# Collaborative Leadership

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## Abstract

Collaborative leadership is vital for addressing global challenges our world faces today. By leveraging diverse perspectives and expertise, it enhances innovation, optimizes resource utilization, and builds resilience. Rooted in participative leadership theories, collaborative leadership emphasizes teamwork and shared decision-making. Drawing insights from biblical foundations, modern management theories, and the author's thesis on polycentric leadership, this article highlights the relevance and practical applications of collaborative leadership. The article supplements these insights with two case studies to strengthen the argument.

**Key Words:** collaborative leadership, participatory leadership, polycentric leadership, polycentric mission

## Introduction

Collaborative leadership has become indispensable in our world due to the intricate nature of global challenges. Issues such as climate change, pandemics, and economic inequality are multifaceted and require cooperation across various sectors, disciplines, and geographical boundaries. In this context, collaborative leadership facilitates the pooling of resources, expertise, and information essential for devising comprehensive solutions.

The rapid advancement of technology has further emphasized the need for collaborative leadership. With the world more interconnected than ever, leveraging technology for effective collaboration enables organizations and individuals to share knowledge and resources efficiently. Diverse perspectives and expertise are imperative for addressing complex problems. Collaborative leadership brings together individuals from different backgrounds and experiences, fostering innovation and offering multifaceted approaches to problem-solving.

Collaboration not only enhances innovation but also optimizes resource utilization, making it possible to achieve more with limited resources. It builds resilience by creating supportive networks and sharing best practices, thereby enabling organizations to adapt and respond effectively to crises. Moreover, collaborative leadership aligns with the growing emphasis on social responsibility and sustainability within the business community today, allowing organizations to work together towards positive societal and environmental change (Heyward, 2020). Ultimately, collaborative leadership is essential for navigating the complexities of today's world, driving innovation, building resilience, and creating meaningful impact on a global scale.

Collaborative leadership has garnered increasing attention in both academic discourse and practical organizational settings. Rooted in Kurt Lewin's research on participative leadership, this collaborative approach emphasizes the involvement of team members in decision-making processes (Lewin, 1938). *Harvard Business Review* suggests, "Business in the 21st Century will be defined by having a Collaborative Advantage" (Fayad et al., 2024).

Beyond these modern management theories, this article proposes a deeper exploration into the origins of collaborative leadership, drawing insights from Scripture. By examining the trinitarian

model of leadership and various instances of shared leadership in the Bible, this article aims to elucidate the timeless relevance of collaboration in leadership.

## Biblical Foundations of Collaborative Leadership

The concept of collaboration finds its roots in the very creation narrative, where God, in his pluralistic expression, declares, "Let us make man in our own image" (Genesis 1:26). This divine example sets a precedent for leadership characterized by shared authority and mutual interaction. Throughout biblical history, instances of collaborative leadership abound, from Moses and Aaron leading the Israelites to the establishment of prophets to advise kings. The New Testament further reinforces this model through the development of elders and deacons, underscoring the importance of shared responsibility and mutual accountability.

At the heart of collaborative leadership lies the trinitarian relationship of God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This divine communion serves as the epitome of polycentric leadership, where distinct persons operate in unity through their unique roles and responsibilities. Drawing strength and wisdom from this triune God, leaders are called to embrace a model that transcends hierarchy and power dynamics, focusing instead on communion, service, and love. This trinitarian perspective emphasizes mutual vulnerability, joy, and participatory engagement, inviting leaders to partner with God in his ongoing mission in the world.

The very nature of God as a communal being underscores the importance of cultivating communities reflective of the divine image. In striving to emulate the trinitarian model, leaders are tasked with nurturing communities characterized by reconciliation, interdependence, mutuality, diversity, and openness. These characteristics extend not only to the relationships among leaders but also to the broader community under their guidance. The Trinity serves as a profound example of polycentric leadership, where multiple centers of authority coalesce in harmony, mirroring the interconnectedness and relational dynamics essential for effective collaboration.

In practical terms, embracing the trinitarian model of collaborative leadership requires mutual respect, appreciation, and recognition of each individual's gifts and experiences. Leaders are called to embody traits of interdependence, self-surrender, and self-giving, fostering a culture of inclusivity and shared ownership. By aligning their leadership approach with the divine blueprint exemplified by the Trinity, leaders can cultivate communities of authenticity, unity, and purpose, ultimately advancing God's kingdom agenda of love, justice, and reconciliation.

## Key Principles and Skills of Collaborative Leadership

Along with biblical foundations, contemporary literature offers valuable insights into the principles of collaborative leadership. Herminia Ibarra in *Harvard Business Review* (Ibarra & Hansen, 2011) emphasizes four key principles essential for effective collaborative leadership:

- connecting people and ideas across networks, movements and organizations
- leveraging diverse talent
- modeling collaborative behavior at the top
- providing strong guidance to prevent stagnation

These principles align closely with the biblical narratives of shared leadership, emphasizing the importance of unity, diversity, and visionary guidance.

In addition to principles, collaborative leaders require a diverse set of skills to navigate complex organizational landscapes successfully. These skills include

- balancing motivations across different groups
- adopting an adaptive leadership approach
- possessing contextual awareness
- integrating across networks
- demonstrating strong interpersonal and relationship management skills.

