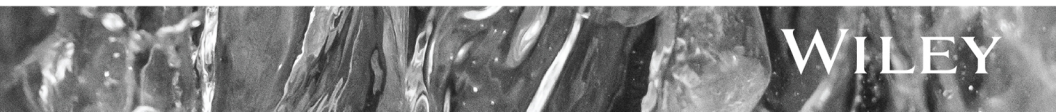




# CONFRONTING OUR FREEDOM

LEADING A CULTURE  
OF CHOSEN  
ACCOUNTABILITY  
AND BELONGING

PETER BLOCK • PETER KOESTENBAUM



WILEY



## **Praise for *Confronting Our Freedom***

These two authors—Peter and Peter—offer us an exposition that will burst open many of our best assumptions and categories of interpretation. They range widely into our economy; they dig deeply into our most intimate and demanding relationships; and they probe honestly into issues that divide and summon our society. The sum of this is fresh thinking about the great gift of freedom and our shared responsibility for the wellbeing of our society. These authors come at issues in fresh ways. It is not a surprise that their judgments result in a profound summons to us.

**—Walter Brueggemann,**  
Columbia Theological Seminary

*Confronting Our Freedom: Leading a Culture of Chosen Accountability and Belonging* is a book of its time where distributed work and post-pandemic living have ushered in a new set of challenges and opportunities when it comes to how we want to live and work. This book is another foundational work by Peter Block that will serve a new generation of thinkers when it comes to asking the big questions about what is a company and how does it serve in the world.

**—Rob Locascio,**  
Founder and CEO Live Person, Inc

*In Confronting Our Freedom*, Peter provides a radical departure from organizational life as we know it. He invites us to deconstruct long-held practices and ways of being in the workplace that prioritize control, predictability, and an unhelpful relationship between leader and employee. Many of these practices we in Human Resources have created and perpetuated with the best of intentions. After reading *Confronting Our Freedom*, I am inspired to reimagine how different our workplaces could be when we believe freedom is inherent in every

person and accountability is chosen rather than induced. This is a must-read for everyone practicing human resources in today's workplace.

—**Tonya Harris Cornileus**,  
PhD, Senior Vice President, Learning & Talent Solutions,  
The Walt Disney Company

Peter Block has a unique gift: to invite each of us to imagine a different future and then he inspires us to do what we need to do to co-create that future. My hope is that *Confronting Our Freedom* will ignite a global conversation toward a new narrative around leadership and organizations. What if we took these ideas seriously? What if we could figure out how to dismantle taken-for-granted and often oppressive structures, processes, and ways of working and work together to co-create organizations with freedom at the core? I hope that many will be inspired to read this book, join the conversation, and do what they can to co-create a more just and equitable world.

—**Louise van Rhyen**, DMAN  
Founder, Partners for Possibility

*Confronting Our Freedom* is the philosophic foundation from which a new social contract and architecture can emanate. It is a guide to social alchemist and architect alike. Our understanding of how to reclaim our capacity to create the world we inhabit can be found its pages.

—**Peter Pula**  
Founder, Axiom News and Convenor,  
Cultivating the Great Community

This is an insightful book about restructuring the world for freedom and collective accountability. It reminds us of the habits we are resigning from and a new meaning for accountability in our lives.

—**John McKnight**  
Cofounder, Asset-Based Community Development  
Institute, author of *The Careless Society*, coauthor of  
*Building Communities from the Inside Out*,  
*The Abundant Community*, and *An Other Kingdom*

Peter Block is the quintessential collaborator—who brings out the best in his colleagues, companions, clients, and friends. This is especially true in *Confronting Our Freedom* where he teams up with the existential philosopher of commerce Peter Koestenbaum to examine the ideas and practices we most need to re-invigorate our post-pandemic era. The result is an inspiring invitation to go deeper into the meaning of exactly what it is we do in our work lives, why and how we do it, and what it ultimately means to ourselves, our world, our posterity, and the earth.

**—Robert Inchausti**

Author, *The Ignorant Perfection of Ordinary  
People and Spitwad Sutras: Classroom Teaching  
as Sublime Vocation*

I often ask, “What has COVID taught us about living well?” This book answered that question for me in surprising ways. There is profound wisdom in these writings and the thoughts shared. Freedom is a choice, as is belonging. A better way of living at work and in the world is possible and it starts within. Do take the time to read this book.

