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FOSTERING HIGH-PERFORMANCE COLLABORATION: KEY TRAITS AND STRATEGIES OF INCLUSIVE LEADERS

INTRODUCTION

In the linked corporate world of today, collaborative leadership is now necessary for firms to succeed. Essential competencies for contemporary leaders include the capacity to foster connections between disparate viewpoints, capitalize on talent, model teamwork, and give clear guidance. This essay examines how executives from companies like Akamai, GE, and Reckitt Benckiser implement these practices to cultivate high-performance collaborative cultures. By analyzing their approaches and exploring the concept of inclusive leadership, we can gain valuable insights into effective team building and organizational transformation.

COMMON COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP TRAITS

Several key collaborative leadership traits emerge as common among the executives discussed in "Are You a Collaborative Leader?" by Ibarra and Hansen (2015). These traits have proven instrumental in building effective teams and fostering a culture of collaboration within their organizations.

1. GLOBAL CONNECTOR ROLE

One prominent trait is the executives' focus on acting as global connectors, linking their organizations to diverse external perspectives. David Kenny of Akamai exemplifies this approach by extensively traveling to meet with employees, partners, and customers worldwide.



Kenny uses these interactions to gain strategic insights and develop critical partnerships. He emphasizes, I spend time with media owners to hear what they think about digital platforms, Facebook, and new pricing models, and with Microsoft leaders to get their views on cloud computing (Ibarra & Hansen, 2015). This outward-facing approach helps break down silos and inject fresh ideas into the organization.

Similarly, Beth Comstock of GE uses her "BlackBerry Beth" blog to share external learnings with GE managers, encouraging them to be more externally focused. Comstock notes, I work hard to curate information that I don't believe many at GE will have heard and to translate information in a way that is relevant to our challenges (Ibarra & Hansen, 2015). This practice helps broaden perspectives within the company and fosters a more collaborative, innovative culture.

2. LEVERAGING DIVERSE TALENT

Another common trait is the executives' emphasis on leveraging diverse talent to drive innovation and performance. Reckitt Benckiser's CEO Bart Becht strongly advocates for having people with different backgrounds on teams to increase the potential for new ideas. Becht states, the chance for new ideas is much greater when you have people with different backgrounds. The chance for conflict is also higher—and conflict is good per se, if it's constructive and gets us to the best idea (Ibarra & Hansen, 2015). This approach to diversity fosters creativity and helps teams avoid groupthink, ultimately leading to better outcomes.



3. MODELING COLLABORATION AT THE TOP

The executives also demonstrate the importance of modeling collaborative behavior at the senior leadership level. At Natura Cosméticos, CEO Alessandro Carlucci implemented an "engagement process" to promote a collaborative mindset among the top team and throughout the organization. This process involved personal coaching for executives, focusing on holistic self-development. Carlucci explains, "It's not just talking to your boss or subordinates but talking about a person's life history, with their families; it is more holistic, broader, integrating all the different roles of a human being" (Ibarra & Hansen, 2015). By having executives show vulnerability and acknowledge their limitations, Carlucci created an environment of trust and openness that cascaded throughout the organization.

4. PROVIDING STRONG DIRECTION

While fostering collaboration, these leaders also recognize the need to provide strong direction to prevent teams from getting mired in endless debate. At Reckitt Benckiser, Becht encourages vigorous debate in meetings but ensures clear decisions are made, often by having the meeting chair make the final call if no consensus emerges. This approach balances the benefits of diverse input with the need for decisive action, maintaining agility and execution speed.

These collaborative leadership traits have led to effective team building within these organizations by:

1. Breaking down silos and encouraging cross-functional collaboration
2. Fostering a culture of innovation through diverse perspectives



3. Building trust and openness throughout the organization
4. Maintaining a balance between collaborative input and decisive action

INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP AND TEAM BUILDING STRATEGY

The statement "Employees who try to collaborate on everything may wind up stuck in endless meetings, struggling to reach agreement. On the other side of the coin, executives who came of age during the heyday of 'command and control' management can have trouble adjusting their style to fit the new realities" (Ibarra & Hansen, 2015) highlights the delicate balance required in collaborative leadership. To address this challenge, we can examine the inclusive leadership and team building strategy of Salesforce.com, as discussed in "The Key to Inclusive Leadership" by Bourke and Titus (2020).

