

Collective leadership



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Contents

Introduction	4
Learning Outcomes	5
1 What is leadership?	6
2 Individual leadership versus collective leadership	8
2.1 Working collaboratively	8
2.2 An example of collective leadership	10
2.3 Case study 1	10
3 Leadership practices to promote collective leadership	12
3.1 The Collective Canyon	12
3.2 Collective leadership in practice	13
3.3 Collective leadership is not easy!	15
3.4 Case Study 2	16
Conclusion	18
Tell us what you think	19
References	19
Further reading	19
Acknowledgements	19

Introduction

Welcome to the free course, *Collective leadership*, which explores the traits and skills of an effective leader in an organisational setting.

There are many practices that could be considered and that you may be familiar with, however this course focuses on three leadership practices that have been referred to as the 'extraordinarization of the mundane' by the Swedish Academics Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003). At various points throughout the course, you will also have an opportunity to hear from the leaders of a variety of organisations.

This introductory course will help you to recognise these three practices, along with many others, and build on them through the lens of collective leadership.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [B208 Developing leadership](#).

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Learning Outcomes

By the end of this course, you should be able to:

- briefly describe leadership theory, considering the leader, the follower and the collective
- understand the metaphor of the 'Collective Canyon'
- understand the importance of a collective leadership approach.

1 What is leadership?

The subject of leadership is highly contested and has many different definitions: 'There are almost as many definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept', according to Bass (1990, p. 11).

This is particularly evident when you consider that, in 2020, a Google search suggested that there are over 47 *million* books and articles on leadership available worldwide. The American consultant Joe Iarocci (2015) estimated that there are on average four books a day being published with the words 'leader' or 'leadership' in the title.

First, you will hear from an influential leader in the Royal Air Force (RAF) – Air Commodore Paul Godfrey. During this short video, he shares his insights about what leadership means to him. Watch it and do the first activity below. You might find it useful to make notes.

Video content is not available in this format.

Video 1 Air Commodore Paul Godfrey: What is leadership?



Activity 1 What makes a good leader?

 Allow about 20 minutes

1. Spend 5 minutes listing the names of leaders who have influenced you. They might be famous, or someone you know personally – for example, a relative, a colleague, a former teacher, or even a friend.
2. Considering this list, spend about 10 minutes noting why you believe they are great leaders. What are their practices, qualities and skills that make them stand out?
3. For another few minutes, think about these qualities.

- What type of skills are they?
- Are they specific to the person you have thought of, or are they generic skills that can be learned?
- Is the person an individual leader making a difference? Or are they in an environment that brings other people together to create and achieve a shared goal?

Discussion

Leadership is subjective. If you showed this list to someone else who also knew these people, would they agree with you? While you are considering these skills and qualities, are they contextual? Maybe they are relational? How might they be interpreted by other people?

In the next activity you will review and consider theories around leadership.

Activity 2 Reading on current theories and research

 Allow about 60 minutes

Now read the following article and reconsider your reflections.

[Leadership: Current Theories, Research, and Future Directions](#)

The next section will build on what you have learned about the individual leader and compare it to leadership as a collective process.

2 Individual leadership versus collective leadership

This short animation will hopefully help you think more about what leadership really is: is it about the 'person' or is it about a collective 'process'? The animation starts by looking at the heroic leaders of the past, all seen as powerful individuals, before going onto consider the idea that to achieve effective results it is often about people working together – leadership as a 'process' of influencing, facilitating and negotiating.

Video content is not available in this format.



Over the past decade it has been recognised in leadership literature that leadership is not just about the 'person', but it involves far more; it is also about process. This rest of this section considers this concept of leadership also involving the follower.

2.1 Working collaboratively

You will now hear from a highly experienced leader who is a Chief Constable in the police force in England. His name is Chief Constable Giles York and he believes that, to ensure your organisation has an opportunity to work effectively, understanding and working collaboratively can help make a difference.

While you listen to Chief Constable York, think about yourself as a follower; without followers, there would not be leaders. Make some notes on the topics he discusses and then complete the activity that follows.

Video content is not available in this format.

Video 2 Chief Constable Giles York



Activity 3 What type of follower are you?

