

# Civic Engagement and the Restoration of Community

*Changing the Nature of the Conversation*



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Name



# **Civic Engagement and the Restoration of Community**

*Changing the Nature of the Conversation*

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## *The person who first hurled a word founded civilization.*

Sigmund Freud

### Overview

This booklet is written for citizens who care for the well being of their community. It is for those people who want to live in a neighborhood and a city that works for all its citizens and who have the faith and the energy to create such a place. It is for those of us who long for a positive future for the cities and neighborhoods within which we live.

The challenge for every community is not so much to have a vision or a plan or program of what it wants to become, it is to discover and create the means for bringing that vision, or possibility, into being. To state it more precisely, the book is about the methodology for creating a future for our community that is distinct and not predicted by its past.

Creating a future is different than naming a future. Most communities have at some point named a vision for themselves. The new millennium was a great occasion for this. These visions are important in that they bring many people together in their development and they give form to the optimism we hold for ourselves.

Most visions are based upon what we know constitutes an ideal or healthy community. There are many wonderful books that describe what a great community looks like. Jane Jacobs crystallized our thinking about the power of street life. Robert Putnam raised our consciousness about the centrality of social capital. John McKnight has detailed the limitations of human systems' capacity to care and also shifted the community conversation from deficiencies to the assets and gifts of citizens. Based on the insight of people like these, a community, usually through the combined leadership of business, local government, foundations, education and other key institutions, produces a vision for itself. Often this, in turn, produces a neighborhood-by-neighborhood master plan for translating that vision into streets, buildings, services and public spaces. Our communities have elected officials, corporate and public leaders who are on record in supporting these visions and plans.

The reality, however, is that while visions, plans and committed top leadership are important, even essential, no clear vision, nor detailed plan, nor committed leaders have the power to bring this image of the future into existence. What brings a fresh future into being are citizens. The investment of people, leaders not in top positions,

who are willing to pay the emotional and economic price that really creating something new requires.

The promise of this booklet is to be very specific about what is required to create an alternative future for our community.

The belief is that the way we create conversations that overcome the fragmented nature of our communities is what creates an alternative future. This can be a difficult stance to take for we have a deeply held belief that the way to make a difference in the world is to define problems and needs and then recommend actions to solve those needs. We are all problem solvers, action oriented and results minded. It is illegal in this culture to leave a meeting without a to-do list. We want measurable outcomes and we want them now. What is hard to grasp is that it is this very mindset which prevents anything fundamental from changing.

We cannot problem solve our way into fundamental change, or transformation. This is not an argument against problem solving; it is an intention to shift the context and language within which problem solving takes place. Authentic transformation is about a shift in context and a shift in language and conversation. It is about changing our idea of what constitutes action.

This booklet therefore presents a way of shifting our thinking about building community. It is disguised as a set of tools designed to restore and reconcile community. The shift in the way of thinking is to recognize that creating an alternative future rests on the nature of our conversations and our capacity to relocate where cause resides.

This different way of thinking is embodied in the tools we use. Tools give form and methodology to our way of thinking and being. Ultimately these offer the means to shift the nature of our public conversation. The public conversation includes the conversation we have with ourselves, the ones we have when people are gathered and the ones that occur in the media. The shift we seek in the public conversation is from speaking about what others should do, to speaking into the possibilities that we as citizens have the capacity to create.

The shift in beliefs is to invert our thinking about the location of cause. This has us believe that audiences create performances, children create parents, students create teachers and citizens create leaders. It is not that this shift is necessarily true, but this shift gives us the power to create an alternative future. In every case it puts choice in our own hands instead of waiting for the transformation of others to give us the future we desire.

The outcome this provides is the means to create communities that live into an alternative future. If our intention is to create the possibility of an alternative future, then we need a future that does not continue the past, but one that breaks from the past. To do this we must not only shift our conversations, but also face the limiting

nature of our stories, for it is the stories of the past that prevent the creation of a future distinct from the past.

This will occur when we create a public conversation based on communal accountability and commitment. This is the essence of what restores community. The most difficult challenge is to create accountability and commitment among those people and in those places where history and the past seem overwhelmingly restraining.

## **Accountability**

If we want to change the direction of our community, then we must create restorative conversations. The dominant existing public conversation is retributive, not restorative. It is void of accountability and soft on commitment. This is true both in the conversation played out in the media and in the private conversations occurring in smaller gatherings.

The existing public conversation claims to be tough on accountability, but it is unbearably soft on accountability. It keeps screaming for accountability, but in the scream, it exposes its weakness. The weakness in the dominant thinking about accountability is that it thinks that people, citizens and leaders, can be *held* accountable. The current conversation believes that retribution, incentives, legislation, new standards and tough talk will cause accountability. One example of this is the belief that incarceration can eliminate crime.

The existing public conversation drives us apart, it does not bring us together. The media exploits the wounds of community by over-reporting fear, dramatizing opposition and headlining retribution. The existing conversation nurtures entitlement and individual rights, not accountability and community.

One limitation of most conversations in smaller gatherings is our desire to talk about people not in the room. We seek to change, persuade and influence others, as if their change will help us reach our goals. This conversation does not produce power, it consumes it.

