

Boundary Spanning Leadership: Tactics to Bridge Social Identity

Groups in Organizations

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As structural and technological boundaries are dismantled, a *flat world of boundaryless organizations*¹ gives rise to a different type of boundary found in intergroup relations. In organizations worldwide, leaders are challenged to bridge social identity boundaries between groups of people with different histories, perspectives, values, and cultures. For instance, in South Africa, leaders work to transform deep-rooted social tensions between Afrikaners and Black Africans in a financial services firm. In Southeast Asia, a CEO of a faith-based organization attempts to bridge differences between religious fundamentalists and non-believing staff regarding how best to align the organization with the needs of a pluralistic, multi-faith community. In a manufacturing facility in the U.S., line managers struggle to create an environment in which Native Americans, African-Americans, European Americans, and Hispanics can work productively together on the assembly line.

As these examples make clear, groups of people who have historically remained apart are now increasingly working together. In this chapter we focus on the role of boundary spanning leadership - leadership that bridges boundaries between groups in service of a larger organizational vision, mission, or goal. Specifically, we provide a detailed description of four boundary spanning tactics - suspending, reframing, nesting,

and weaving – that leaders can use to span differences across groups of people in organizational settings.

The Challenge of Leadership Across Social Identity Boundaries

Boundaries are a basic aspect of organizational life. Social identity boundaries refer to aspects of our identities that have to do with the various demographic groups in which we belong (e.g. gender, religion, age, nationality, and ethnicity).² In varying cultures and contexts, social identity group membership is also expressed through other forms of identification such as educational background, generational differences, sexual orientation, physical disability, job level, function, caste, and tribe.

Management scholars, Dora Lau and Keith Murnighan, propose that social identity boundaries in groups are analogous to geological faults in the Earth's crust; they are always present, and they create various levels of friction as boundaries rub together, pull apart, grind, and collide.³ In the same way that geologists are unable to prevent faults from cracking open in the earth's surface, leaders are similarly constrained in their ability to manage and solve points of friction in intergroup relationships. Specifically, the challenge for leaders to effectively bridge social identity boundaries is fraught with peril in at least three ways.

First, leaders are often *pulled in multiple directions* between conflicting values, viewpoints, and beliefs. Second, they are commonly *pushed to one side*. A leader, by definition, is a member of some social groups and not a member of other social groups. Despite a leader's best efforts to be impartial and fair, members of social groups will form perceptions based solely on the social grouping of the leader. And third, leaders are all too frequently *caught out of the loop*. This is in part due to the natural tendency for

information to be filtered as it moves up the organizational hierarchy. However, another reason is that more often than not, leaders are representatives of traditionally advantaged and dominant social groups. In these instances, leaders often lack critical awareness of the inequities and challenges faced by less advantaged groups.

Given these sizeable challenges, how do leaders bridge the social identity boundaries that exist in their places of work? As members of a global research project at the Center for Creative Leadership, we surveyed and interviewed leaders from for-profit and nonprofit organizations in twelve countries to identify a broad range of boundary spanning tactics in the workplace⁴. For this chapter, we describe a specific subset of four tactics for effective intergroup leadership - suspending, reframing, nesting, and weaving.

Tactics for Boundary Spanning Leadership

Boundary spanning leadership is the term we use to recognize the increasingly important and necessary role that leaders play in bridging social identity boundaries in service of a larger organizational vision, mission, or goal. Boundary spanning lies in creating the necessary linkages between groups in order to move ideas, information, people, and resources where they are needed most.⁵ Each of the tactics described below helps leaders establish these linkages by altering the nature and composition of intergroup boundaries. These tactics are well established in the social psychology literature⁶, and the research supporting them is described elsewhere in this book.

Our aim in the sections that follow is to detail examples of these tactics from a variety of countries and contexts, thereby connecting theories from research with evidence from practice. We will provide specific definitions, share relevant cases, and consider both strengths and potential blindspots characteristic of each tactic. It is our

hope that leaders can use this knowledge to incorporate boundary spanning tactics in the course of their daily work with functional units, project groups, task forces, or virtual teams. A summary of each boundary spanning tactic can be found in the table.

