

Ernst, C., & Chrobot-Mason, D. (2011). *Boundary spanning leadership: Six practices for solving problems, driving innovation, and transforming organizations*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill. 302 pp.

Review by Sally G. Parish

The concept of creating boundary-spanning leadership is not new to the higher education community, and Ernst and Chrobot-Mason's work has been widely reviewed and received for nearly 4 years. However, the conversation about this important approach to leadership needs to continue, and the lessons included in *Boundary Spanning Leadership: Six Practices for Solving Problems, Driving Innovation, and Transforming Organizations* are perhaps more relevant and urgent today than ever before. In the ever-evolving landscape of higher education, scholars and professionals are continuously challenged to traverse a variety of boundaries in order to create partnerships and possibilities that extend beyond the university. As they strive to connect communities and campuses through reciprocal partnerships, the insights and skills of boundary-spanning leadership offer a truly promising guide to collective action.

In her foreword, Marian Ruderman writes: "Today, the leadership advantage goes to the people who are most closely linked to others and can work with a great variety of people from differing positions, backgrounds and locations" (p. xvi). Ernst and Chrobot-Mason's work supports this claim and provides a road map for getting there. Through their study of 25 different organizations, the authors identify and recommend practices for leading across differences and for developing asset-based partnerships. These partnerships can and should extend across departments and divisions and into larger communities, making the contributions of universities to society most meaningful and impactful.

The authors define and explore the concept of boundaries as two connected but differing notions: borders that limit human potential, and frontiers that house advanced thinking and breakthrough possibilities (p. 3). Both definitions are embraced and advanced through the work of boundary-spanning leadership, defined by the authors as "the ability to create direction, alignment and commitment across boundaries in service of a higher vision or goal" (p. 5). The authors recognize five primary boundaries that are encountered in organizations:

1. vertical boundaries: hierarchical boundaries where people are separated by title, rank, power, and privilege
2. horizontal boundaries: boundaries that exist because of “turf” or silos in our organizations
3. stakeholder boundaries: boundaries that exist where sources of value are kept distinct and separate between organizations and partners, vendors, and communities
4. demographic boundaries: boundaries found in the differences of identity in our communities and places of work
5. geographic boundaries: boundaries of space, distance, region, and location

Horizontal boundaries were found to be the most prevalent. The authors describe horizontal boundaries as “the walls that separate groups by areas of experience and expertise” (p. 23).

To navigate the complexities and challenges of aligning groups to achieve greatness while acknowledging and working across the five most prevalent boundaries, Ernst and Chrobot-Mason outline six critical practices for boundary-spanning leaders. The authors offer chapter-length discussions of these practices, which collectively make up more than half of the volume. The practices include the following:

1. buffering: creating intergroup safety through monitoring and protecting the passage of information and resources across groups (Chapter 4)
2. reflecting: fostering intergroup respect through the understanding of boundaries and the facilitation of the exchange of knowledge across groups (Chapter 5)
3. connection: building intergroup trust through the suspension of boundaries and the bridging of people and divided groups (Chapter 6)
4. mobilizing: reframing boundaries and developing intergroup community through the development of a common purpose and a shared identity across groups (Chapter 7)
5. weaving: advancing intergroup interdependence, “the state of mutual dependence and collective learning

that develops when intergroup boundaries are interlaced within a larger whole” (p. 195), by drawing out and integrating group differences within a larger whole (Chapter 8)

6. transforming: enabling intergroup reinvention through the partnership of multiple groups to create emergent, new directions that crosscut existing boundaries (Chapter 9)

The job of a boundary-spanning leader, Ernst and Chrobot-Mason observe, is to build bridges and provide the space for the six practices of boundary-spanning leadership to occur. They note: “The days of ‘I lead and you follow’ are over. Gone are the days when leaders work within an intact group in which leaders and followers share a culture, values and interests. Instead, today you must lead across groups” (p. 7).

Taken together and in the context of higher education, the six practices of boundary-spanning leadership suggest a potentially powerful approach for faculty and professional practitioners to employ in fostering synergistic university–community collaborations. As the authors state, “When safety, respect, trust, community, interdependence and reinvention characterize the interactions between groups, these groups will achieve something together above and beyond what they could achieve on their own” (p. 219). Such groups have the potential to achieve what the authors refer to as the Nexus Effect, characterized as the “limitless possibilities and inspiring results that groups can achieve together above and beyond what they could achieve on their own” (p. 223). The authors paint a picture of a synergistic community that we should all strive for; however, attempts at such synergy are often challenging and complex when operationalized within the framework of higher education.

Boundary Spanning Leadership should be viewed as less of a “how to” model and more of a call to action—a call to do more, to try harder, to be better, and, most importantly, to work together for a greater good and a better tomorrow. The authors remind readers to view partners, on campus and off, as valued members of our community who will help it to advance to new heights. They make a persuasive case for cultivating and honoring a particular set of talents, roles, and relationships that may be vital to the work of coconstructing effective, mutually beneficial university–community partnerships. “The pace of societal change and progress is breathtaking. Perhaps now we stand at the precipice of the last,

great final frontier: our relationships with one another. In a world that spans boundaries, so too must leadership” (p. 253).

Ernst and Chrobot-Mason have provided a compelling depiction of the challenges people face in organizations, businesses, and communities, but in the end, it is up to individuals to transform complex communities as boundary-spanning leaders. Readers who work in higher education will find themselves challenged to reimagine their relationships with peers, divisions, departments, and community partners. Cultivating and sustaining partnerships is not always as simple as Ernst and Chrobot-Mason posit, and the harsh reality is that the artful navigation of their six steps can often be met with competing demands, the least of which are often bound to politics, finances, time, and human resources. There is turf to navigate, egos to contend with, and time to be spent. Nonetheless, to truly engage with others, faculty and professional practitioners must seek to understand, respect, and connect in order to craft a common purpose, reframe boundaries, and weave their work and spaces together. Only then can there be hope of collectively transforming our communities, our universities, and the lives around us. Gone are the days of “us and them,” as we grapple with a new and exciting approach to leadership. I am up for the challenge, and I hope you will join me.

About the Reviewer

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