

Block, Peter. *Community: The Structure of Belonging*. San Francisco, California: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2008.

Peter Block writes about structural change to human relationships and communities, the workplace, and society at large. Some of his works are: *Flawless Consulting*, *The Empowered Manager*, *Community: The Structure of Belonging*. Mr. Block lives in Cincinnati, Ohio. His office is in Mystic, Connecticut.

Welcome. Block writes to encourage people who build well-being in their communities. Community is belonging, where membership entails a sense of ownership and accountability. Communities have structures. Structures that facilitate connectedness among members have the possibility of creating a future different from what we now have.

Introduction: The Fragmented Community and Its Transformation. Our lives are hobbled by structural isolation and self-interest. Healthy communities focus on member interdependence and belonging. Such communities emphasize optimism and members' gifts. These communities build social capital, which is the quality of their members' relationships. Such communities recognize that our social fabric is immensely valuable and fragile. This book will use the word "community" to designate this latter sort of community, not its distorted competitor.

I. The Fabric of Community. Community expands belonging in a series of very small steps. It forsakes ten year plans in favor of making this meeting, now, the sort of meeting of which we want our futures to be full.

Chapter 1: Insights into Transformation. Communal social fabric grows by creating a new language and structure. Its focus is associational life, members' gifts, our worldview (which may need to change), the future, the quality of "aliveness," and evolution (not revolution). Most groups focus on what is wrong or missing; community seizes on member gifts and how they may be employed. Association is people coming together to do good. Language has much to do with how we come to see the world. When we put words to our hopes, they become more real, and more likely to be enacted. Communities create themselves by addressing the form of life they want in small groups, which groups then reassemble to share with the larger community. Communities begin small and emerge slowly.

Chapter 2: Shifting the Context for Community. A human community is an interdependent interpersonal system structured by its internal conversation. Communities build themselves by creating social fabric, emphasizing associational life, working toward a future they value, employing small groups, and changing their conversation. Our current worldview emphasizes deficiencies, interests, and entitlement, which leads to the conclusion that suffering is a set of problems to be solved. A better future lies, so most believe, in better definition, analysis, and study of problems. It attempts to fix the current approach to community, not change it. Because the worldview encourages people to feel victimized by "others," to feel disenfranchised, to feel alone in the social mass, the current worldview breaks down community. These stories limit the future to permutations of the past. These stories deny that our future can hold fresh and as-yet-unimagined possibilities. Most present the old worldview as "fact," but they fail to recognize that all our worldviews are fiction in the sense that we make them up. We must name and abandon the old worldview, the view of things that breaks down community.

Chapter 3: The Stuck Community. The predominant paradigm at present emphasizes fear, fault, and self-interest. Its prescription for better life is more law, oversight, and centralized leadership. It emphasizes the reasons we have to be afraid. Its intention is retribution. This paradigm urges us to do more of what already does not work. It encourages us to romanticize leadership and to defer to leadership. It relishes cynicism

and marginalizes hopeful outcomes. It ignores associational life in favor of local murders. It glorifies money and treats compassion as mere sentimentality.

Chapter 4: *The Restorative Community.* Restoration happens when a community chooses to look hopefully to the future and emphasize relatedness. Restoration happens as communities abandon their old worldview and ask “What can we create together?” The community shifts from retribution to restoration, from fragmentation to belonging, from incivility to listening. To put words on it, the shift is from centrist self-interested individualism to pluralist interdependent communalism [there’s a mouthful.]

Chapter 5: *Taking Back our Projections.* The old worldview preaches that someone else, somewhere else causes our suffering. Someone else should do something about that. Fundamentally, the old worldview projects our pain. We must take back this projection. The suffering is ours; we are the ones who can do something about it. We can transform our circumstance by reaching across boundaries to created relationships and by encouraging focus on gifts and capacities, rather than deficiencies.

Chapter 6: *What It Means to Be a Citizen.* Citizens, in an interdependent communalism, are responsible and committed to communal well-being. Citizens choose activism and care. They hold themselves accountable, exercise power rather than defer or delegate, welcome those at the margin, acknowledge that community grows from the hearts of citizens (not from great expert leadership), and find ways to use the gifts of others. Citizens are sure “we” create our world. Peter Kostenbaum said, “The chicken is the egg’s way of reproducing itself.” It sounds inverted, but maybe not. Perhaps eggs create chickens, youths create adults, audiences create performers, and prisoners create wardens. This is an idea to play with. Citizens are accountable (take care of the whole) and committed (promise action for its own sake, with no expectation of return or bargaining).

