

is your forum transformational?



MY LIFE WAS CHANGED by a Transformational Forum-like group that I experienced as an MBA student at Stanford. Since then I have learned to lead such groups in a variety of settings and never cease to be amazed by their life-changing impact on the participants. Every Forum has the potential to be Transformational. As a current member of YPO, I feel passionately about every Forum achieving its transformative potential.



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transformational forum characteristics...

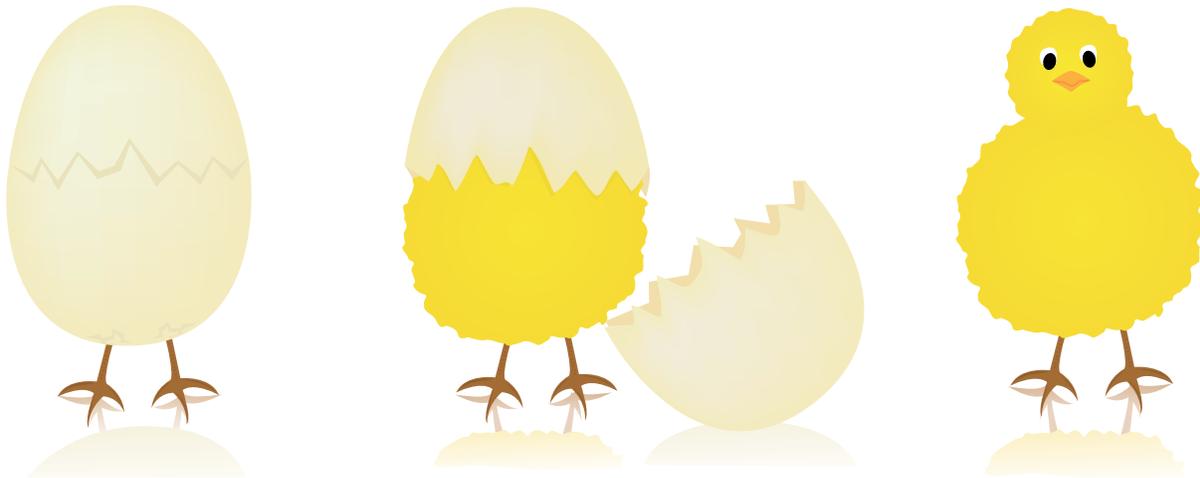
**IN MY EXPERIENCE, the path of evolution of Forums moves
from Social to Substantive to Transformational.**

Is your Forum operating at a Transformational level?

How would you know?

Transformational Forums Typically Exhibit the Following Characteristics:

- Members describe their Forum experience as life-changing.
 - Every member feels unconditionally loved and respected by all others for exactly who they are.
 - Members don't hold ANYTHING back in fear of losing respect, love, or influence in the Forum.
 - Members are willing to be vulnerable, not look good, admit to shortcomings.
 - Members tell each other the hard truths out of commitment to each other's growth.
 - There is no sideline gossip between any members about any others.
 - There IS occasional conflict, rather than pretending there is none. Conflict is aired fully and worked through.
 - There is no outlying member. All members are equally "in." No black sheep.
 - There is no hierarchy or power structure. It is truly a Forum of peers.
 - Forum meetings are often "moving", not just practical and helpful.
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Three Forum Stages

SOCIAL Forums are essentially similar to other common professional or personal groups that are focused on fun and exchange around common interests. The level of personal disclosure, trust, or intimacy that the members experience is not very different from what they might have experienced either in other cohesive social groups or in other professional groups such as a good Board of Advisors. Things are good, but not special and unique to YPO-WPO.

SUBSTANTIVE Forums begin to feel very special and unique to YPO-WPO. However, they still operate on a paradigm of “more and better.” There is higher trust, more caring, better discussions, and better results than the members get from their other personal or professional relationships. The group is the most caring, trusting, and helpful group they have ever belonged to. Why mess with that? What more would one want? While members are helping each other to deal effectively with a variety of personal and professional challenges, the underlying belief systems, mental frameworks, and paradigms about oneself, life, and work remain fairly intact.

