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Leadership practices within collaborative networks:
A comparative case study

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LEADERSHIP PRACTICES WITHIN COLLABORATIVE NETWORKS: A
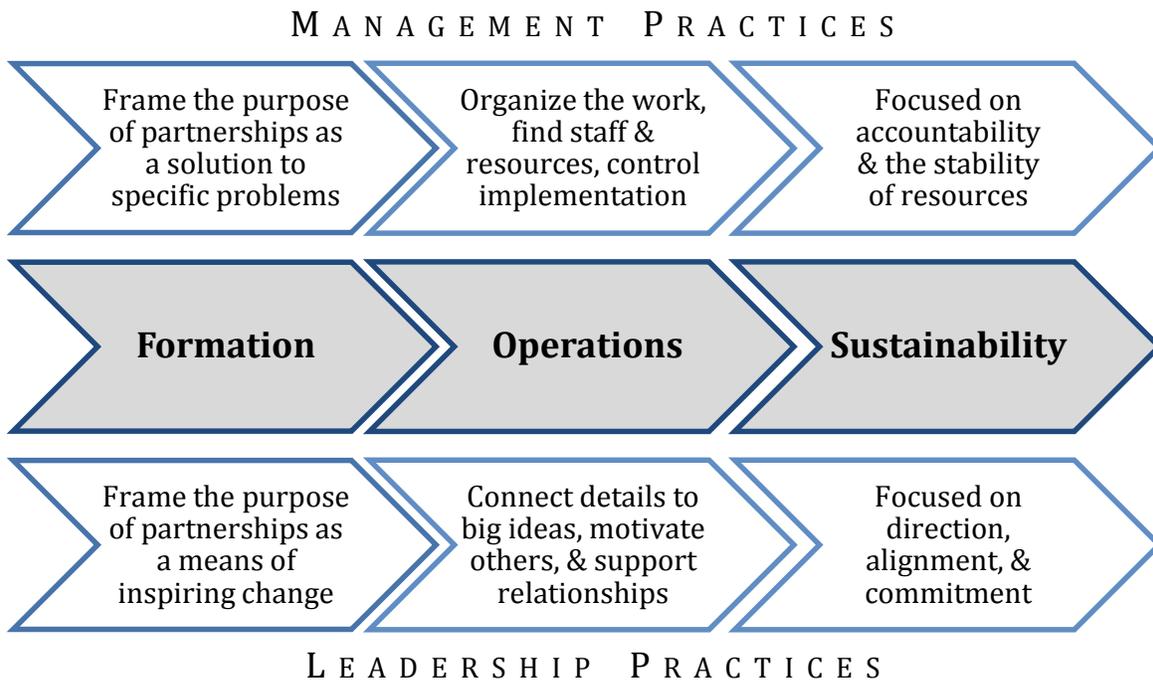COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY

Leadership and management are often presented as contrasting roles within

organizations[1]. Scholarship over the past few decades has promoted a number of similar

concepts, such as charismatic leadership[2], transformative leadership[3], and turnaround

leadership,[4] which cast leaders as promoting vision, energy, and radical change. According

to these related theories, leaders inspire people and motivate them to take ownership of big

ideas[5]. Coaching others, providing individualized supports, and distributing ownership for

change are examples of leadership practices advocated in these traditions.

At the same time, an abundance of scholarship on the nonprofit and public service

sectors has demonstrated the critical need for leadership that supports daily operations and

governance[6]. Community-based organizations, school systems, and human service

agencies encounter multiple expectations for their leadership. Nonprofit and government

agencies have encountered increasing accountability pressures[7]. Most states currently

require the management of public accountability through either results-based

accountability, balanced scorecard, or similar management programs[8]. These systems

guide strategic planning and implementation and place a high value on control and rational

decision making within operations[9].

This paper explores these two types of leadership through examination of the

practices enacted in two collaborative networks. Rather than suggesting that one is better

than the other, this analysis uses comparative cases to demonstrate the differences between

the two approaches in thriving community change collaboratives. These analyses examine:

What is "leadership" in these two cases? How do collaborative members enact

management and leadership practices? What are the benefits and drawbacks of each?

