



COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP: A PROCESS FOR DIALOGUE-BASED PROFOUND CHANGE

BY KALI SAPOSNICK

“A small group of thoughtful and concerned citizens can change the world. Indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”

—Margaret Mead

One afternoon in May 1992, a teenage boy walked into Morning Star Baptist Church in Boston, MA, to attend a classmate’s funeral. Some gang members in attendance knew he was a rival gang member and thought he had come to disrupt the service, so they shot at him. Hearing the commotion, the pastor came out of his study to see several kids stabbing the young man in front of the altar.

The Morning Star incident, as it became widely known, sparked a series of meetings among black clergy throughout Greater Boston to discuss the alarming increase in youth homicide in their communities. Since the late 1980s, many of them had been deeply concerned about the escalating violence among young people (in 1990 Boston had 62 homicide victims aged 24 or younger), but few had taken concrete steps to address it. After the incident, a small group of pastors—Jeffrey Brown, a Baptist minister in Cambridge; Ray Hammond, a Methodist minister in Jamaica Plain; Eugene Rivers, a Pentecostal minister in Four Corners, Dorchester; and Sam Wood, a nondenominational minister in Grove Hall, Roxbury—decided to work together to figure out a solution.

The four ministers based their collaboration on the following questions: How can we make the transition from violence to inquiry? What principles and processes are required to effect the profound change we so obviously need? They decided to walk the streets together and talk to gang members on late Friday evenings, focusing on Four Corners. They figured if they could make a difference

in the most dangerous neighborhood in Boston, they could impact the entire city. The responses they received from young people evolved into themes that formed the basis of the alliance they created called the “TenPoint Coalition.” TenPoint then became a catalyst for mobilizing the entire city to support at-risk youth.

Taking a Stand

For Reverend Jeffrey Brown, deciding to take on inner-city violence was an evolutionary process. Although he had preached at an inner-city church since 1987, most of the members of his congregation commuted to his service from the suburbs, where he himself lived. As the homicide rate skyrocketed, Jeff would dutifully speak about the violence to his congregation—but still drive past the problem back to his home. Finally, in January 1990, when a teenager was murdered by gang members a hundred yards from his church, he decided to act.

Jeff was determined to discover the source of the violence plaguing the entire community. He volunteered at the high school but soon realized that the youth he wanted to talk to weren’t going to school—they were hanging out at parks and on street corners. So he decided to walk the streets, even though his congregation objected. At some point, Jeff realized that, in order to achieve the community he wanted to be a part of, he had to be willing to risk the community he thought he had.

Jeff felt particularly challenged to suspend his assumptions, the many cultural myths he had acquired about inner-city kids. He believed, for example, that they were completely materialistic; spending time with them convinced him that their mate-

rialism was comparable to anyone else’s in Western society. He also believed that kids doing or dispensing drugs were cold and heartless; when he got to know them, he saw them exhibit a whole range of emotions and observed that they were mostly scared to death. Jeff also thought he was going into a “godless” world; he has since had some of his most profound theological conversations with these youth. Once he suspended his assumptions, Jeff was able to build relationships with many of these kids.

Building Bridges

The other ministers in the coalition’s core group had similar revelations: Each had to risk *the answer he already had* to unearth *the answer that was needed*. Through rich conversations, which they later learned were based on the fundamental principles of dialogue, they generated ideas they would never have thought of individually. The group’s primary goal was to reduce the homicide rate in the area. What they achieved went beyond any of their expectations—building bridges throughout the community.

The first bridge emerged through interactions with the Boston police department, whose gang-unit officers wondered what ministers were doing walking dangerous streets late at night. At community meetings, when officers would pull a pastor aside to question him, they would be unexpectedly gratified to find someone who appreciated their own struggles working with gangs and could offer insight into the troubled youth.

Next, TenPoint formed a partnership with the court system, because the ministers had begun to vouch for and support court-involved youth when

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they appeared before a judge or probation officer. Like the police, the probation officers asked them about their involvement and wanted to collaborate. Once the ministers realized the two groups normally didn't talk with one another, they initiated meetings to bring them together. The circle of committed people continued to widen, as community and city agencies learned about the group's efforts and decided to participate; even the private sector got involved once they realized that reduced violence was good for business.

