# Civic Engagement and the Restoration of Community

*Changing the Nature of the Conversation*

Civic Engagement Series

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Name

# Civic Engagement and the Restoration of Community

*Changing the Nature of the Conversation*

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# Overview

This booklet is a set of ideas and tools designed to restore and reconcile our community by shifting the nature of the public conversation. The public conversation is those conversations that are not held in private. It is the one we hold when we gather in meetings and in large events, and the one that occurs in the media. *Our intention is to create the possibility of an alternative future by creating a public conversation based on communal accountability and commitment*. This is the essence of what restores community. Restoration and its new possibility is what can make a difference in those places where history and the past seem overridingly restraining.

**Accountability**

The dominant existing public conversation is retributive, not restorative. It is void of accountability and soft on commitment. In this way it drives us apart, it does not bring us together. The existing conversation is about entitlement, not accountability. *To be accountable, among other things, means you act as an owner and part creator of whatever it is that you wish to improve*. In the absence of this, you are in the position of effect, not cause; a powerless stance.

**Commitment**

*To be committed means you are willing to make a promise with no expectation of return*; a promise void of barter and not conditional on another s action. In the absence of this, you are constantly in the position of reacting to the choices of others. The cost of constantly reacting is increased cynicism.

# What Constitutes Action

Civic engagement as used here is about a shift in the language and conversation we use to make our community better. We treat civic engagement as something more than voting, volunteering, and supporting events designed to bring people together. While civic engagement is about action, it is not about community action and community development as we normally think of it.

The conventional view of community action and development addresses what we usually call problems; areas such as public safety, jobs and local economy, affordable housing, universal health care, education. In the context of civic engagement, these are really symptoms. The deeper cause is in the un-reconciled and fragmented nature of our community. This fragmentation creates a context for solving the symptoms that only sustains them. Otherwise why have we been working on these symptoms for so long, and so hard, and even with so many successful programs, seen too little fundamental change?

*The real intent of civic engagement is to shift the context within which traditional problem solving, investment, and social and community action takes place*. It is aimed at the restoration of the experience and vitality of community. It is this shift in context, expressed through a shift in language, that creates the condition where traditional forms of action can make a difference.

# Change the Conversation: Change the Question

These ideas are designed around the power of language. How we speak and listen to each other is the medium through which a more positive future is created or denied.

A shift in the conversation is created by being strategic about the way we convene and the questions we address. In other words, how we create and engage in the public debate. It is the shift in public conversation that, in our terms, constitutes transforming action.

All of us want action and to create a future we believe in. The premise discussed here is that questions and the speaking they evoke constitute powerful action. This means that the nature of the questions we ask either keep the existing system in place or bring an alternative future into the room. Many of the traditional questions we ask have little power to create an alternative future. These are the set of questions that the world is constantly asking. They are important questions, but we have to be careful how we respond. For some of the questions are, in the asking, the very obstacle to what has given rise to the question in the first place.

For example, all of us ask, or are asked:

> How do we hold those people accountable?
>
> How do we get people to show up and be committed?
>
> How do we get others to be more responsible?
>
> How do we get people on-board and to do the right thing?
>
> How do we get others to buy-in to our vision?
>
> How do we get those people to change?
>
> How much will it cost and where do we get the money?
>
> How do we negotiate for something better?
>
> What new policy or legislation will move our interests forward?
>
> Where is it working? Who has solved this elsewhere and how do we import that knowledge?

If we answer these questions in the form in which they are asked, we are supporting the dominant belief that an alternative future can be negotiated, mandated, and controlled into existence. They call us to try harder at what we have been doing. They urge us to raise standards, measure more closely, and return to basics, purportedly to create accountability, but in reality to maintain dominance. The questions imply that the one asking knows and others are a problem to be solved.

Questions that are designed to change other people are patriarchal and subtly colonial, and this sense, always the wrong questions. Wrong, not because they don t matter or are based on ill intent, but wrong because they have no power to make a difference in the world. They are questions that are the cause of the very thing we are trying to shift: the fragmented and retributive nature of our communities.

# The Offer

Our offer is to provide the means to shift the language of the civic debate away from the default conversation of answers which builds resistance, and move it into questions that build commitment and accountability. Questions that have the power to make a difference are ones that engage people, especially opponents, with each other, confront them with their freedom, and invite them to co-create a future possibility.