These traits, rooted in humility, empathy, integrity, and effective communication, enable leaders to foster trust, facilitate collaboration, and drive collective action.

## Practical Applications

Herminia Ibarra and Morten Hansen's article on "Collaborative Leadership" (Ibarra & Hansen, 2011) and Stanley McChrystal's book *Team of Teams* (McChrystal, 2015) offer practical frameworks and case studies to illustrate the application of collaborative leadership. Moreover, Gitte Frederiksen's TED Talk (Frederiksen, 2022) underscores the importance of flattening hierarchies, sharing knowledge, and fostering kindness and empathy in collaborative environments. By embracing collaborative leadership principles and practices, organizations can nurture innovation, create safe spaces for experimentation, and foster meaningful relationships that drive sustainable growth and societal impact.

Accentuating these approaches also includes the importance of integrating these principles into practical leadership strategies, emphasizing adaptability, contextual intelligence, and relationship management. Furthermore, the role of creating safe spaces and fostering relationships are essential components of collaborative leadership. Humility, integrity, and effective communication are vital interpersonal skills for leaders to cultivate. Leaders must embrace a "servant first" mentality, eschewing hierarchical titles in favor of inclusive collaboration.

*A3/SIM Case Study: Collaborative Leadership in Japan*

A3 (A3, 2024a), the mission organization I serve as president, in 2011 forged a strategic partnership with SIM to deploy missionaries to Japan. This partnership leveraged SIM's operational support and mobilization alongside A3's extensive experience in Japan. Subsequently, in 2020 control of A3's religious status in Japan transitioned from A3 International (A3i) to A3 Japan (A3J), with A3i retaining supervision of the missionary team.

governance structure

The partnership's governance structure involves A3i overseeing and supervising, A3J strategically deploying missionaries and managing legal status in Japan, and SIM's Sending Office handling employment, financial accountability, and HR policies. Additional stakeholders include missionaries' local church partners in Japan, missionary sending churches, and SIM International. This structure exemplifies the trait of connecting people and ideas across networks, as it facilitates the exchange of resources, expertise, and networks, enriching the missionary deployment process.

Japanese leadership (A3J) sets the directional priorities and works in partnership with A3i to deploy missionaries across Japan in partnership with Japanese pastors. A leadership team from A3i, sent by SIM, works hand in hand with Japanese leaders to find appropriate churches to place the missionaries (called "missional partners" by A3i) to serve with and under the direction of the

local church. The SIM team selects, and trains the missional partners in their sending offices but the local leadership team equips them for their field assignment. The synergies between Japanese leaders, A3i and A3J's missional partnership leadership team with SIM work in collaboration to serve the overall mission to help serve God's kingdom in Japan.

benefits

The polycentric structure allows each entity to focus on its strengths, promoting efficient deployment and resource utilization. The structure also fosters a collaborative environment within which multiple organizations contribute to the fruitful ministry in Japan. Leveraging diverse talent from various entities involved, including A3, SIM, local church partners, and sending churches, enhances the effectiveness and adaptability of the missionary team in navigating the complex challenges of mission work in Japan.

challenges

Key challenges include facilitating collaboration and strengthening relationships among organizations. Divergent lines of reporting and accountability create communication hurdles and potential policy conflicts, as evidenced by internet security and candidate screening issues. To address such challenges, the organizations' leaders must model collaborative behavior, actively engaging with each other, resolving conflicts amicably, and prioritizing the common mission over individual interests.

policy and strategy examples

Instances of misalignment between A3i and SIM policies highlight the need for collaborative resolution without undermining authority or trust. Similarly, disagreements over candidate screening underscore the importance of building relationships and fostering communal leadership.

themes and reflections

The partnership exhibits strengths in values-based decision-making, freedom in governance, and diversity among stakeholders. However, challenges persist in achieving collaborative, communal, and relational goals due to limited communication and relationship-building opportunities. Providing strong guidance from leadership is essential to prevent stagnation and ensure progress within the partnership. By providing clear direction, setting strategic priorities, and offering support and resources to address challenges effectively, leaders empower teams to adapt to changing circumstances, innovate, and continue advancing the mission in Japan.

future considerations

As the partnership expands, leaders must address scalability, manage ambiguity, and invest in strengthening horizontal connections. Questions regarding leadership responsibility and overall benefits of polycentric governance remain pertinent for ongoing evaluation and improvement.

Collaborative leadership in polycentric governance presents both opportunities and challenges in missionary deployment. By addressing communication barriers, fostering relational connections, and continuously evaluating the model's effectiveness, leaders can navigate complexities and maximize the partnership's impact in fulfilling the mission in Japan. The integration of key traits of collaborative leadership, such as connecting people and ideas across

networks, leveraging diverse talent, modeling collaborative behavior among leaders, and providing strong guidance, is integral to the success of this partnership.

