

Six Elements of Collective Leadership

Collective Leadership:

What is It, Why is It Important, and How Can You Build Capacity for It?

Collective Leadership – a group of people working towards shared goals while sharing decision making and working collaboratively. So that the entire team strives for the same goal with enthusiasm, and energy.

Learning Objectives

- Understand the Fundamentals of Collective Leadership and the 6 Elements of Collective Leadership
- Be familiar with the differences between Classical and Collective Leadership
- Learn about resources for self-assessment and capacity building of Collective Leadership

Classical and collective leadership compared	
Classical leadership	Collective leadership
Displayed by a person's position in a group or hierarchy.	Identified by the quality of people's interactions rather than their position.
Leadership evaluated by whether the leader solves problems.	Leadership evaluated by how people are working together.
Leaders provide solutions and answers.	All work to enhance the process and to make it more fulfilling.
Distinct differences between leaders and followers: character, skill, etc.	People are interdependent. All are active participants in the process of leadership.
Communication is often formal.	Communication is crucial with a stress on conversation.
Can often rely on secrecy, deception and payoffs.	Values democratic processes, honesty and shared ethics. Seeks a common good.

Drawing from material in Gloria Nemerowicz and Eugene Rosi (1997) *Education for Leadership and Social Responsibility*, London: Falmer Press. Page 16.

Introduction—What is Collective Leadership:

In your role, have you ever felt like you were standing before a mountain you had to climb? As it loomed above you, you may have felt like there was no way you could ever get to the top. Perhaps you felt alone, with no one and nothing to help you.

Now imagine that instead of focusing on the mountain, you had turned around to find that behind you were people waiting to help. Each with unique tools, skills, and knowledge, everything you might need to make it to the top, if you all worked together.

This metaphor for non-profit professionals—invites exploration of those around you. It presents a question: what if the solutions to your dilemmas and to those situations where you feel stuck are living inside the staff, co-workers, and participants in your program? What if, by changing your position—or turning around—you will find you have everything you need?

That's what collective leadership is. It is a chance to feel surrounded by support and resources. So instead of having a leadership mindset that leaves you figuring out everything alone, you are one of a team. The following graphic displays the six elements of collective leadership.



What does this look like? 6 key practices

1. Identifying Shared Goals: The first step in Collective Leadership is to establish common ground, to figure out where you share values, goals, and motivation. This could be with your team, or together with families. Often people think they don't agree with others in their workplace or that there isn't alignment, because they don't have the kinds of conversations that will uncover shared goals. So, look a little deeper. Search for goals that everyone can agree on. We have found that it's helpful to start with the broadest possible language and then work your way to more specific goals. It's also helpful to presume positive intentions, to make the good-faith assumption that everyone has been inspired to enter the early childhood field, and that they want to improve the educational outcomes for young children.

So how can you identify a place of agreement? The simplest way to begin is to ask questions that help people talk about what their goals are for children, families, and their program. For example, "What inspired you to work with children and families?" or "What are your hopes for the children affected by your work?" We use these questions when facilitating staff meetings, retreats, or professional development. Participants are often surprised, and sometimes shocked, to hear that their co-workers love working with children.

Once you have identified an overarching goal that everyone can agree on, such as "we want children to be successful and for staff to be healthy and happy", then you can narrow down to what this might look like or what it might take to get there. Feeling advanced? A key question to consider: How can the day-to-day work experience be changed to reveal these shared goals and values?

2. Structures and Processes for Shared Decision Making: A first step for exploring shared decision making is to look at the kinds of decisions that are currently being made by leaders in your program, and how are they being made. If important decisions are being made by one or two people and then told to staff, there is an opportunity to identify some decisions that might benefit from more staff involvement. There are multiple tools to help identify the decisions being made, the individuals or groups that could be involved, and possible ways of involving them. One tool is called the RACI, which stands for Responsible, Accountable, Consult and Inform. This can be used to help identify who will be responsible for making a decision, who can veto or approve a decision, who can be consulted for input and information, and who needs to be informed once the decision is made.

