

## COLLABORATION | THE MINDSETS AND SKILLS OF COLLABORATIVE LEADERS

*Written by Liz Weaver*

Most of us have been there. We have either convened partners to collaborate on a project or community change effort or we have agreed to be a member of a collaboration. In both cases, there is an inner and outer journey to the collaborative experience. The inner journey or mindset is about how you show up as a leader who is engaging in collaboration. The outer journey or skillsets are the skills and expertise you can share with or contribute to the collaborative work.

Both our collaborative mindsets and skillsets are decisions we make about how we want to participate. Sometimes these are conscious decisions that we make and commit to and sometimes they are less obvious. To be an effective and impactful leader, considering first your mindset about collaboration and the skills you have to offer your collaborative partners can influence the success of the experience.

### The Collaborative Mindset

Mindsets are defined as our personal attitudes and aspirations about collaboration and our attitude about collaborative leadership.

In a recent webinar with Chris Thompson, we explored the [mindsets and skill sets](#)<sup>i</sup> of collaborative leaders. Chris identified critical mindsets for collaborative leaders. The mindsets described by Chris include:

- being adaptive: the ability to shift and change over time
- being comfortable with uncertainty and striving for clarity
- being motivated by outcomes identified by the partners and the community not on self
- sharing power with collaborative partners

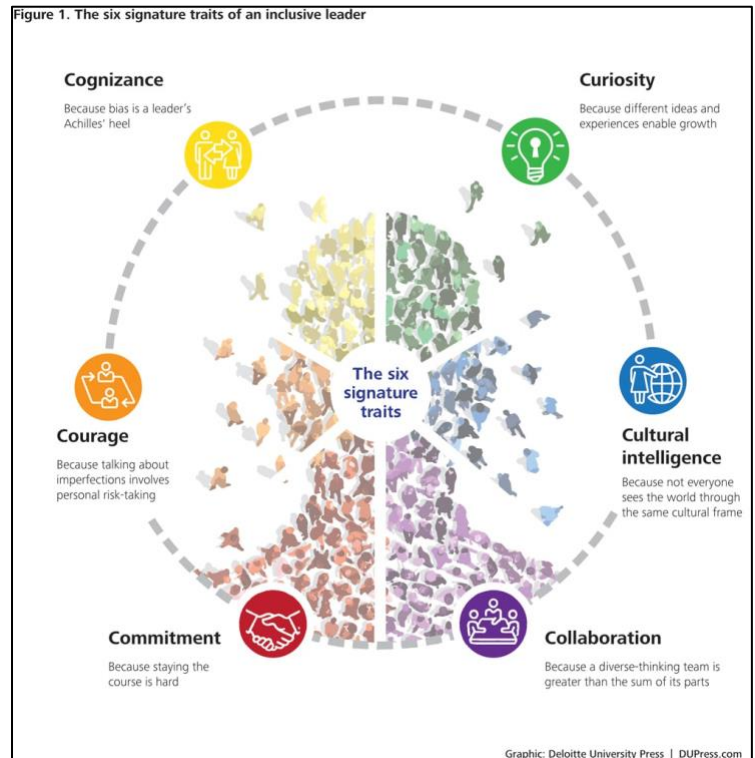
Collaborate CIC in the UK recently published a report which explored [System Leadership in Local Government](#).<sup>ii</sup> The report includes a series of essays about system leadership. The essays are perspectives of leaders driving place-based change in their communities. The Ignite Strategic Framework contains elements or mindsets required by system leaders. These include:

- Mandate, confidence, and courage
- Resilience, development, and self-reflection
- Empathy and generosity

- Purpose and values-driven leadership

[Six Signature Traits of Inclusive Leadership](#) by Juliet Bourke<sup>iii</sup> describes six mindsets which are useful to consider in the collaborative context. These include commitment, courage, cognizance of your own and the groups biases, curiosity, cultural intelligence, and collaboration.

Each of these six mindsets or signature traits is aligned to a practice. Commitment requires understanding your personal values and a belief in the shared business case. Courage includes acting with humility and bravery. Cognizance of bias ins about self-regulation and fair play. Curiosity includes an openness to learning, perspective taking and coping with ambiguity or the unknown. Cultural intelligence is described as drive, knowledge, and adaptability. And collaboration includes empowerment, teaming, and voice.



Bourke describes each of these traits in detail in the paper and provides a useful framework that can be adapted to the collaborative context.

