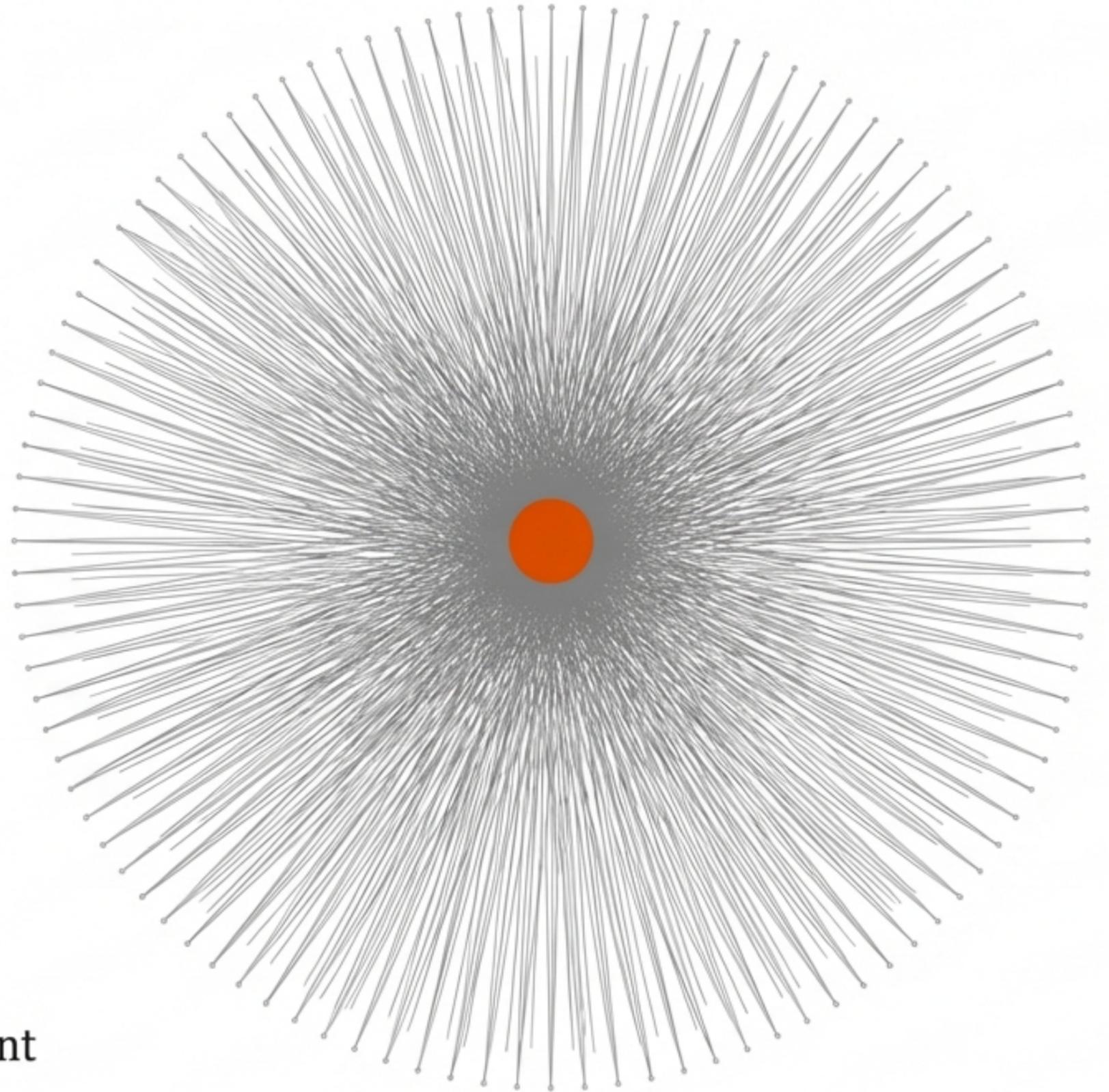


# Chapter 8: Collaborative Overload

Avoid burnout from too  
much teamwork.

Strategic Management Training Series  
Authors: Rob Cross, Reb Rebele, and Adam Grant



# Session Goals & Learning Objectives



**Analyze** the three types of collaborative resources (Informational, Social, Personal).



**Evaluate** team distribution to spot “escalating citizenship” and bottlenecks.



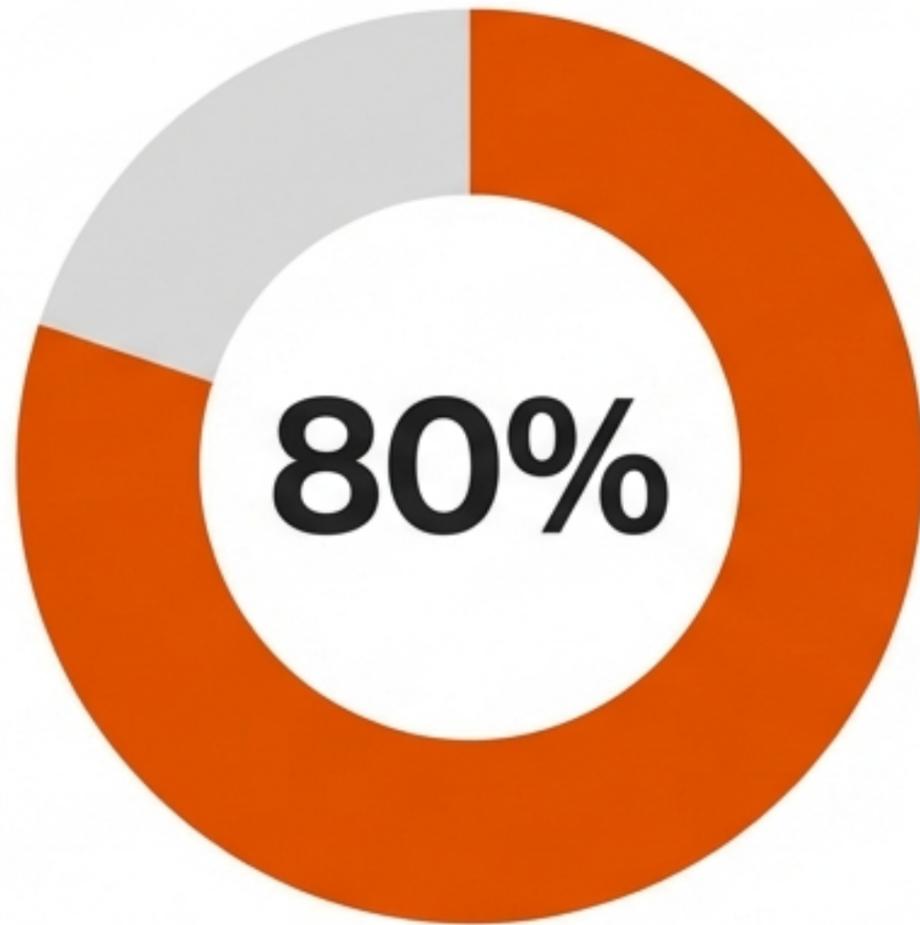
**Apply** behavioral, technological, and structural interventions.



