

Growing Self-Regulating Teams:

A case study in saving lives



“If you need help, help others. To help others best, let them help you.”

– ‘Blue Book’

One of the most difficult dilemmas leaders are faced with is knowing when and how to ‘let go’, in order to allow others to grow and achieve.

Why does a seemingly obvious, common sense approach, pose such a challenge to leadership?

The answer: because it involves fighting the powerful force of conditioning. As leaders we are programmed through a subconscious set of rewards and punishments to be great ‘fixers’ of problems rather than ‘facilitators’, enabling others to achieve results and overcome challenges.

Why do we spend so much time on the nitty-gritty operational issues and fighting fires? For many, fire fighting is more compelling and can be viewed upon as heroic; giving us an adrenalin rush associated with quick wins and instant gratification.

Fire fighting is easier in the short term because it is reactive and provides a quick fix, or band-aid solution.

In a technical role, being a fixer or fire fighter is fine. In a leadership position, constant fixing of problems and situations stifles creativity, stunts growth and ultimately creates a dependent culture.

Our goal should be to create an interdependent team, wherein our role is to facilitate outcomes rather than fix problems.

One organisation that has proven the benefits of this approach over the last 50 years is Grow – a social enterprise in the business of guiding people with mental illness towards recovery. In fact Grow’s model of creating and sustaining ‘interdependent teams’ is so successful – it’s saving people’s lives.

Grow was born in 1957 in a time where mental illness was stigmatized by society. If you had depression or another mental illness you simply did not talk about it. If you did, the most likely support or treatment was to be sent away to an ‘institution’.

A group of people believed that there had to be a better way. So together they formed a forum where they could support each other through the difficulties they experienced in their everyday lives, and go on to live lives full of hope and aspiration.

These people ultimately assisted each other to overcome life’s challenges and recover from mental illness. Today, there are over 250 Grow groups all over Australia. In addition, Grow has offices and branches in USA, Ireland, New Zealand and Trinidad.

Groups vary in size from 3-10 members, and are run by seasoned ‘Growers’ who take a leadership role within the group. In essence, the groups become self-regulating teams supporting each other to take control of their lives and navigate the road to recovery.

A unique aspect of the Grow organisation is its leadership structure for running the groups. Group members volunteer to take on roles such as leading, chairing or organising a meeting. These roles are specifically designed to extend the social and life management skills of Grow members. They, and not the organisation or its staff, are responsible for the encouragement and support of group members as well as challenging them to take steps to recovery.

The results of an independent research study of these interdependent, self-regulating teams are staggering:

- There are positive correlations found between a reduction in the use of medication or hospitalisation and the level of leadership role undertaken in Grow.
- Taking on a leadership role in Grow was described as a commitment which pushed Grow members forward into further action and the development of the new skills.
- This miniature community, driven by a central ethos of mutual helping, appeared to provide the opportunity for re-entry into community for people who had become isolated and without support networks.

(Source: Finn, Bishop, Sparrow; 2007; Mutual help groups: an important gateway to wellbeing and mental health)

How does the Grow model work? Here are just three secrets to their success that can also help the way we manage our own teams and organisations.

Write the unwritten rules:

One of the things that makes Grow so special is the practical advice and wisdoms that are discussed from the literature that has been written by Growers since its inception. These have been collected together in Grow’s ‘Blue Book’. The practical mantras, models, stories and tools, have proven to be of enormous benefit to generations of Growers, keeping them on track with their road to recovery. Examples of material include things like:

- “Feelings are not facts.”
- “When the time comes to act don’t examine any more pros and cons – just do it!”
- “You alone can do it, but you can’t do it alone.”

The additional benefit of the ‘Blue Book’ is it gives each Grower a clear understanding of the expected team rules and expectations.

Through our Proteus leadership programs we encourage leaders to sit down with their teams and ‘state the obvious’. There are many things that frustrate us in life and in our teams at work, but we put up with most of them. However, teams should take the time to openly state to each other those things that are truly important; also called ‘deal breakers’. For example; statements such as “No gossip – go direct” or “If you are not prepared to be part of the solution, you forfeit your right to complain” provide you and your team with clarity.

