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Some practical thoughts on working across boundaries

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Some practical thoughts on working across boundaries[1]

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Introduction

The notion of working across boundaries attracts both practical interest from people in government, and theoretical interest from scholars. Much emphasis has been placed on notions of inter-organisational, inter-jurisdictional and inter-sectoral working, and a range of terms have emerged to capture this phenomenon: horizontal coordination, joined-up government, collaboration, whole-of-government, holistic government, collaborative governance and so on. However, there is a core element to all these terms – the notion that we must traverse *boundaries* to achieve goals.

Most of the new ideas about public management which have emerged over the last decade or so have put the notion of working across boundaries front-and-centre. Indeed, Kelman (2007) has argued that the topics of collaboration across government agencies and between government, private and non-government organisations are the "most-discussed questions involving the performance of public institutions and achievement of public purposes" (p.45).

In this paper we provide an overview of the literature on working across boundaries to help answer two key questions: First, *why* has this notion emerged? Second, what are the critical enablers and barriers which help us to understand *how* this works (or not)?

Working Across boundaries: Why?

The international literature ascribes the emergence of working across boundaries to four potential causes...

1. *...as a long-term issue of functional organisation*

Perri 6 (1997) notes that from the beginning of the 20th century, Ministers in the UK have been arguing that more inter-departmental working was needed, often triggering grand reform plans.

There are multiple ways to organise bureaucracies – by purpose, by function, by clientele and/or by geography – and any one of these creates challenges of coordination because any task naturally contains pieces of each. Whatever the organising principle, boundaries are created which require coordination. Both Ling (2002) and Perry (1997) ascribe the attempts at joined-up government in the UK to the problems caused by both *functional* separation (e.g. health from education from justice), and *hierarchy*.

2. *...as a corrective to New Public Management (NPM)-induced disaggregation and fragmentation*

While some argue that the focus on working across boundaries reflects the enduring problems of coordination, others claim there *is* something new about this trend. They argue that the imperative for working across boundaries comes from the dysfunction of reforms under the NPM banner – that is, separation and fragmentation within the system. Working across boundaries, then, is a corrective device to swing the pendulum back towards more coordination, especially within the governmental system.

[1] This is a précis of a conference paper presented at the International Research Society for Public Management Conference in Berne, April 7-10 2010. The full paper *Working Across Boundaries: Barriers, Enablers, Tensions and Puzzles*, co-authored with Deborah Blackman and John Halligan, is available from http://www.crawford.anu.edu.au/staff/joflynn.php

3. *...as a response to complexity*

An especially strong thread in the literature contends that working across boundaries is the only possibility for addressing complex problems of public policy, some old and some new, or increasing complexity in the strategic operating environment.

A substantial group of writers point to the problems and challenges themselves as the driving force for the focus on working across boundaries. A catalogue of problems is identified in the literature: pollution, drugs, terrorism, health care, urban sprawl, avian flu and natural disaster (Christensen and Laegreid 2007; Linden, 2002). In some sense these are the potentially "wicked" problems many authors have connected to the imperative for cross-boundary working. This raises the question of whether, given this complexity, the state has the capacity by itself to deliver on public policy goals (Sullivan and Skelcher, 2002).

As one of the characteristics of wicked problems is that they take no account of boundaries, many have now written on the need for cross-boundary work to confront them; indeed this has become somewhat of a panacea for complexity among both academic and government documents (Bryson, Crosby and Middleton Stone, 2006; APSC, 2007; Department of Health, 1998).

4. *...for efficiency, effectiveness and service improvements*

A final strand in the literature focuses on working across boundaries to improve areas such as effectiveness, efficiency and service delivery. Joined-up government, for example, has been seen as a means of making better use of scarce resources (efficiency), eliminating duplication by removing contradiction and tensions between policies across government (effectiveness), and bringing together a range of services for citizens (Pollitt, 2003). Entwistle and Martin (2005) also highlight the service issue, arguing that more collaborative approaches might transform service systems. The more general collaboration literature points to a range of reasons to traverse boundaries which are relevant here, such as pooling resources, gaining access to new ones, or reducing transaction costs (see O'Flynn, 2008 for a discussion).

Working Across Boundaries: (Some) Enablers and Barriers

We have identified seven important enablers and barriers for cross-boundary work, to help address the question of *how* this phenomenon works – and how and why it fails. It should be noted at the outset that many of these factors are *both* potential enablers and potential barriers.

1. *Formal structures*

There is no doubt that structures matter for working across boundaries. The longstanding organisation of government on the basis of *function* is seen to be a major impediment to more constructive cross-boundary working. In a major Australian government report (APSC, 2007) it was noted that "existing public sector institutions and structures were, by and large, not designed with a primary goal of supporting collaborative inter-organisational work" (p.17). Perri 6 (1997) argues that this remains the major blockage because attempts to work against functionalism "cut against the grain" and that "Few gain in career terms from questioning the interests of their department…[or are] promoted for cutting their own budgets …[or] thanked by their ministers for negotiating away any of their power" (p. 22). However, we also know that any other principle of organisational design will create new and different boundaries; boundaries do not just disappear. Creating new structures can help in enabling more effective working across boundaries.

