

Leading through Invitation and Consent

An Oregon Executive Forum presentation by Peter Block

When we get to work each day, when we go to a meeting or a presentation, we seldom ask ourselves what Peter Block considers some of the most important questions in life: What can this day (meeting, presentation, time) do for me? Whose day is it? Who causes my experience? Clarifying our answers to these questions can go a long way to creating an accountability that is the province not just of leaders but of all of us.

We live in a leadership-based culture that grows out of our patriarchal culture, what Block refers to as a pyramid of wished-for monarchy. And we hold a series of beliefs about the top and the bottom of that pyramid without recognizing (or accepting responsibility for) our part. Instead, we hold our managers responsible for the wellbeing of we the subordinates. Managers are the cause, and workers are the effect.

In contrast for Block, community, as represented by a circle, is about partnership, communion, connection. What kind of shift could occur if people were invited rather than sent to work, a meeting, a presentation? What happens if we change the room (literally and metaphorically) we're in at the moment in order to change culture? Everything, he says.

Peter Block is out to change organizational life one small group at a time, for he believes that therein lies the power of institutions, companies, and organizations. Block is not an answer man, someone who is willing to hand you the solution. Instead he provokes questions and thoughtful responses as he asks his audience to participate in redesigning social space and how things get done. A summary of his remarks on *Leading through Invitation and Consent* follows.

An award-winning consultant based in Connecticut, Block helped initiate the interest in empowerment. These days, his work centers primarily on bringing service and accountability to organizations and communities. He is a partner in Designed Learning, a training company that offers consulting skills workshops that build on the skills outlined in his *Flawless Consulting* books. Peter has a Master's in Industrial Administration from Yale University and did his undergraduate work at the University of Kansas.

His focus on empowering people within organizations has yielded consistent success in improving performance, expanding accountability, and maximizing individual potential. He is the author of numerous books, including *The Answer to How Is Yes: Acting on What Matters*, *The Empowered Manager: Positive Political Skills at Work*, and *Freedom and Accountability at Work: Applying Philosophic Insight to the Real World*.

Peter serves on the Boards of Directors of the Association for Quality and Participation and Connecticut Public TV and Radio. He has received several national awards for outstanding contributions in the field of training and development, including the American Society for Training and Development Award for Distinguished Contributions, the Association for Quality and Participation President's Award, and *Training Magazine* HRD Hall of Fame.

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In the patriarchy, change is by mandate, by nomination and ratification. A vision is created at the top, it gets written down (and laminated for permanence), and then is expected to cascade down to those at the bottom along with appropriate training to support the vision.

Patriarchy, the old paradigm, the default culture, is closely aligned with parenting. We teach managers to be good parents, to teach, reward, and punish their charges. The authority knows best, and employees wait for management to light their fire.

Patriarchy also has three unintended consequences: It isolates us (I'm on my own in the competitive world). It makes us passive (someone else knows

better). And it breeds entitlement. None of these leads to the highest performance and the widest accountability.

Leadership-based strategies advocate development through Persuasion and Mandate:

- Deciding is doing
- Barter for behavior
- Continually higher standards
- Measuring something makes it happen. If you can't measure it, it won't happen
- Consistency for its own sake
- Love of speed and expertise

The belief that better leaders will create better institutions is what maintains patriarchy and prevents the development of an accountable culture.

A powerful alternative, according to Block, is leadership through consent and accountability. Strategies of consent are a way to sustain the spirit, build a culture of accountability, and open a space where our freedom comes to life.

In our leadership culture, most managers and workers fall into two categories: Engineers and Economists. The Engineer embodies speed, efficiency, accurate gauging, installation, predictability, technology, control. The Economist embodies cost, barter, self-interest, market share, funder and investor centrality, love for sale. These two are incomplete, according to Block. A third partner, the Artist, embodies surprise and discovery, emotion and creativity, intimacy and relationship, vision of a larger possibility, passion over commerce, commitment for its own sake. Marrying these talents creates the Social Architect, Block's metaphor for the new leadership.

The Social Architect convenes:

- Physical space that affirms community.
- Activities and attitudes of welcome and reception that indicate that showing up is everything.

- The context for coming together this time.
- Ways in which connection is always the first step.

The Social Architect also names the methodology:

- Questions over answers.
- Purpose and values over steps and efficiency.
- Defining the compelling question.
- Refusal as an element of commitment.

