“Far from incremental change in leadership approaches, the new marketplace requires an entirely new paradigm: nothing less than admitting that the concept of the all-knowing, all-powerful leader is obsolete and that our entire image of leadership itself must change. While some teams and organizations have made this shift, many have not—at a great cost to both the organizations and their people.”

Leaders Getting Different
Collaboration, the New Inclusive Workplace, and OD’s Role

By Judith H. Katz and Frederick A. Miller

There is a leadership change in the air; an urgency, not only for organizations to be different, but for “titled” leaders to be different: to join people, to connect work to the organization’s purpose, to inspire, to move away from silos and toward a flow of ideas and information across the workplace, to create a sense of safety so that people can bring their best selves to work—all to foster an inclusive workplace in which collaboration can flourish. This urgency stems from a variety of trends. Consumers are demanding more. Markets are moving faster and growing more complex. Millennials are demanding a new workplace.

This means that the “adapt or fail” tipping point for organizations, long rumored, is here with a vengeance (Devereaux, 2004; Laloux, 2014; Stack, 2014). Far from incremental change in leadership approaches, the new marketplace requires an entirely new paradigm: nothing less than admitting that the concept of the all-knowing, all-powerful leader is obsolete and that our entire image of leadership itself must change. While some teams and organizations have made this shift, many have not—at a great cost to both the organizations and their people. This article examines the convergence of trends, describes several keys to the new leadership paradigm, and explores the role that OD practitioners need to play in supporting leadership for a collaborative, inclusive workplace.

A Convergence of Trends

Many elements of the traditional organization and leadership model have come under scrutiny in recent years:

» Leaders know best (or leaders as all-knowing).
» Leaders as “super doers” who were promoted from individual contributor roles to managerial ranks, not because of their skill with people but because of their technical ability.
» Leaders as “fixers” who provide answers and solutions to every problem under their purview.
» Leaders seeing it as their role to accept the status quo and not challenge the opinions or ideas of their leaders.
» People of the organization seen as hands and feet: filling specific roles in the organization, required to “just do their job” and “do as they are told.”

This model has been giving way to a greater emphasis on collaboration—and an inclusive workplace as the ideal environment for fostering that collaboration (Baker, 2014). We have now reached the point where the inclusive workplace is a must for organizations (Katz & Miller, 2012).

More specifically, these trends include:

The (accelerating) need for speed. Global interconnectedness, accelerating breakthroughs in technology, and the always-on workplace have made higher performance at increasing speed a matter of survival.
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.

Figure I. Inclusion is . . .

Faced with a worldwide and intensely competitive field, highly successful organizations must get better faster. Some of them, like Amazon, are aiming for delivery in hours versus days. Increasingly sophisticated consumers are demanding substantial improvements (and often increased speed to market) in each new release or product version.

No one leader, or even group of leaders, can possibly keep up with the extent and speed of change today. The future of every organization—not to mention its competitive advantage—requires the kind of 360-degree vision of the market that only collaboration throughout an organization can provide.

The new skill sets and millennial mindsets. Increasingly, people are coming to the workforce not just with the technical skills required by organizations, but with advanced skills in teamwork and collaboration. Many undergraduate and graduate programs include collaboration as a cornerstone of their educational experience. Having learned this work style, people expect workplaces to function the same way—and they will not work for organizations that discourage collaboration or a high level of team interaction.

For millennials in particular, this “education in collaboration” parallels their life experience. Millennials have been connected—to the Internet, to the world, to one another—from the beginning, so they understand and are drawn to working in teams, and to engaging with people whether they are in another cubicle or another country. They include others as a matter of course, much more so than their predecessors did.

Other millennial characteristics also call for an inclusive workplace. Millennials insist on meaningful work and are not willing to wait years in a role to advance and grow. Long-term loyalty to a single employer is not often in their vocabulary. They want to decide how they accomplish their work. They want to understand how their work connects with the mission, vision, and strategy of the organization. Of course, millennials are not the only people in the workplace who exhibit these traits, so adapting the workplace to their needs will make it better for everyone in the organization.

