



# ERLN Practice Guide 4

## Collaborative Leadership Leading through negotiation, mediation and collective action

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## Introduction

Let us begin by defining what we mean by “collaborative leadership”. It is, in many ways, a counter-intuitive concept – after all, traditionally when we think of leadership, we think of a strong leader who leads from the front, from the top, the captain of the team who gives orders which then percolate down from the most senior person to the most junior.

In its most extreme form, this leadership is practiced in the military, where a lack of decisive, top-down leadership can spell the difference between life and death. But it is also a leadership style that is very common in business and government, where authoritarian management styles are often the norm, rather than the exception. We only have to read the Sunday newspapers – not just in South Africa, but globally - to find out about the latest politician or authoritarian manager in government who has been “outed” for being abusively authoritarian.

Collaborative leadership is almost the opposite of this: it is a process of leading through mediation, negotiation, collective decision-making and engaging with individuals and groups to achieve a desired outcome. It is not a quick process, nor is it always easy, especially considering that it is most applicable to situations where bigger and more diverse groups are involved, and often to situations with high levels of conflict.

David Archer and Alex Cameron, authors of *Collaborative Leadership – Building relationships, handling conflict and sharing control* look at collaborative leadership in the business world, and write:

“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.”<sup>1</sup>

In the context of local government and non-government organisational work, a more useful way of explaining collaborative leadership is that used by *Community Tool Box*, a service of the Work Group for Community Health and Development at the University of Kansas:

“Collaborative leadership is really defined by a process, rather than by what leaders do. It has much in common with both servant leadership and transformational leadership. It starts, according to David Chrislip and Carl Larson, in *Collaborative Leadership*, from the premise that ‘...if you bring the appropriate people together in constructive ways with good information, they will create authentic visions and strategies for addressing the shared concerns of the organisation or community.’

Collaborative leadership can be employed in almost any situation, and indeed is practiced in some businesses with great success, but is seen more often in community coalitions and initiatives, in community-based health and human service organisations, or in alternative education. People often find it particularly useful in situations where ‘no one is in charge,’ where there are issues or problems so complex that no one person or entity has either the information or the power to change them. (This doesn’t mean that no one has responsibility, but rather that sharing responsibility for the issue is necessary in order to arrive at a successful resolution of it.)”<sup>2</sup>

## Collaborative leadership: the African and South African context

We probably have not consciously made the link before, but although collaborative leadership as a concept emerged from Western business schools and universities, it is in many ways rooted in African culture. In South Africa, we would call it “Ubuntu leadership”. In Kenya, it was made an official slogan of the first post-colonial, independent government – “Harambee”, a KiSwahili word that literally means “pulling together” or “working together”. In Tanzania, the word “Ujamaa” (literally, the “family of humankind”) is used, and in Zambia, former president Kenneth Kaunda introduced the concept of “Humanism”. Whatever word is used, the meaning is the same.

“(Harambee) embodies ideas of mutual assistance, joint effort, mutual social responsibility and community self-reliance. It is therefore an informal development strategy of the people, by the people (with assistance from external sources, including the government) for the people. The efforts of the people, Non-governmental Organisations and the government come together in a co-operative endeavour to speed up development.”<sup>3</sup>

## Where should we apply collaborative leadership?

Collaborative leadership is particularly suited to the South African context, which is often one where participants engage from different cultural perspectives, competing economic interests and complex or competing political viewpoints. Examples of where it can be applied could include in an agricultural context, where local government, big commercial farmers, small subsistence farmers, trade unions and distributors need to find common ground despite having seemingly opposing interests.

Similarly, issues relating to, for example, health systems or housing, where there can be competing agendas and a variety of role-players and stakeholders involved, lend themselves to collaborative leadership.

As the *Community Tool Box* quoted above puts it:

“Collaborative leadership is the leadership of a process, rather than of people. It means maintaining a process that allows for the inclusion of all stakeholders involved in an issue or organisation or community effort; that depends on collaborative problem-solving and decision-making; and that is open and open-ended, with no foreordained conclusions. It is particularly valuable in situations where ‘no one is in charge,’ where the size and complexity of problems make it impossible for any individual or organisation alone to effect change.

Collaborative leadership encourages ownership of the collaborative enterprise, builds trust and minimises turf issues, allows for more and better information, leads to better and more effective solutions, encourages new leadership from within the collaboration, empowers the group or community, and can change the way a whole community operates. It can also take inordinate amounts of time, and requires that leaders deal with conflict and resistance to the collaborative process, bite their tongues as the group moves in directions they don’t agree with, and subordinate their egos to the process of the group.”<sup>4</sup>

It also – and this is vital in the South African context – requires the people who are working together to put aside political interests and differences, and work for the common good.



