

Citizens, Community, Leadership & Institutions: A Radical Challenge to all our taken for granted ideas

Peter Block in conversation with John Watters of Living Leadership and Danny Chesterman of Ashridge Consulting

Peter Block is one of the foremost thinkers in the field of organisational consulting. His books, including *Flawless Consulting* (2011) and *The Answer to How is Yes: Acting on What Matters* (2003) have influenced a generation of professionals in the field of leadership and organisational development. Now in his early seventies, his latest writing, *The Abundant Community* (written with John McKnight, 2010), and *Community: The Structure of Belonging* (2008), offers a profound challenge to our taken for granted ideas about how we develop leadership, build community, and the relationship between institutions and citizens. His latest thinking has been informed by his work to restore community in South Africa, the Philippines and grass-roots experience in his home city of Cincinnati, Ohio and his collaboration on work in other U.S. cities with John McKnight of Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) Institute in Chicago.

Shifting our Thinking: from Consumers to Citizens

Block defines a citizen as a participant in a democracy; someone who is willing to be accountable for their part in creating a strong and connected community. Community, as Block uses it, is about the experience of belonging: to be related to and a part of something. To belong has to do with being an owner; to belong to a community is to be a co-owner and co-creator of that community. What I consider mine I will build up and nurture. This is provocative thinking for organisations as well as neighbourhoods, towns and cities. What are the conditions that increase relatedness, co-ownership and community?

Communities, Blocks says, are human systems given form by conversations that build relatedness. And he argues that 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. Strong associational life - the volitional aspect of community, how citizens choose to build connections for their own sake and usually with shared common purpose - and how we encourage and support it is central to his thinking on collective transformation. Citizens who convene other citizens are what creates an alternate future: one qualitatively different from what we have now.

Block contrasts citizen and consumer. A consumer is someone who has surrendered their power to others (public institutions, companies, experts) to provide what is essential for a satisfying, healthy and fulfilling life. This act of surrender he says goes by many names: client, patient, student, audience, fan, shopper. Our addiction to, and colonisation by, consumerism is premised on what Block contends is the false idea that a satisfied good life can be purchased

in the marketplace or provided by institutions of one kind or another: that doctors can produce health, police can make us safe, therapists and social workers can wash away our cares and woes. Institutions, in their traditional form and deep in their culture, too often create dependency, and give their 'beneficiaries' the feeling they are incompetent, inadequate and that the solution lies with the system (doctor, school, police, local authority) and outside of the individual or the community. "Go back to sleep. We'll fix you" is the implicit message that is sent to citizens.

Both books by Block describe the shift in thinking we need if we are to move from isolated individual consumers and spectators into citizens and community. The most sustainable improvements in community Block argues occur when citizens choose to come together to produce a desired future. It is when citizens stop waiting for professionals or elected leadership to do something and decide they can reclaim the power what they have delegated to others that things really happen.

This reminds me of a comment by John Baradell, Chief Executive of Brighton and Hove, said at a recent UK Public Service Summit *'we must stop treating people like customers.....aim for a better democratic conversation everyday'*.

The message from Block is that our current state of weakened family structures, disconnected communities and fragmented nation cannot be revived from the top down.

Fragmentation: how institutions make it worse and how they can help

One aspect of our fragmentation is the gaps between sectors of our cities and neighbourhoods; business, schools, hospitals, churches, mosques, government etc operate mostly in their own worlds. Each piece is working hard on its own purpose, but parallel effort added together does not make a connected community. Block comments that our communities are separated into silos: a collection of institutions operating near one another but not overlapping or touching. This is important to understand because it is this dividedness that makes it so difficult to create a more positive or alternative future. The work is to overcome this fragmentation. How can those of us who care about the whole community create a future for ourselves that is of a different nature from what we have now?

We need to become more skilled in working productively across institutional divides, building partnership and working more effectively with the diversity of perspectives, people and institutions that need to be brought together to create this alternate future. Block believes our knowledge of communal or collective transformation - of workplaces, neighbourhoods, towns - is primitive at best. For those working in and with organisations and communities our challenge is to become multi-lingual: in community development and community organising, the core principles and approaches of collective transformation, and an appreciation for the contribution and limitations of institutions.

