

May 15, 2013 4:02 pm

Business leaders urged to collaborate with partners

By David Archer and Alex Cameron

What is ‘collaborative leadership’?

Many of the people who will make a business succeed or fail today might not work for it. Collaborative leaders harness the efforts of many partners, suppliers and others using a sophisticated set of skills.

Isn't it just people being nice?

Not at all. Building strong relationships with people and organisations who are not like you is one of the toughest things a leader can do. They have to be confident enough to share control with people in organisations who have different drivers and different objectives. That can result in conflict – and handling conflict and using it constructively is another key component of collaborative leadership.

What do collaborative leaders do?

They work on their key external relationships, building trust, listening, and understanding their partners' businesses, confronting areas of conflict early. They are spending less time trapped by details and internal meetings. They talk less about “high performance teams” and more about networks and trusted colleagues or partners.

They seek out people and organisations with different backgrounds and perspectives that can bring new ideas and opportunities. And they are reliable partners – doing what they say they will do and delivering, before trying to deepen business relationships.

Where is collaborative leadership working?

It is working in all sorts of business areas: in a boardroom where executives and non-executives hold each other to account in a trusting, constructive style; or in a retail supply chain that's reducing costs and increasing responsiveness; or in high-tech industries where open systems such as Google Android let innovative start-up companies collaborate on

developing new apps, stimulating more phone sales. Wherever we look, increased interdependence is demanding more collaborative leadership.

Is a downturn the time for collaboration?

It is more important now than ever. Leaders cannot throw money at a poor working relationship or afford to inspect all the work of a supplier they do not fully trust. They have to prize more value from relationships. Leaders need to work across boundaries, understanding their partners' strengths and weaknesses so they can inject the right skills and resources at the best price and the lowest risk.

What are the skills needed?

We have noted three critical skills in all successful leaders: influencing, mediation, and communication. In support of these skills, there are three essential attitudes: agility – to assimilate facts quickly and ask incisive questions; patience – to take a calm approach and give confidence to others; and empathy – to listen and have an open-minded attitude to the views of others.

They also need to build a cross-party constituency of support; work for the long term while dealing with immediate conflicts directly; and understand that they are dependent on others. No one can be a collaborative leader on their own.
