

UNDERSTANDING BOUNDARY SPANNING

DR VICKI HERRINGTON & DR ABBY MCLEOD

The challenges facing our police are complex. They are rooted in differential opportunity, in inequality, in exploitation, and in global systems of commerce and government. The pandemic has given us a glimpse at the impact of systems on public safety. And we can expect much more to come. We are staring down the barrel of climate change, which will inevitably transpire into resource insecurity and migration. We are due for, and facing, another economic crisis. Then we have the rise of technology and the emergence of the fourth industrial revolution to contend with (Schwab 2014), hinting at seismic changes to many aspects of life. As our societies change, the values and norms of the past inevitably rub up against the new (Ronsfeld, 1996). This plays out in policing, and if we are true to our Peelian pledge of prevention, we must recognize that much of our work cannot be effectively done without engaging in, navigating, and reaching across systems.

Dean Williams' 2015 book - Leadership for a Fractured World - tells us that this being the case, our current approach to leadership is flawed. It is incapable of solving the problems in our world, because it is essentially tribal: individuals with formal authority lead in the interest of their own group. This plays out in our multi-stakeholder engagements, where we see jostling for position, turf wars, value-claiming negotiations, and hostile takeovers. Ultimately this is counterproductive. Our organisational boundaries become borders, and us vs them agendas stymie progress.

Williams argues that instead, we need leaders who can see the system, can "shift from being a creature of [her] own faction" (p166) and can mobilise people across borders. Williams argues the case for the boundary spanner.

Boundary spanning is "the ability to create direction, alignment and commitment across group boundaries in service of a higher vision or goal." (Ernst and Chrobot-Mason, 2011, p81).

This requires “...individuals working across different organizational cultures and exercise influence through formal and informal channels in order to strengthen the connections between actors” (Guaneroz-Meza and Martin 2016, p240). The need for boundary spanners is well recognised in business. A Centre for Creative Leadership survey of 128 senior-level executives found that while 86% believed it was “extremely important” to collaborate effectively across boundaries as a leader, only 7% felt they were any good at it (Yip et al., 2016). Moreover, a lack of boundary spanning capabilities has been identified as a leading cause of business failure (Zoltners et al., 2019; Deloitte, 2015)

In late 2018 AIPM undertook a systematic review of the boundary spanning literature to better understand the practices, habits and tasks involved in the practice, and how they might relate to policing. We focussed our attention on scholarly works underpinned by empirical evidence. Disappointingly only 5 articles met the full inclusion criteria, and none were directly related to policing or allied services (please contact AIPM for a technical brief of the systematic review).

The systematic review did uncover some interesting insights. First, we found that boundary spanning occurred across multiple dimensions:

- horizontal boundaries (across agencies and organisations); and,
- vertical boundaries (between different levels of government).

The term is most typically associated with work across horizontal boundaries, although Ernst and Chrobot-Mason (2011) noted that even these horizontal boundaries could be stakeholder, demographic, and geographic in nature too.

Several authors tried to characterise the types of boundary spanning work observed. Ancona and Caldwell (1988, 1992) described four functional typologies:

- the ambassador,
- scout,
- task coordinator,
- guard.

Johnson and Duxbury (2010) extended this to nine categories:

- task coordinator;
- guard;
- relationship building (with a focus on reciprocity);
- shaping (attempts to directly influence others’ agendas);
- intelligence gathering;
- delivering;
- information sharing;
- representing; and,
- intermediary.

Whatever the terms used, broadly all authors identified a similar swathe of activity. Ernst and Chrobot-Mason (2011) defined 6 types of work:

- **Buffering** – shielding cross-functional group members from threats, the boundary spanner helps groups work across, around and through boundaries to engage in productive work with others and develop a clear identity;
- **Reflecting** – informing one group about the other – the boundary spanner helps groups understand their similarities and differences, sensitising them to counterparts’ values, and priorities so that they can see common ground in goals and objectives;
- **Connecting** – creating person-to-person linkages, enabling trust, and developing shared direction, expectations and confidence;

- **Mobilizing** – seeking to reframe boundaries and craft common purpose (creating a larger group identity) by forming coalitions, which result in an intergroup community. Mobilizing redefines the group;
- **Weaving** – group boundaries interlace resulting in intergroup interdependence, which leads to mutual reliance and collective learning; and,
- **Transforming** – intergroup reinvention, reworking of boundaries, resulting in openness to change (and the integration of all 6 boundary spanning activities).