TRANSFORMATIONAL Forums challenge some of the fundamental mental and emotional frameworks and paradigms of their members, in ways that forever change them. They change the old concepts of what it is to trust another human being, the central role of feelings and emotions, the true priorities of life, the gift of vulnerability, the obsession to be in control, the fear of failure or death, the role of money or power, the beauty of conflict, the self-sabotaging obstacles to intimacy, the search for meaning, the purpose of one’s life, and what really constitutes success. These shifts will not just occur as concepts that one can discuss during a nice little exercise at a Forum retreat. They occur deep in the heart, deep in one’s bones, as a result of powerful, goose bump, emotionally riveting experiences with fellow members. That is how transformation happens, experientially and deep in the heart, rather than through cool and safe level-headed discussions.



FOR A FORUM to become Transformational, every member of the Forum needs to be challenged to:

- 1. Move from Control to Vulnerability**
- 2. Move from Rational to Emotive**
- 3. Move from Certainty to Curiosity**

Moving to vulnerability, emotion, and curiosity is a particularly challenging set of demands on most of us YPO-WPOers. We have achieved much of our success through exerting control, being certain about our answers, and being rational. So why shift from what has made us successful? Forum would not be transformational and life-changing if we kept acting in the same way within it that we did outside it. Its safe and confidential boundaries, and non-existent external demands, allow us to explore and discover a significant aspect of ourselves that we might not feel comfortable exploring anywhere else in our lives. No one will take away your ability to exercise control, be certain and rational. You will now just be able to expand those with your ability to be vulnerable, curious, and emotive. Your greatest success and happiness require both sides of you, rather than half of you.

1. From Control to Vulnerability

The dictionary definition of Vulnerable is “open to being hurt.” As we get hurt in the various stages of our upbringing, we learn to wear armor of various kinds to protect us from being hurt again. By the time we are adults, we walk around with this armor, so used to its weight that we don’t even recognize we are wearing it.

The problem is that the armor works in both directions. On the one hand, it shields us from potential hurt coming to us. On the other, it also shields us from deep love and caring coming to us, or going out from us. Once you narrow down the door to your heart, fewer things come in and fewer things go out. It doesn’t work selectively. You pay a huge price.

The scared child in us still thinks that we need the armor to be protected, even though as adults we no longer really need the armor. The safety of the Forum can give you a unique luxury to experiment with removing your armor and seeing what it is like to connect with other human beings without it. What you will discover is deeply moving and often life-changing. But you need to dare and risk that experiment to really see its results.

Vulnerability Practice: Tell the uncomfortable truth about yourself

This could range anywhere from your fear of failure, to feelings of incompetence at work, to a troubled marriage, to mistakes and failures you might be embarrassed about, to financial troubles, to psychological or physical abuse as a child, to spiritual beliefs or doubts, to impossible visions and dream about your future. When you share these things in the Forum, you will realize that people's love and respect for you increases rather than diminishes. This is because the rest of your Forum-mates are living with their own secrets and fears of imperfection and are drawn closer to others who have the courage to be fully themselves. Authenticity is incredibly magnetic in people. And you will find yourself walking around with the huge weight of the armor lifted off your shoulders.

Vulnerability Practice: Tell the uncomfortable truth about others

Telling the truth about others includes sharing with them any negative impact their actions or words might have on you, or bringing up points of conflict. Daring to bring up and deal with conflicts is a critical skill of Transformational Forums. Anytime two or more human beings get together, conflict will inevitably result. If this conflict is not openly acknowledged and resolved, it will go underground and eat away at the trust and safety of the Forum. If it is openly acknowledged and resolved, it invariably results in a deepening sense of trust and intimacy. Conflict resolution forces the involved parties to listen more deeply to each others' needs, concerns, and perspectives in order to find common ground. Conflict is to be cherished as a critical means of bringing people closer. Any couple or group that doesn't freely bring up and work through conflict is condemning the relationship to remaining stuck at a relatively shallow stage.



IT TAKES PRACTICE, but over time you can learn to tune into feelings and pick up the crucial information they hold about what is really going on inside you and others in any given moment. This will provide your greatest conduit into knowing what really brings you happiness and peace, how you sabotage your own enjoyment of life, what is really going on with others, how you really impact others, and how you can inspire and bring the best out of others.

