

SENIOR FELLOWS AND FRIENDS

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https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kayakers_in_Redwood_City,_California.jpg

Recap of 12/3/19 session #2 with Adrian Wolfberg: Boundary Crossing for Leaders

Dear Senior Fellows and Friends,

On the first Tuesday evening in December, a few of us gathered by Zoom with Adrian “Zeke” Wolfberg to discuss his continuing research on boundary crossing. He went the extra mile by sending me the next few paragraphs, so that we could make this recap as accurate as possible for you.

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Zeke used this session to bring to life his [boundary crossing framework](#) by discussing boundary crossing as a strategy in a real-life work situation. [*The link goes to the article in which he introduced the framework. The framework itself appears below, so that you can refer to it as you read.*] He emphasized that the framework is not a static, abstract representation of a simple model but, rather, a guidepost for how one approaches boundary management. He used a five-step process to using the framework:

- describe the problem;
- come up with an initial assessment of why the problem exists;
- frame the problem as a boundary problem using the framework;
- select a boundary crossing technique to try out, and modify if necessary; and
- retrospectively analyze how and why the technique succeeded or failed.

In Zeke's story, the boundary problem was not overly simple ("least complex boundary") or overly complex ("most complex boundary"). The former would suggest that people on both sides of a boundary situation clearly understand how and why they interact, clearly understand the knowledge differences they possess, and clearly understand the dependencies with each other. The perfect kind of boundary condition that typifies least complex boundaries are special kinds of teams who train and work together, typically in high performance jobs. Examples would be: flight crews, nuclear facility control room engineers, police SWAT teams, Navy SEAL teams, and so on. The latter would suggest that people on both sides of a boundary condition are subject to political and agenda interests that obfuscate the working relations people have, which makes it hard for the organization to maintain high levels of performance. These kinds of boundary conditions can exist anywhere, within social units, organizations, and political life.

The boundary condition that Zeke assessed was something between these two extremes ("complex boundary"). People worked with each other but there was confusion or ambiguity in what to expect, or the interdependencies between each other. With this in mind, the next step in Zeke's story was to figure out which boundary crossing technique to use. He first assumed that the boundary was relatively easier to cross ("high permeability") so he used a boundary spanner technique. He made this assumption because in his lived experience he had been a member of both sides of the boundary. He assumed, therefore, that he could translate between the two knowledge areas. This experiment failed because he did not realize that effective boundary spanning assumes that one side or other could absorb the knowledge from the other side of the boundary.

With the acceptance of this failure in mind, he assumed the boundary was not so easy to cross ("low permeability"), and therefore, adopted a boundary architect technique. This approach was used because he figured out that he had to create a connection between people on both sides of the boundary. That connection involved using dialogue to better understand why absorption of new knowledge was not happening. In discussions, people

began to understand that decisions that they previously made unconsciously because they felt that they did not pertain to them, or were not relevant to them, now had to be faced consciously. Once the realization came that people were faced with the need to consciously make a decision, the connection between the two boundaries was bridged.

The reason this particular boundary architect technique worked – the use of dialogue – was because the context in which the dialogue occurred allowed people to pay attention to the issue at hand, ask questions, feel safe in doing so, and have time to think about how they had and will face such decisions in the future. The risk of not making the right assessment of the boundary condition can be severe. If this boundary condition would have been interpreted as the “most complex boundary,” techniques such as changing workflow processes or organizational structure could have been employed. In the case Zeke discussed, changing processes would not have helped people move from a place of unconscious to conscious decision-making. Similarly, a problem can be diagnosed as having multiple types of boundary complexity. Under these circumstances, multiple techniques would be used, and sequencing of these techniques, in time, and in context, would need to be considered.

A future Zoom discussion might focus on boundary techniques for the most complex boundary.

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Zeke mentioned the Invisible Gorilla experiment as a well-known example of a situation in which absorption of new knowledge didn't happen! You can view it at <https://youtu.be/vJG698U2Mvo>.

He also mentioned scaffolding, or "stitching," as a technique to help people move from unconscious to conscious decision-making and predicted that it was going to become more important. Learning & development colleagues in this network will recognize the concept of instructional scaffolding.

One thing that came up in discussion was the parallel with a common challenge faced in learning & development, in which training can be seen as the only appropriate intervention when in fact it may not be. A key sentence above is "In the case Zeke discussed, changing processes would not have helped people move from a place of unconscious to

conscious decision-making." Ziva Mann mentioned Abe Wandersman, University of South Carolina, in this context. Among other things, Wandersman studies "readiness" (Readiness = Motivation x Capability). His current work with government is shown at <https://www.wandersmancenter.org/partners--projects.html>.

Finally, Dan Slattery mentioned his concern about disinformation campaigns on the internet. Although there wasn't time to go into that, I promised to include the link to the [People-Centered Internet](#) because it is making inquiries and may be opening work in this area. Dr. David Bray, a member of our network and former Senior Executive Service member you may know, serves as executive director for that group.

### **Participant affiliations**

ASPA National Capital Area Chapter  
Defense Intelligence Agency  
Government Accountability Office, Retired  
U.S. Army  
U.S. Department of Education, Retired  
ZMM Consulting, LLC

Participants joined the session from the DC-MD-VA metro area, Charlestown, RI, Colorado Springs, and Boston.

### **This discussion will continue**

As mentioned in August, Senior Fellows and Friends will host further discussion with Zeke on a quarterly basis. Invitations will arrive via MailChimp as usual.

Participation requires joining with computer audio and video enabled, either through your web browser or via the free Zoom app available for phone or tablet. The nonverbal aspect of communication enhances understanding and trust, helping to create an atmosphere like that of the past 15 years' dinner salons in DC. Need help with special circumstances? Contact me when the invitation comes out! Please consider joining us in the future.

Regards,  
Kitty Wooley

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

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

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