Enacting Leadership for Collaborative Advantage: Dilemmas of Ideology and Pragmatism in the Activities of Partnership Managers

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Working across organizations has long been recognized as a characteristic of public management, but recent years have seen a worldwide intensification in partnership working. Rhetoric about the benefits is endemic but so are complaints about the difficulty of partnership working in practice. Understanding the way that collaborative approaches may provide value is therefore an essential element of understanding the changing roles of public-sector organizations. The particular aim of this paper is to contribute to a growing understanding of the way in which individuals enact leadership roles in such situations. The focus is on partnership managers, whose main role is to organize the activities of a collaboration. The way in which partnership managers enact leadership is explored and insight into the kinds of activities that typically occupy them, the types of challenges and dilemmas that they face and typical ways in which they respond to these is provided. We suggest that the main categories of activities split into two opposing perspectives on leadership. We propose an overarching concept which suggests that collaborative leadership involves the management of a tension between ideology and pragmatism.

Introduction

Working across organizations has long been recognized as a characteristic of public management (Friend, Power and Yewlett, 1974; Metcalfe, 1993) but recent years have seen a worldwide intensification in partnership working (see, for example, Brinkerhoff, 1999; Jennings and Ewalt, 1998; Lowndes, 1997; Mandell, 2001). Government incentives and directives for collaborative initiatives are increasingly abundant (Ball, 1999; Jacobs, 1997) and many require the participation of ‘the community’ (King, Felty and Susel, 1998; Sarkissan, Cook and Walsh, 1997; Steele and Seargeant, 1999). A key policy driver for collaboration appears to be a perceived need for service provision to be co-ordinated, sometimes deriving from a focus on efficiency and sometimes from a concern to improve the ‘seamlessness’ of the service to the citizen. Other reasons for collaborating are similar to those expressed for commercial-sector strategic alliances and joint

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ventures (e.g. Child and Faulkener, 1998) and include the combining of different resources or expertise, the sharing of learning or good practice and, for expensive projects, the sharing of costs or risks. Rhetoric about the benefits of partnership working is endemic but so are complaints about the difficulty of partnership working in practice (Judge and Ryman, 2001; O’Toole, 1997). As with commercial alliances, reports of unmitigated success are not common (Kale, Dyer and Singh, 2001; Shenkar and Yan, 2002).

Understanding how collaborative approaches may provide value is therefore an essential element of understanding the changing roles of public-sector organizations. At face value, at any rate, it seems reasonable to presume that understanding how leadership could or should be enacted in collaborations in order to address the difficulties and hence reap the theoretical benefits, ought to be critical to this. This paper therefore aims to contribute to the theory and practice of collaboration through the development of a conceptualization of leadership activities undertaken by participants in collaborations. The particular focus is on leadership enacted by partnership managers, those individuals whose main role is to organize the activities of a collaborative venture.

**Conceptual background: collaboration theory and leadership**

The theoretical conceptualization to be described in this paper is rooted in, and contributes to collaboration theory (Huxham, 1996a; Vangen, 2003). This is concerned with conceptualizing, issues concerned with the management of collaborative ventures in a form that is accessible to practitioners who need to take action in collaborative situations. Two counter-posed concepts that relate to the benefits of, and difficulties with collaborative working are key to the theory. Collaborative advantage relates to the desired synergistic outcome of collaborative activity suggesting that advantage is gained though collaboration when something is achieved that could not have been achieved by any organization acting alone. Collaborative inertia relates to the often-pertaining actual outcome, in which the collaboration makes only hard fought or negligible progress. In seeking to understand the reasons for collaborative inertia, the theory aims to provide insight about the complexities that have to be managed by those aiming for collaborative advantage in practice. It includes theoretical perspectives on issues such as collaborative aims, trust and power relationships, collaborative structures, leadership, autonomy and accountability and so on (Eden and Huxham, 2001; Huxham and Vangen, 2000a, 2000b and 2000c; Vangen, 2003; Vangen and Huxham, 2003).

The research described here, builds on a previously published contribution to collaboration theory in which a theoretical conceptualization of leadership issues relating specifically to collaborative situations was developed (Huxham and Vangen, 2000b). Since hierarchical relationships generally do not feature in collaborative settings (Thompson et al., 1991), this is not centred around the formal senior business or public figures that are the subject of much leadership research (Bass, 1990). Instead, it focuses on conceptualizing the mechanisms that lead collaborative activity and outcomes in one direction rather than another – and towards collaborative advantage or collaborative inertia. Following this line, the theory conceptualizes leadership as the mechanisms that make things happen in a collaboration. Clearly this may include both visionary and more mechanistic aspects so the theory therefore does not recognize as relevant the classic distinction between leaders and managers (Bryman, 1996). Indeed, this line of argument steers the theory in a sharp departure from classical notions of leadership. It argues that a collaboration’s structure and communication processes are leadership media that are as instrumental in leading to a collaboration’s outcomes as is the behaviour of the participants associated with it.

