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## Administrative Profile

# Bill Gibson and the Art of Leading Across Boundaries

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*As director of a regional council for more than 30 years, Bill Gibson is instrumental in facilitating “boundary-crossing” collaborations that increase public value. This Administrative Profile examines three cases of regional, cross-sector collaboration catalyzed by Gibson’s leadership. Characteristics of entrepreneurship, attention to “relationship capital,” and the humility derived from ego strength combine with the context of working for a boundary organization to help explain his success.*

If public administration is about governance, then it is fair to say that the orientation of the field today is toward collaborative governance. Indeed, the term “collaborative governance” is seemingly everywhere (Ansell and Gash 2008). Precise definitions are more difficult to come by, but in all cases, the emphasis is on solving public problems or creating public value through collaboration across traditional boundaries. These boundaries include jurisdiction (e.g., interlocal or

regional collaborations), organization (e.g., public service networks), and sector (e.g., public–private partnerships). Major streams of research in the field, such as intergovernmental management, public management networks, and civic engagement, all fall under a broader model of collaborative governance. Cases are made for collaborative governance on both normative and descriptive fronts (Sirianni 2009). In other words, there are many who argue that collaborative governance is how public administration *should* work, while at the same time, there are many others who are finding that, increasingly, this is how things *do* work.

The big problems that the public sector is concerned with today are almost without exception the kinds of wicked, boundary-crossing problems that require collaborative work (Luke 1998). Put in a more positive light, collaborative governance is about opportunities. There are opportunities (to solve problems or otherwise create public value) that lie in working across boundaries that otherwise are not there within a single agency. This emerging paradigm of collaborative governance presents public administration with many challenges, not the least of which is whether and how communities can better realize opportunities for collaboration. Public organizations are still very much defined by hierarchy and a command and control mind-set. They are

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in many ways ill equipped to realize “collaborative advantage” (Huxham and Vangen 2005). While there are many admirable examples of boundary-crossing work in the public sector, one wonders how many opportunities for significant value creation are never realized because of the inherent difficulties of collaboration (Linden 2002).

It is within this milieu that we examine an administrative

leader whose life's work has been, and continues to be, helping local governments in his region realize collaborative advantage.<sup>1</sup> Bill Gibson has been a champion and facilitator of collaborative governance in western North Carolina for more than three decades. His leadership is collaborative and facilitative. He is a boundary spanner who leads "from the middle" rather than the top (Luke 1998). His work highlights the importance not only of boundary-spanning individuals, but also of boundary organizations, for the advancement of collaborative governance in practice.

Gibson was born and raised in Jackson County, North Carolina, in the far western part of the state, near Great Smoky Mountains National Park. After receiving his master's degree from Western Carolina University (also located in Jackson County) and also serving with the U.S. Army in South Korea, he took a position as a regional planner with the Southwestern Commission in 1973. Two years later, Gibson was appointed executive director of that organization, the position he holds to this day. Spending one's whole career with the same organization and in one's hometown certainly is exceptional. Perhaps this explains some of Gibson's success. Having a strong sense of place can be a strong motivator. It is also important to understand the organization Gibson works for.

The Southwestern Commission is a regional council of governments (often referred to as simply regional councils). It is one of 17 "lead regional organizations" designated in the North Carolina General Statutes. Regional councils are unique public agencies. The National Association of Regional Councils defines a regional council as "a multi-service entity with state and locally-defined boundaries that delivers a variety of federal, state and local programs while continuing its function as a planning organization, technical assistance provider and "visionary" to its member local governments. As such, they are accountable to local units of government and effective partners for state and federal governments" (see <http://narc.org/regional-councils-mpos/what-is-a-regional-council.html>).

There are more than 500 regional councils in the United States. About a third of them also function as the metropolitan planning organization for their region. While some regional councils have evolved from regional organizations that date back to the 1920s, most were created in response to federal legislation in the late 1960s and early 1970s that required regional planning and intergovernmental cooperation in exchange for federal funds (Atkins, DeWitt, and Thangavelu 1999). In the 1980s, federal funding to regional councils declined sharply; nevertheless, regional organizations "have carved out a valuable niche for themselves as reliable agents and many operate more independent of federal funding." Some states have statutorily created a formal role for regional councils. The National Association of Regional Councils reports that approximately 90 percent of all general-purpose local governments in the United States are served by regional councils (see <http://narc.org/regional-councils-mpos/what-is-a-regional-council.html>).

