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A manifesto for collaborative leadership

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Abraham Lincoln's ability to build relationships across the political divide was an example of collaborative leadership.

Building strong relationships with partners inside and outside of your organisation has become a business necessity. David Archer and Alex Cameron, authors of Collaborative Leadership: Building Relationships, Handling Conflict, Sharing Control, set out their 'manifesto' for collaborative leadership

Many of the people who will help make you and your business successful don't work for you – in fact they probably don't even work within your own organisation.

In the past the common belief was that a strong leader could deliver results through their own intellect and their ability to inspire the staff they control.

Not anymore. Today's leaders know they have to work with outsourcing partners, negotiate joint ventures,

develop new products together with suppliers or customers, and of course keep investors, regulators and the media on-side too.

Delivering results today means leading across organisational boundaries and getting the best from people who may not share your language, beliefs or culture, but whose skills you rely on. It requires the skills of collaborative leadership.

But of course this isn't new. Anyone who watched Daniel Day-Lewis's Oscar winning performance in Lincoln, or read the book Team of Rivals on which it is based, will have seen a great model of collaborative leadership in action.

Abraham Lincoln, despite being a newly elected second-term president, knew that he couldn't get his historic 13th amendment to the constitution (banning slavery) passed without building relationships right across the political divide. His success demonstrated many of the attributes of a collaborative leader that are so important in today's

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interdependent business world.

Successes and failures

You just have to look at situations such as the Deepwater Horizon disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, where failures of leadership and collaboration between BP, Transocean and Halliburton were seen to be a key cause of a tragedy that cost 11 lives and many billions of dollars in clean-up costs and fines. Or closer to home the recent horsemeat scandal, which caused the leaders of several major retailers to look much more closely at the quality of their supply chain relationships, tells a similar story.

The ability to lead effectively across multiple organisational boundaries is now a business necessity. But as Lord Coe and others showed with London 2012, this can be a good thing. When collaborative leadership works it can lead to spectacular results.

While most of the fundamental leadership lessons have remained constant over time, the context in which these lessons are applied is changing rapidly.

There is clearly more interdependence in the world than in Lincoln's day but, perhaps more significantly, the nature of that interdependence is getting more strategic and the speed of knock-on impacts is accelerating.

And in the middle of all this, leaders are under ever more pressure to deliver and are judged harshly by their shareholders, customers or electorate if they are seen to be failing.

Under this sort of pressure there is a risk that they turn to tribal behaviour – acting to serve the interests of their own constituency while trying to isolate themselves from, or defeat, everyone outside it. But if the interdependence is real, this tribal approach simply won't work.

So to help the aspiring collaborative leader we have distilled what we have learnt from working with many successful exponents of the art – and from the wisdom of Abraham Lincoln – to produce a 10-point collaborative leadership manifesto:

1. **Seek out conflict early.** Address it openly and with confidence, and be prepared to mediate in others' conflict in order to build relationships.
2. **Don't expect your partners to have the same objectives as you.** Look for common ground in shared values and in the things you can achieve together that neither of you could achieve alone.
3. **Understand that collaboration is not a zero-sum game** and that in an interdependent world you can only succeed through the success of others. If you want them to invest in your success you must invest in theirs.
4. **Value and use diversity** – both within your organisation and between you and your partners. Use that diversity to find innovative solutions to problems that need a new approach.
5. **Only get close and collaborate when the situation demands it.** Collaboration is not a moral choice but it is a business necessity in some circumstances.
6. **Look to the long-term in relationships** – and combine patience when sticking by your principles with agility in your actions to make tricky relationships work.
7. **Listen hard** – and then show you have understood what you heard. Get behind the face value of what your partners are saying to empathise with their motives and fears.
8. **Be clear where the significant 'points of interdependence' are in a relationship.** Don't expect to eliminate them – you can't control everything – but get very efficient in your interactions at these key points.
9. **Engage others in your mission to be a collaborative leader.** One thing is for certain, you can't be a collaborative leader on your own.
10. **Be authentic in all you do** – people need to know that what they see is what they get.

Collaborative Leadership: Building Relationships, Handling Conflict, Sharing Control by David Archer and Alex Cameron is out now (Routledge).



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