

# **Special Agents: The Nature and Role of Boundary Spanners**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

This paper is a review of the literature on ‘boundary spanners’ – actors whose primary job responsibilities involve managing within multi-organizational and multi-sectoral arenas. It opens with a brief policy context and argues that the focus of both theoretical and empirical research into collaborative working tends to be pitched at organizational and institutional levels rather than at a micro-level and individual actors. The paper situates this argument within the structure/agency debate, before proceeding to critically examine the relevant literature on boundary spanners. This examination begins with the problems of definition and explores the question of who are the boundary spanners? Perspectives are included from both private and public sector contexts, and particular attention is paid to differentiating between ‘boundary spanners’ and ‘boundary spanning’. This is followed by a discussion on what boundary spanners do - what roles, functions and responsibilities they undertake – what, if any, particular skills, abilities and competencies are used in the course of their work, and how effective they are. A final section discusses the main themes to emerge from this review before concluding with some suggestions for future areas of research.

## **POLICY CONTEXT**

Intra and inter-sectoral collaboration between the public, private and independent sectors is an established feature of the governance of contemporary societies. The motivations to engage in this form of working are numerous and varied, including the desire to create synergy, transformation or budget enlargement (Mackintosh, 1992); risk reduction, economies of scale or technological exchange (Contractor and Lorange, 1988); and asymmetry, reciprocity, efficiency, stability or legitimacy (Oliver, 1990). Aiken and Hage (1968) consider that, basically, it involves organizations chasing resources, notably money, skills and manpower. In addition to voluntary interactions influenced by a mixture of internal and external influences, organizations in the public sector in the UK are subject to a heavily mandated and prescriptive agenda orchestrated by central government through statutory regulation and general exhortation.

A key driver of collaboration is the nature of the policy problems (Grint, 2005) facing society – the so-called ‘wicked issues’ (Rittel and Webber, 1973) that cross many types of boundary – organizational, professional, sectoral and generational. These cannot be contained within conventional jurisdictional or professional paradigms; are difficult to gain consensus upon because of a diversity of interests promoting different constructions of problem definition, cause and solution (Benford and Snow, 2000; Gray, 2003); and because they are intractable and not easily tamed. Child poverty, obesity, teenage pregnancy and low educational attainment remain as stubborn as ever, despite concerted UK government action across these policy areas; the list continues to grow, with new problems being added rather than existing ones being resolved and removed.

In this context, the case for collaborative working is compelling. It offers the potential to devise interventions that are not only superior in quality and innovation through the combined knowledge, expertise and resources of different agencies working together, but also facilitates the delivery of solutions through mechanisms and frameworks based on participation, ownership and stakeholder involvement. In the private sector, co-operative strategies are pursued as a means of securing competitive advantage. However, despite the attraction of collaborative working, it has been found to be both complex and problematic resulting in a high rate of failure in the private sector (Child *et al*, 2005; Hansen, 2009; Parise and Prusak, 2006). The situation is similar in the public sector and: “partnership is seen, generally as ‘a good thing’ although very little empirical work has been done to justify either the claim that policies in the past failed because of a lack of partnership or that new partnership arrangements have demonstrably improved outcomes” (Ling, 2000:82).

Efforts to understand how and why collaboration works have been a preoccupation of both academics and policy makers. There is a diverse literature characterised by “a cacophony of heterogeneous concepts, theories, and research results” (Oliver and Ebers, 1998:549), and if, indeed, a disciplinary bias exists, Grandori (1997) detects the prevalence of economic and sociological macro-analytical approaches to the subject. A defining characteristic of this literature is that it favours an organizational and institutional focus to the neglect of a micro-

level examination. This conclusion is reached by academics working in different sectors. Referring to the private sector, Hutt *et al* (2000:51) comment that: “while these personal relationships between ‘boundary spanning members’, who work closely together, serve to shape and modify the evolving partnership, economic theories of exchange virtually ignore the role of people and their importance in the management of interorganizational relations. Surprisingly, human or people factors appear to have remained unconsidered or, at worst, dismissed, in the alliance research tradition”; in relation to public private partnerships, Noble *et al* (2006:891) argue that: “the PPP literature is dominated by institutional and organizational level discourses to the detriment of analyses of the dynamic role of individual actors in the management of this form of inter-organizational relationship”; and in relation to the public sector, Williams (2002:106) affirms that: “the fixation at the inter-organizational domain level understates and neglects the pivotal contribution of individual actors in the collaboration process”.

The need to search for a better balance between macro and micro level explanations and perspectives is supported by numerous commentators as evidenced by the following views:

- “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, 1993:3)
- “the evidence is that joined up delivery has occurred extensively but in an ad hoc, almost accidental manner dependent on the energy and imagination of individuals” (DTLR, 2002:125)
- “the thing that makes it work in any type of structure is the commitment of the person – structures can be enabling or difficult” (NLIAH, 2009)
- “alliance managers play key roles in nurturing relationships with partners. Because of this, establishing the position of alliance manager has become the single most common step that companies take to improve the performance of their alliances” (Bamford *et al*, 2003: 202)

These contributions underscore a central theme of this paper namely that the role of agency needs much more attention, analysis and research within collaboration than hitherto has been the case.

## **STRUCTURE AND AGENCY**

The assertion that there is an imbalance between theory and research at organizational and institutional levels as opposed to the study of individual actors in the literature on collaboration needs to be framed within the traditional structure-agency debate (Hay, 1995) which is not just an academic issue but is: “an ‘everyday’ issue, which deals with the fundamental question of to what extent we, as individuals, have the ability to direct our lives in the face of sometimes enormous constraints” (McAnulla, 2002:291). The essence of the debate concerns the position that structuralists adopt believing that social, political and economic outcomes can be explained by ‘structure’ relating to form, function, context and setting, as opposed to intentionalists or behaviouralists who argue that agency is the determining factor defined as the “ability or capacity of actors to act consciously...and to realise his/her intentions” (Hay, 1995).

This debate is highly polarised and arguably falsely set up as ‘oppositional’. Alternative approaches are posited by Giddens (1984) who refers to a duality of structure, considering that the interplay between structure and agency is more dynamic, and emphasizing the mutually important processes involved where “individual actors carry out practices that are simultaneously constrained and empowered by existing social structure” (Scott, 2001:75); and Jessop (1996) who takes a strategic-relational approach avoiding the dualism of structure and agency and focusing on the interaction between strategic actors and the strategic context.

Marchington and Vincent (2004) take a pragmatic view by arguing that interorganizational relationships involves “an *interplay of forces*” at different levels (institutional, organizational and interpersonal, and Williams and Sullivan (2009) take the position that whilst actors manufacture outcomes, the parameters of their capacity to act – the constraints and opportunities – is set by the structured context within which they operate. Martin et al (2009)

reach a similar conclusion in their exploration of leadership within public service networks arguing that structure provides the ‘space’ for individual actors to perform and that the relationship between structure and agency is synergistic.

