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## LEADING COLLABORATION

### Introduction

Those involved in collaborations often report difficulties in reaching agreement about the purpose of the collaboration and in maintaining the necessary levels of personal and organisational commitment over the longer term. These difficulties can be accentuated when collaborators encounter doubt, distrust or institutional and/or stakeholder resistance. Multiparty collaboration is complex. It often requires partners to navigate uncharted organisational and operational terrain, and to understand and reconcile diverse perspectives, priorities and needs. Collaboration is often undertaken in circumstances of uncertainty and the precise trajectory of collaborative endeavour can take unanticipated turns.

For all these reasons, collaboration needs to be led with sensitivity and insight. Leading collaboration is not project management nor is it a linear sequence of tasks with predefined, predictable results. Instead, it is an organic process. Understandably, the 'organic' aspects of collaboration sometimes conflict with the formal rules, protocols or habitual behaviours of organisations and institutions. Working across organisational, domain and sectoral boundaries to solve complex public problems places a greatly enhanced emphasis on skills relating to conflict resolution, engaging the public and balancing ethical priorities (Getha-Taylor and Morse 2013: 75).

The practice and attributes of effective leadership in the context of collaboration can be quite different to the leadership attributes often sought after in a traditional management role, and there is abundant emerging evidence that collaborative governance requires a set of leadership competencies quite distinct from those traditionally rooted in hierarchy and formal authority (Getha-Taylor and Morse 2013: 95). In this chapter, we discuss leadership as a critical factor in effective collaboration. We also consider two dimensions of collaborative leadership: first, the personal/individual qualities, attributes and competencies required by collaboration leaders; and second, collaborative leadership as a process.

## **Leadership in the public, private and not-for-profit sectors**

The subject of leadership is under greater scrutiny than ever before (Terry et al. 2019). It is all very well to stress the importance of leadership in collaboration, but what kind of leadership does collaboration require? And, in multiparty collaborations involving participants from different sectors, what account needs to be taken of any differences between leadership traditions or paradigms that prevail in the public, private and not-for-profit sectors, and to what extent might these differences—presuming they exist—affect collaboration?

Relationships between public sector entities and their not-for-profit partners can be distorted by power differentials and by the market logics underpinning contractual relationships (Furieux and Ryan 2014: 1131). Babiak and Thibault (2009: 138) suggest that partnerships formed across multiple sectoral boundaries involve the union of different—and potentially incompatible—missions, goals and values. They also contend that ‘feelings of ambiguity, resentment, uncertainty, and suspicion’ can result from ‘perceived power imbalances’ arising from resource inequities and political backing (Babiak and Thibault 2009: 137).

Orazi et al. (2013: 486) suggest that administrative leaders in the public sector behave differently from their counterparts in the business world, and point to the need for leadership development programs that ‘focus on these differences instead of merely mimicking programs designed for leaders in the private sector’. Their research suggests the emergence of a distinctive style of public sector leadership that is more dispersed, and

shared, and on the whole more conducive to networks of peer organisations and collaborative governance (Orazi et al. 2013: 497). The authors suggest that, compared with their private sector counterparts, public sector leaders ‘have to ensure higher accountability to different stakeholders and face higher levels of formalisation and red tape’ (Orazi et al. 2013: 492). In addition, while public sector leaders exhibit ‘lower levels of satisfaction due to excessive constraints’, they have, on the whole, a stronger sense of ‘public service motivation’ (Orazi et al. 2013: 492).

Whereas the contemporary public sector leans more towards ‘participative’ leadership styles that rely on dialogue and coaching, cooperation and delegation, the private sector, by contrast, is more inclined towards ‘directive’ leadership styles based on the application of rules and instructions aimed at implementing readymade, established strategies (Vogel and Masal 2012; Hansen and Villadsen 2010). Such a finding might, at first blush, seem surprising and even counterintuitive. Vogel and Massal (2012: 12) explain that managers working in complex environments—such as those characteristic of large parts of the public sector—tend to favour the participative leadership style:

Complex issues are presumably solved more effectively by involving the employees than by means of rules and control mechanisms ... In contrast, however, if the working environment is not seen as being very complex, it would seem that autonomy is limited and the role definition is less clear. In this case, the directive leadership style is preferred, which by means of rules and control mechanisms can deal more effectively with the circumstance of limited autonomy and lack of clear role definition.

Andersen (2010: 140) notes that both public and private sector leaders ‘face the same challenges of achieving organisational goals with or through other people’. Even so, leaders in both sectors display marked differences in behaviour: whereas both public and private sector leaders employ intuitive decision-making styles, the former tend to be ‘change-oriented’ (insofar as they are open to new and different ways of doing things) while the latter tend to be more ‘relationship-oriented’ (in that they are sensitive to the nature and quality of their relationships with colleagues) (Andersen 2010: 133, 135). Also, public sector leaders tend to be motivated by ‘achievement’ (a desire to excel, to do something unique or surpass some standard of excellence) whereas private sector leaders tend to be motivated by ‘power’ (to make powerful actions, make an impression or secure reputation and position) (Andersen 2010: 133–37).

