

HEALTHY WISCONSIN LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE

Collaborative Leadership

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Different processes often require distinct leadership approaches. If you're having brain surgery, you would want a surgeon who has successfully completed the same procedure many times and doesn't stop to ask how everyone feels about closing the incision. In a restaurant, you want a team of a chef and a general manager who work together to make efficient decisions, producing good food, served in a pleasant setting, that is safe to eat.

Achieving healthy communities, however, requires a distinct approach. Complex problems require collective action, and collective action is all about relationships. Collaboration is:

...a purposeful relationship in which all parties strategically choose to cooperate in order to accomplish a shared outcome. Because of its voluntary nature, the success of collaboration is dependent upon the abilities of one or more collaborative leaders to maintain these relationships.¹

It's worth underlining a few key words in this definition. If a relationship is *purposeful*, it means that parties are clear about why they have come together. A sports league, for example, is not a league without competing teams. The teams agree to play by a set of rules, and they come together

¹ Rubin H. Collaborative Leadership: Developing Effective Partnerships for Communities and Schools. 2009: Corwin Press.

A leader must be able to lead us to wise decisions, not to impose his own wise decisions upon us. We need leaders, not masters or drivers.

Mary Parker
Follett, *The New State*, 1918

Healthy Wisconsin
Leadership Institute

February 2011

www.hwli.org



to compete, for camaraderie, to learn from each other, and for fun. The relationships are purposeful and the processes explicit. Process is key.

If relationships are *strategic*, it means that parties agree they have come together because what they want to accomplish they cannot do alone. The other party adds something of value. *Shared outcomes* require parties to reveal what they want out of the relationship. Collaboratives often fail to revisit why people get involved. Sometimes objectives change, and if parties assume they know what the others want, problems arise.

Voluntary collaborations mean that people come together because they want to get something out of the collaboration that is valued. By continually revealing the benefits that people get out of the collaborative—by celebrating successes small and large—collaborative leaders can help ensure the viability of a voluntary model.

Maintaining the relationships in a collaborative is a key role of a good collaborative leader. One of the strongest predictors of successful collaboration in a community is whether collaboration has succeeded there before. Why? It can take time to build the kind of trust that allows for true collaboration between individuals and organizations.

Not surprisingly, collaborative approaches require collaborative leadership. Research tells us that effective collaborative leaders build structures to support and sustain productive relationships over time.

Effective leaders share common characteristics. They:

- challenge current processes
- inspire a shared vision
- enable others to act

One of the strongest predictors of successful collaboration in a community is whether collaboration has succeeded there before.

- lead by example
- encourage the heart

Research indicates that good *collaborative* leaders also share other characteristics. They:

- share power
- see the community holistically
- focus on facilitating good decision making processes rather than on making decisions themselves
- value process as well as product
- take risks
- listen actively
- show empathy*²
- follow up to ensure the process moves forward

In general, good collaborative leaders express more comfort with ambiguity, and they tend to value “organic” approaches to initiatives.

Collaboration: a purposeful relationship in which all parties strategically choose to cooperate in order to accomplish a shared outcome. Because of its voluntary nature, the success of a collaboration is dependent upon one or more collaborative leader's ability to maintain these relationships.

Collaborative Leadership: the skillful and mission-oriented management of relevant relationships. It is the juncture of organizing and management. And whereas community and labor organizers are trained to patiently build their movements through one-on-one conversations with each individual they want to recruit, collaborative leaders do this and more by building structures to support and sustain these productive relationships over time.

Adapted from Rubin H. *Collaborative Leadership: Developing Effective Partnerships for Communities and Schools*. 2009: Corwin Press.

² Patnaik D. *Wired to Care*. 2009: FT Press.

Three types of leadership

Research by David Chrislip on community change revealed three types of leadership. Additional types and styles of leadership are out there, but the following are relevant to contrast if you're working in the the world of community and public health.

Tactical leaders may have dramatic music playing in the background. (See St. Crispin's Day speech in [Henry V.](#)) People might pay a lot of money to see tactical leaders at work. They win games, defeat enemies, and remove tumors. There is a time and a place for effective tactical leaders, and you can learn to capitalize on the skills of good tactical leaders within your initiative.

Positional leaders can include people like CEOs, construction foremen, and restaurant managers. Positional leaders are usually assigned to a position by someone from above and are granted the title of "leader" or manager. Positional leaders usually fit nicely in organizational charts. They have delineated job descriptions but are often expected to take on other duties that emerge. Positional leaders are often key partners in public health collaborations; learning how to capitalize on the contributions of good positional leaders can strengthen a collaborative effort.

Collaborative leaders are peer leaders whose approach may not be well-defined at the beginning of a process. Good collaborative leaders can emerge at any level; they can be a "nominal" leader or working behind the scenes. They are skilled at fostering community participation and ownership. The key distinction between collaborative and other leadership approaches is the collaborative leader's emphasis on a maintaining a truly collaborative process.

Adapted from Chrislip DD, Larson CE. Collaborative leadership: How citizens and civic leaders can make a difference. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994.

Research also indicates that common principles guide the actions of effective collaborative leaders. They:

- Inspire commitment and action
- Lead as a peer, working with others to approach challenges creatively
- Expect disagreement and capitalize on conflict
- Build broad-based involvement
- Sustain hope and participation

Effective Collaborative Leaders: Eight Secrets

1. **Cultivate a shared vision** right from the start... even if it's vague.
2. **Recruit the right mix** of stakeholders and decision-makers.
3. Identify a **"shepherd of the process."** This is the person who will identify day-to-day strategies to sustain momentum and attend to management details. He or she will also engage the perspectives and address the process needs of each partner.
4. **Identify self interests.** Distinguish between individual and organizational interests, and match both to the process and products of collaboration.
5. **Don't waste time.** Make meetings efficient and productive. Remember: The collaborative is usually a second (or third or fourth) priority.
6. **Clarify roles and responsibilities** (even if shared or if they shift). Recognize that it is easier and much more popularly received to cancel a meeting or remove a responsibility than it is to add a meeting or responsibility to participants' lives. Secure commitments from participants that the **same people come each time the collaboration meets.**
7. **Make collaborative work routine.** Having a regular collaborative item on participants' schedules will help.
8. **All collaboration is personal.** "Inter-institutional collaboration" is a common misnomer. Effective collaboration happens between people, one person at a time.

Adapted from Rubin H. Collaborative Leadership: Developing Effective Partnerships for Communities and Schools. 2009: Corwin Press.

Factors that characterize effective collaboration

Environment

- History of collaboration or cooperation in the community
- Collaborative group seen as a legitimate leader in the community
- Favorable political and social climate

Membership characteristics

- Mutual respect, understanding, and trust
- Appropriate cross section of members
- Members see collaboration as in their self-interest
- Ability to compromise

Communication

- Open and frequent communication
- Established informal relationships and communications links

Process/structure

- Members share a stake in both process and outcome
- Multiple layers of decision-making
- Flexibility
- Development of clear roles and policy guidelines
- Adaptability
- Appropriate pace of development

Purpose

- Concrete, attainable goals and objectives
- Shared vision
- Unique purpose

Resources

- Sufficient funds, staff, materials, and time
- Skilled leadership

Adapted from Mattessich PW, Murray-Close M, Monsey B. Collaboration: What Makes It Work, 2nd Ed. Fieldstone Alliance, 2001.

Ways collaborative leadership can make a difference in our coalition

Environment

Membership characteristics

Communication

Process/structure

Purpose

Resources