The power to create a future requires us to choose to be accountable. To be accountable, among other things, means you act as an owner and part creator of whatever it is that you wish to improve. In the absence of this, you are in the position of effect, not cause... a powerless stance. To be accountable is to care for the well being of the whole and act as if this well being is in our hands and hearts to create. This kind of accountability is created through the conversations we have with each other.

We also restrain our power through our obsession with a narrow view of action. We think that by focusing on concrete steps, milestones and measures that the future will shift. If we are too concerned with immediate actions and outcomes, we will seek only small changes and the past will remain intact. The action that leads to large changes is indifferent to speed and problem solving, it hinges on

accountability and how that is created by a focus on language, relatedness and purpose.

## **Commitment**

To be committed means we are willing to make a promise with no expectation of return; a promise void of barter and not conditional on another's action. In the absence of this, we are constantly in the position of reacting to the choices of others. The cost of constantly reacting to the choices of others is increased cynicism and helplessness. The ultimate cost of cynicism and helplessness is we resort to the use of force. In this way the barter mentality that dominates our cultures helps create a proliferation of force. The use of force is the essence of the past we are trying to transform.

Commitment, the antithesis of entitlement and barter, is to choose a path independent of reward. It is a choice made in the absence of reciprocity. This is the essence of power.

To summarize, this booklet and the learning experiences within which it is used, are designed to identify the thinking and tools to transform the nature of our conversations in the direction of accountability and commitment.



## **What Constitutes Action**

Civic engagement is the pursuit of accountability and commitment through a shift in the language and conversation we use to make our community better.

We treat civic engagement as something more than voting, volunteering and supporting events designed to bring people together. While civic engagement is about action, it is not about community action and community development as we normally think of it. Action as we use it here, is not a decision to spend more money, to end or continue programs or to better measure or enforce our decisions. It is, most simply put, the choice to radically change our language. Civic engagement is action through which citizens join in new conversations that have the capacity to alter the future.

### **The Futility of Symptoms**

The conventional view of community action and development address what we usually call problems; areas such as public safety, jobs and local economy, affordable housing, youth, universal health care and education. In the context of the restoration of community, these are really symptoms. The deeper cause is in the unreconciled and fragmented nature of our community. This fragmentation creates a context where trying to solve the symptoms only sustains them. Otherwise why have we been working on these symptoms for so long, and so hard, and even with so many successful programs, and seen too little fundamental change?

The real intent of a restorative civic engagement is to shift the context within which traditional problem solving, investment and social and community action take place. The restorative context is one of relatedness, of possibility and the affirmation that each of us has the capacity to transform, even create, the world we inhabit. It is aimed at the restoration of the experience and vitality of community. It is this shift in context, expressed through a shift in language, that creates the condition where traditional forms of action can make a difference.

## Change the Conversation: Change the Question

These ideas are designed around the power of language. How we speak and listen to each other is the medium through which a more positive future is created or denied.

A shift in the conversation is created by being strategic about the way we convene. In other words, how we create and engage in the public debate. It is the shift in public conversation that, in our terms, constitutes transforming action.

All of us want action and to create a future we believe in. The premise discussed here is that questions and the speaking they evoke constitute powerful action. This means that the nature of the questions we ask either keeps the existing system in place or brings an alternative future into the room.

Many of the traditional questions we ask have little power to create an alternative future. These are the set of questions that the world is constantly asking. It is understandable that we ask these questions, but they carry no power. These questions, in the asking, are the very obstacle to addressing what has given rise to the question in the first place.

For example, all of us ask, or are asked:

How do we hold those people accountable?  
How do we get people to show up and be committed?  
How do we get others to be more responsible?  
How do we get people on-board and to do the right thing?  
How do we get others to buy-in to our vision?  
How do we get those people to change?  
How much will it cost and where do we get the money?  
How do we negotiate for something better?  
What new policy or legislation will move our interests forward?  
Where is it working? Who has solved this elsewhere and how do we import that knowledge?  
Why aren't there more elected officials and high level people in the room?

If we answer these questions in the form in which they are asked, we are supporting the dominant belief that an alternative future can be negotiated, mandated, led, engineered and controlled into existence. These questions call us to try harder at what we have been doing. They urge us to raise standards, measure more closely and return to basics, purportedly to create accountability, but in reality to maintain dominance.

The traditional questions imply that the one asking knows and others are a problem to be solved. These are each a reliance on the use of mandate and often force to make a difference in the world. The reliance on mandate and force is appealing when we lose faith in our own power and the power of our community.

Questions that are designed to change other people are patriarchal and subtly colonial, and this sense, always the wrong questions. Wrong, not because they don't matter or are based on ill intent, but wrong because they have no power to make a difference in the world. They are questions that are the cause of the very thing we are trying to shift: the fragmented and retributive nature of our communities.

A restorative community is created when we shift the language of the civic debate away from the default conversation of the conventional questions, which build resistance, and move it into questions that build commitment and accountability. Questions that have the power to make a difference are ones that:

1. Engage people with each other,
2. Confront them with their freedom, and
3. Invite them to co-create a future possibility.

Each of us cares about initiating a place where accountability and commitment is ingrained into the culture. Our offer is to provide the means or architecture for gathering people in a way that will build communities in which citizens will choose accountability and commitment. This is what overcomes our fragmentation and the tendency to demand change from people who are essentially strangers to us.