**Design** reward systems that incentivize efficient collaboration.

# The Collaboration Paradox

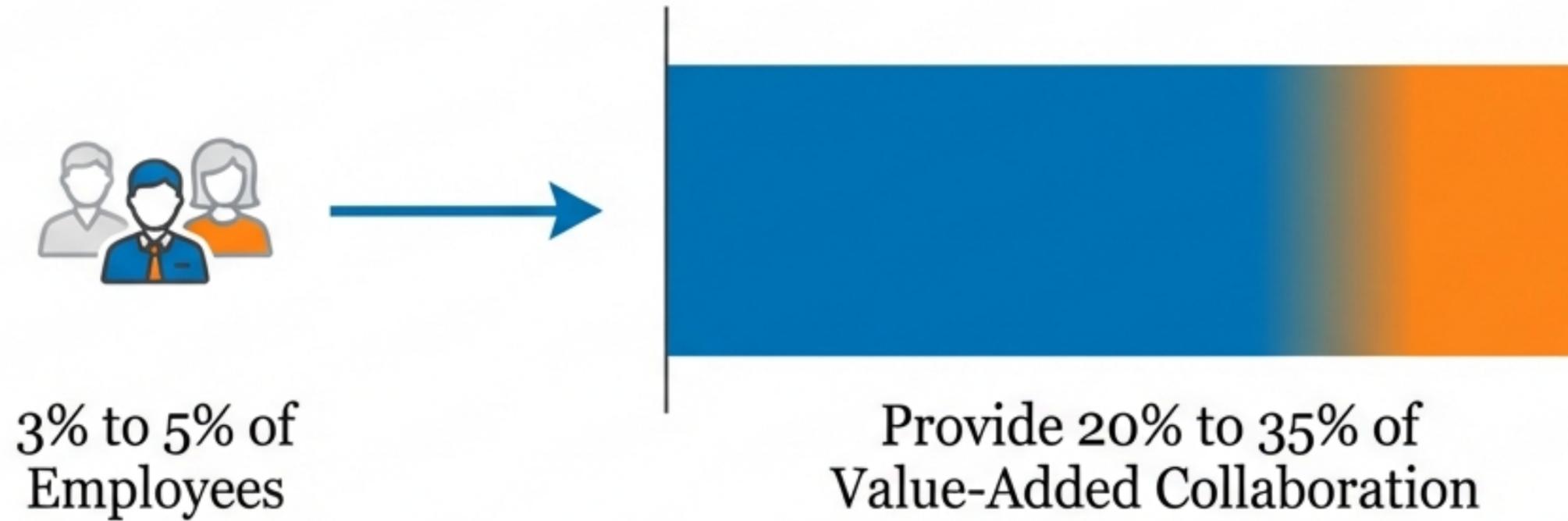
## High Volume, Diminishing Returns



Time spent by managers/employees in collaborative activities (meetings, email, phone).

- **Trend:** Collaborative time demands have ballooned by 50%+ over the past two decades.
- **The Cost:** Performance suffers due to an 'avalanche of requests.'
- **The Risk:** Critical individual work is sidelined; stress and burnout increase.

# The Lopsided Distribution of Help



**Escalating Citizenship:** The mechanism where helpful employees attract more work, enhance their reputation, and attract even *more* work.

**Outcome:** 'Extra milers' drive performance but become institutional bottlenecks.

# Diagnostic Framework: 3 Collaborative Resources



## 1. Informational

Knowledge, skills, and expertise. Can be recorded and passed on (e.g., wikis, reports).

Scalable



## 2. Social

Network position, access, and awareness. Used to connect colleagues (e.g., introductions).

Scalable



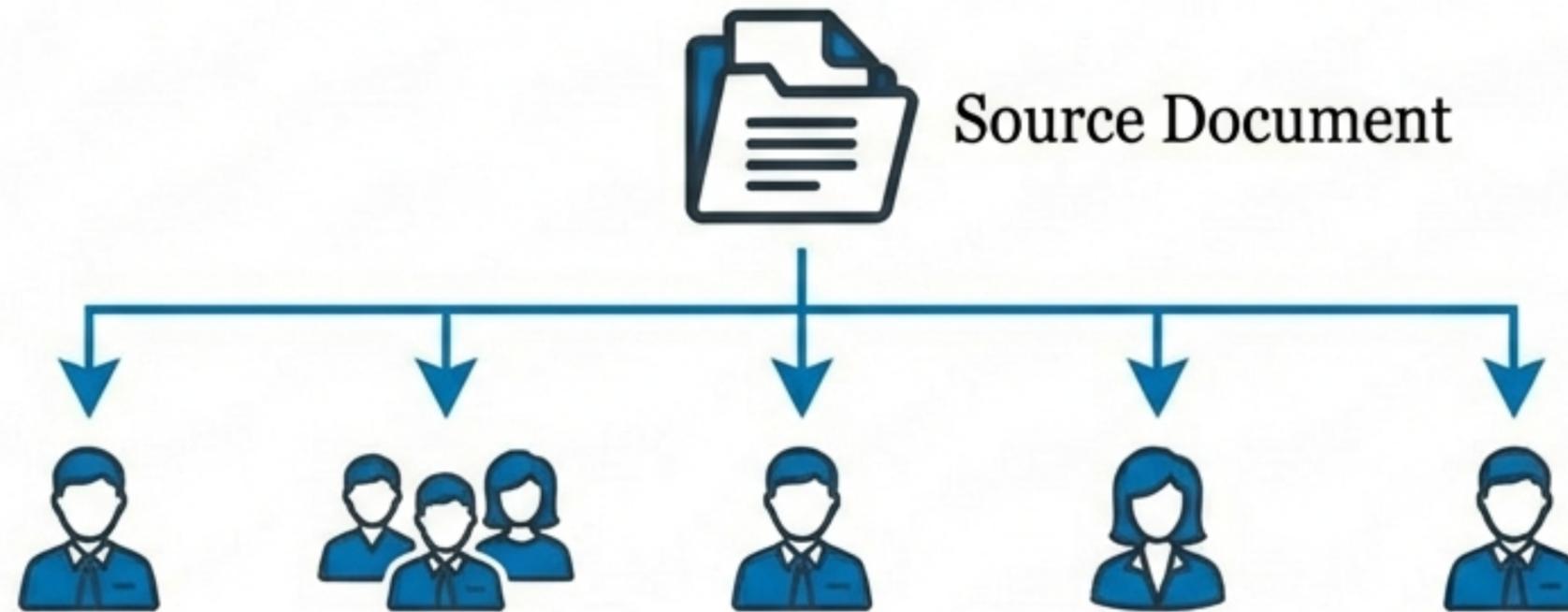
## 3. Personal

Own time and energy. Depleted upon use (zero-sum).

