



Boundary Spanning Leadership for a Networked World

Traditional leadership styles don't fit well in the interconnected business world that exists today. What is called for is leaders who can span redefined boundaries.

Businesses are facing a whole menu of challenges, including increased competition, globalization of the workforce and marketplace, technology-inspired innovation, and accelerated change. In this environment the boundaries are murky at best because the organization is working across cultures and geographies where everyone is connected to everyone else. Traditional leadership practices were designed for a less volatile marketplace where change mostly occurred one at a time and was not so deeply impacted by cross-boundary influences. Leadership strategies must adapt to the reality of the new marketplace by developing capabilities suitable for directing and aligning organizational efforts across diverse boundaries to fulfill the organizational vision and goals.

Direct, Align, Commit

In November 2010, the book *Boundary Spanning Leadership* hit the stands. Written by Christ Ernst and Donna Chrobot-Mason and published by the Center for Creative Leadership, the book got the attention of corporate leaders struggling to direct global businesses. The focus of the book is the need for new leadership strategies better suited for a business environment that is defined by the integration of informal and formal networks (i.e. social media conversations versus siloed directives). The traditional communication and decision-making channels are proving to be too rigid for a setting in which multiple changes are occurring at the same time. In formal decision-making models, each change calls for a response one at a time. In the boundary spanning model, leaders leverage formal and informal networks to address interconnected changes at once.

Boundary spanning leadership is defined by the authors as, "...the capability to create direction, alignment, and commitment across boundaries in service of a higher vision or goal." Direction is a shared understanding of a common vision, goals, and strategies. Alignment is the coordination of diverse activities and resources. Commitment refers to collective success as an organization. Businesses that expect to succeed in the transforming marketplace are challenged with developing leaders who can make decisions in a world where differences, rather than commonalities, rule. Guiding a business with a diverse workforce operating in culturally and regionally different markets requires a new breed of



leaders who are comfortable managing in a diverse environment rather than one where common cultures and priorities are clearly established. In a diverse environment where differences are the norm, leadership must find common ground (vision and mission) and develop collaborative strategies that take advantage of the human differences. These differences include nationality, religion, occupation, gender, location, ethnicity, beliefs, generation, and many others.

There are five types of boundaries to navigate in order to improve competitiveness and leadership effectiveness: vertical referring to hierarchies, silos, levels, and rank; horizontal or cross functions or units and expertise; demographic or human diversity; stakeholder or the interface of the organization and communities; and geographic which includes location, markets, and cultures. Leading across all five boundaries requires the leadership skill to cut across redefine boundaries, uniting people through engagement practices and leveraging the skills and capabilities of change leaders at all levels of the organization. This is opposed to the traditional model of leadership which relies on layering (committees, new structures, etc.).

[Transforming Boundaries Around What is Important](#)

Underlying the boundary spanning approach is recognition that successful management of change requires a high level of inter-unit coordination across the organization. One department cannot affect change without cross-functional or cross-unit alignment, driven by common agreement on what is important to organizational success. There are three primary boundary spanning strategies to increase collaboration: leverage group differences through leadership; find common ground across the boundaries; and identify the innovative opportunities within the organization by creating an integrated organization that continues to recognize the power of differentiation.

There are six leadership practices that define the boundary spanning business model. The first two are to define and understand the existing boundaries because without that knowledge leadership is unlikely to leverage the differentiated groups. The third best practice is to suspend the boundaries so that people understand cross boundary functioning. People are asked to cut across hierarchies, silos, functions, demographic groups, and communities. This builds trust. Once trust is established, the suspended boundaries are reframed in a way that develops a cross-boundary community. The fifth best practice involves developing new boundary interfaces so that every area of the business is dependent on the others for competitive success. Once interdependence is established, the final and ongoing step involves a continual process of transforming the boundaries to ensure they are leveraging skills and capabilities to produce innovation.



Successful transformation produces a highly collaborative, networked organization that can respond to a dynamic business environment. To realize this end result, leaders identify employees throughout the networked organization who can serve as catalysts for change and are able to promote interdependence of groups to accelerate change. They are the opinion leaders, influencers, connectors, experts, and brokers who are instrumental in creating organizational alignment, clarifying goals and purpose, liaising between groups, and energizing the groups to overcome resistance. The resisters who would derail the effort are identified also so that change agents can get them on board. Achieving this level of interdependence within an organization requires identifying the formal and informal networks. Often it is the informal networks in the interconnected world that have the most influence as to whether the change process is successful. To identify the people who are key collaborators is not difficult. Organizations like Accenture and United Technologies used web-based surveys and asked its employees who they see filling the roles.

The book *Boundary Spanning Leadership* comes with tools to assist the effort. The tools help organizations identify leadership challenges, and boundaries and cross-boundary opportunities, and new possibilities. There are tools that help with defining the common ground through identification of corporate identity based on groups and specific differentiators such as cultural, gender, innovativeness, and so on. Leaders then identify their personal identities and what helps or hinders the ability to effectively lead. A third tool helps leaders match the six boundary spanning practices to specific tactics and insights, identifying resources needed to promote collaboration. It is a never-ending process because an ever-changing marketplace needs ever-adaptable leadership capable of managing across organization.