Each of us cares about initiating a place where accountability and commitment is ingrained into the culture. We offer a way of thinking and the tools to achieve this. *Our offer is to provide the means or architecture for gathering people in a way that will build communities in which citizens will choose accountability and commitment.* This is what overcomes our fragmentation and the tendency to demand change from people who are essentially strangers to us.

To achieve this, we need to shift our thinking about leadership.

The dominant belief system is that the task of leadership is to set a vision, enroll others in it, and hold people accountable through measurements and reward. *The shift is to believe that the task of leadership is to produce engagement.* To engage groups of people in a way that creates accountability, which is to care for the well being of the whole, and commitment, which is to make and fulfill a promise without expectation of return.

What this requires is a change in thinking. We invite you into a conversation that creates the possibility of both a change in thinking and the tools to bring this to others. This experience in itself is an example of its theory, and so the tools of building accountability and commitment are every moment available.

# What We Mean By Leadership

Leaders create the conditions for civic engagement. They do this through the power they have to focus attention and define the conversations for people when they gather. We might say that leadership is the capacity to name the debate and design gatherings.

We use the term  gathering,  because the word has more significance than what we think of as just a  meeting.  The fact is that most people do not even like meetings and for good reason. They are mostly designed to produce just talk. They either review the past or embody the belief that better planning, better managing or more measurement and prediction can create an alternative future.

Every gathering or meeting is an opportunity to deepen accountability and commitment through engagement. It doesn t matter what the stated purpose of the gathering is.

Each gathering serves two functions: to address its stated purpose, its business issues, and to be an occasion for each person to decide to become engaged as an owner. The leader s task is to design the place and experience of these occasions to move the culture toward shared ownership.

This is in contrast to the conventional ideology of the default culture about leadership:

Leader and top are essential

The future destination can be blueprinted

The work is to bring others on board

More measurement produces better results

People need more training

Rewards are related to outcomes

What worked elsewhere can work here

The future is a problem to be solved

The conventional thinking holds the leader responsible for assuring that these beliefs are planned and implemented.

All of these have face validity, but they have unintended consequences. They are the beliefs that support patriarchy and the dominion of a benevolent monarch. This creates a level of isolation, entitlement, and passivity that our communities cannot afford to carry. The alternative is to move towards partnership and away from

parenting. To care more about the experience of citizens than the direction or behavior of leaders.

The civic engagement we are talking about here holds leadership to two tasks:

- To create a context which nurtures an alternative future, one based on inclusiveness and hospitality.

- To initiate conversations that shift our experience, which occurs through the way we bring people together and the nature of the questions we use to engage them**.**

In this way of thinking, leaders manage the space between the definition of an issue and its impact. The world does not need a better definition of issues, or better planning or project management. It needs the issues and the plans to have more of an impact, which is the promise of engagement. Engagement is the means through which there can be a shift in caring for the well being of the whole, which is how we are defining accountability.

Each aspect of engagement is designed to evoke a chosen accountability. It does this by asking people to be in charge of their own experience and acting on the well being of the whole. Engagement triggers the choice to be accountable for those things over which we can have power, even though we may have no control.

Engagement occurs through a shift in *ownership* of this place, even though another is in charge. It is *commitment* without barter. It is acknowledging the primacy of *relatedness.* It always entails a larger communal *possibility*. It values diversity of thinking and *dissent,* and changes the world through *invitation* rather than mandate.

These are the specific elements of civic engagement. They are linguistic shifts that change the context through which community can be restored and traditional problem solving and development can make the difference.

This kind of leadership is restorative and produces energy rather than consumes it. It is leadership that creates accountability as it confronts people with their freedom. In this way engagement centered leaders bring kitchen table and street corner democracy into being.

# Change Your Thinking: Change Your Life

Accountability-based civic engagement is created through a shift in three conditions:

Our thinking,
The lens through which we formulate strategy,
The keys or tools we apply to specific events.

The shift in the world begins with a shift in our thinking. Shifting our thinking does not change the world, but it creates a condition where the shift in the world becomes possible.

The shift is actually an inversion in our thinking. *The step from thinking of ourselves as effect to thinking of ourselves as cause is the primary act of inversion*. This is the point upon which accountability revolves.

It is to reverse what we thought to be true. The cause and effect, mechanical thinking of the world, not only overstated the mechanical nature of the world, but put the cause in the wrong direction.

