

Learning about Collective Leadership

What we set out to do: On March 14th, 2008, the Leadership Learning Community (LLC) and the Center for Ethical Leadership partnered to bring together 30 community activists from the Kellogg Fellows for Community Change (KLCC) program and friends, all interested in learning from our own experiences about collective leadership. We gathered in Austin, Texas from all parts of the United States to work together to answer important questions about collective leadership because we believe that together we can learn more than any one of us could learn alone.

A Snap Shot of the Top Themes

As the group discussed what we were learning from our experiences, coming at collective leadership from a number of different angles, several themes kept emerging. We have highlighted them for you. As you read the summary of work from the learning lab you will find suggestions and lessons related to:

- **Personal Work:** The work that an individual must do to contribute positively to collective leadership.
- **Power:** How to redefine power in order to claim our positive individual and collective power, to model new power relationships and deal with oppressive power relationships.
- **Processes:** The approaches, processes, tools, competencies and systems that build alignment around vision and support collective leadership.
- **Relationships:** The qualities of interaction and behaviors of people who are in a collective leadership relationship with each other and with those they are trying to reach.
- **Learning:** The personal and collective commitment to reflection and strategies that support ongoing learning about the practice of collective leadership.

The questions we set out to answer: We came with a set of questions that were developed in conversations with KLCC participants, and at the LLC national meeting held in Baltimore in 2007. We knew that some of these questions would change and that new questions would emerge. These are the questions that we began with:

- How does power come up, and how can it be dealt with in collective leadership?
- What kinds of structures support collective leadership?

- What kind of work do individuals have to do to be in collective leadership?

How we experienced our collectivity as a group: Rather than start out talking we decided to begin with an exercise that would help us to behave collectively. This exercise is called Community Counts.

How to use the Community Counts Exercise

Community Counts is a great experiential exercise for exploring collective work. The person who leads the exercise gives the group the following task: stand in a circle and count from 1 to the number of people in the circle standing in the circle, count sequentially (1,2,3...) and participants contribute randomly (each person says only one number and they say the next number in the sequence when they feel it's their turn). If two people say a number at the same time the exercise starts over with the exercise leader beginning again with the number 1. There are usually several immediate collisions in the first minute often never getting higher than 5 or 6 in the sequence. After several of these instances of two people speaking simultaneously the group is stopped and given these new instructions by the exercise leader: close your eyes and listen to your own breath through several cycles of breathing, then move your attention to the rhythm of the group. The groups stands with their eyes closed listening for a couple of minutes then the exercise leaders starts the group off with one again only this time with the new instruction of doing the exercise this time with our eyes closed. Most groups this time get significantly further and many are actually able to complete the counting successfully getting as high at 45 without two people saying the same number. After this round debrief with the group to make meaning of this difference and what made it possible.

When we did this exercise we had several immediate collisions. After stopping to focus on our breath and rhythm we were able to count to 31 out of 33 with our eyes closed. Everyone thought this was quite remarkable and shared what they noticed in our behavior that supported our collective success even (or especially) with our eyes closed:

- When you slow down you create more space for everyone to participate.
- With our eyes closed we were listening in a different way.
- There is a difference between just getting your individual piece of work done and doing your work as a group.
- There was a rhythm emerging.
- We need to be this aware when we are doing work in groups of how to be quiet so other people can do their part.

How we created a safe space: We began by asking what would help us to feel safe and learn from each other. Many of the ideas about how to help each other learn are also aspects of collective leadership.

- Courage: Be bold and willing to step outside of your comfort zone. This may mean the courage to be yourself.
- Positive energy: Be mindful of the energy you bring and find ways to keep good feelings alive. Shine your light. Breathe. Laugh and have fun.
- Openness: Listen with heart and mind openness. Share with each other. Forgive yourself and others.

What we can learn from images and nature: We used images, mostly of nature, to begin our conversation about collective leadership.

How to use an Imagery Exercise

Sometimes words don't really express all that we feel and know about an idea, subject, or our work. Images and metaphors can create ways of connecting our thoughts, feelings and experiences on a topic that get us away from the common language we use. We often gain new insights and patterns in our common thinking and feelings. It is a different wisdom. We distribute images around the room if we have photographs, or we can pass out a single sheet that has multiple images (for blind and visually impaired people we use objects). We then ask participants to select the image or object they are drawn to as they reflect on a question or subject of the meeting.

In this meeting participants were asked to select an image that they were drawn to as they reflected on collective leadership. As participants shared images, it was fun to see who chose water, deserts (and camels) or trees. The images helped us to draw from the natural world to learn about collective leadership.

- Interdependence: Each rock in a stream and the ripples it creates; the small and little rocks that are balanced within a wall; an aspen grove with one system of roots that connects all of the trees, photosynthesis, connection to the land and the whole world.
- Ebb and flow: Fluidity and the crashing and flow of waves (or people) as we come together and flow; nature's process is long and powerful; slugs are the first bit of spring out of winter and we miss them looking for the big things; out of chaos comes structure; water is a lifeline-symbol of reflection and larger ecology; rock at rest is part of the garden.
- Authenticity: Be yourself; find your voice even if you get burned; be authentic and take off your mask; know yourself; keep it real – children aren't allowed to be children; speak truth to power.
- Diversity: Be different to make a difference; uniqueness; ensemble dance – connecting different gifts to make something new; we play our instruments and then play together.
- Light: Shine our light; unleash our genius.
- Community: Traditions to teach our children; loss of story means loss of community roots; communities are wounded and need to be healed.

