



Perspective | 05 Jan 2023 | 5 minute read

Boundary spanning leadership: Breaking down siloes in a hybrid world

Your call to action as hybrid leaders

As organisations continue to grapple with hybrid working, one of the most common fears of today's leaders, as evidenced by our research, is how they can develop, maintain, and grow their human network. While opportunities for traditional networking have fallen, how can leaders ensure innovation, performance and transformation outcomes do not suffer?

The [research is clear](#); the erosion of organisational networks leads to feelings of isolation, less effective flows of knowledge and less innovation. Left unaddressed, this can have disastrous effects on organisations as innovation and transformation is key to remain relevant and competitive in today's fast-moving environment.

Bridging knowledge flow

The opportunity facing leaders is how to bridge knowledge flow within teams, across siloed functions, and with external partners. The work we do and knowledge we hold is embedded within human networks and connections. Whilst [explicit knowledge](#) is easy to distribute because it's written down and accessible, [tacit knowledge](#) is the implicit knowledge that we acquire through personal experience and context. It is this knowledge that leaders fear their teams losing the most through hybrid working. To appreciate this phenomenon, it is important to understand how the flow of knowledge occurs within your organisation.

Strong and weak ties

‘Strong ties’ exist when we are connected within densely knit networks such as our family, close friends, and the teams we are part of or lead at work. They often form among individuals who share similar cultural, demographic or attitudinal characteristics, and involve more frequent interactions. Strong ties just ‘click’, increasing social cohesion, emotional trust, and a resilient sense of togetherness.

Conversely, ‘weak ties’ tend to form among individuals who share *varied* cultural, demographic, or attitudinal characteristics. They involve less frequent interactions and generally result in lower levels of emotional intensity and intimacy. Despite this, weak ties are often more diverse and so their importance should not be underestimated. Weak ties serve as a ‘bridging’ function to new knowledge and connections across subgroups. They open pathways to a rapid and effective exchange of knowledge not available within ‘close ties’. However hybrid teams risk spending exclusionary time with their ‘strong ties’, preventing them from exploiting new connections and diverse thinking.

The opportunity for boundary spanning

Given the need to foster both strong and weak ties, ‘[boundary spanning](#)’ - the process of building or strengthening bridging ties - is an important practice to be developed and nurtured by leaders. ‘Boundary spanners’ are individuals within organisations who connect different networks or teams, enabling knowledge to be shared. They can communicate shared areas of interest and differences and encourage people to question the status quo.

Five ‘boundary spanning’ steps for leaders:

We suggest some steps leaders can take to start enhancing boundary spanning:

1. **Understand how knowledge currently flows** within your organisation and in the service of which goals. Understand where gaps and opportunities may lie when teams are both virtual and face-to-face.
2. **Encourage and cultivate employees to contribute** to the organisation through boundary-spanning behaviour both virtually and face-to-face, through training, incentives, and promotion. Ensure that boundary spanning can be prioritised as an enabler within roles and not a stressful ‘extra’ thing to do.
3. **Recognise that boundary spanning is a competence** to be developed, not a static one-off practice. What new rituals can be created both virtually and face-to-face to embed this competence across teams and the organisation?

4. **Create interdependent goals** that encourage boundary spanning behaviour across teams and harness virtual and augmented reality to build and support the creation of new networks. Leaders are likely to have greater visibility and understanding of the bigger picture, and how disparate groups may be interlinked.
5. **Follow-up and continue to learn** and experiment to identify best practices and meaningful results of boundary spanning behaviour.

Leaders driving organisational transformation need to pay particular attention to boundary spanning given the need for feedback, alignment and connectedness during their transformation journeys. As well as role modelling behaviours, they may benefit from formally assigning boundary spanner roles across their own network to promote the flow of knowledge more widely.

With clear intentionality leaders, in collaboration with their teams, can redesign an environment which enables more expansive knowledge flow, and view traditional boundaries as important frontiers to be exploited together.