



Boundary Spanner: The Gatekeeper of Innovation in Partnerships

Sean Ansett

Sean was Gap Inc.'s Global Partnerships Director. He worked in the company's Global Compliance department for over six years, where his responsibilities included global stakeholder engagement and the development of supply chain labour rights capacity-building programmes globally.

Today's context

We are facing new forms of engagement, where unlikely alliances bring unexpected returns . . . and where the traditional opposition often seems to be saying just what you are saying while meaning something altogether different.¹

Gap Inc. and many other organisations face increasingly elevated expectations from their stakeholders. This involves more transparency and accountability, through engagement and collaboration with NGOs, trades unions, governments, multilaterals and suppliers. Multi-stakeholder initiatives such as the Ethical Trading Initiative, the Fair Labor Association, the Fair Wear Foundation, Social Accountability International and the MFA Forum are examples of innovative models where companies, NGOs, trades unions or varied collections of these groups have come together to seek solutions to supply chain labour rights issues, with the aim of leveraging their respective expertise, knowledge, networks and resources. Stakeholders reflecting on the successes and failures over the past years related to brands and labour rights have begun to realise that there is no silver bullet to make workplaces better; there are a wide array of intervention points needed to drive positive change including monitoring, education, trade incentives, capacity-building and training, and government engagement, to name but a few.

The evolution of such multi-stakeholder initiatives has improved levels of understanding between the sectors and has opened new collaborative spaces designed to tackle supply chain labour issues. Such collaborative spaces, although far from perfect, often deliver solutions that are more sustainable and better for workers and managers than band-aid fixes that have become the norm.

An emerging challenge for multinational companies and other organisations who seek to enhance their social responsibility performance and stakeholder engagement strategies will be to identify, recruit, reward and retain new team members who will fill

these roles as 'boundary spanners' representing their organisations in these initiatives building relationships, identifying threats and opportunities, and embedding insights and learning back into the organisation.

¹ *S. Zadek and J. Blauert, quoted in S. Zadek, Tomorrow's History: Selected Writings of Simon Zadek, 1993–2003 (Sheffield, UK: Greenleaf Publishing, 2004): 106.*

The MFA Forum

One more recent example of an emerging multi-stakeholder initiative is the MFA Forum. This is made up of a collection of diverse stakeholders conducting research into the likely post-MFA-related impacts. The conclusion of the multi-fibre arrangement (MFA) at the beginning of 2005 ended the quota system, which had previously governed the global trade in textiles and garments. The MFA Forum thus developed a collaborative framework outlining considerations for various stakeholders to take into account when making decisions related to the ending of quotas. In addition, there are developing-country-level programmes to mitigate the negative impacts of the ending of the MFA and creating a space for dialogue and learning through the sharing of best practices. The aim is to enable apparel buyers, suppliers, importing and exporting countries to effectively manage a responsible transition of the global garment industry in a post-quota environment and mitigate negative impacts on workers. The MFA Forum is a clear example of an approach to tackle a huge challenge that could have serious implications on workers in the global supply chain that no one sector could resolve on its own.

This paper explores the boundary spanner dilemmas, the role they play in their organisations, the critical skills needed to be successful, and how to measure their performance.

The call for new leadership

Tempered radicals operate on the fault line. They are organisational insiders who often succeed in their jobs. They struggle between their desire to act on their 'different' agendas and the need to fit into the dominant culture.²

The growth of cross-sector partnerships demands a new type of leader. Tennyson and Wilde, while discussing the new challenges facing organisational leadership, note, 'The 21st century demands leaders who demonstrate accountability for their decisions and actions, concern with sustainability and cooperation, a desire to bring people together across traditional boundaries and effectiveness in convincing others to work together for a common purpose, and to build lasting working relationships. The new leaders do not

2 D. Meyerson, 'The Tempered Radicals', Stanford Social Innovation Review 2.2 (2004): 14-23.

necessarily lead from a position of public status or externally conferred authority. They are often hidden within organisations, in different guises and at various levels, and may not be immediately identifiable as leaders.³ Additionally, they maintain that if you ‘scratch below the surface of any successful partnership you will invariably find one or more individuals who have taken on the role of the partnership’s “broker”. Brokers rarely receive recognition and acknowledgement . . . But the role is essential and without it a partnership-based development initiative is highly unlikely to achieve its goal . . . Partnerships are complicated and difficult and the broker’s role is crucial.’ These new types of leaders are going to be critically important and will play strategic roles in their respective organisations going forward.

