

"This Conversation Is Being Recorded for Quality Assurance and Training Purposes Only"

By Peter Block

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It is common to speak of this moment, the one we live in, as a time of great change. Unique enough that it should be recorded for quality assurance and training purposes. Perhaps every moment feels exceptional and important to record for those who inhabit it.

Thinking back a while, as the growth of science and technology was exploding in the late 1960s, the world of human development, spiritual choices, transcendental meditation was also taking hold. It was thought that these were two different worlds, each proud of its special moment. Surprisingly, however, some of the companies who were leaders in the private sector began to experiment with meshing the two. One version of this was called Organization Development.

My first job was in a research and engineering company conducting training sessions designed to build relational and introspective skills. We helped create something called team building as a means to build a culture of innovation in oil and gas. One of their dreams was to create a car run by a battery. At the time, unfortunately, the battery needed to be larger than the car.

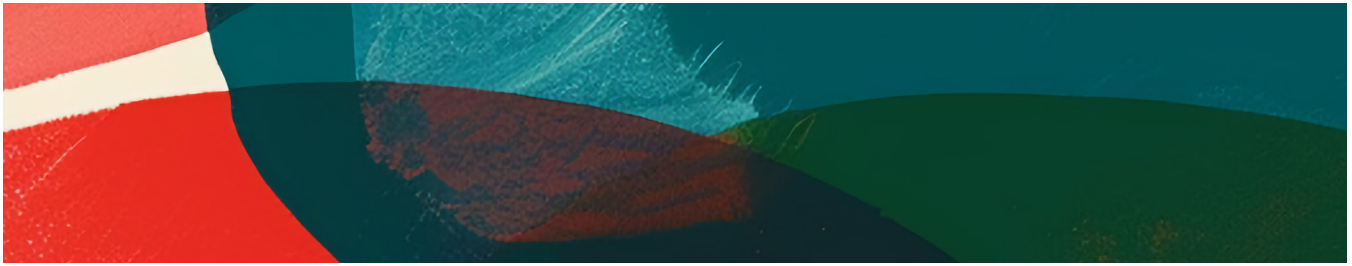
It was in that environment that the Information Technology (IT) director came to me with a question that brought the different worlds together. He stated that his team was making IT recommendations to line managers, but the managers weren't doing anything to implement those ideas. He'd gotten acquainted with our work, so he came to us and said, "Could you put together a workshop for our people? We know our recommendations are good, but nobody's acting on them."

Neale Clapp and I created a workshop organized around the relational skills needed to have impact when you don't have control. We ran it for IT for a few years, and they said it worked. More of their recommendations were being acted upon. So, we decided that maybe we should offer it more broadly. We did and we've been running what we modestly called [Flawless Consulting](#) workshops ever since.

What did this mean?

It meant that technology, science, and skilled human relationships need each other. That technical people, scientists, and digital inventors are engaged in a human endeavor. That the digital world and the world of science -- involved in health care, or education, or sustaining the planet, or whatever technical outcomes matter to people -- ultimately rest on building relationships that matter. This is the point of the book I wrote in 1980 that came out of a technology executive's desire to have innovations actually applied.

At that moment, which was not recorded for quality assurance but was recorded for training purposes, we found a way to give a structure to building relationships that is concrete, tactile, and in a form that makes it accessible to technical people, marketing people, health care providers, and citizens wanting to make a place better. It is based on the foundational belief that relationships are at the center of what propels every business, laboratory, ER room, and citizen gathering to act on what people know.



It means knowing and being right is not enough. This calls for something special from leaders.

What this means is that we need to learn how to [convene](#). This is not just a secondary skill for those who are people- and relationship-oriented. It calls upon us all, especially leaders, to give attention to how people in their domain show up with each other. Which domain does not matter: business, higher education, civic affairs, political campaigns. This notion of leadership encompasses more than vision, organizational and business knowledge, personal style, or strategic thinking. You can call it relational or convening leadership.

