

THE COMPETENT BOUNDARY SPANNER

PAUL WILLIAMS

Inter-organizational frameworks of intervention dominate the resolution of complex societal problems facing the UK and many other countries. Strategic alliances, joint working arrangements, networks, partnerships and many other forms of collaboration across sectoral and organizational boundaries currently proliferate across the policy landscape. However, the discourse is positioned at an institutional and organizational level, and comparatively little attention is accorded to the pivotal role of individual actors in the management of inter-organizational relationships. This paper attempts to redress this balance by focusing on the skills, competencies and behaviour of boundary spanners. A critical review of the relevant literature, both from an institutional and relational perspective, is undertaken. This is complemented by some new empirical research that involves an engagement with groups of particular types of boundary spanner using a combination of surveys and in-depth interviews. Finally, a discussion makes connections between the existing literature and the research findings and offers suggestions for future areas of enquiry.

INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the major factors that influence the effective collaborative behaviour and competence of key agents managing within inter-organizational theatres – the boundary spanners. The discussion is framed within the UK public policy context where the persistence of a number of complex problems is being tackled through partnership and collaborative interventions. A critical review of the disparate and cross-disciplinary literature, both institutional and relational, is examined and used to explore a range of perspectives, themes, concepts and models that help to illuminate the behaviour patterns and competency profiles of practising boundary spanners.

This is followed by a detailed account of the research findings of a study that is aimed at identifying and understanding the competency framework for boundary spanners including the bundle of skills, abilities and personal characteristics that contribute to effective inter-organizational behaviour. Prominent in the emerging framework are the building and sustaining of relationships, managing within non-hierarchical environments, managing complexity and understanding motives, roles and responsibilities. The paper concludes with a discussion about areas for future research.

Paul Williams is Senior Research Fellow in the National Centre for Public Policy, University of Wales Swansea.

THE MORPHOLOGY OF PUBLIC POLICY PROBLEMS

The public policy landscape is characterized by a host of complex and seemingly intractable problems and issues – community safety, poverty, social inclusion, health inequalities, teenage pregnancies, urban regeneration, substance misuse, climate change and homelessness – an ever growing and assorted list of community concerns. Such issues have been referred to as ‘wicked’ because they ‘defy efforts to delineate their boundaries and to identify their causes, and thus to expose their problematic nature’ (Rittel and Webber 1973, p. 167); Trist (1983) simply sees them as ‘messes’. ‘Wicked issues’ appear to possess a number of inherent properties:

- They bridge and permeate jurisdictional, organizational, functional, professional and generational boundaries. They are often capable of metamorphosis and of becoming entangled in a web of other problems creating a kind of dense and complicated policy swamp.
- They are socially constructed because the conceptualization, causes and analysis of problem structures are a function of the unique perspective or gaze of individual stakeholders, of which there are many in dense policy spaces such as with health, poverty or social disadvantage. Schon (1987) and Stone (1997) refer to the act of ‘framing’ because ‘depending on our disciplinary backgrounds, organizational roles, past histories, interests, and political/economic perspectives, we frame problematic situations in different ways’ (Schon 1987, p. 4). In addition, the ripple effect of interdependent problems often makes it difficult to disentangle root causes, and even trace many policy outcomes back to specific interventions despite the current penchant for evidence-based practice.
- Wicked issues are not amenable to optimal solutions. Many are not entirely solved or remain intractable and real progress is dependent on systemic change not short-term fixes.
- Finally, this kind of problem does not ‘yield readily to single efforts and is beyond the capacity of any one agency or jurisdiction’ (Luke 1998, p. 19).

It is instructive to frame an understanding of ‘wicked issues’ in the language and thinking of non-linear theories such as complexity and chaos theories developed in the physical sciences. Complex social problems such as crime or health inequality are not amenable to linear thinking which assume a simple relationship between inputs and outcomes. On the contrary, relationships are non-linear. Outcomes are difficult or impossible to predict; responses can be disjointed from causes and a change in the causal agent does not necessarily elicit a proportional change in some variable it affects. It may elicit no response, a dramatic response or a response at certain levels of cause. The metaphors of complexity theory – strange attractors, bifurcation, edge of chaos and possibility space – may offer useful

ways of exploring and understanding complex societal problems in the future.

ORGANIZATIONAL FORMS

Assuming that a large number of problems presenting themselves in the public policy arena in Britain today bear a close resemblance to the characteristics of a 'wicked issue', it is appropriate to consider the best form of managerial and organizational response necessary for their treatment. I argue that a postmodern rather than a classical form of organization is more likely to be in tune with this particular policy challenge for reasons that are summarized in table 1. Firstly, given that the problems are cross-boundary in nature, the focus of organizational action needs to move from a pre-occupation with intra-organizational imperatives more to a commitment to the building of inter-organizational capacity. Secondly, thinking about 'wicked issues' requires a language that reflects relationships, interconnections and interdependencies – holistic thinking. This is not the prevailing discourse of classical organizations that are underpinned by notions of rationality, linear thinking, task differentiation and functionalism. Bureaucratic forms of organization which champion the virtues of rationality, professionalism and compartmentalism are anathema to the challenge of interdependencies. Forms of organization and governance that are designed around collaboration, partnership and networking appear to be more suitable for the task.

