

The Importance of Collaborative Leadership in Achieving Effective Criminal Justice Outcomes



By Madeline M. Carter
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What Does it Mean to be a Great Leader? Lessons from the Orchestra

Roger Nierenberg, symphony conductor of Connecticut's Stamford Symphony Orchestra, leads a program for management executives called "The Music Paradigm."¹ What can leaders and teams learn from a conductor? Imagine for a moment that you are sitting in a great music hall. The conductor leads her orchestra in beautiful harmony. How is this done? Nierenberg says, "A leader defines for the team what kind of moment they're in. Is this a moment of transition? Is this a dangerous moment? Your job as conductor is to get the orchestra to act together—powerfully. So what do you do? You can't be calling out to people, 'Act now! Act now!' That creates disorder. Instead, you say, 'Here's where we're headed.'"²

Lesson #1: Effective Leaders Are Clear About Their Goals. A leader, according to Nierenberg, is *someone who commits to what has yet to happen*. How can leaders do this? Good leaders know where the team is going. They are able to articulate where the team's work is headed, and why the goal is important. Like a conductor, "as a leader, you stand on a podium and therefore have access to the big picture. Things that are amazingly obvious from the podium are not at all clear from the chair. Your job as a leader is to communicate a sense of how things could be—and to show people how to achieve that vision."³

¹ Rosenfeld (2001).

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

Lesson #2: Effective Leaders Give Their Team Members Permission to Excel. Good leaders, notes Nierenberg, *give people permission to be their best*. People are often capable of a much higher level of performance than they exhibit; what often stands in the way is they have failed to receive "the green light from the podium." When selected properly, the right team members can do great things. But they must know that they have permission to do so; that the expectation is to explore the bounds of the possible, not to sit in their seats and perform with mediocrity.

Lesson #3: Effective Leaders Provide Direction, Not Criticism. Leaders not only have access to the big picture, they also command significant influence over the direction of their team's efforts. When a team is underperforming, its leader stands in a unique position to motivate others to work towards their goal. Effective leaders can redirect the effort using guidance rather than criticism. "Direction points to the way things could be. Criticism, on the other hand, points to the way things were."⁴ Good leaders know the way; great ones lead the way.

Why is Leadership Important to the Effectiveness of Justice-Related Collaboratives?

Lesson #4: Successful Justice System Collaboratives Depend on Effective Leadership. Justice system professionals are increasingly called upon to collaborate in an effort to more effectively address the challenging issues facing

⁴ Ibid.

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the criminal and juvenile justice systems today. Issues as complex as poverty, substance abuse, domestic violence, and mental illness all seemingly manifest themselves in the jail lock-up, courtroom, treatment group, and parole office. Because our law enforcement officials, judges, prosecutors, defenders, advocates, and corrections professionals are specialists and experts in their own right and in their own field, collaboration becomes essential to bring to the table the expertise necessary to adequately address these complex social justice problems if we are to have any hope of increasing the safety of our communities through crime prevention and recidivism reduction.

For good reason, much attention is paid to the role of the team as a whole in carrying out its mutually established vision, mission, and goals, whether the vision is a more efficient justice system through expedited case processing, primary crime prevention strategies, the reduction of recidivism through enhanced assessment and delivery of evidence-based interventions, or increased family support in juvenile justice cases through specialized courtroom, advocacy, and support programs. Less focus is typically paid to the leader on the team, perhaps because the act of singling out and emphasizing the role of one individual over the other team members somehow diminishes the importance of the others, or contradicts the notion of equality that is so central to collaborative teams.

And yet, the critical role of the team leader is undeniable. Indeed, when Carl Larson and Frank LaFasto studied the work of groups from fields as diverse as business, sports, community development, and public health in order to determine what makes teams succeed, the presence of leadership was among the most important characteristics of effective teams.⁵

Distinguishing Management from Leadership

Lesson #5: Management and Leadership Are Not the Same. In thinking about the role of leaders, we often confuse the terms “management” with “leadership.” Peter Drucker and Warren Bennis distinguish these terms by

⁵ Larson and LaFasto (1989).

noting that “Management is doing things right, leadership is doing the right things.”⁶ Qualities that have long been viewed as characteristics of effective criminal justice leaders (e.g., those who are tough but fair, efficient, consistent, or decisive, to name but a few) do not necessarily guarantee that these same individuals have the qualities necessary to successfully lead a collaborative team. Having the necessary skills to manage an agency does not equate to successfully leading an orchestra.