Seven FROM-TO Challenges for Today’s Leaders and Organizations

In our work with organizations, we (along with our clients) have identified several FROM-TOs that are requiring leaders to shift from the mindsets and behaviors of more traditional, hierarchical organizations to the more inclusive, collaborative style of leadership needed for today’s and tomorrow’s organization. Below we describe those FROM-TOs and how leaders must “get different” in response to them.

1. FROM A judging mode — TO A joining mode

All too often, people approach one another in a judging mode. They may engage with caution and defensiveness; they may be wary of new people or people unknown to them and expect them to prove themselves in order to earn trust and support. They might be reluctant to share information or partner with others for the common good, whether a team member, or another function or department. This judging mode creates distance and erects barriers, which slow individuals, teams, and organizations down and prevents effective collaboration.

In joining, by contrast (Katz & Miller, 2013), people approach others as allies: they support and give each other the benefit of the doubt. They begin with the assumption that each individual has a perspective with value. People who engage from a joining mode seek out areas of agreement and find ways to partner and link to others. Joining, in short, is the foundation of enhanced interactions and an important first step in fostering collaboration.

Note the essential difference between judging people and assessing their performance or ideas (a key difference in the need to hold people accountable, as mentioned below). Leaders should assess the value of ideas and the performance of individuals. The question becomes, how do we engage with the other person during and after such an assessment? Do we place blame? Just reinforce what is wrong? Or do we share ideas of how to address the situation as allies?

For leaders to be different, they must see themselves as partnering with their peers and team members—joining in ways that enable growth and development. Leaders who join are transparent with information, link the work of their units with the organizational strategy, trust in the skills of the people who report to them, and inspire others to a vision of shared success and purpose that allows collaboration to take place.

2. FROM Leaders “taking care of people,” reluctant to give feedback or hold people accountable — TO Leaders caring about people and holding them accountable

Many leaders feel uncomfortable leaning into the discomfort (Katz & Miller, 2013) of honest conversations about performance. As a result, they and their organizations go to great lengths to avoid holding people accountable. Rather than address underperformance directly, organizations reorganize people out of positions. In relationship-based organizations, leaders often rate performers as “meeting expectations” rather than have difficult conversations with team members. These steps are often taken in the name of “taking care
leaders”—shielding them from scrutiny and preserving their feelings, if not their jobs.

Instead of taking care of some people (often favorites, friends, “yes” people, people who do not push back, or those with long tenure), leaders must move to caring about people—all people. This involves creating an environment conducive to engagement, with the safety required for people to speak up and share ideas. Caring about people means giving them feedback continually (almost daily, at least weekly) so they know how they are performing, rather than waiting for annual performance reviews.

Leaders coach people, team members provide feedback to their peers, and everyone holds themselves and others accountable for collaboration and results—all in the name of achieving organizational goals.

For leaders to be different, they must learn to lean into discomfort, create a safe environment for people to do their best work, and hold them accountable. They must learn to share feedback in a joining way so that it enables growth; and to be willing to have the hard conversations as needed.

3. FROM Leaders fostering an environment of competition TO Leaders co-creating a workplace where colleagues join one another as partners

Competition among organizations is a reality, but many organizations have created competition within themselves as well. People with this mindset treat the workplace as a zero-sum game: “For me to win, you have to lose.” In the resulting effort to compete, people hoard information, fiercely protect resources, or build alliances against those they see as internal competitors. The frequent downsizings and budget constraints of the past 30 years have, in the minds of many, provided ample justification for behaving in this way.

Unfortunately, this internal strife draws energy and resources away from the pursuit of the organization’s mission, vision, and strategies. It also leaves people not feeling safe enough to contribute and do their best work. In contrast, one of the most inclusive—and effective—things that leaders can do is to ensure that people have meaningful work for a shared purpose. In working for the common good and shared success, people align their work and their team’s work with the strategy of the organization. As they collaborate toward common good, they establish higher-performing patterns of interacting, enhancing individual, team, and organizational results. They give each other supportive energy. The emphasis moves away from competition and toward partnership. People work for the good of the organization as a whole, not just their business unit, their department, their team, or themselves.

