

Practice Insights

Working the Spaces in between: A Case Study of a Boundary-Spanning Model to Help Facilitate Cross-Sectoral Policy Work

Gemma Carey 

University of New South Wales

Kathy Landvogt and Tanya Corrie

Good Shepherd Australian and New Zealand Kathy Landvogt

Since the 1990s, ‘joined-up government,’ ‘whole-of-government,’ and ‘horizontal governance’ approaches have emerged in many industrialized countries, resulting in the devolution of government functions to diverse policy networks. From these shifts, complex systems of networked actors have emerged, involved in designing, implementation, and influencing policy. Arguably, networked approaches to policy may solve some problems. However, as with all paradigm shifts, new problems have emerged. Specifically, skill and knowledge gaps have opened up, reflecting the need for new collaborative and networked relationships that can increase the capabilities and agility to work in these ways. In response to these gaps, we developed the Power to Persuade initiative. Power to Persuade is an annual symposium and online forum, aimed at deepening knowledge and awareness of current problems faced by policy networks, and providing the skills and knowledge to overcome them. In this paper, we discuss how Power to Persuade works within the spaces in between as a vehicle for relationship building and better policy.

Key words: *boundary spanning, cross-sector relationships, practice*

Introduction

Since the 1990s, ‘joined-up government,’ ‘whole-of-government,’ and ‘horizontal governance’ approaches have emerged in many industrialized countries as an attempt to grapple with complex policy issues that involve many actors (O’Flynn 2014; Pollitt 2003; Rhodes 1997, 2007). This has resulted in the devolution of government functions and the development of diverse and extensive policy networks. This includes non-government organizations, the private sector and hybrid entities,

sometimes in very large numbers such as under the Australian National Disability Scheme which has the potential for tens of thousands of providers (Needham and Dickinson 2017; Rhodes 1997, 2007). These providers can all become policy contributors not only through delivering services (policy implementation) but also through exercising a powerful collective voice, although this not always a role they embrace.

Broadly, the more horizontal governance approach reflects the belief that the hierarchical government bureaucracy of the 20th century is no longer an appropriate vehicle for the delivery and development of public and social policy, or securing good outcomes for citizens

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(6, 1997; Bavkis and Juillet 2004; Keast et al. 2007; Klijn and Koppenjan 2000). At the same time, some aspects of policy remain hierarchical (Cairney 2011). For government, the appeal of ‘networked policy’ may be sharing the risk and heightening stakeholder engagement, but arguably these goals can exist in tension with a desire to control policy outcomes. For example, Centrelink’s use of technology in the recent ‘robodebt’ scandal shows government policy actors exercising new administrative powers (with the help of technology) to implement a harsh and controversial ‘debt-recovery’ policy, despite mounting evidence from multiple other policy actors located in diverse sectors (academic, community sector, and legal) of its poor design and implementation (Australia Parliament Senate Committee 2017). In other instances, program ideas are indeed picked up from community initiatives and trials, but once politics have entered the policy process, ongoing dialogue and engagement of the community sector about the program’s effectiveness is often sidelined (Williams 2016). Hence, the control over policy design, and even over some grass-roots policy implementation, is contested. Arguably genuine ‘horizontal governance’ would more consistently invest in knowledge-building across sectors in the interests of the best policy outcomes.

To the degree that devolution has occurred it has been part of cost shifting measures, alongside more genuine beliefs (on both sides of politics) that those closest to communities are best positioned to provide effective and efficient public services (6, 2004; de Bruijn and Heuvelhof 1997; Klijn and Koppenjan 2000; Pollitt 2003). Governments now use a range of ‘outsourcing’ techniques, from formal market arrangements such as contracts, and later under new public governance commissioning and stewarding efforts (Carey et al. 2017; Dickinson 2016). It has been argued that we are moving toward a new era of unprecedented collaboration and partnership between sectors, where “More connectedness and co-operation is needed than ever before: across agencies, across governments, and with more constituencies” (Cortada et al. 2008, p. 1). Similarly, Williams stresses that “Strategic

