



FROM VULNERABLE TO POWERFUL: WHY COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP MATTERS

“We are not poor. We are rich in culture, heritage and the talent of our people.”

~Francisco Guajardo, Llano Grande Center

Something hopeful is stirring in communities across the country. It is just below the surface of what most people see. It is happening in communities that, from the outside, appear to be overwhelmed by issues of poverty, health and educational inequities, low employment, poor wages, etc. A power is rising up in these communities among those who historically have been pushed to the margins: immigrants, refugees, people of color and low income Whites.

From the borderlands of South Texas, to indigenous tribes in New Mexico and Montana, to the urban areas of New York and Massachusetts, people are countering the story lines imposed on them by outsiders who typically use statistics or sensational incidents to characterize entire communities. By coming together to use their collective gifts, talents and wisdom to advance the quality of their lives, these communities are now creating their own stories.

In the new narrative, the elder who spent a life time digging ditches in low-wage jobs is understood to be a founder of the community who built the water delivery system that created a citrus empire that supported the entire region. When this story is told to young people, they see the strength of what their predecessors have done in the past and are inspired to think boldly about what they themselves might do in the future. Their education takes on new relevance and meaning. New expectations and possibilities emerge along with fresh perspectives that suggest they *can* graduate, they *can* go to college, and they *can* come back to their community. The role they envision for themselves becomes one of building their region not only with the labor of their hands but with the creativity of their minds.

This stirring begins when people see assets, strengths, and possibilities within their communities. It combines with restlessness from experiencing the daily impact of disparities. The stirring spreads to adults who know they have been left behind, and that their children are being left behind. They connect with others to begin small movements to use their assets to address the inequities in their communities. In the process, they create leadership that has different qualities. It is more collective in nature relying fundamentally

on the strength of relationships. It is inclusive of anyone who wants to contribute their talents to help and has a strong moral component for creating more just communities.

These small, local efforts are springing up in multiple communities simultaneously, creating a larger movement of collective leadership that shows promise of becoming a prominent force for our time. It is part of what author Paul Hawken, author of *Blessed Unrest*, describes as a global humanitarian movement arising from the bottom up. “No one person has all or much power [and] at the heart ... is relationships,” He notes. This movement has an important task, Hawken adds: to heal “the accumulated wound of the past, the sorrow, shame, deceit and ignominy shared by every culture, passed down to every person, as surely as DNA, a history of violence and greed.”

WHY IS COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP EMERGING?

People in communities know we need a different kind of leadership to solve societal problems in the 21st century. Our society is too diverse demographically to allow solutions to be crafted without robust engagement from the full community. We need the perspectives that different groups bring, and yet our community leadership has not sufficiently included the full range of people living in communities.

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A majority of communities across the United States have experienced profound shifts in demographics. Rural areas, once removed from the migrations that affected urban communities, have refugee and immigrant neighbors. Along with these demographic shifts, the historically disenfranchised are developing new senses of cultural value and rightful place in the national culture. Native Americans are increasingly reclaiming and documenting their own stories, while new immigrant and refugee groups — predominantly of color — are joining African Americans, European Americans, Asian Americans and Latinos in the telling of their own narratives about how they came to be Americans.

The mix of cultures is too prominent to ignore or to allow any group to be indefinitely marginalized. Cultures can and will collide. There is a steep learning curve for both new residents and long-time citizens. The institutions originally created to serve the community struggle to adapt and often are ineffective at connecting to and supporting new populations. It also is becoming more apparent that these institutions have contributed to the disparities experienced by many long-term residents, especially communities of color, who have been marginalized for a long time.

People have become much more aware of how connected we all are. Fewer accept the idea of living side by side in parallel lives with very different realities. They know that if schools

are unsuccessful and students drop out or health care companies refuse to care for people with serious health issues, the larger communities still need to deal with the consequences. We are too interdependent to allow our institutions and systems to perpetuate vast inequities and to pass on consequences to others. We need leadership that will help our institutions serve the full community well.

We have unprecedented awareness of what is going on in our world. We notice the abundance of resources, wealth, and comfort of some and the scarcity, poverty, and struggle of others. We see how decisions made by people in one area affect others. There is heightened awareness of the “whole system.” We can view our place in the community, the country, and the world and understand how the conditions of our lives compare with others. We are confronted with the consequences of actions by powerful institutions and people that deflect responsibility for their impact on others.

These realities have fueled a drive for social justice and desire to undo the disparities created by policies, practices, and institutions. Many people are restless to move from our current status quo and are asking a different set of questions of our society. How do we create healthier, more just and inclusive communities? How do we shape our institutions to better serve the whole community rather than the select few? What kind of leadership is needed to bring about this social change?

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WHAT IS COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP?

