



Collective Leadership: from Silos to Shared Intelligence

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*Following an article by Keith Grint and Clare Holt in the previous issue, Sarah discusses aspects of dysfunctional teams and how these can be transformed. Echoing Graham and Maureen above, she remarks: 'the problems facing leaders today are too complex for any one person to solve.' Her book **Life-Changing Conversations** is reviewed below.*

There was ice in the air as the participants and I filed into the meeting room. Gone was the warmth of the informal conversations over coffee the team had just been having. People avoided looking at each other and their shoulders stiffened as they sat down.

I remembered some of the things that these executives had said when my co-facilitator and I had spoken with them a few days before: "We don't trust each other"; "We don't know what projects other people are working on"; "We have to compete with each other because opportunities for promotion are very limited"; "Our boss is aloof".

When we'd spoken with the Team Leader, he told us about poor attendance at monthly team meetings. Morale was flat, and his team members were bypassing him by going to his boss for strategic guidance—and recognition. He needed to shift the dynamic but he wasn't sure how.

As I sat amongst the team in the circle of 40 chairs, no table in the middle for any of us to hide behind, I took a deep breath. "Welcome", I said, "to this session on Collective Leadership". And off we went on our journey together.

While the story above, only slightly disguised to protect identities, describes some recent experiences with a team of senior leaders in an international organisation, it could, however, capture the mood at the start of many a meeting. After facilitating leadership team meetings and coaching business leaders from the East and West over the last 10 years, I've found several themes to be very familiar:

- Poor communication, no strategic direction and ineffective decision-making.
- Lack of trust, rigid interactions and a cynical atmosphere.
- People working in silos and competing rather than collaborating.

These dysfunctional team dynamics are especially problematic in a global marketplace: the problems facing leaders today are too complex for any one person to solve. The issues this team were dealing with, for example—unsustainable population growth, environmental degradation and widespread pollution—are not limited to the borders of a single country or the boundary of an organisational department. Cutting a swath through these big, hairy issues requires a multitude of stakeholders thinking and talking together in unprecedented ways.

In a recent article in the *Network Review* (Winter 2012), Keith Grint and Clare Holt, researchers at Warwick Business School, define contemporary leadership as "The art of engaging a

community in facing up to complex collective problems" (p. 21). They note the growing antipathy towards heroic leaders and the increasing interest in collective or distributed leadership and working in partnership.

Despite this new approach to leadership having the potential to be the "universal future", Grint and Holt also underline the current reality. Partnerships are often paralysed into inaction, many organisations still operate on the basis of traditional hierarchies and the "command" decision style, while perhaps unpopular, seldom gets replaced with any clear collective decision-making mechanism.

While I agree that collective leadership is a difficult "nut to crack", I've also personally seen enough evidence as a management consultant to know that this form of engagement is not only worth pursuing, but decidedly possible. When a whole team is fully involved in thinking and talking together about thorny issues, drawing on leadership qualities sourced as a group rather than as individuals, the solutions developed and the decisions reached are profoundly different in quality and usefulness from the norm. Team members draw on each other's strengths, deal with resistance at an early stage and consider longer-term legacy issues. The formal leader often chooses to retain responsibility as the single point of accountability, but the decision-making process, which draws on each person's distinct perspective, creates outcomes that stick.

It is my observation that a central role of powerful leaders is to create the conditions in which others can find their voice—and express it. They encourage those around them to "go beyond their tribe" and break the pattern of silo working and competing. They deeply understand that each person has a piece of the puzzle, and that it is in the mix of diverse perspectives that innovative thinking emerges. In short, these leaders have the ability to access the collective wisdom of the people around them to create new possibilities. And the only way to do it is to **talk!**

A compelling piece of research published in the *American Behavioural Scientist* (February, 2004) supports this view. Marcial Losada and Emily Heaphy observed the conversations of 60 management teams, each of about 8 members, in a large information-processing organisation. Their dialogue was recorded, analysed and evaluated across three key dimensions, explained below.

The researchers found that high-performing teams accessed their collective intelligence by talking together in ways that were distinct from low-performing teams. In the teams associated with greatest profitability, best customer satisfaction and highest evaluations by colleagues, the team members had developed three capabilities:

1. They asked questions as often as they asserted their own opinions (a 1:1 ratio between enquiry and advocacy).
2. They showed as much interest in others as they did in themselves, rather than being stuck in self-absorption (a 1:1 ratio between focus on self and others).
3. They made many more positive than negative comments, so that enthusiasm, encouragement and support far outweighed sarcasm, criticism or cynicism (3:1 ratio of positivity to negativity with 6:1 as the ideal).

When all three of these behaviours were demonstrated, they created an “expansive emotional space” in which the team interacted. The atmosphere was buoyant, trusting and resilient. By contrast, in low-performing teams where people did not feel connected with each other, the atmosphere was cynical, distrustful and tense.

At the heart of my own consulting practice is creating settings where people feel safe and energised to talk about what really matters within the context of the meeting. They can speak their truth—and be heard—without fear of rupturing a relationship. In such an environment, people can take risks in their thinking, share their “half-baked” ideas and, together, come up with new insights that no one person would have reached by thinking alone.

To harness this power of collective leadership, where shared intelligence is greater than the sum of its parts, leaders need to be effective enablers of

face-to-face interactions. We are social animals, after all. We make sense of the world around us by being in conversation with other human beings. When there’s a sense of “We’re all in this together”, it maximises the likelihood that we will make life-affirming and sustainable rather than life-destroying and reactive decisions.

Returning to the story I started this article with, my co-facilitator and I were heartened to receive the following email shortly after the team sessions from one of the participants:

“Last week we had our first team meeting after the Collective Leadership session. I must say that there was a noticeable difference. The first sign of change was when everyone rearranged the tables and chairs so that we all sat closer to each other. Most people came well prepared instead of deliberating the matter on the spot. We were able to discuss sensitive issues that required the cooperation and consensus of everyone and it all went smoothly. No one interrupted each other and many who didn’t speak much at previous team meetings were voicing their thoughts.”

From my work with hundreds of different teams, I’ve seen that the capabilities for having productive, performance-enhancing conversations can indeed be learned (and taught). **What’s more, these are key skills not only for senior executives and corporate teams, but for everyone.** Leadership can no longer be defined by the size of the budget you manage, the number of staff on your watch or the complexity of the project you lead. We all have the potential to be leaders, game-changers or wayfarers in whatever mission field we’re working, whether as a parent, school governor, senior executive, lobbyist or parliamentarian. Expanding our capacity to engage in life-changing conversations is beneficial for us all.



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