

Collaborate across teams, silos, and even companies

Collaborative leadership can achieve meaningful change in large organisations, argues Dr. Rebecca Newton



Everywhere I turn right now, I hear leaders talking about their need for collaborative leadership. It's being identified as the fundamental differentiator in achieving strategic objectives. In order to make a difference though, it has to go beyond the polite, thoughtful behaviours of involving others, sharing information and lending strength when it's needed. I define real collaborative leadership as: facilitating constructive interpersonal connections and activities between heterogenous groups to achieve shared goals. It is proactive and purpose-driven.

Dubai Airports offers a case study. Leaders there are being incredibly proactive in their collaborative leadership efforts, with a very clear purpose. While already running the world's busiest airport (passenger traffic grew to almost 66.5 million in 2013, a 15% rise on the previous year), they recognised that to achieve their vision of becoming the world's leading airport company, they need to drive a new service culture through the 3,400-person organisation. But they knew they couldn't make a meaningful change in their culture alone. To change customers' real experience of Dubai Airports, they needed to engage their vendors and partners as well.

One of the outcomes is a **customer-service training programme** that is being rolled out over a three-year period across many stakeholder organisations and 43,000 employees. The Dubai Airports team is investing in training for over 39,000 people outside of their own organisation, aiming to ensure behavioral consistency and therefore customer experience consistency at every possible touch point. Samya Ketait, VP for Learning and Development says, "This is a huge project, but a worthwhile one. It means that regardless of who you meet at Dubai Airports – a police officer, a cleaner, an immigration officer... you should have the same positive customer experience. Collaborating with our stakeholder leaders has made this possible."

While it's spoken of highly in organisational life, it's not something that necessarily comes easily. It may seem like a lovely, generous gesture of Dubai Airports to offer to provide customer-service training for so many other organisations' employees, but the leaders from outside who bought into this collaborative processes had to weigh the costs of their employees' time out of work to participate, and to trust Dubai Airports with training their teams in a way that would match their own organisation's values and objectives. To sustain the three-year collaborative process and

achieve its goals, these leaders recognised the behaviors that would make it work. When it comes to collaborative leadership, these factors can drive success:

- **Focusing on interests rather than positions.** As with negotiations and conflict resolution, one of the most important keys to successful collaborative leadership is focusing on interests rather than positions. When leaders are “collaborating” they are typically not from the same team – otherwise we would most likely frame it as “teamwork.” What makes teamwork different from collaboration is the goal. In collaborative leadership cases the goals may be different – the leaders may have different positions, but yet common ground can be almost always be found at the level of interests. In collaborating with others ask, “What’s most important to you here? What really matters?” Encourage their openness and foster trust by sharing personally what your main drivers are.
- **Being an agent *and* a target of influence.** We spend a lot of time in leadership development helping professionals to have greater influence (i.e. be a more successful *agent* of influence). Rightly so, as influence (e.g. influencing people towards common goals) is at the core of what constitutes leadership. Of equal importance when it comes to collaborative leadership, is being prepared to be a *target* of others’ influence. This requires: *openness* to alternative ideas; *inquisitiveness* to understand the foundation of others’ arguments before pushing back and asserting one’s own ideas; and *recognition* of the value the other party has and therefore can add to the collaborative venture.
- **Having clear roles and responsibilities.** Research has shown that where leaders are successfully leading together, they have a clear sense of who is responsible for what. Mapping out these roles and responsibilities early, and refining them along the collaborative journey, ensures a smoother road.
- **Sharing and acknowledging the credit.** We know that acknowledging our own part in a problem, even if it’s taking only 5% of the blame, alleviates tension during conflict and leads to faster reconciliation. The reverse is true of facilitating collaborative success. Acknowledging others’ contributions – be they big or even incredibly small, in the success of our ventures, energises them in our collaborative efforts. Nothing undermines collaborative leadership like one leader taking — be it actively or passively allowing others to allocate them — all the credit.
- **Carving out space and time to collaborate – and a mission worthy of that effort.** Too often in organisational life we know we’re meant to be collaborating and so try to squeeze it into our schedules when really we just want to get the pressing things on our to-do list done, or collaborate simply to the point of meeting our own immediate priorities. In order for collaborative leadership to be purposeful and sustainable, it needs to meet all parties’ true interests, warrant their time, and help them achieve their core objectives. Leaders need to highlight why this particular collaboration matters (not just extol “collaboration” in general), what difference it will make, and encourage the project’s participants to create the time and space it deserves.

One of the most exciting parts of the collaborative leadership journey is that while it is purpose-driven (there are clear goals and objectives in mind to achieve along the way), the end is unwritten: we never know where our collaborative leadership efforts may take us. One door opens another possibility and one creative venture prequels another.

Note:

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- *The supporting data and figures are correct at the time of publication.*



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