



## TEAM PERFORMANCE

# Outside In

How Leaders Engage Networked Ecosystems For Team Success

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# Introduction

Increasingly, organizations rely on networks of agile teams to get work done.<sup>1</sup> Volatile global markets, digital disruption, and competition for talent have forced companies to accelerate innovation, adapt rapidly to sudden shifts in market conditions, and stay closer than ever to customers. In response to market conditions, some companies are forming fluid networks of empowered teams that are required to communicate and coordinate activities in dynamic ways.<sup>2</sup> Enthusiasm for building networks of teams, or a “team of teams,” was inspired partly by General Stanley McChrystal in his book of the same name.<sup>3</sup> Faced with an enemy—Al-Qaeda—that was moving and re-forming faster than traditional special forces’ decision-making and information-sharing cycles could handle, McChrystal radically altered the military’s traditional up-down hierarchy by creating a network of highly empowered and trained teams. He sought to overcome Al-Qaeda’s ability to counter force with speed by reducing information silos with centralized information provided in real time to all teams. The breakdown of both the decision-making hierarchy and information silos dramatically increased the speed with which military forces could anticipate Al-Qaeda’s moves and led to success on the battlefield.

Yet, too often, companies adopt the team-of-teams model without providing managers with the tools they need to make it work. Working across teams is key to the model’s functioning, but techniques such as open office spaces, job rotation, and swift deployment of individuals from team to team do not easily translate into action steps at the point of execution. Perhaps this is why Deloitte found that, while 65% of survey respondents viewed the shift from “functional hierarchy to team-centric and network-based organizational models” as important or very important, only 7% felt very ready to execute this shift.<sup>4</sup> Despite hundreds of books and articles on agile teams and the widespread adoption of team-based tools, practical guidelines on the best way to lead teams to high performance in today’s organizations remain underdeveloped.<sup>5</sup>

Part of the problem is that the *nature of work* has changed, but the *architecture of work* has not caught up. In addition, models from the battlefield may not translate precisely to companies. The teams in McChrystal’s “team of teams” are relatively small groups of dedicated people who work together on a focused project. In most organizations today, however, this type of small, dedicated team is the exception rather than the rule. Teams are bigger, more permeable, more fluid, and more pervasive than in the past,<sup>6</sup> and it is common for people to work on many teams simultaneously. Indeed, senior-level managers might work on as many as 25 project teams in a given week,<sup>7</sup> creating decision-making and information-sharing bottlenecks. In addition, teams are bigger than the “two pizza” teams once thought optimal. In many organizations, individuals, particularly at more senior levels, lead teams of 20, 50, or even several hundred people across multiple continents and time zones. Leaders are additionally challenged by the collaborative intensity of work, with managers who spend 85% or more of their time in meetings, on the phone, or answering email.<sup>8</sup> In short, the nature of work today requires rapid connections across teams; however, people work in several large and dispersed team structures concurrently and face increasing demands on their time. This constitutes a mismatch between the nature of work and its architecture. It’s no wonder that so many teams fail on a regular basis!<sup>9</sup>

Increasingly, researchers and practitioners are reconceptualizing teams as *networks* embedded within larger organizational networks.<sup>10</sup> This perspective highlights the permeability of team boundaries and emphasizes

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the structure and quality of interpersonal *relationships* and their impact on work. It thereby offers leaders the opportunity to manage their teams' *ecosystems* in a new way. Typically, team leaders are advised to focus on the internal dynamics of their team—to engage in team-building activities to build trust, critical conversations to build psychological safety, and healthy conflict to foster creativity. Indeed, these within-team practices promote collaboration, coordination, and innovation. But the new nature of work calls for a heavier emphasis on managing the ecosystem in which teams are embedded. It calls for an outside-in perspective.

Leaders who fail to invest time in managing their ecosystem risk being sidelined by unexpected project delays, cost overruns, and turnover. But the one thing that most managers lack is time. In fact, research suggests that most people face collaborative overload.<sup>11</sup> They become exhausted by efforts to connect indiscriminately to others in the organization. Organizations annually invest millions of dollars on networking events, including internal conferences, town halls, and leadership development programs. Our research suggests that these well-intentioned investments in indiscriminate relationship-building consume time and resources with limited impact on performance. Meanwhile, teams race from sprint to sprint, focusing on the next deliverable, and miss key opportunities to shape the resourcing, content, pace, and impact of the work itself.

Although external relationships can block or facilitate collaboration, the key is to identify the few most relevant for a particular team's work. Tapping into these high-impact relationships is critical to managing the ecosystem. Leaders who understand both the broader network and their teams' specific networks within it can use a scalpel—as opposed to a chainsaw!—to precisely sculpt the relationships that matter most to the work. Using their knowledge of the networks within and between teams, leaders can identify specific relationships that will bring the most benefit to their teams. By focusing on these critical relationships and not on more generalized relationship-building, they not only optimize their own time but save the team time by avoiding costly burnout, poor quality outputs, and project delays.

Through our research and consulting work, we have met leaders who are intentional about architecting their teams' collaboration in service of their team's work. We wanted to learn more, particularly, how exactly these leaders do it. Prior research tells us that teams that create connections with external stakeholders will boost creativity and innovation, performance, and commitment.<sup>12</sup> Yet, outside of standard stakeholder mapping activities, we know little about the specific tactics used by team leaders to manage the ecosystem in which their teams work. These leaders are constantly moving in and out of teams, with mandates to deliver results from day one. They do not have the luxury of time enjoyed by past generations to establish relationships. Yet, some leaders manage to outperform and scale results. We investigated what they were doing at the point of execution to make this happen.

To better understand the practices that yield performance in today's teams, we conducted 90-minute interviews with more than 100 successful leaders in 20 different organizations. The organizations included a wide range of industries (e.g., financial services, high tech, consulting, manufacturing, food services, hospitality) and ranged in size from several thousand to hundreds of thousands of employees. Teams operated within a range of functions, including sales, R&D, human resources, production, and public relations. We purposefully selected individuals who had been identified as having successfully led multiple teams over at least 10 years to interview because we wanted to capture practices-in-use rather than test causality. Through an iterative process, we collected ideas about how leaders manage their team's ecosystem. As a model emerged from our interviews, we presented it to our interviewees and small groups of business leaders at roughly two dozen other organizations to determine what did and did not resonate (see sidebar "Our approach and methodology").

