

Governance

Governing a Collaborative Organization

Collaborative organizations require collaborative leadership, but are boards getting in their own way?

By [Anne Wallestad](#) | May 31, 2017

It's easy to say that organizations should be collaborative, but what does that actually mean? And what does it take from executives and board members to actually make it happen?

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(https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_networked_nonprofit) and *The Most Impactful Leaders You've Never Heard Of*

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, calls on the social

sector to embody a new and pioneering collaborative spirit based in trust so that it can reach broader audiences, share the risk involved in experimentation, and accomplish more than any single organization could do alone.

(https://ssir.org/network_entrepreneurs/entry/the_most_impactful_leaders_youve_never_heard_of), Jane Wei-Skillern and her colleagues present a persuasive case for a form of collaborative leadership that becomes possible only when we let go of the desire—or need—to do everything on our own, and invest in new

opportunities to lead in collaboration with others. They describe four leadership characteristics: trust, not control; humility, not brand; node, not hub; and mission, not organization.

These concepts echo the idea of “network mind-set,” an orientation to collaboration that *Forces for Good* (<http://www.forcesforgood.net/>) authors Leslie Crutchfield and Heather McLeod Grant found in each of the 12 high-impact nonprofits they studied. Crutchfield and Grant note that most nonprofits have what they describe as an “organization orientation”—a focus on their own goals, institutional structure, and sustainability. In contrast, high-impact nonprofits “see beyond their immediate short-term interest and recognize that they can achieve far more if they collaborate rather than compete.” These collaborative groups, they wrote, “work with and through their nonprofit networks in order to have greater impact themselves.”

While both of these leadership frameworks are compelling, I’m struck by the fact that there’s very little discussion about what such approaches require from boards. Perhaps the assumption is that they don’t require anything different. But if we’re arguing for a different type of organizational orientation and a different type of leader, there’s no question in my mind that we need to argue for a different kind of board.

That’s because—at least in some ways—this collaborative orientation flies in the face of many of the things boards consider important when it comes to organizational and executive leadership:

- **Boards are trained to be fiduciaries of their organizations.** At the most fundamental level, boards have a responsibility to protect the organization and its mission—a legal responsibility that predisposes them to the “organization orientation” I mentioned above. **BoardSource** (<https://boardsource.org/>) encourages boards to think beyond this fiduciary role, but for many—particularly those engaged in an ongoing fight for organizational survival—it’s quite difficult to do so. And for some, the idea of looking beyond organizational success to a broader sense of purpose is not just foreign; it may seem like a luxury or even a slap in the face for all of the effort and hard work they’ve put into building and sustaining the organization.
- **Boards often define accountability as measurement against pre-determined goals and metrics.** For organizations to achieve transformative collaboration as equals, they must take the time to establish mutually defined goals, plans, and partnership parameters before diving into their shared work. That makes it virtually impossible to predict exactly what the results of the collaboration will be on the front end. This is different from a top-down approach to working together, where one organization has identified specific goals and implementation plans, and is essentially “contracting” with another organization to deliver those results. A definition of accountability and success based on measuring results against pre-determined goals and assumptions encourages executives to focus on what can be predicted, controlled, and guaranteed, and thus stifles their organization’s ability to take the risks required to work collaboratively.

- **Boards are encouraged to be ambassadors and fundraisers for their organization.** This often translates into an expectation for brand- and profile-building. Given that charge, it may seem counterintuitive to a board to think and work in a way that focuses less on organizational—or even executive leader—prominence, and more on humility and shared results. A board focused on organizational and brand visibility will be frustrated—and frustrating—in the context of a networked or collaborative approach to impact.

For all these reasons, traditional approaches to board leadership and oversight are better suited to the “organization orientation,” and may make it challenging to shift into a more collaborative or networked mode. But if we believe that collaboration is important—whether or not we’re explicitly supporting the concept of networked leadership—we must articulate what strong board leadership looks like in a networked context. I offer the following suggestions as a starting point for dialogue:

- **Be clear about your purpose and goals, but flexible about strategies and tactics.** As proponents of **emergent strategy** (https://ssir.org/up_for_debate/article/strategic_philanthropy) have argued, effective strategy acknowledges and embraces change by focusing on the overall goals and priorities, and by allowing for flexibility in the specific strategies and tactics that will support them. This is critically important in a collaborative environment, where organizations need to be open-minded and creative about how to work with each other toward shared goals. To support this, boards must focus their strategic engagement on defining what’s most important for the organization to accomplish, and give staff the autonomy to make decisions about how to leverage a network of potential collaborators to achieve those goals.
- **Expand your definition of organizational accomplishments.** In a collaborative or networked environment, organizational success is defined by what each individual organization makes possible through the collective, versus what each accomplishes on its own. In this context, something an organization didn’t do on its own could be an accomplishment if it found a more efficient or more effective way to do it through or with a collaborative partner. Boards need to expand their view of their organization’s impact and success to include all the things it made possible, rather than just the things it accomplished itself.
- **Align executive expectations and evaluations with your collaborative goals.** As Wei-Skillern’s work outlines, organizations that succeed in collaboration do so because their executives are effective collaborators. These are executives who willingly share—or even avoid—the spotlight; who are willing to distribute or let go of power or control; and who are focused on what will create the best result for their organization’s mission and the community it serves, rather than the best result for themselves or their organization alone. This means that when evaluating chief executives, boards must be willing to challenge the traditional view of what strong executive leadership looks like. Things like influence, power, and gravitas will look very different in the collaborative leader, and that should be celebrated, rather than penalized.
- **Cultivate curiosity and openness to all forms of collaboration.** As organizations work in more networked ways, some will naturally identify opportunities for deeper, more structural partnerships and collaborations, such as joint ventures or even mergers—what we at BoardSource refer to as **strategic alliances and restructuring** (<http://www.thepowerofpossibility.org/resources/strategic-alliances-restructuring-mean/>) . Board members can help stimulate and support exploration of these types of long-term collaborations by openly

discussing whether they can create new opportunities to expand the organization's impact, and by celebrating a strategic alliance or restructuring as a win for their mission and purpose.

Boards can play a big role in cultivating—or stifling—an organization's collaborative potential, often completely unintentionally. If you're a board member wondering how your organization can become more successful in collaboration, consider starting with a conversation about what may need to change within the board itself.



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