

JUDGING OTHERS HAS NOT WORKED ... SO LET'S JOIN THEM

Judith H. Katz & Frederick A. Miller

Since the dawn of human history, most people's immediate reaction when meeting someone new has been to judge that person. Organizations cannot afford to take this approach.

Being in a judging mode with other people slows us down in a world that demands speed. Judging others creates waste in our interactions at a time when organizations have little tolerance for waste. Even more serious, judging other people can make them feel small and unwilling to contribute their best thinking—a fatal flaw for organizations that must have everyone's best thinking in order to compete.

In contrast, we can choose to *join* others—assessing performance and ideas when necessary, yet affirming people's essential worth and viewing them as worthy partners who can add value. By incorporating this foundational joining mode into our interactions, we can together move quickly to a higher level of performance at the speed that today's organizations require.

The Essence of a Joining Mode

In joining mode, we operate from a stance of openness and support rather than (as in the case of a judging mode) caution and defensiveness. The goal is to engage with and *learn* from people. We hold the belief that the best way to succeed is by making problems visible and solving them together through collaboration. We begin with the assumption that we are going to connect with others—that we have something to offer to others, and vice versa. The joining mode, in short, focuses on *we*.

This mode makes a marked difference in interactions. In joining, people build on one another's ideas and contributions, seek out areas of agreement, find ways to link to the perspective of others, and foster collaboration. People in joining mode listen as allies, extend trust, and enter difficult con-

versations with the belief that the investment will bring about a better outcome. They give others the benefit of the doubt.

A Role for Judging

Almost immediately in any discussion of joining, the questions arise: “Does judging play *any* role in today’s organization? What about judging an idea, or someone’s performance?”

Without a doubt, assessing an idea is crucial in determining its value for the organization. People must evaluate the idea critically, “seeking out the holes in the argument” as a way to determine its merits and to make sure that nothing is overlooked.

Judging plays a valuable role with people, too, within certain limits. Here we must be mindful of the difference between *judging* people and *assessing* their performance or ideas. Managers, leaders, and team members

*The goal is to engage with
and learn from people.*

have critical roles to play in assessing whether an individual is performing at the level needed for organizational success. Indeed, this assessment is the responsibility of every manager.

However, what one *does* with the assessment is where the choice to judge or join comes in. Do we engage with the person from a joining mode—focusing on the individual’s development and how we can provide support as she or he seeks to improve her or his performance? Do we join even if the person is leaving the organization? Or do we engage from a judging

Joining in Action: The “New Person”

A new team member joins the organization. In the previous months, she navigated a vetting process that included a background check, discussions with references from previous jobs, as well as numerous interviews with HR, the hiring manager, and a handful of individuals from across the organization who were a part of the selection process. All the reports were enthusiastic about hiring her; they expressed the belief that she would bring necessary skills to the organization and be a good fit with its culture and approach.

In a *judging environment*, the new team member’s experience upon joining the team is anything but smooth. Her colleagues keep her at arm’s length, carefully evaluating everything she says and taking a “wait and see” approach. She often hears comments like “You don’t understand” or “That’s not the way we do things around here.” Their critical stance dissuades her from speaking up. As a result, the team does not get the benefit of her ideas, energy, and experience, and they continue to move along in “the way we do things.” All this “re-vetting” of the new person, over and above the hiring process, represents substantial duplication of effort and therefore waste.

In a *joining environment*, the members of her team trust both the functional leader and the vetting process itself. They treat her as the right person to have been hired, not someone who *might* be right and needs to be tested again. They are excited to hear the new person’s perspectives and leverage her experiences to enhance their approach to the work. Sensing this, the new team member eagerly shares ideas from her experience and is eager to learn from her team members and peers. She observes the interactions of the team and raises alternatives that the team members may not see. The team starts performing at a whole new level, achieving breakthroughs they could not have dreamed of before, as they join together to solve problems and learn from one another.

mode—in which the person leaves the conversation feeling small, less empowered, and less supported to address those areas of development? (Even if we do not intend to make the person feel small, we still must take responsibility if that is the undesirable result.) Do we focus on the issue of performance, exploring ways to co-create solutions, or do we decide the person is intrinsically a failure and not worthy of our energy?

The distinction between judging and joining becomes even clearer when applied to the workplace, as in the following case example.