The theory considers the three leadership media – structures, processes and participants – holistically, arguing that all three are important to an overall understanding of leadership in collaboration. In this article, however, our aim is specifically to develop further the understanding of leadership as it is enacted by participants, so the third media is centre stage but is considered within the context of the leadership influences of collaborative structures and processes. The earlier paper concluded that individuals who aim to enact leadership are frequently thwarted by dilemmas and difficulties so that outcomes are not as they intend. Here, therefore, we aim to
uncover the challenges they face by focusing on the activities that they engage in.

In collaborative settings enacting leadership can mean influencing whole organizations rather than just individuals (Stewart, 1999) and there is frequently ambiguity about who the partners are (Huxham and Vangen, 2000a). There is also inherent difficulty in specifying collaborative goals (Eden and Huxham, 2001). This means that it is far from straightforward to translate mainstream theories of leadership, including traits, style, contingency, leader-member exchange and transformational approaches, (see, for example, Bryman, 1996; Denis, Lamotho and Langley, 2001; Fiedler, 1996, Sparrow and Liden, 1997; Yammarino, Dansereau and Kennedy, 2001), which presume both a formal leader-follower relationship and some specified goals that the leader sets out to achieve, into the collaborative setting.

Given the lack of traditional hierarchy the appropriate focus seems to be on informal or emergent leaders (Feyerherm, 1994; Hosking, 1988; Kent and Moss, 1994; Purdue and Razzaque, 1999), decentralising of leadership (Martin, 1992) and shared leadership (Bryson and Crosby, 1992; Judge and Ryman, 2001). Not surprisingly, researchers on leadership in collaboration have tended to emphasize relational leadership (Murrell, 1997) and processes for inspiring, nurturing, supporting and communicating (Bryson and Crosby, 1992; Chrislip and Larson, 1994; Feyerherm, 1994; Purdue and Razzaque, 1999). As will be seen, our data led us to concentrate on the leadership role played by partnership managers since they appear to have a significant role in leading the activities of collaborations. Interestingly, while their significance does stem from their formal position at the centre of a collaboration, they are usually appointed to organize the collaborative activities and are a resource for a collaboration rather than a member of it. Strictly, therefore, they report to (rather than direct) the members, so cannot lead through the exertion of formal positional power (French and Raven, 1959) even though they sometimes have job titles such as Chief Executive or Director of the XXX Alliance.

**Research approach**

The research output described in the next section derives from a rigorous process of action research of the type specified by Eden and Huxham (1996), using an analysis method similar to that specified in Huxham and Vangen (2000b) and Huxham (2002). The approach is intended to lead to the development of practice-oriented theory and is consistent with the spirit of recent calls for management research to contribute simultaneously to practice and theory (Hodgkinson, 2001; Tranfield and Starkey, 1998).

The data, which informs the theory developed, was gathered during interventions by one or both of us in a large number of collaborations where we have typically acted as facilitators, consultants or sounding boards. Locating the theory generation in multiple settings is an explicit aspect of the approach that both broadens the possibilities for data collection and helps in drawing out the generic significance of the output (Huxham, 2002). In this case, the data came from work with 13 public and community sector collaborations, including urban and rural regeneration initiatives, a social inclusion network, health promotion partnerships, poverty alleviation and family support alliances, a collaboration of universities, local health care co-operatives, a special education partnership, a learning disability initiative and a public leadership programme. Almost all of these operate or operated in Scotland but while some have a national focus, others have a regional, city or local focus. The types of partners differed in each case, but included the government, major public agencies concerned with health, housing, local government and economic development, local branches of major charities, local voluntary organizations, community representatives, universities and GP small businesses. Our interventions – and hence our opportunities for data collection – varied from long term, lasting for more than six years, to very short term, single event involvements. Most of the collaborations were in some way interlinked with others, so even short-term interventions could generate significant data not only about the current collaboration but also about others already worked with. Our roles included providing support for core staff, designing and facilitating workshops, and contributing seminar presentations, exercises and discussions.

With one exception (in which interview data was collected for another research project) the data collected was ‘naturally occurring’ in the ethnographic sense, in that it was not generated in response to questionnaires or interviews.
(Marshall and Rossman, 1989). It included expressed experiences and views, dilemmas and actual actions of participants documented sometimes as part of the intervention (e.g. flip charts) but mostly as notes made during and after phone calls, meetings, workshops or seminars. Choice of what data should be collected was guided by our broad understanding of collaboration theory, though in the short-term involvements, which were all recent, we were specifically looking out for data that might have particular relevance to leadership activities.

Data analysis was carried out in several stages, each of which involved us in extensive discussions concerned with sense making, data massaging and finding representations and links.

Stage One: data review. We independently reviewed our own data sets, identifying activities that, arguably, may have influenced the way in which the collaborative agenda was formed or enacted, difficulties struggled with and any issues that appeared to need leadership attention for progress to be made.