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## Our approach and methodology

To gain insight into how people in a wide range of industries navigate demands, we interviewed 101 high-performing team leaders (45 men, 56 women) across 20 organizations. Organizations represented a range of industries (e.g., financial services, food manufacturing, high tech, consulting, hospitality) and sizes (from several thousand employees to several hundred thousand). All but one were headquartered in the United States, although most had global offices. The organizations were all members of the Connected Commons—a consortium of more than 100 major companies and organizations. One individual at each company—usually with a title such as CHRO, SVP People Analytics, SVP Talent Management, or similar—identified approximately five people in their organization who met our criteria of having led multiple teams to high performance over the past 10 years. The 90-minute interviews were conducted by the authors in three phases: (1) 25 between April and May 2019, (2) 40 between July and December 2019, and (3) 36 between March and May 2020.

Phase 1 was exploratory, allowing us to pilot test a semi-structured interview protocol that drew upon themes we had seen in our previous quantitative work, especially as they related to internal team practices.<sup>22</sup> The protocol included background demographics (job title, role, tenure, number of direct reports, number of teams); internal practices (*How do you as a leader manage relationships within your team and for what purpose?*); external practices (*How do you as a leader manage external stakeholder relationships and for what purpose?*); and collaborative contexts (*What threats to team collaboration do you often see, and how do you address them?*). In Phase 2, we probed more deeply into the strategies and practices that had been identified in the Phase 1 interviews. The model that subsequently emerged from our analysis was tested and further refined in the Phase 3 interviews.

Qualitative analysis of Phase 1 data using MAXQDA software produced first-cycle codes from interview transcripts that provided support for a preliminary model of practice. After the Phase 2 data collection, analysis involved more-detailed coding, with first-cycle codes refined through second-cycle coding to develop a greater sense of categorical and thematic organization of data that related to team network management practices. Categorization was based on the research focus and the guiding theoretical lens, emphasizing practitioners in praxis. Subsequent themes were developed inductively, and, to ensure inter-coder dependability, the narratives and meanings of the themes were negotiated and then grouped into 26 specific practices. The research team was in agreement with the coding outcomes. In addition, one of the authors presented the model to more than a dozen small groups of senior leaders across a wide range of organizations and industries and received additional external validation of categories and practices.

# Managing the Team's External Ecosystem

Two broad strategies emerged from our interviews with leaders about the practices they use to architect their teams' collaborative work.

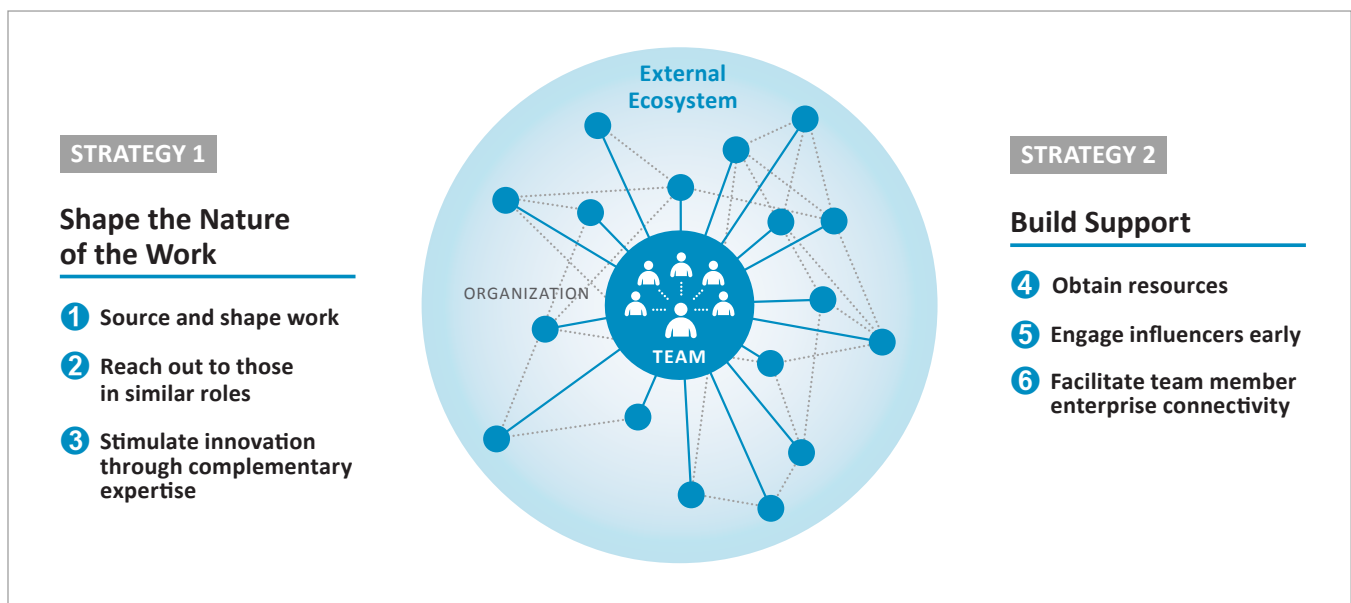
**STRATEGY 1:** Leaders engage in practices to *shape the nature of the work* that comes into the team.

**STRATEGY 2:** Leaders engage in practices to *build the support* that a team needs to accomplish its work.

**Figure 1** depicts activities that were most representative of each of these strategies. The approaches that apply to each strategy are elaborated in **Table 1**. At first glance, these strategies and practices may not seem surprising or

counterintuitive. However, high-performing leaders invest in continual, nuanced, targeted efforts to shape their teams' ecosystems in ways that leaders who focus internally miss.

**Figure 1.** These six activities demonstrate the two key strategies used by leaders of high-performing teams to cultivate the connections within their team's external ecosystem.