According to Terry et al. (2019), there is neither a clear evidence base nor a consensus about what constitutes ‘good’ leadership in the not-for-profit sector. They note that structural challenges confronting the sector have contributed to the emergence of a ‘deficit’ view of not-for-profit leadership—a view that reflects a ‘widespread belief that voluntary organisations lack leadership skills—and that if these could be identified and distilled, they could then be imparted and embedded via leadership development programmes’ (Terry et al. 2019: 2). However, they point to a lack of convincing evidence for such a proposition, instead suggesting the way forward is to ‘reject theories and models that traditionally place the focus on individuals and on hierarchical models of leadership’, focusing instead on ‘conceptualisations of leadership that emphasise its collective nature’ (Terry et al. 2019: 2).

Terry et al. (2019: 10) conclude that there has been excessive focus on the characteristics and skills of individuals in formal leadership positions, and only limited exploration of leadership *processes*:

[M]edia narratives all too often associate the achievements of voluntary sector organisations with the heroic endeavours of extraordinary individuals (a yearning to identify and celebrate such individuals is also apparent in the wider culture), and failure with the character failings of occupants of senior positions.

This emphasis on the ‘person’, they suggest, encourages an ‘elusive search for heroic leaders’ and is potentially elitist in its consequences (Terry et al. 2019: 10). Terry et al. (2019: 10) challenge the heroic leader narrative and argue instead for ‘collective’ approaches in which leadership responsibilities are dispersed and shared and that have the capacity to encourage more diverse sources of leadership and ‘offer more bottom-up relational organisations ways of understanding and exploring leadership that resonate with their values’. Collective approaches to leadership, they say, offer a *process perspective* in which individuals and stakeholders influence one another relationally, share responsibilities and hold one another accountable (Terry et al. 2019: 10). Viewed from a process perspective, leadership is about *how* leaders get things done (Terry et al. 2019: 3).

## Leadership in collaboration

The initiation of a collaboration or partnership requires catalytic leadership in the form of a powerful convenor or brokering organisation able to leverage influence and social capital to overcome institutional or cultural resistance. Once this has been established, leaders need to be able to balance diversity and resolve tensions between stakeholders (Bowden and Ciesielska 2016: 24).

Ansell and Gash (2012: 18) argue that the distinctive quality of collaborative leadership is that it is *facilitative* rather than *directive*, in that facilitative leadership creates ‘the conditions that support the contributions of stakeholders to the collaborative process and effective transactions among them’. In this respect, Ansell and Gash appear to view facilitative leadership very much through the kind of *process* lens advocated by Terry et al. (2019).

Ansell and Gash (2012: 18) identify three types of facilitative leaders:

1. *Stewards*, who facilitate the collaborative process ‘by protecting the integrity of the collaborative process itself’.
2. *Mediators*, who facilitate ‘by helping to arbitrate and nurture relationships between stakeholders’.
3. *Catalysts*, who help stakeholders ‘to identify and realize value-creating opportunities’.

They also propose that facilitative leadership typically requires leaders to ‘play all three of these roles’, although their relative prominence will be influenced by ‘antecedent conditions, systems context, and collaborative goals’ (Ansell and Gash 2012: 18). This they refer to as a ‘contingency approach’ to collaborative governance in which it is assumed that leadership styles will be shaped by the distinctive demands of particular tasks, goals and contexts (Ansell and Gash 2012: 3).

Ansell and Gash (2012: 18) extend their analysis to identify two different styles of facilitative leadership:

1. The *professional facilitator*, who ‘adopts a neutral stance towards outcomes, comes from outside the community, and is independent of any of the stakeholders’.
2. The *organic leader*, who ‘comes from the stakeholder community, and can generally draw on extensive social capital, but may not be neutral with respect to outcomes’.

