

# LEADERSHIP

## and the Small Group



By Peter Block

**Why leaders who know how to convene, question, and listen are better at affecting organizational change.**

**O**ne unique task of leadership is to initiate a future that is distinct from the past. For this to occur, we need to recognize the power of the small group and see that real change is more dependent on creating strong communities than on providing more clarity and better blueprints concerning that future. If all we want is to make tomorrow better, but not different from yesterday, then we don't need good leadership. We need good management.

### **Leadership vs. management**

Management provides structure and order to the world but does not create much that is new. The problem with most change efforts is that there is too much management. In this way, the term “change management” is at odds with itself.

The common belief that you can change a culture by implementing clearer goals, better controls, better measures, more training, and new incentives, is a comfortable illusion. This is why most change efforts end up as a combination of lip service and headcount reduction.

Even many of our ideas of good leadership are infected with a management mindset. We think leadership is about positive human traits, a well-articulated vision, and walking the talk. These are good things, but they miss the real point of leadership, which is the capacity to deal with the uncertainty of a new future by creating a sense of belonging and strong community.

The two best leaders I personally know are Rich Teerlink of Harley Davidson and Dennis Bakke of AES. Both of them bet their futures on the engagement



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and involvement of employees. Teerlink called himself a spiritual leader, and Bakke wrote a book about the importance of employees finding joy at work.

They knew how to get people connected to each other, which could be called “the capacity to convene.” In other words, they knew how to build community. This role of leadership is what is being defined here.

### The small group

Communal transformation is best initiated during those times when we gather. This means that each gathering takes on a special importance as a leading indicator of the future. Every meeting or special event is that place where context can be shifted, relatedness can be built, and new conversations can be introduced. When we gather, we are able to draw conclusions about the kind of community in which we live.

The capacity of leaders to build community is therefore dependent on understanding the importance of small groups. The small group is that structure in which employees and citizens become intimately connected with each other and in which the business becomes personal.

It incorporates six or more people, sitting in a circle, with others with whom they are least familiar, talking about things that matter. Even if hundreds are in the room, when people are configured into small groups, real change is created.

### Leadership means convening

Convening means we change the world one room at a time. The room becomes an example of the future we want to create, and in this way, there is no need to wait for the future. The way we structure the assembly of peers is as critical as the issue or new organizational possibility that we come together to address.

The mindset that we can program and engineer our way into the future does not take into account the importance of context and the linguistic, conversational nature of community.

If we want to see a change in our organizations and communities, we must let go of the conventional or received wisdom about how change occurs. In doing so, we reject, or at least seriously question, the beliefs that communal change occurs under these circumstances:

**We count on an aggregation of individual changes.** We have seen this in attempts by large organizations trying to transform their culture through large-scale training and change efforts.

Communities initiate large-scale dialogue programs and book clubs. And no matter how well intentioned, these efforts largely fall short of their goals because while individual lives are touched, the organizational culture and the community are unmoved.

The missing element is that these efforts do not recognize that there is such a thing as a collective body. A shift in community can benefit from shifts in individual consciousness, but it also requires a shift in the way that groups come together. And to produce a foundation by which the entire system can move, there needs to be a communal structure for belonging.

**We think in terms of scale and speed.**

As David Bornstein points out in his book, *How to Change the World*, large-scale shifts occur only after a long period of small steps, organized around small groups that are patient enough to learn and experiment, and learn again.

**We focus on large systems and top leaders for implementation.** We target senior leaders and large systems to execute better problem solving, clearer goals and vision, and enhanced control of the process. Large-system change is a useful way to think, but transforming action is always local, customized, unfolding, and emergent.

The role of leaders is not to be better role models or drive change. Their role is to create the structures and experiences that bring citizens and employees together to identify and solve their own issues.

Communal transformation occurs when we accept certain beliefs.

**There needs to be a focus on the structure of how we gather and the context in which our gatherings take place.** Collective change occurs when individuals and small, diverse groups engage one another in the presence of many others doing the same. It comes from the knowledge that what is occurring in one space is similarly happening

in other spaces, especially ones in which it is unclear what others are doing.

