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Cross-Silo Leadership

How to create more value by connecting experts from inside and outside the organization

by Tiziana Casciaro, Amy C. Edmondson, and Sujin Jang

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How to create more value by connecting experts from inside and outside the organization

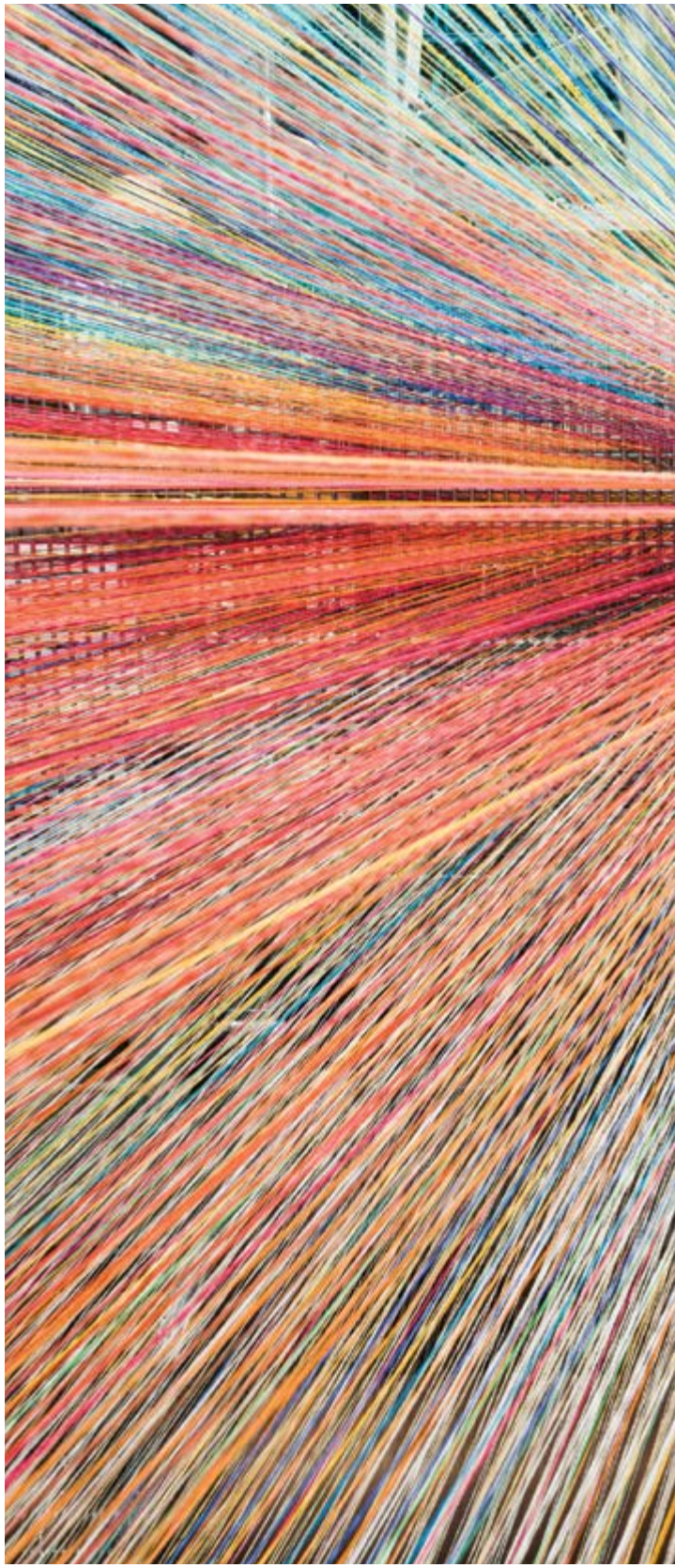
AUTHORS

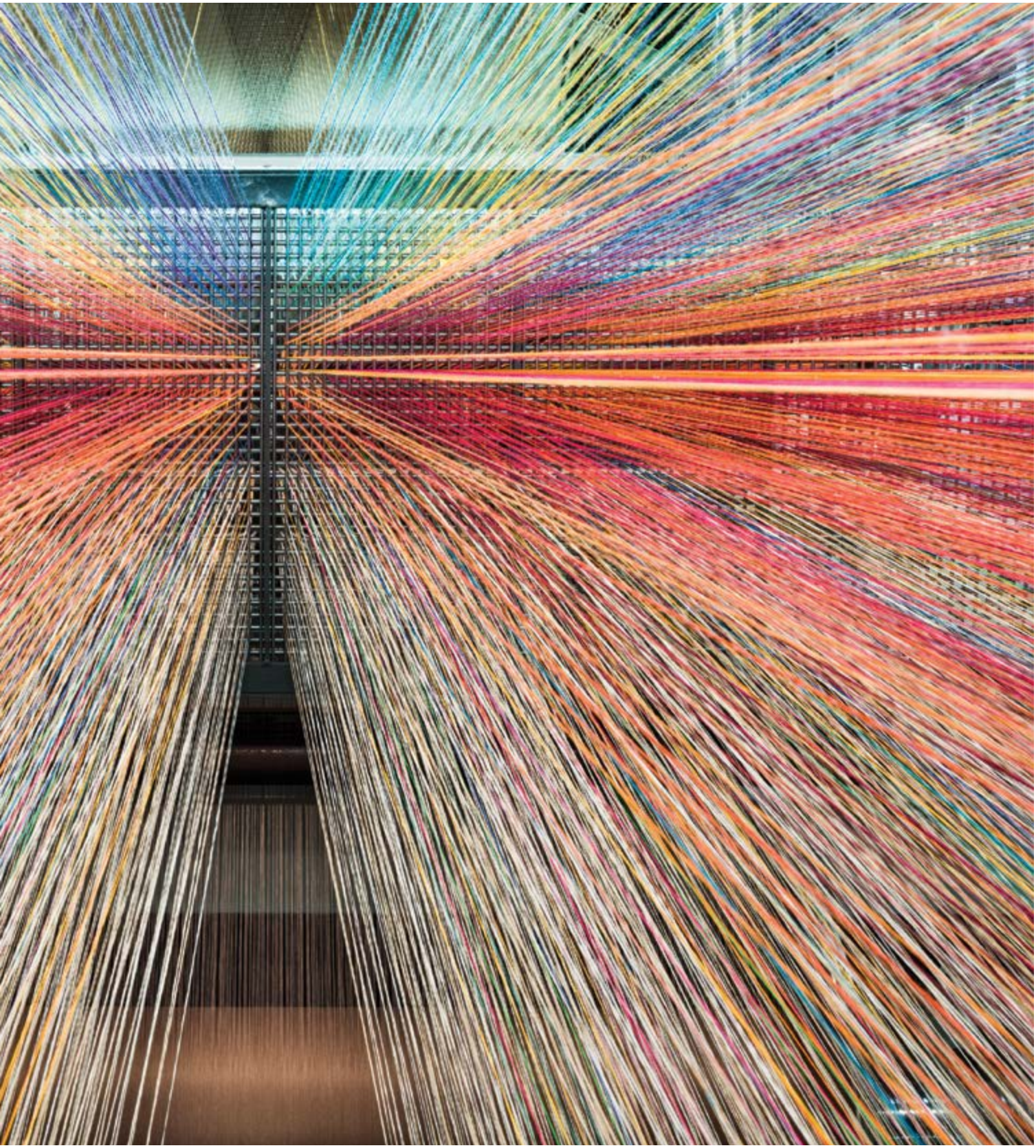
Amy C. Edmondson
Professor, Harvard Business School

Tiziana Casciaro
Professor, Rotman School of Management

Sujin Jang
Assistant professor, INSEAD

PHOTOGRAPHER **CHRISTOPHER PAYNE/ESTO**





LEADERSHIP

START HERE

Though most executives recognize the importance of breaking down silos to help people collaborate across boundaries, they struggle to make it happen. That's understandable: It is devilishly difficult.

Think about your own relationships at work—the people you report to and those who report to you, for starters. Now consider the people in other functions, units, or geographies whose work touches yours in some way. Which relationships get prioritized in your day-to-day job?

We've posed that question to managers, engineers, salespeople, and consultants in companies around the world. The response we get is almost always the same: vertical relationships.

But when we ask, "Which relationships are most important for creating value for customers?" the answers flip. Today the vast majority of innovation and business-development opportunities lie in the interfaces between functions, offices, or organizations. In short, the integrated solutions that most customers want—but companies wrestle with developing—require horizontal collaboration.