The Southwestern Commission (<http://www.regiona.org>) was created in 1965 by a joint resolution of the seven westernmost counties in North Carolina, along with their constituent towns. The region

is almost wholly rural, with a population of about 175,000 spread across 3,100 square miles. The commission's staff of 16 is small relative to other urban regional councils in the state, but has "built a reputation of versatility and excellence." Three staff members (including Gibson) are trained mediators, and several more have taken courses in group facilitation (Gibson, personal communication with the author, October 2009).

The commission's governing board comprises elected officials from member jurisdictions. While the board has never conducted a formal evaluation of Gibson's performance, an informal evaluation occurs each year during budget time. Most of the organization's funding comes from federal grant programs, with additional operating funds coming from the member jurisdictions and a small annual state appropriation.

Regional councils are prime examples of *boundary organizations*. Carr and Wilkinson describe boundary organizations as forums in which "multiple perspectives participate and multiple knowledge systems converge" (2005, 261). While research on boundary work and boundary organizations has focused primarily on the boundary between science and nonscience, it is being extended as a way to understand a variety of cross-boundary interactions. Cash et al. (2006) explain that whether as formal organizations specifically charged to play an intermediary role, or as organizations that have "broader roles and responsibilities," boundary organizations have several important characteristics and institutional functions that enable boundary work: "(1) accountability to both sides of the boundary; (2) the use of "boundary objects" such as maps, reports, and forecasts that are co-produced by actors on different sides of the boundary; (3) participation across the boundary; (4) convening; (5) translation; (6) coordination and complementary expertise; and (7) mediation."

Bryson, Crosby, and Stone's research on cross-sector collaboration likewise identifies the importance of what they call "brokering organizations" (2006, 46) that act as conveners, as well as "prior relationships or existing networks" as antecedent conditions that increase the likelihood of partnership formation. Boundary organizations "offer sites for collaboration, the formation of new relationships, the infusion of research and scientific information into policy, and the exercise of innovative leadership. They have the potential for creating new ways of knowing the problem that may lead to better solutions than any of the institutions would have reached acting alone" (Schneider 2009, 61).

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As executive director of a regional council, Gibson is in a unique position to be a catalyst for collaboration in his region. Gibson explains that his organization is accountable to the towns and counties in its seven-county region: "We are in effect owned by them, we work for them." Therefore, he and his organization work toward the objectives expressed by those local governments, "but altogether on a regional basis, a multi-county basis." Gibson's position allows him to think about what is good for the region first, whereas local government board members tend to (rightfully) think of their jurisdiction first. There are numerous examples in this region of North Carolina of significant public value

being created as a result of multijurisdictional, and often multisectoral, collaboration. It is no coincidence that Gibson is often a key player in those collaborations. The three cases that follow illustrate the kind of boundary-spanning leadership that Gibson provides.

### **Rural Sewer Service against the Odds**

In urban areas, sanitary sewer service is a taken-for-granted public service. Rural areas are a different story, however. In mountainous rural North Carolina, many small communities are without sewer service, a fact that often presents environmental problems and limits economic development opportunities. One such place was Whittier, an unincorporated community straddling Swain and Macon counties and immediately adjacent to the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (ECBI) Reservation. Many of the homes had been “straight piping” sewage directly into the Tuckasegee River, which runs through the heart of the community. The neighboring campus of the Church of God’s Western North Carolina Assembly was looking to expand but was already past capacity for its septic system. The nearby Smoky Mountain Elementary School likewise was in dire need of sewer service, having surpassed the capacity of its septic system years ago. The ECBI also owned property in the Whittier area, and wanted to develop a portion of it with a golf course and dozens of housing units. But, again, these plans would require sewer service.

While there clearly were many stakeholders in the Whittier community with a strong interest in sewer service—those just mentioned, plus the Economic Development Commission and the regional Tuckasegee Water and Sewer Authority (TWSA)—there was no movement to do anything about it because the costs seemed insurmountable. A sewer utility for a community of only 90 households would still cost several million dollars. Gibson, recognizing the community’s need and the stakeholders’ shared interests, initiated a process to explore options for getting a sewer treatment facility in Whittier. The four initial partners—the Economic Development Commission, the tribe, Jackson County, and the water authority—each agreed to pay one-fourth of the cost of a \$26,000 feasibility study.

The study led to a grant application that was developed by Southwestern Commission staff. A \$3.0 million grant from the North Carolina Rural Economic Development Center (Rural Center) was awarded to the Whittier Sanitary District in 2000, to be leveraged against Jackson County, the tribe, and the TWSA, each contributing \$40,000 toward the project. With the funds secured, the permitting process commenced, but soon the project was facing major roadblocks.

