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Dealing with tensions: the expertise of boundary spanners in facilitating community initiatives

Ward Rauws and Martine de Jong

Introduction

In this chapter, we investigate the tension between bureaucratic expertise and situated knowledge in the context of social innovation. We address the frictions that emerge internally in public organisations when they attempt to respond to local demands of social innovation, citizen's engagement and democratic participation. Our contribution to a critique of contemporary technocratic urban management and planning lies in identifying the key axes of internal conflict between public professional expertise and the situated knowledge in urban neighbourhoods. We particularly look at the actions of 'boundary spanners', and their narratives, to examine the role of a new professional profile within public organisations. Boundary spanners work across organisational boundaries developing a specific expertise which is instituted to connect the internal working of bureaucracies with the external demands and needs of actors in particular urban areas.

Throughout Europe, organisations with a public task aim to facilitate community initiatives, as these are believed to strengthen citizens' capabilities and community cohesion, as well as contributing to more tailored responses to the local context and needs (Boonstra and Boelens, 2011; De Wilde et al, 2014; Edelenbos and Van Meerkerk, 2016). Community initiatives are collaborative activities by citizens through which they provide community goods or services based on their own motives and under their own conditions (Bakker et al, 2012; Denters, 2016). Examples include citizens starting community gardens, setting up local sustainable energy companies or organizing community activities to increase interaction between neighbours. Facilitating such initiatives will entail public professionals serving the ambitions of citizens and generating conditions which support community initiatives in realising and managing their initiative, such as providing means, networks and intellectual support (Oude Vrielink and Van de Wijdeven, 2011). However, a facilitating role comes with complicating tensions as the informal and action- oriented logic of community initiatives (CIs) are often at odds with the formal and procedurally- oriented logic of organisations with a public task (POs) (Van Dam et al, 2014). For instance, there is a tension between acting fast to retain the enthusiasm of initiators and simultaneously carefully aligning the initiative with the policies and interests of the PO, to support the initiative more sustainably. In this chapter we analyse such tensions and explore how boundary spanners, who provide POs with specific expertise in facilitating CIs, can make tensions productive.

Boundary spanners, for instance in the role of community workers, stakeholder managers or policymakers, are specialised in negotiating the interactions between their own organisation and other actors, organisations and coalitions, in order to establish a better 'fi t' (Van Meerkerk, 2014). They play a key role in facilitating CIs as they have the skills and competences to identify and exploit opportunities for building relationships across borders and have the capacity to empathise with the

perspectives, values and interests of the 'other side' (Akkerman and Bakker, 2011; Metze, 2010; Schruijer and Vansina, 2008). As such, they link agendas, attune investments and efforts, and highlight potential synergies between the needs and drivers of CIs and the policies and politics of POs. However, while the contribution of boundary spanners in connecting and aligning CIs and POs is acknowledged (Van Meerkerk, 2014 ; Specht, 2012), limited attention has been paid to understanding how the conditions and day- to- day tensions under which boundary spanners operate affect their boundary spanning activities (Van Meerkerk and Edelenbos, 2018).

In this chapter we therefore aim to analyse how boundary spanners can deal with tensions in facilitating CIs. Our argument is twofold. We show that four types of tensions can be identified. Such categorization can assist boundary spanners in making tensions recognisable, discussable and workable. Next, we cast POs as complex adaptive systems demonstrating that tensions are organisationally embedded, meaning that they are connected to various levels and units of the boundary spanner's own organisation. This implies that dealing with tensions is not only an individual responsibility, but also a collective one. In analysing the tensions which come with facilitating CIs, we draw on the ' *Buurtmakers* ' research and training project. This project was commissioned by a housing corporation in the northern Netherlands and was conducted between September 2016 and May 2017. Housing corporations in the Netherlands are hybrid organisations (Blessing, 2012): they are private entities with an explicit public task which is defined and constrained in a legislative framework established by the national government. Housing corporations therefore pre-eminently experience the tensions between public interests, business needs and civic wishes. The authors mapped 82 community initiatives and their characteristics at community level (Rauws et al, 2017). Furthermore, our data is collected from and with a team of seven boundary spanners from different (strategic and operational) parts of the organisation and one tenant. We mapped the tensions they faced in facilitating CIs during training sessions, corporate meetings, field trips, and during the interviews which the boundary spanners conducted with their colleagues.