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Suspend – Create a third space

The tactic of boundary suspending seeks to create a neutral zone where social interactions are person-based rather than identity group-based. In the literature, this tactic is referred to as decategorization given the emphasis on individuals rather than social categories.⁷ In creating a third space, leaders establish a suspended neutral zone where personal relationships can be developed, assumptions can be surfaced, values safely explored, and new language created. The Japanese notion of “*ba*” proposed by philosopher Ikujiro Nonaka is a related concept.⁸ *Ba* is considered to be a shared space that serves as a foundation for emerging relationships and knowledge creation. This space can be physical (e.g. office, dispersed business space), virtual (e.g., email, teleconference), mental (eg. shared experiences, ideas, ideals) or any combination of these.

Consider the case of Mr. Yamada, a Japanese project manager, whose work requires him to work for short stints in countries throughout the Asia Pacific. His role as a boundary spanner demands that he quickly build productive and task-oriented cross-national teams in order to launch new IT initiatives. On assignment in Korea, Yamada frequently created neutral zones through after-work events for his team members from Australia, Indonesia, Korea, and New Zealand. Over time, team members discovered that the cultural stereotypes they held did not apply to members on the team. By providing

space for personal relationships to develop, Yamada was able to build the level of trust needed to launch IT projects in a timely fashion.

While at first glance establishing practices such as these seems straightforward, this is not always the case. Yamada also described an experience in which he managed a new project out of Hong Kong. Here Yamada's efforts to organize after-work activities were met with resistance. He found that while his expatriate colleagues from Europe enjoyed going to an Irish pub, his local Chinese colleagues preferred the karaoke bar. These intergroup boundaries were reinforced in the workplace. Project delays, work-arounds, and behind the scenes ingroup conversations were the norm. The actual technical work was not the problem. The problem, according to Yamada, was that the different national groups were never able to get along. "It was a clash of civilizations between East and West...and I found myself stuck in the middle." Ultimately, Yamada struck upon an elegant solution. Hong Kong is a city blessed with some of the finest cuisine from all corners of the globe. By organizing weekly "Dine Around the World" events, Yamada used food as a medium to develop personal relationships across different cultures, which in turn created a more positive and collaborative work environment back in the office.

Bridging entrenched social identity boundaries is something that few leaders have been trained to do, and yet for people like Mr. Yamada, it is an integral aspect of their leadership role. Boundary suspending tactics allow leaders to create a third space where people can interact not as members of *distinct groups* but rather as *unique individuals*. Other examples of third spaces include story-telling sessions where individuals are encouraged to share personal life events and lessons; "creativity labs" or "hotspots"

where diverse teams can dialogue and problem-solve; or offsite retreats that are designed to take advantage of the third-space qualities of the neutral location.

A potential blindspot in applying the tactic of boundary suspending is that ingroups may feel a sense of threat or resistance when brought into contact with outgroups in which they have a history of tension or mistrust. In the Yamada example, the expatriate workers enjoyed going to the Irish pub because it reconnected them to their European identity just as the Chinese locals valued their cultural singing tradition. Had Yamada required the Europeans to sing karaoke, or the Chinese to cheer for the favored rugby team at the pub, it most likely would be a recipe for disaster. Only by thoughtfully creating a neutral, third space could productive cross-boundary relationships be developed. Equally important, Yamada recognized that the tactic of boundary suspending is not a quick fix, but rather a tactic that must be nurtured and cultivated over time.

