Building a Leadership Community: One University's Experience

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This article describes one university's approach to developing collaborative alliances within the university and between members of the university community and stakeholders in the community. As this five-year initiative moved from Phase 1, the internal component, to Phase 11, the external component, training was offered to members of funded project teams who worked on collaborative projects. Throughout the project, data were collected from teams and individual participants. A portion of this data is reported here.

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Although the concept of collaborative leadership is now in vogue, the idea has been discussed in one way or another since the 1960s (see, for example, Bowers & Seashore, 1966) and even earlier if one counts the literature on employee involvement in decision making that began right after World War II (see Silos, 1999, for a review). And collaborative leadership skills are especially needed now because the nature of organizations themselves is changing (Grantham, 2000; Pettigrew et al., 2003). Kilmann (1989) forecast the advent of the "network" organization and Ashkenas, Ulrich, Jick, & Kerr (2000) introduced the concept of the "boundaryless" organization to depict the shift toward network models of organizing in which organizations share resources and exchange knowledge laterally without command-and-control leadership structures.

While scholars have addressed the various structural forms that networks assume to increase flexibility and openness among members (Ricart, Sieber, & Svejenova, 1999), attention is also needed to how organizational members can acquire the requisite skills to function in these new organizational environments. Gray and Wood (1991) offer the following definition of collaboration, "Collaboration occurs when a group of autonomous stakeholders of a problem domain engage in an interactive process, using shared rules, norms, and structures, to act or decide on issues related to that domain" (p. 146). Heath and Sias (1999) took that definition and developed the notion of collaborative spirit, which they defined as "the general principles regarding acceptable goals, values and behavior that underlie and guide the collaborative alliance" (p. 358). Huxham and Vangen (2004) have extended the concept further by referring to the notion of collaborative advantage, gained when partners develop synergies from their collaboration. The following quote by Larson and LaFasto (1989) regarding the need for collaborative effort epitomizes the need to train people to work in structures that demand collaboration:

> Clearly, if we are to solve the enormous problems facing our society, we need to learn how to collaborate more effectively….We need to know how the activities of people can be coordinated and their efforts brought together within a structure that integrates and focuses, rather than diffuses. (pp. 14-15)

The renewed interest in teams that began in earnest in the mid 1980s also foreshadowed the importance of collaborative leadership (Cotton, Vollrath, Lengnick-Hall, & Froggatt, 1990; Leana, Locke, & Schweiger, 1990), and more recently, several researchers (Avolio, Jung, Murray, & Sivasubramaniam, 1996; Huxham & Vangen, 2000; Lipman-Blumen, 2000; Pearce, 1997; Seers, 1996) have advanced models of shared leadership.

In practice, the increasing role of teams as arenas for collaboration within organizations has been well documented. In 1994, Osterman found that over 50% of the 700 organizational units in his study used teams. Research reported a year later (Lawler, Mohrman, & Ledford, 1995) found that 60% of the 313 organizations studied indicated that they would increase or greatly increase their use of teams over the next decade; only 3% reported they would reduce or discontinue teams. As people from a wide variety of businesses, agencies, and organizations begin to see the value of working collaboratively and operating from a shared leadership perspective,

the question of how to do this effectively arises. From practitioner advice on how to work interdisciplinarily in academia (Younglove, Gray, Abdalla & Purvis Thurow, 1999) or how to create virtual learning communities (Newman & Smith, 1999) to academic analyses of collaborative alliances (Gray, 1989; Gray, 2000; Gray & Wood, 1991; Huxham, 1996), the common thread is developing knowledge and skills for helping people work together effectively.

Team Characteristics

Numerous scholars have addressed the properties of effective collaborative groups or teams. In a three-year study conducted with a wide variety of teams, Larson and LaFasto (1989) identified the following eight characteristics of effective teams: clear, elevating goal; results-driven structure; competent team members; unified commitment; collaborative climate; standards of excellence; external support and recognition; and principled leadership. In a later work, these same researchers (LaFasto & Larson, 2001) discovered that five key dynamics are present in successful teams: collaborative team members, positive team relationships, productive group problem-solving, leadership that encourages collective achievement, and an organizational environment that promotes collaboration and teamwork. In looking specifically at the problem-solving dynamic, they found that teams that were able to solve problems creatively and effectively were those in which team members were focused in their efforts, operated within a positive climate, and practiced open communication. Kolb (1996) likewise identified appropriate communication systems as well as clear project goals and individual member roles, responsibilities, and accountability as team characteristics necessary for effective functioning. Glaser (1994) specified that communication systems need to include an effective method of addressing conflict. In describing a long-term team building intervention, Glaser said, "A group tormented by conflict, subgrouping, and mistrust developed into a team characterized by creative problem solving, open dialogue, and collaborative partnerships" (p. 294). The structure of conflict throughout a team's history was examined by Franz and Jin (1995). In a study that recorded interactions among team members over a six-month period, they found that each subgroup used conflict early in the process to "define and advocate competitively its own position at the expense of the other" (p. 123). Later in the process, however, the subgroups "managed to reduce conflict to facilitate more cooperative behaviors and shared viewpoints" (p. 123).

