



# Healthiest Wisconsin 2020: Everyone Living Better, Longer

A Resource Supplement to the

HW2020 Collaborative Leadership PowerPoint Presentation

<http://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/hw2020/>

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Many approaches and styles of leadership (e.g., servant leadership, transformational leadership, transactional leadership) can be used when attempting to work with communities and organizations. This supplement focuses on *collaborative leadership* and draws from the body of work advanced by David Chrislip and Carl Larson. It is adapted from the Community Toolbox, University of Kansas.

HW2020 makes this resource available to its partners in hope that you will explore and use this concept and its practices to achieve your vision and goals, and ultimately make a difference in the lives of people and communities – the places where we live, grow, work, learn and play.

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## Collaborative Leadership

### Excerpts from *the Community Toolbox, University of Kansas (2013)*

The Community Toolbox is a service of the **Work Group for Community Health and Development** at the University of Kansas, which encourages the reproduction of this material but asks that you give credit.

Source: Community Toolbox: <http://ctb.ku.edu>

### What is collaborative leadership?

Collaborative leadership is really defined by a process, rather than by what leaders do. It starts, according to David Chrislip and Carl Larson, in *collaborative leadership*, from the premise that "...if you bring the appropriate people together in constructive ways with good information, they will create authentic visions and strategies for addressing the shared concerns of the organization or community."

Collaborative leadership can be employed in almost any situation, and indeed is practiced in some businesses with great success, but is seen more often in community coalitions and initiatives, in community-based health and human service organizations, or in alternative education. People often find it particularly useful in situations where "no one is in charge," where there are issues or problems so complex that no one person or entity has either the information or the power to change them. (This doesn't mean that no one has *responsibility*, but rather that sharing responsibility for the issue is necessary in order to arrive at a successful resolution of it.)

While it can be practiced in a number of ways, good collaborative leadership is almost always characterized by some specific traits:

- **Collaborative problem-solving and decision-making.** It's not the leader's job to decide what to do and then tell the group. Rather, the group considers the problem, decides what to do, and counts on the leader to help them focus their effort.
- **Open process.** The leader - or some other interested party - doesn't just start with his goals in mind and steer the group in that direction. Collaborative leadership means that the process of decision-making is truly collaborative, and has no set point when it begins. The end result is worked out among all the participants: that's collaboration.

- **Leadership of the process, rather than the group.** The purpose of collaborative leadership is to help the collaborative process work, rather than to lead the people involved toward something - to a particular decision, for instance, or in a particular direction.

Some differences exist between collaborative leadership within an organization and collaborative leadership among organizations. In the first case, a leader may have to spend much of her time initially trying to coax people to take leadership roles in certain circumstances, or even to participate in collaborative decision-making. In the second instance, a leader's biggest task may be to keep everyone from trying to lead in different directions all at once.

There are really two ways to define collaborative leadership. Although the orienting principles are the same in both cases, we will focus in this section on the first of these: leadership **of** a collaborative effort.

- **Collaborative leadership: leadership of a collaborative effort.** This definition refers to taking a leadership role in a coalition, organization, or other enterprise where everyone is on an equal footing and working together to solve a problem, create something new, or run an organization or initiative. The leader is not in control of the group, but has responsibility for guiding and coordinating the process by which the group decides upon and carries out actions to accomplish its goals.
- **Leading collaboratively: leadership as a collaborative effort.** In this case - usually in an organizational rather than a coalition or community setting - leadership may shift, by group decision, from one person to another as different talents or abilities are called for, or (more often) leadership is permanently shared by all, or several, members of the group. Here, there is no one leader: the group functions as a true collaborative, and guides itself.

## Why practice collaborative leadership?

A coalition or other collaboration will nearly always function best with collaborative leadership. Most other organizations and enterprises may function without collaborative leadership, but there are benefits that collaborative leadership can confer even in situations where there are other possible choices.

## Advantages of collaborative leadership

- **Buy-in.** Collaborative leadership encourages ownership of the enterprise, whether it's a coalition, an organization, a business, or a community project. By involving everyone in decision-making and problem-solving, it makes what people are doing theirs, rather than something imposed on them by someone else. The sense of ownership builds commitment to the common purpose.
- **More involvement in implementation.** Members of a collaborative group are more likely to be willing to take responsibility for implementing the group's action plan, because they were part of developing it.
- **Trust building.** Collaborative leadership, by its use of an open process and its encouragement of discussion and dialogue, builds trust among those involved in the enterprise.
- **Elimination of turf issues.** Similarly, collaborative leadership can help to address turf issues through establishing mutual trust, making sure everyone's concerns are heard, and helping organizations, factions, or individuals find common ground and work together.