Table 7.1 The collaborative leadership role

Collaborative leadership roles	General definition	Skills and strategies	Distinctive role of professional facilitator	Distinctive role of organic leader
Steward	Establishes and protects the integrity of the collaborative process	Lends reputation and social capital to convene the process Establishes the inclusiveness, transparency, neutrality and civic character of the process Manages the image and identity of the collaborative process	Professional facilitator may be more important in establishing process ground rules than in initially convening the process	Organic leader may be critical in convening a collaborative process, because an organic leader has reputation and social capital to invest
Mediator	Arbitrates and nurtures relationships between stakeholders	Serves as 'honest broker' in mediating disputes Facilitates the construction of shared meaning Restores process to positive interaction Builds trust among stakeholders (specific strategies depend on goals and baseline trust)	Professional facilitator role may have an easier time establishing credentials as 'honest broker'; professionals often have sophisticated communication and negotiation skills	Organic leaders may be more effective in intervening to move difficult processes forward; may have context-specific knowledge valuable for adjudication
Catalyst	Identifies value-creating opportunities and mobilises stakeholders to pursue them	Engages in 'systems thinking' Frames or reframes problems Creates mutually reinforcing links between collaboration and innovation	Professional facilitators are probably less likely to engage in catalytic leadership	Organic leaders are likely to draw on contextual knowledge and unique relationships to act catalytically

Source: Ansell and Gash (2012: 8).

Although both types of leader can serve as ‘honest brokers’, Ansell and Gash argue that the professional facilitator ‘will have an easier time establishing their neutrality, but a harder time motivating and persuading stakeholders to make effective contributions’, whereas organic leaders can ‘cajole and mobilise, but may have trouble convincing stakeholders of their neutrality’:

Thus, the professional facilitator will probably not have much luck in convening stakeholders, but may do a good job of maintaining the integrity of the process. Organic leaders may do a good job convening collaborative forums, but may also become the target of distrust as collaboration unfolds. With respect to mediation, professional facilitators will easily stand ‘above the fray’ and will have the professional skills to effectively mediate. Organic leaders, however, may have advantages in arbitrage that requires translation between different specialised idioms. Finally, with respect to catalytic leadership, our expectation is that organic leaders will have the advantage, since recognition of value-creating opportunities often requires a deep familiarity with the substantive issues at stake. Our expectation is that collaborative governance that aims for creative problem-solving will require strong catalytic leadership from organic leaders. (Ansell and Gash 2012: 18)

## **Collaboration leadership**

The role of a leader in a collaborative endeavour is different to the role of the traditional manager, who, more often than not, is obliged to function in a hierarchical, as well as a vertically and horizontally segmented, operating environment. Instead, successful collaboration leaders predominantly work in a non-hierarchical manner where they will likely need to manage the expectations of internal and external stakeholders and engage with collaboration partners to come to mutual understandings about the articulation of goals, methods, timelines and reporting processes (Luke 1997: 24).

Unlike traditional governing roles based on rules, protocols and chains of command, leading collaboration is about curating and cultivating relationships, resolving differences and sharing control (Archer and Cameron 2012). Collaboration leaders are generally more ‘facilitative’ than ‘directive’; indeed, ‘captain’s calls’ or executive decisions by leaders can undermine trust in, and commitment to, collaboration.

Trust is a kind of currency or lubricant that allows people to engage in reciprocal risk-taking and work towards shared goals and objectives (Williams 2002: 114), and building trust is one of the most important activities of collaborative leaders (Atchison and Bujak 2001; Crosby and Bryson 2010; Ansell and Gash 2012; Williams 2002). Collaboration leaders use the trust they have built up to mediate or broker discussion between stakeholders, thereby helping to reduce the potential for conflict (Ansell and Gash 2012; Gray 2008). (For an expanded discussion, see Chapter 10.)

In the complex environments characteristic of collaboration, contradictions and tensions sometimes arise between the collaboration leadership and the prevailing values and norms in partner organisations. It is essential, therefore, that trust also exists between authorisers and collaboration leaders (see Chapter 6).

Effective collaboration leaders also invest time in building diverse networks to allow different points of view to be voiced in discussions and reflected in decisions made (Archer and Cameron 2012). This requires collaboration leaders to use both formal and informal processes to engage their fellow collaborators, share responsibility and ensure that all partners feel they are an important part of the process. This includes being especially attentive to any power imbalances between partners and stakeholders (Fletcher and Käufer 2003).

Collaboration leaders also need to be able to protect collaborative processes politically and adapt to what is likely to be an ever-changing environment while keeping the collaboration objectives in sight.

## **The importance of ‘boundary-spanners’**

Multiparty collaboration is at its most effective when it is led by people who are adept at building and sustaining relationships, managing within non-hierarchical environments, managing complexity and understanding the motives, roles and responsibilities of collaboration partners (Williams 2002: 103). These are the ‘boundary-spanners’—people with exceptional networking skills who are able to cultivate interpersonal relationships, who have ‘an appreciation of the interdependencies around the structure of problems and their potential solutions’, who are able to facilitate communication over ‘social ground’ rather than between ‘institutional grounds’, who are entrepreneurial and ‘creative lateral thinking rule

breakers', and who are able to bring unlikely partners together, break through red tape and frame problems in a different way (Williams 2002: 109–10).