This reconstruction of leadership has some core elements. These begin with understanding that certain conversations are essential to having people, citizens, employees connect with each other. We have to know how to put our wants into words, to deal with resistance, to stop being helpful, to focus on what's working instead of what's not working. We and others are decades into knowing how to teach a basic process where the skills of connection and dealing with resistance among those who have a stake in the moment are seen as essential to any outcome.

Acting on what we know

The goal is to convene people of seemingly separate worlds and have them trust each other, quickly. All around us is the methodology from a variety of sources to engage people from any divide in ways that cultivate relationships. At work or where we live. But we have not decided to train leaders in how to do this. Even though we record conversations for the sake of quality assurance and training, our traditional ways of gathering are interesting but not powerful. Most of the time we don't convene, we assemble and make presentations. Tell stories. Present outcomes. Or offer plans and ask for feedback.

The need is for bosses and employees, leaders and citizens, to be willing to bring people together in a way that focuses on the business at hand and builds relationship and connection, both at the same time. This is to realize that people make decisions based on what it's like to be with you, or each other, and not on passion, advocacy, background, credentials, history, the research results you thought would be decisive.

In most institutional, health care, education, and public domains, we treat relationships as means to an end. Workplaces and neighborhoods and cities are human systems, and it doesn't matter how much new research is presented, it's still true that relationships are essential to have impact. The call is for each of us to know that, no matter the concern that brought us together, our humanity is always an important element that is both at stake and at risk.

With contracting, Six Conversations, Art of Hosting, Open Space, World Café protocols, there are ways to accelerate building relationships and trust, to establish a human connection in seemingly unaccustomed places. This hinges on two things: First, focusing on questions, not answers. And second, giving time for participants, students, activists to have their voices count...to each other.

Over time this becomes a habit of how we connect. It replaces the traditional habits of Robert's Rules of Order, presentations followed by questions and answers, webinars, and the other patterns that put the leader at the center of attention. This is the distinction between convening and assembly. This creates an alternative to conversations recorded for quality assurance and training purposes.

Questions, not answers

The habits or protocols of convening are based on the foundational idea that questions bring us together and answers keep us apart. These protocols also value small groups as the means of engagement. The best questions are not about opinions or explanations or recommendations. They are personal and focused on the present. For example:

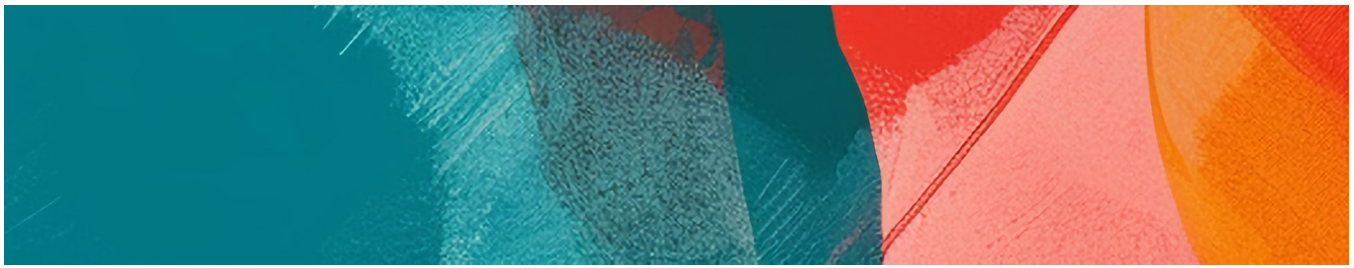
What is the crossroads we are at in this moment?

What doubts do we have about moving forward?

What is our contribution to creating the conditions we are concerned about? What gifts are each of us bringing to this effort?

Questions like these allow us to quickly discover our common interests, to see that we are not alone or crazy.





Exchanging wants, not needs

Absent from most assemblies and meetings are questions where people state specifically what they want from each other. We can discuss a problem, agree on solutions, list next steps, set timetables, call for action, invite participation, and emphasize all relevant matters without actually, person to person, stating what we want from each other.