Marc Benioff, the CEO of Salesforce.com, showed his dedication to inclusive leadership by drastically expanding the scope of the organization's yearly management off-site meeting. Benioff made the customarily private gathering virtual for all 15,000 employees by utilizing Chatter, a social tool created by Salesforce.com. This approach is quite like the Appreciative Inquiry approach, which emphasizes recognizing and enhancing an organization's assets and satisfying experiences.

During the management off-site, Benioff fostered an inclusive environment that appreciated a range of viewpoints by asking all employees to share their ideas. This approach energized teams and unleashed creativity by making everyone feel their contributions were valued. As Benioff notes, Suddenly, the meeting went from a select group participating to the entire company participating (Bourke & Titus, 2020).



The use of Chatter as a platform for this inclusive dialogue demonstrates how technology can be leveraged to foster collaboration and break down hierarchical barriers. This aligns with the Appreciative Inquiry principle of creating positive change by engaging the entire system in the process.

The impact of this inclusive leadership strategy was significant. Benioff observed that many of the people who had critical customer knowledge and were adding the most value was not even known to the management team before this initiative. By fostering a more open and empowered culture, Salesforce.com was able to better align the entire workforce around its mission.

This approach helped Salesforce.com navigate the challenges highlighted in the statement by:

1. Preventing endless meetings by providing a structured platform for input
2. Encouraging agreement by fostering a sense of shared purpose and inclusivity
3. Helping traditional "command and control" executives adapt to a more collaborative style by demonstrating the value of diverse input

TRANSFORMATIONAL COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP IN ACTION

To further illustrate the power of collaborative leadership, let's examine the case of Satya Nadella, CEO of Microsoft, who has been widely recognized for his transformative leadership style.



When Nadella took over as CEO in 2014, Microsoft was known for its competitive internal culture, which often hindered collaboration and innovation. Nadella set out to transform this culture by embracing and embodying the traits of collaborative leadership.

Nadella's approach focused on three key areas:

1. FOSTERING A GROWTH MINDSET: Nadella encouraged employees to adopt a growth mindset, emphasizing continuous learning and improvement. This aligned with the collaborative leadership trait of leveraging diverse talent by recognizing that everyone has the potential to grow and contribute.

2. EMPHASIZING EMPATHY AND INCLUSIVITY: Nadella made empathy a cornerstone of Microsoft's culture, encouraging employees to understand and value different perspectives. This approach mirrors the global connector role seen in other collaborative leaders, fostering connections across diverse groups.

3. PROMOTING OPEN COLLABORATION: Nadella broke down silos within Microsoft and encouraged collaboration across different divisions. This aligns with the trait of modeling collaboration at the top, as Nadella himself actively participated in cross-functional projects.

To create an inclusive environment that energized teams and released creativity, Nadella implemented several strategies:

1. REGULAR EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT: Nadella held frequent town halls and Q&A sessions, allowing employees at all levels to voice their ideas and concerns directly to the leadership.



2. DIVERSE TEAM BUILDING: He emphasized the importance of diverse teams, recognizing that different perspectives lead to more innovative solutions.

3. CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION: Nadella shifted the company's focus from a "know-it-all" to a "learn-it-all" culture, encouraging experimentation and learning from failures.

4. TECHNOLOGY-ENABLED COLLABORATION: Microsoft invested in collaborative tools and platforms, making it easier for teams to work together regardless of location or division.

The results of Nadella's collaborative leadership approach were significant. Microsoft experienced a cultural renaissance, with improved employee satisfaction and a surge in innovation. The company's market value more than quintupled under Nadella's leadership, demonstrating that a collaborative, inclusive culture can drive both employee engagement and business performance.

CONCLUSION

The collaborative leadership examples covered in this essay show the value of bridging different viewpoints, utilizing talent, exhibiting teamwork, and giving clear guidance. These executives have demonstrated how collaborative methods can promote high-performance cultures, from Salesforce.com's inclusive off-site meetings to Microsoft's cultural revolution under Satya Nadella, and from Akamai's global connector approach.



Leaders may foster inclusive workplaces that stimulate teams, release creativity, and propel organizational success by adopting these characteristics and tactics. The capacity for collaborative leadership will become even more essential for long-term success and innovation as companies traverse an ever more linked environment.





References:

Bourke, J., & Titus, A. (2020, March 06). The key to inclusive leadership. *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2020/03/the-key-to-inclusive-leadership>

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