

Bridging Boundaries

Meeting the Challenge of Workplace Diversity

In today's globally diverse and increasingly interconnected world, social identity boundaries rub together, pull apart, and collide in the workplace. When identity divides open up, people look to leaders to bridge the gaps. By employing four tactics—suspending, reframing, nesting, and weaving—leaders can facilitate positive cross-boundary interactions.

Globalization, rapidly advancing technology, changing demographics, and shifting social structures are creating a modern workplace in which groups of people who have historically remained apart are now working together. This is in turn creating a pressing organizational challenge: the need for leaders to bridge social identity boundaries among groups of people with very different histories, perspectives, values, and cultures. (For a detailed look at social identity, see “Branching Out: Social Identity Comes to the Forefront,” beginning on page 7.) How can organizations best meet this challenge of boundary-spanning leadership?

Boundaries are an unavoidable aspect of organizational life. They can take many forms: they may be

functional, geographic, or cultural, and they may be found at the individual, group, or organizational levels. Such boundaries are reinforced through the strong human tendency to categorize people into *in-groups* (people like me) and *out-groups* (people not like me).

In today's globally diverse and increasingly interconnected world, identity boundaries rub together, pull apart, and collide in the workplace. Some of these collisions create minor friction and are quickly resolved; others reveal deep fault lines and significantly affect organizational functioning. Either way, when an identity divide opens up, people look to leaders to bridge the gap.

However, leaders who try to effectively bridge identity divides face at least three major challenges. First,



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they are often *pulled in various directions* among different identity groups' conflicting values, viewpoints, and beliefs. Second, they are commonly *pushed to one side*. A leader will be a member of some identity groups and not a member of others. Despite a leader's best efforts to be impartial and fair, members of identity groups will form perceptions based solely on his or her identity group membership. And third, leaders are all too frequently *caught out of the loop*. This occurs in part because people have a natural tendency to filter information as it moves up the organizational hierarchy and in part because more often than not, leaders are representatives of traditionally advantaged and dominant identity groups. Under these circumstances, leaders often lack critical awareness and knowledge of the inequities and challenges faced by less advantaged groups.

FINDING LINKS

The role of boundary-spanning leadership is to facilitate cross-boundary interactions, thereby creating the linkages necessary to move ideas, information, people, and resources

where they are needed most. Their positional authority allows leaders to establish a number of these linkages *directly* through their actions and words. At the same time, the three challenges described earlier impose limitations on this ability of leaders to intervene directly. As a result, boundary-spanning leaders often act *indirectly*, through enabling or facilitating the cross-boundary interactions of others.

Four boundary-spanning tactics—*suspending, reframing, nesting, and weaving*—can facilitate positive cross-boundary interactions.

Suspending: Creating a Third Space

The tactic of boundary suspending seeks to create a neutral zone, a third space where social interactions are person based rather than identity-group based and where individual relationships can be developed, assumptions can be surfaced, personal values can be safely explored, and new language can be created. This space can be physical (such as an office or other business space), virtual (such as the communication zone created by e-mailing or teleconferencing), mental (such as the common ground opened by shared experiences, ideas, and ideals) or any combination of these three.

Leadership practices that create a third space can be either formal or informal and can occur as part of work or after-work activities. A human resource director in Singapore cites using sports as a third space to facilitate interaction between Chinese Christian employees and Malay Muslim constituents in the community. These sporting events create a common medium through which ethnic and religious boundaries can be suspended and different identity groups can interact and learn more about each other on an individual level.

Also consider the case of a Japanese project manager whose job

required him to work for short stints in countries throughout the Asia-Pacific region. His role demanded that he quickly build productive and task-oriented cross-national teams in order to launch new information technology initiatives. On assignment in Korea, the project manager frequently organized opportunities for his team members from Australia, Indonesia, Korea, and New Zealand to socialize after work, and observed that these interactions were highly effective in developing person-to-person relationships.

Establishing such practices is not always so straightforward, however. In-groups may feel threatened when brought into contact with out-groups with which they have a history of tension or mistrust. An example of this is the Japanese project manager's experience while managing a new initiative in Hong Kong. His efforts to organize after-work activities in this case were met with resistance. Although his expatriate colleagues enjoyed going out to a bar or nightclub to socialize, his local Chinese colleagues preferred to have dinner together. These differences carried over to the workplace. Project delays and behind-the-scenes conversations became the norm. The problem, according to the project manager, was not the technical work but that the different national groups were simply not able to get along.