Inter-organizational capacity is unlikely to flourish in organizational structures that are based on hierarchical control and power. New capacities are needed to manage conflict, inter-personal behaviour and fragmented and contested power relations. Within the realms of inter-agency activity, where 'organizational sovereignty loses credibility and conviction' (Clegg 1990, p. 19), decision-making models must reflect consensus formation and trust building. Difficult problems invite new ways of working and thinking, and whereas 'most people will come to this trapped or constrained by con-

TABLE 1 *Modern and postmodern forms of organization*

	Modern	Postmodern
Domain	Intra-organizational	Inter-organizational
Metaphor	Mechanistic	Systems
Form of government	Administration	Governance
Form of organization	Bureaucratic	Networking, collaboration, partnership
Conceptualization	Differentiation; tasks and functions	Interdependencies
Decision-making framework	Hierarchy and rules	Negotiation and consensus
Competency	Skills-based professional	Relational
Solutions	Optimal	Experimentation, innovation, reflection

ventional organizations, labels and assumptions, what is needed is a willingness to entertain the unconventional and pursue the radical' (Clarke and Stewart 1997, p. 5). A presumption towards innovation, experimentation, risk taking and entrepreneurship is welcome in the battle against complex problems, in contrast to the preoccupation with finding a single 'right' solution.

Finally, the skills and competency profile of individuals who are focused on the management of interdependencies will not be professional or knowledge-based, but rely more on relational and inter-personal attributes designed to build social capital. They will build cultures of trust, improve levels of cognitive ability to understand complexity and be able to operate within non-hierarchical environments with dispersed configurations of power relationships.

THE HEGEMONY OF 'JOINED-UP' GOVERNANCE

The New Labour government in Britain has embraced the analysis of 'wicked issues' with some alacrity and grounded many of its public policy interventions on holistic planning, joined-up government and cross-cutting approaches. An emerging inter-organizational hegemony is promulgated and manifested in terms of multi-agency, multi-disciplinary and cross-boundary programmes across the policy spectrum. A flood of new initiatives bears witness to this approach – Health, Education and Employment Action Zones, New Deal for Communities, City Challenge, Local Strategic Partnerships and many more. One commentator refers to a condition of 'initiativitis' (Fitzpatrick 1999, p. xiii) to describe this type of policy making.

However, it seems that the prevailing policy discourse at both a theoretical and empirical level is quite often confined to a narrow discussion of the effectiveness and sustainability of new inter-organizational structures and mechanisms. I argue that this fixation at the organizational and inter-organizational domain levels understates and neglects the pivotal contribution of individual actors in the collaborative process. The research and analysis that follows argues that the effectiveness and success of inter-organizational ventures rests equally with the people involved in the process and their ability to apply collaborative skills and mind-sets to the resolution or amelioration of complex problems. I am supported in this view by other researchers. Poxton, reflecting on the experiences of primary health and social care partnerships, concludes 'a new policy environment and new organizational arrangements should make co-operation and collaboration easier than it has been in the past. But real success will depend as much on the determination and creativity of practitioners and managers as it will on Government edict and structural change' (Poxton 1999, p. 3). Bardach, also, maintains that it is 'clear that whatever else might help explain success in the collaborative process, the efforts and creativity of what I call purposive practitioners is an essential explanatory ingredient' (Bardach 1998, p. 6).

A mixture of flamboyant and insightful descriptions are sometimes ascribed to people who manage across boundaries including networker, broker, collaborator, cupid, civic entrepreneur, boundroid, sparkplug, collaborator and boundary spanner (Thompson 1967). Some occupy designated boundary spanning or cross-cutting posts such as health promotion managers, anti-poverty officers, community safety co-ordinators and the like. The majority of people are employed in mainstream jobs in which the participation in collaborative exchanges with people in other agencies and organizations is increasingly important to the realization of their own personal or organizational objectives.

However, the literature is not particularly forthcoming on the nature, characteristics and behaviour of these boundary spanners. The emphasis is rather more on managing within organizations as well as on the development of professional expertise.

THEORIES OF INTER-ORGANIZATIONAL RELATIONS

Although this paper has a micro-level focus, a consideration of inter-organizational theorizing at an institutional level is warranted and instructive as it offers perspectives and hints to behaviour patterns relevant to the role of individual actors in the collaborative process. There is no consolidated body of inter-organizational theory and a 'striking characteristic of research on inter-organizational relations is the astonishing variety of disciplines, research paradigms, theoretical perspectives and sectoral focuses within which it is researched' (Huxham and Vangen 1998, p. 1). The literature too is characterized by 'a cacophony of heterogeneous concepts, theories, and research results' (Oliver and Ebers 1998, p. 549). However, Grandori (1997) detects the prevalence of economic and sociological macro-analytical approaches to the subject.

Oliver and Ebers (1998) attempt to identify 'structural beacons in the messy landscape of inter-organizational research' through a review of the pertinent literature. They conclude that resource dependency and network models dominate the theoretical approaches, while considerations of power and control prevail with regard to outcomes. They emphasize the predominance of motivation and interaction in the processes linking antecedents with outcomes. In the case of inter-organizational network research, they find that the theoretical stances are polarized between a social network perspective, which looks at the structural properties of networks, and a governance perspective that focuses on 'attributes of both the networked actors and the form and content of their relationships within a particular institutional context' (Oliver and Ebers 1998, p. 569).

