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Enabling Community and Trust: Shared Leadership for Collective Creativity

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Keywords: organizational culture, collaboration, leadership, community.

Key Points

- The strength of nonprofit organizations comes from well-developed human connections that spur productive collaboration across levels of hierarchy. This article, exploring the experience of the Fetzer Institute, demonstrates that workplace creativity is best fostered if it is matched by a style of leadership that invites a wider spectrum of internal actors to actively participate.
- While acknowledging the significance of shared leadership, this article does not necessarily advocate for the dissolution of hierarchy; rather, it points out that the key lies in finding the sweet spot between organizational structure and a creative community.
- The article describes tools that are particularly effective and elaborates how, through a process of establishing trust and mutual respect, a collective generative impulse emerges when social and structural goals coalesce.

Introduction

This article discusses a leadership style that bolsters collaboration and co-ownership, which are pivotal for nonprofits and philanthropies. Focusing on communal factors that maximize staff motivation and trust at the Fetzer Institute, a private foundation in Kalamazoo, Mich., the authors reflect on how bridges were built between values and everyday operational roles and functions. More specifically, this article looks at a new frame-

work for employee empowerment, observed over a year's time, that was grounded in weekly three-hour sessions of open discussion of the intersections of personal and organizational goals.

A learning organization focusing on education, research, and public awareness, Fetzer dedicates about \$20 million a year to support programs around the world. While earlier projects focused on holistic health and the mind, over the past two decades its mission expanded to helping reduce violence and promoting pro-social behavior. More recently, with the help of more than 200 external advisors who made funding recommendations, the institute implemented a programmatic strategy that centered on sectors such as health care, law, governance, and science.

Beginning with the founder at the helm, Fetzer has adopted various forms of leadership. The mission and strategies of the institute evolved, as well as the contexts in which it operated. Structures included the active engagement of board members who teamed up with staff, and bringing in groups of distinguished fellows to help conceptualize programs. Each of these periods offered unique challenges and opportunities, from the individual visions of chief executive officers to more distributed decision-making. Synchronization and integration of strategic direction was not easy to come by, partly because board and staff had limited opportunities to collaborate around the founding values of the institute. A new configuration was needed to align board, senior

leadership, staff, and external partners. In 2013, after a thorough review of program history, a new management introduced the concept of “community” as a prism through which to look at what Fetzer was originally intended to do. Community, in this context, is a mechanism for encouraging shared ideals and collaboration without flattening individual contributions or undermining organizational structures. When implemented carefully, it can foster collective creativity through shared leadership.

Communities thrive in an environment where members take on leadership roles fluidly; institutions become more efficient within defined structures. The most desirable setup, of course, is when the two can be yoked together. Purposeful connections and collaboration are Fetzer’s centerpiece, which is why it combines shared and hierarchical leadership. A yearlong period of community building, in which the authors participated, resulted in a greater sense of creativity and accountability. More specifically, the institute:

- elicited the active participation of community members in helping shape a new vision;
- added a dimension that highlights relationships as a complement to structure and process;
- increased faith and confidence in its leadership, as demonstrated by more staff members bringing concerns to senior management;
- gained a thorough knowledge of its history, philosophy, and past projects;
- heard many members report improved relations and a sense of being valued; and
- integrated ideas from staff into a draft strategy vision.

The objective of this article is to share the experience of how the institute’s board, staff, and senior management put in place a framework for trust and community by implementing this shared-leadership approach.

Rationale

Singular leadership, too, can be effective for nonprofits. However, the benefits of shared leadership significantly tilt in the direction of shared vision and implementation (Kocolowski, 2010). The range of interests, power centers, and stake-

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holders to whom these nonprofits are accountable make a compelling case for collective leadership.

The philanthropic sector thrives best with an organizational culture that stresses deeper embodiment of values, relationships, trust, connectedness, and higher ethical standards cemented in a social contract. The motivations of staff, many of whom volunteer in addition to working as salaried employees, differ from those of corporate professionals or public-sector administrators. Shared leadership works best in environments where there is strong support from senior leadership and where independence is encouraged; it also works particularly well where success depends on the quality of employee engagement.

