

Leading the Way

If you think leadership is about being a boss and getting people on the same page, you've got it all wrong. It's about being a colleague and getting people to talk to each other. Get ready for Leadership 2.0.

By Pat Matson Knapp

Volumes have been written about leadership in the workplace. Peter Block, organizational-development consultant and author of three best-selling books on the subject, has a different take: Stop being a parent and start having conversations that matter.

Block has thrown out the leader-as-boss model in several of his books, including "Stewardship: Choosing Service Over Self-Interest" and "The Empowered Manager: Positive Political Skills at Work." His latest, "The Answer to How is Yes: Acting on What Matters," won the 2002 Independent Book Publisher Book Award for Business Breakthrough Book of the Year. He's a partner in Designed Learning, a training and consulting organization that offers workshops based on his books and other writings.

Block recently took a rare break from a busy speaking schedule and sat down in his Cincinnati office with HOW's Business columnist Pat Matson Knapp. The two discussed Block's ideas about what it takes to be a leader in a creative workplace.

HOW: The HOW audience may not be familiar with you and your work. Tell us about what you do and how it relates to leadership in business organizations.

Block: The work is how to create institutions that are both productive and habitable. Most institutions err in either one direction or the other. They become exclusively relationship/morale/satisfaction-focused and suffer in terms of performance, or are run at the will and leisure and pleasure of the owner and aren't great places to be. So the goal is to bring both of those aspects together.

The field is called organizational development. It's been around for 35 or 40 years. I was involved in its early days, so I've been associated with that way of thinking. It has certain biases. It says that people matter; they're not just a means to an end. It says that relationships are the foundation for accomplishment. That being right doesn't get you very far. That being smart is usually used as an excuse for some kind of limitation. It says that none of us are very good at knowing how to work together because of how we were taught. In school, cooperation was called cheating.

What are the traditional leadership models that businesses have embraced?

"Leadership" is a well-developed misconception. The dominant belief is that the task of leadership is to set a vision, enroll others in it and hold people accountable through measurements and rewards. It's a patriarchal system used to create high performance through centralization of power. Most leadership training focuses on how to be a good parent. We teach how to "develop" people, as if they were ours to develop. We do a lot

to create the notion that bosses are responsible for their people.

All that parenting has the unintended side effect of creating deep entitlement and having employees stay frozen in their own development. Most management techniques are ways of controlling people so they feel good about being controlled.

When we asked design-firm principals about their greatest leadership challenges, they almost unanimously named the problem of how to "get people to buy into my vision" or "get people motivated." What's your take on these questions?

These are the most common questions I get from my clients. “How do I get people to ...” and you can fill in the blank after that. My favorite is, “How do I get people on board with my ideas/visions/whatever.” My response is, “How do you know you’re in the boat?”

These are the wrong questions. They’re the questions of a parent about recalcitrant children. As soon as you start the sentence, you’re acting as a sovereign. All of these are components of the patriarchal way of thinking that dominates our culture. Put this in boldface: They are not your children. Once you realize that, real engagement is possible.

In “Stewardship: Choosing Service Over Self-Interest,” you advocate for stewardship. What is stewardship, and how is it different from leadership?

Leadership is about creating a place for accountability by centralizing power. The leader creates the vision, decides how the organization will operate and basically tries to get people to support that end. Leadership can be compassionate, but it still has control in mind.

So the challenge is how to create a new framework for thinking about leadership and management that doesn’t have the side effect of entitlement, with its visible symptoms of whining and complaining. The challenge for leaders is creating a culture of accountability, where each of their people—from design to administrative to support—feels responsible for the well-being of the whole institution and not just worried about their own careers or the acceptance of their design insight.

Stewardship tries to create accountability by diffusing the power. The word really means caring for the well-being of the next generation. In business, it’s also about engaging people in a way that produces accountability. Stewardship acknowledges the fact that we’re all in this together.

What does stewardship ask of the organization/employer? What does it ask of the employee?

