

## **SENIOR FELLOWS AND FRIENDS**

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### **Recap of 3/3/20 session #3 with Adrian Wolfberg: Boundary Crossing for Leaders**

Dear Senior Fellows and Friends,

On a Tuesday evening early this month, we gathered on Zoom with Adrian “Zeke” Wolfberg to hear more about his work at the intersection of research and practice. He graciously provided the next few sections in order to make this recap as value-added as possible.

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One of the most important takeaways from the December 3, 2019 and March 3, 2020 Zoom sessions was how the framework (see figure below) for boundary crossing strategies is both theory-driven as well as a practice-based tool to implement the strategy. I’ll use the March 3 session to share how the strategy framework is used as theory and implementation. First, I will discuss generally how to think about theory and implementation. Then, I will recap the real-world example I used.

Techniques for Boundary Crossing	Least Complex Boundary (Clarity in Knowledge Differences and Dependencies)	Complex Boundary (Ambiguity in Knowledge Differences and Dependencies)	Most Complex Boundary (Political Interests and Agendas Overlay Knowledge Differences and Dependencies)
Easier to Cross Boundary (High Permeability)	Information Systems	Boundary Spanners	Boundary Objects
Harder to Cross Boundary (Low Permeability)	Recalibrate Standards	Boundary Architects	Boundary Practices

*Multiple levels of complexity and permeability may apply in a situation, requiring use of a combination of techniques.*

Source: Adapted from Figure 1, in Wolberg, Adrian (2018) "Problem-Solving in Complex Settings: Techniques for Crossing Organizational Boundaries," *Engaged Management ReView*: vol 2, no 3: 39-50.

### Theory-based takeaway:

Strategy framework as theory. I need to explain what I mean by the word theory in the context of the strategy framework. Theory has two meanings: outcome-based and process-based. I am using both simultaneously, but only the latter is likely to be of interest to you. The outcome-based meaning of theory is technical, and is the result of pursuing a scholarship activity to uncover new explanations, and/or test new hypotheses. This sense theory as it applies to the boundary crossing strategy framework, is my outcome from my scholarship that I am sharing with you. As such, it will not stick very much with you, nor does it need to stick with you. The process-based meaning of theory, however, is the process by which we frame a situation, and that meaning I hope does stick with you as it is most relevant. How we frame a situation defines what we pay attention to, the interpretation we place on the situation, and the extent of flexibility we entertain about the situation as it is happening. In this process-based meaning of theory, the framework offers a frame to categorize into three broad types the root of a problem you are facing at an organizational boundary. If you have this theory in mind when analyzing your organizational situation, then you have some tools available in which to diagnose the nature of the problem, and offer types of approaches to overcome the problem.

Strategy framework as implementation. After you have been able to diagnosis the type of boundary problem you are facing using the strategy framework as theory, the next step is to implement a problem-solving action. Before selecting the type of boundary crossing technique for your implementation, one needs to assess the level of difficulty at the boundary: easier to cross or harder to cross. Assessing which is which is subjective and contextual. It gets more complicated when there are multiple kinds of complexity occurring simultaneously. I recommend you make the assumption that the conditions at the boundary are easier to cross. While the situation may seem very difficult, it is much wiser in terms of strategy to begin with an approach that both has an effect, but also allows you to better understand the situation through the intervention of that approach. After all, things are usually much more complex than we initially think. Then, if you find out the extent of the problem, you can escalate the technique. In the December session, we used a complex boundary example and started the problem-solving with boundary spanners, then had to escalate to using boundary architects. In this session, we used a most complex boundary example and started with boundary objects and escalated to boundary practices.

### **Practice-based takeaway:**

The real-world example I shared took place a few years in a program I ran in my organization called “Crossing Boundaries.” Crossing Boundaries was more than a monthly town hall where individuals might complain about problems. It required individuals who raised the problem during a monthly meeting to spearhead the solution to the problem. It was my job to help them be successful. One of the main techniques was building collaborative teams across stovepipes. But, not everyone was please about this approach. In this session, I discussed two types of “most complex” boundaries, which means political interests and organizational agendas are intervening. The two types of “most complex” boundaries occurred simultaneously: hierarchical and structural. Because this level of complexity was a bit overwhelming, I adopted the simpler approach to begin an implementation strategy, which called for the use of boundary objects, but then changed to using boundary practices. For more details on what a boundary object and a boundary practice is, read my article.

(Download: <https://commons.case.edu/emr/vol2/iss3/1/>)

The hierarchical problem was that the vertical movement of ideas, especially for change, was typically downward. In Crossing Boundaries, ideas moved upward through the hierarchy. This was a hard norm to change. What I did initially was use Power Point slides to communicate what was going on with problems presented and the status of solution in process. I did this transparently to people who participated in Crossing Boundaries and people who were watching it happen, from afar. This was effective only at the beginning because it was so new that no one really was affected by it. But, as time went on, and people were being affected, resistance emerged and some no longer paid attention. In response, I escalated the boundary crossing technique from a boundary object to a boundary practice. The practice was to use a device that everyone knows about, called the business case. The business case is a structured mechanism to tell a story in a standard way; the structure made people feel comfortable even though the content may have been somewhat unfamiliar. This worked.

The structural problem, related to the hierarchical problem, was that complex organizations use stovepipes for various reasons. They help focus attention to manage priorities and resources. The challenge, of course, is how to collaborate horizontally across really different stovepipes. First, I was fortunate to have a leader who got involved with the Crossing Boundaries program and modeled behavior. During the monthly meeting, he would use language to reinterpret the problem raised in a way that people from across multiple stovepipes might empathize or have knowledge to solve the problem. The use of language is a boundary object. This worked pretty well for about a year, as it modeled collaborative behavior by employees who participated in the program. But, it still took a long time quite often for solutions to mature because solutions were dependent, quite often, not only with people who participated in Crossing Boundaries but by those who did not. I escalate the boundary crossing technique of boundary objects to a boundary practice. The practice was the creation of council that had representatives from each of the stovepipes, and the council members had direct access to the leaders of each stovepipe. What the council was able to do was quickly disseminate downward and across stovepipes problems raised for maximum awareness so that those who had an interest or had knowledge about a solution could get involved. This worked.

## **Future Zoom Session**

As a follow-up session, we could talk about the challenge of, how do you figure out what kind of boundary complexity you are facing? Answering this question requires some sort of data collection. I can use another real-world example to shed light on this question.

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### **Participant affiliations**

ASPA National Capital Area Chapter  
Defense Intelligence Agency  
Dell Technologies  
U.S. Army

Participants joined the session from the DC-MD-VA metro area, Colorado Springs, and San Mateo County, CA.

Regards,  
Kitty Wooley



Adrian "Zeke" Wolfberg works in the Defense Intelligence Agency's Office of Oversight and Compliance, where he helps ensure DIA's intelligence activities balance the need to protect the civil liberties of Americans with the need to protect Americans from national security threats. In 2017, Zeke contributed a seminal chapter to our first ebook (*Boundary Spanning in Practice: Broadening the Conversation*) while detailed to U.S. Army War College, Carlisle, PA, as Chairman of Defense Intelligence, Department of National Security and Strategy. Prior to his rotation in Carlisle, Zeke created and led the Knowledge Lab at DIA from 2005 to 2010.