

Collaborative leadership — lessons from failure

David Archer and Alex Cameron

Today's interdependent world needs leaders who can get people and organisations working together across internal and external boundaries. But many traditional leadership role models are far from being collaborative. HR professionals need to understand what really makes collaborative leaders tick and what they can do to build this capability in their own organisation. Our research shows that there are as many lessons to learn from failures of collaboration as there are from the success stories. This article highlights four leadership stereotypes and looks at how the behaviour that may have taken them far in their chosen career can prove disastrous in a collaborative venture. We then go on to identify six attributes that underpin future collaborative leadership success and how these can be developed.

Collaborative leadership as a concept is certainly in vogue at the moment. Within days of taking office, President Obama issued a directive on Open Government which stated¹ *"Government should be collaborative. Executive departments and agencies should use innovative tools, methods, and systems to co-operate among themselves, across all levels of Government, and with non-profit organisations, businesses, and individuals in the private sector."* And in the UK too the need for greater linkage across sectors is seen to be vital; to get us out of recession, aid the delivery of public services and get greater value for money in these tough times. In a recent speech, Cabinet Secretary Sir Gus O'Donnell said² *"Aligning public spending more closely to cross-cutting objectives, would, I believe, result in increased collaboration and better results"*.

HR professionals are used to leadership trends that come and go, but this one seems to be born from need, not just from fashion. We live in an increasingly interconnected world. A vast range of our public services rely on private sector contractors for their delivery, the supply of most of our consumer goods relies on global networks of companies collaborating on the manufacture of new products, and we are betting the future of the planet on the ability of nations to work together to tackle global problems such as terrorism, climate change and financial instability. In many domains of endeavour, success increasingly depends on making critical relationships such as these work, often in highly pressured situations. In this environment, leaders need practical solutions to the challenges of delivering results through many interdependent relationships, managing a range of business partnerships and handling complex sets of stakeholders.

But the evidence is that many of these efforts fail; research consistently shows that around half of joint ventures and

mergers do not deliver their forecast profits. Public private partnerships and outsourcing deals bring just as many tales of failed contracts and cost overruns as they do success stories, and in the political sphere the difficulty of acting in a co-ordinated way in times of financial uncertainty is painfully apparent. In some cases the root causes of these failures lie in mistaken strategic decisions to work together in the first place — many deals that look good for all parties when the CEOs shake hands take on a very different aspect by the time the lawyers have finished their due diligence. But in other cases a perfectly feasible collaborative relationship can be ruined by the actions of one or more of its leaders. Sometimes they just lack the leadership skills to make it work, and despite their best intentions a leader unskilled in the ways of sharing control can drive a relationship onto the rocks in a matter of months — and set up patterns of antagonistic behaviour that can take years for others to overcome.

Four archetypal failures of collaborative leadership

People who find themselves in charge of a partnership or other collaborative relationship without being prepared for the change in leadership style required, can find it a stressful and unsettling experience. Suddenly the approaches you have used for years do not work anymore. It is almost as if you have landed in a foreign country where nothing is quite as it seems. Some leaders learn rapidly from the experience and quickly start to pick up bits of the language and customs. But others stick to their guns and either try to bluster their way through, or gradually lose self-confidence and withdraw into themselves.

So what can HR professionals do to help their organisations avoid these pitfalls? One step is to learn from others' collaborative leadership failures.

In this article, we outline four stereotypes of leaders — the control freak, the idealist, the cautious incrementalist, and the selfish fast-streamer. In each case their actions (or inactions) manage to ruin collaborative relationships — failing to achieve the hoped-for value, leaving acrimony and chaos in their wake. This is not a random sample. These four portraits illustrate typical leadership styles which, in the right circumstances, can take someone a long way in his or her career, but which prove disastrous in collaborative ventures.

The portraits are fictional, they are caricatures, but we hope you will find lessons to learn in each of them. In our many years of working in complex multi-party systems, we have seen aspects of all these leadership behaviours and the risks they pose to building effective organisational relationships.

The control freak — or expert loner

We have all met them — leaders who are great technical experts in their subject but (perhaps because of that) are unable to let go of control and let others play their part. For control freaks collaborative leadership is particularly stressful: they want to be sure that *things are done right* and they want to help their partners do just that. But their tactics are often to issue rules and instructions and insist that these are followed to the letter.

Of course this behaviour is not well received by their partners; resentment grows and sooner or later boils over into a row and a withdrawal of support. As the pressure mounts, control freaks take more and more work on to themselves and communication with their partners can quickly descend into barked orders and, in extreme cases, bullying.

The consequence is certainly an unproductive relationship and sometimes can result in a case of long-term sick leave as one or other of the people involved cannot stand it anymore.

