

COMMUNITY: THE STRUCTURE OF BELONGING

DISCUSSION GUIDE

BY PETER BLOCK



PUBLISHED BY

 **designedLearning®**
a Peter Block company

WELCOME

This book is written to support those who care for the well-being of their community. It is for anyone who wants 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.

Citizens and neighbors, in our capacity to come together and choose to be accountable, are our best shot at making a difference. To act on whatever our intentions might be to make the world better requires something more than individual action. It requires people who may have little connection with each other, or may even be on opposite sides of a question, to decide to come together for some common good. The need and the methodology to make this happen simply and quickly is what this book is about.

Belonging is best created when we join with other people in producing something that makes a place better. It is the opposite of thinking that I must do it on my own. Or to hope others will make the difference. Our purpose in exploring the concepts and methods of community building is to increase the amount of belonging or relatedness that exists in the world.

Another meaning of belong has to do with being an owner: Something belongs to me. To belong to a community is to act as a creator and co-owner of that community. What I consider mine I will build and nurture. The work, then, is to seek in our communities a wider and deeper sense of emotional and communal ownership. It means fostering among all of a community's citizens a sense of ownership and accountability, in both our relationships and what we actually control. This is the point of this Book Club.

Belonging can also be thought of as a longing to be. Being in our capacity to find our deeper purpose in all that we do. It is the capacity to be present, and to discover our authenticity and whole selves. This is often thought of as an individual capacity, but it is also a community capacity. Community is the container within which our longing to be is fulfilled. Remember three important themes Every person is a citizen. Relationships are key. Focusing on what is possible is transformative, so that we turn away from problems of community to the possibility of community.

"POSSIBILITY IS A DECLARATION OF WHAT WE CREATE IN THE WORLD EACH TIME WE
SHOW UP."

— PETER BLOCK, *COMMUNITY: THE STRUCTURE OF BELONGING*

INTRODUCTION

THE FRAGMENTED COMMUNITY AND ITS TRANSFORMATION



The essential challenge is to transform the isolation and self-interest within our communities into connectedness and caring for the whole. We begin by shifting our attention from the problems of community to the possibility of community. We acknowledge that our wisdom about individual transformation is not enough when it comes to community transformation. The purpose is to give form to our knowledge about the nature of collective transformation. This is to see the importance of social capital to the life of the community. This is essential to create a future distinct from the past.

Q: Why was it important for you to join?

Q: When did you start caring about your neighborhood and your community?

PART ONE

THE SOCIAL FABRIC OF COMMUNITY



The social fabric of community is shaped by the idea that the key to creating or transforming community is to see the power in the small but important elements of being with others. How are we going to be when we gather together?

CHAPTER 1: Insights into Transformation

Social fabric is created one room at a time. It is formed from small steps that ask, “Who do we want in the room?” and “What is the new conversation that we want to occur?” In community building, we choose the people and the conversation that will produce the accountability to build relatedness, structure belonging, and move the action forward. A series of core insights informs us how to answer these questions. These insights include ideas on focusing on gifts, on associational life, and on the way all transformation occurs through language. Also critical are insights about the context that governs the conversations and the willingness to speak into the future.

Q: What are the gifts that you have not fully brought to this community?

Q: What is it about this community that you find uniquely compelling?

CHAPTER 2: Shifting the Context for Community

The context that restores community is one of possibility, generosity, and gifts rather than one of problem-solving, fear, and retribution. A new context acknowledges that we have all the capacity, expertise, and resources that an alternative future requires. We are enough. Communities are human systems given form by conversations that build relatedness. 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 obligation.

Q: Where do you associate with others in your neighborhood or community?

Q: What aspect of the commons do you care about? For example: Environment, children, safety, health, enterprises, elderly, vulnerable, social and economic equity?



CHAPTER 3: Today's Community

The traditional community context is a retributive and dividing one that markets fear, assigns fault, exalts consumerism, and admires getting ahead. This context supports the belief that the future will be improved with better public relations, better enforcement, more oversight, and stronger leadership. The corporate model is the modern ideal, and the economy is the center story. The story in today's community defines the role of the media as investigator of what is wrong. In community building, we need to realize that there are gifts, informal associations, ways people help each other that rarely make the front page.

Q: What is the dominant narrative people hold about your community? To create a new story, we first need to come to terms with the current one. This begins by naming it. What would you call the current story for your neighborhood or community?