Within the scope of the findings summarized in **Figure 1**, our first goal is to help researchers and practitioners who care about team effectiveness to see that the external ecosystem is built upon intentionally developed networks. A team's *external ecosystem* refers to the connections that the leader and team members have with other teams, units, geographies, and influencers outside of the team. Previous research has provided evidence that teams that are better connected to others in the organization have greater access to resources, including critical information and organizational knowledge.<sup>13</sup> It is easier for them to efficiently locate and absorb unique and more complex information, positioning them for greater success when they seek to innovate.<sup>14</sup> Not surprisingly, strong external networks are associated with higher team performance, especially when the team is facing an uncertain and rapidly evolving situation.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, we know less about how leaders analyze the network in which their team is

embedded to identify the specific relationships critical to their team's performance.

To better understand how leaders cultivate external networks to drive performance and engagement, we were particularly interested in the specific actions that leaders take to build key relationships across the external network efficiently and effectively. The greatest surprise in this research was the amount of time that successful people put into shaping the ecosystem in which their teams reside. We routinely asked our interviewees the amount of time that they spent managing external relationships, and they frequently mentioned at least 50%—sometimes 60%—of their time, far beyond what most team models indicate. Clearly, investments in external relationships can reap long-term benefits. The key is for leaders to build those relationships *intentionally* to sculpt the ecosystem of their team. They do this in two basic ways: shaping the team's work and building support for the team.

**Table 1. Practices for successfully managing the team’s external ecosystem**

PRACTICE	WHY THIS MATTERS	WHAT YOU CAN DO
<b>STRATEGY 1: SHAPE THE NATURE OF THE WORK</b>		
<p>✓ <b>We engage external stakeholders to source and shape work that comes into the team.</b></p>	<p>When work is misaligned with the interests of members, team leaders struggle with disengagement and attrition. When work that comes into the team is beyond capacity or capability, quality and timeliness of delivery falters.</p>	<p>Identify the key constituencies that drive work for your team. Think broadly in terms of customers, stakeholders, and leaders. Where possible, set up a meeting with each to discuss objectives and alternative ways that your team could deliver results in a more efficient way or to provide an outcome of greater value to the stakeholder.</p>
<p>✓ <b>We reach out to those in similar roles to adapt practices that promote the quality and efficiency of the team’s work.</b></p>	<p>Teams can quickly become insular in the face of significant workloads and short time frames. Failing to identify and adapt best practices outside of the team hurts efficiency and effectiveness over time.</p>	<p>Reach out to those who face problems of a similar scope or level of abstraction. Search for and reach out to individuals and teams that tackle similar issues but in different environments. For example, send an email to a peer when you hear about an interesting practice in another part of the organization or in an external organization.</p>
<p>✓ <b>We stimulate innovation through exploratory interactions with teams that have complementary expertise.</b></p>	<p>Most innovations arise from the envisioning of new solutions through the integration of existing products, services, or capabilities. Leaders who proactively explore synergistic or complementary expertise domains are more likely to bring new ideas, services, or products to market.</p>	<p>Identify functions, teams, or centers of excellence that have adjacent expertise for which integration of capabilities could drive service or product innovation for stakeholders’ value. Reach out directly to a leader or representative of that group to explore a possibility over coffee.</p>
<b>STRATEGY 2: BUILD SUPPORT</b>		
<p>✓ <b>We engage external stakeholders to obtain resources that support the team’s work and engagement.</b></p>	<p>When the demands of the work that come into the team exceed available resources, including time, expertise, and budget, work quality suffers, and members are at risk for burnout, disengagement, and turnover.</p>	<p>Tell the right story at the right time in the right way. For example, create context for the request by establishing needs before making a specific request. This gives stakeholders an opportunity to consider alternative ways to meet needs rather than forcing yes/no thinking in the moment.</p>
<p>✓ <b>We engage formal decision makers and informal opinion leaders early to streamline approval and implementation processes.</b></p>	<p>Teams falter, even when producing good work, when they do not engage formal decision makers or informal opinion leaders in ways that streamline acceptance and uptake of their team’s output.</p>	<p>Locate and engage informal network influencers to build support for your ideas. Set up meetings with these people, ask how they might handle the problem that you are facing, and listen to their points of pain and interest. Seek out negative opinion leaders early in the process.</p>
<p>✓ <b>We facilitate team member enterprise connectivity for performance, engagement, and well-being.</b></p>	<p>Higher engagement is created and attrition is reduced when team members connect with groups that are doing work they care about and find meaningful.</p>	<p>Adapt more systematic practices that stimulate enterprise connectivity. For example, create a team alumni network and, as appropriate, pair alumni and members to boost engagement and strengthen team connections to other units.</p>

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## Strategy 1: Shape the Nature of the Work

First, we found that the leaders we interviewed were surprisingly proactive in shaping the nature of the work that comes into the team. Most team models assume that teams are designed, given resources, assigned work, and tasked with executing that work. Once the work comes into the team, the leader's role is usually framed as one of helping the team to deliver outcomes to the satisfaction of those who would use them. As a result, most team advice focuses on how best to motivate team members by removing obstacles to success or by creating facilitating conditions for accomplishing specified tasks.<sup>16</sup>

The leaders we studied, however, took an active role in shaping the team's work. They reached out to their internal clients to shape demand even before it was presented to the team. These leaders believed that they had the power to proactively shape the nature of requests that come into the team from external stakeholders and, in some cases, to generate new and important work or to redirect a request to another team that is better positioned to respond to it. By managing their stakeholder ecosystem, they aligned the work with their team's capacity and interests, which, in turn, fostered higher performance and deeper engagement.

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### 1 Engage external stakeholders to source and shape work that comes into the team

Effective collaboration within a team occurs when the nature of the work aligns with the team's capabilities, aspirations, and capacity. When work is misaligned with members' interests, team leaders face disengagement and attrition. When work that comes into the team is beyond their capacity or capability, quality and timeliness of delivery falters. Leaders who proactively shape the demands that come into the team through interactions with external stakeholders are able to shape the nature and timing of work to optimize team engagement and delivery. They better utilize and advance the skills of the team. As a result, the team becomes more engaged, resulting in work that does not require a herculean effort to perform and is well matched to the team's interests and aspirations.