Williams (2002: 109–10) points out that boundary-spanners play an important role in instilling and reinforcing trust within collaborative networks. A note of caution is warranted, however. Although the kind of social bonding that takes place through interpersonal networking can be extremely positive, there are potential downsides associated with informality and an overreliance on personal relationships, which could be inherently fragile (Williams 2002: 110).

Williams notes that boundary-spanners generally consider that their employing organisation has 'the first call on their responsibility', but they also recognise that there are multiple sources of authority and legitimacy in multipartner settings:

A poor partner is perceived as one who slavishly or dogmatically ploughs a representative furrow in partnership arenas and, irritatingly, has to 'report back' everything to the home organization. Conversely, the more effective partners are those who are empowered, within certain negotiated parameters, to engage constructively with other partners. They have a feel for what may or may not be acceptable to their home organizations and are ready to play the partnership game. (Williams 2002: 120)

Williams (2002) has distilled the 'art of boundary-spanning', which is summarised in Table 7.2.

**Table 7.2 The art of boundary-spanning**

<b>Key elements of boundary-spanning</b>	<b>Key competencies of boundary-spanning</b>
<p><b>Building sustainable relationships</b> by understanding people and the organisations they represent, and managing difference in the pursuit of mutually beneficial agendas</p>	<p><b>Communicating and listening:</b> Searching for shared meanings through a two-way process in which receiving information (listening) is as important as giving information</p> <p><b>Understanding, empathising and resolving conflict:</b> Building robust relationships that can manage conflict and criticism while retaining a willingness to move on without harming the relationship</p> <p><b>Personality:</b> People with the defining traits of respect, honesty, openness, tolerance, approachability, reliability, sensitivity and an ability to divest themselves of organisational and professional baggage</p> <p><b>Trust:</b> A key variable influencing the effectiveness of collaborative relationships and essentially a condition constituted in the relationships between individuals, although by implication organisations can acquire a reputation for being more or less trustworthy, thus underscoring the inherent difficulty of disentangling personal from institutionalised forms of trust</p>
<p><b>Managing through influencing and negotiation</b> in environments characterised by power relationships that are more contested and dispersed than is often the case in traditional bureaucracies</p>	<p><b>Influencing:</b> Being persuasive and diplomatic, being constructive and nonjudgemental, leading on some occasions but facilitating in others and being acutely aware of political and personal sensibilities</p> <p><b>Negotiation</b> over aims, funding proposals, operational programs, priorities, resource allocation and so on</p> <p><b>Brokering:</b> Devising solutions informed by an acute understanding of interdependencies between problems, solutions and organisations</p> <p><b>Networking:</b> Involving exchanges of information, having access to new ideas, seeking support from and influencing others, learning about resource opportunities (often, and most effectively, via conversations that occur outside formal decision-making structures)</p>
<p><b>Managing complexity and interdependencies</b> through the application of interorganisational experience, transdisciplinary knowledge and cognitive capability</p>	<p><b>Making sense:</b> An appreciation of connections and interrelationships manifested in different ways at different stages in the partnership process; dealing with often-disparate bodies of technical knowledge and professional expertise; partner search, problem diagnosis, defining roles and responsibilities, negotiating goals and developing crosscutting agendas</p> <p><b>Innovation:</b> The ability to collaboratively fashion new solutions to previously intractable problems through the skilful negotiation of sustainable partnership agreements and the successful mobilisation or leveraging-in of resources</p>

Key elements of boundary-spanning	Key competencies of boundary-spanning
<p><b>Managing roles, accountabilities and motivations</b> through an acute awareness of the configuration of roles and responsibilities between agencies within an existing or emerging interorganisational domain, and the political and professional sensibilities that encompass them</p>	<p><b>Awareness</b> of the potential conflict between one's role as organisational representative and that of a partner in a multi-organisational endeavour; of conflicting accountabilities and multiple sources of accountability  <b>Understanding</b> the parameters and constraints of each partner</p>

Source: Williams (2002: 114–21).

## Collaboration as a process

Just over 25 years ago, Hood et al. (1993: 14) made the following observations:

Cross-sectoral collaborations are unusual groups in many ways. They bring together individuals, primarily leaders, from divergent sectors in the community to work together on a problem or concern they share ...

The goals, values, and ideologies of the individual participants may differ greatly, and they are expected to solve a problem of large magnitude and over a long-term duration. Each collaborative group develops a sense of the group-as-a-whole, where norms and cultures emerge that are singular to that group. The subgroups that form may be based upon ideology, or they may form according to social status, gender, ethnic origin, or basic personality factors. Interpersonal factors, including communication processes, trust, and conflict, will either contribute to or detract from the success of the collaboration.

These observations remain as true today as when they were first published.