Stage Two: data inclusion and cluster formation. This involved lengthy negotiations between us to clarify the meaning and relevance (or not) for inclusion of each data item, and how it might be linked to others. This resulted in several hundred linked data items and the interpretations of their relevance, which were stored electronically using the software, Decision Explorer (Eden and Ackermann, 1998). Following several iterations of analysis, eight clusters of related issues emerged. For illustrative purposes, Figure 1 shows examples of data items (in ordinary font) and associated interpretations (in italic font) within one of these clusters (labelled 'facilitating access to the agenda'). There are numerous other data items linking into the data items shown here which influenced the emergence of the key concepts (interpretations in italic font).

Stage Three: cluster review and framework formation. We reviewed the clusters and the links between them in order to form the conceptual framework. One cluster, which had been labelled 'types of leaders', highlighted the central
leadership role taken by many partnership managers and so led to the particular focus of this article. Though the data pointed to this focus, it additionally seemed worthy of attention both because partnership managers frequently comment on the difficulties associated with their job and because they are a major resource of (and hence cost to) a collaboration so a better understanding of the role that they do, or could play should be valuable.

Another cluster, ‘tools to lead with’, was rich in detail and felt to be important but different in nature from the others. It was decided that it would be appropriate to subject this area to further research at a later date rather than to include it here. The other six clusters, ‘facilitating access to the agenda’, ‘enabling the collaborative agenda to move forward’, ‘mobilizing member organizations’, ‘communication’, ‘networking’ and ‘manipulation’ form the basis of the conceptual framework.

Stage Four: moulding the theory. The final step involved the drafting, redrafting and circulating for comment of the main body of this article, presenting the arguments at academic conferences and using them with practitioners in further action research interventions. This resulted in the ‘communication’ cluster being treated as central to other clusters rather than as a theoretical element in its own right. The other clusters were eventually slightly reformulated into the six sub-elements of the theory to be presented here. During this process two opposing perspectives upon the leadership activities identified emerged. Examination of the tension between the two perspectives led to the eventual identification of an overarching concept about leadership enactment.

The next two sections provide an overview of the two perspectives through some snapshots of activities that engage attention. These clearly do not portray the full story; they are intended to be indicative. The paper concludes with a discussion of the overarching concept.

Perspective 1: Leadership activities from the spirit of collaboration . . .

Most partnership managers express or demonstrate concerns about building infrastructure and relationships to foster what they seem to regard as central tenets for the enactment of genuine collaborative activity. They often refer to, for example, the need to build trust, manage power relations, facilitate communication and handle the different, and often conflicting, interests of members and these concerns are reflected in research on collaboration. Collectively, these activities can be viewed as being concerned with supporting the members to work effectively with each other. The key sentiment is the focus on activities such as allowing all members to have a voice and seeking consensus with regard to shaping the collaborative agenda. From this perspective, the leadership role that they take is largely facilitative (Bryson and Crosby, 1992; Chrislip and Larson, 1994). Figure 2 aims to show how our data suggested a progression of four closely related leadership activities that contribute to this supportive role; embracing, empowering, involving and mobilizing. The dividing lines between these broad headings are not clearly defined and several different types of activity are captured under each of them. All involve grappling with a reality that challenges the ideology underlying the spirit of collaboration.

Embracing members

Writing on collaboration frequently emphasizes inclusion of those with a stake in the collaborative issue (for example, Chrislip and Larson, 1994; Gray, 1989; Lawrence, Phillips and Hardy, 1999; McCann, 1983; Roberts and Bradley, 1991). Embracing the ‘right’ kind of members may sound like an initial task for a new partnership, but often seems to occupy the attention of partnership managers on a continuing basis. Two inverse challenges can arise: they can find themselves devoting effort both to attracting the partners that are needed and to supporting those who want to be partners.

Efforts may be directed at facilitating the involvement of any individuals and organizations that are willing and able to move the collaborative agenda forward. Frequently, however, specific members or types of member are targeted. Those who are desired by those already involved or required by government policy do not always see a value in active involvement so overcoming reluctance can be a time-consuming activity. For example, one local healthcare co-operative
manager had spent a great deal of time during her first year in post, in one-to-one conversations with GPs in practices that were slow to join in.

Finding ways to embrace all of those who would like to be involved poses a completely different set of issues. Possibly one of the most challenging of the leadership tasks of this inverse type is to find ways to address the principle of ‘community involvement’ that is frequently deemed an important aspect of government supported partnerships. Who can be considered as representative of a community and even how ‘the community’ is defined are issues often raised by partnership managers (Barr and Huxham, 1996; Purdue et al., 2000; Vangen, 1995). Ensuring that whoever does take up the role of community representative feels comfortable and welcome among a group of professionals who often know each other very well, is another aspect of the task.

