

Why You Should Collaborate Across Boundaries

Spanning boundaries is important, but many leaders find it challenging. Our research indicates that leaders who make even a few connections outside their teams can receive meaningful benefits, and the more boundary spanning connections they make, the more they benefit.

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Spanning Boundaries Effectively Is Essential for Leaders

Today's organizations are defined by complexity and interconnectedness. Executives must transform from managers who protect their boundaries to leaders who span boundaries. The leadership advantage goes to people who can work with a variety of colleagues from differing positions, business functions, backgrounds, locations, and experiences.

What Is Boundary Spanning?

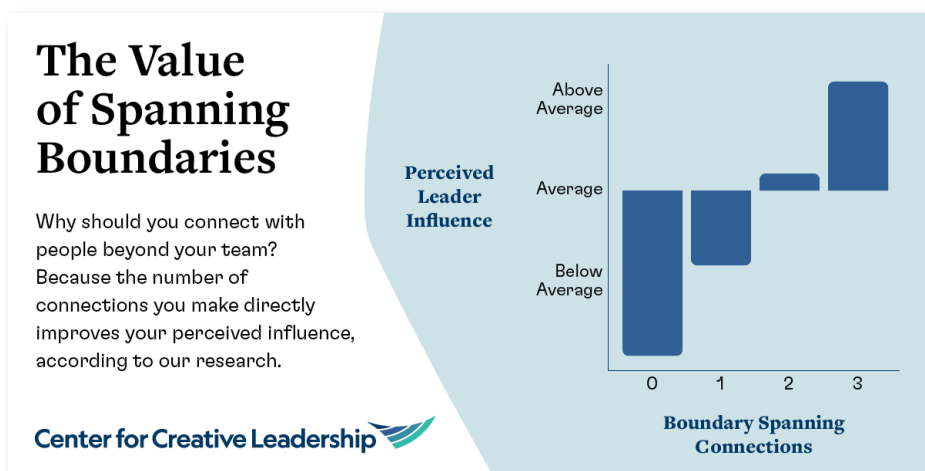
Boundary spanning leadership is the capability to establish [direction, alignment, and commitment](#) across boundaries in service of a higher vision or goal. Examples include representing your team to stakeholders, working on projects across departments, and seeking information from outside experts. Collaboration across boundaries is important at all leadership levels, across all groups and teams, and across larger organizations and systems.

The Benefits of Spanning Boundaries

Leaders who effectively collaborate across boundaries in the workplace have the advantage when faced with solving problems, creating innovative solutions, and evolving to thrive in today's interdependent, complex world. The benefits of spanning boundaries include:

- Increased organizational agility to respond to a dynamic marketplace
- Breakthrough innovations across the organization
- Achievement of mission-critical, bottom-line results
- An engaged and empowered workplace at all levels
- Flexible, cross-functional learning capabilities to solve problems and adapt to change
- Better-managed risks and rewards through enduring cross-sector partnerships
- Higher-performing virtual, remote, and hybrid teams
- Global mindsets and cross-regional collaboration

Leaders who span boundaries also benefit personally from their efforts. Using our proprietary conversational analytics system, we measured boundary spanning data from over 300 senior leader participants working in more than 50 teams during our Looking Glass, Inc.® simulation. [Our preliminary findings](#) suggest that people who consistently spanned boundaries were seen as significantly more influential within their teams, while those who failed to make these connections were granted far less influence.



Importantly, our [past research](#) also suggests that senior executives recognize the importance of spanning boundaries. Drawing on surveys from over 125 senior executives, we found that over 86% of these top leaders stated that it's "extremely important" to collaborate effectively across boundaries in their leadership roles. However, only 7% of those executives reported feeling "very

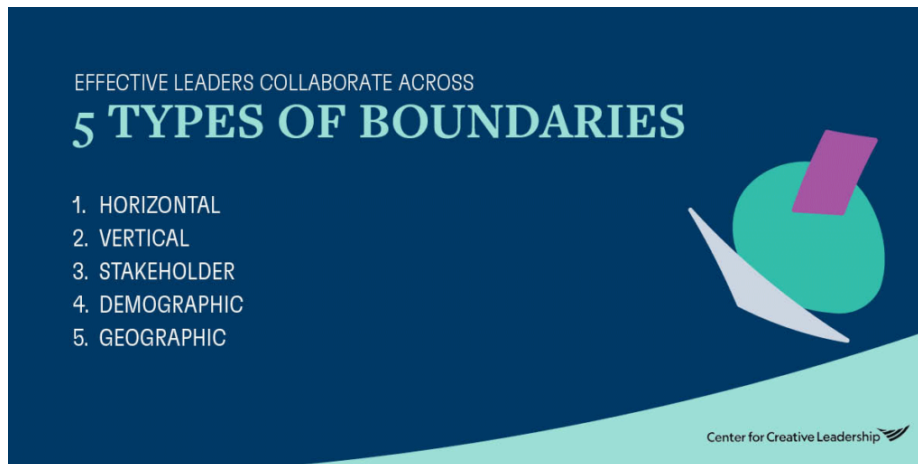
effective” at spanning boundaries — a gap of 79 percentage points. Clearly, this is an important skillset that most of us can improve.