Finite

# Deep Dive: Informational Resources

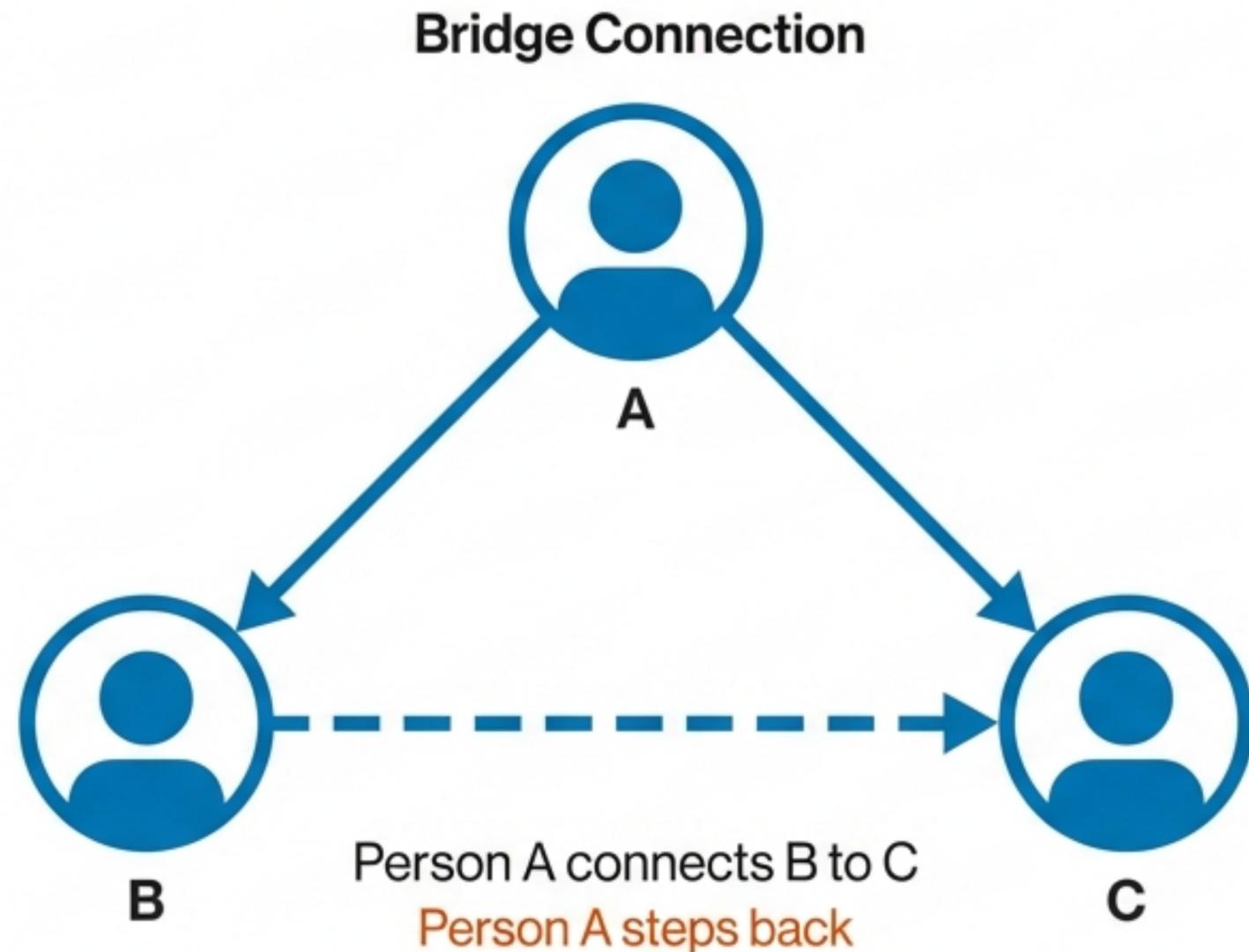
The most efficient form of collaboration.



- **Definition:** Expertise and knowledge that can be codified.
- **Efficiency:** Highly Scalable. The owner shares the asset without losing it.
- **Goal:** Convert personal explanations into shared repositories.
- **Examples:** Technical documentation, white papers, recorded training, FAQs.

# Deep Dive: Social Resources

Leveraging the network without spending time.



- Definition: Awareness of who knows what; position in the network.
- Efficiency: Scalable. Making an introduction takes minutes but yields high value.
- Mechanism: Connecting seekers with the right experts rather than trying to solve the problem yourself.
- Example: “I don’t know the answer, but [Name] in Accounting does.”

# Deep Dive: Personal Resources

The danger zone of collaboration.



- Definition: Individual time, energy, and physical presence.
- Efficiency: Finite / Zero-Sum. Participating in a meeting leaves less capacity for individual work.
- The Trap: Requesters default to asking for Personal resources (e.g., a 30-minute meeting) when Informational or Social resources would suffice.

# The Efficiency Trap

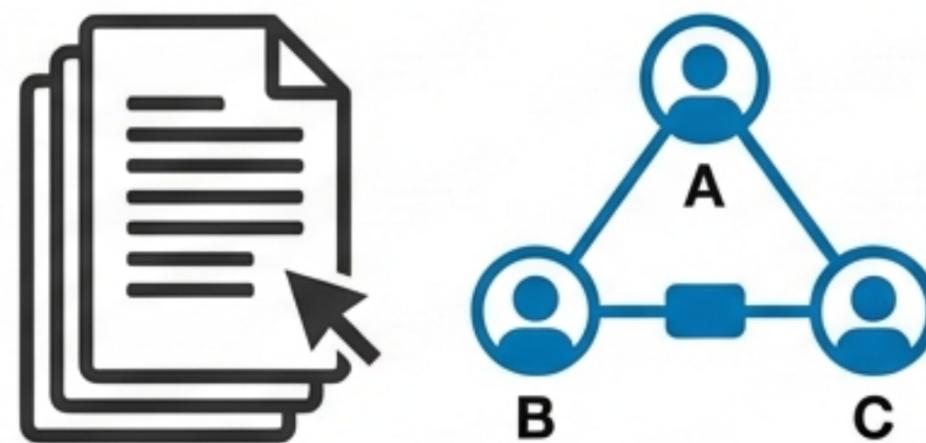
## Default Behavior



Asking for a meeting.

