These are the conversations through which the community is transformed.

CHAPTER 11: Invitation

- The first of the six conversations that create an accountable and hospitable community is Invitation. Invitation is the means through which hospitality is created. Invitation counters the conventional belief that change requires mandate or persuasion.
- Invitation honors the importance of choice, the necessary condition for accountability.
- Once the invitation conversation takes place, we follow with the conversations of possibility, ownership, dissent, commitment, and gifts.
- Invite people who are not used to being together.
- The elements of a powerful invitation:
 - Name the possibility about which we are convening.
 - Specify what is required of each should they choose to attend.
 - Make the invitation as personal as possible.
 - Be clear that a refusal carries no cost.
- 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.

Chapter 12: The Possibility, Ownership, Dissent, Commitment, and Gifts Conversations

- After the invitation, there are five other conversations for structuring belonging: possibility ownership, dissent, commitment, and gifts. Since all the conversations lead to each other, sequence is not that critical. The context of the gathering will often determine which questions to deal with and at what depth.
- It's important to understand, though, that some are more difficult than others, especially in communities where citizens are just beginning to engage with one another.
- Present them in ascending order of difficulty, with possibility generally an early conversation to have and gifts typically one of the more difficult
- We are using possibility here in a unique way. Possibility is not a goal or prediction; it is the statement of a future condition that is beyond each. It works on us and evolves from a discussion of personal crossroads.

Conversation Two: 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 is an act of imagination of what we can create together, and 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?

Conversation Three: The Ownership Conversation:

- The ownership conversation asks citizens to act as if they were creating what exists in the world. Confession is the religious and judicial version of ownership.
- The distinction is between ownership and blame.
- It is important for people to see the limitation of their story for each story has a payoff and a cost. Naming these is a precondition to creating an alternative future.

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 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?

Conversation Four: The Dissent Conversation:

- The dissent conversation creates an opening for commitment.
- Questions explicitly ask for doubts and reservations. When they are expressed, we need to just listen.
- 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.
- The 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?

Conversation Five: 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 kinds 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?

Conversation Six: The Gifts Conversation:

- The most radical and uncomfortable conversation is about our gifts.
- 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.

CHAPTER 13: Bringing Hospitality into the World

- We usually associate hospitality with a culture, a social practice, a more personal quality to be admired. In western culture, where individualism and security seem to be priorities, we need to be more thoughtful about how to bring the welcoming of strangers into our daily way of being together

CHAPTER 14: Designing Physical Space That Supports Community

- Physical space is more decisive in creating community than we realize.
- Most meeting spaces are designed for control, negotiation, and persuasion.
- We always have a choice about how we rearrange and occupy whatever room we are handed.
- Community is built when we sit in circles, when there are windows and the walls have signs of life, when every voice can be equally heard and amplified, when we all are on one level—and the chairs have wheels and swivel.
- When we have an opportunity to design new space, we need the following:
 - Community spaces that have the qualities of communal intimacy.
 - We need reception areas that tell us we are in the right place and are welcome,
 - Hallways wide enough for intimate seating and casual contact,
 - Eating spaces that refresh us and encourage relatedness,

- Meeting rooms designed with nature, art, conviviality, and citizen-to-citizen interaction in mind.
- And we need large community spaces that have those qualities of great communal intimacy.
- The design process itself needs to be an example of the future we are ending to create. Authentic citizen and employee engagement is as important as good design expertise.

Recommendation: This book is written to support those who care for the well-being of their community. It is for anyone who wants to be part of creating an organization, neighborhood, city, or country that works for all, and who has the faith and the energy to create such a place. It is for all who are willing to take a leadership role in creating a strong and connected community,



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About the reviewer: Frumi Rachel Barr, MBA, Ph.D

Frumi is the trusted advisor to go to if you are feeling stuck. She has a passion for helping dynamic leaders and their teams talk about what really matters. She helps them emerge from overwhelm and find clarity out of chaos, communicate effectively with their teams, and accelerate their business results. Frumi is a former CEO and CFO herself and has an MBA and a PhD in business administration. She is known as a catalyst for change and when Frumi shows up with dynamite and band aids, change is bound to happen!



Dear Fellow Reader,

I know how much time it takes to read a book and how many books are sitting on the pile, ready to be read. I don't know about you, but after a while they started to make me feel guilty. I wondered when I would read all the books that I knew would make me feel better informed.

There was also another challenge that I encountered with reading a lot - all the books I read started to blend together in my mind and I couldn't remember what I read in which book. That's why I thought book summaries were a good idea. I could read many more book summaries than I ever could books. I started writing summaries on the books that I read so I could revisit them and remember what I read and where.

Then I started sharing my book notes with all the people I knew. My clients love to hear about what I have read so that they too can learn. That's how a joint journey of learning about leadership, making difficult decisions, knowing how to have tough conversations and many other things began.

I was inspired to start a community of learning and that's when sharing my book notes and starting a book club by teleconference was born.

Reading the RIGHT books and discussing them in the RIGHT way in the RIGHT forum can enhance your leadership skills and communication abilities. Frumi's LEADERSHIP BOOK CLUB can be your ongoing resource!

Go to www.frumi.com and join the discussion forum now!