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Getting to "We": Collective Leadership Development

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We agree with Yammarino, Salas, Serban, Shirreffs, and Shuffler (2012) that embracing collectivistic leadership approaches requires broadening leadership development beyond an exclusive focus on individuals. Over the last decade the leadership development community at the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL)—of which we are members—has shifted its view of leadership. We now approach leadership as an accomplishment of collectives rather than as the actions of individuals identified as leaders. This shift has led us to reconceptualize and evolve our practice of leadership development. In this commentary, we will expand on the focal article by offering examples that illustrate collective leadership development in action.

A Collectivistic View of Leadership

If leadership is a social process, what exactly does that social process produce? Our colleagues have argued that the outcomes of leadership are direction, alignment, and commitment within the collective (DAC; Drath et al., 2008). Direction is indicated by agreement on what the collective is trying to achieve. Alignment exists when activities are coordinated and integrated in service of the shared direction. Commitment is evident when individuals make the success of the collective a priority. Individual leaders' beliefs, competencies, and behaviors are but one part of this broader social process that produces DAC.

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A focus on *collective outcomes* moves the goal of development beyond *only* individual leaders' competencies to the expansion of a collective's (e.g., team, organization, community, and nation) ability to produce DAC. The emphasis of development must now include *collective beliefs and practices for producing DAC*, the management of *identity-based boundaries* within the organization, and the *social network* connecting individuals. Further, this development process requires the adoption of a systems-based perspective to determine why a collective is succeeding or failing to produce DAC given the collective's environment and strategic objectives. This commentary expands the focal article by offering examples that illustrate collective leadership development in practice.

Leadership Culture: Developing Collective Beliefs and Practices for Producing DAC

Leadership culture is the collective's shared beliefs and practices for understanding and producing DAC (Drath et al., 2008; McGuire & Rhodes, 2009). Like broader culture, it is deeply embedded and difficult to change. Yet it is a change in the leadership culture that is often needed for organizations to continue producing DAC in an increasingly unstable, uncertain, and complex world. To help collectives improve their leadership, we needed to make culture change part of our leadership development practice.

The leadership culture transformation at KONE Americas illustrates this shift in practice. KONE, a long-time leader in the elevator-escalator and ''people flow'' industry, had grown comfortable in its historical success and was under-performing in a competitive market. It was clear to the new CEO and his core team that deep organizational change was needed. Through facilitated reflection and dialogue, they realized that a successful deep change would require their leadership culture to be aligned with, and a driver of, their new business strategy, which focused on customer-driven processes.

When changing the leadership culture in an organization, we have found that a core group of senior executives must first begin exploring and transforming their own beliefs and practices for creating DAC (McGuire & Rhodes, 2009). At KONE, our colleagues supported this process by coaching the executive team over a period of several years. This engagement was designed to create readiness, and then capability, for a broader transformation of the entire leadership culture. According to the CEO Vance Tang, ''We had to appreciate that we had to change ourselves first in order to change the culture. We had to experience change together, with our team. We changed how we work together. We spent time on feedback, trust, and dialogue. Now we can challenge each other. Now we have better outcomes because we can all be on the same page and work much faster.''

One of the key challenges in targeting the leadership culture for development is in getting people to ''see'' it and grasp it in various ways. Developing the leadership culture of a collective requires a discovery process of naming, exploring, assessing, and mutually reflecting on the various leadership cultures in the organization. We have found a framework that describes three basic stages of leadership culture to be useful in this work (Drath, Palus, & McGuire, 2010; Palus, McGuire, & Ernst, 2011). In the first, *dependent* culture, the responsibility of leadership belongs to those in formal positions of authority. In the second, *independent* culture, leadership is based on the expertise and formal position of individuals, personal influence, and the drive for individual achievement. In the third, *interdependent* culture, leadership is a collaborative activity of mutual inquiry and learning that can include the earlier stages as required to respond to emerging challenges.

Using a simple wall chart, each KONE executive team member made one mark indicating where he or she believed the stage of leadership culture was at present,

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and another mark for where the culture needed to be in the *future* to enact the business strategy. This provocative gap became the subject for sensemaking in an ongoing learning dialogue. Later, regional and senior managers completed a leadership culture survey, and the results helped the executive team check their initial assessment and extend the dialogue about the present and future desired leadership culture to a wider circle of leaders across all the regions. The executive team's message that ''in order to reach our business goals of industry leadership, we are moving to a more interdependent leadership culture'' gradually became believable and compelling to the wider organization, creating readiness for further collective leadership development. The later aspects of this development process took many forms, including team transformation work, large-group interventions, and an employee engagement tour, in which every employee at the branch level, including technicians, participated in creating DAC with senior leaders (see McGuire & Palus, in press).

