

A Conversation with Peter Block



Peter Block is an author, consultant and citizen of Cincinnati, Ohio. His work is about chosen accountability, and the reconciliation of community. He is the author of several best selling books. The most widely known is *Flawless Consulting: A Guide to Getting Your Expertise Used* (1st edition 1980, revised 1999). Peter is the recipient of the Organization Development Network's 2008 Lifetime Achievement Award. In 2004 he received their first place Members' Choice Award, which recognized *Flawless Consulting* as the most influential book for OD practitioners over the past 40 years.

His latest book is *Community: The Structure of Belonging* (Berrett Koehler 2008). The book explores ways to create workplaces and communities that work for all. They offer an alternative to the patriarchal beliefs that dominate our culture. His work is to bring change into the world through consent and connectedness rather than through mandate and force.

Peter is a partner in Designed Learning, a training company that offers workshops designed to build the skills outlined in his books.

By Lee Weisser, MEd, ACC, writer, editor and career coach



Hear Peter Block at the CSTD National Conference November 18, 2010 in Toronto. ***Community: The Structure of Belonging***, keynote address and concurrent session following the keynote.

Lee: We read and hear a lot of suggestions about how to improve employee engagement. You have stated that real transformation occurs only through choice and ownership. Can you elaborate?

Peter: This is the challenge—most people live in high-control patriarchal systems. The fact that there is so much talk about employee engagement means there's not actually a lot of it going on. Our culture values mandate, commitment, loyalty, getting people on board, team players, enrollment, alignment, etc. Those are the 'soft' terms for patriarchy. No matter what the culture is like, you have a choice as to how you want to 'construct the room.' I can influence how I construct the room regardless of what top management thinks or does, or regardless of how docile and civil employees are. Trainers need to ask, "Do we have faith in what we're advocating?" If we do, then do

it. Don't wait for top management to approve, because all top management wants is to be left alone and get results. And I think that's fine for top management.

Lee: So the concept of ownership comes into play in something as simple as how you construct the room?

Peter: Yes, how you construct the room is a visible way of how you want people to be.

Lee: One of the findings of CSTD's recent research project Investing in People® is that in programs striving to change workplace culture, the training of intact teams or multidisciplinary stakeholder groups is an effective strategy for building the critical mass for change. Can you give your views on why culture change must start with small groups?

Peter: Relationship and connectedness are the pre-condition for change. Every meeting, every process, every training program has to get people connected first.

Otherwise the content falls on deaf ears. So small groups are an essential building block to any future you want to create. And we know how to do that...we have questions and structures...we just have to decide that it matters.

Why would you ever line people up in rows, unless you wanted to alienate them from each other? And why would you be in a U-shaped room running a training program when everyone is blind to one-third of the room? That's not connection, that's receptivity. "I know and you don't." The antidote is small groups in circles, because there's no place to hide and everybody's voice gets heard.

Lee: You've written, "Conversations that open the door to transformation must value questions more than answers." How can trainers in organizations move from giving advice to asking powerful questions?

Peter: Anybody who asks for advice really

doesn't want an answer; they just want the thing to go away. Trainers need to decide, do they want to be powerful or popular? Popularity makes them very vulnerable; and it makes them unmemorable. This is not about being aggressive; this is about structuring the conversation. This is not about speaking truth to power or confronting top management on their hidden incongruity. The adventure is to show up and get interested, get curious, and ask people questions that hold them accountable. "What are you doing to contribute to the thing you're complaining about? What's the promise you're willing to make? I know you want promises and commitments from other people, but what about yours?" Trainers and managers need to start listening for a change, just like you do as a coach. The trainer's task is to create a foundation of trust, owning up to their vulnerabilities. Not acting confident, not saying "Hey, I've done this a million times before." That alienates people. The powerful question really is a matter of courage on the part of the trainer, not skill. Sometimes not knowing is the best way to build trust. Don't get seduced by people's dependency on you as an expert. The reason trainers aren't more powerful is they're so seducible. People say, "Why don't you run a training program for this?", and we don't spend enough time figuring out what's really going on. We're just looking for customers to fill the seats.

Lee: How do we help people who are charged with training to develop that kind of courage?

Peter: They need to be connected to each other. Courage comes out of relationship; it doesn't come out of willpower. People need to feel connected to others within their own department, and they need to find clients that they can relate to. They need to ask themselves: what's the difference I want to make here? Line managers will help you figure it out if you ask them. People in the training function have internalized other people's low esteem. Somehow we have to decide we're here to build the culture, we're here to help create a culture of engagement. That requires us to show up as an equal. You have a right to want something from your clients and to name it. As soon as you start naming what you want from your line managers, they get interested. They find it useful. They begin to say, wow, this is a partnership, instead of thinking of you like you're a vendor.

So the job of learning professionals in the future is to show up as a partner. Stop treating line managers as customers; stop working alone. There are a lot of ways to engage the line organization in the planning of what's going on. There's lots of ways to work.

Lee: Can you give an example?

Peter: Ken Murphy used to run HR for Phillip Morris. He decided to hold six two-day meetings with his staff. He told them, "Come to the meetings or not, it's up to you. Our job is to re-imagine the future for HR, different from what we're doing now.

"We need to tell people not to be helpful. Trying to be helpful and giving advice are really ways to control others. ... Advice, recommendations, and obvious actions are exactly what increase the likelihood that tomorrow will be just like yesterday."

Community: The Structure of Belonging, p. 109.

