

Rob Cross
Amy Edmondson
Wendy Murphy

A Noble Purpose Alone Won't Transform Your Company

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LEADERSHIP BEHAVIORS THAT NURTURE INTERPERSONAL COLLABORATION ARE THE TRUE DRIVERS OF CHANGE.

BY ROB CROSS, AMY EDMONDSON, AND WENDY MURPHY

Consider these two companies: The first is a retail chain with hundreds of locations globally — innovative, but basically a sales platform. The second is a hospital that treats the world's most devastating cancers. Which do you think has a more engaged workforce?

If you chose the latter, in light of its quest to save lives, you wouldn't be alone. Yet, when we spent time with both organizations, we discovered that the working environment in the hospital was rife with fear, workforce morale was low, and employee turnover was high. At the retail chain, on the other hand, there was a palpable spirit of camaraderie, employees were energetic and enthusiastic, and customers were very pleased with the service. The retailer had the more engaged workforce by a long shot.

It's a common misconception, both in businesses and in management articles and books, that a sense of purpose is what matters most when it comes to engaging employees.¹ Many leaders concerned with attracting and retaining top talent believe that nothing motivates people as much as the larger good they might be doing or the chance to change the world. Accordingly, they extol the higher virtues of their companies' missions and the meaning of the work they offer.

But our work with more than 300 companies over the past 20 years, particularly our research



THE

RESEARCH

The authors conducted the research on which this article is based in two phases over the past decade, with two consortia of leading organizations.

In the first phase, through organizational network analysis, they assessed collaboration patterns and identified relationship drivers in several dozen global companies across industries. They also mapped the role of trust, purpose, and energy in building relationships and in creating contexts of high employee engagement and low turnover.

In the second phase, the authors interviewed 200 leaders (100 women and 100 men) across 20 well-known companies to identify leadership behaviors that foster trust, purpose, and energy in interpersonal interactions.

using organizational network analysis (ONA) and our interviews with executives, reveals that purpose is only one contributing factor; the level and quality of interpersonal collaboration actually has the greatest impact on employee engagement.² In this article, we'll explore why collaboration has that effect and which behaviors you can adopt and practice to nurture it.

THE POWER OF INTERPERSONAL COLLABORATION

For all its success, it's doubtful that Silicon Valley-based Workday would win a "most inspiring mission" contest. The company, after all, is a developer of software as a service (SaaS) solutions for financial management, human resources, and planning. But you would never get that impression inside this \$2.8 billion, 11,000-employee company: Of the companies we studied, it had the most engaged workforce. When we interviewed people from the top of the house to the front lines at Workday, we found a consistent, clear sense of commitment to reinventing enterprise software, and a level of energy and enthusiasm that was missing in many other companies with very noble missions.

Workday's leaders place a high premium on interpersonal collaboration. "It's part of the fabric of how we hire people," says senior vice president Greg Pryor, the company's people and performance evangelist. "We look for people who are already oriented toward being empathetic and seem like they would be able to put themselves in service to colleagues and customers."

The effort to build collaboration among Workday's employees begins on their first day on the job, with technology-enabled curated connections that pair each new hire with a veteran employee called a workmate. One of the tasks assigned to workmates is to help new employees "find

their tribe" — that is, to identify and connect with other employees who have similar values and interests. Our research shows that this bridging of networks (helping people make connections across an organization) is a highly predictive factor in employee retention.

Workday's efforts to derive value from interpersonal collaboration are not just a mechanism for acculturating new hires. They continue throughout the tenure of every employee, including leaders. Workday's leadership development programs are designed to help foster connection building and nurture relationship networks throughout the company. At their annual People Leadership Summit, for example, executives and managers are intentionally seated next to people from different functions and at various levels of seniority whom they wouldn't normally meet.

Workday's focus on collaboration has paid off. Employee attrition at the company is strikingly low, and 95% of employees say it is "a great place to work." Indeed, Workday ranked fourth on *Fortune's* most recent 100 Best Companies to Work For list.³ Workday is an exemplar of interpersonal collaboration, but it doesn't stand alone. Using ONA to map the relationships in groups (for more detail, see "Making Interpersonal Collaboration Visible") and examining those findings against attrition data as well as surveys and interviews on engagement and satisfaction, we have found that, at Workday and across companies and industries, employee engagement is determined by the ability of leaders to foster interpersonal networks and a culture of collaboration.

