Navigating Organizational Strategies: Boundary Layers, Viscosities, and Mechanisms

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Agenda

• Part 1: Experience leading “Crossing Boundaries”
• Part 2: Retrospective theorizing
• Part 3: Key competencies for a boundary strategist
Part 1: My Experience

- DIA Strategic Plan
- OIF Lessons Learned
- DIA Knowledge Lab

“Crossing Boundaries” Program Begins

Year

2004  2005  2006

DIA = Defense Intelligence Agency
OIF = Operation Iraqi Freedom
The “Crossing Boundaries” Program

- Why was it created?
- What was the program’s value?
Description of “Crossing Boundaries”

• Shared problem-solving:
  
  – Started as “in-person”
  – Employees and managers were “idea submitters”
  – Each session began with past success
  – Success generated more participation
  – Grew to video teleconference; added asynchronous web-based
Examples of “Crossing Boundaries” ideas

• "Customize Deployment Processing”
• “Reintegration and Reassignment”
• “Create a Repatriation Center”
“ Crossing Boundaries:” Was it successful?

Success Rate 52% after ~4 years)

Only 6.5% of ideas were declined
The remainder were in-progress (15%), merged (15%), or withdrawn (16%)
Why did “Crossing Boundaries” work?

• Because…:
  – Director made personal commitment
  – Funding available for coaches
  – Program execution was flawless, yet flexible
  – Idea submitters felt empowered and safe
  – Results were made visible
Part 2: Retrospective Theorizing

Leading the “Crossing Boundaries” Program

Earned a Ph.D. in Management

Today

2006 2007 2008 2009 2010 2011 2012 2013 2014 …… 2018
Navigating Strategies

1) Design-level strategy

2) Street-level strategy

3) Boundary strategist stitches together multiple strategies
   – Multilevel
   – Emergence

4) Boundary strategist’s phenomena (Today’s focus)
   – Complex layering of boundaries
   – Boundary viscosity
   – Selection and use of boundary crossing mechanisms
Layering of Boundaries

• Nature of boundaries
  – Positive and negative

• Types of boundaries
  – Structural and conceptual

• Boundary language
  – Words and metaphors
Boundary Detection

• Language expresses unique meanings
  – Differences in assumptions, routines, interpretations

• Limits to understanding
  – Absorptive capacity, and uncertainty absorption

• Communicative behaviors
  – Extent of resistance
Boundary Viscosity

• Boundaries are *thick* when:
  – Language, understanding, and resistance differences are *large*

• Boundaries are *thin* when:
  – Language, understanding, and resistance differences are *small*
# Boundary Crossing Mechanisms

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<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Viscosity</th>
<th>Mechanism</th>
<th>Tool</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boundary Spanner</td>
<td>Thin</td>
<td>Boundary Object</td>
<td>Boundary Object</td>
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<tr>
<td>Boundary Architect</td>
<td>Thick</td>
<td>Boundary Practice</td>
<td>Boundary Practice</td>
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Part 3: Competencies for a Boundary Strategist

Boundary Layers

Boundary Mechanisms ↔ Boundary Viscosities
In Practice: Boundary Strategist Work

• Identify and validate your goal

• Analyze the boundary layers within the organizational and/or cross-organizational context

• Determine the various boundary viscosities

• Select the boundary mechanisms and their strategy(s)

• Iterate, as necessary, to achieve the goal
Questions

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