Working with external stakeholders entails a different set of activities and requisite competencies than goal-oriented organisational leadership (Getha-Taylor and Morse 2013: 78). Getha-Taylor and Morse (2013)—drawing on Morse and Stephens (2012), among others—have attempted to distil the broad phases of collaboration and core collaborative competencies (see Table 7.3) at the heart of which is a set of behaviours (and related attributes and skills) that revolves around: understanding and

identifying stakeholders, convening them, designing appropriate processes for them, facilitating agreements among them, designing appropriate governance arrangements for agreements reached and keeping them together to implement what is decided.

**Table 7.3 Phases of collaboration and collaborative competencies**

<b>Phases of collaboration</b>			
<b>Assessment</b>	<b>Initiation</b>	<b>Deliberation</b>	<b>Implementation</b>
Issue analysis	Stakeholder engagement	Group facilitation	Developing action plans
Environmental assessment	Political/community organisation	Team-building and group dynamics	Designing governance structures
Stakeholder identification	Building social capital	Listening	Public engagement
Strategic thinking	Process design	Consensus-building	Network management
		Interest-based negotiation	Conflict resolution
			Performance evaluation
<b>Collaborative competencies</b>			
Collaborative mindset Passion for creating public value Systems thinking		Openness and risk-taking Sense of mutuality and connectedness Humility or measured ego	

Source: Getha-Taylor and Morse (2013: 78).

Consistent with many other researchers and commentators, Perrault et al. (2011: 296) emphasise the process-intensive nature of collaboration: ‘Implementing collaborations is not easy. The cost of participation is high, requiring a commitment of time and resources that must be outweighed by the benefits of collaboration.’

Pointing to the challenges of collaboration, ‘not the least of which is the cost, time, and patience required to collaborate’, Perrault et al. (2011: 283) identify three important success factors for collaboration:

1. Established informal relationships and communication links (personal connections).
2. The attention paid to the development of mutual respect, understanding and trust.
3. A norm of shared leadership incorporating a ‘learning purpose’ at both the individual and the organisational levels (p. 296).

## Shared leadership

Bowden and Ciesielska (2016: 29) consider that public sector managers ‘do not need to hold the naturally powerful, collaborative leadership roles—convenor, conduit and funder—that they used to’. Instead, they suggest, public sector managers need to adapt to the new role of ‘leveraging the legitimacy gained through their technical assistance provider role to influence the direction and content of cross-sector partnerships’ (Bowden and Ciesielska 2016: 29).

Shared leadership can be very positive for collaborations. Crosby and Bryson (2005: 184) observe:

A central challenge for leaders is to bring diverse stakeholders together in shared-power arrangements in which they can pool information, other resources and activities around a common purpose. The focus should be on key stakeholders—those most affected by a social need or public problem or who have important resources for meeting the need.

In collaboration, unlike traditional hierarchical leadership, there are no direct lines of authority over partners. Collaboration works on the basis of consensus, equality and win–win solutions, requiring the application of skills such as negotiation, mediation, bargaining and brokering (Williams 2002). By sharing, leadership partners will feel empowered to engage constructively with one another. As Crosby and Bryson (2010: 222) observe, cross-sector collaborations are more likely to succeed if leaders use resources and tactics to help equalise power, to avoid imposed solutions and to effectively manage conflict.

Crucially, this requires those leading the collaboration to both understand the needs of partners and stakeholders and work towards a shared understanding of each participant’s respective needs and priorities. It is not necessary for the needs and priorities of each partner or stakeholder to be identical; it *does* require a willingness to understand and respect the differing motivations of partners and key stakeholders and bring goodwill to the task of agreeing to feasible and constructive actions and strategies.

## Succession, structure and governance

It is sometimes said of collaborations that they are ‘hero led’—meaning they are often led by charismatic ‘policy entrepreneurs’, who, through the force of their energy, imagination and connections, are able to spearhead new initiatives or win support for new ideas, even in the face of organisational or institutional resistance. There is, however, an inherent fragility to hero-led initiatives. Former head of the Australian Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet Peter Shergold offered the following observation in a 2018 interview with public health think tank the Sax Institute:

Too often I have seen excellent collaborative partnerships falter when leadership ‘heroes’ move on to different organisations. Somehow the culture of collaboration must be embedded into governance structures to ensure its longevity. (Shergold 2018: 2)

Collaboration should not have to depend on charismatic heroes. Rather, all organisations operating in environments characterised by complexity and interdependency—regardless of which sector they inhabit—need to inculcate the range of competencies required for successful boundary-spanning. Collaborative behaviours should be habitual, not exceptional. For this to happen, all members of the leadership teams of partner organisations need to ‘walk the talk’. In this way, collaboration leads can have some confidence that authorisers ‘have their back’.