This inversion is based on the thought that for every great idea, the opposite idea is also true. This requires us to invert the conventional, or default culture ideology. Inversion is 180 degrees, not 179 degrees. This shift in thinking precedes a shift in behavior and outcomes.

An alternative future arises from the choice to invert what we believe to be the case. This is done not to claim accuracy, but to give power to our way of being in community. The question is if you believed this to be true, in what ways would that make a difference, or change your actions?

The heart of the matter is the question of cause. Have we chosen the present or has it been handed to us? The possibility of an alternative future rotates on this question. The primary inversion is our thinking about what is cause and what is effect. The default culture would have us believe that the past creates the future, that a change in individuals causes a change in organizations and community. That we are determined by everything aside from free will. That culture, organizations, and society drive our actions and our way of being. This is true, but the opposite is also true.

*The shift in thinking is to take the stance that we are the creator of our world as well as the product of it.* Free will trumps genetics, culture, and parental upbringing.

Some examples of the inversion of thinking:

The audience creates the performance

The subordinate creates the boss

The child creates the parent

The citizen creates its leadership

Problem solving occurs to build relatedness

A room and a building are created by how it is occupied

The student creates the teacher

The future creates the present

The listening creates the speaker

The openness to learn creates the teaching

*In each case, choice or destiny replaces fate.*

The question is not whether this is true or not. The question is which system of thinking is most useful? Which gives us power?

This shift in thinking is a condition for shifting the context of civic engagement, within which the restoration of community can occur.

# The Context for Engagement

Applying the ideas of inverted thinking to building community, here is what the shift in context entails:

| The Context of Effect | The Context of Cause |
|---|---|
| The community is defined by its history | The community is defined by its connectedness and its possibility |
| We solve problems identified by others | We define and solve problems ourselves |
| The goals, plans, measures and consequences are set by others | The goals, plans, measures and consequences are set by us |
| Cost and efficiency dominate | Purpose and impact dominate |
| We seeks answers and a defined destination | We trust questions and a defined path |
| Express dissent as a stance in reaction to others and how they should change | Express dissent as a stance and a choice that defines us and what we choose to create |
| Prefer safety and security, choose a predictable future | Prefer adventure, choose freedom and anxiety and a vague future |
| Negotiation, force and control of resources create a better future | Relatedness, accountability and diverse engagement create a better future |

The context does not shift only from a change in thinking, but a shift in thinking creates a condition for a shift in context.

# Change the Conversation: Change the Future

The strategy for an alternative future is to focus on ways a shift in conversation can shift the context and thereby create an intentional future.

Reconciliation of community, or a future different and not determined by the past, occurs through a shift in language. Operationally, this means engaging in conversations we have not had before.

The strategy is if you can change the room, you have changed the culture, at least for that moment. We change the room by changing the conversation. Not just any new conversation, but one that creates a communal accountability and commitment.

Certain conversations are satisfying and true yet have no power and no accountability. For example:

Telling the history of how we got here
Giving explanations and opinions
Blaming and complaining
Making reports and descriptions
Carefully defining terms and conditions

These conversations are most often offered through conferences, press releases, trainings, master plans, and the call for more studies and expertise. They are well intentioned and valid, but hold little power.

These help us get connected, or increase our understanding of who we are, plus they are so ingrained in the social convention of a culture that they demand respect. They just do not, however, constitute a transformation.

Transformation occurs through a different way of convening and holding powerful conversations that are the embodiment of accountability and commitment.

Here are the conversational shfits that are other than just talk:

*Invitation replaces mandate, policy and alignment*
*Possibility replaces problem solving*
*Ownership and Cause replace explanation and denial*
*Dissent and Refusal replace resignation and lip service*
*Commitment replaces hedge and barter*
*Gifts replace deficiencies*

Each of these conversations leads to the others. Any one held wholeheartedly takes us to and resolves all the others. In the absence of these, it is all just talk. No matter how urgent the cause, how important the plan, how elegant the answer. These are the conversations through which the community is transformed.

# Six Conversations

### One: The Invitation

Transformation occurs through choice, not mandate. Invitation is the call to create an alternative future. What is the invitation we can make for people to participate in and own the relationships, tasks, and process that lead to transformation?

The invitation must contain a hurdle or demand if accepted. It is a challenge to engage. It declares, We want you to come, but if you do, here is what will be required from you. Most leadership initiatives or training are about how we get or *enroll* people to do tasks and feel good about doing things they may not want to do. Change is a self-inflicted wound. People need to *self-enroll* in order to experience their freedom of choice and commitment.

