

Leadership for collaborative practice

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Abstract: This paper addresses leadership skills needed for working in collaborative groups across multidisciplinary settings. It aims to provide an overview of findings about leadership development for people working in collaborative practice. The research project was undertaken to inform course writers and teaching staff of a 'leadership in action' course on the Bachelor of Applied Social Science degree developed at Waikato Institute of Technology and offered for the first time in 2002. The research was carried out as a Masters in Educational Leadership dissertation, and investigates leadership issues for seven professionals seen as leaders in their professions who are working in collaborative practice across multidisciplinary groups.

The paper explores what collaborative practice means, and investigates leadership for effective collaborative practice through analysis of literature, semi structured interviews and a focus group. Joining forces to establish integrated and collaborative services models is a viable approach for many communities and education, health and human service providers in the present political and social times. People who lead collaborative teams may require specific coordination and leadership skills to enable the group to function effectively. The results of the study show key themes evolving.

Keywords: *leadership, collaborative, multidisciplinary*

Introduction

Joining together to establish integrated and collaborative services models is seen as a viable approach for many communities and education, health and human service providers in the present political, economic and social climate. Overseas this has been recognized for a number of years. In Canada for example in the area of child, youth and family issues, there have been significant changes. One such change occurred in 1996 when the British Columbia Ministry for Child, Youth and Families was formed to bring together child, youth and family serving programmes from five different government ministries. In New Zealand the areas of social service, health and education have only recently been changing with new strategies produced by the Ministries of Education, Social Policy and Social Development. This can be seen through a number of government policy documents, which have recently been produced. The ten-year strategic plan for Early Childhood Education called Pathways to the Future: Nga Huarahi Aratiki, as an example, has three goals: To increase participation in quality ECE services, improve quality of ECE services and to promote collaborative relationships. New Zealand's Agenda for Children (June 2002) also has a number of key principles for government policy and practice. These include collaboration: that Government agencies will work well together, and with families and Whanau, iwi/Maori providers, community and voluntary groups, local government and the private sector to promote the well-being of all children.

While there is a drive from the New Zealand Government for a joining together of groups from education, social services, health and iwi- based practices to establish integrated and collaborative services models, there is confusion about the meaning and process of collaboration. Fullan (1993) argued that collaboration is one of the most misunderstood concepts in educational change. Knapp et al (1998) identified the confusion amongst human service providers where the collaborative integrated services model is being promoted. Along with this confusion, there also lies a question of how leaders can best function to guide the collaborative process in order to achieve positive results effectively and efficiently. It is this problem about leadership in collaborative practice that I chose for investigation.

My interest in leadership of collaborative groups derives largely from my involvement in the curriculum development for the Bachelor of Applied Social Science (BASS) degree at Waikato Institute of Technology (Wintec), which enrolls students from the fields of Counseling, Early Childhood Education, Social Work, Maori Studies and Adult Education. I have also been a member of a number of collaborative groups and am interested in the process of collaboration, how it works, how leadership functions within the groups and why some groups work better than others.

Why would leading collaborative groups be different?

During my work on the BASS curriculum development project, I had a sense that as collaboration between agencies, organizations and sectors is being encouraged at government level, there may be different leadership skills required for leading groups involving people from only one discipline area to those required for leading in a collaborative multidisciplinary way. The diversity of opinions, knowledge, background and experiences that people would bring to the collaborative groups could create problems.

The purpose of this research was to allow seven women who work in multidisciplinary collaborative practice situations the opportunity to tell their stories about leadership in collaborative practice. I hoped to find out what their experiences of working collaboratively have been and what qualities they saw as important in their own and others' leadership, which enabled the collaboration to work successfully.

Methodology

This research was undertaken as part of a Masters degree programme in Educational Leadership at the University of Waikato in Hamilton. It investigated leadership issues for seven professionals seen as leaders in their fields who are working in collaborative practice across multidisciplinary groups. The dissertation explored what collaborative practice means, and investigated leadership for effective collaborative practice through analysis of literature, semi structured interviews and a focus group.

My **research questions** were therefore:

What are the perceived skills and understandings of leadership for collaborative practice identified by leaders of seven NZ based collaborative organisations?

What can be done to improve the relevance of leadership development for those engaged in collaborative practice?

The **participants** in this research were chosen by purposive sampling technique. The participants are all local leaders in their respective fields of practice, and were suggested by colleagues in the academic work setting of the researcher. The requirements I asked were that the person should be a respected leader in their field of practice, who had experience of working within a multidisciplinary collaborative setting. All participants have had diverse careers with several changes in the types of jobs they have done. Participants are all currently holding leadership positions in local organisations, and have responsibility for between 10 and 450 staff members.

What is collaborative practice?