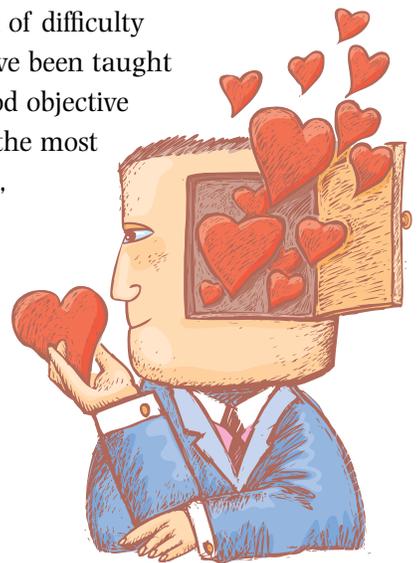
2. From Rational to Emotive

Extensive research by Daniel Goleman and others have indicated that about two thirds of the competencies differentiating great leaders from average leaders are Emotional Intelligence competencies. This is the “soft stuff” as opposed to the rational and technical competencies that tend to be emphasized in most educational institutions and corporations.

These research findings are not surprising. As human beings, we might pretend to be rational beings, but we really are far more emotional. Just think about the most important things that shape the experience of your life. Your “love” for your child, your “pride” over your accomplishments, your “fear, anxiety, and stress” of failure, your “longing” to make a difference or leave a legacy, your “passion” for your favorite sport, your “pain” over the loss of a loved one, your “joy” in your favorite music, your “inspiration” over a great leader’s call for action. These are all FEELINGS, not rational thoughts. Your life’s experience is really primarily shaped by your feelings. It is through feelings that you ultimately connect with others and inspire or move them, regardless of how rational you consider yourself or them to be.

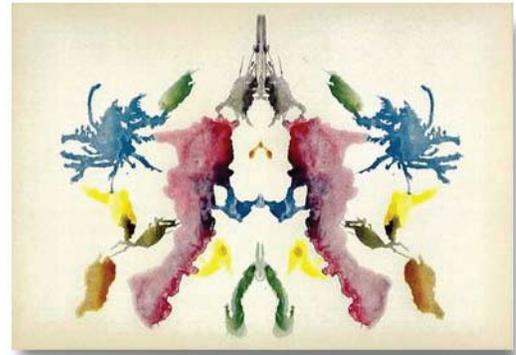


Many CEOs I have coached over the years have had a great deal of difficulty knowing their own feelings, let alone expressing them. They have been taught from an early age that feelings are a distraction from making good objective decisions, or show weakness, etc. They are literally cut-off from the most meaningful part of their own lives, and from others. It takes practice, but over time you can learn to tune into feelings and pick up the crucial information they hold about what is really going on inside you and others in any given moment. This will provide your greatest conduit into knowing what really brings you happiness and peace, how you sabotage your own enjoyment of life, what is really going on with others, how you really impact others, and how you can inspire and bring the best out of others. Trying to achieve great joy and peace for yourself and others without paying careful attention to feeling signals is like trying to land a plane in heavy fog without reading the radar instruments. You are flying in the dark.



3. From Certainty to Curiosity

When your mind looks at the Rorschach inkblots, it can't tolerate seeing just an inkblot of random shapes, which is what the inkblot really is. Instead, it immediately makes up an image of an animal, or object, or scene, locks onto that image, and ignores all the others shapes on the page that don't fit that image. We all do this all the time. Our brain has a need to make up certainty in the midst of ambiguity. It does it so we can feel more in control than we really are. Similarly, we go through our lives making up a whole lot of assumptions and conclusions based on only a subset of reality. We are so sure of our premature conclusion being the accurate picture that we selectively seek and absorb only the information that reinforces that picture and ignore the rest.



HUMAN BEINGS have the answers to their own most profound questions. They just don't know that they do. The way you help them discover it is by showing curiosity and empathy that keep them in an inward exploration of what they really want, what truly matters to them, how they feel about various alternatives, and what ultimately would bring them peace and happiness.