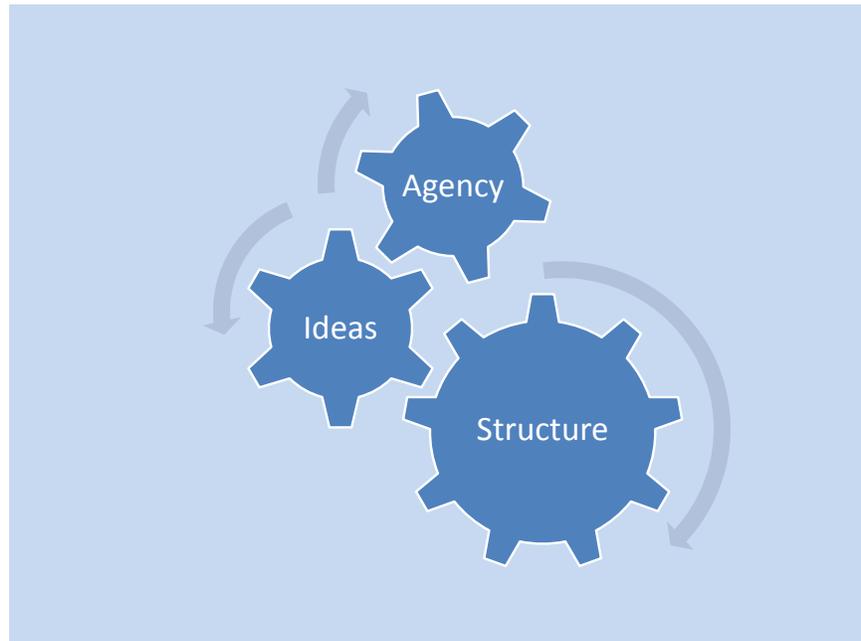


Figure 1: The interlocking forces of structure, agency and ideas

Although structural and agential factors can be used to explain social, economic and political outcomes, some argue (Hay, 2002) that ideational factors also have a significant role to play because actors, in the absence of perfect information, have to interpret the dense and complex world in which they act (Figure 1). This process of interpretation, through processes of framing (Benford and Snow, 2000) and sensemaking Weick (1995), involve the use of ‘cognitive short-cuts’ or lenses to conceptualise and understand the environment. As Emirbayer and Mische (1998:966) argue, agency rests: “in the interpretive processes whereby choices are imagined, evaluated, and contingently reconstructed by actors in ongoing dialogue with unfolding situations”. The formulation and choice of strategic alternatives is driven through interpretation, so enhancing the importance of ideas, narratives and policy paradigms: “the cognitive templates through which actors interpret the world” (Hay, 2002:212).

This line of argument also suggests that key actors – perhaps boundary spanners – are especially important because they can perform the role of ‘cognitive filter’, helping others to interpret the prevailing context. This resonates with Luke’s (1974) third face of power – the ability of certain actors to help shape the perceptions and preferences of others.

### **WHO ARE THE BOUNDARY SPANNERS?**

There is no escaping the lack of definitional clarity around the notion of ‘boundary spanners’ as is evidenced by the nomenclature that Leifer and Delbecq (1976) catalogue for actors operating in collaborative environments. Perhaps an effective way of searching for some clarity is through an initial differentiation between ‘boundary spanning’ and ‘boundary spanners’. Boundary spanning is a set of activities, processes and practices whereas boundary spanners are people who engage in boundary spanning. However, it may be argued that not everyone who engages in boundary spanning can be classed as a boundary spanner as this renders the term rather useless!

I suggest that there might be two types of boundary spanner. The first are individuals who have a dedicated job role or responsibility to work in multi-organizational/ multi-sectoral settings, and to ‘serve as a connection between different constituencies’ (Wenger, 1998). Examples of these in the public sector are crime and community safety co-ordinators, community strategy officers and partnership co-ordinators; and in the private sector, the alliance management staff and relationship managers involved in helping to make strategic alliances and joint ventures work effectively.

The second type of boundary spanners is those large numbers of Individuals (practitioners, managers and leaders) who undertake boundary spanning activities as part of a mainstream job role. The argument being that the type of policy problems facing society are increasingly complex and interrelated and an increasing proportion of jobs demand cross- boundary engagement. The notion of ‘collaborative public management’ and ‘collaborative public managers’ coined by O’Leary and Bingham (2009) encapsulate this interpretation. However, as alluded to above, if ‘we are all boundary spanners now’, does this render the notion somewhat

redundant, or should some limit be placed on the amount of time that a particular manager engages in boundary spanning activity to warrant being termed a boundary spanner? The situation is complicated by the notion of an internal boundary spanner (Wright, 2009) which refers to certain types of people who operate within organizations but cut across departmental, divisional or professional boundaries.

### **WHAT DO THEY DO AND HOW DO THEY DO IT?**

Early perspectives from organizational theory conceived the boundary spanning function as one of managing the interface between organizations and their environment. Katz and Kahn (1966) refer to this as the ‘export of services, ideas and products/import of materials and people into the system’; Adams (1976) identifies two main roles in this function, an information-processing or transmitter role, and an external representation or gatekeeping function; Aldrich (1979) conceives it as a process of ‘buffering, moderating and influencing external events’; and finally, Thompson (1967) suggests that it involves controlling threats from the environment. Boundary spanning is then seen as a job for ‘special people’ which are variously described as ‘organizational representative’ (Brown, 1983); ‘organizational liaison’ (Tushman, 1977); ‘foreign affairs person’ (Evan, 1971); and ‘internal communication stars’ (Tushman and Scanlan, 1981).

This version of boundary spanners does not do justice to their manifestation within inter-organizational and multi-sector environments where motivations do not centre on protecting/managing an organization and its environment, but involve working together for shared purposes and common goals, albeit in the private sector still driven by competitive advantage. Insights into the work of boundary spanners in predominantly public sector contexts are not extensive but have begun to be addressed by Williams (2002) and Noble and Jones (2006), and in the private sector in relation to the management of strategic alliances and joint ventures, there is a substantial body of literature on alliance management actors – the archetypal boundary spanners. Critically, there is little work on the comparisons and differences between the two sectors, although Noble and Jones’s (2006) work is framed within the context of public private partnerships.

### **Boundary Spanners in Alliances**

The management of alliances, joint ventures, partnerships and other forms of co-operatives strategies are often vested in dedicated individuals, operating individually or sometimes within defined alliance management units. The key functions of such a dedicated strategic alliance capability include, improving knowledge management, increasing external visibility, providing internal co-ordination’ and helping to eliminate accountability and intervention problems (Dyer *et al*, 2001). In the context of managing multiple alliances, Doz and Hamel (1998) refer to the role of the network manager as offering a focal point for communication and exchange, a watchdog for free riders, a central repository of information and member performance, and finally, a maintainer of behaviour norms. Child *et al* (2005) point to the importance of ‘intercultural boundary spanners’ within international joint ventures needing to bridge two different organizations or two or more people from different cultures.

A number of references are made to the existence of different stages in the alliance management life cycle with different roles requiring different alliance staff (dealmaker, launch manager, alliance chief, alliance operating staff, and corporate alliance manager). Bamford (2003:186) for instance asserts that: “an alliance lifestyle has seven distinct stages. The skill sets required from an alliance manager are different in each one of those stages – a visionary is called for at one stage and a facilitator at another”.

