

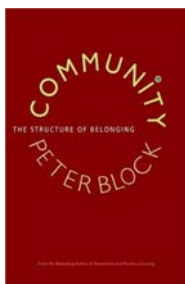
# On the Nature of Possibility Conversations

Fall 2013

Provost Belle W. Y. Wei has invited us to participate in ‘possibility’ conversations so that we may discern and create the Academic Affairs’ future *together*. She invites us to shift from reacting to the past to opening up what might emerge from the future.

This document has three goals in mind. First, it will explain briefly what possibility conversations are. Second, it will feature “dialogue” as the center piece of a new way of talking with each other. Third, it will introduce another concept, “three intelligences,” to assist people to engage in dialogue effectively.

## Possibility Conversations



We use an important book *Community: The Structure of Belonging*<sup>1</sup> by Peter Block to guide how we do conversations together. Block observes that many of our communities are fragmented and at odds within themselves. We are separated into silos. We are at best a collection of programs operating near one another but not overlapping or touching. But there is a way out. Block suggests that each of us has the power to help overcome this fragmentation, open up a way of restoration and create an alternative future.

To do so, ‘new conversations’ may be used as the means through which we dissolve fragmentation and bring out people’s collective wisdom. To be effective, these conversations focus on ways to shift context, build relatedness, and create space for more intentional possibilities.

Let us begin by shifting context: Move beyond concerns, problems, and deficiencies. Focus on existing social capital, collective possibility and a willingness to speak into the future. This means to create a more positive and connected future. We trade problems for possibilities.

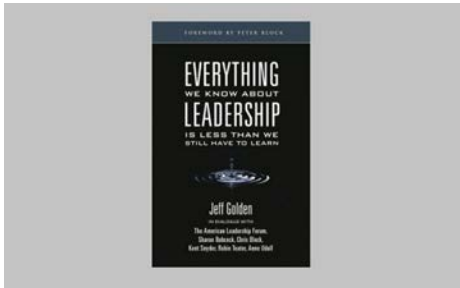
Let us build relatedness: Work with each other as partners and come to the conversation as creators of community and future. See ourselves as creators of new circumstances rather than victims of circumstances.

---

<sup>1</sup> Peter Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging*, San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koshler Publishers, Inc., 2008. See also: Peter Block, *The Answer to How is Yes: Acting on What Matters*, San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koshler Publishers, Inc., 2003.

Let us create intentional possibilities: A response like: “Go ahead, whatever you want is fine with me. I don’t care,” does not claim our place as creators and participants in community. To paraphrase Marshall McLuhan, “There are no passengers on spaceship Chico State. We are all crew.” Collectively, that is, we shape our destiny: **Our Time, Our Future!**

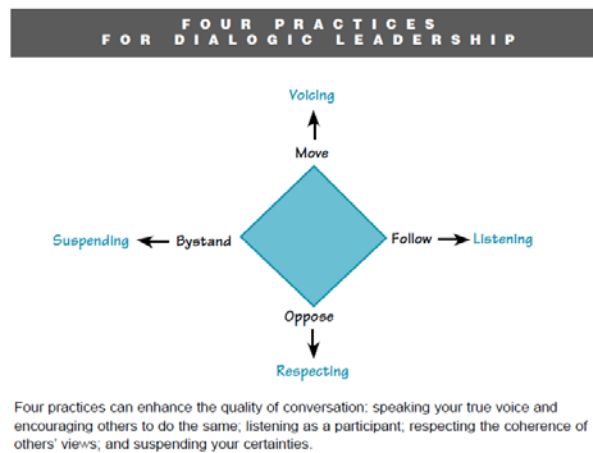
## Dialogue Rather Than Debate



New conversations emphasize ‘dialogue’ over ‘debate’ or ‘discussion.’ The word ‘debate’ is more likely to conjure up images of arguing for the correctness of one position and arguing against the perspectives of others who hold different positions. “We do not listen, we reload!”

Dialogue is a qualitatively different kind of exchange.<sup>2</sup> In dialogue, we use the energy differently; we welcome our differences in order to enhance collective wisdom. We begin to think *together*—not simply reiterate old thoughts and report out old narratives. We listen deeply, and hold space for and respect other people’s views. We broaden awareness and perspective. In debate we ask “Who is winning?” In Dialogue we ask “What are we learning and where can change for the better occur?”