During a Forum meeting, when a member presents, our brains are busy grabbing onto the pieces of information we have, and trying to fit them into the certainty of answers about what is really going on, and what should be done. We are impatient to arrive at certainty, at conclusions, at something that would be valuable advice and move things forward. While well-intentioned, this tendency can actually prevent the presenter from deriving far greater value by diving deeper into the exploration that comes from genuine curiosity.

When my company trains executive coaches, this is the single most important point of training them. We help them get in touch with that part of their ego that wants them to look good and appear smart by coming up with the answers. And then we let them see that by far the most helpful thing they can do in coaching someone is to help that someone discover their own answers. Human beings have the answers to their own most profound questions. They just don't know that they do. The way you help them discover it is by showing curiosity and empathy that keep them in an inward exploration of what they really want, what truly matters to them, how they feel about various alternatives, and what ultimately would bring them peace and happiness. The coach's job is to help the other person discover their own brilliance rather than be impressed by the brilliance of the coach.

TRANSFORMATION OCCURS when we go deep enough to discover and shift some of our hidden underlying belief systems, assumptions, and behavioral patterns that dictate our actions and feelings.

Substantive Forums move to practical solutions for the presenter's problems relatively quickly. Great ideas are generated and everyone goes away happy. Problem solved. They deal with the problem more at face value so the underlying roots might remain intact and generate similar problems in the future. Thus the quick conclusion to fire the problem executive might miss the point that the CEO's deep-seated obsession for control might actually be the root cause of his/her trouble with the executive. Transformation occurs when we go deep enough to discover and shift some of our hidden underlying belief systems, assumptions, and behavioral patterns that dictate our actions and feelings. The job of a coach, and your job in the Forum, is to help the presenter unearth and see all the relevant factors that impact their situation, particularly the deepest most emotionally charged factors. You can fully trust that the presenter will then be able to arrive at their own great solution and wisdom about what to do. And given that they arrived at it themselves, they would be much more likely to follow through.



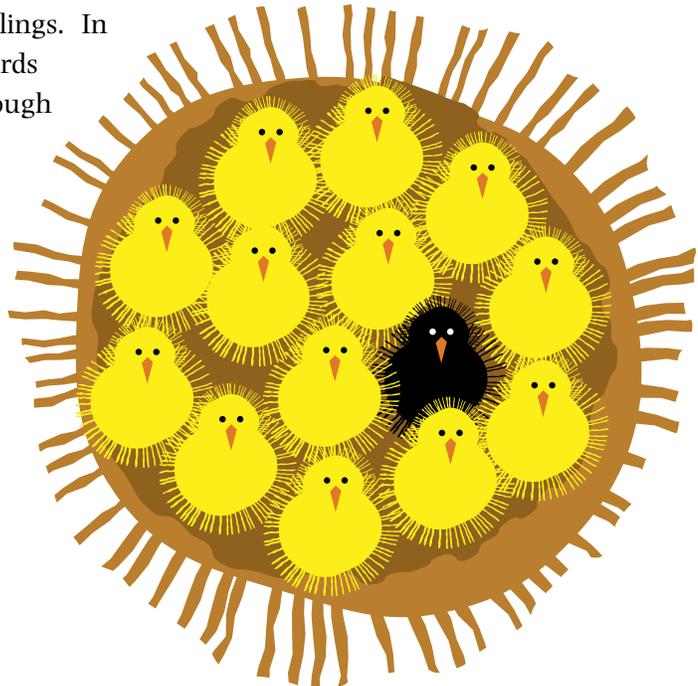
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Do I have the “right” people in my Forum?

The people you are the most judgmental about are actually the people who could most contribute to your growth in a Forum. In some Social or Substantive Forums, some members might be considered by others as problematic and less willing or able to be open. Indeed a Forum can only go as deep as the least willing member of the Forum. People wish they could get rid of these “laggards.” These laggards, however, don’t really mean to be that way. Even though they might not show it as openly, they want to be connected, to be trusted, to be loved, to make a difference, like most other human beings. However, they might be more uncomfortable than others about being open and vulnerable, or have more difficulty getting in touch with their own feelings. In Transformational Forums, these initial laggards often provide great inspiration to others through their great enthusiasm once they discover a way to step free of their self-imposed armor. Typically these discoveries first occur during retreats where a professional facilitator creates a safe environment for people to stretch outside their comfort zones and get in touch with their feelings.





