Leading Across Boundaries: 
Up, Down, Across, and 
Outside Your Organization 
Research Summary
Executive Summary

How can you manage when you’re not really in control? How can you lead when boundaries are so blurred that many people you depend on don’t even report to you—and some work in different companies altogether?

—Thomas W. Malone, The Future of Work

Organizations have become global and increasingly decentralized. The technology revolution has created virtual organizations staffed by diverse groups of people who must work together seamlessly to meet the demands of ever more sophisticated customers.

Increasingly, managers at middle to senior levels are responsible for leading people over whom they may have little direct control to achieve critical outcomes. These outcomes run the gamut from merging diverse organizations into one, to implementing sophisticated technology solutions, to developing and rolling out innovative product lines before the competition rolls them out, to implementing new processes for reducing costs and improving customer satisfaction—and the list goes on. Senior leaders must lead people across a variety of boundaries, both inside and beyond their organization’s walls, to achieve these challenging goals.

In addition to leading specific cross-boundary endeavors (CBEs), senior leaders are expected to set the expectation that people from varying silos and turfs collaborate on a daily basis. The challenge is that most senior leaders lack the insights and skill sets to be maximally effective in leading across boundaries.

Despite the difficulty of leading across boundaries, top business leaders around the world cite one skill as the key to future competitive advantage: “Future advantage will go to those that can stimulate and support inter-unit collaboration to leverage their dispersed resources.”

Market Trends

The Decentralization of Organizations

Since the 1980s, highly centralized management structures have become less common, and decentralized, looser, flatter structures are becoming the norm. The steep and continuing drop in the cost of communications means that huge numbers of workers now have easy access to information that allows them to make more choices for themselves and to collaborate across organizational and regional boundaries.

While this accelerating flow of information at first stimulated the formation of very large organizations, today we see a trend toward the opposite direction: the increasing formation of smaller organizations that outsource work to contractors, form alliances, use temporary workers, and take part in business webs—forming complex ecologies of companies, networks, and individuals.

A Gradual Redefinition of Leadership

Over the past century, corresponding with the rise of more decentralized, flatter management structures, several concepts of workplace leadership have evolved. Command and control, the original understanding of corporate leadership, is derived from military organizations, and it emphasizes hierarchy. Engage and empower began in the 1950s, when management gurus emphasized the virtues of motivated employees who offer insights and solve problems.
Both these approaches to leadership, though different, assume that one is leading a well-defined group of people over whom one has authority. *Coordinate and cultivate,* in contrast, assumes that one is leading diverse, undefined groups of people over whom one may have no formal authority.

*Coordinate* means to organize work so that good things happen—whether you are in control or not. *Cultivate* means to discover and encourage people’s capabilities, values, and ideas—whether they report to you or not.2

Today, senior leaders sometimes need to *command and control* their organizations, and they always need to *engage and empower* the people who report to them. In addition, they need to *coordinate and cultivate:* to initiate and lead large-scale, cross-boundary initiatives with diverse, flexible pools of resources—often including employees, colleagues, project team members, executives, partners, suppliers, and customers. This calls for an updated set of leadership strategies and skills.

**A Market Mentality Toward Finding and Engaging Talent**

Hierarchical managers have direct reports to whom they delegate work. Cross-boundary leaders, in contrast, have flexibility in the people they recruit for initiatives and collaborate with. Increasingly, leaders are expected to call upon the talents of diverse, dispersed groups, such as:

- Employees in other work units
- Shared services groups
- Internal and external consultants
- Independent contractors
- Leaders above them in the official hierarchy
- Suppliers
- Customers
- Competitors
- Members of communities of practice
- Members of professional associations and networks

Successful leaders today are looking far beyond the boundaries of their work groups to find the talent and resources they need. In fact, senior leaders in many businesses are adopting a market mentality to finding talent. Here are two examples of this approach:
Procter & Gamble’s Connect and Develop Initiative:3 “Innovation is the engine for growth. But, if you’re relying solely on internal innovation—new products and services developed by your own R&D team—your engine may be sputtering … A better approach to innovation? The connect and develop method. Through this radical alternative, you connect with external sources of new ideas: university and government labs, web-based talent markets, suppliers, even competitors. Then you develop these ideas into profitable new or refined products—swiftly and cheaply—using your firm’s R&D, manufacturing, and marketing processes.”

