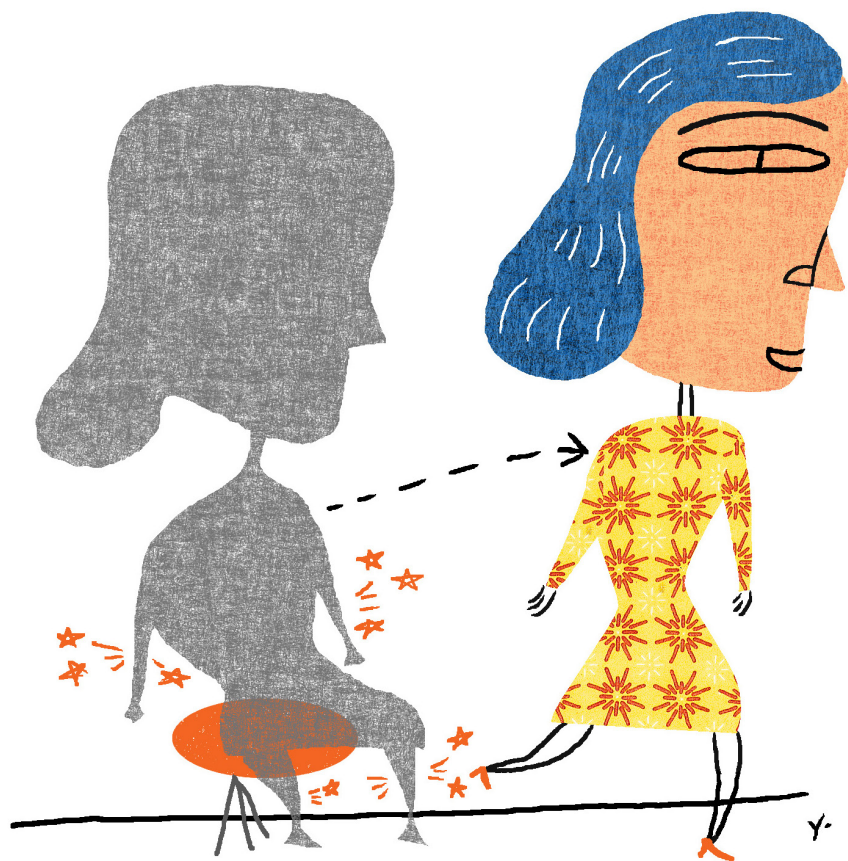




Grow Yourself, Grow Your Team, Grow Your Business: The Challenge for Today's Leaders

Judith H. Katz



How can leaders practise new behaviors when everyone is watching their every move?

This dilemma has long challenged leaders and those who advise them. Changing behavior is no simple task - no matter how committed leaders are to the new state - because they live in an organizational fishbowl: everyone is watching them carefully and missteps are met with cynicism. How can they safely experiment with, and move toward, internalizing new behaviors? How can they get honest, constructive feedback to learn how their behavior is impacting others?

To create a breakthrough, leaders need a supportive environment in which to grow, learn, and hear honest feedback. In the past 18 months, we have developed a process to foster that environment - with remarkable results to date. It goes by the simple name of *Pod*.

Creating the Pod

Pod is not an acronym. Rather, the word describes a small group that comes together to support the leader on her or his learning journey. (Think of peas in a pod!)

The Pod process begins with each leader committing to practise and live two new behaviors, as identified through a self-assessment in which the leader identifies where she or he is today and where she or he wants to be three months from now. Leaders make their commitments public by sharing the self-assessment results with others (such as their peers, direct reports, and eventually their Pod).

To create their Pods, leaders select a small group of people - typically six to eight - to provide feedback on their

behavior over the course of a year. Pods meet quarterly, at a minimum; most meet every four to six weeks. Leaders select Pod members to reflect a diversity of backgrounds, functions, and levels, and with one thing in common: they all interact with the leader on a regular basis and can provide specific feedback based on that interaction. A leader's Pod might, for example, include a peer in another division or department, an HR professional, a recognized change agent, a direct report, someone who supports the leader from another function, or individuals at other levels of the organization. All Pod members must be willing to provide honest feedback about the leader's behavior - both areas in which the leader is doing well and those in which improvement or development is needed - so the leader can continue to strive toward her or his goals, and consistently model and live the new behaviors.



