

Powerful Practice or Panacea? Collaborative Leadership in The UK Voluntary Sector

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Abstract

Recent discourses on the UK's voluntary organisations (VOs), originating from a number of different perspectives - public policies (or their absence), a succession of 'leadership' scandals (at Kids Company, Oxfam and others), fears for the 'independence' of the sector (Barings, 2016, 2017), and apparently declining public trust - have combined to create a sense of a loss of confidence in the sector to tackle social and environmental problems. To make a difference, fulfil their mission, and make best use of scarce resources, VOs are exhorted to adopt 'collaborative' ways of working and leading (see for example Broomhead et al [2017]; Hale 2018; Hunter and Longlands, 2017; Lloyds Bank Foundation, 2018). In spite of these exhortations, the UK academic debate has until recently conceptualised leadership in the sector in individual and positional terms (Terry et al, 2018). At the Centre for Voluntary Sector Leadership (CVSL), we have sought to reframe this debate by adopting collective and collaborative accounts of leadership in our research, teaching, and engagement with the sector. However, there is a danger that in doing so, we simply replace 'leadership' with 'collaborative leadership' as a magic concept that will somehow both ensure VO sustainability and keep the sector close to its espoused values.

This paper adopts a more critical approach to the potential of collaborative leadership for the sector by unpacking how actors make use of the concept to make sense of challenges and possibilities they encounter in leading VOs. The paper draws on a series of semi-structured interviews with six individuals, each interviewed 4-5 times over a 12-18 month period on the topic of collaborative leadership. These individuals have also engaged more broadly over a longer period with CVSL. This has enabled us to get to know them and interact on multiple levels – including site visits, interactions with staff teams and volunteers, and training events. The interviews are therefore 'ethnographic' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007) in that they are embedded in a broader engagement with the context in which interviewees work. The paper introduces findings from an initial inductive thematic analysis of the interview texts. It explores three different but interrelated interpretations of these findings, organised around three conceptual lenses, as outlined briefly below.

Conceptual lens 1: Leadership as person: the collaborative entrepreneurs

The concept of the 'collaborative entrepreneur' appears in the non-profit literature (Takahashi and Smutny 2002; Cornforth et al 2015), paralleling the more familiar 'policy entrepreneur' (Kingdon 1995). The concept adopts an individual leadership-as-person framing, positioning individual activity as response to context. Collaborative entrepreneurs gather partners, and initiate alliances (Takahashi and Smutny 2002) in response to temporal and spatial context, exploiting collaborative windows as they emerge through the 'confluence of problem, policy, organizational, and social/political/economic streams' (ibid p.165). This lens highlights interviewees' account of themselves as 'connectors' – opportunity spotters who connect people and organisations to create new collaborations. While extant literature focuses on collaborative entrepreneurs' significance for partnership governance, our data shows them enabling a wider range of informal and formal collaborations.

Conceptual lens 2: Leadership as process: managing tensions

A leadership as process lens (Grint, 2005) draws attention to interviewees' account of collaborative leadership as two distinct processes that are intertwined but in tension. The first process focuses on building relationships. It is values-driven and concerned with high-order, aspirational goals, but also with process goals – broadly, a better (relational) way of doing good things. The second is an instrumental process concerned with effectiveness, efficiency, and resource acquisition. This reflects earlier research findings (Vangen and Huxham, 2003) that 'collaborative' leadership involves managing a tension between ideology and pragmatism. Our data suggests that interviewees' make sense of this tension in relation to individual and organisational identity.

Conceptual lens 3: Leadership as discursive practice: discourses of collaboration

Adopting a discursive lens (Fairhurst, 2011, Alvesson and Karreman, 2000), we identify two distinct discourses of collaborative leadership – an instrumental discourse and an identity discourse. On the one hand, collaborative leadership is discursively constructed as a rational strategy that produces purposeful activity focused on accessing resources, meeting needs, and organisational sustainability. On the other hand, it is constructed as a values-led, relational way of working that represents identity work for the individual and the organisation.

Next steps

The full paper will develop the above analysis, and return to the non-profit context to discuss whether and if so how ‘collaborative leadership’ enables powerful practice in an unequal society or is simply an attractive discursive panacea for VOs in a challenging context.

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