Dr. Kathleen Allen

An Interview with Dr. Kathleen Allen on Leading Collaboratively

Traditionally, leadership is defined as characteristics or attributes belonging to an individual, such as charisma, determination, or magnetism. But more and more, people are beginning to view leadership as a way of working with others in a group rather than a set of personality traits that an individual needs to gain a position of authority. Especially in the environmental and social change movements, it is becoming more common for groups and individuals to work collaboratively instead of following the dictates of one dynamic leader.

With environmental problems spanning not only ecological issues, but social, economic, and political ones as well, many up-and-coming environmental leaders today also are making connections with groups that have not been traditional allies - such as unions, religious organizations, rural communities, and businesses - to work together towards common goals that speak to underlying values and visions shared by all. Building coalitions and working effectively with diverse groups is an important way for environmentalists to connect their work to other issues that are in turn linked back to quality of life and sustainability. Collaboration between multiple groups seems essential to making progress toward the interlinked goals of a clean, healthy, sustainable, and just society.

But how does one work collaboratively? Are there particular leadership skills or qualities that can help individuals build effective collaborations? Does collaboration produce more results than focusing our energies on an individual goal? And what does the phrase "collaborative leadership" really mean?

ELP spoke recently about collaborative leadership with Dr. Kathleen Allen, a consultant who specializes in leadership coaching and organizational change work in human service non-profit organizations, foundations, higher education, national and regional associations, and businesses. Dr. Allen has written and presented widely on leadership, human development, and organizational development. She is a Senior Fellow at the Academy of Leadership at the University of Maryland, and currently serves on the Board of the Leadership Learning Community. She can be reached at keallen1@charter.net. - *Robin Claremont*

What makes collaborative efforts work?

There are a number of practical strategies that can be used to build and strengthen collaborative groups. Strong collaborative partnerships are founded in authentic relationships among the members, shared core values or vision for the group, and supporting structures and processes that help equalize participation, encourage engagement and good communication practices, and provide members with choices, rather than coercive mandates.

If you are exploring strategic partnerships, it is helpful first to assess your proposed partners to see if they share passions and values, if trust and relationships can be built, and if the members are able to give effective feedback, communicate directly, and learn from their experiences.

The tendency is to start a collaborative group on something practical. This is a helpful way to bring people together to develop relationships and explore the larger possibilities of working together. In this initial stage, I like to ask, "what can we do together that we cannot do alone?" Organizations with widely different program foci might, at first, not seem like good strategic partners; however, if you look deeper at the vision and values of the organizations, you may find similar or supporting visions for communities and individuals. Members of collaborative partnerships must connect to something larger than themselves, or the collaboration will not be sustainable.

For example, one Multi-County Collaborative I work with brought people together to change the way agencies and counties approach problems, develop a stronger sense of reciprocal care in communities, and increase quality of life. When they invited other groups to become partners, one constituency led to another, spanning a wide range of organizations. The collaboration included groups that wouldn't ordinarily work together, but they built alliances around core values for the future of their county.

How is this related to leadership?

Practitioners who build coalitions can empower individuals, and move themselves and others from individual empowerment to a collective voice. Effective collaborators often see the world is as interdependent - someone else's problem is also their problem. It is easy, when beginning a partnership, to miss the "big picture" connections, but they are essential to achieving common goals across different programmatic foci.

The act of bringing together groups to collaborate is often leveraged through the quality of relationships between individuals. Trust, honesty, absence of manipulation or control, and authenticity are all vital to building collaboratives. Relationships create a platform for deeper conversations to occur. Collaborative leadership is about learning who your collaborators are and what they care about, building affinity, and bringing your most honest self to the table. Inauthentic relationships might produce limited results but are unlikely to create long-term substantial change.

The environmental movement is a great example of where collaborative leadership should occur. Anyone who cared about their great grandchildren would be interested in protecting the environment, if they could just see the connection between how we treat our environment today and the quality of life for their great grandchildren tomorrow.

Can you expand more on what "collaborative leadership" is?

I define collaborative leadership within the context of four attributes: dependent-self interested; empowered-self interested; dependent-common interest; or empowered-common interest.

Individuals in the dependent and self-interested quadrant expect others to tell them what to do and how to get things done, but are also focused mostly on what is good for them. They are the type of people who can easily be taken advantage of by a power-wielder.

Individuals who are empowered and self-interested are what I call "empowerment gone wild." These folks are highly capable but are working strictly for their own vision or their organization's vision, not for the common good. They push their own agenda, and in a collaborative situation, often are not willing to focus on the big picture.

In the box of dependent and common interest are individuals who hold the larger vision but also suffer from the burden of leadership. These are often people in management positions who are looked on by others as having the information, providing the motivation, and being responsible for making sure things get done. They may not realize that other people in the organization are looking for more shared leadership.

Finally, collaborative leaders are both empowered and working for the common interest. They share responsibility for information, creating change, and motivation. Often, in a collaborative leadership situation, you can't keep track of all the good things that are happening, because there are multiple people actively working towards a common goal. There's strong positive energy and efficiency.

How is collaborative leadership effective in creating social change?

Once you choose collaboration as a strategy to influence change, and build it right, you

actually become more effective in your work, because more people bring more assets to the table. Problems that would otherwise require significant investments of money can be solved simply by "unleashing" the resources and skills provided by individuals in the collaborative.

For example, one collaborative I work with consists of seven regional public schools as well as numerous other community organizations with the common goal of saving money in counties in rural Minnesota. The school superintendents wanted to hire a childhood developmental councilor for each of the grade schools, which would have taken about half the money the collaborative had. Most of the people in the collaborative didn't like the idea and started asking if there were ways all of them could help solve the problem. People got together and realized that they could "tweak" their own services and resources in a way that would address the problem of needing developmental support for children in the grade schools. The mental health organizations could provide staff assistance, the parent-teacher organizations could work with parents to address children's needs, the after school programs could tailor their activities, and so on. With all this shared support, they decided they needed to hire just one councilor to coordinate the community and county services in order to serve all seven schools. They developed a joint solution that met the same needs as the original proposal to hire seven councilors, and spent significantly less money.

It's important to look at the resources and assets that exist within a collaborative to come up with a better solution. Oftentimes, to make change, we need a lot of partners nudging from different places but in the same direction. It's like making a footprint in wet sand - you can't just slap your foot down once in order to leave an impression; you need to place your foot on the sand and wait until the sand gives way. Human beings, like wet sand, need time to respond. If you keep pushing you build resistance to your change process. The same is true for collaborative enterprises.

Robin Claremont *is program associate at the Environmental Leadership Program, and is editor of Environmental Leadership News.*

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http://www.elpnet.org/newsletter/spring2004/elpnews_spring04_interview.php