Embracing members also involves paying attention to ensuring that new members are ‘on board’. Collaborations tend to be highly dynamic in nature with membership continually changing as for example, public institutions are re-organized and individuals change job roles (Gray, 1989; Huxham and Vangen, 2000a; Lawrence, Phillips and Hardy, 1999; McCann, 1983; Sharfman et al., 1991). Therefore, as the manager of the poverty alleviation alliance commented:

‘Careful induction of new group members is important, as is a recognition that they take time to learn the ropes’.

Getting to grips with the history and purpose of a collaboration is difficult for any individual who has not been party to the earlier phases, but those for whom this way of working is new face particular obstacles. One community representative from a social inclusion partnership put the point graphically:

‘For 1 year I sat on the SIP Board as a nodding dove . . . I hadn’t a Scooby what they were talking about . . . I stuck it out and it fell into place’.

Leadership practices vary in this area. Occasionally the introduction of a new member is seen as an opportunity for fresh blood and a change of direction but more commonly the concern is to ensure continuity and to persuade the new member to take ownership of the values and programmes of activity already established. Minutes of meetings and other documents are often used as initial
briefing material. Documents intended to capture the history of the partnership may also be prepared. While probably a necessary part of the induction process, this kind of approach is not guaranteed to produce results. As the manager of the rural regeneration initiative commented:

‘(having the documents) does not mean that they are familiar with them – in any case it’s not their history’.

Inevitably, a part of the leadership task for partnership managers is to foster collaborative activity in situations where at least some of the members are not yet fully on board.

**Empowering members**

Embracing members does not in itself empower them to have a voice in the collaboration or to contribute to the shaping of its agenda. Creating an infrastructure in which people and organizations can be enabled to participate in a collaboration seems to be a very central aspect of many partnership managers’ leadership role. A key aspect of this is often to design a structure that will allow ‘the community’ to act as a member alongside public organizations and to be empowered to play an active role. In one regeneration partnership, for example, it was deemed that:

‘the partnership must be community led rather than committee led’.

In another, a management committee,

‘operating as an accountable body rather than simply (as) an advisory group overseeing progress’.

was designed. Steps were taken to ensure that community representatives were elected onto the management committee and provided with briefing and information to allow them to play an active role on it.

The skills to communicate and to design mechanisms for communication between partners seem to be particularly important for empowering members. Comments from partnership members such as,

‘we have fought to keep meetings open so all can be party to decisions rather than allowing decisions to be made in the pub’.

‘make sure we don’t stop talking when things go wrong’

‘set up a structure which allows two way flow of information’

and,

‘design processes that will allow local residents to communicate effectively with others on the partnership’

indicate the importance attached both to ensuring that views are communicated and can affect the decisions made and that the collaborative agenda is taken forward.

Keeping communication flowing effectively is obviously an important aspect of empowerment. Since partners are generally geographically dispersed, encouraging them to talk on a day-to-day basis is not an option. Some have tackled this problem through a ‘constructive use of e-mail’. Many use mechanisms such as a project newsletter, which, though time-consuming to produce, has the additional potential of providing a communication link to the outside world.

Bringing people together is, however a very central aspect of leading empowerment. Helping them communicate in face-to-face interaction in meetings, workshops and other events is one aspect of this. It has been argued that getting people to interact, whilst being extremely difficult, is a key leadership activity (Useem, 2001). Since collaboration tends to pull together individuals with a range of different skills, backgrounds and experiences, choosing a style of language that all are comfortable with may not be straightforward. One way of getting around this is to ensure that members have time to read and digest information in preparation for meetings. The manager of the urban regeneration partnership, for example, explained how she had changed processes to ensure that relevant papers are circulated two weeks in advance of meetings and how she regularly spends considerable time going through this documentation with individual members. She sees part of her role as helping to explain technicalities and the meaning of the content of relevant documents. Her aim is to:

‘provide individuals with information to be empowered to sit around the table and argue their case at the SIP board’.

Clearly nurturing individuals in this way is a time-consuming activity and choosing to focus on this leadership role may be at the expense of attention to others. One leadership dilemma is to find
ways of supporting all of the members, not just those needing specific help with communication.

Involving

Creating structures and support for involvement does not, in itself, ensure the involvement of members and the leadership role played by partnership managers often has to include activities specifically aimed at overcoming some of the hindrances to this. Problems arise because of the inevitability that some partners are more central than others, so managing the inequality between principal and subsidiary members frequently becomes an issue.

Inequality can arise in a number of ways. For example, the special education project involved a process of change to the legal infrastructure. This took two years and required the involvement of only two key organizations. Until the legalities were finalized there was no certainty that the project would be allowed to go ahead, and thus little basis for involving the other parties that they viewed as essential to delivering the project. From the perspective of members of the two organizations, as leaders of the project at this stage, the ‘natural’ (i.e. pragmatic) time to invite the others was at the completion of the legalities phase. The invitees, however, though apparently pleased in principle to be involved, expressed a degree of cynicism at the invitation and raised issues of trust and power between themselves and the original two organizations. Given that they were being asked to make major shifts in resource allocation to support the project, their defensiveness is understandable. In such situations the leadership task facing the partnership manager involves making judgements about the degree of equality that can or should be achieved in the next phase of the project and then finding ways of shifting the balance of power. Building trust out of mistrust and realigning project goals are likely to be a part of this task (Vangen and Huxham, 2003).

