

Collaborative Governance – Leveraging People and Process

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Abstract

Effective collaboration requires that partners maintain a dual focus on both the process of governance and the engagement of the people around the table. The engagement of partners is often an overlooked part of collaboration efforts. We make assumptions that there is shared commitment and engagement and are disappointed when partners back away from the table or lack the engagement expected. The process of governing a collaboration is equally complex. This paper explores practices to improve the people and governance process leading to more innovative and responsive collaborations.

Introduction

Nonprofit governance is typically a hierarchical process. At the top of the hierarchy is a board of directors providing strategic oversight of and to a Chief Executive Officer or Executive Director. The staff team is also often constructed in a vertical structure.

Collaborative governance is different. It is about the collective. Collaborative governance, when built and structured well, requires a more horizontal approach with peer leaders working collectively and sharing a common vision and goals. In the case of collaborative governance, leaders must focus on the complementary and sometimes competing elements of managing both the people side and the process side of collaboration.

This paper explores the people and process factors of collaborative governance. Many collaboratives only focus on the process of collaboration. They do so at their peril. Focusing on the duality of the people of collaboration and the governance process of collaboration will strengthen the collective effort and lead to deeper engagement and a strong commitment to achieving the shared purpose and goals.

David Chrislip, the author of **The Collaborative Leadership Fieldbook**, combines the dual aspects of the people and process of governance through what he describes as the collaborative premise.

If you bring the appropriate people together as peers in constructive ways with good content and context information, they will create authentic visions and strategies for addressing the shared concerns of the organizations and the community. (Chrislip, 2002)

The collaborative premise identifies the key people factors of bringing together appropriate people and engaging them as peers. The collaborative premise also identifies the process factors of ensuring the collaborative effort uses good content and context information to create an authentic vision for change. The collaborative premise provides the context and structure for a more horizontal or collective approach to the governance of collective work.

Diving Deeper into the People of Collaborative Governance

Understanding the motivations, mindsets, and skillsets required by collaborative leaders is vital to achieving deep and durable change and impact. The people factor of collaborative governance is both about the individual members of the collaboration table and their collective commitments to each other and the process of collaboration on shared outcomes.

The individual act of collaborative leadership

A moral compass is an indicator of leadership. This leadership motivation and mindset is described in the **Stanford Social Innovation Review** series on leadership. Authors Jacqueline Novogratz and Anne Welsh McNulty identify the most critical ingredient in leadership as moral courage.

Moral courage is the commitment to act upon one's values *regardless of the difficulty or personal cost*. It inspires the conviction to take action with the clarity to remain constant in goals but flexible in method. Moral courage is a mindset that centers the internal conditions needed to make the courageous choice visible and to instill the confidence that it's possible. (Novogratz & Welsh McNulty, 2022)

The authors further describe moral courage as both the determination and resilience to try and fail in attempting to address some of society's inequities. It is about continuing to pursue change over the years and sometimes over a lifetime.

The authors believe that moral courage can be cultivated in leaders who are deeply engaged in social change and describe cultivating the following practices as key. In this article, the individual approach to moral courage requires developing deep and collaborative relationships with others. It is both an inward-facing and outward-connecting practice.

1. Practice self-awareness
2. Examine, sharpen, and clarify core values in dialogue with others
3. Create systems of trust and nourishment

The authors further conclude that the multiple and complex challenges facing communities and societies require a deeper investment in leadership, particularly investing in authentic and courageous leaders who navigate their way utilizing the compass of moral courage.

A scan of popular articles identifies that impactful collaborative leaders place a focus on building and maintaining relationships as a core success factor. The **Organizational Development Institute** website describes the following personal characteristics of collaborative leaders.

- Being a Bridge Builder – includes personally contributing to the outcome and building strong personal relationships
- Working across silos – being able to see the future, see forward, and see across multiple partners and perspectives
- Navigating and sharing power - knowing when to step forward and step back
- Being a strategic thinker and engager of others – understand the strategic context and enable others to connect their skills and motivations
- Adapting to different contexts – navigate and build trust, be comfortable with conflict, and bridge cultures, expectations, and differences (Newell, 2020)

The collective act of collaborative leadership

The collective act of collaborative leadership is more challenging. It is about the relationship amongst and between collaborative partners.

