

## 11 Practices of Collaborative Leaders

By George Ambler; September 23, 2013

Collaborative leadership is crucial for leading in uncertain and turbulent times. Leading in turbulent times requires a deliberate shift away from command-and-control towards a more collaborative style of leadership. When talking about leadership here, we're referring to leadership as a verb and not a noun. We're talking about leadership as the social process shared by all members of an enterprise. We're not the person at the top of an enterprise's organisational structure!

If you are considering making the shift towards a more collaborative leadership approach you may be asking yourself, "What are the practices that support collaborative leadership?" Good question. In this post we will briefly explore the 11 practices of collaborative leaders.

"Gettin' good players is easy. Gettin' 'em to play together is the hard part." - Casey Stengel

**1. Passionate Purpose and Vision:** Collaborative leaders create an environment where people can unite behind a common purpose, vision and set of values. Clear and compelling purpose, vision and values are essential. They unite people and provide guidance as to the goals and standards of behaviour. Passion begins with the leader, unless the leader is passionate and leads by example others will be reluctant to follow.

Having a purpose and vision is necessary, but it's not sufficient. Vision and purpose must be supported by passion. Collaborative leaders have passion for a cause. It's passion that drives people to initiate, to act and draws them into conversations about the best ways to create a new future. It's passion that causes people to step up to a challenge, to take on ambitious responsibilities and accept risk. Seek out people who are passionate about the purpose and vision of the enterprise and help the participate in bringing the vision into reality.

**2. Accept You're Not in Control:** The reality is a leader is never in control. Leaders are unable to command the commitment and passion required for success. People may comply when you're around, but they only commit as the result of inspiring leadership and a meaningful cause. Moving towards collaborative leadership requires you moving away from the thinking that leadership is about control. Making the shift from "command-and-control" is not easy, but it's critical if you want to develop a more collaborative leadership style.

Collaborative leadership demands that leaders, lead without the safety of authority, position and hierarchy. This requires that leaders let go of their need to control and embrace an alternative a collaborative leadership style.

Collaborative leadership begins with the understanding that although you cannot change others you can change yourself. You can change your leadership philosophy, your leadership behaviors and develop a new set of leadership beliefs and skills. The bottom line is that collaborative leadership starts with you and your example. It's a decision you must make and begins with a change in your mindset, behaviors and the example you set for the team and your enterprise.

**3. Flatten Your Enterprise Structures:** Flat organizational structures have fewer levels of management with more people reporting into a single manager. This supports a fast, reliable communication and increased collaboration when compared to tall, deep structures. Flat structures are more agile and flexible as a result of faster decision making. However to be successful flat structures require more competent employees as higher levels of responsibility is placed on each individual. Collaborative leaders seek to flatten their enterprises structures allowing individuals to take more responsibility, increased accountability for decision making and power to initiate change.

**4. Lead Horizontally:** Collaborative leadership is about breaking down silos and building trust based cross-functional relationships. This requires a shift in thinking about who's your team. Instead of seeing your team as consisting only of your direct reports you must learn to embrace the horizontal team consisting of your peers. Your peers, those leading and working in other functional disciplines, is your team. Leading a horizontal team requires influence and strong relationships. To lead outside your area of responsibility and accountability is the hall mark of collaborative leadership.

**5. Develop Leaders at All Levels:** Unless we invest massively in the development of leadership at all levels we'll be stuck with command-and-control as the primary way of getting things done. We'll constrain the extent to which the enterprise could embrace collaborative leadership. Sadly, many enterprises have historically underinvested in the development of the necessary leadership skills required throughout the organizational structures to navigate in complex, ambiguous and uncertain times.

Collaborative leaders focus intensely on the development of leaders at all levels of the enterprise. Everyone is a leader. Everyone is expected to take responsibility to lead. Everyone is developed to become a leader. Collaborative leaders commit to the development leaders at all levels. Letting go of control and sharing power gives other the opportunity to step up and develop their leadership skills.

One of the best ways to develop leader is through leadership experiences. This means viewing mistakes as a learning and development opportunities. It means placing your best leaders on your biggest opportunities, rather than your biggest problems. It means rotating individuals so they lead outside their comfort zone and to encourage them to lead strategic projects.