Redesigning Social Space

Patriarchy doesn't create a habitable environment. It is too focused on product and productivity. Educational institutions are great for teaching/transmission but not for learning. Block encourages us to ask and answer the question, "Who's responsible for my workspace?"

How people gather is what creates culture. Redesigning the physical space to restore community is essential for shifting accountability from leaders to peers. What is a particular room designed for? In a patriarchy, for example, the auditorium is the venue for learning: seats bolted down, you face the backs of the others and are unable to move. And most of our workspaces are designed for efficiency, including meeting rooms. They are not designed for welcome and hospitality.

Redesigning our social space to create community requires a better model, say, hotel lobbies, which are designed to be invitational; they establish common ground and they offer reception. It is possible to bring these qualities into the workspace, especially if we embrace the concept of relationship as an end in itself and create spaces where depth of connection is more important than speed or scale (larger) or quantity (more).

Renegotiating the Work Experience

Equally important is redesigning the work experience. While it may be true that

workers cannot impact the bottom-line requirements of the organization (what product or service is offered, how much work needs to be completed, or in what timeframe), they can influence how those requirements are met. Herein lies the importance of invitation to convene to talk purpose, connection, and accountability (*what* and *who*) rather than just more conversation about tools and methodology (*how*). The big shift occurs in moving from the focus on tools to a statement of a possibility: to move towards, to create together. Block tells of his own workshop, full of expensive and useful tools, but with which he has yet to build anything. What is the value, he asks, of all having good tools (and the same ones) if we don't have a common purpose, if our intention is not to build something together?

How do we construct our experience? We change what is by changing the conversation, by having a conversation today that we've never had before. Cynicism is based on having the same conversation over and over. Patriarchy *is* an old conversation: "If they would change, my life would be better."

The shift comes in completing the past and creating a different future. And for this, the small group is the most effective unit of change. Large organizations don't change large; they change in the small units. And they change through conversations about purpose, not about methodology. Instead of "How do we do this?" a more powerful question is "What do we want to create?"

If we don't care at the small group level, we won't care at the larger one because our institutions are set up to be competitive. Like school, life/work are seen as being evaluated on a bell curve, with top and bottom percentiles. We all want to be in the top 10%. And of course, that's not possible. As Block says, if everyone hires the top 10% (of what?), where do the other 90% get their jobs?

Shifting to a new mode of being together takes a willingness to sit with the questions, to be open to renegotiating each time the group convenes. It takes courage for leaders to confront people with freedom and choice and to help construct a social space in which people choose to be accountable and to care for the wellbeing of the whole group. It takes courage to ask people to redesign

the social space towards partnership and to commit to the group for the sake of the shared purpose, and to ask them to do so not expecting a return on their investment.

Moving from Answers to Questions

For Block, every day, every meeting, every encounter, is a metaphor, a microcosm of how we live our lives. “I will manage this day as I manage my life.” He suggests starting any endeavor with four powerful questions:

1. How valuable do I plan for this to be?
2. How participatory do I plan to be?
3. How much risk do I plan to take?
4. To what extent am I invested in the wellbeing of those with whom I will interact here?

Then he suggests developing connection through exploring the answers (based on a scale of 1-7) in trios formed from the group. There is a caveat, however. Block says, “It’s important to substitute curiosity for advice. Being helpful can be a subtle form of control. It is unfriendly to ask, ‘What are you going to do about this?’ That’s a form of parenting.”

The question-and-answer exercise does two things: it begins to renegotiate the social contract by asking group members to design the day (or the meeting or the presentation) together. And it helps members get connected. With these kinds of questions, we have a new definition of others, where they are defined by their wants and their commitments, not their pasts.

If we can shift to a strategy of consent, we consent to other shifts as well:

- Answering ○ Questioning
- Parenting ○ Partnering
- Persuading ○ Engaging
- Bargaining ○ Committing
- Safety ○ Adventure

- Needs
- Gifts

These all lead to new conversations.

Being in New Conversations

Substantial research shows that learning is social and best done in peer groups, but our patriarchal world is designed around vertical relationships (boss on top, subordinates below). What if we changed that to lateral relationships where peers were accountable to each other? This goes against the grain, of course. The conventional wisdom of our culture, reinforced by high technology, dictates that our culture be deeply individualistic, one in which we don't need others. And it's a rights-based culture, with "what's in it for me?" as a primary driver. Yet while the world seems to want us to go faster and faster and by ourselves, for Block, the solutions lie in going deeper and in each taking responsibility for ourselves and for the group.

