

What makes a collaborative leader?

Posted by David Archer & Alex Cameron in [CPD](#) on Wed, 17/04/2013 - 14:30



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It's a common experience for many leaders these days: many of the people who are crucial to their success don't report to them – directly or indirectly. And, increasingly, these people are often not even employed by the leader's business.

In a world of partnerships, joint ventures, outsourcing and complex supply chains, leaders need to be able to deliver results by working across organisational boundaries. No matter how senior they are or how powerful they may appear, leaders have to accept the realities of interdependence and the limits of their own authority. In short, one of the key attributes of the successful leader is his or her ability to lead collaboratively. This article addresses six skills and attitudes that underpin collaborative leadership.

The need to be a good collaborative leader doesn't just apply to business situations. Even a President of the United States, complete with the mandate of a second term election victory, has to understand the limits of their power and the consequences of sharing control. A topical example might be President Obama's current challenges in getting gun control legislation passed by Congress. But it was ever thus: witness Abraham Lincoln's deployment of his collaborative skills in securing agreement to the passing of the 13th amendment to US constitution which banned slavery. The story is told in the compelling book 'A Team of Rivals' - the basis for Spielberg's recent biopic.

To get the 13th amendment through the House, Lincoln had to build relationships with all sorts of unlikely allies from right to left across the political divide, and in doing so he displayed a number of the attributes of a collaborative leader that we have identified through our own research.

Defining collaborative leadership

Put simply, collaborative leadership is the type of leadership required to get results across internal or external organisational boundaries. And that means the leadership required to get value from the differences (in culture, experience, or skills) that lie in the organisations that sit either side of these boundaries. This means leaders investing time to build relationships, being ready to handle conflict in a constructive manner and, most importantly, being able to share control.

There isn't a simple template to follow or one personality type to emulate, but successful collaborative leaders are pretty self-aware – they know their strengths and weaknesses and they understand that it's not all about ego and charisma. The capability of the collaborative leader is dependent on them having all the basic experience and skills of any leader, but it is also founded on a set of skills and attitudes that are necessary to

address complex interdependent situations.

There are three essential skills.

Mediation - Collaborative leaders need to be able to address conflict constructively and effectively as soon as it arises. This is a demanding skill. Evidence from many collaborative leadership 360° feedback programmes suggests that handling conflict and the associated mediation skills are often the number one leadership development priority.

Influencing - Collaborative leaders need to be able to share control and so choose the best approach to influencing their partners. This requires an understanding of the organisational culture and personality type of their partners as well as an objective analysis of the business situation to hand.

Engaging others - Collaborative leaders can't be successful without the skills of networking and relationship building. This means communicating with clarity, often in high stress situations, and involving others in decision-making at the right time.

In support of these three skills, collaborative leaders can only be successful if they hold three additional essential attitudes.

Agility - These complex collaborative situations require a forward looking attitude of mind, coupled with an ability to quickly assimilate facts and ask incisive questions.

Patience - Managing relationships takes time and collaborative leaders need to be able to take a calm and measured approach, reflecting on new information and giving confidence to others.

Empathy - All the attributes of any collaborative leader must be underpinned by a willingness to truly listen and be open-minded to the views of others. Only with these attitudes can the leader develop the high degree of self-awareness necessary to accurately assess the impact their behaviour on others.

HR and L&D professionals have a vital role to play in building collaborative leadership capability. The inclusion of collaborative leadership attributes in recruitment specifications and senior job profiles, the creation of collaborative leadership 360 tools and development programmes, will all play a part. But most of it all it will be leaders acting as role models of collaborative leadership that make the difference. Because if there is one simple truth about being a collaborative leader it's that you can't do it on your own!

38% of people at a recent Melcrum conference felt collaboration was a demonstrated priority for leaders

This is a really good piece on collaborative leadership and the Lincoln / Obama analogy is even more pertinent with the decision yesterday on gun control.

I thought I'd add to it with a stat recently captured at the Melcrum IC summit. Engage Group ran a survey of the audience and asked them a number of questions about collaborative readiness. Alarming on 38% of the audience (of senior IC people) believe cross business collaboration is a demonstrated priority for senior leaders within their company, while this number stands at only 29% for those leaders at ground level.

Dr Andy Brown spoke about the collaborative leader and was able to speak about the BBC and Sainsbury's leadership from personal experience consulting with them. Engage wrote a blog post about the event and in encapsulates their thinking well with a few "how to's" that add to the analysis in this item. Here's the link: <http://www.engagegroup.co.uk/Blogs/February-2013/Are-you-ready-to-collaborate.aspx>

I think Melcrum also have videos of the talk on their website.

This is a fascinating area which reminds me of the development of thinking around emotional intelligence in leaders.

-- Paul Blunden

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Posted by [pblunden](#) on Thu, 18/04/2013 - 11:27

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Collaborative leadership

Thanks for this post Paul and yor feedback on our article. I'd not seen this stat but it matches my own experince. IBM did a CEO survey last year with similar findings (see <http://www-935.ibm.com/services/uk/en/c-suite/ceostudy2012/>)

David Archer

Posted by [David Archer](#) on Tue, 23/04/2013 - 08:10

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