**6. Build a Foundation of Trust:** Trust is the foundation of effective team work and collaboration. When trust fails, leadership fails. All the dysfunctions of teams as described by Patrick Lencioni – the lack of accountability, fear of commitment, lack of conflict and the avoidance of accountability – are a result of the absence of trust. Trust is the foundation of successful team work and collaboration.

Trust does not “just happen” as the result of spending time with others. Trust needs to be deliberately nurtured and developed. Trust is a choice we make about someone, it's a belief in the competence, reliability, integrity and character of another person. To encourage trust you need to be trustworthy, it's a two way street. Collaborative leadership have the courage required to trust others, to risk being vulnerable and to expose who you are and what the stand for to others.

**7. Encourage Risk Taking:** Developing leaders at all levels means encouraging people to take initiative and the implications of that is we need to take risk. When individuals feel trusted and secure they're open to risk taking. This is a good thing. Thoughtful risk taking by individuals and teams is necessary for creativity, innovation, learning and growth. Without this, enterprises find themselves stuck in the mire of process, procedure, bureaucracy and the status quo. When individuals feel free to take risk they spend less of their time figuring out how to cover their asses and devote more time to driving change.

**8. Lead with Questions:** When you lead with questions you're trading control for collaboration. Information and knowledge is spread throughout the enterprise in different silos. To leverage this information require shifting the leadership role from providing the answers to asking questions. Effective questions opens up the conversation and the search for creative new solutions. Effective questions engage people in meaningful conversations. Conversation is how groups think. Effective questions generate conversation. Collaborative leaders bring people together in conversation around the enterprises biggest opportunities.

**9. Share Information Broadly:** Information is the lifeblood of any enterprise. Sharing information widely places everyone on same level, it encourages responsibility and collaboration. A continuous

stream of information about customers, suppliers, markets improves agility and decision making at all levels.

There was a time when information was seen as a source of power and many hoarded and withheld information. However collaborative leaders share information generously. This gives others the information they need to confidently step into leadership roles and take responsibility for initiating change.

Sharing information broadly contributes to building an environment of trust. Without information people feel isolated and tend to make up their own version of reality. This leads to gossip and rumours that undermine trust and leadership effectiveness. Collaborative leaders share information creating an environment of trust and openness.

**10. Support Transparent Decision Making:** Collaborative leadership requires that leaders share power and allows individuals to contribute and influence decisions. Collaborative leaders are clear about who makes decisions, how decisions will be made, who is accountable for the outcomes and how others can participate in the process. When decision making processes are transparent people spend less time questioning decisions and commit their energy to implementation.

Collaborative leaders create processes and systems that support participation in decision making. Transparent decision making processes empower individuals and teams with the authority to make decisions. They develop supporting principles, values and decision making criteria as decision making guidelines. This empowers individuals and teams by providing the necessary decision making processes and frameworks in which they can execute their decision making authority.

When individuals are involved in decision making they get a deeper understanding of the issues, challenges and constraints that influence decisions. When people feel their voice has been considered they're more likely support the decision. This builds the commitment necessary in support of the decisions implementation. Transparent decision making creates buy-in, builds trust.

**11. Encourage Constructive Conflict:** The active sharing of diverse perspectives provides a richer understanding of what's happening resulting in better decisions and outcomes. It's when we combine different ideas, perspectives and understanding that we gain insight. But such insight is hard won – it occurs as the result of difficult conversations around conflicting issues and concerns.

Encouraging constructive conflict in an environment where people are free to raise tough issues, to provide raw feedback to their leaders and team members is essential. Without open and constructive conflict innovation fails, decision making stumbles and creative solutions become scarce.

Collaborative leaders invest in building the interpersonal skills necessary for constructive conflict in themselves and others throughout the organisation. They celebrate diversity and welcome new and challenging perspectives with the goal of finding innovative solutions.

## **Conclusion**

Leading in turbulent times requires a deliberate shift from command-and-control towards a collaborative style of leadership. This is easier said than done. It demands that individuals at all levels take initiative and act in ways that supports the achievement of the vision, purpose and objectives of the enterprise. The freedom to take risk, to fail, to engage in constructive conflict, to participate in decision making and to experiment, to learn and innovate. All this is the result of collaborative leadership.

<http://www.georgeambler.com/11-practices-of-collaborative-leaders/>