For leaders to be different, they must create safety for team members: people must feel safe inside the organization amid the uncertainty they face in the outside world. Leaders need to join their colleagues and peers to identify priorities—the “common good and shared success” toward which they are all driving. They need to foster an environment that does not create competition among their team members, but instead enhances collaboration and partnership. Today’s leaders need to be asking their team members, “Whom did you involve to make this decision?” “What other departments did you engage to get a 360-degree view?” And, more fundamentally, “What do you need to feel safe to say what you need to say and do your best work?”

4. FROM Keep problems hidden TO Make problems visible and solve them at their root cause

The norm in many organizations has been not to raise issues and not to speak up. All too often, the person who identifies the problem is tasked with solving it, blamed for the problem, or even scapegoated for bringing it up. In addition, because organizations are not “looking out for people” as they did many years ago, people are spending more and more time looking for ways to protect themselves. As a result, people (including leaders) gloss over issues or look for quiet, stop-gap fixes, and performance becomes secondary to self-preservation.

A variant of this practice is equally wasteful: raising problems and then applying a quick fix, assuming that the only problem safe enough to raise is one for which a solution has already been found. Either way, hidden problems exert a serious drain on the organization’s performance.

In the TO state, people recognize that making problems visible is critical for success and that, once raised, problems should be known to all who can be part of the solution. With this shift in mindset, people move from hasty, “Band-Aid” fixes to analyzing root cause, from crisis management and “fighting fires” to collaboration that solves the underlying problem. The deeper solutions that arise from such collaboration are far more effective and help move the organization to higher performance.
For leaders to be different, they must reward individuals and teams that bring up issues rather than “kill the messenger.” And rather than accepting superficial fixes, they must expect and support the discipline of getting to root cause so that problems are solved once and for all. This also means leaders need to ask and ensure that the right people are involved to get a 360-degree view of the problem and its solution.

5. FROM Leaders follow orders TO Leaders have the courage to do what is right and challenge the status quo

By definition, leaders have the opportunity to influence the biggest issues of the organization: mission, vision, strategy, objectives. Yet too often, they do not feel safe enough to speak up on these issues, particularly when they perceive that “the boss” does not want to hear their street corner (Katz & Miller, 2013). When leaders themselves do not feel safe, they follow their leaders’ direction without question, afraid to risk speaking up or exercising thought leadership.

For leaders to be different, they must see their number one responsibility as having the courage to step out and challenge current practices and approaches that are not enabling the organization and its people to do their best work, even when it might upset senior executives. They recognize their job is to lean into discomfort, to lead, to act, to be willing to look to the horizon, to try new things and constantly experiment, and to have the courage to question the status quo.

6. FROM Leader is all knowing, in control TO Leader as a guide, coach, and teacher

Having a single leader in control—a cornerstone of the traditional leadership model—might have made sense when the world operated closer to steady state. Leaders had been thoroughly trained to understand and succeed in the environment in which they operated; that environment changed little from year to year, and unknown variables were few. A small group of senior leaders could easily direct operations without much leadership assistance from other levels.

We are not in steady state anymore. The sheer size of many organizations today, together with the massive trends mentioned above, has made it necessary for leaders to relinquish many aspects of their previous all-knowing, all-powerful role. The variety of challenges and opportunities facing an organization requires that many more minds are focused on them than just those in senior leadership. Indeed, few of these issues truly require attention at the senior-most levels of the organization at all. In addition, many people in organizations need “touch” from the leaders: to be acknowledged, to be communicated with (individually and as part of a group), and to know they can interact with the leaders of the organization. Senior leaders cannot do all of that; they need others to partner with them in giving this level of leadership to the organization.