To create these new conversations that open up possibilities, Block suggests asking ambiguous questions, ones that have no "right" or "true" answers. Then small groups take on sharing their answers in trios, a good small unit for conversation to help make deeper connections. (It is important, however, to avoid tribalism: i.e., our group is better.) Finally, leaders or facilitators bring the small group's responses and reactions to the larger group. This work can go a long way in healing the wounded community.

If we change our thinking and our speaking, we can change our life. We are products of the culture, yet we can be a clear expression of another way of thinking. Changing our language can change our culture.

Things change when people speak up and their ideas get shared, says Block. We've lost the idea of our speaking as a gift, as a contribution. In many ways, it doesn't matter what we say; it's just important to say it. And leaders have to let go of controlling what people say or trying to fix it or solve it through justification, explanation, or comforting. There is no need to fix or solve. If as a leader, you think you do have to solve it, you won't ever ask the question.

Instead, acknowledging and thanking people for sharing is enough.

Anger needs expression but not resolution (resolution means winner/loser). If anger is a life-stance, as it is for some people, we can just honor it. When you redesign, someone will always object because they liked where they were. They will not want to move. And when people move, we can thank them for it. According to Block, leaders shouldn't take credit for anything the group does.

There's always a tension between individual, small group, and whole group desires, and there's a feeling that if we bump against each other, there'll be less connection. In fact, says Block, there can actually be more. Saying what we need to say may be painful but it is not necessarily destructive. In group settings, it can be best to let people be angry and discouraged. Strain and conflict may need to be present for deeper connection. That may be their point of entry into the conversation and into promise and commitment.

Committing to Accountability

Block suggests getting peers to make promises to each other, rather than to managers and supervisors, because peers know how to hold each other accountable. It's harder for most of us to manipulate our peers. How do we get peers into a circle of commitment? By telling each other what we promise to do and letting the others in the group decide if that's enough. The question then becomes "Will the collective promises of the peer group meet the needs of the larger group?"

Of course, says Block, leaders have to take the weapons off the table; these conversations cannot be related to compensation or advancement. And making no commitment or promise at all has to be okay too; no loyalty oath applies here.

What if we acted as if people wanted to commit to each other? We play small if we work only for praise or to avoid punishment. Plus, we all already know that there are consequences. And Block argues that this knowledge does not make us more accountable. That's because we're still repeating the old conversations and they don't work.

Where is the leader in this? Right in the middle, says Block. As a leader, I'm also part of the conversation. We don't give up the right to make demands. The leader is what Block calls "a powerful partner," one who retains his own rights. Yes, there's a double message here. It's not "do your own thing." The community (company, organization) has requirements (primarily, to be self-sustaining). But how we participate in that requirement can be arrived at differently. Powerful leadership recognizes that the learning happens with peers but the leader can say, "No, I need more from you."

Will peer accountability work for everyone? No, says Block. There are a certain percentage of people who are dependent and childlike. They complain about and are unwilling to choose accountability. But we can live with them and work around them without needing to organize the institution around them.

The Right of Refusal

What if the institution has "unrealistic" expectations, wanting more and more? Then, says Block, we ask what the purpose or intention is. We question the validity of the intention. People have the right to say no. Refusal, expressing doubts and reservations, is the beginning of commitment, says Block. How do we change the intention? What gives us the best shot at meeting those requirements?

Block advocates a quiet revolution. We may not be able to impact the **what** (what is asked) but we can impact the **how**. He reminds us that we gave the 40-hour workweek back without a whimper although many died in union efforts to make it happen. We can ask, "What is the leader's moral responsibility? What is my ability and responsibility to say no? What is my relationship to my right and responsibility of refusal?" Most of us think we don't have the right to say no. But Block argues that we have much more right than we take advantage of. For example, we can decide what measures are meaningful to us.

And avoiding a yes is an indirect form of refusal. Why don't we feel we have a right to say no? Sometimes it feels suicidal (professionally, socially) to say no.

Is authenticity in small groups transferable to larger groups? We can choose to be authentic no matter what. People want to drive fear out of the workplace. Block asks, "Where do you want to send it?" All business is personal. It's impossible to live life and have no regrets, unless you're not paying attention. Going public with our fear makes it less powerful. Power lies in the possibility of refusal. And holding the possibility of saying no doesn't mean I'll get my way.