“Procter & Gamble used connect and develop to launch Pringles Prints—a line of potato crisps printed with entertaining pictures and words—in record time and at a fraction of the normal cost. Instead of looking inside for solutions to the problem of how to print images on crisps, P&G searched its global networks of individuals and institutions. It discovered a small bakery in Italy, run by a university professor who had invented an ink-jet method for printing edible images on cakes and cookies. P&G adapted the method—and its North American Pringles business scored double-digit growth.”

Hewlett-Packard’s VC Café:4 “Most internal freelancers depend on informal networking to find work. But some companies are setting up more formal labor markets within their walls.”

“Hewlett-Packard is experimenting with [an internal market system]. I call it a quasi market, and it works like this: Anyone in HP who has an idea for a new project can propose it to a board of senior managers at what the company calls its VC Café. The board acts as a kind of venture capital group, providing funding to the projects it finds most promising. Descriptions of the approved projects are posted on an internal network, and anyone who is interested in working on a project can let the project leader know. The leader talks to all candidates and builds a project team.”

“In this way, skill combinations can be continually changed without the need to constantly restructure the organization. Good ideas percolate up from throughout the organization. Projects find people with the right capabilities, wherever they are in the organization. People find projects that suit them even if their managers don’t precisely know their particular interests. And managers get continuing feedback about what projects their people think are most promising. What’s more, if the VC Café board finds that no one is interested in doing a project it has approved, it rethinks its decision.”

The Link Between Collaboration and High Performance

Business today is increasingly knowledge intensive. In the 20th century, improving workers’ performance and productivity was largely a matter of adopting new technologies, reengineering processes, and automating production and clerical jobs. Today, however, high-value knowledge workers are growing in number and importance, and their performance depends on a very different set of factors. “Technology can replace a checkout clerk at a supermarket but not a marketing manager. Machines can log deposits and dispense cash, but they can’t choose an advertising campaign. Process cookbooks can show how to operate a modern warehouse but not what happens when managers band together to solve a crisis.”5

The performance and productivity of today’s workers depends largely on how well they can exercise judgment, solve problems, and learn new things—and, most important, how well they can do all of that in collaboration with one another. There is a vast amount of evidence that people are better at complex, intellectual tasks of all kinds when they are skilled at collaboration and are encouraged to work together rather than compete. (Routine or physical tasks—in contrast—can be enhanced by competition.) Many studies have also demonstrated a strong positive link between a collaborative climate and organizational performance.
Southwest Airlines provides a case in point. To date, Southwest has continued to be in the top of the pack at a
time when airlines are suffering staggering losses and significant customer disloyalty. In The Southwest Airlines
Way, Jody Hoffer Gittell describes the culture of collaboration that has emerged over time at the airline. The
emphasis from the top down is on “relational coordination” rather than on competition between silos.

The airline defines relational coordination as employee relationships based on:
- Shared goals
- Shared knowledge
- Mutual respect

Gittell completed an extensive study6 comparing two Southwest operational sites to seven sites of other
airlines. The author surveyed employees from numerous functions to assess the level of relational coordination
and then compared those levels to the performance of the sites. Relational coordination significantly improved
all aspects of the flight departure process:
- “A doubling of relational coordination … enables a 21 percent reduction in turnaround time and a 42
 percent increase in employee productivity.”
- “That same increase in relational coordination contributes to a 64 percent decrease in customer
 complaints, a 31 percent decrease in lost baggage, and a 50 percent decrease in flight delays.”

Implications for Leadership

Most leadership models focus on the things that leaders in a hierarchy need to do in order to mobilize, develop,
and engage the group of people they manage. Leaders need a somewhat different set of competencies and
strategies, however, when it comes to working across boundaries and leading much more diverse, fluid groups.

Research on inter-organizational collaboration points to five action areas that are critical to leading across
boundaries:
- Creating a compelling context for people to work together
- Enrolling the right players
- Building support and momentum for cross-boundary endeavors
- Fostering collaboration
- Developing yourself as a non-positional leader

(See the following section for details on the collaboration research done by the Amherst H. Wilder Foundation
and The Forum Corporation that supports these five action areas.)

Creating a Compelling Context for People to Work Together

In most situations, silos rise up not because of what [leaders] are doing purposefully but rather
because of what they are failing to do: provide themselves and their employees with a compelling
context for working together.

