

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

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Over seven billion people live on the planet Earth, each one an individual with distinct beliefs, associations, languages, and practices. Our characteristics and communities define us as persons, influence our affiliations and create boundaries around us. Boundaries protect us but also limit our capacity to know each other, to work together, to honour our differences, to harness the richness of our varied talents, and to develop common purposes. Finding common ground is not always easy. Forging liaisons across boundaries, whether between continents or across the hall, requires a special set of attributes and an exceptional kind of leadership. *Boundary Spanning Leadership: Six Practices for Solving Problems, Driving Innovation and Transforming Organizations*, (2011) by Chris Ernst and Donna Chrobot-Mason, offers a six step process to help transform boundaries into frontiers of growth. When followed, these steps produce, what the authors describe as, the *Nexus Effect*, where differences intersect to produce transformative results.

Chris Ernst, who writes in the academic and popular press, is a faculty member of the Center for Creative Leadership, a world-wide non-profit organization headquartered in North Carolina. Donna Chrobot-Mason has a Ph.D. in industrial and organizational psychology from the University of Georgia, and is an associate professor at the University of Cincinnati. Ernst and Chrobot-Mason base their book on ten years of global research and practice at the *Center for Creative Leadership*. Their message is relevant for a myriad of fields including politics, business, service and education. They write in straight-forward prose suitable for a range of readers. To demonstrate the need for boundary spanning leadership, the authors provide real life stories of leadership practices from around the world, from small towns in the United States, to non-governmental agencies in the developing world, to multi-national corporations. Ernst and Chrobot-Mason's observations are important to anyone who strives to bring people together for collaborative endeavours, whether modest or elaborate.

Boundary Spanning Leadership is divided into five parts. The first section argues for a new kind of leadership in today's world. Subsequent sections offer detailed information and examples of the steps of the process. Ernst and Chrobot-Mason argue that boundary spanning leadership means finding common understandings, goals and practices, ensuring alignment of resources with needs, and sowing commitment to the superordinate group while retaining the identities of the constituent groups. Drawing upon their experiences and research, they contend that divisions occur more in groups

than in systems. Insufficient trust, disrespect, insecurity, and the absence of a common purpose, can undermine group success.

Ernst and Chrobot-Mason believe divisive forces in groups occur along five major boundary lines: *vertical, horizontal, stakeholder, demographic and geographic*. Vertical boundaries are typically hierarchical, nested in traditional notions of rank, span of control and power. Horizontal boundaries occur along functional and divisional lines. Ernst and Chrobot-Mason describe stakeholder boundaries as the influence of external partners and alliances; demographic boundaries as the complete range of gender, racial, educational, age and other differences in the workplace; and geographic boundaries as the physical distances that separate locations, cultures and clients.

Ernst and Chrobot-Mason report that *horizontal* boundaries, when individuals and groups need to collaborate in organizations along non-hierarchical lines, present the greatest leadership challenges for leaders. Stakeholder, demographic and geographic boundaries also pose significant demands for groups and organizations. The authors contend that without appropriate leadership practices, destructive conflict may emerge among colleagues of dissimilar backgrounds for professional, demographic, cultural, internal and external, geographic and other reasons. Ernst and Chrobot-Mason caution us to be aware of and ready to address the forces that divide us. They remark that when groups come together, good things or bad things may happen. The book uses several examples to illustrate how effective boundary spanning leadership helps prevent and mend divisions.

Ernst and Chrobot-Mason postulate that *identity* and *belonging* are the two core conditions leaders need to recognize and manage as they seek to engage disparate groups in shared actions, and overcome the gap between the perceived *us* and *them*, the *in* group and the *out* group. The authors cite psychological studies to support their claims that groups form quickly. Groups may compete with each other in unhealthy rivalries to the detriment of the organization, or work successfully together for shared gain. Leaders play a critical role in establishing a connection with and among their constituents, in how they present themselves as leaders and demonstrate themselves to be ethical, fair and trustworthy. Ernst and Chrobot-Mason use the analogy of geological faults to suggest that leaders who ignore the warning signs of widening divisions, worker disquiet, and anxiety, risk creating major fissures and significant upheaval in their organizations. The authors identify four major sources of organizational disruption: *breach*, (one group seems favoured over another); *side-swipe*, (one group inadvertently disrespects another causing a major incident); *submersion*, (a group imposes its identity on another group); and *clash* (where neither group is prepared to accommodate the other).

