Qualitative Social Work

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ARTICLE

Boundary Spanners Revisited

A Qualitative Inquiry into Cross-system Reform through the Experience of Youth Service Professionals

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ABSTRACT
While collaborative change models are gaining momentum in human services, more needs to be known about those leading the changes in a contemporary context. The professional experiences of those who work among diverse, fragmented, even rival factions, often without formal authority, and manage to facilitate cross-system cooperation among multiple partners remain under explored. They represent the evolution of a rich and varied history of models of leadership in social networks and social movements. In this qualitative study, leaders from the Reclaiming Futures initiative reflect on their roles in collaborative efforts to improve substance abuse treatment and community involvement in juvenile justice. Findings revealed the characteristics and strategies of successful boundary spanners – valuable for those engaged in such work and for future workforce development.

KEY WORDS:
change agent
leadership
systems change

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INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

The identification and promotion of best practices in adolescent substance abuse treatment has grown substantially in the last decade (Brannigan et al., 2004; Drug Strategies, 2003). 'Systems of care' for these youth (Nissen et al., 2004) have also advanced in treatment, youth development and juvenile justice settings (Kraft et al., 2001). To most effectively advance enhanced programming, more needs to be known about the experiences and interpretations of 'systems change' agents themselves. This article focuses on the 'boundary spanner,' who coordinates joint community efforts to implement improved services in a living laboratory of social networks and social movements.

In this study, the change agent role included: cultivating excitement and momentum for new treatment approaches; generating and/or applying for new funding for such approaches; building cross-organizational partnerships (among community agencies, schools, juvenile justice, family, and behavioral health) to better identify adolescents in need of treatment; addressing ideological, procedural or administrative barriers to coordinated care for young people; assuring and monitoring that appropriate care was received; creating successful community partnerships to reclaim youth after formal treatment was concluded.

Cross-organizational practice has been a focus of inquiry for some time – particularly building coalitions and developing strong collaborative approaches to complex community challenges (Linden, 2002; Mattessich et al., 2001). The family tree of cross-organizational practice, however, links strongly to a study of social networks and social movements, and both ways to understand how these arrangements of human relationships are organized (Provan et al., 2007) and how they are led (Morris and Staggenborg, 2007; Nepstad and Clifford, 2006). This evolution has included a rich historical frame that has been informed by the lessons of social networks and movements including throughout the last 40 years including the war on poverty, deinstitutionalization movements, and community reform movements from everything from educational improvement to efforts to increase political involvement (Crossley, 2002; Diani and McAdam, 2003; Della Portia and Diani, 2006; Goodwin and Jasper, 2003; Piven and Cloward, 1977, Tarrow, 1998).

In 1992, Dr Harry Steadman introduced the term 'boundary spanner' to the fields of mental health and justice. This term – widely cited in justice system reform literature – describes a new generation of change agents who make an improved treatment system possible. Paraphrasing Steadman, a boundary spanner works between systems whose goals, though superficially complementary, may carry inherent conflicts requiring mediation, negotiation, and strategy. Despite a rich literature exploring system of care approaches in general (Holden et al., 2001; Pires, 2002; Stroul and Friedman, 1994), and some preliminary examination of the role of leadership in creating systems change in the

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Reclaiming Futures initiative (Nissen et al., 2005) and the Fighting Back Initiative (Alexander et al., 2006) more knowledge is needed regarding how cross-disciplinary community change initiatives are experienced by the leaders who are engaged to guide these processes.

The present study explores the experiences and characteristics of real-life 'boundary spanners' engaged in a multi-year, multi-system demonstration and reform effort. It is hoped that the results can guide those currently engaged in this work, as well as recruit and train new professionals with the skills to excel in this role.

The Research Questions

The research questions were:

1. What is the experience of those performing this type of role (e.g. working for 'system change' across disparate organizational structures that do not always have a common ideology or purpose)?
2. What are the most important lessons people in the role have learned about the job of trying to change systems across agency boundaries?
3. What do others who need to take on this type of work need to know to be successful?