To achieve this, we need to shift our thinking about leadership.

What this requires of leaders is to create experiences which in themselves are an example of our desired future. The experiences we create need to be designed in such a way that relatedness is paramount, and chosen accountability and voluntary commitment are every moment invited into the room.

## Restorative Leadership

Leaders create the conditions for civic engagement. They do this through the power they have to convene, focus attention and define the conversations for people when they gather. We might say that leadership is the capacity to invite, name the debate and design gatherings.

We use the term “gathering,” because the word has more significance than what we think of as just a “meeting.” A gathering is hosted; it is the product of an act of hospitality. Meetings are called or scheduled. They are intended for production rather than hospitality. Most of us complain about meetings and for good reason. They are mostly designed to take the past and will it into the future. So they become one more version of the past. They either review the past or embody the belief that better planning, better managing or more measurement and prediction can create an alternative future. In this way they become just talk, not powerful conversation.

A new future is created when each gathering (or meeting) becomes an opportunity to deepen accountability and commitment through engagement. It doesn't matter what the stated purpose of the gathering is.

Each gathering serves two functions: (1) to address its stated purpose and (2) to be an occasion for each person to decide to become engaged as an owner. The leader's task is to equally focus on both these purposes. To get the business agenda right and to design the place and experience in a way that moves the culture toward shared ownership.

This conception of leadership is a shift from the dominant conventional belief system that the task of leadership is to set a vision, enroll others in it, and hold people accountable through measurements and reward.

Most leadership training focuses on the conventional ideology of the default culture about leadership:

- Leader and top are essential
- The future destination can be blueprinted
- The work is to bring others “on board”
- More measurement produces better results
- People need more training
- Rewards are related to outcomes
- What worked elsewhere can work here
- The future is a problem to be solved
- Leaders should be a role model

This conventional thinking holds the leader responsible for assuring that these beliefs are planned and implemented.

All of these have face validity, but they have unintended consequences. They are the beliefs that support patriarchy and the dominion of a benevolent monarch. They represent great parenting. This creates a level of isolation, entitlement and passivity that our communities cannot afford to carry. The alternative is to move towards partnership and away from parenting. The task of the leader is to care more about the experience of citizens than the vision or behavior of leaders.

The civic engagement we are talking about here holds leadership to two tasks:

- To create a context that nurtures an alternative future, one based on inclusiveness and hospitality.
- To initiate conversations that shift our experience, which occurs through the way we bring people together and the nature of the questions we use to engage them.

In this way of thinking, leaders manage the space between the definition of an issue and its impact. The world does not need a better definition of issues, or better planning or project management. It needs the issues and the plans to have more of an impact, which is the promise of engagement. Engagement is the means through which there can be a shift in caring for the well being of the whole, which is how we are defining accountability.

The primary purpose of engagement is to evoke chosen accountability. It does this by asking people to be in charge of their own experience and acting on the well being of the whole. Engagement triggers the choice to be accountable for those things over which we can have power, even though we may have no control.

At this point we can define which specific conversations give engagement its power. Engagement becomes powerful through conversations that create *ownership* of this place, even though another is in charge. These are conversations that evoke *commitment* without barter, ones that acknowledge the primacy of *relatedness*. Add to these, conversations about the larger communal *possibility*, the value of *dissent*, and an approach to creating the world through *invitation* rather than mandate. Finally, and fundamentally, we seek conversations which treat all people as *gifts* rather than needs or deficiencies.

These are the specific elements of civic engagement. They are linguistic shifts that change the context through which community can be restored and traditional problem solving and development can make the difference.

This kind of leadership is restorative by producing rather than consuming energy. It is leadership that creates accountability as it confronts people with their freedom. In this way engagement centered leaders bring kitchen table and street corner democracy into being.

## Notes

## Change Your Thinking: Change Your Life

To create accountability through above conversations and version of leadership we need to go deeper. Accountability-based civic engagement is created through reflecting on three elements of transformation:

- Our thinking,
- The lens through which we formulate strategy,
- The keys or tools we apply to specific events.

As mentioned earlier, the shift in the world begins with a shift in our thinking. Shifting our thinking does not change the world, but it creates a condition where the shift in the world becomes possible.

The shift is actually an inversion in our thinking. *The key inversion is to move from thinking of ourselves and others as effect, to thinking of ourselves and others as cause. This is the primary act of inversion.* This is the point upon which accountability revolves.

This inversion is based on the Boehm insight that for every great idea, the opposite idea is also true. This requires us to invert the conventional, or default cultural beliefs. Inversion is 180 degrees, not 179 degrees. This shift in thinking precedes a shift in behavior and outcomes.

An alternative future, then, arises from this inversion of cause. This is done not to claim accuracy, but to give power to our way of being in community. The question is “if you believed this to be true, in what ways would that make a difference, or change your actions?”

The key issue is, have we chosen the present or has it been handed to us? The possibility of an alternative future rotates on this question. The primary inversion is our thinking about what is cause and what is effect. The default culture would have us believe that the past creates the future, that a change in individuals causes a change in organizations and community. That we are determined by everything aside from free will. That culture, organizations and society drive our actions and our way of being. This is true, but the opposite is also true.