Similar categories were identified by Barner-Rasmussen et. al. (2014) (captured under the headings of exchanging, linking, and facilitating) and adding a nuance of intervening work, where the boundary spanner intervened to create positive outcomes by resolving conflicts, building trust, and turning negatives into positives.

Given the work of boundary spanners, it is unsurprising that the skills and attributes employed required high levels of emotional (ability to understand and manage self) and social intelligence (ability to understand others and manage relationships) (Williams, 2008). Williams especially noted that boundary spanners attended to development of individual relationships, group relationships and relationships of the whole. Non-boundary spanners (or ineffective boundary spanners) focussed on individual relationships instead (2008). An ability to build trust, through being empathetic, perspective taking and demonstrating patience, were key skills boundary spanners used in Guaneroz-Meza and Martin's research (2016). For Barner-Rasmussen et. al. (2014) "cultural and language skills" were also significantly associated with boundary spanning ability. Those who had both were found more versatile than those without (2014).

Implications

To summarise, the five empirical studies reviewed found that boundary spanning is about creating direction, alignment and commitment across groups. It is about working through organizational cultures and formal and informal channels; forging common ground; and discovering new frontiers while weaving and transforming work. Drawing a line to clear implications from a small number of studies is fraught, but given the logic of boundary spanning, and the lived experience of our complex operating environment, it does beg the question whether this is something the profession can get better at.

Recent identity research has suggested that individuals with "broad functional experiences" (Horton, 2021, p408) may be more attuned in interpersonal situations and may therefore be better equipped to coordinate with members of other teams. Horton goes on to note that individuals with "complex identities" – that is they identify across multiple social groups – may be particularly comfortable in cross-functional teams. This has implications for our workforce. Broadening who we attract and retain in policing has been a key concern over the last 5-10 years, with efforts around the world to break away from typical career paths, typical entry points, and typical demographics. Applying a boundary spanning lens, this diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) work has scarcely been more important. As our need for boundary spanning leadership increases, so does our reliance on members who come from different backgrounds and can connect with stakeholders who are unlike us.

We can develop our boundary spanning capabilities in other ways too. Horton notes there are things at an organisational level that can create and reinforce cross-functional identities. For example, organisations could implement cross-functional training initiatives, or job rotations and exchanges; they could engage in inter-group training for cross-boundary work-teams, with a particular emphasis on communication, negotiation, inter-cultural understanding and conflict management. We have myriad examples of multi-agency teams in policing and national security, which intuitively try to span organisational divides. Results are variable and one cannot help but wonder if a more conscious recognition of what is trying to be achieved, and how that might better be facilitated through boundary spanning leadership approaches, might advance these initiatives?

For those of us interested in leadership capability development, the lingering question from this review is what an individual leader could do to practice their practice of boundary spanning? Entrepreneur Penelope Trunk gives three simple suggestions (2013).

1. **Go somewhere you don't fit:** the rationale being that disconnecting from the daily grind can spark new ways of noticing, and new ways of thinking.
2. **Work with people you don't like:** because those that grate on our nerves can give us practice in the core skills of understanding, perspective taking, developing a shared vision, and patience.
3. **Make yourself nervous:** because boundary spanning requires stepping out of one's comfort zone, so we need to resist a natural urge to retreat.

While none of these practices will magically make individuals boundary spanners, they could help us be better skilled at some of the constituent behaviours. For those who recognise their everyday in the above list, might they be the latent boundary spanners we could do better to tap into.

At AIPM we would also add a fourth skill to practice to the list: that of reflection. No matter the leadership endeavour, or style, or task being approached, meaningful reflection helps us learn more about ourselves, our behaviour, and how that behaviour is experienced by others. At AIPM we use an adult learning reflection cycle to help step through the stages of acting, reflecting and committing anew. Effective boundary spanning depends on other people, and our influence is often all we have. To effectively influence other people we must have a clear grasp of both them and us. Meaning that for boundary spanning skills to develop, we must surely start from the inside out.

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