Particular attention is focused on the social aspects of alliance management and the pivotal role of personal relationships. Hutt *et al* (2002) refer to the social network of a strategic alliance and the need for boundary spanning to occur at multiple levels, top management, middle management and operational personnel. They emphasise the importance of interpersonal relationships being superimposed over a formal structure, and being able to expedite communication, conflict resolution and learning, build trust, speed decision making, and uncover new possibilities for partnership working. Communication is seen to be especially influential because it helps to produce a shared interpretation of goals and agreement on roles and norms. The role of personal relationships is a theme picked up by Adobor (2006) and he

suggests that although alliances often proceed through early, growth and maturity stages, the benefits of personal relationships are mostly realised in the early stages, and the dysfunctions of personal ties are more likely in later stages. He provides a balanced view of the advantages and disadvantages of personal ties. The main advantages include speeding up alliance formation process, reducing relational risk, building and strengthening trust, and helping to reduce uncertainty, as against the disadvantages of conflict of interest, pursuit of self-interest and escalating commitment to a course of action, the fate of an alliance being tied to personal relationships, and the possibility of increased agency and transaction costs of the relationship.

The development of trust is central to the maintenance of effective inter-personal relationships and Perrone *et al* (2003:435) make the interesting point that boundary spanners should be given space to develop this. They argue that: “boundary spanners with greater autonomy to manage interorganizational relations are better able to cultivate trust from their counterparts. Freed from the constraint of strictly adhering to rigid rules and requirements of their own organizations, boundary-spanning agents have greater latitude in upholding commitments to partner organizations and fulfilling the positive expectations of their representatives”. The critical point here is that trust is considered to be meaningful if it is allowed to develop as a result of a person’s freewill rather than an expectation of a job role. However, Zaheer *et al* (1998) believe that interorganizational trust is more important than interpersonal trust in driving exchange performance between firms and managing negotiation and conflict. But, in the context of the structure/agency debate, they conclude that interpersonal trust may also matter through its institutionalising effects on interorganizational trust.

The life of boundary spanning agents within collaborative settings is often the subject of considerable tension and ambiguity because of the problems associated with managing without power, preventing opportunistic behaviour by partner firms, and maintaining a balance in accountability between partnerships and their host organizations. Mohr and Speckman (1994:148) comment that: “such a wilful abdication of control (and autonomy) does not come easily but appears to be a necessary managerial requirement for the future”. Managing in this

type of environment can be seen to demand a particular set of skills and abilities. Bamford (2003) refer to the following skills in alliance management: threshold (self-confidence; inspiring others; innovative; respectful); distinguishing (depth and breadth of internal and external networks; trust); high performance (credibility; articulating mutual benefits); and Child *et al* (2005) consider the following to be the most important: effective communication, adaptability, ability to function in fluid conditions and to cope with ambiguity and personal stress, capacity to work in and manage teams of diverse membership, relationship and negotiation skills, ability to work with people over whom they have no direct authority, and capacity to build trust. Whether these skills and competencies are different from those required within organizations is a matter of keen discussion.

### Boundary Spanners in the Public Sector

Williams (2002) identifies a number of key aspects of the boundary spanning role in the work of a range of boundary spanners in the UK public sector (Figure 2), including reticulist, entrepreneur and interpreter/communicator, with each of these elements having a number of associated key competencies (defined as skills, abilities, knowledge and experience).

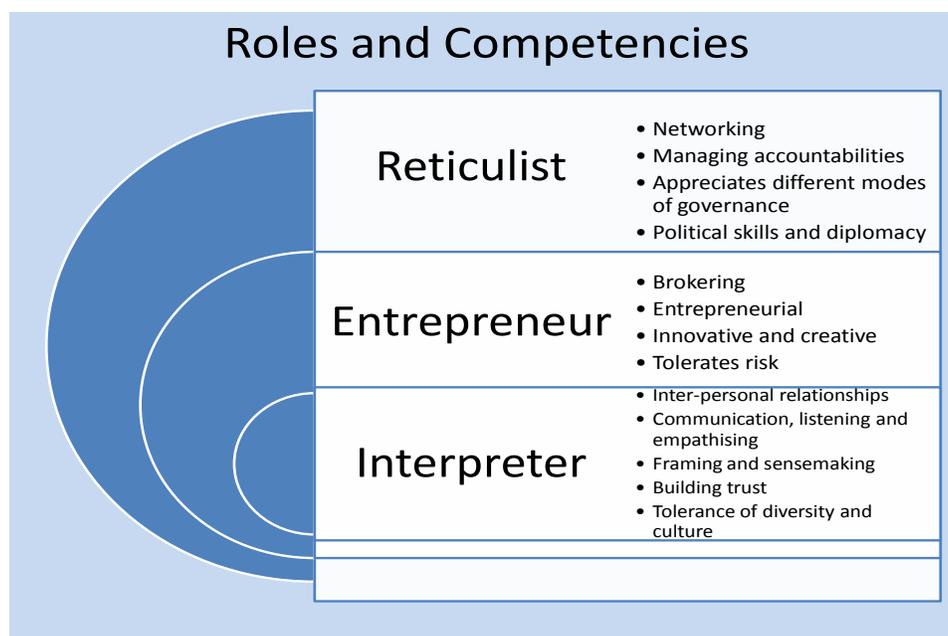


Figure 2: Roles and Competencies for Boundary Spanners

Critically, the research highlights a high degree of connectivity and interplay between the various elements and competencies, indicating that, in practice, they are deployed differently depending on the circumstances presented.

### **Reticulist**

One of the dominant themes in the literature on boundary spanners is that of a reticulist. Friend *et al* (1974) refer to the need for reticulist or networking judgments to be made in activating, fashioning, re-fashioning or creating decision networks to address a particular decision area. These judgments, which are fraught with tension because they are bound up in personal, professional and organizational concerns, depend on the cultivation of reticulist skills, including: an appreciation of problem structure and the political and organizational context within which it is grounded; an understanding of current and future patterns of interdependencies; and a keen awareness of the structure of both formal and informal relationships and roles of the actors involved, together with the costs and benefits of particular actions for each. A fundamental prerequisite for the effective reticulist is an ability to cultivate a network of personal relationships that, although designed to achieve professional or organizational goals, will be “guided by other motives at the more personal level such as the desire to be liked or esteemed by his associates” (Friend et al, 1974:365). In addition to these, reticulists are expected: to deploy political skills which “must include a sure grasp of modes of behaviour relevant to different types of relationship between agencies and between actors” (Friend et al, 1974:367); to appreciate when to engage in bargaining, persuasive or confrontational modes of behaviour; and to adopt the ‘mixed scanning’ approach associated with Etzioni (1967), knowing how to move “between different levels of strategic and tactical exploration so as to develop an appreciation of how one influences the other” (Friend et al, 1974:365). Rhodes (1999) makes the connection with the old-fashioned virtues of diplomacy and the arts of negotiation and persuasion.

Reticulists are defined as “individuals who are especially sensitive to and skilled in bridging interests, professions and organizations” (Webb, 1991:231), with reticulist roles, in terms of

joint opportunities and liaison posts, being of particular value in that “they give concrete substance to abstract statements of goodwill and foster a sense of shared fate, as well as facilitate communication” (Webb, 1991:239). Hoskings and Morley (1991) consider that reticulists attempt to influence others in a symbolic fashion by helping to structure and frame situations, through forms of exchange in the relationship, and by negotiation. The negotiated element consists of two components – a cognitive one that focuses on managing complexity and information processing, and a political one that appreciates the differential power relationships between various actors. Ebers (1997) refers to reticulists, as ‘informational intermediaries’ who act as mutually trusted lynchpins to bridge informational asymmetries, reduce communication costs, help establish a common set of goals and facilitate better co-ordination. Degeling alights on the theme of power with his conceptualisation of reticulists as ‘entrepreneurs of power’ who are: “concerned with recruiting and building coalitions between strategically located players who are committed to finding new ways forward on specific concerns”(Degeling, 1995:297). He suggests that reticulists should command an appreciation of the interstices of power; have an understanding of where coupling, interdependencies and fissures are likely to occur; be skilled at identifying the strategic points in the leverage exercised. Effective reticulists, he adds, will combine a strong commitment to change through the cultivation of linkages between key individuals with common interests and power, rather than adopt a passive role of organizational representative.