The permitting process ended up taking two years to complete. There were environmental issues concerning threatened species in the river, as well as the discovery of a Native American archeological site on the would-be location of the plant. By the time the permitting process was complete, the total cost of the project had increased by about \$1 million. Three years into the effort, and the project was essentially in a holding pattern. During that time, Gibson scrambled to find additional funds and was able to make up part of the difference with new grants from the Appalachian Regional Commission (\$200,000), the U.S. Department of Agriculture (\$99,000), and the Cherokee Preservation Foundation (\$45,000). That still left

a \$750,000 deficit. At this point, Gibson’s skills as a “multilateral broker” (Mandell 1988) were particularly valuable. The ECBI tribe, Jackson County, and the Church of God each eventually agreed to fund one-third of the deficit (\$250,000 each).

With those commitments in hand, the project finally went out to bid five years after the initial grant award. The result was another setback—the lowest bid showed a cost overrun of about \$1 million. The future of the project was again in question. The Rural Center gave a deadline to have all funds raised and long-term operating costs secured, or the plug would be pulled from the project altogether. Gibson again returned to the primary stakeholders “with his hand out” in search of funds to fill the funding overrun gap. The Rural Center agreed to an additional \$200,000, for a total commitment of \$3.2 million. Then the county, the tribe, and the church agreed to up their portions another \$250,000 and the county and tribe agreed to underwrite a portion of the expected operating losses for the first three years. With Jackson County, the tribe, and the church now invested at \$1,500,000, or approximately \$500,000 each, and with the county and tribe agreeing to underwrite the expected initial operating losses, the project again was a go.

The long and arduous process is now paying off, with an outcome that will benefit multiple communities economically and environmentally. Gibson’s leadership and brokering role in particular helped the partners not only sustain, but also increase their commitment. Larry Blythe, vice chief of the Tribe, notes that “Bill [Gibson] and his office has been a major pushing player in this thing . . . [not only from] a funding standpoint [obtaining and managing the grants] . . . [but also] facilitating groups” (interview with the author, July 2007). It was a remarkable result to all involved, not only in that the project was a unique public–private partnership, but also in that the water authority ultimately agreed to manage and operate the system. The authority board originally had instructed the authority director to “steer clear” of any commitments to the Whittier sewer project. But the board gave the director the go-ahead to begin negotiations, because “Bill [Gibson] asked instead of maybe someone else” (Joe Cline, interview with the author, July 2007).<sup>2</sup>

### **Preserving an Ecological Treasure**

The story of the preservation of the “Needmore Tract,” 4,500 acres of pristine riverfront land encompassing 26 miles of Little Tennessee River frontage and 37 miles of tributary streams, is a remarkable example of collaboration across many different kinds of boundaries (jurisdiction, sector, and worldview). This tract of land is referred to as the “Noah’s Ark of Blue Ridge Rivers.” It is part of “the most species-rich river system outside of the tropics on earth, [and Needmore] is the most ecologically intact region of the . . . system” (Paul Carlson, interview with the author, July 2007).

The area has been known as Needmore since the first settlements were established in the 1820s. Beginning in the early twentieth century, the Needmore lands were owned by power companies, possibly to be used as the location of another dam in the area. Through all that time, a majority of the land was in use in farm leases. A dam was never built, but the threat was ever present, at least in the minds of those who lived, farmed, hunted, and fished in the area. Duke Power eventually acquired the property, and in 1999, the company announced that it was transferring the Needmore Tract to Crescent

Resources, its property development arm. News of the transaction quickly became a source of public concern among the local people. The transfer to Crescent took the threat of a dam off the table permanently, but replaced that fear with one of development of the Needmore Tract.

While the notion of development was threatening to the traditional users of the Needmore lands—farmers, hunters, and fisherman—it is important to note that most people in Swain and Macon counties historically have been very pro-growth. Nearly half of the land in Macon County is in federal ownership, and 87 percent of Swain County is either federal or tribal lands. So for many, Needmore represented a potential boost in the tax base for the respective counties.

Naturally, the environmental community immediately called for complete preservation of the land. Local residents of Needmore, though not typically aligned politically with environmental interests, found common cause with the environmental community. They soon organized themselves as Mountain Neighbors for Needmore Preservation. Many others voiced similar sentiments, and the stage seemed to be set for a clash between pro- and no-development advocates.

