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In order to continue enjoying our site, we ask that you confirm your identity as a human. Thank you very much for your cooperation. Here’s a term you may not have heard before: “boundary spanning.” It sounds more like a geopolitical strategy than a business skill. If you’ve never heard of it before, it’s a business term we’re confident you will come across soon because it’s gaining recognition as an increasingly necessary skill in today’s workplace. But don’t just take our word for it: a CEO survey (conducted by IBM) ranked it as one of the top skills employees need to have to effectively—and successfully—operate in today’s workplace. And yet you may ask yourself… What exactly is it? wiseGeek defines the term as “the efforts by an organization to establish connections both within and outside the organization.” But it can also mean establishing “bridges” between different levels of employees, like executives and managers, or even between a company and its distributors. Essentially, it’s building your own personal information network from many different sources. Boundary spanning is vital to the effectiveness of cross-functional teams and change management initiatives (among a myriad of other endeavors) because as you work with others (and unless you are the sole caretaker of a lighthouse, you will be working with others), two elements are key to success: the ability to establish and maintain healthy relationships with others, as well as the skill to tackle disordered data, vagaries, and potentially a high degree of ambiguity in order to meet objectives, deadlines, and goals. In other words, you must get along with a wide swath of people and make sense of a lot of disparate information. Today’s business world is messy and complicated, and it’s a lot more challenging than it used to be to collaborate on comprehensive solutions and communicate them in a world where virtual teams, virtual offices, and international colleagues are more and more the rule than the exception. The fact that we have smartphones, Wi-Fi, and social media at the ready means that we can navigate this complexity more easily than before, yet it’s also a lot easier to inundate ourselves with a constant stream of information that can distract us from doing it well. Sound familiar? This is why a skill like boundary spanning has gone from “nice to have” to “critical.” In her post, “Put Yourself in Uncomfortable Situations,” Penelope Trunk talks about a big reason for why this has become the case. “One of the biggest changes in the workforce in the new millennium is that we have to be information synthesizers instead of information producers. All information is available online. So we can’t add value by memorizing it. We have to add value by reframing it. I call this synthesizing.” And by no means is this easy or straightforward, even if it might sound simple, because we all know that there are very few business issues that have one clear-cut answer. So what does boundary spanning have to do with this? And how can I get better at it? Good questions! Trunk has devised some excellent tips for what you can do to get better at navigating the murky waters of bridge spanning and information synthesizing. “Go somewhere you don’t fit”: Trunk is not a fan of travel—if you are using it to escape the problems of your life. But, she does believe that travel can offer a tremendously valuable opportunity to solve a specific problem by shifting your perspective around. But you’ve got to set off with the intention that unmooring yourself from your daily routine will help spark new ways of thinking. And she offers one more valuable nugget: “A test of whether you’re using travel productively is whether or not you have a very clear way to implement the results of your travel once you get home.” “Work with people you don’t like”: When you are first hired for a job, you’ve been vetted for a specific set of core skills, and more than likely, for being the right “fit.” But what no one tells you, says Trunk, is that “your job is to help your boss.” And that means inevitably collaborating with people you may not like to get your job done. And then there’s this: “if you’re good with people, you need to work with someone who is terrible with people. If you’re good with numbers, you should work with someone who is terrible with numbers.” You won’t be good at everything, and no one—not even your boss—expects you to do everything well. So know your weaknesses and skill gaps skills, and own them. And learn how to work with people who can help you, and with whom you can help in return—without keeping score. “Make yourself nervous”: Don’t let fear prevent you from working with people who are very different from you. You just might be surprised at the great work you can achieve when you combine your strengths with people who think and work in ways that are far removed from your own style. And, one more helpful tidbit: people who work and think differently from you can help motivate you to take more risks. And this is important, Trunk believes, because “risk takers will rule the next millennium. This is how we find a clash of new ideas and a surge of creativity, by taking intellectual and emotional risks.” If you take more risks, you keep from getting soft—because that’s the last thing you want to be. Discomfort and uncertainty can help you keep sharp and on the lookout for new ways to