Hierarchical leadership tends to be a simple, vertical pyramid. An example of an opposing management style is holocracy, which distributes power by eliminating management structures (McGregor, 2014; Wirthman, 2014). Both approaches leave little room for the intricacies of human enterprise, which require careful balancing of relationships, emotions, and ways of being. In contrast, shared leadership – also known as distributed or horizontal leadership – is suitable to the complex environments in which many nonprofits operate (Bergman, Rentsch, Small, Davenport, & Bergman, 2012; Carson, Tesluk, & Marrone, 2007). Taking a practical perspective, some management theorists like Peter Gronn suggest a “hybrid configuration” that goes well be-

yond a simplistic dyad of hierarchy versus shared leadership (as cited in Bolden, 2011, p. 263).

While corporations can arguably afford to concentrate on specific products or services, nonprofits deal with complex and relatively unpredictable conditions. The kinds of communities relevant to this discussion provide safe space and foster personal and social relatedness that lead to mutual trust. The communal nature (or ideals) of nonprofits makes essential a leadership that reflects broader interests and perspectives, collective decision-making, collaboration, and ownership.

What Is Shared Leadership?

For a for-profit entity, success is always demonstrable in the bottom line. Nonprofits, on the other hand, emphasize the relationship between the institution and its environment (Anheier, 2000). Described as the action of individuals leading one another to achieve group goals, the emergent shared-leadership approach is best understood in terms of what it excludes. Task distribution – leading meetings, creating committees, and so forth – is not a function ideally suited to shared leadership and therefore requires the right formulas and norms for productive relationships.

Among nonprofits, those norms are even more crucial given that collective creativity and community are essential within the board, among employees, and in relation to the public. While corporations can arguably afford to concentrate on specific products or services, nonprofits deal with complex and relatively unpredictable conditions. The kinds of communities relevant to this discussion provide safe space and foster personal and social relatedness that lead to mutual trust. The communal nature (or ideals) of nonprofits makes essential a leadership that reflects broader interests and perspectives, collective decision-making, collaboration, and ownership.

This does not necessarily imply that individual leadership cannot represent communal or wider interests. Admittedly, collective decisions may not be as efficient and nimble as those made by accountable single entities. But norms, openly articulated or implicit, are integral to the creation of a sense of community. Together, these sets of values form the “social contract,” an organizational environment aptly defined by Riordan and O'Brien (2012) as

an explicit agreement that lays out the ground rules for team members' behaviors. A [social] contract can cover territory such as how members will work together, make decisions, communicate, share information, and support each other. Social contracts clearly outline norms for how members will and should interact with one another.

At Fetzer, this alignment to purpose and personal values is known as “deep engagement,” which points to the intent and content of one's actions in connection with everything and everyone else and to deepening the level of communication and trust among board, management, and staff.

A Pause for Reflection

Social networks can make the most out of human impulses. Creating an unstructured space allowing a pause for reflection, or what Ori Brafman (2013) calls “white space,” that can encourage unexpected ideas to emerge has proven to be effective in motivating employees. A notable example is Google's 80/20 practice, which allocates 20

percent of employee work hours for personal-professional projects and has been credited with giving birth to innovations like Gmail. Such latitude brings together individuals and team leadership modulated by social contracts that are then mapped onto the organizational structure and complement structured decision-making.

Admittedly, many nonprofits often organize “retreats” to untangle big-picture issues and ideas, build stronger teams, or simply to break routine. These retreats are generally infrequent, however, and too many activities are often packed into the available time, making it difficult to put into practice the takeaways. Recognizing the importance of regularity and that deliberate practice makes integrated communal and organizational leadership effective, Fetzer introduced a space for open reflection by inviting all members of the community (everyone who works at the organization) to fully engage in the weekly pause for reflection.

Putting the Hybrid Leadership Model Into Practice

The loosening of structure in a controlled environment on a designated day of the week to encourage the emergence of communities requires conscious effort, however counterintuitive that might seem. The hybrid brand of leadership takes into account the limitations of “going solo and operating by command and control ... [which] ... can’t resolve complex problems” and recognizes that leadership “is about communities learning to put their collective shoulders to the wheel” (Intrator & Scribner, 2007, p. 155). In such spirit, employees at all levels are given a whole morning once a week to reflect, ask questions, speak their truth, talk in small groups, meditate, doodle, and take walks. These are also “refresh” sessions, where participants gauge at a deeper level the alignment of the founding purpose and values as well as those of individual staff members. These sessions also serve as a convenient vehicle for self-development, building relationships, open dialogue, and sharing experiences.