## How do you practice collaborative leadership?

Dr Carol Goman, a US body language coach who works with large corporations in leadership training, outlined eight essentials in an article on Forbes.com (see text box 1).<sup>5</sup>

Archer and Cameron write that “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.”<sup>6</sup>

They list three essential skills:

1. **Mediation** - Collaborative leaders need to be able to address conflict constructively and effectively as soon as it arises. This is a demanding skill... handling conflict and the associated mediation skills are often the number one leadership development priority.
2. **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.
3. **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.<sup>7</sup>

In addition, they say, collaborative leaders need mental agility – “a forward looking attitude of mind, coupled with an ability to quickly assimilate facts and ask incisive questions”; patience because collaborative leaders need to take “a calm and measured approach, reflecting on new information and giving confidence to others; and empathy – “collaborative leader(ship) must be underpinned by a willingness to truly listen and be open-minded to the views of others.”

### How to practice collaborative leadership, according to Dr Carol Goman

1. "Realise that silos can kill your business. Silo mentality is a mindset present when certain departments or sectors do not wish to share information with others in the same company... Wherever it's found, a silo mentality becomes synonymous with power struggles, lack of cooperation, and loss of productivity.
2. "Build your collaboration strategy around the 'human element.' In trying to capture and communicate the cumulative wisdom of a workforce, the public and private sectors have invested hundreds of millions of dollars in portals, software, and intranets. But collaboration... is, first and foremost, a change in attitude and behaviour of people throughout an organisation. Successful collaboration is a human issue.
3. "Use collaboration as an organisational change strategy... Whether the change involves creating new products, services, processes – or a total reinvention of how the organisation must look, operate, and position itself for the future – success dictates that the individuals impacted by change be involved in the change from the very beginning.
4. "Make visioning a team sport. Today's most successful leaders guide their organisations not through command and control, but through a shared purpose and vision... The power of a vision comes truly into play only when the employees themselves have had some part in its creation.
5. "Utilise diversity in problem solving... Groups composed of highly adept members perform worse than groups whose members have varying levels of skill and knowledge. The reason for this seemingly odd outcome has to do with the power of diverse thinking. Group members who think alike or are trained in similar disciplines with similar bases of knowledge run the risk of becoming insular in their ideas. Diversity causes people to consider perspectives and possibilities that would otherwise be ignored.
6. "Help people develop relationships. The outcome of any collaborative effort is dependent upon well-developed personal relationships among participants. Not allowing time for this can be a costly mistake... give your group time (upfront) to get to know one another, to discover each other's strengths and weaknesses, to build personal ties, and to develop a common understanding about the project.
7. "Focus on building trust. Trust is the belief or confidence that one party has in the reliability, integrity and honesty of another party. It is the expectation that the faith one places in someone else will be honoured. It is also the glue that holds together any group... suspicious and cynical employees are disinclined to collaborate — sharing knowledge is still perceived as weakening a personal 'power base'.
8. "Watch your body language. To show that you are receptive to other people's ideas, uncross your arms and legs. Place your feet flat on the floor and use open palm gestures (which is a body language display inviting others into the conversation). If you want people to give you their ideas, don't multi-task while they do... focus on those who are speaking by turning your head and torso to face them directly and by making eye contact. Leaning forward is another nonverbal way to show you're engaged and paying attention, as is head tilting. (The head tilt is a universal gesture of giving the other person an ear.) To encourage team members to expand on their comments, nod your head using clusters of three nods at regular intervals."

As John Folk-Williams puts it in an article titled *Defining Collaborative Leadership*, “To be most effective, a collaborative policy or problem-solving group has to operate as if its members were peers. I say ‘as if’ because generally there will be great differences in their levels of experience with the issue, the resources at their disposal, technical expertise, and the authority and influence of the agencies they represent.

“But the point of the process is to take advantage of the creativity of interaction among these diverse perspectives. It is not to emphasise differences, setting one participant apart from another or empowering some over others. That may be the reality outside the collaborative space, but, within it, results depend on mutual respect and reciprocity in the exchange of ideas.”<sup>8</sup>

## References

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5. <http://www.forbes.com/sites/carolkinseygoman/2014/02/13/8-tips-for-collaborative-leadership/>
6. See endnote 1.
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8. <http://www.crosscollaborate.com/2010/06/collaborative-leadership-eshift-the-burden-thinking/united-colors-38/>