In addition to having internal systems that facilitate teamwork, teams also need a supportive organizational framework (Hackman, 1990). Basic components of this framework include clear direction and accountability, sufficient staffing and training, adequate information and other resources, and rewards that encourage both individual and group effort (Kolb, 1996). Hirokawa & Keyton (1995) also emphasized the importance of information resources. Their research found that information resources, along with compatible work schedules, interested/motivated members, and good group leadership were key factors that distinguished between effective and ineffective groups.

Developing the capacity to work collaboratively across organizations, however, also means dealing with increased complexity and more ambiguous accountability structures (Gray, 1989; Huxham & Vangen, 2000). The requisite set of leadership skills goes beyond merely applying traditional leadership skills in a team environment. For example, Lipman-Blumen (2000) advocates a set of skills she calls "connective leadership" that include effective listening, empathy, and sharing of power. Similarly, Heath & Sias (1999) examined communication practices related to the generation of collaborative spirit which entailed construction of a shared mission and shared power in an alliance of community leaders working on a common problem. Among the leadership skills Gray (1989) identified for multiparty collaboration were the roles of convener and mediator. Conveners play the role of envisioning the collaboration and bringing the relevant parties together while the mediator role involves facilitating a dialogue that bridges differences among the various partners.

Problem Statement/Purpose

Like many organizations, academic communities have a need to build both internal and external collaborative alliances. In this article, we use case study methodology to examine one university's approach to developing collaborative alliances and building collaborative spirit between members of the university community and stakeholders in the wider environment. This effort was funded by W. K. Kellogg Foundation as part of an initiative, Leadership for Institutional Change (LINC), that sought to provide guidance and support for new leadership models in higher education. A primary goal of this initiative was to create a system that would build linkages between university populations and their stakeholders and increase the universities' responsiveness to changing needs. The

specific focus of this article is the collaborative leadership training that was developed and delivered as part of this initiative and the feedback received about the university's efforts from participants in the LINC project. The purpose of this paper is threefold:

•To present a model of collaborative skills that might be used by team members to improve process

• To describe a training program designed to introduce collaborative leadership skills in a university setting

•To report information gathered during this process and provide reflective evaluation of the utility of the model and the success of the training for enhancing interactions among collaborative partners.

Both authors were involved in the LINC project from its inception as members of the steering committee, facilitators of learning communities in Phase 1, and trainers/facilitators in Phase 11. Although the university described in this article worked in partnership with another university, the individual or partnership activities of the second university are not included here.

Overview of the LINC Project

Phase 1

The University's LINC project consisted of two phases over a five-year period. In Phase 1, the University leadership and the LINC steering committee created leadership learning communities (LLCs) that focused on various aspects of leadership and change within higher education institutions. Deans and other leaders nominated department heads, faculty, and administrators as candidates for these learning communities. The Provost extended 43 invitations; 38 candidates accepted. These individuals were then assigned to learning communities taking into consideration demographic factors, functional positions, and time availability. Undergraduate students were later added to the LLCs. Several of these learning communities met for over two years during Phase 1, and some continued to meet into the beginning of Phase 11. The mission statement developed to guide the LLCs is as follows:

Our mission is to promote institutional change in higher education systems, especially those pertaining to student access, the student experience, and broad-based stakeholder involvement. We will achieve this mission by building community and strengthening informal systems using shared learning and understanding as the foundation for change.

The LLCs each met monthly with a facilitator, a member of the steering committee, who helped them determine and organize priorities. Individual projects dominated the work of the LLCs from March until May. As an example, one LLC interviewed a sample of department heads who were asked whether and how they viewed themselves as agents for change within the University. Another studied the factors that facilitated effective interdepartmental mergers. All LLCs met jointly at the end of the academic year to present their projects to each other.