Study Participants

The informants for the research were Project Directors (PDs) within the 5-year, 21 million dollar Robert Wood Johnson Foundation initiative 'Reclaiming Futures: Communities Helping Teens Overcome Drugs, Alcohol and Crime.' At the time of the research, they were in the fourth year of their grants. Participants were invited to be a part of this study (including serving as co-creators of the research design and semi-structured interview questions). Participation was voluntary. From an initial pool of ten potential subjects, nine elected to participate in the semi-structured interviews, subsequent focus groups and ongoing dialogue. By the time the last of 3 focus groups had met, several project directors had transitioned out of their original roles and been replaced with new PDs, so that 13 total participated in the 1.5-year process. This expanded the pool of informants, and provided a de facto method for engaging and orienting new PDs to their roles.

Table 1 provides demographics of the initial group of PDs who completed the interviews ($n = 9$). They averaged 11.4 years' experience in this type of work and ranged in age from 30–59; 78% were female; 67% Anglo, 22% African American, and 11% Hispanic.

Context for the Role of the Project Director

The PD job description utilized in the start-up phase of the Reclaiming Futures initiative was used as a reference for the research and can be viewed at: http://www.reclaimingfutures.org. The roles of these professionals

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Table 1 DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE INITIAL GROUP OF PROJECT DIRECTORS WHO COMPLETED THE INTERVIEWS (N = 9)

Age	
Range:	30–59
Average:	45
Race/ethnicity	
Caucasian/white:	6 (67%)
African American:	2 (22%)
Latina:	1 (11%)
Gender	
Female	7 (78%)
Male	2 (22%)
Education	
Masters	5 (56%)
BA	2 (22%)
Graduate/postgraduate	2 (22%)
Years doing this work	
Average:	11.4
Total	9

included:

- Leading efforts to create a seamless integrated care system out of a fragmented and gap-ridden assortment of services.
- Creating readiness and momentum to introduce evidence-based treatment approaches and/or treatment improvement in cross-organizational settings, convening a diverse coalition of community stakeholders.
- Monitoring, identifying and negotiating agency-based or cross-agency communication challenges or conflicts that could impede integrated care.
- Constructing and coordinating cross-agency and community-anchored strategic plans.

METHODS

Qualitative Research Assumptions

This research features a qualitative research paradigm, utilizing a participatory action approach. It focuses on the naturally occurring behavior of a group of

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people who participated in the design and implementation of the study itself, and were assumed capable of understanding and communicating about their shared experience of working in a socially constructed role (Kemmis and McTaggert, 2000). The data that emerge from this study – subjective, interpretive and descriptive – are based on the subjects' diverse experiences. No preordained theory is being tested; rather, a phenomenon is being explored: the authentic experience of performing 'boundary spanner' work in very specific, yet diverse, contexts (Creswell, 2003; Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Miles and Huberman, 1984).

Researcher's Role

The researcher had participated in cross-disciplinary and multi-system reform for over 15 years at the time the research was conducted. As a leader of the national initiative that is the context for this study, she worked closely with its project directors over a number of years (4.5 at the time this research was conducted), and was uniquely positioned to propose the research project to them and engage them as true collaborators in its design and construction. The informants co-created the plan for the project, and provided comment on each stage of the project's design, including feedback on the IRB proposal submitted to (and approved) by the host university. They also critiqued and shaped the final semi-structured interview protocol.

Ethical Considerations

Because the researcher served as the national program director for the Reclaiming Futures initiative (involving managerial and fiduciary responsibility as well as coaching and technical assistance for each project director) and as this study's lead researcher, she took extra steps to protect the confidentiality of participant responses. Once Reclaiming Futures project directors had provided the extensive input described earlier, an outside interviewer and transcriptionist (not otherwise associated with Reclaiming Futures) were employed to gather the data. The outside interviewer audiotaped the interviews, which were later transcribed. She then removed all identifying information from the transcripts before providing them to the lead researcher. The interviewer and lead researcher identified initial themes; subsequent analysis and multiple focus groups were used to refine them. Final findings were only included if they were approved by the research informants themselves.

