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LEADING ACROSS BOUNDARIES: BOUNDARY SPANNING IN BUSINESS

Provided by National University, [Center for Creative Leadership MBA](#)

LEADING ACROSS BOUNDARIES

Leading in tough environments requires serious brainpower — and not just from one brain. To solve an organization's biggest challenges, leaders must be able to leverage the collective intelligence of all the bright minds around them. In other words, leaders must master a fundamental skill called "boundary spanning."

In a recent Center for Creative Leadership research report, surveyors asked 128 senior-level executives whether they saw the value of boundary spanning. While 86% said it was extremely important, only 7% felt they were doing it effectively.

Why is this an important gap to close? Because when leaders get it right, boundary spanning leads to creative problem solving and innovative processes across the organization. Employees feel engaged and empowered. Culture change happens.

COMMON ORGANIZATIONAL BOUNDARIES

Traditionally, we think of working across vertical boundaries — collaborating with employees above and below us on the org chart — and horizontal boundaries — partnering with peers, either in our unit or across the organization.

These aren't the only two boundary types, however. Regardless of where they are in the world, leaders need to span five boundaries, which transcend cultures, contexts, and time. Here's a quick overview of the boundaries within your organization:

- **Vertical boundaries** exist between hierarchical levels of the organization, such as rank, class, seniority, authority, and power.
- **Horizontal boundaries** cross departments or functions in the organization.
- **Stakeholder boundaries** exist between external groups, such as customers or partners.
- **Demographic boundaries** span multiple genders, generations, nationalities, cultures, personalities, and ideologies.
- **Geographic boundaries** cross locations and markets.

Effective leaders focus on spanning each of these boundary types, realizing collaboration increases productivity, efficiency, and innovation.



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WHY BOUNDARY SPANNING MATTERS

A common problem exists within any organization, whether it's an educational institution, a workplace, or a community group. The leader presents a problem or an assignment and expects everybody else to jump in and solve it, ASAP.

As everyone scrambles to make a game plan, the setting becomes ripe for conflict. If the individuals have never collaborated before, they don't know each other's strengths and weaknesses. Furthermore, everybody has their own point of view — a perspective that may not be acknowledged or respected by other team members. And if teams have never collaborated before, an "us vs. them" mentality can take hold.

As a leader, it is a mistake to think the infrastructure for collaboration, or boundary spanning, already exists. Rather, the most effective leaders understand how to lay the foundation for effective team work.

Leaders at every level of an organization play a role in boundary spanning. While senior leaders can model and communicate expectations, leaders embedded in the organization recognize that taking time to get to know one another is critical. It's not just a feel-good, team-building exercise; it's an investment in your culture.

THREE STRATEGIES THAT HELP LEADERS SPAN BOUNDARIES

To usher their organizations successfully into the future, leaders first must learn to create and sustain conditions that allow their employees to bring their best selves to the table.

STRATEGY 1: MANAGE BOUNDARIES.

It all starts with managing boundaries, which sets a solid foundation for cooperation. Managing boundaries involves fostering employees' sense of curiosity about their colleagues' unique perspectives. Leaders can do that by reserving time and space for their team members to get to know each other and to share their points of view.

Inevitably, people with different perspectives and backgrounds will experience conflict. But when leaders effectively manage boundaries and foster teams that embrace curiosity, respect, and understanding, they provide a bedrock upon which conflict can be navigated and resolved.

It's easy to imagine that as team members feel increasingly comfortable with each other and understand the respective challenges they face, their ability to manage boundaries and work through conflict becomes the norm.

Once team members learn how to navigate conflict and communicate effectively, conflict becomes productive and employees have established a foundation to forge common ground.

STRATEGY 2: FORGE COMMON GROUND.

When team members are curious and listen to understand others' points of view, they are better equipped to build meaningful networks across the organization. As they connect with



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people from other teams or build relationships with people across unfamiliar boundaries, they have an opportunity to learn deeply about how others may see and experience the challenges they are trying to solve.

Such insights can help boundary spanners iterate and refine solutions before they are communicated more broadly. When the solutions are ready to be shared, people will mobilize around them more readily because they have been developed from a shared perspective.

When the teams come together to solve an organizational challenge, their solutions already contain a high degree of buy-in, and it's easy for the organization to mobilize. Collectively, the individuals within an organization do their part to advance organizational goals.

STRATEGY 3: DISCOVER NEW FRONTIERS.

As boundaries are managed and team members forge common ground in service of their objectives, they equip themselves to discover new frontiers by leveraging capabilities in new and exciting ways.

Boundary spanners weave their talent and resources into a collective whole to address unexpected challenges and opportunities. They become more agile, configuring unique boundary spanning teams to manage these challenges. They also maintain the ability to reconfigure themselves at a moment's notice when necessary.

CATALYZE TRANSFORMATION

Over time, as organizations absorb and internalize boundary spanning capabilities, they develop the potential for remarkable transformations. Boundary spanning catalyzes innovation, it catalyzes organizational restructuring and culture change. It empowers an organization, and the people within it, to aspire to achieve outcomes it never thought possible.

National University has partnered with the Center for Creative Leadership to create a Master of Business Administration that focuses on leadership. This partnership is driven by the 50-year history each institution holds, in both online adult education and leadership upskilling.

This article showcases content from the Leading Across Boundaries course that is part of the CCL MBA program. To learn more about the CCL MBA, visit <https://nu.edu/cclmba/>.