In this chapter, we first deepen our understanding of the tensions boundary spanners face when facilitating CIs and how they are embedded in a multi- layered organisational landscape. Then we analyse the tense situations that became apparent in *Buurtmakers* and discuss the strategies boundary spanners can use in making tensions productive.

Tensions in the facilitation of community initiatives

To facilitate CIs, public organisations need a broader repertoire of actions. Community initiatives are by definition led to a large degree by the initiators themselves and as such dependent on the motivations, ambitions and ways of working of these initiators (Lowndes et al, 2006). Hence, the relationship between POs and citizens inverts in the context of community initiatives; initiators decide how and on what topic they want to become active in the public domain, while this is traditionally shaped by POs (Van de Wijdeven, 2012). As the traditional, directing role would return the ownership and leadership at the PO level, a facilitating role is recommended as more effective if these organisations want to preserve the energy, activity and responsibility at the initiator level. A facilitating role is not meant to replace, but rather to supplement a directing role (De Jong, 2016 ; Van der Steen et al, 2015). It is described as an indirect management method focused on empowerment, capacity building and creating conditions for effective collaboration and communication (Ansell and Gash, 2008 ; Schwarz, 2002).

In the context of facilitating community initiatives, Bakker et al (2012) define two main aspects of facilitation: network structuring and process management. Facilitation by network structuring includes rule setting to structure the action arena for initiatives, for instance through the appointment of specialised coordinators, the implementation of subsidy schemes, best idea

competitions or explanation of approval procedures for initiatives. Facilitation by process management refers to actions which help initiators to reach their goals. Examples include demonstrating engagement by listening to and thinking along with initiators, connecting them with other relevant actors and helping them in navigating the often bureaucratic governance structure of POs. These facilitation activities require the specific expertise of boundary spanners and their role is crucial to combine the various organisational logics of CIs and POs (Van Meerkerk, 2014; Morgan-Trimmer, 2014). The expertise of boundary spanners is therefore not to provide relevant domain-specific knowledge, but to bring together the 'expertise' of the many actors involved. They focus on the transfer of skills, knowledge and rationalities, and the creation of new successful patterns of collaboration (Richardson and Tait, 2010).

The world of CIs is driven by the interests and demands of particular groups of citizens who typically have a more creative, informal and action-oriented way of working (Innes and Rongerude, 2013; Sampson et al, 2005). We refer to this as the 'logic of improvisation'. In contrast, POs are expected to serve the public interest, resulting in a strong emphasis on the legitimacy, accountability and transparency of their actions (Van der Steen et al, 2014; Scholtes, 2012). As such, POs are typically characterised by formalised working methods, here described as the 'logic of institutionalisation'. Boundary spanners thus have the difficult task of balancing institutional and improvisational logics, managing the inter- and intra-organizational tensions which emerge from these paradoxical practices (Van der Steen et al, 2015).

We will concentrate here on the tensions which boundary spanners experience within their own organisations when facilitating CIs. CIs are grounded in everyday life situations that transgress the often sectoral structure of POs. Therefore, facilitating CIs usually involves several PO departments. The differences in how different departments think and work and their orientations towards CIs can cause tensions. These tensions emerge due to the stress, anxiety and discomfort felt in the clash of ideas, principles and actions (Putnam et al, 2016; Fairhurst et al, 2002). For instance, in a housing corporation context, tenants can be encouraged to take ownership of their living environment through facilitated self-directed alterations to their homes and public spaces. At the same time, the corporation simultaneously aims for efficiency, with large-scale maintenance schemes and guarantees for professional quality and safety. We argue that dealing with such intra-organisational tensions productively is a key condition for boundary spanners to strengthen both the community initiatives and their own organisation.