According to the [Global Leadership Forecast 2018](#) by EY and DDI, companies with high collective leadership have:

- Five times higher likelihood of a strong leader bench
- Twice the rate of “definitely engaged” leaders
- 50% less likely for leaders to leave
- Constant learning embedded in the organization
- The desire to develop each other permeates across all levels (DDI, 2018)

These results also apply beyond the business environment. When collaborative and collective leadership is a focus, partners around the table are more engaged, connected, and involved in the development of collective design and decision-making processes.

The **Global Leadership Forecast 2018** also identifies a set of seven strategies for building collective leadership, including:

- Building collective leadership is a cyclical process – it doesn’t happen all at once – you have to relearn to work this way
- Collaboration doesn’t mean agreeing all the time – tensions keep teams alive
- Senior leaders must learn to let go – share power and influence
- Collective leadership works most of the time – but there may be times to define clear roles and accountabilities
- Collective leadership is more complicated than most think – collaboration must be purposefully designed – balance between hyper collaboration and individual accountability
- Develop leaders in cohorts – use complementing skills rather than expecting one person to be good at everything




- Create leadership teams that cut across boundaries – integrate diverse expertise, backgrounds, generations, genders, and perspectives – develop meta-skills such as self-awareness, empathy, and adaptability (DDI, 2018)










Building a network of collaborative leaders takes time and investment over both the short and long terms. Tamarack Institute, in supporting place-based, multi-sector collaborative leadership tables over the last 20 years, has learned that collaboration is not a linear process but one that shifts and adapts over time. Leaders come and go. The focus of the collaboration process changes. The community context shifts and responds. Investing in collaborative leadership development requires investing in the individual leaders and in the collaborative relationship that exists between and amongst individuals.

Diving Deeper into the Process of Collaborative Governance

Many collaboration efforts are successful at focusing on the process of collaborative governance. **McKinsey & Company** identifies the process of collaborative governance as having three distinct yet interconnected elements: decision-making, creative solutions and coordination, and information sharing. The following table illustrates these elements in more detail.

Collaborative interactions fall into three categories.

 Virtual
  In person
  Other mechanisms

	Interaction	Suggested Format	Purpose	Characteristics	Outcome
Decision making	Complex or uncertain decision		Make uncertain, hard decisions	Most complex, hard decisions Quality debates	Decisions for complex issues and actions
	Cross-cutting routine decision	 	Make routine decisions	Standard set of routine decisions Well-defined protocol for approvals Most time spent on exceptions or escalations	Routine decisions
Creative solutions and coordination	Innovative session		Identify innovative solutions	Innovative problem solving Usually half-day sprint Solutions to be brought into a decision meeting	Potential innovative solutions—preparation for a decision meeting
	Routine working session	 	Coordinate actions Get input Crowdsource ideas	Round-robin Usually short	Considerations and next steps
Information sharing	One-way		Share information	No interactions required Other effective mechanisms; eg, memo, email, podcast, vlog, Slack-based town hall	Awareness of new information
	Two-way	 	Share information and answer questions	Interactions (eg, Q&A) required to be successful	Awareness of the new information and concerns and questions addressed

McKinsey & Company

(Company, McKinsey &, 2022)

The collective impact approach, defined by John Kania and Mark Kramer in 2011, broadens the framework for the collaborative governance process by identifying five core conditions that underly successful collective efforts: the agreement to a common agenda; the use of shared measurement to define the complexity of the problem and gauge progress; the ability to leverage collective capacity through mutually reinforcing solutions, investing in continuous communications and infrastructure through backbone or steering resources. (Kania & Kramer, 2011)

The five conditions of collective impact provide a strong framework for considering collaboration governance but fail to define the structures, roles, and accountabilities required fully. Without a clear structure and defined roles and accountabilities, many collaborative efforts drift and fail. A collaborative governance structure is useful for organizing leaders and partners engaged in the collective effort and as an invitation for new members to be engaged. Defining roles and accountabilities within and amongst collaborative partners enables the functions

identified in both the collective impact approach and the McKinsey & Company collaborative process.

Leveraging People and Process

Effective collaborative governance leverages and maximizes the elements of people and processes. It seeks to deeply engage collaborative leaders in meaningful ways and invests in and supports them on their leadership journeys. It focuses on the individual leadership capacity of each member and the collective capacity of the whole.

From a governance perspective, the collaboration pays attention to process. This includes building a shared and engaging agenda, investing in decision-making processes, and focusing on communications. It also includes defining a structure, roles, and accountabilities amongst partners and having the ability to shift and adapt over time.

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