*The shift in thinking is to take the stance that we are the creator of our world as well as the product of it. Free will trumps genetics, culture and parental upbringing.*

To elaborate this inversion of thinking, we can claim that:

The audience creates the performance  
The subordinate creates the boss  
The child creates the parent  
The citizen creates its leadership  
The student creates the teacher  
Youth create adults  
The future creates the present  
The listening creates the speaker  
An openness to learn creates the teaching  
Problem solving occurs to build relatedness  
A room and a building are created by how it is occupied

In each case, choice or destiny replaces fate.

Again, the question is not whether this is true or not. The question is which system of thinking is most useful? Which gives us power?

This shift in thinking is a condition for shifting the context of civic engagement, within which the restoration of community can occur.

***The problem, of course, was that Baba saw the world in black and white. And he got to decide what was black and white.***

**Khaled Hosseini, *The Kite Runner***



## The Context for Engagement

Broadening these ideas of inverted thinking to building community, here is what the shift in context entails:

### The Context of Effect

The community is defined by its history

We solve problems identified by others

The goals, plans, measures and consequences are set by others

Cost and efficiency dominate

We seek answers and a defined destination

Express dissent as a stance in reaction to others, a demand how they should change, and the beginning of negotiation.

Prefer safety and security, choose a predictable future

Negotiation, force and control of resources create a better future

### The Context of Cause

The community is defined by its connectedness and its possibility

We define and solve problems ourselves

The goals, plans, measures and consequences are set by us

Purpose and relatedness dominate

We trust questions and an emergent path

Express dissent as a stance, a choice that defines us. This kind of dissent is the beginning of a conversation.

Prefer adventure, choose freedom, anxiety and a vague future

Relatedness, accountability and diverse engagement create a better future

The context does not shift only from a change in thinking, but a shift in thinking creates a condition for a shift in context.

*We are changing the world, one Rumi at a time.*

**Ron King**

## **Strategy: Change the Conversation One Room at a Time**

Given a shift in thinking about leadership and where cause resides, we can spell out a strategy for an alternative future.

One element of strategy is to create an alternative future one room at a time. If you can change the room, you have changed the culture, at least for that moment. This means that each room we enter needs to become an example of the future that we want to create. This room, this way of gathering and engaging becomes a metaphor for the larger world and its possibility.

The essence of this room we are constructing is the conversation we design. Other aspects of strategy are covered later under tools. If we change the room by changing the conversation, it is not just any new conversation, but one that creates a communal accountability and commitment.

Change the conversation from what? Certain conversations are satisfying and true yet have no power and no accountability. For example, the conversations we want to avoid or postpone are:

- Telling the history of how we got here
- Giving explanations and opinions
- Blaming and complaining
- Making reports and descriptions
- Carefully defining terms and conditions
- Retelling your story again and again
- Seeking quick action
- Talking about people not in the room

These conversations characterize most meetings, conferences, press releases, trainings, master plans, summits and the call for more studies and expertise. They are well intentioned and valid, but hold little power.

These help us get connected, they increase our understanding of who we are, and most of all they are our habit; they are so ingrained in the social convention of our culture that they cannot be easily dismissed or disrespected. They just do not, however, contribute to a transformation.

Transformation is a change in the nature of things, not simply an improvement. More clarity, more arguments, more waiting for others to change does not change anything. If transformation occurs primarily in language, then a different kind of conversation is the vehicle through which transformation occurs. And the transformational language that is restorative is the one where accountability and commitment become viral and endemic.

Here are the conversational shifts that are restorative and accountability creating:

*Invitation replaces mandate, policy and alignment*

*Possibility replaces problem solving*

*Ownership and Cause replace explanation, blame and denial*

*Dissent and Refusal replace resignation and lip service*

*Commitment replaces hedge and barter*

*Gifts replace deficiencies*

Each of these conversations leads to the others.

Any one held wholeheartedly takes us to and resolves all the others.

In the absence of these, it is all just talk, no matter how urgent the cause, how important the plan, how elegant the answer. These are the conversations through which the community is transformed.

# Defining The Six Conversations

What follows is more detail on the six conversations.

## **One: The Invitation**

Transformation occurs through choice, not mandate. This means it must be initiated through invitation. Invitation is a call to create an alternative future. The question is, "what is the invitation we can make for people to gather in a way that they will own the relationships, tasks and process that lead to transformation?"

A powerful invitation must contain a hurdle or demand if accepted. It is a challenge to engage. It declares, "We want you to come, but if you do, here is what will be required from you." Most leadership initiatives or training are about how we get or *enroll* people to do tasks and feel good about doing things they may not want to do. Change then becomes a self-inflicted wound. People need to *self-enroll* in order to experience their freedom of choice and commitment.

The initial leadership task is to name the debate, issue the invitation and provide the space for those who choose to show up. This recognizes that for every gathering there are those not in the room who are needed. Those who accept the first call will bring the next circle of people into the conversation.

## **Two: Possibility**

This conversation asks us to enter a possibility for the future as opposed to problem solving the past. This is based on an understanding that living systems are really propelled to the force of the future. The possibility conversation frees people to create new futures that make a difference.