The Impact of a Joining Mode

The shift from judging to joining (Figure 1) can deliver organizational results while improving the quality of interactions. Those benefits include:

- *More and faster collaboration.* When people join one another, they are more open to hearing and building on each others' perspectives. As a result, their inclination is to collaborate, and they act on this inclination more often and more

quickly. On a systemic level, a joining mode enables people to break down silos and other barriers that have prevented them from working effectively across work groups, departments, and functions. This, in turn, allows them to collaborate at increased speed, which may be the key to being competitive and thriving in a complex, shifting world.

- *Being more accepting rather than always sizing up others.* In judging mode, we size people up: Are they better than me? Smarter than me? Adding more value than me? When we join others, we look for ways we can learn from and partner with them, accepting their strengths and their areas for growth as well as our own.
- *Exploring ideas versus evaluating ideas.* In judging mode, we expend a great deal of energy and thinking on evaluation. Is this idea “good” or “bad”? Where are the holes in the argument? What’s missing? In joining, by contrast, the conversation is about exploring, expanding, building on what others present, thinking together, and continuous improvement by all involved.



Source: Adapted from Judith H. Katz and Frederick A. Miller, *Opening Doors to Teamwork and Collaboration: 4 Keys that Change EVERYTHING*, copyright © 2012, Berrett-Koehler, San Francisco. All rights reserved.

FIGURE 1. JUDGING VERSUS JOINING

- *Being curious versus being defensive.* When we judge people for seeing things differently, we often leave them feeling small, guarded, and defensive. In joining mode, we are curious about why they see things differently. We are willing to explore and discover what we can learn.

The Benefits of Not Being in a Judging Mode on Organizations

Joining also helps us avoid several pitfalls of a judging mode:

- *Waste.* Judging people in organizations takes an enormous amount of effort and generates significant waste. People waste time evaluating others, searching for hidden agendas, being cautious, and second-guessing others' motives and approaches when they could be joining together and collaborating for the good of the organization.

Another source of waste in judging is the strong possibility that we will judge incorrectly. By establishing distance between ourselves and others—before we have had the opportunity to get to know them—we run the risk of cutting ourselves off from the ways in which their strengths and contributions could, through joining, help everyone be more effective.

- *Loss of talent.* Judging places limits on the person being judged. When individuals are con-

tinually judged by their colleagues, they stop speaking up and contributing. The organization misses out on their expertise, experience, and knowledge—and ultimately loses the people themselves.

- *The vicious judging cycle.* Once we are judged by others, we act small and in turn judge them, creating a cycle of defensiveness and mistrust. Likewise, joining creates its own (virtuous) cycle of inclusion, trust, and speed.

Concerns About Joining

With all of these advantages, why would anyone *not* proceed from a joining mode? People in our client systems have told us that joining would leave them too vulnerable. They do not want to appear gullible to their colleagues, as they might if they attempt to join someone and that person judges them in return. They feel a need to protect themselves from this type of interaction. This is one reason that judging has persisted for millennia: it is a ready defense against vulnerability.

In addition, many people in organizations value their “good judgment.” The ability to assess a situation or an idea and chart a course of action is held in high esteem. “If I stop judging,” they wonder, “will I lose my edge? Will I be able to make an assessment when called upon to do so?”

A change this foundational must start at the senior leadership level. Only with a visible commitment from senior leaders will people feel safe enough to make the choice to join and practice the associated changes. Moreover, leaders' modeling of the joining stance and inclusive behaviors give people a clear picture of what joining looks like in the workplace. When people see leaders calling out instances of judging and joining, partnering differently with others, or giving feedback from a joining stance, they can follow that lead more effectively, and the joining mode and inclusive behaviors can take hold more quickly through the organization. And when leaders model how to assess situations or performance without judg-

People do not want to appear gullible to their colleagues.

ing people's value, they show the way for others to do the same.

What Leaders Can Do

Within the general categories of commitment and modeling, leaders can leverage a variety of strategies to make joining foundational to the way people interact in the organization. First and foremost is modeling several behaviors that typically accompany joining:

- *Make the decision to join—and let others know about it.* Challenge yourself to find ways to connect with others. Let go of the past, and give others the benefit of the doubt. Invite others to challenge you when they think you are in judging mode.
- *Listen as an ally.* When we decide to join people, we need to listen to them *as their allies*. This means listening actively, setting aside our own criticisms and viewpoints to pay full attention to the other. After listening, we respond, also as allies, to what we have heard. Associated with *listening* as an ally is *challenging* as an ally: for example, bringing alternative points of view not from a place of attack but rather from a stance of “How can *we* make this better?”
- *Be aware of your own stance.* When we find ourselves in judging mode, we can move toward joining by asking ourselves “What would it be like if I were joining this person or team right now? How might I engage in a joining mode to communicate my discomfort or concern? How would I indicate that I am here to help solve the problem *with* the other person or team?” This awareness of whether we are joining or judging at any given time helps us be clear of the choice we are making in every situation—whether we have chosen to judge or to join.
- *Pay attention to others' street corners/perspectives.* Invite others to share their perspectives—and when they do, be curious about them. If something they say is different from your point of view, it presents a great opportunity to be curious and join them,

Judging places limits on the person being judged.

to learn more about why they see the situation from a different street corner (or perspective).