Fetzer puts a high premium on the values of personal transformation and service. Through a layer of shared leadership, it was apparent that

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employees can become empowered if they have the opportunity to regularly reflect on the purpose of their work. Such effort is helping bridge divides, address common challenges, and build such essential relationship skills as listening and dialogue. Senior leaders helped frame the initial conversation with a series of presentations about Fetzer’s origin and programmatic history as well as potential visions for its future. For staff and board members, these activities helped enhance contextual self-awareness and focused awareness of others in the community. Interactions resulting from the reflection pause also carve out a fresh space where those so inclined step in to provide guidance to colleagues. As Deepak Chopra (2010) writes, a leader is the symbolic soul of a group; in this case, many voices came forward.

Two months after the launch of the sessions, a survey collected ideas for future gatherings. Staff members were asked to rank their top 10 topics from a longer list; the most popular suggestions included effective communication, emotional-intelligence training, a review of values, community formation, and leadership skills. Each employee joined a group that prepared the session for one of the 10 top-ranked topics. These small groups workshopped such ideas as inviting in external experts on the topic, and were given rein to determine the resources needed for hosting a session.

Convening small groups, nurturing circles of trust, deep listening, and dialogue constitute the key ingredients of success. Implementing shared leadership includes a quarterly rotation of leaders, regardless of position, to allow every individual to contribute thoughtfully and with a clear a sense of purpose.

The Tools

These pauses for reflection have been refined over time and have been well received within the institute and among outside partners as we have begun using this approach in our external work. Convening small groups, nurturing circles of trust, deep listening, and dialogue constitute the key ingredients of success. Implementing shared leadership includes a quarterly rotation of leaders, regardless of position, to allow every individual to contribute thoughtfully and with a clear a sense of purpose. The underlying principles are similar to those of “servant leadership,” a concept based on shared responsibilities that prioritizes the philosophy of serving over that of leading (Greenleaf, 1977, 1998). Simon Sinek (2009) argues that successful leadership spirals from what he calls the “why” – an inquisitive approach to action rather than working on autopilot. Fetzter has a parallel philosophy, articulated as “living the question”: Why does an individual or an institution do what it does?

Pillars of the Community

Presence, groundedness, inclusiveness, expansiveness, incubation, confluence, reflection, and emergence are the pillars of the community.

Presence

Whether in small groups or in full community and regardless of the vertical hierarchy, listening with an intentional presence of mind while another speaks is a tool that has been honed and actively practiced in these reflections. The late Clifford Nass found in his research on multitasking that not being fully present in fact hurts productivity (Yardley, 2013); an example of such behavior would be checking email and sipping coffee while a colleague is speaking to you about something important. In many cultures around the world, not paying full attention to the speaker would be considered rude and highly disrespectful. Honoring speakers and appreciating their thoughts has a cultural parallel adapted from the Native American tradition: A person picks up a feather to indicate the desire to speak to the group and signals an end by setting the feather down.

Groundedness

Specifically, this means being grounded in Fetzter’s vision and founding philosophies, and connecting these with overall purpose. It is, in other words, an inquisitive approach to work and relationships that emphasizes taking time to reorient ourselves and to reflect on whether we are on track to fulfilling the Japanese concept of “a reason for being,” or *ikigai*. This has a parallel in the work of David McLean (2001), who challenges us to live our authentic selves by “investing time and energy in ourselves and listening to our life-force” (p. 17).

The dimensions for this “being” are personal, including cultural attributes; professional, as manifested in collegial relationships and the foundation’s mission; and a “common purpose,” shared with partners and external stakeholders. A Gallup study (Harter, Schmidt, & Keyes, 2003) found that the well-being of any entity depends on the physical as well as social well-being of individuals and the community. More important, the study indicates, “meaning and personal development” are desired by employees as essential for overall fulfillment. Two Fetzter employees volunteered to lead a session on developing a personal mission statement, which challenged members of the community to thoughtfully articulate actionable goals based on strengths and priorities. Employ-

ees are thus encouraged to engage in a profound search for self and communal awareness through journaling, one-on-one conversations, silence, and walking meditation. Journaling and capturing quick thoughts on big paperboards in shared areas of the institute's building have become common; such practices have parallels at organizations ranging from the World Bank to Google (Tan, 2012; Confino, 2013).

