

Leadership for the future: Collaboration

Podcast transcript

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Transcript

We are living in a time of complexity and uncertainty, when there is no simple answer to many of the problems being faced. These are interconnected within the broader social, political, economic and cultural context of our lives today, as well as, the organisations and institutions that are part of that, including in higher education. The ground is constantly changing. To look at the world through a single lens will not give you the whole picture. There will be things that exist on the edge or outside of our peripheral vision that we cannot see or understand through our own eyes.

Adaptability, Collaboration and Authenticity came out of the Advance HE's 2023 Leadership Survey as three core leadership qualities needed to navigate the current context in higher education, a shift towards a more emotionally intelligent style of leadership, one about caring and communication, rather than command and control.

So, why is collaboration so critical to leadership and how we work in higher education?

My name is Dr Joanne Coysh and I am a senior consultant in the Leadership, Organisational Development and research team with Advance HE.

The importance of creating spaces and opportunities for collaboration is a core part of my work over the last 25 years, working with international organisations to design and create more collaborative, participatory and inclusive spaces for problem-solving, learning, planning and decision-making around the world. These spaces bring people together across countries, disciplines, contexts, sectors and identities. They are diverse, rich and full of knowledge, experiences, ideas and creativity. The idea of involving the people affected in the decisions and planning of programmes that affect their lives is not new in community development both in the UK and overseas. And when done well, collaboration can have transformative outcomes and impact.

Collaboration leads to better informed decision making around complex issues, if done well and in a participatory and inclusive way, it can bring in a multiplicity of voices so people feel heard, share diverse experiences and knowledge, it opens-up debate to various ways of moving forward and because of engagement and participation can generate ownership and motivation to ensure any decisions or ideas are seen through to the end. Therefore, actions can have more impact, influence and be sustainable.

Collaboration and creating collaborative spaces where people connect, share ideas and experiences, explore challenges and develop collective plans can have a powerful impact on how people 'feel' about themselves, their work and their organisation.

True collaboration can build a sense of belonging and working with others around a common agenda, it engages us in conversations and can ignite our curiosity about others experiences and ideas. We feel a sense of connection when people share their stories in that we realise we are not alone in our challenges and a willingness and sense of empowerment by being engaged in doing something together. In this way, collaboration can improve wellbeing.

But collaboration is not a quick fix or easy approach. Building collaboration takes time and it requires intentionality and a commitment to process. It requires moving away from the 'we just need to get it done' mindset to one which acknowledges the value of participation and working with others as a critical part of the outcome. It is not about the destination but the journey – and collaboration means valuing and participating the journey.

Collaboration needs to be built into both the culture and operations of organisations. This is why in many time-pressed organisations, collaboration is viewed as a necessary evil and a tick box exercise as part of a consultation process rather than meaningful dialogue and something of real value.

However, as the Leadership Survey showed, many people see collaboration as an important leadership quality.

So, what are some practical considerations to keep in mind with collaboration and the conditions needed to build it?

Firstly, collaboration is both an intention and a practice. This means it is not about the 'I' but the 'we' in leadership and asking what can we achieve together and how can we collectively do this? It requires not only a shift in the mindset and behaviours of those in senior positions and a willingness to let go and shift away from closed meeting spaces to connected, fluid and collaborative spaces and ways of working that are open, transparent and inclusive. I am sure there are many examples of what these can look like out in the world today and also within your own organisations.

As an intention, collaboration calls on us to actively seek out opportunities and ways of working across boundaries and breaking down silos. It requires a mindset of bringing people in rather than keeping them out, welcoming different voices, identities and perspectives and making space for them to be included.

As a practice, collaboration requires being on the journey for the long term consistently improving our approach and finding new opportunities to engage inside and outside our organisations to work with others. It is not a quick fix solution and takes time both in terms of shifting our own mindset and approach. Working with others, gathering different perspectives and views does take time and commitment.

Secondly, collaboration is cultural and structural. It is a combination of cultivating behaviours that build collaboration in everyday life, the structures and systems which support it. Time for open conversations rather than meetings. Valuing connection and intentionally making time

and space for it to happen. Creating and hosting spaces for conversations and creating connection and a culture where this is valued.

What are the personal qualities and behaviours that can encourage better collaboration and what might we need to work on? Active listening without judgement and being present, empathy and care for others, a curiosity and open-mindedness as to what you might or might not learn.

If we go into conversations, interactions or meetings with pre-set ideas of what we want to say and achieve, we are often not open to what emerges. While having an eye on the long-term vision, we can remain open and adaptive to how this might change over time and through the process of working together. Paying attention to how we are listening, letting go of control and being comfortable with not knowing can sometimes lead to unexpected and positive outcomes and change.

Thirdly, building collaboration requires some skill, knowledge and experience – it doesn't just happen - creating safe spaces, generating inquiry and dialogue, developing shared understandings and handling challenging conversations require an understanding group dynamics and group processes, facilitation and process design, observation and listening. Understanding the purpose and building a shared sense of purpose - setting the parameters so people are free to explore. We need the skills to host, facilitate, guide and coach.

Collaboration requires paying attention to the group, keeping them on course and guiding them through the conversations and interactions, as well as, encouraging a sense of responsibility of the group for what happens and how they move it forward. In the end collaboration is not something that can be imposed and something that is cultivated and practiced over time.

Fourthly, collaboration can be both invited and open. How we design and create spaces which invite collaboration does need preparation and creativity. We've all sat in meetings where there is no space for conversation, people are looking at their watches, ideas are presented rather than generated and where communication is a one-way transactional process. How can we create environments and spaces that promote meaningful, generative conversations, where people feel appreciated and valued, spaces that encourage creativity, ideas and innovation?

Collaboration does challenge hierarchical models of leadership and there will be people who find it challenging and may not initially be willing to participate. In my experience, working with those who want to participate, modelling and showing how it can work to others, invites and encourages others who may have been more sceptical to join, gradually building a culture of collaboration over time and creating the conditions that enable it.

I want to leave you with some question to think about:

How open are you to collaborating with others around problems and challenges?

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How open are you to involving others in decision-making processes and creating the spaces for collaboration across teams, roles, disciplines, sectors and identities?

What are your own barriers to collaboration? And where can you do some work?

Where are the existing spaces of collaboration and opportunities to build on these? Where can you open-up opportunities to include new people and perspectives in existing processes? How can you connect and work with others better?

And, what is one action you can take today to build collaboration?

Go on, reach out and connect! What have you got to lose?



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