THE DISCOVERIES that occur in a Transformational Forum build the foundation of higher Emotional Intelligence which has been proven in extensive research to be critical to leadership effectiveness.

What If I Don't Want Transformational?

Some might wonder that YPO-WPO is primarily a professional organization focused on business issues and Forums should not deal in personal transformation. The challenge is that a Chinese wall between Personal and Professional is a fallacy that does not work in practice. Everyone who works for you is a human being first and a professional second. The discoveries that occur in a Transformational Forum build the foundation of higher Emotional Intelligence which has been proven in extensive research to be critical to leadership effectiveness. Why would you choose to put a cap on your own leadership effectiveness, let alone your fulfillment and happiness?

Exert Leadership

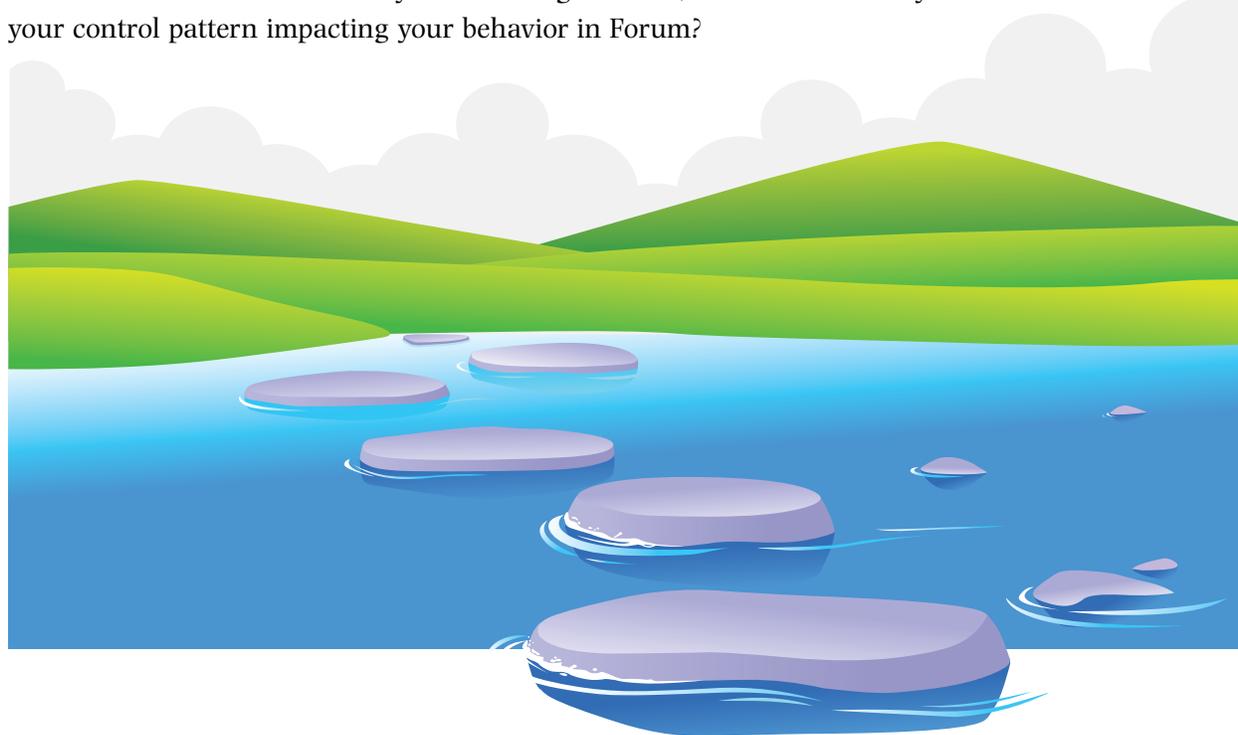
Any single Forum member can become a powerful catalyst for their Forum to reach a Transformational stage. You can use this article as a catalyst for a powerful Forum conversation in which everyone shares their frank assessment of where they see their Forum and how they view their own participation and others'. The exercises are meant as just a starting point to build some new habits together. If additional help is needed, consider a professionally facilitated retreat for your Forum. All you need is being inspired and not resting until your Forum reaches a Transformational stage. The rest can be an excellent adventure!



