

Organising and managing across boundaries



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Guest Editors: Chris Blanter and Tom Boydell

This is an experimental edition, likely to evolve over the coming weeks

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Cover illustration: Original quotation – 'Two monologues don't make a dialogue' – Jeff Daly, from an original photograph by Mark Cardwell, composed by Chris Blanter, December 2002.

e-O&P Editorial Board:

Bob MacKenzie

David McAra

Our Virtual Gathering: Transcending boundaries

Although too few for the Work Foundation, we were able to go ahead with our gathering virtually, Siobhan took comprehensive notes which we've worked on a little to try to render the essence of the dialogue. It's a messy business, conversation and while we've done a bit of tidying up, some of the mess remains. 'CAB' is our shorthand for collaborating across boundaries.



The Gatherers

Linda Williams (Dorchester; technical facilitator)
Chris Blantern (Kirkcudbright; process facilitator)
Siobhan Soraghan (Milton Keynes)
David McAra (Aberdeen)

Julia Goga-Cooke (London)
Parry Davies (Aberaeron)
Bob MacKenzie (Southampton)
Tom Boydell (Sheffield))

Introductions

Chris: I am an organisational learning consultant with a general interest in collaborative organising and a specific academic interest in relational practice. How do we structure the world through the way we interact to create collective performances?

Siobhan: I offer consultancy in leadership development (coaching and programmes), including senior team facilitation and staff engagement. I'm interested in supporting CEOs as they engage their teams in decision-making. But I'm aware that not all want to relate in this way.

David: I work in software training for the oil industry. Amongst other things, I've been influenced by

Goldratt's 'theory of constraints', though I find it very difficult to communicate and share my ideas on this and on working across boundaries. I'm drawn towards a whole systems view, rather than merely addressing the parts.

I was trying to convey how thrilled I was when first introduced to systems thinking. A whole new way of seeing the world ... and yet, how difficult it was to share the insight. People just didn't get it.

David

Julia: My research interests include complex collaborations. Few people seem to know how to create the collaborative partnerships. I've carried out experiments with start-ups, crowd-sourcing, and studied collaboration between different communities – elite, expert, and crowd.

Parry: I am Director of Social Services in S. Wales; concerned with integration between Health & Social Care. How do elusive combinations of personalities and systems combine to produce a better experience for the end user? We're encouraging regional collaborations between local services, legislation, the 3rd sector, leisure, education, which present all kinds of boundaries. We're seeking an understanding of how to contribute to the Wellbeing agenda. I've realised that language can form barriers - a phrase used too much loses meaning and becomes a shibboleth.

A **shibboleth** is a word or custom whose variations in pronunciation or style can be used to differentiate members of "[ingroups](#)" from those of "[outgroups](#)". Within the mindset of the ingroup, a "connotation" or "value judgment" of correct/incorrect or superior/inferior can be ascribed to the two variants.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shibboleth>

Bob: For me, boundaries can be both political and personal, and – as an exile Scot - this came home to me forcefully during the Scottish Referendum. Perhaps we all embody boundaries within ourselves. There are also boundaries in my professional life which I seek to span, and I sometimes describe myself as a hybrid academic - practitioner (jobbing consultant). Additionally, I attempt to transcend boundaries in my voluntary roles with AMED's Council and the Editorial Board of the journal *e-Organisations and People*. In these different contexts, I find that I'm having to work out where the boundaries are all the time. I embarked on my doctorate: '*A learning facilitator's uses of writing*' in an attempt to explore such boundary crossings and to identify possible 'solutions'

Tom: My interest in this theme arises from anger at the unfairness of everything. Elites keep working for their own advantage, and I hope we've not left this initiative too late. We're killing people who disagree with us. Re Parry's point about language, when it's 'in', it means everyone's claiming to do it, and no-one's actually doing it.

I may have said this but I don't think it makes much sense when written - probably didn't when I said it!

Tom

I think I know what you meant. I had to look up 'Shibboleth'. Suddenly, everyone is speaking about 'Mindfulness', it's 'in'. If I want to be 'in' too, I'll have to embrace 'Mindfulness' but it isn't arising from any real insight.

David

Process

Chris – Let's agree the purpose of today and what might follow. We didn't get enough takers for the residential event. There's a lot more to it (the topic of CAB) than the cognitive ideas and insights. We can talk about it positively, but we find it hard to do. We have the possibility to create a group to meet every now and again as a community of inquiry – around practice...shifting from talking to doing. We're hoping to share experiences, and invite others to join in. We could establish small f-2-f gatherings in the regions, and invite local people tackling these issues to share their stories - good and bad.

