
How to Cultivate Cross-Silo Leadership



By [Rachael Noyes](#) , Senior Editor, INSEAD Knowledge

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.

How can HR professionals leverage this research to ensure that both job candidates and in-house talent are in a position to work well across departments, regions or functions? In many firms, such skills may be mistakenly considered non-essential or “nice to have”. But the bottom line is that organisations that fail to cross silos are at risk of not providing the services their customers need.

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 way that other employees can continue working as they would within their own silo.
- An “adhesive” connects colleagues and helps them work directly with one another, rather than acting as a bridge between them. They sow the ground for further fertile relationships to flourish, independent of the cultural broker.

Cultural brokers create great value for a firm. HR professionals can identify cultural brokers by looking at candidates’ background and experience. These are the candidates who tend to have experience in multiple domains (who have lived and worked in multiple cultures or in multiple functions) and have experience helping people work across domains. Such candidates may have

been involved in post-merger integration or have experience simultaneously working with others from multiple functions, for example.

To create an environment for current employees to engage in cultural brokerage, HR managers can consider rotation programmes or matrix structures, which provide ample opportunities to develop the skills required to be a cultural broker.

Encourage inquiry and perspective taking

Asking good questions and taking others' perspective on-board are another set of skills that HR managers can look for in candidates and encourage among in-house talent.

One way employees can see the world through the eyes of others is by asking good questions. Many organisations explicitly hire for demonstrated connecting skills. Southwest Airlines, for example, evaluates empathy when sourcing customer-facing roles. As a result, the company is famous for its award-winning customer service.

In an interview, an HR manager can listen carefully to the kinds of questions asked by candidates. Are they asking open-ended questions that allow them to gain a better understanding of the organisation and their role? Are they asking questions to check their own understanding along the way? Candidates who ask the right kinds of questions know how to engage in effective inquiry to gain perspective.

Beyond hiring for perspective-taking ability, it is also important that a firm provides opportunities to further develop individuals' perspective-taking capacity after they join the organisation. Some large 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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