Grandori (1998) suggests that interfirm co-ordination modes can be explained by the core variables of task complexity, environmental uncertainty, task-related competence, behavioural trustworthiness, task interdependence and resource interdependencies. Oliver (1990), on the other hand, lists the critical contingencies of relationship forming as asymmetry,

reciprocity, efficiency, stability and legitimacy. Ebers (1997) contrasts Inter-organizational networks with other form of organizing such as markets and firms. They 'institutionize recurring, partner-specific exchange relationships of finite duration (often based on goal accomplishment) or of unspecified duration among a limited number of actors' (Ebers 1997, p. 21); actors within them individually retain residual control over resources but sometimes jointly decide on their use; processes of negotiation are used to coordinate resource allocation decisions, and a wide range of information is shared between organizations.

The network metaphor is a highly integrative mechanism between different levels of analysis and Ebers (1997) identifies three types of micro-level ties that represent key core concepts:

1. resource flow and activity links;
2. information flows, especially to address issues of complexity and uncertainty. The role of catalysts or informational intermediaries is considered to be highly influential in shaping and facilitating network form because they act as brokers to allow information symmetry and 'as mutually trusted lynchpins between social groups, human catalysts can bridge and help overcome informational asymmetries, establish a common set of expectations, and facilitate goal adjustment' (Ebers 1997, p. 31); foster co-operation and exchange; act as neutral arbitrators in conflict resolution; and reduce communication costs and uncertainty. The role played by catalysts is also associated with innovation and entrepreneurship because of a greater access to external partnering, critical resources and information (Dodgson 1994; Ahuja 2000);
3. mutual expectations between actors, particularly trust.

Managing within networks occupies the focus of a number of researchers (Kickert and Koppenjan 1997; O'Toole *et al.* 1997) and is described as 'promoting the mutual adjustment of the behaviour of actors with diverse objectives and ambitions with regard to tackling problems within a given framework of interorganizational relationships' (Kickert and Koppenjan 1997, p. 44). The major activities include intervening/restructuring network relations, joint problem solving and negotiating integrative strategies. Game management strategies such as brokering and facilitation are much in evidence. O'Toole *et al.* (1997) highlight the demands of network management at different phases of the policy-making process. Although there may be similarities with other stages, they suggest that the implementation phase is characterized by managing across and through different functional networks; working in a multi-party and multi-level environment and understanding the complexity of assembling all the pieces of the implementation jigsaw. This entails a very focused and problem-solving mode of engagement.

Some models of inter-organizational relationships present a typology of different structural forms (Alter and Hage 1993) and others visualize this

type of activity unidimensionally along a continuum of varying degrees of sophistication from co-operation to collaboration, reflecting the changes in the intensity of the interaction and the magnitude of the reconfiguration of power relationships (Taylor 2000; Mattesich and Monsey 1994; Hudson 1998; Pratt *et al.* 1999).

Much of the research focus on inter-organizational relations is on motives, contingencies and structures and less on processes. An exception to this is theories that map joint working in terms of a sequence of defined stages or phases. Gray (1989) proposes a 3-stage model – problem setting, direction setting and implementation – using this approach, and Lowndes and Skelcher (1998) refer to a four-stage life cycle of partnerships. Ring and Van de Ven (1994) propose a cyclical model of network development that emphasizes socio-psychological factors as much as managerial proficiencies. It may be that a different set of boundary spanning skills and styles are appropriate for different stages as is suggested by Snow and Thomas (1993) with phase-specific broker roles. A final approach centres on the identification of particular factors, barriers or conditions that are influential in determining the success or failure of collaborative encounters – critical performance factors such as shared vision, communication, teamwork and so on. Huxham and Vangen (1999) prefer to concentrate on the key themes in collaborative practice such as trust, leadership, accountability and power, some of which are process-orientated and others that are structural in nature such as ambiguity, complexity and dynamics.

PROFILING BOUNDARY SPANNERS

The literature on boundary spanners is by no means extensive or consolidated. However, it is possible to identify a number of themes and perspectives that permeate the research that is available from a number of different disciplines and traditions.

The boundary spanner as reticulist

Friend *et al.* (1974) identify a cluster of reticulist or networking skills and judgements and emphasize the importance of cultivating inter-personal relationships, communication, political skills and an appreciation of the interdependencies around the structure of problems and their potential solutions. Webb refers to individuals ‘who are especially sensitive to and skilled in bridging interests, professions and organizations’ (Webb 1991, p. 231), and Degeling (1995) sees reticulists as ‘entrepreneurs of power’ who understand coupling, interdependencies and fissures in strategically located players. Trist visualizes them as facilitating communication over ‘social ground rather than between institutionalised figures’ (Trist 1983, p. 280), although a knowledge of how to operate within the formal organizational system is equally essential. One report refers to ‘special’ people in networks who play a role in ‘bringing unlikely partners together, in breaking through red tape, and seeing things in a different way’ (LGMB 1997, p. 10).

Hosking and Morley (1991) summarize the functions of networking as gaining information, achieving influence to help implement the actor's agenda and to exchange with others, co-operation and resources. Effective networking enables a boundary spanner to understand the social constructions of other actors, and how they 'define the issue in relation to their own values and interests, knows what "outcomes" and processes each would value, knows who needs to be involved, knows who could mobilize influence, and so on' (Hoskins and Morley 1991, p. 228). It is the basis for successful negotiation.