Reticulists are “individuals who engage in networking tasks and employ methods of co-ordination and task integration across organizational boundaries (Alter and Hage, 1993:46); ‘strategically placed individuals’ who use their interpersonal skills and relationships to keep pathways open at all levels in the hierarchy (Trevillion, 1992); and ‘self-proclaimed reticulists’ who have “skills in managing mental modes of spanning and networking” (Fairtlough, 1994). Challis et al (1988) note that such people are not located at the top of the formal organizational hierarchy, but typically, have good access to it. They are less bound by normal and accepted channels of organizational behaviour and are encouraged or allowed to be unconventional. Their position and status within the hierarchy is such that they do not represent an explicit

threat to top management, but are tolerated in the expectation that they can deliver solutions to complex problems. Wilson and Charleton (1997:51) suggest that reticulists need to be comfortable working within informal decision structures and that the “skill is to use informal networks, links and alliances to build positive relations between all the different parties” which in turn require good communication and negotiation skills. Finally, reticulists face a fundamental balancing judgment involving who they should network with and how much effort they should devote to it in comparison with managing internally (Meier and O’Toole, 2001).

Ferlie and Pettigrew (1996) suggest that in many public policy areas, the reality is that actors face the challenge of managing in mixed modes of management – network, hierarchies and markets - and the challenge for effective boundary spanners is to appreciate when and how to switch between these different modes. However, Machado and Burns (1998) indicate that this is fraught with potential difficulties because of the zones of incongruence and tension that are created at the junctures and interfaces of the different modes of organizing. They argue: “at these points or zones, there is potential ambiguity, confusion and conflict - agents and processes may clash” (Machado and Burns, 1998:357). There is research to suggest that the quality and frequency of exposure between reticulists leads to the blurring of the boundaries between professional and personal relationships (Van de Ven, 1976; LGMB, 1997). This process of social bonding can change the reliance on inter-role relationships to that of inter-personal relationships; may assist in a deeper understanding of the cultures of respective organizations and the constraints that may apply in any potential co-operation; and “partially mitigates...professional role orientations, and...provides an alternative avenue for role specialists to resolve their conflicts” (Ring and Van de Ven, 1994:109).

An alternative view suggests a downside to “informality or reliance on personal and social relationships” (LGMB, 1997:11). The tensions between the cultivation of personal relationships and accountability to the ‘home’ organization are fraught with difficulty. An over-reliance on social and personal relationships is inherently unstable, given the fact that people often move between posts and employers, and more significantly, friends sometimes have the habit of

becoming enemies. Finally, personalised ways of working can be very exclusive, giving rise to ‘cliques’ of various kinds. If the ‘right’ stakeholders are not involved, this has the potential of undermining collaborative effort. A significant area of debate concerns the perceived loss of control and accountability in network governance as opposed to that in hierarchies and markets, and Agranoff and McGuire (2001:310) pose the dilemma that: “with no single authority, everyone is somewhat in charge, thus everyone is somewhat responsible; all network participants appear to be accountable, but none is absolutely accountable”. These problems are exacerbated by the demands of multiple accountabilities. The reticulist element of a boundary spanner’s role responds directly to the challenges inherent in managing within a network mode of organizing, requiring the mobilization of a range of political, managerial, personal, strategic and technical competencies discussed above. However, this role is problematic because of the tensions involved in the blurring of boundaries between personal and professional relationships, multiple forms of accountability, and the need to couple network management with other forms of organizing. In summary, Sullivan and Skelcher (2002) list the following required skills and attributes of reticulists: critical appreciation of environment and problems/opportunities presented; understanding different organizational contexts; knowing the role and playing it; communication; prescience; networking; negotiating; conflict resolution and risk taking.

### **Entrepreneur**

The entrepreneurial element of the boundary spanner’s role reflects the view that current public policy problems are not readily amenable to traditional approaches, but rather demand the application of new ideas, creativity, lateral thinking, and a rejection of conventional practices. Degeling (1995:297) considers that people employed to undertake this role need to be “committed to finding new ways forward on specific concerns”; Challis *et al* (1988) use the term “risk takers”; and Hornby (1993) focuses on the importance of flexibility and a “readiness to explore new ideas and methods of practice”. Leadbeater and Goss (1998) draw attention to the urgent need to recruit ‘civic entrepreneurs’ to the public sector to reflect a re-focusing of the debate from a narrow obsession about the size and structure of the state, to the promotion

of the “capacities and skills it needs to be more effective” in dealing with complex public policy problems. They profile civic entrepreneurs as “often creative, lateral-thinking rule breakers” who “frequently combine a capacity for visionary thinking with an appetite for opportunism”. These operators either innovate new products or services themselves or “create the space for others” to do so. Moreover, they possess an armoury of both political and managerial skills, which when absorbed in experimentation and innovation, are used to support risk-taking.

Bryson and Crosby (2005) refer to the role of ‘policy entrepreneurship’ within their view of public sector leadership, suggesting that policy entrepreneurs are “catalysts of systemic change” who are “inventive, energetic, and persistent in overcoming systemic barriers” (p.156); they can be involved at any stage of the policy change cycle; they attend to most on-cycle decision-making processes but must understand off-cycle ones; they manage ideas, particularly in relation to the framing of problem causes and explanations; they analyse and manage the multiple interests that are often associated with public problems; and help to design or re-engineer appropriate structures to sustain desired changes. Critically, policy entrepreneurs are considered to require effective political skills, experience of bargaining and negotiation, and an appreciation of the different demands of the policy process from policy formulation, through delivery to evaluation. Cobb and Elder (1981) consider that policy entrepreneurs depend on an “ability to orchestrate the flow of people, problems, solutions, and choice opportunities; and Eystone (1978) distinguishes between two types: the initiator who is responsible for shepherding an idea to the point where it commands active attention from decision makers, and the broker who builds coalitions of policymakers to ensure the passage of that idea through the difficult terrain of institutional processes.