Authorisers and collaboration partners need to be mindful of the risks flowing from the person-centred nature of collaboration leadership: burnout and the turnover of key personnel can lead to a loss of corporate memory, and the departure of leaders—heroic leaders, in particular—can undermine collaborative purpose and strategic intent (Butcher et al. 2019; Ansell and Gash 2012). These are foreseeable and manageable risks that can be mitigated by the adoption of a governance framework that builds capacity for the future needs of the collaboration and includes provisions for business continuity and succession planning.

## What the cases tell us

### Collaboration leadership

In some respects, collaboration is about reconciling—or at least accommodating—diverse and nuanced perspectives on problems and contributing to solving those problems. Each of the policy spaces in which our cases operate involves stakeholders who work from quite different vantage points. A capacity to acknowledge, balance and valorise differences of perspective—whether cultural, institutional or disciplinary—is an essential component of collaboration leadership.

However, as discussed above, leadership sometimes has an ephemeral quality that tends to reside in individuals and is not necessarily endemic in organisational culture. As one Throughcare interviewee observed:

If I think about the collaborations that happen between organisations outside of government, the longevity of those depends on the longevity of key leaders staying the same. In government, it's very rare for key leaders to be in their roles for really long periods of time. So, the collaborations are time-limited because they're limited by the people ... When you get the right people with the right skill set and the right leadership capability, they find the opportunities to make things happen.

Another interviewee observed that collaboration leadership 'is a cultural issue', noting that authorisation to engage collaboratively:

has to cascade downward from [executive] leadership ...

People acting entrepreneurially off their own bat can achieve a lot, but if they're hobbling around with a ball and chain then they can only go so far. (CAP)

It is also possible that, over time, as a collaborative initiative evolves, the style and skill mix required to carry the initiative forward might change:

I remember a boss saying to me once when I went into a role that he was looking for someone very different to fill the same role when I came on board than the person that preceded me because they'd done a certain lot of things and taken things to a level and achieved what they needed, but now as a result of that they actually needed something quite different. So that does lead

me to wonder about not just that conundrum of everything being dependent on the individual but also about our overall leadership that sees us needing to have one person there for the longevity of an initiative and whether that's viable. (CAP)

Leadership can, as one interviewee observed, come from a number of different quarters: it might come from someone assigned a formal management role, from a respected member of the community or from someone in another organisation who 'steps up'. It might be all three. However, leadership does sometimes need to be 'nudged':

What do we do to get the right leadership ... I think if we'd had a leadership change implementation program going alongside the implementation of the initiative, we would have been much more successful. (CAP)

Two themes that emerged from the interviews—often in conjunction—were the 'conundrum' of person-centred leadership and the predominance of an operational/transactional leadership paradigm that fails to incorporate the attributes or skills essential for collaboration:

Reflecting back on your question around the leadership ending up being very dependent on the personality in a role, it does prompt me to think and ask, if we acknowledge that it is about some unique individuals, then how do we cultivate a pool of that kind of individual? Normally we cultivate—certainly in the government sector—subject matter experts; we don't cultivate leaders that have these intrinsic things that certainly help the collaborative approach. (CAP)

## **A competency framework for collaboration**

Leading collaboration requires good, innate facilitation skills. Collaborative leaders have a sound understanding of the constraints under which partners and stakeholders are obliged to operate. They know when to step in, and when to step back. As one interviewee suggested:

I think a good leader probably knows when it's time for them to step out of their own spotlight and do what they are there for but also is able to surround themselves with smart expertise within their team and put those people forward when it is more appropriate. (Change the Story)

Collaboration leaders need to be able to inspire people to action, demonstrate empathy and manage egos. They require the capacity to obtain a nuanced understanding of the community, institutional and policy spaces in which they work or which are impacted by the collaborative project, and they understand what shapes people's perceptions and what fuels their fears and their hopes. Collaborative leadership is about enabling key players to contribute to shared leadership:

I see leadership as about setting directions, but it's also about giving others the wherewithal to assist in getting there. And it's also about succession planning. It is not just about individuals; it is about having a group of people that can share that leadership. (Throughcare)

Of course, leadership also has practical, instrumental applications, as expressed by another interviewee:

A function of leadership is direction, protection and order. So, having the ability to let them know that risk-taking is acceptable; giving them the protection that you're going to back them up, which is not a common public service mantra; and creating an ... ordered environment. (Throughcare)

Importantly, leading collaboration does not rely solely on formal instrumental leadership. Success resides in the judicious empowerment of frontline workers and communities:

I think that one of the learnings has been that we need to engage, that you really need to have both mandated leadership—the support of mandated leadership of CEOs and those sorts of people to give their workers a mandate to work in a particular way—as well as leadership in the broader sense of good community leadership. Both of them are important ... the people who are employed by the health services have got a very limited mandate, really. Unless their leaders, their managers, have a broad view about the work being done in the community rather than in delivering services then they really are very limited. (WHO STOPS, GSC Change)