Many of the leaders with whom we spoke identified the key constituencies that drive work for their team—thinking broadly in terms of customers, stakeholders, and leaders—as well as the specific individuals or roles that intersected with their team's work. Where possible, they set up a meeting with each to discuss objectives and alternative ways that their team could deliver results in a more efficient way or provide an outcome of greater value to the stakeholder. The most successful leaders sculpted the work to be of greater interest to their team. They were often better able to align work and interests because they engaged in ad hoc conversations or systematic one-on-ones with their team members in which 50% or more of the time was off-task and focused on each individual's professional development and career aspirations. Although they could not control all aspects of work that comes into the team, by virtue of their clarity on team members' capabilities and aspirations, leaders were able to better align

work with what the team was most capable to deliver and most willing to give greater effort to.

For example, one consumer products leader learned to always ask questions about the ultimate use and desired impact of the work that her team was being asked to do. In her words:

*“Just probing in this way for a minute or two might catch the leader off guard or be a little frustrating at first. But over the years, I have probably saved 10 person-years of unnecessary work by reframing what my teams deliver and in what time frame through a couple of probing questions. But you have to catch this in that small window when they are asking.”*

Another leader in the software industry initially focused her efforts internally. By taking copious notes while engaging in one-on-ones and group dialogue with her solution-design team, she developed a list of five things that the team did well. She converted these core capabilities into a single slide and then used that slide in proactive discussions with external stakeholders to shape the nature of the team's work. *“I can't tell you how many times I use that one document to help me to guide a conversation, to introduce our group to somebody, to align goals and priorities to, to challenge whether we need to evolve.”* As a result, she was able to pull work into the team that aligned with their core competencies and shared purpose, reinvigorating the team's commitment to their work and establishing a track record of success.

In contrast to those leaders who are not externally proactive—often overwhelmed by demands placed on the team—more successful leaders experienced greater engagement and innovation in their teams. Over time, they cultivated a reputation for producing high-quality work that pulled new

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talent and more interesting work into the team. One senior sales leader in the life sciences industry described engaging key financial sponsors early in the funding process to better align incoming work with the aspirations of his employees. He did this not with a detailed slide deck but, rather, with a single slide and rich exploratory conversations focused on possibilities months ahead of the formal planning process:

*“It took me 20 years to figure out that that approach allowed us both—my primary financial sponsor and me—to create*

*streams of work that better aligned with our respective needs versus being in a more defensive posture of showing what I could do for certain levels of support and defending that in detailed slide decks.”*

Regardless of the approach, the key is to look for opportunities to shape the work, whereby doing so will build key capabilities and engagement in the team.

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## ② Reach out to those in similar roles to adopt best practices

Teams can quickly become insular in the face of significant workloads and short time frames. Failing to identify and adapt best practices outside of the team keeps the team’s efficiency at a suboptimal level and degrades long-term effectiveness. Just a few select inquiries can dramatically improve projects. The leaders we interviewed identified and brought best practices into their teams through connections with people who were doing similar work in different geographies, functions, or organizations. Proactively engaging in ideas at the forefront of their discipline often also has the side effect of spurring team engagement. As well, exploring synergies creates network leverage as collaborating teams become aware of capabilities and sources of future work and referrals.

Although many organizations encourage connections between individuals in similar roles, the leaders in our study were selective in building targeted relationships to identify and bring best practices into their team. They did not seek out vague possibilities. Rather, they sought teams that faced a very similar environment or problem, preferably ones that had successfully addressed it. They often delegated responsibility for finding those connections to team members. For example, one leader identified two specific challenges every quarter (e.g., a piece of a work process, techniques for streamlining meetings) and asked her team to reach out to a small subset of people and then share in monthly meetings one or two changes that the team could make based on their conversations:

*“The key is to focus on high-impact areas and low asks of the team. But to be systematic about this so that we find these things we can do differently that are worth investing time in.”*

Other leaders looked for ways that a given activity or capability was emerging across units or geographies. For example, one

successful leader in the consulting industry pulled together a working group on IT modernization initiatives when she noticed that several teams in different markets were addressing the same issue, explaining:

*“There’s a lot of new technologies out right now that people are looking into: machine learning, blockchain, artificial intelligence. Our team has a whole solution we’ve started to deliver, and we noticed that some of our market teams who are doing delivery already had similar versions. The working group helped us come up with one common solution that we could take across all of our clients to execute.”*

Leaders who took the time to engage their team in outreach to those in similar roles for the purpose of adapting practices that promote quality and efficiency of the team’s work experienced numerous benefits. First and foremost, search efforts yielded new ideas and practices. As a result, they were able to quickly and efficiently leverage the expertise of others to boost their own team’s performance. One leader of a high-tech firm, for example, located and adopted code-parsing processes that saved days of time. By virtue of getting the entire team engaged in the search for best practices, the leaders we interviewed also improved team members’ networks and engagement by building enterprise networks and external connectivity, which are crucial to performance and engagement. A director of software engineering at a fintech firm was purposeful about making those connections when one of his team developed innovative solutions to test automation:

*“I connect to bridge the gap between teams but also to take an individual who has a strength or a passion and let them excel. I say, ‘Hey, Andrew here has a passion for this and he’s really good. I’d like to open up a conversation between you guys.’”*



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### ③ Stimulate innovation through exploratory interactions with teams with complementary expertise

Most innovations arise from envisioning new solutions by integrating existing products, services, or capabilities. Leaders who proactively explore synergistic or complementary expertise are more likely to bring new ideas, services, or products to market. As a result, their team's work is differentiated and generates reputational benefits. If in a market-facing role, these teams can also often charge higher premiums. In addition, exploring synergies creates network leverage as collaborating teams become aware of capabilities and sources of future work and referrals.

