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COMMUNITY

The Structure of Belonging

PETER BLOCK

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To Maggie

In appreciation for your commitment, intelligence, love, and integrity that make what I do possible. You are a placeholder for all who give their talents and love in support of others. Plus, you got the point of it all: You have chosen adventure over safety. This, in itself, is a rare gift.

CHAPTER 7

The Transforming Community

Conventional thinking about communal transformation believes that focusing on large systems, better leaders, clearer goals, and more controls is essential, and that emphasizing speed and scale is critical. The conventional belief is that individual transformation leads to communal transformation. Our explorations to this point lead instead to the understanding that transformation occurs when we focus on the structure of how we gather and the context in which the gatherings take place; when we work hard on getting the questions right; when we choose depth over speed and relatedness over scale. We also believe that problem solving can make things better but cannot change the nature of things.

Community transformation calls for citizenship that shifts the context from a place of fear and fault, law and oversight, corporation and "systems," and preoccupation with leadership to one of gifts, generosity, and abundance; social fabric and chosen accountability; and associational life and the engagement of citizens. These shifts occur as citizens face each other in conversations of ownership and possibility. To be more specific, leaders are held to three tasks: to shift the context within which people gather, name the debate through powerful questions, and listen rather than advocate, defend, or provide answers.

* * *

The mindset that we can program and problem-solve our way into a vision does not take into account the complexity and relational nature of community. It undervalues the importance of context and the linguistic, conversational nature of community. If we want to see a

change in our communities, we must let go of the conventional or received wisdom about how change occurs. This means we reject or at least seriously question the beliefs that communal change will occur in the following circumstances:

- **We count on an aggregation of individual changes.** We have seen this in attempts by large organizations trying to change their culture through large-scale trainings and change efforts. Communities initiate large-scale dialogue programs and book clubs where many are simultaneously reading the same book. No matter how well intentioned, these efforts largely fall short of their goals. Why? Because individual lives are touched, but the organizational culture and the community are unmoved.

  What's missing is that these efforts do not recognize that there is such a thing as a collective body. A shift in community benefits from shifts in individual consciousness but needs a communal connectedness as well, a communal structure of belonging that produces the foundation for the whole system to move. This is why it is so frustrating to create high performance and consciousness in individuals, and in individual institutions, and then find that they have so little impact on the social capital or fabric of the community.

- **We think in terms of scale and speed.** As David Bornstein has so clearly pointed out, something shifts on a large scale only after a long period of small steps, organized around small groups patient enough to learn and experiment and learn again. Speed and scale are the arguments against what individual and communal transformation require. They are a hallmark of the corporate mindset. When we demand more speed and scale, we are making a coded argument against anything important being any different.

- **We stay focused on large systems and top leaders to implement better problem solving, clearer goals and vision, and better controls of the process.** Large system change is a useful way to think, but transforming action is always local, customized, unfolding, and emergent. The role of leaders is not to be better role models or to drive change; their role is to create the structures and experiences that bring citizens together to identify and solve their own issues.

Communal transformation does occur when we accept the following beliefs:

- **We focus on the structure of how we gather and the context in which our gatherings take place.** Collective change occurs when individuals and small diverse groups engage one another in the presence of many others doing the same. It comes from the knowledge that what is occurring in one space is similarly happening in other spaces, especially ones where I do not know what they are doing. This is the value of a network, or even a network of networks, which is today's version of a social movement. It holds that in larger events, structured in small circles, with the certain conversations that I will define later, the faith in restoration is established. All this needs to be followed up with the usual actions and problem solving, but it is in those moments when citizens engage one another, in communion and the witness of others, that something collective shifts.

  Keeping this focus is especially critical when individuals and institutions meet across boundaries. The key is to structure a way of crossing boundaries where people become connected to those they are not used to being in the room with. Every gathering, in its composition and in its structure, has to be an example of the future we want to create. If this is achieved in this gathering, then that future has occurred today and there is nothing to wait for. Pretty Zen.

- **We work hard on getting the questions right.** This begins by realizing that the questions themselves are important, more important than the answers. The primary questions for community transformation are "How do we choose to be together?" and "What do we want to create together?" These are different from the primary questions for individual transformation, which are "How do I choose to be in whatever setting I find myself in?" and "What am I called to do in this world?"