The value of horizontal teamwork is widely recognized. Employees who can reach outside their silos to find colleagues with complementary expertise learn more, sell more, and gain skills faster. Harvard's Heidi Gardner has found that firms with more cross-boundary collaboration achieve greater customer loyalty and higher margins. As innovation hinges more and more on interdisciplinary cooperation, digitalization transforms business at a breakneck pace, and globalization increasingly requires people to work across national borders, the demand for executives who can lead projects at interfaces keeps rising.

Our research and consulting work with hundreds of executives and managers in dozens of organizations confirms both the need for and the challenge of horizontal collaboration. "There's no doubt. We should focus on big projects that call for integration across practices," a partner in a global accounting firm told us. "That's where our greatest distinctive value is developed. But most of us confine ourselves to the smaller projects that we can handle within our practice areas. It's frustrating." A senior partner in a leading consulting firm put it slightly differently: "You know you should swim farther to catch a bigger fish, but it is a lot easier to swim in your own pond and catch a bunch of small fish."

One way to break down silos is to redesign the formal organizational structure. But that approach has limits: It's costly, confusing, and slow. Worse, every new structure solves some problems but creates others. That's why we've focused on identifying activities that facilitate boundary crossing. We've found that people can be trained to see and connect with pools of expertise throughout their organizations and to work better with colleagues who think very differently from them. The core challenges of operating effectively at interfaces are simple: *learning* about people on the other side and *relating* to them. But simple does not mean easy; human beings have always struggled to understand and relate to those who are different.

Leaders need to help people develop the capacity to overcome these challenges on both individual and organizational levels. That means providing training in and support for four practices that enable effective interface work.

Employees who can reach outside their silos to find colleagues with complementary expertise learn more, sell more, and gain skills faster.

1 Develop and Deploy Cultural Brokers

FORTUNATELY, IN MOST companies there are people who already excel at interface collaboration. They usually have experiences and relationships that span multiple sectors, functions, or domains and informally serve as links between them. We call these people *cultural brokers*. In studies involving more than 2,000 global teams, one of us—Sujin—found that diverse teams containing a cultural broker significantly outperformed diverse teams without one. (See "The Most Creative Teams Have a Specific Type of Cultural Diversity," HBR.org, July 24, 2018.) Companies should identify these individuals and help them increase their impact.

Cultural brokers promote cross-boundary work in one of two ways: by acting as a *bridge* or as an *adhesive*.

A bridge offers himself as a go-between, allowing people in different functions or geographies to collaborate with minimal disruption to their day-to-day routine. Bridges are most effective when they have considerable knowledge of both sides and can figure out what each one needs. This is why the champagne and spirits distributor Moët Hennessy España hired two enologists, or wine experts, to help coordinate the work of its marketing and sales groups, which had a history of miscommunication and conflict. The enologists could relate to both groups equally: They could speak to marketers about the emotional content (the ephemeral "bouquet") of brands, while also providing pragmatic salespeople with details on the distinctive features of products they needed to win over retailers. Understanding both worlds, the enologists were able to communicate the rationale for each group's modus operandi to the other, allowing marketing and sales to work more synergistically even without directly interacting. This kind of cultural brokerage is efficient because it lets disparate parties work around differences without investing in learning the other side's perspective or changing how they work. It's especially valuable for one-off collaborations or when the company is under intense time pressure to deliver results.

Adhesives, in contrast, bring people together and help build mutual understanding and lasting relationships. Take one manager we spoke with at National Instruments, a global producer of automated test equipment. He frequently connects colleagues from different regions and functions. "I think of it as building up the relationships between them," he told us. "If a colleague needs to work with someone in another office or function, I would tell them, 'OK, here's the person to call.' Then I'd take the time to sit down and say, 'Well, let me tell you a little bit about how these guys work.'" Adhesives facilitate collaboration by vouching for people and helping them decipher one another's language. Unlike bridges, adhesives develop others' capacity to work across a boundary in the future without their assistance.