Problem solving and negotiation of interests makes tomorrow only a little different from yesterday. Possibility is a break from the past and opens space for a future we had only dreamed of. *It may be that declaring a possibility wholeheartedly is the transformation.* The leadership task is to postpone problem solving and stay focused on possibility until it is spoken with resonance and passion. As Werner Erhard has so clearly stated, the possibility works on us, we do not work on the possibility.

### **Three: Ownership**

Accountability is the willingness to acknowledge that we have participated in creating, through commission or omission, the conditions that we wish to see changed. *Without this capacity to see ourselves as cause, our efforts become either coercive or wishfully dependent on the transformation of others.*

Community will be created the moment we decide to act as creators of what it can become. This requires us to believe in the possibility that this organization, neighborhood, community, is mine or ours to create. This will occur when we are willing to answer the question “how have I contributed to creating the current reality?” Confusion, blame and waiting for someone else to change are a defense against ownership and personal power.

The idea that I am cause can be a difficult question to take on immediately, so lower risk questions precede this. The best opening questions are questions about the ownership people feel for this particular gathering. To what extent they act as owners of this meeting is symptomatic of how they will act as owners of the larger question on the table. The extent of our ownership for larger questions is more difficult and therefore requires a level of relatedness before it can be held in the right context.

A subtle denial of ownership is innocence and indifference. The future is denied with the response, “it doesn't matter to me—whatever you want to do is fine.” This is always a lie and just a polite way of avoiding a difficult conversation around ownership.

People best own that which they create, so that co-creation is the bedrock of accountability. It is the belief that I am cause, not effect. This is the question that really confronts people with their freedom.

#### **Four: Dissent**

Dissent is the cousin of diversity; the respect for a wide range of beliefs. This begins by allowing people the space to say "no". *If we cannot say "no" then our "yes" has no meaning.* Each needs the chance to express their doubts and reservations, without having to justify them, or move quickly into problem solving. *"No" is the beginning of the conversation for commitment.* Doubt and "no" is a symbolic expression of people finding their space and role in the strategy. It is when we fully understand what people do not want that choice becomes possible. The leadership task is to surface doubts and dissent without having an answer to every question.

#### **Five: Commitment**

*Wholehearted commitment makes a promise to peers about our contribution to the success of the whole.* It is centered in two questions: What promise am I willing to make? And, what is the price I am willing to pay for the success of the whole effort? It is a promise for the sake of a larger purpose, not for the sake of personal return. Commitment is the answer to lip service.

Peers receive the promise and determine whether the promises are enough to bring an alternative future into existence. The leadership task is to reject lip service and demand either authentic commitment or ask people to say no and pass. We need the commitment of much fewer people than we thought to create the future we have in mind.

### **Six: Gifts**

The most infrequent conversation we hold is about our gifts. We tend to be deficiency obsessed. Rather than focus on our deficiencies and weaknesses, which will most likely not go away, we gain more leverage when we focus on the gifts we bring and capitalize on those. Instead of problematizing people and work, the conversation is about searching for the mystery that brings the highest achievement and success.

The focus on gifts confronts people with their essential core that has the potential to make the difference and change lives for good. This has the added benefit of resolving the unnatural separation between work and life. *The leadership task is to bring the gifts of those on the margin into the center.*

## Notes



## The Tools

The tools or keys for restoration fall in three categories:

**The Invitation:** The invitation is a request to engage. It is different from selling, trying to gain “buy-in” or “rolling out” something. It is to ask others to choose to join in creating a new conversation.

**The Order of Assembly:** The way we structure the assembly of peers and leaders is as critical as the invitation or the questions. What is critical is to recognize the importance of the way we assemble. One conventional order of assembly is Robert’s Rules of Order. It is good at efficiency and containing conflict; it is also good at dampening aliveness. Most of our gatherings pay primary attention to problem solving, rather than engagement, and in this way they drain our aliveness. We want to give as much or more attention to the engagement which creates energy, than to the content which usually exhausts energy.

The key is the design of small group discussions for the questions that follow. The small group is the unit of change and it the configuration where relationship and connection occurs.

**The Construction of the Questions:** Questions are more transformative than answers. They are the essential tools of engagement. They are the means by which we are all confronted with our freedom. In this sense, if you want to change the culture, find a powerful question. The shift in language, evoked by the question, is the transformation that constitutes the change in culture.

# The Invitation

The invitation offers a possibility and urges others to participate. It also warns that if they do come, something will be required of them.

## Constructing the Invitation

The elements of invitation are:

- The context and possibility of the gathering
- Who needs to be in the room
- Making clear that attendance is a choice
- What hurdle is required of them should they choose to attend
- A strong request to attend
- Picking the form of the invitation

**Naming The Possibility** – Begin the invitation by naming the possibility we are committed to. This becomes the context of the gathering. The more personal the better.

**Composing The List** – Who are the critical people to invite? The intent is to bring together people across boundaries. Who should make the invitation? People show up based on who invites and their connection with those people. The more who join to issue the invitation, the more powerful.

**Framing A Choice** – Refusal is perfectly acceptable. The invitation must allow room for a “no.” If “no” is not an option, then it is not an invitation. Emphasize that you value their decision NOT to attend and have faith that there are good reasons for not attending.

