Leading Across Boundaries
Bridging professions for system-wide change

by Katherine Skinner, David Horth and Christina Drummond

In our networked world, traditional hierarchical, geopolitical and social boundaries have been disrupted. As a result, many of the important challenges business leaders face today are interdependent in nature. Across fields — e.g., education, law, architecture, technology, journalism, medicine, information management, etc. — leaders are engaged in a critical moment of redefinition in which they must reshape their services, technical infrastructures, staffing models and partnerships. Associations serving a wide range of fields and sectors seek to empower their members to navigate this rapidly changing and increasingly integrated technical, social and political landscape.

Today’s leadership advantage often goes to people and groups who can work across sectors and locations with ease. The nexus points that form between fields, “[w]here disparate groups collide, intersect, and link,” are crucial junctures at which unified vision and alignment across sectors can emerge. Cross-germination between fields in these nexus points can free us from traditional thinking, helping us to creatively meet our challenges. It can also equip us with a broadly shared vision and implementation strategy that can help to advance a field or system as a whole. These convergence points can be difficult to engineer, in part because boundaries are meaningful mechanisms, providing us with a coherent sense of identity and purpose in much of our day-to-day work.

Association leaders are positioned well to help to engender and encourage boundary-spanning leadership practices in and across our own respective fields. In this piece, we’ll look first at the Boundary-Spanning Leadership Model and then dive into a case study in which library, archives and museum associations have deployed the model successfully to enrich their fields.

Boundary-spanning leadership

Based on decades of research, the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) has developed a model for developing leadership across boundaries termed Boundary-Spanning Leadership. CCL identified five key kinds of boundaries: hierarchical, horizontal (between peers within a system), stakeholder (e.g. vendors, suppliers, distribution channels, etc.); geographic and demographic. As explained by Lance Lee, David Horth and Chris Ernst, “All too often, boundaries create borders that divide groups into Us and Them,” spawning “fractured relationships, diminished resources, suboptimal results and divisive conflict.”

Intuitively (and historically), when leaders seek to span such boundaries, they start by finding and highlighting points of similarity in order to convince stakeholders to work together. This method of stressing connection and pursuing mobilization most often fails — the “jump” effectively ignores the very boundaries we are trying to bridge, causing each stakeholder group to feel a need to defend those boundaries instead.

CCL has developed a set of six practices that intentionally circumvent this intuitive (and often harmful) approach. Instead of beginning with bridge-building, this method starts with two crucial steps: Buffering and Reflecting. These recognize and validate current boundaries, developing a sense of identity and safety within each group. Once this sense of “home base” is established and validated, individuals can cross the divide and begin Connecting (engaging in diplomacy across the divides), Mobilizing (capitalizing on the newly built trust to undertake cross-stakeholder projects), Weaving (building interdependence and synergistic teamwork) and finally,
Transforming or building new frontiers in which the diverse perspectives of the original groups fuse and spark innovation.

This Transforming phase catalyzes truly innovative practices that may dramatically change a field or the system as a whole. The diversity of perspectives — once a stumbling block — now becomes the very source of innovation.

Case study: Nexus LAB

The Nexus Leading Across Boundaries (LAB) project, funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services and hosted by the Educopia Institute, has used CCL’s Boundary-Spanning Leadership methodology to bridge three distinct-but-related fields — libraries, archives and museums — in a moment of severe disruption in the business of “information management.”

Leaders of libraries, archives and museums currently navigate shrinking budgets, changing user expectations, quickly morphing standards and technologies, and increasing competition from commercial information specialists (e.g., Google and Amazon). The decisions these information organizations make today about their practices, priorities and identities inform both the futures of these institutions and the communities they cultivate and serve.

In this critical moment, how can libraries, archives and museums strategically advance their shared core mission: to collect, make accessible and preserve information for today and for future generations?

This was the question that led the Nexus team of 38 industry and association leaders\(^5\) to “Span Boundaries” in 2013. Using CCL’s six-step methodology, leaders came together to evaluate their capacity for alignment and collective transformation. At the outset, many articulated reservations about finding common ground in leadership training needs. Concerns centered on the prevalent differences between these three knowledge dissemination-oriented fields and their leadership training needs, such as jargon and differing definitions for specific job functions (e.g., curation).

The Nexus LAB project began not with tales of our similarities, but instead with Buffering, or an intentional reinforcing of our field boundaries, and Connecting, or diplomatic engagement across those boundaries. During this crucial phase of work, Educopia and CCL took care to manage issues related to language, presentation style, work culture and

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\(^5\)See [http://educopia.org/research/grants/nexus-lab-leading-across-boundaries](http://educopia.org/research/grants/nexus-lab-leading-across-boundaries) for the full list of participants

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Nexus LAB: Layers of Leadership across Libraries, Archives and Museums

Layers of Leadership: Key Roles and Challenges

Role specific skills are developed at each stage. Common skills are also developed across all levels.

**Layer 1:** Leading Self

**Key Role:** Pursue knowledge, assignments and responsibilities that expand leadership capabilities

**Challenge:** “How do I navigate my organization in order to have impact, learn, and grow both technically and as a leader?”

