

"BORDER" PEOPLE IN ORGANIZATIONS: TAPPING CURRENT STAFF TO BRIDGE CULTURES*

Picture this: It's 1975...

I'm working with a state prison system. I've been called by the headquarters training officer to defuse what I've been told is an escalating, near riot situation - not among inmates - but among staff. I'm told that it's due to racial tensions stemming from department attempts to racially integrate staff. I catch a plane and fly for an hour. I rent a car. 2 hours later I drive into a traditional, predominantly Caucasian, rural small community.

When I arrive at the prison I find that the Departmental Affirmative Action Team is just winding up a state-wide tour to develop support for implementation of the program. The staff is angry at the program, at the team members, and in general.

I'm 7 months pregnant and as I enter the first group I'm to work with I hear someone mumble: "I see they sent us a pregnant one so we wouldn't hit her".

By this time I've heard hair-raising stories of staff behavior. A new minority staff person who was deathly afraid of snakes opened his locker one morning to find a snake in it. Other staff had been harassed in a variety of ways at the institution and in the community at large.

And of course the administration wanted us to fix it -and them- immediately. I needed this job and I needed to come out with credibility to get future jobs. How was I going to survive?

As I look back, I realize that the interventions our team performed at that time were guided by my early upbringing between two cultures - by what I've been learning through my research to value as border behavior. I've spent most of my life going back and forth between cultures. That experience has provided me with a different perspective, one that I call a *fronteriza* or border person perspective.

That perspective and the actions that follow from it are the subject of my current research and today's discussion. To date, organizational efforts to value and employ a multicultural workforce have paid little attention to processes that bridge cultures. My work over the last 2 years, is an effort to make explicit activities carried out in the borderlands between cultures and ethnic groups. Preliminary research suggests that a border perspective and border behaviors can be keys to harmony and cooperation between groups with differences. This research can provide you with a new tool that can make a difference in managing multicultural environments, in helping people from various cultures work together effectively.

The term "border" in this context refers to the area that exists between groups that are different. The differences can be differences in culture, race, ethnicity, age, sex, interest, work function, etc. It should be noted that borders may be seen as lines of separation as well as points of contact (Asiwaju 1985:13).

Trying out a border perspective

To help you understand what is meant by border perspective, I'd like you to participate in an historical simulation by listening to (reading) a few paragraphs from *Poor Richard's Almanac* written in 1757 by Benjamin Franklin.

As you listen (read), use a sort of internal witness or observer to keep track of your thoughts, reactions and any changes that occur in your point of view. When I finish I'm going to ask you to review those reactions and discuss them with a neighbor.

Perhaps if we could examine the manners of different nations with impartiality we should find no people so rude as to be without any rules of politeness, or none so polite as not to have some remains of rudeness.

...An instance of this occurred at the treaty of Lancaster, in Pennsylvania, anno 1744, between the government of Virginia and the Six Nations. (The Six Nations were six tribes of Indians formed in a league, also known as the Iroquois.) After the principal business was settled, the commissioners from Virginia acquainted the Indians by a speech that there was at Williamsburg a college, with a fund for educating Indian youth; and that if the chiefs of the Six Nations would send down half a dozen of their sons to that college, the government would take care that they should be well provided for and instructed in all the learning of the white people. It is one of the Indian rules of politeness not to answer a public proposition the same day that it is made; they think it would be treating it as a light matter, and that they show it respect by taking time to consider it as a matter important. They therefore deferred their answer til the day following, when their speaker began by expressing their deep sense of the kindness of the Virginia government in making them that offer: "for we know," says he, "that you highly esteem the kind of learning taught in those colleges, and that the maintenance of our young men while with you would be very expensive to you. We are convinced, therefore, that you mean to do us good by your proposal, and we thank you heartily. But you, who are wise, must know that different nations have different conceptions of things; and you will therefore not take it amiss if our ideas of this kind of education happen not to be the

*in **Managing the Multicultural Workforce: Strategies for Human Resource Professionals**, ed. Rosalind M. Schwartz, Policy and Practice Series: HR 2000, Institute of Industrial Relations, University of California, Los Angeles, 1992.