A recurring theme in the interviews is that personal qualities are as important to the success of collaboration as technical or business skills:

The personal qualities of people to implement things have the greatest influence on the success of an initiative, more than the clinical ones and more than the technical ones. You need those, but they are not as important. I think that's what's coming

to be known: people's personal strengths about staying calm, being in control, resilience, maintaining the bigger, longer-term picture, supporting people who are less confident about those things, more anxious about why isn't it working now—they are the leadership skills that are required longer term to be successful. (CAP)

## **Creative rule-breakers**

Collaboration leaders are also operating in spaces where normative organisational rules are blurred. They need to have a clear understanding of normative boundaries while also being prepared to step over those boundaries. The following quote captures a common sentiment:

There are some fantastic people out there who just do the right thing regardless of all of those kinds of rules or regulations. But they are very rare in my experience. (CAP)

Effective collaboration leaders are creative, often charismatic, rule-breakers; however, they are most effective when they have express authorisation to exercise initiative and when they have confidence that authorisers will back them up. Conversely, authorisers need to have confidence in the judgement of collaboration leaders and assurance that they will be kept informed about any real or potential risks:

At a leadership level, it's giving your staff permission to share information and managing and then having trust and confidence that you will manage that risk. (CAP)

Collaboration leaders are trusted sources of information; they are also 'myth busters', being less concerned with enacting 'bureaucratic intent' and more focused on community activation and fostering constructive relationships based on trust and reciprocity. And because the levels of collaboration skills represented around the table are often uneven, it is a prime objective of collaboration leaders to raise the collective collaborative intelligence of others and bring diverse, complementary skills and knowledge to the collaboration:

It's about being able to inspire people to want to go over and above what it is that their formal job description might be.

... Being able to be discerning, being quite strategic, being able to manage egos and being able to inspire people. I don't think that it's smart for any of us to think that as one individual we will have all of those skill sets and that alone we are going to be the reason why this program stands up or falls down. We won't. (CBEM)

Finally, collaboration leaders often succeed in spite of the bureaucracies in which they are employed—bureaucracies that do not necessarily realise that these are the very people they need:

It's the entrepreneurialship [sic], I think, that we don't look for enough. People who are going to push boundaries and challenge. We can all be great public servants and stick to all the rules and stuff. We've got to find some rule-breakers and get them into leadership roles. Then we'll really start to see some change, I believe. (CAP)

## Leave your ego at the door

One interviewee from Victoria suggested that ego can be toxic in collaboration settings and added that 'reluctant leaders are best'. A good leader is one who can 'abandon their ego to the talent of others' (De Pree 1987). While acknowledging the importance of formal authority (often associated with seniority) to drive a collaboration agenda, interviewees often cited the attributes of humility and a willingness to listen as indispensable features of effective collaboration leadership:

We had enough people with sufficient seniority who wanted to see the program get up, but they were also willing to work with people with sufficient knowledge and expertise to design a good program. So, we got that sweet spot of people with sufficient authority to drive a change agenda but with sufficient humility to be guided. That's a hard thing to land in that sweet spot. Usually the style of leadership is, 'I have authority and I'll make decisions', whereas these people said: 'I have authority, and I will listen and I'm prepared to change my mind.' (Throughcare)

Of course, one of the challenges facing any collaboration leader is managing the egos of other stakeholders. One interviewee encapsulated the problem as follows:

It is about dealing with other people's egos, and that is not exclusive to the agencies or the departments. We're dealing with the egos of other community representatives at any given time and in any community. So, if their ego is bigger than what they've actually got to offer in the short, medium and long term to an initiative then for me that's a game changer. Because now my passenger is obstructive for starters because that ego is getting in the way, and we are now needing to carry that inefficiency and do it in such a way that that ego continues to be massaged, and that is exhausting and unhelpful and unproductive. (CBEM)

## Relaxing institutional rules

The nurturing of collaborative approaches depends heavily on executive sponsorship and the selective relaxation of the usual institutional rules. The *quid pro quo* in these understandings is that the collaboration leader will act judiciously and provide timely information and assurance to the executive. This is a ‘no surprises’ relationship but not a ‘no risk’ relationship. However, there can also be an inherent fragility in executive-level support for collaboration owing to mobility and changing personnel or changes in the political or operating environment.