Based on paradox theory, Smith and Lewis (2011) and Smith et al (2013) distinguish four types of tensions. We argue that this categorisation offers a useful framework for analysing the intraorganizational tensions that boundary spanners face in POs which aim to support CIs. The first are *performing tensions*. These emerge when organisations aim for varied and conflicting goals. This type of tensions affect boundary spanners, particularly because they also pursue goals established by citizens outside POs. *Organising tensions*, as the second category, arise from the commitment of actors to conflicting organisational structures, cultures and processes. These tensions are felt by boundary spanners because they seek to address the organisational capacity of (different departments of) their own organisation as well as of various community initiatives. Third, *belonging tensions* are connected to articulations of identity and core values. This is relevant for boundary spanners because facilitating CIs opens up alternative identities and sets of values which affect who feels ownership for what. Finally, *learning tensions* arise from contradictory strategies for developing and implementing new ideas and innovations. This type of tensions matters to boundary spanners as, on the one hand, experiential knowledge is key to dealing with the idiosyncratic nature of CIs. On the other hand, they have to make use of codified knowledge to persuade their colleagues and implement new ways of working across the organisation.

Distinguishing various types of tensions can be regarded as the first step in understanding the complicated work of boundary spanners. The second step requires attention to be paid to the structural nature and organisational embeddedness of tensions. Viewing POs as complex adaptive systems allows us to formulate four basic assumptions to deal with tensions. First, tensions are structural. Organisations are always in a process of becoming as a result of their open and dynamic nature (Connolly, 2011). A stable equilibrium between improvisation and institutionalisation will therefore never be achieved. Second, dealing with tensions requires incremental strategies, as processes of becoming follow non-linear paths (Dooley, 1997). Third, tensions are essential for an organisation's vitality. While tensions often complicate internal and external collaboration, the coexistence of opposing values contributes to a system's capacity for change (Seo and Creed, 2002; De Roo, 2017). Finally, from a complexity perspective, organisations are embedded in, overlap with and consist of multiple semi-autonomous units which each aim to maximise their fitness while also being interdependent (Dooley, 1997). This implies that tensions surface between multiple layers and units as interactions run in all available directions, vertically and horizontally. A complexity lens thus urges for sensitivity towards the multi-layered nature of tensions and their dynamic interplay.

Tensions and their organisational embeddedness in practice

Based on the conceptual framework presented above, this section discusses the four typical tensions that the boundary spanners of the *Buurtmakers* faced within the housing corporation when facilitating CIs. These tensions were all brought about by the two opposing logics of institutionalisation and improvisation, as summarised in Table 3.1. To understand how these tensions were embedded in the multi-layered structure of the housing corporation, we analyse particular moments at which tensions surfaced. The analyses show how tensions are connected to various organisational levels (for example, employee, department or management) and organizational units (for example, real estate department or purchasing department). We also illustrate some of the strategies which were applied in dealing with these tensions.

Performative tensions: diverging goals

In the *Buurtmakers*' case performing tensions concerned the provision of housing for low income groups, which is the primary task of a housing corporation by law, and improving the quality of life in a community, a goal shared by a network of actors in the neighbourhood. For the boundary spanners, these diverging goals implied that support for their boundary spanning efforts could not be taken for granted and had to be actively sought.