**Depletes Personal Resource**

## Strategic Triage



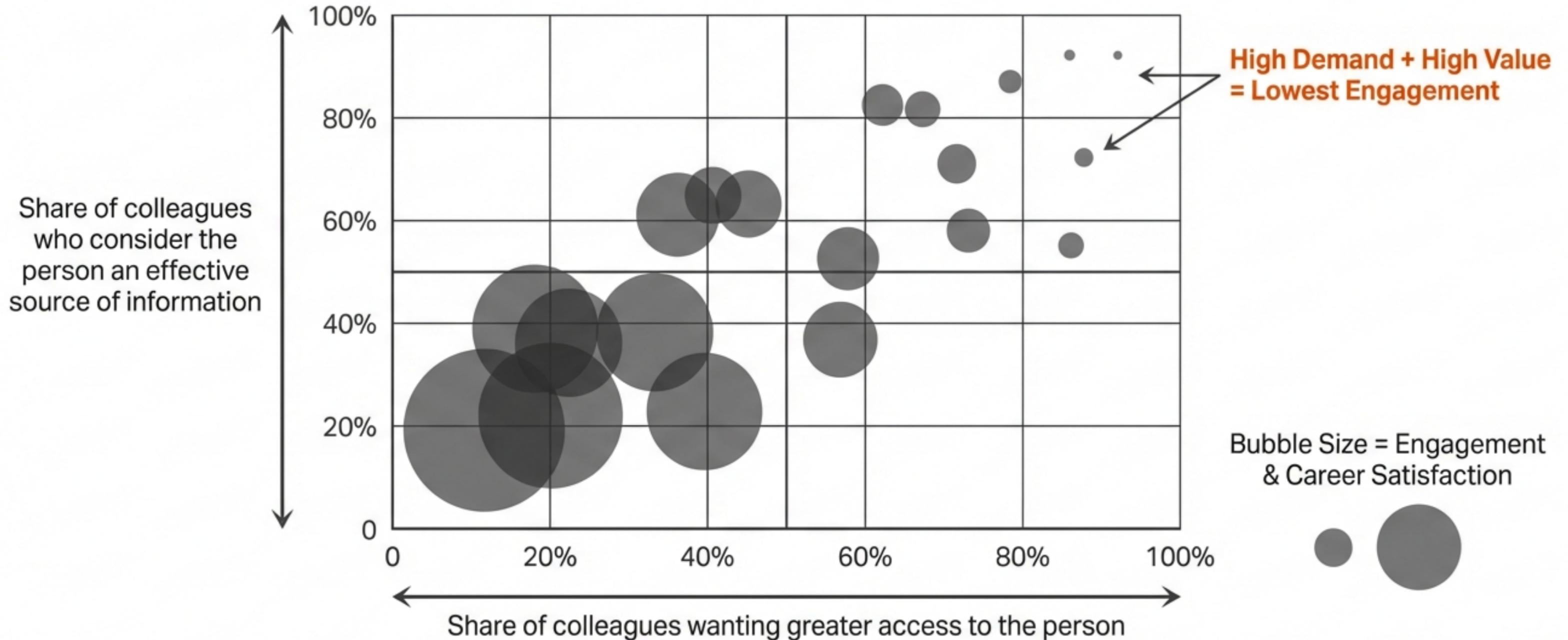
Offering a document (Informational)  
or a Referral (Social).

**Preserves Capacity**

Collaboration overload is often a failure of resource triage, not just volume.

# The High Cost of Being In-Demand

The correlation between demand and disengagement



# Interpretation: The Burnout Zone

**Insight:** The most helpful employees often have the lowest engagement scores.

**The Threshold:** When >25% of requesters seek more access, performance and retention suffer.

## The Outcomes:

1. They leave the organization (**Brain Drain**).
2. They stay and become apathetic (**Spreading Disengagement**).



# Intervention Level 1: Behavioral Change

## Filtering and Triage

### Checklist for “Extra Milers”:

- **Filter Requests:** Coach helpers to prioritize or say ‘no’.
- **Partial Allocation:** Give permission to offer half the time requested (e.g., 15 mins instead of 30).

- **Resource Shifting:**

→ **Old Way:** “Let’s meet to discuss.”

→ **New Way:** “Here is the documentation (Informational).” ✓

→ **New Way:** “Talk to [Name], they are the expert (Social).” ✓

# Intervention Lever 1: Behavioral Change

## Setting Boundaries

### Basecamp

Use notification snooze buttons to limit constant interruptions.



### Dropbox

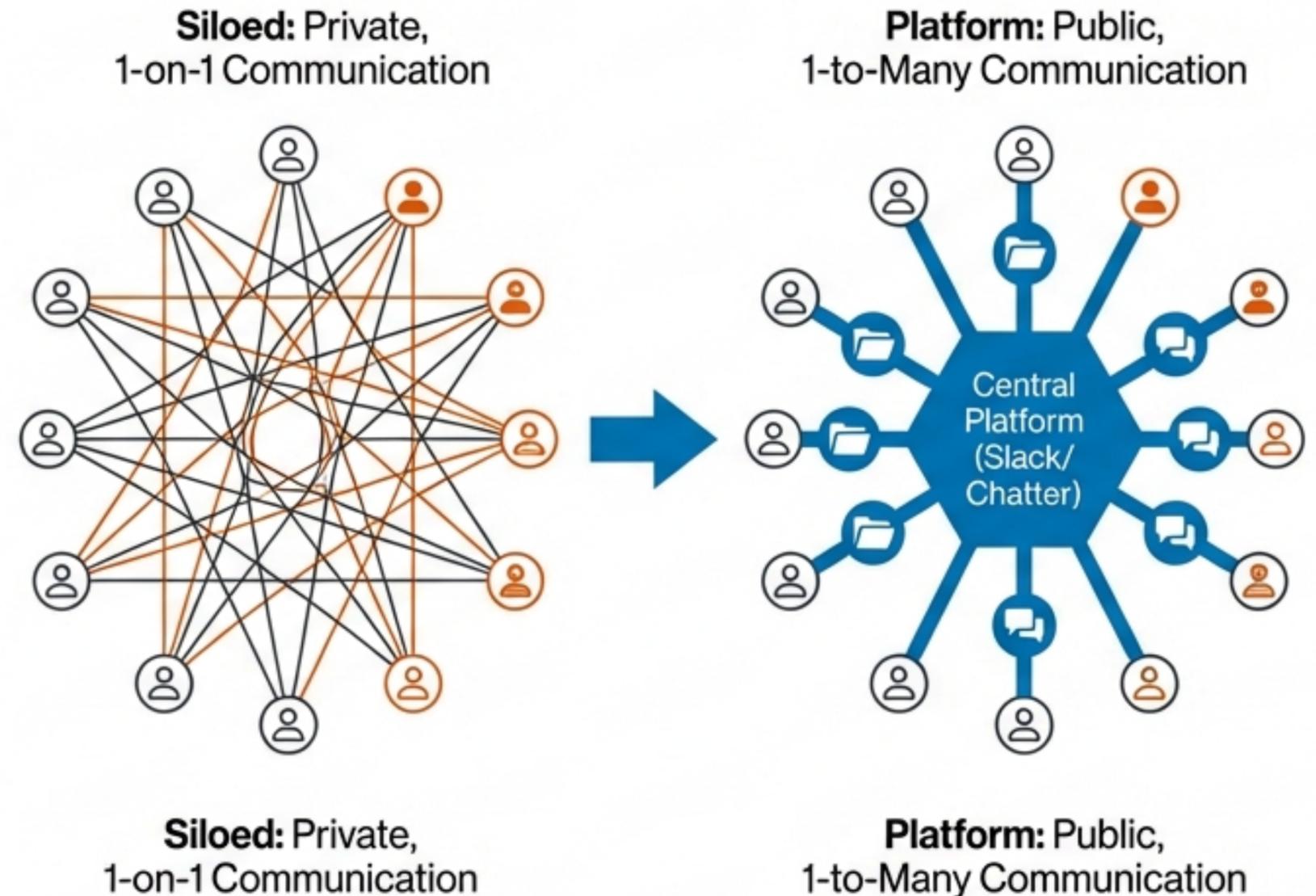
Eliminated all recurring meetings for two weeks ('Armeetingeddon'). Forced employees to reassess necessity and agendas.