Q: What can you imagine for your community as a shift in narrative which might better reflect what you care most about?

CHAPTER 4: The Restorative Community

Restoration comes from the choice to value possibility and relatedness over problems, needs, self-interest, and the rest of the traditional community's agenda. It hinges on the accountability chosen by citizens and their willingness to connect with each other around promises they make to each other. Restoration is created by the kinds of conversations we initiate with each other. These conversations are the leverage point for an alternative future. The core question that underlies each conversation is "What can we create together?" Shifting the context from retribution to restoration will occur through language that moves in the following directions: from problems to possibility; from fear and fault to gifts, generosity, and abundance; from law and oversight to social capital and chosen accountability; from the dominance of corporation and systems to the centrality of associational life; and from leaders to citizens.

Q: What is the crossroads you are at with respect to what you care most about concerning your community?





CHAPTER 5: Taking Back Our Projections

Citizens become powerful when they choose the context within which they operate. This is difficult because we are seeking an alternative to the received wisdom of the culture. Choosing our own language of context, rather than aligning with the language of the dominant culture, puts the choice into our own hands. It acknowledges that our mindset, even our worldview, is subjective and therefore amenable to change. There is a cost to this, namely we are subject to doubt and at times loneliness. It is the path of a pioneer.

To choose a context conducive to citizenship, we first need to understand the idea of communal projection. Projection is the act of attributing qualities to others that we deny within ourselves. It is expressed in the way we label others and then build diagnostic categories and whole professions around the labeling. The shift away from projection and labeling provides the basis for defining what we mean by authentic citizenship—which is to hold ourselves accountable for the well-being of the larger community and to choose to own and exercise collective power rather than defer or delegate it to others.

Q: What doubts do you hold about anything being any different in the domains that matter to you?

CHAPTER 6: The Inversion into Citizen

Choosing to be accountable for the whole, creating a context of hospitality and collective possibility, acting to bring the gifts of those on the margin into the center—these are some of the ways we begin to create a community of citizens. To reclaim our citizenship is to be accountable, and this comes from the inversion of what is cause and what is effect. When we are open to thinking along the lines that citizens create leaders, that children create parents, and that the audience creates the performance, we create the conditions for widespread accountability and the commitment that emerges from it. This inversion may not be the whole truth, but it is useful.

Q: Where do you see islands in the community where citizens are creating their own well-being together?

Q: How would you answer the question, “Have we chosen the present or are we living into what has been handed to us?”



CHAPTER 7: The Transforming Community

Conventional thinking about communal transformation believes that focusing on large systems, better leaders, clearer goals, and more controls is essential, and that emphasizing speed and scale is critical. The conventional belief is that individual transformation leads to communal transformation. Our explorations to this point lead instead to the understanding that transformation occurs when we focus on the structure of how we gather and the context in which the gatherings take place; when we work hard on getting the questions right; when we choose depth over speed and relatedness over scale. We also believe that problem solving can make things better but cannot change the nature of things.

Community transformation calls for citizenship that shifts the context from a place of fear and fault, law and oversight, corporation and “systems,” and preoccupation with leadership to one of gifts, generosity, and abundance; social fabric and chosen accountability; and associational life and the engagement of citizens. These shifts occur as citizens face each other in conversations of ownership and possibility. To be more specific, leaders are held to three tasks: to shift the context within which people gather, name the debate through powerful questions, and listen rather than advocate, defend, or provide answers.

Q: How do you see your group activating the primary questions for community transformation: “How do we choose to be together?” and “What do we want to create together?”

PART TWO

THE ALCHEMY OF BELONGING



Up to this point, we have said that transformation occurs when we shift context, value possibility, and shift language, all of which produce a sense of belonging. We can now be specific about the means for making this happen. The following are the properties, as Christopher Alexander has written, which can create a pattern language for the community. These patterns, when undertaken within a context of caring for the whole, can produce a new future:

- Leadership is convening.
 - The small group is the unit of transformation.
 - Questions are more transforming than answers.
 - Six conversations materialize belonging and choosing accountability.
 - Hospitality, the welcoming of strangers, is central.
 - Physical and social space support belonging.
-

CHAPTER 8: Leadership Is Convening

“Leadership is convening” is not an argument against leaders or leadership, only an expression of a desire to change the nature of our thinking about leadership. Communal transformation requires a certain kind of leadership, one that creates conditions where context shifts:

- From a place of fear and examination to one of gifts, generosity, and abundance
- From a belief in more laws and oversight to a belief in social fabric and chosen accountability
- From institutions, corporations, and systems as central, to associational life as central
- From a focus on leaders to a focus on citizens
- From problems to possibility

For this shift in context to occur, we need leadership that supports a restorative path. Restoration calls for us to deglamorize leadership and consider it a quality that exists in all human beings. We need to simplify leadership and construct it so that it is infinitely and universally available.