Phase 11

As part of the transition to Phase 11, the steering committee encouraged the learning communities or subsets of them to submit proposals for the collaborative partnerships that became the focus of Phase 11. The primary goal of this second phase was to create a Leadership Consortium that facilitated change within the University by linking university activities with the needs of the greater community. The primary approach to meeting this goal was to support the development of groups of internal and external stakeholders who were collaboratively addressing recognized campus/community challenges and to provide training in facilitation and collaborative leadership to these groups. Toward this end, the University LINC project sponsored mini-grants to collaborative partnerships that were involved in such efforts.

The mini-grant competition was advertised within the University and also in the wider community and resulted in more proposals than could be funded. However, by keeping the funds distributed to each initiative small, more in the nature of seed money than a complete coverage of all costs, LINC was able to fund a total of 29 collaborative projects over the three-year period that constituted Phase 11. Funding per project ranged from $2,000 - $8,000 per year. In exchange, participants agreed to participate in the Consortium's activities, attend training, and complete an evaluation at the end of the project.

The following criteria were developed by the steering committee to review and evaluate mini-grant proposals:

•Collaborative Impact - Does the applicant's team represent a diverse group of people from the campus and the community? Is the team expected to further collaborative goals?

•Assessment - Are the objectives clearly written and defined? Are appropriate methods of evaluation proposed?

•Feasibility - Is the applicant likely to be able to accomplish the objectives of the project? Are the resources adequate? Is the proposed strategy likely to succeed?

•High impact - How many students, faculty, staff, and community members will be served by the expected results? What is the importance of the initiative to the campus and community? Is there a clear educational benefit?

•Leverage - Does the project build on existing, successful projects or ongoing activities? Is there a potential to leverage funding from external sources? Will the project extend or create resources in ways consistent with campus or community missions?

Training Component

Near the end of Phase I, funds were approved to develop and deliver collaborative leadership training to participants in the funded projects. The remainder of this article focuses on the collaborative leadership model and related activities that were developed and used in training that was part of the LINC project. Data collected from the participants during the workshops and at year-end sessions are included to provide an indicator of the response to and success of the training workshops.

Planning

The first step during the initial planning meeting was to discuss and determine the overall goal and the specific objectives of the training. The training workshops were deliberatively designed as 3.5 hr. sessions (including a 30-minute working lunch) to enable participants to travel to and from the training in one day. Our focus during the face-to-face training session was on developing awareness and building collaborative skills. Participants were also given materials for additional on-site team building and reflection. Participants from each collaborative project were encouraged to attend the workshop as a team because the goal of the overall training effort was to transform a committee into a collaborative working group. The specific objectives of the 3-hour training sessions stated that, at the completion of the session, participants should be able to: 1) identify the key characteristics of an effective, collaborative team and 2) use the following process tools: nominal group technique, interest-based conflict resolution, and creative reframing. Roughly one-half of the time was spent on objective 1 although by first teaching and then using the nominal group technique to further explore issues related to collaborative leadership, we accomplished two purposes with one activity. The second half of the session was devoted to participants learning to use negotiating techniques to resolve conflicts within collaborative partnerships and to find creative ways to address issues and problems.

After putting together a preliminary design, we asked for feedback from the steering committee, tried out portions with one author's LLC group, and finally delivered a pilot of the training to the steering committee and to our LINC partners at the other university. Some adjustments in content, placement of materials, and timing were made before the first session was delivered for LINC participants.

Execution

Model. To develop a collaborative leadership model for our workshop, we examined a variety of literature including Hackman (1990), Health & Silas (1999), Larson and LaFasto (1989), Gray (1989), Kolb (1996), and Lipman-Blumen (2000), and drew on our own experiences in Phase I, the experiences of other steering committee members, and information collected from LLC participants. Our model is presented in Figure 1.
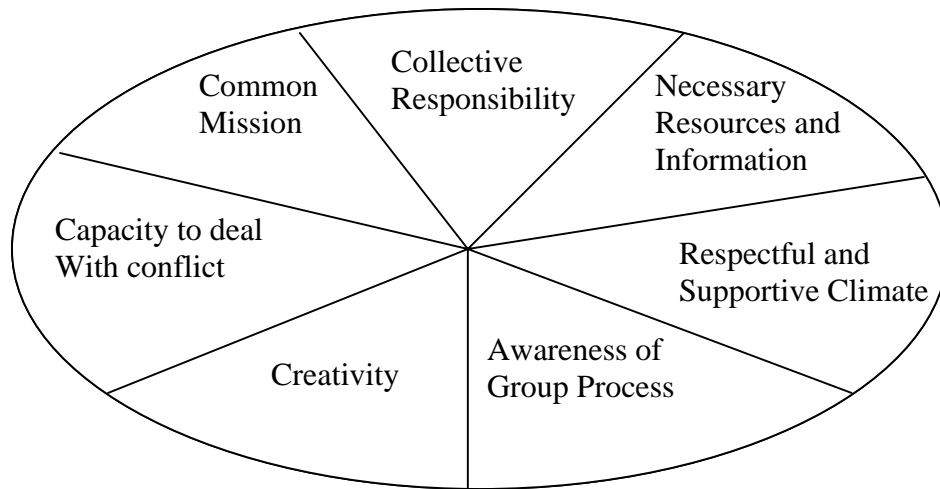
Figure 1. Collaborative Leadership Model