- **We choose depth over speed and relatedness over scale.** The question "What do we want to create together?" is deceptively complicated. It implies a long journey crossing social, class, and institutional boundaries. Depth takes time and the willingness to engage. Belonging requires the courage to set aside our usual notions of

action and measuring success by the numbers touched. It also means that while we keep our own point of view, we leave our self-interest at the door and show up to learn rather than to advocate. These are the conditions whereby we find new places where we belong.

To stay with this thinking—that communal transformation is about the structure of gathering, letting the right questions evolve, and going slow with fewer numbers of people than we would like—we have to continue to shed certain conventional notions. For example, the dominant belief is that better or more leadership, programs, funding, expertise, studies, training, and master plans are the way to build community. Unfortunately, trying harder at these things gives us just a little more of what we already have. They are the path to improvement but not transformation.

Better leadership, funding, training, and the like are about fixing a set of symptoms or problems, which is the conventional conversation. What we want to explore is that way of thinking and being in community that allows our good will to make a real difference. These are ways of thinking and being that can help us choose a new context and find more effective ways to improve our structure of belonging.

Choosing Possibility over Problem Solving

Creating a future is different from defining a future. If our goal is to build social capital and to change the way that citizens are engaged with each other, then we have to shift our thinking about the roles that traditional strategy and problem solving take. We talked earlier about valuing gifts and possibility over needs and problems. Now we can be more detailed about what this looks like.

Our typical way of creating a future is by specifying the vision, the goals, and then defining a blueprint to achieve it. This is called a destination strategy for solving problems. Here are the strategic elements of traditional problem solving:

- **Identify a need.** Find a problem, need, or deficiency that we want to fix or improve.

- **Study and analyze the need.** Do research, assemble facts, survey people, organize survey results and data to make a compelling case for change.
- **Search for solutions.** Brainstorm alternatives. Benchmark where others have solved this deficiency. Bring in experts, consultants, academics, former leaders, and ex–public officials to provide good approaches.
- **Establish goals.** Set realistic and achievable goals, based on the vision. Define outcomes, narrow the effort toward results that can be achieved; the quicker and lower the cost the better. Search for the low-hanging fruit. Maybe initiate a pilot project to prove the viability of the strategy. Laminate the vision, mission, and goals to demonstrate the permanence of this intention.
- **Bring others on board.** Sell to key leaders, meet with citizens to define the effort and name the playing field. Enlist organizations and individuals to create an alliance for change. Publicize the burning platform and stress the urgency and the need for quick results. Give wide distribution to the laminate.
- **Implement.** Launch the program and drive it forward. Stay on message and measure at frequent intervals. Hold people accountable for results, fulfilling promises, and showing outcomes. Declare to others how accountable we are.
- **Loop back.** When the world intervenes and creates a bump in the road, begin the problem solving anew, identifying what went wrong and who was responsible, and initiating a clear oversight process so that this will not happen again.

The essence of these classic problem-solving steps is the belief that the way to make a difference in the world is to define problems and needs and then recommend actions to solve those needs. We are all problem solvers, action oriented, and results minded. It is illegal in this culture to leave a meeting without a to-do list. We want measurable outcomes and we want them now. And this all has such face validity that it seems foolish to argue in any way against it.

Also, this way of thinking does indeed work for many things, especially for the material world. It does not work well with human systems or when the desire is to create something out of nothing. In fact, it is this very mindset, one based on clear definition, prediction, and measurement, that prevents anything fundamental from changing. We still believe that in building a community, we are in effect building and operating a clock. Once again, problem solving makes things better, but it cannot change the nature of things. This insight is at the center of all the thinking about complex adaptive systems, emergent design, and the organic and self-regulating nature of the universe.

The limitations of a clockwork strategy for the future can be seen in one of the most popular forms of community problem solving: creating a vision. Most communities have at some point described a vision for themselves—these visions are developed as a way of defining the destination. (The new millennium was a great occasion for this.) These types of visions have value in that they bring many people together for the sake of development and they give form to the optimism we hold for ourselves. But they are limited in the power to transform because they assume that a defined destination can be reached in a linear path from where we are today. This is the fundamental assumption of the problem-solving model.

