

From Heroic to Collaborative Leadership

By Don Mroz

There are fewer “heroic” leaders these days, and that’s a good thing. A new movement is afoot, and by some standards it is long overdue. The movement is collective or collaborative leadership, and it comes in numerous forms. Here are several examples:

In a Midwest insurance company, collaborative leadership takes the form of two CEO’s and two COO’s, each with different responsibilities within the company, and it entails collective decision making on difficult, complex issues. Within this organization, the collective leadership team also focuses on other collaborative opportunities to move the organization forward, which by the way, has succeeded very well.

In a large New York health care organization we worked with recently, collective leadership took the form of pushing the leadership responsibility down the chain of command. Decisions could be made in a timely fashion while giving more responsibility to those closer to the customer.

In yet another organization, a non-profit arts council on the East Coast, we have seen evidence of collective leadership through the board of directors, which prefers to use consensus decision making (sometimes referred to in this instance as “group governance”), while disregarding titles and positions. All board members have an equal say in how the organization will be run.

Another example is found in one of the largest corporations of computer hardware, software and business solutions, which is undertaking an effort to educate its global leaders on how collective/collaborative leadership can move the organization forward in dealing with complexity at all levels of the organization.

Collaborative and collective leadership can also go beyond a single organization, shaking competition and cooperation paradigms, through concepts like “Open-Market Innovation” (Rigby and Zook, HBR, 2006) in

which organizations like Pitney Bowes and Cisco Systems routinely go outside their own industry sector to collaborate and innovate with other organizations.

A recent research study by the Center for Creative Leadership titled *The Changing Nature of Leadership* provides evidence of organizations and leaders continuing to move toward the direction of collaborative and collective leadership. More than five hundred respondents in the study indicated organizations/leaders have moved in the past five years from individual leadership (“having the position”) toward the use of a more “collective and collaborative” leadership. This is seen more as a process and not necessarily as the position.



Drivers of Collective and Collaborative Leadership

The actual definitions of collective/collaborative leadership may vary, but what is very clear are the drivers pushing organizations and leaders in this direction. The following are among the forces we see pushing leaders and organizations to move toward more collaboration:

- Challenges, problems, and decisions becoming more complex
- Greater reliance on interdependent work across boundaries, including organizations
- Shifting competition bases from known competition to upstarts and diverse markets
- Globalization
- Increased expectations by customers, stakeholders and employees
- Drive for innovation
- Boundary spanning resulting partially from mergers and acquisitions and the like
- The need for reinventing the organization and its processes at an ever faster rate

Continued on next page

Heroic to Collaborative, continued

Continued from previous page

“Heroic” leadership doesn’t have the panache it once did. Leaders seem to be realizing no one individual can possibly run an organization alone, nor even a large division. The world is becoming more complex. Decisions require more data and deeper thinking.

Increasing complexity also increases the need for scenario building with optional futures impacting the business. Such requirements compel leaders to create environments that allow for deeper thinking, rather than quick fixes. Organizations are moving toward collective and collaborative leadership as a way to more effectively grapple with today’s business realities.

Implications for Leaders

The implications of collective/collaborative approaches for leaders are numerous. Depending on one’s self perception, the reactions range from potentially threatening to welcoming. Collective/collaborative leadership as noted by the CCL study means a greater reliance on interdependent work to solve problems and make decisions, beyond individual capabilities.

A leader wanting to undertake this form of leadership must hold a paradigm of desiring to learn, sharing power, as well as trusting and respecting colleagues. Further, leadership itself will need to be viewed as a collective process of interdependent decision-making.

The graph above illustrates some of the differences in leadership perspective moving from a more individualistic, heroic view of leadership to a more collective and collaborative view.

New Skills for Leaders

Moving from individual heroic leadership to collective/collaborative leadership may fundamentally be a

mindset change, but it also requires the adoption of a new skill set for many.

Openness to learning. First and foremost, the ability to learn from others and from every experience, which I like to term as “unconditional learning” is critical in implementing collective leadership. Traditional thinking is that the leader makes the important decisions, thus requiring the leader to have all or most of the answers (i.e., information, data and knowledge). With collective/collaborative leadership, the opposite is true - it is the collective body which collaborates to create the approaches and solutions to complex issues and challenges needing to be resolved.

Relationship building. One of the most surprising aspects of the CCL research outcomes was the rise of so-called “soft skills,” and in particular the ability to build and manage relationships.

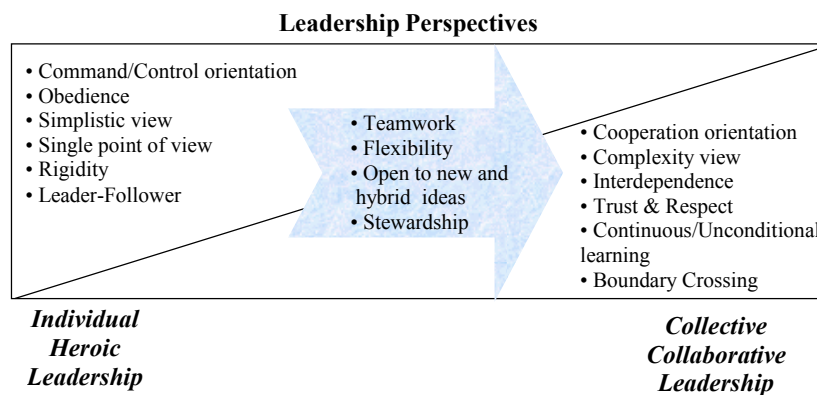
This is a sharp rise in the belief of participants

compared to a similar study conducted by CCL in 2002. The need to focus on relationship also fits with previous research conducted by Daniel Kim and Peter Senge in their work on Organizational Learning.

