Adaptive Leadership for Public Health Podcast Series

Episode #5: Collaborative Leadership

Hello everyone, and welcome to Adaptive Leadership for Public Health, a podcast created to help you address the complex challenges of public health leadership by growing and thriving as an adaptive leader. This podcast is sponsored by the Region IV Public Health Training Center at Emory University.

My name is Brandy Walker and I am faculty at the J.W. Fanning Institute for Leadership Development, a unit of Public Service and Outreach at the University of Georgia. I'll be your host as we explore various aspects of adaptive leadership through our podcast. Today's episode is about collaborative leadership.

Collaborative leadership is an aspect of adaptive leadership, because when faced with the complex challenges that don't have known solutions, single-source leadership isn't the answer. Instead, the solutions require a multiplicity of perspectives, as well as diversity of skills, talents, and experiences. And it requires that we, as leaders, turn to the people with the problem to be engaged stakeholders in problem-solving.

Now, collaboration as a concept is very on trend these days—collaboration is the thing to do. But do we over use the word? Are we really clear on what collaboration is? In this episode, I'm going to provide you with some definitions of collaboration and principles of collaboration. I'll clarify different stages of working together, and share some practices of collaborative leaders. Your task as you listen is to reflect on these distinctions, and see if what *you* have been calling collaboration is the real deal. And while you're reflecting, try to assess at what level you are engaged in collaborative leadership practices.

One reason you hear so much about collaboration, especially in the field of public health, is because it actually is a cornerstone of how the field operates. In a 2018 book called *Leadership with Impact: Preparing Health and Human Service Practitioners in the Age of Innovation and Diversity*, there is an entire chapter focused on the importance of collaboration, positive relationships, and motivation in the field of public health. We know that we can't solve the complex problems that we face in public health without working together. This field relies on collaborative efforts to achieve the goals of improving public health.

Let's start with a basic definition. Collaboration can be defined as bringing together the resources and energy of two or more groups that then share in the success and sometimes missteps of a project. There must be sharing, not only of resources that include your time, talent, and treasure, as well as energy. Also, there is the sharing of responsibility, both for

success and missteps. Now, there are levels of engagement that we sometimes mistake for collaboration. It's important to distinguish between these other levels of engagement and collaboration, because at each level there are different expectations for your partners, and a different kind of sharing of resources, as well as energy, required of you as a part of the collaboration.

I like to refer to the 3 T's of collaboration when distinguishing between the various levels of engagement. Those "T's" are TIME, TRUST, and TURF. Time refers to how much time you devote to maintaining that level of engagement; trust refers to how much trust is required to maintain that level of engagement; and "turf" or we sometimes call it "toys" refers to the resource sharing—how much turf do you give up to engage with another group? How much sharing of each other's toys is in play? Do you share or hold back because you don't have the trust needed to share?

The lowest level of engagement along this continuum is **networking**, which is a very important first step. This is a great kind of engagement in which you are exchanging information for mutual benefit, but very little "turf" or very few resources are actually shared. This is the least time-intensive strategy on the continuum to collaboration. Very little trust is needed to network because the stakes are relatively low. This also means that you will most likely be networking with far more people and groups than you will be collaborating with, and also that some of those networking opportunities can grow into collaborations.

The next level on the continuum to collaboration is the stage of **coordinating**. This type of activity helps people and organizations exchange services and begins to reduce barriers. This requires more trust, and a little more access for each entity to the other's "turf" or resources. An example might be coordinating schedules with another organization or group so that you don't plan an outreach event on the same date. You're not really collaborating just yet, just coordinating activities, literally altering your activities to coordinate with another group, so your audience isn't having to choose between your two events.

The next level (we're almost at collaborating, but not yet)—this next level is **cooperating**. At this stage of working together, information is exchanged (like in networking), activities are altered (like in coordinating), and more resources are shared. This involves higher levels of trust and more significant sharing of turf or resources. It also requires greater time and commitment between agencies or groups. So think of the coordinating example when two agencies coordinate their calendars and alter dates for activities so they are not competing. Now, in that same situation, a *cooperating* group might decide to share the date of an event, pool their resources, and cooperate in an activity fair. They might even have a formal written agreement on how they will share a venue, but they still have their own mission and purpose for being there.

And now we're at the **collaborating** stage of working together. When we think of our three T's at this stage (time, trust, and turf), a true collaboration involves the most time, sharing of the most turf or resources, and requires the greatest level of trust. Why? Because you wouldn't fully open up and share all of your resources (or a good bit of your resources), if you didn't trust the other agency or group, and if you weren't sure that you were ***working toward the same shared goal***—this is a key component of collaborating that is not found in the other examples of working together. It involves fully sharing in the responsibilities, risks, and rewards. So let's take the previous example of sharing a venue and a date for an activity fair to the next level of true collaboration. The two agencies would agree on a shared goal with their mission and purpose aligned with each other. They would then pool resources to work together in achieving that shared goal. That requires that they trust each other to best use the resources for their shared goals. In this kind of collaboration, you would definitely have a written agreement to clarify roles and responsibilities, and formalize the relationship.

