Social practitioners as boundary spanners **Dr Jane Munday, Australia**

Introduction

Social practitioners are 'boundary spanners' working across organisational, disciplinary and cultural boundaries to seek beneficial outcomes for all. They build relationships and trust, find common ground to convey new ideas, act as interpreters of community values, convey insights into stakeholder needs, and guide good planning and better decisions.

Heightening the importance of boundary spanning are the twin urgencies of climate change and the accelerated intrusions of critical minerals extraction and renewables infrastructure. These have collapsed the timeframes for social practitioners' work, requiring them to collaborate across power imbalances, and broker solutions at the frontline of conflict between frustrated proponents and outraged communities.

Working in this 'age of conflict' requires boundary spanners to be: storytellers conveying meaningful communication that resonates with the values and worldviews of affected communities; empathetic listeners with the emotional intelligence to understand context and vulnerabilities; sense-makers synthesising the wisdom of diverse knowledge systems; mediators delving below discrepant value systems to navigate conflict; negotiators facilitating collaborative solutions; and advocates for disempowered people and communities.

Boundary spanning

The concept of 'boundary spanning' emerged from organisational sociology and management literature to describe workers able to connect people across social, societal or organisational silos (Aldrich & Herker 1977; Tushman 1977). Organisations in early literature were described as bounded, closed systems with 'dominant coalitions' of internal decision-making groups (White & Dozier 1992). Boundary spanners were public relations, communication, community relations or outreach workers whose role was to manage relationships with external stakeholders (Grunig et al. 1992), transfer knowledge and ideas across system boundaries, guide strategic decisions that typically involve a change of direction for the organisations (White & Dozier 1992) and build relationships with strategic constituencies that could constrain or enhance the ability of an organisation to achieve its goals (Grunig et al. 1992). Boundary spanners also performed an ambassadorial or external representation function, helping to maintain the legitimacy of the organisation by providing specially adapted information to important client groups (Aldrich 1977).

The concept of boundary spanning has evolved to describe people with feet in multiple worlds such as agricultural extensions officers work as change agents; land managers integrating western science with First Nations ecological knowledge; research partnerships generating shared knowledge; public servants working with citizens across vertical service demarcation; and co-design of multi-agency governance systems (Needham et al. 2017; Goodrich et al. 2020; Hatch et al 2023; Stephens et al. 2024).

Organisations in heterogeneous environments will have a higher proportion of boundary roles, whereas stable environments should evoke fewer (Aldrich & Herker 1977). In more complex environments, boundary spanners may be working in communities of place with diverse composition, culture and language; conflicting priorities and goals; and different ways of working (Stephens et al. 2024). To be effective, they may need to break down barriers or boundaries by facilitating meaningful relationships between specific groups (Gibbs & Ross 2025) or brokering knowledge exchange at the boundary between science and policy (Goodrich et al. 2020). Those with a 'foot in both worlds', such as First Nations people facilitating interaction with Western science and Indigenous ecological knowledge, may help 'to create a braided path that integrates each distinctive knowledge system without assimilation of one by the other, making the results more accessible and meaningful to everyone' (Hatch et al. 2023, p.11).

Social practitioners such as social performance and community engagement professionals may be embedded in organisational or project teams, liaising across boundaries to build relationships, overcome power imbalances, and act as a conduit between internal and external stakeholders. They may be implementing management strategies to resolve community concerns, minimise the harms of projects and maximise equitable benefit-sharing.

SIA practitioners, however, are likely to be independent contractors working in the interstices of organisational and cultural boundaries to build collaborative processes bridging social science methodologies and the predominantly biophysical culture of project management and impact assessment teams. Practitioners will need to build personal credibility and trust with dominant professional and client coalitions as well as with communities affected by the change processes invoked by large projects, programs and policy reforms.