Reframe – Activate a Shared Identity

The tactic of boundary reframing is designed to activate a common category or superordinate identity that is inclusive across social groups. In the social identity literature, this tactic is known as recategorization or the common in-group identity model in that it attempts to break-down group identity by uniting people under a superordinate identity.⁹ In the workplace, boundary reframing works to increase the salience, relevance, and importance of belonging to the organization as a higher-level social category. Thus, the organization itself and its mission and goals becomes the all inclusive identity group. In this regard, boundary reframing has much in common with visionary or charismatic leadership models.¹⁰ While such models emphasize the qualities

of the leader (i.e., persuasive, articulate, inspiring), boundary reframing focuses on the process of creating a commonly shared and inclusive identity across social groups.

A powerful example of boundary reframing comes from CRY (Child's Rights and You), a NGO in India that is transforming itself from an agency for child relief to an agency for child rights. The grass roots organization spans across 17 of the 28 Indian states and is a microcosm of the tremendous diversity of the vast nation, including intergroup differences in gender, religion, region, language, ethnicity, and caste. Members of the management committee recognized that the transformation would only succeed if all the social groups of the organization reframed their differences and identified with the broader mission of the organization. Becoming an advocacy-based organization for child's rights meant having to come to terms with intractable social identity issues that play out in the broader society. As one senior leader put it, "We can't create a movement with over a billion people in India until we first create that movement and that understanding within our own diversity."

To create their vision for the future, the organization is using a number of practices including whole systems methodologies. As described by organizational development pioneer Marvin Weisbord, these methodologies require representatives of whole systems to be present in the discussion, planning, and action cycle of key organizational initiatives.¹¹ For CRY, bringing cross-boundary groups together allows key decisions to be broadly informed, and discourages an "us versus them" mindset from developing. When North or South regional divisions, or rifts between the Brahmin and Dalit castes become apparent, they can be addressed in the moment. This process allows

for common ground to be identified, which in turn creates the needed momentum for CRY to reframe a galvanizing cross-boundary vision for its future.

A compelling mission or vision found in nonprofit organizations, such as CRY's vision concerning child's rights, creates a built-in superordinate goal to bridge disparate social groups. In the corporate arena, however, superordinate goals often focus on competitive dimensions such as winning market share, hitting financial targets, or being first to market with an innovative product or service. These practices serve to bridge social identities by focusing on inter-organizational competition and by emphasizing what is positive and distinctive about the organization versus its competitors. Typically, reframing practices such as these will be particularly effective in tightly contested industries such as finance and technology. In education, nursing, or other helping professions, however, leaders may find reframing works better by calling on a shared professional identity. A professional calling, such as care for those in need, can provide a binding identity that transcends other social identity differences.

The boundaries that separate social identity groups are rooted in group membership and are charged with emotion and meaning. As such, boundary spanning leaders are well-advised to not ignore these differences or attempt to make them go away. Nor should they deliberately put members of social groups in a position where they must abandon core aspects of their social identity on behalf of the organizational identity. Not only does this raise basic issues of ethics, but it is a strategy that cannot sustain itself over time.

While being mindful of these blindspots, it is also the case that an inclusive shared vision can be an incredibly powerful means to bind groups together. As observed

in an environmental organization in Israel, boundary reframing is one of our most hopeful tactics for the future. This school brings together Israeli and Palestinian teenagers to work together on preserving common natural resources. Through these interactions, the two groups are able to identify with one another as stewards of a shared natural resource. By appealing to a larger societal value that improves the world condition, the outline for a new, inclusive identity can be found within the next generation of leaders in the Middle East.

Nest – Embed Groups Within Larger Whole

The tactic of boundary nesting seeks to structure interactions so that social groups have distinct roles that are embedded within a larger mission, goal, or objective. In the literature, this tactic is known as subcategorization or mutual intergroup differentiation, as members of different groups are considered to have distinct but complementary roles to contribute toward a common goal.¹² It draws on decades of psychological and adult learning research that demonstrates that humans have strong needs for both distinctiveness and belonging.

