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Community: The Structure of Belonging by Peter Block

The challenge: "*getting individuals to do the desirable thing without anyone having to tell them what to do.*" Hayek

Your stories, insights, understanding are both welcome and encouraged. This newsletter is after all entitled *Together*, and is dedicated to our shared understanding

Beginning Together

Together is a new, online newsletter directed to those with an interest in the collective behaviour of individuals and organizations. In this inaugural edition, we begin by sketching out the scope of its concern.

At Christopher Wilson & Associates we believe that whether one thinks in terms of organizations or communities, the biggest challenge is always getting people to work together effectively. The most efficient way of doing this turns out not to be the exercise of greater control but, as Nobel economist Friedrich Hayek observed, in "*getting individuals to do the desirable thing without anyone having to tell them what to do*". It is coordination without leadership and participation when no one is 'in charge'.

As human beings we are constantly together - as families, as organizations, as communities and as countries. Yet we demonstrate little awareness about being and working together. More than ever before, understanding why and how we are together is crucial for all prospective leaders, employees and citizens, especially given the complex nature of human and organizational problems and the increasingly distributed nature of their solutions.

We hope this newsletter may contribute to that understanding.

Cooperation & Collaboration

Any community begins with the realization that more can be accomplished together than separately. **Cooperation** refers to the practice where individuals or organizations support each other in a common interest, instead of working separately in their own interest or in competition. Research supports the idea that cooperation is not automatic and that both a clear enunciation of future benefits and the ongoing maintenance of trust building regimes are needed to sustain it. What triggers cooperation? How may it be sustained? When should you cooperate and when should you just get on with what you need to do? These are just some of the questions we want to explore.

Collaboration refers to a more formal process of cooperation wherein a number of individuals and/or organizations agree to work jointly towards a shared goal in order to accomplish together what they could not do independently. Participants cooperate in the preparation of business plans, decision making, resource allocation and actions.

Whereas an agreement to cooperate may imply only a loose affiliation,

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Partnerships

Partnerships refer to a collaborative entity in which participating ‘partners’ formally share risks, costs, benefits and decision making. One form of partnership that is gaining increasing attention is *private-public partnerships* or P3s. These partnerships might involve one or more departments of a single government, multiple levels of government as well as private or voluntary organizations.

Compared to the traditional use of vendor contracting by public sector organizations, P3s emphasize a more direct partner relationship that encourages trust building, transparency, shared governance, mutual accountability, and broader stakeholder engagement. Partnerships offer the prospect of greater innovation, increased flexibility and adaptiveness, and a broader access to resources. They also present the opportunity to offset specific challenges with the specific strengths of individual partners.

What are the fundamentals of good partnerships? What tricks, tools or mechanisms could be applied to make partnerships more successful? Since P3s may often span 20-30 years, it is, for example, important to start them off on the right foot. Several of the key success factors for partnerships include:

1. Socializing the potential partnership initiative upfront. Get to know everyone’s strengths and weaknesses.
2. Conducting due diligence and business planning in a manner that fosters social learning and lays the groundwork for successful future relationships among the players.
3. Developing a contract that aligns well with the level of certainty or uncertainty the project demands and aligns risk/reward sharing with the partners best suited to mitigate the risk.

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collaboration typically involves Memoranda of Understanding, resource sharing agreements, steering committees and performance measures. It also involves the formation of a separate team or leadership group to oversee the collaborative work. While cooperation at its simplest may involve only an informal agreement not to compete, collaboration is structured around specific tasks and actually doing something together. What constitutes successful collaboration? What mechanisms are used to sustain it?

For instance, successful collaboration often begins with a clear understanding of why participants can’t do what they want on their own. The recognition of this distributed nature of the problem and its solution, leads to a better awareness of the knowledge, resources (financial and otherwise) and authorities needed both to define the problem properly and to create adequate responses. Successful collaboration requires having the right people involved - those who can contribute, those who are stakeholders and those who can successfully oppose any joint action.

Consequently the first steps of collaboration require time upfront to identify the possibilities for joint action, the principles or rules for working together that the participants agree to abide by, and who is necessary to make the effort successful.

“Partnerships offer the prospect of greater innovation, increased flexibility and adaptiveness, and a broader access to resources.”



Collaborative agreements are always personal, based on an awareness of mutual benefit and trust.

Stewardship

In almost every good consultant's report there is a comment about the importance of leadership, and the need to ensure 'buy in' from the people at the top for whatever is being recommended. As straightforward as this may seem, in organizations where "nobody is in charge" or in collaborations or partnerships where participation is ultimately voluntary, all those platitudes regarding leadership buy-in are meaningless and distracting.

