

## Blog from Beyond Collaborative Leadership Webinar

13<sup>th</sup> July 2022

These are reflections following a webinar that Place Matters held on July 13 2022 where we brought together 3 panellists with a diverse and rich experience of what it means to be a collaborative leader and to lead social and systemic change.

*Liz Weaver* is President and Co-Lead of the Tamarack Institute in Canada with over 20 years of experience in tackling poverty and now climate change, youth futures and social isolation.

*Elle Dodd* is Practice Lead at Collaborate CIC working with the public and VCSE sectors in the UK to build collaborative practice and leadership

*Nick Gardham*, CEO of Community Organisers building the infrastructure for grassroots organisations to act together to bring about change.

The question we were asking is what lies beyond collaborative leadership in shifting the broader system that enables place-based change in the context of the challenging times we now face. It is now widely accepted that top-down and siloed ways of leading change cannot effectively address the more complex issues our communities face. We need collaboration to work especially across public, private sectors, VCSE and community-based organisations. But it is tough and challenging to create collaborations that really shift systems, so how can place leaders lead differently to disrupt the norms that maintain the deep inequalities communities experience?

### Place Matters perspective

There were many aspects of the discussion that resonated with our experience and added new perspectives to our thinking:

- The need for a radical new framework of leadership that shifts the mindset from self or organisation interest to a focus on collective interest – an “abundance mindset” that believes in the additional power of working collectively. Being in the open about what we care about as leaders, being part of the mission to bring about change and making it personal.
- Starting with the self in the journey of change. Doing the work personally to understand and confront the conscious and unconscious biases that influence the way we think and act. Being honest about how we contribute to the problem and taking responsibility for making the change.

- Creating the opportunity for those for whom the change is most important to be an intrinsic part of designing and delivering the change as part of the leadership of the process so it is legitimate and creates a lasting legacy. Expecting and embracing the tension that arises when you challenge the status quo to drive change.
- Finally, we reflected on what contributors termed as the value in ‘lifting up and sharing experiences’ between projects to build confidence in what is possible and help navigate the process of change in individual places.

This is a link to the event itself is on [Vimeo](#). Below is a summary of the discussion.

## The Webinar Discussion

### *What does it mean to be a collaborative leader in place-based change?*

Whilst the need for effective cross-sector, community-inclusive collaborations has been very widely debated and accepted, in truth it remains difficult to put into practice and there is much to do to make it a usual rather than unusual way of working. The panellists offered a few perspectives on what makes an effective collaborative leader.

### *Mental models and mindsets.*

Having an “abundance mindset” a belief that we are better if we are together and there is an inherent greater wisdom in crowds. This means being comfortable as a contributor to a greater whole and being prepared to change the way you and your organisation works to enable collaboration.

Seeing leadership as a process by which we mobilise change rather than a role we take. The key skill of a leader being about how to enable and empower those that want to drive change.

*It is an action we take rather than a role we are given and therefore anyone and everyone can exercise leadership. Elle Dodd*

### *A recognition of complexity and the limitations on our sphere of influence.*

For example, an NHS Manager might be responsible for waiting times for a particular procedure, but in practice can only influence one side of the problem. A multiplicity of factors lead to the incidence of a condition that requires treatment and someone being put on a list. To really tackle waiting times the NHS Manager must collaborate with other parts of the healthcare system, with those that care in the community, with organisations that educate and support people with conditions and ultimately with people themselves, particularly where lifestyle choices can impact on the incidence of the condition. A systemic approach would lead to a much more collaborative way of working across organisational

boundaries, but it also demands a significant commitment from those involved. Few roles are designed to have the mandate and capacity to engage in this way

*A shared imperative for change that starts with a recognition that the system is not working for many people.*

We need to galvanise collective action and common cause, whilst recognising that the status quo benefits many others by asking people and organisations to examine their own role in reinforcing the existing system and to make changes from their own perspective. We need to understand and forefront different interests and be transparent about what reinforces the status quo and what it means to change it. A collaboration can only work where all parties are open about what impact changes have on them and to find achievable common ground for change.

*All change happens in the context of place and community*

We cannot make change happen without the deep and central involvement of people with lived experience of the issue you are seeking to change. Without that deep involvement changes are unlikely to be appropriate to the context of the place and fail to create sustainable impact. The journey of change working alongside communities means creating a platform for collective action where there is a strong and mutually reinforced shared purpose and a movement for change. For example, in Tamarack's work on poverty in Hamilton, every meeting would start with a repeated mantra that as a community they saw the poverty they experienced as unfair and stood together to tackle it.