Q: What is the No you have been postponing? What is the ‘Yes’ you no longer mean?

Q: What gifts have you received from your Book Group up to this point? Name people for the gifts you have received from them.

CHAPTER 9: The Small Group Is the Unit of Transformation

The future is created by shifting our thinking about speed and scale. This puts our attention on one room at a time, one gathering at a time. Each gathering needs to become an example of the future we want to create. This means the small group is where transformation takes place. Large-scale transformation occurs when enough small groups are aggregated to lead to a larger change. Small groups have the most leverage when they meet as part of a larger gathering. At these moments, citizens experience the intimacy of the small circle and are simultaneously aware that they are part of a larger whole that shares their concerns.

The small group gains power with conversations that are mildly personal and speak to the present. To build community, we seek conversations where people show up by invitation rather than mandate, and experience an intimate and authentic relatedness. We have conversations where the focus is on the communal possibility and there is a shift in ownership of this place, even though others are in charge. 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 form the basis for action.

Q: What small groups are you a part of?

Q: Describe a moment when you felt particularly accepted in one or more of these groups.



CHAPTER 10: Questions Are More Transforming Than Answers

Conversations that create trust, accountability, and connection are the essence of a productive community. Traditional conversations that seek to explain, study, analyze, define tools, and express the desire to change others are interesting but not powerful. They actually are forms of affirming the call to maintain control and make the world predictable. If we adhere to them, they become a limitation to the future, not a pathway.

An alternative future is brought into the present when citizens engage each other through questions of possibility, commitment, dissent, and gifts. Such questions open the door to the future and are more powerful than the answers they evoke. They invite trust and engagement. This is what creates chosen accountability.

How we frame the questions is decisive. They need to be ambiguous, personal, and stressful. The way we introduce the questions also matters. We name the distinction the question addresses by stating what is different and unique about this conversation. We give permission for unpopular answers, and inoculate people against advice and help. Advice is replaced by curiosity.

Q: What is a promise you are willing to make with no expectation of return?

Q: What courage is required of you now to make that promise?

CHAPTER 11: Invitation

The first of the six conversations that create an accountable and hospitable community is invitation. Invitation is the means through which hospitality is created. Invitation counters the conventional belief that change requires mandate or persuasion. Invitation honors the importance of choice and the necessary condition for accountability. We begin with the question of who we want in the room. For starters, we want people who are not used to being together. Then we include the six elements of a powerful invitation: naming the possibility about which we are convening, being clear about whom we invite, emphasizing freedom of choice in showing up, specifying what is required of each should they choose to attend, making a clear request, and making the invitation as personal as possible.

Q: Who are the others and strangers you might invite to participate in creating a community of connectedness and purpose?

Q: How might we seek and invite people into your gathering who are not used to being together?

CHAPTER 12: The Possibility, Ownership, Dissent, Commitment, and Gifts Conversations

After **the invitation**, there are five other conversations for structuring belonging: possibility, ownership, dissent, commitment, and gifts. Since all the conversations lead to each other, sequence is not that critical. The context of the gathering will often determine which questions to deal with and at what depth. It's important to understand, though, that some are more difficult than others, especially in communities where citizens are just beginning to engage with one another. They are listed here ascending order of how much trust is needed to engage them with only mild discomfort. Possibility is generally an early conversation to have and gifts typically one of the more difficult.

In the **possibility conversation**, we are using the word possibility in a unique way. Possibility is not a goal or prediction; it is the statement of a broad desirable condition that is beyond reach. It is a stance we take. It works on us and evolves from a discussion of personal crossroads. It is an act of imagination that occurs in us every time we show up. It is something we can create together, and it takes the form of a declaration, best made publicly.