Block takes this a step further. Creating a future requires saying no to the past. Once we express doubts and reservations, we can step into commitment. Adult life starts when we say no to parental expectations; otherwise, we live out their unfulfilled dreams. When we complete the past, a void is left. Every transformation has this void, this ambiguity. It's what we do with the opening that's created that counts.

What is it in your life now that you've been putting off refusing? What have you said yes to that you've changed your mind about? In what ways are you indirectly saying no? What is your relationship with refusal? What are your boundaries? What needs clarifying?

Making Connections and Acknowledging Gifts

There are other important conversations to have: What's the crossroads we're at in this stage of our life? Life isn't a Disney film with a happy ending. Instead, it's one crossroads after another. We can ask, "What are we trying to create together? Are we just getting 'gooder and gooder at what matters lesser and lesser'?" We can move towards a consent-based world at work and in the community. What could we create in our small group that would move us forward?

Asking authentic questions creates authentic conversations and authentic commitments. It is this simple to connect. But does it matter? Yes, says Block.

Connection and relatedness are the basis of accomplishment. Yet we treat connectedness as a bonus, not as the centerpiece. Transformation is measured by the shift of the question. The answers may be inconsequential in themselves but the clarity of the question is everything.

Speaking of our gifts and talents, our own and those of others to us, creates community. A good leader helps a group bring everybody's gifts to the center. We spend our life loving—and wallowing in—our deficiencies and avoiding our gifts, to the point, says Block, that we are unable to receive our gifts even when they are acknowledged by others.

Conversations of Power

In your group, Block asks, what's the conversation you haven't had yet? What conversation would make the social space, the work experience, yours, not "theirs"? Block defines frustration—and cynicism—as having the same conversation over and over. There is no power in this, he says, no power in just describing what we are doing and rehashing the "if only's."

So, what would a conversation of power be like? Here are some of Block's suggestions for moving in that direction:

1. What are your undiscussables? Every dynamic relationship has them.
2. What do you want to own or take responsibility for?
3. What's your contribution to the problem? This is a form of confession. Name what you complain about and see your contribution. If you can't see it, imagine. If you were contributing to the problem, what would it be?
4. What is it that you've been reluctant to forgive? What resentments have you been holding on to?
5. What do you and we want from each other? Now make requests to get it.
6. What do we want to create together?

For the new leadership, the goal is to move the conversation to more choice and more power than when people came in, to move towards accountability. And remember, it's important to ask true questions, ones where the asker has no investment in the answer, where the asker doesn't know the answer.

Having conversations you haven't had before is about:

- Asking people to be accountable for the whole.

- Generating or reclaiming power instead of trading it away. Powerlessness is an institutional issue.
- Deciding together what we want to create.

Our culture has lost the idea of civic virtue, civic engagement, civic good. Yet, the commitment peers make to each other transforms the group, the institution, the world. In this context, goals are relevant but not powerful. What's the promise I'm willing to make? What do we want from each other? Don't play small. The answer could be nothing. What's the price I'm willing to pay? All commitments carry a price and demands more than we imagined. What courage is required of us now? To get off the familiar path and to move towards the adventure of co-creating. The commitment, the promise, is only worth anything if there is a future we are longing for. Holding on to what we have, what the institution has, is death.

Lastly, it's important to focus on our gifts. We're blind to our own strengths, and our typical commitment is to our deficiencies. Setting that old commitment aside can remove an obstacle to transformation. (Block advocates suggesting that individuals and the group agree to a 6-month moratorium on talking about our deficiencies.)

The leader's job is to bring the gifts of all into the limelight, into the center. We need to legitimize the naming of others' gifts as a useful conversation. That's a big part of building community.

Authentic commitment and accountability occur when peers:

- Join through consent.
- Build through invitation.
- Create vision through conversation, not "lamination."
- Motivate through relationship and community.
- Are willing to doubt and say no (commitment begins with refusal made public).
- Renegotiate the social contract; redistribute the ownership of the social space.

The Powers of Consensual Community

Invitation

Not coercion.

Reception &

Make people feel at home and thank them for showing up.

Welcome

Offering an explanation as to why we are gathering.

Context &

Overcoming isolation by sharing in triads

possibility

Creating space to express doubts and reservations.

Connection

What's the conversation we haven't had yet, one that

The right of refusal

doesn't complain about others?

New conversations

What can we promise each other?

Space for

What have we received from each other? The leaders can

commitment

help bring the gifts of all to bear on the community.

Gifts

What message does it carry?

Place and space