

# Leading Across Boundaries

## Bridging professions for system-wide change

by Katherine Skinner, David Horth and Christina Drummond

In our networked world, traditional hierarchal, geopolitical and social boundaries have been disrupted. As a result, many of the important challenges business leaders face today are interdependent in nature.<sup>1</sup> 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.

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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,”<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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

<sup>1</sup>As evidenced by a decade of research across 12 countries and six world regions by the Center for Creative Leadership, see Chris Ernst and Donna Chrobot-Mason (2011). *Boundary Spanning Leadership*. (Greensboro: Center for Creative Leadership).

<sup>2</sup>Ibid

<sup>3</sup>See e.g., “Collective Impact” methodologies, summarized here: John Kania and Mark Kramer. “Collective Impact” *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (Winter 2011), [https://ssir.org/articles/entry/collective\\_impact](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/collective_impact)

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.”<sup>4</sup>

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,

<sup>4</sup>Lance Lee, David Magellan Horth and Chris Ernst. 2014. *Boundary Spanning in Action: Tactics for Transforming Today’s Borders into Tomorrow’s Frontiers* p. 3. <http://www.ccl.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/BoundarySpanningAction.pdf>

*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<sup>5</sup> 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

<sup>5</sup>See <http://educopia.org/research/grants/nexus-lab-leading-across-boundaries> for the full list of participants

## 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	LAYER 2: Leading Others	LAYER 3: Leading the Department	LAYER 4: Leading Multiple Departments	LAYER 5: Leading the Organization	LAYER 6: Leading the Profession
<p><b>KEY ROLE:</b> Pursue knowledge, assignments and responsibilities that expand leadership capabilities</p> <p><b>CHALLENGE:</b> “How do I navigate my organization in order to have impact, learn, and grow both technically and as a leader?”</p>	<p><b>KEY ROLE:</b> Add value to position and organization with creative and transformative teamwork</p> <p><b>CHALLENGE:</b> “I’m good at doing my own work, but how do I get the work done through others?”</p>	<p><b>KEY ROLE:</b> Manage complex strategies and projects through cross-functional teams</p> <p><b>CHALLENGE:</b> “How do I translate organizational culture and associated strategy into practical plans and objectives that my people can relate to and be measured on?”</p>	<p><b>KEY ROLE:</b> Connect with broader internal and external systems</p> <p><b>CHALLENGE:</b> “How might the collective performance of my departments be enhanced for the long term success of the overall organization?”</p>	<p><b>KEY ROLE:</b> Envision and shape broader culture, organization and strategy</p> <p><b>CHALLENGE:</b> “How do I strengthen or transform my organization so it continues to be relevant and adds value to the communities we serve?”</p>	<p><b>KEY ROLE:</b> Help my profession constructively examine itself and evolve</p> <p><b>CHALLENGE:</b> “How do I make an impact on the growth, development, sustainability and reputation of my profession?”</p>

<https://educopia.org/deliverables/nexus-lab-layers-leadership-across-libraries-archives-and-museums-september-2016-draft>

field-based perceptions. We also encouraged engagement and representation not only from each of the three main fields (libraries, archives and museums) but also from the many subfields and sectors represented within them (e.g., rural/urban, nonprofit/government/academic, regional/state/national).

Once the project team reinforced their field-based identities, strong, trust-based personal connections formed across project partners. The team moved into *Mobilizing* (engaging in cross-sector work together) and *Weaving* (forming more interdependency through developing common frameworks and tools). The project team collaboratively produced a rich, multi-dimensional set of blended leadership competency and impact models, to serve as curriculum design frameworks. These “Layers of Leadership” differentiate leadership responsibilities across six professional/career roles (layers), affiliating each with specific skills, tasks and outcomes.<sup>6</sup> For example, “Layer 1: Leading Self” addresses the challenge: “How do I navigate my organization in order to have impact, learn and grow both technically and as a