Their research states that increasing the quality of relationships in turn increases the quality

of thinking, which then leads to an increase in the quality of actions and results, ultimately leading back to an overall increase in the quality of relationship. Thus, a reinforcing causal loop is apparent and this cycle perpetuates itself making the case for working on relationships and showing its value to the actual work being accomplished.

Non-defensive behavior. Defensiveness and having to be “right,” are unacceptable behaviors and serve as roadblocks to collective leadership. The more



Continued on next page

Heroic to Collaborative, continued

Continued from previous page

one can hold their own ego in check and realize that others have relevant information and knowledge, the closer one can get to collective leadership. It seems a paradox is at play when one undertakes this approach to leadership, in that humility is key, but so too is confidence in one's own ability. That ability becomes positioned and utilized with the collective.

Teaming. The ability to team and work with others—even under pressure—is critical. Many leaders believe in the concept of teaming, and understand its practical implications. They work well with teams when the going is easy.

Under stress, some of those same leaders will jump in and make the decisions, ultimately undermining the decisions and work of the team. It's a journey to disaster, and it results in the leader losing the team's trust. And yet it continues to happen. Under similar circumstances, the leader will again and again take over and make the decisions.

For collective/collaborative leadership to work, trust, respect and ultimately teaming need to be inherent in the relationships.

Challenging. The ability to challenge in a positive manner, to ask questions rather than simply advocate a position, is a skill set that is important to the success of collaboration. The ability to think critically about complex issues can only happen in the collective if the environment and culture have been created to allow individuals to respectfully challenge the thinking brought to the group by their peers.

Asking questions of “not knowing,” providing differing viewpoints, and using productive communication skills are all necessary in order to challenge and learn effectively and efficiently without harming relationships.

Flexibility. Undertaking collective/collaborative leadership requires one to be flexible related to thinking, style, decision-making, and even beliefs. The fact is that most of us *do what we believe and believe what we do*. This minimizes our flexibility when it comes to hearing what others have to say, and reduces our inclination to

try new approaches. In realizing collective leadership, one must let go of old habits (easy to say, very hard to do) and openly embrace differing points of view.

Key Questions for Leaders

It seems evident that if leaders are going to move in this direction many questions need to be answered regarding personal stances and beliefs, the organizational circumstances and needs, as well as organizational culture. Several questions need to be considered regarding personal preparation for moving in the direction of collective and collaborative leadership. The questions below can be used to initiate conversation or reflection on the part of leaders. This reflection can be used to evaluate one's position at the beginning of a journey, now and periodically throughout its course.

The questions may seem rather obvious, and the tendency may be to say, “Well of course I do this or that!” To combat this natural tendency, the author recommends a leader find a few respected people, and ask them to answer the questions concerning the leader undertaking a more collective approach. This potentially objective feedback may confirm one's approach in some areas, and perhaps hold some surprises in others.

The key questions include: What is the extent to which...

- I am willing to let go of sole decision-making?
- I am open to new learning?
- I am open to new experiences?
- I am open to giving and receiving feedback?
- I am willing to change my behavior?
- I am able to reflect critically on my experience, previous decisions and relationships?
- I will be able to receive the support I need from my peers, environment and the overall culture?
- I am able and willing to establish and maintain good working relationships with a wide variety of people?

Continued on next page

Heroic to Collaborative, continued

Continued from previous page

An alternative format is to consider past behavior, asking, “*When* have I been willing to let go of sole decision making?” “*In what situations* am I best able to be open to new learning?” “*When* am I most able to receive and accept feedback about myself?”

Asking the questions this way allows the leader to consider how and when they have applied, which may help them understand the circumstances in which they can most easily be successful. The key, of course, is for the leader to be reflective around questions that can help them move further toward collective and collaborative leadership.

Moving from a *one-point-of-view* perspective to a perspective of *interdependence* and *collaboration* requires a fundamental shift in thinking and undertaking the work of leadership. Increasing teamwork, being flexible, being

“What we have seen is the need to provide a change in the way leaders think about their role.”

open to new ideas, and stepping into the world of stewardship (e.g., viewing leaders and subordinates as intimately connected and sharing ownership of content and process) are critical to moving toward a collective and collaborative leadership approach.

Naturally, there are times when one technical expert will indeed have the answer to a complex problem, and should be respected for these skills and abilities.

More and more, though, what we have seen is the need to provide a change in the way leaders think about their role. They don’t need to be heroes, but rather need to build the skills necessary for undertaking collective/collaborative leadership. By asking some questions of themselves, and by focusing on a few key skills, they can. ☛

Donald Mroz Ph.D. is an organization development consultant specializing in organizational learning, leadership and change management, as well as the positive aspects of organizations. He is a principal in Waves of Change, based in Nantucket, Mass. Don can be reached at 508.228.5398, or donmroz@wavesofchange.com. His web address is www.wavesofchange.com.

