White Paper

Collaborative Leadership to Drive Innovation and Inclusive Participation at Work

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How we work has changed considerably in the 21st century. The barriers employees must overcome to collaborate are multi-faceted and complex.

Collaborators are no longer located at a single office or in a specific city, region, or continent, but live all around the world. Teams are also diverse, made up of people who do not necessarily share the same age range, gender, ethnicity, or training. The office, as traditionally understood, is now located in the cloud, and many teams are staffed by people who work at different times of the day and may never meet in person. In this environment, it can be challenging to effectively engage inclusive communication practices that cultivate a sense of belonging and participation, especially as a leader. Collaborative leadership offers one powerful approach to cultivate a sense of belonging that can also help to establish equitable communication practices among diverse groups, employees and organizations.

In this white paper, we describe collaborative leadership and how it can help your organization meet its goals for shared leadership and enhance participation and a sense of belonging.

Background on Work and Working Inclusively in the 21st Century

For many employees, the workplace can feel daunting. As one team ends their workday another one begins theirs in a different time zone. A teammate finishes a task and another initiates the next phase of the project where your role is more ambiguous. Work today requires constant coordination and ad hoc collaboration. When employees are not in the same space, communication can feel transactional or disengaged. While employees are networked by their workplace tools and have "partial membership in multiple networks and rely less on permanent memberships in multiple groups" (Rainie and Wellman, 2012), how we communicate at work must evolve to meet networked dynamics in inclusive ways that makes space for diverse groups of people to effectively participate and contribute to the workplace.

Not only has how we communicate shifted, so has what our work focuses on. Studies of the workplace tell us that today's organizations are more often trying to solve "wicked problems" as a form of business development (Spinuzzi, 2015). Wicked problems involve pollution, hunger, or access to clean water—they are problems that can be characterized by how difficult they are to even define (see Rittel and Webber, 1973; Buchannan, 1992). Since so many multinational organizations are taking on wicked problems as part of their work, market factors require organizations to move quickly to be competitive in the marketplace.

As well, the need for innovation requires we bring diverse points of view into conversation. However, the need to move fast can also make people feel left behind and may not include people who have different communication needs. Also, moving quickly can make building relationships and making space for marginalized identities to substantially contribute difficult to arrange.

Such shifts in how we work and what we work on have motivated many leaders to ask how to best organize our workplaces to cultivate creativity and harness diverse ways of thinking. Some have argued we must use design thinking to reimagine how workplaces function (e.g., Brown and Katz, 2019). Meanwhile, workplace demographics are changing rapidly. Even so, women still lag men in leadership roles, and that to ensure more women take on leadership roles, workplaces must adopt significant structural changes that align with the values

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of collaborative leadership (see Geffner, 2023). Recent studies also tell us that Millennial and Generation Z workers bring very different values into the workplace, with improved communication and social consciousness being key traits they expect from employers (Johns Hopkins, 2023). Such expectations of workplaces are also a natural match for Collaborative Leadership.

