

Thriving in the Boundaryless Organization How People Can Make a Difference

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*Whatever is flexible and flowing will tend to grow;
whatever is rigid and blocked will wither and die.*

Lao Tzu

Borderlessness, horizontality, boundarylessness, cross-functional. These terms, plus more, have been used to denote the need to move beyond traditional organizational designs to a new form that is based on enabling people to perform their work and to serve clients effectively.

How people collaborate, share information, learn from one another, generate new knowledge, and disperse this knowledge throughout their organizations is at the heart of why change is urgently needed. I have chosen to use *boundarylessness* in this article. But it is not the word that is important but rather the change in mindset that must accompany the use of it. Otherwise, we risk disenfranchising people as they become numb to more espoused concepts and promises.

The Boundaryless Organization (initially coined by Jack Welch, former CEO of General Electric) is in effect an organization without walls. This type of organization is founded upon *interdependency* and *trust*. Without these two key characteristics, an organization is effectively blocked from moving from the old organizational model to the new model characterized by the absence of functional walls and turfs.

The individual working in a boundaryless environment must understand the importance of these characteristics. She must *trust* her co-workers and be willing to support them anytime – to back them up *consistently* when needed.

She is acutely aware of the need for a high level of interdependency among people, and in turn the importance of *mutual accountability*. People share when credit is given, and conversely, share when mistakes are made. Scapegoats are unheard of.

The boundaryless person is one who sees the big picture. He sees the *interrelationships* and *patterns* within the organization, as well as emerging trends in the outside world. He strives continually to build strong and lasting relationships with others.

He's not interested in the least in protecting his 'turf.' His focus is on the organization's best interests – its future and well-being. Moreover, he has an obsession for client service. Not only does he respond quickly to client needs, but he makes every effort to anticipate them as well.

To accomplish this, and to be effective in the boundaryless organization, this individual is *nimble* and *agile*. He moves effortlessly across the organization, seeking peoples' inputs and making things happen.

The boundaryless individual has a direct and profound impact on management and leadership. In this type of environment, managers assume a new role. They, too, now work across the organization, forgetting about previous fiefdoms. They thrive on inspiring their people to connect with others, to make things happen, and to serve clients to the highest degree possible. The manager serves as a *catalyst* to her people. Less reliance is placed on managing things (i.e., doing things right) and more is placed on *leading people* (i.e., doing the right thing).

A high level of *energy* prevails in the boundaryless organization. People are charged up with knowing that they are making a *meaningful contribution* to the organization. They are *avid learners*, continually seeking out new information and acquiring new skills. They realize that the more they learn that the more ignorant they are. Yet, they possess self-confidence, realizing that learning is a never-ending journey.

The boundaryless individual can therefore be viewed as someone who exhibits the following traits:

- Possesses self-confidence,
- Trusts others,
- Sees interdependencies and patterns,
- Works across the organization,
- Builds relationships,
- Takes the initiative to make things happen,
- Is obsessed with client service,
- Has a zest for learning.

To thrive in a world of change and chaos, we will need to accept
chaos as an essential process by which natural systems,
including organizations, renew and revitalize themselves.

Kevin McCarey