The leadership task is to name the debate, issue the invitation, and engage those who choose to show up. For every gathering there are those not in the room who are needed. Those who accept the first call will bring the next circle of people into the conversation.

**Two: Possibility**

This is framed as the choice to enter a possibility for the future as opposed to problem solving the past. This is based on an understanding that living systems are really propelled to the force of the future. The possibility conversation frees people to create new futures that make a difference.

Problem solving and negotiation of interests makes tomorrow only a little different from yesterday. Possibility is a break from the past and opens space for a future we had only dreamed of. *Declaring a possibility wholeheartedly is the transformation*. The leadership task is to postpone problem solving and stay focused on possibility until it is spoken with resonance and passion.

**Three: Ownership**

Accountability is the willingness to acknowledge that we have participated in creating, through commission or omission, the conditions that we wish to see changed. *Without this capacity to see ourselves as cause, our efforts become either coercive or wishfully dependent on the transformation of others.*

Community will be created the moment we decide to act as creators of what it can become. This requires us to believe in the possibility that this organization, neighborhood, community, is mine or ours to create. This will occur when we are willing to answer the question  how have I contributed to creating the current reality?  Confusion, blame, and waiting for someone else to change are a defense against ownership and personal power.

The idea that I am cause can be a difficult question to take on immediately, so lower risk questions precede this. The best opening questions are questions about the ownership people feel for this particular gathering. To what extent they act as owners of this meeting is symptomatic of how they will act as owners of the larger question on the table. The extent of our ownership for larger questions is more difficult and therefore requires a level of relatedness before it can be held in the right context.

A subtle denial of ownership is innocence and indifference. The future is denied with the response,  it doesn't matter to me--whatever you want to do is fine. This is always a lie and just a polite way of avoiding a difficult conversation around ownership.

People best create that which they own and co-creation is the bedrock of accountability. It is the belief that I am cause, not effect**.** The leadership task is to confront people with their freedom.

**Four: Dissent**

Dissent is the cousin of diversity; the respect for a wide range of beliefs. This begins by allowing people the space to say "no". *If we cannot say "no" then our "yes" has no meaning*. Each needs the chance to express their doubts and reservations, without having to justify them, or move quickly into problem solving. *No  is the beginning of the conversation for commitment*. Doubt and "no" is a symbolic expression of people finding their space and role in the strategy. It is when we fully understand what people do not want that choice becomes possible. The leadership task is to surface doubts and dissent without having an answer to every question.

**Five: Commitment**

*Wholehearted commitment makes a promise to peers about our contribution to the success of the whole*. It is centered in two questions: What promise am I willing to make? And, what is the price I am willing to pay for the success of the whole effort? It is a promise for the sake of a larger purpose, not for the sake of personal return. Commitment is the answer to lip service.

Peers receive the promise and determine whether the promises are enough to bring an alternative future into existence. The leadership task is to reject lip service and demand either authentic commitment or ask people to say no and pass.

We need the commitment of much fewer people than we thought to create the future we have in mind.

**Six: Gifts**

The most infrequent conversation we hold is about our gifts. We tend to be deficiency obsessed. Rather than focus on our deficiencies and weaknesses, which will most likely not go away, we gain more leverage when we focus on the gifts we bring and capitalize on those. Instead of problematizing people and work, the conversation is about searching for the mystery that brings the highest achievement and success.

The focus on gifts confronts people with their essential core that has the potential to make the difference and change lives for good**.** This resolves the unnatural separation between work and life. *The leadership task is to bring the gifts of those on the margin into the center.*

# Notes

# The Tools

The tools or keys for restoration fall in three categories:

**Invitation:** The invitation is a request to engage. It is different from selling, trying to gain buy-in, or rolling out something. It is to ask others to choose to join in creating a new conversation.

**Assembly:** The way we structure the assembly of peers and leaders is as critical as the invitation or the questions. What is critical is to recognize the importance of the way we assemble. One conventional order of assembly is Robert s Rules of Order. It is good at efficiency and containing conflict; it is also good at dampening aliveness. Most of our gatherings pay primary attention to problem solving, rather than an engagement logic. We want to give as much or more attention to the engagement than to the content.

**Questions:** Questions are more transformative than answers. They are the essential tools of engagement. They are the means by which we are all confronted with our freedom. In this sense, if you want to change the culture, find a powerful question. The shift in language, evoked by the question, is the transformation that constitutes the change in culture.