**Specifying The Requirements** – Tell them explicitly what is required of them should they choose to attend. There is a price to pay for their decision to attend. They will be asked to explore ways to deepen their learning and commitment. They will be asked to postpone problem solving and the negotiation of interests. They will not be asked to compromise their interests or constituent interests, just to hold them to the side for the time being. They will be asked to talk intimately with people they do not know and people that they have a “story” about.

The idea is that everything that has value has a price and must be purchased. Make the purchase price explicit.

**Being Explicit about The Request** – End the invitation by telling them that you want them to come, and if they choose not to attend, that they will be missed, but not forgotten.

**The Form of the Invitation** – The more personal the better. A visit is more personal than a call; a call is more personal than letter; a letter is more personal than email.

# The Order of Assembly

Each meeting is designed to be an example of the future we want to create. It is this meeting in which the context is shifted.

The structure of gatherings is about the design of the room, the groupings of people and managing the small group and communal discussion.

All change begins with a small group, for the small group is the unit of change. Even a large group meeting uses small groups to create connection and move the action forward. The small group is the structure that allows every voice to be heard. Everything has been said but not everyone has said it.

The room is a metaphor for the whole community, physically and psychologically. The room is the visible expression of the kind of learning and community we plan to create. This is what is meant by “change the room, change the culture.”

Rooms are traditionally designed to support patriarchal experiences. We may not have control over the form and shape of the room but we always have choices as to the nature of our occupation of the room. So the task is to design the room to meet our intentions to build accountability and commitment.

Here are the configurations that go into thinking about the order of assembly:

**Seating in Circles.** The circle is the geometric symbol for community and therefore for arranging the room. No tables if possible. If tables are a given, then choose round tables (the shape of communion), which are better than rectangles (the shape of negotiation), or classroom (the shape of instruction).

## Reception

Here is a sequence of events for opening a gathering:

**Welcome and greeting** - Greet them at the door; welcome them personally and help them get seated. People enter in isolation. Reduce the isolation they came with, let them know they came to the right place and are not alone. This expresses our hospitality.

**Restate the invitation** – To all assembled, offer a statement of why we are here. Use everyday language and speak from the heart, without PowerPoint, slides, video, etc. Use words and phrases that express choice, optimism, faith, willingness to act, commitment to persevere.

**Small Groups.** Connection occurs in small face-to-face groupings. In general encourage people who “know each other” to separate - it gives them freedom to be who they are and not who their colleague thinks they should be.

Certain groupings are better for learning and connection, others are better for closure and problem solving. Use diverse, maximum mix of people who know each other the least, for opening questions and raising issues. Use affinity groupings for planning actions and making promises. Start with the individual preparing alone, then talking in trios, next in groups of six and then to the whole community.

**Large Group.** When people share with the larger group, they’re sharing with the world. Have them stand, as they are in fact standing for something. Ask their name so they can be known for their stance. Amplify all voices equally.

When people make powerful statements to the whole community, make them say it again slowly. They speak for all others who are silent, and in that way they speak for the whole. Also when people speak in a large group, they need to be acknowledged for the courage it took to speak out.

Note: All of this is part of an emergent, but well established methodology often called large group interventions.

### **Begin with Connection.**

Connection is not intended to be just an “icebreaker,” which is fun, yet does little to break the isolation or create community. Icebreakers will make contact but not connection.

Some examples of connection questions:

*What led you to accept the invitation?*

*What would it take for you to be present in this room?*

*What is the price others paid for you to be here?*

*Who in your life, living or dead, that you value and respect would you want to invite to sit with you and help make this meeting successful?*

**Late Arrivals** – Welcome them without humiliation, connect them to the group.

Restored community becomes one step closer when every gathering is a demonstration of the future we came to create. Including those who come late creates a culture of hospitality and often taking the time to welcome a late comer sets the tone for what we consider to be important, which is relatedness.

## Departure

Ending is an element of engagement. We want a high-engagement ending to the gatherings. Treat the ending as important as the beginning and the middle.

Ask in the beginning for people to give notice of leaving. Leave in public, do not sneak out. When people leave early and won't return, they leave a void in the community. It hurts the community; there is a cost, a consequence to the community.

Acknowledge their leaving in a deliberate way:

Have them acknowledge that they are leaving and where they are going

Have three people say, "Here's what you've given us..."

Ask, What are you taking with you? What shifted for you...became clearer? What is one thing you'd like to say to the community?

Thank them for coming

Remove their chair – if it remains, it only acts as a reminder that there has been a loss.

# The Nature of Powerful Questions

The conditions for achieving accountability entail the use of powerful questions. Questions express the reality that change, like life, is difficult and unpredictable.

It is the questions that change our life. We all look for answers and all we get in response is more questions. This is why questions confront in ways that statements and answers don't. And why questions are essential for the restoration of community.

Questions open up the conversation, answers close it down.

## Elements of a Great Question

**It is ambiguous.** Do not try to precisely define what is meant by the question. This requires each person to bring their own, personal meaning into the room.

**It is personal.** All passion, commitment and connection grows out of what is most personal. Create space for the personal.

**It evokes anxiety.** All that matters makes us anxious. It is our wish to escape from anxiety that steals our aliveness. If there is no edge to the question, there is no power.