Defining collective leadership is a work in progress for the many people who are sharing their insights from work in communities. Collective leadership is robust and has multiple components and is challenging to describe in one concise sentence. Some of the condensed definitions include:

- the collective soul in action;
- people, power and place;
- mobilizing collective spirit and wisdom into action;
- speaking truth in love to power; and
- relationships in action that advance justice by trusting shared wisdom and liberating individual gifts.

Two definitions offer more description. Collective leadership is:

- a practice that develops the conditions that allow a group of committed individuals to co-construct solutions to challenging issues from a place of learning rather than from having predetermined answers.”

It also is:

- the result of a dynamic process that brings together a diverse community of people around a set of pressing issues in an effort to build broad-based knowledge and participation that leads to constructive change.”

We offer a more elaborate definition based on the many powerful aspects we have seen in collective leadership working in communities across the U.S. over the past decade.

Collective leadership is a diverse group of people working together in partnership to make a difference in their communities. It is based on the premise that needed leadership and answers emerge from the collective wisdom of a group. It is highly relational where the group collectively holds the purpose, direction, and action in service of the change they have come together to affect. They work across boundaries to cultivate trusting relationships capable of undoing the structures that perpetuate inequities. Power is shared among people and organizations and the group works across positions and hierarchies. They tap into wisdom from diverse sources, particularly from those who have been marginalized and previously left out of leadership. They learn together, letting go of what no longer is effective in order to create an opening for something new and better to emerge. The group relies on both individual and collective skills. The work is embedded in and shaped by context and place.

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We offer a deeper look at two aspects of collective leadership to illustrate its power.

One of the unique features of collective leadership is working across boundaries, particularly those created by identities. A powerful driving force in the formation of collective leadership is to address the disparities that have been created in peoples’ lives by how past social orders have treated differences in people. We have lived through hundreds of years of powerful institutions treating difference as deficient. For example, Native American cultures were deemed uncivilized by external powers that sought to eliminate them. People of African descent were treated as property and later as second-class citizens.

Discrimination was legalized against people of color. There are numerous other examples of how difference was used to dehumanize others.

What is dramatically different in collective leadership is that the identities once used against people, are now viewed as sources of strength to draw on to build better community. For instance, Native Americans who reclaim culture, language and way of life are finding renewed pride and wisdom that can influence all aspects of their communities. Their heritage provides a foundation for governance, civic engagement, economics, education, health and spirituality. It can bring stability to people in the community.

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In collective leadership, the work is not to develop strong, separate communities based on identity, but to bring together the many perspectives in order to create a larger community that is healthy and just for all residents. The energy that once went into maintaining boundaries such as race, class, age, citizenship, gender, sexual orientation, becomes available to work collectively for a healthier community. The strength each world view brings is an asset for the group as they work together to address community issues. We move from differences creating disparities to treating differences as gifts to contribute to an abundant future. This allows us to build relationships across difference based on respect, equity, and mutuality.

Another key characteristic of collective leadership is its relational nature. The leadership capacity created is dependent on the quality of the relationships of those working on a change issue. The group collectively holds the work. Power is shared across members of the group and the organizations that are in partnership. Those with positional power hold their authority differently as they see the importance of the perspectives, passions, and talents others in the group have to offer.

The group is not focused primarily on bringing together people with power, but on engaging community members in meaningful ways. This can lead to unusual new relationships that open up possibilities – bringing together the judge and the former gang member to work on restorative justice or connecting the superintendent with the student on the edge of dropping out to work on helping students stay in school. In this way, the group cultivates a strong network of relationships capable on holding the purpose, approaches, and action.

Ultimately, the group builds relational capital capable of offering the leadership and solutions that are needed in the community at various points in the change process.

HOW IS COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP MAKING A DIFFERENCE?

Where ever there is tension in community created by disparities, exclusion, or alienation, there is opportunity for collective leadership to make a difference. Where ever an institutional policy or practice under-serves a part of the community, there is an opportunity to utilize collective leadership.

Much of the work we have experienced is in education. Many public school systems struggle to successfully educate all the students in their community. There are significant achievement gaps between racial/ethnic groups. Different communities are cultivating their collective leadership to improve education.

In Montana, Native Americans and European Americans share a public school. The dropout rates are extremely high for Native Americans. Public education has not been good to them over the past century and the mistrust is deep. The community divides across cultural lines, and has for over 100 years. On the Flathead reservation, a group formed to bring together both Native Americans and European Americans to develop new relationships. They gathered parents, business owners, teachers, administrators, coaches, community members. They built trust in the group and worked with the school system to create a more welcoming, unified culture; to help parents feel comfortable interacting with the schools; to develop mentoring and after school programs; to bring cultural relevance into the curriculum. They began impacting the graduation rates. The students in this effort graduated and several became teachers in the system. And importantly, they built the capacity to have mutually respectful relationships across race, capable of addressing difficult issues.

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We have seen the community improve their support for schools when Latino, African American, and European Americans worked together in Buffalo. Their enhanced collaborations attracted millions of dollars in additional funding for the school.

