



Walking on the Leading Edge Judi Neal, Ph.D

Executive Summary

- The complexity of today's world requires people to walk in many different worlds.
- Edgewalkers™ are leaders who sense the leading edge and have the courage to take action on their vision.
- It's important not to get too far ahead of the pack; walking on the edge only succeeds when others are motivated to follow.
- Walking on the leading edge is frequently the only way to succeed. Innovation, risk, and an ability to push beyond comfort zones can often be decisive.

The complexity of the business world today is astounding. Nothing is predictable. The rules of the game are changing. Just when you think you've figured out how to have a competitive advantage, a competitor develops a new technology. Just when you think you've found the right motivation tool, the values in your workforce seem to shift. Just when you think you've found the right geographical area for the expansion of your internationalisation efforts, political turmoil erupts.

Yet some people seem to have an uncanny knack for knowing what's going to happen before it unfolds. They're able to create new rules for the game instead of following the rules everyone else follows. They're able to plan a strategy that seems absurd to most people at first, and is later called brilliant when it's successful. They are a part of an unusual breed of leaders called Edgewalkers.

An Edgewalker is someone who walks between two worlds. In ancient cultures each tribe or village had a shaman or medicine man. This was the person who walked into the invisible world to get information, guidance, and healing for members of the tribe. This was one of the most important roles in the village. Without a shaman the tribe would be at the mercy of unseen gods and spirits, the vagaries of the cosmos. The skill of walking between the worlds hasn't died out, in fact it's even more relevant today. Organizations that will thrive in the 21st century will embrace and nurture Edgewalkers. Because of their unique skills, they are the bridge-builders linking and facilitating different approaches, strategies, and techniques.

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Edgewalker Qualities

Five basic qualities form the hallmark of an Edgewalker:

- self-awareness
- passion
- integrity
- vision
- playfulness

1. Self-Awareness

Awareness of your thoughts, values and behavior and a commitment to spend time in self-reflection with the goal of becoming a better person.

The most important Edgewalker quality is that of *self-awareness*. A principle that Edgewalkers understand is that each person is a microcosm of the whole. Leaders who are Edgewalkers know that if they're experiencing a vision or dream or hunger, it's most likely arising in others as well. They take the time to pay attention to that still small voice within. They have some kind of contemplative practice, such as meditation, prayer, journaling, or taking time in nature. Through self-awareness, Edgewalkers come to trust their inner responses and their inner knowing about people and situations. They also tend to have a greater understanding and compassion for others. They are able to very quickly find the points of commonality, even though someone on the surface might seem very different.

2. Passion

An intense focus on your purpose or the use of your gifts in a way that adds value to your life and the world.

Edgewalkers are intense and passionate people. They have a strong sense of mission about something greater than themselves. They feel called to make a difference in the world. Because of this, they have very little tolerance for small talk, bureaucracy, or routine tasks. They are aware of their gifts, and have a real clarity about their purpose in life. Some people may see them as arrogant. Others may see them as too-focused or as workaholics. But the Edgewalker herself feels a great joy and commitment to having found work that is in alignment with her sense of purpose.

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3. Integrity

A commitment to live in alignment with your core values, to align your words and your behavior, and to keep your word.

Edgewalkers have a strong sense of values and integrity. Often these values are developed through some kind of painful experience or loss, and the Edgewalker becomes committed to helping other people who may be going through similar kinds of experiences. The self-awareness practices of an Edgewalker help him or her to become more and more aware of his or her core values. Edgewalkers hold themselves to a very high standard about living in alignment with these values and see this as a lifelong challenge. As a result, they tend to be trusting and trustworthy.

4. Vision

The gift of being able to see what others cannot – possibilities, trends, the future, guidance from the spiritual world – and the ability to take steps to make the vision a reality.

Edgewalkers, like prophets of old, truly have visions. They see things from a different level of consciousness, or from a different perspective. They are visionaries and have an intuitive way of knowing things that they could not know logically and analytically. People describe them as having uncanny judgment, or a sixth sense. This kind of vision gives them a competitive edge, but they often have to couch their decisions or actions in everyday business language of forecasting, business results, and the bottom line. But the truth is that they just “know” things that they cannot explain.

5. Playful

A joyful sense of fun and creativity, and an ability to keep everything in perspective.

Edgewalkers have an unusual sense of playfulness that shows up in both their personal and their professional lives. They are incredibly creative and allow their imaginations free rein. They are able to see non-rational links and connections between seemingly unrelated things, which allows them to create new products, services, or processes that are quite innovative. As leaders, their playfulness and sense of fun facilitate an environment of trust and openness, which leads to higher levels of employee commitment and the willingness to exert discretionary effort towards organizational goals. Their humor also helps to defuse difficult or tense situations, which allows for people to move into a more effective problem-solving mode.



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These five qualities can be developed and enhanced. However, the leaders who tend to learn best are those who strongly value their own personal development and have low control needs.

Avoiding potential pitfalls

Edgewalkers can often get too far ahead of the pack. If this happens they lose their credibility and the opportunity to influence others to do creative work. It's nice to have someone say you're ahead of your time, but there are few rewards for being too far out there. The most successful Edgewalkers can remain in the real world and can remember established language and values so they can be a bridge to new ideas. For this reason, you should:

1. Watch for signs that you may be getting too far out on the edge; if this seems to be happening, revisit your own past experience, current priorities and future aspirations.
2. When you have a new idea that you want to implement, talk to people who are likely to disagree with you or try to block you.
3. Create relationships with people who may provide a good reality check.
4. Have patience with people who don't want to move as fast as you do; take time to build relationships with them and specifically ask for their support.
5. Cultivate the skill of honouring people who disagree with you; listen for any pearls of wisdom they have to offer.
6. Be very aware of your highest values and have a strong commitment to integrity. Even if you get too far out on the edge, you will know you are doing it for the right reasons.