Chapter 7: *The Transforming Community.* Community transforms members. For a community to be transformational, it must choose connective structure, provide a worldview that reinforces community values, ask the right questions, and choose deep relating over swift global change. Leaders must be held to three tasks (and no more): help shift worldview, name the debate, and listen. Structurally, transformative community is a network of social networks. It meets in small groups with others meeting in small groups. Transformational community focuses on transforming questions: How do we choose to meet when we meet together?” and “What do we want to create together?” The old worldview tells us to 1) identify a need, 2) study and analyze, 3) search for solutions, 4) establish goals, 5) get others on board, 6) implement the solution program, and 7) loop back to look for new problems to solve. The problem with this view is that it prevents anything fundamental from changing. It asserts that things are great except for this one little problem, so let’s fix that. Things are not great. We need a different approach. The transforming community starts small, seeks engagement and commitment, stays small, and builds a structure of belonging for every member. This is more important than a vision and well-stepped plan. **We must recognize that one of the critical goals of our meeting together is to do so well. It is an end in itself. It is the better future we seek.** As we begin to meet transformationally, we can identify a task and set a plan.

II. The Alchemy of Belonging. Transformative communities have leadership that convenes, meet in small groups, focus on transformative questions, emphasize six conversations (invitation, possibility, ownership, dissent, commitment, and gifts), exaggerate hospitality, and create physical and social spaces that facilitate belonging.

Chapter 8: *Leadership is Convening.* We must de-glamorize leadership and know that all humans have the capacity to lead. We must spread leadership around as much as

possible. Leaders are social architects; they create social experiences for others. Leaders convene gatherings. A leader tends the social fabric. Leaders are responsible to nurture an alternative worldview, to start and sustain critical conversations that help people shift their worldviews, and to listen to the ensuing conversations with attention.

Chapter 9: *The Small Group is the Unit of Transformation.* “Each gathering needs to become an example of the future we want to create.” We seek to build “intimate and authentic relatedness.” “We change the world one room at a time.” Whatever creates energy is more important than the content we want presented. Small group structures (gatherings of three to twelve) make every voice heard. Being heard, we believe we belong. Every group moment combines methodology and metaphor. We should ask people speaking to physically stand (since they stand for what they say). We should make sure everyone is amplified if anyone is (since all voices matter). We should ask important contributions to be restated (since what they said is important enough to hear twice). We should acknowledge anyone who speaks (since it takes courage to speak at all).

Chapter 10: *Questions Are More Transforming Than Answers.* Well-framed questions are ambiguous, personal, and produce anxiety. Such questions help people transform themselves and their communities. Questions about explanation, study, analysis, definition, and wishful thinking do not assist transformation. These are questions about the past; they project the past into the future. These old questions tell us the lie that by answering them, we take uncertainty out of the future. The old questions tell us the future will be the “present projected forward.” The future is unknown, clothed in unpredictability and mystery. Good questions evoke accountability and commitment, and lead us to requests, offers, declarations, forgiveness, confession, gratitude, and welcome. To have good conversations based on transformative questions, we must set up the conversations well. If we fail to do so, people will repeat the default conversation. Good setup requires that one: 1) distinguish the question from the old worldview default question, 2) give permission for dissenting answers, 3) avoid advice in favor of curiosity, and 4) name the question precisely.

Chapter 11: *Invitation.* Invitations must be unadulterated. Do not promise incentives or rewards other than authentic community. Invitation is more than creating open communities. It is a way of life, a commitment to collaborate with others. We invite people to show up, but also to engage. They must do so. Block says that critical change is a self-injury. We must reach out to include all who belong in the conversation. Invitation also means that those who show up are the right people. To invite, we declare what we hope, frame the choice we ask, name the hurdle to overcome, restate and reinforce the request, speak in the most personal form possible. Those who decline an invitation should be told they will be “missed but not forgotten.” Refusal carries no cost for the refuser of the invitation.

Chapter 12: *The Possibility, Ownership, Dissent, Commitment, and Gifts Conversations.* The sequence of the six conversations (invitation, possibility, ownership, dissent, commitment, and gifts) is not important, because each leads to the others.