—Patrick Lencioni, Silos, Politics, and Turf Wars
At the highest level, breaking down intra- or inter-organizational silos is the responsibility of the top executives of an organization. But leaders of cross-boundary endeavors (CBEs) are responsible for creating a compelling context that encourages the players in that CBE to work together.

A compelling context has three key elements:

- **A link to an organizational goal.** A leader of a CBE needs to identify and articulate a high-level organizational goal and to link the CBE to it. This helps one get out of a silo mind-set and signals to the diverse players that this is a true cross-boundary endeavor—not one group’s pet project or “somebody else’s problem.”

- **A purpose that is relevant and inspiring to all players.** Next, the leader should articulate a purpose for the CBE that is relevant to all players in the collaboration and links to the organizational goal. A common mistake leaders make is to talk about their cross-boundary endeavor in language that is interesting only to their own business unit.

- **A perception of workability for all players.** Leaders usually understand the importance of an inspiring goal, but they often forget how important it is for a goal to be seen as attainable by the various people involved. Different constituencies have different understandings of what is workable: What seems feasible and clear to one group may feel completely unreasonable and vague to another.

### Enrolling the Right Players

> The biggest job in getting any movement off the ground is to keep together the people who form it.

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

Cross-boundary leaders enroll the right players for their CBEs: They look beyond their work groups to identify the best talent and resources, and then they are able to gain the buy-in of those resources. Three practices are critical to enrollment:

- **Cast a wider net.** Effective cross-boundary leaders look far and wide for talent. They recognize that while they may need to go through certain functions and people to get certain types of work done, they also have flexibility in building their network and reaching out to other people, functions, and organizations for help and involvement of various kinds.

- **Establish rings of involvement.** In their book *How to Make Collaboration Work*, David Straus and Thomas Layton say, “Once you have identified who your [players and] stakeholders are, you then face the question of how to involve them in the collaborative process. It’s often impossible for every stakeholder to be involved in face-to-face problem-solving … But that doesn’t mean everyone else must just sit on the sidelines.” Effective leaders set up “rings” or appropriate intensities of involvement in a CBE for various groups of stakeholders.

- **Bridge gaps in context.** Leaders need to understand the context each core player is coming from and strive to bridge any gaps in context between him or her, the leader, and others on the team. Each player on a CBE comes from a slightly different (or very different) “tribe”; it takes time and effort to arrive at a point where people identify themselves not only with their home function or business unit, but also with the work of the CBE.
Building Support and Momentum for Cross-Boundary Endeavors

In his book *The Tipping Point*, Malcolm Gladwell asserts that “little things can make a big difference.” He describes how a few key people carrying a compelling message that matters can create an “epidemic” for change. Gladwell proposes that a few people and seemingly small interactions can tip a situation in one direction or another and create a sweeping trend. One notable example was Paul Revere, whose widespread connections, useful knowledge, and compelling message—and one courageous ride—changed the fate of a nation.

Effective cross-boundary leaders think strategically in order to create momentum for their initiatives. They pay attention to several “little things” that can make the difference between an initiative that goes nowhere and one that becomes the bandwagon everyone wants to join.

- **The stickiness factor.** Gladwell talks about the importance of messages being memorable enough to “create change … spur someone to action.” He calls this the stickiness factor. It involves making messages practical and personal for the receivers.

- **The law of the few.** Gladwell also observes that not everyone is equally suited to starting trends. Certain types of people are the critical few who tend to pass along messages and influence large numbers of others: Gladwell calls them connectors, mavens, and salespeople.

- **Say it again.** Delivering a sticky message to the critical few is not quite enough. One also needs to be prepared to repeat oneself—a lot. Most marketers will say that it takes about seven touches with a brand or product before a customer will buy. Similarly, someone may need to hear or see a message seven times—or more—before it moves him or her to do anything.

Fostering Collaboration

**There can be hope only for a society which acts as one big family, and not as many separate ones.**

—Anwar al-Sadat

**The root cause of failures in cooperation is conflict ... The fact is, you can't improve collaboration until you've addressed the issue of conflict.**

—Weiss and Hughes, “Want Collaboration?”