same with yours. We have had some experience of it. Several of our young people were formerly brought up at the colleges of the northern provinces; they were instructed in all your sciences; but when they came back to us they were bad runners, ignorant of every means of living in the woods, unable to bear either cold or hunger, knew neither how to build a cabin, take a deer, nor kill an enemy, spoke our language imperfectly; were therefore neither fit for hunters, warriors, nor counsellors—they were therefore totally good for nothing. We are, however, not the less obliged by your kind offer, though we decline accepting it; and to show our grateful sense of it, if the gentlemen of Virginia will send us a dozen of their sons we will take great care of their education, instruct them in all we know, and make men of them.
(Franklin 1970:62-67)

Reflect for a minute on what went on as you listened or read. Take a few moments to explore your inner dialogue and discuss your reactions for a few minutes. ...

Think about the extent to which you took first one side and then the other and traveled back and forth between what you imagined to be the positions of these two groups. When you could see both points of view, you held a border perspective.

Now, imagine that as human resource professionals, you have been called in by both parties to figure out what to do about this impasse. Take a few moments to plan what you might say or do with this group of Virginians and Iroquois that might help them bridge their differences....

If you planned strategies that kept communication going, that created bridges between the two cultures, that valued both cultures and that showed an understanding of both points of view, you were considering border behaviors.

Further clarification about borderness can result from exploring a metaphor. Consider the situation of hyphenated Americans such as African-Americans, Mexican-Americans, Arab-Americans, Jewish-Americans, Anglo-Americans, Korean-Americans. When we refer to them we are usually describing their position on one or the other side of the hyphen - today I'm talking about what happens when they **are** the hyphen.

So, people who habitually travel back and forth across this hyphen bridge are *border people*. The way they think creates a *border perspective*. And, the things they do, are *border behaviors*.

As shown by the selection from *Poor Richard's Almanac*, border perspectives have been around for a long time. Nevertheless, little value has been placed on them until recently. Stanford anthropologist, Renato Rosaldo (1989) is among a growing group of scholars who point out the legitimacy and importance of studying borders as culturally distinct spaces and there are some recent efforts by social scientists to study people living along international borders (Martínez 1990).

I suspect that many of you—because of the requirements of the profession you are in—may be good at doing many of the things border people do. Some of you may have been drawn to this work precisely because you are border people. Highlighting this aspect of your thinking and acting is a way to begin to identify the processes involved.

Border people think and act differently

Out of my past work and current research, I have identified nine areas which impact on bridging activities between cultures.¹ They fit into three dimensions (Fig. 1). The first, the taking of a border perspective, describes the stance the person takes regarding a border. The second dimension, intergroup behaviors, expands actions that have traditionally been regarded as interpersonally important to include their importance from an intergroup point of view. The third dimension, points to a cluster of communication behaviors that are particularly important in transborder situations. Some activities in these dimensions are carried out by any individual with good interpersonal communication skills. It is the unique combination of many activities that is contributed by border people.

(Figure 1)

¹Some of the basic concepts for the following come from work done by Brent D. Ruben (1976).

DIMENSIONS FOR BRIDGING

	Comfortable with ambiguity
I. A BORDER PERSPECTIVE	Accepts multiple world views
	Searches for synthesis
	Shows respect
II. INTERGROUP BEHAVIOR	Expresses empathy
	Builds networks
	Checks out meaning
III. COMMUNICATION BEHAVIOR	Facilitates reciprocal participation
	Describes rather than evaluates

DIMENSION I: A BORDER PERSPECTIVE

Border people have a different orientation to the borders between cultures and the entities on either side than do those who identify with only one culture. Psychologically speaking they choose to **face** the border rather than turn away from it. To them, the border is like a living cell wall; something transparent and porous through which they continuously travel, back and forth. They do this both mentally and physically. "Culture commuters" as Lu Ann Darling (Interview, February 14, 1990) suggests or "citizen diplomats" as the border humorist Gómez Peña (Breslauer 1990) calls them. Border people **want** to straddle the border, they are not immigrants with a one way ticket, nor are they migrants with intention to return to a permanent (mental or physical) residence on one or the other side. They express pleasure at being able to "pass" on both sides -"They have a wish," as Tom Greening, psychologist and editor of the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* told me, "to have it both ways". (Interview, December 4, 1989)

