

Reconstructing Our Idea of Leadership

By Peter Block

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Leadership is the capacity to initiate a future distinct from the past. This is what distinguishes leadership from management. Management is the capacity to give order and structure in service of high performance. Management is not burdened with an act of creation, it is about operationalizing goals and objectives.

A distinct future can only be achieved through high engagement. We can say then that the essence of leadership is about convening, valuing relatedness, and decentralizing its own role. It is not a personality characteristic or a matter of style and therefore it requires nothing more than what all of us already have.

In this way, "leader" belongs right up there with cook, carpenter, artist, and landscape designer. It is a capacity that can be learned by all of us, with a small amount of teaching, and an agreement to practice. The ultimate do-it-yourself movement.

An alternative future, sometimes called transformation, occurs when a community of people chooses to come together and be accountable for something larger than themselves. All we know about learning, exceptional performance and creativity indicate that the existence of a supportive community is what makes the difference. Leadership in these terms becomes community builder.

What community building requires is a concept of the leader as one who creates experiences for others--experiences that, in themselves, are an example of or in support of our desired future. For example, if we seek a culture of agility, customer focus, learning and commitment, then these qualities need to be present every time we come together. The experiences we create need to be designed in such a way that agility, care for the wants of others, openness to surprise and commitment are every moment experienced and demonstrated.

Engagement Is the Point

This is very different from the conventional belief that the task of leadership is to set a vision, enroll others in it, and hold people accountable through measurements and reward. Consider how most current leadership writings and trainings assert that:

- ◆ Leader and top are essential. They are role models who need to possess a special set of personal skills
- ◆ The task of the leader is to define the destination and the blueprint to get there
- ◆ The leader's work is to bring others on board -- Enroll, align, inspire
- ◆ Leaders provide for the oversight, measurement, and training needed (as defined by leaders)

Each of these beliefs elevates leaders as an elite group, singularly worthy of special development, coaching, and incentives. All of these beliefs have face validity, and they have unintended consequences. These are isolation, entitlement, and passivity that our institutions and communities cannot afford to carry.

The Art of Convening

The shift is to believe that the task of leadership is to provide context and produce engagement, to tend to our social fabric. The skill to do this is too often relegated to facilitators or specialists.

In this way of thinking we hold leadership to three tasks:

- ◆ Create a context that nurtures an alternative future, one based on gifts, generosity, accountability, and commitment.
- ◆ Initiate and convene conversations that shift people's experience, which occurs through the way people are brought together and the nature of the questions used to engage them.
- ◆ Listen, pay attention and refrain from giving answers and advice.

Convening leaders put people in small groups and use questions to create the social space within which citizens get deeply engaged. Through this engagement, citizens discover that it is in their power to resolve something or at least move the action forward. This is what triggers the choice to be accountable for those things over which they can have power, even though they may have no control.

Listening as an Action

In addition to convening and naming the question, we add listening to the critical role of leadership. Listening may be the single most powerful action the leader can take. Leaders will always be under pressure to speak, but if building social fabric is important, and sustained transformation is the goal, then listening becomes the greater service.

The Convening Role of Elected Officials

Elected officials are a special case of how we think about leadership and the art of convening. We have put elected officials in a difficult role. We distort them into service providers and suppliers. We relate to them as if we are consumers, not citizens. We want them to solve *for* us those issues that we should be solving for ourselves.

The customer model, where elected officials exist to satisfy citizen demands, is a disservice to community, even though citizens love it. Elected officials are partners with citizens, not suppliers. The most useful role elected officials can perform is to bring citizens together. They have this convening capacity like no one else in a city, but it is way underutilized. If we continue to define elected officials primarily as legislators, then we are going to have to endure the results of their productivity.

For Example: Cold Spring

Mark Stoeber is the Mayor of Cold Spring, Kentucky, a small and mostly residential town. At some point he realized that the citizen complaints he was getting did not need an elected official to resolve. For example, he was getting complaints in one neighborhood about someone's dog. Mark decided that the complaint about the dog was a symptom of the lack of connectedness among neighbors. With the dog's behavior as cover, he asked one citizen to host a meeting in their home with other neighbors. Neighbors showed up, including the dog owner, and some agreement was reached. Social fabric became a little stronger. Dogs were better behaved. The mayor moved on to other things.

A year later, Mark decided to take another step and invited about twenty community leaders into a conversation with city council members. They met in council chambers, but not in the usual configuration. In Cold Spring, as in most cities, the council sits on a platform and citizens sit in seats on a lower level. For this meeting everyone sat in chairs in circles at the same level in the council room. They arranged themselves in groups to sit with people they knew the least and talked about some of the questions we are discussing here: crossroads facing the city, the

major gifts of the city and its citizens, doubts about anything really shifting, a look at the future demands facing the city, and what commitment they had to participate in engaging more people to develop the possibility called Cold Spring.

A small, but symbolic beginning for an elected official deciding that the future economic development and quality of life of the city was dependent on the quality of relatedness of its citizens and its ability to bring those on the margin into the center.

You can easily see how these examples are relevant to organizations. Instead of investing so much in training people and infusing them with new skills, we would be better off helping employees discover their own capacity to own and create the future. Bosses, if they saw themselves as conveners, would view their employees as a community waiting to be engaged.

To Summarize: None of this is an argument against leaders or leadership, only a desire to change the nature of how we think of them. Creating a new future, which hinges on widespread accountability and connectedness requires leaders that convenes people in new ways to create conditions where context and practice shifts:

- ◆ From a place of fear and fault to one of gifts, generosity, and abundance
- ◆ From a bet on measurement and oversight to one of social fabric and chosen accountability
- ◆ From a focus on advice and predictability of leaders to a focus on evoking the wisdom, capacities and ownership of citizens

When we train leaders we should get off the vision and style wagon, and help them learn about convening, questioning and listening. This allows us to de-glamorize individualized leadership and consider it simply the capacity to create community.

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