**—Paul Born**

Cofounder, Tamarack Institute and author of  
*Deepening Community* and *Breakthrough  
Community Change*

These are prophetic voices of freedom that humanity and the world of organizing and work need today! The Peters are serving up a provocative portion of “philosophic insight” with the intent to place us each at the center of our own lives and institutions. *Confronting Our Freedom* captures the essence of freedom and its natural presence in our lives, a personal freedom, as a “profound way of thinking” about *us* that both Peter Block and Peter Koestenbaum have called forth in their work. Both complex and elegantly simple, they share that “our will is free” and all that may mean. Through the exploration of this freedom we

each hold, they ask us profoundly what are we willing to be accountable for? A question that serves as an invitation to the power and free will of our own life, and the future we choose to create.

**—Gary Mangiofico, Ph.D.**

Executive Professor of Leadership and  
Management, and Academic Director, Pepperdine  
University, Graziadio Business School

With the powerful, philosophical, and provocative ideas in *Confronting Our Freedom*, Peter and Peter invite us to take what we thought was peripheral and bring it to the center of our awareness, to shift from considering freedom as an escape from fears, constraints, burdens, and limitations to understanding freedom as the opportunity to be the creator in the unfolding of our own lives, replete with the anxiety that will entail!

**—Charles Holmes**

CE Holmes Consulting, Inc.

It is a daunting challenge to capture the brilliance and importance of what Peter has written in this latest book. He provides a way forward from being stuck personally and organizationally, but only if we have the courage and insight to take responsibility for our choices and accept the anxiety that goes along with being free. *Confronting Our Freedom* is a practical and at depth a spiritual call to reflection and to authenticity that we so urgently need in our lives and for the organizations we serve.

**—Ward Mailliard**

Founding Member of Mount Madonna Center

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## **Selected Works**

### **Also by Peter Block**

*An Other Kingdom: Departing the Consumer Culture*, with Walter Brueggemann and John McKnight

*Community: The Structure of Belonging*

*The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods*, with John McKnight

*The Answer to How Is Yes: Acting on What Matters*

*Flawless Consulting: A Guide to Getting Your Expertise Used*

*Stewardship: Choosing Service over Self-Interest*

*The Empowered Manager: Positive Political Skills at Work*

*The Flawless Consulting Fieldbook & Companion: A Guide to Understanding Your Expertise*, with 30 Flawless Consultants and Andrea M. Markowitz

### **Also by Peter Koestenbaum**

*Freedom and Accountability at Work: Applying Philosophic Insight to the Real World*, co-authored with Peter Block

*The Language of the Leadership Diamond®* (videotape with Peter Block)

*Leadership: The Inner Side of Greatness—A Philosophy for Leaders*

*The Heart of Business: Ethics, Power, and Philosophy*

*Managing Anxiety: The Power of Knowing Who You Are.*

*The New Image of the Person: The Theory and Practice of Clinical Philosophy*

*Existential Sexuality: Choosing to Love*

*Is There an Answer to Death?*

*The Vitality of Death: Essays in Existential Psychology and Philosophy*



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*To Ari Weinzeig. An entrepreneur who understands that  
philosophy and enterprise are one and the same thing.*

# Note to Readers

## *About how to put the ideas in this book into practice*

A more specific methodology for the path toward distributing agency and choice can be found in a series of videos and podcasts at <https://www.peterblock.com/the-six-conversations/> and <https://www.peterblock.com/interviews/common-good-podcast/>.

## *About Peter Koestenbaum's quotations*

Material quoted from Peter Koestenbaum throughout is taken from two previously published books. Sources for the quotations are identified in text as follows:

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1978 *The New Image of the Person: Theory and Practice of Clinical Philosophy* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978).

1971 *The Vitality of Death: Essays in Existential Psychology and Philosophy* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1971).

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# Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>xv</i>
<i>Prologue: Then Was the Moment</i>	<i>xix</i>
<i>The past is not past</i>	<i>xx</i>
<i>What lies ahead</i>	<i>xxii</i>
<b>Introduction: The Philosophic Insight</b>	<b>1</b>
Conversations on freedom and accountability	4
The view from where we are	7
Parenting is the origin story of management and leadership	14
Shifting the historical context	17
Philosophic insight in the world of organized effort	20
The existential understanding	28
<b>Chapter 1 The Power and Structure of Freedom</b>	<b>31</b>
Rewards	35
Freedom, reality, choice, and will	35
Accepting our freedom	37
The fundamental insight	39
Implications: The forms of freedom	42
Choice, reality, and will	55