Caution! Although people love the opportunity to share their opinions and experiences, they don't like to be asked their opinion only to have it ignored. Prevent this danger! Be clear about what you are seeking input on. Are you seeking input on a decision that hasn't been made yet? If so, you can invite people to share their opinions and have input on the decision. Then follow-up when the decision is made—share with people what the decision is, explain why it was made. If there were things that people suggested which you didn't do, it goes a long way to help them feel heard and valued if you explain why.

If a decision has already been made (by you or someone else) and you can't change it, ask for input from people about how to work with the decision. Again, be clear. There is nothing more frustrating than discussing what you want a decision to be, when the decision has already been made.

3. Identify and Build on Strengths: Explore what people are good at. What are their talents, and interests? What do they like doing or know a lot about? Seems obvious, right? But research suggests that 70% of people Do NOT get to use their strengths at work. Don't let this happen to you or your team. How do you find out more about your strengths? There are several great ways to find out. One is the Strengthsfinders Assessment by Gallup. You can buy the book Strengthfinders 2.0 (Rath, 2007) or Strengths Based Leadership: Great Leaders, Teams, and Why People Follow (Rath, 2009). Both books will come with a code that you can use to complete the on-line assessment. The Strengths-Based Leadership report generated from the assessment also includes information on how to work with others who report to you.

Another strengths assessment is the VIA Inventory of Strengths, formerly known as the "Values in Action Inventory." This is a psychological assessment measure designed to identify an individual's profile of character strengths (<http://www.viacharacter.org/www/>).

One final way is to use Appreciative Questions. These focus on "peak experiences" that people have had, and can be related to any topic. For example, "What was a peak experience you had as an educator, team member, with this school, or learning something that made a difference?" If you're interested in exploring how Appreciative Questions could help, there are two great books with interview guides on many topics: Appreciative Team Building: Positive Questions to Bring Out the Best of Your Team (Whitney, Trosten-Bloom and Cherney, 2004) and the Encyclopedia of Positive Questions, 2nd Ed. (Whitney, Trosten-Bloom and Cooperrider, 2014).

After you have found out more about people's strengths, explore how they could use more of their strengths at work, and how they could apply their strengths to reach shared goals.

4. Rotating and Sharing Roles so Team Members Can Activate Their Gifts: What a concept! You mean the "boss" doesn't have to facilitate every meeting and training? That's right! Rotating responsibilities for things that your team (or organization) needs, helps everyone grow their skills and creates a learning community. Looking for new ideas of how to run great meetings or trainings? We have an e-book, The Six Secrets to High Impact Presenting. Additionally, a great website with innovative meeting ideas is Liberating Structures: Including and Unleashing Everyone, <http://www.liberatingstructures.com/>.

5. The Whole is Greater Than the Sum of the Parts: To realize this requires activation of the collective intelligence of the staff. How do you do that? By using high engagement methods to facilitate meetings and trainings rather than using stale one-way communication strategies.

Sometimes assumptions are made that there is nothing going on in the minds of those who are quiet. This couldn't be farther than the truth, yet we may not have the tools to access it. So, how do you get at this hidden knowledge? We've already explored asking different kinds of questions. In addition, we can also look at different processes that engage the intellect in more active ways.

Creating a space where people feel that their thoughts and ideas are welcome is the first step. The second step is inviting the collective wisdom to surface by inviting people to interact and have conversations about issues where you are looking for solutions. It's hard to come up with solutions cold. But by letting people be in relationship with each other you will get outcomes that are entirely different from those that come from one-way communication.

6. Best Practices for Organizational Effectiveness: Is your organization following them? There are many best practices for organizational effectiveness. One of these is creating structures and processes for recognition. This isn't one-size that fits all. People like to be appreciated in different ways. Taking the time and making a norm of your culture to appreciate others can drastically alter the moral, motivation, and performance of your whole staff. Take the plunge!

“Go to the people. Live with them. Learn from them. Love them. Start with what they know.

Build with what they have. But with the best leaders, when the work is done, the task

accomplished, the people will say, ‘We have done this ourselves’” -Lao Tzu