*Turf issues arise when individuals or organizations feel someone else is invading their "turf," their professional or philosophical or personal territory. In a community, this can mean competition among organizations for prestige, credibility with a target population, or - worst of all - funding, and can result in organizations that should be natural allies working against one another. In an organization, it can mean individuals asserting "ownership" of information, the use of equipment, or administrative procedures, and can cause disastrous splits among staff and ineffective and inefficient operation.*

- **Access to more and better information and ideas.** When all involved in an issue are party to addressing it, they bring with them a wealth of information, as well as a variety of perspectives. As a result, the solutions they arrive at are likely to be better than those developed in a vacuum, or by only a small number of people.
- **Better opportunity for substantive results.** The combination of ownership of the process and its results, trust, real collaboration, and better planning yields real success in the real world. In looking at successful community development efforts, David Chrislip and Carl Larson found that nearly all were characterized by collaborative leadership.
- **Generation of new leadership.** Collaborative leadership helps to train new leaders from within the group, thus assuring continuity and commitment to the issues the group is addressing.
- **Community or organizational empowerment.** The inclusion of all stakeholders - anyone with an interest or involvement in an issue or organization - in problem-solving and decision-making not only prepares potential leaders, but leads to people taking more responsibility and caring more about what they do. It leads to better functioning in every sphere.
- **Fundamental change for the better in the ways communities and organizations operate.** Collaborative leadership breeds more collaborative leadership and more collaboration, leading to a different way of looking at solving problems. This in turn brings more willingness to find common ground and common cause with others, more willingness to tackle new issues, and more effective and wide-reaching solutions.

## Disadvantages of collaborative leadership

For all its advantages, collaborative leadership also has disadvantages. It can be frustrating, and there's no guarantee that it will work with a particular group.

### Some of the major difficulties with collaborative leadership include:

- **It's time-consuming.** Collaboration takes time, and decision-making that involves a large number of people and organizations may seem to proceed glacially: slowly, and with a great deal of friction.
- **It demands the ability to face conflict directly** and mediate it to a resolution acceptable to everyone. Collaborative leadership is not a job for people who like everything calm and who would prefer that no voices are ever raised.
- **It may mean trying to overcome resistance to the whole idea of collaborative leadership.** Many people, particularly in organizations, would prefer a leader to tell them exactly what they need to do, so they know they're doing the right thing. Being asked to share leadership just makes them resentful, and leaves them feeling that the leader isn't doing her job. Selling the concept may be the hardest part of the job.
- **It can lead to groups taking what seems to you to be the wrong path.** As a collaborative leader, you have to be able to let go of your own ideas and biases, and maintain a process that will guide the group to its own goals, strategy, and action plans.

- **It demands that leaders subordinate their egos.** You're not the boss in this situation, and furthermore, you may not get any credit if the group is successful.

Whether or not these last two possibilities actually play out depends on the situation. In an organization, the opinions and status of a collaborative leader might still carry more weight than those of other staff members, regardless of how hard he tries to eliminate any hierarchy. In a coalition or community-wide collaboration, even though there may be more and more varied participants, it may be easier for the leader to be seen as a peer.

## When is collaborative leadership appropriate?

Collaborative leadership is not always the best solution for a particular group. In the military, for instance, particularly in a combat situation, collaborative leadership would be fatal: while the group carefully worked out its plans, it would be overrun. There are numerous other situations - often related to how quickly decisions have to be made and how decisively people have to act - where collaborative leadership wouldn't work well. Time is clearly a factor, as is the ability of a group to gather and digest information, its level of experience and judgment (you wouldn't put preschoolers in charge of their own safety, for instance), its freedom to act, etc. So how do you know when to employ collaborative leadership? Here are some possibilities to consider:

- **When the timing is right.** Good timing is often necessary for collaborative leadership to succeed, when circumstances conspire to bring a situation to a crisis point that can break down barriers and convince otherwise-reluctant stakeholders that they need to collaborate. By the same token, when things are going well, there may be the time, the funding, and the common will to take on a new collaborative effort.
- **When problems are serious and complex, and both affect and require attention from a number of individuals and groups.** This is the kind of situation, referred to earlier, when no one is in charge. It's impossible for any one individual or group to solve the problem by tackling it alone. At the same time, the seriousness and complexity of the problem mean that it's in the self-interest of the individuals and groups involved to put turf issues and the like aside, and to collaborate on dealing with it.
- **When there are a number of diverse stakeholders, or stakeholders with varied interests.** In order for these stakeholders to work together, collaborative leadership is needed to build trust - both among stakeholders and in the process - and to make sure that everyone's agenda is heard and honestly considered.
- **When other attempts at solutions haven't worked.** Individual organizations or officials may have tried to deal with an issue and failed, or a coalition may have faltered because of internal conflict and/or inability to generate effective action.
- **When an issue affects a whole organization or a whole community.** If everyone's affected, everyone needs a voice. Collaborative leadership can provide the opportunity for all to be heard and involved.
- **When inclusiveness and empowerment are goals of the process from the beginning.** A coalition that has set out, for instance, to broaden political participation throughout the community would do well to operate with collaborative leadership and a collaborative process. Such a structure would give it credibility among those it's trying to reach, and would also provide that target population with the opportunity to develop its own voice, and to increase its ability to participate fully.

## Who are collaborative leaders?

While no one walks around with a name tag saying "Hi, I'm a collaborative leader," potential and actual collaborative leaders are everywhere in a community or organization. They may be

independent consultants hired for their facilitation skills, or they may emerge from unexpected places - the corner office of a powerful business, for instance, or a three-room apartment in a public housing complex. Regardless of who they are or where they come from, collaborative leaders usually have some characteristics in common.

- **Collaborative leaders are - or quickly become - trusted and respected by all the groups and individuals they have to deal with.** Depending on the circumstances, this may mean that they're viewed as neutral, unconnected to any of the interests involved in the collaboration, or having no prior history with any group, and therefore unbiased. Or it may mean that they have a solid reputation for fairness and integrity. It almost always means that, while they may stand to gain from the success of the collaboration, they have nothing personal to gain from their leadership position.
- **Collaborative leaders relate to diverse groups and individuals with respect and ease.** The necessity of approaching everyone with openness and without condescension, and of being trusted by people of diverse backgrounds and experience, make this quality a great asset for a collaborative leader.
- **Collaborative leaders have good facilitation skills.** Because they have to deal with whatever comes up in the collaborative process, collaborative leaders have to be skilled at facilitating more than meetings. Facilitation skills include:
  - *A tolerance for and understanding of how to use conflict.*
  - *The ability to involve everyone and make sure all voices are heard.*
  - *The capacity to restate arguments, ideas, or issues so that everyone's clear on them.* This includes the gift for reframing debate to disarm or enlist as allies many who might otherwise be opponents.
  - *An understanding of group process.* The words "group process" often conjure up graduate school courses and psychosocial models of how a group works. Some people may not have this educational or professional background, but have an intrinsic understanding of what's happening in a group, and of how to intervene to address whatever needs to be addressed. If that's the case, groups quickly learn to trust their judgment.
  - *An ability to see the big picture.* A good facilitator can both view the process that the group is going through, and consider and act on it in light of what's needed to realize the group's goals.
- **Collaborative leaders are catalysts.** They bring the right people together at the right time to make things happen, and continue to sustain the process that will lead the collaborative to success.
- **Collaborative leaders nurture new leadership within the collaboration and the community.** Rather than trying to protect their leadership positions, good collaborative leaders encourage potential leaders. They provide opportunities for them to hone their leadership skills, and afford mentoring and support. Collaborative leaders know that new leadership is the lifeblood of collaboration.
- **Collaborative leaders have a commitment to the collaborative process and to finding real solutions to problems.** Good collaborative leaders have to believe in the process, and to champion and maintain it, often in the face of strong opposition. At the

same time, they have to keep everyone moving toward the group's goals, even when it feels like nothing's happening.

- **Collaborative leaders keep the focus on what's best for the group, organization, or community as a whole.** Just as the leader has to be willing to let go of his ego or specific concerns, he tries to help group members learn to do the same, and to focus on solutions that address the broadest, rather than the narrowest, interests.