 Allow about 60 minutes

1. Having listened to the perspective of leader/follower relationships from Chief Constable York, now read [In Praise of Followers](#) by Lawrence Suda.
2. Spend about 10 minutes thinking about what type of follower you are.
3. Whether it is while you are studying, working or part of a club, how do you view yourself as a colleague or team player?
4. What skills, qualities and traits do you bring to the 'collective'?

Discussion

If you look back at the list of qualities that people expect from leaders, many of the skills, traits and competencies are the same qualities needed in effective followers. Both entities need to demonstrate initiative, independence, commitment to common goals, and courage. A follower can provide enthusiastic support of a leader, especially one where there is trust and respect. However, a follower should not fail to challenge a leader who is unethical or threatens the values or objectives of the organisation.

It could be argued that ineffective followers are as much to blame for poor performance or ethical and legal lapses within organisations as poor and unethical leaders are. Therefore, as a follower, individuals have a responsibility to speak up when leaders do things wrong.

2.2 An example of collective leadership

You will now consider collective leadership in more detail by watching the following video. Ellie Garraway is a Chief Operating Officer for a charity, working in the voluntary sector. She explains the importance of collective leadership from her personal experiences.

Video content is not available in this format.

Video 3 Ellie Garraway



2.3 Case study 1

To assist in understanding collective leadership in practice, the following case study is a real example of how an elected public official engaged with the electorate to help them realise they could work together to improve 'their' city.

Activity 4 The 'nerdy' professor

 Allow around 30 minutes

Read the case study at the link below. While you are reading it, there are two questions in the introduction for you to think about. But think especially about how the 'nerdy Professor' worked to connect with the different age groups, cultures and languages across the Canadian city of Calgary.

[Doing politics differently: How a 'nerdy Professor' engaged with the citizens of Calgary](#)

Discussion

Naheed Nenshi used social media to connect to a wider and younger audience but he recognised that it was not going to connect with everyone. However, to be

‘collective’, he realised the importance of being relational – meeting people face-to-face at coffee mornings. It was an opportunity to have a two-way conversation with Nenshi, in community settings where there were opportunities for open and honest conversations.

Rather than talking using political rhetoric and complicated jargon, Nenshi believed in sharing ‘big ideas’ for Calgary, listening to what the people of the city wanted.

For example, to connect with the people of NE Calgary, Nenshi’s team realised that they needed to work with community leaders and talk to people in a language and manner that they would understand and connect with. By translating leaflets and involving respected community leaders, an open and honest conversation was providing opportunities for change in Calgary.

Having considered the individual leader as ‘person’ and leadership as a process, you are now going to consider a few practices that might benefit from working more collectively to improve follower engagement. This will be done by considering the metaphor of the Collective Canyon.

3 Leadership practices to promote collective leadership

First, here is Air Commodore Paul Godfrey again talking about his experiences of collective leadership throughout his career.

Video content is not available in this format.

Video 4 Paul Godfrey: what is collective leadership?



You are now going to focus on the importance of leadership practices as part of collective leadership.

3.1 The Collective Canyon

The following animation introduces the metaphor of the Collective Canyon. This is the 'space between' leaders and followers where the relationships, communication, trust and any other social actions happen.

Video content is not available in this format.

The Collective Canyon



These practices are sometimes strong between certain individuals or teams or departments. Between others they are weak and therefore need extra attention and maintenance to strengthen them and ensure that collective leadership is effective.

The article below by Mats Alvesson and Stefan Sveningsson supports the argument that building these relationships brings various positive effects for both leaders and followers.

[Managers doing leadership: the extra-ordinarization of the mundane](#)

3.2 Collective leadership in practice

You will now hear about real examples from two leaders in the voluntary sector. One is Ellie Garraway again, and the other is Clare Walton, who is a Chief Executive Officer of a charity. They both talk about collective leadership and the more 'mundane' leadership practices that they, and other people around them, use. These practices ensure that relationships are strong, and that individuals in the organisations – leaders and followers – are fully engaged to make a difference.

Activity 5 Collective leadership and the mundane

 Allow around 15 minutes

Video content is not available in this format.

Video 5 Ellie Garraway



Video content is not available in this format.

Video 6 Ellie Garraway



Clare Walton talks about some of the practices employed at her charity which help forge strong working relationships.

Video content is not available in this format.