By this time, Gibson was working behind the scenes in a mediator-type role. Crescent Resources, in consultation with the Nature Conservancy, announced that it would embark on a two-year study to gather information about and ideas for the Needmore property. Gibson had many conversations with elected leaders in Macon and Swain counties during that time, which resulted in a critical turning point in the process. Macon County Commission chair Harold Corbin decided that complete conservation of the Needmore was the way to go, contradicting his earlier position supporting development. He presented a pro-conservation resolution for the preservation of the Needmore Tract and was able to convince his fellow board members to go along with it. To the surprise of many, the board put forth a unanimous resolution stating that “the conservation of the Needmore Tract in Macon County represents the best opportunity this county will ever have to protect floodplain, farmland and open space.”

After many more discussions with Gibson, Paul Carlson of the Land Trust for the Little Tennessee, and others, and after public meetings indicating strong community support for preservation, the Swain County commissioners, working collaboratively with Macon County’s board, gave a major boost to the preservation effort by passing a resolution similar to the one that Macon County had passed a year before. It called for 100 percent preservation of the Needmore lands and supported using the property for public purposes in the future consistent with traditional use (farming, fishing, hunting, etc.). At the same time, like Macon County, Swain County appointed Gibson as the county’s representative in the process of seeking a solution consistent with the interests expressed in the resolutions. At that point, Gibson worked in an official capacity, as the counties’ agent, with the relevant stakeholders to develop a workable solution for the Needmore Tract.

Having a broad consensus was a major first step, but there would have to be enough funds to purchase the land from Crescent. Agreements would also need to be reached to place the land in public trust, while still allowing for farming, fishing, hunting, and so on.

At this stage, the process shifted from public consensus building to negotiation. This is where the experience, expertise, and relationships of Gibson (along with other boundary-spanning leaders such as Carlson) were indispensable. Several grant applications were prepared while negotiations with Crescent over the price for the tract ensued. The Nature Conservancy also became an important broker in the process, and in the end, three years after the transfer of the property to Crescent Resources, an agreement was reached for the purchase of the entire tract for \$19 million and for the land to be managed by the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission (WRC).

At that time, the plan was for the state’s Clean Water Management Trust Fund to contribute \$13 million, with the balance coming from other agencies and grant sources. About this same time, the state government was entering into a serious budget crisis, which affected the trust fund’s appropriation, dropping its commitment to less than half. Gibson and his colleagues (including Carlson and Katherine Skinner of the Nature Conservancy), again, through their expertise in negotiations, grant writing, and simply through connections that had been built up over time, were able to cobble together a large portion of the \$19 million from a variety of sources. Still, about \$2 million was left that needed to be raised privately. By December 2003, the funds had been raised, and on January 15, 2004, the purchase was made official and the property was transferred from Crescent Resources to the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission. The commission had agreed to manage it for public use, continuing the farm leases, hunting, fishing, paddling, and other traditional uses. A public event was held to celebrate the transaction. The *Smoky Mountain News* noted that “up to 10 different organizations and individuals played a key role in the effort that led to the Needmore purchase. Many others worked in peripheral roles” (McLeod 2004).

The Needmore story does not end with the purchase in January 2004. Gibson, Carlson, and Mountain Neighbors for Needmore Preservation, now a 501(c)(3) designated nonprofit, are working with the WRC to develop a campground on the site. This will be a unique venture, as the WRC does not operate facilities. A new nonprofit will manage the campground in partnership with the WRC. The planning, negotiations, and collaboration involved in getting the campground completed and operating is another story itself. But the arrangement that has been made only underscores the deeply collaborative effort that went into preserving, and now managing, this tract of land, which is an ecological and cultural treasure. Behind the scenes throughout the process was Bill Gibson. He was not the only leader in the community who helped make this remarkable outcome a reality. Carlson, Skinner, the political leaders in Swain and Macon counties, and the citizen activists with Mountain Neighbors, all deserve ample credit. But in looking at how events unfolded, it is clear that Gibson was indispensable.

### **The Western North Carolina Education Network**

The Western North Carolina Education Network (WNC EdNET) is a partnership made up of the six westernmost counties in North Carolina, the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indians, two community colleges, a four-year college, two regional agencies, and several grant-making organizations, to bring broadband access to the 70 schools in the region. The broadband network, and the interorganizational network supporting its development and use, will “open up



learning opportunities not currently available or imagined” for local students (WNC EdNET 2007). It is a prime example of a broad, regional, multisector collaboration that creates significant public value.

