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Collective Leadership: Activating the Gifts of Your Team

by Monica Brinkerhoff, Albert Murrieta, and Cassandra O'Neill

Go to the people. Live with them. Learn from them. Love them. Start with what they know. Build with what they have. But with the best leaders, when the work is done, the task accomplished, the people will say, "We have done this ourselves."

— Lao Tzu

What is Collective Leadership?

Collective leadership is a group of people working together toward a shared goal. Collective leadership goes above and beyond working as a team; it entails working as a system. When collective leadership is present, people say: We have done this ourselves.

Collective leadership can operate within a team, an organization, a collaboration, a community, and even a profession or system. It enables those in leadership positions to feel surrounded by support and resources rather than figuring out everything alone. In collective leadership, the concept of leadership shifts from something you do *to* or *for* others to something you do *with* others. And it is a way for people in any position within an organization to contribute to their fullest ability.

Not only is leading in this way more enjoyable, it surfaces and utilizes the gifts and strengths of staff, volunteers, program participants, and community members. In addition, this construct of leadership is a perfect fit for the early childhood field. Collective leadership is not far removed from the concept of valuing children as capable, competent learners, honoring the gifts and strengths of each individual child, and encouraging reflection and learning through asking thoughtful and intentional questions.

There is a growing recognition that society needs leaders who can navigate complexity, as many of the challenges

that we face are not simple (Senge, Hamilton, & Kania, 2015). Similarly, our field is complex and our work crosses multiple systems. The time is right to rethink leadership.

In her foreword of *Professionalizing Early Childhood Education as a Field of Practice: A Guide to the Next Era* (2015), Rhian Evans Allvin, executive director of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) writes:



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Cassandra O'Neill, CEO of Wholonomy Consulting, has over 25 years of experience building leadership capacity in the social sector. She is passionate about helping leaders create high performing teams so they achieve exceptional results. She has worked with leaders in over 200 organizations including libraries, schools, government agencies, foundations, and a variety of nonprofit organizations. Cassandra uses models that focus on getting more of what you want, creating a learning environment that is optimistic and enjoyable. She is passionate about building capacity for organizational effectiveness, system change, collaboration, collective impact, collective leadership, strategic learning, and evaluation. She has written articles for two Charity Channel newsletters and contributed chapters to multiple books on governance and community engagement. She has also authored multiple publications related to building capacity and readiness for collaboration and collective impact. Learn more about her at www.wholonomyconsulting.com and her new program www.bethebestbossever.com.

“Among other systems-building strategies, (we are asked) to contemplate our existing mental models, as they are often deeply embedded and might be obstructing our progress. (We are encouraged) to engage in personal reflection and initiate or participate in conversations with intent to develop a shared understanding and evolved direction... moving this boulder will take both a personal and collective commitment, and... the action required must come from inside the field.” (p. 9)

Nowhere are old mental models more destructive than in the realm of leadership. Traditional models of leadership are hierarchical, directive, and utilize top-down communication and decision making. In these models, the leader is the hero. These mental models have underlying assumptions that people need to be told what to do, often by one person at the top of an organization. Unfortunately, these structures prevent people from using their gifts and talents toward shared goals in schools, organizations, and communities across the country. At the same time, there is a national dialogue about collective impact initiatives, whose success is dependent on true collective leadership (Senge, Hamilton, & Kania, 2015).

Collective Leadership: Identify Shared Goals

The first step in collective leadership is to create common ground and establish shared values, goals, and motivation. Take time at the outset to explore what values those on your team bring to the work. Provide space for sharing values, goals, and motivations aloud, and then look for commonalities: Whose goals are being pursued? Do people feel they have a shared goal or that they are working toward someone else's goal? A collective leader helps people co-create a vision of the conditions they want to see.

Collective Leadership: Use Structures and Processes for Shared Decision Making

Explore shared decision making by looking at the kinds of decisions that are currently being made by leaders in your program, and how they are being made. If important decisions are being made by one or two people and then told to staff, there may be an opportunity to identify some decisions that might benefit from more staff involvement. There is an important caveat here: Although people love the opportunity to share their opinions and experiences, they don't like to be asked their opinion only to have it ignored. Prevent this by being clear about what you are seeking input on, and follow through with acting on feedback provided.

Collective Leadership: Identify and Build on Strengths

Explore what people are good at. What are their talents and interests? Building on strengths may seem obvious, but Gallup research (2014) suggests that the majority of businesses in the United States don't focus on employees' strengths. There are several good resources for surfacing the strengths of those on your team (see Resources section), but the most simple is to ask appreciative inquiry questions such as:

- “When do you feel you are at your best in your work?”
- “What gifts do you bring to the team?”
- “What are five (or your top) strengths?”
- “How might you use your strengths in your work/this coalition/this profession?”