Again, the leaders in our study connected intentionally to other teams. They looked for functions, teams, or centers of excellence with adjacent expertise to that of their team, such that integration of capabilities could drive process, service, or product innovation that stakeholders would value. Once they identified people with whom to connect, they engaged in a set of interactions to make these connections happen, for example, reaching out to a leader or representative of that group to explore a possibility over coffee, sparking an exploratory brainstorming session with well-connected people from multiple teams, or launching a customer-focused (with a real internal or external customer) design-thinking workshop to co-create a value-added solution. One talent acquisition director at a major health insurance provider reached out to the firm's onboarding team to identify a way to use emerging technology to alter the new hire process:

*"We've been working pretty collectively with that team to talk to vendors, see what's out there, kind of understand what the flow would look like, not just through our processes but from the time you attract the candidate all the way until they've been here for 90 days."*

After months of ongoing interactions, the partners successfully designed and implemented a new customer relationship management system and career site for the seamless integration of hiring processes.

Leaders who seek out those with complementary expertise are more likely to involve their teams in high-impact work, creating a positive cycle of recognition, increased resources, and more latitude to experiment. For example, a global design and development leader in engineering was concerned that his team was developing incrementally better products but not next-generation products. He first identified several teams with complementary expertise. Then, he physically moved his

team into the same space. Finally, he encouraged members of all of these teams to spend as much as 15% of their time on whatever new idea interested them, even without an immediate payoff. Before long, a handful of small project-focused groups, composed of members of different teams, formed. The gamble paid off. One of his top designers, as the leader reported,

*"...had been designing and developing jet engines for 35 years around conventional manufacturing technologies, so his brain was 100% wired to 'that's the only way to do it.' When people showed him things that didn't fit those rules, he immediately threw them out. It took him three months to deprogram. But once he did, the results were worth it. In just one day, he wrote down three patents that today are published patents for our group."*

Key to this success is that the leader purposefully sought teams with expertise adjacent to the expertise of his team.

The way that leaders connected with complementary expertise was counterintuitive. Most leaders pursue collaboration through a standard presentation in which they present slides that list their teams' impressive accomplishments and hope for ideas to emerge in response. In contrast, the leaders we interviewed spent more of their time trying to understand the capabilities and needs of the other teams. They might show a slide or two to establish credentials, but they spent most of their time asking questions to understand the other team's needs and aspirations. They identified areas of potential by connecting their team's expertise to the other team's needs and aspirations. This process created much more energy around a mutual win, inspiring and galvanizing both teams. Notably, by focusing on gaining insight into the other team's capabilities and interests, successful leaders are more likely to develop a reputation for innovation than are leaders who focus on broadcasting their own team's achievements. Further, team members became more excited by the work and more engaged with the team, resulting in higher retention rates. In contrast, leaders who fail to manage their ecosystem are at risk of their teams' work becoming less innovative over time. Teams become pigeonholed by others in the organization, reducing their access to high-visibility, high-impact projects and reducing the pool of talent that moves into and stays in the team.

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## Strategy 2: Build the Support the Team Needs

The second theme that we observed in the interviews was leaders' attention to building the support that their team needed to achieve its objectives. When the demands of the work that comes into a team exceed the available time, expertise, and budget, work quality suffers, and members are at risk of burnout, disengagement, and turnover. Most leaders, especially those with long tenure in an organization, are adept at navigating formal systems and processes. This allows them to deliver well-researched budget requests, solicit the backing of key managers when tackling new initiatives, or recommend talented individuals for upcoming projects and promotions. These critical skills are the hallmarks of all good managers. But the leaders we interviewed supplemented these activities by proactively seeking a broader range of resources to secure funding and support for current and future demands. These leaders were confident that extra resources—such as budget, expertise, and political power—were available in the organization with extra prompting. Thus, they proactively sought support from targeted sources in the team's ecosystem. For example, a talent acquisition leader at a large insurance company was able to significantly reduce her team's continual work overload in response to last-minute 'high priority' requests by establishing relationships with key business leaders and helping them to redirect some of their requests to other capable teams with lower workloads.

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### 4 Engage external stakeholders to obtain resources that support the team's work and engagement

Effective collaboration depends on adequate resourcing, as noted above. As timeliness and quality of the team's output falter, a negative spiral often ensues, further reducing the team's resources and quality. Many leaders wait until their teams are operating in a deficit before they seek additional resources. Typically, leaders make formal budget requests, with justifications for additional costs (e.g., return on investment, adjustments for growth). Too often, these leaders have no recourse when budgets are cut to a bare minimum, crippling their ability to do things for their team that promote innovation (e.g., traveling to work with colleagues at another location) and deepen engagement (e.g., hosting celebratory dinners, attending professional conferences).

In contrast, the leaders in our study cast a wider net when seeking resources. Even within formal performance management and budgeting processes, they tended to operate more effectively. For example, they found ways to add (or preserve) budget for team celebrations or individual rewards, knowing that small investments have outsized effects on morale, engagement, and innovation. They also proactively worked *informal* channels to secure funding for current and future demands, finding creative ways to communicate the performance dividends of these team investments. One vice-president of revenue management in the hospitality industry told us that he never schedules more than five meetings a day to give himself time to walk the building and talk to peers as well as those above and below him in the organization:

*"I have those relationships with them so that, when I need to move fast and move outside of the formal network, I have that connection to do that. I can really rely on people. I just*

*submitted the largest business case for a new technology, and I didn't go through any of the formal processes. I just went right to the CEO and asked for \$50 million, and I got it."*

Another distribution leader at a global power corporation built an informal relationship with a member of another team who provided his team with valuable sales data. When we asked how the relationship started, he told us that he had initiated it:

*"He helped us with a project. I wasn't involved in the project. I was just aware of it, like two or three years ago. I knew he had been involved in it. So, I reached out, 'Hey, I remember you helped with this project. That was really awesome.' And, 'I've seen the data. The sales are still up. I have this other project. Are you willing to help?' And that's how it started."*

He attributed their continued engagement to the genuine gratitude he expresses when he receives help. *"Every time he sends me something, I'm like, 'Man, that was awesome. Thank you for helping me. I really needed it.'"* Key to this exchange is that the leader targeted the relationship, nurtured it, and was able to leverage it to bring valuable resources into the team. He did this by acknowledging and appreciating his effort and by letting him know the (positive) impact that it was having on his ability to serve customers.