The **ownership conversation** asks citizens to act as if they were partly creating what exists in the world. Confession is the religious and judicial version of ownership. The distinction is between ownership and blame. The questions for ownership are: "How valuable do you plan for this gathering to be, how have we each contributed to the current situation, and what is the story you hold about this community and your place in it?" It is important for people to see the limitation of their story, for each story has a payoff and a cost. Naming these is a precondition to creating an alternative future.

The **dissent conversation** creates an opening for commitment. The questions explicitly ask for doubts and reservations. The distinction is between dissent and complaint. When the dissent is expressed, we need to just listen. Don't solve them, defend against them, or explain anything. People's doubts, cynicism, resignation are theirs alone. Not to be taken on by us. Dissent is distinct from denial, rebellion, and resignation. The questions for dissent are about doubts, refusal, retracting commitments we no longer want to fulfill.

The **commitment conversation** is a promise with no expectation of return. Commitment is distinguished from barter. The enemy of commitment is lip service, not opposition. The commitments that count the most are ones made to peers, other citizens. Not ones made to or by leaders. Commitment is a variation of "What is the promise I am willing to make?" We have to create space for citizens to declare there is no promise they are willing to make at this time. Refusal to promise does not cost us our membership or seat at the table.





The most radical and uncomfortable conversation is the **gifts conversation**. The leadership and citizen task is to bring the gifts of those on the margin into the center. The gifts conversation is the essence of valuing diversity and inclusion. We are not defined by deficiencies or what is missing. We are defined by our gifts and what is present. This is so for individuals and communities. Belonging occurs when we tell others what gift we receive from them, especially in this moment. When this occurs, in the presence of others, community is built. Some of the questions for the gift conversation are: “What is the gift you still hold in exile, what is a gift in you that no one knows, what gratitude has gone unexpressed, and what have others in this room done that has touched you?”

Q: What is the possibility that you are a stance for?

Q: What might I be contributing to the very things that concern me?

Q: What is the No statement you might make that seems difficult to you? Does this create an opening for a commitment you each might make?

Q: How specifically would you create space in your next gathering for a discussion of what gifts have been exchanged and are brought into the world?

CHAPTER 13: Bringing Hospitality into the World

We usually associate hospitality with a culture, a social practice, a personal quality to be admired. In western culture, where individualism and security seem to be priorities, we need to be more thoughtful about how to welcome strangers into our daily way of being together.

Q: Which people in your community are rarely in your discussions? Which might be open to an invitation from your group?



CHAPTER 14: Designing Physical Space That Supports Community

Physical space is more decisive in creating community than we realize. Most meeting spaces are designed for control, presentation, and persuasion. While the room itself is not going to change, we always have a choice about how we rearrange and occupy whatever room we are handed. Community is built when we sit in circles, when there are two windows and the walls have signs of life. When every voice can be equally heard and amplified, when we all are on one level—and the chairs have wheels and swivel.

When we have an opportunity to design new space, the same communal consciousness applies. We need reception areas that tell us we are in the right place and are welcome, hallways wide enough for intimate seating and casual contact, eating spaces that refresh us and encourage relatedness, meeting rooms designed with nature, art, conviviality, and citizen-to-citizen interaction in mind. And we need large community spaces that have those qualities of great communal intimacy.

Finally, the design process itself needs to be an example of the future we are intending to create. The material and built world needs to be a reflection of the connectedness, openness, and curiosity that we wish from those that will inhabit those spaces. Authentic citizen engagement is as important as design expertise.

Q: What does the expression “Change the room, change the culture” mean for the way you and your group might gather from now on?

CHAPTER 15: The End of Unnecessary Suffering

There is a future that I know to be possible. The possibility that is working on me is the reconciliation of community. Reconciliation is for me the possibility of the end of unnecessary suffering. The core idea is that without a shift in trust, social capital, belonging, relatedness—call it what you wish—our capacity to solve problems, organize work effectively, or end the suffering around us is greatly diminished.

Q: What has shifted in you as you have participated in this book study??

Q: What more might participants who have been any part of this process do together? Which collective concerns we have about our community might we continue to come together and embrace?

IN SUMMARY

THE SOCIAL ARCHITECTURE OF BUILDING COMMUNITY



A shift in social capital occurs when we decide that having citizens, strangers up to now, sitting in circles, learning to trust each other and deciding how to make a place better, is the real transformation.

THANK YOU

To learn more about the Six Conversations that Matter® and how to use them to create a future distinct from the past, visit www.designedlearning.com.

