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## Boundary spanning leadership and power in public sector organizations

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**Abstract:**

The phenomenon of boundary spanning leadership and power in public sector organizations is the topic for the present workshop. The workshop takes its starting point in an interdisciplinary Scandinavian research project of how (power) processes can promote or hinder boundary spanning leadership in public sector organizations. This research project has, among other things, highlighted the ways in which the boundary spanning leadership can be related to establishing a shared pool of actions, knowledge, communication, trust and identity in the organization. Furthermore, the research project stresses the fact that analysis of boundary spanning leadership and power relations is an essential, significant, and critical tool in questioning different forms of management in public sector organizations. The workshop focuses on how to identify and analyze boundary spanning leadership processes and how they affect the organization's ability to create inter-organizational outcomes. The aim of the workshop is to investigate, elucidate and discuss management across organizational units. The general interest in this workshop and the study of boundary spanning leadership and power in public organizations is related to perspectives concerning the extent to which the quality of boundary spanning activities has significant spillover effects on the organization's productivity, job satisfaction and efficiency. The working method will be an interaction between interactive discussions, dialog, reflection, and presentations.

## **OVERVIEW OF THE WORKSHOP**

### **Background**

How do we establish an effective interdisciplinary collaboration in complex problem-solving among several professional groups, departments and organizations? This is one of the really 'hot' issues preoccupying both researchers and practitioners in an era that is characterized by high complexity (Gittell, 2012; Brookes and Grint, 2010; Melander, 2010). This workshop takes its point of departure in a Scandinavian empirical and theoretical study of how (power) processes can promote or hinder boundary spanning leadership in public sector organizations. Boundary spanning leadership is defined here as 'the ability to create direction, alignment and commitment across group boundaries in service of a higher vision and goal' (Ernst and Chrobot-Mason, 2011, p. 2). The goal of boundary spanning leadership, therefore, is to create a coherent chain of targeted activities vertically and horizontally within the organization (ibid.). The workshop includes both a focus on the interdisciplinary collaboration work processes around the operational task and the opportunity for development, innovation and creativity as a result of boundary spanning leadership.

We focus on public sector organizations, as they are constantly being challenged by the increasing pressures for cost reduction, privatization, outsourcing, new agendas, etc. (Ernst & Yip, 2008; Gittell, 2012; Klausen, 2009). The ever-increasing complexity and interdependence of today's world calls for a critical transformation in leadership from managing and protecting boundaries to boundary spanning (Yip, Ernst & Campbell, 2011 p. 4). This workshop regarding boundary spanning leadership highlights the organization's capability to create direction, alignment, and commitment across boundaries in service of a higher vision or goal. Organizations can no longer succeed solely through secure operations in well-functioning 'silos'. The current change agenda requires boundary spanning leadership to engage the rest of the organization in holistic cross-cutting cooperation and coordination.

There is a move towards flatter and more localized forms of management that are not necessarily based on a traditional hierarchy (Contractor et al., 2012). Both the organizational models and the welfare state models have reached a stage of development where there is an increasing need for fundamental change and new ways of thinking about organization and management (Brookes and Grint, 2010; Melander, 2010). These contextual factors highlight the need for management that actively engages itself in boundary spanning and bridge-building management, both internally within the organization and externally toward the citizens, interest groups and cooperating partners. In the international research literature, this kind of leadership is referred to as 'boundary spanning leadership' (Marrone 2010). It concerns leadership that actively attempts to transcend and bridge those organizational, psychological, professional and cultural boundaries that prevent cooperation and innovation and which harm organizational efficiency and growth. Boundary spanning is a task to be undertaken within the organization (breaking down the organizational and professional silos) and externally to citizens, stakeholders and partners, who in the future must be integrated more actively into the value creation of public organizations at all levels.

