



STIMULATING “LEADERFUL” CHANGE IN A SENIOR MANAGEMENT NETWORK

BY JONATHAN RAE LIN, WITH MEMBERS OF THE
EXECUTIVE DEVELOPMENT SERIES OF THE
BOSTON CONSORTIUM FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

Chief administrators from enterprises within the educational sector are lamenting what has been called “the perfect economic storm,” caused by the unfortunate confluence of increased costs, decreased revenues, and falling endowments. Fortunately, new sources of value are emerging from what was once considered to be the “soft” side of management, such as shared collaborative ventures that extend across the networks in which these enterprises conduct their businesses. If you’re a manager who would like to reach out in this fashion to enterprises within your value chain or practice field, how might you organize a network that embodies a collective mindset and a commitment to collaborative behavior? How might you create a leadership development approach that is inclusive and that implants leadership, not only into each individual, but into his or her host organization and across the network?

These questions formed the challenge that The Boston Consortium for Higher Education (TBC) faced in the fall of 2001. Founded in 1996, TBC’s mission is to develop new and creative ideas that can improve quality and produce cost savings among Boston’s world-renowned institutions of higher learning. Its primary *modus operandi* is to promote results-oriented collaboration by developing trusting relationships across its member schools so that each might engage the creativity and energy that reside within the network system. In this way, TBC attempts to broker solutions to what may seem to be intractable problems. For example, the Consortium’s Environmental Health and Safety Group found an

environmentally conscious way to save member schools from spending significant revenues on training for handling hazardous materials. By working together, the group members customized a shared online training program that was delivered through a joint web site.

TBC’s distinguishing feature as a network is to promote collaboration not through hierarchical control but through genuine exploration and mutual learning using facilitated work groups. However, while it had become successful working with middle managers from the member institutions, it had not sufficiently influenced senior management to adopt a comparable level of collaborative engagement. So, in the fall of 2001, the executive director of the Consortium, Phil DiChiara, commissioned a unique executive breakfast series for senior administrators in such capacities as chief financial officer, chief information officer, facilities director, and vice president of human resources. The series began with the popular theme of leadership development, but DiChiara dreamed that it could become much more. He envisioned the program as setting in motion a commitment to personal and professional development that would evolve into an enduring collective approach to leadership.

What prompted TBC’s interest in collective leadership was DiChiara’s abiding belief in leaders as intermediaries of mutual learning and mutual action. Such leaders don’t see their role as providing the direction that releases others to act. They instead encourage their staffs to act in their domain of expertise and to learn collectively what

they need to know. This process encourages a cascading approach that starts with the individual, expands to the department and organization, and ultimately extends between organizations across the network.

Leaderful Practice

TBC referred to this new brand of leadership as “leaderful practice,” a term used by management professor Joe Raelin in his book, *Creating Leaderful Organizations: How to Bring Out Leadership in Everyone* (Berrett-Koehler, 2003). What attracted the executive staff of The Boston Consortium to Raelin’s work was that, while many writers have suggested that leaders consult with their followers or that leaders learn to step aside to let others take the reins, Joe goes a step further by advocating a mutual model that involves everyone in leadership—transforming it from being an individual property into a truly collaborative practice that individuals and teams co-create.

Of course, many organizations, academic or otherwise, are hesitant to embrace this form of leadership. In leaderful practice, rather than await instructions from the official team supervisor, any member of a team can act under the simple principle that anyone who is connected to an organizational practice should have a say in its planning and implementation. A leaderful approach may take some courage, especially in organizations in which leaders have historically exerted hierarchical control, because it frames the position leader as the person *without* all the answers. It also requires a certain level of vulnerability

Continued on next page >

> Continued from previous page

and trust to rely on others to lead when it is their time. Yet this approach can release the multiple perspectives and out-of-the-box thinking that foster creative solutions to systemic problems.

In order to introduce participants to the concept of leaderful practice, TBC invited Joe Raelin to participate in developing what came to be known as the Executive Development Series, initially a set of workshops that would expose participants to a wide-ranging “perspectives approach” to leadership. The logic of the perspectives approach is that there is no fixed model for effective leadership; instead, there are many lenses from which to view leadership, and each lens can produce a set of unique practices. Once we’ve considered these different lenses, we can develop a model of leadership that fits with both our personal and professional aspirations and settings. Raelin didn’t see the perspectives approach as constituting the essence of the Executive Development Series; rather, he hoped that it would serve as a take-off point from which participants would gradually become engaged in work-based applications of emerging practices in their own environment.

