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The future of creativity is relational

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 **2nd JTBD Summit –**

By: **Chuck Frey**

The future of creativity is relational, based upon engaging and connecting with others, according to author and consultant Peggy Noonan.

Interview #26 in the Creativity in Business Thought Leader Series is with Seattle-based author and consultant Peggy Holman, who works with social technologies that engage “whole systems” of people from organizations and communities in creating their own future. She consults on strategies for enabling diverse groups to face complex issues by turning presentation into conversation and passivity into participation. In the second edition of *The Change Handbook*, she joins with her co-authors to profile 61 change processes.

Winner of the 2011 gold Nautilus Award for conscious business/leadership, her latest book, **Engaging Emergence: Turning Upheaval into Opportunity**, dives beneath these change methods to share stories that make visible deeper patterns, principles, and practices for change that can guide us through turbulent times. Since 1996, she has worked with a range of organizations, including Microsoft, Biogen Idec, Novartis, Boeing, and the Gates Foundation. You can learn more about Peggy [at her at her website](#).

Q: How does your work relate to creativity?

Holman: Much of my work is reminding people of their innate ability to engage with disruption and difference to achieve great outcomes. At the heart of their success is creative engagement – connecting with ideas, each other, the whole system, even themselves.

When disturbed, most of us would rather hunker down someplace safe. This attitude kills creativity. Negativity and despair are all around. When you hear them, it’s a great opportunity to creatively engage. Ask a question of possibility. Take a stand for connection in a time of separation.

Q: What do you see as the new paradigm of work?

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Holman: I see a shift underway from hierarchies to networks. The implications for what leadership looks like are profound. Not only can it come from anywhere, but if you consider the dynamics of networks, what constitutes leadership varies more.

Think about the difference between pack animals, with alpha leaders keeping others in line versus birds, ants, bees, or other animals that seem to function with no one in charge. In hierarchies, a few people make strategic decisions for everyone else. Increasing complexity – a more diverse public, greater access to a broader range of perspectives, technological innovations affecting scale and scope of just about everything – makes this strategy less effective. No longer can a few people with relatively similar backgrounds and perspectives make the best choices for the rest of us

In contrast, leadership in networks is collective and relational, as people form hubs and link with others. From the outside, hubs in a network look a lot like hierarchical organizations: groups of people organized to accomplish something together. That makes it easy to confuse leadership of a hub with hierarchical leadership, thinking the same rules apply. Not! Giving orders, chain of command, top-down decision making doesn't function when people can choose whether to participate.

Hubs form because people are attracted to them. Hubs grow when people are drawn to the purpose and/or the people and believe that they can both give and/or receive something of value. The remarkable communities that maintain the Wikipedia or fill the Open Source software movement are examples of networks producing real-world benefit.

More elusive is “link leadership” – connecting people, organizations, and ideas. Why is connecting people or organizations a form of leadership? If you want breakthroughs, interactions among those who don't usually meet is an essential ingredient. And when hubs connect to hubs, ideas can spread like wildfire.

Q: What do you see the role of creativity in that paradigm?

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Holman: I think networked organizations are inherently creative, not to mention more responsive, resilient, and fun. Since leadership can come from anywhere, the possibilities are endless.

Q: What skills, mindsets and behaviors do you see as most essential for effectively navigating the new work paradigm?

Holman: A core skill that makes networks powerful is taking responsibility for what you love as an act of service. That's a mouthful, so let me unpack it a bit.

This game-changing way of operating liberates hearts, minds, and spirits. It calls us to pay attention to what matters most, putting our unique gifts to use. You see, many of us live with an unspoken belief that to belong, we must conform. If we each pursued what we love, it sounds like a recipe for chaos. What a loss! Not only is more of the same the outcome, but by keeping our feelings and ideas bottled up, we become more isolated and the group's creative potential is diminished.

In contrast, networks thrive when we contribute our unique gifts. Since what binds a network together is shared purpose, by pursuing what I love, my distinctiveness rubs up against other's differences and suddenly we're playing jazz. Everyone's part is different and it matters. Not only do I belong, but I do it by being the best me I can be.

Q: What is one practice that people could start applying today to bring more creativity into their work or their business^[1] organization?

Holman: If I were to pick on practice that is simple to apply and powerful in its affect, I'd say: welcome disturbance by asking questions of possibility. Creativity often shows up in a cloak of disruption. It makes sense when you stop and think about it. If there were no disruption, there'd be no reason for change. And change opens the door to creativity.

Great questions help us to find possibilities in any situation, no matter how challenging. Here are some of their characteristics:

- They open us to possibilities.

- They are bold yet focused.
- They are attractive: diverse people can find themselves in them.
- They appeal to our head and our heart.
- They serve the individual and the collective.

Some examples:

- What question, if answered, would make a difference in this situation?
- What can we do together that none of us could do alone?
- What could this team also be?
- What is most important in this moment?
- Given what has happened, what is possible now?

Some tips for asking possibility-oriented questions:

1. Ask questions that increase clarity: Positive images move us toward positive actions. Questions that help us to envision what we want help us to realize it.

2. Practice turning deficit into possibility: In most ordinary conversations, people focus on what they can't do, what the problems are, what isn't possible. Such conversations provide an endless source for practicing the art of the question. When someone says, "The problem is x," ask, "What would it look like if it were working?" If someone says, "I can't do that," ask, "What would you like to do?"

3. Recruit others to practice with you: You can have more fun and help each other grow into the habit of asking possibility-oriented questions. But watch out: it can be contagious. You might attract a crowd.

Q: Finally, what is creative leadership to you?

Holman: Creative leadership is engaged, curious, open, focused, and bold. Boldness inspires us to rise to the occasion. Focus points the way. Curiosity sparks exploration and pioneering. And engagement brings the diversity of others.

Asking possibility-oriented questions as one means of exercising creative leadership. So the next time you face a complex issue or disruptive situation, ask a great question. Then jump in with others to discover a creative response.

Peggy Holman will be a panelist at the upcoming [Creativity in Business Conference](#) in Washington, DC on October 23, 2011. Michelle James is CEO of The [Center for Creative Emergence](#).

August 10th, 2011 | Tags: [act of service](#), [change](#), [collective](#), [connection](#), [creative leadership](#), [Creativity](#), [disruption](#), [hubs](#), [ideas](#), [Interview](#), [leadership](#), [networked organizations](#), [networks](#), [open source](#), [participation](#), [possibility-oriented questions](#), [relational](#), [resilient](#), [responsibility](#), [responsive](#), [shared purpose](#), [social technologies](#), [whole systems](#)

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