The challenges that this workshop addresses are thus connected to the fact that public organizations are often based on a hybrid of machine bureaucracy and professional/specialist bureaucracy with the inherent learning and silo problems (Minzberg 2009). The consequences of this include poor utilization of knowledge workers, silo barriers, lack of organizational learning, confusion and overall low performance (Seeman, Gustafsson and Dinesen, 2011). Furthermore, in a survey of 128 public and private sector executives carried out by the Centre for Creative Leadership, 86% of the executives pointed out that their ability to lead across organizational boundaries is extremely important to them, while only 7% state that they have mastered this skill (Yip, Ernst & Campbell, 2011). Hence, there is a growing need to develop management

perspectives, both socially and organizationally, that can create cohesion and synergy across different professional groups, departments and functional areas (Moore and Hartley, 2008; Minzberg, 2009; Ernst and Chrobot-Mason, 2011). Against this background, it can be argued that there seems to be a significant gap between the identified need for boundary spanning and the quality of the boundary spanning leadership as actually practiced (Yip, Ernst & Campbell, 2011).

Inter-organizational collaboration is set up in order to achieve some goals through a coordinated effort, which cannot be achieved by a single professional or organizational unit (Hannum, McFeeters and Booysen, 2010). Decisions must be continually made regarding how to organize this effort. Such decisions are complicated by the fact that goals will often be interpreted in ways that may be more or less contradictory. Furthermore, there may be very different views on how best to pursue these objectives, interests and desires, i.e., which means should be applied in a given situation (Clegg, Courpasson and Phillips, 2006). In order to understand what takes place in these inter-organizational processes, it is thus necessary to identify who actually makes decisions, how this occurs, and what consequences it has for the organization (Christensen & Jensen, 2008). In other words, we need to identify the kind of power processes that can explain the decisions. Power in organizations concerns the effects of structures and processes on employee behavior and attitudes (Thompson & McHugh, 2002; Yukl, 2013; Pfeffer, 2010). Specifically, power plays a role in ensuring the joint coordination and determination of what each person in the organization must do in order to ensure the common path and achieve organizational goals (Haslam, Reicher & Platow, 2011). The network-based decisions and common negotiated goals easily come to be based on the assumption that we can base ourselves on 'good will'. But who actually has the power to point out the challenges, actions and opportunities that lie in the interstices of the organizational units? Who has the power to define what is the best joint solution in a field where many conflicting and competing logics are often operating? Hence, it is essential to discuss and examine how power

processes can inhibit or promote boundary spanning leadership, both horizontally in processes and vertically in the linkages between the hierarchical levels of management. However, power has not been studied, analyzed and described in relation to boundary spanning leadership and inter-organizational cooperation processes. A key challenge for organizational researchers and practitioners, therefore, is to discuss and study how such processes can proceed optimally for employees, managers and the organization as a whole.

## **Objectives**

The workshop focuses on how to identify and analyze boundary spanning leadership and power processes in public organizations and how they affect the organization's ability to create inter-organizational outcomes. The aim is to investigate, elucidate and discuss leadership across organizational units. The focus is on the elements of leadership that can/must create a connection between the organization's many actors and the organization's overall goals and strategies. The general interest in a study and discussion of boundary spanning is related to perspectives concerning the extent to which the quality of boundary spanning activities has significant spillover effects on the organization's productivity, job satisfaction and efficiency.

How we talk about boundary spanning leadership and interdisciplinary collaboration is not insignificant. The language we use helps create the conditions for boundary spanning leadership and cross-cutting cooperation. When we talk about interfaces and interface clarification, we risk producing the kind of separateness and 'us-them' thinking that inhibits smooth-running, cross-cutting cooperation. Instead, we propose that managers begin to think, speak and act on the basis of the metaphor of cooperation spaces which leads to establishing a shared pool of actions, knowledge, communication, trust and identity. These aspects raise the following essential questions: *What characterizes successful boundary spanning leadership in the public sector? What organizational prerequisites can inhibit or promote boundary spanning leadership? How are power*

*processes and trust associated with the management of inter-organizational processes of change?*

*What organizational (practical and theoretical) opportunities are associated with boundary spanning management as an analytical focal point?*

In the workshop, we will address these questions. Specifically, the questions will be taken into consideration by introducing a productive and practice-related display of the concept of boundary spanning leadership and power in connection with public organizations. The aim is to create a platform for constructive, practical development of the field of boundary spanning leadership and power. Moreover, on the basis of the research project, the aim is to discuss the links between boundary spanning leadership and power in relation to productivity, job satisfaction and efficiency in public organizations. Furthermore, the contributions of the research project will be discussed in relation to a global context.