Each of these questions is explored along three phases of network evolution: the formation

of the Discovery Collaborative, maintenance of operations, and sustainability planning. In

each phase, the emphasis is on leadership practices, rather than on individual leaders[10].

This is a fitting approach as Discovery Collaboratives foster partnerships that distribute

ownership and accountability and, therefore, leadership across local stakeholders.

Management and Leadership as Complementary Practices in Collaborations

M A N A G E M E N T   P R A C T I C E S

Frame the purpose of partnerships as a solution to specific problems	Organize the work, find staff & resources, control implementation	Focused on accountability & the stability of resources
Formation	**Operations**	**Sustainability**
Frame the purpose of partnerships as a means of inspiring change	Connect details to big ideas, motivate others, & support relationships	Focused on direction, alignment, & commitment

L E A D E R S H I P   P R A C T I C E S

The Case Sites

We take two networks of collaborating partners as the comparative cases for this

study. The first is the Vernon Community Network, which convenes around a community

blueprint organized into three areas by target population (Birth to Eight, Youth 9-18, and

Community). The Vernon School Readiness Council is responsible for guiding implementation of the Birth to Eight workplan. The mission of the Vernon School Readiness Council is "to ensure that every child in Vernon starts school 'ready to learn'" (website, www.1.vernon.org/Plan.htm). This network is co-chaired by the Early Childhood Director of the Vernon Public Schools and the Director of Vernon Youth Services.

With a population of approximately 30,000 residents in a post-industrial corridor outside the state capitol, Vernon is considered a mid-size town. The town is largely white (85%), with a growing Latino community (7%) and 40% of the county's Black population living in town (comprising 6% of the town population). A substantial portion (9.2%) of residents live in poverty, though the poverty rate and the medium household income ($61,848) are on par with state averages.

The public school district in Vernon serves approximately 3,500 students across seven schools. About 6% of students speak a language other than English at home and a third (34%) qualified for free or reduced-price lunch in 2010-2011 (which is the same proportion statewide). Three out of four students begin kindergarten with preschool experience. Students perform at about the state averages on standardized achievement tests, with only 55% of third grade students meeting or exceeding goal in reading and 63% meeting or exceeding goal in writing. Within this context, the Vernon Community Network and the Vernon School Readiness Council are working to provide better, more connected experiences for children and their families.

The other case involves the Collaborative for Colchester's Children (C3), which formed in 2008 in response to an opportunity to develop a community plan for improving early childhood systems. The resulting community plan was released in 2009 and C3

examines their progress annually using a Results-Based Accountability framework. Members of C3 operate according to consensus and strive to take a consistently holistic view of their work, rather than adopting a hierarchical organizational structure.

Colchester is a small town with approximately 16,000 residents – most of whom are white (95%) and economically stable. Only 2.5% of residents live in poverty and the medium household income of $95,034 is well above the state average. On the whole, the town is small and well-resourced.

The public school district in Colchester serves approximately 3,000 students across four schools. About 2% of those students speak a language other than English at home and 11% qualified for free or reduced-price lunch in 2010-2011. Nine out of ten students come to kindergarten with preschool experience and Colchester students outperform the state averages on standardized tests at all levels. Despite these advantages, only 63% of third grade students met or exceeded goal on standardized tests in reading and only 64% met or exceeded goal in writing during the 2010-2011 school year. These trends are at the core of the Collaborative for Colchester's Children's work to accelerate student success.

Methods

This qualitative, comparative case study describes the leadership practices within two Discovery Collaboratives. A case study approach is appropriate for this application of contrasting schools of thought around leadership for several reasons. First, case studies can be used to present extended examples that explore how contrasting sets of theories are reflected in real-world enacted practices[11]. Second, this is a methodology that applies a holistic, contextual understanding to social phenomena, such as leadership in partnerships

for community change. This allows multiple voices and perspectives to be considered in constructing knowledge about the cases and the underlying themes being explored.