Boundary Spanning Leadership: Managing Identity-based Intergroup Divides

As with KONE, more interdependent, collaborative leadership cultures are required by organizations that seek to break down functional silos, integrate global offerings, and work closely with multiple stakeholders. These collaborations require groups with distinct identities to span boundaries and create DAC across groups. Although this may sound straightforward, it is often fraught with difficulties. When groups with significantly different values and priorities interact they often become more polarized and experience greater conflict (Chrobot-Mason, Ruderman, Weber, & Ernst, 2009). This polarization likely occurs because the security of the groups' identities is threatened during the process of collaboration (Fiol, Pratt, & O'Connor, 2009). Collective leadership development must balance the need for both intergroup differentiation and unity (Ernst & Chrobot-Mason, 2010; Fiol et al., 2009) by upholding subgroup differences in values, priorities, and skills while also promoting a common mission (Hogg, Van Knippenberg, & Rast, 2012).

Facilitating the production of DAC across boundaries is another practice that we have sought to add to our leadership development capabilities. For example, fifteen months prior to the departure of the United States military from Iraq, the Commanding General of U.S. Forces-Iraq and the Ambassador to Iraq partnered with CCL to work more effectively across the boundary between the Department of State and the Department of Defense. This boundary spanning leadership (BSL) initiative helped establish more interdependent leadership beliefs and practices for addressing the challenges of security and nation building in Iraq (Hughes, Palus, Ernst, Houston, & McGuire, 2011). The commanding general and ambassador understood the importance of collaboration for the transition of military operations to a sustainable diplomatic presence. They also recognized the distinct culture and priorities of their organizations and the potential these differences had to derail their collaborative effort.

In a day-long workshop, leaders from both departments joined together to apply the three strategies of the BSL model (Ernst & Chrobot-Mason, 2010) to their current leadership challenge—withdrawing troops, transferring responsibilities and equipment to the State Department, and negotiating with the Iraqi leadership about its future (Chrobot-Mason, Ernst, & Ferguson, 2012). The workshop began with both groups working separately with facilitators to *manage boundaries*, the first step in the BSL model. This step is designed to clarify and define differences that designate an intergroup boundary. Each group established their department's unique strengths and weaknesses and the outcomes they hoped to accomplish through a successful transition. Through this process subgroups experienced a sense of safety because the distinctiveness of their subgroup identity was emphasized.

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During the second part of the workshop, leaders from Defense and State were brought together again. They shared with the other group, their own strengths and weaknesses and their vision for a successful transition. This step in the process fosters intergroup respect as it creates a space to discuss divergent perspectives, engage in conflict resolution, and share the unique challenges, skills, and knowledge of each group as well as the capabilities each lacks to resolve the challenges. This step creates a path and desire to span boundaries and advance collaboration. What the Departments of Defense and State uncovered was both surprising and inspiring—their strengths and weaknesses were basically mirror images of each other. Instead of focusing on differences, they were able to see that the strength of one could offset the weakness of the other. At this point, leaders were encouraged to employ the second strategy of the BSL model—*forging common ground*. The goal became exploring their shared vision and their respective roles and responsibilities to learn how they might best collaborate. As the day progressed, leaders began to employ the final phase of the BSL model—*discovering new frontiers*—to craft a strategy for working more interdependently. Together they formed a shared vision, made personal commitments to creating unity of effort through collaboration, identified metrics to measure success, and developed plans to handle potential issues that might arise.

Follow-up interviews with the commanding general and ambassador (Chrobot-Mason et al., 2012) revealed how the work accomplished during this day-long retreat set the stage for a year-long commitment to interdependent leadership. The BSL model became a guiding framework for their future interactions. Diplomats and soldiers learned how to manage organizational boundaries and work more collaboratively. They recognized that their mission could only be accomplished through an interdependent leadership approach and the groups' identity shifted from one of ''us versus them'' to ''we.''

Expanding Our Capabilities to Facilitate Collective Leadership Development

Facilitating collective leadership development involves more than simply adopting best practices for developing individuals. Individual leader development is a necessary but insufficient part of collective leadership development. Further, as suggested in the focal article, this process requires new perspectives, methods, and interventions. Meeting this need requires expanding our capabilities as leadership development professionals, including adopting perspectives that traditionally resided outside of individual leader development (e.g., coaching teams from a systems perspective, drawing on knowledge regarding intergroup conflict).

We have also adopted a long-term perspective. Collective leadership development is an ongoing strategic effort that goes well beyond event-based training. This often means developing long-term relationships with groups and organizations to help them create the time and space to engage in developmental work before reaching their ultimate goal of more interdependent forms of leadership. In the first example, this occurred by helping the executive team fully explore and understand their assumptions, beliefs, and practices before taking actions to change the broader leadership culture. Similarly, we encourage clients engaging in BSL development to slow down by explaining that the natural tendency to focus first on creating a common mission and vision can actually lead to divisiveness and intergroup tension if differences are overlooked and devalued.

It is clear that the practice of collective leadership development is complex and challenging. There are many opportunities and needs for research and new development tools and techniques. For example, we are beginning to utilize network analysis to visualize identity-based boundaries within the organization, help collectives strategically span those divides, and track changes in cross-boundary activity. We

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are also developing new tools to measure and visualize leadership cultures and subcultures within collectives. We hope that by sharing our experiences we may spark additional research on collective leadership development and aid practitioners and organizations in transformations to ''we.''

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