



Building bridges from the margins: The work of leadership in social change organizations

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ABSTRACT

Attention to the relational dimensions of leadership represents a new frontier of leadership research and is an expression of the growing scholarly interest in the conditions that foster collective action within and across boundaries. This article explores the antecedents of collaboration from the perspective of social change organizations engaged in processes of collaborative governance. Using a constructionist lens, the study illuminates the question *how do social change leaders secure the connectedness needed for collaborative work to advance their organization's mission?* The article draws on data from a national, multi-year, multi-modal qualitative study of social change organizations and their leaders. These organizations represent disenfranchised communities which aspire to influence policy makers and other social actors to change the conditions that affect their members' lives. Narrative analysis of transcripts from in-depth interviews in 38 organizations yielded five leadership practices that foster strong relational bonds either within organizations or across boundaries with others. The article describes how these practices nurture interdependence either by forging new connections, strengthening existing ones, or capitalizing on strong ones.

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In a shared-power world, each of the individuals, groups and organizations affected by complex, intractable public problems have only partial authority to act on them and lack the power to resolve them alone (Crosby & Bryson, 2005, p. 22; O'Leary, Gerard & Bingham, 2006). Collective action is, therefore, essential, but it cannot happen without first connecting across differences.

Bridging differences within a complex web of interconnected yet separate actors is not easy. Achieving a common purpose may require resolving significant conflict (O'Leary & Bingham, 2007). Yet the potential for connectedness is always present in human beings. When fostered, it can promote reciprocal relations and commitments in groups and organizations that, in turn, generate the collaboration required to achieve collective goals.

Leadership scholars argue that a functional requirement of organizing in contemporary society is fostering and strengthening relational bonds among stakeholders with differing perspectives (Fletcher & Käufer, 2003), that is “the ability to work from a multi-group perspective—one that not only fully understands each group's needs, but also successfully bridges these needs and moves toward the goal of producing a greater good for everyone” (APALC, 2003, p. 6). Scholars argue that this “boundary-spanning collaboration” requires a particular type of leadership (Gasson & Elrod, 2006). Crosby and Kiedrowski (2008) call it “integrative leadership,” which they define as “fostering collective action across boundaries to advance the common good” (p. 1).

Scholarly interest in the conditions that foster connectedness both across and within boundaries has grown considerably over time (Fletcher & Käufer, 2003; Jackson & Parry, 2008). Some refer to this as the relational dimension of leadership; Uhl-Bien has articulated the various streams into a coherent approach that she calls “relational leadership theory” (2006).

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In the public management field, conflict resolution researchers also inquire into the conditions for collaboration (Bingham, O'Leary & Carlson, 2008). They join the broadening interest in the dynamics of “collaborative public management” (Agranoff & McGuire, 2003; Milward & Provan, 2006; O'Leary & Bingham, 2007) and “collaborative governance” (Ansell & Gash, 2008), associated with increased cross-agency coordination and the growth of cross-sector policy networks to address public problems. Their research on antecedents, processes and outcomes of collaboration provides insights about the requirements for connectedness. However, this work has yet to converge with leadership scholarship, despite its conclusion that “good leadership demands collaboration” (Bingham, O'Leary & Carlson, 2008, p. 5). Our work fosters this convergence, while focusing on the civil society side of the governance equation.

We draw on data from a national, multi-year, multi-modal qualitative study of social change organizations and their leaders, which explored the ways in which communities trying to make social change engage in the work of leadership (Schall et al., 2004; Ospina & Dodge, 2005).¹ These organizations represent disenfranchised communities with few material resources at their disposal. Yet they aspire to influence policy makers and others in order to change the conditions that affect their lives. They are thus part of the collaborative governance arrangements needed to “make or implement public policy or manage public programs or assets” (Ansell & Gash, 2008, p. 547). Their success depends largely on their capacity to develop partnerships that cut across the traditional boundaries dividing social groups, including race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, and class, as well as geography, sector and specialized interests.

Our research question is “How do social change leaders secure the connectedness needed for collaborative work that advances their organization's mission?” In this article, we identify and analyze five leadership practices that foster strong relational bonds either within organizations or across them. We explore how these practices nurture interdependence within and among organizations by forging new connections, strengthening existing ones, or capitalizing on strong ones. The answer to our question thus illuminates the antecedents of collaboration from the perspective of social change organizations engaged in processes of collaborative governance.²

The paper starts with a discussion of the benefits of a relational leadership lens, and the use of practice theory as a theoretical anchor for implementing this type of research. It then describes the methodological implications of choosing this perspective, documenting the methods used during our study. The findings are structured around the presentation of five leadership practices and two cross-cutting themes. A discussion section analyzes how the findings advance the convergence of the leadership field's interest in relational leadership with the public management field's interest in collaborative governance. The conclusion discusses contributions and limitations.

1. Advancing a relational leadership perspective to explore connectedness

Reviews of the current discussion in leadership research (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Jackson & Parry, 2008) suggest that leader-centered and follower-centered models of leadership have given way to perspectives that attend, instead, to the “space between” leaders and followers (Bradbury & Lichtenstein, 2000), thus highlighting the relational processes of leadership. Relationality refers to the theoretical understanding that self and other are inseparable and co-evolve in ways that must be accounted for. An agenda that explores the question of how connectedness is developed to ensure collaborative work in social change organizations greatly benefits from this perspective.

1.1. Relational leadership theories and the need for connectedness

Two distinct ways of approaching the role of relationships offer different understandings of the appropriate focus of attention in researching leadership. The first, which Uhl-Bien (2006) calls “the *entity* approach to leadership,” examines relationship-oriented behavioral styles such as consideration, and relationship-oriented leadership behaviors based on high quality, trusting, work relationships. Examples of relationship-based approaches to leadership are Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) Theory (e.g., Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), charismatic theories of leadership (e.g., Kark & Shamir, 2002) and social identity leadership theory (e.g., Hogg, 2001).³ These approaches tend to assume that a form of leadership-strengthening relational bond among stakeholders is increasingly necessary and apparent, given the functional demands of contemporary organizing; in other words, they see relational leadership as a *trend* (e.g., Pearce & Conger, 2003; Fletcher & Käufer, 2003; Crosby & Bryson, 2005).

In contrast, the second approach in Uhl-Bien's frame, “the *constructionist* approach,” views leadership as the outcome of human social constructions emerging from the rich connections and interdependencies of organizations and their members. In this view,

¹ Our experience in the Research and Documentation component of the Leadership for a Changing World (LCW) program informs the ideas we have developed in this article. We would like to acknowledge the many contributions of co-researchers and partners, who, over the course of the years, have been active participants in shaping our learning. We also thank the Ford Foundation for its generous support of the LCW research.

² Ansell and Gash (2008) narrow their definition of “collaborative governance” to include only those collaborative efforts initiated by the government. In this paper we study the leadership dynamics of collaboration in the context of civil society organizations engaged in social change, which might require engaging government in collaboration. Independent of where the effort originally initiated, collaboration between these social change organizations and government agencies must be considered part of the collaborative governance arrangements in a given polity.

³ LMX theory for example defines leadership as effective relationships (partnerships) between leaders and followers that result in incremental influence and mutual gains. Charismatic scholars also define charisma as a social relationship, inquiring into the qualities of followers that lead them to identify leaders as charismatic and the relationships that foster the perception of the leader as charismatic. Social identity theory highlights the reciprocal nature of leadership, viewed as a “relational property” of a group: “leaders exist because of followers and followers exist because of leaders” (Hogg, 2001, p. 185).

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