Inclusiveness

Pivoting on the centrality of relationships and a sense of self in community, the reflection pauses are also sandboxes where modalities of social configuration find a place. These relationships are akin to "samyama," a Sanskrit concept for expressing the power of inclusion. While these relationships are additive, they are more than the sum of their parts. The planning process of the weekly sessions is designed so that any interested employee can participate. Small teams share such practices as tai chi, yoga, doodling, brain mapping, and idea visualization. Membership in these teams is open; people can join or rotate out anytime. From employees overall, there has been evident active participation and requests to contribute.

There are also online tools for anyone to contribute to conversations and a suggestion box for those who prefer to comment anonymously. Feedback is gathered periodically and in real time to identify the effectiveness of these activities and to make necessary course corrections. This learning lens also helps lift new ideas along the way while improving the content of agenda items from week to week. Anonymous surveys, full-community open feedback, and small-group discussions are channels to receive responses. Such generative exercises were engaging and have led to many fruitful ideas.

Connectedness

Re-acquaintance with colleagues at a deeper level, by taking the time to create a comfortable level of mutual vulnerability, is key to connection. To this end, Fetzer offered a six-hour training in emotional intelligence to all employees. And in pursuit of a higher level of connection – expressed

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well in the South African concept of "ubuntu," or humanness – a practice of reaching out to another person known as "just like me" was introduced. In this exercise, one person looks into another person's eyes and imagines empathetically how he or she feels, while prompts are given such as "just like me, this person has experienced pain" and "just like me, this person wants to be successful."

One participant said these exercises helped the group see beyond a divisive "you or me" to a relational "you and me." In this context, choices are not presented as individual goals, but rather as a reflection of the ethos of the community and the relationships among members. And, with persistent practice, such exercises would certainly contribute to building connections at a human level even outside of an organization.

Expansiveness

As one board member commented, "Who we are is a driver for our work." This observation underscores the importance of creating a shared vision and strong commitment, which eventually becomes the work. In this sense, the work is a reflection of what individuals and the community jointly, up and down the hierarchy, invest as the best use of their strengths. Like molecules build

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into cells, and cells into organisms, institutions are composed of individuals' capabilities, which add to the strength and character of the organization. Just like social networks, this approach allows individual connections to expand from small groups to larger ones, but one deliberate step at a time.

Incubation

The weekly session also offered a platform to initiate, cross-fertilize, and nurture new ideas. In one open forum, in the presence of the board, staff members were encouraged to contribute their thoughts not only about past projects, but also to point out best practices from elsewhere and blue sky ventures. There was a surprising *mélange* of ideas encompassing the design of this emerging community as a key strategy to mine new partnerships and networks. Some suggested efforts to replicate Fetzner's physical and human structure in other locations. The creative exercises drew rich contributions on improving the design of a strategy and test-driving prototypes for program vision.

A technique known as the world café (Brown, Isaacs, Senge, & Wheatley, 2005), which offers a group-discussion process on a given topic, was used to generate feedback and articulate vision for the future. Large paper sheets were provided

at each table for staff to sketch thoughts and write short sentences, and participants switched tables at timed intervals to contribute thoughts on other topics; a host at each table reported out key insights.

The specific practices of deep listening, respect for differences, space for silence, and meaningful dialogue without judgment, have become fun and relatively regular tools to generate creativity.

Reflection

A quiet space to reflect on the significance of the work and its personal meaning to everyone is prized as much as lively brainstorming or the exchange of views with colleagues. Moments of silence helped create opportunity for thoughtfulness and productive inactivity. These sessions are about more than enjoying a break from routine – what the Italians call “*dolce far niente*,” literally, “sweet doing nothing.” Such pauses enable bringing the mind to an open and creative mode by consciously linking one's fundamental purpose of being to everyday tasks. Stewards of business like Ford Motor Co. Chairman Bill Ford and Robert Stiller, CEO of Green Mountain Coffee Roasters Inc., are among many who value the time of day they dedicate to introspection.

Strength-finding exercises like those in Don Lowry's *True Colors* (1992) that assist in identifying natural strengths and talents helped map personal capacities. In addition to an opportunity to appreciate unique qualities that each employee brings, the exercises also provided room to deepen an awareness of the self and unlock the points of connection where personality types complement each other. In an article titled *Can Reality Set Us Free? The Puzzle of Complementarity*, Chopra and his collaborators compared the variety of qualities individuals possess, likening them to pieces of a puzzle that become a complete picture when teams are formed in a complementary fashion (Chopra, Doraiswamy, Tanzi, Theise, & Kafatos, 2013). The application of complementarity relates to synchronization of purpose and action. As such, everyday work depends as much on processes as on relationships that enrich each other at personal and professional levels.

