Influencers in the Field

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The New Growth Leader: Building High-Performance Teams Across Complex Business Units

Complexity is the new reality within organizations, an inherent part of the demands of modern businesses that feature multiple units, disciplines, product lines and locations. Rather than the predictable, top-down models of simple businesses, organizations are now full of dynamic team ecosystems that each carry their own sets of pressures, priorities and constraints.

As a business leader, focusing only on broad outcomes can leave you blind to the individual complexities within teams, such as points of friction, confusion and ambiguity that can result in duplicated efforts, stifled innovation, lost opportunities and decreased revenue. To get true clarity, you need visibility into how the work gets done, not just the end result, to ensure alignment across teams.

Navigating these complex, interconnected ecosystems requires business leaders to have operational empathy, the ability to connect authentically with teams not only by understanding people and their experiences, but also by comprehending the systems, workflows and processes that shape their experience and execution of their work.

Continue reading for insight into how this works in practice, including breaking down silos; acting as a leader, change-maker and connector and powerful signs your teams are on the road to achieving high performance.

Fostering Alignment: Moving from Silos to Shared Direction

Within complex business units, organizational silos tend to form naturally. According to the *Sustainability* paper, *Silo-Busting: Overcoming the Greatest Threat to Organizational Performance*, this can deliver some benefits, such as "creating clearly delineated 'cultural tribes' that people identify with, and tightly defined teams or communities that people are motivated to work for, as well as to feel safe within…" there are some significant detriments that can inhibit collaboration and cooperation, even to the point of affecting customer satisfaction, innovation, effectiveness and financial performance.

Here are four common types of silos and how they can impact your team or department:

- **Departmental silos –** Do you see departments acting as worlds unto themselves, often making decisions independently without communication or knowledge sharing? While a competent department can run like a well-oiled machine on its own, it can also create systemic pain points across the entire organization, such as information hoarding, inefficiencies from redundant efforts, disengaged employees due to isolation, a lack of community, conflicting priorities stemming from a lack of communication and fragmented execution of important goals.

- **Rank or level silos –** When a manager or leader within a team does not share critical information with all levels of the organization, such as important business updates, horizon planning, strategic goals and other efforts, it can result in rank or level silos. This can have a number of detrimental impacts, such as decreased engagement from employees who feel disconnected from leadership and the decision-making process, stifled innovation when employees don't have a channel to communicate their ideas up the chain, the blockage of vital information for lower-level employees and the creation of a divisive "us versus them" mentality that can destroy trust, reduce worker satisfaction and increase turnover.
- **Geographic silos –** When teams are segmented by physical location or work model, such as remote and hybrid, it can disrupt communication due to distance. Colleagues working within the same department may communicate with each other, but — unintentionally or not — avoid doing so with remote workers. Similar to departmental silos, this lack of knowledge-sharing can result in duplicated efforts, wasted resources and information bottlenecks.

- **Schedule silos –** For national and global teams, scheduling issues caused by time zone differences can create silos. For instance, if a team leader on the East Coast schedules an important announcement that accommodates them but does not consider international team members, who will not be online until that evening in Eastern Standard Time, it can prevent essential information from being shared. This too fosters an "us versus them" mentality and stifles communication.

Silos are more than a functional divide between teams and departments; they are fundamental obstacles to your company-wide mission that can stifle the communication-driven innovation essential to your success. Removing them will help your employees feel empowered to share insights and knowledge, naturally fostering cross-collaborative teams that can build on each other's ideas. Failure to do so can create competing — or even conflicting — priorities that waste resources, undermine efficiency, damage trust and even harm reputations.