Another type of inequality arises when a single organization has a dominant role in a partnership. Partnership managers are often employed by, or located (physically and/or administratively) within a formally designated ‘lead organization’. They vary in their level of comfort with this. For example, one with whom we worked commented that having as her boss a senior member of the Local Authority’s Planning Department, severely hampered her ability to act neutrally and supportively with respect to the other partners. Another, however, had worked closely with his Local Authority’s elected councillors in a previous role and found it quite natural to spend considerable portions of his day supporting their needs even though another organization contributed a substantial portion of the funding and expertise to the partnership and to his own salary. He commented that this often diverted him from partnership activities but he did not appear to question the legitimacy of doing it. Indeed he seemed unaware of the influence that his unequal treatment of the partner organizations might have on the outcomes of the partnership. For partnership managers in this sort of situation, leading in the spirit of collaboration would seem to imply a consciousness of their relationship to each of the members and an ability to manage a dilemma between loyalty to their employing agency and loyalty to the other members.

Mobilizing members

Embracing, empowering and involving members are essential but do not, in themselves, make things happen. A seriously challenging aspect of partnership managers’ role is to influence individuals and whole organizations in support of the collaboration (Stewart, 1999). Our data suggest a number of related activities by which partnership managers seek to mobilize members to work on behalf of the collaboration. One such leadership activity is concerned with ensuring that all member organizations benefit from their involvement. The manager of the poverty alleviation alliance put this succinctly:

‘We need to assume that organizations will only become involved with the Alliance if they can get something out of it’.

Further comments by partnerships managers such as ‘get an understanding of what is going on’ and ‘find the incentive for involvement of business’ indicate that acquiring a thorough understanding of, and being sensitive to, the aims and aspirations of the participating organizations are seen as key aspects of leading mobilization.
Getting beyond understanding what the needs of organizations are to encouraging investment of resources in the collaboration for mutual advantage is another key aspect. Central to this is the establishment and maintenance of a well-functioning interface to and between each of the member organizations within which individuals can represent and lead their organization in the collaboration. Sensitivity to the needs of the individual organization can greatly facilitate communication and help ensure that individuals are able genuinely to represent and act as conduits to the resources of their organizations. Yet, the leadership task of energizing both the representatives and their organizations sufficiently for them to take an active interest in the collaboration is challenging. For the organizations involved, there is a tension between allowing sufficient autonomy to staff involved in a partnership, perhaps via a job specification, to allow it to progress and ensuring accountability of the partnership to the member organizations (Huxham, 1996b). Acquiring the freedom for individuals to act on behalf of their organization has to be reciprocated with an assurance that they do represent the needs of their organization. Perhaps the greatest paradox of collaboration however, is that the potential for advantage is rooted in the varying resources that organizations bring to the collaboration, which inevitably also implies that they are seeking different things in return. Frequently, these differences in needs imply varying levels of commitment and even conflict with respect to the collaborative agenda (Huxham and Vangen, 2000c).

The process of communication may nevertheless help encourage and enthuse involvement in the collaboration. A third way in which partnership managers mobilize action is by actively designing processes to facilitate effective interfaces. Bringing people together in face-to-face interaction in committees, workshops, seminars or open fora is a popular means of doing this. In addition to equipping and empowering members to have full access to the collaboration debate, such events are frequently used as opportunities to negotiate, seek agreement and commitment to action by participating organizations despite their varying levels of commitment and specificity of needs. In the special education project, for example, a key player from one of the two initiating organizations organized a workshop purely to seek Health and Social Service’s commitment to the collaboration.

Partnership managers often seem to have few skills and little experience, or training in how to lead such events effectively. Some recognize this and enlist facilitators to support them but sometimes do not have sufficient skill to allow them, in turn, to support the facilitator. In one case, the partnership manager briefed a consultant to plan a seminar but on the day, in front of the partnership members, questioned (and so sabotaged) the carefully thought-out design for it. Even the most sensitive and careful managers can fail to achieve what they set out to do in this area. For example, in the health-promotion partnership a series of workshops aimed at mobilizing synergy between various partnership projects failed to get beyond the first event when the permanent postholder replaced the temporary manager who had conceived it.

However, collaborative activities frequently come to fruition, and a fourth aspect of leading mobilization is concerned with ensuring that actions are taken on reasonably informed bases. Despite efforts of communication with and between members, partnership managers are frequently heard expressing concerns that the members of the collaboration, including individuals on steering committees, seem ill-informed of issues and activities pertaining to the collaborative agenda. The manager of the academic partnership for example expressed astonishment over the extent to which ‘powerful’ individuals appeared willing to take decisions despite, in her judgement, very obvious lack of information and understanding of key issues. This is another paradox of collaboration; that partnership managers often seem to have a clearer sense of the issues pertaining to the collaborative agenda, than do any of the members. One of their leadership roles therefore involves balancing the facilitation of progress despite the lack of understanding with trying to find ways to continuously keep members informed.