Roberts and King (1996) provide a seminal contribution on the notion of ‘public entrepreneurs’ whom they describe as people who ‘introduce, translate and implement an innovative idea into public practice’. They argue that an individual’s identity as a public entrepreneur derives from a unique set of skills, knowledge, values, motivation and personality, some of which depend on innate characteristics and others that are the result of learned behaviour. Particularly important

attributes include effective problem solving skills, whole-systems thinking, good communication skills, a risk taking ability, being focused and tenacious, and being comfortable with ‘difference’. The importance of managing ‘meaning’ is highlighted because of the differential framing of policy problems, and an appreciation of power and politics within the process of innovation is underlined. Roberts and King go so far as to suggest that: “policy entrepreneurs appear to have a unique identity with certain innate personality characteristics” (p.157), namely being highly intuitive: critical analytical thinkers; instigators of constructive social action; well-integrated personalities; highly evolved, developed egos; high level of leadership potential; high level of managerial potential; and finally ending this impressive list, average or above average creative potential.

deLeon evokes the image of public entrepreneurs as innovators, where innovations are not necessarily new but can be a creative repackaging of existing ingredients, and risk-takers who “have keen ears to hear opportunity knocking” (deLeon, 1996:497). She further develops this image by references to such people as “derring-do, Robin Hoods of the bureaucracy”, “catalysts who bring together problems and solutions that otherwise would bubble chaotically in the convection currents of modern policy streams” (deLeon, 1996:498), and “loners or mavericks, sometimes.... regarded with the suspicion commonly accorded ‘outsiders’ or ‘aliens’ ” (deLeon, 1996:498). However, one view suggests that it is unwise to allow such entrepreneurs unbounded freedom and it is important to exercise a restraining influence to ensure that “anarchic zones are encysted within a bureaucratic or organizational matrix” (deLeon, 1996:505). This potentially creates some tensions and deLeon’s solution involves advocating a protected zone of autonomy, to buffer the entrepreneurial or anarchic activity from the rest of the organization; however, it could equally be argued that a strategy of integration into the organizational mainstream is a more appropriate and sustainable approach.

Kingdon (1984) likens the prevailing policy terrain to a kind of ‘primeval soup’ in which windows of opportunity, some predictable and others unpredictable, bubble up and require the coupling of problems, policies and politics. He refers to notion of policy entrepreneurs, whose primary

function is: “to play a major part in the coupling at the open policy window, attaching solutions to problems, overcoming the constraints of redrafting proposals, and taking advantage of politically propitious events” (Kingdon, 1984:174). The idea is that policy entrepreneurs lie in wait for windows to open, with ready-prepared recipes - they are “ready to paddle, and their readiness, combined with their sense for riding the wave and using the forces beyond their control, contribute to success” (Kingdon, 1984:190). The defining characteristics of these policy entrepreneurs include, the claim to be heard by virtue of expertise, ability to speak for others or the occupation of an authoritative decision making position, a competency in negotiating skills and well developed political connections.

As policy entrepreneurs, boundary spanners both advocate their proposals as part of a softening up process, and act as brokers to negotiate successful couplings between the necessary stakeholders; they are associated with creativity because of the free form of the process; they quite often bend problems to solutions (and therefore goals which are too tightly defined can be restrictive); and, policy entrepreneurs have “excellent antennae, read the windows extremely well, and move at the right moment” (Kingdon, 1984:192).

Mintrom comments on ‘policy entrepreneurs’ who engage in: “identifying problems, networking in policy circles, shaping the terms of policy debates, and building coalitions to support policy change” (Mintrom, 2000:57). Investing significant time in networking enables boundary spanners to appreciate the different ‘worldviews’ of other stakeholders and build credibility. The profile of effective policy entrepreneurs suggests that they must be creative and insightful, socially perceptive, able to mix in a variety of social and political settings, able to argue persuasively, be strategic team builders, and be prepared to lead by example (Mintrom, 2000).

A key message is that creativity and innovation must be coupled with an appreciation of how and when to convert solutions into practice; further, although technical expertise and legitimacy are important, other competencies, centering on political awareness and networking must be brought to bear on the task to ensure successful implementation.

### **Interpreter and Communicator**

The ability and sensitivity to manage difference is particularly important in collaborative arenas. People from a variety of organizational, professional and social backgrounds assemble to pursue mutually beneficial agendas. 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 inter-personal relationships is part of a process of exposure, 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, and the medium for this process of enquiry and knowledge exchange is the quality and durability of personal relationships. Effective communication (Ferlie and Pettigrew, 1996; Hornby, 1993), reciprocal understanding and empathy (Trevillion, 1991) are important characteristics of collaborative relationships, and these relationships need to be underpinned by positive personal attributes such as tolerance, personability and diplomacy (Fairtlough, 1994; Beresford and Trevillion, 1995). The ability to get on with other people, either individually or in groups, is a key feature of the most effective proponents of boundary spanning, although people who are embedded in cultures or professions that rely heavily on inter-personal skills are perhaps at some initial advantage.

Despite the importance of personal relationships, there is a view that collaboration is possible through mutual forms of understanding that fall short of empathy, and need not cross the line between professional and personal relationships, although there are occasions when this happens to good effect (Van de Ven, 1976). The potential sensitivities involved in working with people from a diverse set of backgrounds demands particular care, especially in an environment where power relationships are contested, distributed and negotiable. The consequences of dysfunctional inter-personal relationships are protracted and ineffective collaborative working, with low levels of cooperation and high costs of lack of co-ordination. The ability to build and promote trusting relationships is a vital ingredient of the boundary

spanner’s work, although a variety of interpretations of this notion are advanced including, calculation (Boon, 1994; Lewicki and Bunker, 1996); value-based (Cummings and Bromily, 1996); and technical and professional based trust (Sydow, 1998). Trust building can be considered to have its own dynamic and to be capable of reinforcement over a period of time in the manner suggested by Huxham and Vangen (1999). The converse of this is also recognised as a real danger with spiraling distrust having the potential to harm collaborative action, and as Hardy et al (1998) counsel, power can be hidden behind a façade of trust.

Boundary spanners operate in an environment where ‘reality’ is framed in different ways because: “depending on our disciplinary backgrounds, organizational roles, past histories, interests, and political/economic perspectives, we frame problematic situations in different ways” (Schon, 1987: 4). Framing is: “a process of constructing and representing our interpretations of the world around us” (Gray, 2003:12) and Stone (1989) emphasizes the importance of causal ideas in this process. Importantly as Schon and Rein (1994:29) indicate, there is a close relationship between frames and interests, because: “frames are not free-floating but are grounded in the institutions that sponsor them, and policy controversies are disputes among institutional actors who sponsor conflicting frames”. Benford and Snow (2000) suggest that key actors operate as ‘frame articulators’ and function as managers of meaning within strategic processes through which actors attempt to “link their interests and interpretive frames with those of prospective constituents and actual or prospective resource providers” (Benford and Snow, 2000: 624). There is some evidence to suggest that boundary spanners perform the role of frame articulators helping to shape and mould possibilities and preferences as discussed in the structure-agency section above (Williams and Sullivan, 2009; Sullivan and Williams, 2009).

Although dedicated boundary spanners of the type described above are mandated to work across organizations, their employment status is invariably tied to a single agency. The issue of their identity becomes important because of the ambivalence that arises from their position both as employees (insiders) within an organization, and also as ‘outsiders’ working with people

in other organizations. Wright (2009) argues that boundary spanners claim to be distinct in terms of both the structural and knowledge dimensions of organizational interaction, whilst emphasizing inclusiveness at the political and interpersonal levels. This resonates somewhat with Meyerson and Scully’s (1995) notion of a ‘tempered radical’ who is committed to their own organization or profession, but also to a cause, community or ideology that may be different to the prevailing culture. This requires a balancing assimilation and separatism, being opportunistic in relation to resources and shifting power alliances, and taking advantage of their position as ‘outsiders within’.