We also developed a one-page survey instrument based on our model for participants to use as a discussion tool during the sessions and to take back to their teams to provide for quick process checks (Contact the first author for a copy of this instrument). After a discussion of the model and the survey instrument and a brief orientation to nominal group technique, participants used the NGT to generate a list of obstacles to collaborative leadership. The responses were catalogued and are reported later in this article.

Participants. Members of 29 different teams participated in the Collaborative Leadership training over a three-year period. On average, 4 members per team attended the six workshops with the number of participants per workshop averaging 15. Project team members were encouraged to attend as a group so that they could maximize the learning from the training within their project. If only a few members attended, those participants were given materials to share with others.

Feedback. Evaluations received at the end of the workshops were favorable with scores averaging 9.2.on a 10-point scale. Short-answer responses were also favorable, and comments were used throughout the training to decide if changes were needed. However, after some preliminary changes in placement of material and timing during the first few sessions, subsequent changes were not deemed necessary since participants were happy with both the content and the flow of the training.

Participant Responses

From Training Sessions
A record was kept of the obstacles to collaborative leadership generated in training sessions over the three-year period in which the training workshops were offered. During the workshops, each training group prioritized the most important obstacles they identified. We prepared a summary (reported here) of the prioritized obstacles identified by all the training groups. In preparing the summary, we allotted a total of 15 points to the responses from each training group: 5 for their top response, 4 for the second, 3 for the third, and so on. Thus, if a group had three responses tied for first, those were the only responses that counted in this summary for that group. This methodology ensured that responses from groups with several ties in their rankings did not count more heavily than those from other groups. The top four factors reported are as follows:
1. Missing or unclear goal
2. Individuals not pulling individual weight on the project
3. Lack of time
4. Lack of resources

The top four factors were each mentioned by three training groups. The remaining factors were mentioned by only one training group. They are listed here in descending order in terms of placement on each team's list. Loss of vision, lack of a point person, and talk instead of action each was listed as a top factor by one group. Other factors mentioned were dysfunctional alliances, lack of collaborative skills, logistics, frustration with the process, and individual agendas. This information was collected during training sessions using the same question and the same methodology for each group. The purpose of the question was to stimulate discussion on the factors affecting collaborative effort as well as give participants experience using the nominal group technique.

From Year-end Consortia

Year 1. The first Leadership Consortium was held in May at the end of the first year of Phase 11. Forty-seven participants from 14 projects attended. The purpose of the workshop was to stimulate cross project interaction that enabled participants to learn more about collaborative leadership, share experiences across the projects, and discuss solutions to the challenges that arise during collaborative ventures. Project groups first shared information about their projects with the group at large. Then, common misconceptions about leaderships were presented by one of our project's co-directors (who recently spent a sabbatical at the Center for Creative Leadership in North Carolina). Next, we posted a list of the factors that had previously been identified as obstacles to collaborative leadership during the nominal group activity of the training sessions, and each participant had three votes for the factors they now thought were greatest obstacles to collaborative effort. Finally, they worked in groups to generate solutions to these obstacles and presented their conclusions in an interactive plenary session.

Year 2. In September at the beginning of the third year we held our second annual Leadership Consortium Workshop for all mini-grant participants. About 25 participants from eight projects attended. We utilized the same format for the workshop as last year because it had generated a very positive response. Workshop participants each presented their projects to each other. Common misconceptions about leadership were again presented. Finally, we posed challenges identified by previous workshop participants to the second year group who then worked in cross-project groups to generate constructive ways to overcome pitfalls to collaboration.