A sentiment commonly expressed in the interviews is that leaders with the skills necessary to both maintain respectful relationships at the coalface *and* deftly manage the executive are uncommon and hard to recruit because, as one interviewee astutely observed:

You needed someone that could do both, and that was very hard to find someone that could do both that also had the trust of both sides. It was very hard to do that. And more often than not it didn't work. There were trade-offs along the way, and it just didn't work. You either got one or you got the other. (CAP)

Other interviewees speculated about the reasons for this difficulty:

That's not often how you advertise a job. You advertise with particular academic qualifications or experience. To have to steel the person to be able to weed through some of these tensions, and also to be able to do this sort of work in the prevention space, where ultimately you're sitting across all of these jurisdictions, literal differences, both at a macro and [a] micro level, being able to do that stuff sensitively and with a sense of humour. I think the sense of humour bit is the only bit that probably gets you through when you get into some of the really dark, sticky bits. But being able to reach out across communities and acknowledge your privilege in the space but also that sensitivity to different things. (Change the Story)

Yet another said:

I mean [I] know you've got to work within the political context and stuff like that, but there's always little things you can do within the system, if you like, that kind of challenges that stuff ... And there'll be pockets of brilliance and it's kind of like how do you recognise that talent and not knock the stuffing out of them through rules of bureaucracy, because that's often what happens to those people, isn't it? (CAP)

## Continuous communication

Collaboration leaders and partners invest an extraordinary amount of time in communication—with each other, with the executive, middle management and frontline workers of their own organisations, agencies or community groups, and with the range of external stakeholders who are in some way affected by the collaboration:

There has to be a [recognition] amongst the stakeholders that there's a problem. The collaboration, to me, is getting the stakeholders together around a common problem and then using the collaborative [sic] approach to try and agree on what is the path forward to resolve that problem. (Change the Story)

As such, and confirming this analysis, three consistent messages from each of the cases investigated for this study are: communication is the bedrock of collaboration, communication is both labour-intensive and time-intensive and effective communication requires empathy, active listening and patience:

It's the style of leadership; it's the style of collaboration. At the end of the day, if you spent an hour with people, they could feel very involved, very listened to, [that they] very much own the process when they leave. You could spend two hours with people and they could feel like they were never consulted. So, it's not so much the time and the money; it's the quality of the time that's spent with them. (Change the Story)

## Final observations

The personal qualities and skills collaboration leaders bring to the table can make or break any collaboration. Importantly, effective collaboration leaders must enjoy the trust, confidence and backing of authorisers in their respective employing organisations. In the early stages of collaboration, partner organisations need to decide what kind of leadership model might offer the best chance of getting buy-in from stakeholders, especially those who might believe themselves to be disadvantaged in terms of power or influence. It is also essential to ensure the best fit between the aptitudes and skills around the collaboration table and the core attributes and competencies that effective collaboration demands. Authorisers and partner organisations need to commit to building the capacity of collaboration leaders through the provision of training, mentoring or specialist

facilitation. While leadership is an important factor in the effectiveness of any collaboration, the leadership role need not be vested in any one organisation or individual. For most multiparty collaborations, shared leadership might offer the best prospects for reaching agreement about ends and means, reinforcing a sense of shared purpose, managing power imbalances and instilling trust and commitment. Moreover, all partner organisations need to be supportive of the leadership model selected for the collaboration and back the modus operandi of collaboration leaders.

## Practice considerations

1. Consider who might be best to exercise leadership roles within the collaboration. Ensure that you are selecting potential collaboration leaders based on collaboration competencies rather than on rank, position or formal responsibilities.
2. Give careful consideration to the leadership model you think is most appropriate to this collaboration. Give careful consideration to potential power imbalances between collaboration partners and key stakeholders. Carefully assess any sensitivities that might arise and how these might be ameliorated by sharing or distributing leadership roles within the collaboration partnership.
3. Benchmark your proposed collaboration leadership against other, comparable initiatives. Speak to the leaders of other collaborations to find out what works and what does not. Use available, relevant self-assessment tools such as the Collaboration Health Assessment Tool developed by the Centre for Social Impact.<sup>1</sup>
4. Take stock of the skills mix within the collaboration, including any gaps in key collaboration leadership competencies. Identify strategies to address those gaps and to leverage the strengths of partners. Identify sources of support or training within partner organisations or externally, including specialist consultants or facilitators. Identify potential mentors within partner and stakeholder organisations who might work individually or collectively with the collaboration team.
5. Formulate a leadership plan that takes into account any developmental needs of key partners such as the:
  - a. competencies required to support boundary-spanning activities
  - b. competencies required for each phase of collaboration.
6. Formulate a strategy for the purpose of socialising the collaboration among authorisers, partners and stakeholders, and for addressing and resolving any differences that might arise.
7. Ensure that authorisers understand the dynamics of collaboration leadership and the nature and desirability of shared accountability within a leadership group. Keep authorisers apprised of any issues that arise and the manner in which any disagreement about the aims, goals, strategies or means will be resolved.
8. Develop a business continuity and succession plan in anticipation of possible changes in key personnel to ensure that the collaboration stays on track.

<sup>1</sup> To access the Collaboration Health Assessment Tool, go to: [www.csi.edu.au/chat/about/](http://www.csi.edu.au/chat/about/).

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