One point at which performing tensions surfaced was during a field trip attended by the boundary spanners and the CEO of the housing corporation. We spent a week together visiting best practices for facilitating CIs and a collective act of reflection was held midway through the programme. During this reflection, the CEO expressed his appreciation of the holistic and participative approach to improving quality of life in the communities visited and the close alignment he felt with the ambitions of his own organisation. However, in response the boundary spanners pointed out that they experienced this differently, as they felt confused and uncertain due to a perceived ambiguity in their organisation's goals. They felt that encouraging citizens' goals for improved liveability in communities was not considered a central goal in many of the daily practices and was often overshadowed by the goal of providing social housing. Some boundary spanners indicated that the aim of improving liveability sometimes seemed little more than fine words as it did not suit their already full agendas. They lacked support from the real estate and purchasing departments in developing shared solutions with active citizens and struggled with different priorities set by different board members and middle managers. Others argued that the liveability goal is insufficiently integrated into budget approval and communication procedures with tenants.

The boundary spanners thus experienced a tension in balancing the housing provision goal, thoroughly grounded in the organisation, and the liveability goal, passionately advocated by the CEO.

The occasion narrated above made the boundary spanners realise that discussing this tension with the CEO already required courage and that dealing with this performing tension demanded an even broader dialogue. Alignment of time allocation, priority setting and procedures required the involvement of the other board members and middle managers. The position and contributions of various departments in facilitating CIs had to be addressed as well. All in all, actions at various organisational layers were required to make the performing tension workable. Examples of strategies which have been attempted include a 'draw your caricature workshop' to feel more at ease with talking about implicit tensions, open sessions with the board to discuss potential conflicting goals, and redesigning employee assessments to include performance on both the housing provision goal and the liveability goal.

Organising tensions: conflicting structures, cultures and processes

In *Buurtmakers* organising tensions comprised the contrast between the informal and personal ways of working and organisational principles of the CIs, and the formal and generic ways of the housing corporation. This means that the boundary spanners often acted as 'translators', helping both colleagues and citizens become aware of and be able to anticipate the attitudes and working ways of the 'other'.

The tensions between formal and informal ways of working became apparent during the redesign of the public space surrounding a social housing estate. Invited by the housing corporation, a group of four active tenants brainstormed and developed a plan for the redesign themselves. To garner the support of their neighbours they conducted a personal visit to all the households and intuitively selected the best of three offers made by landscaping companies. The costs were considered excessive and an amended plan was presented to the community, after negotiations with the help of the housing corporation. However, when the order was transferred to the housing corporation's purchasing department it was refused: selecting a different landscaper than the one contracted was not possible. The boundary spanners had not been informed about this procedure and did not realise that this procedure was difficult to alter. The plan was ultimately realised by the initially contracted landscaper, and the organising capacity of the tenants was left unused. The boundary spanners found themselves caught in the clash between the organisational structures and cultures of their own organisation and those of the citizens' initiative.

To deal with the organising tension, the boundary spanners indicated that they had to address the relationship with the active tenants at the organisational level in general, as well as their own contacts with the tenants at the personal level. This was viewed as necessary to manage expectations and to foster an understanding of each other's ways of working. Similarly, they felt that they needed to involve the purchasing department earlier in their activities to achieve a better mutual understanding and alignment of tasks and responsibilities. Several strategies were followed at *Buurtmakers* to raise awareness of the organising tension. An interactive group game was played with the employees in which they had to vote with their feet to clarify their position on the several opposing ways of working. Internal guidelines were also developed to ensure the early involvement of possible relevant departments when dealing with a civic initiative. Finally, the boundary spanners organised short sessions during lunch breaks to make their colleagues more acquainted with the organisational nature of civic initiatives and the potential implications for the organisation's relatively formal working methods.

Belonging tensions: competing identities and values

In *Buurtmakers* belonging tensions surfaced as a clash of identities. The institutionalised identity of the housing corporation is constructed around social housing production, referring to 'product delivery', 'expert role' and 'tenants as consumers'. Facilitating CIs triggered critical reflection on this identity and the corporations' tendency to think and to decide for tenants on what is best for them. Alternative identities were devised related to 'user value creation', 'supportive role' and the 'tenants as producers' of a pleasant living environment. The boundary spanners had to empathise with both identities and find ways to incorporate them in a workable narrative.