Networking takes place through inter-personal relationships and this can result in a blurring of professional and personal relationships. Some research (LGMB 1997; Ring and Van de Ven 1994) views this process of social bonding as a positive feature in terms of sharing values, gaining trust and so on. An opposite view (LGMB 1997) warns of the potential downside of informality and an over-reliance on personal relationships, the tensions of multiple accountabilities, the inherent fragility of personal relationships and the negative effects of the formation of cliques.

The boundary spanner as entrepreneur and innovator

Complex public policy problems tend not to be amenable to tired traditional or conventional approaches. Their resolution demands new ideas, creativity, lateral thinking and an 'unlearning' of professional and organizational conventions and norms. The entrepreneurial and innovative capacities of boundary spanners are emphasized by Challis (1988) who highlights the defining characteristic of flexibility, and Leadbeater and Goss who refer to 'civic entrepreneurs' as 'creative, lateral thinking rule-breakers who frequently combine a capacity for visionary thinking with an appetite for opportunism' (Leadbeater and Goss 1998, p. 15). Similarly, deLeon evokes the image of public entrepreneurs as mavericks or 'catalysts who bring together problems and solutions that otherwise would bubble chaotically in the conventional currents of modern policy streams' (deLeon 1996, p. 508). Kingdon (1984), also, underlines the importance of 'policy entrepreneurs' who are skilled at coupling problems, policies and politics, particularly opportunistically in response to opening 'policy windows'.

The boundary spanner and otherness

Boundary spanners are characterized by their ability to engage with others and deploy effective relational and interpersonal competencies. This is motivated by a need to acquire an understanding of people and organizations outside their own circles – to acknowledge and value difference in terms of culture, mind-set, profession, role and 'gaze'. Trevillion views boundary spanners as 'cultural brokers' who need to understand others' organization and to 'make a real effort to empathize with, and respect others' values and perspectives' (Trevillion 1991, p. 50); Engel concludes that, because much interorganizational activity takes place in teams, the people

involved need to practice empathy and that 'communication underpins and permeates the entire construct of capability for collaboration' (Engel 1994, p. 71); and Hornby alights on the notion of 'reciprocity' which she considers is manifested 'in respect and concern for the individual, gives value to mutual understanding and the building of mutual trust' (Hornby 1993, p. 160). The dynamics and dilemmas of support relationships in boundary management is considered to be a difficult because boundary spanners 'must be adept at breaking down boundaries between themselves and recipients to listen empathetically and build trust; they also need to enforce boundaries to protect themselves from enmeshment with the recipient's problems' (Bacharach *et al.*, 2000, p. 706). This is a balancing act between inclusion and separation, dependence and autonomy.

The boundary spanner and trust

Trust is often isolated as one of the most important factors to influence the course of interorganizational relations. Webb is forthright in his assertion that 'trust is pivotal to collaboration. Attitudes of mistrust and suspicion are a primary barrier to co-operation between organizations and professional boundaries: collaborative behaviour is hardly conceivable where trusting attitudes are absent' (Webb 1991, p. 237), and 'trust is thought to be a more appropriate mechanism for controlling organizational life than hierarchical power' (Sydow 1998, p. 31). It is a highly contested notion that is the subject of a substantial body of theory from a variety of disciplines (Giddens 1991; Lane 1998; Boon 1994; Lewicki and Bunker 1996; Cummings and Bromily 1996; Das and Teng 2001).

Various models of trust implicate the concept with faith, predictability, goodwill and risk taking. Others suggest that it can be derived from calculation, value and norms or common cognition. Bachmann (2001) refers to trust as a mechanism for coping with uncertainty and complexity, and there are theories that position trust at both a personal and system level. Bachmann (2001) is also anxious to stress the relationship between trust and control, both being mechanisms for co-ordinating social interactions. Similarly, Hardy *et al.* distinguish between real and simulated trust, and attempt to disentangle the two heavily loaded notions of trust and power. They suggest that most functional interpretations of trust 'ignore the fact that power can be hidden behind a façade of "trust" and a rhetoric of "collaboration" and can be used to promote vested interests through the manipulation and capitulation of weaker parties' (Hardy *et al.* 1998, p. 65). Newell and Swan (2000) submit that different types of trust interrelate in particular ways depending on the motives holding actors together in a network. Lastly, from a practical point of view, there is an important question to be resolved in relation to the building and sustaining of trust. Vangen and Huxham single out expectation forming and risk taking as the main determinants of a model that envisages a cyclic process because 'each time partners act together they take a risk and form expectations about the intended

outcome and the way others will contribute to achieving it. Each time an outcome meets expectations, trusting attitudes are reinforced. The outcome becomes part of the history of the relationship, so increasing the chance that partners will have positive expectations about joint actions in the future' (Vangen and Huxham 1998, p. 8).

The boundary spanner and personality

The literature is peppered with innumerable references to the personalities, character, traits and disposition of boundary spanners. There are suggestions that they are personable, respectful, reliable, tolerant, diplomatic, caring and committed – to name but a few. Failtough (1994) writes that 'diplomacy, tact, dispassionate analysis, passionate sincerity, scrupulous honesty; the boundary spanner needs an impossible string of virtues', and Beresford and Trevillion (1995) consider that collaborative values to be characterized by honesty, commitment and reliability. The proposition is, perhaps, that good collaborative behaviour is a function of particular personal attributes – an assumption that is grounded in the personality school of thought which argues that people are different because of defining characteristics, personalities or temperaments (Eysenck 1994).