One way that leaders obtained resources was by telling the right story at the right time in the right way to the right stakeholders. Sometimes, these stakeholders were outside of the formal process but had direct or indirect influence over setting budget priorities or locating sources of additional funding. Leaders create context for requests by establishing needs *before* making a specific request. This gives stakeholders an opportunity to

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consider alternative ways to meet needs rather than forcing yes/no thinking in the moment. Some leaders used an evidence-based approach to make their case, relying on hard data as much as possible to describe the need in the team that called for action. Not only does evidence make a case more compelling, it also helped stakeholders justify requests to others. Leaders also quickly sought agreement on common criteria for success. As one leader at a multinational data analytics company told us:

*“The trick is getting them to that same shared set of facts... getting buy-in on the front side. Saying, this is how we’re going to look at things; this is how we’re going to evaluate things. Absent that, it’s a commercial.”*

One human resources leader in a multinational consulting company told us how she successfully hired a person to support 500 individuals for whom she had responsibility when her firm had a strict policy of only hiring one support person for every 1,000 individuals. *“I needed someone to support staff in Charleston, South Carolina, and we didn’t have enough people to support them at the level I needed.”* She realized that the number of staff in the extended region (e.g., Atlanta) exceeded 1,000. She also noticed griping in team leader meetings about how things were falling through the cracks because there was ‘no one on the ground’ to deal with minor issues and prevent them from becoming bigger. Thus, she made the business case for a hire on her team based on the needs of the entire region, not just those of her own team:

*“I brought it up in a meeting with my manager and my colleagues because it impacted them as well. I was going to possibly take a headcount away from them—which I did—but the business case was there. It just made sense...They were beyond thrilled. They’re like, ‘Yes. We thought about it. That’s a great suggestion. If you need any help, if you get any pushback, you tell us.’”*

Key to this leader’s success was that she thought of the needs of others, proposed a solution that benefited all, and gained the support of her colleagues and her manager in the process.

Leaders who proactively shape their resource environment trigger a positive spiral and avoid a negative one. They are more likely to deliver above and beyond expectations, fueling the reputation of their teams’ work. This higher-profile reputation, in turn, helps them to secure future resources and support with which to deliver high-impact results. This spiral also positively affects team morale and capabilities, furthering teams’ ability to deliver results and secure enabling resources. In contrast, leaders who rely solely upon formal processes often feel helpless in the face of budget and staffing cuts. Having reduced resources makes it more difficult to deliver next-generation results, dampening the team’s reputation—and enthusiasm—and making it even more difficult to obtain funds through formal channels.

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## 5 Engage formal decision makers and informal opinion leaders early

Most managers are adept at getting the support of their direct or skip-level supervisors when pursuing new initiatives. Far fewer, however, reach out to other formal decision makers, such as the internal customer or users of the team’s output. Still fewer think to engage with informal opinion leaders—those individuals who are not directly involved in the current project but who have a strong *indirect* influence on the work and how it is received and implemented. The influence of informal opinion leaders, whose perspectives have a disproportionate impact on other peoples’ acceptance, can dramatically shift the flow of resources and support.<sup>17</sup> Teams falter—even when producing good work—if they do not engage formal decision makers or informal opinion leaders to foster uptake of their work.

Successful leaders spend time identifying and engaging informal opinion leaders well in advance of approval points. They are quick to engage these people in ideation and solution development processes so that their team incorporates the opinion leader’s thinking and obtains their support early. Seemingly counterintuitively, the leaders we interviewed tended to not focus their efforts on painting a picture of the worst-case scenario and what would go wrong if the team did not receive adequate resources. Instead, they drew decision makers and influencers into an exciting vision of what the

team could achieve, given the right support. The shift in emphasis made the difference between begrudging minimal support and enthusiastic advocacy.

The leaders in our study also engaged a small set of formal decision makers and informal influencers in ways that led to shared ownership of the team’s work. They did this by listening carefully to the interests and aspirations of a potential sponsor and positioning the team’s success as supporting their success. A successful software executive put it this way:

*“When I hear them telling the story as if it were their own idea, I know I have won. All the obstacles go away, and they are invested if I need more resources.”*

Surprisingly, the leaders we interviewed were particularly likely to identify and seek out *negative* opinion leaders early. Negative influencers often have an outsized impact on projects compared to positive influencers.<sup>18</sup> Negative influencers were typically colleagues with different priorities driven by functional commitments, incentives, or personal values in their work. The leaders we interviewed tended to ask who might be against a given plan or have competing priorities and seek them out early. Some leaders leveraged their team’s network by engaging a team member whom the resistor was known

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to trust. One high-performing team leader at a multinational publishing company explained:

*“I always ask my team whom they should be talking with about a particular initiative. Their voice will go up, or they’ll give some indication as to who their favorites are or who they’re closer to. And so I know, ‘Okay, those are our influencers for the resister.’”*

A head of advocacy for a global food manufacturing firm demonstrated the precision with which these leaders target and approach naysayers. *“We’ll say, ‘Do you know what? When you see that person downstairs at the coffee machine, say this.’”*

This approach contrasts with the ‘push’ strategy used by most leaders, i.e., *“let’s bullet-proof our presentation and win through logical argument.”* Instead, the leaders we interviewed pulled opinion leaders into co-creation, not only giving them a broader perspective on the challenges that their proposed plan faced to help anticipate and overcome them but also building buy-in among critical influencers. It takes courage to seek out and engage naysayers in these early-stage conversations, and the leaders in our study told us that it was more than worth the effort to get their teams the resources they needed to produce superlative results.

Proactively engaging both formal and informal leaders, especially potential resisters, generates multiple benefits. It stimulates the flow of resources, provides leaders with deeper insight into the complexities that surround projects and initiatives, and helps them to understand how their teams’

work supports organizational goals to shape the project to best maximize its quality and impact. With broader awareness of the team’s efforts, its members have more space and time to address setbacks. One head of talent, learning, and diversity for a multinational financial institution encouraged her team to prioritize targeted relationship-building, explaining:

*“They need to spend time building trust. They need to spend time doing deeper needs analysis, understanding the business, so that they’ve got enough social and political capital with that business leader to get sponsorship for the projects that they’re doing.”*

She supported the team by taking on its transactional administration work to give members the opportunity to build critical stakeholder relationships.

