

Collaboration and Leadership:

# Secrets of Success



# When problems are big and nobody's in charge, what can you do? Here are the keys.

By Richard Bush

**W**hat do you do when the scope of problems is beyond the capacity of one person, organization, or even the cooperation of two or three groups interested in change? Increasingly in these situations, the answer is: You collaborate.<sup>1</sup>

As has been reported in the pages of this journal, collaboration is difficult and in fact has its "dark side."<sup>2</sup> As a participant in several collaborations, however, my colleagues and I have found that collaboration can succeed, generating solutions to complex problems of many kinds.

In our case, the problem was that nonprofits in the St. Louis area weren't getting the management training they needed. While our region was blessed with several colleges, universities, training organizations, and consultants providing education for nonprofits, there was too much duplication, too many gaps in needed services, and fragmented and often ineffective delivery of what did exist.

The key to fixing this situation was the creation of the Nonprofit Services Consortium, a collaboration of four universities, the regional community foundation, three organizations providing technical assistance to arts' nonprofits, the area's grantmakers' organization, the regional United Way's management assistance program, and the region's NSFRE chapter. Creating this group of very different organizations was not easy, took time, and hinged on the leaders behind the effort.

For collaboration to succeed, a new kind of leadership is essential. Collaborative leaders must be able to do the following:

**1. Expand the Focus.** Collaborative leadership requires a different focus. That focus is more global and oriented toward better community as its primary goal. It's not about any one individual or organization or their successes.

**2. Spread Authority.** Collaborative leaders avoid hierarchies and relationships based on narrowly defined or poorly shared authority.

**3. Be Flexible.** Given the complexity of the environment, collaborative leaders prefer a flexible approach to solving problems.

**4. Take a Risk.** Collaborative leaders are by nature risk-takers. They are social and organizational entrepreneurs who gravitate toward untested but promising new forms of organization and problem solving.

**5. Draw on People's Strengths.** Leaders in successful collaborations practice leadership that's at once individual and collective. They pool strengths and leadership styles, using each member fully and effectively and as the changing environment or situation requires.

**6. Create New Leaders.** Members of a collaboration are willing to function with multiple leaders. Some of these leaders focus on the relational aspects of the collaboration. Some attend to the instrumental needs and interactions within the group. Others focus on direct tasks and the need for performance. All

are equally important.<sup>3</sup>

**7. Focus on Group Success.** Collaborative leaders worry more about collective success than individual longevity in leadership positions. They encourage and permit the shifting of the guard, recognizing this as healthy rather than threatening.

There is an abundance of collaborative leadership hidden within your organization and community. When setting out on the collaboration journey, find people with the above characteristics and the possibilities that go with them. Recruit people interested in helping individuals and groups reach their full

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# Partnership Is Key to Saving Wildlife



*Through the collaborative efforts of many organizations, these former poachers have been educated and turned into tiger protectors in eastern Russia.*



The Save the Tiger Fund (STF) understands that collaboration is crucial in the international effort to save endangered wildlife such as the tiger. The Fund is overseen by an independent council of some of the world's foremost zoologists and conservationists and is managed by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation. The Fund serves as a model nonprofit partnership, with alliances with dozens of other conservation organizations, including:

- the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF), which links tiger conservation programs across Asia, a major step in unifying the efforts of many conservation organizations
- the Amur Leopard and Tiger Alliance (ALTA), a coalition of 12 organizations that work cooperatively to ensure a future for Amur tigers and leopards in the wild
- the Tiger Information Center ([www.5tigers.org](http://www.5tigers.org)), dedicated to providing information to help preserve the remaining 5 subspecies of tigers
- the Tiger and Rhino Conservation Web site ([www.temwildlife.org](http://www.temwildlife.org)), which works to save endangered species by promoting alternative remedies.

The Fund has been successful in encouraging organizations to cooperate, pool resources, and share the limelight and in finding solutions to complicated conservation challenges, by following these precepts of collaboration:

- Be sure all collaborators share a compatible mission and vision.
- Include all partners when determining objectives and action plans.
- Use participative leadership to empower all partners.
- Determine the strengths of each partner, and make use of those strengths.
- Be creative in solving problems and making decisions. Encourage and reward creativity and risk-taking. ■

## A new kind of leadership is essential.

Barker, Joel A., *Future Edge: Discovering New Paradigms of Success*, New York: William Morrow & Company.

Pinchot, Gifford and Elizabeth Pinchot, *The End of Bureaucracy and the Rise of Intelligent Organization*, San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Richard Bush is associate professor in the Master of Public Administration program at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. Dr. Bush is also the director of a new American Humanics degree program in nonprofit leadership (Community & Nonprofit Leadership Initiative, American Humanics, SIU Edwardsville, 3327 Alumni Hall, Edwardsville, Illinois 62026-1457, 618-650-3692, rbush@siue.edu).

potential.<sup>4</sup> Draw these people into the collaboration, and encourage them to practice their special skills. It's the best way to let leaders work their magic. ■

the Nonprofit Services Consortium of Greater St. Louis, Indianapolis, IN: 26th Annual ARNOVA Conference.

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>See *Leadership for the Common Good: Tackling Problems in a Shared-Power World* by John Bryson and Barbara Crosby (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass).

<sup>2</sup>See "The Dark Side of Collaboration," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 17, No. 6, available free at [www.snpo.org/members](http://www.snpo.org/members).

<sup>3</sup>See *Critical Factors in the Success or Failure of Collaboration: The Role of Leadership* by Richard Bush (Seattle, WA: 27th Annual ARNOVA Conference, 1998) and *The Connective Edge: Leading in an Interdependent World* by Jean Lipman-Blumen (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass).

<sup>4</sup>See *In the Shadow of Organization* by Robert Denhardt (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas).

### Other References

Bush, Richard, Jeanene Harris, and John McClusky, *Critical Factors that Determine the Success or Failure of the Collaboration Paradigm: Lessons Learned from*

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