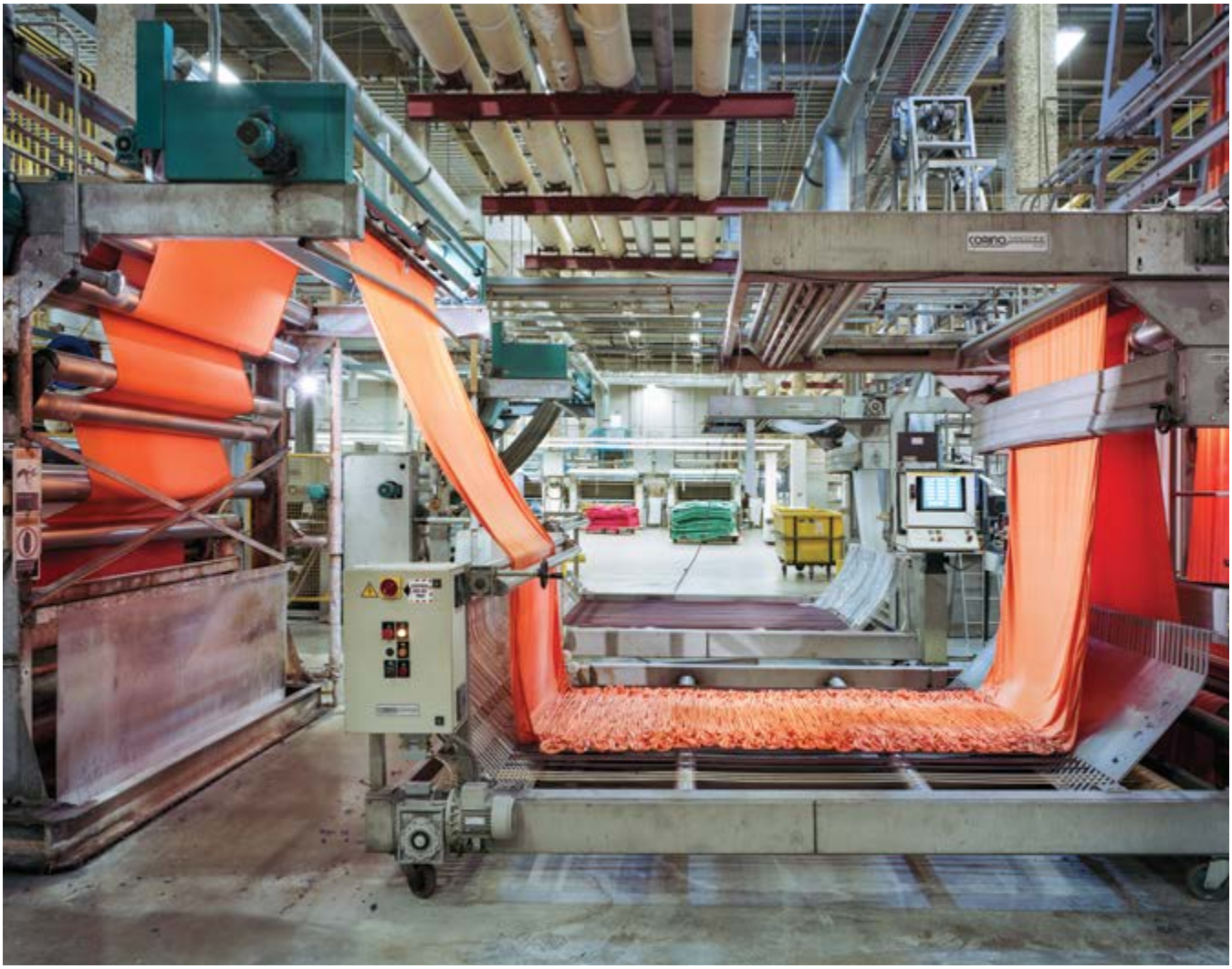
Company leaders can build both bridging and adhesive capabilities in their organizations by hiring people with multifunctional or multicultural backgrounds who have

IDEA IN BRIEF

THE CHALLENGE
Innovation initiatives, globalization, and digitalization increasingly require people to collaborate across functional and national boundaries. But breaking down silos remains frustratingly difficult.

THE CAUSE
Employees don't know how to identify expertise outside their own work domains and struggle to understand the perspectives of colleagues who think very differently from them.

THE SOLUTION
Leaders can help employees connect with and relate to people across organizational divides by doing four things: developing and deploying "cultural brokers," who help groups overcome differences; encouraging and training workers to ask the right questions; getting people to see things through others' eyes; and broadening everyone's vision of networks of expertise inside and outside the company.



the strong interpersonal skills needed to build rapport with multiple parties. Because it takes resilience to work with people across cultural divides, firms should also look for a *growth mindset*—the desire to learn and to take on challenges and "stretch" opportunities.