Engaging early with formal decision makers and informal influencers also enhanced the team’s and the leader’s reputation, leading to more and higher-quality future opportunities for the team. As one sales leader at a major pharmaceutical company noted, *“I make sure that we have very high touch with our leadership and that we’re picking the two or three things that can help fulfill what’s being asked for us, that make us most successful.”* The result was that leaders boosted the efficiency and effectiveness with which their work moved forward and kept projects from derailing in a high-stakes presentation/approval point or more slowly via a death of a thousand cuts.

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## 6 Facilitate team member enterprise connectivity

Many people identify meaningful work as the most desired feature of their work lives.<sup>19</sup> Finding a sense of purpose at work motivates and invigorates, and people are more likely to go above and beyond their job requirements when their work connects to a personal sense of purpose. Further, turnover and absenteeism go down and performance ratings go up, thus increasing the productivity and efficiency of their business units.<sup>20</sup> Importantly, work relationships are key determinants of perceived work meaningfulness.<sup>21</sup>

The leaders we interviewed helped people on their teams cultivate personally meaningful connections to others in the organization. They purposefully connected team members to others, scanning their network to find the right people for whom a connection would be meaningful to all involved.

Many leaders with whom we spoke adopted systematic practices to stimulate enterprise connectivity. For example, a vice president of analytics and strategic pricing created a team alumni network and paired alumni and members to boost engagement and strengthen team connections to other units. One operations lead for a diversity and inclusion team revised electronic collaboration practices to creatively connect people to existing projects, sometimes sending video rather than text

introductions. A director of strategic innovation for a large consulting firm incorporated discussions of career goals and a sense of purpose into every regular one-on-one meeting. This allowed her, for example, to connect a team member with a personally meaningful initiative:

*“A woman on our team really wanted to get involved in some of the women’s initiatives and especially those on working moms. And I connected her to someone I knew who was leading one of the working mom initiatives so that...she can get involved with some of the programmatic initiatives on the topic.”*

Making targeted connections between team members and other individuals in the organization has numerous benefits. Most obviously, it creates higher engagement among team members and reduces attrition by helping people connect to others who are doing work that they find meaningful. Team performance is impacted by broadening the personal networks of the individuals in the team, giving the team—through these members—access to expertise and influencers throughout the organization. This, in turn, helps team members to be more innovative in the solutions they envision and more effective in mobilizing resources and commitment to the team’s work on an enterprise level.

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# Conclusion

High-performing leaders in today's collaboratively complex organizations recognize that managing their teams' ecosystems is essential work. These leaders draw upon their knowledge of the organizational network to cultivate the specific relationships with external stakeholders that pull their teams toward high performance.

Although already-time-pressed leaders may be reluctant to add still *more* tasks to their workload, managing a teams' ecosystem does not have to be overly time consuming. As the examples in this paper illustrate, the long-term benefits that leaders can realize in innovation, efficiency, engagement, and reputational gain far outweigh the short-term investment of time. Moreover, in the short term, this work need not—and should not—fall to the leader alone. Many of the practices that the leaders we interviewed told us about can be distributed within teams to better align the architecture of the work with the new nature of the work. When the work is architected thoughtfully, the time per person to realize high-impact

benefits is quite low, as little as a few hours a week or month. The key is to be intentional and persistent in not letting the constant urgency of the moment interfere with the execution of these critical activities. The following **activity** describes how leaders and team members can share the work of managing the team's ecosystem.

Any organization that seeks to become more agile through building a network of teams faces many challenges. A pandemic, financial uncertainty, and social unrest intensify these challenges, leaving people more dispersed and more in need of leadership than ever. Relying on old models of teamwork, unaware that the structures and needs of teams have changed in fundamental ways, is a recipe for failure. Our research revealed strategies used by high-performing team leaders who provide powerful insights for academics and managers alike to significantly improve the success of their teams and organizations.

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## ACTIVITY: Team Leadership Tool

### Managing Your Team's Ecosystem

Reflect on an important core deliverable that is due during the next six months, especially one that is central to your team's mission. Below, identify actions that you and your team members should engage in to cultivate the team's ecosystem in ways that improve performance and engagement.

Identify upcoming core deliverable:

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ECOSYSTEM DIMENSION	TEAM LEADER ACTION ITEMS	TEAM MEMBERS ACTION ITEMS
<b>STRATEGY 1: SHAPE THE NATURE OF THE WORK</b>		
<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Engage external stakeholders to source and shape work that comes into the team.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Identify the key constituencies that drive this work for your team. Set up meetings with each to discuss objectives and alternative ways that your team could deliver an outcome of greater value to the stakeholder.</li><li>• Situate your team's capabilities in the context of others' needs. Ask questions about others' priorities and goals and slowly adapt your team's capabilities to their needs as one strategy to create a vision for others to see how to leverage your group.</li><li>• Organize a meeting or create a virtual space that allows the primary stakeholders who drive this work for your team to see the totality of requests that your team is managing. Urge them to collectively agree on work that is critical and that falls within the capabilities and capacity of your team.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Initiate exploratory individual developmental projects with key stakeholders to build domain-specific capabilities and create exposure for team members to grow in desired capabilities.</li><li>• Document the demands on you or the team as a whole (e.g., tickets, spreadsheets). Use this document to create transparency for stakeholders who could then be asked to prioritize new asks in the context of ongoing work.</li><li>• Develop an intake process to triage high-volume requests. For example, determine whether work could be processed more efficiently if a predetermined set of answers and processes are in place before work comes into the team.</li></ul>
<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Reach out to those in similar roles to adapt practices that promote the quality and efficiency of the team's work.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Once a month, reach out within your organization to those in similar roles or who engage in similar tasks but in different functions or geographies. Share and inquire into common challenges to determine whether either group has developed solutions that might also work for the other group.</li><li>• Identify core roles for which uncovering and adopting best practices in different domains (e.g., technical, functional) could yield a positive impact. Reflect on leadership roles that could inform the way the team is collaborating and working together.</li><li>• If you notice that several teams in different markets/functions are addressing the same issue, pull together a working group whose purpose is to determine and codify solutions. Members could then adapt solutions to bring back to the team.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Make two or three exploratory contacts a month on agreed domains critical to the team's success and then share in monthly meetings one or two takeaways that the team can incorporate.</li><li>• Engage in at least one online community of practice around a problem or issue related to the team's core deliverable.</li><li>• Leverage social media or networking applications to locate people in similar roles outside of the organization. Reach out to these individuals to identify best practices that could be brought into the team.</li></ul>