# The Invitation

The invitation offers a possibility and urges others to participate. It also warns that if they do come, something will be required of them.

### Constructing the Invitation

The elements of invitation are:

- The context and possibility of the gathering
- Who needs to be in the room
- Making clear that attendance is a choice
- What hurdle is required of them should they choose to attend
- A strong request to attend
- Picking the form of the invitation

**The Possibility** —Begin the invitation by telling them the possibility we are committed to. This becomes the context of the gathering. The more personal the better.

**The List** —Who are the critical people to invite? The intent is to bring together people across boundaries. Who should make the invitation? People show up based on who invites and their connection with those people. The more who join to issue the invitation, the more powerful.

**A Choice** — Refusal is perfectly acceptable. The invitation must allow room for a no. If no is not an option, then it is not an invitation. Emphasize that you value their decision NOT to attend, have faith that there are good reasons for not attending.

**The Requirements** — Tell them explicitly what is required of them should they choose to attend. There is a price to pay for their decision to attend. They will be asked to explore ways to deepen their learning and commitment. They will be asked to postpone problem solving and the negotiation of interests. They will not be asked to compromise their interests or constituent interests, just to hold them to the side for the time being.

The idea is that everything that has value has a price and must be purchased. Make the purchase price explicit.

**The Request** —End the invitation by telling them that you want them to come, and if they choose not to attend, that they will be missed, but not forgotten.

**The Form** — The more personal the better. A visit is more personal than a call; a call is more personal than letter; a letter is more personal than email.

# The Order of Assembly

Each meeting is designed to be an example of the future we want to create. It is this meeting in which the context is shifted.

The structure of gatherings is about the design of the room, the groupings of people, and managing the small group and communal discussion.

All change begins with a small group, for the small group is the unit of change. Even a large group meeting uses small groups to create connection and move the action forward. The small group is the structure that allows every voice to be heard. Everything has been said but not everyone has said it.

The room is a metaphor for the whole community, physically and psychologically. The room is the visible expression of the kind of learning and community we plan to create. This is what is meant by  change the room, change the culture.

Rooms are traditionally designed to support patriarchal experiences. We may not have control over the form and shape of the room but we always have choices as to the nature of our occupation of the room. So the task is to design the room to meet our intentions to build accountability and commitment.

Here are the configurations that go into thinking about the order of assembly:

**Seating in Circles.** The circle is the geometric symbol for community and therefore for arranging the room. No tables if possible. Round tables (the shape of communion), better than rectangles (the shape of negotiation), or classroom (the shape of instruction).

**Small Groups.** Connection occurs in small face-to-face groupings. Certain configurations are better for learning and connection, others are better for closure and problem solving. Use diverse groupings for opening questions and raising issues. Use affinity groupings for planning actions and making promises. Start with the individual preparing alone, then talking in trios, next in groups of six, and then to the whole community.

**Large Group**. When people share with the larger group, they re sharing with the world. Have them stand, as they are in fact standing for something. Ask their name so they can be known for their stance. Amplify all voices equally.

When people make powerful statements to the whole community, make them say it again slowly. They speak for all others who are silent, and in that way they speak for the whole. Also when people speak in a large group, they need to be acknowledged for the courage it took to speak out.

Note: All of this is part of an emergent, but well established methodology often called large group interventions.

**Reception**

Here is a sequence of events for opening a gathering:

**Welcome and greeting –** Greet them at the door; welcome them personally and help them get seated. People enter in isolation. Reduce the isolation they came with, let them know they came to the right place and are not alone. This expresses our hospitality.

**Restate the invitation —** To all assembled, offer a statement of why we are here. Use everyday language and speak from the heart, without PowerPoint, slides, video, etc. Use words and phrases that express choice, optimism, faith, willingness to act, commitment to persevere.

**Connection –** We must establish a personal connection with each other. Connection before content. Without relatedness, no work can occur.

Encourage people who know each other to separate - it gives them freedom to be who they are and not who their colleague thinks they should be.

Connection is not intended to be just an icebreaker, which is fun, yet does little to break the isolation or create community. Icebreakers will make contact but not connection.

Some examples of connection questions:

> *What led you to accept the invitation?*
> *What would it take for you to be present in this room?*
> *What is the price others paid for you to be here?*
> *Who in your life, living or dead, that you value and respect would you want to invite to sit with you and help make this meeting successful?*

**Late Arrivals** —Welcome them without humiliation, connect them to the group.

Restored community becomes one step closer when every gathering is a demonstration of the future we came to create.