## How do you practice collaborative leadership?

A number of elements should be mentioned in any discussion of the practice of collaborative leadership:

1. Leadership of the process
2. Understanding the context of leadership in a particular situation
3. The role of motivator
4. Flexibility and persistence
5. The leader's willingness to put aside her own ego.

We'll look at each of these elements in turn.

### Collaborative Leadership Element #1: Lead the process, not the people

As a collaborative leader, your most important task is not to make sure that the group comes up with the "right" ideas or plans, or to produce single-handedly the vision or goals that it needs to follow. Your main job is to establish, maintain, and safeguard the collaborative process that allows everyone to participate fully in the group's work. In order to fill your role well, there are a number of things you need to do:

- **Help the group set norms - for meetings, communication, and general operation - that it can live by, and that encourage respect, participation, and trust.** Norms may be stated or unstated, depending on the group and its needs, but in general, the more explicit they are, the better. They can range from, say, the formality of Robert's Rules of Order as a structure for meetings, to the arrangement of seating (chairs in a circle - often an unstated norm), to the responsibilities of particular subgroups or individuals, to guidelines for discussion (no interruption until someone's thought is finished, no name-calling, etc.).
- **Assure that everyone gets heard.** That means not just letting people speak in meetings, but actively soliciting the opinions of those who haven't spoken, and recording and reviewing with the group everyone's concerns and ideas as you discuss possibilities. Between meetings, it means communicating any news and developments to people on a regular basis and giving them a chance to respond, and making sure they communicate with one another.
- **Encourage and model inclusiveness.** As a collaborative leader, you have an obligation to invite participation from all segments of the community or organization, to welcome new participants and make sure they meet others (and to encourage other members to do the same), to include them in discussion and subgroups, to help them gain whatever skills they need to participate fully, etc. Perhaps most important, you should be instrumental in creating an atmosphere where all these things happen automatically, without your intervention.

- **Help people make real connections with one another.** In order to develop trust, especially in those who might formerly have been seen as competitors or enemies, people need time to get to know one another. It's up to the collaborative leader (as well as others) to make sure they get it, in an atmosphere that's safe and open. The leader must exhibit trust as well as encouraging it.

As is probably obvious here, the collaborative leader must set an example by practicing what she preaches. To a large extent, the group will become what the leader models, and therefore, she must model what she wants the group to become. Modeling all the functions on this list will help a leader to institutionalize the collaborative process.

- **Mediate conflicts and disputes.** In any group, conflict is almost inevitable. Trying to ignore it and hoping it will go away is probably the absolute worst way to handle it. In collaborative groups, especially, conflict needs to be faced head-on and not only resolved, but used constructively, to build trust and further the work of the group. Creative dispute resolution is a vital function of collaborative leadership.
- **Help the group create and use mechanisms for soliciting ideas.** Suggesting and teaching, if necessary, such techniques as brainstorming; introducing research or other relevant ideas from outside the group; gaining the help of knowledgeable non-members (university faculty or graduate students, for instance) - these are some of the ways that a collaborative leader can assist the group to examine complex issues and come up with potential solutions.
- **Maintain collaborative problem-solving and decision-making.** The leader must guard against an individual, organization, or small group running away with the process. In many circumstances, it's not only reasonable but necessary to ask a small group to come up with suggestions or plans. But the larger group should instruct them to do so in the first place, and their results should come back to the larger group for discussion and approval.
- **Push the group toward effectiveness** by urging it to come to decisions after there's been enough discussion.
  - Help it to devise appropriate action plans.
  - Make sure that people take and honor responsibility for implementing action plans in a timely and competent way.
  - Hold people accountable to their implementation (and other) responsibilities.
  - Remind the group to evaluate, adjust, and reevaluate both plans and their implementation, based on results.
- **Help the group choose initial projects that are doable, in order to build confidence and demonstrate collaborative success.** It's important that the collaborative leader do all she can to encourage the group to take on tasks that can be accomplished with the available time and resources. Initial success will both motivate the group and give it legitimacy.
  - Help the group to identify and obtain the necessary resources to do the work.
  - Insist on and protect an open process, one that has no expected outcome when it starts, no predetermined decisions demanding only the group's rubber stamp. The process should belong to the group from the very beginning.