- *If you must judge, judge quickly.* As a species, we have been judging for so long that it is often automatic. When we find ourselves in judging mode, moving faster through it—that is, moving to joining more quickly—keeps us from the significant waste of time and energy incurred when we linger in judging mode.

One Leader's Decision to Join

Once leaders decide to join, opportunities for practicing a joining mode seem to emerge everywhere—as do the results. A composite story from our client experience illustrates this point.

A global organization began to miss key opportunities in a challenging market of rapidly accelerating change. When investigating the causes, a senior leader discovered that members of her team were afraid to speak up for fear of retribution. She realized how often she took a judging stance toward the people around her—finding the holes in their ideas, criticizing them as people rather than assessing their performance, dismissing any contribution that did not fit her preconceived notions. To improve her performance and that of her organization, she made the decision to join more and spent the next few months practicing a joining stance.

She began by telling her team members of her decision and asking them to challenge her when she appeared to be in judging mode rather than joining. At first they were reluctant to speak up

as requested, but over time—as team members leaned into discomfort, gave her candid feedback, and were thanked for it—they developed a level of trust in her.

With that trust came information. Individuals began to bring the opportunities and challenges they saw in the organization to her attention. At first this was difficult for her. In one early case, a manager presented a potential market opportunity to her and the leadership team, and her first thought was “No, no, no! This will never work!” As the presentation proceeded, however, she moved quickly from that judgment to a joining stance and invited other team members to comment. As it turned out, the manager’s presentation was well received, and team members used it to build on one another’s ideas. Even though the manager’s initial idea was not a large part of the team’s final decision, several new and promising options came out of the conversation. The implementation of these options helped the organization make significant progress in addressing the market.

Buoyed by this success, the leader looked for other ways in which joining could enhance her work—and she did not have to go far. One of her managers came in for his second performance evaluation, having made no progress on his areas for improvement from the first. In the past, the leader might have asked for his resignation on the

spot, bemoaning his lack of progress and leaving him doubting his own value as a person. Instead, from her joining mode, she began the meeting by listening as an ally; she communicated the “hard” feedback she had for him and then gave him the space to explain the dynamics behind his performance. With this information in hand, she was able to recommend a coach and specific strategies for rectifying the situation. As a result, the manager turned around his performance.

Not long afterward, the organization decided that consolidating its operations would enhance its competitive position, which meant downsizing in several functions, including that of the leader. In her previous judging mode, she might have avoided discussing the topic or even made people feel small to justify the downsizing. In joining mode, however, she not only communicated the situation fully and openly but also encouraged people to share their street corners on specific strategies for the downsizing. The underlying message, delivered time and again, was “Regardless of your status in this workplace, you matter.” That inspired people to continue doing their best work until the downsizing occurred; because of their positive experience with the leader’s joining, several of them chose to rejoin the organization when it began expanding again in the following business cycle.

No longer can organizations and teams afford to approach interactions with anyone—new people, people from another area or department, even those who disagree with them—from a judging mode. It puts distance between people, and the resulting inhibition of individuals and ideas can prove fatal to the engagement, speed, collaboration, and higher performance that organizations need. Only through a reorientation to a joining mode as the dominant way of interaction can the organization begin to gain from the flow of knowledge, innovation, and energy required for success today and in the years to come.

Challenge yourself to find ways to connect with others.



*Thought leaders in organization development for more than thirty years, Judith H. Katz, EdD, and Frederick A. Miller have created numerous breakthrough concepts, including Inclusion as the HOW® as a foundational mind-set for higher operational performance and accelerated results. As executive vice president and CEO (respectively) for The Kaleel Jamison Consulting Group, Inc., they have partnered with organizations worldwide to elevate the quality of interactions, leverage people's differences, and enhance teamwork and collaboration. Together they have coauthored three books: *Opening Doors to Teamwork & Collaboration: 4 Keys That Change EVERYTHING* (2013), *Be BIG: Step Up, Step Out, Be Bold* (2008), and *The Inclusion Breakthrough: Unleashing the Real Power of Diversity* (2002).*