This is the value of a network, or even a network of networks, which is today's version of a social movement. It holds that in larger events, structured in small circles, with the powerful questions that I will define later, our faith in reinvention is established.

All of this needs to be followed up with the usual actions and problem solving, but it is those moments when citizens engage one another, in communion and the witness of others, that something collective shifts.

**The small group gains power and intimacy when we work hard on getting the questions right.** This begins by realizing that the questions themselves are important, and are more important than the answers. The primary questions for community transformation are, "How do we choose to be together?" and "What do we want to create together?" These are different from the primary questions for individual transformation, which are, "Who am I?" and "What am I called to do in this world?"

**Depth should be chosen over speed, and relatedness over scale.** The question, "What do we want to create together?" is deceptively complicated. It implies a long journey, crossing social, class, and institutional boundaries.

Depth takes time and willingness to engage. Belonging requires the courage to set aside our usual notions of action and of measuring success by the numbers affected. It also means that while we keep our own points of view, we leave our self-interest at the door and show up to learn rather than to advocate. These are the conditions where sustainable change can occur.

This thinking—that communal transformation is about the structure of gathering, letting the right questions evolve, and going slowly with fewer people than we would like—does require a special role for leadership. By this way of thinking, we hold leadership to three tasks:

**1. Create a context that nurtures an alternative future—one based on gifts, generosity, accountability, and commitment.** Teerlink influenced

Harley Davidson by creating a context of quality and involvement. Bakke's context was one of fun, which to him meant maximum choice at lower levels. Both were more interested in gifts than deficiencies and more interested in local choice than in keeping control.

**2. Initiate and convene conversations between employees and citizens.** This should increase a sense of belonging, and it should shift people's experience. This is produced through the way people are brought together—the small group. The tools to make these groups powerful are the questions that engage people and confront them with their freedom. This recognizes that all transformation is linguistic and that the questions embody the pathway to a new conversation.

**3. Listen and pay attention.** Retire PowerPoint decks, put blueprints back on the shelf, stop having the answer, and get used to saying "it's a mystery to me." This is not the kind of leadership most citizens and employees are looking for, and that is why it is useful.

These are the elements of convening. Every facilitator and trainer understands these, but most leaders do not. Facilitators and staff people provide services along these lines to leaders, but they do not train them in this way.

These are leadership functions, and they are too important to remain in the hands of specialists. Leaders need the skill and faith to help employees and citizens discover their own power to resolve something, or at least move the action forward. The small group, a good set of questions, and the willingness to stop being a hero or parent are the factors that make this forward action possible.

Great questions have to be personal, ambiguous, and risky. They need to carry the hook of accountability, which grows out of choice. For example, ask people why they chose to show up. Ask them how they are contributing to the problems that they are reporting. Ask them about the gifts they have that are not fully being brought into the workplace or the community. These questions are hard to answer, but in the asking, they begin to influence us.

The cost of these kinds of questions is anxiety because they confront people with their sense of freedom. The benefit is that they are restorative—they produce energy rather than consume it. They are also the basis of intimacy and accountability—the underlying point of the conversation.

Listening may be the single most powerful action a leader can take. It needs to be elevated to being thought of as an action step. Leaders will always be under pressure to speak, but if building social fabric is important and sustained transformation is the goal, then listening offers the greater service.

We need to reach the point at which people can call for immediate action, and the answer will be, "I am taking immediate action, and I am busy listening."

Finally, for those of us involved in leadership education, we need to keep moving from training to learning, and from providing knowledge to helping people discover what they already know.

It is clear that relatedness, belonging, and community are keys to the future, and that real change takes time and creates uncertainty. We have just been seduced into believing that these are secondary to speed, having a great vision, and staying in charge. Educators need to put convening and small groups at the top of our agendas and use our educational dollars to support them. **T+D**

This article is based on the book *Community: The Structure of Belonging* by Peter Block.

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**Peter Block** is a partner in *Designed Learning* ([www.designedlearning.com](http://www.designedlearning.com)) and lives in Cincinnati, Ohio; [pbi@att.net](mailto:pbi@att.net).

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