In addition, leaders can develop more brokers by giving people at all levels the chance to move into roles that expose them to multiple parts of the company. This, by the way, is good training for general managers and is what many rotational leadership-development programs aim to accomplish. Claudine Wolfe, the head of talent and development at the global insurer Chubb, maintains that the company's capacity to serve customers around the world rests on giving top performers opportunities to work in different geographies and cultivate an international mindset. "We give people their critical development experiences steeped in the job, in the region," she says. "They get coaching in the cultural norms and the language, but then they live it and internalize it. They go to the local bodega, take notice of the products on the shelves, have conversations with the merchant, and learn what it really means to live in that environment."

Matrix organizational structures, in which people report to two (or more) groups, can also help develop cultural brokers. Despite their inherent challenges (they can be infuriatingly hard to navigate without strong leadership and accountability), matrices get people used to operating at interfaces.

We're not saying that everyone in your organization needs to be a full-fledged cultural broker. But consciously expanding the ranks of brokers and deploying them to grease the wheels of collaboration can go a long way.

2 Encourage People to Ask the Right Questions

IT'S NEARLY IMPOSSIBLE to work across boundaries without asking a lot of questions. Inquiry is critical because what we see and take for granted on one side of an interface is not the same as what people experience on the other side.

Indeed, a study of more than 1,000 middle managers at a large bank that Tiziana conducted with Bill McEvily and Evelyn Zhang of the University of Toronto and Francesca Gino of Harvard Business School highlights the value of inquisitiveness in boundary-crossing work. It showed that managers with high levels of curiosity were more likely to build networks that spanned disconnected parts of the company.

But all of us are vulnerable to forgetting the crucial practice of asking questions as we move up the ladder. High-achieving people in particular frequently fail to wonder what others are seeing. Worse, when we do recognize that we don't know something, we may avoid asking a question out of (misguided) fear that it will make us look incompetent or weak. "Not asking questions is a big mistake many professionals make," Norma Kraay, the managing partner of talent for Deloitte Canada, told us. "Expert advisers want to offer a solution. That's what they're trained to do."

Leaders can encourage inquiry in two important ways—and in the process help create an organization where it's psychologically safe to ask questions.

ABOUT THE ART

In 2010, Christopher Payne discovered an old (but still functioning) yarn mill in Maine and was inspired to explore, through his photography, how the iconic American textile industry has changed and what its future may hold.

Be a role model. When leaders show interest in what others are seeing and thinking by asking questions, it has a stunning effect: It prompts people in their organizations to do the same.

Asking questions also conveys the humility that more and more business leaders and researchers are pointing to as vital to success. According to Laszlo Bock, Google's former senior vice president of people operations, humble people are better at bringing others together to solve tough problems. In a fast-changing business environment, humility—not to be confused with false modesty—is simply a strength. Its power comes from realism (as in *It really is a complex, challenging world out there; if we don't work together, we don't stand a chance*).

Gino says one way a leader can make employees feel comfortable asking questions is by openly acknowledging when he or she doesn't know the answer. Another, she says, is by having days in which employees are explicitly encouraged to ask "Why?" "What if…?" and "How might we…?" (See "The Business Case for Curiosity," HBR, September–October 2018.)

Teach employees the art of inquiry. Training can help expand the range and frequency of questions employees ask and, according to Hal Gregersen of the MIT Leadership Center, can reinvigorate their sense of curiosity. But some questions are better than others. (See the sidebar "How to Ask Good Questions.") And if you simply tell people to raise more questions, you might unleash interrogation tactics that inhibit rather than encourage the development of new perspectives. As MIT's Edgar Schein explains in his book *Humble Inquiry,* questions are the secret to productive work relationships—but they must be driven by genuine interest in understanding another's view.

It's also important to learn how to request information in the least biased way possible. This means asking open-ended questions that minimize preconceptions, rather than yes-or-no questions. For instance, "What do you see as the key opportunity in this space?" will generate a richer dialogue than "Do you think this is the right opportunity to pursue?"