Eventually, Boston's youth violence began to decrease dramatically: The youth homicide rate dropped from 151 in 1991 to zero in 1995. The Boston police commissioner reported to Jeff that, at an annual command staff meeting to discuss budgets and purchases, instead of their usual request for bigger guns and more sophisticated surveillance equipment, his officers asked if they could create a program to find jobs for street kids.

Principles of Collective Leadership

Since that success, Jeff has formed the Circle Institute with Bill Isaacs, founder and president of *DIA•logos*, a company offering transformational leadership programs in dialogue and dialogic consulting and change projects for organizations. Together they have begun to reflect upon and articulate some of the principles and processes for collective leadership:

Magnetic Identity. The starting point for a group discovering the power of collective leadership is to ask, "What is my stand? Where will I focus my energy?" According to Bill, the "charge" you carry is a function of what you yourself put most stock in. When you position yourself around something positive, you tend to organize yourself accordingly. Not only do you move in that direction, the things that support your vision will be drawn to you. In this way, you can polarize your environment to lift it up. Jeff and his colleagues took a stand by adopting a particular spiritual orientation that polarized and expanded their world. For instance, many members of Jeff's

church initially resisted his youth outreach efforts. But as increasing numbers of young people began to attend the weekly services—including relatives of church members—the congregation began to support his change initiative.

Two in Agreement. "Two in agreement" represents the seed of the collective. It is the discovery of an already existing resonance between at least two people that can be cultivated and expanded with conscious attention and awareness. Agreement, Bill notes, does not mean that people necessarily agree conceptually, but that they connect at a deeper level. This principle builds on the first in that two people, closely aligned in their stand, can polarize interest or response from others, either attracting or repelling them.

Resonant Containers. Most groups collapse under pressure. Creating a container—that is, setting a pattern of relationship where an increasingly large number of people are in agreement—gives a group the capacity to hold pressure. When a core group of people can hold an intense pressure as they inquire into the questions, not the answers, to problems, gradually more and more people can become involved.

Differentiation. As people come into agreement with one another, something counterintuitive begins to happen: They become more distinctive and differentiated, not more alike. This principle emerges from the idea that, as people become more aligned with others, they can relax and become more authentic. Further, by encouraging diversity, a group is able to encompass far more complexity than if it were uniform. Members develop a broader range of vision than before.

Operating from Love. Coming from a place of love creates an inclusiveness that leaves nobody out. This does not mean operating with sentimentality or emotion. It means behaving with awareness, committing acts of kindness, going to where people are instead of expecting them to come to you, suspending assumptions about them, and so on. In the end, the energy that brings and holds a container together is love.

When a group practices these

principles, they produce a charged energy field that subtly polarizes people's thoughts and feelings toward a concrete goal.

Putting It into Practice

Based on the results of TenPoint and other large, multinational organizations, Bill and Jeff have been evolving a sequence of actions for putting collective leadership into practice. They call this process "sea change," based on a phrase from Shakespeare's play *The Tempest* that indicates a universal shifting. Sea change refers to the kind of profound transformation that cannot be understood without experiencing it and that is presumed to be impossible. To foster this kind of transformation in organizations requires creating cascading patterns of deep agreement and genuine resonance throughout the system. When this flow occurs, producing genuine change feels more effortless and requires much less struggle and pain than we're used to.

Sea change also refers to a shift toward something more stable and lasting than previously existed. For example, as TenPoint helped certain groups in Boston shift their pattern of relationships, that city experienced a drastic reduction of youth violence. Unfortunately, a city's wider ills cannot be cured permanently by one group, because an urban center is part of a wider ecosystem that constantly influences it. Nevertheless, Jeff and Bill are struck by the degree of profound change that occurred over the past eight years. More than ever, they are committed to advancing collaborative leadership so that, ultimately, people can influence the thought and emotional patterns that underlie any system, no matter how large or daunting. ■

Kali Saposnick is publications editor at Pegasus Communications. This article is based on a presentation that Reverend Jeffrey Brown and William Isaacs gave at the 2001 *Systems Thinking in Action*® Conference. Recordings of this session are available from Pegasus Communications, Inc.

The Circle Institute is a nonprofit organization based in Cambridge, MA. It is affiliated with **DIA•logos**, which uses dialogue and systems intervention to bring together traditionally conflicting constituencies to foster collective leadership for organizational and community change.