Border people are comfortable with ambiguity

Acceptance of ambiguity speaks to the comfort level with which a person handles new and different situations. Border people react with little frustration or nervousness when confronted with changing, unclear or unknown circumstances. They adapt to different environments fairly quickly and without experiencing noticeable discomfort to themselves or causing tension in others. Doing this helps them to remain viable members of an interchange. They do not set themselves apart or stand out because of their reactions nor do they behave in ways that would cause others to discount them as being unable to empathize. Their ability to do this contributes to a fluidity in the environment which allows changes to come about that more closely fit the people and circumstances involved. If, for example, someone says that one of the delicacies they miss (now that they live in North America) is fried worms, a border person would not do or say anything that would imply a lack of appreciation of that custom. As a result, he would remain in a position to further communication with those present. Border people allow and accept as part of their 'turf' the discomfort that comes with new and different situations. They react to dissonance without noticeable stress. They seem to view this discomfort as a part of their daily existence. Tolerance for ambiguity also describes an inner mental ability which allows divergent thoughts to exist side by side:

In perceiving conflicting information and points of view, she is subjected to a swamping of her psychological borders. She has discovered that she can't hold concepts or ideas in rigid boundaries... Only by remaining flexible is she able to stretch the psyche horizontally and vertically. [She] constantly has to shift out of habitual formations; from convergent thinking, [and] analytical reasoning that tends to use rationality to move toward a single goal (a Western mode), to divergent thinking....., she strengthens her tolerance (and intolerance) for ambiguityshe copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions.... (Anzaldúa 1987:79)

Border people accept multiple world views

Border people consider the potential validity of more than one world view. They are aware that their knowledge, perceptions, feelings and insights may not be shared by others; that their explanation of the world will not always be the same as those of other mature, knowledgeable and insightful people. They tend to personalize the explanation of the world around them rather than to generalize it. As a result they are more likely to preface their remarks with "I feel..." or "I think..." rather than "It's a fact that..." or "It's human nature to..."

It's someone who can think a variety of different thoughts without them necessarily being in conflict. It would be hard for me to be dogmatic about very many things - because I might be wrong....Because I don't know the TRUTH - I'm not sure that anybody does. (Interview with Margaret Pliscou, February 23, 1990.)

Border people search for synthesis

Border people have a basic orientation toward integration, synthesis and synergy. They experience the putting together of disparate groups as an exciting challenge. A Mexican-American writer puts it this way:

It is where the possibility of uniting all that is separate occurs. This assembly is not one where severed or separated pieces merely come together. Nor is it a balancing of opposing powers. In attempting to work out a synthesis....a third element is added which is greater than the sum of its severed parts. ...its energy comes from...breaking down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm....the future depends on the straddling of two or more cultures. (Anzaldúa 1987:79-80)

This activity serves well in bridging efforts; it can set the climate for people of different persuasions to work together.

DIMENSION II: INTERGROUP BEHAVIORS

Intergroup behaviors are more complex than those involved in interpersonal situations where the sought for resonance is with only one person. Bridging diversity involves an understanding of the person in a group context while attending to the person as a unique individual.

Border people demonstrate intergroup respect

In their dealings with others, border people show verbal and non-verbal respect for the experiences, the thoughts, and the feelings they hear. Their words and actions communicate that the other is worthy of esteem and should not be demeaned. Without continuous attention to the giving of respect the negotiation of meaning or the translation of symbols between groups is not possible. According to the linguists Lakoff and Johnson, to ensure interpersonal communication and mutual understanding between those who do not share the same culture, knowledge, values, and assumptions:

...you have to become aware of and respect both the differences in your backgrounds and when these differences are important. You need enough diversity of cultural and personal experience to be aware that divergent world views exist and what they might be like. (Lakoff and Johnson 1980:231)

This last statement points out why monoculturals (people who hold one world view) may have difficulty showing respect when faced with major cultural differences. Most have little experience with world views other than their own. A previously mentioned factor tied to the ability to show respect is the degree of willingness to accept the possible validity of other world views. Unfortunately, we are all too familiar with the stereotype of the "ugly" tourist - of whatever background - that exemplifies this point.