# Intervention Lever 2: Tech & Space

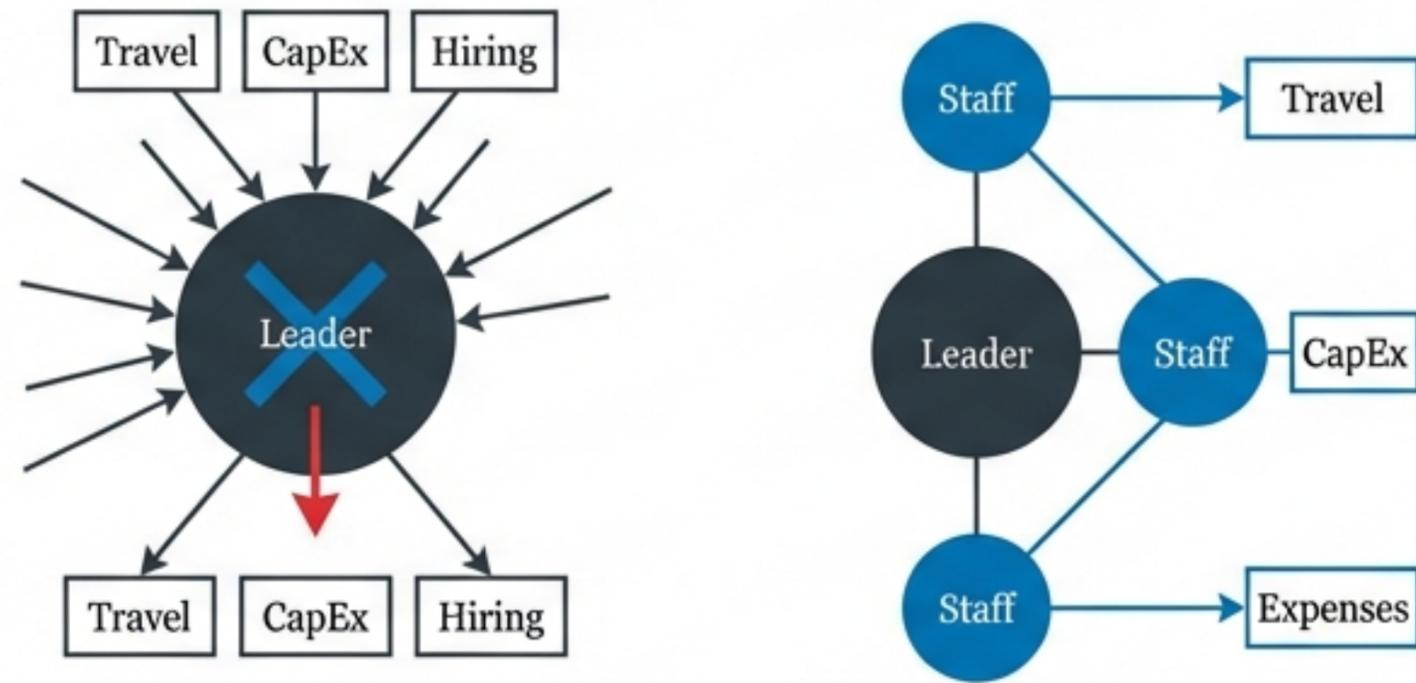
Making resources transparent.

- **Leverage Technology:** Use platforms (Slack, Salesforce Chatter) to make Informational resources transparent and searchable.
- **Goal:** Shift knowledge transfer from private (1-on-1 email) to public (1-to-many threads).
- **Physical Space:** Colocate interdependent employees.
- **Benefit:** Facilitates brief, low-cost interactions rather than scheduled 30-minute meetings.



# Intervention Level 2: Structural Buffers

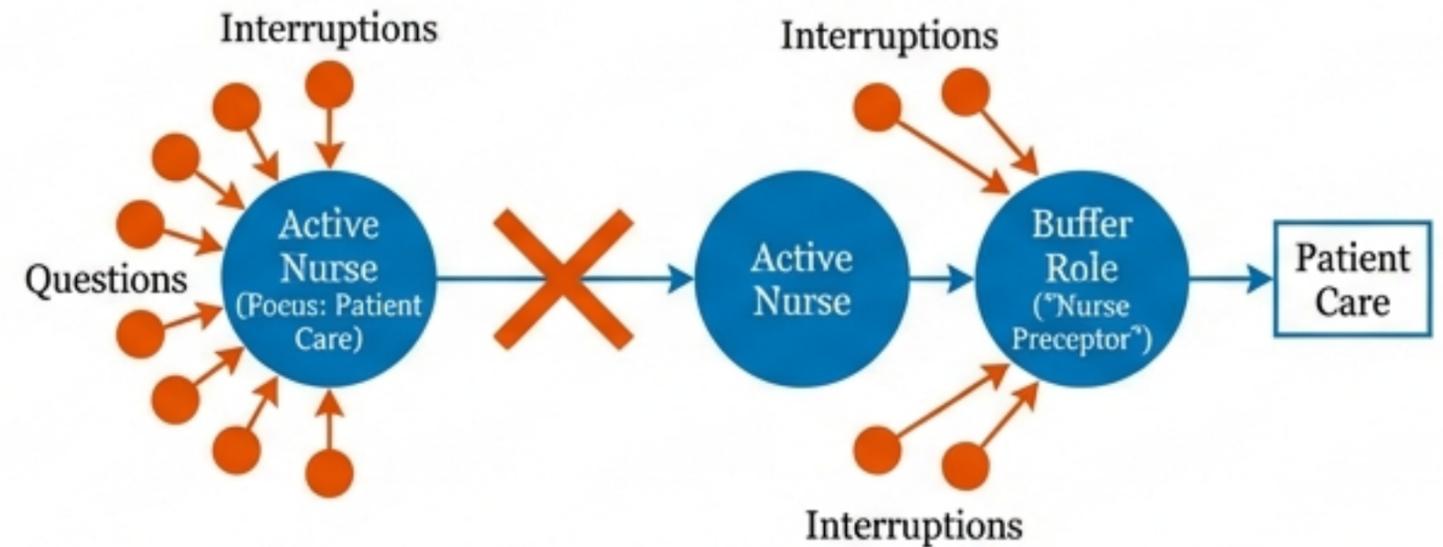
Designing roles to absorb demand.



## Shift Decision Rights:

Empower lower-level staff to make low-stakes decisions (travel, CapEx).

Result: Removes bottlenecks at the leader level.



