

Knowledge leadership on the edge

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THE MODERN knowledge leader stands on a delta, flanked by three interrelated fields: leadership, knowledge management, and complexity thinking. They work in a highly complex environment, where knowledge is probably the most valuable asset of the organisation. The modern knowledge leader is a skilled integrator, synthesist, network weaver, and a master of work with edges and connections.

The importance of leadership

Leadership enables change. Marion and Uhl-Bien reflect the importance of knowledge work when they write that: 'Leadership can be roughly defined for our purposes as tending to growth, fitness, innovation, and the future of organisations.'¹

In addition to work within your organisation's business metrics, there are at least six reasons for modern knowledge leaders to enable change:

- Despite huge shifts in economies, many organisations still focus on tangible assets. Organisations can often manage tangible assets more skilfully than the intellectual capital of the organisation, even though the value of knowledge may dwarf the value of all tangible assets combined. The shift to a knowledge focus requires a sea change, which needs much more leadership than management.
- Organisations span geographic boundaries. Long gone are the days when most people could walk down a hall to explore some problem face-to-face with a trusted colleague. Though databases and repositories are important, people go to people for important information.² Many adults are still not comfortable building relationships and learning effectively from each other at a distance. Leaders understand how technologies can interface with knowledge acquisition, generation, and sharing.
- Offices may be located on different continents, in the midst of different cultures, different languages, and different assumptions about values, work patterns, gender, status, communication, and conflict resolution. All of these cultural elements influence knowledge generation, sharing, and use. Leaders help people negotiate these cultural boundaries respectfully and effectively.
- Even in a small organisation, different groups of people think differently. Central office leaders explore big ideas, irritating some front line managers who want quick, concrete results. Scientists and engineers focus on hard evidence, excluding ideas important to the people who see knowledge as generated through trust, relationship, and conversation. Modern knowledge leaders strive to understand underlying beliefs about knowledge, and when and how to break down – or reinforce – silos.

- External groups and trends pressure organisations to be many things to many people. A company that focused only on profit 20 years ago may now be audited for corporate social responsibility. A department created for the public good may be measured on revenue-generation. Modern knowledge leaders immerse themselves in different perspectives and envision different futures. A leader taps into key directions and leading practices related to financial, social, and environmental sustainability.
- Structures are evolving. Our well-established, long-term hierarchies are now augmented with – or are replaced by – a myriad of more horizontal, complex, and agile structures. These are led in different ways, and the boundaries between these structures and pre-existing hierarchies can be especially challenging.

Notice that all of these drivers for change involve boundaries and edges amongst groups with different goals, beliefs, and values, all shaped by different experience and knowledge bases.

Historic faces of leadership

There are hundreds of thousands of books about leadership. Interest in leadership increased dramatically in post-war years, and led to a range of perspectives about leaders' traits, attributes, and behaviours. Many newer publications describe how perceptions of leadership have changed, and claim we now have a much more sophisticated understanding of what works.

Have we evolved? Yes and no. Pick up a newspaper or take a look at the executive suite in your organisation. Do you see a disproportionate number of

decisive, mature, white males? If so, does it make sense in a complex, changeable, globalising environment that all leaders be over a certain age, male, white or praised for appearing decisive? If you fit that demographic, how do you reach out to broaden the strengths you bring to your organisation?

Some thought leaders emphasise that different positions and contexts require different competencies. Dr David McClelland³ speaks about how much he used to emphasise use of power in his leadership presentations, based on a study of AT&T. Later, as he became familiar with other organisational models, such as customer-driven organisations, he spoke more about affiliation and relationship building. He also became aware of gender differences, with women thinking of power as a resource in contrast with men who tended to use power to correct.

If you do not do so already, you might skim new research related to modern knowledge leadership. There has been exponential growth in studies about leadership in knowledge-intensive environments. However, here we deal with another boundary: formal research does not always inform practice, and the successes you and your colleagues have in practice may not be informing formal research.

