

COMMUNITY: The Structure of Belonging

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The following ideas are more about our thinking than our practice. Kurt Lewin said years ago that there is nothing as practical as a good theory. Miles Horton has written on his building that action is the basis for all theory, and without action, theory has no value. As Niels Bohr said, "The opposite of a great truth is another great truth."

Note: All the ideas that follow are subject to change without notification. See website for details. The ideas expressed here do not necessarily reflect the views of top management.

Community

- What we normally call problems (low performance, high costs, poor morale, unsafe streets, poor healthcare) are really symptoms of the breakdown of community.
- Performance in any domain rides on the restoration of community.
- Community, often confused with culture, is most often treated as an afterthought, left for specialists to worry about.
- Creating community requires the courage to acknowledge that we need each other. It is also a choice for restoration over retribution. Connectedness over fear. Local knowledge over expertise.
- “Trust is the loom through which threads of community are woven.” John McKnight
- “Hospitality is the sign of a confident community.” John McKnight
- The measure of community is the capacity to allow silence, take time, and greet surprise with enthusiasm.

- It is about creating a new context. The new context emerges from each member declaring and living into a possibility.



Leadership

- Leadership is the capacity to initiate a future distinct from the past. It is a capacity given at birth, only waiting to be claimed.
- The core task of leadership is to build community. Our traditional strategies for dealing with problems of performance, quality, cost, employee satisfaction, health, safety are strong on individualism and weak on community.
- The work is to overcome the culture of isolation, fear, and waiting for the leaders to get their act together. Their act is as together as it is going to be.

- The leadership we have been pursuing has lost its utility. Focusing on personality, characteristics, vision, and a special relationship with followers has no power, only attraction.
- Leadership with power depends on listening, convening, invitation, and the triumph of questions over answers. It is the act of supporting others to find their voice, name their world, and in that accountability is created.
- This leadership also chooses relationship over technology, gifts over deficiencies, and possibility over problem solving. Leadership is about being host, not hero.
- Leaders need to learn and become sophisticated in the methodology of convening. This methodology is too important to be left to trained specialists.



Transformation

- Transformation is a shift in the nature of things. It promises a culture of chosen accountability, authentic commitment, stronger social fabric — all elements of a strong community.

- Successful efforts to change the world or your neighborhood have begun small, been under funded, and took time. Scale, funding, and speed have a great beginning but little staying power.

- Thus transformation begins with a shift in thinking.

- Transformation is the inversion of where cause resides. It is in contrast to conventional wisdom. We try on for their usefulness the ideas that:
 - Employees create bosses
 - Listening creates speaking
 - Problem solving exists to build relationships
 - The present is dictated by the future, not the past
 - Students create teachers
 - Citizens create leaders

- Communal transformation is about leadership that is independent of style, role modeling, and holding people accountable.

- The dominant belief is that laser-like goals, better controls, clearer consequences, more inspirational leadership, and better systems will make a difference. They won't. They are the problem, not the solution. These strategies are incapable of transformation; they just make things a little better.

- Engagement is more critical than sponsorship. Relationships are the ends, not the means.
- All transformation is linguistic. We have to change the public conversation to achieve communal transformation. Our private conversation, no matter how powerful or crucial, does not shift the communal possibility.
- Communal transformation occurs in public, in assembly, in meetings, when we are reminded we are part of something larger.
- Small groups are the unit of transformation, questions are the means, and invitation is the strategy.
- Transformation occurs when the axis of accountability shifts. It occurs the moment we seek the right question. In the pursuit of the question, I become an activist citizen and an owner of the future. In seeking the right answer, I become a consumer and the effect of the actions of others.

Conversation

- The future occurs by both creating a sense of belonging and bringing a cross section of the community into a new conversation. If we maintain the old conversations about making the world predictable, measurable, individual-focused, and leader-driven, nothing will change.
- We change the culture by changing the nature of the conversation. This is more than improving the conversation or becoming more skilled at dialogue. It is about choosing conversations that have the power to create a new future.
- This occurs when we shift the conversation from problem solving to possibility, deficiencies and needs to gifts, lip service to dissent, blame to ownership, and barter to commitment.
- We shift the nature of the conversation by shifting the questions we ask, and become obsessive about the structure of the room and how people are grouped within it.
- When the conversations of possibility, gifts, dissent, ownership, and commitment become collective, the community becomes competent.



Gatherings

- How we gather is what makes the difference. The task is to minimize PowerPoint and maximize experience. No small task in a world of speed, efficiency, and fast food. This is a shift in the ecology of gathering as the way to sustain healthy culture, high performance, and a carbon free way of being together.
- The space within which we meet is more powerful than we have yet imagined. In seating people, the circle trumps the rectangle, the classroom and for sure the auditorium as the geometry of choice. Auditoriums should be restricted to artist performance. Period.
- The purpose of the design of each gathering is to create the social space where a proliferation of gifts is possible.



Accountability

- All intentions for an alternative future pivot on the choice to be accountable. The first step in accountability is to understand

how profoundly we have internalized the conventional belief that accountability can be purchased, enforced, and held.

- If we insist on holding people accountable, friendship and love are the only two options available.
- We think accountability is all about clarity and consequences, when it is all about relatedness. Relatedness is the condition under which accountability can occur.
- “This *world* to which each person relates is not a static and closed order, a *given* reality which we must accept and to which we must adjust; rather, it is a problem to be worked on and solved. It is the material used by us to create history, a task that we perform as we overcome that which is dehumanizing at any particular time and place and dare to create the qualitatively new.” Paolo Freire

Learning

- We are in the business of learning, not teaching or training. All learning and change require a community to sustain it. Learning is a social phenomenon first and content/clarity second.
- “The core purpose of education is to help people discover what is possible. It is to support those whose voice is not heard.” Miles Horton
- “Our goal is to give people access to information and knowledge usually held exclusively by the ruling and dominant class.” Miles Horton
- Expertise is most often used to control people. Expertise is useful only after people have done all they can do on their own. In this sense, the classroom becomes an affirming and organizing vehicle.
- Advice is unfriendly to learning, especially when it is sought. Most of the time when people seek advice, they just want to be heard.

- Advice at best stops the conversation, definitely inhibits learning, and at worst claims dominance.
- “Stimulating reflection rather than prescription gives people the power to name the world. Prescription is the key element between oppressed and oppressor. The act of naming their own present and future is the right of every person.” Paolo Freire



The Public Conversation

- The future begins in our community when we become a possibility.
- When we blur the distinction between possibility and probability, we live into the past. We make a casserole out of life. A possibility is improbable, by definition.
- The current public conversation, either in civic space or organizational space, is about problems, fear, and lip service.

- “Our public conversation is mediated by politicians who have mastered ‘sound bites’ sculpted from polling data, by ‘pundits’ whose credibility increases with the frequency of exposure despite being consistently wrong, and ‘experts’ whose authority depends not on reason, evidence or logic but on ideology and affiliation. The public, J.R. Priestly observed, ‘has been transformed into a vast crowd, a permanent audience, waiting to be amused.’” Bill Moyers
- “Jesus would not be crucified today. The prophets would not be stoned. Socrates would not drink the hemlock. They would instead be banned from the Sunday talk shows and op-ed pages by the sentries of establishment thinking who guard against dissent with the one weapon of mass destruction most cleverly designed to obliterate democracy—the rubber stamp.”
Bill Moyers
- The public conversation that produces an alternative future is held in small groups among citizens, leaders invited, and focused on their possibility, gifts, ownership, and commitments.

Footnote

“I began a journal at birth. Day 2: Still tired from the move.”

Stephen Wright