Leaders can close this gap by developing the collaborative skills, mindsets, and behaviors of our [Boundary Spanning Leadership training](#).

Recognizing the Challenges of Spanning Different Types of Boundaries

[Our research](#) with leaders around the world suggests that there are distinct types of boundaries inside organizational structures; they require different tactics and skills and often produce different benefits. The 5 types of boundaries that leaders need to be able to span:

- **Horizontal:** between functions of the organization (expertise, departments, peers)
- **Vertical:** between hierarchical levels of the organization (rank, class, seniority, authority, power)
- **Stakeholder:** with external groups (customers, partners, constituencies, value chain, communities)
- **Demographic:** with various groups (gender, generation, nationality, personality)
- **Geographic:** across localities (regions, markets, distances)



Horizontal Boundaries

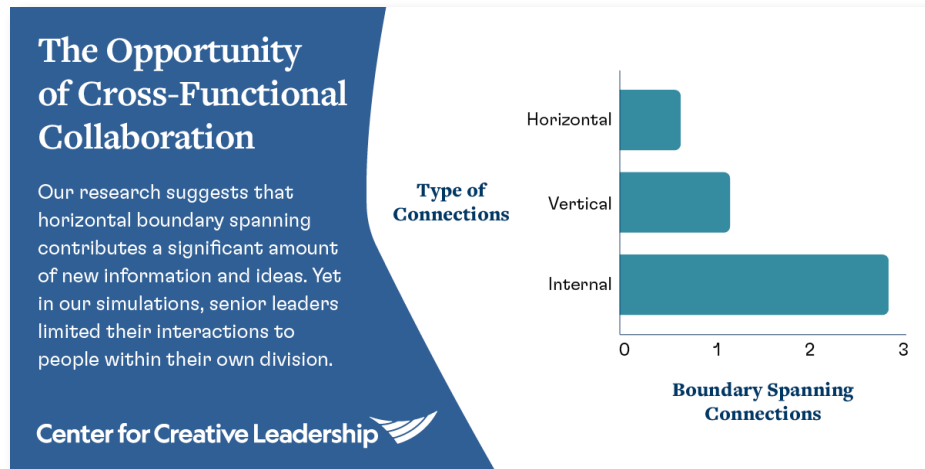
Our research shows that while horizontal boundaries are often the most valuable for leaders to span, they are also the hardest.

Horizontal boundaries separate organizational groups by areas of experience and expertise. The negative costs of horizontal organizational boundaries are revealed when one function is favored over another, when the work of one unit or product line threatens the viability of another, or when departments or functions work at cross-purposes.

[Our research](#) with senior executives found that the challenges arising from spanning horizontal boundaries were cited as a concern nearly 3-to-1 (71%) over those of the other dimensions.

Facilitating cross-functional collaboration is one of the most common issues leaders face and speaks directly to the challenge of spanning boundaries.

Preliminary findings, [based on data collected](#) within the Looking Glass simulation of our [Leading for Organizational Impact program](#), help explain why horizontal boundaries are so difficult to span. This data suggests that horizontal connections are the least likely to be maintained during the simulation, once we consider people's roles and the structure of the organization. Put more simply, people are more apt to connect with senior leaders or their own team members than they are with their peers in different divisions.



Yet, this same data suggests that horizontal boundaries may be a primary conduit for new information and ideas entering a team.

The unintended consequence of the many matrixed and regional structures at most organizations is that walls have been erected between groups that need to be collaborating. As a result, “silo-busting” has become a leading pastime for managers and executives. Facilitating lateral, cross-functional collaboration is the most common presenting issue that clients bring to the experts in our [Organizational Leadership practice](#).

When thinking about collaboration across boundaries in the workplace, our first inclination may be to consider who's in our immediate network, how we can connect with them, and what resources they can provide to help our teams achieve their goals.