The first harvest of what we are learning: We began in small groups where participants were asked to share with each other one thing in their experience that supports collective leadership and one new question. For the group, this was a task in collective leadership itself. For fun, the groups were also asked to give themselves a name. This exercise is called the Continuum Exercise.

How to Use the Continuum Exercise

The Continuum Exercise is used to raise awareness among people about what contributes to and interferes with success. The exercise asks people to imagine a continuum where 10 is representative of being highly successful, and 1 is fraught with frustrations and obstacles to success. The facilitator brainstorms 10 and 1 to give people a "feel" for the continuum. Each person is asked to think about themselves, their organizations (or some other context) and assign a number that captures where they are on the continuum. Participants arrange themselves in a line by their numbers and then cluster in groups of 4-5. Each group is asked to share why they chose the number they did with others in the group. The group then gives themselves a name and comes up with one piece of advice and one frustration to share with the larger group.

Each group generated suggestions and new questions:

Suggestions

Some of the suggestions built on the themes from the imagery work:

- Positive energy: Stay open, listen and be honest. A number of the groups added "nurturing," e.g. pay attention to the health of individuals; a nurturing relationship is fundamental; bring out people's passions.
- Authenticity: Leave roles behind and come as people.

Some of the groups began to talk about processes:

- Build bridges: Find commonalities
- Transparency: Be transparent about the decision making process.

Questions

The groups also shared their questions about collective leadership:

1. How do we communicate in ways that build collective spirit, keep people motivated and on the same page?
2. How do we manage differences in power, real or perceived, and how do you empower others?

3. How do you know if a group is ready for collective leadership, or what do you do if people are at different levels of readiness?
4. How do you evaluate collective leadership?

Getting everyone's perspective and going deep: We selected five questions that seemed to rise to the top on almost everyone's mind. First, we divided into small groups and had every group take a turn commenting on each question. Then we began the difficult work of making meaning of all of the input. We formed a second group of teams for this purpose. Each team was assigned one question and one person from each of the earlier teams to help with clarification. The process of getting everyone's contribution is called a Roving Conversation. The addition of the 'meaning making' groups was an innovation to this process to keep the power of making deeper meaning among the participants.

How to Use Roving Conversations

Roving Conversations is a process to help a group gather multiple perspectives on a set of key questions. The questions are posted on flipcharts and the group is divided up so that there is a small group (3-6 people) that starts with each question. Each question has a host-recorder that stays with the flipchart as the groups rotate to each flipchart. Groups are given 10-20 minutes at each question (often later groups require less time because there is a lot of information already present). Groups can add to or raise questions about previous answers to the question. At the end, we have found that there is great value in having someone type up and develop categories for responses to the questions. This helps the group understand better the work that they did together.

What follows is the synthesis of each of the five questions that we tackled.

Question 1: How is power expressed and negotiated in collective leadership?

The group began its work on this question by talking about what power is and what we mean by power. Is power an idea, relationship or structure? Can power be good or bad?

Reframing Power: As a starting point it's important to realize that we all have influence and power. Power is a relationship. People often use innate power for the common good and to help each other. Collective leadership is a form of power. Spirit is the most powerful of sources. You can build power by organizing people. It's part of creating a new consciousness where everyone feels that their voice counts. It was pointed out that if we accept notions of power as defined by others (money is power; position is power; power is authority; control is power; hierarchy is power; oppression is power) we lose our own power.

Positive Power in Collective Leadership (Principles and Norms): Positive power is expressed in open and respectful relationships where everyone feels some ownership. Everyone's opinion counts. No one is trying to have power over someone else, power is shared. Relational power is rooted in our stories, shared language, common understanding and joint action. We have to acknowledge that we are all different and able to walk in each other's shoes. It's important to be able to have conversations about conflict and to work through it. Roles and responsibilities are important so that everyone can contribute their gifts to common goals. Collective leadership is power!

Dealing with and Changing Negative Power Relations: The group recognized that the shared power that is part of collective leadership is not the "norm." Power can be monopolizing, autocratic and hierarchical. It is necessary to understand how power is perversely used outside of collective leadership models (and sometimes within) so that we can deal with power. It is necessary to intentionally negotiate power, understand power structures (e.g. hierarchy and positional authority vs. shared leadership; voting vs. consensus). Control of money, resources and information is a form of power. Communication is a form of power. We need to tell our own story, make meaning of our own work and not be validated by external evaluators. There was agreement that we cannot just stay within our communities where we share values and behave collectively. If we want to change the world, we have to be willing to model collective leadership. This will mean dealing with abusive power, and it will take courage!