The following list presents some additional challenges to collaborating that mini-grant awardees identified during the second consortium:

- Identifying students who wanted to participate in leadership development activities and finding
- optimum timing in the school calendar
- Getting and maintaining commitment of resource people (including faculty) to conduct the project
- Aligning interests, priorities and plans of faculty at different universities.
- Finding funds to extend or replicate the project beyond the pilot phase
- Community resistance to trying out new ideas
- Turf battles among community participants

We found that, once again, participants benefited from the opportunity to learn about each other's projects and to pool ideas for overcoming the many similar challenges they faced.

Discussion and Implications

Missing or unclear goal was the number one obstacle to collaborative leadership mentioned by participants in this study. This should come as no surprise to anyone involved with teams. Clear goals have been consistently identified in the literature as a critical factor in effective teams and are a central component of most teamwork training sessions. The number 3 and 4 obstacles, lack of time and lack of resources, are directly related to goal attainment. Certainly, a team cannot accomplish its goal if it lacks these essential elements. Kolb (1996) and Hackman (1990) both mention the importance of a team having clear and appropriate time frames and realistic deadlines. Resources also have received attention in the teamwork literature. Larson and LaFasto (1989) state, "Tangible support lags behind philosophical support" (p. 112). Kolb (1996) says, "Organizations talk about the importance of teamwork, but their allocation of resources does not support this commitment" (p. 462). Hackman (1990) calls for the provision of "mundane material resources—equipment, tools, space, money, staff, or whatever—that teams need to execute their tasks" (p. 500). As a practical matter, time also can be considered a resource, which gives these combined factors even more weight as obstacles to collaborative leadership.

The second most commonly mentioned factor, individuals not pulling weight on the project, is perhaps the most interesting obstacle identified in this research. Two challenges to collaboration mentioned by participants during the

second consortium—aligning interests, priorities and plans of faculty at different universities and turf battles among community participants—provide insight into possible reasons for lack of engagement. In recent years, considerable criticism of the phrase "There is no I in teamwork" has surfaced with the result that team training today often stresses the importance of organizational, team, and individual goals being met. This stands alongside the traditional team advice that team members must have clarity about roles, responsibilities, and accountability (Kolb, 1996) and be interested in and motivated by the project (Hirokawa & Keyton, 1995). Larson and LaFasto (1989) refer to the issue of meeting individual and team needs as a balance between differentiation and integration. They say that the dimension of team unity can be fostered by "recognizing that team members have high expectations for each other, expect that everyone on the team will contribute to the extent that each is capable, and will become disturbed if a member pursues individual objectives *at the expense of the team goal*" (p. 83). This does not preclude members pursuing individual goals that are congruent with the team's purpose. Results of this study suggest that we as scholars and practitioners should maintain our focus on clear goals, realistic time frames, and sufficient resources, and additionally direct our attention to ways in which we can integrate individual and group goals and increase the level of engagement in collaborative projects. This is especially relevant on our campuses. As faculty members are increasingly encouraged to join with other faculty, students, and community members on projects of mutual concern, collective leadership (Lipman-Blumen, 2000) and multiparty collaboration skills (Gray, 1989) are needed.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In summary, the LINC project enabled the university to experiment with several means of stimulating collaborative leadership development including the organic learning communities, the collaborative project teams, the structured training program, and the leadership consortia. Each of these offered a different and unique approach to promoting the development of leadership skills within the university and its stakeholders. Overall, we were encouraged by the enthusiasm generated by each of these activities, and, in particular, by the collaborative leadership training program. Several conclusions from this "experiment" can be provisionally drawn. First, partners in collaborative alliances identify common, predictable problems that impede their effectiveness in achieving their collaborative goals, and these are generalizable across organizational settings. Second, identification of requisite "skills for collaboration" can help collaborative partners focus their energies on creating constructive processes for their joint work, rather than scapegoating individuals as the source of impediments to collaboration. Third, members of collaborative teams can profit from periodic review of and problem solving about the obstacles impeding their collective work particularly in a cross-training context in which they come to realize that the problems they face are endemic to collaborative context and not merely caused by their own or their partners' incompetence. Fourth, the positive responses we experienced in the LINC project suggest that similar training could beneficially be applied in other settings where the development of collaborative leadership skills is necessary or desired. Since collaboration is becoming a necessary component of organizational life, but few employees have been prepared to engage in it, building employees' knowledge and skills for how to collaborate effectively will be essential to future organizational success.

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