Unfortunately, trait theories are found to be poor predictors of behaviour, and a second school of thought associated with cognitive psychology interprets individual differences in terms of different cognitive styles and processes (Brunas-Wagstaff 1998). The significance of personality remains a highly contested intellectual domain and the question, 'is an effective boundary spanner born and not bred', will continue to attract keen debate.

The boundary spanner as leader

The boundary spanning challenge impinges significantly on leadership styles. Luke (1998) offers a critical comparison of leadership styles between traditional and collaboratively inclined organizations and this is illustrated in table 2. The sovereign and charismatic leader, who enthuses firm and

TABLE 2 *Contrasts between modern and postmodern styles of leadership (after Luke 1998)*

Modern leadership	Postmodern leadership
Hierarchical Evokes followership Takes charge; seizes the reins of an organization Takes responsibility for moving followers in certain directions	Non hierarchical and inter-organizational Evokes collaboration and concerted action Provides the necessary catalyst or spark for action Takes responsibility for convening stakeholders and facilitates agreements for collective action
Heroic; provides the right answers Has a stake in a particular solution or strategy	Facilitative; asks the right questions Has a stake in getting to agreed-upon outcomes, but encourages divergent ways to reach them.

directive leadership, is sharply contrasted with a more facilitative and catalytic approach displayed by leaders in partnership arenas. He identifies certain foundational skills that are essential for 'catalytic leaders' – these are thinking and acting strategically, interpersonal skills for facilitating a productive working group or network, and underlying character. Kanter (1995), also, profiles cosmopolitan leaders of the future as integrators, diplomats, cross-fertilizers and deep-thinkers.

The preoccupation of the New Labour government in Britain, with joined-up approaches to policy making, has spawned a number of reports and studies that refer to individual skills and competencies. One government report concludes that civil servants need to be better at working across organizational boundaries and 'alter their mindsets from a culture of tribal competitiveness to one of partnership' (Cabinet Office 2000, p. 42). This report also advocates the promotion of 'culture-breakers' to act as catalysts for cross-cutting behaviour. Another report judges that in local government 'new skills and capacities are essential, particularly strategic capacities, and skills in listening, negotiation, leadership through influence, partnership working, performance management and evaluation' (DETR, 2000, p. 7). Capacity building is considered to be especially important, as are brokering, networking, resource packaging and building trust. Finally, Jupp (2000) addresses the neglected issue of training and development in partnership working. He notes that, traditionally, management training is concentrated around managing in hierarchical situations and more recently, in managing contracts. In contrast, the emphasis should now move to developing key partnership skills such as brokerage, facilitation, negotiation and co-ordination and project management.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

New empirical research has been undertaken by the author to explore the management of interdependencies inherent in collaborative and networked forms of governance. This research set out to identify, describe, categorize and understand boundary spanning competencies and effective collaborative behaviour. The fieldwork and data collection consists of two interconnected phases (table 3). Phase 1 is directed to an initial identification and categorization of boundary spanning competencies together with a short attitudinal investigation. The concept of 'competency', which is often used promiscuously (Sandberg 2000), in this context, is taken to mean, 'an underlying characteristic of a person in that it may be a motive, trait, skill, aspect of one's self-image or social role, or a body of knowledge which he or she uses' (Boyatzis 1982, p. 21).

To start with, surveys of three types of boundary spanner operating in different policy areas – health promotion specialists, crime and community safety co-ordinators and environmental and local agenda 21 co-ordinators – were undertaken using postal questionnaires. They were selected opportunistically through personal contact between the author and three national

TABLE 3 *Details of fieldwork*

	Phase 1			Phase 2
Geographical area	UK	Wales	Wales	Welsh local authority area
Sample	Environmental & local Agenda 21 co-ordinators	Crime & community safety co-ordinators	Health promotion specialists	Partnership managers
Type of organization	Local authority	Local authority	Health authority and NHS Trust	Local authority; Health authority; NHS Trust; Police; Voluntary sector; Probation service; Youth offending partnership
Research method	Postal survey	Postal survey	Postal survey	In-depth interviews
Sampling method	Opportunistic	Opportunistic	Opportunistic	Snowball
Sample size	469	22	10	15
Response rate (%)	50	54	100	100

networks. This enabled effective access to individual contacts and a potentially enhanced response rate. The policy framework and institutional contexts for all three samples was comparable, involving managing across traditional boundaries and tackling complex problems within a variety of multi-agency initiatives.

Phase 2 sharpened the focus of the research with a more intensive exploration and understanding of the potential determinants of effective boundary spanning framed within a particular geographical area. The area selected was a unitary local authority in South Wales within which a variety of different agencies were collaborating across a range of policy areas. The policy and governmental context was broadly similar to that in other local authority areas throughout the UK where partnership working is high on the political agenda. A sample of boundary spanners operating at a strategic level was chosen for interview using personal contacts in the study area to identify the main actors managing in multi-agency partnerships addressing key problem areas – health, social care, crime and young people. The findings from Phase 1 were used to inform the topic guide for a series of in-depth and semi-structured interviews. Topics covered included motivations for partnership working; the management of boundary spanning roles; personal skills and competencies for collaborative working; evidencing effectiveness through critical incidents; barriers and problems in cross-boundary activity; and training and development.