Laying the groundwork for alignment between teams requires leaders to act as change agents, driving necessary organizational adjustments to improve coordination, reduce redundancy and increase efficiency. Here's how you can start:

- **Be the change you want to see in the organization –** The best leaders lead by example. To help break down silos, you need to actively bring teams together, participate in cross-functional discussions and support initiatives that encourage collaboration, rather than simply focusing on your direct reports. Find ways to incentivize leaders for the overall success of the business, rather than their specific specialties.
- **Establish and align around shared goals –** A shared mission can break down barriers and encourage collaboration. While establishing goals across teams, think beyond functional key performance indicators (KPIs). These provide powerful, *quantifiable* metrics for hard objectives, such as increasing the number of meetings between teams, but what you're trying to do is also *qualitative*. Consider goals focused on behaviors, learning and relationships to align teams.
- **Address gaps in ownership or accountability –** Clear expectations, documented agreements and an iron-clad process chain are essential to prevent ambiguity. Accountability, when properly doled out, is the glue that keeps cross-functional teams together. When fostered, it can build trust, boost agility and create much-needed structure.
- **Keep your communication methods and frequency consistent –** Communication is essential to eliminate information gaps, reduce stress and foster trust. Not only should your communications be clear, concise and consistent — the 3 Cs — but stick to the same channels to ensure it is easy for teams to not only find your updates, but to reach out with any questions, if necessary.
- **Reinforce how each team contributes to broader outcomes –** If teams focus only on their own responsibilities without understanding how they contribute to broader outcomes, it can create detrimental knowledge gaps. Creating division-wide transparency into how work connects, as well as priorities and performance goals, can help maintain high engagement and cross-functional support.
- **Actively seek to understand different perspectives before making decisions –** Collaboration is a powerful tool to drive innovation, but it can also lead to disagreements over how best to handle certain projects, plans or issues as they arise. Prevent momentary friction from souring cross-collaborative teams by giving them space to explain their perspectives, something that can help them feel seen and heard, even if you ultimately decide to move in a different direction.

Facilitating Connections: The Role of the Modern Leader

In complex business units, the old style of leadership, where commands came from the top and were reinforced with rigid hierarchies, must become a thing of the past. Now, leadership has shifted from directing, in which the leader acts as the sole problem-solver or decision-maker, to fostering powerful connections across the organization.

Being seen fostering these connections is important to ensuring your teams take advantage of its benefits, as managers account for 70% of the variance in team-level engagement, according to Gallup research.

By connecting people, priorities and execution across complex business units, leaders ensure strategic alignment, an important step in achieving scale and consistency.

According to the Harvard Business Review (HBR) on Leadership podcast episode *The Best Managers Are Connectors*, connector managers make three valuable connections for their employees:

1. **The employee connection –** Getting to know your employees better is a powerful force that can help you understand their motivations, interests and goals. Taking one-to-one opportunities to connect with your teams can help you identify growth opportunities, passions and development areas that can lead to future innovations.

   When you meet with employees, take this opportunity to gain greater insights by simply asking, "What's getting in your way?" Rather than merely reviewing the results of a campaign or project, this simple question can help illuminate situations where extra clarity is needed, such as translating enterprise strategy into specific roles, processes, projects and more.

2. **The team connection –** By fostering an open and transparent environment throughout your business unit, you can not only encourage collaboration between teams, but empower them to help one another learn, develop and grow without you needing to act as the sole coach. It's important that this environment feels inclusive and respectful, and any friction between teams or processes is addressed, so they are more likely to share individual skills and insights.

   As a team connector, take this opportunity to increase performance visibility as well, ensuring teams' goals and progress are shared for greater understanding and support.