In Michigan, an African American community created youth and adult partnerships that engaged youth in improving their own education and in the civic issues of their community. They improved after-school programs, college preparation, leading to 100 percent graduation and college acceptance of the youth participating in the program.

In Texas, university professors, transformed their institution's approach to teacher and administrator preparation. They taught teachers to be community developers – engaging parents, community members, and students as partners in the education process. They are

having great success in educating a primarily Latino student population, that has struggled in the schools.

Collective Leadership is being used by people inside organizations and those outside in the community. It is being used on such issues as immigration education, youth violence, restorative justice, community elections, bond levies, and community health.

Groups within communities are building new capacity to have the *difficult conversations* that will move the community forward. They can deal with tensions in a positive way that deepens understanding rather than getting stuck. In many cases, this involves the *racial healing* that will release people from past wounds of discrimination and marginalization.

These smaller efforts are spreading as the way of operating becomes embedded in individuals. They take the collective leadership approach and spirit with them where ever they go – new jobs, new organizations, new projects, etc. It leads to bringing key questions to any initiative: Who needs to be in the room? What relationships do we need to develop next to move forward in a good way? What changes will improve our community? How will changes affect the whole community?

GETTING STARTED

Collective leadership is hard work. It is not fast or easy. It requires sustained commitment. If a community believes that a better future is possible for all of its residents, they can utilize collective leadership to help them get there. There are some first steps that help.

IDENTIFY WHAT MATTERS TO THE COMMUNITY THAT HAS ENOUGH RESONANCE TO ATTRACT PEOPLE TO WORK TOGETHER.

Having a compelling shared purpose not only draws people, it helps keep them together when the conversations are hard. It sustains commitment through frustrations and set backs.

ASK WHO NEEDS TO WORK TOGETHER IN ORDER TO ADVANCE THIS ISSUE

Who in your community, if they worked together, could advance this change to a new level? Where are there divides that need to be bridged? Our most challenging issues need new relational capacity if we are to make a significant change in outcomes in people's lives.

DETERMINE WHAT AGENCY OR CORE GROUP CAN SUPPORT THE EMERGENT WORK. WHO HAS STAYING POWER?

Who has a track record of community change? Who has standing and credibility with different parts of the community? What organizational missions align with the issue? Organizational support is critically important to sustainability.

START WITH THOSE WHO ARE BRIDGE BUILDERS

When reaching out to individuals to participate, look for people who have open minds and willingness to get to know those who are different. Identify those ready to have difficult conversations. Once you build a strong core, you can reach out to those who will take more work to open up.

GIVE YOURSELF TIME AND SPACE

To build collective leadership capacity takes effort and many small steps. Learn to balance the natural tensions: urgency and patience, relationship building and taking action.

BUILD IN REFLECTION, LEARNING, SO YOU CAN ADAPT TO WHAT IS NEEDED NEXT

Collective leadership is messy and relies on leadership and answers emerging from the collective wisdom of the group. This is an unfolding process. Some activities work, some don't. Keeping learning central will allow the group to build its capacity to discover solutions together.

TREAT THE WORK AS A WAY OF LIFE NOT A PROJECT

There are many collaborative approaches that can carry out a project. To develop collective leadership relationships requires a deeper commitment of continuously embedding certain principles: inclusion, sharing power and voice, opening up to learning together, and bringing both honesty and love. One saying we use is "you can't get to a good place in a bad way." Collective leadership focuses on both the good place and the good way.

CONCLUSION

There is something different about the leadership stirring in our communities. People are looking to each other for answers. They are looking within our communities for wisdom. They are claiming their power to make a difference.

The future can be better in our communities. We do not need to accept the current disparities and inequities. To have sufficient wisdom to create this future, we need to include more voices and views. We need our institutions to be engaged in community.

The stirrings we see may look small, but they are powerful. Each effort to build collective leadership for community change adds up. Collective leadership based in community can make a difference. And when it does, we will live a more hopeful future.

—This paper was written by Dale Nienow of the Center for Ethical Leadership.

Afterword

The W.K. Kellogg Foundation has been a pioneering force in this movement to cultivate and learn about collective leadership for community change. The foundation has actively partnered with diverse cultural communities, and those living on the margins, to develop this leadership and effect community change. Common folks from the Native-lands, the Borderlands, the Heartland, Appalachia, the Great Lakes, and every corner of this country, have been coming together to champion a new civic engagement. Through a collective leadership model, they have begun to paint an emerging aesthetic of leadership that is characterized by inclusion, innovation, and a bold and enterprising spirit. This is the emerging landscape in the field of leadership, rooted in community wisdom and driven by the energy of collective participation.

The Center for Ethical Leadership has served as one of the partners with the Kellogg Foundation. **For questions about this work or to receive a copy of the Collective Leadership Framework Work Book, please contact: center@ethicalleadership.org, 206.328.3020. Also visit our Web site at www.ethicalleadership.org.**