Intentionally supporting diverse contributions to the workplace also has a clear business case. Research done on the importance of diversity points to needing multiple levels of diversity on teams. The ideal state is considered 2-D diversity, which includes inherent diversity (made up of traits like gender and ethnicity) and acquired diversity (made up of experience and skill set). Teams with "Employees of firms with 2-D diversity are 45% likelier to report a growth in market share over the previous year and 70% likelier to report that the firm captured a new market" (Hewlett, Marshall, and Sherbin, 2013). The same research on 2-D diversity at work also suggests autocratic or hands-off leadership approaches are unlikely to motivate employees from marginalized identities, including women, to succeed at work because they tend not to involve structural changes to existing workplace dynamics. In the worst cases, lack of a shared leadership approach might cause marginalized employees to disengage and feel as though they don't belong. Workplaces need approaches that help employees feel as though they belong and their voice matters, and collaborative leadership offers this sort of approach.
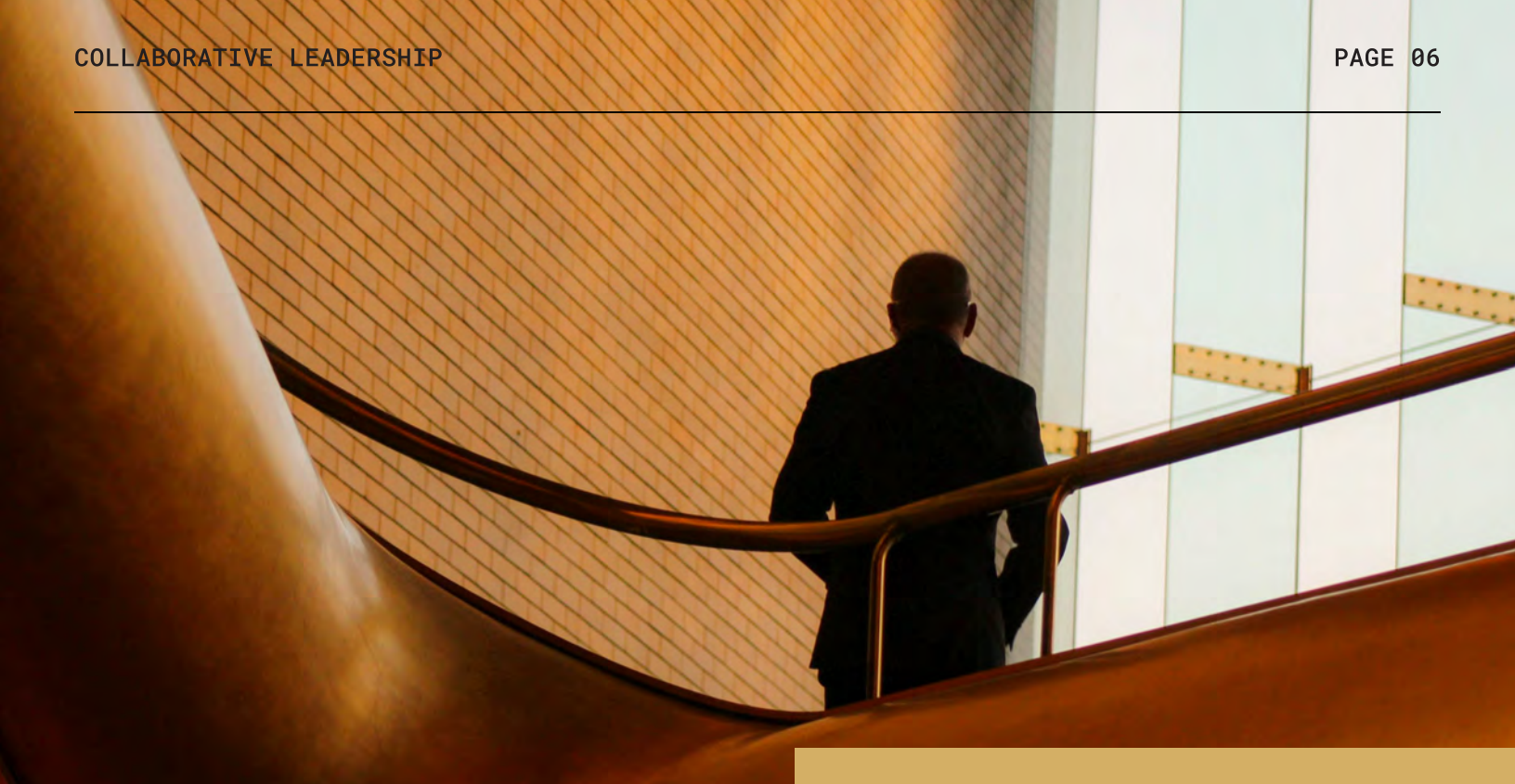
The Need for Collaborative Leadership

Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and the radical shift to remote work, organizations around the world began to adapt leadership in support of a networked workforce and created structural changes to the corporate world due to demographic changes (e.g., General Electric, Salesforce, IBM, Bank of America). Coupled with the development of methods teams use to innovate—whether utilizing Agile, Lean, or Design Thinking—leaders must more often be trained as facilitators of ad hoc project teams (Lauren, 2018). For many, the result of these shifts motivated employees to seek out a more satisfying work-life balance (Warzel and Petersen, 2021) and assist in locating facilitative skills that can enhance equitable participation in decision-making.

Collaborative leaders can learn to use the power of facilitation to help teams identify and achieve shared goals and build strong bonds in a productive work environment. With this leadership style, all employees are invited to contribute their perspective in an organized, coherent manner. The invitation itself helps develop a sense of psychological safety. Psychological safety is defined as the degree with which employees feel they can fail or make mistakes publicly without retribution or impact on their social capital on the team (Edmondson, 2018). It is essential that managers intentionally facilitate working environments where collaborative approaches to leading can thrive.