Most visions are based upon the belief that we know a lot about what constitutes an ideal or healthy community, which is true. There are many wonderful books that describe what a great community looks like. Jane Jacobs crystallized our thinking about the power of street life. Robert Putnam raised our consciousness about the centrality of social capital. John McKnight's work has built wide support for asset-based community development.

A community will take what it believes to be the thinking of people like these to produce a vision for itself, usually working through the city manager's or mayor's leadership or with group of community leaders. Often this produces, in turn, a neighborhood-by-neighborhood master plan for translating that vision into streets, buildings, services, and public spaces. Elected officials, corporate supporters, and public leaders then go on record supporting the vision and plan.

The challenge for community building is this: While visions, plans, and committed top leadership are important, even essential, no clear vision, nor detailed plan, nor committed group leaders have the power to bring

this image of the future into existence without the continued engagement and involvement of citizens. In most instances, citizen engagement ends when the plan is in place. The implementation is put in the hands of the professionals. In concept, the master plan provides some parameters for development and the use of space, but in real life it usually is a call to let the arguing begin. For all its utility, it rarely builds interdependence or strengthens the social fabric of a place.

What brings a fresh future into being is citizens who are willing to self-organize. An alternative future needs the investment of citizens—leaders not in top positions—who are willing to pay the economic and emotional price that creating something really new requires.

Therefore, the challenge for every community is not so much to have a vision of what it wants to become, or a plan, or specific timetables. The real challenge is to discover and create the means for engaging citizens that brings a new possibility into being. To state it more precisely, what gives power to communal possibility is the imagination and authorship of citizens led through a process of engagement. This is an organic and relational process. This is what creates a structure of belonging. This is more critical than the vision and the plan.

Example: Covington

In Covington, Kentucky, several city institutions together chose to use civic engagement as a way of developing a strategic plan for its civil servants and citizens. City Manager Jay Fossett, Center for Great Neighborhoods head Tom DiBello, and the head of the local business association, Gina Breyfogle, asked for help with a series of citizen gatherings to create the agenda for the city following the protocol suggested in this book. Under the leadership of Jeff Stec, a very talented local community builder, we invited the citizens of Covington to four public gatherings. Not to advise the leaders, but to define the priorities of the plan and to commit to making the strategic plan work. Five hundred people in a town of 44,000 showed up to do just this. At the end of the process, the city had its strategic plan—and more important, it had the commitment of a significant group of citizens signed up to make the plan work. Plus, perhaps most important, they strengthened the fabric of their community in the process.

Transformation is about altering the nature of our relatedness and changing the nature of our conversation, as in the community-building effort initiated by local leaders and government in Covington. The problem-solving mindset treats relatedness and language as means rather than the end itself. Therefore, it instrumentalizes relatedness and conversation, keeping problem solving the point.

What creates an alternative future is acting on the belief that context, relatedness, and language are the point, and that traditional problem solving needs to be subordinated and postponed until context, relatedness, and language have shifted. In this thinking, problem solving becomes a means, and not an end in itself.

We cannot problem-solve our way into fundamental change, or transformation, or community. To state it one more way: This is not an argument against problem solving; it is an assertion that the primary work is to shift the context and language and thinking about possibility within which problem solving takes place.

Problem solving leads to an alternative future only when it is embedded in a restorative context, one based on relatedness, generosity, and a focus on gifts. These are the conditions for a new possibility and a shift to shared accountability, and this is what creates a chance for authentic communal transformation. This shift requires us to change our idea of what constitutes action, so that what was once seen as a means to an end now is valued itself as action. Another key insight from Jim Keene, who has spent his life in the public arena, is, "Perhaps the purpose of problems is to give us an excuse to come together."

Expanding Our Idea of Action

Of course, just coming together has to provide some movement toward the future. Every time we meet, we want to feel that we have moved the action forward.

The question is, what qualifies as action? Traditionally, we want a strategy, and a list of next steps and milestones, and the knowledge of who will be responsible for them in order to be satisfied that we have spent our time well when we are together. Any change in the world will, in fact, need this

kind of action. To say, however, that this is all that counts as action is too narrow.

