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# Leadership as Partnership

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by Karen Hutchins Bieluch

As our world becomes increasingly connected and interdependent, our vision for leadership also needs to evolve. Increasingly, businesses, governments, and universities and colleges are working in partnerships to cross organizational boundaries and share knowledge and accomplish things that can only be achieved when working together (Bednarek et al. 2018). This change in how we work together not only shifts how leadership is viewed, but also uncovers a range of new questions about the skills needed to effectively develop a collaborative leadership approach in partnerships.

During my career, I have had the good fortune to participate in a number of university-community/nonprofit partnerships, working with groups such as Alewife Harvesters of Maine, the Bangor Area Stormwater Group, and the Maine Winter Road Maintenance Working Group, to name a few. I have also studied partnerships. These experiences have made me rethink what it means to be a leader and have pointed to new opportunities and new questions about leadership.

To perhaps oversimplify past leadership approaches, they often were organized around a single leader who guided the work and the decision making. Whether heading up a corporation, a nonprofit, a school, or a healthcare center, for example, that leader was ultimately charged with making many of the decisions about how things should go. Partnerships often involve a different form of leadership: a single individual is typically not in charge; the individual who takes the lead at different points of time depends on expertise, the issue being addressed, and the stage of the

process; and the group may be constantly in the process of renegotiating the way forward. Leadership in this context needs to be more dynamic than may be necessary in a single-leader decision-making model. Leadership in multi-institutional partnerships is further complicated by the need to understand not only the individuals involved in the partnership, but also their institutions and the ways those institutions constrain and enable them in the partnership.

Part of my research has involved investigating what groups and individuals want from community-university partnerships. This research is a valuable way to begin to see what leadership will be needed if partnerships are to achieve the expectations held for them. In Maine, an important kind of partnership for addressing sustainability issues facing the state is between municipalities (urban, rural, northern, southern) throughout the state and universities with academic resources that could be put to work for municipal problem solving, growth, and change.

Universities are increasingly entering into partnerships, but often do so with limited knowledge of what partners—such as municipalities—want and need from such relationships. Since universities are in the business of generating new knowledge, and partnerships will often be built around drawing on this capacity, key questions are who makes the decisions about what knowledge is needed, how will information be collected, how will the findings be used? Additional questions include who will lead in making these decisions, and how could the potential partnerships use this

information to create effective collaborative leadership?

In my research, representatives from municipalities throughout the state were asked through a mail survey to provide information about how they wanted to be involved in decisions about studies that would serve their needs: did they want to lead or be involved in developing the focus, in collecting the data, in analyzing the data, and/or in putting the data to use? Our study yielded interesting findings about preferred strategies or models of partnership (Table 1).

As the results demonstrate, most respondents preferred a collaborative approach to partnership—and leadership—where university researchers and municipal officials work side by side in some, but not necessarily all, aspects of the research partnership (Bieluch et al. 2016). It is easy to assume that partnership means that all partners will want to be involved in every element of decision making and activity. Our results indicate that the hopes and expectations of municipal partners are much more nuanced. They see opportunities for collaborative leadership in decisions about what information would be helpful to collect. The actual data collection and data analysis, they indicate, might well be done under the leadership of the university researchers. And when it comes to using the results, the municipal leaders see opportunities for using their own municipal resources to implement the findings in ways that work for their municipality.

But municipal official preferences were also influenced by other factors related to the partnership, such as officials' confidence that researchers can help address problems, the type of issue being addressed (for example, economic, environmental, social), the level of trust in university partners, the reasons for trusting university partners (for example,

# COMMENTARY

TABLE 1:    **Response of Municipal Officials to Community-University Research Partnership Strategy Options**

| Type of Partnership | Problem Identification | Research | Proposed Solutions | Implementation | Percentage of Respondents |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Lead:** University as Lead Partner | University researchers | University researchers | University researchers | Local government officials (LGOs) | 2 |
| **Consult:** University as Consulting Partner | LGOs/University researchers | University researchers | University researchers | LGOs | 28 |
| **Facilitate:** University as Facilitating Partner | LGOs/University researchers | University researchers | LGOs/University researchers | LGOs | 27 |
| **Full:** University as Full Partner | LGOs/University researchers | LGOs/University researchers | LGOs/University researchers | LGOs/University researchers | 18 |

trust in having shared values, trust in technical knowledge), and prior experience with university researchers.

While there is much left to learn about what leadership in partnerships looks like, these studies encourage us to check our expectations and preferences in these relationships and suggest important questions about what leadership looks like when working in partnership. The findings suggest that when partnerships are a central part of addressing complex problems, it will be important to find ways to not simply work in lock step or to assume that everyone must be involved in every decision. Leadership and decision making in partnership will sometimes involve "handing off the baton" at crucial points and trusting the other partners to move alone, to work independently. But trust and understanding do not necessarily come easily in long-term partnerships. Missteps and too much independent work and decision making can erode the sense of working in collaboration. Thus, leadership in partnerships also requires responsiveness to and an awareness of each partner's perceptions and expertise, a willingness to learn and adapt, and open, effective, and regular communication among partners. Too

much independence and we lose the generative potential of partnerships. Too much interdependence and partnerships may fail to thrive or move too slowly to address issues of concern. Finding the balance requires a delicate interplay of people, personalities, and institutions and a willingness to change our expectations of leadership as we work together. ◞

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