According to Gallup, people perform better when leaders build on their strengths (Sorenson, 2014).

Collective Wisdom: The Whole is Greater Than the Sum of the Parts

To realize this ideal requires activation of the collective intelligence of the staff. How do you do that? First, it is necessary to begin with yourself. Make sure that you regularly engage in self-reflection and are committed to leading with a stance of collaboration.

Margaret Wheatley (2015) lists seven core practices of life-affirming leaders, which establish a solid foundation for anyone exploring collective leadership. According to Wheatley, these leaders:

- know they cannot lead alone.
- have more faith in people than they have in themselves.
- recognize human diversity as a gift and the human spirit as a blessing.
- act on the fact that people only support what they create.
- solve unsolvable problems by bringing new voices into the room.
- use learning as the fundamental process of resiliency, change, and growth.

- offer purposeful work as the necessary condition for people to engage fully.

These core practices support the process of realizing collective wisdom. And they are exactly what is necessary to convene and facilitate the intentional conversations that are necessary for our profession.

Collective Leadership in Practice

A champion of collective leadership, I saw an opportunity to build this capacity within our Head Start agency through a transformation of our pre-service professional development program. The goal was to create a team to lead this transformation that was passionate about facilitating the changes staff said they wanted — and in such a way that they felt it was their success.

My Story

Our agency is a large organization of over 500 employees. We serve approximately 2,300 children ages birth to five. As a Head Start agency, we provide comprehensive services, including education, family support, and health. Each year our organization hosts an event to welcome teachers back for the school year and to provide professional development. As can be imagined, we have multiple departments with a wide variety of interests and priorities that need to be considered and planned for:

- We started the planning process by gathering feedback from every level of the organization, asking staff what they wanted from the experience.
- We also hosted a facilitated discussion with staff from all departments to find out what topics would be a priority, based on best practice, Head Start Performance Standards, program evaluation results, and what participants wanted to know more about.
- We found commonalities among each and those became our topics.
- We also asked those in the planning group to talk about what our vision and goals were for pre-service training, using the feedback from participants as a starting point.
- All staff who would be planning and delivering the content participated in a learning session together about creating engaging adult learning experiences.

- Next, committees were formed to plan and develop content.

- We encouraged staff to take on tasks that they wanted to do to allow people to build upon their strengths; this way people were doing what they were naturally good at.

Albert, a curriculum coach, helped develop content and was one of our facilitators. His story illustrates how our shared goals were infused at all levels of the process.

Albert's Story

As a planning committee, we established a mutual goal to create training that would bridge learning with creativity, playfulness, and connecting with ourselves as leaders. During the planning process:

- we remained flexible in our roles; some of us preferred to research and design content while others emerged as lead facilitators for the workshops.
- we shared roles through a process of allowing each other to engage in ways that were aligned with our individual strengths.
- we strive, as facilitators, to create a learning climate where participants engaged with each other as fellow leaders, shared ideas by empowering one another, and learned key elements through the focus and use of materials. This allowed us to tap into the collective wisdom of those in the group.

In the activity shown in the photo, participants were invited to create an image of their leadership — in a way similar to how children are invited to create their self-image in our Reggio-inspired curriculum. Photograph by the authors



To the inexperienced eye, nothing particularly special or spectacular would seem evident from a pre-service workshop in Nogales, Arizona; on the other hand, deep learning and collaboration were happening. Nearly 30 teaching staff, home visitors, site supervisors, and program specialists came together on a Thursday afternoon for approximately three hours to think, explore, interact, and learn.

Participants began the afternoon by identifying and discussing leadership qualities, traits, and characteristics in connection to the Languages of Learning curriculum framework (Child-Parent Centers' Reggio-inspired curriculum), and made the parallel connection for how these tenets can relate with adults, just as they would be with children. The design of the workshop utilized what we know to be best practice in adult learning.

Conclusion

In our field we can feel isolated and overwhelmed by the pressure to get everything accomplished on our own. We are drawn to early childhood care and education because we want to help others and make a difference in the lives of children, but we can't do it alone. Opening your eyes to the possibilities of what you can accomplish with others can be liberating. There is power in the realization that not only do you have people to help you, but that you have a responsibility to recognize and build the strengths and leadership of others in the field. Your impact will be much greater when you work in partnership with those around you, inspiring and empowering their contributions in actualizing your shared goals.

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Resources

If readers would like to learn more about Collective Leadership, we have found these resources to be very helpful in our learning journey:

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