Bridging entrenched identity divides is something that few leaders have been trained to do, yet it is an integral aspect of their leadership roles. Examples of successful boundary-spanning practices include holding storytelling sessions in which individuals are encouraged to share personal life events and lessons; setting up a *war room* where cross-boundary teams can construct maps, track progress, and have meetings; organizing *creativity labs* where diverse teams can dialogue and solve problems; and arranging off-site retreats designed to take advantage of

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the third-space qualities of a neutral location.

Reframing: Activating a Shared Identity

The tactic of boundary reframing is designed to activate a common category or superordinate identity that is inclusive across identity groups.

In the workplace, boundary reframing increases the salience, relevance, and importance of belonging to the organization as a higher-level social category. Thus the organization itself and its mission and goals become the all-inclusive identity group.

A powerful example of boundary reframing can be seen at Child Rights and You (CRY), a nongovernmental organization in India that is transforming itself from an agency for child relief to an agency for child rights. This grassroots organization spans seventeen of the twenty-eight Indian states and is a microcosm of the tremendous diversity of this vast nation and its intergroup differences in gender, religion, region, language, ethnicity, and caste. Members of the management committee recognized that the transformation would succeed only if all the identity groups within the organization internalized the change. As one senior leader put it, “We can’t create a movement with over a billion people in India until we first create that movement and that understanding within our own diversity.”

Bringing the entire organization together in internalizing the transformation has helped to discourage an us-versus-them mind-set from developing. When regional divisions or rifts between castes become apparent, they can be addressed in the moment rather than externalized. This process allows people to identify common ground and to form new levels of trust and community.

The compelling missions of non-profit organizations can function as built-in superordinate goals with the

power to bridge gaps between disparate identity groups. In the corporate setting, superordinate goals tend to focus on achievements such as winning market share, beating the competition, and reaching collective financial targets that result in bonuses or pay raises. These focuses can bridge social identities by emphasizing interorganizational competition and what is positive and distinctive about the organization compared with its competitors.

For example, in a company that manufactures clothing for some of the world’s best-known brands, leaders draw on the shared need of employees for financial security. About 40 percent of the employees are Jordanians; the remaining 60 percent are from India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and China. Effectively working together and meeting production targets results in collective financial incentives and rewards; causing trouble and not getting along results in losing your job.

What these examples have in common is the activation of a shared vision. The real boundaries that separate identity groups in these organizations are rooted in group membership and are charged with emotion and meaning. Leaders should not ignore such powerful differences or attempt to make them go away. Nor should they deliberately put members of identity groups in a position where they must abandon core aspects of their social identity in deference to the organizational identity. This practice not only raises ethical issues but also results in an unsustainable strategy.

Nesting: Embedding Groups Within a Larger Whole

The tactic of boundary nesting seeks to structure interactions so that identity groups have distinct roles that are embedded within a larger mission, goal, or objective. It draws on the strong needs humans have for both distinctiveness and belonging.

Common examples of boundary nesting are affinity groups and communities of practice, both of which seek to foster the development of a shared and nested identity while keeping groups connected to a larger organizational identity. Like Russian *matryoshka* dolls, smaller subgroups with unique meaning and integrity are nested within larger groups that constitute the whole. A number of organizations use educational or cultural events to bring social identity groups together.

CRY has adopted an innovative strategy-planning process that uses the concept of boundary nesting. This NGO wanted a strategy process that recognized and valued the distinct regional identities across the organization yet also addressed the need for an integrated long-term plan to provide an overarching blueprint. The outcome is a collective process whereby each region works on the strategy after having broken it down into smaller actionable steps. The final version of the strategy then emerges after the groups cooperate to reconcile their various plans.

A key distinction between boundary suspending and boundary nesting is that in the former, leaders seek to facilitate cross-boundary interactions between individuals, whereas in the latter, they seek to stimulate interactions between groups. Research evidence demonstrates that nesting groups within larger wholes can reduce perceived intergroup threats and anxiety.