THE ART OF BOUNDARY SPANNING

The research findings indicate that, as far as boundary spanners are concerned, there are a number of key factors and influences implicated in effec-

tive collaborative working, and they involve the use of particular skills, abilities, experience and personal characteristics. It is particularly evident, also, that there is considerable overlap and interdependency between the various factors and individual variables, and typically, they are deployed in different permutations depending on particular circumstances.

Building sustainable relationships

A necessary part of interorganizational working involves building and sustaining effective personal relationships. Collaborative encounters involve the management of difference. People from a variety of organizational, professional and social backgrounds assemble to pursue mutually beneficial agendas, and this demands an investment in time to forge an effective working relationship and a readiness to visualize reality from the perspective of others. The development of interpersonal relationships is part of a process of exploration, discovery and understanding of people and the organizations they represent – a search for knowledge about roles, responsibilities, problems, accountabilities, cultures, professional norms and standards, aspirations and underlying values. The quality of this information is invaluable in allowing boundary spanners to identify potential areas of communality and interdependency. The medium for this process of enquiry and knowledge exchange is the quality and durability of personal relationships. The respondents to the research draw particular attention to a number of factors in this process.

Communicating and listening

The value of basic and effective oral, written and presentational communication skills cannot be overestimated. The ability to express oneself, and one's position with clarity, is considered to be essential, as is the choice and use of language. The problem associated with the use and interpretation of 'professional' languages and jargon is recognized as an area in need of sensitive management in order not to undermine, patronize, mislead or give offence to others. The search for shared meanings is particularly acute in partnership arenas. Communication is also a two-way process and receiving information – listening – is considered as important as information giving. References are made to 'active listening' which is expressed as a willingness or openness to be influenced by the views of other people.

Understanding, empathizing and resolving conflict

Relationship building is described as a process that occurs over time – an interaction that seeks to illuminate the perspectives, roles, problems, priorities, motivations, styles and values of prospective partners. One view is that this must involve a balance between how much to invest in the personal as opposed to the strictly work relationship. Time is clearly a significant factor here, as is regular exposure to, and engagement with, partners. It is also felt that a state of understanding can proceed to a higher, and potentially more rewarding level, the condition known as empathy. How-

ever, it is accepted that, notwithstanding the potential benefits of this end state, a working relationship can still be maintained at a lower level of 'understanding'. The acid test of a robust relationship is considered to be the ability to manage conflict and criticism – the potential to disagree and fallout, but a willingness to move on without harming the relationship.

Personality

The conversations with boundary spanners around building and sustaining relationships inevitably invite references to defining personality traits, characteristics and personal values. Respect, honesty, openness, tolerance, approachability, reliability, sensitivity and many others are viewed as desirable qualities, and the 'best' boundary spanners are considered to be those with an easy and inviting personality, particularly those who are able to divest themselves of their organizational and professional baggage.

Trust

Not surprisingly, trust is raised as a key variable within exchange relationships, acting as a kind of currency or lubricant. The study confirms the conclusion of the literature review that the notion has no universally agreed meaning and, moreover, is often taken for granted and internalized. However, there is consensus that trust must underpin effective relationships at both an individual and organizational level. A number of meanings are attributed to the notion, including that it entails a reciprocal risk-taking involving the giving and receiving of information not widely accessible in the public domain. The risk is, that if the person entrusted with this information misuses it, then some harm could befall the informant. It is conceptualized as a process of 'opening-up' or exposing oneself, and of dependency testing. If it passes the tests of reliability, delivering on promises, not being underhand and being honest, the relationship moves on to a possibly more enduring state of 'deep trust'. This description of trust is very indicative of the calculative model referred to in the literature. Other comments suggest that individuals approach trust in one of two ways. Either by assuming that people are trustworthy from the outset and proceeding accordingly or, believing that people are naturally guarded and even devious, and testing whether this proves to be a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Trust is considered essentially to be a condition that is constituted in the relationship between individuals, although by implication and on the basis of the aggregated behaviour of individuals representing it, organizations can acquire a reputation for being more or less trustworthy. This evidences the difficulty of disentangling personal from institutionalized forms of trust.

Managing through influencing and negotiation

Collaborative environments are characterized by power relationships that are more contested and dispersed than is often the case in traditional bureaucracies where power, authority and control over resources are often

exercised by individuals drawing on their position and status in the hierarchy. There is an acute awareness amongst the boundary spanners interviewed that they lack direct lines of authority over other partners, and the atmosphere of interorganizational working needs to be set within decision-making models that are premised on consensus, equality and win-win solutions. The skills needed to be effective in these arenas are felt to be influencing, bargaining, negotiation, mediation and brokering.

Influencing is about being persuasive and diplomatic; always being constructive and non-judgemental; leading on some occasions but facilitating in others; and of being acutely aware of the political and personal sensibilities surrounding exchanges. The potential for effective influencing stems from the nature and robustness of personal relationships, and the dynamics often change depending upon whether the encounters are dyadic or in groups, private or in public. Collaboration involves a great deal of negotiation – over aims, funding proposals, operational programmes, priorities, resource allocation and so on. It is seen by a number of survey respondents as a process that is both convoluted and very time consuming, particularly in collectives involving a number of partners. Effective boundary spanners can expect to enter such arenas having to compromise and make careful judgements about the balance between benefits and disbenefits for themselves and other organizations. It is a far from altruistic exercise and needs to be ‘hard-nosed’, particularly around detailed operational, contractual, financial and delivery considerations as they impact on individual organizations.