The questions themselves are an art form worthy of a lifetime of study. They are what transform the hour.

## The Setup of Questions

Each time a small group takes up a question, it needs to be set up in a specific way. The setup is as important as the question, for it sets the context.

There are three elements of the Setup: Name the Distinctions, Give Permission for Unpopular Answers and Avoid Advice.

**Name Distinctions.** Each question has a distinction that is critical. For example, later in this booklet we list four questions which confront people's ownership of this event. In one of the four questions, we ask how valuable an experience we *plan* to have vs how valuable an experience we *want* to have. The distinction between plan and want is the difference between effect and cause. In this case we can want to have a good experience, but it does not mean we choose it. We can still wait and see what the world will provide us. To ask what kind of

experience we plan to have places the ownership of that experience clearly in our own hands. The language of what we plan forces us to be accountable.

Each question is about creating powerful distinctions, which needs to be highlighted. If you are not aware of the distinction that makes the question powerful, don't use the question.

**Give Permission for Unpopular Answers.** When people answer a question they are conditioned to seek the right answer. Encourage them to answer honestly, by naming unpopular possible answers, and supporting their expression. For example, on the above question, let them know that an answer that says they plan for this to be a very poor experience is a fine answer. All we care about is that people own their experience, not that the experience be a good one.

**Avoid Advice.** We need to tell people not to be helpful. Trying to be helpful and giving advice are really ways to control others. Advice is a conversation stopper. We want to substitute curiosity for advice. No call to action. No asking what they are going to do about it. Urge participants to ask others "why does that mean so much to you?" The goal is to replace advice with curiosity. Plus in our rush to advice and action, we increase the likelihood that tomorrow will be just like yesterday.

### **Risk Order of Questions**

Certain questions require a greater level of trust. Begin with less demanding questions and end with the more difficult ones. Same with the conversations -- ownership and commitment are high risk and require higher trust to have meaning. Possibility and dissent are lower risk questions and come first.



## The Questions for Each Conversation

The initial conversation, the invitation, has been detailed above. When people have accepted the invitation and decided to show up, there are five language actions which, when taken in the presence of others, create community and shift the public debate. These are:

- To declare a possibility
- To take ownership – “I created the world I live in”
- To say no authentically
- To make a promise with no expectation of return
- To declare the gifts we and others bring to the room

Each of these language actions, or conversations is created through its own set of questions. What follows is the meaning of the conversations and the questions that can be used for each one.

### One: The Conversation for Possibilities

Traditionally we problem solve and talk about goals, targets, resources and about persuading others.

Problem solving needs to be postponed and replaced with possibility. The future is created through a declaration of what is the possibility we stand for. Out of this declaration, each time we enter a room, the possibility enters with us.

#### **The distinction is between possibility and problem solving.**

Possibilities, though begun as individual declaration, gain power and impact community when made public.

The best opening question for possibility is:

*What is the crossroads that you find yourself at this stage of your life or work or the project around which we are assembled?*

Later, the final individual question for possibility will be:

*What declaration of possibility can you make that has the power to transform the community and inspire you?*

The communal questions for possibility are:

*What do we want to create together that would make the difference?*

*What can we create together that we can not create alone?*

## **Two: The Conversation for Ownership**

Ownership is the decision to become the author of our own experience. It is to be cause rather than effect. It is the choice to decide on our own what value and meaning will occur when we show up. It is also the stance that each of us, collectively, are creating the world, even the one we have inherited.

**The distinction is between ownership and blame (a form of entitlement).**

### **Renegotiation of the Social Contract**

People enter each room believing that someone else owns the room, the meeting, and the purpose that convened the meeting. Leadership needs to change this.

We want to shift to the belief that this world, including this gathering, is ours to construct together. The contract moves from parenting to partnership. Also we want to move towards the position that each of us is creating the current condition.

We begin by shifting the ownership of the room.

The Four Questions that renegotiate the social contract are to ask people to rate on a seven-point scale, from low to high:

*How valuable an experience (or project, or community) do you plan this to be?*

*How much risk are you willing to take?*

*How participative do you plan to be?*

*To what extent are you invested in the well being of the whole?*

People answer these individually, then share their answers in a small group. Be sure to remind them not to cheer anyone up or be helpful. Just get interested in whatever the answer.

At some later point, the essential question upon which accountability hinges needs to be asked:

*What have I done to contribute to the very thing I complain about or want to change?*

### **Three: The Conversation for Dissent**

“No” is the beginning of the conversation for commitment. If we cannot say no, our yes means little. Early in every gathering, there needs to be space for dissent.

#### **The distinction is between dissent and lip service, rebellion and resignation.**

The belief is that it is a good thing for others to have doubts and concerns. We want to make room for the doubts and concerns to be expressed openly, not left to quiet conversations in the hallways, among allies, or in the restrooms. Dissent is a form of care, not one of resistance.

It is the public expression of doubts, authentic statements of “no,” that shifts a culture and builds accountability and commitment. We will let go of only those doubts that we have given voice to.

When someone authentically says no, then the room becomes real and trustworthy. An authentic statement is one in which the person owns that the dissent is their choice and not a form of blame or complaint.

The fear is that we will make people more negative by making room for refusal. If people say no, it does not mean they will get their way.