As a result of all this, leader mindsets and behaviors need to change accordingly. Today’s leaders must be more responsible for coaching, mentoring, and developing people; convening the right people to do the right work at the right time; and, giving energy back. Leaders, in short, are not so much in control of teams and individuals as they are accountable for the creation, development, and growth of a collaborative environment where all people can do their best work.

For leaders to be different, they must give up control—or, rather, admit they no longer have control—and create the collaborative environment necessary for people to achieve organizational goals. Rather than see themselves as having all the answers, leaders need to invite people to share ideas. The foundation for this is the mindset that “none of us is as smart as all of us,” which means that even leaders must be learners. In such an environment, the leader’s role becomes one of facilitator and nurturer, enabling others to grow.

7. FROM Go faster to go faster TO Slow down to go faster—build speed through interaction and developing trust

In the relentless quest for better, smarter, cheaper, faster that epitomizes today’s hypercompetitive market, we run into problems when warp speed becomes...
our only speed. Collaboration, by its very nature, takes time, and rushing through it often leads to quick fixes, less-than-best solutions, and rework. Some things only happen at a slower pace: the reflection required for making complex decisions, the open-ended discussions that spark new ideas, the hard work of resolving conflict, the ability to get to root cause solutions. Slowing down allows us to speed up again with a clearer purpose, a better goal, and alignment among the key participants.

In the same vein, slowing down to speed up applies to the most fundamental building block of the inclusive workplace: interaction—taking the time to know and understand one another. Through interaction, you each learn what the other needs in order to do their best work. You discover what is important to each other, you build the partnership. Over time, these interactions foster trust, and trust builds speed: when trust is in place, there is no need to negotiate each step of an interaction because you trust that your partners will join you, share information, and do what they say they will do.

For leaders to be different, they must practice slowing down to speed up—and teach their teams how to do so as well. They need to set a new expectation that the fastest approach is not always the best, and that a high-performing team is able to use a range of approaches and styles.

**What This Looks Like**

Perhaps the contrast between traditional leadership and inclusive, collaborative leadership can be best highlighted in one of the most common (and derided) features of any organization: the meeting. In a collaborative workplace, a leader’s meeting with the most senior executives may look like this:

When I get to the meeting a few minutes early, everyone seems relaxed—a far cry from c-level meetings I have known in the past. The CEO calls us to order and people start reporting on their teams. As Mark updates us about his division (which is only distantly related to mine), I suddenly hit upon a way we might collaborate on an opportunity he’s facing, and I offer my team as a resource. Others do the same. Next, Susan brings up an ongoing problem with her production line, and we all listen intently, asking questions and helping her think through solutions.

At one point the CEO (who doesn’t say a lot at these meetings, but rather encourages us to share our street corners) puts forth an idea. I see a potential flaw in it, so I speak up—and she gives me positive feedback and some great ideas to enhance our approach. That is standard for her, but today it strikes me how different she is from my previous CEOs. These meetings are so productive because she has clearly defined our direction but joins us as peers, as colleagues, and has made it clear we can contribute anything, at any time.

Our protagonist has created a similar environment for his own team, whose meeting displays many of the same collaborative elements:

It’s been a while since we have “taken the pulse of our team” so I have called this meeting to slow down and see where we are. As it turns out, we have a lot to talk about.

Clarice has discovered a potential opportunity for us in a new market. The high level of risk jumps out at me, but I hold back until the team members share their thoughts. As usual, their ideas help shape the opportunity in a way I never could have imagined—a way that makes it much more doable for us. I am delighted to tell Clarice to move forward with it.

Others make their reports. Bill shares his challenges with a difficult member of his team, and we brainstorm ideas to help him. Along the same lines, Ali raises a sensitive issue that has been going on for about six months; at first the issues are unclear, but during the discussion they become clearer, and we offer experiences from our own teams. I am impressed with how readily our team members come to one another’s aid.

After the meeting, I pull Ali aside and privately suggest that next time he raise sensitive issues like this earlier, so he can achieve a solution earlier. I also give him energy back for raising the issue now.