Sample and Data Collection

Data for this case study was collected from several sources. Individuals in roles with influence over leadership and management tasks were interviewed between late 2013 and early 2014, including a long-standing chairperson and two staff persons in Vernon and two coordinators and a highly involved, de facto leader in the school district in Colchester. These interviews focused on the history of the collaboratives, interviewees' roles and responsibilities, and concrete examples of leadership practices. Interviews were conducted in-person or over the phone and lasted 45-60 minutes. When conducted in person, interviews were audiorecorded; when that was not possible, notes were taken for analysis.

Following these interviews, focus groups were held with each collaborative in early 2014. In Vernon, 14 members of the Vernon School Readiness Council participated, including two staff members, one school district central office administrator, four education providers, five healthcare providers, one parent representative and one chairperson. In Colchester, 17 members of C3 participated, including one staff person, one school district central office administrator, six education providers, four healthcare providers, one parent representative, and four local government officials. Focus groups lasted 90 minutes and were audiorecorded with permission. As part of the discussion, participants discussed the ways in which the collaboratives were supported by those in leadership positions, as well as the overall collaborative cultures of the networks.

Documents were also collected, both from collaborative staff (such as meeting minutes), as well as from public sources (such as websites). The sources describe the

histories of the collaboratives, the collective identity of the networks, and strategies employed during planning and implementation of community plans.

Analysis

Audiorecordings were transcribed and analyzed, along with documents, using the constant-comparative method of coding[12]. In the first round, I applied three closed codes – formation, operations, and sustainability – to organize each case's data according to the phase of collaborative work. I then conducted iterative rounds of closed and axial coding within each subset of data according to the model presented above to identify instances of contrasting types of leadership practices in each case.

Formation of Collaboratives

During the initial formation of networks, a key function of leadership is to engage potential partners in the value of working together. One way they do so is through framing the partnership in particular ways to suggest how to think about the current situation and how partnering might promote a better reality[13]. Leadership during this phase frames partnerships as a means of inspiring innovation and stimulating change. Management frames the purpose in a slightly different way, focusing on partnerships as the solution to one or more specific problems. Both frames are designed to build a new way of working as a community collaborative; however, there are some key differences in the hooks to engage partners and the resulting group identity. In this section, the formation of each collaborative is described through leaders' explanations of their origins to highlight these differences.

The Vernon Community Network

According to one longstanding co-chair, the Vernon Community Network came together in order to address a number of inter-related local issues. The Vernon Community Network originally organized in 2003 under the name Family Summit as eight agencies wrestled with local changes shaped by state level forces. He describes the growing need in the mid-2000s for a coordinated community response to declining support from the state:

> We were also at a point in time when the state of Connecticut decided to change some laws, change the language around the families with service needs laws. We recognized that we were going to be, on the local level, left with the work – that the teeth had been pulled out from the court system. These kids were going to be at great risk, would really have no recourse – their families would have no recourse – and we were going to have to take care of it locally. And that really pushed us to the place of talking about a community plan.

The original partnership was framed as a means of preparing for the devolution of state assistance for youth and families to local communities.

A related problem addressed through the Family Summit was the scarcity of local resources. One co-chair discussed the original selling point for participating in the network was to share resources for a greater chance of success. By the time the Family Summit re-branded as the Vernon Community Network in 2006, the network had expanded to more than 20 community service organizations and city officials. Then-chairman was quoted in a local paper as pointing out, "Economy of scale is the key word of the day, that's for sure. We can get together and see how we can fulfill the needs of the community without a lot of people doing the same thing twice." Partners continue to talk about needing better economies of scale across service providers and the benefits of writing grants collaboratively, rather than competing over dwindling resources.

Finally, many members of the network described their initial participation in terms of creating and sharing a unique space for exchanging information and promoting community awareness. The current co-chair described a dearth of shared spaces for agencies and organizations serving families prior to the inception of the network, which detracted from coordination of services, as well as morale in the local service sector. Forming a network with the explicit purpose of supporting collaboration has yielded a culture of sharing as a good unto itself.