It asks the same from both: a deep willingness to be authentic with each other. In less vague terms, it asks them both to grow up. Growing up means we are willing to engage each other as equals and partners and have honest conversations. It means stop whining and complaining, and confront your own choices and responsibilities.

Tell us more about the leader’s role in an organization that embraces stewardship.

The leader’s job is to speak for the well-being of the institution all the time and engage in authentic contracts with people about what we’re here for, which is to build a great institution.

Leaders create the conditions that foster accountability and commitment, through their power to focus attention and to define the conversations for people when they gather. Leadership of a design firm is deciding, “What are the conversations we need to have that serve the interest of the business and also make it a place where people care and are treated well?”

In traditional leadership, the focus is on the boss/subordinate relationship. Stewardship is peer-to-peer. After all, the work gets done peer-to-peer, not boss-to-subordinate. So the leader has to be smart about how to engage peers with each other. When do peers engage with each other? The most public way is through meetings.

So the leader’s job is to design gatherings and conversations that get peers engaged with each other—with the leader as a powerful member instead of a parent. That’s redesigning the social space in which people gather. Just as design is about visual space, leadership is about social space.

The most powerful tools for a leader are what I call “conversations that matter.” There are certain conversations that have transformative power.

Like what?

If you want to create an alternative future, you have to change the way people speak and listen to each other. You can't legislate consent or demand accountability. It doesn't work. So you have to engage people in ways that encourage them to choose accountability.

There are certain conversations you want to eliminate—whining, complaining, blaming, over-analyzing, discussing weaknesses. Other conversations—such as telling the history of how we got here and giving explanations and opinions—are satisfying and true but have no power.

The real skill for the leader—the practical application that gets right down to the next meeting with your staff and how to help them contract more powerfully with each other—is to create a conversation about what we want from each other. We do this by asking powerful questions that confront people with their freedom and their responsibilities, such as:

- What do we want to create together?
- What's our contribution to the thing we complain most about?
- What do we say yes to that we really don't mean?
- What do we want to say no to that we don't have the courage to?
- What's the promise we're willing to make with no expectation of return?
- What are the gifts we hold that we neither fully acknowledge nor have fully brought into the world?

You could say these are questions of possibility, ownership, dissent, commitment and gifts. You can go a long way with these questions.

How can companies start on the path to stewardship and build it into the way they work?

First, decide what transformation you want to experience for yourself, because all change comes from the inside out. Begin by having these conversations with yourself:

- What do I want to create? (Sometimes it's hard to remember, after years of running a business, what you had in mind when you started.)
- What am I saying yes to that I don't mean?
- What's the promise I'm willing to make without expectation of return?
- What are the gifts I'm setting aside?

Then, make a decision to be more honest with the people around you. Being honest is not the same thing as emoting or expressing feelings or "getting it out." Being honest is being clear about what your requests are of other people, being clear about yes and no, being clear about disappointments with them as soon as they occur and being verbal about what's working in the business and in the people who work for you.

Like other busy professionals, design leaders are challenged by balancing day-to-day decisions with vision and "the big picture." What does your definition of leadership have to say about that?

Most people who run small firms are leading very stressful lives. I think it's the way they think about running their businesses that causes the stress; it's not inherent in the job. I think because they've taken on the burden of being a parent, it drives them crazy. They make themselves too central to the universe.

Vision matters. You can't balance, so quit trying. The job is to hold a vision and bring it into every room you enter. In that same room, there are a set of limitations that have to be honored. The scope or vision of the client is a limitation, cost is a limitation, time is a limitation. So what?

There's a spiritual element to your work, isn't there?

Leadership is a spiritual journey. It's a matter of the human heart and spirit. As soon as you say that, you move into a different domain of questions, which are questions of purpose. What is your purpose in life?

The spiritual dimension brings up questions of courage and caution, forgiveness and gratitude, and confronts people with the fact that time is passing them by. It makes us ask, "What meaning am I creating in my life at this point?"

Leadership at its best is the use of power to support the human spirit. It's the capacity to initiate something in the world. Leadership is not just a job title; it's a way of being in the world.

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