Key roles played by boundary spanners

The roles played by boundary spanners will vary according to context, situational factors and how and by whom their work is commissioned. These include:

- **Facilitators and advisors**: Acting as the 'fulcrum facilitating collaboration' (Hatch et al. 2023, p.1) to achieve a compromise between organisational policy and environmental constraints (Aldrich & Herker 1977), they facilitate the flow of information between organisations, manage tensions, promote interdisciplinary collaboration, network to share information, mediate discrepant viewpoints, build community ownership and empowerment, and navigate the structures, policies, values, beliefs and approaches of each world in service of the other (Hatch et al. 2023).
- **Teachers and educators:** Translating between systems with differing languages and cultures (Stephens et al. 2024), they work with outside researchers to increase their cultural competency and awareness (Hatch et al. 2023), and provide services, training and complementary expertise to enhance the production of actionable knowledge (Goodrich et al. 2020).

- **Synthesisers:** By filtering, translating and transforming (Goodrich et al. 2020), they understand and synthesise many kinds of knowledge and evidence (e.g. science communicators), select consequential information, and develop expertise in summarising and interpreting information (Aldrich & Herker 1977).
- **Sense makers:** Good communicators and story tellers, they build shared meaning (White & Dozier 1992), explain concepts, work collaboratively to produce and disseminate materials, and customise information to different decision contexts.
- **Problem solvers and fixers**: Viewing their role as more than a job, they work at the front line of wicked problems not amenable to simple solutions (Stephens et al. 2024) and in the 'ambiguous space between multiple objectives' (Esteves 2024, p.2), to influence decisions and practices while often lacking direct authority over operational outcomes (Esteves 2024).
- **Honest brokers:** By reconciling and protecting interests and attending to issues of equity, unequal power, inclusivity and trust-building (Goodrich et al. 2020), they account for power differentials to ensure the less powerful 'are not drowned out or excluded' (Goodrich et al. 2020, p.5). They are able to develop interpersonal trust across organisational boundaries (Needham 2017) and foster mutual understanding among different interests while representing the interests of all (Goodrich et al. 2020).
- **Advocates and champions:** They advocate for the less powerful and ensure the community voice is heard, while working 'in spaces that might not privilege the perspectives and priorities of Indigenous communities' (Hatch et al. 2023, p.4). They protect communities from extractive and exploitive relationships, seek out beneficial outcomes and guard against false promises, advocating for the resources or time needed for proper stakeholder dialogue or raising ethical concerns about proposed actions or decisions (Esteves 2024).

Competencies

As noted by Esteves et al. (2024, p.2) The social performance function 'is inherently complex, operating not in a binary space between company and community, but in a multi-dimensional arena where various interests intersect'. This complexity requires specific skills, capabilities and personality traits (Goodrich et al. 2020), such as:

- **A trusted ally:** Building trust over a long time through strong personal relationships and local networks, being comfortable working away from their primary organisation and often embedded in two or more contexts (Stephens et al. 2024), they are approachable, available and easy to find, bring diverse groups together and listen with patience and respect (Hatch et al. 2020).
- **Accountable to multiple stakeholders:** Working with integrity and accountability to both their organisations and communities impacted by their work (Esteves et al. 2024), boundary spanners may become a 'code switcher' (Hatch et al. 2023) with a feet in two worlds, able to hear the priorities and interests of the community, while acting as an 'ambassador who can connect one world to the other, and be a conduit of knowledge and knowledge systems in both directions' (Hatch et al. 2023, p.5).
- **Dedicated:** Boundary spanning work is often informal and performed after hours. Practitioners see their work as a vocation rather than a job, respect and believe in

their neighbours, and display deep sincerity and commitment to the local area (Stephens et al. 2024). They develop long-term, rather than a fleeting, commitment to communities, with deep personal relationships carefully nurtured across multiple projects and years.