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a democratic and action-focused form of leadership that emphasizes effective facilitation of individuals and teams, inviting all team members, *especially from inherently diverse backgrounds*, into decision-making processes and transforming employee participation into empowerment and engagement.

What is collaborative leadership?

Collaborative leadership is a democratic and action-focused form or leadership that emphasizes effective facilitation of individuals and teams, inviting all team members, especially from inherently diverse backgrounds, into decision-making processes and transforming employee participation into empowerment and engagement. In this way, collaborative leadership is "...distributed rather than concentrated at the top" (Bolman and Deal, 2013). Implementing collaborative leadership requires making structural changes to workplace environments to ensure success of the approach. Collaborative leadership invites personal accountability so teams can align their individual goals with that of the collective organization, particularly in organizations where shared decision-making is essential to project success (Lauren, 2018; Spinuzzi, 2015). As a practice that enhances inclusion and belonging, collaborative leadership involves a series of actions rooted in facilitative practices of communicating.

Under a collaborative leadership approach, managers and leaders work to decentralize the workplace and co-create an inclusive and supportive work environment that fosters effective communication, strong bonds, and overall success (see Mintzberg, 2013). Collaborative leaders can disrupt the way organizations work in a human-centered, sustainable way, ultimately giving space to focus on the most central, meaningful questions for an organization's purpose.

Furthermore, it can enhance an organization's inclusion initiatives in actionable, structural ways.

Many leaders will tell you it is not about what you say, it is about what you do that makes a difference. Collaborative leaders align people and organizations by making space for employees to participate. They do this work by identifying and implementing a shared set of values for how to approach work and develop an internal set of policies and procedures to govern shared decision making, particularly among project teams.

Collaborative leadership is often purposefully created with, not for, employees.

Collaborative leadership also has many kinds of implementations. At one workplace, an organizational hierarchy might be entirely flat, meaning there are no managers or leaders and every employee works at the same level of the organizational chart (e.g., Valve Corporation). In a less flat hierarchy, organizations might start in smaller increments, sharing in leadership decisions by making space for meetings where employees can raise concerns, coordinate work, and ask questions about the direction of a project. Collaborative leadership is often purposefully created with, not for, employees.

How does Facilitation Differ From Collaborative Leadership?

Given the need for cross-functional collaboration for innovation, many organizations have hired professional facilitators. Sometimes these facilitators are project managers, other times they are trained in specific development methodologies, such as SCRUM masters. Even more often, organizations are training all employees to act as collaborative leaders because of how useful facilitation can be to enhance a shared sense of responsibility.

Facilitators are often focused on group dynamics, and they usually have little stake in the direction of a project. As Doyle (2013) explains, "A facilitator is an individual who enables groups and organizations to work more effectively; to collaborate and achieve synergy." A facilitator owns a group's progress toward some sort of shared goal.

Facilitation is a practice that can be done, with the right practice and preparation, by anyone positioned to lead a group of people through an inclusive decision-making process, building a consensus related to the goal of the session. Collaborative leaders use facilitation to create alignment among their team, building up the capacity of the team. It heavily on effective facilitation techniques while also working to create a dynamic and equitable workplace experience.

Unlike facilitators, a collaborative leader's work isn't bound by time. While a facilitator leads a particular meeting, a collaborative leader works toward the continued improvement of the people, processes, projects, and environment in which they lead. As DeMarco and Lister (1999) explain, collaborative leaders look to *grow* teams rather than *build* them.

Five Essential Values of Collaborative Leadership

Strategic development of empathy and compassion are crucial to an effective collaborative leadership practice. Additionally, the ability to strategically engage in practices that implicitly communicate empathy and compassion is closely connected to the core skills essential to effective facilitation. The core skills of effective facilitation are purposed, inclusive, clear, crafted, and adaptive. Let's break down how a successful collaborative leader uses these qualities in their practice, especially as a method for approaching leadership with empathy and compassion.

01 Purposed

In both facilitation and leadership, purpose is everything. Without a guiding north star and clear purpose, a meeting can feel like a waste of time. The same is true when applied to leadership. If a collaborative leader isn't sure of their guiding purpose, they cannot effectively anchor their team to their tasks and their commitments. Employees feel adrift and disengaged.

