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## THOUGHT LEADERS

# Influential Strategist: Peter Block

By Steven Steckler

**P**eter Block has consulted to many of the world's largest and most complex corporations, government agencies and public service institutions for more than 35 years. He has been one of the most influential and effective strategists and practitioners in the field of organization change. Block is the author of a number of best-selling books. His most widely known book: *Flawless Consulting: A Guide to Getting Your Expertise Used*, now in its third edition, has been and still is a primer for effective consulting relationships. The book received the first place 2004 Members' Choice Award by the Organization Development Network and was recognized as the most influential book for OD practitioners over the past 40 years. Block's latest book, co-authored with John McKnight and published in 2010, is titled, *The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods* and followed Block's book, *Community: The Structure of Belonging*. He also wrote *The Answer to How Is Yes: Acting on What Matters* (Berrett-Koehler, 2002) that won the 2002 Independent Book Publisher Book Award for Business Breakthrough Book of the Year. He has received various national awards for outstanding contributions in training and development.

**To start, can you assess the actual impact that HR has had over the last 30 years. What is your honest assessment of the actual impact that we have had as a group of internal practitioners, consultants, academics and authors on both individual employees, their lives at work, how they are managed and on organizations?**

First, I believe we have brought the vocabulary of team building and the importance of relationships into the forefront. I can remember in the 1960s when I first began, the idea of team building, the idea that relationships matter, that high performing teams were radical ideas. This resulted in a significant shift and people started to accept the fact that business results and overall performance are affected by human factors. I think that was the important shift in thinking that was introduced by HR. However, now institutions think people are perceived as less important than they have ever been during my career. Companies value their people less. Not in terms of their humanness, but in terms of what the business really needs to succeed. I just think that there has been a huge shift toward automating and outsourcing that has had an enormous impact. As soon as a company is willing to outsource, that company is saying that loyalty, commitment, company knowledge, company history and tradition has no value to us anymore.

**What specifically have you learned from successes and disappointments?**

I think that people are more afraid now about losing their jobs and feel more vulnerable than employees have ever felt based on what I have seen. It is not caused by the recent recession. It is

beyond the recession. Regarding the humanness of our institutions, this is where I don't see much progress. I am not blaming HR. People are afraid of their bosses, and they are isolated in their work. We went through a period in the '80s that I think was different. In early 1983 and 1984 with the recession then and the competition with Japan, I think companies for about 10 years decided that employees were their future. You saw enormous growth in employee involvement. The quality improvement movement was very humanistic in its tone. Most of that has disappeared.

**Should HR re-engage this discussion about performance and loyalty and a meaningful employee value proposition. Or is it too late?**

As far as companies, I think that the big question for companies is one of *purpose*. Once you say that our purpose is for stockholders or our number one purpose is for shareholder return, then, the conversation about human resources is a secondary one. I have one client, finally, where I am in a conversation of what is the purpose of a business. And I find that thrilling. It is with M&M Mars, and I have worked with them for six years. They are privately held. They say that freedom, mutuality of interest and engagement are their core principles. And now because their founders are aging, they are asking, "So how do we sustain the fact that this business has never been run for the money even though it is making several billion dollars a year in profits?" They are saying, "Well maybe what made us great was the deep belief that everything we do was out of a mutuality of interest and if we do not consider the interests of those around us, we don't have a future." I find that a positive sign post.

**Do you think that we have a role in framing that purpose and introducing that conversation? Could that be a role for HR?**

I would love it. I would love HR to join forces with corporate communications and the corporate social responsibility conversation. If we don't get off this notion that absentee shareholders are our primary customers and our primary interests, institutions will lose their license to operate.

**For years, HR has tried to establish its credibility by talking about shareholders, the bottom line and Wall Street. Is that the wrong way?**

It's not powerful. As soon as we decide that we should sound like management, they don't need us any longer. Why would you go up to somebody whose whole being is one of pragmatism, consistency, control and predictability and say, "Can I help you become more consistent, more in control and more predictable." That is not a unique offering. I think companies need some people who have a lot of focus and energy and care for sustaining the humanity of the system. The great question of purpose, of meaning and contribution, people still have that. And I think that HR has something to offer in that.

**So we should at least be thinking about purpose. The HR field doesn't seem to raise that discussion to the level of prominence that it should be at.**

Exactly, that is the point. HR has a role to play in the discussion of purpose. We have "human" in our name. We should take that seriously. We have to provide an alternative voice to the one that argues for control and consistency. Our function is to stand for the restoration of humanity in the systems world. Also to take a stance for local control, local culture. I hear from clients, "We operate in 54 countries and how do we take our values and spread them across those 54 countries; how do we bring to these cultures what has made us great in the United States?" The question

should be, “What do we have to learn from the local units and local cultures in which we operate?” We should ask, “What have they figured out that we don’t understand?”

**What are the key challenges in front of us now as a profession and what should we be doing about them?**

I think the broader we become in our perspective, the more powerful we become. I would say that the task of human resources is to look for those ways to help people restore their own humanity.

**What are you personally/professionally working on now that is important to you; what is providing meaning to your work?**

I am on a pilgrimage to discover how people in a wide variety of disciplines are dealing with the same core questions that I have always had. My project is to explore more dimensions of the restoration of humanity efforts. I am super interested in rethinking the economics of abundance. I am talking to economists now. I am very interested in art. I was just part of a two-day discussion with 15 people about how do we make art, music, theatre, drawing, poetry central to the process of transformation. My focus is also on neighborhoods and their capacity to raise a child, provide a job and care for the vulnerable. All this means working to change the narrative of who we are, to write a new narrative for our institutions and communities. The narrative that we have now is one of deficiencies, that we are a problem, that what we have is not enough. That what we need is more programs, leadership and money. This current narrative is the problem. All transformation is about the story that we tell. And so my work for the last six years in Cincinnati has been to try to shift the narrative of who we are as a community toward one of that what we have is enough, here are our gifts, here is our capacities, rather than the current dominant narrative that is we are a problem to be solved.

**So yet another transformation? The most important one, perhaps?**

Who is to say? Just because I am interested, does not mean it is important. The narrative work, though, is promising. You ask, “What’s the role of HR?” The role is to change the narrative within our institutions and communities. To move us to an alternative narrative that has us living in a place that is one of possibility, and relatedness, and of appreciating our gifts. To back away from the problem narrative that we have been living. I would love to see HR do that. I would show up for that conversation.