

Grow Yourself, Grow Your Team, Grow Your Business:*

The Challenge for Today's Leaders

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

The dilemma has long challenged leaders and those who advise them. On the one hand, any change effort must ensure that leaders not only sponsor the new behaviors but also live and model them. On the other hand, changing behavior is no simple task—no matter how committed leaders are to the new state—because they live in an organizational fishbowl: everyone carefully watches how they model change, and missteps are met with cynicism. How can they safely experiment with and move toward internalizing the 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 in her or his learning journey. (Think of peas in a pod!)

The process has proved simple but powerful for our clients who are changing interactions throughout their organization by using the 12 Inclusive Behaviors (see sidebar) and Inclusive Meeting Norms. These clients are transforming their organizations so that inclusion is the

HOW for day-to-day operations, impacting the ability to accelerate results and achieve higher performance.

The Pod process begins with each leader committing to practice and live two of the 12 Inclusive 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 at least quarterly; many meet every four to six weeks. Leaders select Pod members to reflect a diversity of backgrounds, functions, and levels, with one thing in common: they all interact with the leader on a regular basis and can provide specific feedback. 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, and individuals at other levels of the organization. All people 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 inclusive behaviors.

*Title adopted from Hal Yoh, "Strategic Growth: Setting the Stage for 2011 and Beyond" (February 2011), PowerPoint presentation. Hal Yoh is the CEO of Day & Zimmerman.

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, including the integration of **Inclusion as the HOW®** into day-to-day operations). The choice of 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 to ensure that leaders receive the broadest possible range of perspectives on their behavior—a 360-degree view that enables

them to fully understand both their impact and the opportunities to strengthen their modeling and leadership through the 12 Inclusive Behaviors.

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 their leader. For many people, this is one of the more difficult elements of the Pod, 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”—because they worry that it could be a career-limiting move, with possible retribution. In this context, the Pod becomes a learning experience for all involved as they create a safe environment for interaction that leans into discomfort and enables honest, deep dialogue. Through the interactions of the Pod, both leaders and members learn to model and live the inclusive behaviors.

Thus prepared, Pods meet regularly to provide specific feedback on the behaviors the leader is addressing. Between these meetings, Pod members may collect feedback from others in the organization, using the feedback and their own observations and experiences to support and challenge the leader.

Several hurdles often need addressing, even beyond the traditional resistance to giving feedback. Some Pod members, when hearing input from other 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 giving feedback to leaders but giving it in a group setting. In many of today’s organizations, the drive to protect leaders is so strong that it deters feedback—and that feedback

12 Inclusive Behaviors

Outcome:
A Joining Mindset

Inclusion Is...
A sense of belonging;
Feeling respected, valued, and seen for who we are as individuals;
There is a level of supportive energy and commitment from leaders, colleagues, and others so that we—individually and collectively—can do our best work.

- 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° vision: Ask others to share their street corner/perspective and accept their frame of reference as true for them.
- 9 Address misunderstandings and resolve disagreements—work “pinches.”
- 10 Speak up when people are being made “small” or excluded.
- 11 Ask who else needs to be involved to understand the whole situation to ensure right people, right work, right time.
- 12 Build **TRUST**: Do what you say you will do and honor confidentiality.

may make all the difference in the leader's behavior and growth.

Members might react differently if they knew how much leaders actually value 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 that input, leaders have no idea how effectively they are modeling the behaviors or how people perceive their actions—so they cannot modify their behavior in a way that would make the greatest positive impact on 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 others. 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? First and foremost, it demonstrates how inclusive behaviors can identify issues, change interactions, and improve performance. More broadly, 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.

Examples abound. 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 around this behavior, the opportunity might have been missed.

In another situation, Pod members made it clear 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 it a point to say 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 the change effort; they become committed to it. At some point, they see how the 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 those two that 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.