**Perspective 2: Leadership activities . . . towards collaborative thuggery**

In the last section partnerships managers are pictured in a supportive role. From this perspective, leadership is a facilitative activity suggesting
the need for relational skills such as patience, empathy, honesty and deference (Eckert, 2001; Fletcher, 2001). Our data shows numerous examples of partnership managers trying to operate in this way. However, as we have aimed to emphasize, carrying through such an approach is far from straightforward. To overcome the inevitability of working with members who are not ‘on board’, have different needs and varying levels of commitment, are ‘ill informed’, cannot mutually communicate and so on, partnership managers generally enact a part of their leadership role through resorting to pragmatic approaches that, at face value, seem less consistent with the spirit of collaboration. Two aspects of this pragmatic leadership role, as summarized in Figure 3, are suggested by our data, manipulating the collaborative agenda, and playing the politics.

**Manipulating the collaborative agenda**

Since partnership managers are, in principle, employed as a resource to the collaboration to support the members they often have no legitimacy to shape the content of the collaborative agenda. There are, however, a number of reasons why in practice they may become engaged with the substantive issues over which collaboration occurs. For example, both empowering members and mobilizing activities can involve them in promoting understanding of the collaborative purpose. They often also take a lead in activities relating directly to negotiating the purpose of the collaboration and are frequently required to produce papers relating to this. This suggests acceptance by the membership that they have a substantive role to play. It requires them to make judgements about the extent to which issues are of relevance to the collaborative agenda. Much power and influence can be exercised on the direction of the collaboration through definition of issues and creation and dissemination of text (Lawrence, Phillips and Hardy, 1999). Inevitably therefore, partnership managers will influence which, and the way in which, substantive issues become part of the joint efforts.

While some aspects of the influence exerted may be indirect, unintended and even unconscious, partnership managers do also influence the collaborative agenda more directly. Their ability to perform their jobs satisfactorily (to themselves and others) hinges on the progress made by the collaboration. Finding ways to avoid collaborative inertia is therefore an essential aspect of their leadership role. Many enact this by actively pushing the collaborative agenda forward. Not surprisingly, some lean towards taking an active lead rather than facilitating the
members to agree and jointly implement their own agenda.

Partnership managers can be quite creative and frequently manipulative in devising ways to influence the agenda. The manager of the academic partnership for example, explained how she,

‘deliberately but casually drop ideas into conversations with the aim to get individuals with power to pick them up and run with them as their own’.

She does this, she said because she believes that,

‘individuals on the management committee by norm act on briefs rather than through having a full understanding of issues’.

She judges herself to be better positioned than they to make judgements about ways in which the collaborative agenda ought to be taken forward. Yet recognizing the limitations of her own power and clout, she takes deliberate steps to influence the agenda not directly, but via ‘stealthy behaviour’. In a similar vein, the manager of the health-promotion partnership, for example, persistently used ‘high profile’ individuals to introduce partnership workshops, presumably because she saw it as a way of raising the profile of the agenda.

Partnership managers adopt different ways and styles of ensuring that the agenda moves forward and some are more directive and less subtle in taking decisions that have an obvious impact on the direction of the collaboration than others. For example, the health-promotion partnership manager referred to above was described as having:

‘strong views on how the partnership should look and how things should be done’.

Yet, although her style might have been perceived as directive rather than facilitative she frequently used the phrase ‘in the interest of the partnership’. Similarly, in the context of painstaking efforts to get partners with a history of mistrust and competition to work in a collaborative manner, the manager of a local healthcare cooperative commented:

‘They are not in charge of me. I don’t have direct influence over them. So I need to work hard to try and persuade them what is in their best interest’.

She explained the various and different ways in which she tries to get individuals to change their mindsets about working in partnership and moving forward in a way that she feels is appropriate. For example, she would deliberately approach individuals differently, introducing herself in different ways and getting them gradually interested in different aspects of the partnership. One of her comments summed up her approach:

‘Lots of manoeuvring goes on in the background to get them to come to the decision you want them to come to’.

The need to lead even when you are not in charge is not uncommon (Useem, 2001) and partnership managers may well perceive themselves as having a legitimate role in directing the agenda. One advantage of using stealthy behaviour is that the more members of the partnership may run with ideas as their own the greater the commitment to the ideas and to seeing them put into action.

Regardless of the precise ways in which managers go about leading the collaborative agenda, they are very likely to find themselves in situations where they have to manage a tension (Huxham and Beech, 2001) between directing on substance and co-ordinating partnership activities. Consciously or otherwise, they are likely to have to make a trade-off between promoting genuinely collaborative, but time consuming and difficult activities such as workshops, and ‘getting on with it’. As expressed by the manager of a health promotion partnership, when pressed for output by a funding body, there is a ‘need to deliver on things as well as getting together’.