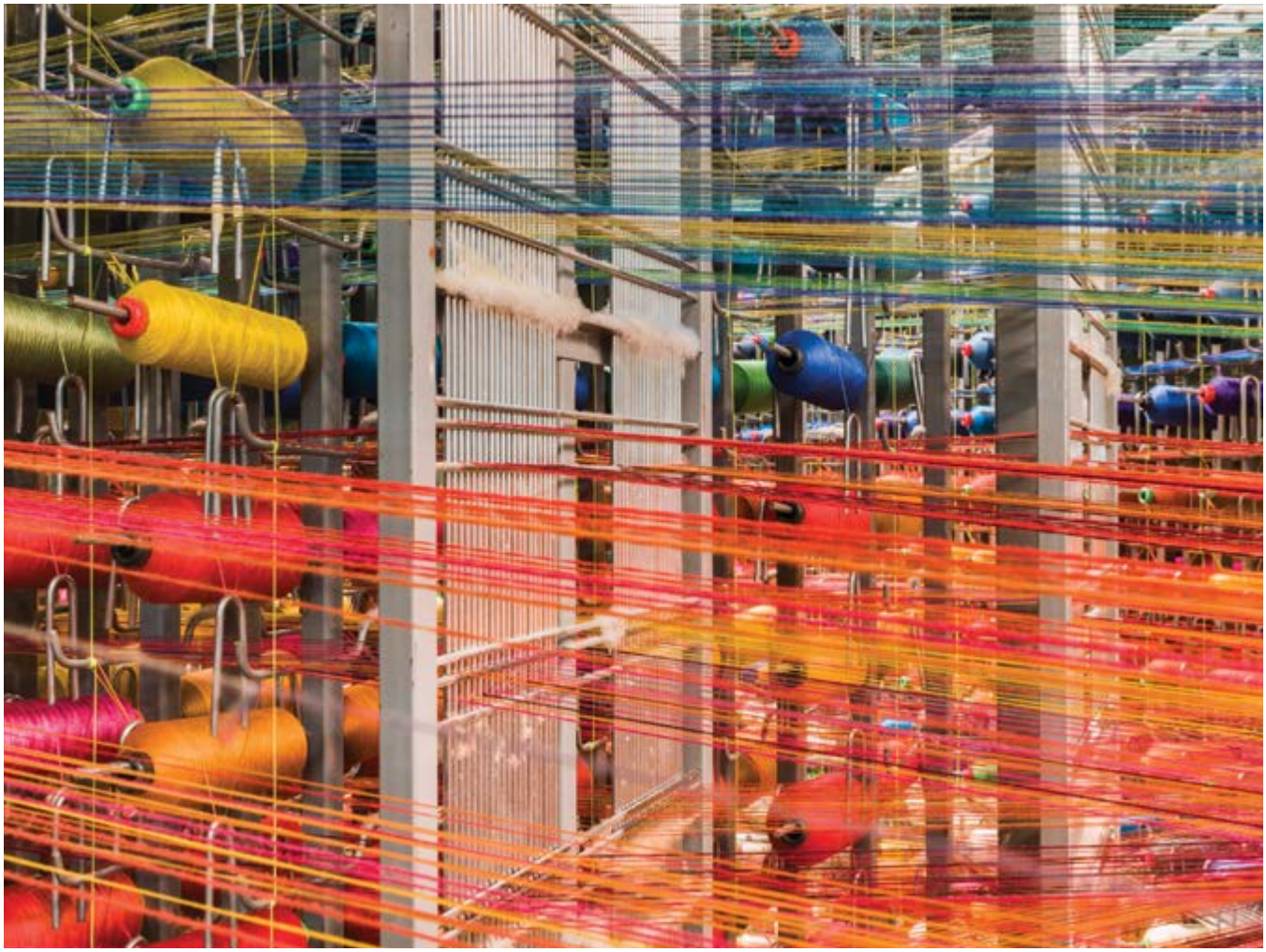
As collaborations move forward, it's helpful for team leaders or project managers to raise queries that encourage others to dive more deeply into specific issues and express related ideas or experiences. "What do you know about *x?"* and "Can you explain how that works?" are two examples. These questions are focused but neither limit responses nor invite long discourses that stray too far from the issue at hand.

How you process the answers also matters. It's natural, as conversations unfold, to assume you understand what's being said. But what people hear is biased by their expertise and experiences. So it's important to train people to check whether they're truly getting their colleagues' meaning, by using language like "This is what I'm hearing—did I miss anything?" or "Can you help me fill in the gaps?" or "I think what you said means the project is on track. Is that correct?"

Finally, periodic temperature taking is needed to examine the collaborative process itself. The only way to find out how others are experiencing a project or relationship is by asking questions such as "How do you think the project is going?" and "What could we do to work together more effectively?"