"in collaborations or partnerships where participation is ultimately voluntary, all those platitudes regarding leadership buy-in are meaningless and distracting."

Increasingly there is talk about a new kind of leadership - collaborative leadership - as a necessary requirement for collective action. This new form of leadership is embodied in someone who empowers others, who facilitates the interests of others and is not directive, who negotiates among diverse positions and is not commanding, who recognizes the legitimacy of each participant and perspective and is capable of identifying the common ground upon which agreements can be made. For those acting in such a way a better, less confusing term instead of leadership is stewardship.

Stewardship is the capacity to hold in trust and act responsibly for the interests of someone else. In collaborative entities where no one is in charge and therefore everyone is in charge, everyone is an owner, and a good steward acts to ensure the interests of all owners are satisfied or at least satisfied.

How must our leadership concepts be modified to incorporate the demand for good stewardship? What are the appropriate roles of stewards? What principles should guide stewards? These are all topics that require more exploration, especially since our management schools are so ebullient in their praise of heroic leaders and almost dumb on the subject of stewardship.

Distributed Governance, Community Building & Democracy

Distributed governance is about effective coordination in a world where power, resources and knowledge are widely held and distributed across many organizations. In the complex environments in which today's organizations operate, no simple system of coordination is likely to be successful without utilizing diverse contributions, social learning, collaboration, and negotiation.

This leads to several important questions, including:

- What interdependencies exist and how are they straining conventional forms of governance?
- How is coordination achieved within and across the boundaries of private, public and civic organizations?
- What are the leadership environments necessary to achieve good governance in this environment?
- What mechanisms can enhance the quality of governance?

Community building refers to practices directed at the creation or enhancement of relationships between people within a region who share common interests and are willing to cooperate for mutual benefit. These relationships contribute to social capital, a sense of belonging and ownership in local affairs, and a capacity to work together towards shared goals. What are those practices, how can they be developed and when should they be used?

Democracy reflects our sense of ownership in our own lives. It implies rights but also our obligations to each other in our community. The practice of democracy is primarily about taking individual responsibility for our collective future.



Governance is about guiding or navigating. Community building is about developing the capacity for collective action. When taken together they represent a power that is profoundly democratic.

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4. Ensure the delegation of decision making to those directly involved and establish the links necessary to permit the 'active' partners to influence their home organization.
5. Always pay attention to the relationships. Although the contract is a good learning exercise, navigating tough times will be based on the relationships among the partners. This implies trust, appropriate openness, mutual and shared accountability that is directed at learning, and always a clear awareness of the potential benefits- both tangible and intangible for every partner.

Partnerships resist standardization. Each P3 differs because of the unique nature of the partnership tasks, their contexts, their stakeholders, and the unique combination and capabilities of the participating partners.

As such it is important to assemble a variety of mechanisms, tools and possible approaches that can be applied as and when needed in a heuristic manner. While the broad strokes of partnerships are evident, they must be tailored for each and every partnership.

Food for Thought

Community: The Structure of Belonging by Peter Block

Our ideas of community are based on our sharing of something in common; frequently a place, but these days this may also entail a sense of shared interest. That notion of community lends us a sense of identity and belonging but as Peter Block sees it, it also implies a sense of ownership and hospitality and a capacity to act as co-creator of that community with others.

“Community is fundamentally an interdependent human system given form by the conversation it holds with itself. The history, buildings, economy, infrastructure and culture are [artifacts] of the conversations and the social fabric of any community”

In this his latest book, Block has turned his attention from how people behave in organizations to exploring those conversations that are necessary to help restore our communities from being places of isolation and conflict to being places of belonging, of hospitality, of participation and active citizenship.

As he says, *“The key to creating or transforming community is to see the power in the small but important elements of being with others. The shift we seek needs to be embodied in each invitation we make, each relationship we encounter, and each meeting we attend. For at the most operational and practical level ... it gets down to this: **How are we going to be when we gather together?**”*

What is most valuable in this book is not so much Block's outline of possibility, but his framework for revitalizing community conversations. That framework can help move us beyond conventional debates that marginalize hope; wait for someone else to take charge; seek to find fault and market fear; demand more rules or laws; and trivialize the value of citizen contributions. Such talk affirms not only that we can't do it alone but also that we can't do it together either, keeping us stuck in communities that neither protect nor nourish us.

Community displays a profound passion and belief in the power of people working together. At every turn it proclaims that if we come together, bringing our collective knowledge, energy and resources, we can live into a new possibility starting from today.

*“Forging Better Results
Through Collaboration”*

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*Your stories or insights would be welcomed.
Submissions should be kept to 250 words.*