How can you establish and nurture high levels of collaboration and engagement in your company? It's a tiered process: First, you lay a strong foundation by identifying, adopting, and rewarding leadership behaviors that enhance psychological safety and trust. That is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition.

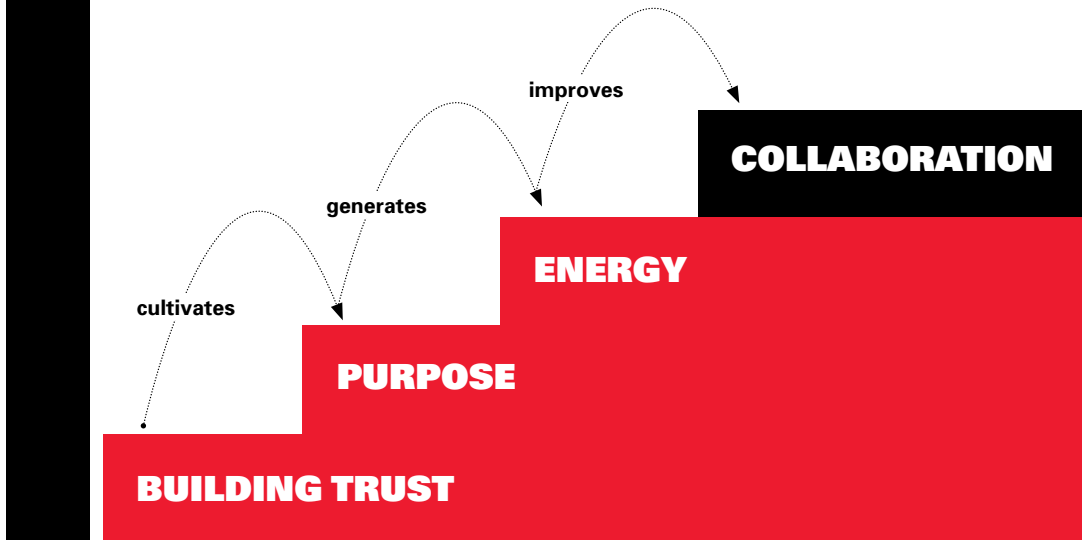
MAKING INTERPERSONAL COLLABORATION VISIBLE

Organizational network analysis (ONA) can illuminate the quality of interpersonal collaborations by offering leaders insights regarding how influence is dispersed among group members within and across organizational boundaries, hierarchical levels, and job functions. It is a sort of MRI that can reveal where interpersonal collaboration is healthy or ailing, and who is responsible for its condition.

ONA can identify a variety of collaboration builders, including connectors, who link people together; experts, whose knowledge and skills support others; brokers, who span boundaries and integrate subcultures; and energizers, who instill passion and excitement in others. It also can identify collaboration destroyers: de-energizers, fearmongers, and other hobgoblins who spread cynicism and slow momentum, often in subtle ways.

THREE STEPS TO PRODUCTIVE COLLABORATION

When trust cultivates purpose and purpose generates energy, people are more likely to become productive, engaged collaborators.



Once trust is established, you must instill a sense of purpose — the conviction that the work being done has meaning and impact. And once purpose is established, you must generate energy — a day-to-day enthusiasm within the workforce. (See “Three Steps to Productive Collaboration.”) When we overlay engagement responses on network analyses, we find that leaders who took these steps saw greater engagement than leaders who didn’t.

BUILDING SAFETY AND TRUST

Trust encourages and enables people to take risks and collaborate in pursuit of aspirational goals.⁴ Without trust, people hold back. With it, their reservations dissipate and information flows freely. People openly discuss possibilities, willingly offer their ideas, and help others.

Leaders can make it easier for employees to trust them and one another by establishing psychological safety — the feeling that people can offer constructive criticism or a new idea in a group setting without risking disapproval or rejection. Such safety is what psychologist Frederick Herzberg labeled a *hygiene factor*.⁵ It cannot create high levels of interpersonal collaboration on its own, even though it’s often presented that way.⁶ But if it’s absent, it’s impossible to take the first step toward facilitating collaboration.

In other words, when you create psychological safety, you are easing off the brakes and enabling trust, but you aren’t yet pushing the gas pedal and *motivating* people to collaborate. To do that, you need to generate purpose and energy in the organization (the second and third tiers of the process, which we discuss below).⁷

Three kinds of trust are essential to effective interpersonal collaboration:⁸

- *Benevolence-based trust* stems from psychological safety and the underlying belief that leaders and colleagues will act with your interests in mind, not just their own.
- *Integrity-based trust* stems from the belief that others will be consistent in word and deed.
- *Competence-based trust* stems from the belief that others have the expertise they claim.