The key is that *leaders choose the Pod members themselves*, with help from their change lead (a dedicated resource responsible for supporting the organization in implementing major strategies). The act of choosing members enables leaders to create a safe space for themselves to focus intently on how they can improve their behavior. Diversity of experience, background, and perspective is essential in members to ensure that leaders receive the broadest possible range of perspectives on their behavior - a 360-degree view that enables them to understand fully both the impact they are having now and the opportunities they have to strengthen their leadership through the new behaviors.

The work of the Pod

It may sound simplistic to say that Pods work in any way the leader wants them to, yet this is true in many respects. Most Pods, however, have some elements in common. The launch of a Pod requires considerable preparation. After a leader has identified Pod members and sent them a personal invitation, the change lead meets with the leader to discuss what she or he wants to get from the experience. This meeting also serves to clarify which behaviors the leader is working on, and how the Pod can give feedback on them.

Similarly, the change lead meets with Pod members to make them comfortable with giving honest, even challenging, feedback to the leader. For many people, this is one of the more difficult aspects of the Pod process, and it represents a major mindshift: people have been taught not to give feedback up the organization - as the phrase goes today, "Don't speak truth to power" - and they worry that it could be a career-limiting move, with possible retribution. In this context, the Pod will become a learning experience for all involved as a safe environment is created for interaction that leans into discomfort and enables honest, deep dialogue.

Thus prepared, Pods meet regularly to provide specific feedback on the behaviors the leader is addressing. As the Pod members work together they, too, are working on their own behavioral agenda, applying the 12 Inclusive Behaviors as the foundation for their interactions (listed in the sidebar). Between meetings, members may collect feedback from others in the organization, to enable them to use this feedback along with their own observations and experiences to support and challenge the leader.

Some Pod members, when hearing input from other Pod members with which they agree, may resist adding their perspectives for fear of "piling on the leader." One of the biggest challenges in Pods, then, is not only to give feedback to leaders but to give it in a group setting. In many of today's organizations, the drive to protect leaders is so strong that it deters providing feedback (whether positive or negative) - and yet that feedback may make all the difference to the leader's behavior and growth.

12 Inclusive Behaviors

1. Greet people authentically - say "hello."
2. Create a sense of "safety" for yourself and your team members.
3. Work for the common good and shared success.
4. Listen as an ally - listen, listen, listen and engage.
5. Be BIG: Lean into discomfort - be willing to challenge self and others.
6. Put your stake in the ground and be willing, eager and able to move it.
7. Link to others' ideas, thoughts and feelings - give energy back.
8. Create 360-degree vision: ask others to share their thoughts and experiences and accept their frame of reference as true for them.
9. Address misunderstandings and resolve disagreements.
10. Speak up when people are being made small or excluded.
11. Ask who else needs to be in the room to understand the whole situation - Right People, Right Work, Right Time.
12. Build trust: do what you say you will do and honour confidentiality.

Members might react differently in these instances if they knew how much leaders actually appreciate such feedback. The leaders with whom we have collaborated often tell us that the Pod process has been invaluable to them. Most leaders want honest input and do not get enough of it to meet their needs for growth (either their own growth or that of their team). Indeed, without this input, leaders have no idea how well they are exhibiting their new behaviors or how people are perceiving their actions - so they cannot modify their approach in a way that would make the greatest positive impact in their organizations. As one leader said in her Pod, "This is the only place that I get to focus on me and in which I am hearing honest feedback about my impact. Most people tell me what I do well; few will tell me when I have done something that needs to be changed."



As the Pod matures and everyone becomes more comfortable with the process, the meetings often expand. Once leaders feel some degree of mastery of the initial behaviors they selected, they may ask for input on other behaviors. They might invite people outside the initial group into a meeting to get feedback on specific events. After visiting a plant in a region whose primary language was not English, the leader asked the plant manager to join the next Pod meeting. In the course of that meeting, the plant manager suggested that the leader during subsequent visits to that site and others, say at least a few words in the plant's home language. It was a simple request - but often people do not make these simple requests of their leaders. This suggestion significantly changed the leader's future visits to plants and made a big difference in how he was received.

