

BOOK REVIEW

COMMUNITY: THE STRUCTURE OF BELONGING

By Peter Block
San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers (2008)
Hardcover, 240 pages
Reviewed by David S. Penner

Peter Block, in his engaging book on community and belonging, urges us to set aside other agendas and engage in building the future. He challenges leaders as well as organizations to rethink their ways of serving. In his consistently gentle way he reminds us, in reference to the influence and power of small groups, of our tasks:

The future is created one room at a time, one gathering at a time. Each gathering needs to become an example of the future we want to create. . . . 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. (p. 93)

Peter Block is a well-known author and consultant. He has written several books on the subjects of leadership, management, and consulting, and is a partner in the firm Designed Learning. In this current book, he builds on and expands some ideas introduced in his other books. He introduces, in *The Empowered Manager* (1987), ideas for creating an organization of our own choosing. In his challenge to leaders, *Stewardship: Choosing Service Over Self-Interest* (1993), he redefines the task of leadership as stewardship. “We choose service over self-interest most powerfully,” he explains, “when we build the capacity of the next generation to govern themselves” (p. xx).

Now in this book, *Community: The Structure of Belonging*, Block expands his ideas to offer an alternative future, one that is different from what he describes as the patriarchal system that dominates community-leader relationships. He speaks to those who want “to be part of creating an organization, neighborhood, city, or country that works for all, and who has the faith and the energy to create such a place” (p. xi). While he uses words like “citizen” and “community,” he is speaking in terms understood just as well by those who want to create belonging in any organization. The key to community is *belonging*, a word that carries several meanings. “We are in community each time we find a place where we belong,” he observes. The broadest meaning is defined as being a part of something, for example, to hold membership in an organization. The second

meaning carries the idea that something belongs to me; I have helped create it. But “belonging can also be thought of as a longing to be, . . . to find a deeper purpose in all we do, . . . to be present and to discover our authenticity and whole selves” (p. xii).

In the introductory chapter, Block introduces the themes of community and belonging, which he will expand and develop throughout the book. He starts by observing that much of what we do flows from our own “isolation and self-interest” and not from community. To bring about change we must transform what we have had yesterday and have today (which, he points out, may not be working very well), and work to “create a future distinct from the past” (p. 1).

From this point on in the book we are in for some surprises. The first surprise is simply the way the book is written. Rather than footnotes and bibliographies, Block

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takes time in the first chapter to acquaint us with those who have influenced his thinking.

We are, as it were, present in a room with a great number of thinkers and doers, each one to whom we are personally introduced. Block guides us through the various ideas they have contributed and helps us to see the importance of each to the overall theme of building

community. By the time we are finished with the introductions, we not only know the persons in the conversation but can also begin to see how the rest of the book will unfold. In the final chapter, “Role Models and Resources,” we are again introduced to everyone mentioned in the book. Block describes what each person does and in most cases provides details on how to make further contact with them. Although I would not normally recommend reading the last chapter first, in this case it is a wonderful way to feel connected to the conversations as they unfold throughout the book.

The organization of the book is helpful. Each chapter begins with a summary section in which Block outlines the key points that will be explained in greater detail later in the chapter. This way one can quickly grasp the main points and be ready to engage in the discussion to follow. An example is found at the beginning of Chapter 2. “The context that restores community is one of possibility, generosity, and gifts, rather than one of problem solving, fear, and retribution.” Avoiding the word “meeting” (which he finds has a pre-conceived negative hierarchal bias) and substituting the term “associational life,” he continues:

The conversations that build relatedness most often occur through associational life, where citizens show up by choice, and rarely in the context of system life, where citizens show up out of obligations. The small group is the unit of transformation and the container for the experience of belonging. Conversations that focus on stories about the past become a limitation to community; ones that are teaching parables and focus on the future restore community. (p. 29)

As he does in the rest of the book, he devotes the rest of the chapter to a more thorough and detailed discussion of these opening statements.

Those who are acquainted with other leadership books will be further surprised by

some of the important elements of building community and creating a sense of belonging. We are reminded that sustainable change occurs best in small groups on a local level. We are urged to move beyond planning, strategic planning, and even visioning to create possibilities for the future. “Every time we gather becomes a model of the future we want to create” (p. 32). That means we can live in the future now. We can focus our attention on those issues rather than the agenda of today that was created by issues of the past.

For those who think in more traditional ways about leadership, this book does not give comfort. What it does provide, however, along with a word of warning about our understanding of leadership, is an alternative role for leadership. “The role of leaders is not to be better role models or to drive changes; their role is to create the structures and experiences that bring citizens together to identify and solve their own issues” (p. 74). Redefining leadership is not dismissing it. He observes that we do not need “leaders to better define issues, or to orchestrate better planning or project management.” What we need “is for the issues and the plans to have more of an impact, and that comes from citizen accountability and commitment” (p. 87). This changes the task of the leader from providing the answers to that of a convener, which will result in that desired engagement. Noting that leaders are always under pressure to speak, he suggests that just the opposite might be the better role of the leader in building community. “In addition to convening and naming the question, we add listening to the critical role of the leader. Listening may be the single most powerful action the leader can take” (p. 88).