Research by psychologists Jack Dovidio and Sam Gaertner have verified through a series of experiments that intergroup bias can be decreased when group identities are made salient and subgroup identities are part of a larger shared identity. In addition, Michael Hogg and Deborah Terry of the University of Queensland provide evidence that in situations where the group is large and the shared identity amorphous, subgroup members might view imposed assimilation (e.g. boundary reframing) as an identity threat. Hogg and Terry suggest that an effective strategy for managing such situations is to make subgroup and shared group identity simultaneously salient.¹³

As residents in Singapore, we've witnessed firsthand how the nation's first Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, and subsequent generations of government leaders have used boundary nesting to remarkable effect. As a highly multicultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-faith society, Lee Kuan Yew has stressed since Singaporean independence in 1965 that the nation's strength lies in the diversity of its many cultures. Diverse ethnic and religious identities are respected for their unique traditions while concurrently contributing to the whole of the nation. This culture of respect is evidenced in social practices ranging from the celebration of each religion's primary holidays to spectacular annual events, such as the New Years Parade and National Day, in which diverse groups are given equal time on center stage. Such practices prevent dominant identity groups from asserting their identities over others and allows minority groups to practice their unique identities.

The tactic of boundary nesting has functioned as a powerful force against ethnic discrimination in Singapore and its success is evident in the ease with which citizens of different ethnic backgrounds interact. Singaporeans, by and large, value the state of their multi-ethnic society in terms of the quality of inter-ethnic relations and the stability they provide. Consequently, these relationships are often cited as one of the key drivers in fueling what has become one of the world's most dynamic, successful, and diversified economies.¹⁴

Returning to the organizational arena and CRY, the India-based NGO has adopted an innovative strategy planning process that utilizes the concept of boundary nesting. Many are familiar with traditional strategic planning in which a strategy is developed by the senior team and then cascaded down through the chain of command. Each functional

and geographic unit must then attempt to fit itself within this prescribed box. In sharp contrast, CRY wanted to develop a strategy process that recognized and valued the distinct regional identities across the organization. India is a vastly different country as you travel north to south and east to west in everything from dialects to social attitudes to the amount of spice in the food. Yet, while recognizing these differences, the organization also knew they needed an integrated long term plan to provide an overarching blueprint. The solution is a process whereby each region collectively works on the strategy after having broken it down into smaller actionable steps. With this approach, the final version is what emerges after the groups cooperate to reconcile regional variations in support of an integrated strategy.

Other common examples of boundary nesting in organizations includes the creation of affinity groups and communities of practice. Both of these methods seek to foster the development of a shared identity while also keeping groups connected to the broader organizational strategy. As discussed earlier, research evidence demonstrates that nesting groups within larger wholes can be an effective means to reduce intergroup threat and anxiety. Yet, nesting can be difficult to put into practice. Given the often territorial nature of organizational life, it is a real challenge for leaders to balance in-group cohesion with cross-group identification to the organization as a whole.

To help manage these tensions, boundary spanning leaders can take several additional steps. First, they can structure interdependent tasks so that each group's expertise is equally valued. Second, they may find benefit in using a tiered approach in which subgroup members engage in activities that affirm their identity first, and then bring different groups together to work towards a shared understanding.¹⁵ Lastly,

boundary spanning leaders can help manage these intergroup dynamics by actively speaking out concerning *both* the unique perspectives brought by various groups *and* their contributions to larger organizational goals. Like well-crafted Russian dolls, these additional steps help ensure that smaller subgroups retain unique meaning and integrity, while being nested within a larger organizational whole.

Weave: Cross-Cut Roles and Identity

The final tactic of boundary weaving seeks to cross and intersect social and organizational identities in an interdependent manner so that they are less tightly coupled. The concept of weaving speaks to the practice of interlacing social identities across roles and levels in the organization, which in turn facilitates opportunities for increased cross-boundary collaboration and creativity. This is an extension of Marilyn Brewer's concept of cross-cutting.¹⁶ Dr. Brewer, a professor of psychology at Ohio State University, argues that social categories in the broader society become problematic when they are related to subcategories within the organization. For example, social categories often overlap with functional groups such that people may be categorized as male executives and female secretaries. As such, boundary weaving is particularly relevant in bridging the diversity gap between dominant and minority groups in the organization.