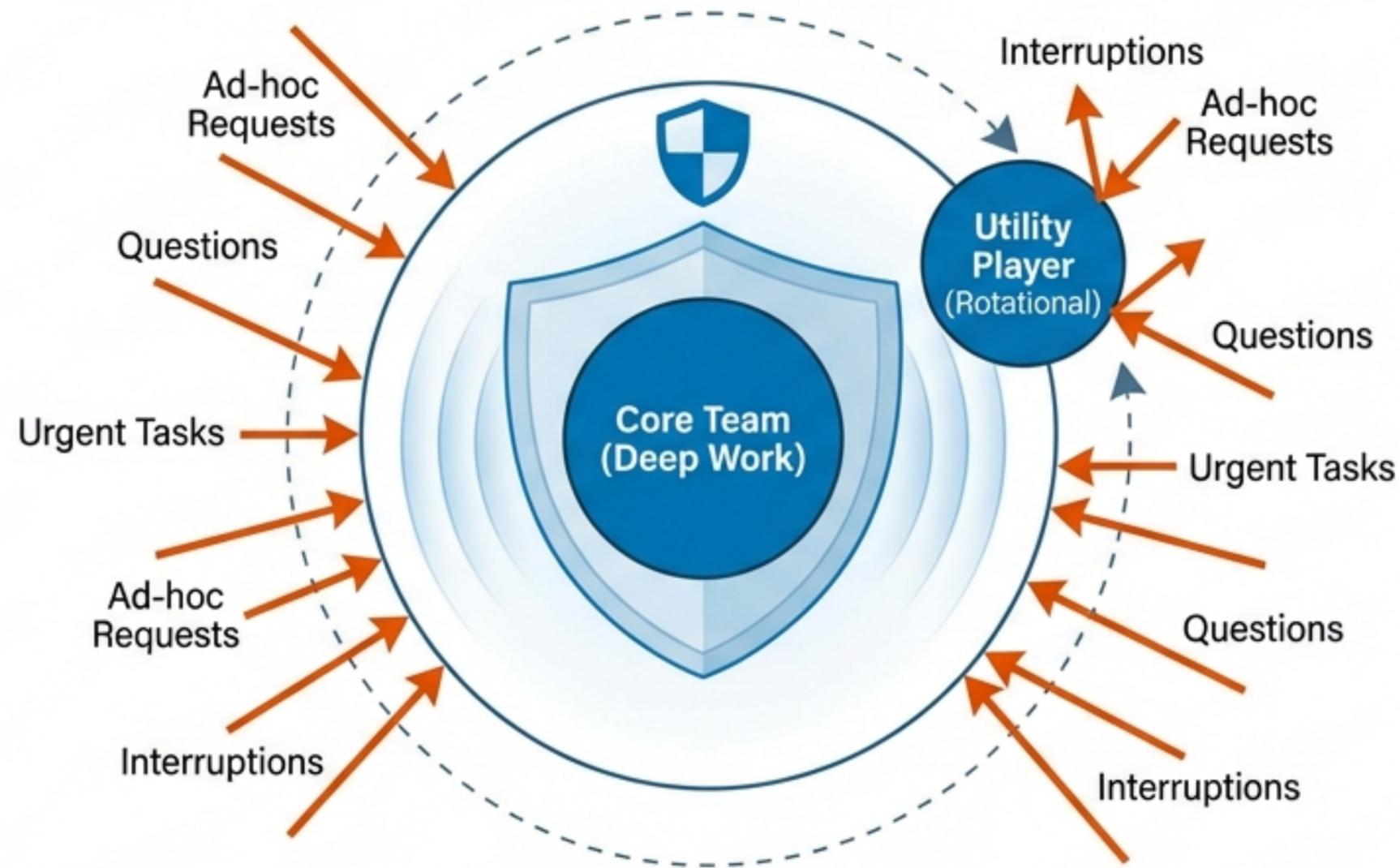
## The "Nurse Preceptor" Model:

Context: Hospitals designate a nurse specifically to answer questions.

Result: Protects active nurses' focus on patient care.

Application: Create "buffer roles" in corporate teams.

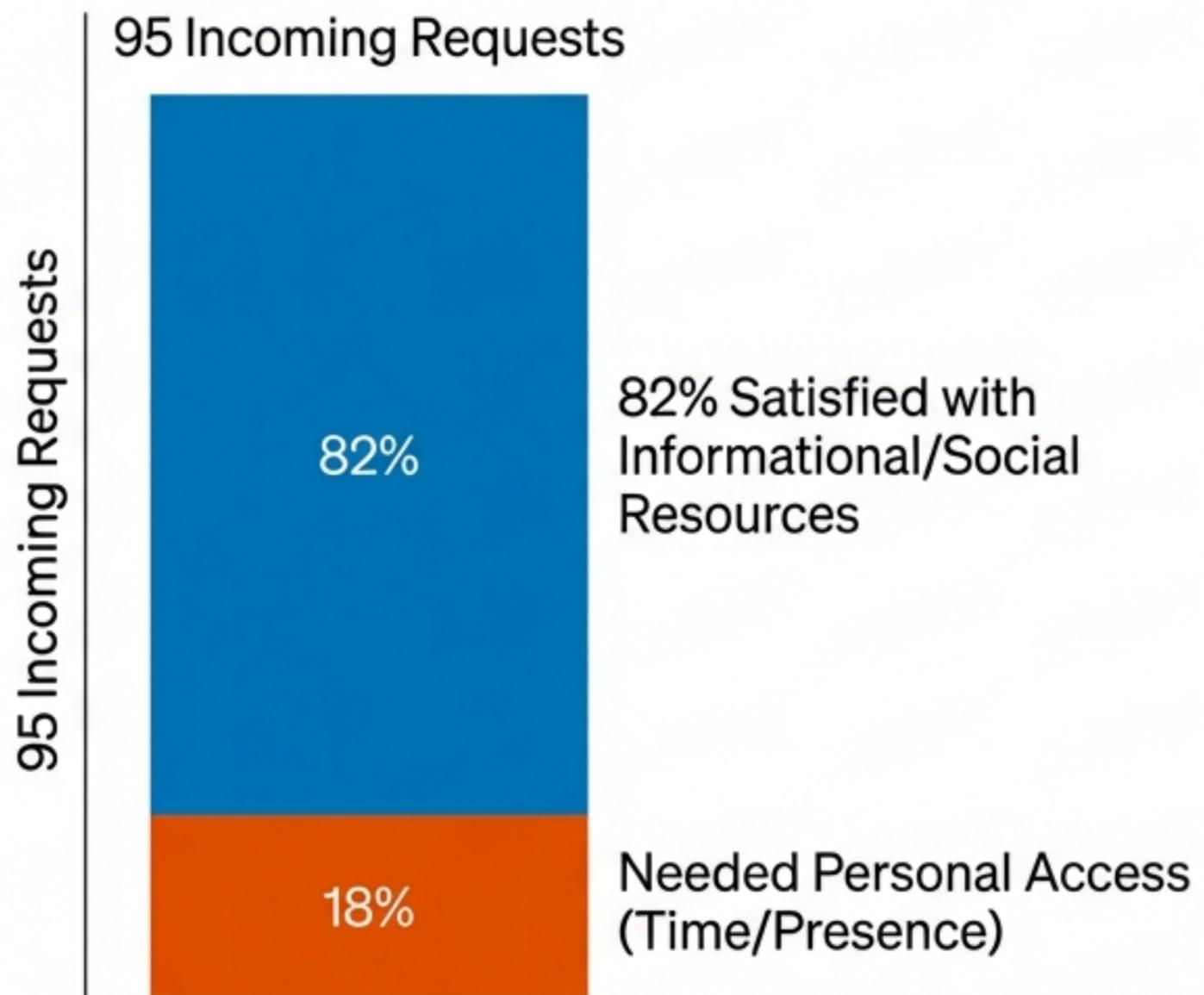
# Application: The “Utility Player”



- **Concept:** Designate a specific team member to handle ad-hoc requests on a rotating basis.
- **Mechanism:** This person absorbs interruptions for the week; others focus on deep work.
- **Benefit:** Reduces the ‘context switching’ tax on high performers.