In the context of stakeholder engagement, individuals who are operating outside the boundaries of their organisation in the external environment are often meeting with boundary-spanning counterparts from other sectors. Both individuals are trying to expand the boundaries of their organisations and bring them closer together to address each other’s needs and identify potential spaces of ‘strategic overlap’ where possible

collaboration can take place. It is extremely rare that organisations will agree on everything, or even most things, but often there are times where space for collaboration can create a win-win opportunity for both organisations and situations where neither could create change alone. It is within these spaces that the innovative ideas and initiatives often emerge and it is between these two spheres that innovation is born. As Zadek notes in *Tomorrow’s History*, one enduring truth is that ‘Successful partnerships are those shaped around common or shared activities that first and foremost deliver against the individual aims of each partner, particularly where these have been legitimised within the partnership.’⁴

For example, organisations from different sectors often find a starting point to identify ‘strategic overlap’ such as ‘improving the lives of workers in global supply chains’. We often share this in common with a number of external stakeholders but each organisation may often have different means of how to achieve the goal. However, if organisations are aligned in achieving this goal, there is a place to start exploring possibilities.

My team at Gap Inc. is charged with global stakeholder engagement and developing training initiatives to

3 R. Tennyson and L. Wilde, *The Guiding Hand: Brokering Partnerships for Sustainable Development (UN Department of Public Information, 2000)*.

4 Zadek, *op. cit.*: 277.

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complement our supplier factory monitoring programme. Stakeholder engagement practitioners often find themselves playing the role of the boundary spanner maintaining one foot in the organisation and one foot outside of it straddling this divide like playing the game of ‘hokey pokey’.

The role of boundary spanner can be complex and frustrating but also very rewarding like colleagues in more established positions such as negotiators, conflict resolution facilitators and marriage counsellors. Some, but still far too few, companies, have chosen to invest in stakeholder engagement, recognising the value that boundary spanners bring to the organisation as a key component to their social responsibility programmes. Many of the individuals have diverse professional backgrounds in others sectors. Unfortunately, in many organisations boundary spanners are not appreciated, their roles are misunderstood and sometimes may be viewed as outsiders within their own organisation. A good number of boundary spanners leave their organisations prematurely or ‘brown out’ — performing at a substandard level — due to frustration, lack of support and feeling undervalued, thereby taking with them critical skills and institutional knowledge that is invaluable to the organisation.

As Murphy and Coleman suggest, ‘Given that partnership development depends so heavily on mutual symbiosis between motivated individuals, partnership survival may ultimately be threatened by this dependency.’⁵ This dilemma can cause partnerships to lose innovation and creativity.

The boundary spanner’s role

Boundary spanners serve strategic roles in organisations by gathering critical information, obtaining feedback and perceptions from the external environment through their stakeholder networks and then interpreting and translating that information back into their organisation. Ultimately, if the boundary spanner is effective, the process can lead to innovations in strategy, processes or products.

The key activities of the role are as follows:

- creating internal and external networks;
- issue identification;
- translating the knowledge back into the organisational culture;
- influencing and educating internal and external stakeholders;
- creating buy-in and support;
- identifying internal senior-level champions.

5 D. Murphy and G. Coleman, ‘Thinking Partners: Business, NGOs and the Partnership Concept’, in J. Bendell (ed.), *Terms for Endearment: Business, NGOs and Sustainable Development* (Sheffield, UK: Greenleaf Publishing, 2000): 213.