Data Collection Strategies

Interviewing was qualitative, using a semi-structured format. Questions were devised through expert panel review and input from the informants. Due to geographic constraints (participants were from all around the USA), the

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interviews were conducted by phone. Advantages of phone interviewing include 'reduced interviewer effects, better uniformity in delivery, greater standardization of questions, greater cost-efficiency and fast results,' (Shuy, 2001: 540). Disadvantages for telephone interviewing as a technique in research include risk of getting less thoughtful and accurate responses, loss of distribution of interactive power, inhibiting marginalized respondents or inhibiting responses to sensitive questions (Shuy, 2001), however following discussion with the PDs themselves, it was determined that these risks were outweighed by the benefits. Subsequent focus groups to discuss emerging themes were conducted at regularly occurring project director phone conferences and occasional face-to-face meetings. Focus group activities occurred in regular meetings in which participants flew to a central location (primarily to conduct the regular business of the initiative), and engaged in specific groups set aside to review, discuss and enrich the emerging categories and eventually, analysis of the results. Official job descriptions were requested about mid-point in the research as useful reference points for emerging interview themes.

Data Analysis Procedures

Transcripts were analyzed with an approach grounded in constructivist theory that initially involved open and axial coding and continued iteratively until saturation occurred (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Through this process, core themes, subthemes and relationships among themes emerged. These were discussed with informants themselves, in keeping with participatory action principles, then further refined. Charmaz (2008) has more recently linked constructivist theory to grounded theory as an effort to amplify the political, institutional and personal meaning and implications of the emergent analysis within very real and current social settings. This clarified the boundary spanner role, increased awareness of within-system and cross-system power dynamics, and enhanced understanding of the work's inherent challenges and opportunities. Two project director job descriptions provided additional data and an invaluable cross-reference regarding key terms in applying to the boundary spanner role.

Assuring Credibility and Trustworthiness

Credibility and trustworthiness were established by triangulation (multiple sources of qualitative interviews, focus groups, document review of the initial job description template and later versions of PD job descriptions); member checking (multiple and iterative review of themes with research informants themselves over time); and clarification of researcher bias, as noted earlier (Creswell, 2003).

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PRESENTATION OF THE DATA AND KEY THEMES

Five core themes were identified from interview transcripts and focus groups.

Core Theme A: Doing the Job Every Day

The interviews intentionally probed how the job 'looked' and 'felt' to people who had been engaged in it for multiple years. Three subthemes emerged to illustrate the range of their activities.

Subtheme 1: Facilitating systems change

The PDs viewed themselves as active agents working creatively to meet the challenge of changing complex systems.

> Think of me as a case manager for systems. I have a case management background and you have to do the same things. Find out what's going on, what are the goals, what do you want to accomplish? Then you come up with a treatment plan – these are the needs and this is how we will accomplish it, and you assign responsibility for the client and people providing services, and you make adjustments as time goes on.

> I say my job is a lot like juggling feathers, bowling balls, and knives all at once. Fluffy stuff or heavy-duty stuff – that is always extremely challenging.

> I used to be a therapist . . . [and] working with the clients was the easy part. The hard part was dealing with the system. For me, the motivation is to make the system easier to navigate . . . It feels like a puzzle – if they all came together, the potential for success is so amazing. It is that potential that keeps me engaged.

Subtheme 2: Keeping/Communicating/Expanding the Vision/Motivating People

For the PDs, the idea of creating and maintaining momentum through a variety of methods was a frequent topic.

> Being an engine to a train . . . having a clear picture of where we are going and [making sure] we stay on track . . . the train is continually moving forward.

> Seeing the connections between the parts of the network that need to work together. In our system here, mental health, substance abuse, juvenile justice, mentoring, everything has been happening in silos. People don't necessarily, at least initially, see the connections between themselves. Or some of the common interests and values. It has always been easy for me to see how things can be networked.