alliances, joint working arrangements, networks, partnerships, and many other forms of collaboration across sectoral and organizational boundaries currently proliferates across the policy landscape” (Williams 2002, p. 103). Yet, what has been created by these shifts, irrespective of the mechanisms or tools being used by government (e.g. markets, contracting, or stewarding), is a complex system of loosely networked actors, designing, implementation, and influencing policy (Klijn and Koppenjan 2000). This presents interesting questions about how we can facilitate effective working across these networks and the different actors they bring together (O’Flynn 2014).

In this paper, we argue as a result of these changes we need to invest more in explicit boundary-spanning initiatives. These have the potential to address emerging skill and knowledge gaps created by various efforts to devolve government functions (Tushman and Scanlan 1981; Williams 2002). As Crosby et al. (2010, p. 205) suggest, boundary spanners help us to connect “people, ideas, and other kinds of actors into a way forward.” Although boundary spanning as a concept can focus on the activities of individuals (Williams 2002), it can also take collective forms (Hsiao et al. 2012; Medvetz 2012). In this paper, we describe a unique boundary spanning initiative operating in the Australian context since 2012. We reflect upon key learning, challenges, and future opportunities that have emerged working in the ‘spaces in between.’

Emerging Skill and Knowledge Gaps: The Consequences of Networked Governance

There has been much discussion of the ‘professionalization’ of policy actors, particularly not-for-profit and third sector organizations (Carey et al. 2009; Fyfe 2005). The type of skill and knowledge developments which have accompanied this professionalization have related to the interface between citizens and services, including training in community development and in reporting and accountability requirements. In this sense, efforts to enhance the relationships between government and policy

networks have largely been attached to political agendas and program delivery imperatives. As a whole, governments have not invested in the skills and knowledge required to work in complex networks. This has included a lack of investment in the capacity of policy actors to understand the whole system in which they are embedded and how it functions (not just how individual services, organizations, or parts of government function) (Carey et al. 2015a; Carey et al. 2015; Pollitt 2013).

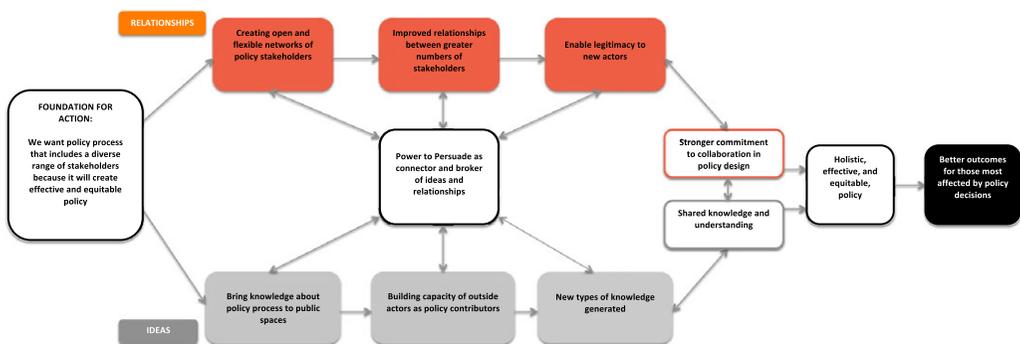
The Power To Persuade

Power to Persuade was founded in 2012 to help build relationships and capacity for effective cross-sectoral working across government, the community sector, and academia (Carey et al. 2015b; Carey and Landvagt 2015; Landvagt and Carey 2015). More recently, policy actors in the for-profit sector have also been included. The key objectives of Power to Persuade are to contribute to the creation of open and informal policy networks through addressing skill and knowledge gaps, and to connect new and existing actors to knowledge and resources needed to improve policy development, implementation, and delivery. The initiative does this by providing new spaces (both virtual and face-to-face) for individuals to come together and ‘meet differently.’ That is, to meet and discuss how policy (whether development or implementation) is changing, how the actors involved are changing or repositioning in response to this

and how we can forge better working relationships. A key part of this has been encouraging an emphasis on the ‘the whole’ system, rather than specific service sectors, policy imperatives, or organizations (Carey and Landvagt 2015; Landvagt and Carey 2015). Figure 1 illustrates the Power to Persuade program logic.

