

Leadership, Empowerment, and Interdependence

Those emerging from habitual powerlessness may find it hard to share leadership.
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For some years now, I've been learning through ongoing experimentation what collaborative leadership means. It's not been easy, because our either/or lens on reality renders the space between coercive leadership and no leadership elusive, almost invisible. Which is not to say it's not there, as so many successful leaders know. What it means is that we lack forms, models, and habits of collaborative leadership which are essential for transforming the way we use power and how we respond to power and leadership.

In my own experiments, I have brought forth an endless dedication to empowering people when I lead, a deep commitment to transparency in my leadership style, and enormous willingness to work with what ensues when people wake up to their power. The results have often been bewildering. More often than not, it seems that the more explicitly I invite people to self-responsibility and participation, the more effortful I find the process of facilitating and the more I hear disappointment and even criticism and judgment of my choices. At other times, when I present and follow a clear structure with limited participation in shaping the content or outcome of the event - whether it be a training or a staff retreat I facilitate - people appear to be much more satisfied and my work appears dramatically easier.

Collaborative Leadership System



This past week I led my first of three retreats of [Leveraging Your Influence Using NVC](#) - the new program I started this year. Given the purpose of this program, it was particularly important to me to invite others to co-create with me. In working through what happened over the six days that we were together, I was able, for the first time, to have some beginning understanding about the puzzle related to my own efforts at collaborative leadership. As I know that many others are doing their own experiments with collaborative leadership, perhaps what I learned may be of use.

Power and interdependence

In the traditional models we have inherited, power resides outside us, usually attributed to the designated leader. Even as we seek to transform the world, we continue to act as if this is true. I cannot count the number of times when I hear from people, be it participants at a workshop or employees in an organization I support, that it never occurred to them to attempt to shape the outcome of a decision or an event when one thing or another didn't work for them. They implicitly assume that they have no power and no "right" to power. I have seen this dynamic happen even in response to explicit invitations on my part to participate. By virtue of my making a request from a position of power, many hear it as a demand and respond accordingly by resentfully submitting or defiantly rebelling.



Even when no designated leader exists, people are often more likely to leave a group believing they don't "fit in" rather than to recognize that they are, by definition, an integral part of the group and to choose active participation in shaping the nature and actions of the group.

Aside from our acquired aversion to conflict, this profound disempowerment is intimately related to our struggles to grasp our interdependent relationships with others. Everyone I have ever asked has felt the effect of someone walking out of a group and yet we continue to believe that our presence or absence don't have an effect on others and continue to choose to leave. People come fully alive when they tell or hear stories of giving to others and yet we continue to proclaim an illusory self-sufficiency in which we don't ask for what we need. So much pain arises when others make decisions that

affect us without our participation and yet so many of us stiffen up when we imagine making decisions with others, fearing the potential loss of our autonomy. The very act of dialogue with others appears to some of us as giving up on our needs. The vision of a world where everyone's needs matter intuitively appeals to people and yet the capacity to hold our own and others' needs at the same time remains beyond reach in the face of apparent scarcity. We give up on our own needs to focus on others', or we tune them out in our efforts to make things work for us. Separation, scarcity, and powerlessness combine to perpetuate an ongoing experience in which we feel alone and helpless to care for ourselves in a fundamentally hostile world.

Waking up to our needs



The insight I had this week was an understanding of what happens when we wake up to our human needs and to our power to take actions to meet them. Without an awareness of and practice in engaging with our interdependence, we are then most likely to advocate for our needs rather than take on the complex art of balancing our needs with those of others. Simply put, our collaboration skills have been stunted by centuries of focusing on competition and individualism. As a result, for many of us waking up to our needs means increased conflict in our lives. In the context of a group, this means more challenge in navigating group decision making and flow. This is one way of understanding some of the challenges of the Occupy movement, for example. After such a long time of stifling our needs and having no voice in what happens, the surge of energy that comes with realizing that we do have a voice can easily result in an insistence on speaking up regardless of what else is going on, regardless of the task at hand or the potential effect on others.

This is also what happens, regularly, when I invite people, especially in the multi-day retreats that I lead, to risk their power and participate in shaping what happens. Instead of being joined in holding responsibility for the whole and in the art of balancing everyone's needs, I am handed a larger and more charged pile of needs to balance. Instead of appreciation for the invitation to empowerment, I encounter a criticism and disappointment when I fail, by necessity, in my attempts to balance and include everyone's needs to their satisfaction in all moments.

Getting better at collaborative leadership

One unexpected outcome of understanding this dynamic is increased compassion for people who are leaders or would-be leaders. I can see why people who rise to positions of leadership, even those who were previously critical of those in power, begin to make unilateral decisions without considering the effect on others. The challenge of navigating everyone's needs is so big, that reducing the data or finding ways of controlling the outcome provide much more manageability. I can also understand why others, weary of the idolization followed by criticism of leadership, attempt to protect themselves by acting as if they don't have power. No wonder some people, concerned about their capacity to withstand the pressures of power and responsibility while remaining true to their values, avoid leadership altogether and remain invisible by choice.

None of these options appeals to me. I want to continue to provide direction and vision while finding ways of collaborating with others. Paradoxically, the more I can remember the reality of disempowerment and isolation that filters how people hear me, the more I might succeed in expressing myself in ways that allow people to awaken directly to our interdependence. However challenging, this task of transforming the legacy of domination and developing collaborative leadership is essential to our survival. I take it on willingly.

Crossposted from [The Fearless Heart](#).

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