# Case Study: The 'Vernell' Analysis

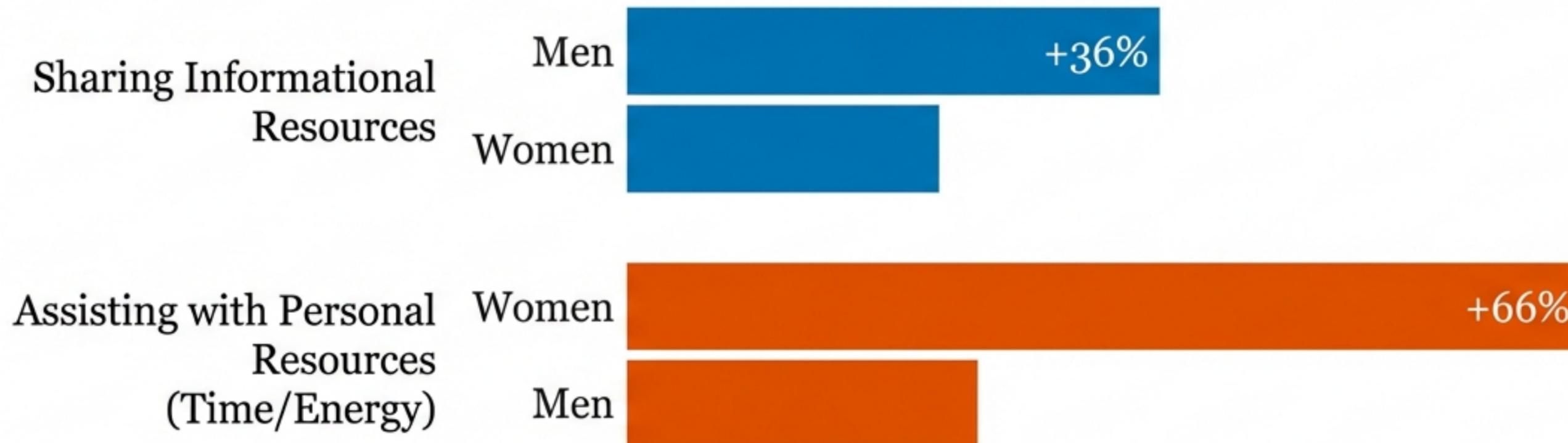
## Perceived Need vs. Actual Need



- **Subject:** "Vernell," Top Collaborator at a blue-chip firm.
- **Lesson:** Collaboration overload is a failure of triage. The vast majority of requests (82%) did not actually require Vernell's time.

# The Gender Burden in Collaboration

Who bears the cost of “Personal” resources?



- **Stereotype:** Women are expected to be “communal/caring,” leading to more requests for mentoring and “invisible” work.
- **Correction:** Managers must credit invisible work and coach shifting toward informational sharing.

# Knowledge Check: Diagnosis

**Q:** A team member is in meetings all day but produces no documentation. Which resource imbalance is this?

**A:** Over-reliance on **Personal Resources.**

**Q:** High demand + High value = What two outcomes?

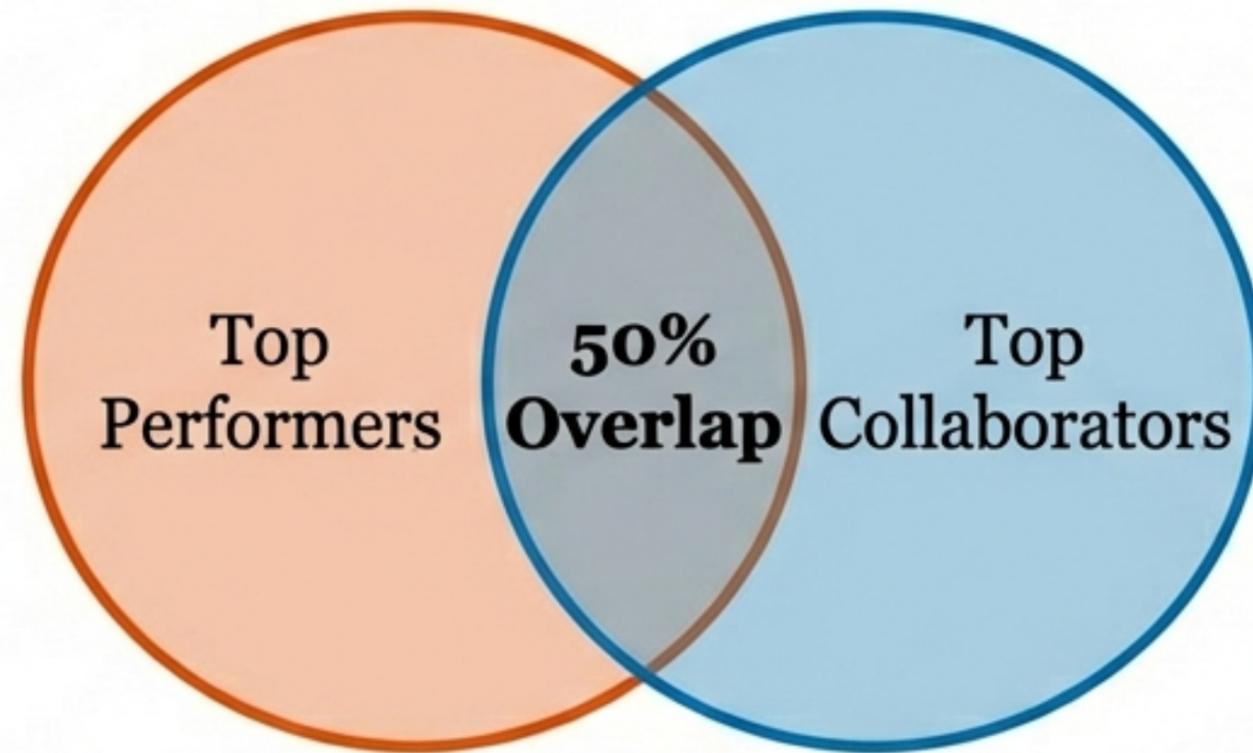
**A:** Turnover or Apathy.