Power to Persuade was originally funded by University of Melbourne and Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand (Good Shepherd). Steady growth has seen Power to Persuade attract a number of high profile sponsors from private, not-for-profit, and government sectors as well as universities. As of 2015, Power to Persuade has become a 2-day event incorporating the annual Power to Persuade Symposium and Women’s Policy Forum, accompanied by an active online policy forum (operating through blogs and twitter). Each symposium is curated around an issue of concern and/or discussion, which is identified by the intersectoral reference group in collaboration with the directors. The themes invariably interrogate changes in the way policy is being ‘done’ and the adoption of new approaches to governance. For example, past themes have involved the meaning of ‘evidence-based policy,’ opening up the ‘black box’ of government policy design decisions, the advance of for-profit providers into new service areas and deepening our knowledge of the ‘performance’ of collaboration. The Women’s Policy Action Tank (incorporating a blog stream and the forum) was also developed through this process, in recognition of the particular policy biases and silences impacting on women, and

Figure 1. Program Logic (Carey and Landvagt, 2015) [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]



the need for a networked, collaborative space to address these.

By exploring these topics from a range of vantage points we aim to not just build knowledge of the ‘whole’ (i.e. how the policy landscape is changing, including approaches, actors, and priorities) but also incorporate specific skill building and networking opportunities. For example, in 2017 part of the symposium focused explicitly on the role of middle managers – an often overlooked section of the public service – and how they can act as interlocutors between evidence and politics. For those outside of government, we aim to broaden an understanding of how middle manager roles are changing and the ways in which non-government actors can effectively engage.

Framework

Consistent with the increasingly networked nature of public policy (Klijn and Koppenjan 2000; Rhodes 2007), Power to Persuade draws on concepts from social network theory (Considine et al. 2009). In particular, two aspects of network structure inform the Power to Persuade project logic: notions of centrality and the power of ‘weak ties.’

Centrality, or more specifically ‘global’ or ‘closeness’ centrality, refers to the ability of network members to access other members of the network going through the fewest possible links (Keast 2014). A point is central if it has the highest number of connections to others in the network, denoting a position of strategic significance (Lewis 2005; Scott 2000). It is important to note that this is not the same as ‘network density’ (everyone connected to everyone else), rather describes the most strategic points of connection the network (Scott 2000). A further social network theory concept, ‘betweenness’, captures the extent to which a network member is the key bridge between two otherwise unconnected clusters. Network centrality and betweenness build policy influence by enabling network members to create and exchange resources efficiently by joining up otherwise disconnected points in the system. Power to Persuade connects participants to highly connected individuals (invited

speakers, other participants, and bloggers), who can illuminate unfamiliar policy languages, modes of work, drivers for change, and needs for collaboration. These insights increase the capability to operate with agility and sophistication in constantly changing policy environments.

Second, ‘the strength of weak ties’ has critically informed the Power to Persuade model (Granovetter 1983). Weak ties enable access to new sources of information and diverse perspectives by bridging across networks (Durlauf 2002; Putnam 1995). Although strong bonds with like-minds are important, these familiar networks are not enough in situations of change when new information is needed and indeed can be an inhibitor of innovation, so the ideal network has a number of loosely connected clusters (Durlauf 2002). When curating the Power to Persuade symposium and blogs, we seek contributions from different points in the policy process and different perspectives on the policy landscape. The space between their ideas is left for participants to fill and connect. Having a large number of indirect links into other sectors (academic, government, and business), other service domains (health, planning), or other roles (executives, policy advocates, service managers) helps access resources, build coalitions of support and find important new ideas (Himmelman 2001).