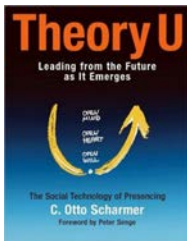
David Kantor has proposed a ‘four player Dialogue model’ to help us understand the dynamics of ‘generative’ dialogue. The model identifies four p that are needed for a successful dialogue: a) listening, b) respecting, c) suspending, and d) voicing (*Isaac, p.3*).



<sup>2</sup> From David Bohm, *On Dialogue*, New York, NY: Routledge, 1996; Jeff Golden, *Everything We Know about Leadership Is Less than We Still Have to Learn*, Houston, TX: American Leadership Forum, 2013 (p. 91) and William N. Isaacs, *Dialogical Leadership, The Systems Thinker*, Vol. 10, Number 1, February 1999.

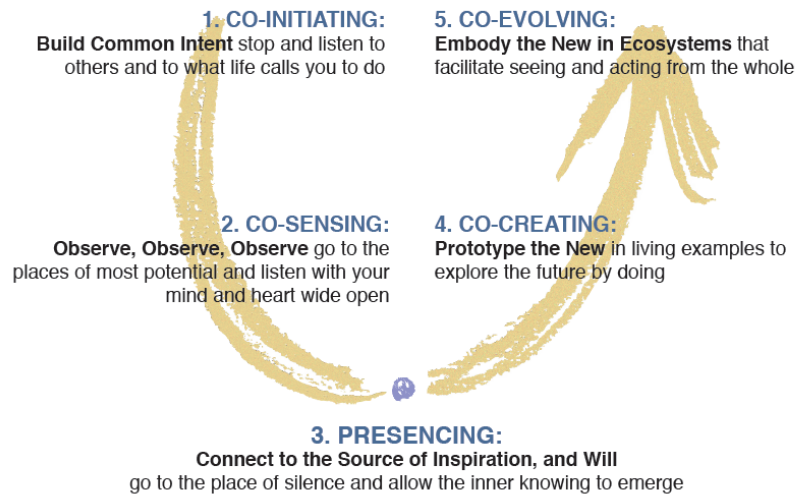
A central dimension of ‘dialogue’ is the emergence of a balance between advocacy and inquiry, that is, a balance between the positions participants advocate and their willingness to inquire into their own and other participants’ perspectives. Conveners of possibility conversations constantly look for ways to maintain this balance in participants’ interactions so that collective wisdom may emerge and inform the creation of an alternate future. As William N. Isaacs notes, dialogue is the “art of thinking together or the capacity of accessing collective intelligence.”

## Open Mind, Open Heart and Open Will



C. Otto Scharmer in his book *Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges* further elaborates and theorizes about how to create alternate futures. He, too, focuses on conversation and dialogue as means to shifts in the quality of thinking, conversing and collective action. When these shifts occur, people can, he argues, connect to a ‘deeper source of creativity and knowing and move beyond the patterns of the past.’<sup>3</sup>

Scharmer refers to three intelligences—those of the *open mind*, the *open heart* and the *open will*—that are involved in a ‘journey with five movements.’



<sup>3</sup> C. Otto Scharmer, *Theory U Leading from the Future as It Emerges*, San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2009. For an executive summary of Theory U, see: <http://www.presencing.com/executivesummary>

Like Bohm, Isaacs and Block, Scharmer sees listening as a foundational capacity. Listening to others. Listening to oneself. And listening to what emerges from the collective. The *open mind* focuses on our modes of inquiry and our suspension of judgment; the seeing of something with fresh eyes. The *open heart* directs us to the well-being of the whole and accesses our emotional intelligence. The *open will* tunes into the future and lets go of our old identities and intentions. When all three levels of openings occur, we learn from our past, augment that with what we learn from the future as it emerges, and commit to *doing* things differently, not just talking about it.

## Fall 2013 New Conversations

The Provost has invited us to a series of ‘possibility conversation’ in which dialogue is used to create a common vision of the future for the Division of Academic Affairs. In dialogue, we move from seeing the division as something outside of ourselves to seeing ourselves as part of the division. We move beyond the boundaries of our individual viewpoints and begin to look at our collectively-enacted patterns as part of the bigger picture or condition of the academic community.

Please join us in reclaiming that ‘Special Sense of Place’ and that ‘Special Sense of Community.’

TODAY ▽ DECIDES ▽ TOMORROW