The first part of the book draws us into conversation about community and belonging; the second part engages us in a discussion as to how this can be done. Again we are surprised by what we find. The details are organized around what Block calls six conversations. But before entering these conversations—and central to engaging in them—we are reminded that “questions are more transforming than answers.” He notes that questions “are more powerful than answers in that they demand engagement” and that they “create the space for something new to emerge” (pp. 101, 103). While there are questions that lead to argument, analysis, explanation and defense, he suggests that they have little power aside from maintaining dominance:

Powerful questions are those that, in the answering, evoke a choice for accountability and commitment. They are questions that take us to requests, offers, declarations, forgiveness, confession, gratitude, and welcome, all of which are memorable and have a transformative power.
(p. 103)

Questions also help us “guard against solution finding and advice giving,” which Block finds work against building community (p. 107). Giving advice is part of the old conversation. “Trying to be helpful and giving advice are really ways to control others,” he says. “Advice is a conversation stopper. In community building, we want to substitute curiosity for advice” (p. 109).

The six conversations, “invitation,” “possibility,” “ownership,” “dissent,” “commitment” and “gifts,” introduce us—not surprisingly—to further questions. Throughout the book, Block argues for gathering and engaged conversation as a way of building community.

And so the “first critical question for ourselves is . . . ‘Who do we need in the room for something different to occur in the world?’” (p. 118). Possible questions include “What do we want to create together that would make the difference?” and “What can we create together that we cannot create alone?” (p. 127). By inverting the role from leader to citizen, Block suggests a series of questions to build ownership, starting with “How valuable an experience do you plan for this to be?” (p. 129). On a more difficult issue, he presses leaders to use questions to encourage dissent (a response defined by Block as distinct from denial or resignation, which he defines as a passive form of control). “Dissent,” he says, “is a form of caring, not one of resistance” (p. 136). The conversation about loyalty is not about commitment to the leader or the organization. The promises that matter, he believes, are not those made to those who have power over us, but to those to whom we are committed—our peers. Rounding up the six conversations, he keeps our attention focused on building community through recognition of gifts, a reoccurring theme running through the book. “The leadership task is to bring the gifts of those on the margin into the center” (p. 139).

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Since even the details of how we gather is important, Block devotes two chapters to hospitality and designing physical space. Although not part of the conversations, both have a major impact on the power of the conversations. He emphasizes the need to be inviting, to speak from the heart (and not from PowerPoint presentations), to acknowledge late arrivals and early departures, and to provide a way to share food together. He also advocates a careful rethink to the way the room is arranged so that it too supports the purpose of bringing people together. “Every room we occupy serves as a metaphor for the larger community that we want to create. . . . The room is the visible expression of today’s version of the future” (p. 152). Rows of chairs facing a raised platform does not build community; it support control and authority.

Block insists that he does not have the answer to what the future should be like, but he cannot resist putting together a few of his thoughts which he has included in the penultimate chapter entitled “The End of Unnecessary Suffering.” Reconciliation is the possibility that Block sees as the solution. He gives illustrations from various community levels. While the ideas are interesting, I found this chapter less compelling than the rest of the book. Perhaps he is attempting to avoid giving advice, a leadership mistake he pointed out earlier. If so, I applaud.

As I read, I found myself in a curious situation. It was hard to put this book aside, yet it took a long time to read. I kept thinking about what he was saying, putting it in context in my world and thinking how I might integrate a particular idea into my life and work.

For that reason alone I found the book to be a great read. Of course there were other reasons. We are introduced to other concepts from veteran leaders who also share many of these ideas, but Block has put them together in a convincing and believable way. Although he speaks in terms of citizens and communities, one

could easily substitute “employees,” “university faculty,” or “church members.”

I like books that challenge my thinking, that stretch me a bit. I am most attentive to books that provide a new framework to organize what I have also puzzled about. As I read, I was drawn into the conversation. Although I know that Block is speaking, I also sense that the words and ideas are emerging from a broader discussion engaged in by intelligent, passionate, caring people who want to make a difference, who have thought long and hard how to make a difference, and whose ideas are informed and tempered by practice.

We have become fascinated, if not fixated, on the power of the leader to effect change. Yet we are often disappointed. This book provides us with another view, a view that offers a more useful model for change, one that invites community and citizens to effect change. It may also help leaders to rethink their need to have all the answers, to always speak, and to dominate the agendas. It may help us to listen, to recognize the gifts each person brings, to create space, and to encourage others to step up to responsibility and accountability. Perhaps we will learn that there are better ways of building what we all want—community and belonging.

Some readers may not like the book, and for a variety of reasons. It does not give a quick fix for building community; the alternative offered is a long process of active engagement. It does not elevate the leader but rather lowers leadership expectations, spreads responsibility, engages citizens, and leaves the role of the leader as important but less glamorous. Nor is it a complete manual on leadership; readers looking for such will be disappointed. And it is not a motivational book often found among business books. It is, nevertheless, inspiring through its reflective and considered approach—and may be more valuable because of it.

There are a number of other excellent books that address other leadership issues. This one, while not addressing leadership directly, has pointed us to invaluable role changes for leaders and communities. Block offers us an alternative—“community, the structure of belonging.”