## The Collaborative Skillset

Chris Thompson, in the Tamarack webinar, identified the following five essential skills for collaborative leaders. He described these skills as important for collective impact backbone leaders. Many of them are also essential for collaborative leaders advancing program and organizational change as well.

- Facilitation – helping partners make decisions and move forward together
- Evaluation – assess how well the partners are working together and apply our learning to work better together
- Understanding context – having a ground level view, a system level view and 360-degree view of the context in which the collaborative is working
- Inquiry – asking new compelling questions and listening to the responses that are provided, who do we listen to and focusing on those questions that lead to what might be possible
- Building trust – focusing on how to build trust with and among the partners and with community

The Organizational Development Institute, New Zealand confirms many of the collaborative leadership skills identified by Chris Thompson. They add to the list:

- Collaborative leaders are skilful in self-awareness; understanding and working with their own strengths and weaknesses, and in reflective practice through which they monitor and modify their leadership activity.
- They are practised listeners, able to draw out and ‘hear’ the input from others. The skills of empathy help them engender trust and bring out the best in others.
- Facilitation skills are core to their leadership practice; maintaining focus on issues rather than people (often through extensive use of whiteboards, flipcharts and post-it notes), flexing between leading and following in order to enable others to occupy centre stage; and clear verbal communication, including use of questions to explore and clarify the input from others.
- Skills of delegation enable responsibility to be taken on by others. Capability to give (and receive) constructive feedback supports successful delegation and the development of others.<sup>iv</sup>

## Creating a Culture of Belonging and Engagement

Collaborative leaders should consider the type of culture they are seeking to build through the experience. Two considerations around culture are creating a culture of belonging and a culture of engagement. On the surface these two approaches seem similar, but they are distinct and connected.

A culture of belonging is about creating the space where all partners are motivated and identify that they are welcomed and belong to the collaboration. Tamarack builds a culture of belonging through invitation questions which enable the partners to connect to the core purpose of the collaboration.

Building a culture of belonging starts at the very beginning of collaboration. The leader or convener must have a deep interest in the participants engaging in the collaborative. They should work to build connect and trust, not only between themselves and their partners but also between the group as a whole. This can be done by creating opportunities for connection each time collaborative partners gather together.

CoCreative Consulting has developed a very useful agenda tool which encourages collaborative efforts to build meetings around four elements: connecting, aligning, learning, and making (CALM). [The Four Agendas Tool](#)<sup>v</sup> bridges belonging and creates opportunities for learning and engagement.

Creating the culture of engagement is what keeps participants around the collaborative table. Partners who feel deeply engaged will contribute to shared decision-making, shared purpose, and shared



### BELONGING OR CONNECTION QUESTIONS

- **Why is it important that I am here today?**
- **What are your hopes for this collaborative?**
- **What are you willing to contribute?**
- **What will you need to keep you connected?**

outcomes. Individuals who are less engaged, are likely not to show up as often or engage in the conversation.

Lisa Attygalle, Director, Community Engagement at Tamarack explored how fear of effective engagement often holds collaborative efforts from achieving their full potential in her paper “[Creating the Culture for Engagement](#)”. Many collaborative leaders are fearful that deep and committed engagement will take away from the shared purpose of the collaborative.

*In the small group interviews I conducted, fear shows up in all stages of a typical engagement process: fear of reaching out to the public at all; of being verbally attacked; of being the frontperson representing a whole organization and not having all the information or answers; risk of creating additional awareness to a problem; fear of the community wanting something you can't deliver; fear of disappointing people; fear of not being able to follow through.*

*For many people fear is often closely bundled up with a desire not to harm the community. We do not want to get into conflict, offend people, or retraumatize, so we avoid altogether—which may also cause harm in the process. As I speak to practitioners who experience fear, mitigating risk is a consuming thought as they approach engaging their communities. Sometimes the fear is named outright, sometimes it is not, but it is apparent in their behaviors. It shows itself as a hesitancy, an uncertainty, desire to self preserve and to not be vulnerable.<sup>vi</sup>*

Effective collaborative leaders are able to navigate through the fear and have the mindset that effective engagement will lead to purposeful outcomes. In the paper, Attygalle provides useful strategies for collaborative leaders to move from the fear zone into the engagement and learning zone.