Playing the politics

Though collaboration is intended to be a benevolent way of working, political manoeuvring is often strongly evident in public and non-profit collaborations (Lawrence et al., 1999). Partnerships initiated via government policies for example, frequently pull together organizations that would rather not work together. Our data shows that problems such as stepping on each others’ territories, competing for resources and needing to outperform each other tend to ensue. Even when collaborations are initiated voluntarily, problems emerge as a range of often competing agendas has to be satisfied (Eden and Huxham, 2001; Judge and Ryman, 2001; Vangen, Huxham and Eden, 1994). In addition, partnership managers usually report to a management
committee or steering group so the usual political problems associated with being a subordinate can play out in unusual ways.

For these kinds of reasons, comments such as

‘there are people who do not want the partnership to work for various reasons’

and

‘One has to recognize that xxx Council did not want the yyy project to succeed’

are not untypical. Under these circumstances, the response that,

‘there is a need to know the politics and how to play it’

made by the manager of the urban regeneration initiative does not seem unreasonable, even though it may not be entirely within the spirit of collaboration.

Trying to take steps to work alongside those who may otherwise hinder progress is one way in which partnership managers can lead collaborative agendas. For example, a partnership coordinator associated with a health-promotion partnership remarked that

‘insisting on X having a role in the seminar was a political move’.

Similarly, the partnership manager of the urban regeneration initiative argued:

‘You need to recognize that the City Council has power so strive to get them on your side’.

In the light of both the need to manage the tension between directing on substance and coordinating partnership activities, and the need to play the politics, it is perhaps not surprising that partnership managers themselves repeatedly highlight the need to keep themselves informed of the goings-on of the partnership and to become well networked. Collectively, statements such as,

‘gain an understanding of who influences who’

‘find out who the good guys and the bad guys are’

‘exchange information with the good guys’

‘knowing the field and being networked to key players’

‘gain familiarity with organizations and projects in the area’

‘develop mechanisms to link together the X Project into a network which is sustainable’

would suggest that a great deal of subtle assessment takes place with regard to, as one manager put it,

‘finding out who is worth the bother’.

It would appear also that individuals enter into reciprocal relationships in terms of sharing information and taking action in support of each others’ agendas. Some, however, apparently take a more unilateral approach to sorting out those who are and are not worth the bother. In one case, a participant argued that a partnership in which he had been involved,

‘has been successful because the convenor is a thug. If members are not willing to be actively involved, he pushes them out’.

Although the descriptor is extreme and certainly the antithesis of the spirit of collaboration, we did not perceive this to be intended as a derogatory remark; the speaker appeared to be suggesting that this was a positive, pragmatic way of managing a complex situation. Undoubtedly the trade-off between carefully nurturing reciprocal relationships and resorting to thuggish behaviour is one that needs to be managed.

The essence of leadership enactment for collaborative advantage

The above discussion has sought to demonstrate the dilemmas of ideology and pragmatism in the enactment of leadership for collaborative advantage. We have chosen to conceptualize this as a tension between the spirit of collaboration and towards collaborative thuggery. It is not intended however, that the term ‘thuggery’ should be taken literally. Clearly the term is extreme; it is used here simply to draw attention to, and raise awareness of, the pragmatic end of the spectrum of collaborative leadership activities. The identification of the ‘thuggery’ end of the spectrum seems significant because it is so distant from the rhetoric of (i.e. from the ‘spirit’ of ) a partnership approach. The need to lead in a facilitative and supportive manner (Bryson and Crosby, 1992; Chrislip and Larson, 1994) is both required and expected; yet the research shows that this in itself is not sufficient to generate collaborative advantage. Of course, the need for those who are supposed to be acting in a supportive role to take
a lead in the action is not, in public arenas, unique to partnership settings. Frederickson (1997) for example argued that public managers inevitably engage in policy making because policy cannot be detailed enough for implementation to happen without any form of decision-making.

Although, for clarity of expression, we have presented this dilemma as though it is bipolar we do not mean to imply that it is a clear dichotomy. For presentational purposes, we have deliberately resisted the intertwinedness of the two perspectives with the view that this would enable a deeper exploration into the pragmatic details of this tension in collaborative settings. The progressions from activities pertaining to the need to embrace members through to engaging them in actions provide helpful detail into the facilitative aspect of the leadership role. Similarly, the recognition that the achievement of collaborative advantage is likely to require engagement in the type of activities captured under the headings of manipulation and politicking legitimates these leadership activities. In practice, there are however likely to be elements of both perspectives in all specific types of activities with which partnership managers engage. For example, ‘embracing reluctant members’ may entail some manipulation and ‘background manoeuvring’ may be another way of involving and supporting members.