### **Personality and other elements of the Boundary Spanner’s Role**

A theme that emerges on occasions in the literature on boundary spanners relates to personality and personal attributes. The question is whether effective boundary spanning can in some way be linked to particular personality traits in the actors involved? The references in the literature fall broadly into 3 categories. Firstly, those that link boundary spanners to extrovert personalities including, being outgoing, sociable, friendly, people-orientated and cheerful. Secondly, those which reflect a moral soundness such as respect, openness and honesty, and finally, those characteristics that emphasize commitment, persistence and hard work. Examples of researchers who comment on personal characteristics include Fairtlough (1994) who lists the strengths of boundary spanners as diplomacy, tact, dispassionate analysis, passionate sincerity and scrupulous honesty; Engel (1994:71) who refers to “the need to be able to practice self-discipline, self-restraint, punctuality and courtesy”; and Beresford and Trevillion (1995) who highlight the collaborative values of honesty, commitment and reliability.

However, although we do have a: “tendency to attribute the consequences of people’s action to people’s dispositional attributes or personality bias” (Brunas-Wagstaff, 1998:94), a position supported by personality and trait psychologists, there is not a consensus on this view. The cognitive school of thought takes a different view suggesting that cognitive style – preferred ways of using our abilities and thinking processes – explain behaviours. The importance of a discussion on personality is that it raises the question of how far it is possible to train and

develop people to become boundary spanners. If it is a matter of personality, there is not much you can do about it? My general view is that an actor’s personal attributes or traits are likely to influence the manner in which he/she undertakes their boundary spanning role. In my research (Williams, 2005:213), a group of partners identified an example of a poor exponent of boundary spanning who exhibited the following unhelpful characteristics: “extreme narrow-mindedness; inability to look outside his own remit; lack of preparedness to listen to other people’s perspectives and views; wanting credit for everything; intransigence and rigidly; fearing the loss of power; confrontational and aggressive approach; failure to keep people informed; constantly operating in ‘organizational representative’ mode; seeing problems rather than solutions; and, self-interest”.

Although it has been suggested above that that the boundary spanner’s role consists of a number of main elements, reticulist, entrepreneur and interpreter/communicator, there are other elements that can be identified. Professionals normally acquire their legitimacy through the possession of a discrete repository of knowledge and expertise which in turn is protected by professional bodies. Can boundary spanners make a claim to a special area of knowledge, and if so, what is it? My research (Williams, 2005) suggests that a key area of expertise and knowledge lies in an understanding of the context in which they operate – the roles, responsibilities, cultures, operating systems, accountabilities and motivations of individuals and agencies working in a particular inter-organizational domain. This is a picture of complexity and interdependence and the value of boundary spanners is their ability to appreciate and analyse the connections, links and interrelationships in this system. Inter-organizational and inter-sectoral experience was considered to be important particularly in terms of making connections, identifying opportunities and highlighting possible barriers. Trans-disciplinary knowledge can be a source of advantage to boundary spanners particularly as a means of heightening their legitimacy in the eyes of different partners. This underscores the view that although boundary spanning has a great deal to do with process – and in that boundary spanners have a claim to a special area of knowledge – there has to be a substantive content to collaborative exchanges that inevitably require technical knowledge and understanding.

Lastly, a role element that emerges from the work of boundary spanners relates to the management of the process of collaboration. The boundary spanner in organizer mode involves the planning, co-ordination, servicing and administration of partnerships, often making significant demands upon their time. The logistics inherent in these tasks are complicated by the range of actors involved and the need to ensure that each is treated fairly and inclusively through effective means of communication, information sharing and decision making processes.

Finally, to re-emphasize the point made at the outset of this section, although different elements of the boundary spanning role have been unpicked, they and their associated set of competencies are used in various combinations to tackle particular issues and problems faced at any one time. There is a complex interplay between the various elements and a degree of synergy is needed to combine them to best effect.

### **We are all Boundary Spanners Now?**

The inter-related, multi-level and interdependent nature of the policy environment, the characteristics of many policy problems, and the spread of new forms of governance such as networks, partnerships and alliances (Goldsmith, 2004; Agranoff, 2007), have stimulated new forms of public management – collectively termed ‘collaborative public management’ by Agranoff and McGuire (2003:4) and defined as a: “process of facilitating and operating in multi-organizational arrangements to solve problems that cannot be solved or easily solved by single organizations”. Here, public managers and leaders work across boundaries – professional, sectoral and organizational – to achieve their aims as an integral part of their mainstream job role – not in a defined, dedicated position as discussed above. Boundary spanning is an essential part of the job and in that sense such actors might legitimately be described as boundary spanners. However, is this role and function the same as dedicated boundary spanners, do they face similar tensions and ambiguities and do they need to be equipped with a similar skill set?

The defining characteristic of this type of boundary spanner is that they work both as managers or leaders in single agencies, and as agents within mechanisms of collaboration. O’Leary and Bingham (2009) maintain that the consequences of this division of responsibilities are the tensions and paradoxes of managing in two modes of governance – hierarchical and network. This involves working with autonomy and interdependence; being participative and authoritarian; balancing advocacy and enquiry; and being able to manage conflict using effective bargaining and negotiation skills. This argument is premised on there being clear differences in the two modes of governance. A counterview is that managing within single agencies – particularly those that are highly differentiated by profession and purpose – may also respond to collaborative management, and indeed, some aspects or stages of collaborative governance may need directive approaches. Simply switching between different modes may not be a straightforward management strategy. Nevertheless, assuming that managing in different contexts is materially different, the logic is that: “a different type of practice and new capacities are needed” (Bingham *et al*, 2008: 274), and Figure 3 lists the appropriate skill sets generated by a number of researchers.