The Collaborative for Colchester's Children

The origins of C3 are framed in terms of passion for children's success and a deep, collective belief that working together could fundamentally change the way Colchester prepares its children. Perhaps because of Colchester's relatively strong infrastructure and the economic stability of the town, the chairperson in 2013 did not describe C3 as coming together to solve problems, as much as it emerged as a natural extension of the town's existing collaborative culture. Prior to organizing as C3, Colchester was awarded a School Readiness Grant, which required the formation of a School Readiness Council, similar to the council in Vernon. Three years later, the group expanded as part of a community planning grant to develop a results-based community-wide blueprint, funded by the Connecticut Early Childhood Education Cabinet through the State Department of Education, as well as the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund.

Both events provided an outlet for the existing collaborative spirit of Colchester and harnessed energy for community change. While the individual strategies of the C3 planning process were generated by community members, the idea to organize around early childhood would not have been prioritized without the external impetus of these grants.

For example, the chairperson spoke about how C3 was able to mobilize community partners around an issue that had not been particularly relevant to their individual missions. As she said,

> a couple years ago, early childhood wasn't – I mean, I don't want to say it wasn't important, but it wasn't really important to this community. And then C3 became very visual and I think it became very important to this community. I mean, testament is the idea that we might actually pass full-day kindergarten in Colchester, which is incredible. And I don't think we could have done that five years ago in this community.

While those who became involved in C3 did not originally see early childhood issues as particularly problematic for their town, they were still engaged in forming a collaborative around early childhood.

Partners attribute this, in large part, to the prevailing sense that all issues in Colchester are interconnected – an approach fostered by the coordinator and her successor. As she describes the process of constructing the community blueprint – the initial activity of the collaborative, "we brainstormed with abandon, discussed options with passion." Rather than forming in order to solve particular problems, C3's leadership has allowed issues to emerge through collective exploration and decision making about where to focus.

Maintenance Operations of Collaboratives

After the formation of networks, collaboratives must figure out how to support the maintenance of operations. One set of management tasks involve organizing the work, finding staff and resources to support projects, and controlling implementation of the strategic plan[14]. All of these are critical to achieving the work the collaborative sets out to do. Another set of leadership practices aim for the same goals, but through a different set of tactics: connecting details to big ideas, motivating others to understand and use their own capabilities, and supporting productive relationships[15]. This section describes how

each of the networks in this case study has approached the maintenance of regular operations and how those in chairperson and staff roles have directed their efforts.

The Vernon Community Network

Much of the leadership of operations at the Vernon Community Network focuses organizing the multifaceted work into more delimited groups and supporting spaces and relationships for effective problem-solving. This is consistent with framing the original formation of the Vernon Community Network as a solution to multiple problems. The Vernon Community Network has several layers of leadership, including an executive committee, which reports to the Town Council and Board of Education, as well as other community partners. General members are organized into Communities of Practice, each of which has a chairperson (or co-chairpersons) that reports to the Executive Committee. According to members, leaders have structured the Vernon Community Network this way to create collaborative spaces where members can solve problems as they arise.

The Communities of Practice meet once a monthly to manage implementation of strategies in the community plan, exchange information, and address any new issues. For example, when the Infant/Toddler Community of Practice found out that a local daycare center would be closing, they recognized a problem for families who depend on that daycare center that they could help to address. Rather than competing over new clients, the Community of Practice worked to figure out which daycares had opening that were suitable for the closing center's clients and contacted them with referrals in a systematic, orderly fashion.

Another example of how leadership addresses problem-solving is evidenced in responses to whether parents are sufficiently engaged in the collaborative. Like many

partnerships across service agencies, nonprofits, and schools[16], the Vernon Community

Network has struggled to bring parents into their governance structure. Although many

members indicated that parents were not adequately represented in the collaborative, the

chairperson interjected with a way of framing parent engagement that solves this dilemma:

> We talk a lot about the fact that not having parents physically at this table does not mean parents aren't engaged…But I think everyone around this table does an excellent job connecting with the folks that they provide services to. And I'm very confident that parents are getting the information and when we ask for feedback, I think the mechanism is, if a person can't come here, then folks will take the questions to their clients.

For the chairperson, providing information and soliciting feedback can be efficiently

managed through the network as partners connect with their own client bases. By framing

parent involvement in this way, he provides collaborative members with a solution to their

historical problem of engaging parents.