tips and exercises

1. From Control to Vulnerability

- Tell the uncomfortable truth about yourself. The most magnetic, trustworthy, and likable version of you is the real you, with all your human imperfections. Challenge the voice inside you that believes otherwise. So long as you don't believe this, you are living your life partially as a fugitive in hiding from others and yourself. It is very stressful to be in hiding.
- Vulnerability is the currency of exchange in relationships. If you aren't spending much of that currency, you are probably not buying much intimacy and deep connection with people. Challenge yourself to be as generous in spending this currency as you are in spending money.
- Look at the physiological signs of whether you are being vulnerable. Is your heart rate going up, or are your palms getting sweaty any time during the forum? If not, challenge yourself more.
- Use "I" language when you want to give people tough feedback. Sharing your emotions about their impact on you is vulnerable. Criticizing them about that behavior is invulnerable. "I still feel hurt over how you treated me" is a vulnerable statement and likely to generate mutual vulnerability, empathy and curiosity in the other. "You shouldn't have treated me that way" is an invulnerable attack that would likely produce defensiveness.
- Give people concrete data about impact of their behavior while remaining curious about the underlying cause or intention. "I feel resentful when you interrupt me" is a true statement of your feelings that no-one could argue with. "You don't respect me" is an assumption about what causes the other person's interruption behavior, which may or may not be accurate.
- Examine your own relationship with control. How anxious do you get when you can't control a situation? How does this serve you in dealing with life, which is ultimately uncontrollable? How is your control pattern impacting your behavior in Forum?



tips and exercises

2. From Rational to Emotive

- Learn to check into yourself frequently during Forum meetings and ask yourself “what am I feeling?”
- Share as much as possible about how you are feeling as those feelings are occurring to you. It is more vulnerable and effective to share feelings in real-time.
- Emotions are all valid. Don’t talk people out of their emotions. People won’t feel safe sharing their emotions with you if you argue with those emotions and tell them they shouldn’t feel that way.
- Use “I” language in sharing your feelings rather than criticizing others for generating those feelings in you.
- Watch for judgments masquerading as emotions in “I” language. “I feel like ...” is often the precursor to a thought rather than a feeling. “I feel like you humiliate people” is a judgmental observation rather than a feeling and will generate a defensive reaction. “I feel embarrassed” is a vulnerable expression of emotion that generates mutual vulnerability, empathy and curiosity.
- Examine what emotions are most challenging for you to express. Are they the softer emotions like love and caring, or the harder emotions like anger or resentment? Share this observations with your Forum-mates and ask them to challenge you to express more of the feelings you typically avoid.



tips and exercises

3. From Certainty to Curiosity

- Bring out the deeper and root-level considerations in a presentation. These include someone's deeply held values, deepest fears or aspirations, common patterns that repeat themselves, deeply held assumptions or beliefs about life or people which color their experience.
- See if you can replace your need for answers, solutions, and certainty, with a deep urge for curiosity. Imagine a picture of a child turning rocks on a beach to see what is underneath them. Keep turning rocks over, keep getting surprised and fascinated by what you discover. Let go of any agenda you might have about doing anything with these findings. The agenda is deep curiosity itself.
- Check any possible personal “agenda” that might make it difficult for you to remain curious during someone's presentation. Examples include:
 1. Needing to look good and impress your Forum-mates with your quick solutions.
 2. Any left-over resentment or unexpressed judgments or feelings you hold about the presenter.
 3. Someone's presentation triggering a personal sore spot or vulnerable feeling which you are not willing to share.
- Bring to mind a role model in your life who helped you find your own answers and trust your own internal wisdom as opposed to those giving you good advice. Use that as an inspiration and model in your Forum participation. If you don't have any models, notice who in the Forum best exemplifies that behavior.