At the workshop, we will present data from an exploratory case study of cross-cutting cooperation in an executive group in a Danish municipality. Through focus group interviews and participant observation, we have discovered how the group has worked with boundary spanning leadership, and what this has meant for the executive's ability to carry out cross-cutting cooperation and coordination, as well as their effects further out in the organization. The research is related to a hypothesis that the quality of cooperation within the executive group has a spillover effect on the value (efficiency and growth) created in the management team and farther out in the organization (Bang and Midelfart 2012 ).

We hope the workshop can inspire additional empirical and theoretical analysis of leadership power processes in public organization. In particular, the ambition is to discuss and identify how it is possible to work with boundary spanning leadership and power in everyday work as a consultant, manager, or leader in public organizations – including focus on concrete, usable tools, knowledge, and methods.

## **Staff**

### ***Submitter and presenter***

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### ***Facilitators***

Anders Trillingsgaard, Licensed organizational psychologist, Ph.D.

Manon de Jongh, Ph.D., Chief organizational Consultant at Development Consultants

We have received signed statements from all participants agreeing to participate for the entire workshop, and that these participants are not in violation of the rule of three + three.

## **WHY SHOULD THIS WORKSHOP BE OF INTEREST TO THE SPONSOR?**

The present workshop will be of special interest to participants working within Public and Non Profits (PNP) and Management Consulting (MC), since focus is directed specifically towards the development of concrete tools, usable knowledge, and methods linked to leading boundaries and cross-cutting cooperation in the public sector organizations. The workshop illustrates the conference's theme, 'the Power of words', in that it follows research from data to insights and concepts (words), and from words to practice and results. Furthermore, the workshop is of interest to participants working with Organizational Behavior (OB). Boundary spanning leadership and power reflects central themes concerning the understanding, analysis, and intervention in organizations. A common definition of leadership is to solve tasks through other people (Yukl, 2013). This definition calls concepts like power and influence to mind and in recent years there has



been increased attention on power in management literature (Haslam, Reicher & Platow, 2011; Yukl, 2013; Pfeffer, 2010). Given that power is an essential precondition for considering different organizational needs, goals, and interests sufficiently (Clegg et al., 2006), a crucial leadership task is to comprehend, analyze, and constructively use the existing power mechanisms and relations. Thus, the link between power and leadership is a key element in understanding organizations and organizational behavior.

Moreover, the workshop is relevant for participants interested in Conflict Management (CM). Power is an essential concept to grasp in order to understand and manage conflicts in organizations. Conflict is often defined as an expression for collision between interests, attitudes, and actions (Mestdagh, Van Poucke & Cools, 2006). Since power, in many ways, is concerned with safeguarding private and organizational interests, conflicts are unavoidable; if there were no conflicts concerning organizational strategies and goal, there would be no need for power to secure a shared direction and alignment. Thus, conflict is an embedded and central part of the power aspect; power is used to make individuals act in a certain way, even though these actions might contradict what they would otherwise have done. Consequently, the question of power becomes essential in order to analyze and to comprehend organizational conflicts. Finally, the workshop offers an opportunity to discuss essential methodological issues related to research and practice in organizations. Therefore, the workshop would also be relevant for participants interested in Critical Management Studies (CMS).

## **Criteria**

From our point of view, working directly with the constructive ways in which boundary spanning leadership and power can be used in organizations is an ideal platform for explicitly linking theory and practice. Concretely, we will apply an interactive approach, focusing on participation in order to develop both theory and intervention methods. Participants will get an in-depth, concrete, and

practically usable understanding of the complex dynamics and processes that operate (in both positive and negative ways) in organizational settings. Moreover, focus will be on interventions both in theoretical and practical terms. We hope the workshop will inspire additional empirically based and theoretically reflected analysis of boundary spanning leadership and power processes in organizations. To achieve this aim, we consider it important to operate with an inclusive and multifaceted concept of leadership power (both methodically and practically). The theory/practice distinction is important because boundary spanning leadership power was inscribed in practice long before it was reflected upon in theory.