Leaders in high-performing organizations emphasize the value of collaboration and make sure it becomes part of the culture. Based on many research studies on highly collaborative organizations—including the Southwest Airlines study by Jody Gittell, cited above—we know that their senior leaders communicate three key messages to employees about cross-boundary work:
We have a shared goal
• We reach out and share knowledge
• We attack problems, not each other

Above all, effective leaders are consistent in communicating these messages. Leadership experts from Jim Collins to Rosabeth Moss Kanter have noted that the most successful leaders are unrelentingly on-message when it comes to the culture and employee behavior they want to reinforce.

The other key to fostering collaboration is effective conflict management. Cross-boundary leaders need to take a broad, strategic approach to managing conflict in their CBEs and, indeed, throughout their organization. This approach must start with an understanding of their own range of “conflict styles” and the unproductive behaviors to which they are susceptible. But leaders must move beyond their own personal conflict issues and work with their peers to set up organizational systems and approaches to conflict, including ways to:

• Prevent conflict that is unproductive
• Mediate conflicts that boil over and get in the way of team effectiveness and collaboration
• Encourage and leverage useful conflict, which can lead to greater innovation and quality

Developing Yourself As a Non-Positional Leader

If I had to identify the number-one misconception people have about leadership, it would be the belief that leadership comes simply from having a position or title. But nothing could be further from the truth.

— John C. Maxwell, The 360° Leader

The final leadership action area, non-positional leadership, underlies and reinforces the previous four. The following five practices, drawn from Forum’s research on influencing without authority, encapsulate the behaviors demonstrated by effective cross-boundary leaders:

• Setting cross-boundary goals and objectives
• Bringing together people with different perspectives
• Creating buy-in and enthusiasm about cross-boundary work
• Fostering cooperation with other groups
• Seeking creative ways to manage conflict

Non-positional leaders are able to engage, mobilize, and inspire people beyond their direct authority. Faced with large, intractable problems that span multiple organizations, places, and interests, they “imagine success and set about to achieve it by involving others in the effort.”
Collaboration Research

How the Wilder Inventory Was Developed

Purpose of the Research
The initial Wilder Collaboration Factors Inventory was developed in 1992 and then updated in 2000 by Paul Mattessich, Marta Murray Close, and Barbara Monsey, researchers with the Amherst H. Wilder Foundation. The purpose of the research was to identify the keys to success in inter-organizational collaboration. It remains the broadest and most systematic study that looks at success factors in collaboration across organizational boundaries (rather than within a work unit or team).

Research Methodology
The research methodology used by the Wilder team included the following:

- They identified all the research available on cross-boundary collaboration, ultimately finding a total of 414 studies on the topic.
- They then narrowed down the studies to 40 that matched the team’s definition of collaboration and that met rigorous research standards for validity and relevance.
- They content-coded the findings from each study. They then synthesized the factors common to multiple studies and consolidated them into 20 critical factors for a collaboration to be successful.
- Finally, the researchers asked independent reviewers to validate the factors.

Grouping the Factors
Based on our own research, and to make the factors more memorable, The Forum Corporation grouped the 20 factors into five leadership action areas:

- A Compelling Context
- The Right Players
- Support and Momentum
- Collaboration
- Non-Positional Leadership

Defining Non-Positional Leadership
The Wilder team identified “skilled leadership” as one of their 20 factors, but they did not specify particular leadership behaviors. In order to define Non-Positional Leadership more fully, the Forum team drew upon its own database of validated influence practices and identified five that directly support the other leadership action areas of A Compelling Context, The Right Players, Support and Momentum, and Collaboration.

These five practices replace the one Wilder factor of “skilled leadership,” and they appear in the inventory as factors 20 to 24.
Definitions

The following definitions will help you as you review the Collaboration Factors Inventory based on the Wilder research:

A collaboration = a cross-boundary initiative, project, or ongoing priority engaged in by two or more groups to achieve mutually beneficial goals.

The players = the individuals directly involved in the work of the collaboration.

Stakeholder groups = the functions, work units, and/or organizations involved in or affected by the collaboration.

The 24 Collaboration Factors

The 24 factors in the inventory outline the characteristics that make the difference between successful and unsuccessful collaborative endeavors. The bullet points after Factors 1 to 19 on the following pages provide more detail on what that factor looks like in practice.