Boundary spanning also entails robust ties to external stakeholders across teams. [Based on a sample of over 400 leaders](#), we found that 89% of respondents endorsed the following statement: “Effective boundary spanning emerges mainly due to strong team-to-team relationships.” These team-to-team relationships occur, in large part, due to boundary spanning.

However, research also suggests that such externally-focused efforts should be complemented with strong internal processes within a leader's team (such as determining team priorities, [defining clear roles](#) and responsibilities, and cultivating trust in one another's expertise). Without laying the groundwork within your team, your boundary spanning leadership may not reap the benefits you're expecting.

Vertical Boundaries

Vertical boundaries cross level, rank, seniority, authority, and power. The separation of groups into organizational hierarchy layers of top, middle, and entry-level — each with corresponding levels of authority — is a ubiquitous feature in nearly all organizations.

Vertical boundaries, in contrast to horizontal ones, were the least frequently cited challenge or dimension of spanning boundaries by executives in our earlier research. This is consistent with emerging findings from our study using the Looking Glass simulation, where such connections occur more frequently and are engaged in regardless of one's level of formal authority within the organization. Even though these boundaries are spanned more often and are less challenging for senior leaders, care and attention should be given to help employees feel comfortable voicing their concerns and sharing information up the hierarchy.

The picture that emerges, then, with vertical boundaries is that leaders and their team members may be a default route through which issues are raised, questions are asked, and resources are shared. The risk though is that if this becomes the only boundary that's being spanned, one will quickly find themselves in a "siloed" organization where expertise remains locked within different pockets of the organization.

Stakeholder Boundaries

Spanning boundaries with organizational stakeholders can be complex and varied. Your organization may have many stakeholder groups, including clients or customers, shareholders, boards of directors, partners, alliances, suppliers, vendors, advocacy groups, governmental or non-governmental agencies, plus local, regional, national, and global communities. These groups are likely vital to your success, but you often have little to no formal authority over their day-to-day actions. In fact, [our recent research](#) found that board members' perspectives provide unique information in predicting senior leaders' effectiveness.

How to Put Spanning Boundaries Into Practice: A Guide for Leaders

The solutions to today's most pressing business challenges often rest at the intersection of multiple boundaries. That's why truly effective leadership involves [creating direction, alignment, and commitment](#) across key boundaries.

For most of us, **it's not easy to lead outside our box in the org chart, across the lines of stakeholder interests, or beyond the borders of the division or group we represent.** The effort involved in collaborating across boundaries can, at times, feel taxing and straining.

Nevertheless, spanning boundaries can be done.

Through our research and experience in fostering more interdependent forms of leadership, we've found that leaders, groups, and organizations that effectively span boundaries do so by using 3 universal strategies. They:

1. **Manage boundaries.** The first step to spanning boundaries is to create or strengthen them. Seek to understand the unique values, skills, and expectations that members of your team, and those on other teams, bring to collaborative work. Well-managed boundaries build psychological safety and respect.
2. **Forge common ground** by cultivating and nurturing relationships with people of diverse backgrounds, disciplines, and roles. Connect at a personal level to build trust and enable more candid communication. Identify issues, priorities, or challenges upon which you can collectively build and mobilize toward a common goal.
3. **Discover new frontiers** by combining the unique capabilities within your team with those of others. Building on the previous 2 strategies, develop a highly informed, opportunistic, and agile network that functions as a team-of-teams. Groups weave and link with differentiated expertise, experience, and resources guided by an integrated vision and strategy to support breakthrough innovation, transformation, and reinvention.

Strategically Spanning Boundaries

As you embark on collaborating across boundaries with more intention, here's how to identify the best tactics to use in spanning boundaries.

What boundaries are in play?

Consider the nature of your challenge and which boundaries are most prevalent or difficult for you to span. Ideally, you'll do this in conjunction with your team. You might ask, for example, "What are we looking to achieve with these stakeholders?" and "Who might be best suited to initiate this boundary spanning effort?"

Which tactics will help clarify your focus?

Above, we outlined the 3 universal boundary spanning strategies. With each of their outcomes in mind, what are the strengths and limitations you have observed in your boundary spanning relationships? Assess each strategy and determine tactics that can help you maximize effectiveness.

We recommend you select one strategy and focus your attention there until you see improvement in that area. Then move your attention to the next strategy. Start by assessing managing boundaries, then forging common ground, and then discovering new frontiers.