**Departure**

Ending is an element of engagement. We want a high-engagement ending to the gatherings. Treat the ending as important as the beginning and the middle.

Ask in the beginning for people to give notice of leaving. Leave in public, do not sneak out. When people leave early and won t return, they leave a void in the community. It hurts the community; there is a cost, a consequence to the community.

Acknowledge their leaving in a diliberate way.

> *Have them acknowledge that they are leaving and where they are going*
>
> *Have three people say,  Here s what you ve given us*
>
> *Ask, What are you taking with you? What shifted for you became clearer? What is one thing you d like to say to the community?*
>
> *Thank them for coming*
>
> *Remove their chair — if it remains, it only acts as a reminder that there has been a loss*

# The Nature of Powerful Questions

The conditions for achieving accountability entail the use of powerful questions. Questions express the reality that change, like life, is difficult and unpredictable.

It is the questions that change our life. We all look for answers and all we get in response is more questions. This is why questions confront in ways that statements and answers don t. And why questions are essential for the restoration of community.

Questions open up the conversation, answers close it down.

### Elements of a Great Question

It is ambiguous
It is personal
It evokes anxiety and accountability

The questions themselves are an art form worthy of a lifetime of study. They are what transform the hour.

### The Setup of Questions

Each time a small group takes up a question, set it up by explaining why the question is important and then telling people not to be helpful. Trying to be helpful and giving advice are really ways to control others. Advice is a conversation stopper. We want to substitute curiosity for advice or a call to action. Urge participants to ask others  why does that mean so much to you?  If we quickly move to action, then tomorrow will be just like yesterday.

### Risk Order of Questions

Certain questions require a greater level of trust. Begin with less demanding questions and end with the more difficult ones. Same with the conversations -- ownership and commitment are high risk and require higher trust to have meaning.

# The Questions

There are five language actions which, when taken in the presence of others, create community and shift the public debate. These are:

To declare a possibility
To take ownership — I created the world I live in
To say no authentically
To make a promise with no expectation of return
To declare the gifts we and others bring to the room

Each of the conversations is created through its own set of questions.

**One: The Conversation for Possibilities**

Traditionally we problem solve and talk about goals, targets, resources, and talk about persuading others.

Problem solving needs to be postponed and replaced with possibility. The future is created through a declaration of what is the possibility we stand for. Out of this declaration, each time we enter a room, the possibility enters with us.

Possibilities, though begun as individual declaration, gain power and impact community when made public.

The best opening question for possibility is:

*What is the crossroads that you find yourself at this stage of your life or work or the project around which we are assembled?*

Later, the final individual question for possibility will be:

*What declaration of possibility can you make that has the power to transform the community and inspire you?*

The communal question for possibility is:

*What do we want to create together that would make the difference?*

**Two: The Conversation for Ownership**

Ownership is the decision to become the author of our own experience. It is to be cause rather than effect. It is the choice to decide on our own what value and meaning will occur when we show up.

**Renegotiation of the Social Contract**

People enter each room believing that someone else owns the room, the meeting, and the purpose that convened the meeting. Leadership needs to change this.

We want to shift to the belief that this world, including this gathering, is ours to construct together. The contract moves from parenting to partnership. Also we want to move towards the position that each of us is creating the current condition.

We begin by shifting the ownership of the room.

The Four Questions that renegotiate the social contract are to ask people to rate on a seven-point scale, from low to high:

> *How valuable an experience (or project) do you plan this to be?*
>
> *How much risk are you willing to take?*
>
> *How participative do you plan to be?*
>
> *To what extent are you invested in the well being of the whole?*

People answer these individually, then share their answers in a small group. Be sure to remind them not to cheer anyone up or be helpful. Just get interested in whatever the answer.

At some later point, the essential question upon which accountability hinges needs to be asked:

> *What have I done to contribute to the very thing I complain about or want to change?*

**Three: The Conversation for Dissent**

No is the beginning of the conversation for commitment. If we cannot say no, our yes means little. Early in every gathering, there needs to be space for dissent.

The belief is that it is a good thing for others to have doubts and concerns. We want to make room for the doubts and concerns to be expressed openly, not left to quiet conversations in the hallways, among allies, or in the restrooms. Dissent is a form of care, not one of resistance.