*Anonymous Mission Case Study: Nurturing Collaborative Leadership*

In 2017, our organization embarked on a transformative journey, transitioning from a traditional single leadership model to a collaborative International Director team (Anonymous, 2023). Rooted in principles of trinitarian theology, teamwork, trust, stewardship, and diversity, our approach to collaborative leadership has emphasized the importance of connecting people and ideas, leveraging diverse talent, modeling collaborative behavior, and providing strong guidance to prevent stagnation. This case study explores our experience, highlighting how these key traits have shaped our journey towards effective collaborative leadership.

Trinitarian theology

Central to our approach is the principle of trinitarian theology, which underscores the interconnectedness and mutual deference among equals. Just as the Trinity embodies perfect unity amidst diversity, we have sought to foster connections across networks, movements, and organizations. By embracing a holistic view of leadership that transcends individual silos, we have endeavored to create synergies and foster innovation through collaboration.

team

At the heart of collaborative leadership is the recognition that diverse talent is a valuable asset to be leveraged. By assembling a team with complementary skills, experiences, and perspectives, we have sought to harness the collective intelligence and creativity of our members. We believe that embracing diversity not only enriches decision-making but also fosters a culture of inclusion and belonging, where every voice is valued and heard.

trust

Trust is the bedrock of effective collaboration, providing the foundation upon which relationships are built and ideas are shared. As leaders, we have endeavored to model collaborative behavior by demonstrating transparency, integrity, and accountability in our interactions. By fostering an environment of trust and psychological safety, we have empowered team members to take risks, challenge assumptions, and innovate without fear of judgment or reprisal.

stewardship

Effective collaborative leadership requires strong guidance to steer the collective towards shared goals and objectives. As stewards of our organization's mission and values, we believe that we provided strategic direction and clarity of purpose to prevent stagnation and ensure forward momentum. By articulating a compelling vision and setting clear expectations, we have inspired confidence and commitment among team members, enabling them to align their efforts towards common goals.

diversity

Diversity is not only a hallmark of effective collaboration but also a source of strength and resilience. By embracing diversity in all its forms—cultural, ethnic, gender, and ideological—our leadership team has fostered a culture of inclusion and belonging where everyone could thrive. Recognizing the inherent value of diverse perspectives, we have actively sought out input from

across the organization, leveraging the collective wisdom and insights of our members to drive innovation and excellence.

structure

Our (anonymous mission) structure distributes its leadership, starting with a team from across many nations. Ever since long before this global team was in place, our teams have operated independently in settings across the world. Each team has had a leader and a team leader overseer to ensure alignment with our overall objectives, but the teams have been independent and automous in making most decisions based on the local realities. The team leader overseer has simply provided coaching and support when needed and usually has held a monthly call and periodic visit to ensure the teams were operating well. In this way collaboration has occurred in multiple ways:

- through the global leadership team providing the overall directional leadership for our mission;
- through our team leader overseers working in collaboration between the global team and local teams; and,
- through the local team leader and team structures in hundreds of locations worldwide.

This distributed leadership structure has fit well with our (anonymous mission) collaborative leadership approach.

challenges

Addressing common questions and concerns, we have sought to clarify the practical aspects of our collaborative leadership model. From decision-making processes to division of responsibilities, we have emphasized the importance of modeling collaborative behavior among the leaders and providing strong guidance to prevent stagnation. By integrating these key traits into our leadership approach, we have sought to create a culture of collaboration and empowerment that inspires excellence and drives results.

As we reflect on our journey towards collaborative leadership, we are reminded of the transformative power of connection, diversity, trust, and stewardship. By embracing these key traits and integrating them into our leadership approach, by God's grace we have cultivated a culture of collaboration and innovation that transcends individual boundaries and fosters collective success. Moving forward, we remain committed to nurturing and strengthening collaborative leadership within our organization and beyond, knowing that together we can achieve greater impact and create positive change in the world.

**Conclusion: Importance of Collaborative Leadership in Today's World**

Collaborative leadership is indispensable in addressing the multifaceted challenges of today's world. From climate change to pandemics, complex issues necessitate collaborative efforts across sectors, disciplines, and geographical boundaries. Rapid technological advancement further underscores the need for collaborative leadership to leverage diverse perspectives and expertise, foster innovation, and maximize efficiency. Moreover, collaborative leadership promotes social responsibility, sustainability, and resilience, aligning with stakeholder expectations and driving positive change at scale.

Collaborative leadership emerges as a timeless and indispensable approach to navigating the complexities of leadership in today's interconnected world. By drawing insights from biblical narratives and contemporary management literature, this article underscores the significance of collaboration, diversity, and visionary guidance in effective leadership. As organizations strive to address global challenges, foster innovation, and promote social responsibility, collaborative leadership offers a transformative pathway towards achieving shared goals and creating a more inclusive and sustainable future.

As I shared in my book *Polycentric Mission Leadership*:

Success for mission leaders hinges on dependence on God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is in this trinitarian relationship that a polycentric model draws significance. God the Father sends the Son and Holy Spirit to lead using their own unique roles and responsibilities. Together, they form a triad of leadership operating in unity through their diversity. It is in this style that leaders draw their strength and wisdom, knowing that only in being connected to the vine will we bear fruit (Handley, 2022, kindle location 165).

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