

Boundary spanners: working between knowledge systems and culture



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Boundary spanners



Work outside the hive

- Connect people across social, societal, organisational, disciplinary silos
- Work between 'dominant coalitions' and often disempowered stakeholders to seek beneficial outcomes
- Work across multiple knowledge systems and cultures
- May be a) embedded in one organisation, b) have their feet in multiple worlds or c) be outsiders navigating between multiple perspectives

Boundary spanning



1. Stakeholder liaison role



- Embedded in the dominant culture but works across internal and external boundaries
- E.g. public relations, stakeholder management, social performance
- Liaising with communities
- Representing interests of the company

Images: From Shutterstock

2. Linking multiple organisations

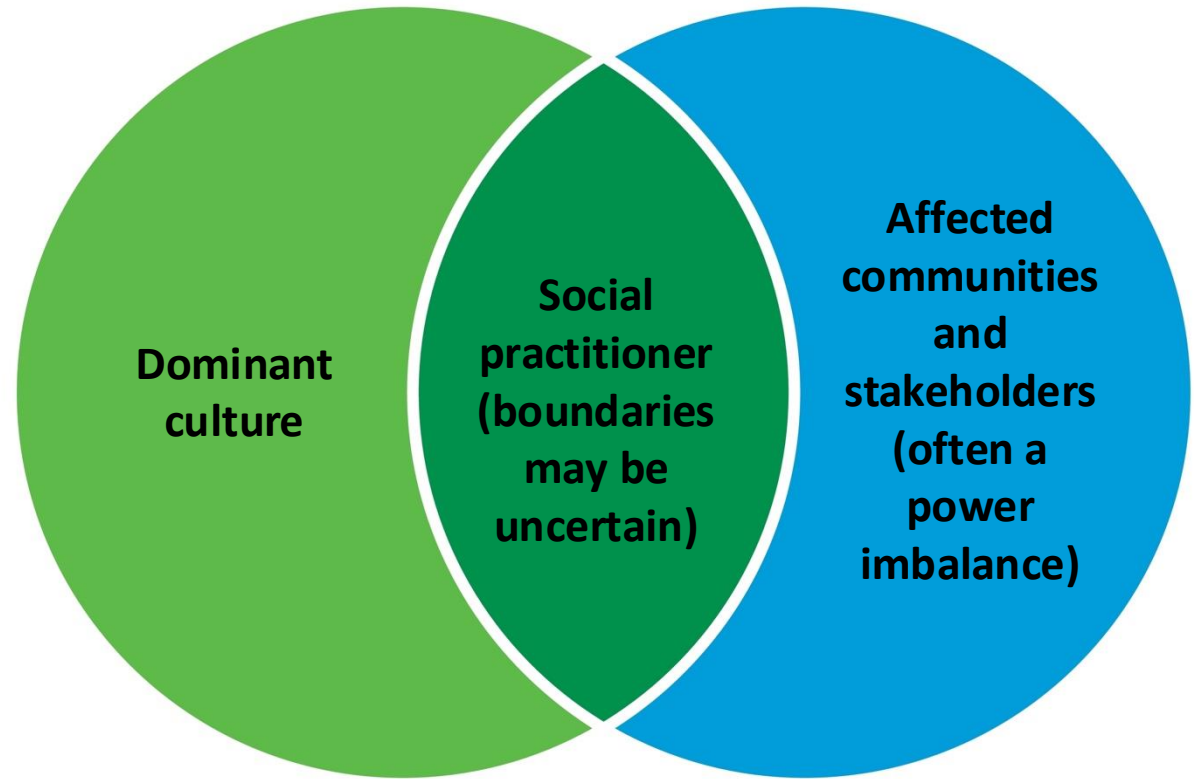
Boundary spanning



- Work across cultures, knowledge systems, organisations
- Feet in multiple worlds
- Change agents, e.g. extension officers
- Research partnerships generating shared knowledge, e.g. First Nations and Western science
- Link vertical service providers
- Co-design governance systems

3. Working at the interstices of knowledge and culture

Boundary spanning



Not embedded in the dominant culture

Outsiders



Often swimming alone, against the tide

Can be lonely

Out of professional and organisational comfort zones

Their work

Varies with the context, but may include

- **Facilitators and advisors:** network, mediate, navigate, share information both ways
- **Teachers and educators:** translate between systems with different language and cultures
- **Synthesisers:** filter, translate, synthesise many kinds of knowledge and evidence
- **Sense makers:** good communicators and story tellers, build shared understanding
- **Problem solvers and fixers:** work at the front line of wicked problems to influence decisions
- **Honest brokers:** develop interpersonal trust, reconcile and protect diverse interests
- **Advocates and champions:** ensure the community voice is heard, seek out beneficial outcomes.

Skills, knowledge, experience

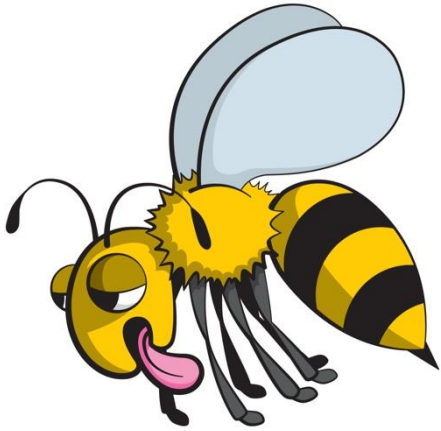
Competencies for an age of conflict

- **Cultural competence:** respect other worldviews
- **Trusted ally:** strong relationships and networks, approachable
- **Accountable to multiple stakeholders:** 'code switchers', feet in two worlds
- **Dedicated:** a vocation not a job, respect and believe in their neighbours
- **Professional and knowledgeable:** have the skills and qualifications to establish credibility
- **'Communication stars':** trusted sources of information
- **Able to work with complexity:** Adaptable
- **Influential:** Get results, resolve dilemmas
- **Emotionally intelligent:** Good listeners, empathetic, self-aware and community-aware
- **Ethical:** will not compromise community integrity.

Challenges



Mental hard work



Emotional labour

Practitioners are motivated, have strong values and are dedicated to their work.

BUT the downside of motivation and commitment may be burnout and stress:

- the effort of rapport-building
- emotional dissonance
- working after hours
- unrealistic deadlines
- role unclear or not valued
- exposure to trauma and complex lived realities



Other challenges

- **Loyalty may be suspect**, often relaying unwelcome input and challenging assumptions
- **Maintaining integrity**, while accountable to multiple communities
- **Taking a long-term view**, against short-term pressures
- **Work easily undone** by false promises, misplaced comments
- **Lowly status**: may be junior, lack a seat at the table
- **Work is hard to measure**: what counts is what can be counted.



Why it matters

- ❖ Complex problems need multi-disciplinary solutions
- ❖ Twin urgencies of climate change + plus critical minerals/renewables expansion = generating an 'age of conflict'
- ❖ Boundary spanners can bring multiple perspectives to inform quality process and decisions
- ❖ Mis/disinformation is amplified by social media but mitigated by trusted communicators who can build a shared understanding of problems and co-design solutions.

In summary



Boundary spanning work is:

- complex but vital
- challenging but rewarding
- takes account of what matters to multiple constituencies
- builds more equitable outcomes

BUT requires:

- role clarity
- professionalism
- support and respect
- adequate resources
- self care.



THANK YOU



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Let's continue the conversation!

Message me your questions or comments in the IAIA26 app.

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