In identifying this tension between the spirit of collaboration and towards collaborative thuggery, we are in some ways mirroring many of the dichotomies raised in classic theory on organizational leadership and management styles. At face value, the two opposite ways of enacting leadership may have some similarity to the alternative approaches to leadership – democratic versus autocratic, participative versus directive, relationship oriented versus task oriented and consideration versus initiating structure – identified by Stogdill (Bass, 1981), or to the transactional versus transformational leadership dichotomy raised by Burns (1978). It would be possible to argue for example, that leading ‘in the spirit of collaboration’ would not be inconsistent with a democratic leadership style emphasizing consideration and responsiveness. Yet a democratic leadership style does not imply most of the activities required to embrace, empower, involve and mobilize the members of a collaborative initiative. Similarly, leading with a healthy portion of ‘thuggery’ would not be inconsistent with an autocratic style in which partnership managers engage in defining and deciding the activities to be undertaken by others. However, in collaborative settings, manipulation and politicking necessarily has to replace the use of legitimate power (French and Raven, 1959) because the lack of traditional hierarchy between leader and led does not allow formally for autocratic decision-making. If there are any lessons for leadership in collaboration settings to be taken from the organizational leadership literature, it is clear that they would have to be carefully ‘filtered’ by collaboration theory.

In addition, in common with Johnson (1996) who modelled leadership as continually switching between opposing styles of leadership and Quinn (1990) who characterized leadership from four different but not mutually exclusive theoretical perspectives we do not argue for alternative ways of leading but propose the alternative ways of acting as aspects of a leadership portfolio. In this sense, our theory is compatible with Beech’s (2000) notions of romantic and heroic leadership. In contrast to Johnson’s and Quinn’s conclusions, our data specifically suggests that partnership managers operate constantly from opposing perspectives and that both aspects are essential to making progress. This would suggest that partnership managers therefore need to be skilled at operating from both modes and at managing the interaction between them, as an overemphasis on either would not be likely to generate collaborative advantage. This differs from contingency or situational leadership approaches (e.g. Fiedler, 1967) in which different styles are seen as appropriate in different situations. Here, opposing styles and types of leadership are seen as operating together and all of the time.

The leadership challenge for partnership managers is clearly immense. The essence of the enactment of leadership for collaborative advantage would appear to involve the ability to lead contingently in the spirit of collaboration whilst simultaneously drawing on ‘collaborative thuggery’. Although we do not have any hard evidence for this, our observation is that those who seem to lead most successfully are those who can operate from both perspectives and who are able to continually switch from one to the other. One practitioner articulated this point
graphically when he commented that a key to successful partnership is,

‘going behind people’s backs in a trustworthy kind of way’

We have summarized this contribution in Figure 4.

Conclusion

In using the theory presented in this article in training events with practitioners, we have found it helpful to relate the enactment of leadership with other aspects of managing partnerships. The focus has been on exploring reasons for collaborative inertia with the conclusion that continuous nurturing and the presence of at least one competent individual who champions and nurtures the partnership is essential (Huxham and Vangen, 2000c). We argue here that partnership managers frequently undertake this championing, leadership role and we have explored the level of challenge that it implies.

It is evident that leading collaborative initiatives is not necessarily a comfortable or rewarding experience. The explorations in this article of the activities and dilemmas that confront partnership managers have begun to unpack some of the reasons for the challenge that enactment of leadership entails. Though derived specifically around the activities of partnership managers, we view the broad theoretical principles and many of the examples in this article as relevant to other participants in collaborations and to commercial as well as public settings. We see the theory contributing to the practice of leadership in collaborative settings at two levels.

The first level of contribution arises from the highlighting and legitimizing of the simultaneous enactment of both the facilitative (spirit of collaboration) and directive (collaborative thuggery) roles. When we have used the theory presented in this article in capacity-building events with practitioners, they have commented that they find the legitimization of the activities at the thuggery end particularly helpful. However, it is the duality of the two opposing roles that the tension emphasizes. Furthermore, the conceptualization of roles in terms of on the one hand the progression of supportive roles and the other hand manipulation and politicking, provides broad conceptual handles through which the enactment in practice of the two roles may be considered.

The second level of contribution is concerned with the detailed examples of the way in which partnership managers enact these in practice. This is clearly far from the full picture and it

Figure 4. The essence of leadership for collaborative advantage
would be possible via further research to elaborate considerably upon this. Nevertheless, even at this level of development, the examples can be used to provide cues about the types of activities that need to be addressed and so may give those aiming to lead further conceptual handles for considering their practice. Clearly they could at least partly underpin management development programmes in collaborative leadership.

The examples also highlight many issues and challenges intrinsic to the enactment of leadership activities in collaborative settings and it is clear that these are not easily addressed. For practitioners and policy makers, therefore, this may lead to consideration of realistic, rather than idealistic expectations of what can be achieved. For practitioners – and for partnership managers in particular – it may help to address some of the despair about lack of progress and the difficulty of supporting members with different, and sometimes conflicting goals and needs. For policy makers, it may lead to more careful consideration of appropriate resourcing and support requirements.

References