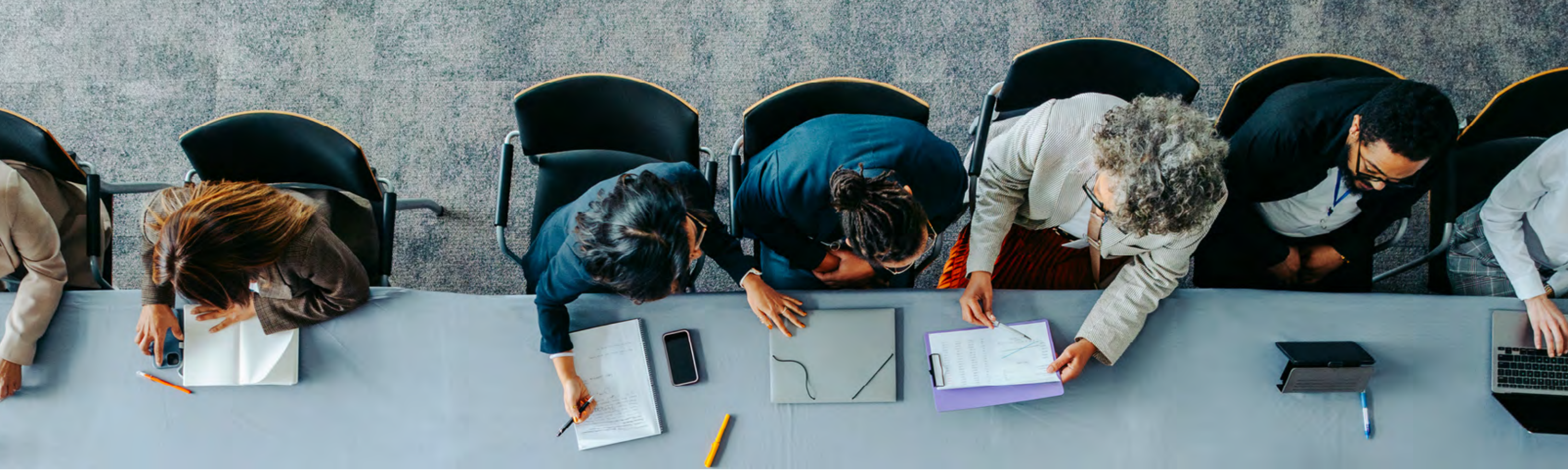
3. **The organization connection –** According to the podcast, as a connector-leader, it's important that you recognize that you don't have all the skills your employees require, but you have the ability to help them find the right skills or knowledge outside of themselves.

   By leveraging your connections, you can help your employees learn from others, apply their new insights in their roles and even enable leaders within their functions to make aligned decisions.

One way to foster the mindset of a modern leader is to build your own inner complexity, so you're poised to better respond to issues as they arise. In the *Business Horizons* paper, *Navigating Complex Environments Requires Complex Leaders*, its authors argue that today's business landscape poses "increasingly complex environments and complex problems" for which many leaders are unfortunately underprepared.

They argue that leaders need to foster an equal level of personal leader complexity — self-complexity and cognitive complexity — to thrive under these conditions and respond to these challenges. Self-complexity "…enables leaders to embrace a multifaceted understanding of their roles and identities, fostering adaptability and resilience." While cognitive complexity "…enhances leaders' capacity to process nuanced information and integrate diverse perspectives for sound decision-making."

By developing their own self-complexity and cognitive complexity, the authors claim leaders will navigate external business complexity more easily through a better understanding of their roles and abilities in this environment, as well as a greater ability to observe the world with nuance and multifaceted detail. This enables them to respond more effectively to unpredictable challenges, develop better options and leverage innovation to improve situational navigation. This is especially valuable across complex business units, where a variety of interconnected internal and external factors must be considered during the decision-making process. Read the paper for exercises to help foster your own internal complexity.



Achieving High Performance: Better Together

High performance results from a strong understanding, alignment and connections, rather than merely setting goals and handing down directives, especially in increasingly complex business units. Positive performance is foreshadowed in how teams execute their tasks, not just what they achieve.

Powerful signs your business unit teams are on the road to achieving high performance include teams working proactively and autonomously across functions without needing to be directed, clear accountability and ownership across initiatives to reduce friction and pain points, open and honest communications — including addressing challenges early — and consistently utilizing data to guide decisions and track progress.

When leaders foster collective clarity by breaking down silos, enhancing communication, setting clear expectations, making powerful connections and supporting opportunities for creativity and innovation, it helps your teams gain a sense of direction and purpose for achieving organizational goals. Not only this, but it arms them to act autonomously, collaborate and take ownership over their work.

The role of today's leader isn't to simplify complexity — it's to connect it in a way that drives results. The most effective leaders take time to understand business unit pain points, create alignment across different teams, act as connectors across the organization and, ultimately, build teams that perform better together.

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