The project was initiated when Gibson learned of an initiative by the Golden LEAF Foundation to support technology in schools; being familiar with other technology-related initiatives in the area, he saw the potential to make something happen. The first partnership formed was between Gibson’s Southwestern Commission and the Western Region Education Service Alliance (WRESA)—another regional organization that serves school districts. In the spring of 2005, Gibson and his counterpart at the WRESA, Roger Metcalf, got together to explore next steps. Gibson and Metcalf had worked together on other efforts before, and both brought significant skills and professional networks to the table.

A key precondition that made the EdNET idea possible was the formation in 2003 of BalsamWest FiberNET, LLC, a public–private partnership formed by Drake Enterprises Ltd. and the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians to develop a fiber-optic backbone connecting the six westernmost counties of the state. Drake and the EBCI initially invested \$14 million in BalsamWest with the idea of leveraging those funds to attract additional private and public investments in the future. But the costs of connecting specific locales to a backbone is often a major barrier, particularly in rural areas (the so-called middle mile problem), and even more so in mountainous regions such as western North Carolina. With Golden LEAF expressing interest in helping enhance technology in rural schools, plus potential for other funding sources, Gibson, working with his colleagues at the WRESA, saw an opportunity and provided the spark to bring the relevant stakeholders together to take the next steps.

The school superintendents, technology coordinators, and representatives from the three area colleges were brought in early on. By October 2005, the first grant had been awarded by the Golden LEAF Foundation—\$2 million to get WNC EdNET started. The majority of the funds went toward fiber-optic infrastructure and equipment to start connecting schools. The initial Golden LEAF grant was then leveraged to obtain several additional grants.

From the early stages of the effort, the group recognized the need not only to procure the infrastructure, but to also form a network that would assist educators in using it. This recognition of the need to develop two types of networks—broadband and interorganizational—is reflected in the stated objectives of the project, which include establishing a partnership “for the purpose of collaboratively enhancing the development and use of technology as a tool for improving learning opportunities” and facilitating “capacity building and use of broadband technology for the enhancement of teaching and learning” (WNC EdNET 2007). In the few years since the initiation of the project, there has been a great deal of progress toward these objectives, attributable in large part to the strength of the collaboration and the level of support from funding agencies.

Gibson and other project leaders continually reached out to relevant business and nonprofit organizations and used them to help develop the technical plans. This enabled the group to not only come up with better plans, it also formed and strengthened important

linkages that are crucial to successfully accomplishing the objectives set forth at the beginning. The collaboration on the EdNET effort has been extensive, both on the “implementation side,” through the various school districts, colleges, regional and state agencies, nonprofits, and for-profit vendors, but also on the “funding source side,” meaning that the many different “funding agencies have worked together in a rational and sequential manner to insure coverage, quality, and consistency in the WNC EdNET resource procurement process” (Byrd 2007, 5). At the end of 2008, approximately \$5.7 million had been secured in grants, with an additional \$1 million-plus from local and corporate sources.

Although the network is quite new when one considers that the initial exploratory meeting was held in August 2005, it represents a dramatic example of the value of boundary-spanning leaders such as Bill Gibson. The potential was there, but in order for the potential to be realized, there needed to be a spark to initiate the process and the expertise (in facilitation, network building, and grant management) to see it through. Because of that leadership, schools across the network are already benefiting from the new technology. What is more, a network is now in place to help build individual and organizational capacity to fully realize the potential across all schools. The network will continue to develop and undoubtedly adapt to changing needs and circumstances. WNC EdNET recently incorporated as a 501(c)(3) organization and is realizing the potential to become a “major collaborative, coordinating body” in the region, again, thanks in large part to the boundary crossing leadership of Bill Gibson (Byrd 2008, 22).

### **Boundary-Spanning Leadership**

These stories are illustrative of the work that Gibson has been doing for the past 30 years in his region. Many more could be recounted, such as the consolidation of five water utilities into the successful regional water authority that exists today in Jackson County, or a more recent extensive regional planning effort called the Mountain Landscapes Initiative. Though the subject matter varies (from fiber-optics in schools to land preservation), there are some common threads in the way Gibson adds value to his region. First, the examples all represent latent opportunities to create significant public value that could not be realized without bringing together a variety of stakeholders to act collaboratively. Second, in each case, Gibson was in a unique position to act as a broker or agent given his position working for all of the governments in the region. Third, trust and relationships are Gibson’s primary currency.

In interviewing Gibson and several of his colleagues associated with the foregoing cases, four important lessons about boundary crossing leadership stand out.<sup>3</sup> The first three have to do with interconnected personal characteristics: being a social entrepreneur, developing and utilizing “relationship capital,” and having ego strength. The fourth lesson has to do with Gibson’s leadership platform. Operating from the vantage point of a boundary organization offers Gibson significant advantages in enabling boundary work in his region.

