

# How to... be a collaborative leader

**Collaborative leadership can be developed in any organisation and it is seen as a vital skill-set in an increasingly interconnected world**

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**Publication date:** 4 September 2008

**Source:** People Management magazine

**Page:** 45

We live in an interconnected world. In business, we see organisations relying ever more closely on partners to deliver key elements of their services to customers, while large portions of our national infrastructure are being rebuilt through public-private partnerships.

These issues place great reliance on leaders to work collaboratively and to share control effectively. This is not a skill-set that comes naturally to most people in senior roles, but collaborative leadership can be developed in any organisation – and in any leader.

## **1 Have courage and act long term**

Good collaborative leaders find common purpose with their partners and look at success over the lifetime of the partnership. In the private sector, financial models are often built with a payback period of many years, and leaders will take a short-term hit if they are confident of the long-term health of the relationship. In the public sector, paradoxically, it can be harder to take a long-term view because the political cycle means that goalposts will move as election time comes around. You need to simplify these situations for your people so they can focus on a few principles that describe the long-term common purpose and are elegant and simple to share.

## **2 Prepare for conflict**

Start with the assumption that conflicts will occur during the relationship and look hard at your own habits and the typical reactions of your organisation to them. Will conflicts help or hinder the long-term progress of the partnership? What can you do in advance to build a mutual "safety net"? Recognise that there are some people or organisations that can't be your partner. If a high degree of collaboration is vital in a particular contract or situation, you may just have to rule those people out as potential partners.

## **3 Invest in personal relationships**

You need to do this all the way throughout a partnership and externally with stakeholders. Nothing can beat human connections when things go wrong. Manage the tensions between focusing on delivery and investing time in building relationships. That can also mean recognising that imposing financial penalties on your partner can be counterproductive: it takes money out of the system and reduces willingness to collaborate in future. On the other hand, when things go well, have the confidence to share the credit generously – successful partnerships are not about single stars but constellations and galaxies.

## **4 Continually develop interpersonal leadership skills**

Key among these are empathy (understanding what drives others and causes them to

respond in a particular way), patience (sticking to what you believe in, taking the time to bring people along and not walking out on important relationships), tenacity (caring enough about the outcome to keep going, however hard the negotiations), holding difficult conversations (confronting issues honestly and early in the process so things don't fester) and coalition building (building networks of support, finding critical friends, and pulling together the necessary people from disparate groups to get the job done).

### **5 Find the personal motivation**

It's not just about making a good business case for a partnership or, indeed, about "being nice" – you need to work out what's in it for you. In today's world, being a great collaborative leader is good for your reputation and good for your career.

#### **Key points**

- Work to understand the overarching common purpose with your partners.
- Be prepared for how you will handle conflict when it arises.
- Be patient and tenacious in pursuit of the long term aim.
- Invest in relationships – at all levels.
- Be clear about what is in it for you – collaborative leadership isn't about altruism.

## **Further Info**

David Archer and Alex Cameron are directors of partnership consultancy Socia and authors of Collaborative Leadership (Elsevier)

### **Annual conference and exhibition**

David Archer and Alex Cameron will facilitate the interactive seminar "Collaborative Leadership" at the [CIPD annual conference in Harrogate](#), on 16-18 September.