Question 2: How do we facilitate collective leadership across different cultural contexts?

Prepare yourself: It's important to do the personal work. This means being aware of your own power and when you need to get out of the way to support other people's leadership. It is important to be truthful and willing to share weaknesses and mistakes. This means being brave and taking risks in the group. Bringing your individual self into balance with the group means putting the group before yourself. Each individual needs to put their ideas out and not take it personally if others disagree. All of this requires time for renewal, self reflection and learning.

Build relationships with others: Recognize the value of others, their ideas and contributions. Cross-pollinate your learning so that your work will develop. Understand the interdependence of the group. Learn to listen openly to new ideas and new ways of doing things. Persist and commit your energy to others in the group. Make time to have fun and get to know each other.

Develop practices that support collective leadership: Balance friendships and accountability within the group. Cultivate shared ownership of vision and goals. Learn to have effective conversations. Learn how to create systems of accountability for the group. Build in celebration.

Question 3: What are the processes that support accountability and learning in collective leadership?

Processes that support accountability:

Building alignment: It is important to do the work as a group to build alignment around shared values, language, leadership practice, power and a sense of ownership.

Communication: It is important to communicate openly and transparently. The group should create clear ground rules and expectations of each other. Use consensus so that all voices are heard. Communicate for different audiences. Use story and non-verbal and multi-media techniques. Share information. Ask the right questions - how well did we do? Collect data that will help you know how you are doing. Address concerns and issues promptly, as they arise.

Development: It is important to support everyone's opportunity to be successful and accountable by making sure they are mentored and have the training they need to do their work.

Systems: Develop work plans collectively and plan for how you will map progress. Talk about power dynamics and the power relations you are creating in the group, e.g. neutralize titles and positions. Make sure that roles and responsibilities are clearly defined. Engage the group in creating accountability standards. Talk about how your environment and processes will be culturally sensitive and competent. Build in time for individual and collective reflection and assessment processes. Create new reward systems that reward collective leadership.

Processes that support learning:

- Account for different styles of learning.
- Create feedback loops.
- Good facilitation
- Provide time for group and individual reflection.

Values: The groups identified values that are important to collective learning. It is critical to walk the talk of the values of openness and transparency, individual responsibility, a commitment to service and risk taking. They are important to both learning and accountability:

Question 4: How do we nurture, support and sustain the collective leadership process?

Take care of individuals: It is important to encourage individuals and be very intentional about supporting them. Make time for regeneration, rejuvenation and reflection. Provide food and breaks. Take time to motivate, educate and model. Help work through problems in a positive way. Celebrate collective leadership.

Pay attention to the group process: Create shared definitions and name the process. Talk about the shared vision. Understand the difference between unilateral and relational power. Create processes that acknowledge and reward collective leadership.

Reach out and bring new people into the process: Many of the suggestions had to do with reaching out to bring new people into the work. We can't do it alone and this helps to sustain us and create a tipping point. Cross boundaries, invite new communities in, engage youth, build partnerships, create a whole new culture of volunteerism, and keep growing the circle. Collective leadership should not become inclusive to protect established trust relationships. It should model values of trust, transparency and accountability while reaching and gathering new people to the work.

Question 5: What is the individual work required for collective leadership to emerge and flourish?

Self Knowledge: It important to have a clear sense of identity (often social identity), know where you stand and be clear on your beliefs and values. Understand your own community and context. Become aware of your own biases and be willing to unlearn. Know and be honest about your agenda. This is the spiritual work of authenticity, humility and personal accountability.

Relationships and Valuing Others: Engage in deep and respectful conversation with others to find common ground. Listen to understand. Share information. Let go of beliefs about how it should be and listen to how it could be. Find the common ground. Use stories to build bridges. Invite other people to bring their cultures into the process. Try to understand others' worldviews.

Self-Development and Continuous Learning: We acknowledged that these personal characteristics and relationships with others were not all just going to miraculously come about and so asked – How can we incorporate and be intentional about nurturing these attributes?

- Story: Story was honored as an important process, auto-ethnographies, conducting interview with family and community, collecting and sharing stories to create a collective narrative or storyboard.
- Self-care: Remember to take breaks, rest, and have retreats
- Learning: Encourage self-reflection, share back with each other. Take time at beginning and end of sessions for self-reflection circles. Recognize appropriate tension and learn from it. Cultivate an analytical approach.

Conclusion:

The LLC Learning Lab on collective leadership was a deep dive into our experiences trying to implement and understand collective leadership. The importance of personal work came as no surprise. It's critical to all leadership work. The emphasis on processes points us in the direction of doing more intensive learning work to identify and learn from different approaches to decision making, group processes, dialogue and listening techniques, cultural competence and shared leadership structures. The conversation about power offered an interesting starting point: the need to respond to oppressive power by understanding, claiming, organizing and bolstering our own positive power through collective leadership. Questions of how to flatten hierarchies or negotiate with external hierarchies remain and need further exploration. Any good learning experience generates new questions while tackling the questions

we began with to surface what we know. This learning experience was no exception! The group practiced the values of collective leadership, engaged and had fun.