Rules of engagement or ‘non-negotiable’ behaviours can be described as agreed sets of rules or team ‘norms’ that have been clearly established by the team. Adherence to these rules (as the name suggests) is non-negotiable. It is the team’s responsibility to ‘call’ each other’s behaviour if they break these rules.

Failure to explicitly articulate these team norms can create a culture of assumptions and people can interpret this lack of communication as either arrogant or ignorant – both ugly perceptions!



Grow celebrates its 40th Birthday



A decade later Grow founders celebrate its 50th birthday

Elegantly Organise

Mark Zuckerberg, founder and CEO of Facebook, claims that one of the key responsibilities for leaders in the post 'command & control' leadership age is to elegantly organise teams to be successful by themselves.

This ethos is succinctly described in one of Grow's mantras: "Letting People Help Themselves And Help One Another".

Group meetings at Grow follow a highly structured 'group method' delineating how group time is to be spent. At each Grow meeting members have an opportunity to share their current life challenges, if they wish. Some members, or 'first timers' may choose not to speak, and that's fine. The group shares their challenges and together develops solutions based on experience. Importantly, this structured group is facilitated by a leader who keeps the group on task and prevents the meeting from becoming a free-for-all advice session.

As leaders we can learn a great deal from this approach. For example; next time you run your own team meeting

consider throwing out the old and tired, perpetually recycled agenda and ask the team to design an agenda covering the topics/issues they wish to discuss. Then facilitate the participants to devise their own solutions for the problems and issues they raise.

Plenty of tough of love

Don't be misled by the Grow model- it's not all fluffy and 'feel good' – there is plenty of tough of love.

Grow CEO, Clare Guilfoyle, explains that a key to overseeing the success of the 250+ groups, is to approach the challenge with "eyes wide open" and to empower the Grow leaders to give the tough feedback.

"We expect people to make mistakes, for it is through these mistakes that real learning and breakthroughs occur. When Growers do make mistakes, we don't meekly pat them on the shoulder, give them a hug, or tell them everything will be alright – we acknowledge the lesson and challenge them to be better next time."

One of the powerful dynamics in a Grow

session is hearing the group of Growers share quotes, mantras and tools from their 'Blue Book' to push each other to keep on growing and improving.

Should someone in the group behave in a way that is unacceptable or outside the guidelines of engagement, the group will self-regulate and ask the person to change their behaviour. The inspirational by-product of all Growers being genuinely empowered to challenge each other, is they build the confidence and skills to manage their own behaviour, thinking and life choices.

The Grow case study provides a powerful, practical example of how today's leaders can achieve great results. No longer should the effective leader just model the behaviours of famous war generals by simply leading the charge from the front. Instead today leaders need to demonstrate the pastoral qualities of a shepherd – standing behind their flock, protecting them from harm while encouraging them to find greener pastures and new growth.

For more information on Grow visit www.grow.net.au

Personal Stories

My name is Tony.

My first hospitalisation was when I was 16 being diagnosed with acute depression. So effectively, all of my life, I have suffered from mental illness. My life has been very chaotic and being diagnosed with bipolar I finally made sense of some of the ups and downs that occurred. There has never been a single method of treatment that really helped; and the amount of medication I'm on (because of potential psychosis) makes me very tired.

Three years ago I had a complete

breakdown and in the process lost everything. I spent 4 months in hospital after which there was an issue of where I was going to stay. I did have a house, but my wife refused to let me come home. So I was alone and had nowhere to go.

I had never heard of Grow before and was completely unsure of what they did.

One of the first things I learnt, that was instrumental to my growth, was to be aware of my own illness and to take responsibility for actions and thoughts. When this happened, I was finally able to make progress towards recovery.

I found that the only way the Program was effective, was by action and using it every single day so it slowly became an attitude. It is no good learning the Program, if you are not going to use it.

Two years have passed and I now show a lot of leadership in the Community. I am the organiser of a Grow Group and have been to Training and Leadership weekends.

At the risk of being melodramatic, Grow saved my life. I believe that the best in life and love and happiness is ahead of me. I am looking forward to the future.