

WHAT IS COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP?

Collaborative leadership is really defined by a process, rather than by what leaders do. It has much in common with both **servant leadership** and **transformational leadership**. It starts, according to David Chrislip and Carl Larson, in *Collaborative Leadership*, from the premise that "...if you bring the appropriate people together in constructive ways with good information, they will create authentic visions and strategies for addressing the shared concerns of the organization or community."

Collaborative leadership can be employed in almost any situation, and indeed is practiced in some businesses with great success, but is seen more often in community coalitions and initiatives, in community-based health and human service organizations, or in alternative education. People often find it particularly useful in situations where "no one is in charge," where there are issues or problems so complex that no one person or entity has either the information or the power to change them. (This doesn't mean that no one has *responsibility*, but rather that sharing responsibility for the issue is necessary in order to arrive at a successful resolution of it.)

While it can be practiced in a number of ways, good collaborative leadership is almost always characterized by some specific traits. Among the most important:

- Collaborative problem-solving and decision-making. It's not the leader's job to decide what to do and then tell the group. Rather, the group considers the problem, decides what to do, and counts on the leader to help them focus their effort.
- Open process. The leader - or some other interested party, like Putnam's mayor - doesn't just start with his goals in mind and steer the group in that direction. Collaborative leadership means that the process of decision-making is truly collaborative, and has no set end-point when it begins. The end result is worked out among all the participants: that's collaboration.
- Leadership of the process, rather than the group. The purpose of collaborative leadership is to help the collaborative process work, rather than to lead the people involved toward something - to a particular decision, for instance, or in a particular direction.

There are some differences between collaborative leadership within an organization and collaborative leadership among organizations. In the first case, a leader may have to spend much of her time initially trying to coax people to take leadership roles in certain circumstances, or even to participate in collaborative decision-making. In the second instance, a leader's biggest task may be to keep everyone from trying to lead in different directions all at once.

There are really two ways to define collaborative leadership. In this section, we will focus on the first of these situations, though the orienting principles are the same in both cases.

- *Collaborative leadership: leadership of a collaborative effort.* This definition refers to taking a leadership role in a coalition, organization, or other enterprise where everyone is on an equal footing and working together to solve a problem, create something new, or run an organization or initiative. The leader is not in control of the group, but has responsibility for guiding and coordinating the process by which the group decides upon and carries out actions to accomplish its goals.
- *Leading collaboratively: leadership as a collaborative effort.* In this case - usually in an organizational rather than a coalition or community setting - leadership may shift, by group decision, from one person to another as different talents or abilities are called for, or (more often) leadership is permanently shared by all, or several, members of the group. Here, there is no one leader: the group functions as a true collaborative, and guides itself.