- Factors 1 to 19 describe the conditions that people experience during a successful collaboration. These factors do not describe activities and behaviors that leaders must demonstrate to create these conditions.
- Factors 20 to 24 describe non-positional leadership behaviors—things that leaders do to create the previous 19 factors in a cross-boundary collaboration.
Collaboration Factors Inventory

A Compelling Context

1. Unique purpose
   - What we are trying to accomplish in this collaboration would be difficult for any single function or business unit to accomplish by itself.
   - No other function or unit in the organization is trying to do exactly what we are trying to do.
   - This collaboration is designed to provide value to target customers.

2. Shared vision
   - The players in this collaboration are dedicated to the idea that we can make it work.
   - The players seem to have a shared understanding about what we want to accomplish with this collaboration.

3. Concrete, attainable goals and objectives
   - The players have a clear understanding of what this collaboration is trying to accomplish.
   - The players know and understand our goals.
   - The players have established reasonable goals.

4. Appropriate pace of development
   - This collaboration has tried to take on the right amount of work at the right pace.
   - We are currently able to keep up with the work necessary to coordinate all the people, organizations, and activities related to this collaboration.

The Right Players

5. Appropriate membership
   - The players represent a cross-section of those who have a stake in what we are trying to accomplish.
   - All the functions, units, and organizations that we need to be members of this collaborative group have become members.

6. Multiple layers of participation
   - When the group makes major decisions, there is enough time for the players to take information back to their functions, units, or organizations to confer with colleagues about what the decisions should be.
   - Each player can speak for the entire function, unit, or organization he or she represents, not just a part.
7. Clear roles and decision guidelines
- The players have a clear sense of their roles and responsibilities.
- There is a clear process for making decisions.
- The players understand that getting input from customers is critical to any decision.
- The players know that getting input from the people closest to the actual work is critical to any decision.

8. Link to self-interest
- The players see how their function, unit, or organization will benefit from being involved in this collaboration.

Support and Momentum

9. History of collaboration or cooperation in the organization(s)
- Functions and units in our organization(s) have a history of working together.
- Trying to solve problems by collaborating across boundaries has been common in our organization(s).

10. Collaborative group that has legitimacy in the organization(s)
- Leaders in the organization(s) who are not part of this particular collaboration seem hopeful about what we can accomplish.
- Others who are not part of this collaboration would generally agree that the functions, units, and organizations involved are the right ones to make this work.
- Customers (both internal and external) see the value of this collaboration.

11. Favorable climate
- The business climate seems to be right for a collaborative initiative like this one.
- The social/political climate seems to be right for a collaborative initiative like this one.
- The time is right for this collaborative initiative.

12. Stakeholder groups that are committed to process and outcome
- Stakeholder groups invest the right amount of time in our collaborative efforts.
- All stakeholder groups want this project to succeed.
- The level of commitment among the stakeholder groups is high.

13. Sufficient resources
- The collaboration has adequate funds to do what it wants to accomplish.
- The collaboration has adequate “people power” to do what it wants to accomplish.
Collaboration

14. **Mutual respect, understanding, and trust**
   - The players always trust one another.
   - The players respect one another.
   - The players take time to understand others' perspectives.

15. **Ability to compromise**
   - The players are willing to compromise on important aspects of the initiative.

16. **Flexibility**
   - There is flexibility when decisions are made; people are open to discussing different options.
   - The players are open to different approaches to how we can do our work. They are willing to consider different ways of working.

17. **Adaptability**
   - The collaboration is able to adapt to changing conditions, such as lesser funds than expected, changing political climate, or change in leadership.
   - This group has the ability to survive even if it has to make major changes in its plans or add some new members in order to reach its goals.

18. **Open and frequent communication**
   - The players communicate openly with one another.
   - People feel they are informed as often as they should be about what goes on in the collaboration.
   - Leaders of the collaboration communicate well with the players and stakeholder groups.

19. **Established informal relationships and communication links**
   - Communication among the players happens both at formal meetings and in informal ways.
   - I personally have informal conversations about the project with other players.

**Non-Positional Leadership**

20. **Setting cross-boundary goals and objectives**

21. **Bringing together people with different perspectives**

22. **Creating buy-in and enthusiasm about cross-boundary work**

23. **Fostering cooperation with other groups**

24. **Seeking creative ways to manage conflict**
Bibliography


**Endnotes**


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