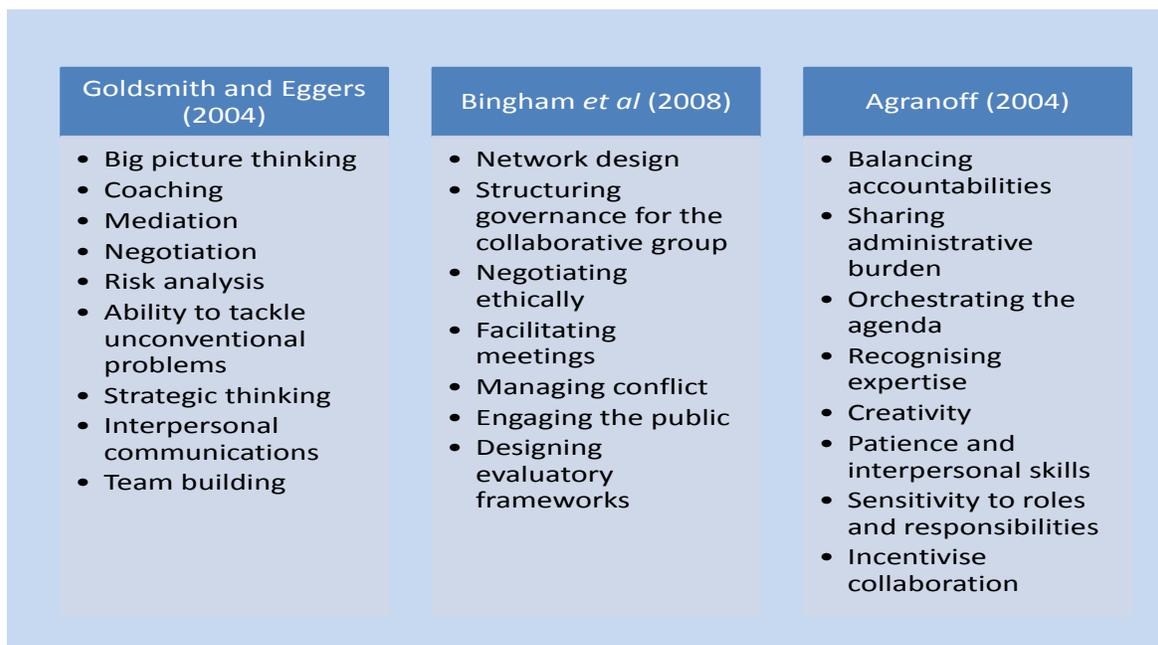


Figure 3: Competencies for Collaborative Managers

A similar distinction between public managers needing to differentiate between managing in single organizations as opposed to forms of collaboration is mirrored in the literature on collaborative leaders and leadership (Chrislip and Larson, 1994; Linden, 2002; Kanter, 1997; Feyerherm, 1994; Luke, 1998; Alexander *et al*, 2001 and Huxham and Vangen, 2005). Feyerherm (1994:268) emphasises the importance of collaborative leaders as managers of meaning who are “conceptualizers, providers of reasoning and context, facilitators, and profound questioners”, and Linden (2002) sees this expressed through four qualities – being resolute, focused and driven especially about collaboration; having a strong but measured ego; being inclusive and preferring to ‘pull’ rather than ‘push’; and finally, having a collaborative mind-set which focuses on seeing connections to something larger. Luke (1998) makes a clear distinction between a ‘sovereign’ leader operating within a single organization and a ‘catalytic’ leader working within collaborative settings and being able to think and act strategically, to apply interpersonal skills to facilitate a productive working group or network, requiring the application of facilitation, negotiation and mediation skills, and lastly, to display a sense of connectedness and relatedness, exemplary personal integrity and strong ethical conduct. In a similar vein, Kanter (1997) offers a profile of cosmopolitan leaders who must be integrators, who can look beyond obvious differences among organizations, sectors, disciplines, functions or cultures; diplomats, who can resolve conflict and influence people to work together; cross-fertilizers, to bring the best from one place to another; and deep thinkers, who are smart enough to see new possibilities and to conceptualize them.

Common themes in this body of work include, building and sustaining high quality interpersonal relationships between a diverse set of stakeholders, fostering trust, managing power relationships and generating consensus; building a common collaborative culture based on an appreciation of interdependence and common purpose, helping stakeholders appreciate connectivity, generating shared meaning from multiple constituencies; understanding complexity and converting strategic intent into effective action; combining diverse skills and experiences in new ways to foster creativity and innovation, facilitating learning and reflective

practice; and leadership processes dispersed amongst individuals at all levels in different organizations.

Morse (2008), using as a baseline the public organizational leadership competencies generated by Van Wart (2005), suggests that an additional or enhanced set of attributes, skills and behaviours are needed for collaborative leadership. These resonant with many of those already identified above including, having a collaborative mindset, strategic thinking, risk taking, openness, sense of interdependence, facilitation skills, promoting trusting relationships, convenorship and framing abilities.

### **How effective are boundary spanners?**

Measuring effectiveness is a particularly complex challenge in collaborative settings in which outcomes are likely to be the product of a mixture of structural and agential factors. Attributing causality to the interventions and behaviours of individual actors in dynamic processes is difficult methodologically, conceptually, practically and in resource terms, and as a consequence the body of literature in this area is modest. In the context of strategic alliances, there is: “some evidence that alliances with embedded ties may perform better or last longer than others”; these include the continuity of boundary spanners and structural attachments arising from a history of interaction (Gulati, 2004). Alternatively, Zaheer *et al* (1998) maintain that: “interorganizational trust emerges as the overriding driver of exchange performance, negotiation and conflict, whereas interpersonal trust exerts little influence on those outcomes”. De Man (2005:321) is forthright in his assertion that: “next to experience, alliance management skills are the main factor distinguishing successful alliance companies from unsuccessful companies”, a conclusion that is supported by Dyer *et al* (2001:43) who argue that: companies with a dedicated alliance function have been more successful than their counterparts at finding ways to solve problems of knowledge management, external visibility, internal co-ordination, and accountability”. However, alliance capability for both authors is more than just individual actors and includes tools, processes and systems. Finally, Mohr and Speckman (1994) identify a range of factors which are critical to partnership success – trust, willingness to co-ordinate

activities, ability to convey a sense of commitment to the relationship, communication strategies and joint problem solving – all of which are agential in character and focus on the relationship between partners.

Mintrom’s (2000:282) work on the role of policy entrepreneurs within an education context suggests that they: “are individuals who, through the skills they develop over time, are able to exercise greater levels of agency than other members of policymaking communities”, often through the manipulation and transformation of policy images; Kingdon (2003:205) reflects that: “an item’s chances for moving up on an agenda are enhanced considerably by the presence of a skilful entrepreneur, and dampened considerably if no entrepreneur takes on the cause, pushes it, and makes the critical couplings when policy windows open”; and, Oborn *et al* (2010) conclude that: “whilst in some instances, the entrepreneur's role may be minimal, our analysis revealed the extent of Darzi’s role in re-defining problems, forging alliances across interest groups (and mediating between them), and developing (or refining policy proposals). Hence, his role lay not simply in coupling but in shaping the context, content, and process of the policy development”.

The pivotal role of boundary spanners is supported by a number of researchers and policy reports. For instance, Trevillion (1992:50) states that: where inter-agency work is successful, it often seems to demonstrate that it is not agencies which relate to one another, but people representing them” and Hudson (1993:373) argues that: “the fashioning of collaborative relationships of substance is a job for talented practitioners”. Challis *et al*’s (1988:213) research in social care identified the central role performed by ‘tacticians’ who made things work despite prevailing structural barriers combining: “routine intra-agency management with inter-agency flair and expertise”. Over 20 years later, a similar conclusion is made in relation to Local Strategic Partnerships in the UK: “there were some key gatekeepers who controlled access to member organizations and who kept the partnership relevant and responsive to local needs. If they were to leave there would be real damage to the partnership” (Audit Commission, 2009:

42). However, in general, there is a dearth of research material that analyses the effectiveness of boundary spanning individuals in collaborative public policy settings.

## DISCUSSION

This paper examines the role of ‘agency’ in collaboration through the work of a class of actors known as ‘boundary spanners’. These actors operate in a particular form of governance – multi-organizational and multi-sectoral environments – which have a distinct set of rules, forms and operating systems. The picture is complicated because of the many different manifestations of this form of governance involving the public, private, and 3<sup>rd</sup> sectors and various permutations amongst them. A number of central questions and themes emerge from the review of the literature. Firstly, a key question is one of definition – who are the boundary spanners and does the notion have sufficient clarity to be a useful analytical and practical construct? Amongst a minefield of terminology, I suggest that two types of boundary spanner can be identified – those who have a dedicated position and role to operate in collaborative settings, and those actors – managers and leaders - whose role straddles intra and inter-organizational working. The definition of the second type invites the criticism that this is too broad an interpretation and includes a very large number of people? However, there can be little doubt that this group of actors do engage in boundary spanning activities to varying degrees.