This is not a phrase I like or would knowingly use – because talking is very much doing. I might have said – or at least, would like to have said something like... “shifting from talking about collaborating to talking for collaborating.”

Chris

The conversations

Chris: I've been talking with Tom over couple years, in the context of Health and Social Care, and VDS (Volunteer Development) Scotland. Collaborating across boundaries (CAB) is incredibly difficult to do in practice. Yet simply blaming the system stops us from inquiring further. What actions characterise CAB, and how we do stuff together? Cultures develop over years in hierarchy in a mutually exclusive fashion. Do we have stories of specific episodes? Let's share what touches us.

Siobhan: A bank with which I've been involved professionally has not been working well across boundaries. There's an evident lack of responsibility and support for colleagues in different silos from whom they picked up a process baton in the value chain. Is the need for boundaries hard-wired in human nature, reinforcing the protection of silos and fostering competition? What are we asking from boundary-crossers in terms of maturity and consciousness?

Parry: Everybody thinks CAB is a great idea in principle, but when we start to look at reality... We create a narrative of failure if it just stops there. Nobody unpacks what integration really means. Often, it's seen as just realigning rather than radical restructuring.

David: Systems thinking may have something to offer, though it's difficult for us to look at something different and see something differently when it means sacrifice for ourselves by relinquishing control. Self-interest becomes a barrier.

Parry: I've been working to have meaningful constructive conversations. These build on relationships that occur at local level and acknowledge the need to move towards integration. The search for common ground represents a hugely aspirational approach, but is generally tempered by a caution to be realistic.

Chris: People can find informal ways of getting round organisational obstacles, yet these are not usually legitimised.

Bob: And you, Parry, *have* done some things. Let's build on the positive examples we know about.

Chris: What makes successful co-operation work? What do we have in common?

Julia: I couldn't agree more. We can easily become depressed by difficulties that are there. If and when they are researched, they don't get much traction. What is the power we have to tell the story well? Culture is related to what we believe in, process and do. For years we have taught people to compete...

Now there are lot of platforms, technology, to help us bring people together for shared tasks. When is collaboration strategically important? And how do I decide who to involve? Yet the way we have educated Masters in Business Administration (MBA) graduates is about control rather collaboration.

Chris: People on the ground know how to do things in collaboration; they find “work-arounds”. But why can’t organisations legitimise this?

Julia: This is through fear of loss of control. How do you find boundary-crossing enablers and support them?

Chris: When I work with facilitators, they tell me that they’d often find themselves being asked to manage meetings, because of a common plea from ‘conventional mangers’ is that they couldn’t handle how to help their people to collaborate.

David: I liked Siobhan’s views on what CEs need to be able to do, which is to change underlying beliefs. We don’t need to be in control; there are solutions beyond the compromise of all parties, which we are able to discover together.

Chris: What we discover or make happen together: I like that.

I think I said that I prefer ‘what we make happen together – rather than “discover”.

Chris

David: Perhaps I have a success story. At the end of a successful project, I invited participants to tell their stories from beginning to end, just talking through their experiences... When groups or individuals told their stories, they surprised one another: “I didn’t know this small decision here had this big consequence for you later”. Perhaps this approach helps to get over some dangers of oversimplifying? It’s OK to be afraid and confused and unsure what comes next, before you learn something...

Siobhan: Parry – you’re clearly a positive proponent of cross-boundary working. What do you believe and what do you do to support CAB?

Parry: We are heavily regulated, and there are some pretty clear command and control regimes in place. Things aren’t amazingly different, but there’s something around how we get the work done, believing in the people, not being on their backs, trusting that they want to do a good job throughout the organisation. We try to be comfortable with messiness. There’s no point at all in trying to hold on to and control everything. We try to have confidence in our own and others’ experiences. There will always be a messy environment; nothing is as we would like it to be. Yet within that there will be things we can do and achieve together

Bob: This conversation is fascinating, and I’m reminded that we’ve managed to arrive at this point today after some 11 months (at least) of messiness in developing this project we’re all involved in - organising and managing across boundaries. It’s been evolving continually since David and I first began talking to Chris and Tom about it at AMED’s ‘*Exploring Frontiers*’ conference in Bournemouth. We’ve gradually shifted from the ambition of convening a fairly large residential gathering in London to focusing initially on a constellation of more localised online gatherings, of which this is the first. Perhaps, through action learning and action research through shared projects, we can identify and privilege practical examples over grand theory, as advocated by people like William James? Over the past year, we’ve already generated and shared a lot of material that may help us to start telling something of a success story.