In the United States, especially within the corporate sector, organizations typically use multi-layered initiatives to ensure greater cross-boundary representation and contact across levels. One practice involves actively hiring and promoting underrepresented social groups to particular job titles or occupations. A second practice uses formal job rotation programs to broaden employee skills and ultimately to increase underrepresented groups within a specified occupation or role. A third practice includes cross-cutting

mentoring, such as pairing a supervisor and an employee of different identity groups and levels. Each of these practices is consistent with the tactic of boundary weaving in that they cross-cut work group boundaries with social identity membership.

Taking boundary weaving a step further, leaders can strategically use this tactic as a catalyst for cross-boundary collaboration, learning, and innovation. Take Siritina, a corporate leader whose job requires her to lead virtual teams in implementing regional financial services across countries with widely different infrastructures. She describes a typical team as being upwards of 30 members consisting of both men and women, of various ages, with multiple nationality backgrounds, and representing a range of organizational levels and functions. The strength of these teams, Siritina explains, is that by having mixed functional and social identity representation, she increases the likelihood of creating relevant, market-sensitive services. The blindspot, however, is a sharply increased potential for intergroup faultlines and conflict, as various subgroups line-up around shared demographic or functional attributes.

In an interesting twist on conventional wisdom, in the early stages of a new team, Siritina emphasizes a task orientation to a greater extent than a team orientation. She draws up detailed monthly timetables, clearly communicates performance goals, and ensures required team budgets and resources are obtained. Her rationale is to build quick and visible momentum for the project. “When diverse teams experience early success, potential areas of conflict fade into the background,” she reasons. “But when things start off on the wrong track, differences will quickly derail your efforts.” Later, as her teams move into the formal execution of their tasks, Siritina switches to emphasize a greater interpersonal orientation. “I increasingly focus on relationships, and make sure everyone

on the team feels included and has voice around the work.” This helps ensure the best ideas come forward across demographic and functional boundaries, which in turn creates feelings of commitment and buy-in over time.

By demonstrating flexibility in her leadership style, and a keen awareness of group composition, Siritina is able to proactively weave multiple layers of intergroup boundaries.¹⁷ For leaders like Siritina, intergroup differences are not thought of as just a challenge to solve, but rather as the very means to solve the challenge. By weaving social groups with organizational level and roles, boundary spanning leaders unlock creativity within individuals and the organization as a whole.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we outlined four tactics leaders can use to span boundaries across groups of people with different histories, perspectives, values, and cultures. As illustrated in the examples, leaders incorporate these tactics according to their strengths and potential blindspots in daily work projects, meetings, activities, and initiatives. By *suspending* intergroup differences, *reframing* a shared and inclusive identity, *nesting* diverse groups within a larger organizational goal, and through *weaving* organizational and social identities, boundary spanning leaders can generate effective intergroup contact in service of a larger organizational mission, vision, or goal.

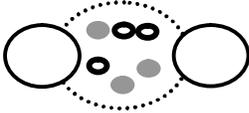
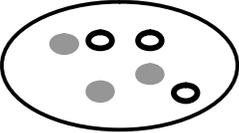
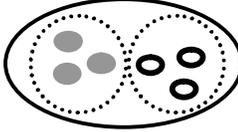
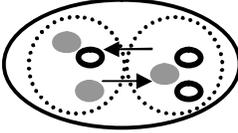
As dynamics in our broader society increasingly spill over into organizational settings, the workplace serves as a crucible for bridging historical and emerging intergroup boundaries. If people of different social groups are provided with opportunities for positive cross-boundary contact in the workplace, then our hope is that these experiences can spill over into local

communities. Framed as such, boundary spanning leadership can serve as a catalyst for positive organizational change, and the broader communities they serve.