Although conditions of uncertainty and insecurity draw people back to their stronger familiar networks, that is precisely the time that contact with the ‘weak ties’ in one’s network is needed. It is the role of ‘public learning’ to create spaces where this can occur.

“Public learning occurs when people learn together and when changes of perception, understanding and action are observed by others. . . [this way] public actions have a widespread and collective affect” (Atwood et al. 2003)

The aim of Power to Persuade is to bring people with different knowledge and common values together in a non-competitive (and non policy-specific) environment, for public learning. Recognized leaders share their knowledge from experience, and people come together to create learning and understanding in collective

‘sense-making.’ Power to Persuade is, of course, not the only place where this is happening. We are increasingly seeing on-line spaces emerge in particular. This is part of an important movement toward enabling a more collective and participatory ethos so that academic knowledge can be both challenged and complemented by practitioners’ experiences, and policy practice can be transformed through learning about new research and theory (Newman 2012).

To be effective, one needs to ensure a diversity of voices and meet differently (i.e. putting them into spaces which disrupt the status quo and allow for robust debate and discussion). As described by one researcher seeking to deliver both practical policy recommendations and scholarship, such public conversations bring together diverse people to “find the questions that weren’t being asked and what might be the consequences of not asking those questions” (Newman 2012, p. 119).

Insights for Boundary Spanners

Increasingly, public administration research is emphasizing the importance of ‘soft skills’ for public service leaders, because they are important for working in a networked environment (Dickinson and Sullivan 2014). Given those outside of government who are engaged in policy processes need to also negotiate this environment, soft skills are equally important. These skills include:

- problem-solving skills,
- coordination skills (getting people to the table),
- brokering skills (seeing what needs to happen),
- flexibility, deep knowledge of the system and,
- a willingness to undertake the emotional labor associated with relational working.

In many ways, the Power to Persuade team and reference group is a microcosm of the very issues it is working to address; it brings together actors from different parts of the system, requiring them to find common ground in the

creation of the symposium and online forum. For the reference group in particular, this means we do not have a common language, framework, or practice and are constantly learning from one another. To facilitate this, we have adapted a parallel process in the sense that the way we approach the bigger problem Power to Persuade works to address, is the same as how we approach working with each other. In addition to developing the soft skills noted above, there are five principles that underpin the way we work (adapted from Atwood et al. 2003):

- (1) Begin by listening – Different sectors speak different languages, work in different ways, and experience different challenges. We have found it important to take the time to listen and understand these experiences in an open and reflective manner. As well as Power to Persuade being based on a cross-sector partnership between the community (Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand) and academic (UNSW Canberra) sectors, we have attempted to ensure further diversity in the voices represented in the reference groups, symposium programs, and blog authors.
- (2) Ask questions – Listening is a good first step, but questions are better. Questions help to gain deeper insights and understand the needs of others, e.g. How do you see your professional practice? What challenges do you experience that I may be able to help with? What can I learn from you? These types of questions lead to more innovative thinking.
- (3) Approach with humility – Each of us can only speak from our own experiences, which may differ significantly to those in other sectors. In fact, the community, academic, and government sectors are made up of vastly different professional practices, constraints, and expectations. Remember, you do not know everything.
- (4) Valuing difference and diversity – Diversity has been a key ingredient for both a successful program on the day, but also in the behind the scenes work to curate the event. As Atwood suggests, the greater

the diversity of views gathered, the more likely it is that creative ways forward will be found. In addition to openly expressing opinions and experiences, this requires us to critically examine the differences between our perspectives. Through this process, perspectives can be radically transformed. Part of valuing difference and diversity is ‘parking’ flashpoints – knowing which issues agreement cannot be reached on, and placing them to one side.