“Collaboration” has been defined as “the interaction of stakeholders with shared language and values taking action toward collective goals (Fauske, 1999). The term stakeholder includes anyone who has an interest in or who would be affected by the collaborative action. Some literature describes collaboration as occurring along a continuum of degrees of integration (Pappas, 1994, Orelove & Sobsey, 1991). The degrees of integration depend on the objectives of any given project, and also the membership of the project team. As collaborative behaviours develop and mature over time some members will be more experienced in their ability to collaborate than others. Findings from the Nicholson et al (1998) study show that there appears to be no one “cut and dried” model for collaborative practice involving different disciplines. Rather, Nicholson et al suggest that the appropriate approach depends on the context and goals of the work and on the organisational structure. Seashore Louis and Kruse (1995) suggest that effective collaboration is that which provokes meaningful and productive discourse to empower all while simultaneously protecting individual efficacy.

A literature review looking at collaboration in general terms revealed a number of themes developing. These included:

- ?? Clear communication
- ?? Decision-making
- ?? Team/group coordination
- ?? Organisational structure and recognitionA commitment by diverse groups to a common mission
- ?? Identifying spheres of competence and valuing diversity
- ?? Power sharing

Literature about Leadership for collaborative practice

How then does one learn to be a leader in a collaborative group if one of the key concepts of collaborative practice is the sharing of power and leadership? The participative leadership approach emphasizes the benefits of shared leadership, delegation, and self-directed teams. Some research does suggest that participative leadership, delegation, and self-directed teams do facilitate greater motivation, commitment, and better quality of products and services and organizational efficiencies in certain circumstances than when the leader or supervisor makes decisions alone (Gardner & Nudler,1999).

Findings and Discussion

Fullan (1999) argued that a limitation of cross sectional studies on collaboration has been that they have provided a snapshot of “what is out there, and how to get there remains in the black box of collaboration” (p.33). Using Fullan’s metaphor, and in a similar vein (on a smaller scale) to Slater’s (2001) study this project attempted to “open up the black box” by examining participant’s experiences of collaboration. It was interesting to note the essential characteristics of collaboration described by the participants. During the focus group participants were asked what would be included if we could develop a ‘collaboration kit’, that is: a (black box) kit containing the necessary skills, attributes and knowledge to be effective collaborators. As well as those that have been identified in the five themes described below, the following were also agreed upon as being essential for successful collaboration: Influence of previous experiences (family, marae, role models, education, bruises). One participant spoke of the “bruises” that people suffer from their experiences of leading collaborative groups- that effective collaborative leaders are those that are “able to pass on lessons from the bruises”. Positive results, trust, respect, passion and commitment with shared excitement were also seen as important and effective and healthy relationships are the key.

The experiences of these seven women are widely diverse and each of them discussed varying rates of success in terms of working with different collaborative groups. There were five themes that emerged from the findings, relating to how these particular leaders see success when working with collaborative groups. These are that effective leaders in collaborative practice:

1. Establish structures for facilitating communication

Given the nature of collaborative relationships it is understandable that participants identified excellence in communication skills as a key competency for ‘expert collaborators’. Although all of the participants in this study have had training at various times in communication skills and interpersonal relationship, there is a need for individuals working in collaborative groups to reflect more deeply and deliberately on the content of their communication. Communication skills include listening skills, verbal skills, non-verbal communication, and non-verbal cues.

Knapp et al (1998) describe this category of competencies for interprofessional collaborators as competence with interpersonal relationships- often referred to as ‘people skills’. This is the capacity to interact effectively with others in ways that nurture the participation and effective action of others. It is acknowledged by those who are working in collaborative groups that this is often difficult and that the expert collaborator is frequently faced with conflict, lack of trust, lack of motivation, or other emotionally volatile responses. The task of the expert collaborator is to help change the interpersonal conditions in which they and others find themselves in, so they can sustain more productive working relationships with others.

The area of emotional competencies is also critical for maintaining effective relationships amongst group members. Daniel Goleman (1998) introduced the term emotional competency to describe learned, job related capabilities or skills that individuals develop based upon their emotional intelligence. Goleman (1998) identified five domains in his description of emotional intelligence including: self-awareness, managing emotions, motivating oneself, empathy, and adeptness in relationships. The nature of collaborative relationships would make it fairly critical that building emotional competence is a necessary skill for effective collaborators.

2. Make explicit team/group coordination, roles and responsibilities

Knapp et al (1998) describe this competency for expert collaborators as “competence with group process and dynamics”(p.47). It is critical that those working collaboratively can maximize the constructive use of team meeting time, ensuring that goals are jointly owned, keeping individuals with divergent perspectives focused on joint tasks and other leadership functions. Knapp et al (1998) state that the leadership function “can and must be shared within the group as a hallmark of the collaborative group process and therefore they act in ways that assume responsibility for group functioning and share control over group functions with others, no matter what their formally assigned roles may be”.

3. Recognise the importance of organisational structure and support

Knapp et al (1998) call this competency “organizational savvy”. This enables expert collaborators to understand and navigate different organizational contexts that come into play when individuals with different professional backgrounds work together. “They can develop the capacity to discern the relevant features of the multiple organizational environments in which they work with others, both by asking the right questions about unfamiliar environments and by helping introduce their collaborating partners to the nuances of their own organizational cultures”(p.49).