Video 7 Clare Walton



Discussion

Now you have heard the different 'mundane' practices from Ellie and Clare, do you recognise these practices in your place of work? As potential leaders, do you recognise these practices in yourself? What is your view with regards to the limitations of these shared collective leadership practices?

3.3 Collective leadership is not easy!

Now watch the second part of the animation on the Collective Canyon. It demonstrates that just because you have put in the effort at the start, or rebuilt a bridge, it does not mean that your job as a leader is done. Maintaining these 'bridges', to keep the 'space between' as an effective collective space, takes continual effort by both the leaders and the followers.

Video content is not available in this format.



Animation 3 – Collective leadership is not easy !

The next case study is going to bring these practices, and others, together. It is a real example of working collectively in a hospital in the USA.

3.4 Case Study 2



Figure 1

Read the case study in the activity below about how the Positive Deviance Approach improved working relationships to reduce MRSA infection in an American hospital.

Activity 6 Positive Deviance Approach

 Allow around 20 minutes

When reading the article from [Singhal, Buscell and McCandless](#), think in particular about the following questions:

- How did Positive Deviance bring people together?
- What role did the Chief Executive play?

Discussion

Positive Deviance was a way to get everyone in the hospital to talk and share ideas. It was people from all levels of the organisation, not just the leaders, working together towards a common goal and to make a difference to the issue of MRSA infection. It helped to break down hierarchical, cultural and social barriers, giving individuals permission to speak up when it was necessary without fear of being ignored or shouted down for speaking out of turn. The improvisations – or improv as they were called by the hospital staff – allowed individuals to learn from each other in a simulated environment and, therefore, to speak more openly and challenge honestly.

Involving the Chief Executive as the overall 'leader' of the hospital ensured that there was buy-in from the top. With the Chief Executive being present and supportive, there was an element of permission giving to everyone else in the organisation to own the problem, change their behaviours, break down barriers, and gradually change the organisational culture (even if this was done subliminally).

Conclusion

You have now reached the end of this free course on collective leadership. This is only a taster about what is meant by leadership and working collaboratively within an organisational setting.

The course touched on the Collective Canyon to help you think about leadership practices. You also heard from leaders from a variety of backgrounds who have shared their experiences and insights.

To finish, there is one more insight to share with you. In the final video, Air Commodore Paul Godfrey reflects on who has inspired him to be the leader that he is today. It is an important part of working in a collective. Remember that, as a leader or a follower, you are being watched by many others. These could be new people to the organisation, contractors, customers, less senior personnel, and so on. What you do, how you think, and how you react is all part of casting your own shadow – this shadow influences the people around you.

Video content is not available in this format.

Video 8 Paul Godfrey: Inspirational leadership



This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [B208 Developing leadership](#).

Tell us what you think

Now you've come to the end of the course, we would appreciate a few minutes of your time to complete this short [end-of-course survey](#). We'd like to find out a bit about your experience of studying the course and what you plan to do next. We will use this information to provide better online experiences for all our learners and to share our findings with others. Participation will be completely confidential and we will not pass on your details to others.

References

- Alvesson, M. and Sveningsson, A. (2003) 'Managers doing leadership: the extra-ordinarization of the mundane', *Human Relations*, 56(12), pp. 1435–59 .
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Further reading

[Avolio, B. J., Walumbwa, F. O. and Weber, T. J. \(2009\) 'Leadership: Current theories, research and future directions', *Annual Review of Psychology*, 60, pp.421–49.](#)

Acknowledgements

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Activity 3: Source, Suda, L. (2014) 'In praise of followers', PM World Journal, 3(2), pp 1–11.

Activity 4: Source, Dr Clare Holt (2013) Doing politics differently: How a 'nerdy Professor' engaged with the citizens of Calgary. Courtesy: Dr Clare Holt.

Section 3.1: Source, Alvesson, M., & Sveningsson, S. (2003). Managers Doing Leadership: The Extra-Ordinarization of the Mundane. Human Relations, 56(12), 1435–1459.

Activity 6: Source, Singhal, A., Buscell, P. and McCandless, K. (2009) Saving Lives by Changing Relationships, Positive Deviance for MRSA Control and Prevention in a U.S. Hospital, Number 3. With kind permission.

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