

Building Restorative Communities

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One simple yet powerful step you can take to strengthen your ITP community is to appreciate the gifts each member brings to the group. A single meaningful conversation focused on appreciation has the potential to transform your community and inspire a future that exceeds your greatest expectations.



I learned this and other vital principles of community at a talk presented by management consultant expert Peter Block in the fall of 2008. His talk, titled *The Structure of Belonging*, transformed me and permanently changed my leadership style.

Here are three crucial points I'd like to share from his presentation about building community:

1. Making the Shift from Problems to Possibilities

Some groups and organizations create energy, while others consume energy. What makes the difference? Gatherings that *consume* energy tend to have very different kinds of conversations than those that renew. The critical dimension of community is *what it is that we choose to discuss when we gather*.

Groups that focus on problems, oversight and ways to fix others tend to consume energy. "The story" is that the future will be better if hero leaders provide direction, and the rest of the group complies. But these communities aren't always good for the leaders or the followers. The leaders bear the burden when things do not go well. And they are given the impossible task of having all the answers. The followers, as they wait for the exalted leaders to guide them, never step up to provide the expertise with which they are gifted. Their profound gifts may forever remain in exile. There is a better way, a way to share power and expertise while still enabling healthy leadership.

Renewing or restorative community is built when conversations shift from problems and oversight to new discussions involving possibilities and shared accountability. Block shared that "the new context of community is one that emphasizes possibility, generosity and gifts, rather than defending the status quo, identifying blame and assigning fault..." These communities discuss possibilities related to a positive future and the gifts that each person brings. While unified by a common purpose, there is an embrace of dissent and a belief in individual choice and accountability. The sum of these elements is a culture of belonging and shared ownership.

2. Leadership Means Asking Powerful Questions

The most powerful skills of a leader in a restorative community are to (1) ask powerful questions, and (2) listen deeply. As Block said, "The most important thing about questions is that they create the space for an alternative future. The power is in the asking, not the answers. Questions are more powerful than answers in that they demand engagement." Here are a few examples of powerful questions to consider in building your ITP community:

- *What is the commitment that brought you into this room?*
- *What possibility has the power to transform the community and inspire you?*
- *How valuable an effort do you plan for this to be?*
- *What doubts and reservations do you have?*
- *What have others done in this room, in this gathering, that has touched you?*

3. Confronting Us With Our Gifts

Focusing on problems and deficiencies is a defense mechanism that allows us—and our communities—to stay stuck. In Block's words, "The burden of our gifts is more than we can handle. We must actually be confronted with our gifts." Conversations around gifts are central to building restorative community. Not only do they create relationship, they also invite us to "be all that we can be." We all possess incredible gifts and with those gifts also come incredible responsibility.