The need to nurture trust is a nearly universal blind spot among leaders. Over the past 22 years, when we have asked groups ranging from 30 to 450 executives to vote on the individual behavior they most need to adopt — one that builds trust, one that instills purpose, or one that generates energy — only about 2% of the participants vote for trust. But when we do the equivalent of 360-degree surveys for leaders, we find lots of distrust in their organizations,

including complaints about leaders not following through on promises, withholding information, and behaving in self-serving ways.

These complaints are not always grounded in reality, but most employees will not directly confront leaders or ask for clarification regarding their intent.⁹ Thus, trust is further eroded.

A senior investment banker told us, “As I look at the behaviors that help build trust rapidly, I am sure I don’t think about them or do them enough.” She’s probably right, and she’s not alone.

A number of leadership behaviors establish and support trust. (See “The Leadership Behaviors That Nurture Collaboration” for the 27 behaviors that promote trust, purpose, and energy in organizations.) For instance, although leaders are usually advised to “walk the talk,” when it comes to trust, they also must “talk the walk.” That’s because nurturing benevolence- and integrity-based trust requires communicating who they are and the intent of their actions in clear, unambiguous ways. When leaders walk without the talk, they leave employees guessing, and in work situations those guesses often take a negative cast. “People have so many different ways they can misinterpret what I am doing or make inferences about my intent,” a manager at a pharmaceutical company told us. “If they just have a slightly better sense of who I am and where I am coming from, this kind of frenzy is less common.”

Competence-based trust can be problematic, too, if leaders are unwilling to admit that they don’t know everything. When a senior executive we interviewed was brought in to turn around a division of a high-tech company, she initially struggled to master the technical side of the business. But then she realized it made more sense to leave the technical expertise to others on her team and focus on strategy and team building, two areas in which her skills were extraordinary. “In part this made me vulnerable and let others do the same,” she told us. “But telling the team what I was not good at also ensured their trust in me when I did indicate an area I had experience in.”

Trusted leaders spend a good deal of time in one-on-one meetings with employees. One Workday manager told us that he devotes at least half the time in these meetings to “off-task” topics that have nothing to do with work timelines or deliverables. “Once I know what people care about and where they want to

go, I can shape their work to line up with their aspirations,” he said. “Of course, as they see this, their reservations about who I am start to fall away.”

All forms of trust benefit from personal connection. Workday encourages managers and employees to connect through 141 sponsored clubs that encompass interests such as a cappella, cheese, karaoke, K-pop, paintball, and powerlifting. The company also encourages employees to connect with one another through sports and community involvement. These nonwork connections build trust and a sense of camaraderie.

PROMOTING PURPOSE

Once people have a sense of trust, it is much easier for leaders to widen the aperture and show employees how the work they do matters to the organization and the outside world. Leaders accomplish this not only by giving people inherently meaningful tasks (which isn’t always possible) but also by creating a context for meaningful collaboration.

That’s what David Sylvester has discovered. In a career that has included leadership roles in the Marine Corps and for-profit companies, Sylvester (who currently serves as Amazon Web Services’ director of new employee success) has conducted a number of ONAs to identify the predictive social network drivers of things such as revenue generation, speed to productivity, information and decision flow, collaborative overload, engagement, and retention. This work has resulted in a wide range of targeted talent management, leadership development, and organizational effectiveness initiatives. In one organization, he began an analysis with a simple question: “When you interact with this person, do they leave you with a greater sense of purpose about the work you do?” It revealed, in an anecdotal confirmation of the Pareto principle, that 80% of the sense of purpose within the organization was generated by just 20% of its leaders and that these leaders had, among other things, a significantly better record of employee retention than the rest.

He then examined how these particular leaders were instilling an enhanced sense of purpose among employees. “It was all behavioral — and very teachable,” Sylvester recalled. The organization took the ONA findings, including the ability of effective leaders to, as Sylvester put it, “provide

more clarity behind tasks,” and incorporated them into its leadership training programs for executives and other parts of the workforce.¹⁰

We used ONA to identify the instillers of purpose in a leading investment bank by asking its top 600 leaders, “Who among you leaves you feeling a greater sense of purpose in your work after an interaction?” The results showed that the top quartile of leaders created a sense of purpose for nearly 16 people on average — a strong span of influence. (The bottom quartile gave a sense of purpose to less than one person, on average.) Moreover, the leaders in the top quartile were able to attract higher performers to work for them, saw lower attrition rates, and had teams with higher engagement scores.

