How HR managers can look for, develop and reinforce certain behaviours to break down barriers within their organisations.

HR managers who strive to identify and cultivate the best talent for their firms understand certain truisms. They know that hiring can’t be done by a bot, that there is a human aspect to finding the right fit for a particular team, and that there is great value in working across divides, be they cultural or functional.

In a recent Harvard Business Review article, Tiziana Casciaro (Rotman School of Management), Amy C. Edmondson (Harvard Business School) and Sujin Jang, Assistant Professor of Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD, argue that employees who communicate and collaborate across silos to provide integrated solutions for their clients create great value for their organisations. Drawing on their work with hundreds of executives across many organisations, the authors present a set of practices that facilitates cross-silo leadership, which can be learned and developed over time.

For cross-silo leadership, HR managers can focus on hiring and developing talent with the following skills:

- Cultivating cultural brokerage
- Asking questions that facilitate perspective taking
- Expanding points of view through network scanning

**Hire and develop cultural brokers**

As Jang has previously written, cultural brokers facilitate interactions between individuals who have different sets of assumptions, values and norms. Although her original research on this topic is based mostly on people working in multinational teams, she posits that functional or organisational cultures can also be brokered.

Jang identified two distinct roles of cultural brokerage: Those who help colleagues work around cultural differences (“bridges”) and those who connect colleagues with one another to build lasting relationships (“adhesives”).

- A “bridge” allows others to collaborate across silos with little disruption to their daily routine. They do this by taking care of the cross-silo work on behalf of others, in such a
Naturally, the high-potentials are not experts in the importance of executives who can span divides. Firms with this kind of training recognise the need for employees to rotate in different functions such as finance and marketing over the course of several years. Firms like GE have programmes requiring high-potentials to rotate in different functions such as finance and marketing over the course of several years. Firms with this kind of training recognise the importance of executives who can span divides. Naturally, the high-potentials are not experts in every field, but they do have a sense of what it's like to work in the different parts of the business. A more technological solution to encourage perspective taking is found in Sberbank, where employees wear a VR suit literally called “Empathy” to develop compassion for their elderly clients and their possible physical limitations.

Having a workforce with developed perspective-taking skills leads to several important benefits. Edmondson has found that cross-industry collaborations can succeed when diverse workers take on the perspectives of other workers from dissimilar backgrounds. And Casciaro’s work shows that curious employees who ask the right types of questions build broad networks that span boundaries across disparate parts of the company.

Help employees leverage their holistic view of the network

Finally, one of the challenges of working across divides has to do with the perception of who is connected to whom beyond the formal org chart. This ability to perceive the web of connection in an organisation is important, because the more employees can broaden their vision of where the interesting opportunities are or where the important intersections might be, the easier it is to work across silos. Casciaro found that people don’t understand exactly who is connected to whom in a network, or what she calls “elemental” perception. For example, if I know Ben and Saeedah, I tend to assume they know each other, even if this isn’t actually the case. Elemental perception isn’t our strong point. Instead, people are more effective at “holistic” perception of networks, such as determining who is central in a network. That is, it’s easier to see which colleague is connected to everyone and which one works on the periphery. With this holistic perception, we understand who our go-to person for information is. Employees can develop their network perception by asking questions and working out who is central in an organisation.

HR managers can help employees distinguish between elemental and holistic perceptions and encourage them to trust their holistic perceptions. When employees start seeing the forest of connections rather than the trees of individuals, they can connect across silos more effectively. In addition, leveraging their holistic network vision will also help them determine which relationships are in need of cultural brokerage and which ones would benefit from thoughtful inquiry and perspective taking.

Cross-silo skills and alignment of incentives

The research by Casciaro, Edmondson and Jang suggests that it is possible to look for and develop
all these skills in job candidates. Although it requires some investment, the potential payoffs are great: Employees who can engage in cultural brokerage, take others’ perspective and see the informal network in the organisation are much better equipped to provide the kind of cross-silo solutions that customers need.

One of the biggest barriers to fostering these skills is that these behaviours are often considered non-urgent and are therefore not necessarily rewarded in a way that equals the value they bring to a firm. That is, the connection between who does the work (employees) and who benefits (the company) is often missing. To support these activities, organisations – and HR professionals in particular – can put structures and incentives in place to encourage these skills.

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