

Collective Leadership: Not who is it, but where is it?

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Is the concept of a single, strong leader – or even a team of leaders – outdated? Nick Petrie of The Center for Creative Leadership thinks so. He published a white paper entitled “Future Trends in Leadership Development.” In it he identifies four trends, one of which is **a shifting focus from the idea that “leadership resides in individual managers” to the idea that “collective leadership is spread throughout the network.”**

Collective leadership is not facilitative leadership on steroids. It is not tied to the formal or informal power of any single person, position, or entity. It is also not leadership that is delegated to a select team. Instead, it is leadership capacity that lives in the network of individuals and organizations that make up a community, however that might be defined.

Petrie gives the example of the 2011 uprising in Egypt that toppled President Mubarak. The media tried to identify “the leader” of the movement but was unable to do so. The effort was enabled by many people in many places using social media tools to work towards a single shared interest.

Wow. We can have sympathy for a new collective power being applied to overthrow an oppressive regime, but we might also view this trend as a threat to a fundamental purpose of government, namely, to hold and wield centralized authority that serves a greater good.

Does the concept of collective leadership make sense in the daily life of our public sector and not just in the context of radical politics or revolutions? Let’s consider some every day applications of this concept:

- **We should be consistent in (1) recognizing that any change has a ripple effect and (2) involving those who are informed about or affected by it.** Working across organizational and geographic boundaries is becoming the norm rather than the exception now. The old silo mentality - in applying expertise or in making change happen - is simply inadequate any more.
- **We need to improve in developing the leadership capacity of all staff everywhere instead of relatively few people in prominent positions.** Anyone could potentially hold or discover useful information that applies to design or change processes. Similarly, anyone might naturally have

opportunities to share information, guidance, or motivation out into less visible or connected corners of the community.

- **We need to re-think how we invest in and recognize individual contributors, given that shared responsibility for success “lives” in the network through our collective intelligence and resources.** Excellence in performance will have less to do with the capacity or talent of any individual and more to do with how any individual contributes to or monitors the capacity and talent of the network.

- **We should broaden the role of public organizations as conveners. Innovation “lives” in the network, too.** The state of any art is being collectively defined by the creative applications simultaneously developing in many places at once, not by a lone inventor. We all know how to seek answers via Google. Perhaps the public sector should take the initiative more often to name our needs and challenges, and then provide venues for collecting or developing pieces of the solutions.

Petrie concludes this discussion by stating that collective leadership is more likely to flourish under these five conditions: open flow of information, flexible hierarchies, distributed resources, distributed decision-making, and loosening of centralized controls. Some of these conditions would challenge the foundation of our public institutions, as they are now designed. Traditionally thinking baby boomers might well consider the implications and conclude that retirement will arrive in the nick of time.

Collective leadership takes teamwork to a whole new level, not unlike the difference between playing checkers and three-dimensional chess. Seriously, how ARE we going to adapt the authority, practices, and roles of the public sector to this concept? Let's figure it out.