Lessons for leaders

1. You cannot do it all on your own. Not only do you have to share control with partners, you need the special skills of others in your own organisations (perhaps from functions like procurement, commercial or legal) to help you build constructive relationships.
2. The successful operation of any organisational relationship is often dependent on the personal relationships between the leaders involved. Leaders are role models for the behaviour of the rest of their organisation, and the way they act is particularly important at the start of a new relationship — early experience forges the habits that others will adopt.
3. You cannot always pick the personalities of your partners, and bullying behaviour unfortunately can take place. You need a strategy to manage such situations:
 - ~ agree the ground rules on how to treat each other from the start
 - ~ build strong relationship governance to deal with inappropriate behaviours
 - ~ address any first signs of bullying behaviour — do not let a problem become a crisis
 - ~ avoid colluding with a bully just to have a quiet life — it never works in the long term.
4. Be aware of your own need for control — when things are going well, most people behave reasonably but, when the pressure is on, it is easy to lose flexibility, and the need to control everything and everyone can become destructive.

The Idealist

Idealists are driven by passion and commitment to a cause or set of beliefs (often born from their own early experiences or those of someone close to them). They tend to draw close groups of fellow believers around them.

They can do great things in situations where their personal integrity and charisma motivates people to align their efforts and put past differences behind them to follow a simple leadership message.

But the idealist will struggle in more complex situations where there are multiple and sometimes contradictory objectives.

Their tendency to put great faith in a small group of insiders — but to be very slow to trust others — makes forging new alliances difficult.

The consequences for a large collaborative system of an idealist leader are often a painful transition. People quickly go from an initial state of great optimism, through increasing division as factions form (you are either with us or against us), to a point where many feel betrayed and disappointed to have put so much faith in a leader that has promised much, but ultimately been unable to deliver.

Lessons for leaders

1. Not all parties enter a new collaborative relationship with the same level of enthusiasm. Some may see it as something of a forced marriage — and leaders of all parties need to recognise this at the outset.
2. When things begin to go wrong, it is important that leaders have an open relationship where difficult issues can be discussed and resolved. Most difficulties are evident to the leaders if they listen to their people and ask the right questions. But leaders who are overly enthusiastic can discourage difficult feedback from others.
3. Charismatic leadership might be engaging and motivating in some circumstances, but in a collaborative relationship there is more than one person in a leadership role. A single leader cannot influence all the parties and stakeholders equally.
4. Ambition, drive and vision are important, but so are realism and planning. Things will inevitably change and problems emerge. Mature collaborative leaders should be able to recognise when other parties are losing engagement with the objectives of partnership, stop and listen to difficult messages, and change their approach to deal with the concerns of others.

The cautious incrementalist

Cautious leaders who work in small steps can have many qualities that help them form collaborative relationships, but taken to extreme this incremental approach can damage the future of a partnership — especially in difficult times.

Archetypal incrementalist leaders work by consensus — at all times. They want to take everyone with them and to avoid any possibility of conflict. Their desire for harmony and their aversion to acting presumptively or take risks in a relationship can often mark them out as “good partners” at one level — they are seen as “a safe pair of hands”. But when the pressure comes on and a partnership has to really perform, in order to take on a new competitor or tackle a new market, what seemed to be strengths can act as a drag-anchor to the relationship.

The consequence of an incrementalist leader in a collaborative system can often be lacklustre performance and lost potential as any hope for innovation is driven out by his or her inability to handle disagreement or to act decisively when contradictory views emerge.

Lessons for leaders

1. Incremental leaders can get caught in the vicious circle of their own lack of confidence with radical change:
 - ~ team members who expect them to be on top of all the detail
 - ~ colleagues who would rather collude with risk-averse behaviour than have a radical role model in their midst
 - ~ external stakeholders who are risk-averse by nature and demand an audit trail of all decisions and actions.
2. Control means different things to different people. A leader who is used to incremental change and being sure of every step will struggle with partners who are used to making a leap of faith in the confidence that they will thrive in any situation.
3. Frustrated partners who offer increasingly radical suggestions to try to break the log jam will only reinforce the belief that they need to have strong controls on them to prevent them from doing something stupid.
4. Driving change across a collaborative relationship takes personal courage — daring to be unpopular in your own organisation because you can see the long-term benefit for the whole system.

The selfish fast-streamer

Successful collaborative leaders are not driven by altruism — a streak of self interest is important to motivate performance. But collaborative leaders have the patience and tenacity to act for the long term.

Archetypal fast-streamers are driven by the speed of their career trajectory and a desire to keep moving on. Used wisely their sheer energy and willingness to tackle any new barrier head-on can sometimes be of benefit to a collaborative system that is stuck or bogged down in bureaucratic detail.