If you feel blocked at every turn by people committed to the status quo, consider finding a different organization to work for, or even going out on your own. Being an Edgewalker can feel very lonely. Connect with other Edgewalkers for support and inspiration.

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Mini-cases

Here are some examples of people that successfully walk the leading edge.

Tom Aageson, is the Executive Director of the New Mexico Museum Foundation. When Tom turned 50 he was a highly successful executive at the Mystic Museum in Connecticut. For his birthday he went on a week's retreat to contemplate the rest of his life. He realised that his mission was to do whatever he could to eradicate poverty in the world. That led him to a position as the executive director at Aid to Artisans, which helps artists and craftspeople in developing countries to design and market products that respect their cultures and improve their economic situation.

Bill Catucci is the leader of Regulatory Data Corp. and former CEO of AT&T Canada. When Bill first came to work for AT&T Canada, the company was losing a significant amount of money. His first act was to send a cheque for \$75 to the home of every employee, saying that this wasn't much, but it was a token of appreciation for what they had already contributed to the company, he looked forward to working with them to turn the company around, and there would be more where that came from if they were successful. He turned AT&T Canada from a company losing \$1 million a day into a winner - and inspired his people as part of that. Then he turned around Equifax, raising the value of the company by over \$3 billion during a time when the stock market was stagnant.

John Lumsden is the CEO of Metserve in New Zealand. John is originally from Scotland and served as an executive in Canada for a number of years; he's truly learned how to walk in different cultural worlds. On the first day of every professional meteorological training course for new employees that begins with a Maori welcoming ceremony focusing on Tawhiri-Matea, the God of the Winds.. John holds regular 'advances' (as opposed to retreats) for his management team, at which people spend time reflecting on deeper questions of life and work. They aim to have a lean and meaningful organization, lean to be competitive, meaningful for services for the users as well as for the environment for the employees.

Jennifer Cash O'Donnell is director of organizational strategy and professional development for AT&T's Asia-Pacific group in China. Walking between the worlds of operations and organizational development, she helps AT&T achieve great results through a focus on human relationships and team-building, using Barry Heerman's Team Spirit process. Her success at AT&T Solutions with this team-based programme led to her promotion to the directorship in Asia. This provides her with yet another opportunity to be an Edgewalker.

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Making It Happen

- Write mission and values statements for the work you want to do in the world.
- Read professional material in fields that are unfamiliar to you.
- Listen carefully to what people and the world have to say.
- Trust your instincts about ways you can make a difference.
- Remember to take time to nurture your inner being and to pay attention to the signs you receive.
- Master practicality and common sense, as well as commanding the creative and visionary skills.
- Bring creative skills to scientific problems.
- Learn a new artistic skill or deepen your involvement in the arts.
- Involve others in your ideas, recognizing different approaches and perspectives.

Conclusion

Edgewalkers are the leaders of the future. They are the corporate shamans and mystics who bring wisdom and guidance for their organizations. It's not an easy role to play, but it's one that's essential to the success of your organization—and one that can make you feel fully alive.

Resources

Books:

Moxley, Russ S. *Leadership & Spirit: Breathing New Vitality and Energy into Individuals and Organizations*. Chichester: Jossey-Bass, 1999.

Neal, Judi. *Edgewalkers: People and Organizations that Take Risks, Build Bridges, and Break New Ground*. Westport, CT: Praeger 2006.

Neal, Judi. *Creating Enlightened Organizations: Four Gateways to Spirit at Work*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

Neal, Judi. 2013. *Handbook of Faith and Spirituality in the Workplace*. New York: Springer

Ray, Paul H., and Sherry Ruth Anderson. *The Cultural Creatives: How 50 Million People Are Changing the World*. New York: Harmony, 2000

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Websites:

www.Edgewalkers.org This site has information and resources directly relevant to readers of *Edgewalkers* by Judi Neal

www.Judineal.com This site has information on the consulting, writing and other work by Judi Neal.

Biography

Judi Neal received her Ph.D. from Yale University in Organizational Behavior. She is the Chairman and CEO of Edgewalkers International, an organization committed to helping leaders, teams and organizations reach their full potential through personal and organizational transformation. Judi was the founding director of the Tyson Center for Faith and Spirituality in the Workplace at the University of Arkansas. She is Professor Emeritus in the School of Business at the University of New Haven, and is Academic Director of the Master of Arts in Organizational Leadership program at the Graduate Institute. She was the Founder and CEO of the International Center for Spirit at Work. Judi is the author of *Edgewalkers: People and Organizations that Take Risks, Build Bridges, and Break New Ground*, *The Handbook for Faith and Spirituality in the Workplace*, co-author with Alan Harpham of *The Spirit of Project Management* and author of *Creating Enlightened Organizations: Four Gateways to Spirit at Work*. She is currently working on two new book projects. The first will be co-authored with Mel Toomey and is titled *Integrating Change*. The second is an edited book titled *The Handbook of Personal and Organizational Transformation*. In addition, Judi has produced a CD of original music titled *The Journey*.

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