The Series gradually evolved as a three-stage process, taking participants through increasing levels of personal and professional commitment and risk:

- Stage One: Perspectives Discussion
- Stage Two: Learning Team
- Stage Three: Project Team

In Stage One, as mentioned above, participants explored alternative perspectives of leadership theory and practice. They decided to meet initially for six sessions and, from a menu of 12 perspectives presented by Raelin, chose to consider the leader as steward, as team facilitator, as change agent, as meaning-maker, as conflict manager, and as manager of professionals. Each perspective was supported by readings that were carefully selected not only to characterize the perspective in question but also to provide a wide variety of views in order to stimulate thoughtful dialogue.

In Stage Two, most of the participants indicated a desire to move on to a different form of experience. While they enjoyed the readings associated with the perspectives approach, they wanted to do more than just think about them; they wanted to experiment with the ideas in their own professional work settings. Doing so would allow them to test whether the theories they were reading about were actually applicable in practice. In the shift from Stage One to Stage Two, the discussion group evolved

A leaderful approach may take some courage, because it frames the position leader as the person without all the answers.

into a learning team. Participants chose to serve as a sounding board and a support to each other as they began to convert their theories of leadership into practice and, in turn, their practices back into theory. Testing the theory of collective leadership, for example, one member reported, “I used less structure within my work team to create more opportunities for others to feel comfortable to step up.”

After five months had elapsed in Stage Two, another substantial subset from the learning team asked to move on to yet another level of experience, now known as Stage Three. The participants reasoned that their reflections on their leadership experiments, though helpful, were nonetheless based on what the individual reported was happening rather than on direct observation. A more reliable form of feedback would arise from actually observing one another’s leadership behaviors. Why not, then, engage in a project together? The participants believed that there would be no greater opportunity for real-time experience and collective reflection on that experience than from doing work together.

But what project should they choose? The team assembled to con-

sider a number of options. After thorough deliberation, they settled on a project to deliver the same program that they had experienced to what they began to refer to as a “second-generation” of TBC administrators. This second group would go through the same stages as the original, or “first-generation,” participants had, except that the facilitation would come from the initial group, not from Joe Raelin. These first-generation facilitators would continue to meet with Raelin to reflect upon and learn from their experiences in guiding others.

Learning Journal

While going through this program, the participants in both generations of TBC’s Executive Development Series created a supportive community that allowed them to talk freely about their fears and failures as well as their hopes and successes. They were committed to bringing their own lessons on leadership to others in their home organizations and throughout the Consortium. But why stop there? Both teams also became committed to a “third-person” form of learning that could benefit other networks that might want to create their own collaborative communities.

As a result, the teams decided to study themselves through a “learning journal,” a written history of their experience in all its critical detail. They hired a consultant to survey both generations of participants in the Series to learn how these groups transformed themselves into leaderful learning teams. The learning journal revealed what members agreed were the critical ingredients to the development of a leaderful management network: personal readiness on the part of participants, sensitive facilitation, and the presence of peer exemplars. All three conditions need to work in tandem, or the team is unlikely to be successful.

The learning journal reported that, at the beginning, people were at different levels of personal readiness to change. Those who were more ready than others were able to serve as peer exemplars and help to enhance the

Continued on next page >

feeling of safety and encourage others to grow. The facilitator, meanwhile, maintained a balance between freedom and control, letting members take over the facilitation of the team over time. At that point, the original facilitator effectively worked himself out of a job.

Creating leaderful management networks is not merely a question of sharing data or services; it involves learning how to truly collaborate so as to invent new ways to lead together and unlock any knowledge that might benefit the network as a whole. Member organizations need to learn from

and create synergies between one another. The capital to be generated is not only economic; it is also social. As one of the team members stated in the learning journal, "I have forged connections with colleagues that I would not have ordinarily had time for. It has increased my confidence in my own preparation, learning, and judgment. I am eager to go forward and extend this experience into my work environment." At The Boston Consortium, as more administrators experience the value of leaderful practice, this form of collective leadership will permeate the

entire network and, perhaps in part based on this article, from there to other social networks. ■

Jon Raelin is a research consultant with The Boston Consortium. He conducted the "Learning Journal" that reported the history of the leadership development experiences from which this article was based. Full collaborators in this project were the members of the Executive Breakfast Series Teams who presented at the Society for Organizational Learning's Fourth Research Greenhouse: Mark Braun, Bill Gasper, Phil DiChiara, Jim Kreinbring, Pattie Orr, Joe Raelin, Vicky Sirianni, Susan Vogt (deceased), and Colleen Wheeler.