



# Collaborative leadership

## FACT SHEET 9

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Collaborations require a type of leadership that differs from conventional leadership in several ways. In collaborations those in leadership roles are not 'in charge'; their role is to get all members to interact in new ways that tap into, and leverage, individual strengths to create collective outcomes. In this context leadership is focused on facilitating — rather than directing — and safeguarding the collaborative process<sup>1</sup>. It is about making connections between the right people, bridging diverse cultures and getting members used to sharing ideas, resources and power.

Another feature of leadership within collaborations is that the role can be shared among multiple participants. The leadership role can shift depending on (a) the phase of the collaboration and (b) the types of expertise of collaboration members. For example, in its early phase a collaboration may need leadership capacity in visioning and relationship building and moulding; latter stages may require expertise in acquiring resources and identifying and leveraging synergies. It is also likely that there will be multiple leaders within the collaboration at any one time. The aim is for these participants to read the context and respond when necessary; that is, 'step up to' and 'step back' from the leadership role as required.

Leadership in collaborations involves creating the conditions and processes to enable participants to learn about and from each other, appreciate individual strengths and limitations, and look for areas of commonality and joint effort. Most importantly it is about facilitating and maximising synergies between agencies and pushing system and behavioural boundaries to have these realised. "In collaborative leadership the emphasis is less on producing a solution to a known problem and more on developing new ways to reframe situations and develop unanticipated combinations of actions"<sup>2</sup>.

Effective collaborations nurture and build on relationships to produce mutually beneficial outcomes. Collaborative leaders also must sustain a balance between their facilitative or nurturing functions and the need to drive outcomes.

Clearly collaborative leadership calls for a different skill set, including abilities to:

- initiate and nurture relationships
- be trustworthy
- build agreement around a collaborative vision
- articulate and communicate the collaborative vision and the advantages of working that way
- network within and across sectors to build support for both the initiative and collaborative ways of working

The Advancing Collaboration Practice program has been established to support ARACY's work building cross-sector collaborations capable of implementing action that addresses the complex problems impacting the wellbeing of children and young people in Australia. The program builds stakeholder capabilities to establish and manage long-term joint working relationships and collaborative efforts. **For more information please contact ARACY on 08 9476 7800**

1 Chrislip, D and Larson, C (1994). *Collaborative Leadership: How Citizens and Civic Leaders Make a Difference*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

2 Innes, J and Booher, D (1999). Consensus Building as Role Playing and Bricolage, *Journal of the American Planning Association* 65(1):9–26.

- influence within the collaboration as well as upwards and outwards to other groups and decision makers
- read and diagnose collaborative processes and actions and know when and how to intervene
- see the 'big picture': how members are connected and the opportunities for synergistic actions
- take risks and encourage others to be comfortable with taking risks.

The term *process catalyst* has been used to describe this new type of collaborative leadership<sup>3</sup>.

### **Key aspects of the process catalyst role**

The process catalyst style of leadership draws on the ability to make connections among collaboration participants. This involves articulating what the participants can achieve together and how their joint action can benefit both their individual agencies and the broader community. To do this, the process catalyst needs to focus on building trust and respect among participants. They must also have a broad vision for what can be achieved and be able to influence members to further shape this vision. Such 'influencing' is achieved not through positional authority but by creating a sense of a 'new whole' that participants can embrace.

Process catalysts must also create an environment that supports inclusiveness and openness and in which differences of opinion can be voiced and conflict can be effectively managed, harnessed and directed toward goals. The role of the process catalyst leader(s) is to encourage members to learn new ways of behaving and dealing with each other. This can take considerable time and effort, so collaborative leaders must keep members engaged and committed to the vision through a regular process of checking-in.

As process minders, collaborative leaders must also constantly monitor and review the interactions and processes. If the collaboration is struggling, the interaction has become stagnant or stale, or commitment is wavering, leaders need to be able to respond — for example, by reinvigorating it with new ideas or implementing new processes. Similarly, there is a need to remain alert for interaction blockages and 'toxic' members, including 'fence sitters', who contribute little and can undermine the collaborative spirit of other participants.

Collaborative leadership also requires an understanding of, and focus on, the constraints and opportunities that result from the environment in which collaborations operate. This includes getting buy in, not only from participants within the collaboration, but also from their parent organisations and other key stakeholders that could have an impact on the success of the endeavour. Collaborative leaders will also be actively engaged in 'selling' the advantages of the initiative and promoting the spirit of collaboration to influential decision makers within government, business and the community sector.

### **Conclusion**

Effective collaborative leadership requires the ability to recognise, and capitalise on, the unique features of the collaboration process. This is not the type of leadership that most sectors or professions are producing or demanding. But when this type of leadership is enacted in a collaboration, it can make a difference to the success and outcomes of the effort.

3 Mandell, M and Keast, R (2009). A New Look at Leadership in Collaborative Networks: Process Catalysts, in J Raffel, P Lesink, and A Middlebrooks (eds), *Public Sector Leadership: International Challenges and Perspectives*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, pp 163–178.

# Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth

ARACY is a national non-profit organisation working to create better futures for all Australia's children and young people. Despite Australia being a wealthy, developed country, many aspects of the health and wellbeing of our young people have been declining. ARACY was formed to reverse these trends, by preventing and addressing the major problems affecting our children and young people. ARACY tackles these complex issues through building collaborations with researchers, policy makers and practitioners from a broad range of disciplines. We share knowledge and foster evidence-based solutions.

## About the authors of this fact sheet

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