

Get “U” Out Of The Way!

I’m amazed at how one letter of the alphabet can cause such a profound shift in perception. I admit, this is a fairly ambiguous statement to begin an article with—and yet I’m totally convinced of the truth of it.

Lately, I’ve been spending a lot of personal and professional time exploring the topics of teams, teaming, diversity, multiculturalism and other similar topics. My practice in helping people learn to work together better has led me to the observation that although there are many aspects of team which have a healthy, inclusive feel to them, there are also a number which have a less desirable exclusive aspect. Whenever there’s an opportunity for people to work as a member of one of several teams, there is generally an inherent sense of competition with the other teams, even though competition has neither been explicitly or implicitly set up. For a number of well-rooted, traditional reasons, the concepts of team and competition often go hand in hand (eg. the competitive sports team model). The very nature of “team” seems to imply a boundary. *“This is my team and we are working on “X”. That is your team and you are working on “Y”. Or perhaps you are working on “X” as well, and one of us is likely to be better at it than the other—and I’d rather be on the team that’s better.”* There is a clear sense of “this is what I do and this is what you do”—a boundary of sorts. The boundary can be one based on task, gender, thinking style, culture, geography, etc. The point is, there is a boundary—a point or line of differentiation or distinction.

I was reading an article the other day (I don’t remember what it was about—sorry!) and I came across a misspelling that leaped out at me as a wonderful way to reframe the notion of boundaries between teams. The word “boundaries” was missing a “u”—it was spelled “**bondaries**”. A simple misspelling with a potentially profound impact. Imagine the change in mindset if the point or line of distinction between two teams, genders, cultures or countries was viewed as a **bondary** rather than as a boundary.

The discussion would become one of “What do we have in common at this point?” rather than “What are the differences which we have to maintain or protect?” The focus might become one of commonality, similarity, cohesion, unity, etc. This in no way means that we should be any less aware of our differences, but rather that we examine them from a starting point of how we are alike. Rather than focussing on how different we are and struggling to find ways or means to work and be together, we start from a premise of “likeness” and explore differences so we can better understand and work with each other.

What are the **bondaries** between Canada and the United States? What are the **bondaries** between male and female? What are the **bondaries** between different levels of an organization? What are the **bondaries** between the various roles we play at work, home and in the community?

What would be the impact if divisions, departments, teams and individuals began to look for the **bondaries** in all possible horizontal and vertical views of their organizations? Is it possible that corporate vision and values might take on a more powerful role? Might turf wars diminish? Might a higher level of collaboration begin to take hold?

There are an increasing number of articles written on the theory and practice of the “Boundaryless” corporation—I believe one of the necessary steps in moving towards this form of organization is a **boundary** orientation.

So how might you go about developing this orientation? Here is a totally untested and unresearched process that might help!

1. Turn up the sensitivity of your “Boundary Awareness” meter. Be mindful of situations where you are taking on a boundary line mentality.
2. Ask yourself “What are the commonalities along this line?”
3. Given the desired outcome of your interaction, determine whether it is more important to focus on the boundary aspects or the **boundary** aspects. Which will result in the best possible win-win outcome?
4. If it is important to acknowledge or deal with differences, first take the time to establish the **boundary** before discussing the boundary issue.
5. Decide how to proceed in the common interest.
6. Continue to monitor your self-talk for evidence of other boundary thinking that arises.
7. Reframe them as boundaries and repeat the first 6 steps!

I don't have any proof, but my guess is that taking on a **boundary** focus would dramatically increase understanding, appreciation, quality relationships and service in virtually any context, be it family, team, corporate, intercultural or international. I also doubt that any program or process can be developed that will create a **boundary** mindset. Awareness of the concept can be raised, and yet like so much of the change that's required to build a collaborative world, it requires individual desire and commitment to actually make the shift this article has been exploring. And the best way I know to make a decision on something new is to experiment with it. Boundary or **boundary**? Removing the “U” is up to YOU!