And he said, in these six sessions we're going to explore things from the point of view of: a philosopher, an actor, a city manager, etc. Your job is to make sense of this. We're not going to make sense of it for you." It was very powerful, very different. They weren't used to that. HR is used to jumping right to solutions: what are we going to do next? Everything's done in a hurry.

Lee: I hear training folks say, "Line managers don't want to take this kind of responsibility, and anyway, they won't listen to us because they don't report to us."

Peter: That's whining. That's the narrative that the training function holds. It's just not so. Let's talk instead about the possibilities of training instead of the

pathetic nature of the function. Why doesn't training create a narrative that says we're here to create an alternative future? We're here to build strong connections with line managers. We will be powerful when we learn how to name what we want, instead of showing up as a servant, and then complaining after dinner.

That's what your coaching is about, isn't it? Helping people take responsibility? You don't feel like a pawn in the hand of your client...and you don't have any control over them.

Lee: No. But I also don't have an agenda because I'm not connected to their situation.

Peter: Then tell the training department to get rid of its agenda. Stop doing the programs, or do them in a way that puts choice on the table. Maybe the choice is how we go from this line of thought to that line of thought. Employees will look at any area where they don't have control and whine about it. I don't buy it. There's always choice in every situation.

The task of training is to discover where choice resides at different levels of the organization. And sign people up to take a stand for choice. That's the work, that's what most coaching, therapy, intervention does.

And, in addition, look at what's working... where are the people in the organization who are doing things right? Let's find the most engaged people and find out what they're doing. Make them visible, celebrate them, rather than looking for needs and deficiencies.

There are so many ways into this, once you decide what matters.

Lee: Can you give another example?

Peter: The best examples come from outside the training function. There's a group called the Positive Deviance Initiative (www.postivedeviance.org). They work with communities, teams, hospitals, and they just show up curious. They ask, "Okay, what's going on here?" And they hear about problems. Then they ask, "Is there any place somebody is not having this problem?" And they're interested in that but they don't do anything with it. They believe that the wisdom resides in the community. Then they ask, "What is that group doing?"

If trainers just got curious about what people in the room knew was working, and why, they would have a greater impact than coming in with specific objectives and

what they want people to leave with. I think that kind of work is on the rise in the world. It's a gift-based, asset-based wisdom in the room, a way of transformation, rather than, "I know and you don't", which is an obstacle to training. Another thing: benchmarking is inspiring but it's not useful. The training function has to shift its philosophy to: we're going after places that work; we're creating a different story for our function; we're showing up as partners regardless of the evidence to the contrary...and the actions will come out of a shift in their thinking. They need to realize that their doubt about their role is a huge obstacle in making a difference. The existing narrative is a form of complaint. How about, instead, training people talk about the possibilities for themselves and the possibility for the culture?

Lee: What do CEOs and CFOs say to that?

Peter: They love it! They've been waiting for it! Every time I give a talk, people ask me, "What do you say to CEOs and CFOs?" I say, I say the same thing. I just have to say it more often because they're slow learners! At the end of the day, they're just looking for people they can count on.

But we have a huge task to take on, because most CEOs and CFOs these days don't care about their own people, let alone us. Compared to 10 years ago, people are valued less and less and less. That's sobering.

Lee: The short term thinking seems to be increasing in inverse proportion to the fact that we understand our impact on the world for the long term.

Peter: Yes, so much for reason and logic.

Our culture calls out the short term thinking and abandons the future. But inside every client, the future resides.

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

Community: The Structure of Belonging, p. 138.

What do we want to speak into? Half the people in the company we work for are truly not interested in what we're about. And that's a conversation with God. Why did I choose a profession that people are so uninterested in?

Lee: That's where I come in. I'm a career coach. I help them find something they're passionate about.

Peter: That's right, if you're passionate, you don't care about the world's response.

Lee: What do you see as the role of workplace learning professionals in the future? What can they contribute to building a sense of community in their organizations?

Peter: In some way you're always choosing between safety and adventure, safety and contribution. You can't be safe and contribute something worthwhile...they won't know you were there. The reason trainers aren't invited to the table is because the food they have isn't very appealing. "What have you got to offer? I don't like that; we've been eating that for years." Where does surprise come into the role description? When do trainers stop begging and acting as if they have a right to be powerful? To be powerful is to be related to the culture, but not to treat the culture's expectations as sacred. I don't like the customer model: the customer is not always right. We're not selling shoes; we're selling a future. And most people's version of the future is too small. ■

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MESSAGE DE LA PRÉSIDENT DU CONSEIL

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un guide de perfectionnement professionnel destiné aux praticiens de la formation et du perfectionnement et un cadre à utiliser pour la conception et la mise au point de programmes de formation et de cours. Compétencies for Training and Development Professionals sert aussi de fondement aux deux programmes d'accréditation de la CSTD. Il sera possible d'acheter en septembre prochain cet ouvrage, qui a été officiellement lancé à Calgary, lors du Symposium national de 2010.

Je vous donnerai plus tard d'autres nouvelles sur cette initiative stimulante. ■



M. Rob Pearson, CTD, est président du conseil d'administration de la CSTD. Il est vice-président, Apprentissage, auprès de Maritz Canada Inc. et il est possible de le joindre à l'adresse rob.pearson@maritz.com.

MESSAGE DE LA PRÉSIDENTE

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aussi d'autres chefs de file de l'industrie et experts du domaine, dont Jim Kirkpatrick, David Weiss, Bob Mosher, Diane Gayeski, Lance Secretan ainsi que de nombreux autres. Ces personnes vous feront part de leurs idées, de leur savoir et de leur vécu, et vous donneront la possibilité d'en faire autant. ■



Lynn Johnston, CAE
President