So to summarize, networking involves exchanging information; coordinating involves altering activities; cooperating involves a significant sharing of resources, and collaboration serves to enhance the capacity for the organizations—working together to achieve more than you could if working alone.

Take a moment to pause and reflect on a recent activity or project that you considered a collaboration. Was it? Or did it possibly fall into another category of working with others? Thinking about this helps you become more clear on the expectations you and others have in projects around commitments of time, levels of trust, and the sharing of turf.

Now, let me ask you a question: why do you think we seem to want to jump to collaboration as the gold standard? What is the appeal? Let's talk about the pros and cons.

One obvious reason why we want to move toward collaboration, particularly in adaptive leadership, is because today's adaptive challenges require more—more resources, more diverse perspectives, and more diverse skill sets to address these complex problems. Collaborations that enhance our capacity to do this important work can lead to new or improved services. Increasing the level of collaboration in your work can result in improved communication with more perspectives in the mix. Pulling together in a collaboration can give you wider reach and greater access to communities in need. A successful collaboration should also result in greater coordination of activities, and the elimination of duplicated efforts. That's a big one—you don't want to recreate the wheel, or waste your resources on something someone else is already doing. And by collaborating with other agencies and groups, you can build stronger, more united communities.

Sounds like a great deal, right? But it's not always as easy as it sounds. There are significant barriers to collaboration, mostly related to issues around the 3 T's: time, trust, and turf issues.

The dark side of getting more opinions and perspectives with more involved partners, is that you might be getting *unwanted* opinions and perspectives. Be careful what you ask for, right? That's why trust is so important, and getting on the same page with a shared goal or mission is critical.

Another barrier might be that with more players involved in a collaboration, you might find you have decreased levels of cooperation during a crisis. Why? Because when we're in crisis, we tend to hold on to our resources rather than risk losing them by sharing. Another 'con' is that people may be silent in their disagreement, and, because of lack of trust, hold back good ideas. This would be the equivalent of someone not sharing their "best toy" (or best idea) because they don't trust the other partners. Maybe the fear is other people will run with the idea and leave you out, or maybe everyone will devalue the idea and not treat it with care, which could me metaphorically breaking your best toy. On a related point, social pressure may lead to individuals and groups making the wrong decision. This danger increases when you do not have a clear and agreed upon shared goal for the collaboration, and a framework or guiding principles for how you'll work together in the collaboration. And finally, if a collaboration fails (remember, the stakes are higher), there may be significant damage to the reputation of a community or group. This is another reason why established relationships and the continually increase of trust among partners is key.

And speaking of principles, there are six key principle that guide collaborative leadership, and they involve exchange, diversity, democracy, strengths, vision, and maintenance. I'll explain each one:

First, collaboration involves **exchange**. The exchange is more than just information. True collaboration moves beyond networking and coordination to the sharing of risks, resources, rewards, *and* responsibilities.

Second, collaboration encourages **diversity**. Solutions that meet the needs of all stakeholders will be more likely if all groups are present and participating.

Third, collaboration practices **democracy**. The process of collaboration promotes active citizenship and empowerment, creating space for conversations where all voices are heard, respected, and counted.

Fourth, collaboration builds on **strengths**. Focusing on the assets that individuals and groups bring to the community help to identify connections and interdependencies that lead to successful collaboration.

Fifth, collaboration requires a shared **vision**. Partners in a collaboration effort may play different roles, but without sharing a common goal and purpose, there is no collaboration.

And finally, our sixth principle is that collaboration requires **maintenance**. Any collaborative effort needs regular tune-ups, adjustments, and refueling to run well. A collaboration is a dynamic process that requires constant check-ins with partners, continued attention to effective communication, an awareness of dynamics related to conflict. Remember what we've said about conflict, that it is often the source of energy and creativity. So as an adaptive leader, part of maintenance in a collaboration is diagnosing the energizing vs the draining conflict moments, and cooking that conflict within safe spaces to build stronger partnerships and develop more effective solutions.

Those safe spaces help to create a climate of trust, which we keep coming back to as one of the 3 T's in collaboration. Think back to our episode on leadership practices. One of the 5 practices of effective leaders was the practice of **enabling others to act**, which fosters collaboration and strengthens others. As an adaptive leader working to enable others and create an environment that supports collaboration, you want to focus on two things: the first is creating a climate of trust, which is definitely easier said than done. And second, you want to facilitate relationships within the collaborative group.