<b>Chapter 2</b>	<b>The Potential of Anxiety</b>	<b>59</b>
	The fruits of your patience	62
	Solving anxiety	64
	The promise of anxiety	66
	The language of freedom: It was an inside job	68
	Shifting the context to freedom and accountability	71
	Implications: Anxiety as an ally of accountability both central to performance in a time of permanent uncertainty	72
	The permanent condition	80
	Being conscious	82
<b>Chapter 3</b>	<b>Speaking of Death and Evil</b>	<b>85</b>
	Death is an option	89
	A storm in the shelter	91
	Facing reality. Taking charge of our life.	93
	A summary of usefulness of the reality of death	95
	The presence of evil	97
	Denying the reality of evil	99
	Do no harm	101
	Implications: failure, fear, death, and evil	103
<b>Chapter 4</b>	<b>Fully Human Organizations</b>	<b>117</b>
	Guilty as chosen and guilty as charged	119
	The sounds of freedom	124
	Reversing the illusion of clear roles and expectations	125
	Not enough	126
	Our expectations	128
	What are we to do?	131
	Real and chosen accountability? Fully human organizations	136

## Contents

xiii

<i>Epilogue: Final Words from the Philosopher</i>	145
<i>References and Background Reading</i>	149
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	151
<i>About the Authors</i>	155
<i>Index</i>	159
<i>About Designed Learning</i>	165





# Preface

Twenty years ago, the first version of this book rested at the intersection of philosophy and leadership in a practical world. That effort was organized around the voice and thinking of Peter Koestenbaum, an existential philosopher who, after decades of teaching and writing about life and death, vision and reality, turned his attention to the business world. As his attention shifted to business leadership, “The Leadership Diamond” and its variations were published. The cornerstone of this philosophy was the idea that freedom, with its innate appeal and risks, was an essential aspect of being human. And that how we organize work and institutional life was a major player in encouraging or setting limits on our freedom.

Now the world has caught up with the philosopher. A post-pandemic world no longer whispers about freedom. No longer thinks freedom has to be postponed, waiting to be purchased by making your number. Or waiting for the empty nest or counting the years to retirement.

The pandemic gave many more people a taste of not going to a workplace. Technology has long made working at a distance commonplace. People in notable numbers are torn about going back to their workplace. Many of those wanting

to keep their jobs do not want to return to the office. Some companies, in turn, are forcing employees to return to the office. It is complicated.

This book rests on the ideas of freedom and accountability. Especially how they fit into our ideas and practices that occur in our places of work. It reframes how we think about the common practices that are the essence of most jobs. It is intended to question our management practices. And offer an alternative. It is ultimately a friendly whisper into how we might think about the common practices that are the essence of most jobs. It is in essence a friendly whisper into how we might question our assumptions about consistency, control, and predictability. Even in organizations that rate highly in employee satisfaction. Best places to work and the like.

There resides in the words that follow an invitation toward freedom. Freedom as a pathway to accountability, which is what management, in the end, is after. Words create a world. Personally, and in the work I continue to do with organizations and communities, there remains the confusion between freedom, liberty, license, revolution, and rebellion. “Freedom fighter” poses a world where someone is withholding your freedom against your will. Even more compelling is the idea that freedom, as used here, is what creates real accountability. For our children, our workplace and our community. Structuring our world for freedom is the path to a collective accountability that puts entitlement and certainty in their proper places. And it is possible as we experience the reality we hold in our hands and feel under our feet all that matters, we will shop less, care for the earth more, and extract less.

Today's conventional thinking is little changed since the industrial revolution took hold a few hundred years ago. The industrial revolution, symbolized by the linen mills of Glasgow, was a radical moment where productivity, the speed and cost of making something, became the point. It replaced independent sources of livelihood, access to common land, and a craft culture. It introduced the idea of a labor force and employment. People were driven off the land and into the cities by enclosure. The promise was a middle class where you had your own lace curtains. Management became the way of organizing human effort, and accountability became a way of holding people. It became the rationale for carrots and sticks, motivation, and rewards for compliance and performance. It introduced the idea that manager was cause and worker was effect. Before industrialization, worker was both cause and effect.

The point here is to explore this way of thinking as one construct, rather than the truth about what works. To question what freedom might bring to where we assemble. To remind us that freedom is in our nature. And that it can be put to good use. Eve knew that and she expressed her freedom through cuisine.

Same with accountability. Why isn't this the first choice each of us will make, every day of the week, on everything that matters to us? Perhaps we were born to choose accountability.

Instead of celebrating and naturalizing freedom and accountability, we live in structures and practices and solutions that are a mixture of treading water and living in the habits of monarchy and colonialism. Having endured the pandemic, which exposed our habits that we are resigning from, we are in a moment to create a shift with a central appreciation that our freedom is present and no waiting is necessary.