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Boundary Spanning Leadership

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Consider any of the complex challenges that organizations face today, and one characteristic is common to all of them — the challenges cut across boundaries: vertical, horizontal, stakeholder, demographic and geographical. Critical challenges defy simple solutions and require the efforts of many people in the organization. They require collaborative solutions. In the recent book "Boundary Spanning Leadership," authors Chris Ernst and Donna Chrobot-Mason describe the perspectives of 128 senior executives surveyed over two years. The findings show that as today's business challenges span across boundaries, so too must leadership. The definition of boundary-spanning leadership is "the capability to establish direction, alignment and commitment across boundaries in service of a higher vision or goal." Eighty-six percent of the executives surveyed stated that this ability is extremely important in their roles.

What are the five types of boundaries that leaders must work across? The first boundary most managers traditionally learn to manage is vertical: to work upward with superiors and downward with subordinates. But the boundaries that are much more difficult to work across are the horizontal boundaries — across functions, areas of expertise, and with peers. Horizontal boundaries also are particularly challenging in matrixed organizations and when mergers and acquisitions occur. Seventy-one percent of senior executives rated this as the most challenging boundary to work across. The second most challenging are geographical boundaries. As organizations work more globally, managing across regions, countries and time zones is a critical skill set that must be developed. It takes extra skill for a manager leading a team meeting by telephone across different countries, with some members just starting their workday and it being late at night for others. Of course, working with external partners and stakeholders outside the firm is challenging as well. The fifth boundary is demographic: leading across the diversity in today's organizations, including gender, culture,

race, age, education and others. Bridging these differences to create common ground takes competent leadership.

This all sounds good in theory, but how does it work in real life? There are three strategies that leaders can implement to work across boundaries. The first is managing boundaries. It seems paradoxical, but the first step is to define and understand group boundaries before one can bridge them. This strategy taps into the power of differentiation, the need for distinctiveness and uniqueness across groups. One leadership tactic in this area is called "reflecting," where the leader helps two or more groups better understand the needs, priorities and values of the other groups, becoming aware of their similarities and differences. The leader becomes a connector. Of course, this requires the leader to have a deep understanding of the different teams and groups in the organization. This builds respect for other groups and sets the stage for the next strategy: forging common ground.

This strategy brings groups together by exploring what is universal, shared and in common. It involves suspending and reframing boundaries to allow people to work collaboratively to achieve a larger goal. Groups "step outside" their boundaries, creating a neutral zone for group members to interact as individuals. They begin to make connections based on their similarities and to build trust. Most people's experience includes instances where differences or conflicts with another person were reduced when they got to know each other on a more personal level, discovering similarities and shared experiences. Or they came up with a novel idea or solution by pooling their knowledge and ideas. How might this look practically? Suggestions include setting up informal spaces that invite boundary-spanning conversations to occur.

A well-known example is Google's U.S. headquarters, designed to bring its 8,000 employees there together in creative ways, from working in clusters, writing on large public whiteboards or conversing in its many cafes and public areas. Of course, most companies do not have resources like Google but can still find ways to encourage boundary-spanning interactions. Another tactic is to use events to build leadership networks and to find ways to mix groups in more informal settings away from the office. Connecting can lead to different groups having a shared direction and goals, mutual trust and cross-fertilization of ideas. Technology can greatly enhance this process.

While the first strategy focuses on group differences and the second on what groups have in common, the third strategy intersects the forces of differentiation and the integration in transformative new ways. It is here that the most skill is required but where the most innovative opportunities arise.

One tactic is called weaving. Think of a patterned carpet made up of different colored individual threads that create new designs when woven together. In this approach, groups intersect their boundaries but remain distinct. Each group has a unique role, but when interlaced this adds up to a larger whole. Weaving can lead to increased collective learning in the organization at the juncture where boundaries collide and intersect. What might this look like in practice? An example would be to bring different demographic groups together to identify market trends within their respective groups and how the organization could create new products to serve them. A more radical tactic, transforming, brings multiple groups together in new directions to "cross-cut" boundaries in creative ways. This tactic can

lead to reinvention of parts of the organization — or even the organization itself. One suggested tactic is to host "alternative future conversations," attended by a diverse cross-section of the organization, with no agenda other than to imagine the organization five years in the future.

Back to boundaries: There are two ways to define a boundary. One is as a border, barrier or outer limit. But another view is to see the boundary as a frontier, the location of the most advanced or newest activity in the area, the leading edge of exploration. Boundary-spanning leadership involves new ways of thinking, new values and new competencies for your leaders. Only then can they turn today's borders into tomorrow's frontiers, to solve problems, drive innovation and transform your organization.

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