The ability to crunch a plethora of verbal and non-verbal communication and information, identifying the critical and relevant information, the opportunities and the risks associated with the potential collaboration, translating the information and influencing internal audiences and creating a strategy for implementation are decisive components to their role. The information helps the company evaluate threats and opportunities and create programmes that are innovative, perhaps more sustainable and externally credible than if developed solely internally.

It is important to note that engagement is not a solution in itself. Any organisation or individual can engage in dialogue with their critics and external organisations but maintaining credible high-quality and value-added engagements is crucially important; ultimately, it is the organisations' 'actions not words' that will deliver credibility and positive change.

Identifying individuals for these roles internally or externally can be difficult. As Cross and Prusak acknowledge, there are usually only a few individuals in organisations that possess these skills. 'Boundary spanners are a rare breed, however, and few networks have many of them.

That's primarily because most people don't have the breadth of intellectual expertise, the wealth of social contacts and the personality traits necessary to be accepted by vastly different groups . . . Corporate life may not be particularly friendly to the boundary spanner, who has to spend a lot of time developing an external network.'⁶

Tools of the trade

Boundary spanners need a highly specialised skills set, as well as the ability to develop a new language, in order to be effective and successful at developing and implementing innovative partnerships. Tennyson discusses 'the many skills that are needed in successful partnerships including negotiation, mediation, assimilation, coaching and institutional engagement amongst others. Individuals who possess these personal qualities of imagination, empathy, optimism and modesty are more likely to be successful at acquiring these skills.'⁷

These 'soft' skills are also components of what is known as, 'emotional intelligence' (EI), which is becoming more recognised, even in traditional organisations, as a key factor in management success. According to Mayer and Salovey, 'Emotional Intelligence (EI) is a type of social intelligence that involves the ability to

6 R. Cross and L. Prusak, 'The People Who Make Organisations Go — or Stop', Harvard Business Review, June 2002: 105-11.

7 R. Tennyson, The Partnering Toolkit (The International Business Leadership Forum and the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition, 2003): 18-19.

“Good social skills play a large role in managing partnerships with multiple actors in order to keep the group moving beyond breakthrough issues and thereby achieving the partnership’s objectives”

monitor one’s own and others’ emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use the information to guide one’s thinking and actions.⁸ In previous work, they stated that ‘EI abilities can be categorised in five domains including self-awareness, managing emotions, motivating oneself, empathy and handling relationships.’⁹

Some of the key skills that seem to be associated with successful boundary spanners include: empathy, open-mindedness, active listening, strong communication skills, strong abilities to synthesise information, emotional maturity, and integrity.

The boundary spanner also needs to be highly aware of the other partner’s differences and feelings appreciating that their boundary-spanning colleagues are also dealing with their own institutional cultures and external stakeholders in the process. Good social skills play a large role in managing partnerships with multiple actors in order to keep the group moving beyond breakthrough issues and thereby achieving the partnership’s objectives. A partnership practitioner who has strong soft skills will be able to leverage the strengths of each partner and should be more effective at

building strong and effective partnerships.

In addition to these skill sets, boundary spanners must be effective at understanding the sensitivities of using a common language in their relationship building. It may seem a bit simplistic to some people but ensuring that word choices are acceptable to the other organisational culture is critical to success. For example, take the word ‘partnership’. The business sector is typically comfortable using this term when developing a business relationship. An NGO, on the other hand, may be considerably less comfortable with this term when involved with the corporate sector as it may be perceived externally as the business co-opting the NGO.