Clearly, this leader and those around him have become adept at many of the TOs described in this article: making problems visible, treating colleagues as partners, slowing down to speed up, collaborating across silos. More fundamentally, however, the leaders involved have made this possible by creating a different sort of environment: joining (rather than judging) their peers and colleagues and creating a sense of safety in which to speak up.

**The Role of OD in “Leaders Getting Different”**

How can we, as OD practitioners, support leaders as they seek to “get different” in this way? We must:

1. Identify what is getting in the way of the organization exceeding its goals. Senior executive and organization mindshare needs to be focused on change efforts that will have significant payoff in the delivery of services and the bottom line. We as practitioners need to identify an organization change that will have that kind of impact. The reason is simple: amid all the issues vying for leaders’ attention, they must hear a clear and compelling reason to initiate such a fundamental change in both their own lives and their organizations. As part of this case, we need to specifically identify the TO state, describe the new FROM→TOs, and delineate the role of leaders in leading and managing the change.

2. Assist leaders to lean into the discomfort of change. Leaning into discomfort is important for facing any change, and the shift to collaborative leadership is a significant change, to say the least: in many cases, we are asking leaders to adopt an entirely
new way of being in their organizations—to be more vulnerable and self-aware. In some respects, this way of being is antithetical to the traditional model of leadership. Adopting it, then, will require a deliberate choice on the part of leaders to embrace the change and guide others through their own discomfort.

3. Support leaders as they practice the new mindsets and behaviors. This includes positive reinforcement for the desired behaviors and suggestions for improvement when leaders exhibit counterproductive behaviors. As part of this, we can help leaders stop giving answers and start asking themselves who the right people are to have the conversation about any given issue.

4. Collaborate with leaders to change mindsets about leadership. Part of our role is to get people throughout organizations to ask two questions: “What does the organization need from leaders to be its best?” and “How do people need to interact with each other to achieve the best individual and team results?” By asking the questions, really listening to the answers, and working toward the TO states in this article, organizations can support a more collaborative environment at every level.

5. Facilitate changes in performance management. Leaders are more likely to get different and make the TO states the norm when they are rewarded for doing so. That makes it critical to revise performance evaluation and reward/incentive systems to reinforce teamwork and collaboration rather than individual contributions.

6. Assist leaders as they support their teams through the change. During the change effort, leaders will need to welcome other people’s street corners, listen to their concerns, give them reasons to persevere and to join, celebrate even the small signs of progress, and communicate the change and its elements continually—all while engaging the change themselves.

An OD practitioner who is willing to join them in this effort will be invaluable to their success.

All of Us Getting Different

The world of organizations is asking much of people: nothing less than to get different. The most successful leaders will foster the environment for this to happen—joining their colleagues and peers, viewing them as partners, holding people accountable, making problems visible, slowing down to go faster, challenging the status quo where necessary, and, most important, creating the work environment where all people feel safe enough to do their best work. As OD practitioners, we can be powerful partners to help leaders lead the way—differently!

Because no one of us is as smart as all of us, we would welcome your input on the FROM—TOs you see as necessary in this massive paradigm shift. Please feel free to engage us by sending your ideas to judithkatz@kjcg.com.

References


Judith H. Katz and Frederick A. Miller, thought leaders in organization development for more than 40 years, have created numerous breakthrough concepts in their field, including Inclusion as the HOW® as a foundational mindset for higher operational performance and accelerated results. As Executive Vice President and CEO (respectively) for The Kaleel Jamison Consulting Group, Inc.—one of Consulting magazine’s Seven Small Jewels in 2010—they have partnered with Fortune 50 companies to elevate the quality of interactions, leverage people’s differences, and transform workplaces. Their latest book is Opening Doors to Teamwork and Collaboration: 4 Keys That Change EVERYTHING (Berrett-Koehler, 2013). Katz can be reached at judithkatz@kjcg.com and Miller can be reached at fred411@kjcg.com.
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