TABLE 1 Feedback on Session Formats

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
Individual Format	2.5%	7.5%	17.5%	40.0%	32.5%
Pairs Format	9.5%	7.2%	16.7%	21.4%	45.2%
Small-Group Format	2.4%	2.4%	2.4%	16.6%	76.2%
World Café	2.4%	0.0%	0.0%	19.5%	78.1%
Full Community Report-Out	2.5%	2.5%	15.0%	20.0%	60.0%

Emergence

Equivalent to what is known in Arabic as “ain-el-yaqin,” or the envisioning of certainty, emergence is a breakthrough that appears as a result of good intent and persistent practice. Individual initiatives in listening and dialogue, enriched by problem-solving skills, strengthened productive relationships among staff. As a result of exercises, individuals reported that they were more comfortable communicating their thoughts and engaging with one another without fear of judgment. The technique of mind-mapping, which has become a popular tool with multiple software and apps, was another exercise planned to be applied to lay out ideas and trace their relationships collaboratively. This approach allows for the natural surfacing of leadership with a sense of shared goals and ownership that results in a collective understanding and embodiment of the mission.

Feedback

As the reflection pause matured, feedback was gathered through a staff survey – with a response rate of 85.5 percent out of 55 employees – that included qualitative and quantitative variables. The results showed successes and areas for improvement, as well as comments on particular methodology. (See Table 1.) Designed with the assistance of Fetzer’s evaluation team, the survey was intended to learn whether the weekly activities met employees’ expectations and if personal and professional skills and experiences gained were applied in everyday situations, and to gather

suggestions for more sessions. Staff members overwhelmingly expressed a desire to be together and to bond. The survey as well as the world café sessions also uncovered some challenges: too many ideas crammed into a short span of time, a limited number of outside speakers, uneven participation in small- and large-group activities, the difficulty of translating learnings into everyday work, and redundant content. The feedback also included outlier requests like aromatherapy and time for naps. Improvements to sessions were made in response to these concerns and new training sessions in such areas as consensus-building facilitation skills were rolled out to select groups where the need was observed.

Conclusion

Outlining the full range of cognitive and behavioral changes that may be measured in shared leadership is beyond the scope of this article. In general, implementing shared leadership can also be challenging and complicated; distributing roles that minimize strict hierarchical bottlenecks does not necessarily mark a complete turnaround in culture. A shift from a singular leadership to a flattened model cannot be an easy transition, either (Kocolowski, 2010). Recognizing this complexity, Fetzer came up with an old solution to a common fear of change by investing in a community that focuses on enriching the dynamics of human relationships using the tools explored in this article that complement vertical leadership.

The biggest asset for an organization is not simply a set of skills. Instead, it is about how it empowers professionals who possess those skills to forge meaningful communities around common objectives.

Staff described this collaborative process as exciting. It helped form a community of trust and led to transformative shifts in culture. As discussed by Bradley and McDonald (2011), the biggest asset for an organization is not simply a set of skills. Instead, it is about how it empowers professionals who possess those skills to forge meaningful communities around common objectives. The social contract implemented at Fetzer goes beyond skills and methods to leverage teams; the process goes deeper into human connections and meaning that align with personal values. Communities are an important channel in building integrity from the ground up and instilling a sense of personal responsibility that translates to the highest standards of ethical practices.

The community's social contract became the springboard that led to a new participatory strategic plan. Senior leadership recognized the importance of having everyone on board in formulating, testing, and managing a set of frameworks underlying the strategy. The openness of a shared-leadership model allowed the early exposure of a long-term plan with the hope of instilling shared ownership. The nascent leadership style, driven by relationships centered on trust, has been showing signs of strengthening the structures already in place.

The intention of hybrid leadership is to weave together the values of community members and to stack the building blocks for a larger vision in which everyone has a vested interest and is motivated to actualize a common future. This paves

the way for collective creativity to flourish by allowing unique individual talents to surface and nurturing them along the way with the support of a community and institutional resources. Individual passions are given a positive outlet while all professional standards and processes relevant in the work environment are adhered to.

It was evident, during the experience covered in this article, that a dynamic imaginative impulse would be released when social and structural goals coalesce. Aggregation of knowledge or information yields better results than decisions made by individual members when the creative process is based on active contributions by everyone (Surowiecki, 2005; Lehrer, 2012). Generally, motivated and energized employees in an enabling environment deliver high-quality value.

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