

The Heart of Collaborative Leadership

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The need for collaborative leaders has never been greater. Most, if not all, of the public problems we grapple with are highly complex and “boundary crossing,” meaning they cut across organizational, jurisdictional, and sectoral boundaries.

Collaborative leaders are catalysts who bring stakeholders together to address shared issues. They are conveners and facilitators that lead more from the middle than from the front. Much has been written in recent years about the skill set of these post-hierarchical leaders. They are [systems thinkers](#). They are effective facilitators and negotiators. They help resolve conflict.

But in my observation it isn't the skill set that sets collaborative leaders apart. Rather, personal attributes, one's "heart" if you will, is the real difference-maker when it comes to leading across boundaries as a catalyst, as a collaborative leader.

Of course I am not the first person to note the importance of the "heart" of collaborative leaders. In Russ Linden's [Working Across Boundaries](#) published in 2002 (Jossey-Bass), he includes these questions for one to think about their collaborative leadership:

- Do you come across as someone who prefers to be the source of all new ideas?
- Do others see you as someone who typically wants to find the answer to problems and challenges on your own?
- How do you react when others' perspective on an issue is very different from yours? Is that an irritation to be avoided? An inconvenience to be overcome? An asset to be used?
- When you're working on an issue with others, how likely are you to ask if there's anyone else with a stake in the issue?
- When you're trying to influence others, how much do you tend to push your own ideas, and to what extent do you use pull to invite others into the discussion?

Jeff Luke devoted his concluding chapter of [Catalytic Leadership](#) (Jossey-Bass, 1998) to personal attributes. It is titled "Leading from Personal Passion and Strength of Character." And more recently surveys of federal and local government leaders found that "the primary skill set for successful collaborators is defined by personal attributes" more so than more tangible or substantive skills (emphasis added; see O'Leary and Gerard's report in the 2013 ICMA Municipal Yearbook). **Here I'd like to draw attention to three of these attributes at the "heart" of collaborative leadership.**

The first is what we might call a passion for creating [public value](#). Public value has to do with the value to society created by a particular enterprise, be it an organization or a partnership of some kind. It is the public and not-for-profit sector equivalent of what private sector organizations call shareholder value. Whereas private sector organizations think of shareholder value in terms of profit, public service organizations think in terms of the public interest or common good. It is that common good, whether it be addressing a wicked public problem or simply improving the way a public service is provided, that drives collaborative leaders. Their drive for results is stronger than the pull of organizational inertia. It is that passion or drive that motivates them to look out beyond silos and think systemically and ultimately be open to collaboration.

Collaborative leaders are also humble. Their caring about the results is bigger than any selfish desire for credit. This is key to collaborative success as egos and desire to protect one's turf often become major obstacles. Russ Linden describes collaborative leaders with "strong but measured egos" as not having to "grab the headlines for every success. Quite the opposite, they seem to take great satisfaction when they can share credit for accomplishments with many others. Their

ambitions are directed more toward . . . success than personal glory” (Working Across Boundaries, Jossey-Bass 2002). It is notable that the combination of a deep, driving passion for outcomes or “fierce resolve,” combined with humility, are the primary attributes Jim Collins found in so-called “[level-5 leaders](#).”

Finally, at their core collaborative leaders are also entrepreneurs—social or civic entrepreneurs. Their passion for the common good and genuine humility enable them to be comfortable taking risks, to be comfortable stepping outside their realm of their own authority, their comfort zones if you will. They are on the lookout for new ideas, new ways of doing things. They are open to change and are willing to stick their neck out if necessary in order to realize collaborative opportunities.

There are other important attributes of course, but these three stand out and seem to be mutually-supporting. Not all public service leaders possess these personal qualities. The ones that consistently are able to catalyze collaboration do seem to have a good measure of them, however.