**Q:** Why is 'saying no' a collaboration strategy?

**A:** It preserves finite resources for unique, high-value contributions.

# Intervention Level 3: Rewards

## The Incentive Gap



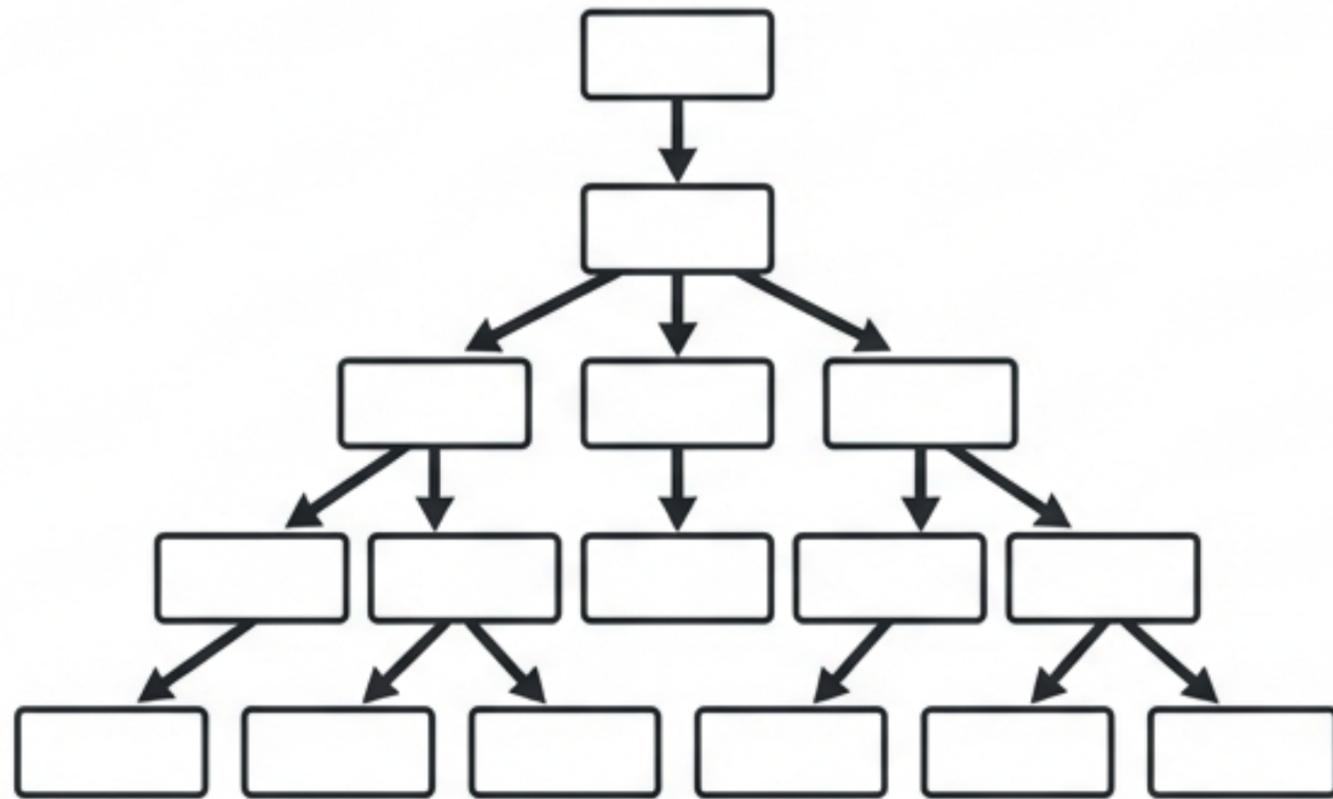
Only ~50% of top performers are also top collaborators.

- **The 'Selfish' Star:** 20% of stars hit numbers but don't help.
- **The Overwhelmed Helper:** Helpers miss targets because they are overburdened.
- **The Fix:** Efficient sharing must be a prerequisite for promotion.

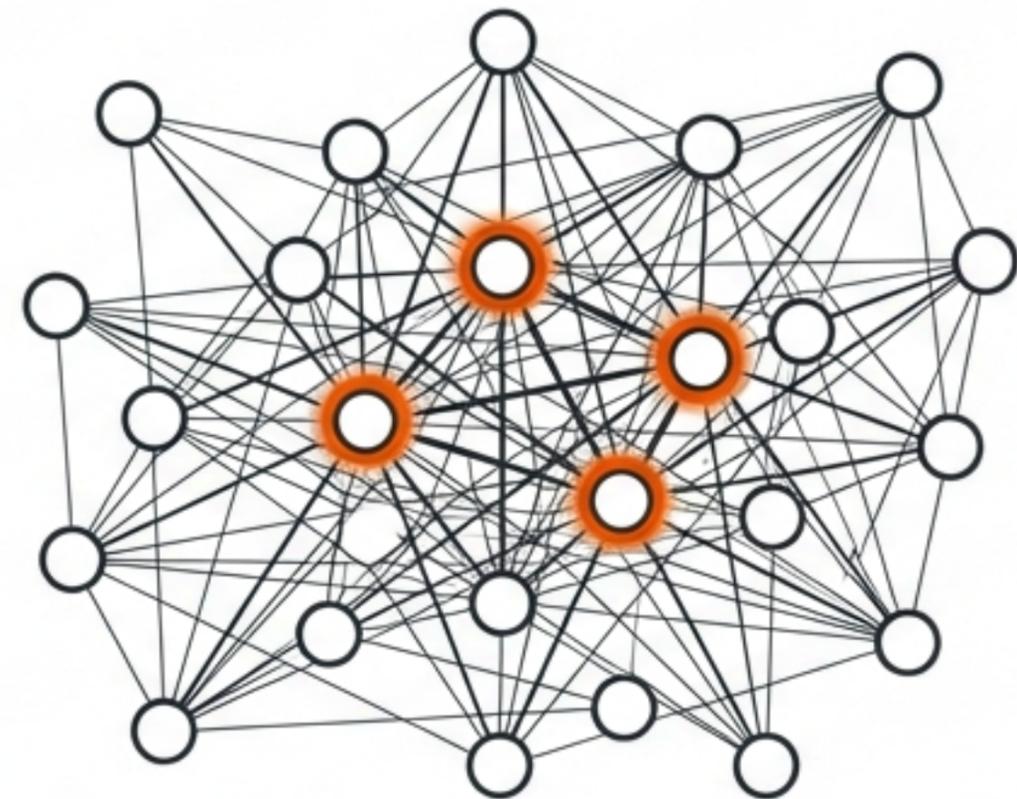
# Application: Network Analytics for Rewards

Finding the hidden influencers.

**Traditional View:**



**Network View (ONA):**



## Life Sciences Acquisition

**Problem:** Risk of 'brain drain' during merger.

**Insight:** Used ONA to identify influential employees without formal authority.

**Action:** Targeted retention bonuses to these hidden influencers, stabilizing the transition.