- (5) Follow through – Whether on an individual, organizational, or sector-wide level, change is almost always incremental. This means ‘sticking with it,’ working through temporary impasses and accepting setbacks as par for the course.

Challenges for Boundary Spanning Initiatives

Although Power to Persuade has been broadly successful in its ambitions – growing its audience, forms of engagement, and profile over time – the experiences of designing and directing Power to Persuade raise questions for boundary spanning initiatives in general. In this final section of the paper we focus on three of these. First, should boundary spanners have an institutional base? Second, how does one demonstrate success? And third, how the processes we use can be genuinely and broadly participatory?

Although Power to Persuade has some sponsors who have remained constant, others come and go. As a whole, Power to Persuade lacks an institutional or organizational home. Since its inception Power to Persuade has often operated as a ‘skunkworks,’ sitting outside formal institutional and organizational structures, and often shifting institutions with the directors. This means it takes considerable energy to source and maintain funding and resources, and it can be difficult to maintain continuity in our team (outside the two directors). However, one could argue that the very nature of boundary-spanning initiatives requires this degree of flexibility. Being ‘owned’ or ‘institu-

tionalized’ might leave such initiatives open to being captured or used to meet the aims of a specific institution – pulling it away from its goals. Here, ensuring our boundary spanning initiatives exists across entities (i.e. not within a single organization) has been key. Moreover, we have found that having a diversity of sponsors and voices involved in the reference group has been important. Demonstrating the commitment of different actors (non-government, government, and private) validates Power to Persuade while also ensuring that no one voice dominates. At times certain topics have challenged our sponsors (e.g. if they do not align with an organization’s stance). To tackle this challenge, we aim to incorporate a range of view points on any one issue being discussed at the symposium (and where we can, the online forum). This helps to both unpack the complexity of an issue, while also assure sponsors that their position will be represented (though challenged and hopefully enhanced).

The commitment of the hosting community organization, Good Shepherd, rides on its self-identity as a facilitator of boundary-spanning activities that support the common good. Good Shepherd seeks to challenge the structures and systems that prevent everyone participating in the fullness of life. The contemporary interpretation of this legacy mission, expressed through its leadership, culture, and strategy, aligns with the goals of Power to Persuade to create networks and knowledge that improve policy development. In the current environment where there are new and significant challenges to the traditional role of community organizations, this alignment requires agility on the part of both partners. The most recent evolution has seen the 2-day event split into two separate events, the symposium led by the academic partner UNSW Canberra, and the women’s policy forum led by Good Shepherd. This is more practical logistically while enabling the project as a whole to remain collaboration.

The second on-going challenge we experience as a boundary-spanner initiative is demonstrating impact. Policy impact is often treated in reductionist terms; however, the impact Power to Persuade has is more diffuse – connecting, reframing conversations, bridging gaps. This

makes it difficult to capture. Increasingly, as the initiative grows sponsors ask for evidence of impact. This is particular difficult given that most philanthropic-type funding arrangements tend toward programs aimed at vulnerable community groups – where outcomes are more tangible and immediately demonstrable (or able to be documented). We have made attempts to track the impact of Power to Persuade through evaluation surveys. However, these have largely been unsuccessful because the impacts of boundary spanning initiatives are often diffusing (e.g. a new collaboration, a change of board composition). Although we are often told about these anecdotally, they have proved difficult to capture through surveys and evaluation efforts.

Arguably, new ways of working demand new ways of measuring. Increasingly, we are using ‘alt-metrics’ to demonstrate our impact. This includes on-going and increasing registrations at symposiums, which indicates that we are continuing to meet a demand that exists across sectors. For our online forum we track unique visitors to our website and growth in twitter followers, the number of submissions we receive that the diversity of individuals and organizations contributing to our blog. The challenge here is to convince others that these are valid metrics for measuring the success of boundary-spanning initiatives.

