# How to Stop Being ‘Them’ and Start Being ‘Us’

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A few months ago, I was in conversation with a group of senior director and vice president level leaders in a client company. I asked them, “Before you were promoted to senior director or VP, what did you used to say about the people who had those titles?” What I heard in response was pretty telling:

  They don’t get it.

  They don’t understand what’s really going on.

  They’re arrogant.

  They’re presumptuous.

  They think they’re better than us.

It took maybe 10 seconds to get all of that out on the table. Clearly, the memories were pretty fresh. Then I asked my next question, “Do you think it’s possible that people are saying those kinds of things about you now that you’re a senior director or VP?” I didn’t hear much in response but I did see a lot of “Oh, s\*\*t,” looks on everybody’s faces.

When you get a senior leader or executive title in an organization, you become one of “them” to the vast majority of the people who work there. All of the things the majority is saying about “them” may or may not actually be true, but that doesn’t matter. Their perception is your reality. If you want to be effective as a leader and create a working environment where people feel engaged and excited to be there, you’ve got to work hard to demonstrate that you’re not one of “them” but are, instead, one of “us.”

Here are some actionable ideas on how to do that:

**Create opportunities to connect.** I first tuned into the “them” dynamic when I was an executive myself. I had been the vice president of HR at my company for about 18 months when I extended an offer to everyone in the department to join me for a short duration discussion group on a book I really liked. (It’s called [Slowing Down to the Speed of Life](https://amzn.to/2VUHSsW). An oldie but a goodie.) About a dozen people took me up on it and we met for about six weeks on Tuesday mornings. The discussions were great but the big takeaway for me personally came about three weeks in when I received an email from an administrative assistant named Lisa. She wrote to tell me that she enjoyed the group and was getting a lot out of the book but the best thing for her was learning, after three weeks of talking with me, that “not all vice presidents have green blood and horns.” That line really set me back. My first thought was, “How could she have thought that about me?” And then I focused on her language of “all vice presidents.” The green blood and horns imagery wasn’t about me specifically, it was about vice presidents in general. That was Lisa’s story about “them.” My unexpected lesson learned was that by creating opportunities to connect as people and not co-workers in a hierarchy you can break down the stories that separate “them” from “us.”

**Sit in with the front liners.** In our [Next Level Leadership® group coaching program](https://eblingroup.com/services/programs/), we have high potential leaders shadow senior leaders for a day. So a senior director in operations might hang out with the company CFO for the day or a VP in IT might sit in with the CEO. It’s a great opportunity for the rising leaders to broaden their perspective and observe what it’s like to operate as a senior executive. What I’ve seen in our best client companies over the years is that after hosting a few shadow days, the members of the senior leadership team recognize that they should be shadowing colleagues who are closer than they are to the everyday experience of the front line. In one of our client companies, members of the senior team each spent at least a day sitting in with the employees who staff their customer call center. The senior leaders got some on the spot training and mentoring from the experts and took live calls. By doing that, they showed some vulnerability and that they cared enough to learn more about (or, in some cases, remember) what it’s like to work on the front line. It was sort of like an episode of [Undercover Boss](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Undercover_Boss) without the disguises. It definitely built trust between the senior leaders and the team members in a very important part of the company while shrinking the overall gap between “them” and “us.”

**Talk about the big picture and where everyone fits.** One of the perks of a leadership role is the power to convene. If you want to call a meeting, you can call a meeting. The key, though, is to use that power wisely and creatively. One of my executive coaching clients recently used that power to call a town hall meeting for everyone in his part of the company. He and his leadership team talked about where the company has been, where it is now, where it’s going and why it’s going there. More importantly, they talked about how everyone in the room played an important role in creating the present and the future. The leadership team members didn’t lecture or drone on. They were intentional about making the meeting a multi-directional, interactive conversation so everyone could learn more about everyone else’s work and how it how hangs together. The feedback on the meeting was off the charts positive. There were pages of appreciative comments about the “what” of the conversations and the “how” of feeling a sense of teamwork, inclusion and that “we all matter.” When that happens the distinction between “them” and “us” fades away. It’s just “us.”