A skill that frequently appears in the conversations with the interviewees is the ability to successfully broker solutions or deals between a number of different parties. This requires considerable expertise in influencing and negotiation, but also the perceived legitimacy to act objectively and openly for others – the honest broker role. Brokering effective deals epitomizes, perhaps, the essence of a successful boundary spanner as it depends on the employment of a range of competencies and skills – an acute understanding of interdependencies between problems, solutions and organizations; an interpersonal style that is facilitating, respectful and trusting; and a drive to devise solutions that make a difference to solving problems on the ground.

Networking

Partnership environments are characterized by networked forms of governance and, certainly, networking is the predominant *modus operandi* of choice of the boundary spanner. Within the particular interorganizational domain studied, there is a well-developed network of key ‘movers and shakers’ – primary nodes in the network – which make partnerships work. It consists of a reservoir of people active at a strategic level, representing different agencies and organizations who are referred to as ‘the usual suspects’ because of their appearance on many different partnerships. This has considerable advantages in terms of the accumulated investment of inter-

personal relationships and social capital. There are clear benefits of being a member of an interorganizational network, including being at the leading edge of information, having access to new ideas, gossip and happenings in other sectors, professions and organizations, and being able to seek support from and influence people in other organizations. A network offers members the benefit of 'being in the loop' for information of all sorts, about emerging resource opportunities, changing government priorities, impending changes, potential scandals, new needs – the raw material for constructing a joined-up agenda.

Networking occurs at and around meetings, but is most effectively undertaken outside formal decision-making structures, especially in conversations. There is a general view that the 'real' business of partnership work is effected within the framework of these personal exchanges. It is where difficulties are shared, aims agreed, problems sorted out, deals struck and promises made – all out of the public gaze. Crucially, this is where interorganizational imperatives are translated into the organizational realities of individual participants, and where the progress of formal events are mapped out in advance and choreographed.

The extent to which networking involves the blurring of professional and personal boundaries is contested. One view is that a strictly professional relationship is perfectly tenable, but another argues that a more personal relationship will increase the potential, quality and richness of the interchange. The dangers of tight and exclusive networks are recognized, particularly in terms of their potential to become institutionalized through processes of group normalization and shared values leading to 'blindness' in certain areas. Questions are also raised about the inherent fragility of networks that are reliant on personal relationships, and the problems encountered when key boundary spanners are removed from a network as a result of a job shift or breakdown in relationships.

Managing complexity and interdependencies

The interviews with boundary spanners confirm that interorganizational management is a highly complex business. In addition to dealing with often-disparate bodies of technical knowledge and professional expertise, actors are faced with making sense of the structure and process of collaboration. This demands an appreciation of connections and interrelationships which are manifested in different ways at different stages in the partnership process. At the planning and formulation stage, the relevant links involve partner search, problem diagnosis, defining roles and responsibilities, negotiating goals and developing cross-cutting agendas; at the implementation and delivery stage, they are about contracts, agreements, protocols and budgeting; and at the evaluation stage, they involve joint accountabilities and the measuring of outcomes. Although the boundary spanners interviewed operate primarily at a strategic level, they are acutely aware of the need to cross the boundary between strategy and implementation, to ensure

that policy intentions are translated into problem solving on the ground. In fact, most profess a commitment to achieving real change in the face of difficult problems and issues.

The study isolates three main contributory factors to an ability to manage interdependencies – interorganizational experience, transdisciplinary knowledge and cognitive capability. The value of accumulated ‘on-the-job’ interorganizational experience is considered to be possibly the main source of understanding. It is the constant exposure to others that enables an understanding of their viewpoints, constraints, cultures, working practices and so on to be stored. Also highly regarded is a track record of employment in different types of organization and sector. The belief is that experience of different cultures, ways of working, roles and responsibilities and past networks – insider knowledge – is invaluable for both making connections and understanding the motivations, mind-sets and behaviours of colleagues in partner agencies.

On the question of technical knowledge, there is a view that boundary spanners need to be knowledgeable in one area of expertise to act as a kind of passport of legitimacy for engaging with people from other organizations – harnessing the power that is associated with knowledge. Another view is that boundary spanners need to be ‘a jack of all trades and master of none’. It is suggested that the best boundary spanners do not have a conventional professional or career profile, are less constrained by the attendant baggage, and are not perceived as direct threats to the status of the more professionally grounded practitioners of this art. Numerous references are made to the desirability of having ‘analytical ability’, ‘being able to think laterally’, ‘taking a holistic view’, ‘understanding the big picture’ and of ‘strategic thinking’. Whether these abilities are rooted in experience or a function of a particular cognitive style is a matter of debate.

The ability to be creative, innovative and entrepreneurial is important in joint working environments, particularly where the design of effective solutions to complex problems, the skillful negotiation of sustainable partnership agreements involving a number of different agencies, and the mobilization of resource packages is needed. Interviewees highlight the value of opportunism as well as the ability to collaboratively fashion new solutions to previously intractable problems. In addition, the successful mobilization or leveraging-in of resources is considered to evidence well-developed entrepreneurial skills. A powerful image of Kingdon’s (1974) ‘policy entrepreneurs’ is invoked by a number of respondents who are adept at coupling solutions to problems, and of often being ahead of the agenda with ‘Blue Peter’ solutions already prepared in anticipation of future political/resource opportunities or opening ‘policy windows’.