### **Quality**

The topic of this workshop is of the utmost importance because boundary spanning leadership and power is necessary and unavoidable in all social contexts. Necessary, because groups, organizational units, and society only function if power relations make the individuals collaborate in order to attain shared goals which might compromise private interests at times (Huxham & Vangen, 2005). Unavoidable, because social systems are based on reciprocal relationships of influence (Yukl, 2013). Thus, it is vital for leaders, managers, employees, and consultants to be aware of power games, power mechanisms, and the functions of power in organizations. The workshop will therefore present the participants with essential, concrete, and usable learning outcomes in relation to understanding and working with power dynamics in management and consultancy work.

The working method will be an interaction between discussion, dialog, reflection, and presentations. We will apply an interactive approach focused on participation in order to develop both theory and intervention methods. Furthermore, participants will be divided into groups facilitated by educated professional process consultants from a leading Danish research-based consultancy.

## **Impact**

It is important for us to create room for reflection. Thus, we will brainstorm together, discuss, and develop methods and tools for practical usage. Moreover, we will create possibilities for discussing future research projects. Also, the workshop will introduce the tools, knowledge, and methods that we successfully use in our own practice as consultants and researchers. We wish to contribute to the foundations of future perspectives; both different theoretical understandings of boundary spanning leadership and power in organizations and, informed by these, better practices of boundary spanning activities in organizations.

## **DESCRIPTION OF THE FORMAT OF THE WORKSHOP**

### **Phase 1: (55 minutes)**

Introduction to the topic and central issues related to this topic. Especially, focusing on different approaches to boundary spanning leadership and their implications for theoretical development and practical interventions. Furthermore, the first tools for constructively leading boundaries in public sector organizations are presented.

### **Phase 2: (30 minutes)**

We facilitate a process regarding the boundary spanning leadership and power as an intervention strategy. The participants work in subgroups. The aim of this process is to create concrete ideas on how to intervene as a manager or consultant and thus create new organizational opportunities for actions dealing with establishing effective cross-cutting cooperation in complex problem-solving among several professional groups, departments and organizations. The essential questions are: How does the integration between the building up of structural management tools compare to the presence of relational trust among the actors for supporting boundary spanning management? What

cultural characteristics inhibit or promote boundary spanning management? How do different power processes promote or hinder opportunities to create management across organizational boundaries? Focus is on brainstorming with regard to themes, development of concrete tools, and presentation in plenum. Every group has an experienced facilitator who supports the process. All facilitators are educated professional process consultants.

**Phase 3: (35 minutes)**

The workshop will end with a recap in plenum where inputs, which have emerged during the process, will be reflected upon. Based on the shared reflections, we will draw up a brief, capturing the most essential dimensions discussed. Ideally, this brief will be the starting point for new collaborations concerning future research projects and development of practical interventions focusing on power and leadership.

**TABLE 1: WORKSHOP TIMELINE**

<b>Time</b>	<b>Type of activity</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>0.00</b>	Presentation (plenary)	Workshop facilitators and participants introduce themselves and share their motivation for participating in the workshop.
<b>0.15</b>	Theoretical introduction (plenary)	Interactive presentation of various conceptions of boundary spanning leadership and power, focusing particularly on the intersection of these with that of public sector organizations, in both theory and practice.
<b>0.55</b>	Subgroup sessions	Participants are divided into groups according to the themes presented. The aim of this process is to create concrete ideas and tools on how to intervene as a leader, manager, or consultant and, thus, create new organizational opportunities for action. Each group has an experienced facilitator who supports the process.
<b>1.25</b>	Plenary wrap up	The subgroups give a short summary of their work
	Plenary reflection	Based on the shared reflections we will draw up a brief, capturing the most essential dimensions discussed.
<b>2.00</b>	Ending	

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