- **Professional and knowledgeable:** They have appropriate skills and qualifications, exhibiting the technical or domain expertise needed to establish legitimacy and act as a credible and trusted source of information (Goodrich 2020; Hatch et al. 2023). Those working with First Nations community will have a deep knowledge of the customs, practices, formal and information systems of power as well as the respect of their own scientific community (Hatch et al. 2023).
- **Good listeners:** Able to listen to both what is said and what is meant 'and reflecting out loud their understanding until both sides are satisfied that they have been heard and understand each other' (Hatch et al. 2023, p.5), they may be dual knowledge holders who can hear verbal and nonverbal signals, know when communities are using silence to speak but also understand the jargon and format of their scientific communities (Hatch et al. 2023).
- '**Communication stars'** (Goodrich 2020) ensuring that communication is meaningful, relevant and culturally appropriate, relying on dialogue rather than one-way promulgation of 'facts'. They have cross-cultural competencies, simplify and explain complex issues, and overcome misinformation amplified by becoming reliable and trusted sources of information.
- **Able to work with complexity,** work autonomously and self-regulate for ethical and professional practice in circumstances that neither the dominant coalition or affected community truly understands. They adapt to local circumstances to gain access to diverse groups and deep community knowledge (Stephens et al. 2024).
- **Influential:** Able to resolve ethical dilemmas and exercise influence with diverse constituencies. They will be resourceful and able to draw on entrepreneurial skills to resolve problems (Goodrich 2020; Hatch et al. 2023).
- **Emotional intelligence:** They are empathetic, sympathetic, self-aware and community aware. They understand the frustration and passions of others; are calm, not defensive, can accept blame even if the fault is not theirs, are not afraid to admit they don't have all the answers, are humble and can play the long game (Hatch et al. 2023); and are able to go beyond their personal views and value others' perspectives (Goodrich 2023).
- **Ethical:** They respect confidentiality and privacy and will not compromise community integrity in the name of research (Hatch et al. 2023). They adhere to universal ethical principles and individual rights, and are guided by a commitment to justice, equality and the wellbeing of all stakeholders, 'transcending mere adherence to laws or organisation norms' (Esteves 2024, p.3).
- **Culturally competent:** They arrive with the ingredients to build equitable collaboration rather than with a 'fully baked project' (Hatch et al., 2023, p.2). They create space for community knowledge to be valued, such as educating scientists on the importance of community knowledge and creating safe and appropriate spaces for knowledge holders to be recognised and valued (Hatch et al. 2023).

Challenges

Boundary spanning is often lonely, 'emotional labour'. The downside of passion and commitment is vulnerability to burnout and stress. Boundary spanners often work to unrealistic deadlines, with less than ideal resources and support. They may be constrained by company or community gatekeepers or clients paying lip service to their work. Emotional labour includes the effort of rapport building and the emotional dissonance of gaps between displayed expressions and personal feelings. Boundary spanning jobs are often rewarding, but there are tensions between their role building trust as citizen advocates, while remaining embedded in organisations with all the reporting and compliance that entails (Needham et al. 2017). Other barriers include:

- **Their loyalty may be suspect**: While exerting some influence in an organisation through access to external information, they may be seen as too close to external stakeholders, blamed for unwelcome messages and challenging assumptions, or disparaged as emotional and subjective. They must maintain the trust of the dominant coalition 'even while communicating disturbing and unwelcome input from the organizational environment' (White & Dozier 1992, p.103).
- **Maintaining integrity**, independence and ethical practice can be difficult when boundary spanners' roles are not well understood. They are accountable to multiple stakeholders (their employing organisation, affected communities, broader society, and future generations) and have to navigate complex power dynamics and corporate-community power imbalances (Esteves 2024).
- **Taking a long-term view:** Building relationships and trust takes time, but many social practitioners work as short-term consultants, affected by project delays, design changes and staff turnover. Brought in late, they often have to play catch up and repair relationships, while working to short-term pressures on projects with intergenerational implications (Esteves 2024).
- **Their work is easily undone:** Careful relationship building be thwarted by one misplaced comment from the project team or a failure to deliver on false promises delivered as a sales pitch for the benefits of the project.
- **Lowly status:** Boundary spanners are expected to be ambidextrous, content experts, visionaries, communicators, analysts and synthesisers of multiple perspectives, yet are often inadequately trained and supported (Goodrich et al. 2020). SIA, for example, is a field of practice but not a discipline (Esteves et al. 2024). It is often poorly resourced and unsupported, with clients paying tokenistic attention to the findings and management plans of SIA.
- **Their work is hard to measure,** requiring metrics for a host of non-standard indicators, including trust building, fostering equity and reconciling different interests (Goodrich et al. 2020)

Boundary spanning work is complex but insightful, challenging but rewarding. Done well, it guides better process and good decisions. Properly supported, social practitioners can help address complexity, take account of what matters to communities, build more equitable outcomes and, above all, integrate multiple perspectives and knowledge systems to find solutions for the planet's most pressing problems.

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