### **Social Entrepreneurship**

Boundary-spanning leaders such as Bill Gibson are entrepreneurs who create public value. Rather than the business entrepreneur whose success is defined in market terms, social (or civic or

public) entrepreneurs<sup>4</sup> define success in terms of public value created. This is not a new insight, of course, but it is a characteristic that Gibson so clearly exemplifies.

In these three cases, Gibson “[saw] opportunity, and mobilize[d] others in the community to work toward their collective well-being” (Henton, Melville, and Welsh 2004, 209). *Opportunity* is a key thread running throughout all three cases. Gibson saw in the set of conditions in front of him an opportunity to do something different. He saw an opportunity for significant value creation through collaboration. This perhaps lies at the core of what it means to be a catalyst (Luke 1998). In order for collaboration to be possible, someone has to envision the process of coming together to create something new. Thus, the vision of public value is often dependent on individual leaders such as Gibson—the entrepreneurial boundary spanners, unsatisfied with the status quo, who are willing to take risks to realize something better.

Consider Henton, Melville, and Welsh’s description of civic entrepreneurs: “They are risk takers. They are not afraid of failure. They possess courage born of strong convictions. They are passionate and energetic. They are people of vision and persistence” (2004, 209). Gibson explains that this sensibility means “a willingness to operate outside of my comfort zone. . . . The longer that I operated out of my comfort zone the larger that zone became. Success bred comfort and thereby expanded my zone” (personal communication with the author, October 2009).

In addition to seeing opportunity and taking risks, the social entrepreneur must be persistent in facilitating change, which often is a long-term process. EBCI vice chief Larry Blythe, in discussing the back-and-forth negotiations to get the Whittier sewer project accomplished, explained, “I’ll be honest with you, Bill and his office have been a major pushing player in this thing. . . . they kept pushing us to get to the table” (interview with the author, July 2007). Note, however, that the drive is not about getting people to *follow* (per traditional conceptions of leadership). Nor is it a passion for collaboration for collaboration’s sake. Rather, it is a *dogged pursuit of public value*, or the common good, that is the driver. It produces a passion and energy directed toward getting people to the table, and once there, helping them envision the opportunity that is there.

### **Relationship Capital**

Another notable aspect of Gibson’s leadership is his notion of “relationship capital.” It is not enough to have the passion for results and the vision of possibility. Partnerships often involve conflicting interests, perspectives, cultures, and values. A key boundary-spanning role, therefore, is to be able to sustain commitment through inevitable conflicts and setbacks. The key, according to Gibson, is what he calls “relationship capital.”

As Gibson explains it, relationship capital is accumulated over time, and it is absolutely critical during those times when people may need to be pushed or challenged in the process (interview with the author, July 2007). Practitioners usually point to fiscal, physical, and

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human capital as the ingredients of success for programs and projects. Gibson explains that several years ago, he started hearing references to relationship capital,<sup>5</sup> and as he began to understand what the term meant, he realized that it is the fourth “and *most* essential factor in the project development equation . . . it is the lubricant that smoothly meshes the other three gears/ingredients together. It eases friction and facilitates the assemblage of common interests with fewer incidents of friendly fire” (personal communication with the author, October 2009). Relationship capital is now viewed as the Southwestern Commission’s primary “currency” (see <http://www.regiona.org/commission/history.htm>).

It is relationship capital that, according to TWSA director Joe Cline, factored into his board’s decision to reconsider playing a larger role in the Whittier sewer project (given Gibson’s extensive history with TWSA). Leonard Winchester, one of the leaders of the WNC EdNET effort, points out that it was this relationship capital that often provided the glue as the network was forming. Speaking of Gibson, he commented on “how he treats people and how people trust him and how they can count on him . . . the gears really spin on that” (interview with the author, July 2007). Additionally, it was evident that the funding agencies’ representatives developed relationship capital with EdNET partners, which greatly assisted in keeping things moving forward.

Relationship capital factored into the information sharing that occurred throughout the Needmore effort between Gibson and Fred Alexander, a manager at Duke Energy who had been assigned to work with the community on the Needmore situation. Reflecting on the four-year process, Alexander noted that he and Gibson often exchanged information that helped both parties (Crescent Resources and the community) be more effective in the negotiation process and ultimately led to a win-win outcome. He felt that those exchanges were only possible because he “trust[s] Bill Gibson as much as I trust anyone” (interview with the author, July 2007).