Managing roles, accountabilities and motivations

Boundary spanners are acutely conscious of the configuration of roles and responsibilities between agencies within an existing or emerging inter-

organizational domain, and appreciate the political and professional sensibilities that encompass them. This accumulated knowledge of 'who does what' is vital in the management of partnerships and provides the basis on which potential connections and interrelationships can be identified and explored, both at the strategy formulation stage and for detailed operational programming.

The management of multiple accountabilities is viewed as an area of tension that requires delicate judgement. Boundary spanners are particularly confronted with the accountability interface between their role as organizational representative and that of partner in a multi-agency environment. These accountabilities may be conflicting at times and the situation may be confounded by perceived accountabilities to service users or deep-rooted value systems such as the public service ethos. Boundary spanners interviewed in the survey are adamant about the first call on their responsibility – that is, to their employing organization. However, it is felt that the way in which this is discharged needs to recognize the other sources of accountability. A poor partner is perceived as one who slavishly or dogmatically ploughs a representative furrow in partnership arenas and, irritatingly, has to 'report back' everything to the home organization. Conversely, the more effective partners are those who are empowered, within certain negotiated parameters, to engage constructively with other partners. They have a feel for what may or may not be acceptable to their home organizations and are ready to play the partnership game. Understanding the parameters and constraints of each partner is considered to be highly important.

The interorganizational relations' literature offers a number of explanations to the triggers for partnership working, and some of these resonate well with the individual motivations that are expressed by people in the survey. I conceptualize these as hegemony, resource opportunity and mandate. Collaboration as hegemony embraces the view that interorganizational working is the only way for dealing with complex and interrelated problems that cross artificially created administrative and jurisdictional boundaries. It is the most effective and efficient way of using an organization's resources, avoids duplication and overlaps, and can produce synergistic outcomes that can only be achieved through 'whole-systems' approaches. This model of collaboration also includes the deep-rooted motivation expressed by some boundary spanners of a commitment to service users or citizens as the basis for service delivery – as opposed to approaches based on the convenience of existing bureaucratic structures and administrative arrangements.

Collaboration as resource opportunity reflects the resource exchange model in which organizations seek to work in partnership in order to realize their own internal goals through accessing resources from other organizations. This practice is certainly increasing outside the sphere of 'natural partnerships' with the advent of more cross-cutting issues. The third source of collaborative motivation is mandated. Central government is committed

to the concept of interorganizational working and is anxious to encourage, persuade, empower or coerce all organizations, particularly in other tiers of governance, to be similarly committed. New legislation, advice, guidance, funding regimes and initiatives are geared to partnership working. The problem occurs where coercion and prescription conceals the true motivations of individuals and organizations. The rhetoric of collaboration may be fuelled but insincere; convenient or fragile relationships may result.

CONCLUSION

It is hoped that the value of this paper lies in the fact that it provides a much needed focus on the individual actor within the field of interorganizational relationships, while the strength of the empirical research lies in its attempt to build a framework of competency-based variables and factors that influence effective collaborative engagement, behaviour and management. The research reinforces many of the images that dominate the relational literature – the boundary spanner as network manager; the importance of building effective personal relationships with a wide range of other actors; the ability to manage in non-hierarchical decision environments through negotiation and brokering; and performing the role of 'policy entrepreneur' to connect problems to solutions, and mobilize resources and effort in the search for successful outcomes.

The empirical research also resonates with institutional level perspectives and theorizing on interorganizational relationships. The network metaphor is certainly a powerful integrating mechanism across all levels of analysis, and the micro-level ties identified by Ebers (1997) can be clearly seen – the management of expectations between actors through the medium of trust, and the ability of catalysts to cope with highly complex and ambiguous information. Individual motivations of boundary spanners, whether mandated or voluntary, have clear parallels with domain level perspectives, and there is an appreciation at the micro-level of the different phases in the collaborative process.

It is recognized that the research presented in this paper is by no means definitive and important questions remain unresolved. There needs to be more specific evidence to link the use of a particular set of competencies or collaborative behaviour to outcomes. The interorganizational literature is particularly poor in this area. It is comparatively strong on antecedents, motives and structures, but weak on processes and effectiveness. Methodologies that link competency to impact, performance and effectiveness need to be explored and developed, particularly in relation to comparisons with other forms of organizing. Although the boundary spanners involved in the research cover different policy areas, organizations and types of partnership, the research does not explore possible differences and contrasts. The role and behaviour of boundary spanners within different contextual and institutional situations needs further examination. Again, many partnerships typically proceed through various stages of development, and are

manifested at both a strategic and operational level. The skill demands of each of these phases, and the relationship between strategic and operational boundary spanners, represents an interesting avenue for further exploration. A deeper understanding of the dynamics of boundary spanners' interventions would also be an invaluable contribution. These and many other questions offer potentially rewarding pathways for future research.

Finally, there are practical benefits from this type of research. In the current British policy climate, which extols the virtues of partnership working, a clear recognition and understanding of effective boundary spanning capacities is essential to inform the training, development and education of current and potential practitioners. There is a current dearth of opportunities on collaborative working and this needs to be addressed as a matter of some urgency.

There is little doubt that 'the fashioning of collaborative relationships of substance is a job for talented practitioners' (Hudson 1993, p. 375) and much greater attention needs to be focused on their contribution within inter-organizational relationships than has been the case in the past. It is hoped that this paper will stimulate further research in this important aspect of public policy in the future.

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