“People [leaders] view networking as something that ‘is not them’ or that they could not see themselves doing. However, networking ability is crucial for getting things accomplished and making change inside organizations...”

When managers take a network approach to leadership, they develop close communities of practice, which help the organization in achieving its strategic priorities.

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For us to develop deep-rooted connections and a sense of community at the workplace, we need the kind of environment that can help us become rooted. The essence of a community is awareness, understanding, acceptance, and harmony. Most organizations develop cross-functional teams and diverse groups to work on specific goals. Individuals with varied skills, abilities, and competence come together to constitute such teams. However, if the basic attributes of high-performing teams such as trust, empathy, and understanding are missing, leaders should have the courage to say so. Without these, no real connections or sense of belongingness and engagement is possible. On the other hand, if you find these elements in an organization, you know you have the fortune of being part of a real community whose support will help you become a better individual at work, and otherwise.

Developing these simple, yet powerful qualities is possible only through the practice of mindfulness. Research shows that people spend almost 47% of their waking hours thinking about something other than what they are doing. In other words, many of us operate on autopilot. The good news is that one can train one’s brain [mind] to focus better by incorporating mindfulness exercises throughout the day.

Being mindful needs focused thought and action. Ask yourself this question: in order to become mindful at work, what can I do individually, technologically, and socially or culturally? Simple practices such as setting timelines with clear goals for daily tasks, setting intention and saying ‘no’ when you must can help you become more focused, innovative, and effective at work. Similarly, dedicate your first few hours in the morning to important and prioritized work that needs deep thinking, focus, and creativity, instead of jumping straight to emails, which lead us down a distracting and fire-fighting trail of activities.

The internet and mobile technology have changed the way we work. Even if we are not physically present at our workplace, work finds us through our devices at home or outside. In such a situation, creating close communities and working relationships becomes an even greater challenge. It is therefore imperative that we move away from being action-addicts to becoming deliberate, intentional, and high-performing individuals with the ability to tap our social networks that ensure consistent levels of strong performance.

What we understand today as critical states of leadership has long been practiced by old spiritual sects and communities, widely known to be highly socially integrated and self-sustaining. For instance, Buddhist communities, the world over, take refuge in the sangha. Their decisions and actions are not just for their personal growth, but also for the development of others in their sangha. Their actions are a deliberate means to inspire each other and help one another feel supported, particularly in times of adversity. Similarly, leadership in organizations today is moving from the concept of leadership being just a hierarchical role to being a social process.

Many researchers and practitioners are working hard to understand how collectives—groups of people, teams, organizations, communities—may enhance their network perspective and build, manage, and leverage their network connections. People with network perspective understand the dynamic web of connections that have an impact on their work, their leadership, and the leadership culture of their organization.
They can identify patterns of relationships and people in their personal network and the broader organizational network that will foster strategic success—and those that will inhibit or undermine it. When you take a network approach to leadership, in fact what you are doing is emphasizing those collective dimensions of leadership. What you are saying is: leadership is not just about an individual taking action by herself, but it is about the dynamic that gets created when that person is engaged in very interdependent relationships with others. Ultimately, what you are doing is taking the idea of leadership to the next level up and making it a property of a system.

Organizations typically begin with a formal structure, which then shapes informal networks. When individuals start at an organization, they are placed in groups, which are usually defined for efficiency and execution, thereby putting like people together. Then, social networks develop largely within these groups due to proximity, homophily, and other natural human tendencies; however, some of the most important ties cut across groups. In most communities, there is no formal organizational structure in place. Instead, the objective is to seed more connectedness among people with a common focus, such as addressing health needs in a rural community, advancing the adoption of preventative medical treatment, changing government policies, or spurring other social movements. In an organizational setting, this would be similar to developing communities of practice. The question therefore is: how do we develop close communities of practice in organizations? The challenge is to identify structural aspects of networks that need to be changed to spur innovation, but also developing the mindset and behaviors to lead within a network and work across boundaries effectively.

We must empower a sense of intentionality when incorporating network thinking, analysis, and development into practice.
Developing leaders who understand the network perspective is hence critical. Leadership development using this perspective must include strategically building, reshaping, and leveraging networks. We must empower a sense of intentionality when incorporating network thinking, analysis, and development into practice. For instance, a key aspect of leadership development is a network perspective. Increased perspective provides a starting point for building a network that will help an individual achieve personal and organizational goals. Individuals need to know where they are in the network, the overall structure of the network, and how their position in the overall structure impacts their leadership ability and the success of their team or organization. Becoming more intentional about their network requires understanding their network, their role, and the associated outcomes. Therefore, leadership development must provide assessments and reflections to increase network perspective and help individuals consider the opportunities and constraints that their network position provides. This ability also helps leaders be aware of, understand, work within, and manage complex organizations systems.

In this swiftly changing, complex, and interconnected world, the ability to understand and leverage informal organizational networks is vital for leaders. In an environment where tough decisions have to be made quickly and often, you cannot rely on hierarchy or traditional approaches to get information or make things happen. The network perspective—the ability to look beyond the organizational chart to see, understand, and engage the informal, invisible structure supporting the organization, is key to establishing connections and achieving strategic priorities. Network-savvy leaders intentionally develop this perspective and create a connected, more interdependent culture. Some take it even further, expanding their organization’s network throughout the world. ■

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