Rethinking power and the role of Top Leaders

One of the most challenging points Peter makes about our current mind set is that we habitually see top leaders are *cause* and all others are *effect*; this belief still seems to drive much leadership thinking and is sustained by organisations, the media, politicians, and so on.

He points out the implications of this assumption:

"that way, leaders are foreground while citizens, followers, players and anyone else not in a leadership position is background. This love of leaders limits our capacity to create an alternative future. It proposes the only real accountability in the world is to the top. The effect of buying into this view of leadership is that it lets citizens off the hook and breeds dependency and entitlement. What is missing or dismissed are the community-building insights about how groups work, the power of relatedness, and what occurs when ordinary people get together."

John: *I can often be in a group of people and hear a typical complaint that: 'We haven't got the right people in the room...' What people are often saying between the lines is that we don't have enough top-ranking people here to be able to do anything worthwhile. This is said even when a number of senior people are present.*

Peter: *There is no top. However high you go, there's no one who isn't answerable to someone else, no one who has all the power. Top implies someone who has the power and control to create an alternative future. When someone says the wrong people are in the room it points to their helplessness and their lack of faith in themselves.*

Whoever is in the room is enough. The important thing is to get a variety of voices in the room. If some of the tops show up that's great they can participate. But I'd rather make sure there are enough people from the lower levels and the margins there. Change doesn't start at the Top. I get asked all the time questions about the Tops. "What would you have Board of Directors do to bring more ethical financial accountability into this company?" I say to myself why would I start with the Board of Directors? If you want something new to happen that's the last place I would go. So this is the challenge to be more Middle-Minded, more Citizen-Minded. This has been the drive behind these last two books".

It's asymmetrical at the top. Tops don't have the power to create something but they can kill things off. You can't make a tree grow but you can cut it down. Mostly I tell the tops to get out of the way. Any Top member who wants to get involved I welcome as a participant; we need their point of view in the room; we don't need their decisiveness.

Large scale systems change

John: *When clients talk to me about achieving large scale system change they can focus almost exclusively on levers and organisational structures and then my sense of possibility of the change process producing anything wanes rapidly. It feels very hard to interrupt this conversation. How does your averagely competent leader or OD practitioner have the courage to make the shift in these conversations? How do we interrupt the conversations when we know they are unlikely to go anywhere?*

Peter: *It doesn't require courage. It requires clarity. Because we want change on a large scale, we start thinking of large scale system change and it is going to take us nowhere. We can play with the levers all we want and they have been played with for decades – pricing structures, legislation, oversight, predictable rules – these are the tools of large scale change. Change will play out at a large scale but real change is the aggregation of local change - local transformation. Which means there has to be space in a large system for local discretion.*

It's not an argument against all structures it's a way of thinking about structures. All transformation is local if transformation means inverting our thinking, shifting our thinking. I don't want to participate in large scale change; I don't believe in it anymore. There is a lot of arrogance around large scale system change. Every time I see it, it is advocated by people at the top or in centre who talk about how great it was. We've done it on everything – we engineered and de-engineered, we did quality for a long time and now it's turned into Six Sigma black belt.

John: *I'm reminded of the statistic that 70% of all change projects fail.*

Peter: *This is why. We have to change the nature of the conversation and the narrative. It has to be done in manageable sized units with those people interested in making a change. It can't be legislated. Most people in the centre need to overcome their isolation; they don't need to be smarter.*

Many OD practitioners and others know the process that will work; they just don't have faith in them. That's why at workshops I don't ask people what they came for because I know their expectations are too low. I don't want to imply I'm interested. It's not a customer model. It's a partnership model. I'm willing to hold to certain things I know. I know legislation and system-wide changes should follow the transformation – they can't produce it. When we engage each other differently then we can ask the question: are there also structural things that might help?

The neglected power of conversation and narrative

Peter: *We have to change the nature of the conversation and the narrative. This has to be done with those people interested in making a change. It can't be legislated or mandated from above. We need to bring the local system together*

with voices from the larger system. But the action is local. After local units get clear and connected and show up as owners, then we can ask the question: are there also structural things that might help?

Block underlines the centrality of narrative. It's the implication of the story we are telling ourselves that is stopping things from changing – that the right people aren't in the room, that tops are cause and we are effect – this is what is stopping things from changing. Moreover, he argues nothing in our doing will shift until we can question, and then choose again, the basic set of beliefs – the mindsets and narratives that lie behind our action. Mindset always trumps technique and tips, which is why focusing on the latter without the former is fruitless.