Understanding these differences, having the ability to build a new vocabulary and being sensitive to word choices can make or break a relationship. These issues can be amplified when working with other partners from different cultural backgrounds and languages. In discussing the importance of common language in cross-sector partnerships, Tennyson believes that ‘partners need to be sensitive to how they are using language — consciously and conscientiously speaking in language

8 J.D. Mayer and P. Salovey, ‘The Intelligence of Emotional Intelligence’, *Intelligence* 17 (1993): 433-42.

9 J.D. Mayer and P. Salovey, ‘Emotional Intelligence’, *Imagination, Cognition, and Personality* 9 (1990): 185-211.

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that is appropriate, clear and concise. A few words well selected and communicated are worth far more than a lot of words that are obscure and confusing.¹⁰

Finding common language can be the biggest barrier to getting programmes off the ground. We were negotiating a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with two human rights organisations. More than a year was spent finding common ground before agreement could be made regarding the language and the tone of the MOU. We spent considerably more time on this aspect of the partnership than we spent in the agreements regarding monitoring protocols and resource requirements. It is crucial for businesses to understand the need for the required upfront investment of time needed to reach a common understanding in line with the local organisation’s culture and capacity. That in turn would remove more barriers or issues in the long term. Translating the needs of our NGO partners involved in the negotiation with internal business colleagues and the legal department was extremely challenging because they are used to working with corporate profit-driven partners and typically enjoying the power in the relationship.

In the end, the process was critically important to getting all of the stakeholders to embrace the programme as equals and the internal learning about these non-traditional partners was very valuable for future initiatives.

Measuring performance

Boundary spanners’ performance may be hard to measure since creating change takes time, building relationships can’t be measured through a company’s quarterly sales results and in the case of many partnerships the process outcomes may be more important than the product’s outputs.

Companies should consider taking a development approach (long-term view) when reviewing these roles and individual performance. Often due to the diverse viewpoints at the table, ‘getting to yes’ and the need to develop consensus can take longer than expected and deadlines are missed. Forcing the issues simply to hit target dates can lead to more damage within the partnership and set back the work further and ultimately lead to failure. Most stakeholder relationships are not contractual or transactional (although in some cases they can be) like the majority of traditional organisational relationships with external

¹⁰ *Tennyson, op. cit.: 21.*

consultants and suppliers, and this demands viewing these roles through a slightly different lens. Often a more qualitative employee-type evaluation rather than a metrics-based assessment may be the best alternative.

Managers should realise that 'boundary spanners' serve as connectors and are dependent on many internal and external stakeholders whom they have no direct control over to deliver programmes that make project delivery more challenging.

Clearly a manager could measure: how many (y) trainings were delivered to (x) factories and at what cost. The metrics-based quantitative measurement is acceptable but is harder to measure than, for example, the number of public campaigns avoided through strategic engagement and factory-level action. It is easy for an organisation to overlook the amount of resources from a human and time standpoint needed to deliver a quality engagement. Often the financial costs are relatively low but the drain on resources may be the time needed to engage effectively.

A final critical role the boundary spanner plays is as an influencer of the organisation with which he or she

is interacting. A manager can measure how effectively the person has influenced the other organisation to understand the context of your organisation, how clear expectations are set, how the organisation's tactics or position has changed through transparency and engagement.

Conclusion

Increasingly, as social responsibility evolves from traditional philanthropic endeavours that at one time satisfied stakeholder expectations to a more holistic triple-bottom-line approach, there will be a growing need for organisational boundary spanners. The research has analysed the challenging boundary spanner role that these individuals play in their organisations. The specific 'soft' skills that are required to develop strong, transparent relationships with external organisations from other sectors in society are quite different from the 'hard' business skills that are typically highly regarded by employers. It is important for companies to identify individuals who possess these skills and ensure that they are retained in their respective organisations. For other boundary spanners, Bradshaw has some words of advice. 'To manage the stress of boundary spanning, maintain strong internal linkages, build strong external linkages — and even celebrate — the

uncertainty of their boundary spanning role and, recognise differences in organisational structures for what they are.¹¹

Boundary spanners are the gatekeepers of innovation within an organisation's social responsibility programmes and are critically

important in developing successful strategies in a global, complex and increasingly chaotic external environment. Senior organisational leaders should understand the complexity that exists in these non-traditional roles, celebrate their uniqueness and realise the value they bring to their organisations.

11 *L.K. Bradshaw, 'Principles as Boundary Spanners: Working Collaboratively to Solve Problems', NASSP Bulletin 83.611 (1999): 38-47.*