Trust is the key to understanding relationship capital. It is about being trustworthy oneself, but equally about “consistently exud[ing] trust in others.” Gibson explains that if one fails to “exhibit trust of others’ motives, actions, and words, one defines them—by inference—as untrustworthy . . . Once distrust is projected, at that point working together in partnership toward common interests becomes . . . immensely more difficult” (personal communication with the author, October 2009). The notion of trust being at the heart of productive relationships is described well in Stephen Covey’s *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (2004).

### **Ego Strength**

The characteristic of being a social entrepreneur, being one who doggedly pursues the public good, according to Luke, “cannot occur without first shifting one’s attention away from a preoccupation with oneself and toward looking outward to relationships and interpersonal networks” (1998, 226–28). This observation is certainly reflected in Gibson’s attention to relationship capital. It also speaks to an attribute that Russ Linden describes as a “strong but measured

ego” (2002, 154). Boundary-spanning leaders “don’t have to grab the headlines for every success. Quite the opposite, they seem to take great satisfaction when they can share credit for accomplishments with many others. Their ambitions are directed more toward organizational success than personal glory” (Linden 2002, 154).

To be sure, Gibson is ambitious and driven. Yet at the same time, there is a certain humility underlying the way he operates. Luke (1998) connects this to what psychologists call “ego strength.” Persons with ego strength “don’t have the internal motivation to be in charge of everything . . . [there is a] willingness to share credit, which is crucial in forging agreements and sustaining action” (Luke 1998, 230–31). It also means, according to Gibson, that “one not take oneself too seriously and that one avoid taking things (negative or positive) too personally” (personal communication with the author, October 2009).

This does not mean Gibson is always in the background, or that he is a shrinking violet in any way. On the contrary, he is an animated promoter of the Southwestern Commission and its work. Gibson likes to get the word out about the Southwestern Commission’s accomplishments. But that is the key: the promotion is about the work and the organization, not about himself.

### **Working for a Boundary Organization**

Besides these personal characteristics, the fact that Gibson leads the Southwestern Commission—a type of boundary organization—as opposed to a county or municipality or even a state or federal agency, is an important factor in the outcomes he has helped achieve for the region. The literature on boundary organizations is primarily in the sciences and natural resources realm. There has been considerable interest in examining organizations that bridge different ways of knowing, such as cooperative extension, which bridges boundaries between farmers and researchers (Carr and Wilkinson 2005).

In public administration, scholars have begun to identify these boundary organizations as “sites for collaboration, the formation of new relationships, the infusion of research and scientific information into policy, and the exercise of innovative leadership” (Schneider 2009, 61). Thus, the purpose of boundary organizations is to facilitate integration across boundaries (boundaries of sector, jurisdiction, and so on)—integration that will lead to “boundary actions” (Feldman et al. 2006, 95). Gibson observes that jurisdictional lines by and large promote inertia. If states were starting from scratch and drawing county lines, for example, it is clear that there would be far fewer counties. Yet in most communities, it is “political heresy” to suggest consolidation, so the alternative is to “do it practically” through multijurisdictional partnerships. Regional councils specialize in this kind of cross-boundary work (Gibson, personal communication with the author, October 2009).

Regional councils of government bridge boundaries of jurisdiction to enable member governments to think and act regionally (Lindstrom

1998). They are intended to function as “a regional forum” (Atkins, DeWitt, and Thangavelu 1999), and they are adept at consensus building and creating partnerships (see <http://narc.org/regional-councils-mpos/what-is-a-regional-council.html>). While not all regional councils (or all boundary organizations, for that matter) are equally successful at facilitating boundary work, the Southwestern Commission, under Bill Gibson’s leadership, has been exceptional.

### **Conclusion**

Bill Gibson is, in some ways, a special case. Not many public leaders have the opportunity to direct an organization that is based in their hometown for their entire careers. Those who do are unlikely to have the opportunity to have as broad and deep an impact as Gibson has had with the Southwestern Commission. Yet there are important takeaways for any public leader in a boundary-spanning role. In summary, successful boundary-spanning leadership includes the following:

- *Being entrepreneurial*: Seeing opportunities to create public value, being willing to go outside one’s comfort zone, and having the persistence required to bring the pieces together to make it happen.
- *Developing relationship capital*: Building trust with partners, both by being trustworthy and by exuding trust in others.
- *Having ego strength*: Being driven by accomplishment of the common good rather than individual credit or accolades.
- *Leveraging boundary organizations*: Understanding the value and purpose of boundary organizations in enabling collaboration across jurisdictional, sectoral, and other boundaries.