The belonging tensions became apparent during the project's kickoff phase. The manager of the real estate department initially resisted allocating team members to the project, as *Buurtmakers* was not considered the organisation's core business. The department manager and staff mainly identified themselves with their organisation's position as a housing provider and its associated values. After some negotiations, one real estate department staff member sceptically joined *Buurtmakers*. The tensions persisted and angered the manager and staff of the community management department, who promote cooperation with tenants and other citizens in support of liveability as a central value of their organisation. They blamed the real estate experts for being inwardly orientated and fearing the loss of control. The situation exposed differences in the values and beliefs of the employees of both departments and their ideas on the position of tenants in the conduct of the business of the housing corporation.

As the *Buurtmakers* team consisted of a selected group of boundary spanners from various departments, including the two departments mentioned, they faced the challenge of working with belonging tensions at various levels: at a personal level between the various team members, at the level of the two departments, between the managers of these departments and also in the external profiling of the housing corporation. One strategy applied to address these tensions was to conduct interviews with colleagues to help them become more aware of each other's personal views, motivations, experiences and struggles. The scope of the project was also adjusted to include site visits to best practices with an explicit link to real estate. This adjustment facilitated the exploration of the complementarities between housing provision and co-creation with tenants. They also organised an external event with active citizens and professionals from other organisations to explain the role the housing corporation wanted to play in facilitating CIs. Eventually, the initially sceptical boundary spanner from the real estate department became an ambassador of both identities.

Learning tensions: contradicting strategies for integrating innovation

The boundary spanners in *Buurtmakers* experienced a tension between 'learning by knowing' and 'learning by doing'. The former includes evaluating and improving the housing corporation's products and procedures, informed by codified knowledge such as explanatory models, checklists and pattern analyses across cases. The latter concerns personal reflections on skills, attitudes and intuition, based on experiential knowledge in specific situations. The boundary spanners encountered this learning tension in transferring the lessons learnt in facilitating CIs to their colleagues.

An example of such a tense situation was the preparation of the final project presentation. The boundary spanners experienced the value of learning by doing, by visiting and engaging in a series of initiatives while at *Buurtmakers* and in their daily work. The specific characteristics and personal stories behind each of these initiatives triggered them to reflect on their own attitudes, skills and intuitions. However, these results were difficult to define within a frame of direct and SMART outcomes. In organising the final presentation the boundary spanners therefore expressed major diffidences in how to incorporate learning-by-doing activities. For instance, the idea of

organising a real-life simulation for civic initiators and professionals, to offer their colleagues an experience of what it is like to facilitate initiatives, was considered too risky. They also felt insecure about whether the board and the middle management would support launching a series of pilot projects intended to create structural opportunities for learning by doing. The boundary spanners therefore struggled with how to position hard to document experiential knowledge gained through learning by doing, as valid and complementary knowledge alongside codified knowledge.

In making the learning tension workable, the boundary spanners had to address at least three organisational layers. First, the internal tension experienced at a personal level: equally valuing codified knowledge and experiential knowledge as useful outcomes of diverging learning strategies in improving the facilitation of CIs. Then, in the interactions with colleagues, the challenge was to find a productive balance in introducing colleagues to the value of learning by doing, while linking in with the dominant organisational approach of learning by knowing. This balance is important to lower the barriers for colleagues to integrate the lessons collected into the broader organisational practices and make facilitating CIs more successful. The final layer included the interactions between the boundary spanners and the management and concerned the provision of means and explicit support for activities which enable learning by doing, such as pilots, working visits and buddying. Two strategies applied to address the learning tension were informal lobbying for pilot projects and inviting CIs initiators to share their experiences publicly. These strategies aimed to show that actors working according to institutional or to improvisational logics can each learn from the other.