These are just a few examples of the problem-solving culture of operations in the

Vernon Community Network and the ways that leadership has supported the need to create

spaces for responding to issues facing providers and the families they serve.

The Collaborative for Colchester's Children

C3 has a history of coordinators who see their role as supporting members in

connecting to big ideas to make dramatic shifts in educational practices. The coordinator

between 2005 and spring 2013 facilitated group dialogue around holistic models for

community-wide efforts and collective impact, sharing articles and bringing in speakers

from similar ventures. Rather than using meetings to share progress on programs in a

didactic manner, she established a culture of connecting work to larger visions for progress.

For example, at one meeting an elementary school administrator described their

implementation of an intervention to screen kindergarten, first and second graders for

social and emotional warning signs. After describing the initial results, she said, "We can now ask, 'So what should we do as a school?'" This explicit connection of strategies to broader implications is typical and supported by deliberate coordinator practices.

This coordinator, and the one before her, both approached implementation of projects in terms of distributed leadership and capacity-building. They persistently distributed the work in ways that developed partners' skills and provided supports as needed, rather than taking ownership of projects themselves. This approach generated a sense of trust and feeling valued, which in turn encouraged greater engagement in the collaborative. One school-based partner talked about how both coordinators took a developmental approach when figuring out who might be convinced to take on specific tasks. "They give you the impression that your level of skill is maybe a smidgeon higher than it is at the time – because you'll reach for that," she said. Another partner agreed that the coordinators were persistent in distributing the work among partners, even when they had to convince people that they were capable of doing the work. This set up expectations for participation across the collaborative, rather than a group dynamic in which meetings focused on talk without follow through action.

Sustainability of Collaboratives

Networks collaborating for community change face complex, and often harsh, realities for sustaining their work[17]. Management of accountability demands[18] and the stability of resources[19] are crucial to continuing to support community change, and these needs surfaced in both case sites. However, there are also leadership practices to support direction, alignment, and commitment – all of which influence the sustainability of a network of collaborative partners in continuing to choose to work together[20].

The Vernon Community Network

Leaders in Vernon are aware of the resource deficits facing the community network and designed their community plan with financial guidance in mind. A Leadership Work Group convened during the community planning process and members paid explicit attention to the resources to support and sustain the Vernon Community Network's work moving forward. The President of the network at the time framed this attention in terms of making working together more beneficial for members than staying in their silos – a culture in Vernon that had not served them well, but could easily persist if the network was not able to support a collaborative approach to shared work.

The Leadership Work Group commissioned a fiscal scan that compiled information on all sources of revenue for programs and services as of 2008. This information was then used to write a financial plan within the community plan, which aligns each indicator, strategy, and action – by population segment – with the existing resources in Vernon. The financial plan also aligns the network's planned work with projects through fiscal year 2014-15 – three additional years of financial planning beyond the initial year. By providing this information to members and potential partners, the leadership of the Vernon Community Network made it possible to easily see where redeployment of existing resources might make certain strategies and actions possible. Furthermore, the finance plan suggests which strategies and actions have been sustainable through institionalized roles or practices within partnering organizations, and which need new investments to remain sustainable.

In addition to providing this information at the onset of the network's community planning, leadership continues to parse changes in information for the members. When

School Readiness Grant guidelines changed for the 2014-15 application process, the co-chair of the network spent a large chunk of a monthly meeting explaining the new policy and re-educating members. The goal, according to his presentation, was to inform members so they would be prepared to adjust the way they sustain their School Readiness activities. This kind of leadership task is consistent with the problem-solving and coordination work provided during the formation of the network and the operational maintenance activities of leaders.

The Collaborative for Colchester's Children

After five years of implementing the community plan, C3 adopted a sustainability plan organized into four strategies: increasing community awareness and support, recruiting new C3 members, implementing a financing plan, and advocating for additional state resources. In addition to developing a strategic plan for sustaining current activities, C3 leaders have encouraged key leadership outcomes that are foundational to future success of collaboratives: direction, or collective agreement about the overall mission and goals; alignment of strategies and work processes into a coordinated system; and commitment, or the willingness of members to prioritize the collaborative above their own interests and benefit[21].