But being purposed isn't just about having a direction—it's about sharing that direction and forming a structured environment around it, allowing all team members to feel connected to a greater purpose and invested in realizing it. In collaborative leadership, purpose is defined with and through the team, and it is done so in alignment with the organization's goals. Working with purpose enhances a sense of belonging by empathizing with employees' needs, goals, and values. Purpose can be defined through professional development opportunities and shared opportunities among teammates. It can also be defined as having broader impact, such as a shared purpose to address wicked problems that face many organizations and individuals today.

02 Inclusive

Modern businesses regularly tout their commitment to inclusion, yet that value does not always make its way down to the experiences of all team members. Collaborative leaders have the unique opportunity to make a significant impact to the inclusivity goals of the organization simply by how compassionately they guide people, run meetings, and operate the business.

Collaborative leaders can use their facilitation skills to co-create a psychologically safe environment with a climate of trust, where all ideas are encouraged and welcome. Importantly, inclusion starts outside of the meeting room, with collaborative leaders ensuring that a diverse group is invited and no one is overlooked. Common ways inclusion is practiced is through meeting design, shared agendas, and long-term strategic planning activities that involve employees at all levels of the organization to share ideas and feedback.

03 Clear

Corporate communication often seems to exist at two extremes, either sharing an overwhelming amount of information that's impossible to sift through or failing to be transparent at all. Through collaborative leadership, leaders and managers invite

employees in, making them a part of the collaborative process rather than a recipient of endless memos. Employees learn how different dynamics impact what can be communicated, when, and how. Creating access also helps employees professionally develop and learn how to productively contribute to their workplace.

Collaborative leaders should use clear communication to guide but not dictate, creating focus among the team toward common goals. They should seek to understand rather than persuade. The approach of using clear communication demonstrates respect, care, and concern for the success of employees in their organization.

04 Crafted

Collaborative leadership can be closely tied to the design thinking process, which encourages a holistic view of a problem or decision, welcoming uncertainty and ambiguity to better consider all sides of a problem. Collaborative leaders should therefore utilize a crafted mindset, promoting equitable experiences by requesting feedback on meeting agendas and thereby centering the needs of people on their team. Underlying this approach is the desire to communicate that employees' ideas and concerns are valid and worth investing in.

When leaders value crafted methodologies, they can be intentional in their actions and promote the utmost creativity and innovation. By crafting a structured environment for employees to thrive, they can harness the collective brilliance of a team and encourage thinking collaboratively and with compassion for coworkers and workplace stakeholders.

05 Adaptive

With how quickly the world can change, great leaders must be highly adaptive. For collaborative leaders, adaptability isn't just another buzzword, though—it's the cornerstone of genuine progress and unity. Collaborative leaders rely on their adaptiveness to identify when needs change, recognize when a plan is failing, understand the mood of their team members, and more. They can lead and be led.

A well-laid plan may seem like the ultimate sign of a great leader, but a great leader knows when to pivot away from the anticipated course. Collaborative leaders utilize their adaptiveness to delve beyond the surface and address the core challenges that, when resolved, can set a team on a transformative trajectory. This might mean completely scrapping initial plans altogether in service to what is ultimately best for the team.

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Five Benefits of Collaborative Leadership

Workplace studies in a variety of markets have reaffirmed the positive impact of collaborative leadership on organizations, especially as organizations attempt to remain competitive in the global workplace (e.g., Maalouf, 2019; Ang'ana and Chiroma, 2021). As a result, a collaborative leadership style stands out among other approaches thanks to its broad range of benefits because it relies on evidence-based practices of leading people and organizations.

01. Improved Decision-Making Process

In many autocratic settings, a decision is handed down from the company leader without room for conversation or feedback, which leaves no space for individuals to feel ownership in the decision. By its very nature, collaborative leadership instead encourages the active participation and open participation of the very employees who will be affected by this outcome. Studies document that collaborative approaches help employees take more ownership over their work and more effectively align with the organization's mission (e.g., Ang'ana and Kilika, 2022). Collaborative leadership requires skilled facilitation to serve as a guide for the group decision-making process. Effective facilitators have the right active communication skills and toolkit of facilitation tasks to ensure an optimal outcome.