Yet nesting can be difficult to put into practice. Given that organizational life is often territorial and status oriented, it is a challenge for leaders to ensure in-group cohesion and at the same time to balance it with cross-group identification with the organization as a whole.

Leaders can manage these tensions by structuring interdependent tasks so that each group’s expertise is equally valued. Another option is a tiered approach in which subgroup mem-

bers first engage in activities that affirm their identity and then the different subgroups are brought together to work toward a shared understanding. Lastly, leaders can deal with these tensions by actively speaking out concerning the unique perspectives brought by various groups and their contributions to larger organizational goals.

In Singapore the nation's first prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, and subsequent leaders have used these approaches to remarkable effect. Since gaining its independence in 1965, Singapore, a highly multicultural, multiethnic, and multifaith society, has stressed that the nation's strength lies in the diversity of its cultures. The respective ethnic and religious identities are honored for their unique traditions and for their concurrent contributions to the whole of the nation. Such an approach serves to prevent dominant identity groups from asserting their identities above others and protects the unique identities of minority groups.

In Singapore the tactic of boundary nesting has been a powerful force against ethnic discrimination. Its success is evident in the stability of interethnic relations in the country and the ease with which Singaporeans interact with the rest of the world.

Weaving: Cross-Cutting Roles and Identity

The final tactic, boundary weaving, seeks to cross and intersect social and organizational identities in an interdependent manner so that they are less tightly coupled at a limited number of points. Interlacing social identities across various roles and levels in an organization facilitates opportunities for increased cross-boundary collaboration and creativity. Boundary weaving is particularly relevant in bridging the diversity gap between dominant and minority groups in an organization. With the weaving of organizational and social identities, minority-

group membership and employment classifications are intersected so that a person's identity is not correlated with his or her employment role or classification.

Boundary-spanning leaders use weaving tactics to facilitate greater representation, opportunity, and voice for identity groups across organizational levels and functions. With the use of modern communication technology, geographically dispersed or virtual teams are an increasingly prevalent mechanism for organizations to use as they seek innovative cross-boundary solutions.

Consider the example of a leader in an Asian multinational organization whose job requires her to implement regional information technology solutions across countries with widely different technology infrastructures. She composes her teams to ensure that their members are mixed in terms of both functional expertise and social identity. What she has learned is that regional diversity is necessary to a deep understanding of end-user norms and values, whereas functional diversity is a valuable way to identify the appropriate technical parameters and solutions. She feels that the cross-boundary composition of her teams is a critical factor in their ability to generate new ideas, and depart from conventional solutions.

Global diversity is the new reality of the workplace. For boundary-spanning leaders this diversity is not thought of as a challenge to solve but rather as the very means to solve the challenge. By cross-cutting identity groups with organizational levels and roles, boundary-spanning leaders can unlock the creative potential within individuals and the organization.

RIGHT COMBINATIONS

In practice the four boundary-spanning tactics are closely integrated, as leaders can use different combinations for different situations. This is

demonstrated by the example of Ong Keng Yong, former secretary-general of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Comprising Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam, ASEAN is an association of nation-states that have vastly differing economic and political statuses and are home to more than 500 million people. The leadership challenge and opportunity faced by Ong was in working across the various cultural and political differences represented in ASEAN while moving the group toward regional integration.

Ong described ASEAN meetings as forums where boundaries of national identities were *suspended* and representatives of member states engaged in person-to-person dialogue on issues of shared interest. In these settings he *reframed* intergroup differences by actively staking out the common ground. *Nesting* was seen in the secretary-general's efforts to uphold the distinct traditions of member nations; during ASEAN meetings Ong ensured that member states were given opportunities to contribute their unique knowledge and experience toward ASEAN goals and objectives. Lastly, as a political association ASEAN was noteworthy in its use of *weaving*, exemplified in the diverse representation and rotation of member states across levels and roles.

As this example of boundary-spanning leadership illustrates, if people of different identity groups are provided with opportunities for positive cross-boundary contact in the workplace, then these experiences can spill over into local communities. Boundary-spanning leadership has the potential to transform long-standing biases and beliefs. The impact is felt not only within the individual organization but also in the broader community or society. Through the work of boundary-spanning leaders, organizations can act as levers for positive societal change. &