## Assessing The Collaborative Leader

There are many approaches and tools available to assess your collaborative leadership capabilities. Two tools or approaches which are often referenced by Tamarack are the [Turning Point: Collaborative Leadership Self-Assessment](#). There are six capabilities identified in this tool:

- Developing Clarity – Visioning & Mobilizing: Defining shared values and engaging people in positive action.
- Developing Trust & Creating Safety: Creating safe places for developing shared purpose and action.
- Sharing Power and Influence: Developing the synergy of people, organizations, and communities to accomplish goals.
- Assessing the Environment for Collaboration: Understanding the context for change before you act.
- Self Reflection – Personal CQI (Continuous Quality Improvement): Being aware of and understanding your values, attitudes, and behaviors as they relate to your own leadership style and its impact on others.
- Developing People – Mentoring and Coaching: Committing to bringing out the best in others and realizing people are your key asset.<sup>vii</sup>

The Collaborative Leadership Self-Assessment is composed of a series of statements and a self-rating scale for each of the six capability areas. As well, the questionnaire encourages self-reflection and identification of areas for development.

The capability areas are useful to consider as they reflect a holistic approach to collaborative leadership and reflect both the process of collaboration including developing clarity and assessing the environment and the people-side of collaboration including building trust, sharing power and influence, and developing people.

A second assessment tool which is useful for collaboration is the Amherst H. Wilder Foundation [Collaboration Factors Inventory](#).<sup>viii</sup> The Collaboration Factors Inventory, now in its 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, contains 22 collaboration factors and 44 statements which can be rated by the collaborative leader or the collaborative partners to assess the current strength of the collaborative process.

The [Collaboration Factors Inventory](#) assesses the context for the collaboration, the process of the collaboration and the role and contributions of members to the collaboration. There is also a guide to help collaborative leaders interpret the results.

## Final Reflections

Reflecting on your personal commitment and capabilities to convene a collaboration are essential first steps. Collaboration is an investment of time and resources by not only the convener but also the collaborative partners.

### Tools for Building Your Collaborative Leadership Mindsets and Skillsets:

1. Tamarack Institute. [The Essential Mindsets and Skillsets of Backbone Leaders](#).
2. CoCreative Consulting. [The Four Agendas](#).
3. Tamarack Institute. [Creating a Culture of Community Engagement](#).
4. Turning Point. [Collaborative Leadership Self Assessment](#).
5. Amherst Wilder Foundation. [Collaboration Factors Inventory](#).

## The Collaborative Governance and Leadership Series

This is a paper in a series about Collaborative Leadership and Governance. The papers will be released throughout mid 2022 and early 2023. We invite your comments and feedback. If you are a member of a collaborative table, we would love to hear from you. Please email Liz Weaver – [Liz@tamarackcommunity.ca](mailto:Liz@tamarackcommunity.ca)

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<sup>i</sup> Tamarack Institute. The Essential Mindsets and Skillsets of Backbone Leaders. Chris Thompson and Liz Weaver. 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZcRwJZn-Jul>

<sup>ii</sup> Collaborate CIC. System Leadership in Local Government. [http://wordpress.collaboratei.com/wp-content/uploads/Ignite-Essays\\_digital-Rotated-cover.pdf](http://wordpress.collaboratei.com/wp-content/uploads/Ignite-Essays_digital-Rotated-cover.pdf)

<sup>iii</sup> Deloitte. Six Signature Traits of Inclusive Leadership. Juliet Bourke. [Six signature traits of inclusive leadership | Deloitte Insights](#)

<sup>iv</sup> Organization Development Institute. Collaborative Leadership. [What is Collaborative Leadership :: ODI \(development.org.nz\)](#)

<sup>v</sup> CoCreative Consulting. The Four Agendas Tool. [https://www.wearecocreative.com/files/ugd/7c2b0e\\_86f42b11969f42a9a317d329ee9d45bc.pdf](https://www.wearecocreative.com/files/ugd/7c2b0e_86f42b11969f42a9a317d329ee9d45bc.pdf)

<sup>vi</sup> Tamarack Institute. Creating the Culture for Community Engagement. Lisa Attygalle. <https://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/library/paper-creating-culture-community-engagement>

<sup>vii</sup> Turning Point. Collaborative Leadership. Fundamental Concepts. [http://216.92.113.133/Pages/pdfs/lead\\_dev/curriculum/manual\\_sections/CL\\_fundamentals\\_Participants.pdf](http://216.92.113.133/Pages/pdfs/lead_dev/curriculum/manual_sections/CL_fundamentals_Participants.pdf).

<sup>viii</sup> Amherst H. Wilder Foundation. Collaboration Factors Inventory. <https://www.wilder.org/wilder-research/research-library/collaboration-factors-inventory>

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