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Peter Block is a renowned speaker and author of several bestselling books on workplace empowerment, accountability, and stewardship. His work focuses on improving workplaces and communities through consent rather than patriarchy and mandate.

*Q. What was your first job, and what lesson did you take away from it?*

I worked in the kitchen of an ice cream shop. The guy who ran it asked me to fill a pitcher with syrup out of a huge container. About 20 minutes later somebody told me that I didn't turn off the handle of the container. The whole floor was flooded with syrup.

I felt awful, but the guy just said "Don't worry about it; we'll clean it up." His forgiveness and acceptance were stunning. I think about that sometimes and feel overwhelmed by how accepting people were of the work I did early in my career. And I'm grateful for that. Maybe people saw something that I myself did not know was there.

My first good job was with Exxon's training department, where I spent 8 months designing a performance appraisal form for engineers. I put 165 items on that rating form. Why they put up with me, I'll never understand.

*Q. You are involved in a youth organization in Cincinnati. What have you learned from your juniors?*

Teenagers are the visible symptom of the wounded nature of our culture—they are not the problem. It's painful to watch kids hanging around street corners and to see how marginalized they have become. The work we do is to try to affirm the gifts these kids have, especially the ones that are not mainstream. So you could say that we try to bring the gifts of those in the margins into the center.

Cincinnati has something called the Hip-Hop Center, which takes all the things we adults complain about—graffiti, hip-hop music, dance, drooping pants—and treats them as an asset. We teach kids how to be intentional and focused about the things they love, rather than teach them the things we adults love. It values graffiti and dance as art forms.

The kids are energetic, irreverent, and more honest than we are because we have more to lose. They bring a sense of purpose to the room. Often they make me feel very humble, which is no small accomplishment. That's also what we need from leaders; not vision and charisma, but humility. At the moment we are missing that desperately.

*Q. You have said space influences work and learning enormously—what do you mean by that?*

I'm hypersensitive to space. The more I pay attention to it, the more powerful I see that it is. Actually to the extent that I have become a nuisance: When ever I go into a room I want to rearrange it. Space is very powerful, whether it's the layout of a neighborhood or intersection, or the design of a building or room. Most of our rooms are not designed to

be habitable. They are windowless, the furniture is too heavy to move, and the chairs are lined up either in rows or across the table from each other in rectangles. Space is undervalued; it's treated as a design or an aesthetic problem rather a relational or community-building problem. It has a big impact on the way we choose to be together.

We still line people up in conferences and run workshops where PowerPoint is the central theme, where people ask for handouts so they know ahead of time what we are going to discuss. There's no space for surprise.

If you want to bring aliveness into an institutional experience, you need a room that has the capacity to nurture it; one that has windows, art on the walls, a growing thing in it, microphones so that everybody's voice is equally heard. It needs people facing each other, without tables separating them. It's a disturbance to most systems to advocate that—it means people have no place to put their water bottles!

Such places are so hard to find that you can spend your whole life looking for them. It got so bad I had to rent my own space in Cincinnati just to be in a room that has those qualities: a wall of windows, and movable chairs and tables. You can't leave it to architects—it's the social sciences and training people who need to become advocates for this type of space.

Right now companies put most of the money up on the walls in the form of technology. They put million dollars on the wall, so we can go online anywhere in the world, as we are all lined up watching this huge screen. Bringing relationships back to the center of our attention is what this work is about.

*Q. You love painting, photography, and sculpture—where does that passion come from?*

Art is the most powerful medium in our reach. You can't talk about an alternative future without choosing methodology that has aliveness and surprise, and that gets past our verbal habits. Most of the conversations we have we know where they are going—in fact, we like that. Art brings surprise, color, and texture. It treats details as if they matter, feeling as if it's central, and unpredictability as if it's a good thing. It brings emotion into the room in a way that we don't know how to defend against. That's what is powerful about it. The only place where art is valued is in the work place of senior level executives. Everything else looks like something between a prison and a hospital ward.

There are people all over the country who have taken theater, music, visual arts, and improvisation, and made them part of transformational efforts, mostly because art gets around people's defenses and the habit of their conversations. To me the biggest obstacle to transformation is that we are having totally predictable conversations.

Why would you ever start a meeting without music? Every time you take a break and come back, why not start with a moment of reflection to remind you of something larger that is going on in the world? These are the small ways to change the context in which we work. That's the work of training and development: It's really not about skills and tools.

You really try to change the context in which normal problem solving takes place.

*Q. What is currently the most pressing issue in organization development?*

The problem with organizational development is that it treats itself as a profession, as the kind of work that you're either for or against. I think it should be de-professionalized, renamed just as "leadership." All the things that OD people do are what every leader needs learn how to do.

I would love to see leadership be the art of convening and hosting, and that leadership training would teach how to bring people together and initiate conversations that have power rather than predictability. I think the biggest struggle is that OD is still trying to define itself. Somehow the professionalism of OD is a limitation, even though it has a set of values and processes that are wonderful. It's just that as long as it depends on a facilitator, nothing is going to change. It's marginalized by calling it something that needs facilitation, rather than it being the essence of what leadership is about.

Leadership is simply the art of convening people in a more powerful way. And once you decide that's what leadership is about, you start caring about the room, the walls, and the way people get connected.

*Q. Organizations are in a constant state of change. How has your approach to change management evolved over the years?*

Change management is a defense against anything shifting. The way you keep the future from occurring, is by rational, logical, highly measured, and practical efforts to create a different future. The methodology of change management—even its language, as if change can be managed rather than discovered or emerged—is what has created the problem. There is a noble intention behind it, but the methodology, its predictability and bottom-line orientation, is what has created the problem. So we use the disease to cure the illness.

Most companies give lip service to their concern for people. They try to automate and outsource as fast as they can. That is my concern about change management.

What I like about it is its noble intention, a longing to shift cultures of places where we work. It's just that they won't shift with the same old conversation and rational problem solving.

People are always looking for tools, and for me it means you are worshipping too small a god. The real longing is to change the nature of our experience, the way of being together and to bring idealism and faith to the work. That comes out of relatedness.

If we could organize the management process around relatedness, listening, and idealism—that would be great. But then we wouldn't call it change management. Management is giving orders and structure to the world. It's useful and important, but it doesn't create an alternative future. The organizing question for this work is how you create a future distinct from the past, not just a minor extension of the past. That is the sign I would put over the training and development business: "All who want to create a future distinct from the past: Enter. The rest of you, keep doing what you're doing—just try harder."