4. Value commitment by diverse groups to a common mission

This leadership requirement is part of the competence described by Knapp et al (1998) as understanding collaborative practice. They emphasize the importance of collaborative professionals “having first of all a clear understanding of what collaboration is and an appreciation of its complexities; they do not see this mode of professional work as a simple way of fixing problems, nor do they blindly advocate collaborative solutions to all, or even most human needs” (p.44). Expert collaborators will be willing to discuss the ethical and legal implications of groups working toward a common mission on a collaborative project, as well as understanding the implications of attempting to fashion solutions that cross professional boundaries.

5. Understand each other’s strengths and value their differences

Knapp et al (1998) describe this leadership skill as “competence in responding to sociocultural diversity”. This category traverses all other competencies and enables professionals to “work with people whose perspectives differ substantially from their own, but makes explicit a dimension of diversity that underlies all aspects of collaborative human services work: the fact that individuals, groups, organizations, client populations, and communities all exist in sociocultural contexts”(p.50). It acknowledges that sociocultural differences profoundly influence how individuals approach their work and that often these differences reflect the unequal distribution of power and resources amongst social groups. For effective collaboration to take place it is important for people to “let go of their ego” and participate honestly and openly in the process. Sergiovanni (1994) suggests that interdependent individuals have enlarged their sense of self from a conception of “me” to a sense of “us”. Transcending self to Sergiovanni does not mean losing our identity but rather our egocentricity. Someone with a personal agenda and who hasn’t let go of their ego can threaten the collaborative process.

Conclusions

A key realization for me during the course of this research project was that there is more to the word 'collaboration' than just cooperating with others, joining in partnership with others or consulting about a project. The concept of collaboration is in fact a complex one. Part of the complexity arises because we are working with human beings and relationships, which can be convoluted enough to start with. Collaboration amongst people from diverse disciplines also entails untangling the structure and aims of different organizations, and their cultures, beliefs, expectations and values. The role of leaders within interprofessional or interdisciplinary collaborative groups is significantly different from working with a team of people from one discipline area. The very nature of collaboration implies a sharing, and leadership therefore must be a shared role, with team members taking shared responsibility for outcomes. This is a significant shift in thinking about the leadership role, as in collaborative groups the leader is prepared to involve others in decision-making. To have successful outcomes from the collaborative group therefore all of the members must be "expert collaborators".

This conclusion has made a significant difference to my thinking about the teaching and learning on the Bachelor of Applied Social Science degree. Two courses in particular have potential for review: the Leadership in Action course and the Developing a Personal framework for Collaborative Practice courses. In the current programme the collaborative practice course entails students taking part in a collaborative project which enables them to experience firsthand the benefits and barriers to working collaboratively. The Leadership course has a skills development component as students explore the theories of peer mentoring, as well as theories of leadership. Already a number of changes have been identified as a result of this research project, and a series of planning and discussion sessions have been planned for the teaching team.

There is currently a groundswell of interest regarding collaboration among social services and education to better serve the needs of children and families, particularly for those most likely to encounter interrelated social, health and educational problems. There is a growing recognition that social services are highly fragmented, often duplicative, that there are only limited resources for these services and that the 'clients' of social services remain in a disenfranchised position (New Zealand's Agenda for children, 2002). The drive towards an inclusive economy and more future focused strategies include a drive towards greater collaboration and rationalization of services within the education, social services and health systems. One could speculate that collaborative ventures are driven by economic expediency. But it is interesting to note that during their investigation for the need for an interprofessional curriculum in Washington, USA, Knapp et al (1998) recognized that:

There is growing evidence from both individual studies and research synthesis that when carefully orchestrated, such integration of organization and effort can pay off in better health, lower absenteeism, higher school achievement, lower rates of suicide, and other indicators of social well being (Schorr and Both, 1991; Robison, 1993; Philliber Research Associates, 1994; Wang, Haertel, and Walberg, 1994).

There is also evidence, however, that such collaboration is hard work, difficult to organize, and fragile, as well as inherently costly in most instances. There is no simple checklist of "how-to-do-collaboration".

It would appear that if the New Zealand Government wants further collaborative initiatives as a way of moving New Zealand towards better standards of living, and increased integrated social

and educational services, then resourcing of the collaborative groups would become a key issue. As a direct result of the government drive for agencies, communities, and educational institutions to collaborate it would also follow that there is a need for interprofessional education programmes in Aotearoa/New Zealand. The experiences of the seven women in my study show that current leaders have often not had any formal education about collaboration despite the fact that they have been practicing it in a variety of forms for some years. One participant's words about working collaboratively sum up for me one of the key values of pursuing this way of working:

People who are working collaboratively are enriched by their work...you as a person are acknowledged...in a sense it's that community of people, again which is rich beyond the actual work.

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