The discussion has attempted to explore and understand what boundary spanners do, what specific roles they undertake, and what skills and competencies they bring to bear on the tasks they face. A number of key factors emerge as central to the work of an effective boundary spanner – managing/influencing without formal sources of power – facilitating and convening; dealing with complexity and interdependence because it is a job for ‘clever’ people (Kanter, 1997); working with diversity and different cultures arising from a variety of interests and agencies; managing conflict (O’Leary and Bingham, 2009) as much as collaboration requiring diplomacy and negotiation; managing in different modes of governance; building and sustaining inter-personal relationships constructed around trust and networking – although like ‘shares’, trust can go down as well as up! Boundary spanners are in potentially influential positions to

help frame, interpret and make sense of reality and shape the course of strategic action as a result. Finally, these actors have a strong inclination towards innovation and risk, the ‘prosecutors’ in Miles and Snow (1978) conceptualization of the most highly performing strategic agents.

This insight into the working life of boundary spanners replete with its tensions and ambiguities (Figure 4) raises a second important question which centres on whether the skill-sets required to work in boundary spanning roles are materially different to those needed to manage in single organizations, and if so, in what way? Also, do they apply equally to leaders and managers, in different policy areas and in different forms of collaboration? This question is especially significant in relation to the argument that actors have to modify and adapt their behaviours when switching between different modes of governance. Is this a practical proposition or do actors adopt default styles of management?



Figure 4: Sources of Ambiguity (adapted from Weick, 1995)

A third area of exploration and debate centres on context and the respective insights on the role and behaviour of boundary spanners in each. The private sector literature is certainly more focused and integrated than its public sector counterpart. Alliance management has a clear purpose and its effectiveness can be linked to performance. However, it is practiced in diverse settings and driven by different purposes. Although competitive advantage underpins the overall purpose, businesses are motivated to co-operate for different reasons including learning, skill substitution and resource exchange. This colours the nature of the alliance management function including, the management of risk and prevention of opportunistic behaviour, division of rewards, and approach to managing cultural diversity through strategies of integration or differentiation. The literature on boundary spanners in the public sector is modest, diverse and unconsolidated. There is little evidence to connect their interventions to collaborative performance, indeed, what constitutes ‘success’ in many public sector collaborations is often hazy and contested. However, in terms of skills and competencies, the evidence presented above suggests a degree of compatibility between boundary spanners operating in both contexts, focusing on personal relationships, building trust, communication, negotiation, and managing without power. One key difference may rest in a potentially broader role for public sector boundary spanners as opposed to their private sector counterparts who can be limited to simply relationship management. It might also be argued that the public sector with its diverse purposes and actors is a potentially more complex arena in which to manage than the private sector. The legislative and bureaucratic context which dominates the public sector, problems of transparency and democratic accountability, coupled with unclear and sometimes perverse incentive systems further complicate the picture. Importantly, as Ingraham and Getha-Taylor (2008) point out, financial recognition is not the only way to achieve enhanced collaborative performance primarily because it is not an individual endeavour and people can be motivated by a different set of assumptions.

A fourth important theme permeating the literature concerns the problem of managing the demands of two organizations – home organization and the collaboration. This presents many tensions, dilemmas and ambiguities which impact on identity, allegiance and accountability.

There is some evidence from the alliance management literature that these factors often appear as a disincentive to recruitment – alliance management being viewed as a career backwater away from the mainstream of company business. A contrasting view is that boundary spanners “have elite status in the organization and an ability to influence senior and operational managers outside of traditional authority relations” (Wright, 2009:320), and they are presented with “a diversity of experience closed off to other members” (Aldrich, 1979:262) with a consequent enhancement in their employment prospects. Lastly, an important point to emerge from the literature review is a general lack of research evidence on the effectiveness of boundary spanning roles, strategies and interventions, particularly in the public sector.

In time honoured fashion, a plea for more research in this area is more than justified. There is a need to re-balance the attention that has hitherto been given to macro-level and institutional perspectives, but more importantly to couch future research within the ‘structure-agency-ideas’ framework discussed in earlier in this paper. What contextual conditions enable effective agency and what factors constrain it? How do actors interpret their context to act strategically? What lenses do they use to undertake this task? Are boundary spanners gifted in some way, or powerfully placed to frame and articulate strategic action? Are the processes involved dynamic and in what ways do actors learn? In the light of the different purposes and meanings ascribed by diverse actors and interests to the notion of collaboration, in what ways do/can boundary spanners act as cognitive filters, and how are they influenced in this process by structural factors? Future research agendas must examine the different contexts within which boundary spanners operate, particularly public and private, exploring the extent to which ‘context’ influences the role and behaviour of boundary spanners. Also, given the increased importance of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sector, research should be extended to include situations where boundary spanners from this sector are involved. There are potentially interesting insights to be gained from examining the role of boundary spanners operating at strategic as opposed to operational arenas, in different policy areas, in different types and forms of collaboration, and at different stages of the policy process?

Finally, the research agenda in this area needs to be more innovative methodologically to generate more in-depth and nuanced agency-centred accounts and explanations of boundary spanners’ in practice. The two-dimensional focus on actor types and skills need to be extended through qualitative research methods - ethnographic, case study and action research - to collectively build up a picture of their operation and behaviour in a variety of different settings. They need to reflect what Emirbayer and Mische (1998:1012) refer to as ‘relational pragmatics or the fact that actors live simultaneously in the past, present and future adjusting their patterns of engagement and action accordingly. Such a perspective: “lays the basis for a richer and more dynamic understanding of the capacity that actors have to mediating the structuring contexts within such action enfolds”. The accumulated body of evidence generated by such research will be invaluable to academics but also to the policy community to help inform the future training and development of this special cadre of collaborative actors – the boundary spanners.

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**APPENDIX 1: Hypothetical Job Description for a Boundary Spanner**

**JOB TITLE:** BOUNDARY SPANNER

<p><b>QUALIFICATIONS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Undergraduate degree</li> <li>• Postgraduate degree (desirable)</li> </ul>
<p><b>KNOWLEDGE</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Appreciation of multi-organizational environments</li> <li>• Understanding of the policy process</li> <li>• Appreciation of different organizational contexts</li> <li>• Some trans-disciplinary knowledge</li> </ul>
<p><b>EXPERIENCE</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Experience of working in multi-organizational settings</li> <li>• Cross sector experience</li> <li>• Experience of working in different types of organization and policy area</li> </ul>
<p><b>SKILLS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Networking</li> <li>• Negotiation and conflict resolution</li> <li>• Cultivation and maintenance of effective inter-personal relationships</li> <li>• Able to build trusting relationships and cultures</li> <li>• Effective communication skills</li> <li>• Ability to work in teams and groups</li> <li>• Critical analysis skills to cope with high complexity</li> <li>• Innovative, creative and entrepreneurial</li> <li>• Proven planning and co-ordination skills</li> <li>• Comfortable working with cultural, professional and organizational diversity</li> <li>• Ability to manage multiple accountabilities</li> <li>• Ability to work in different modes of governance</li> <li>• Well developed influencing skills</li> </ul>
<p><b>PERSONAL ATTRIBUTES</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• tolerant of ambiguity</li> <li>• risk taking</li> <li>• self-confident</li> <li>• respectful</li> <li>• personable</li> <li>• diplomatic/tactful</li> <li>• honest and committed</li> <li>• patient and persevering</li> </ul>