If we are to value building social fabric and belonging as much as budgets, timetables, and bricks and mortar, we need to consider action in a broader way. For example:

> Would a meeting be worthwhile if we simply strengthened our relationship?
>
> Would a meeting be worthwhile if we learned something of value?
>
> Suppose in a meeting we simply stated our requests of each other and what we were willing to offer each other. Would that justify our time together?
>
> Or, in the gathering, what if we only discussed the gifts we wanted to bring to bear on the concern that brought us together. Would that be an outcome of value?

Saying yes to these questions opens and widens the spectrum of what constitutes action, and this is the point. Relatedness, learning, requests, and offers of gifts are outcomes as valuable as agreements and next steps.

It is not that we are gathering just for the sake of gathering. Or gathering to get to know each other. We come together for an exchange of value and to experience how relatedness, gifts, learning, and generosity are valuable to community. When we name these as outcomes, it allows us to get completion for the investment we made without having to leave with a list for the future.

With this expanded notion of action, we can bring visioning, problem solving, and clearly defined outcomes into the room—and in fact we need them to sustain us. People will meet to learn and connect for only so long, and then a task is needed. The task doesn't have to be the main point of the gathering, but it is an essential point.

PART TWO

The Alchemy of Belonging

Certain properties of collective transformation create the conditions for greater belonging and stronger social fabric. Not that transformation can be reduced to a recipe or set of steps, but its properties can be seen as a combination of ingredients that give it a more concrete structure. Our attempt to convert lead into gold, as with the original alchemists, is part working with the right properties and part an act of faith and spirit.

> To gain the kingdom of heaven is to hear what is not said, to see what cannot be seen, and to know the unknowable.
>
> Hawaiian Queen Liliuokalani to her daughter, after she saw the end of her monarchy

Up to this point, we have said that transformation occurs when we shift context and value possibility, and this grows from a sense of belonging. We can now be specific about the means for making this happen. The following are the properties, in Christopher Alexander's terms, that, when undertaken with a consciousness of the whole, can produce a new future:

Leadership is convening.

The small group is the unit of transformation.

Questions are more transforming than answers.

Six conversations materialize belonging.

Hospitality, the welcoming of strangers, is central.

Physical and social space support belonging.

These provide the framework for the discussion of methodologies that put the ideas from Part One into practice.

CHAPTER 8

Leadership Is Convening

This is not an argument against leaders or leadership, only a desire to change the nature of our thinking. Communal transformation requires a certain kind of leadership, one that creates conditions where context shifts:

- *From a place of fear and fault to one of gifts, generosity, and abundance*
- *From a belief in more laws and oversight to a belief in social fabric and chosen accountability*
- *From the corporation and systems as central, to associational life as central*
- *From a focus on leaders to a focus on citizens*
- *From problems to possibility*

For this shift in context to occur, we need leadership that supports a restorative path. Restoration calls for us to deglamorize leadership and consider it a quality that exists in all human beings. We need to simplify leadership and construct it so that it is infinitely and universally available.

• • •

In communal transformation, leadership is about intention, convening, valuing relatedness, and presenting choices. It is not a personality characteristic or a matter of style, and therefore it requires nothing more than what all of us already have.

This means we can stop looking for leadership as though it were scarce or lost, or it had to be trained into us by experts. If our traditional form of leadership has been studied for so long, written about with such admiration, defined by so many, worshipped by so few, and the cause of so much disappointment, maybe doing more of all that is not productive. The search for great leadership is a prime example of how we too often take something that does not work and try harder at it.

I have written elsewhere about reconstructing *leader* as social architect. Not leader as special person, but leader as a citizen willing to do those things that have the capacity to initiate something new in the world. In this way, leader belongs right up there with cook, carpenter, artist, and landscape designer. It is a capacity that can be learned by all of us, with a small amount of teaching and an agreement to practice. The ultimate do-it-yourself movement.

Community building requires a concept of the leader as one who creates experiences for others—experiences that in themselves are examples of our desired future. The experiences we create need to be designed in such a way that relatedness, accountability, and commitment are every moment available, experienced, and demonstrated. David Isaacs of the World Café calls this "relational leadership."

