

Creativity Without Control¹

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Why leaders need to be more like hosts and less like heroes.

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Computers can't function without an operating system. The operating system manages all interactions and communications between the computer hardware and its software. Whenever we download new programs or plug in a new toy, the operating system does the work of integrating these applications—ideally, without crashing.

Within this complex environment, order is achieved because every application is built using the same source code (instructions written in a programming language). Programmers work from this code to create new apps, games and gizmos. No matter what they create, they use the same source code.

Microsoft keeps a strong proprietary grip on its source code; only those who sign a formal agreement can work with it. The corporation charges expensive licensing fees and maintains control over the system's boundaries, expressions and uses.

By contrast, the Linux operating system is free and open source, meaning anyone can use its source code. Without fees and entrance barriers, this open system promotes creativity and experimentation. Developers agree to share their work freely. Whatever is created can be used, modified and redistributed among members of the community of software developers. As a by-product of these exchanges, the Linux culture has become one in which people feel "we're all in this together."

In Western culture, most leaders behave like Microsoft. They hold power close, telling people what they can and can't do. Rather than engaging everyone's creativity using the same source code—the organization's values and principles—they design rigid hierarchies, assign tasks. But hierarchy isn't interested in apps.

The art of hosting is like Linux, freely offering its source code for leaders to use in achieving order without control. Their code is a set of principles and practices concerning how to host conversations that matter: setting intentions, creating hospitable space, asking powerful questions, surfacing collective intelligence, trusting emergence, harvesting learning and moving into wise action.

¹ <http://odewire.com/136030/creativity-without-control.html>

Like Linux, the art-of-hosting operating system encourages sharing worldwide. What's emerging is a vibrant global community of people discovering that the wisdom we need exists in all of us, not in any one of us—even so-called heroes.

We all love a hero. Something keeps us hoping that somebody somewhere knows what to do and will get us out of this mess. If a hero rushes in, we're off the hook for solving our problems. We're so hungry for heroes that we create them out of thin air, no act of bravery required.

Our beliefs feed our trust in heroic leadership: "Leaders have the answers." "High risk requires high control." When we believe this, we give away power. We wait for our leaders to act, assuming they know what they're doing. But we're caught in a terrible illusion. When problems are complex, there are no simple answers; no one person, no matter how brilliant, can make things better.

Submitting to heroic leadership may be effective in the moment; it may even feel good. But it assumes that someone is in control. In our turbulent world, things that we have no control over—that no one has control over—can change our lives forever. Today's highly complex systems have emerged over time through thousands of small, local actions, and they cannot be untangled even by the boldest visions of our most heroic leaders.

If we want to find solutions to our most challenging problems, we need to transform our ideas about effective leadership. We need to walk out of our reliance on the leader-as-hero and invite in the leader-as-host. Leaders who act as hosts are welcoming, caring and respectful of the people with whom they work, just as if they were guests in these leaders' homes.

So much becomes possible when leaders rely on other people's creativity and commitment. These leaders bear witness to people's capacity to engage in work, to collaborate well and to stay engaged long enough to discover solutions. Leaders learn to trust everyone has gifts to offer and that most people want to work on behalf of something greater than themselves. In some cases, these leaders serve as mirrors, so people can see their skills and potential, which may have been buried under years of disregard.

Over time, as conversational processes become the normal way of meeting, communities discover they have new skills. They can examine problems in depth, make use of each other's diverse insights and create robust solutions. Leaders, and those they happily host, take on large-scale, intractable problems and find themselves to be capable of solving them. Maybe this is why the art of hosting as an operating system for change is spreading like freeware through organizations and communities all over the world.

This is an adapted excerpt from *Walk Out Walk On: A Learning Journey into Communities Daring to Live the Future Now* (Berrett-Koehler) by **Margaret Wheatley**.