Another goal we have persistently re-visited with mixed success is engaging a wider range of symposium participants and in a more interactive manner. To be true to the Power to Persuade program logic, we need to include diverse stakeholders in more open and mutual knowledge-sharing relationships. Although engaging multiple sectors (academic, government, community, health, and environment) is the main focus, embracing co-design by involving those most impacted by policies has also become a goal. Drawing lived experience expertise into the discussion requires deliberate strategies, skills, and additional resources. We have therefore increased our efforts to engage and support panelists with lived experience.

We have also attempted to recognize the expertise in the audience. Although the speaker contributions are highly valued by participants, traditional didactic presentations do not pro-

mote the maximum networking and mutual learning opportunities. For this reason, we have often included a workshop element that attempts to capture the wisdom in the room. The most successful of these involved a specialist facilitator but this requires additional resources that need to be planned for (other speakers are engaged free other than covering travel costs).

Opportunities for Boundary-Spanning Initiatives

One of the key insights to emerge from Power to Persuade for other boundary spanning initiatives is to make sure the ‘spaces’ that are created are indeed accessible to those from different contexts. Creating a boundary object requires deliberate practice; without this symposiums, blogs, and other activities can easily devolve into less diverse spaces (e.g. where one sector or group of actors come to dominate). In addition to ensuring a diversity of voices in the planning process through to the end product, this also means considering issues such as price point. Power to Persuade uses sponsorships to subsidize the cost of registration at the event. This keeps it accessible to non-government organizations, in particular.

One of the deliberate practices has been to maintain a gender lens in curating the symposium speakers. In 6 years since the project commenced the terrain has changed considerably so that now an all-male panel will be instantly noticed and criticized. When Power to Persuade commenced it was a conscious struggle to ensure at least one woman was on every panel. The names that first come to mind are inevitably those we have heard, speak, or are already public figures, so it is all too easy to reproduce this gendered privilege in the program. We dug deeper and with every year it became easier.

Engaging non-academics as keynote speakers can be challenging and yet always having academics set the scene reflects a hierarchy rather than a democracy of knowledge. Academics are ready speakers, being paid to develop and make public their knowledge. Although non-academics will willingly join

Power to Persuade panel discussions to share their specific expertise, it is harder to secure them for a general keynote (unless they are paid professional speakers, which are not within the budget). In the second women's policy forum, we invented the 'keynote conversation' to remove the need for onerous preparation of a paper and share the load between several 'keynote conversationalists' who held positions as Commissioners and community organization CEO's. Perhaps there is a gendered element to this also: the collaborative and dynamic nature of the 'conversation' seems to suit women thought-leaders.

The inclusion of government as an active sector in the Power to Persuade collaboration has taken several forms and also requires some agility. Government departments have provided some sponsorship and reference group involvement, and speakers from government have appeared on the programs. The opportunities for genuine participation can be quite limited due to the increasingly risk averse nature of the public service. We find greater engagement at the Commonwealth than State level is easier to secure, though this may merely reflect the size of government(s) being engaged. Power to Persuade has always tended to have lower attendance by public servants, which may relate to professional development funding, workload issues, or the types of networking activities that are valued by the Australian public service.

We have found that having a clear vision and mandate is crucial. Decisions, such as pricing, composition of reference groups, and sponsors all flow from Power to Persuade's guiding principles. This means that each decision is inclusive of different groups and voices, and that Power to Persuade continues to exist as an accessible space 'in between.'

Conclusions

The expansion of policy networks has opened up new avenues for addressing wicked policy problems – bringing diverse forms of knowledge and experience to table. However, with the growth of networks skill and knowledge gaps have emerged because working in a networked

environment requires a different skill set. In this paper, we have set out to explain how Power to Persuade is working in the Australian context to bridge skill and knowledge gaps. We anticipate that by sharing our learning, we will assist those in other contexts working in similar spaces.

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