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Table: Boundary Spanning Leadership Tactics

	SUSPEND <i>Create a Third Space</i>	REFRAME <i>Activate a Shared Identity</i>	NEST <i>Embed Groups Within Larger Whole</i>	WEAVE <i>Cross-Cut Roles and Identity</i>
Action	Create a neutral zone where social interaction is person-based rather than identity-group based	Activate a shared or superordinate identity that is inclusive across social groups	Embed and affirm groups within large wholes so that groups have both distinct and interdependent identities	Cross-cut work group roles with social group membership in a systematic way
Schematic				
Example	A leader in a multinational financial services firm organizes frequent after-work activities to encourage interaction between individuals of different national origins.	Teachers in a school in Israel bring together Israeli and Palestinian teenagers to work together on preserving common natural resources, thereby identifying one another as stewards of a shared natural resource.	A global technology company creates affinity groups for non-dominant groups in which employees have voice as a unique group <i>and</i> contribute input to broader, strategic goals.	A bank in South Africa uses a mentoring strategy in which previously advantaged white supervisors are paired with black South Africans to cross-cut layers of management and social identity membership.
Specific Leadership Practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organization-sponsored events • After-work activities • Organizational “hot spots” or “creativity labs” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All-inclusive organizational mission or goal • Third-party competitor • Larger calling or societal value 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Affinity groups • Communities of practice • Cross-boundary strategy planning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Job rotations • Cross-cutting mentoring • Virtual or dispersed teams

Endnotes

¹ Thomas Friedman, *The World is Flat*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005); Ron Ashkenas, Dave Ulrich, Todd Kick and Steve Kerr, *The Boundaryless Organization: Breaking the Chains of Organizational Structure*. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1998).

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³ For a comprehensive analysis on demographic faultlines, see Dora Lau and Keith Murnighan, "Interactions within groups and subgroups: The effects of demographic faultlines," *Academy of Management Journal*, 48, no. 4 (2005): 645-659; and Dora Lau and Keith Murnighan, "Demographic diversity and faultlines: The compositional dynamics of organizational groups," *Academy of Management Review*, 23, no. 2 (1998): 325-340.

⁴ The *Leadership Across Differences* project is a multi-country, multi-method study of leadership in the context of social identity differences that is housed at the Center for Creative Leadership. For more information, visit the project website at: www.ccl.org/lad

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⁷ Marilyn M. Brewer and Norman Miller, "Beyond the contact hypothesis: Theoretical perspectives on desegregation," in *Groups in Contact: The Psychology of Desegregation*, ed. N. Miller & M. M. Brewer, (New York: Academic Press, 1984), 281-302.

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¹² Miles R.C. Hewstone and Rupert J. Brown, "Contact is not enough: An intergroup perspective on the contact hypothesis," in *Contact and Conflict in Intergroup Encounters*, ed. M.R.C. Hewstone and R.J. Brown, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 1-44.

¹³ Michael A. Hogg and Deborah J. Terry, "Social identity and self-categorization processes in organizational contexts," *Academy of Management Review*, 25 (2000): 121-140.

¹⁴ Chua Beng-Huat, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore* (London/ New York: Routledge, 1995).

¹⁵ Alexander Haslam and Naomi Ellemers, "Social identity in industrial and organizational psychology: Concepts, controversies, and contributions," in *International Review of Industrial and Organizational Psychology (Vol. 20)*, ed. Gerard P. Hodgkinson & J. Kevin Ford, (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2005), 39-118.

¹⁶ Marilynn M. Brewer, "Managing diversity: The role of social identities," in *Diversity in Work Teams*, ed. Sharon E. Jackson & Marian N. Ruderman, (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 1995), 47-68.

¹⁷ The techniques described in the Sirtina example parallel recommendations made in a quantitative study of leadership by Lynda Gratton and her colleagues. For more on how leaders can modify their style to manage faultlines, see Lynda Gratton, Andreas Voigt and Tamara J. Erickson, Bridging faultlines in diverse teams, *MIT Sloan Management Review*, 48, (2007): 22-29.