Given the ecological approach of C3, establishing a clear direction may not have been an easy task. However, partners have embraced the spirit of results-based accountability and established procedures for making strategic decisions based on analysis of data, which has helped to clarify the aims of the group and establish agreement across partners. This process of revising the community plan occurred as leadership and staffing changed, which the coordinator and several other partners described as fortuitous timing, as

it served as a means of re-establishing a collective sense of accomplishment and next steps in their new phase as a network.

For example, during the 2013-2014 school year, the coordinator, who previously served as the Accountability Officer, worked with the collaborative to upload information into balanced scorecard software. She reports that the process of reviewing information as it was entered pushed C3 to reconsider their direction. During this review, the group decided to remove an indicator that was not a strong fit for the issue of family empowerment. However, the partners decided to continue to move forward with strategies without an indicator, since there was consensus that this work is important. Without strong direction, the group could have stalled in this area, as the results-based accountability framework they use recommends having indicators in order to track the impact of strategies on more distal outcomes, in this case, student learning and success.

C3 has also established norms regarding how to engage partners in ways that align their contribution with the community plan, rather than scattering efforts in reaction to emerging opportunities. The coordinator was able to clearly articulate the difference between the benefits of a holistic approach and the dangers of opportunistic efforts. "We don't do things in isolation…but we run on consensus." The chairperson continued her description, stating that the historically strong distributed leadership allows the collaborative to "move forward in such a tight way."

As a concrete example of the coordinated efforts of C3, one partner described wanting to engage the Senior Center in the collaborative. However, the group had established a norm of not connecting partners to strategies until there was a way for them to feel valued and to take actions relevant to their own identities. "To not set us up to fail, but

also to not set us up to not have support. Move it along and make it happen first, and then bring in bits and pieces of partnerships." The partner concluded by stating that she is content to wait until there is a way to align the Senior Center with specific strategies, at which point she will gladly extend introductions.

The commitment of C3 partners to the collaborative is evident. The group has institutionalized the partnership with the district through commitment of funds to support implementation of strategies, as well as C3 responsibilities in the job description of educational leaders. C3 leaders were also allowed to participate in hiring a new elementary school principal in order to ensure that the person hired would be a good fit for the partnership's early education agenda.

Implications and Questions Raised about Leadership

Leadership practices in both the Vernon Community Network and the Collaboration for Colchester's Children have helped to support strong collaboratives that have mobilized and coordinated community efforts to improve early childhood experiences and systems. Comparing the different approaches to leadership across these two collaborative networks leads to some questions about the nature of leadership and how leadership practices can best be supported.

The Discovery Initiative within which these two case studies operate values a community-wide collaborative approach to setting the agenda, making decisions, and being collectively accountable for change. This has both immediate and indirect implications for leadership. When is distributing leadership across collaborative partners effective – and is it ever less effective or efficient than the alternative? In the case of the Vernon Community Network, organizing the work into Communities of Practice was a leadership decision

around facilitating collaborative spaces that are relevant to members' own work and foster

relationships that reduce the competition between organizations. Distributing leadership

for Community of Practice agendas and operations supports these goals. At the same time,

annual accountability reports are written not through a collective process, but by

individuals in support roles – which takes the onus of this work away from those charged

with enacting the strategies being measured and managed.

     This leads to another question about the nature of leadership in collaborative

networks. Which activities are most appropriately directed by those in recognized

leadership roles (e.g., chairpersons, directors, leadership team members) and which are

appropriate for paid staff to undertake? The focus in this comparative case study was on

leadership practices, regardless of the role of the individual – in fact, many of the

leadership activities described in Colchester involved the actions of staff persons. Is

leadership practice more important than having individual leaders? Under which

circumstances are the boundaries between roles within the collaboration important to

maintain – and more important to recognize than the results of any leadership practices?

These questions get at the dichotomies between approaches to leadership examined in this

comparative case study and the answers suggest how leadership might be best guided and

supported within collaborative networks.

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