- Keep the group focused on what's best for the organization, collaborative, or community as a whole, rather than on individual interests.

## Collaborative Leadership Element #2: Know the leadership context

The context of leadership - all the elements that affect what a leader may have to face and what will be required of him - is unique to each situation. As a collaborative leader, you need to understand your particular situation fully, so you're not caught by surprise by a development you could have expected.

- **The community.** Important factors here are:
  - **The current circumstances.** What are the issues that the coalition or organization is responding to, and why are they issues?
  - **History.** What brought the community to this point? What is its history of trying to deal with the current issues? Are there roadblocks that might be thrown up as a result of what happened in the past?
  - **The stakeholders and other interested parties.** What are their relationships to the issues? Perhaps more important, what are their relationships to one another? How might those relationships help or hinder the effort?
  - **Community attitudes.** Are there things you need to know about how most people in the community view particular issues, or about what they'll respond to and what they won't accept?
- **The nature of the problem.** The nature of the problem can be considered in two ways. The first is "problem type." Chrislip and Larson, following Ronald Heifetz and Riley Sinder, put problems in three categories:
  - **Type I** is an obvious, clearly-defined problem with an equally obvious, clearly-defined solution that can be exercised by an expert. (The remedy for a broken window is to replace the glass, which can be done by anyone who knows how to glaze windows.)
  - **Type II** is a clearly-defined problem, but one whose solution requires both an expert and effort on the part of those affected as well. (If your windows are always broken because you keep hitting baseballs into them during backyard games, they not only need glazing, but you need to take your games farther away from your windows.)
  - **Type III** problems have neither a clear definition nor a clear solution. (All the windows in the neighborhood are continually broken, and no one knows why.)

**Note:** Type III problems - and community problems, particularly, are almost always Type III - require collaborative leadership to understand and solve. Recognizing a problem as one of this type can make it easier to convince stakeholders that a collaborative effort is needed.

In addition to problem type, the other consideration here is the nature of the problem in your particular community or organization. No two communities or organizations are alike, and problems play out differently in each, even though they may appear similar. A drug problem in a suburban community may not involve dealing within the community at all, for instance - people may buy their drugs in the neighboring city.

Addressing the problem will mean addressing not only the demand for drugs, but their availability. The suburban problem can't be dealt with unless the problem of dealing in the city is attended to as well, which will require collaboration between the two communities.

The strategy, the stakeholders, and the nature of collaboration in each case have to be looked at in the light of the problem in that particular community.

- **Barriers to collaboration.** Collaborative leaders are often confronted with situations or factors that work against collaboration. It's important to anticipate the most common of these, and to be aware of some ways to eliminate them.
  - **If people don't know how to work together,** teach them. A community development effort in Newark, New Jersey, brought in a consulting firm to facilitate group-building and to teach collaborative problem-solving and other techniques.
  - **If there are turf issues,** emphasize the benefits to everyone of collaboration. Show people they're better off collaborating, and chances are they will.
  - **If there's unfortunate community history,** either among organizations and individuals, or with the issue itself, then mediate disputes; point out the differences between now and then; point out the differences between collaboration and groups working separately; and structure the situation so that groups and individuals can interact and make connections.
  - **If professionals or some other elite seem to be dominating the collaboration,** work with that group to emphasize the importance of inclusiveness, while modeling it yourself. At the same time, provide support and, if necessary, training for others so they feel more comfortable participating. Structure face-to-face situations (meetings, workshops, etc.) to equalize input from everyone.
  - **If there are poor links to the community,** forge new ones. Bring people together through introductions and events. Encourage organizations and groups to reach out with active solicitation of help and advice, publicity, public education, and events.
  - **If there is little organizational capacity,** find resources to hire a coordinator, or tap the collaboration's internal resources for one. Create, with the collaboration as a whole, structures that address this issue.
  - **If there seems to be no funding available,** look for unusual sources, as well as looking within the collaboration for ideas. At the same time, work on projects that are significant, but require little or no funding to complete. As mentioned many times in the *Community Toolbox* (University of Kansas), resist applying for or accepting funding that isn't directly relevant to what the collaboration wants or needs to do, and that isn't consistent with the goals, mission, and philosophy of the group. Selling your principles will cause far more problems than the money will solve.
  - **The group's capacity for change.** Organizations, groups, and communities vary greatly in their acceptance of change in general and in their openness to particular kinds of change. It's important to start where the group is, rather than at some point which most members may see as radical or impossible. Knowing how ready a group is to try something new can mean the difference between a highly successful collaboration and a group that breaks up with recriminations and a certainty that collaboration doesn't work.