2. *Commonality and complexity*

An important enabler/barrier is commonality. With a sense of shared goals or outcomes, for example, working across boundaries can be enabled; a lack of commonality can undermine such attempts. Parston and Timmins (1998) argue that cross-boundary work needs agreement on what the problem is and also an outcomes focus. Outcome agreement can then foster agreements on what each party will do to contribute to the achievement of them, including designing a range of outputs to feed into the outcomes. Much of the work on collaborative approaches highlights the importance of shared or common goals as an enabler of effective working across boundaries.

Commonality can sometimes be more easily engineered in times of crisis or when confronted with complexity (i.e. the wicked problems imperative). Lundin (2007) found that inter-organisational cooperation was both reasonable and beneficial in situations where there was significant task *complexity*, but was both costly and unhelpful when applied to *simple* tasks. Complex inter-organisational approaches should be contingent, not automatic. As Huxham (1996) has argued in relation to collaboration: "Most of what organisations strive to achieve is, and should be, done alone" (p. 3). Head (2004) agrees: "Selection of inappropriate structures and processes can be a recipe for frustration among participants, and ensures under-achievement of goals" (p. 3). Put more succinctly: "Don't work collaboratively unless you have to" (Huxham and Vangen, 2004: 200). Applying collaborative approaches in the wrong setting may create long-term resistance to working across boundaries as it can incur major costs and effort for little return.

3. *People*

At some level we might consider that working across boundaries inevitably hinges on the *people* that carry out this cross-boundary work: on their ability to operationalise these notions, and to collaborate across hard and soft structures. There is much written here – from the skills and competencies required, to the performance management systems constructed to assess them.

Many terms have emerged for individuals driving work across boundaries, including networkers, brokers, collaborators, civic entrepreneurs, boundroids, sparkplugs and collabronauts (Williams, 2002: 107). In describing the skills, competencies and behaviours of competent boundary-spanners, Williams (2002) set out several critical aspects that are bundled together

- *building and sustaining relationships* (communicating and listening; understanding, empathising and resolving conflict, personality style and trust);
- *managing through influencing and negotiation* (brokering solutions, diplomacy, persuasion, networking); *managing complexity and interdependencies* (making sense of structures and processes, appreciating connections and interrelationships, interorganisational experiences, transdiciplinary knowledge, cognitive capability); and
- *managing roles, accountabilities and motivations* (managing multiple accountabilities).

Such skills develop outside technical or knowledge-based expertise; successful boundary spanners "will build cultures of trust, improve levels of cognitive ability to understand complexity and be able to operate within non-hierarchical environments with dispersed configurations of power relationships" (Williams, 2002: 106).

As well as being prime enablers of cross-boundary work, individuals face considerable challenges and barriers in attempting and undertaking this work. Membership of a single organisation creates identity and focus for individuals, whereas creating and sustaining commitment to cross-cutting and cross-boundary objectives may be more challenging (Pollitt, 2003). People resolve problems of marginality in a variety of ways – "by passing on one side or another, denying one side, oscillating between worlds, or by forming a new social world composed of others like themselves" (Star and Griesemer, 1989: 412). One way of addressing this is to rotate individuals who act in boundary roles to ensure ongoing commitment and integration (Aldrich and Herker, 1977), however this produces issues of continuation and stability in cross-boundary working.

Despite the wide recognition that specific skills and competencies are needed to facilitate these boundary-spanners, there is a strong argument that they have not really been cultivated. There needs to be a complex mix of rewards, incentives and increased freedom to enable the achievement of outcomes – all of these factors rely heavily on HRM systems, organisational cultures and leadership (Parston and Timmins, 1998).

4. *Understanding culture*

The enabling (and blocking) potential of culture can also be considered here. It has been argued that major cultural change will be required if cross-boundary working is to be successful, partly to shift people away from narrow, siloed issues and objectives (Christensen and Laegreid, 2007; MAC, 2004). Partly this is because the pressures from functionalism are embedded and intense. Osborne and Brown (2005) claim that informal

aspects of organisations are often the greatest barrier to successful change programs. Others argue that change programs can become 'stuck' if culture is not well understood; this means that there must be considerable effort invested in understanding the underlying assumptions held by people within the organisation (Lawson and Ventriss, 1992; Schein, 1985). An understanding of public sector culture is important in working across boundaries, and the ability to identify points of instability (i.e. lack of alignment between culture, processes and structure) can give great insight into what enables and blocks working across boundaries (Hood, 1996).