These lessons learned raise some questions for the field of public administration. Many observers of the field view collaborative governance as the present and future of the public sector (Ansell and Gash 2008). If this is the case, then we need to consider how

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Many observers . . . view collaborative governance as the present and future of the public sector. . . . If this is the case, then we need to consider how to develop leadership competencies in public managers that will contribute to collaboration and partnerships rather than traditional command and control. Gibson’s example sheds light on some of these competencies. . . .

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to develop leadership competencies in public managers that will contribute to collaboration and partnerships rather than traditional command and control. Gibson’s example sheds light on some of these competencies, and others are recounted elsewhere (Getha-Taylor 2008; Morse 2008). The key question, however, is *how* to develop those competencies in the context of public organizations that are, by and large, dominated by a command and control, bureaucratic paradigm. It is not as if bureaucracy is going away anytime soon, and there are many good reasons to have clear lines of authority. But in a posthierarchical world, public leaders need to be adept at leading *across* hierarchies as well as within them. Most public leaders do not work in boundary organizations, and yet they will be required to act in boundary-spanning ways. A key question for leadership development going forward is how to achieve this both/and, realizing that it is not either/or.

Gibson’s special advantage of leading a regional council of governments raises another question for public administration: are we



investing enough in boundary organizations? Boundary organizations relevant to public administration are everywhere. Regional councils, cooperative extensions, and other regional entities (such as education alliances or many economic development councils) are boundary organizations that are established to facilitate boundary work. Yet in many cases, these organizations struggle to secure adequate funding and, as a result, find it difficult to attract (or keep) talented leaders like Gibson. Do the principals of these organizations (often local government boards) appreciate the value of having a regional forum? What could be done to give boundary organizations greater prominence and support so that more opportunities to great public value could be realized?

Finally, while there are many exemplary cases of boundary-spanning leadership and effective boundary organizations in the public sector, there are many more (which we usually do not read about) that are not successful. Why is this the case, beyond a lack of resources? It may be that in some cases, the principals do not demand that kind of leadership. Often, public boundary organizations are reduced to grant management agencies because this may be all that is expected of them. As public leaders realize the importance of collaboration across boundaries, perhaps they will realize the value of boundary organizations beyond grant management or service delivery. As the case of Bill Gibson demonstrates, these organizations provide a platform for the kind of boundary work that is necessary to address today's public problems and otherwise create significant public value.

## Notes

- Other administrative profiles in *PAR* have spotlighted boundary-spanning, collaborative leaders such as Gibson. Cooper and Bryer's profile of William Robertson (2007) highlights "the necessity of building trust and collaboration" in successfully serving the citizens of Los Angeles. Naff's profile of San Francisco's Nancy Alfaro (2009) likewise demonstrates "collaborative public management" in action as Alfaro worked to build the city's Call 311 network. These profiles highlight the political savvy, commitment to public service, and deep integrity of boundary-spanning leaders in the public sector—all prominent themes in this profile of Bill Gibson. What is unique about this profile, however, is Gibson's institutional home—a regional council—a type of organization that provides a unique platform for facilitating boundary-crossing collaboration.
- It is important to note here that Gibson and his organization "conceived and facilitated the formation of TWSA in the early 1990s." Gibson explains that the work to consolidate four water systems and four sewer systems into a regional authority "may very well have been the most difficult of the ultimately successful collaborative that I have ever taken on." By all accounts, the TWSA has been a success, and therefore Gibson's "significant history with TWSA" was not lost on the board members when the Whittier project materialized (Gibson, personal communication with the author, October 2009).
- For several decades, organization theorists have recognized the role of so-called boundary spanners as "key agents managing within interorganizational theaters" (Williams 2002, 103). Boundary spanners "engage in networking tasks and employ methods of coordination and task integration across organizational boundaries" (Alter and Hage 1993, 46; see also Aldrich 1979). More recently, public administration scholars are paying attention to the important role of boundary-spanning leadership in the context of collaborative governance (Linden 2002; Noble and Jones 2006; Williams 2002).
- For contemporary research on social entrepreneurship, see Schneider, Teske, and Mintrom (1995) and Light (2008).
- The literature on collaboration and partnerships in the public sector almost uniformly highlights the importance of trusting relationships (see, e.g., Bardach 1998; Linden 2002), though the exact term "relationship capital" is rarely used. In the general management literature, however, there are some explicit references to relationship capital as a critical factor for successful partnerships and alliances (see, e.g., Cullen, Johnson, and Sakano 2000; Sarkar et al. 2001).

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