How do your employees experience modern knowledge leadership?

Think about two very different workplace interactions. In both cases, you need to learn something new:

- A. You connected with a very helpful individual. They asked questions. They learned about your context. They shared stories of related experience, but did not assume your situation

was identical. Perhaps they offered to connect you with other individuals who might help. Perhaps they offered to reconnect with you if you had further questions.

- B. You had difficulty finding the right people. Your efforts sometimes felt discouraged, blocked, or even sabotaged. You learned a bit, but the learning was less personal and contextual. Perhaps you were directed to a document for the answer. Perhaps the answer seemed simplistic.

Why do we have such different experiences? Chances are the first interaction happened in a climate of modern knowledge leadership, where knowledge was valued, connections enabled, and knowledge sharing across boundaries was encouraged, or at least not frowned upon.

One of the ironies is that there can be short-term gains for managers who encourage approach 'B'. They are being measured on outputs related to a slice of the organisation's mission or a geographic slice of the company's productivity. If a manager has developed the most effective unit in the company, why should his staff spend time helping a competing unit? His accountabilities sit firmly within a boundary, appropriately labelled something like 'division.' This may not change unless a leader intervenes, as did Jack Welch with 'boundarylessness' and Lord Browne in the 1990s when he was CEO of BP. Browne stated: 'Anyone in the organisation who is not directly accountable for making a profit should be involved in creating and distributing knowledge that the company can use to make a profit.' This led to policies and practices described to me by Kent Greenes,⁴ such as efficient work units being accountable for helping others get up to speed.

Learning from nature

The importance of terminology

Have you noticed language from nature and from the related field of complexity trickling into workplace conversations? I am hearing terms such as cross-fertilisation and emergence much more often. Most terms are so familiar we do not think about the assumptions behind them. Cross-pollination may seem novel enough that we actually see images of insects or hummingbirds flying in seemingly random patterns, taking pollen (ideas) with them and connecting things (people and their knowledge) rooted in different locations. Do we think as much about the implications of mechanical terms and phrases such as 'staying on track,' 'leverage points,' 'nuts and bolts,' 'tool kit,' or 'putting on the brakes'? Do metaphors such as 'staying on track' reinforce an illusion of predictability and control we simply do not have when working with people, culture, and knowledge? In my work with a counter-terrorism network, I noted that people in the successful groups often used terms such as cross-pollination to describe good leadership. When I asked them if they thought their groups should be more like healthy ecosystems or well-oiled machines, those in successful groups chose healthy ecosystems (even if they said they did not know much about ecology!).

The importance of diversity

Many traditional leadership practices reduce diversity. For an assembly line, that is exactly what you want, at least for the short term: a tightly focused vision, buy-in, and efficiency. But in complex environments, such as nature, a diverse ecosystem is more robust and resilient than a simpler one. Some of that diversity might not be important at a point in time, but as the surrounding environment shifts, it might become critical.

A heritage grain, for example, might be rare and struggling now, yet might thrive as a food crop as climate changes. This is true for the complex groups with which we work as modern knowledge leaders. Some ideas may seem different or even radical, but they might be seeds of innovation – or even survival – in the near future.

Boundaries and edges

There are many kinds of boundaries in knowledge work, and as many ways of working with them.⁵ You may need to construct a firm boundary around a group while they incubate and develop ideas for a new product or service. Or you might need to enable knowledge flow between a multi-agency Community of Practice and decision-makers in your organisation who could benefit from what they are learning.

One of the most interesting types of boundary work requires a shift from the mechanistic mindsets of industrial work to organic mindsets of knowledge work. One significant difference between the way machines operate and the way nature evolves can be found by looking at boundaries and edges. Machines have clear, firm edges. It makes perfect sense to say a machine part needs ‘replacing’ because an exact duplicate can be inserted and will function just as the previous part did. (So why are we so comfortable talking about replacing an employee, when each person brings unique knowledge and relational assets?)