*Lift up and share experience to build confidence and capacity.*

For example, Tamarack has been involved in tackling poverty in Canada for 20 years. Initially working with 12 communities, they shared what these places were doing via their learning centre and that enabled them to identify the enablers of change and scale up the work to 400 communities. Then, through learning and sense making together, to build the capacity of communities to take on a broader set of challenges around youth employment and tackling social isolation in building stronger neighbourhoods. This was made possible through 10 years of funding from a Foundation who enabled deep learning and to build a shared narrative around the opportunity for change that Tamarack describe as their [poverty gamechangers](#).

*The ripple effect.*

There is a tipping point of change when a sufficient proportion of community leaders are collaborating and the way of working and thinking takes a life of its own, permeating the broader culture and practice of leadership in the place. Rich Harwood talks about this in The Ripple Effect. How change spreads in communities<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [https://governor.hawaii.gov/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/RippleEffect\\_v9\\_final.pdf](https://governor.hawaii.gov/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/RippleEffect_v9_final.pdf)

### *The impact of serial crises*

We discussed the impact of being in a moment where there are a series of external crisis: climate change, the pandemic, cost of living, a war in Ukraine all contributing to the deep-seated challenges that appear in different forms in different communities and *make people feel powerless to affect change*. For example, it was argued that we have not seen or heard the voice of people affected by the cost of living crisis to the extent that would galvanise significant collective action at a national scale, in part because people feel powerless, but also because the organisations that would voice their perspectives to those in power have been immersed in responding to the crisis; e.g. creating food banks, responding to those isolated or not able to access support. Community organisations have had to step in where the state does not have the capacity and their focus has been on the more immediate challenges of meeting the needs of individuals rather than reflecting on the impact of the crisis and influencing those in power. Nick Gardham talked about how and why he had been part of creating the [Cost of Living Alliance](#), an example of connecting and convening people to enable local action and building a collective evidence base from their experience to influence those in power.

*“Conflict is the midwife of change”.*

*Marshall Ganz*

Moments of significant external pressure unlock the potential for change and a shift in power dynamics. But with those changes comes conflict as different interests either vie for power or seek to hold on to the status quo. Community leaders need to have the capacity and confidence to grasp that opportunity and be prepared to work with the tensions that arise from conflict to find ways of moving forward in a positive way. That means being honest in voicing our interests and what inhibits our ability to change ourselves and being prepared to understand the interests and position of others. Whilst the reality of those interests may conflict with our values, we need to create an environment where they can be given respectful expression to build a safe and productive space for a widely based collaboration of systems actors. Nick Gardham talked about understanding the intersection of interests between the state, the market and the citizen. If we serve each of these interests, we can find a space for change to happen

### *Self and self-interest*

*“if you want to change the world, start with yourself”.*

*Mahatma Gandhi*

We discussed starting with an understanding of the impact we as individuals and as organisations have on the challenge we are addressing. Do we consciously or unconsciously reinforce the situation through protecting our own interests or the way we frame issues through our mental models or inherent bias? What can we do to be part of the solution and what does that tell us about what others might be able to do?

Participants saw this journey of personal change as being one of the more significant challenges for a leader, but one that enables leaders to see and act more inclusively. The FSG water of systems change model<sup>2</sup> is a good framework for looking at the different inner and outer layers of change.

### *What does a future leader of place-based change look like?*

In this part of the discussion we explored what aspects of leadership might be different or more important to how we typically think about collaborative leadership now.

### *Disruptive-emergent leadership.*

Starting with Liz Weaver's co-authored recent article on Leadership for Navigating Uncertainty<sup>3</sup>, we discussed the scale of change facing our communities and what that demands of our leaders. The paper argues that the time has come for what they term disruptive-emergent leadership, an integrated set of local networks building communities in new ways. Disruptive-emergent leadership is about building a distributed movement for change around a defining purpose. No single organisation or person tries to lead, the focus is on creating the conditions for change and building a shared accountability and momentum. It doesn't try to change existing structures or processes to enable collaboration, rather it relies on individual organisations making their own changes to participate. It is an inherently dynamic model that allows wide participation and can change rapidly as it evolves – hence the emergent part of the title. The downside, as the authors acknowledge, is that it is difficult to measure progress or be accountable to a funder.