3 Get People to See the World Through Others' Eyes

LEADERS SHOULDN'T JUST encourage employees to be curious about different groups and ask questions about their thinking and practices; they should also urge their people to actively consider others' points of view. People from different organizational groups don't see things the same way. Studies (including research on barriers to successful product innovation that the management professor Deborah Dougherty conducted at Wharton) consistently reveal that this leads to misunderstandings in interface work. It's vital, therefore, to help people learn how to take the perspectives of others. One of us, Amy, has done research showing that ambitious cross-industry innovation projects succeed when diverse participants discover how to do this. New Songdo, a project to build a city from scratch in South Korea that launched a decade ago, provides an instructive example. Early in the effort, project leaders brought together architects, engineers, planners, and environmental experts and helped them integrate their expertise in a carefully crafted learning process designed to break down barriers between disciplines. Today, in striking contrast to other "smart" city projects,



New Songdo is 50% complete and has 30,000 residents, 33,000 jobs, and emissions that are 70% lower than those of other developments its size.

In a study of jazz bands and Broadway productions, Brian Uzzi of Northwestern University found that leaders of successful teams had an unusual ability to assume other people's viewpoints. These leaders could speak the multiple "languages" of their teammates. Other research has shown that when members of a diverse team proactively take the perspectives of others, it enhances the positive effect of information sharing and increases the team's creativity.

Creating a culture that fosters this kind of behavior is a senior leadership responsibility. Psychological research suggests that while most people are *capable* of taking others' perspectives, they are rarely *motivated* to do so. Leaders can provide some motivation by emphasizing to their teams how much the integration of diverse expertise enhances new value creation. But a couple of other tactics will help:

Organize cross-silo dialogues. Instead of holding one-way information sessions, leaders should set up cross-silo discussions that help employees see the world through the eyes of customers or colleagues in other parts of the company. The goal is to get everyone to share knowledge and work on synthesizing that diverse input into new solutions. This happens best in face-to-face meetings that are carefully structured to allow people time to listen to one another's thinking. Sometimes the process includes customers; one consulting firm we know started to replace traditional meetings, at which the firm conveyed information to clients, with a workshop format designed to explore questions and develop solutions in *collaboration* with them. The new format gives both the clients and the consultants a chance to learn from each other.

One of the more thoughtful uses of cross-silo dialogue is the "focused event analysis" (FEA) at Children's Minnesota. In an FEA people from the health system's different clinical and operational groups come together after a failure, such as

the administration of the wrong medication to a patient. One at a time participants offer their take on what happened; the goal is to carefully document multiple perspectives *before* trying to identify a cause. Often participants are surprised to learn how people from other groups saw the incident. The assumption underlying the FEA is that most failures have not one root cause but many. Once the folks involved have a multifunctional picture of the contributing factors, they can alter procedures and systems to prevent similar failures.

Hire for curiosity and empathy. You can boost your company's capacity to see the world from different perspectives by bringing on board people who relate to and sympathize with the feelings, thoughts, and attitudes of others. Southwest Airlines, which hires fewer than 2% of all applicants, selects people with empathy and enthusiasm for customer service, evaluating them through behavioral interviews ("Tell me about a time when…") and team interviews in which candidates are observed interacting.

4 Broaden Your Employees' Vision

YOU CAN'T LEAD AT the interfaces if you don't know where they are. Yet many organizations unwittingly encourage employees to never look beyond their own immediate environment, such as their function or business unit, and as a result miss out on potential insights employees could get if they scanned more-distant networks. Here are some ways that leaders can create opportunities for employees to widen their horizons, both within the company and beyond it:

Bring employees from diverse groups together on initiatives. As a rule, cross-functional teams give people across silos a chance to identify various kinds of expertise within their organization, map how they're connected or disconnected, and see how the internal knowledge network can be linked to enable valuable collaboration.

At one global consulting firm, the leader of the digital health-care practice used to have its consultants speak just to clients' CIOs and CTOs. But she realized that that "unnecessarily limited the practice's ability to identify opportunities to serve clients beyond IT," she says. So she began to set up sessions with the entire C-suite at clients and brought in consultants from across all her firm's health-care practices—including systems redesign, operations excellence, strategy, and financing—to provide a more integrated look at the firm's health-care innovation expertise.