A number of leadership behaviors promote purpose in a team or an organization. For instance, leaders can highlight the “why” of an assignment or a project.¹¹ When Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower issued his statement to the troops on D-Day in June 1944, he focused on the context, telling the combatants that

theirs was “the great crusade,” that “the eyes of the world are upon you,” and that “the hopes and prayers of liberty-loving people everywhere march with you.” He wanted them to know why their actions mattered. This sort of context setting is standard in the military, especially when people are being asked to risk their lives, but not so much in business, where the stakes are usually considerably lower. But managers can use this approach to create a context in which people see the value in what they are doing and feel a part of something more meaningful than, for example, meeting a deadline or staying within a budget.

What is less understood is that at least one aspect of “how work is done” plays an essential role in instilling purpose. Our research suggests that as much as half of employees’ sense of purpose and impact comes from the quality of their interpersonal collaborations. Thus, leaders should help employees see purpose as embedded in how they work together, not just in the execution of work itself. For example, one C-level leader at a Fortune 500

THE LEADERSHIP BEHAVIORS THAT NURTURE COLLABORATION

By using organizational network analysis (ONA) to identify leaders who are good at nurturing collaboration, and interviewing them and the people they work with, we found 27 behaviors that build trust, instill purpose, and generate energy.

10 TRUST-BUILDING BEHAVIORS

- I make others want to turn to me for transparent, credible expertise.
- I acknowledge areas in which I am not an expert.
- I create rich interactions at key points in projects.
- I actively encourage others to critique and improve my ideas.
- I offer time, resources, information, referrals, insights, and other assistance before I ask for help and without expectation of benefit.
- I connect with people off-task, seeking to understand their backgrounds, interests, and aspirations.
- I consistently communicate my values and priorities.
- I do what I say I am going to do and follow through on commitments I make to people.
- I am committed to principles and goals that are larger than my own self-interests.
- I keep confidential or revealing information to myself.

11 PURPOSE-INSTILLING BEHAVIORS

- I help people clarify and pursue meaningful career objectives.
- I help structure work to align with others’ career aspirations.
- I establish the importance of work (the “why”) before the tactics for accomplishing it (the “what” or the “how”).
- I cocreate solutions and diffuse ownership early.
- I encourage people to be attuned to and synchronized with the demands their colleagues face.
- I show appreciation for others’ work.
- I encourage fun in work.
- I reframe negative interactions to focus on work worth doing.
- I encourage people to find purpose by helping others.
- I coach people to collaborate at a certain pace and in cycles that allow them to work at their best.
- I encourage people to find purpose in their work through networks inside and outside the organization.

6 ENERGY-GENERATING BEHAVIORS

- In meetings and one-on-one conversations, I engage others in realistic possibilities that capture their imaginations and hearts.
- I am typically fully engaged in meetings and one-on-one conversations, and show my interest in others and their ideas.
- I create room for others to be a meaningful part of conversations and make sure they see how their efforts will contribute to an evolving plan.
- When I disagree with someone’s plan or a course of action, I do so in a way that focuses attention on the issue at hand and not the individual.
- I use humor — often at my own expense — to lighten tense moments or remove unnecessary status or politics from interactions.
- I maintain an effective balance between pushing toward a goal and welcoming new ideas that can improve the project or the process for reaching a goal.

company makes it very clear among newly formed teams why she invited each team member to join a project or an initiative: “It helps them appreciate each other and see why all of them together will be more successful than any of them could be alone.”

There are other behaviors, too, that are common to leaders who successfully instill a sense of purpose. They tend to diffuse ownership early, making the pursuit and achievement of shared goals a cooperative undertaking from the beginning. They also show appreciation for others’ work. One pharmaceutical executive with whom we worked set aside an hour at the end of each week to send thank-you notes to employees who made a particularly important contribution in a collaborative way.