ECOSYSTEM DIMENSION	TEAM LEADER ACTION ITEMS	TEAM MEMBERS ACTION ITEMS
<p>□ <b>Stimulate innovation through exploratory interactions with teams with complementary expertise.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Once a month, reach out directly to leaders of functions, teams, or centers of excellence who have adjacent expertise for which integration of capabilities could drive service or product innovation that your stakeholders value. Share feedback and data from customers and markets to generate discussions about how to co-create new solutions.</li> <li>• Consider cross-staffing on projects, paired rotations, or “day in the life” programs across teams that have complementary expertise. Look for targeted and efficient ways to enable well-connected people within each team to learn about the work and context of the other team.</li> <li>• Once or twice a month, have an exploratory phone call or meeting with a leader in a completely different domain (e.g., past colleagues in different industries, leadership groups) to discuss current challenges. Look for opportunities to promote innovation whenever you notice processes or outcomes with similar features that are approached from very different perspectives.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conduct small-scale exploratory brainstorming sessions with well-connected people from teams with complementary expertise.</li> <li>• Launch a customer-focused (with a live customer—internal or external) design thinking or hackathon workshop to co-create a value-added solution.</li> <li>• Develop a process by which your team can share regular updates (e.g., quarterly) on team activities with a defined set of other teams with complementary expertise. Capture updates in a slide or two and distribute by posting in a shared space, emailing to team liaisons, or contributing to a shared newsletter. Similarly, become familiar with the updates from other teams and reach out when possibilities for innovation emerge.</li> </ul>

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### STRATEGY 2: BUILD SUPPORT

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<p>□ <b>Engage external stakeholders to obtain resources that support the team’s work and engagement.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engage in formal budgeting processes with evidence-based resource needs to show the quantifiable impact that each budget reduction would have on the team and/or its output. Make clear the concurrent adjustment of performance expectations for the team.</li> <li>• Schedule bi-annual check-in meetings with three senior sponsors to understand and clarify how your team can best support key objectives of each stakeholder.</li> <li>• Schedule time with key leaders and formal budget/resource holders—inside and outside of your chain of command—who have a vested interest in your team’s work. Share the work that your team is doing and possible synergies with their interests.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When developing project strategies and budgets, ask, “<i>What will we do differently to understand what’s working (and not working) as the project develops so that we can continually improve?</i>” Use the answers to this question to provide the team leader with a more realistic sense of the resources needed to support innovation and continual improvement.</li> <li>• Seek opportunities to give when feasible. For example, when meeting with stakeholders, build in extra time to inquire into ongoing issues and offer help (or maintain awareness so that you can offer help when you have help to offer), as a reputation for giving promotes responsiveness when you are in need.</li> <li>• Once a month, proactively engage a select group of peers to explore mutual overlap in interests and ways that sharing resources could yield desired results.</li> </ul>
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ECOSYSTEM DIMENSION	TEAM LEADER ACTION ITEMS	TEAM MEMBERS ACTION ITEMS
<p>□ <b>Engage formal decision makers and informal opinion leaders early to streamline approval and implementation processes.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify formal stakeholders and customize engagement strategies through a stakeholder mapping process. Formal influencers are those who have decision-making authority, resource allocation rights (e.g., time, talent, funding) or occupy roles where misalignment in objectives can erode team success. Often, they are not in the formal chain of command but still have an influence over the trajectory and formal approval of your team’s work.</li> <li>• Ask well-connected colleagues whether there is anyone else who is interested in a given idea or plan. Follow their suggestions until you identify a key set of informal influencers relative to your team’s work. Set up meetings with informal influencers: Ask how they might handle the problem you are facing and listen to their points of pain and interest.</li> <li>• Ask more-senior colleagues who might have competing priorities or be against a given plan. Seek those opinion leaders out early to understand their perspective. Use this information to shape and (re)frame your plan, as appropriate. Create a feedback loop by asking resisters to respond to updated plans.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Build time into project plans and forums to message benefits and rationale for the program of work. Obtain feedback in pilots and communicate actions you have taken based on that feedback in regular team meetings.</li> <li>• With the team leader, determine potential resisters to new initiatives and their points of pain/conflict. Leverage positive relationships with these potential resisters to help the team to socialize and sculpt initiatives.</li> <li>• Once a week, send a text, IM, email, or handwritten note to express appreciation and empathy to others whose work is driven by your work. Communicate the impact of their efforts on important team outcomes and your gratitude for their contributions.</li> </ul>
<p>□ <b>Facilitate team member enterprise connectivity for performance, engagement, and well-being.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Devote a certain percentage of time (e.g., 30%) in every one-on-one meeting with team members to a discussion of career development. Ask, “<i>What are your aspirations, interests, and motivations?</i>” Utilize this information to make cross-boundary connections that put team members in touch with people who can further their professional and personal development.</li> <li>• Identify individuals with expertise relevant to the employee’s core objective and create connections—across geography, organization, or functional lines—where connections could help to promote depth, currency, or efficiency in their work.</li> <li>• Encourage team members to allocate 5% to 10% of their time to connect with others who are doing work that they care about. On a quarterly or biannual basis, ask members to give a short briefing on how exploration in the new domain could benefit the team and what the team member will do to support that transfer of knowledge or resources, while continuing to build capabilities in the new domain.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work with team leaders to identify silos where value could be created by bridging conversations—across expertise domains, functions, or clients, for example—and initiate an exploratory conversation.</li> <li>• Once a month or quarter, schedule time to create connections and interactions with people who have energized you during a given work cycle (e.g., by quarter, project timeline).</li> <li>• Consider ways in which investing in clubs, physical health, and service or sustainability efforts could yield a significant impact on engagement and well-being.</li> </ul>



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