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> It is a very diverse, truly leadership role, bridging the gap from the lower echelon to the policy-making echelon, bring people into unison with a vision. I motivate people – keeping the vision before them and keeping the mission.

Subtheme 3: Tracking the Changes

PDs reported carrying a sense of accountability, both personally and on behalf of the community team.

> Footwork has to be done by others, but [it] comes down to me to make sure we stay timely and the right people are involved. My job is to make sure the systems change is effective . . .

Core Theme B: Challenges in the World of the Boundary Spanner

Specific obstacles to change differed by project site. However, the PDs consistently reported similar challenges, largely rooted in the nature of their work across systems.

Subtheme 1: Little Control/Authority over Foci of Change Effort – Relying on a Variety of Persuasive, Tactical, and Non-hierarchical Strategic Methods

Many of the PDs discussed their initial discomfort and gradual acclimation to the unusual role they inhabited – responsible for change, yet often lacking official authority. They also frequently mentioned the affective experience of being perceived as an 'outsider.' In follow-up dialogue, they discussed what they had learned about how to move groups forward with their agendas, gain respect from community leaders, and get access to key conversations to achieve initiative goals.

> . . . being on the outside and not having any control over processes is one of the hard parts.

> . . . You are always an outsider. There are benefits to that but it is also hard . . . can be perceived that I am telling that what they have been doing for 200 years is a problem. They may perceive it as being told what to do. In order to alleviate that, you need to have people trust you and that takes a lot of time. This project has been going on for over three years and some of the people are just starting to trust me.

> The hardest part is getting people to do what I need them to do, because they have varying interests . . . When I came aboard this project, people saw me as an outsider. They wondered, what do I know about juvenile justice? What do I know about kids in this context? You have to convince people that you are capable and that you know what you are doing. So you do more listening than speaking. This culture is so entrenched, it is difficult to penetrate. When you find

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> someone singing your song, that is exciting, and you use that person to help with what you are doing.

> Everything I get done is done by cajoling and getting people to agree to it on some level and the[n] following up and making sure they are doing it. It is all about influence, not command. I am being held accountable for a lot of systems I have no control over. I am starting to get more buy-in from people who do have that authority, and that is helpful.

Subtheme 2: Fragile Partnerships

PDs had to build relationships across factions that did not necessarily want to work together, trust one another (due to previous conflict or competition for scarce funding), or who simply believed that coalition-style approaches were inefficient and/or ineffective. In follow-up focus groups, PDs described their vulnerability when conflicts inevitably arose, and learning to 'read' the politics and become aware of alliances and schisms. They described the risks they had to take regularly to defuse political conflicts and redirect the attention of their stakeholders back to their collective charge.

> You have a group of people at a table, but they aren't all there for the same reasons.

> Just a small thing blown out of proportion ripped our . . . team apart for a while. We had to deal with it the best we could. We are back on track now, but it is hard to see your progress go down the tube in a few minutes. That is when you need those negotiation and mediation skills.

Subtheme 3: Getting Distracted by so Many Opportunities and/or Competing Demands

The job of a PD is complex. Many of the respondents reported challenges establishing and maintaining focus on top priorities amid so many interesting yet ultimately distracting opportunities, such as new projects or committees.

> The thing about getting new information – for example, on best practices – is that there comes a point when you can't focus on [it]; you have to stick with what you've already committed to . . . and see if it works before you move on to the new model, or try to integrate new information. I have found that I want to innovate again and again, but it's not helpful . . . If I pay too much attention to [innovation] though, the implementation piece will suffer.

> . . . having new projects . . . so many good things sent our way that it is hard to say no, but when you have one more thing to do it lessens the ability to do things well. We have to pick and choose what works at our site . . . I have a hard time passing up an opportunity.

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Subtheme 4: Turbulence

PDs were all experiencing significant funding and political turbulence throughout the life of the initiative. Each site experienced dramatic and unanticipated cuts due to upstream political and budget shifts relating to 9–11 and the war in Iraq. Learning to anticipate shifts, prepare and defend against disruptions, organize political allies and analyze potential barriers – these aspects of the work eventually became routine, but involved the investment of significant energy and attention.