It is the public expression of doubts, authentic statements of no, that shifts a culture and builds accountability and commitment. We will let go of only those doubts that we have given voice to.

When someone authentically says no, then the room becomes real and trustworthy. An authentic statement is one in which the person owns that the dissent is their choice and not a form of blame or complaint.

The fear is that we will make people more negative by making room for refusal. If people say no, it does not mean they will get their way.

Saying no doesn t cost us our membership in the meeting or in the community. Encourage those who say no to stay — you need their voice.

It is important to make the distinction between authentic dissent and inauthentic dissent, which we can call false refusal. Inauthentic forms of refusal are denial, rebellion, and resignation.

> *Denial* means we act as if the present is fine and a longing to return to a world that never existed.
>
> *Rebellion* is in reaction to the world and is a vote for dominion or patriarchy. It is a complaint that others control the monarchy and not the rebels.
>
> *Resignation* is the ultimate act of powerlessness and a stance against possibility. It is also a passive form of control.

The challenge is to frame the questions in a way that the dissent is authentic. If it comes back as denial, rebellion or resignation, all we can do is recognize it, not argue, and give attention to dissent in its more authentic form.

Some questions for the expression of dissent:

> *What doubts and reservations do you have?*
> *What do you want to say No to, or refuse, that you keep postponing?*

*What have you said Yes to, that you do not really mean?*
*What is a commitment or decision that you have changed your mind about?*
*What forgiveness are you withholding?*
*What resentment do you hold that no one knows about?*

**Four: The Conversation for Commitment**

Commitment is a promise made without expectation of return and without an investment in the approval of other people s responses.

The declaration of a promise is the form that commitment takes and is the action that initiates change.

It is one thing to set a goal or objective, but something more personal to use the language of promises. Consider two kinds of promises:

My behavior and actions with others
Results and outcomes for community

Promises that matter are made to peers — those colleagues at the local level with whom we have to live out the intentions of the change. It is to these people that we give our commitments, and it is they who decide if our offer is enough — for the person and for the institution.

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

Write the promises by hand, sign and date them. Then collect and publish the whole set. About once a quarter, meet and ask, How s it going?

The key questions are those we have to ask ourselves.

*What promises am I willing to make?*
*What measures have meaning to me?*
*What price am I willing to pay?*
*What is the cost to others for me to keep my commitments, or fail in my commitments?*
*What s the promise I m willing to make that constitutes a risk or major shift for me?*

A note: I am willing to make no promise at this moment is a fine and acceptable stance.

**Five: The Conversation of Gifts**

Change and an alternative future occur by capitalizing on our gifts and capacities. Bringing the gifts of those on the margin into the center. This is a definition of community.

When we look at deficiencies, we strengthen them.

Rather than telling people about
what they need to improve
what didn t go well
how they should do it differently next time
Confront them with their gifts. Talk to others about
the gift that you ve received from them
the strength that you see in them

Pay special attention to the setup for gifts:

We focus on gifts because what we focus on, we strengthen. In circle, one person at a time receives statements from the others of what they have appreciated from that person.

The person says thank you, I like hearing that. Don t deflect the appreciation.

Keep a complete ban on discussing weaknesses and what is missing, even if people want this feedback.

Every gathering ends with this conversation.

The questions:

*What gift have you received from another in this room? Tell the person in specific terms.*
*What is the gift you continue to hold in exile?*

**Summary of Questions**

Whatever the venue, accountable community is created when we ask certain questions. Here is a summary of the core question associated with each stage:

1. To what extent are you here by choice? (***Invitation***)

2. What declarations are you prepared to make about the possibilities for the future? (***Possibilities***)

3. How invested and participative do you plan to be in this meeting? (***Ownership***)

4. To what extent do you see yourself as part of the cause of what you are trying to fix? (***Ownership****)*

5. What are your doubts and reservations? (***Dissent***)

6. What promises are you willing to make to your peers? (***Commitment***)

7. What gifts have you received from each other? (***Gifts*)**

These are samples only. The work is to invent questions that fit the business you are up to and the conditions you are attempting to shift.

Real life is circular, not in a line as it appears on a page. Which conversation, in which order, will vary with the context of a gathering. Since all the conversations lead to each other, sequence is not critical. The conversations as listed here, though, are the rough order that usually aligns with the logic of people s experience.

For more information about A Small Group, contact the website at **www.asmallgroup.net** or Peter Block at **pbi@att.net**.

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