According to Ernst and Chrobot-Mason, organizations have much to gain from enabling groups to collaborate, share knowledge, harness skills, and bring together their unique assets. The authors state that successful boundary spanning leadership is deliberate and planned. Their six practices of boundary spanning leadership help close the *divide* and lead to where boundaries become frontiers and "...powerful human forces – differentiation and integration-intersect in transformative ways (p. 11)".

Ernst and Chrobot-Mason use the symbol of a spiral to show the process of boundary spanning leadership, beginning with the *divide* at the bottom, followed by *managing boundaries* (*buffering* and *reflecting*), upward to *forging common ground* (*connecting* and *mobilizing*), and finishing on top with *discovering new frontiers*, (*weaving* and *transforming*). Each of these steps is explained with case study references and illustrations. The authors use an example from post-apartheid South Africa to illustrate *buffering* (p. 87). They describe how the leaders of an insurance company intervened to prevent a seemingly minor incident about staffroom milk from becoming a major cultural conflict. Ernst and Chrobot-Mason describe how buffering practices help create safety, manage the flow of information and forge shared identities. *Reflecting* generates respect through intergroup interaction, by surfacing and acknowledging deeply held assumptions, seeing what is common among them, honouring differences and being patient.

In the section on *Forging Common Ground*, (*connecting* and *mobilizing*), the authors describe how a senior oil executive played a leadership role in bringing together dissimilar community interests to devise a plan to reduce green house gas emissions. Through creating a neutral third space with opportunities for group members to build personal relationships, this leader facilitated connections between group members, created conditions where people began to trust one another, to listen to and to respect each other, and to work together. These ties helped build bridges across communities and produced creative solutions to difficult questions. *Mobilizing*, say the authors, means developing a shared vision, a collective identity, a group culture with artefacts and stories to represent who the new group is and what they stand for, while continuing to respect the composite sub-group identities of their constituents.

The last piece of the process, *Discovering New Frontiers* (p. 130) contains two important practices: *weaving* and *transforming*. Leaders weave when they extract differences from within groups and incorporate them into the larger whole. Leaders transform, say the authors, when they bring groups together, cut across boundaries and help groups reinvent themselves. Ernst and Chrobot-Mason cite the case of a children's aid organization in India that employed boundary spanning strategies to overcome numerous challenges of language, religion and culture to achieve its aims. The authors explain that the goal of their six point process is to achieve the *Nexus Effect*. "When safety, respect, trust, community, interdependence and reinvention characterize the interactions between groups, those groups will achieve something together above and beyond what they could achieve on their own (p. 219)."

Ernst and Chrobot-Mason's *Boundary Spanning Leadership* provides important information for those who lead both formally and informally in organizations. Their book is especially relevant for the challenges of today as we work together across boundaries of diverse personal, social, cultural and professional realities. Many readers may see in Ernst and Chrobot-Mason's work, an extension of earlier thoughts by key contributors to organizational theory. Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs is relevant, where physiological, safety, belonging, self-esteem and self actualization inform human action.

Sengé's (1990) work on organizational learning, personal mastery, mental models, team learning and systems thinking, comes to mind as do the arguments of Argyris (1999) on the importance of people, groups, relationships and non-defensive exchanges. Mintzberg's (1983) evolution of hierarchical arrangements in different formal organizational models, as well as Weick's (1990) definition of loosely coupled organizations in dynamic situations, provide important complementary information for those who read this book. Schein's (1993) observations on culture, inter-group trust, respect for differences and developing common goals, the importance of informal groups and the power of deeply held assumptions are also worth consulting. Transformational leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006), is present in boundary spanning leadership, when followers go beyond what is necessary, feel valued and respected and transcend the transactional reasons for contributing to an organization. "Boundaries are defining characteristics of organizations, and boundary roles are the link between the environment and the organization (Aldrich & Herker, 1977, p. 217)".

Boundary Spanning Leadership reinforces numerous theories on organizational leadership and goes a step further in plotting definitive steps to bring disparate groups together for a common purpose. For those who seek step by step guidelines for boundary spanning leadership practice, this book will be especially helpful. For those who prefer illustrative examples, these are also present. For those who reject a systematic prescription for human interaction and leadership, this book may not be for you. As we continue to support collaboration as preferable to isolation in today's organizations, Ernst and Chrobot-Mason remind us that the actual process of realizing effective intergroup cooperation is neither easy nor guaranteed. Informed skilled leadership and deliberate strategies are necessary to turn boundaries into transformative frontiers.

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