Border people express intergroup empathy

Border people express empathy even when the world view held by the other is unlike their own. The ability to show empathy by expressing awareness of apparent and not so apparent feelings of the other is an important component of the communication skills used by border people. Their verbal and non-verbal responses demonstrate being in a state of resonance with the other's situation. The behavior is the external expression of what the psychologist Alfred Adler described as "seeing with the eyes of another, hearing with the ears of another and feeling with the heart of another". (Ansbacher 1957) However, in a border context an additional dimension is added. Not only does one 'walk in the shoes of another' as an individual but one adds the walking in the shoes of that person as a member of their group. The effect of genuine and sincere empathic behavior is to strengthen and solidify relationships which lays the groundwork for the mutuality needed in cooperative actions between groups.

Border people build networks in the borderlands

Border people build, maintain and use networks. They spend time working the borders between cultures. They will go back and forth just because it gives them pleasure to do the crossing - the commuting. They like people to know that they can operate well in both settings and they develop casual as well as work related relationships. Networking also includes a brokering function that border people perform as they develop and nurture contacts with individuals on both sides of a border. They keep a mental catalogue of similarities, differences, needs, resources. The matching process itself is rewarding and satisfying to them. This particular bridging activity is perfectly suited to the task of building cooperative interaction. This quote from a border person gives a sense of how networking feels to him:

I went to a very important meeting. It turned out that ninety percent of the people there didn't know each other. I was the only one that knew everyone. So I spent the whole night connecting people. 'Did you know that your counterpart is interested in....' So I spent the evening just pairing people up. And when I got in the car to go home... WOW! sure it is not all hunky dory... but at least they can begin to dialog... to me, that is very rewarding. (Interview with Geoff Bogart, Assistant Director of Binational Affairs, City of San Diego, May 17, 1990.)

DIMENSION III: COMMUNICATION BEHAVIORS

Border people place a great deal of emphasis on the process of speaking, listening and giving feedback because of their acute awareness of the almost irreversible effects of mis-communication. When trust between groups is damaged by insensitive communication, purposeful or otherwise, bridging efforts are at best delayed and at worst destroyed.

Border people consistently check out meaning

In terms of language, border people work continually at checking out and clarifying meaning. They know that communication only *begins* with the translation of phrases and words. They translate political, economic and cultural disparities to common symbols understood by both groups (Stoddard 1984:17). They show special sensitivity to the possibilities of taboos different from their own and make special efforts to keep feathers smooth and unruffled, and hackles down. Border people pull individuals together through careful choices of words, images and metaphors in order to build the trust and understanding needed for cooperation.

Border people facilitate reciprocal participation

A heightened awareness of the need for interaction management is important if all are to feel heard and satisfied. Border people value and use that awareness to create speaking space so that each person has an opportunity to express their needs and points of view. They pay attention to subjects initiated by others, their tolerances and orientations. They attempt to take turns in discussions. They show awareness of beginning and ending conversations that is consistent with the needs of others. The result is that people involved in well managed interchanges feel valued, and more willing to act in a cooperative manner.

Border people describe rather than evaluate

Border people offer descriptions rather than dogmatic and rigid evaluations. They express tentative and provisional evaluation only after considering the context. They do not seem to use a rigid scheme of "good" and "bad". The time allowed between another's comment and their own response suggests that what the person said is being considered before a positive or negative reaction is given. The effect is that the other is aware of being listened to and understood within their own context, not pre-judged and rejected out of hand. These actions build further trust and respect for the worth of another, which develops a willingness to cooperate.