**Layer 2:** Leading Others

**Key Role:** Add value to position and organization with creative and transformative teamwork

**Challenge:** “I’m good at doing my own work, but how do I get the work done through others?”

**Layer 3:** Leading the Department

**Key Role:** Manage complex strategies and projects through cross-functional teams

**Challenge:** “How do I translate organizational culture and associated strategy into practical plans and objectives that my people can relate to and be measured on?”

**Layer 4:** Leading Multiple Departments

**Key Role:** Connect with broader internal and external systems

**Challenge:** “How might the collective performance of my departments be enhanced for the long term success of the overall organization?”

**Layer 5:** Leading the Organization

**Key Role:** Envision and shape broader culture, organization and strategy

**Challenge:** “How do I strengthen or transform my organization so it continues to be relevant and adds value to the communities we serve?”

**Layer 6:** Leading the Profession

**Key Role:** Help my profession constructively examine itself and evolve

**Challenge:** “How do I make an impact on the growth, development, sustainability and reputation of my profession?”

As a result of CCL's involvement in their development, the frameworks also draw heavily upon CCL's thoroughly researched and validated 360 by Design Competency Library.

In drafting the “Layers of Leadership,” project partners recognized and defined a novel layer that was previously unaddressed, even by CCL's models: “Layer 6: Leading the Profession.” This layer strengthens leaders who serve to develop and advocate for their profession as a whole. It makes visible the challenge “How do I make an impact on the growth, development, sustainability and reputation of my profession” and specifically identifies outcomes that can be realized by an individual with competencies in this layer.7

Nexus LAB: Layers of Leadership across Libraries, Archives and Museums

Layer 6 – Leading the Profession: Design Framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>My daily challenge</th>
<th>Key leadership tasks</th>
<th>Skills to perform tasks</th>
<th>Change I (and others) want to see</th>
<th>Greater outcomes</th>
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"How do I make an impact on the growth, development, sustainability and reputation of my profession?"

In order to develop as a leader in my profession, I need to excel at:
- Practicing and communicating thought leadership
- Challenging norms
- Ensuring scalability and sustainability
- Building relationships/forge networks across libraries, archives, and museums to break down silos
- Seeing and understanding libraries, archives, and museums holistically, as a single integrated ecosystem
- Interacting and partnering with library, archives and museum leadership nationally and internationally

Role specific skills
- Negotiate political entities
- Gather, synthesize, test, adapt and use ideas and information from across LAMs, nonprofit and for-profit sectors
- Sharpen critical thinking, writing and speaking skills
- Lead or participate in large-scale change efforts that can be used across LAMs
- Build strong cases for change that can be used across LAMs
- Work leading the profession into my daily/weekly/monthly routines
- Be transparent and trusted

Shared skills
- Leading organizational culture
  - Transform the profession
- Polarity thinking
  - Embrace emerging polarities
- Agile learning
  - Encourage community partners to be actively learning
- Effective communications
  - Persuasive and influential communicator
  - Appreciate strengths in self and others
- Spanning boundaries
  - Influence without authority
  - Navigate multiple types of boundaries
- Developing expertise
  - Act as thought leader
  - Develop professional expertise / brand
  - Authoritative voice for the profession
- Team-building
  - Build effective teams across organizational boundaries
- Innovation leadership
  - Lead innovation strategy
  - Cultivate culture of innovation
  - Act as role model

By the end of the training, leaders will be able to:
- Articulate issues shared by archives, libraries, and museums
- Articulate/develop standards and best practices/models/case studies for collaboration across libraries, archives, and museums
- Diplomatically draw convergent voices into conversations about the future of libraries, archives, and museums
- Integrate trends from across nonprofit and for-profit sectors
- Encourage libraries, archives, and museums to become laboratories of experimentation and innovation

At my organization
- I'm authentically walking the talk
- My and/or my institution's work is cited as a model
- Reframe the value of the industry

Across Libraries, Archives, and Museums
- The value of libraries, archives and museums is increasingly understood by diverse stakeholders
- Libraries, archives, and museums are increasingly seen as indispensable educational and cultural community assets
- Libraries, archives, and museums collaborate more to communicate impacts and develop best practices and models around shared needs
- Libraries, archives, and museums increasingly work together on advocacy and awareness-building, fundraising, and joint programming around shared issues

Within our community
- Greater recognition of organizational value within and across distinct communities
- Recognition of organization as a critical part of the community fabric
- Libraries, archives, and museums have a stronger voice on national and international stages

7The group partnered with Toolkit Consulting (http://www.toolkitconsulting.com) to create seven curricular modules addressing this “Leading the Profession” layer. These are currently being piloted in and across each of these sectors, and they will be released as open curriculum that anyone may use and build upon at the conclusion of the project in October 2017.
As the Nexus LAB project team moves into the Transforming phase of Spanning Boundaries, the diverse perspectives of the original groups are fusing and sparking innovation. Boundary-spanning leadership training has provided the methodology and mechanism for developing networks of leaders ready to reinforce, and where necessary, reinvent the knowledge dissemination professions.

So, as an association leader, how might you use boundary-spanning leadership practices to advance change in the communities you serve?

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