Published on Axiom News (https://axiomnews.com)

Inviting Leaders to Grow from Hero to Host

Inviting Leaders to Grow from Hero to Host
Common Good Protocols Bring Us Together for the Larger Purposes of Our Existence
Tuesday, February 13, 2024 -- Peter Block

We know that leadership matters. Traditionally, we have defined the function as visionary, role model, designer, inspiration, and voice of where we are headed. We ask our leaders to be coach, listener, and a gardener who grows people.

We also, as an expression of their importance, “hold” them responsible when things go wrong. They have a cash drawer where the buck stops.

And we think that activism and social change are achieved by a heroic leader.

Now is a moment for us to reconsider this construction. The option is to ask the leader to create connection among the led. Citizens. Employees. Siloed organizations and functions. As many have said, move from hero to host. What is new is our decision to make this the top priority of leaders. As to the leader as role model, yes. But that is true of each of us. As well as to coach and nurture those who matter to us.

Leaders, by their position, hold something unique, in addition to their personal qualities: the power to change the context of where accountability and care for the whole reside. To use their position to engage citizens and members in relational activism. For whatever the purpose, decide that social capital and peer engagement is the first priority in high performance, and building a civic world that longs to be safe, educated, economically viable, and healthy.

Convening

When we become connected, we become accountable to each other. We know the ways to do this. Every facilitator and organization development person, every community builder, has this capacity. If we seek accountability and belonging, these relational methodologies are what work. Especially in this hybrid, virtual, volatile time we live in. The problem is that these methods are in the hands of helpers, not most leaders.

Our invitation is to shift the content of what we teach leaders. This involves how we gather, how we occupy a room, both live and virtual, and how we learn. These ways of being and doing are how we best produce accountability in citizens and employees.

Leader as role model, visionary, people developer, and one who holds others accountable is a habit that will be hard to let go of. That notion creates comfort in that it encourages dependency, entitlement, and constant looking at the corner office. Leader presence and behavior as the center of our attention is popular because it lets citizens and employees off the hook.

The demand for a redefinition of the leadership function is reinforced by the current crisis in social isolation. The challenges and opportunities of working virtually and remotely have been with us for a long time. We are constantly told that we are polarized, siloed, likeminded, and attracted to tribes. All this was intensified by the pandemic and invited us to reconsider how leadership might attend more powerfully to the need for a stronger community and chosen accountability. The future will not be a return to something. It will be the reimagination of something.

The major challenge for leaders will be to develop the skills and mindset to convene and engage people in new ways. Ways that overcome isolation, deepen connections, and prepare people to live into the uncertain realities of all workplaces and communities. And to do it quickly.

This shift in how we think about leadership is served by making a distinction between management and leadership. Managers create order in the workplace. They know how to plan, organize, delegate, and control work and people. The value proposition of managing is speed, predictability, and convenience in a disordered

world.

Leadership needs management, but it is much more than that. It holds a larger possibility than creating order and clarity. That possibility is the capacity and power to invite us into an alternative future.

The Leadership Task

The leader's task is not to promise or define the alternative future. This is too often a marketing campaign. Managing the news. An alternative future does not occur by offering certainty. It begins by increasing authentic connection. Relational activism. Especially with the stranger. This means creating new habits of how we convene people. The purpose is to engage them in co-creating a response to a shifting market, technology, and supply world. To engage them in a response to volatile and fragmented elements of places we care about. Good leadership has to become more sophisticated in engaging people with each other. The value proposition for this kind of leadership is accelerated trust building, accountability to peers, and adaptability in a complex and fluid setting. These are the benefits in the shift from hero to host and convener.

We already know a lot about the protocols of convening and engagement. The problem is that they exist primarily in the hands of facilitators, team builders, community organizers, and human resource and organization development people. What is new here is not the actual tools of convening. They have been around for quite a while.

Unfortunately, we have used those tools mostly for out-of-the-ordinary intentions. When we want peers to truly engage, or to set aside times for thoughtfulness and relationship building, we call on retreats, team building, focus groups, recovery groups, spiritual practices, block parties, summits, and special events. As if building trust and accountability and change were needed only on occasion.

Leaders and citizens have had to purchase these skills rather than embody them. We need to learn how to transfer this convening-and-engagement thinking and its tools into the minds, hearts, and hands of leaders and people who run things. And

make these common good protocols a habit. This is how we create impact engagement, a more powerful and authentic alternative to surveys, questions and answers, or requests for feedback.

Principles of Leader As Convener

There are several principles of leading for this relational activism or high-impact engagement:

1. Questions are more powerful than answers.
2. The small group is the unit of transformation.
3. Purpose is to go deeper rather than faster. Slow and small is more powerful than speed and scale.
4. Conversations between peers are more vital than the interactions between leaders and followers.
5. Horizontal connection among peers or citizens produces accountability and commitment to the well-being of the whole. The common good.
6. Highlighting people’s gifts and capacities is what is important. Let their deficiencies rest in peace.

This kind of engagement accelerates building trust and social capital when treated as a first priority. The research is convincing that this produces better outcomes, whether looking at organization results, safety in a neighborhood, healthier citizens, raising a child, or social and economic equity.

We are calling these convening tools Common Good Protocols. This set of tools includes learning the power and specific framing of questions of possibility, dissent, crossroads, ownership, commitment, contracting, and gifts. We need to teach and learn how leaders can use these questions in a variety of settings. This work is both simple and hard. There also must be ongoing support to make the shift.

In addition to the questions, the Common Good Protocols include a range of convening designs built around Open Space, World Café, Appreciative Inquiry, and Art of Convening gatherings. The challenge to leading through convening is that it relocates and diffuses control, violates employee and citizen-dependent expectations, and asks us to surrender our belief in top-down and bottom-up theories of change and improvement. It also asks us to stop complaining. To give up waiting for people on top to change or people at the middle and bottom to “get on board.”

The Invitation

The invitation is to shift leadership to convener wherever we are together.
Any situation where three or more people are gathering. Staff meetings, cross-functional teams, special focus and town hall gatherings, strategy sessions, and education events. Each time people gather––on the phone, a digital platform, or in a room together––is an opportunity to accelerate trust, and to produce peer accountability.

If we care about institutional and community outcomes and transformation in a volatile world, these Common Good Protocols become everyday practices. Every part of every day. It is not about devaluing typical problem-solving, predetermined agendas, and the devices for predictability. It is simply putting management where it belongs, as a useful but second priority. First in line are specific protocols designed to bring us together to connect for the larger purposes of our existence.

This blog was originally published by Designed Learning and appears here with permission.