Those meetings allowed the consultants to discover the connections among the practices in the health-care division, identify the people best positioned to bridge the different practices, and see novel ways to combine the firm's various kinds of expertise to meet clients' needs. That helped the consultants spot value-generating opportunities for services

How to Ask Good Questions

COMMON PITFALLS	EFFECTIVE INQUIRY
Start with yes-or-no questions.	Start with open-ended questions that minimize preconceptions. ("How are things going on your end?" "What does your group see as the key opportunity in this space?")
Continue asking overly general questions ("What's on your mind?") that may invite long off-point responses.	As collaborations develop, ask questions that focus on specific issues but allow people plenty of room to elaborate. ("What do you know about *x*?" "Can you explain how that works?")
Assume that you've grasped what speakers intended.	Check your understanding by summarizing what you're hearing and asking explicitly for corrections or missing elements. ("Does that sound right—am I missing anything?" "Can you help me fill in the gaps?")
Assume the collaboration process will take care of itself.	Periodically take time to inquire into others' experiences of the process or relationship. ("How do you think the project is going?" "What could we do to work together more effectively?")

You can't lead at the interfaces if you don't know where they are. Yet many firms unwittingly encourage employees not to look beyond their immediate environment.

at the interfaces between the practices. The new approach was so effective that, in short order, the leader was asked to head up a new practice that served as an interface across all the practices in the IT division so that she could replicate her success in other parts of the firm.

Urge employees to explore distant networks. Employees also need to be pushed to tap into expertise outside the company and even outside the industry. The domains of human knowledge span science, technology, business, geography, politics, history, the arts, the humanities, and beyond, and any interface between them could hold new business opportunities. Consider the work of the innovation consultancy IDEO. By bringing design techniques from technology, science, and the arts to business, it has been able to create revolutionary products, like the first Apple mouse (which it developed from a Xerox PARC prototype into a commercial offering), and help companies in many industries embrace design thinking as an innovation strategy.

The tricky part is finding the domains most relevant to key business goals. Although many innovations have stemmed from what Abraham Flexner, the founding director of the Institute for Advanced Study, called "the usefulness of useless knowledge," businesses can ill afford to rely on open-ended exploratory search alone. To avoid this fate, leaders can take one of two approaches:

A *top-down approach* works when the knowledge domains with high potential for value creation have already been identified. For example, a partner in an accounting firm who sees machine learning as key to the profession's future might have an interested consultant or analyst in her practice take online courses or attend industry conferences about the technology and ask that person to come back with ideas about its implications. The partner might organize workshops in which the junior employee shares takeaways from the learning experiences and brainstorms, with experienced colleagues, potential applications in the firm.

A *bottom-up approach* is better when leaders have trouble determining which outside domains the organization should connect with—a growing challenge given the speed at which new knowledge is being created. Increasingly, leaders must rely on employees to identify and forge connections with far-flung domains. One approach is to crowdsource ideas for promising interfaces—for example, by inviting employees to propose conferences in other industries they'd like to attend, courses on new skill sets they'd like to take, or domain experts they'd like to bring in for workshops. It's also critical to give employees the time and resources to scan external domains and build connections to them.

Breaking Down Silos

IN TODAY'S ECONOMY everyone knows that finding new ways to combine an organization's diverse knowledge is a winning strategy for creating lasting value. But it doesn't happen unless employees have the opportunities and tools to work together productively across silos. To unleash the potential of horizontal collaboration, leaders must equip people to learn and to relate to one another across cultural and logistical divides. The four practices we've just described can help.

Not only is each one useful on its own in tackling the distinct challenges of interface work, but together these practices are mutually enhancing: Engaging in one promotes competency in another. Deploying cultural brokers who build connections across groups gets people to ask questions and learn what employees in other groups are thinking. When people start asking better questions, they're immediately better positioned to understand others' perspectives and challenges. Seeing things from someone else's perspective—walking in his or her moccasins—in turn makes it easier to detect more pockets of knowledge. And network scanning illuminates interfaces where cultural brokers might be able to help groups collaborate effectively.

Over time these practices—none of which require advanced degrees or deep technical smarts—dissolve the barriers that make boundary-crossing work so difficult. When leaders create conditions that encourage and support these practices, collaboration across the interface will ultimately become second nature.

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TIZIANA CASCIARO *is a professor of organizational behavior at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management.* **AMY C. EDMONDSON** *is the Novartis Professor of Leadership and Management at Harvard Business School and author of* The Fearless Organization *(Wiley, 2019).* **SUJIN JANG** *is an assistant professor of organizational behavior at INSEAD.*