ENERGIZING PEOPLE

Once the tiers of trust and purpose are in place, leaders can turn their attention to energizing employees. This is the process of motivating others to bring their best selves to work and fully engage with colleagues. Research shows that energy is a key stimulator of high-quality work connections and collaboration.¹²

Leaders who can generate energy and enthusiasm, a relatively rare talent in work settings, are enormously valuable to their organizations. Indeed, our research finds that energizers are four times as likely to receive an organization’s top performance ratings and be promoted than nonenergizers. They are two to three times as likely to successfully manage career transitions. And, on average, their compensation, including bonuses, is 20% to 30% higher.

Energizers provide the jolt needed to quickly produce novel outcomes and speed the transfer of knowledge. This makes them highly effective change agents. But that jolt can be delivered in a strategic manner only if organizations recognize their energizers and deploy their special skills.

This is easier said than done. You might expect energizers to always be the most charismatic people in a room or the funniest or the best storytellers. But they can be tough to spot. The most outgoing people are just as likely to be de-energizers as energizers, and energizers are just as likely to be introverted as extroverted. Our interviews with energizers reveal that they don’t distinguish themselves by being larger than life but by making other people feel as if

they matter and creating flow in networks so that information, opportunities, better talent, and creativity move more fluidly through an organization.

The obstacles to identifying energizers by personality traits mean that companies need other ways to identify them. Again, ONA can help. At the Broad Institute of MIT and Harvard, a biomedical research organization, Kate O’Brien, director of people analytics, used ONA to find the energizers among two groups of employees (approximately 400 out of 1,500 total), many of them scientists, in the Cancer Program and the Data Sciences Platform groups. “There are these people who are connectors — hubs for other scientists,” said O’Brien. “They’re really essential people who, should they decide to go somewhere else, we would start to feel enthusiasm and mission-focused collaboration falling off in the culture.”

The results of the analysis were a surprise to the institute’s senior leaders, according to O’Brien. The list of energizers included quite a few scientists who weren’t winning research grants and who weren’t necessarily perceived as technical superstars. But they had other valuable attributes: The energizers saw people as individuals. They always took time to talk to colleagues and help them solve problems. They instinctively recognized that other scientists appreciated being cared about, and they took on that task. These behaviors are among several key leadership behaviors that we’ve found energize employees.

Humor is also part of energy generation. Many energizers use a self-deprecating approach to lighten moments or to lower the natural barriers that arise in interactions with authority figures. They look for opportunities to inject levity into work and encourage others to do so, too. One pharmaceutical manager told us that he asks a different team member to start each meeting with a humorous ad or video involving a company in an unrelated industry. The idea is to get people to laugh and relax a little — and not take themselves too seriously.

Leaders often underestimate the power of energizing behaviors. But throughout our study of energizers, we’ve found that their success is driven not by their ability to make things happen but by their ability to attract ideas, opportunities, and talented people. These things may seem to flow to them through serendipitous encounters, but energizers open the channels through which success flows.

HOW DO LEADERS MOVE FORWARD?

inevitably, when we present our findings to groups of leaders, someone asks the question on everyone's mind: "What's the one behavior I can adopt today that will raise the level of collaboration in my organization?" Unfortunately, for a couple of reasons, there isn't a simple answer to that question.

First, the effectiveness of the 27 behaviors identified in our analysis varies based on the dynamics within a given organization. That said, they all contribute positively and often work in combination. The more of these behaviors leaders exhibit and celebrate in others, the more likely their organization is to have high levels of collaboration. Conversely, if there are missing behaviors, the gaps can become stumbling blocks to the establishment of trust, purpose, and energy in the workforce — no matter how many of the other behaviors are present.

Second, every leader exhibits these behaviors in different combinations and different magnitudes. This means that the solution to raising the level of interpersonal collaboration will differ for every leader.

Instead of searching for a silver bullet, we invite you to assess your leadership behaviors by noting which of the 27 you exemplify and which you don't.¹³ Then, starting with the behaviors that create an environment of trust, adopt the ones you currently lack and continually refine the rest. We've found that this systematic approach is the best way to become a better driver of interpersonal collaboration and employee engagement.

Rob Cross (@robross_ona) is the Edward A. Madden Professor of Global Leadership at Babson College and founder of the *Connected Commons*, a research consortium of 80 leading global firms. **Amy Edmondson** (@amycedmondson) is the Novartis Professor of Leadership and Management at Harvard Business School. **Wendy Murphy** (@wcmurphy) is an associate dean and a professor of management at Babson College. Comment on this article at <http://sloanreview.mit.edu/x/61207>.

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