- “Possibility” is a declaration of the world that we want to inhabit. To address this question, we speak of crossroads, inspiration, and what we can create together.
- “Ownership” believes that our affairs are ours to create. This world, community, concern is ours to shape and make our own. Innocence or indifference are denials of ownership. People are accountable only for that which they own. Ownership confronts us with our freedom, and our failure to use it. Owners are authors of their own experiences. This gathering, and our world, are “ours to construct together.” Ownership asks about value, risk,

participation, investment, and ultimately about our contribution to that about which we complain. It asks us what story we tell ourselves that makes it okay for us to do nothing. It asks what that story is costing us. Usually, the cost of the do-nothing story is the death of our sense of aliveness.

- “Dissent” recognizes that thoughtful people see downsides. Reservations and doubts are normal and desirable. Group response to doubts and dissent must be curiosity and thankfulness. Making room for dissent is what validates our decision to commit. It affirms freedom. Dissent refuses to live a life someone else planned. We must make sure that dissenters retain their place in community. Inauthentic forms of dissent are denial (the status quo is good enough), rebellion (others, not we, control the situation), and resignation (passive control deadening others). Dissent raises questions about doubts, saying no, yeses we have said but no longer mean, forgiveness, resentment. “Dissent is a form of caring, not one of resistance.”
- “Commitment” promises without expecting return, without barter for consequences. My promise is not contingent upon others’ actions. Contingent promises are contracts, not commitments. The deadly enemy of transformation is lip service. It says “I will try” when it means “I will not commit.” Commitment is “promise to peers about our contribution to the success of the whole.” Commitment raises questions about promises, meaning, costs, failure, risks, postponements, and refusal. When a person declines to commit, honoring that refusal validates the choice of all who chose to commit.
- “Gifts” conversation emphasizes what we have to contribute and how that capacity might be employed. We do not focus on deficiencies or weaknesses. Transformative communities bring the gifts of those on the margin to the center. We say: “I am not what I am not able to do. I am what I am able to do—my gifts and capacities.” Gifts conversations raise questions about what we have received, strengths, uniquenesses, needs, and making a difference. We talk of unutilized gifts, what people do not know of us, gratefulness, gifts we deny. We must discuss in our gatherings what gifts have been exchanged. Talking about a thing strengthens it. We must avoid discussing weaknesses and what’s missing. Gifts are not gifts until offered to others.

Chapter 13: *Bringing Hospitality into the World.* Hospitality matters in transformational community. Greet people at the door, and seat them. They enter isolated; relieve that. Restate for all the invitation, why we are gathered. Make sure people connect with one another before any content is discussed. Connection happens best in small groups of three to six. Late arrivers must be welcomed, and a place made. Stop what you are doing, greet them without humiliating them, and connect them somewhere in the group. Early leavers leave a hole behind in the meeting. Ask people who plan to leave early to give notice of their plan, stop the meeting and acknowledge their leaving, ask them to tell the group they are leaving and where they are going, have the group tell the leaver what they contributed to the meeting, ask what the leaver got from the gathering, thank the leaver for coming, remove the leaver’s chair, do it all (though it takes time) because we must choose depth over speed. Share food (healthy food, not snack food).

Chapter 14: *Designing Physical Space That Supports Community.* Physical spaces support (or hinder) transformational community. Every room is a metaphor for the community we want to create. Spend time and energy designing the space for human interaction. Prefer circles and rooms with views. Bring in plants. Amplify everyone if anyone needs amplification. Choose chairs that swivel and roll. Avoid stages and raised platforms. Include art; mark meeting transitions with a song, poem, story. Art magnifies the sacred in our gatherings. Fill walls with meaning. Consider a talking stick if some members tend to dominate conversations.

Chapter 15: *The End of Unnecessary Suffering.* Block hopes to end unnecessary suffering. Some suffering, such as loneliness, illness, loss of meaning, sadness, death, is unavoidable. Other suffering, mostly political, we inflict on ourselves. We can end political suffering. Lack of belonging is a political pain. It can be fixed. Block applies his framework to youth, public safety, economic development, families, and health care. We need to see youth more positively, even the upside possibilities in some very dubious activities. We need to believe neighbors can keep their neighborhoods safe; police cannot keep us safe. Economically, developers and social activists must build relationships between their groups. Families need to be seen as people with gifts in a system, not as dysfunctions needing help. Health care needs to focus on health, not disease. Collaborative consultation, not professional expertise, should make health care decisions, considering all impacts on patient well-being.

Book at a Glance: Block's own epitome of this book.

Role Models and Resources: Block lists individuals and organizations doing their community work in the transformative manner he appreciates.