Table 3.1: Tensions boundary spanners in the *Buurtmakers* project faced within their organisation when facilitating CIs (Table layout partly based on Smith et al, 2013)

Type of Tension (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Smith et al., 2013)	Institutionalization logic	Improvisation logic	Tensions boundary spanners faced in facilitating CIs	Connected organizational levels and units in illustrated tensions
Performing tension	Provision of housing for low income groups	Improving quality of life in the community	How can efforts to achieve the housing provision and the liveability goals be balanced and complementary?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - CEO - Board - Middle management - Real estate department - Purchasing department - Community development department
Organizing tension	Formal ways of working based on procedures, contracts and allocated responsibilities	Informal ways of working based on experimentation, personal relations and ownership	How to commit to both ways of working when aligning efforts within and outside the organization?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Active tenants - Community management department - Purchasing department
Belonging tension	Staff and departments which mainly identify with product delivery	Staff and departments which mainly identify with user value creation	How to respect and relate to competing values and identities in the cooperation with colleagues?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Among boundary spanners - Community management department - Real estate department - Middle management
Learning tension	Learning by knowing	Learning by doing	How to ensure that codified knowledge and experiential knowledge reinforce each other in collective learning?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Board - Middle management - boundary spanners - Direct colleagues of boundary spanners

Conclusions on a multi-layered approach to organisational tensions when facilitating CIs

The boundary spanner, a new professional profile that is becoming central in today's Dutch urban management and planning processes deals with the key tensions between bureaucratic public procedures and situated know-hows. The institutional logic of organisations with a public task (POs) and the improvisational situated logic of community initiatives (CIs) challenge each other when facilitating community initiatives. Due to their expertise and unique position as intermediaries, boundary spanners are tasked with a key role in balancing these logics. Our analysis shows that social innovation in urban areas requires the ability by these actors to deal with performing, organising, belonging and learning tensions that. Such tensions not only emerge between the CIs and POs, but also within POs between the different organisational levels and organisational units.

These intra-organisational tensions are both structural and vital aspects of today's public organisations that attempt to 'reach out' to communities beside their bureaucratic and standardised procedures and protocols. At the same time, in the Netherlands these tensions are symptomatic of the stable role of public bureaucracies in planning, that are adapting their organisation to address important priorities of social innovation. The 'both/ and strategies' performed by the boundary spanners, in which contrasting poles are simultaneously accommodated, can be recognised in the *Buurtmakers* project. These strategies were however not self-evident and were specifically encouraged in the context of the research project. Rather than choosing one pole of a tension field ('either/ or strategies') and masking, avoiding or ignoring the state of tension, during the project the boundary spanners applied the following three steps to deal with these tensions: making tensions recognisable, discussable and workable (see De Caluwé, 2015). Tensions were, for instance, made recognisable with help of a 'voting with your feet' game. Discussing tensions was enabled through the lunch sessions with board members and the interviews with colleagues. Strategies for making tensions workable included the early involvement of experts with contrasting approaches and responsibilities in CI facilitation activities. Furthermore, site visits to observe best practices and starting pilot projects were instrumental for identifying complementarities between the different logics to help them coexist.

Smith (2014) argues that individuals have deeply rooted mindsets which limit their ability to work with tensions. As a solution she suggests stimulating diversity in teams and groups. Based on our findings, we believe that this alone is not enough. The *Buurtmakers* case illustrates the multilayered nature of intra-organisational tensions. We argue that public and semi-public organisations need to address internally the need to diversify their layers, professions and tasks in order to respond adaptively to informal and dynamic social innovation. Tensions may become manifest at one level, but as showed in *Buurtmakers* the different levels and units need to deal with these tensions collectively. Our study therefore suggests that, in order to address the emerging role of expert knowledge of boundary spanners, it is crucial to investigate the internal reorganisation of public bureaucracies and the functioning of their organisational layers. This can be a crucial step in building strategies for dealing with the inherent tension between bureaucratic action and social innovation.

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