Distinguishing Leadership Roles from Leadership Skills

Lesson #6: Good Managers Are Not Necessarily Good Leaders. Collaborative leaders are therefore *not necessarily* those who occupy the positions of agency director, chief judge, or key community leader. These are *positional leaders*. Individuals may also serve as *situational leaders* by being asked (or self-appointed) to serve in a leadership role for a specific purpose or period of time. These positional and situational leaders may or may not be effective collaborative leaders. If they are, it is because of their unique skills, not because of the positions they hold. In both situations, the *role* of leadership must be distinguished from the *skills* of leadership. While occasionally these are found in the same individual, this is not always the case.

Defining Collaborative Leadership

In their work *Collaborative Leadership*, Chrislip and Larson (1994) describe collaborative leadership in the following way:

“...Leaders are those who articulate a vision, inspire people to act, and focus on concrete problems and results. [But] collaboration needs a different kind of leadership; it needs leaders who can safeguard the process, facilitate interaction, and patiently deal with high levels of frustration.”

⁶ See: <http://successfultoffice.com/leadership-quotes.htm>

*Collaboration works when ...
leaders... keep the process going.”⁷*

Because leadership in the collaborative environment is entirely different from hierarchical (positional or situational) leadership—collaborative leaders guide rather than control, motivate rather than direct. Effective collaborative leaders are individuals who possess a unique and critically important set of qualities and skills.

Common Qualities of Effective Collaborative Leaders

Lesson #7: Leadership is Not a Mystery; Collaborative Leaders Share Common Qualities. A review of the literature as diverse as that produced by the New Center for Collaborative Leadership, Steven Covey and other organizational consultants, and the National Institute of Corrections on correctional leadership, produces a remarkably similar list of qualities of effective leaders. In general, collaborative leaders are considered to be those who are:

- *Willing to Take Risks.* Great leaders are dissatisfied with the status quo and “business as usual.” They are willing to take risks that hold the promise of positive change. They encourage team members to seek out new solutions, to consider alternatives to the norm, and to embrace the potential of change. As management consultant Tim McMahon says, “Yes, risk-taking is inherently failure-prone. Otherwise, it would be called sure-thing taking.” Great leaders are not afraid to take risks; they understand that the benefits of success outweigh the setbacks that may be encountered along the way.
- *Eager Listeners.* Great leaders are open to all viewpoints. They do not dismiss new ideas as far-fetched, random, or uninformed. They seek input of all kinds from all places; it shapes their thinking and they expect that it will have a similar impact on others.

⁷ Chrislip and Larson (1994), p. 42.

- *Passionate.* Often one of the most visible characteristics of great leaders is their passion for their cause, whatever that may be. In the justice field, this may evidence itself in great fervor for children, or victims, or for justice, fairness, and equality. As noted in Larson and LaFasto, “Leaders are the most results oriented individuals in the world, and results get attention. Their visions or intentions are compelling and pull people toward them. Intensity coupled with commitment is magnetic. And these intense personalities do not have to coerce people to pay attention; they are so intent on what they are doing that, like a child completely absorbed with creating a sand castle in a sand box, they draw others in.”⁸
- *Optimistic.* Great leaders are effective, at least in part, because of their attitude. They are believers in the possible. They are not immobilized by today’s barriers or yesterday’s failures. They are motivated by them and they encourage the same attitude in those around them.
- *Able to Share Knowledge, Power and Credit.* Effective leaders are not concerned with garnering individual recognition for their work. Rather, they choose to acknowledge the achievement of others and emphasize the success of the group over the success of specific individuals.