### *A platform for plurality and diversity.*

We discussed the lessons from COVID around building a platform for grassroots action. COVID created the common purpose and Government guidance created a framework (the intention at least) that allowed a plurality of individual action. But for challenges that are more complex and adaptive<sup>4</sup> and where there is a diversity and plurality of views on what is right, the role of a disruptive leader is to build the platform for a common cause – a “Northstar” that a plurality of people and organisations can gravitate around and understand their role and contribution.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.fsg.org/blog/new-article-water-systems-change/#:~:text=The%20Water%20of%20Systems%20Change%2C%20a%20new%20article%20from%20John,i nterested%20in%20creating%20systems%20change.>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/hubfs/PAPER%20-%20Leadership%20for%20Navigating%20Uncertainty.pdf?hsCtaTracking=58193e43-511f-48ed-b402-442bb5696af9%7C303800d9-56a7-480c-b5da-0521e054ce48>

<sup>4</sup> See [Cynefin](#) framework for explanation of the factors that affect how we tackle different types of challenges

### *Horizontal power*

Building on the work of Adam Kahane, how can we become more skilled in exercising “horizontal” power, working with lateral rather than hierarchical structures and authority. He argues we need to be more regenerative, adaptable, externally facing and agile?<sup>5</sup>

### *Community accountability*

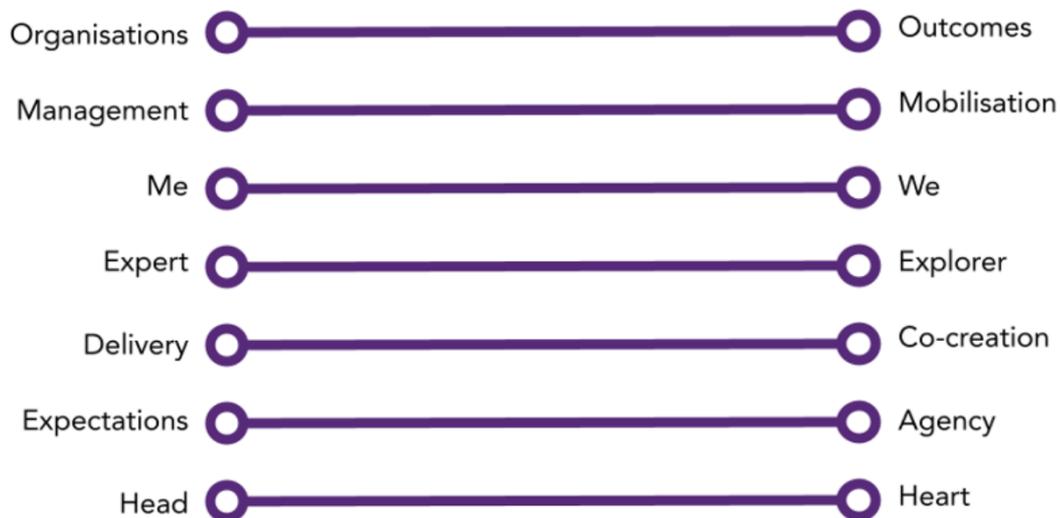
Strengthening communities’ ability to hold government and other decision makers to account for their policies and promises by evidencing impact and working collectively to influencing for change. We need to strengthen the conversation between those in power and those affected by their decisions and actions. Leaders need better connections across projects and the ability to build shared narratives and evidence for common issues.

*“A bigger sense of a we”*

### *From me to we*

Elle Dodd shared the thinking in her recent blog From Me to We<sup>6</sup> which talks about the role of a leader as a systems activist, someone seeking to change the system rather than manage it. She argues that there are seven shifts in the way leaders act as activists. The first three are about a shift in perspective, the next three are about the skills and behaviours needed and the final shift is about mindset and emotional connection.

## The 7 shifts



<sup>5</sup> Adam Kahane – Facilitating Breakthrough. How to remove obstacles, bridge differences, and move forward together. August 2021, Penguin Random House

<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/678199/facilitating-breakthrough-by-adam-kahane/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://collaboratecic.com/from-me-to-we-lessons-on-leading-as-a-systems-activist-389eb31c27b3>

## Other resources

Video from panel discussion on disruptive-emergent leadership

<https://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/library/transforming-leadership-in-an-age-of-disruption?>

Not letting a good crisis go to waste

[https://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/hubfs/Resources/Article/Article%20-%20On%20Not%20Letting%20\(Another\)%20Crisis%20Go%20To%20Waste%20-%20Tim%20Brodhead.pdf](https://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/hubfs/Resources/Article/Article%20-%20On%20Not%20Letting%20(Another)%20Crisis%20Go%20To%20Waste%20-%20Tim%20Brodhead.pdf)

Future of Good referenced by Liz Weaver <https://futureofgood.co/>

Links shared by funders

<https://londonfunders.org.uk/latest/news/collaborative-action-recovery-moving-discussion-delivery>

<https://www.footwork.org.uk/people-and-place-fund>