This concept of leadership means that in addition to embracing their own humanity, which is the work of every person, the core task of leaders is to create the conditions for civic or institutional engagement. They do this through the power they have to name the debate and design gatherings. We use the term *gathering*, because the word has different associations from what we think of when we say "meeting." Most people do not even like meetings, and for good reason. They are frequently designed to explain, defend, express opinions, persuade, set more goals, and define steps—the result of which is to produce more of what currently exists. These kinds of meetings either review the past or embody the belief that better planning, better managing, or more measurement and prediction can create an alternative future. So the word *gathering* is intended to distinguish what we are talking about here, something with more significance than the common sense of *meeting*.

Engagement Is the Point

Leadership begins with understanding that every gathering 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 structure the place and experience of these occasions to move the culture toward shared ownership.

This is very different from the conventional belief that the task of leadership is to set a vision, enroll others in it, and hold people accountable through measurements and reward. Consider how most current leadership trainings assert the following:

- Leader and top are essential. They are role models who need to possess a special set of personal skills.
- The task of the leader is to define the destination and the blueprint to get there.
- The leader's work is to bring others on board. Enroll, align, inspire.
- Leaders provide for the oversight, measurement, and training needed (as defined by leaders).

Each of these beliefs elevates leaders as an elite group, singularly worthy of special development, coaching, and incentives. All of these beliefs have face validity, and they have unintended consequences. When we are dissatisfied with a leader, we simply try harder to find a new one who will perform more perfectly in the very way that led to our last disappointment. This creates a level of isolation, entitlement, and passivity that our communities cannot afford to carry.

The world does not need leaders to better define issues, or to orchestrate better planning or project management. What it needs is for the issues and the plans to have more of an impact, and that comes from citizen accountability and commitment. Engagement is the means through which there can be a shift in caring for the well-being of the whole, and the task of leader as convener is to produce that engagement.

The Art of Convening

The shift is to believe that the task of leadership is to provide context and produce engagement, to tend to our social fabric. It is to see the leader as one whose function is to engage groups of people in a way that creates accountability and commitment.

In this way of thinking we hold leadership to three tasks:

- Create a context that nurtures an alternative future, one based on gifts, generosity, accountability, and commitment.
- Initiate and convene conversations that shift people's experience, which occurs through the way people are brought together and the nature of the questions used to engage them.
- Listen and pay attention.

Convening leaders create and manage the social space within which citizens get deeply engaged. Through this engagement, citizens discover that it is in their power to resolve something or at least move the action forward. Engagement, and the accountability that grows out of it, occurs when we ask people to be in charge of their own experience and act on the well-being of the whole. Leaders do this by naming a new context and convening people into new conversations through questions that demand personal investment. This is what triggers the choice to be accountable for those things over which we can have power, even though we may have no control.

• • •

In addition to convening and naming the question, we add listening to the critical role of leadership. Listening may be the single most powerful action the leader can take. Leaders will always be under pressure to speak, but if building social fabric is important, and sustained transformation is the goal, then listening becomes the greater service.

This kind of leadership—convening, naming the question, and listening—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.

Example: Findley House

Seven Hills is a neighborhood center in the West End of Cincinnati. One of its locations is called Findley House, and a project there illustrates the power of engagement-centered listening. The story starts when four "leaders" were asked to work with a group of urban youths. The essence of the story is that they resisted the temptation to be helpful.

Joan and Michael Hoxsey and Geralyn and Tom Sparough were four white overeducated adults when they first met with a dozen streetwise African-American youths in what began as an intervention to help the youths, including a full curriculum on what these young men "ought" to learn about relationships.

Shortly into the effort, the Hoxseys and Sparoughs realized that to make any difference in the young men's lives, the adults had to try to understand who these young people were. So they threw out the curriculum and decided to simply hang out with the youths. They listened two nights a week for eight months. The listening was hard, the language was hard, the stories were heartbreaking.

At first it seemed the young men were unreachable, and any attempt to "help" would be futile. Then, at some point the adults' listening made a difference. The adults and the young people began to trust one another. As one young man put it, "The reason I respect you so much is because you may be the only people who really listen. Everyone wanted to tell us to 'pull up our pants' and tell us how to live." Something valuable was built, and in the end the "things" the adults wanted to teach about relationships were taught by simply changing the nature of the conversation.