But their need to leave the past behind means they do not see the consequences of their actions or the damage they can do to relationships.

The tendency of selfish fast-streamers to want to take all the credit for success means they build resentment among their partners, who in the end become less willing to work with them and more guarded in their interactions.

In the short term their stock may rise meteorically, but if they leave a trail of destruction in their wake their reputation will eventually get around. And in the end no-one will want to work with them.

Lessons for leaders

1. Ambitious leaders move roles and organisations frequently as they pursue their career. The developing collaborative leader should use these moves to learn from the experience of others and build new relationships quickly. This means being open about your lack of knowledge, and willing to accept advice and ideas from others who may work in different ways to you.
2. Building an effective coalition at the start is crucial. If trust is not built early, leaders will have to spend time attempting to salvage it at the later stage — with inevitable delays in the timetable.
3. In large collaborative projects, organisations need to build governance and processes that avoid placing all the power with one leader, who may then choose to move on when the going gets tough.
4. Leaders need to share the pain as well as the plaudits. If they are seen to be drawing all the praise to themselves and acting as a personal figurehead for the programme, then do not be surprised if others are less than willing to throw their own weight behind the wheel.

In conclusion

Sadly, these four examples of collaborative leadership failure are not that unusual. Anyone who has worked around partnerships for a time will have their own story of isolationism taken to extremes, passion unchecked by realism, over-cautiousness that stifles innovation, or ego unchecked by humility and patience. And these experiences are unlikely to end happily.

If organisations are to avoid failures like these, HR professionals need to help identify the leadership risks and develop the necessary collaborative leadership capability at all levels. From our own work and research³ we have identified six attributes in leaders who have learned lessons from others failures — and develop their own collaborative leadership capability⁴.

- **Patience:** Collaborative leaders are patient with their partners and with themselves.
- **Collective decision-making:** Decisions made by leaders in isolation and enforced by hierarchical power are not sustainable in today's world.
- **Quick thinking:** Leaders need to be able to see relationship opportunities and risks before others do, and have the courage to act quickly in response to them.
- **Tenacity:** Successful collaborative leaders are tenacious in their pursuit of the overall common purpose in the face of a changing external environment.
- **Building relationships:** Collaborative leaders go out to find future partners, identify sponsors, and make new alliances. They approach these new relationships with a high degree of empathy and self awareness.
- **Handling conflict:** Collaborative leaders do not see conflict as a mark of failure — rather it is part of the territory, and they are confident in holding the difficult conversations that help to bring about a resolution.

These attributes may not be the familiar leadership competences, but they underpin success in a collaborative environment. HR professionals have a vital role to play in challenging and supporting leaders, at every level and across all disciplines, to develop their abilities in these areas.

References

¹ http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/TransparencyandOpenGovernment/

² <http://www.civilservice.gov.uk/news/2009/july/audit-commission.aspx>.

³ See for example — “*When to Ally and When to Acquire*”, by Jeffrey H Dyer, Prashant Kale and Harbir Singh, *Harvard Business Review*, July–August 2004.

⁴ *Collaborative Leadership: How to succeed in an interconnected world*, D Archer and A Cameron, Butterworth Heinemann 2009.

Collaborative leadership is a sophisticated art, but there are now specialist 360° feedback tools that evaluate these attributes, and you can devise talent programmes that include things like cross-organisational secondments and development workshops that focus on building just these sorts of collaborative leadership capabilities. For senior staff, helping them to find a mentor or a coach who has experience of delivering results across boundaries and sharing control can be a great way of providing support, particularly when times are tough and the priorities of different stakeholders are in conflict.

The overall lesson from our research is that by basing the development of collaborative leadership capability on these six pillars (while avoiding the pitfalls outlined in the four stereotypical examples above), HR professionals can play a central part in helping your organisation to succeed in today's interconnected world.

Points to ponder

- How much emphasis is placed in your organisation on developing collaborative leadership? What processes work best?
- What would need to happen to ensure that collaborative leadership can become an embedded aspect of your culture?

David and Alex are founding Directors of Socia Ltd, a company which develops leaders in large organisations across the public and private sector to manage the risks of interdependence and to get greater value from their critical business relationships.

Before setting up Socia, David was a lecturer at the University of Hertfordshire.

He works to help groups create the right environment of governance, working practices and behaviours which will allow creative solutions to emerge.



Alex taught in schools and in industry before progressing to a career in executive development.

He coaches individual leaders and executive teams. He sees the possibility of avoiding the waste of effort and resources that can often occur in conflict situations — between individuals and organisations.