> Some of the times when I feel most challenged are when I didn't anticipate certain things . . . [W]e were wanting to make these changes, and in our state we started with the directors, and I assumed they would filter this message in the right way down to their line staff. What hindered me as a leader was wasting too much time assuming it was happening . . . what I didn't do was check in with the direct line staff and see if it makes sense in their line of work . . .'

Core Theme C: Supports in the World of the Boundary Spanner

As busy and diverse as the role of the PD is, it is – ironically – a lonely job for which few peers are present locally. Obtaining support emerged as critical to success.

Subtheme 1: Other Boundary Spanners doing Similar Work

Despite some turnover among the PDs, they relied heavily on the support of their peers, and created a strong community of leaders among themselves. New PDs used the group to complete their orientation to their new role.

> The group of other 9 project directors is a wonderful community. We inquire what is happening, we keep each other sane. We have monthly phone calls, we meet face-to-face once a year. We also have an understanding that we talk to each other whenever we need to . . . We have all found some real confidants who will give us some helpful feedback. It's a peer community . . .
>
> . . . it is something about the value of that connection – it isn't so much about sharing concrete ideas, but is more about needing people who do the same kind of role and being pulled in 50 different directions to talk to and complain to and commiserate with and get help and encouragement with how to survive it.

Subtheme 2: Formal Advisors and Coaches

PDs learned quickly to form local leadership advisory systems to guide them through the political minefields of their complex work.

> Having a very safe, stable and supportive advisory board. The people on my advisory board are the directors of very large agencies, and they could have looked at me as a person coming in running this project and knowing nothing,

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> or they could have looked at the skills I brought to the table and welcomed me in, and that is what they have done. When I have made mistakes they have been able to talk to me about it and give me advice. Many have become my mentors.

> Shared leadership. As long as you are the lone ranger, it is hard to accomplish anything. What helped me is when our governance group backed me up and were also carrying the same message I was carrying. That helped because people saw it was backed up.

> There are some [members of executive committee] who I refer to as interpreters who can make sense of what is going on for an outsider like me. If it is something . . . happening in treatment or the juvenile justice system and I don't understand why, there are a few people to whom I can turn in all candor and who will often explain that it is political or policy-based. They are a fabulous part of my professional community who help me learn more and become more effective.

Subtheme 3: Technical Assistance, Information and Other Resources

The PDs had to sift through enormous amounts of information on best practices in multiple fields, existing organizational strengths and barriers, community dynamics and politics, and the wide array of experts at their collective disposal to focus on pertinent challenges. They found that learning to use the information and other resources available in a logical sequence across the multiple years of the project was critical.

> Lots of information braided throughout the initiative – calculating when . . . to use it was sometimes a challenge.

> We use information all the time . . . truly one of the neat parts of this initiative is that we have gained the best access to some of the most cutting edge information such as how communities mobilize or best practices in the field . . . We use this in grantwriting . . . and letters to local and state elected officials. Even beyond that, we have taken the . . . tools and put them into practice and that has been very exciting.

> . . . use information to influence directors of the various systems about how we can work together and have a common approach . . . the information is very important to us as we look at models of best practice . . .

> . . . training is designed to institutionalize best practice approaches where it becomes part of the operating philosophy and operating performance of our organization.

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Subtheme 4: Inspiration

Focus group conversations honed in on how passion for the work, despite scant financial or political reward, was essential in PDs of the future. However difficult it may be to identify this quality in prospective PDs, everyone in the PD community agreed that the ability to tap into one's own inspiration for the work, and help others tap theirs, was essential.

> What is most fulfilling is seeing our youth who are connected to the Youth Committee emerge as leaders. They are able to sit with the executive board members and members of the community and recommend changes. That is huge.

> The belief that challenged youth can succeed, and we all share responsibility.

> I become a voice for people who feel vulnerable in systems they don't think are responsive.