Danny: *How do we help people manage their anxiety and their frustration so we can create the conditions for these better quality conversations? The patience needed to do that is in really short supply.*

Peter: *The urgency for a solution is what keeps anything from changing. Anything done quickly is likely to give us more of what we've got now. So the contract you might say is only about time. Community cannot be built quickly. If speed is what they are interested in then bless them and let them go about their business. Now, that's overstating it.*

The other thought is we know that certain conversations won't go anywhere. I can tell what kind of conversations won't be productive: problems, disappointment, the wish for other people to change, feedback, honesty. Lots of times people will say: 'We are just trying to be honest with you.' I'm not interested in that: honesty is the mask of disappointment. Whenever people say I just want to be honest with you, I know they are disappointed, I know they want something they are not getting. To continue to ask for something I'm not getting is not productive. If it would have been, we would have gotten it already.

The distinction is between an accurate conversation and a powerful conversation. A conversation can be accurate but not powerful. Often when police, health, social care show up with citizens they want to explain themselves or tell citizens what they need to do. And most times when citizens show up they want to talk about someone else other than citizens. We institutionalise these types of conversations as feedback, citizen engagement, citizen voice, accountability.

So the question is: are you interested in a conversation you haven't had before? Are you willing to leave your interests, your feelings and your history at the door? Are you willing to show up knowing that our work is to get past and complete our history?

John: *What about the process for getting complete on the stories we have about each other? Is it a necessary step?*

Peter: *Probably. But people need to know they are coming to do that.*

I use the lens of narrative therapy: What's your story? What's the payoff of that story? What is that story costing you? That's what we did in Northern Ireland with people on opposite sides of the Troubles. That was about as vivid as it gets. But you don't want to spend the whole time getting complete. The people that don't want to get complete on their story hopefully won't show up though you wouldn't ask them not to come.

Another distinction is between problems or possibility. You have a choice to talk about problems or possibility. I have been in the room with people who have 20 years of history, fighting and using each other; they were environmentalists, park people and the loggers. 20 years and they only met in court. At some point somebody said how it's going? "Not great". Would you be up for a conversation about an alternative future from the past that has brought us to this point? They said yes and spent a weekend working together on the future.

All this means is that we want to change the nature of our speaking and listening to each other. It's not so much about inquiry. We have to talk about ownership, we have to talk about possibility, we have to talk about gifts.

It always boils down to "Do people really want an alternative future or do they want just to be right?" If you want to be right and to win then we have no reason to be together.'

Pay attention to the structure of how we gather – understanding the critical role of the large group and small groups

Block advocates that we pay more attention to *how* we gather: be more aware that how we act as the leader/convener in setting-up the conversation, including the nature of the invitation, affects whether we fall into the same-old conversation patterns or not. Experiment with how we ask powerful questions that engage people in an intimate way, confront people with their freedom, and invite them to co-create a future possibility. Every gathering, in its composition and structure, has to be an example of the future we want to create.

For Peter it is the small group, 3 to 12 people, that is the unit of transformation; the place where a sufficient feeling of belonging is created. He also describes how small groups are at their most powerful when they meet as part of larger gatherings. At these points, citizens experience the intimacy of the small circle and are simultaneously aware that they are part of a larger whole that shares their concerns. To build community we need to 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. 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.

By working with a fractal of the system – the small group - you are less likely to trigger the immunity responses which all systems have to protect their boundaries.

Peter: *Small groups enable me to express dissent at low risk. In them I discover I'm not as isolated as I thought...and that other people feel the same way. When you feel yourself going down a well travelled conversational path, break into small groups and ask them what's going on? What do you have faith in? What do you know that is true?' We know the process but we don't have faith in it.*

The small group also offers a self-correcting mechanism when things are not going well. The best path in nearly every situation is to put our faith in citizens to identify and name what is occurring. Simply request people to form groups of three or four and ask them to discuss what is going on and report back in ten minutes. In doing this we ask the community to take responsibility for the success of this gathering and express faith in their good will.