Managing boundaries clarifies how to operate with one another and is the foundation upon which collective outcomes are built. If the foundation is insecure, anything built atop it can be compromised.

Tactics for managing boundaries:

- Create a boundary spanning [team charter](#) to clarify shared purpose as well as roles and responsibilities across your partnership. Have each team create a charter for their own group. Then, meet collectively to share and integrate key insights for the collective boundary spanning charter.

- Ask powerful questions of one another to learn more about other partners' values and assumptions.
- Allow members from other teams to shadow one another for a half-day, then meet afterward to share insights and learnings.
- Practice “putting on the other shoe” by taking time during internal meetings to ask your group, “How would our partner team think about this?”

Having identified and managed the boundaries facing your team, you can then prioritize forging common ground. This strategy emphasizes the importance of building trust in one another and developing the collective investment in the shared work.

Tactics for forging common ground:

- Seek out connections with other groups you don't often interact with — they may add value to your team's work.
- Link 2 or 3 of your team's immediate stakeholders who don't normally interact with one another, but should.
- When engaging with collaborators outside your team, make time for personal updates. This information can deepen these relationships.
- Establish a set of compelling organizational symbols, images, iconography, or names to represent your collective team.
- Bring different groups together to discuss an ongoing conflict and invite their perspectives on the issue. While respecting differences, strive to identify areas of agreement that can be built upon.
- Revisit performance targets that reinforce silos and, when possible, replace them with new, collaborative performance standards that discourage competition between groups.

Each of these tactics should help tap into the [power of networks](#) and build on your successes. The findings emerging from our studies using the Looking Glass simulation suggest that small gains — maintaining just 1 or 2 additional connections — can often reap meaningful benefits.

Over time, the sustained weaving of relationships enable the network to understand itself and its members in new ways. These collective insights help catalyze a transformative process that better positions the boundary spanning network for future challenges and opportunities.

Tactics for discovering new frontiers:

- Join your organization with one from a completely different sector (for example, a nonprofit) to tackle a shared problem.
- Continuously implement simple, small-scale projects for cross-boundary groups to gain experience at low risk.
- Target existing boundaries that seem impede collaboration; they deserve to be removed or reinvented.

Closing Thoughts on Collaboration Across Boundaries

We've outlined strategies to help you put boundary spanning into action. The behaviors, skills, mindsets, and practices of spanning boundaries are best learned and applied within the course of everyday work and activities, so draw on these tactics for in-person or virtual meetings, off-sites, strategic planning sessions, and more — anytime you see boundaries emerge.

Effective leaders find ways to generate change, co-create innovative solutions, and contribute to their organizations and communities by spanning boundaries every day.

BASED ON RESEARCH BY



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Andy has over a decade of experience working as an organizational scientist identifying data-driven solutions that help organizations address some of their most pressing challenges. In his current role, his research focuses on work groups and teams and emerging leaders. Prior to joining us, Andy was a member of the faculty at Louisiana State University.



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A social psychologist with over 15 years of experience, Diane is a researcher with expertise in executive education and consulting. At CCL, she conducts research and provides subject matter expertise in the areas of women and leadership, the gendered assessment of workplace helping behaviors, leader listening behaviors, and employee voice.



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Karissa is the product manager and a lead designer of CCL's flagship [Leadership Development Program \(LDP\)[®]](#) and other programs. She designs and facilitates leadership development solutions with a focus on high-tech, biotech, and research organizations where collaboration and innovation across boundaries and expertise are critical to success.



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Following a decade of work in sales and sales management, and his Ph.D. from University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Preston joined us in 2011. Though he has developed expertise with collegiate populations, Preston's work has spanned a diverse clientele, including educators, scientists, engineers, and healthcare professionals. He has developed a broad spectrum of leaders, ranging from early professionals to middle managers to executives.



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Honorary Senior Fellow

David has designed and facilitated numerous creative leadership and innovation development experiences. He's the co-author of *The Leader's Edge: 6 Creative Competencies for Navigating Complex Challenge* and co-inventor of many of our leadership development tools, including [Visual Explorer®](#), Leadership Metaphor Explorer™, Wisdom Explorer™, Targeted Innovation Toolkit™, and Transformations™.



Chris Ernst, PhD
Former Senior Faculty

Chris co-founded our Organizational Leadership practice, creating a research-based, boundary spanning methodology that has empowers cross-boundary groups to solve complex, interdependent challenges. He's the co-author of [Boundary Spanning Leadership: Six Practices for Solving Problems, Driving Innovation, and Transforming Organizations](#).

About CCL



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