5. *Leadership*

Leadership, although a fluid concept, also emerges as a critical enabler and barrier in the literature:
The OECD report *Public Sector Leadership for the 21st Century* (2001) makes a strong claim that leaders need the ability to address interconnected problems. Further, in order to solve these complex problems, leaders should be able to "initiate concerted action not only within their own organisations but among a set of stakeholders with different and competing interests" (Broussine, 2003:175). Leaders are important in enabling cross-boundary work as they can provide the force for operating, and for leveraging resources, across boundaries. Thus we can anticipate that poor leadership or a lack of attention from leaders will provide a serious barrier to working across boundaries. Without the endorsement of those in powerful positions, cross-boundary work is undermined.

6. Power and politics

Power is, of course, a critical issue. Working across boundaries may reshape power relations and thus pose a significant barrier to the ability to operationalise this mode of working. Working across boundaries has the potential to disrupt existing power bases and structures – political and administrative. In effect, this may mean that powerful actors must lend it their support to enable it to be successful. The counter argument is that these approaches should be cooperative, not mandated or imposed from the top (see Pollitt, 2003). Where this power is used, he argues it should be focused on steering and facilitating, negotiation and persuasion.

The issues of politics and power are linked. Endorsement is a valuable currency, but as Pollitt (2003) has noted, to make cross-boundary working viable, politicians will need to cede some of their traditional authority. It is politicians that often must break stalemates between competing objectives and feuding administrative groups (Pollitt, 2003), because the administrative machinery was not designed to be collective or collaborative (Wilkins, 2002). Politicians give important signals to public servants about the importance of working across boundaries; they set the priorities and they signal to civil servants whether or not cross-cutting approaches are valuable (Pollitt, 2003). The challenge comes because ministers have their own turf and power to protect (see Perri 6, 1997), and also because the accountability issues that emerge from this approach may place them at risk either of not gaining kudos for successful outcomes, or for problems that emerge outside their control.

7. Performance, accountability and budgets

Considering how to assess and account for working across boundaries points us to another important set of potential barriers or enablers.

<u>Performance</u>

In the area of *performance* systems, it is clear that there are tensions between working across boundaries and the developments of the last decade or so which have focused agencies inward onto enhancing *their* achievement of targets and goals. Pollitt (2003) argues that unless these cross-cutting targets are given equal weight (and reward), they will not get the attention they need. Hence, a failure to reconfigure performance systems, both for individuals and for organisations, will create powerful barriers to working across boundaries. Resetting these systems and restructuring incentives within them can better enable cross-boundary work.

<u>Accountability</u>

Traditional *accountability* systems can also act as a major impediment to working across boundaries. Christensen and Laegreid (2007) point to accountability and risk management as central tensions: "how we

can have WoG joint action, common standards, and shared systems, on the one hand, and vertical accountability for individual agency performance, on the other?" (p. 1063). The APSC's wicked problems report (2007) explores whether there is a lack of compatibility between the existing accountability framework – structured around delivering on tightly specified program outputs and outcomes – and a model which seeks to work across boundaries.

In part this barrier comes back to functionalism and the difficulty of allocating risk and reward to encourage cross-boundary work: accountability requirements need to be relaxed for cross-boundary working to be effective. What is needed here is freedom to break the rules to deliver outcomes – a "consensus to operate" – along with safeguards to identify problems (Parston and Timmins, 1998: p. 21). However, such ideas don't gel with traditional accountability approaches. Adapting some systems may work; Pollitt (2003) argues that formal agreements can underpin joined-up approaches (although this is not sufficient). On top of this, cultures must adapt to a mixture of horizontal and vertical accountability, and external oversight bodies need to consider more complex accountability approaches.

Budgets

A complementary area of importance is that of *budgets*. When we think about inter-organisational models, budgets are (for the most part) hardwired into departmental silos. This means that budgets are attached to functions and programs, not outcomes. It has been argued that this traps departments into short-term ideas, annual spending rounds, and battles of maintaining resources (Perri 6, 1997). To overcome this major barrier and enable more cross-boundary working, some have suggested that budgets should be pooled in pursuit of broader outcomes (e.g. Wilkins, 2002). Perri 6 (1997), for example, has floated the idea of holistic budgets which are tied to outcomes or geographical areas, not functions or organisations. However, the accountability issue emerges here immediately – considerable readjustment of traditional approaches will be needed to accommodate such ideas. In part this is because pooling budgets and effort makes it difficult to own success or assign responsibility for failure.

Conclusion

Clearly there is an ever-increasing push to work across boundaries, however creating the architecture to enable effective working across boundaries raises many challenges for public managers. On the one hand, we can see that the ideal would require a fundamental transformation of the way in which governments operate; on the other the status quo constrains our ability to address complex issues. On-the-ground frustrations abound from those trapped by old ways of structuring and working. Serious commitment to working across boundaries will require, at some point, a very serious commitment to system redesign.

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