> The way we in probation and social services and children's mental health treat families is not how I would want to be treated . . . When families come in they are more afraid of us than we are of them. We are holding their lives in our hands and [we] should be doing the best job that we can. That motivates me.

Core Theme D: The Right Person for the Job: Attributes of the Ideal Boundary Spanner

As part of the research process, the PDs examined the initial job description template and deemed it a fair initial representation of what was needed, but further identified the following list of attributes and abilities essential for the job. This was perhaps the area of most agreement and consistency among interview responses and focus groups.

- Patience, flexibility, sense of humor and ability to keep things in perspective – specifically with regard to the development of community leadership team identity, formulation of mission and strategic plan, and execution of complex cross-system change activities within a specified timeline.
- Energy – The PDs were unanimous that they had never experienced a job so demanding. The felt it was essential to attend to their physical, emotional and spiritual well-being to protect their vibrancy and momentum.
- Commitment to learning and expanding knowledge – Because of the range of systems and issues involved, the PDs agreed it was critical to build learning into their job activities and to serve as conduits of information for partners.
- Dedication to the challenge and a positive attitude – PDs concurred that there were times when the collective effort could have fallen apart were it not for the dedication they and other initiative leaders had to the goal, and their belief that it was possible.

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- Taking initiative – Not waiting for someone to provide guidance and direction. While general guidelines had been developed for the initiative as a whole, each PD had to lead the effort to adapt them to local circumstances.
- Diplomacy and mediation skills – The differentials in power in the work of the PD were notable. They were most often mid-management themselves, yet worked with judges at one end (high level of formal authority) and community members at the other end (low level of formal authority, high level of informal authority), and the full range in between. Learning to be effective sounding boards for each party, keeping abreast of the complex dynamics, spoken and unspoken, in the group, while progressing on a change agenda required exceptional talents and skills in diplomacy and mediation. Diplomacy was sometimes mentioned as a skill essential to delivering information back to the funder or the national program office when set targets seemed unrealistic.

Core Theme E: Lessons about Leadership

Reclaiming Futures employed a shared leadership framework and facilitated progressive, in-depth exploration and support of leadership development. With their peers, PDs had critical opportunities to explore, vet, compare and reality-check the direction of their local efforts, while simultaneously providing both sail and rudder to the national program. The interviews revealed two consistent themes about leadership in this type of effort.

Subtheme 1: Gauging One's Effectiveness as a Leader

PDs deemed it very important to determine whether progress had occurred, for themselves and for the groups they led/facilitated.

> I . . . try to look at concrete accomplishments like when we implemented the GAIN. Or implementing a data tool that will track all of the kids in our system and how they are doing in treatment. It set into motion not only something that will last [a data tool] but also a change in process, and that is a huge change.When we have identified a goal, and when goals are accomplished. When I hear a story about a kid who went through the system and it worked the way it was supposed to work . . . When people consider you a resource or invite you to things like work groups or task forces. When you become part of the regular players – that feels like a measure of effectiveness.
>
> When a job gets done. When there are harmonious relationships moving towards the same mission. When we produce the outcomes we pledge annually. When we reach milestones . . . When things are in place that weren't before. When there is a coordinated team effort toward fulfilling our mission.
>
> I have been effective because I am honing in on some specific goals and not grandiose ones . . . my effectiveness is better because I made [our group] more focused. I am starting to say we have a year and a half left and we need to be

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> focused and see what is realistic. So I brought some realism back to what we can accomplish . . . We want to be successful and move forward, but if you plan too many things, it will seem like you fail rather than move forward.

Subtheme 2: Most Important Lessons

The PDs agreed that Reclaiming Futures had not been a typical leadership experience. It engaged their sense of adventure individually and as a group; tested their egos, humility and skills in a variety of ways; ignited their desire to be effective change leaders, and had been a significant chapter in their professional and personal lives. Balancing 'the vision' with practical aspects of the work emerged as a strong theme.

> I have learned that my leadership style has been more a facilitative style. I think a leader finds strength in the people around them and encourages them to do what they need to do accomplish a common goal.