*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.*

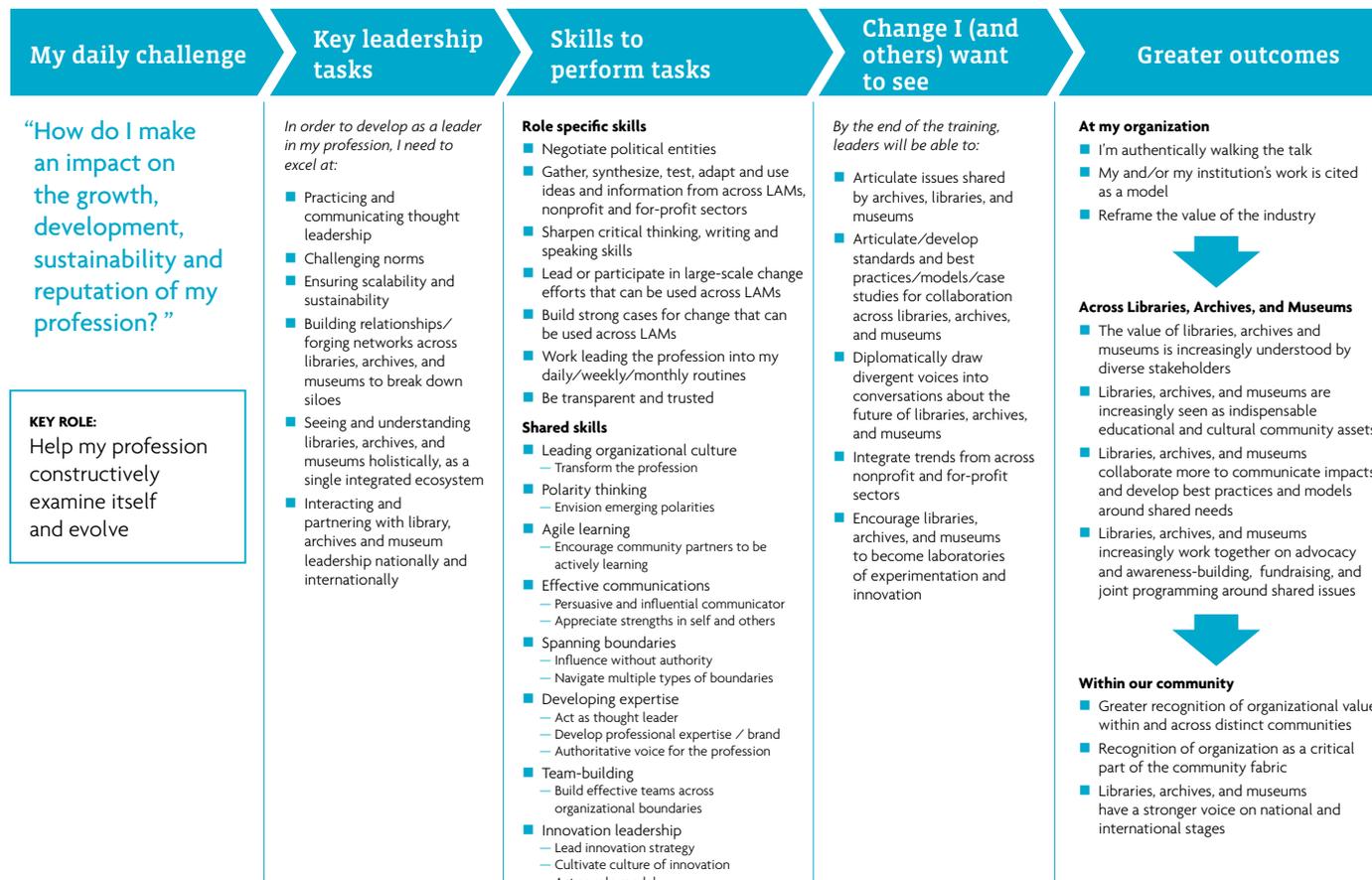
leader?” while “Layer 4: Leading Multiple Departments” answers “How might the collective performance of my departments be enhanced for the long-term success of the overall organization?” The design framework for each layer provides a crosswalk from the layer’s career challenge, to the leadership tasks and skills required to succeed, to learner, organizational and community outcomes that could result from developing leaders at that level.

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.<sup>7</sup>

*<sup>7</sup>The 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.*

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

### Layer 6 – Leading the Profession: Design Framework



<https://educopia.org/deliverables/nexus-lab-layers-leadership-across-libraries-archives-and-museums-september-2016-draft>

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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