### **Leadership Element #3: Motivate, motivate, motivate**

Keeping the collaboration or organization enthusiastic and eager to continue its work is a significant part of the collaborative leader's role. Being upbeat, even when things look bleak, keeping the group focused on the future and on the larger picture, and identifying and celebrating even the small successes all act to strengthen commitment and guard against discouragement and burnout.

At the same time, the leader has to ensure that there continues to be reason for optimism and successes to celebrate by being realistic. It's also part of her job to act as a reality check, and keep the group from taking on more than it can accomplish. Success is usually incremental, step by step. In guiding those steps, and making sure that the group doesn't try to run before it can walk, the collaborative leader not only safeguards the group's effectiveness, but provides motivation as well.

### **Leadership Element #4: Be flexible; be unyielding**

Be flexible in:

- Trying out new ideas, and ideas from unusual or unlikely sources
- Changing course when the situation demands it
- Letting go of something that's not working
- Creating opportunities for more participation

Be unyielding in:

- Protecting the integrity of the open, collaborative process
- Inclusiveness
- Keeping the group on track
- Advocating for what's in the best interests of the organization or community as a whole

### **Leadership Element #5: Check your ego at the door**

As a good collaborative leader, you have to let go of your own ego, and forget about taking credit or being seen as a hero. The role calls for contributing to problem-solving and decisions, but only as a member of the group. The group has to go through its own process, and you, as leader, have to accept the decision it comes to.

This doesn't mean you can't argue for a different position, or that you can't refuse to participate in something you consider unethical. It's important, and is in fact your duty, to model reason and integrity. But while you shouldn't budge on integrity, your reasoning may be faulty, or may simply fail to convince others. If you make your argument forcefully, and people don't buy it, integrity dictates that you respect the process and go along with what's decided.

If you're absolutely certain that the group's plan is suicidal, you can, of course, refuse to participate. But you can't force a collaborative enterprise into a path it's not willing to take.

In addition, you have to encourage ideas from all quarters, and encourage new leadership from within the group. Often, you may step aside while others assume leadership on particular issues. In some situations, it may be best for you to step aside permanently, and cede leadership entirely. The ability to do that may be the true mark of a collaborative leader.

## Summary

Collaborative leadership is the leadership of a process, rather than of people. It means maintaining a process that allows for the inclusion of all stakeholders involved in an issue or organization or community effort; that depends on collaborative problem-solving and decision-making; and that is open and open-ended, with no foreordained conclusions. It is particularly valuable in situations where "no one is in charge," where the size and complexity of problems make it impossible for any individual or organization alone to effect change.

Collaborative leadership encourages ownership of the collaborative enterprise, builds trust and minimizes turf issues, allows for more and better information, leads to better and more effective solutions, encourages new leadership from within the collaboration, empowers the group or community, and can change the way a whole community operates. It can also take inordinate amounts of time, and requires that leaders deal with conflict and resistance to the collaborative process, bite their tongues as the group moves in directions they don't agree with, and subordinate their egos to the process of the group.

In general, the advantages far outweigh the disadvantages, but not in every situation. The best times for collaborative leadership are when the timing is right; when complex and serious problems arise; when stakeholders are characterized by diversity and/or a variety of interests; when other solutions haven't worked; when an issue affects a whole organization or community; or when empowerment is a goal of the process from the beginning.

While collaborative leaders may come from anywhere, they usually have in common community credibility; the ability to relate comfortably to everyone in the community; good facilitation skills; the ability to be catalysts; a commitment to the collaborative process; and a commitment to the common good, rather than to narrow interests.

To be a good collaborative leader, you have to lead, maintain, and safeguard the collaborative process; understand and use the leadership context (the community and the nature of the problem you're facing); be a motivator with a firm footing in reality; be flexible in your dealings with people and inflexible in your defense of the inclusiveness, openness, and collaborative nature of the process; and leave your ego needs at home. If you can do all that, the chances are good that your collaborative effort will succeed.