synthesize information and ideas. OK, so there’s no step-by-step guide on exactly what to say and do to boundary span with the best of ’em…and you have to be willing to make yourself uncomfortable. But here’s what we think is a helpful perspective: you can build your threshold for dealing with messy, uncomfortable situations by using those scenarios that test you, push you, and hone your ability to generate “A-ha!” moments to your advantage when others are retreating to their comfort zones. How? Every business challenge you experience, even if the outcome isn’t as you hoped or planned, makes you a better bridge builder and information synthesizer. In time, you’ll learn to live in the heart of messy, complex situations, with a cool calm that others will come to rely upon. You’ve been down that road before, and each time you got a bit smarter and probably found some new co-workers or colleagues to help you through it. You know those mud puddles that everyone else at work is trying to avoid, and walk around? Jump into them. Getting muddy is the best thing you could do to become the most effective employee or boss you can be. And the boundary spanning you’re doing, without even thinking about it, is making every mud puddle a little less murky—and a lot more gratifying to jump into. Photo courtesy of Raymond Larose. If you would like to find out more about Hult’s business programs, download a brochure here. Hult offers a range of highly skills-focused and employability-driven business school programs including a range of MBA options and a comprehensive one year Masters in International Business. To find out more, take a look at our blog Student perspective: Adjusting to life abroad and how I knew Hult was right for me. Download a brochure or get in touch today to find out how Hult can help you to learn about the business world, the future, and yourself. “The term Boundary Spanning is now widely used to describe any situation where an individual crosses the boundaries of a social group”“When I first came across this term, about a year ago, I must admit that I had no idea what it was about. I was in the process of accrediting an agile leadership course and one of the learning outcomes that my course was supposed to meet was stated like this: ‘Learning must flow across organizational boundaries in support of the larger vision or goal. Introduce the value of spanning boundaries and the importance of building skills to do so. Building awareness includes helping participants see the value in (1) seeking to view one’s function from the boss’s perspective and collaborating with or even acting as a leader among peers; (2) learning about global situations that might yield opportunities or threats for your business; (3) listening to and learning from suppliers, customers, regulators, competitors, thought leaders; (4) building relationships with people and groups in your industry, community, or field; and (5) sharing what is learned or gained back inside the business and creating feedback loops for on-going exchange. Obstacles in spanning boundaries are common: fear, rejection, mistakes, failure, inertia. Discuss ways to overcome fear and vilification, how to speak truth to power and seek and welcome dissent, how to allow your boundaries to be permeated without losing coherence, and how to otherwise change cultural inertia.”ICAgile, Learning Roadmap, ICP-ALP**In the eagerness to get the course accredited quickly, we tried to disregard the importance of it and skip the concept of Boundary Spanning, thinking it would not be crucial for the understanding of how to enact agile leadership - there were so many other learning objectives that were more important, we reasoned. However, our accreditor would not accept that we did not explain and teach the concept within the modules of the course, and made us go back to revisit the Learning Roadmap to complete the course, including the concept of Boundary Spanning. So we did, and when I reluctantly started to dig deeper into Boundary Spanning, I understood that this term is extremely useful and crucial to create a culture where adaptability, diversity, cross-functional work and company-wide networks are keys to success. Boundary Spanning competence in leaders can directly contribute to a culture where acceptance and cooperation between different roles and departments can flourish and where you all the time interact with the world outside as well as inside the scope of the organization, working across all sorts of boundaries, wether demographic, geographic, cultural, functional, social or political. The complete understanding of agile leadership is just not possible without also understanding and using Boundary Spanning!There is a lot of interesting articles and books on Boundary Spanning out there, and if you are interested in increasing Business Agility for your organization, I suggest you dig into some of them to learn more about the concept. Or attend one of our trainings in Agile Leadership / Agile People Coaching to understand how to apply it practically in your company. We have also incorporated Boundary Spanning as one of the most important concepts to understand in our Agile People Manifesto, which has just been produced by Agile People from all over the world. If you are curious about that, keep your eyes open for more, very soon :)“Wikipedia”“Learning Roadmap, ICAgile Agile Leadership track

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