The Fruit of Pods and the Power of Inclusion

What makes the Pod concept such a breakthrough for our clients? In our work, we have employed the Pod process in conjunction with our *Inclusion as the HOW*SM process not just as a general leadership development tool but as an organizational intervention to release the power of inclusion. Leaders who have decided to use their Pod to embrace more inclusive behaviors have discovered how the 12 Inclusive Behaviors (which define the way the Pod, itself, operates) enable them to identify issues, change interactions, and improve performance. The Pod models the unmatched power of inclusion to bring honest dialogue and broader perspectives to any issue, resulting in deeper insights and better decisions - a learning the leader can apply to her or his role in the wider organization.

Examples abound of the system-wide potential of the Pod process. While working on his ability to listen as an ally, one leader attended a meeting with a team focused on new markets. One of his direct reports shared an opportunity she saw, and the leader instantly thought, "No, that won't work." By setting the thought aside and listening as an ally - however uncomfortable it made him - he gradually began to see the promise behind the opportunity. Without the work he and his Pod had done together around this behavior, the opportunity might have been missed.

In another situation, Pod members made it apparent to their leader that she was not having the impact she wanted. Although her intent was clearly to be more inclusive, she sent an entirely different message with her hurried demeanor and tendency to ignore people. Equipped with that input from her Pod, she made a point of saying authentic hellos on a regular basis. The impact was immediate and dramatic: people resonated with her efforts, began to trust her, and thus were more willing to raise key organizational issues with her.

As they experience this kind of impact, leaders become more than sponsors of a change effort to create a more inclusive organization; they become committed to it. At some point, they see how the 12 Inclusive Behaviors

could unleash the organization. Their enthusiasm for inclusion as a *business opportunity* grows exponentially, and their role expands from support to leadership, driving this new way of interacting throughout the organization.

Walking *Toward* the Talk

The purpose behind Pods can be neatly summed up by a long-needed shift in language. When engaging change, organizations often call on their people, leaders included, to "walk the talk" - to back up the new policies and procedures with exemplary action. "Walking the talk," however, implies that one is already "there" or can change one's behavior to the desired goal instantly, without much effort. This is asking too much. Complex changes, in particular, require profound mindset and behavioral shifts that reach full fruition only in months and years, after steady practice.

For that reason, we speak not of "walking the talk," but of "walking *toward* the talk" - clarifying the truth that one's vision always reaches further than one's behavior. It is in the gap between these two positions where Pods can be so effective.

In such a complex and fast-changing environment, organizations need *all* their people doing their best work - individually and as a whole - to survive. Pods catalyze that "best work" by supporting and inspiring the people from whom all change must eventually come: the leaders of the organization.



BIOGRAPHY

Judith Katz brings more than 30 years of experience to her work in strategic culture change. Her work is an extension of her lifelong commitment to championing fairness, respect for all people, and social justice, and she was recognized for this by Profiles in Diversity Journal, which named her one of 40 Pioneers of Diversity. Judith assists organizations to understand and appreciate the uniqueness that each associate brings as her or his added value. She also assists organizations to create sustainable and highly successful inclusion change efforts that, when integrated with business strategies, can achieve enhanced bottom-line results.

She has consulted with many organizations, including: Allstate, Cisco Systems, Inc.; Dun and Bradstreet; E. I. du Pont de Nemours and Company; Ecolab Inc.; EILEEN FISHER, INC.; Singapore Telecommunications Ltd.; Toyota Motor Sales; and United Airlines. She is also the co-founder of the Covert Process Concept and Lab with Bob Marshak.

Judith began her career in academia, earning a doctorate in education from the University of Massachusetts in 1976. She served on the faculties of the University of Oklahoma (tenured associate professor) and San Diego State University.

She joined The Kaleel Jamison Consulting Group, Inc., in 1985 and currently serves as Executive Vice President and Client Brand Lead.

Notes

1. The title of this article is adopted from Hal Yoh, CEO of Day & Zimmerman - the first person the author has known who both says the phrase **and** applies it in his team and company during performance reviews.
2. For more information on **Inclusion as the HOWSM** see www.kjcg.com/our-work/our-methodology/

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