> It is hard not to be in complete control . . . I don't have to do everything all the time. It is very hard to let go and trust that people will do as good a job as you will . . .

> I have learned that . . . we can help others and build partnerships and let other individuals and agencies take credit for it . . . From the beginning, we have wanted to let others take the credit and praise for everything that has happened here. It is a new leadership skill for me.

> A good leader develops other leaders.

> . . . I have been effective because I am honing in on some specific goals and not grandiose ones. I started looking at what is doable . . .

> This is very hard work. You have to find some way to motivate yourself day in and day out. You get so busy day to day, you forget about the big picture, and when you do that, it is easy to get lost.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Framing the Challenge: Navigating Inherent Tensions Personally and Professionally

The role of the 'boundary spanner' is clearly fraught with a variety of inherent tensions that must be negotiated by real people working in dynamic and turbulent settings. For example, when a collaboration is externally funded, tensions may emerge between the desires and vision of the funders and the local team as the local collaborative matures. Other tensions included those between

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players with formal authority (agency representatives, including large agency directors, their agents and judges) and those with informal authority (local community members and/or families and youth), among whom there may have been no precedent for trusting and productive alliances. Their ability to adapt to local circumstances allowed them to gain power and access across diverse groups. Failure to do this risked alienating one of these groups, impeding progress toward the vision. Additionally, there is much similarity between the array of tensions among PDs and those encountered through Lipsky's classic 'street–level bureaucrat' model (1980) involving the navigation of systems giving multiple and often conflicting messages and models regarding goals and methods of service provision in both the substance abuse and juvenile justice practice settings, and supporting transformative dialogue among members of the network alliances to learn to more clearly target and address inequity and ultimately ineffective, but longstanding bureaucratic processes where they exist.

The RF initiative clearly illustrated that a boundary spanner must learn to address, deconstruct and eventually help to more fruitfully reconstruct these tensions within and across systems in order to fulfill the mission of the initiative: to facilitate development of new forms of community/institutional care and responsivity to a group of marginalized youth. Though this reference group found numerous creative ways to accomplish this, one cannot overlook that they found it personally exhausting, and learning to support one another was regularly included as part of the dialogue regarding the history of the program. It is essential that those seeking to retain quality boundary spanners ensure they have adequate support. Ensuring that people engaged in similar cross-system change work can communicate and support one another is highly recommended.

Living Amid Complexity and Developing Methods to Succeed in the Midst of Uncertainty

The Reclaiming Futures PDs, like many collaborative leaders, operated in complex, fast-paced, and unpredictable environments. Menzies (2005, 238) describes the ubiquitous pressure facing contemporary professionals in a social, technological ecosystem that involves 'an accelerated pace, and multi-layered, multi-tasking complexity' as one that requires heightened degrees of intentionality, dialogue and evolution of personal and professional strategies to create focus, space for people to interact in meaningful ways. This includes, she says, finding time to participate in community and civic development that can be compromised due to an ever-present time crunch facing almost everyone. Boundary spanners could, in fact, be described as professionals who have managed to create just these kinds of spaces, protect and nurture them, to a successful group outcome. Their evolving use of information, and creation of their own peer-based reference group, helped counterbalance their limited overt control. Learning to

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unite stakeholders with disparate interests and divide complex tasks and processes among them to obtain a manageable task list appeared to be key, and the PDs grew in their ability to do this well.

The PDs use of Themselves as Change Agents

The role of such affective attributes as patience, flexibility, hope, the ability to form and maintain genuine and diverse relationships in a strategic manner, and passion for this type of work, in addition to more traditional competencies like organizational and communication skills, has great potential to enrich our understanding of how complex systems change occurs. These findings add to the emerging dialogue regarding new types of leadership, sometime referred to as facilitative, collaborative, or servant leadership (McCauley et al., 1998). Their own descriptions of themselves are echoed in emerging literature regarding a reflective stance (Fook and Gardner, 2007) among human service professionals. In this approach, the production of knowledge and experience involves interacting cycles of action and reflection mediated by the social context and underlying power dynamics present in contemporary practice settings. A reflexive stance provides a framework for sense-making and rigorous review of assumptions among complex groups of actors and systems.