“What do you want from me? Here is what I want from you” is most often left to be implied, not named. If left to be implied, or assumed, it will only be spoken when there is resistance, moments of disappointment or crossed wires. To have people, peer to peer, or citizen to public servant, employee to boss, pastor to congregation, say in the beginning, and on a regular basis, what each wants from the other expresses the fact that we are partners, equal agents trusting one another to each be accountable for what is to come.

The word “want” matters here. We are talking about a want, not a need. To talk of needs creates an imbalance in the moment and between the parties. There is a plea in saying “I need” because it makes it unkind to say no to a need. Also, when we focus on “needs” we are putting deficiency at the center of the conversation. Asking for what we “want” rests on our gifts and strengths. It is what adults do with each other. It can be softened in your own way, but the point is that we have a right to ask for what we want. At the same time, as part of the exchange, we ask the other person, “What do you want from me?” This is where we choose to act on what we know.

A caveat: Asking for what you want does not mean you are going to get it. The value, and the trust, is in the asking. Not necessarily in the answer. Acknowledged or not, the reality in each gathering is that each person has an important part to play in whatever we gather for. This is even true in situations where it seems like all eyes are designed to look to the front. Even in a performance, a speech, a movie, a concert, the audience has a part to play in creating the experience and what it means.

Asking for people to say what they want from each other helps them treat each other as human beings and value each person’s right to their wants. It affirms that what each of us wants matters, and that we show up as a collaborator, a partner in the world. Not as a pair of hands or an expert or a person with or without leverage. If what we seek is accountability or any kind of transformation -- as in people shifting from consumer to citizen/producer or from parent/child to partner -- making space for the discussion of wants is one clear path to it.



When the answer is no

Discussing wants needs space for dissent. There are always surprises and hiccups. Recording for quality assurance does not guarantee high quality. When wants are expressed, it is important to embrace the possibility of refusal or simply the other saying no. A key is to understand that saying no can be viewed as the beginning of a conversation.

When we ask for what we want and the answer is no, regardless of the form it might take, this resistance is not a thing to be “overcome.” Refusal or dissent needs to be understood, without judgment or an increase in volume. Curiosity becomes an action step.

Simply ask something like: What are you concerned about? What doubts do you have? Do you have any concerns about control or vulnerability? Listen without giving advice, and for sure don’t argue with anyone. Resistance means people are getting somewhere. Welcome resistance, knowing that people are taking this moment seriously because they’re dissenting. Arguing does not take us anywhere, even though it can be satisfying. Saying no and having it understood is an authentic step in the process of building trust.

When the answer is no, it may be that agreement is not possible. Better to know this now than later. But most often, there are ways to move forward. This often is facilitated by putting into words what we see happening. It’s very simple. If it’s not going well, you say, “This isn’t going well.” If the other person seems angry, you say, “You are raising your voice.” Or simply ask, “What is it that you would be willing to say yes to?” Plus, if you ever find yourself explaining the same thing for the third time, call for a break because you are going in circles.

Checkpoint questions and beyond

One more protocol designed to build and affirm trust and connection among people in the room is to implement a pause. Halfway through any gathering, simply ask, “Is this gathering creating what you came for?” Ideally, people in small groups take five minutes to say how it’s going for each of them.

In the pause and the questions -- How is this going? Are you getting what you want out of this conversation? -- we are embodying the intention that we are all players in the moment. And no matter what the answer, say thank you. We can’t always get the world right, but we can invite each of us to be a part of a mid-course correction. Much more powerful than evaluating our experience after it is over.

Caring for the well-being of the whole

In this social media and digital age, the world celebrates information and confuses it with relatedness. A selfie, or digital exchange, is interesting but leaves little space for the vulnerability and intimacy that connection and accountability call for. Our humanity is now produced and sold more than experienced. It is no accident that the popular measure of the social media world is “followers.” And “likes.” We are marketing to each other, which is different from joining each other to create a place that works and is an expression of what we most care about.

Each time we gather, virtually or in person, it is an opportunity for trust to be built, connection to be created or affirmed, and our capacity to both know something and act on it together realized. Let those moments be recorded for quality assurance and training purposes.





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