02. Increased Productivity and Efficiency

When working under collaborative leadership, employees act autonomously and feel empowered in their roles. These employees participated in a decision-making process, so they will have a better understanding of the primary goal and their role in achieving it. As employees become more personally successful in their work and in their contributions to the company, they open up space for long-term professional development and increase overall productivity (e.g., Ang'ana and Chiroma, 2021). Collaborative leaders can also utilize facilitation techniques and practices to optimize meetings for an efficient day-to-day work environment.

03. Stronger Interpersonal Relationships

A great collaborative leader will foster trust with their team members, and those team members will have a greater opportunity to develop positive group dynamics and strong bonds. These improved relationships can, in turn, create a productive and positive work environment where coworkers cheer each other on and provide support to one another (e.g., VanVactor, 2012). By bringing team members into the decision-making process, collaborative leaders create greater opportunities for those team members to have open discussions and harness a variety of views and expertise. Collaborative leaders harness the power of facilitation to turn potential conflict into healthy conversations, using gentle interventions to guide employees toward their goals.

04. Greater Innovation and Creative Thinking

While autocratic leadership limits who makes decisions, collaborative leadership and teamwork opens the decision-making process to more team members who each have a unique area of expertise and perspective to contribute. The collaborative work environment gives team members the opportunity to put their heads together and tackle a problem with creativity, which can lead to greater innovation (e.g., Carlström, 2022). Collaborative leaders bring together team members with different backgrounds and areas of expertise, and thus can view a problem or decision from more than one angle.

05. Increased Engagement and Participation in the Workplace

At its core, the practice of collaborative leadership is powered by participation. Collaborative leaders provide the platform for this participation, showing team members that their ideas and contributions are valued through their active listening and constructive feedback. When team members are a part of the decision-making process from the start, they feel a greater sense of ownership in the organization's goals—they can better see where their role fits into the bigger picture (Kaner, 2014). Collaborative leaders can guide teams to be grounded and find a sense of purpose in their short-term and long-term goals.

Potential Challenges of a Collaborative Leadership Style

Every leadership style has its potential challenges. With proper practice and preparation, these challenges can be overcome.

A main concern with collaborative leadership is misalignment across the organization. More autocratic leadership styles can conflict with the nature of a collaborative approach, so it's important that the leadership of the organization agrees on the utilization of a collaborative leadership style. If some company leaders think they are leading in an authoritarian manner, while others strive to utilize collaborative leadership, they can find themselves at odds when it comes to everything from big organizational decisions to how to manage meetings or team dynamics. Collaborative approaches require structural changes in approaches to leadership. These issues can make an organization less effective and end up stifling innovation (Carlström, 2022). Just as a skilled facilitator guides participants toward alignment in a session, collaborative leaders should strive for alignment among their leadership team when it comes to how they will operate their organization.

While it may seem impossible to implement a collaborative leadership approach at a large company, many organizations of all sizes have successfully done so. For example, the founders of the iconic ice cream brand Ben and Jerry's, Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield, have long championed a democratic and inclusive approach to

business. In their organization, they set up processes to ensure employees at all levels could contribute ideas, voice concerns, and have a say in company decisions. They are not alone, IBM, Salesforce, General Electric, and Bank of America have done the same in recent years. Bank of America published an account of their rationale for developing a collaborative leadership style in the organization, explaining that an impetus was five distinct generations working together in today's workplaces. Seeking an equitable way for decision-making, they utilized a collaborative approach to help build trust and invite all employees to participate in operational success.

Become a Collaborative Leader with Voltage Control

At Voltage Control, we are leading experts in facilitation and collaborative leadership. Unlike many training companies that focus on one-off workshops to support client growth, our academy takes a deeply-tailored and experiential approach to guiding leaders and teams. We customize our corporate programs using assessment data and design our workshop and certification experiences to include communities of practice as our clients implement new learnings. These differentiated approaches lead to better success in implementation, sustainability, and long-term impact.

By bringing together the top thought leaders and the latest methodologies, we teach the power of facilitation through our certifications, workshops, and beyond. Voltage Control also hosts Facilitation Lab, a facilitator community. The Facilitation Lab HQ bi-weekly meetup provides a free place to engage with and learn from other facilitators in a way that deepens learning and exposure to new techniques and tools.

Contact Voltage Control to learn how collaborative leadership can transform the future of your business.

End Notes

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