In nature, edges are complex. These meeting places of natural communities can be intensely interesting, diverse, and productive spaces. Estuaries – the places where land, fresh water, and salt water come together – are some of the most productive areas on the planet. Modern knowledge leaders can help such productivity flourish in

organisations as well. If we effectively bring together the team in India with the team in the US, or marketing people with R&D, it is possible to get an explosion of ideas that can solve problems and lead to innovations. This is the phenomenon at the heart of successful peer assists. When I create diverse groups for problem solving in organisations, I regularly hear comments such as: ‘I admit I was really surprised that someone from housing would have such great ideas for a forest fire management issue. This was great.’ Borrowing from nature, I use the term *edge-effect*[®] to describe these synergies.

Moving ideas into practice

A story from a police department provides one illustration of the *edge-effect*[®] in practice.⁶ A local fire chief approached Police Chief Todd Wuestewald one day and said: ‘That’s a great programme you guys are doing.’ Wuestewald asked: ‘What programme’s that?’ to which he replied: ‘You know: the one where the fire prevention officer goes out with a police officer to the elderly person’s home. And they check all the smoke alarms and their safety systems, and the officers checking their security procedures and all their property is marked and that kind of stuff. That’s a great programme!’ You need some context to understand the significance of this conversation.

First, you already know that police cultures are extremely hierarchical. However, Chief Wuestewald had disrupted the hierarchy for several reasons, including the fact that the strict hierarchy was discouraging people from sharing their knowledge. As a modern knowledge leader, he had created – among other things – a very diverse leadership team, empowered to make the department’s big policy

decisions. He did this using the complexity principle of a firm boundary (a few criteria – such as decisions must not break the law) and freedom within the boundary. This decision to delegate power had not been easy for him personally (having spent 25 years reaching a treasured leadership role), but he believed it would be best for the organisation and the community.

Next, you need to know that at the time of the conversation, Wuestewald did not have a clue what programme the fire chief was talking about. Perhaps he should have, but this did not upset him. He simply asked department members for better communication in the future. By the time the fire chief approached him on the street that day, the leadership team culture had been so exciting and empowering for employees, that innovations were emerging naturally. In this case, a group of officers and civilian employees had come together to serve seniors better. They formed a task force; had meetings; drafted a survey, which they circulated at the seniors' centre; studied the results; and implemented this programme. It is difficult to measure the success of proactive programmes, but the fire chief was convinced fires had been prevented and that seniors were very pleased with the services. Wuestewald's exact approach could never be replicated successfully because every context is different, but his approach could certainly inspire and inform shifts in other organisations.

One of the reasons mechanical approaches are so attractive, is that they give the compelling illusion of simple steps. It is comforting to think there might be 10 steps to becoming a leader, or three prerequisites for ensuring employees will not hoard information. In the midst of a frenetic week, such promises are soothing. However,

letting go of a control-mindset can be freeing, as the story above illustrates. The police chief at the core of this story said that at first, the leadership team concept felt like one of those orchestrated trust-building exercises where you fall backwards. Then he added: 'They caught me.'

Leadership in this police department was not about one person. It was not about control. And it was not about standard operating procedures (though officers know those well, for use as needed). To quote an idea from recent academic studies, leadership was 'generated in the interactions among people acting in context'.⁷ This modern knowledge leadership was about groups connecting, people and their knowledge being valued, the creation of a collaborative culture, and making spaces for the emergence and implementation of great ideas.

Leaders and boundaries

Leadership competency frameworks and development programmes often speak of things such as being authentic, creating a vision, and mobilising employees. They seem to assume: (1) there is an individual leader, and (2) they have positional authority. They rarely mention knowledge explicitly, nor do they focus on the many ways the modern knowledge leader can understand and work with boundaries. This is odd considering that the idea of systems and their interactions (social, economic, cultural, information technology and so on) has become so important, and boundaries have been identified as a central systems concept.⁸ By adding conscious boundary work to your ecosystem of approaches, you might launch your organisation towards a surprisingly successful future.

References

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