Common Skills of Effective Collaborative Leaders

Lesson #8: Leadership Skills Are Innate in Some and Must be Developed in Others. To be truly effective, collaborative leaders are served well by a combination of qualities, as described above, and specific skills that facilitate the work of their teams. They generally fall into three areas:

1. *Political knowledge and skills:* Effective leaders must have sufficient substantive expertise to assist with the identification of

⁸ Larson and LaFasto (1989), p. 28.

the individuals who will form the collaborative team, define clearly the group's vision, mission, and goals, negotiate relationships and sensitive issues, and secure external support for the team's work. Specific actions effective leaders take towards this end include:

- Ensuring that the team is balanced in membership and includes all those who have a vested interest in the outcome of the work, whether they are initially "on board" or not. Great leaders are mindful of the old adage, "Keep your friends close and your enemies closer."
- Taking the initiative to develop their substantive knowledge so that they are able to guide and support the team's work. While it is true that leaders easily and appropriately defer to the expertise of their teammates, they do not neglect their need to be knowledgeable. As frequent spokespersons for the team's work, their command of the substantive issues cannot be underestimated.
- Developing a keen understanding of the interests at stake—those who support the team's vision, mission, and goals and those who don't, and why—and building a strategy to garner advocacy, cooperation, and resources from those outside of the team.

2. *Interpersonal knowledge and skills:* Leaders must also have the ability to work effectively with others. Key skill areas are consensus-building, conflict management, the ability to build trust, to "read" individual's needs, and to manage to their strengths. Specific actions leaders take that demonstrate their interpersonal knowledge and skills include:

- Communicating their personal belief in the power of the collaborative process.
- Communicating their personal commitment to the team and its work.
- Demonstrating respect for the team as a whole and its individual members.
- Modeling the standards for individual and group interaction and behavior.
- Consistently following through with commitments.
- Sharing control of the team process, decision making, and the work.

- Identifying the unique contributions of each individual team member and drawing upon these routinely.
- Seizing the opportunity of conflict to surface and resolve hidden disagreements.
- Developing and encouraging leadership qualities in other team members.
- Sharing opportunities to demonstrate leadership.

3. *Process knowledge and skills:* Finally, effective leaders must be skillful in collaborative team management. This speaks to the ability to organize team work activities and discussions, manage meeting agendas, and establish work processes that will accomplish the team's goals. Leaders evidence their abilities in these areas by:

- Focusing their attention on both the team's substantive work and its work process.
- Helping the team to be clear about their shared vision, mission, and goals, and routinely revisiting these to maintain focus.
- Conducting productive, goal-oriented meetings.
- Using each and every meeting as an opportunity for meaningful exchange and product development.
- Ensuring regular participation from all group members—drawing out less vocal members, balancing the contributions of more vocal members, and following up immediately on members' absences from meetings.
- Assuring that the team develops a specific work plan that is tied directly to its vision, mission, and goals, that is accompanied by a timeline and specifies members' responsibilities, and holds the team accountable to these mutual commitments.

Conclusion

Leaders cannot lead those who choose not to follow. As Meg Whitman, CEO of the successful company eBay notes, leadership is "a span of

influence, not of control.”⁹ As such, to be effective, leaders must first appreciate the importance of their role in guiding their teams; second, have the qualities and attitudes essential to work in a group setting; third, exercise the political, interpersonal and process skills that will facilitate a successful outcome to the group’s work; and fourth, make the deliberate choice to take productive advantage of their span of influence.

A Note to Readers

The Center for Effective Public Policy is administering a national training and technical assistance project, entitled the National Resource Center on Collaboration in the Criminal and Juvenile Justice Systems. This project, sponsored by the State Justice Institute, along with several federal partners including the National Institute of Corrections and the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, is assisting selected jurisdictions in building stronger collaboratives as they seek to enhance justice in their communities. This is the fourth in the series of articles produced under this project.

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⁹ See: www.ksg.harvard.edu/leadership/usnews/whitman.html

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Contact Information

Madeline M. Carter, Principal
Center for Effective Public Policy
8403 Colesville Road, Suite 720
Silver Spring, MD 20910
Phone: (301) 589-9383
Fax: (301) 589-3505
Web site: www.cepp.com