When it comes to how you create a climate of trust there is no clear checklist, but you might consider what is known as the **trust equation**. Now, if you're visual like me and also challenged with mathematical equations, you may want to listen to this part more than once. I'm going to describe this equation, which is formulated as a fraction with one part over another part. But we're not talking about numbers. Instead, the numerator, or top part, and denominator, bottom part, are concepts. And because it is a fraction, the higher value you have on top versus on bottom gives you a larger number or value overall. When the bottom value is larger than the top value, you have a less than 1 value. Ok, remedial math class over! For the top part of this trust equation, or the numerator, we have your credibility plus reliability plus intimacy, or the closeness of the relationship. And on the bottom part, or the denominator, we have self-orientation, or how you see yourself, which means do you focus more on yourself or on others in your work with others. When your self-orientation is high, meaning that you are focused more on yourself than others, the trust will be lower. And the more credibility you and your organization have with the other person, plus the more you have exhibited the characteristic and behavior of being reliable, added to the level of intimacy or relationship already established, will give you a higher top number. Dividing the top value by the lower value, your self-orientation, means that even if you have high credibility and reliability as well as the established relationship, if your self-orientation is focused on you rather than the well-being of others, your trustworthiness value will be lower.

Moving now to what might seem to be a simpler list for ways to build trust and mutual respect, they are not necessarily easy to put into practice. Here is a list of 5 things you can do to build trust with others: First, **treat others as equals**. This has a strong connection with adaptive

leadership, because rather than coming from a position of hierarchical leadership, you come from the position that values everyone's contributions and recognizes the strengths that diverse perspectives bring to a collaboration. This also will impact your self-orientation, allowing for that trustworthiness value to increase. Second, **listen actively**. This allows you to show you value the other person, and allows you to do the third item, which is **learn from other people.** It's often hard to know what we don't know. When we start from assumptions and interpret things from our own experiences alone, we can't know what we're missing from the perspectives of others, until we listen and learn from them. And fourth, you can build trust by **sharing your stories**. There is such value in understanding experiences as what helps create the people that we are. When we share stories, we are speaking to our need to have narrative understanding of one another to build relationships, not just knowledge or information. And finally a fifth step you can take to build trust is to **align your collaborative efforts around a shared goal and mission**. When people are working toward the same goal, they have more incentive to put their time, talent and treasure into the work. As public health professionals, connecting the work you are doing with the values of stakeholders you wish to be part of the collaboration is key.

This connects clearly with the second area of focus to increase trustworthiness, which is by facilitating stronger relationships within a collaborative effort. A few ways you can do this is by intentionally and strategically developing cooperative goals and roles, which is more granular than that shared mission. A shared understanding of the goals and clear roles for each person to play helps strengthen the bonds in the collaboration, and enables people to feel valued but not necessarily overwhelmed. Another thing you can do as a collaborative leader is to structure projects and activities that promote joint efforts rather than reinforcing siloed activities. And in those joint efforts, you can support the norms of reciprocity, or the expectation that there is mutual benefit for both parties.

And finally, let's address some ideas about group decision making as a collaborative leader, because, of course, decision-making is central to the actions of collaborative work. It is important to be aware of the pitfalls of making group decisions. Have you ever been in a group decision-making process and seen how the loudest voice got all of the attention or the most charismatic person was able to sway the decision, even if they didn't have the best or even a good solution? Or have you been in situations where you or someone else with a quiet and less forceful voice may have had real value to add but no one was listening? These are the dynamics that good leaders need to be paying attention to. As you work through group decisions in collaborative leadership settings, insist on the following ground rules:

For starters, respect the expertise and knowledge that each person brings to the group. Recognize when that expertise or knowledge is missing. Don't let the strong personality push the group into a bad decision. And be sure to allow space for that quiet person to be heard.

So in summary, success as a collaborative leader depends on creating an environment of trust, mutual respect, and shared aspiration in which all can contribute fully and openly to achieving collective goals. As we close, I encourage you to think about the collaborations you have been part of or are currently part of, and consider how the principles of collaboration have or have not been in play. And, reflect on how the practices of collaborative leadership would benefit the work you do within your agencies and with external stakeholders and partners in communities.

On behalf of the Region IV Public Health Training Center, I want to thank you for listening. We hope this podcast will help you build your confidence and capacity to address complex challenges in your public health organization by growing and thriving as an adaptive leader. Our next episode will focus on l as an important part of adaptive leadership. Until next time, reflect on what you've heard and how it fits into your leadership journey.