The role of the large group: In gatherings where there are more than 20 people in the room – which Blocks calls the large group – he recommends we need to move back and forth from the small group to the large group. There have to be moments when the whole group hears individual voices and what other small groups are speaking about. These are the moments where individuals have an opportunity to stand for something, a person speaking to the whole group literally needs to stand. As they “stand” for something for themselves, they are standing for the sake of all in the room. As each person stands, we ask their name so they can be known for their stance. Consider asking people who are making a powerful statement to the whole room to say it again slowly. They speak for all others who are silent, and in that way they speak for the whole. These can be sacred moments and repetition honours this.

Learning the subtle art of building community

What makes community building so complex is that it occurs in an infinite number of small steps, sometimes in quiet moments that we notice out of the corner of our eye. Block calls us to treat as important things we thought were incidental. If the artist is the one who captures the nuance of experience, then Block says this is whom each of us must become.

The key to creating or transforming community is to see the power in the small but important elements of being with others. The shift we seek needs to be embodied in each invitation we make, each relationship we encounter, and each meeting we attend.

Social fabric, Blocks asserts, is created one room at a time. Who do we want in the room? What is the new conversation we want to occur? Each small step must capture a quality of aliveness for it to evolve in an organic way: valuing all the voices in the room, using the small group even in large gatherings, and recognizing that accountability grows out of co-creation.

Each small step must capture a *quality of aliveness* for it to be alive in the final product. The human experience of aliveness in each choice or step has as much significance as any technical, economic or purely practical consideration.

Danny: *What do you mean by this quality of aliveness?*

Peter: *Aliveness is a state of unpredictability. It requires mystery, fallibility, relatedness – some love, affection or connection in the room. It requires a willingness to not know, a willingness to face the silence. It requires time: whatever it takes versus how long will this take. These are the conditions under which community is built. It requires an act of generosity - I make an offer with no expectation of return.*

What kills aliveness is our need for consistency and control, wishing for barter, love of speed, love of knowing and certainty, belief that relationships are instrumental, belief in scale. Aliveness has to do with small scale. Nature operates at two scales: medium and slow. Scale is always small; aliveness is connected with intimacy. So the language of scale, speed and consistency and barter is how we steal each other's humanity by being performance-orientated.

What has become clear in this conversation with Peter is that if we are to rebuild communities we need to see much more clearly the limitations of institutions as well as their contributions.

Institutions as systems (hospitals, schools, global companies) are inherently designed to create consistency, control and predictability. These are important benefits. As my mentor said to me twenty years ago when I was a young manager of surgical services at a London teaching hospital, predictability is highly important for the patient coming in for a heart operation. Predictability and the absence of surprise are the foundation of institutional life. Block notes that this uniformity is the strength and bane of systems. And here is the rub that Peter Block points out: systems that are constructed for order cannot provide satisfaction in domains that require a unique and personal human solution.

Block's writing offers pointers and practical approaches on the way forward but no blueprint. This is the frustration and the conundrum for those of us who expect and are used to grand plans and a list of key actions. We have to create the way forward, navigating, reimagining and recasting the relationships between institution and community and citizen.

Peter Block's work isn't in the easy management genre of ten steps to success.

Peter: I've lost faith in reforming anything that calls itself an organisation...they inevitably dehumanise us... what dehumanises organisations is the system's design based on predictability, consistency and control. There can be experiments locally for a while, but most often they are killed off by the system's requirements for consistency and predictability.

Peter's primary focus is now working as a citizen in Cincinnati.

Peter: *My aim is to carve out spaces for human possibilities. I cannot change organisations, they have this inbuilt context, and the patriarchy is so deeply embedded in usbut I can decide every time how to occupy the room.*

Most important in creating that alternate future Peter says is a shift in our thinking, our narrative, but also a change of heart. Danny and I asked him what got him interested in community after so many years of working successfully with organisations in the U.S and globally.

Peter: *It was a mixture of things. I was working in the Philippines right after Marcos was deposed and Aquino became president. I was asked to work with the Cabinet – over a week with people who come had come out of years of protest into government.*

And it dawned on me that I was with people who cared deeply about something larger than their own future, their own career, their own system. I was spoiled forever. In that moment I realised I want to be in a room where people really care about something worth caring about.

All those years of working in organisations most of the time I wasn't in a room with that. I realised I wanted to be part of conversations where there was more than just discussions of efficiency and effectiveness and bottom line performance. Gods too small to worship.

John Watters, 14 September 2011