The PDs had a wide variety of approaches to measuring their successes in relation to project goals, minimizing their professional isolation, and navigating political turmoil. Each of these can spark critical dialogue regarding successful collaborative change, and support the leaders needed to orchestrate such efforts in the future.

Implications for those Hiring or Supervising Boundary Spanners

The job of the boundary spanner is unusually demanding and fulfilling. For those who seek to find and retain quality professionals for this role, a number of implications seem clear.

First, time and care should be taken to hire the right person – ideally, someone with professional experience in cross-system work and the elusive but critical 'passion' for the work. Persons who have realistic, yet fresh and hopeful perspectives on the work appear to be the best fit for the job. (It was not clear if a certain educational background was helpful, though in this sample, well over half had at least a master's degree, and the group averaged 11.4 years' experience doing similar work.)

Findings suggest that the cross-disciplinary representatives to whom a new boundary spanner will be accountable should do the hiring jointly, to avoid early conflicts regarding implied alliances. Further, applicants should be screened to assure that they have some familiarity with environmental uncertainty, cross-systems communications, and/or facilitating task attainment.

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Second, the research suggests that while qualities such as courage, self-directedness and self-reliance are important for the job of the boundary spanner, it is clear that support is also essential. When conflicts arise, they need support from powerful people in their communities – and, as reflected in the social movement leadership literature, they need to be able to engage other leaders in a broader, cross-sector management of challenges, risks and opportunities (Morris and Staggenborg, 2007) increasing both political capital but also increasing ability to understand, frame and act upon these challenges. When problems arise for which there is no obvious solution, they need access to topical experts and information that may help them. And when they are just plain frustrated with the slow pace of change, they need to know that there are others experiencing the same thing, learning to ride out the periodic stalls in progress with good humor, evolving strategy and patience.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research was to explore an evolving variety of professional knowledge and identity: that of the 'boundary spanner,' by engaging those already leading cross-system collaborative change to shape and participate in research regarding their experiences. Their insights include: the importance of being an open-minded person with the ability to take risks without being strident or careless; to have vision, but stay practical; to be courageous while attending to the politics; and to systematically create and nurture infrastructure for support and guidance. It is not an easy job, to be sure, and has required a considerable amount of talent and dedication as well as a sense of adventure. The extensive literature in the topic of social networks and social movements reflects and validates the stated experiences of the research informants in this study. Examples from the narrative intersect with literature which suggests that these leaders both 'operate within structures, and they both influence and are influenced by movement organization and environment,' (Morris and Staggenborg, 2007: 174). From the data, one can ascertain that PDs possess an array of skills in navigating these opportunities, creating and momentum, mobilizing resources across a wide variety of stakeholder groups, and translating them into action plans that they regularly engender ownership back to the larger collective membership. To the degree that emergent community challenges are more likely than ever to require collaborative problem solving strategies, then a continuing focus on defining, mapping, grounding and evolving knowledge about the roles, experiences, and strategies of these leaders remains a priority.

Although they are, by their own admission, the least likely in their community teams to claim credit for project successes, the unique contributions of these real-life change agents are clear. This study was intended as an initial exploration of their everyday experiences and reflections on their work, and is

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offered in the spirit of generating additional understanding, recognition, and success for all boundary spanners.

With their permission, the author dedicates this article to those who have served as Reclaiming Futures Project Directors: Tom Begich, Jeffrey Bidmon, Rick Calcote, Benjamin Chambers, Kari Collins, Kit Enniss, Maria Gagnon, Rose Golden, Ray Goodman, Michelle Kilgore, Scott MacDonald, Maureen McGlone, Charlotte McGuire, Yolanda Perez-Logan, Richard Rapp, Donald Robinson, Liz Smith, Margaret Tumulty and Marlies White Hat.

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