Siobhan: It's interesting how early we are taught to compete. I recall back in the '90s being given an American book on corporate politics for women. There was a lot in it about how male team sports (which boys learn at school) work, as the sporting metaphors about team and competition and winning are rife in business. Which is quite male.

Tom: I'm interested in Siobhan's point that we are hard-wired and are we looking for a different level of maturity. This ties in with a picture I have of how we develop and become increasingly mature. Is empathy the development task of the current era? A book: 'Zero degrees of empathy' holds that some people are incapable of understanding others or appreciating others' priorities, though I'm not sure I agree. As for sport from the point of view of a not very sporting type, based on envy and ??? I think it generates unhealthy competition – an emphasis that really annoys me. Julia's observation that MBAs are all about control is a neat point. And I also liked Julia's point about boundary-spanners not being supported because they are not in top positions.

Chris: I'm reminded of Goffman's traffic rules of engagement, which hold that it's not enough to know what's in drivers' mind; we also need to know about traffic lights.not all in the mind, we need to do other things as well.

'need to take account of what characterises context – like social rules & conventions as well as the acting role of objects – such as more formal documented procedures (like those traffic lights).

Chris

David: Perhaps the notion of buffering scarce resources has something to offer?

Julia: Here's another potentially relevant element, drawn from personal experience. Unless we see this collaborative behaviour modelled by the people who are at the top, just talking about it will not change anything. Where do we look for examples of this? Who is championing these behaviours?

Siobhan: This comment triggered a thought for me about Jim Collins' book: 'Good to Great and Level 5 Leaders'.

I might have said the two key characteristics of Level 5 leaders that Jim Collins refers to are Humility and Determination. Bob

Siobhan

Julia: What makes Millennials tick? Research derived from 45,000 people (PWC?) surveys and new methods and tools made possible by ICT, 4,000 to converse over 72 hrs across the world to see how they tick, how are they going to be led...how are we preparing them to take the reins rather than just complaining.... They are modelling collaborative behaviour within their own generation, not with the generational level above, as previous generations did. They are likely to leave their employer after a few years, showing weaker loyalty to the employer. They are influenced by teen experiences and the technology at their disposal, with or without permission.

Julia – I didn't quite follow this bit. Could you possibly re-summarise your contribution here? Many thanks

Bob

Siobhan (postscript): I think there was more talk about differences in gender here – and some playful banter about women being more naturally empathetic and more mature than men (Toms' work found this?). I couldn't possibly have commented! But it made me think about the benefits of women in senior roles and yet there are fewer women on Board positions than a few years ago – the numbers have slipped.

Some reflections on the process before we signed off

Q About the length of such online conversations: 1.5 hours is possibly the optimum. 2 hours can be a long time to listen with such intensity.

Q About the technology for the conversation? All liked GoToMeeting. Possible alternatives include:

- VSee
- Google Hangout – this can cater for up to 10 participants, who can share their desktops.

Q About moving forward: Let's continue with this format for the time being, finding ways of making it inviting and vital for people to come and join in... This could involve convening regional face-2-face gatherings as well, where we could specialise and see what people like Parry are doing...?

Q How to get this conversation out to a wider audience?

Chris: Please choose six things that each of us has been most struck by on this conversation – let's share them.

Bob: The conversation has been extremely rich, and it would be wonderful to make it more widely available... 'We had this conversation and here are a few highlights' (Hence this 'transcript').

The journal e-O&P could carry excerpts...transcripts. Let's propose a rough schedule of further events.

Julia: Maybe a fixed day in the month to put in the calendar, like IAF do?

Chris: Each participant could flag one of 'their six highlights' on they might be prepared to facilitate a discussion in a subsequent gathering.

A note about *inter-logics*



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Our registered office is in S. Yorkshire with a satellite office in Dumfries & Galloway we have extensive UK and international experience.

Directors and associates are renowned practitioners and authors (Pedler, Burgoyne & Boydell) of seminal works on organisational learning and self development.

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