To synthesize the above dimensions and activities of border people, it is useful to think of them as jugglers. They keep many things up in the air at the same time. They start with their willingness and ability to tolerate ambiguity which is probably the most important single aspect of borderness. To that they add their ability to accept more than one world view and hold each of them in present time as possibilities to be entertained. Meanwhile, they continue to respect those worldviews while they work at understanding and clarifying them. They search for more than a surface understanding of the others' language. Simultaneously, their own use of language shows recognition of the subtleties they themselves are communicating through speech and body language. They continue to hold judgment in abeyance. All the while they are combing out meaning, spinning it into threads of different symbols that they weave into a tapestry which depicts respect for differences and nuances of uniqueness and creates the space for a coalition to emerge.

The combination and clustering of these 9 border behaviors offers a process for creating and maintaining a culturally diverse workforce that can function interdependently. By keeping a border perspective and doing border behaviors, people in organizations are kept in dialogue long enough so they can learn from each other and work in peaceful, respectful co-existence. Without border behaviors it's easy to settle into armed camps - like those I found among the prison staff mentioned earlier.

Supporting and encouraging borderness

It's true that many organizations intend to train and support a culturally diverse work force. However, most organizations have not yet worked out exactly how to do it. What is missing is the human process and the skills needed to carry out these intentions. Border bridging provides a blueprint for this process. Some strategies for expanding the use of border perspectives and border behaviors to bridge cultures in organizations follow.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Define borders as points of contact

Problems only arise when those on either side of a border are isolated from one another, without the possibility of interaction and mutuality. This unnecessary division in organizations occurs between groups when borders are seen only as lines of separation and not, also, as points of contact where people exchange ideas, cultures, goods and services.

Value borderness

Border people and behaviors have not been valued by organizations in the past in spite of research that pointed to their importance as far back as 1967 (Lawrence and Lorsch 1967:151). Fortunately, that seems to be changing. According to the American Society for Training and Development's 1990 report from *The Conference Board*, one of the abilities of a global leader is "comfort with ambiguity". No longer does this quality and the behaviors associated with it imply passivity, indecision or an unwillingness to act but rather a state of flexibility from which a variety of actions can be taken.

Know your people

Be on the lookout for border people within your staff. They are so good at 'fitting in' that you may not notice them. For example, looking at me, on the outside a total Anglo, would you know - *que tengo alma mexicana*- that on the inside I have a Mexican soul? Help them to clarify their value to the staff and the organization.

Acknowledge borderness

Recognize your own and others' border abilities, cultivate them and put them to use. Make sure to seed groups with people who have border abilities. Include border perspectives when gathering input regarding intergroup activities. Encourage border people to help manage and deal with intergroup tension. Expose staff in interpersonal communication training classes and those in Supervisory and Management Development Programs to the concept and importance of border people and border behaviors.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, and to finish the prison story I started with, many of the reasons that I was successful (and that I survived at all) in that intervention had to do with using border behaviors to develop credibility with the various cultures present. By using a border perspective and border behaviors in small group meetings with the entire staff, each person felt respected and heard without regard to position or point of view. We provided space in the borderlands between factions so that bridging work could begin. Fortunately, my reputation as a facilitator and consultant was validated and not obliterated.

Now that you've been a juggler in the borderlands between the people of Virginia and the Iroquois Nation - I hope you'll continue to work with me to further refine blueprints for bridging. I welcome your questions, input and experience as I continue my research and organizational consulting in this area. If we do our job well in the 90's, we'll have the means to close the gap between organizational goals and current practice regarding the acceptance of diversity. Border behaviors provide us with additional ideas for accomplishing those goals. We can use a border perspective to design interventions and develop training, to define new management and supervisory competencies that will allow all of us to work together productively come the year 2000.

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- Margaret Pliscou, Rosarito, B.C., Mexico, February 23, 1990.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Kathleen Rubin was born in Santa Barbara, CA, USA raised on the US-Mexico border, in Mexico and Northern Michigan. She holds a Master's degree from UCLA and was awarded a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship before following careers in education, social work, corrections and, most recently, in the fields of training and organization development. She is currently involved in doing the research that has led to today's session.