In this same facility, there were two other programs for the youth started at the same time: GED training and computer skills training. Both of these programs had something in mind for the young men, something the leadership knew was best for them. By the end of this part of the program, the youths simply stopped showing up. Operating under the traditional ideas of good leadership, the GED program and the computer training program were gone. The youths rejected that kind of help.

Even when the program that brought the youths and the Hoxseys and Sparoughs together ended, these adults and youths continued to meet, and they are all currently working on a longer-term project: making a movie

about the crucible of choices facing young urban people. What turned out to be sustainable and durable over time is the program of listening and valuing run by the Hoxseys and Sparoughs, whom the youths decided to trust.

One of the challenges facing relational approaches such as this is that they do not measure well. If we were to take a conventional approach to measuring these efforts, we would look for computer skill improvement and how many got their GED diplomas. The report would give low marks to the easily measured expected outcomes. We would probably conclude that the youths were not ready to learn. We would not consider the computer and GED efforts a failure in leadership—that would be too strong an indictment of our current thinking.

The social outcomes of the Hoxseys' and Sparoughs' work would most likely not be valued by the assessment at all, nor would their leadership style show up as a positive factor. Conventional measures would miss the essence of the humanity and restraint that led to transformation in the form of a group of young African-Americans finding four white people, in positions of leadership, whom they could trust.

The Convening Capacity of Elected Officials

Elected officials are a special case of how we think about leadership and the art of convening. We have put elected officials in a difficult role. We distort them into service providers and suppliers. We relate to them as if we are consumers, not citizens. We want them to solve *for* us those issues that we should be solving for ourselves.

The customer model, in which elected officials exist to satisfy citizen demands, is a disservice to community, even though citizens love it. Elected officials are partners with citizens, not suppliers. The most useful role that elected officials can perform is to bring citizens together. They have this convening capacity like no one else in a city, but it is way underutilized. If elected officials take on this role as their primary one, we may still occasionally request that they pass some legislation or ordinance that serves us, but this should be the exception. If we continue to define elected officials primarily as legislators, then we are going to have to endure the results of their productivity.

Example: Cold Spring

Mark Stoeber is the mayor of Cold Spring, Kentucky, a small and mostly residential town. At some point he realized that the citizen complaints he was getting did not need an elected official to resolve. For example, he was getting complaints in one neighborhood about someone's dog. Mark decided that the complaint about the dog was a symptom of the lack of connectedness among neighbors. With the dog's behavior as cover, he asked one citizen to host a meeting in their home with other neighbors. Neighbors showed up, including the dog owner, and an agreement was reached. Social fabric became a little stronger. The mayor moved on to other things.

A year later, Mark decided to take another step and invited about 20 community leaders into a conversation with city council members. They met in council chambers, but not in the usual configuration. In Cold Spring, as in most cities, the council sits on a platform and citizens sit in seats on a lower level. For this meeting, everyone sat in chairs in circles at the same level in the council room. They arranged themselves in groups to sit with people they knew the least and talked about some of the questions we are discussing here: crossroads facing the town, the major gifts of the town and its citizens, doubts about anything really shifting, a look at the future demands facing the town, and what commitment they had to participate in engaging more people to develop the possibility called Cold Spring.

A small but symbolic beginning for an elected official deciding that the future economic development and quality of life of the town were dependent on the quality of relatedness of its citizens and its ability to bring those on the margin into the center.

Local government has two primary responsibilities. One is to sustain and improve the infrastructure of its community: roads, traffic, transportation, public safety, code enforcement, economic development, master planning, environment, and more. City managers and civil servants are well trained to do this and mostly do an excellent job at it.

The other role of local government is to build the social fabric of the community. They are in a key position to engage citizens in the well-being of the city. The challenge in doing this is enlarged by the structures they most often use to do it. The typical forms of engagement are city council meetings, public hearings, neighborhood summits, town hall meetings, and

any variety of speaking engagements and special events that they attend.

There is nothing in the current structure of these gatherings that encourages citizens to get connected to each other or to be engaged as producers of the future. Citizens show up as critics and consumers.

For local government to build social fabric and create the context for a restorative community, the form in which citizens are involved needs to change from a patriarchal, consumer model to a partnership model that takes advantage of the energizing power of the small group.