Saying no doesn't cost us our membership in the meeting or in the community. Encourage those who say no to stay – you need their voice.

It is important to see the difference between authentic dissent and inauthentic dissent, which we can call false refusal. Inauthentic forms of refusal are denial, rebellion and resignation.

Denial means we act as if the present is fine and long to return to a world that never existed.

Rebellion is in reaction to the world and is a vote for dominion or patriarchy. It is a complaint that others control the monarchy and not the rebels. The community form of rebellion is protest. It is noble in tradition, but keeps us in perpetual reaction to the stances of others.

Resignation is the ultimate act of powerlessness and a stance against possibility. It is also a passive form of control. None of us are strong enough to carry dead weight. It is born of our cynicism and loss of faith.

The challenge is to frame the questions in a way that the dissent is authentic. If it comes back as denial, rebellion or resignation, all we can do is recognize it, not argue, and give attention to dissent in its more authentic form.

Some questions for the expression of dissent:

*What doubts and reservations do you have?*

*What do you want to say No to, or refuse, that you keep postponing?*

*What have you said yes to, that you do not really mean?*

*What is a commitment or decision that you have changed your mind about?*

*What forgiveness are you withholding?*

*What resentment do you hold that no one knows about?*

#### **Four: The Conversation for Commitment**

Commitment is a promise made with no expectation of return. It is the willingness to make a promise independent of either approval or reciprocity from other people.

**The distinction is between a promise made for its own sake and a barter agreement.** Barter is an exchange of agreements that are contingent on the actions of another. I will do this if you will do that. This means that we hold an out for ourselves dependent on whether other people fulfill their part of the bargain. This reciprocity works as an element of commerce. It falls short of the level of commitment that creates a new future.

The declaration of a promise is the form that commitment takes and is the action that initiates change. The word promise brings a sacred element into the conversation and this is what generates power and new energy.

It is one thing to set a goal or objective, but something more personal to use the language of promises. Consider two kinds of promises:

My behavior and actions with others  
Results and outcomes that occur in the world.

Promises that matter are made to peers, not those made to those who have power over us (parents, bosses, leaders). The future is created through the exchange of promises at the local level with whom we have to live out the intentions of the change. It is to these people that we give our commitments, and it is they who decide if our offer is enough – for the person and for the institution. Peers have the right to declare that the promise made is not enough to serve the interests of the whole. As in each act of refusal, this is the beginning of a longer conversation.

Promises are sacred. They are the means by which we choose accountability. We become accountable the moment we make them public.

Write the promises by hand, sign and date them. Then collect and publish the whole set. About once a quarter, meet and ask, “How’s it going?”

The key questions are those we have to ask ourselves.

*What promises am I willing to make?*

*What measures have meaning to me?*

*What price am I willing to pay?*

*What is the cost to others for me to keep my commitments, or fail in my commitments?*

*What’s the promise I’m willing to make that constitutes a risk or major shift for me?*

*What is the promise I am postponing?*

A note: “I am willing to make no promise at this moment” is a fine and acceptable stance. This comes in the form of saying “I pass,” an act of member refusal. Remember that refusal does not cost someone their membership in the circle.

## **Five: The Conversation of Gifts**

Change and an alternative future occur by capitalizing on our gifts and capacities. Bringing the gifts of those on the margin into the center is the primary work leadership and citizenship. This is a definition of community.

**The distinction is between gifts and deficiencies.**

When we look at deficiencies, we strengthen them.

Rather than telling people about...  
what they need to improve  
what didn't go well  
how they should do it differently next time  
Confront them with their gifts. Talk to others about...  
the gift that you've received from them  
the strength that you see in them

Pay special attention to the setup for gifts:

We focus on gifts because what we focus on, we strengthen. In circle, one person at a time receives statements from the others of what they have appreciated from that person.

The person says "thank you, I like hearing that." Don't deflect the appreciation.

Keep a complete ban on discussing weaknesses and what is missing, even if people want this feedback.

Every gathering ends with this conversation.

The questions:

*What gift have you received from another in this room? Tell the person in specific terms.*

*What is the gift you continue to hold in exile?*

*What gift do you hold that no one knows about?*

*What are you grateful for that has gone unspoken?*

## Summary of Questions

Whatever the venue, accountable community is created when we ask certain questions. Here is a summary of the core question associated with each stage:

To what extent are you here by choice? (Invitation)

What declarations are you prepared to make about the possibilities for the future? (Possibilities)

How invested and participative do you plan to be in this meeting? (Ownership)

To what extent do you see yourself as part of the cause of what you are trying to fix? (Ownership)

What are your doubts and reservations? (Dissent)

What promises are you willing to make to your peers? (Commitment)

What gifts have you received from each other? (Gifts)

These are samples only. The work is to invent questions that fit the business you are up to and the conditions you are attempting to shift.

Real life is circular, not in a line as it appears on a page. Which conversation, in which order, will vary with the context of a gathering. Since all the conversations lead to each other, sequence is not critical. The conversations as listed here, though, are the rough order that usually aligns with the logic of people's experience.

For more information about A Small Group, contact the website at [www.asmallgroup.net](http://www.asmallgroup.net) or Peter Block at [pbi@att.net](mailto:pbi@att.net).

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