

LC WHITE PAPER SERIES

CONSCIOUS COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP: $1+1=3$

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LEADERSHIP
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CONSCIOUS COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP: 1+1=3	3
Five Dimensions of Creative Collective Leadership	5
Relating:	5
Self-Awareness:	6
Authenticity:	6
Systems Awareness:	6
Achieving:	7

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Collective Leadership Defined

In today's Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous (VUCA) world, the Leadership Circle believes a new level of "Collective Leadership" is required to be successful. No one person has all the information, skills, or ability to meet the needs of an organization on their own.

Collective Leadership means prioritizing the success of the whole organization to reach the highest potential for the entire leadership team. This requires a heightened sense of communication, trust, and connection between leaders, so that their combined decision making and actions best serve the whole. This collective interaction allows for the best information to be surfaced to make optimal decisions and increase the chance of successful implementation across a complex network. In other words, focusing on collective leadership sets the optimal conditions for organizations to reach their most Creative potential.

Six core principles of healthy collective Creative Leadership:

1. **Whole over the parts.** Leaders consciously give primacy to the success of the whole over the performance of isolated parts (and ensure that the reward system and work processes do too).
2. **Invest in connections.** Leaders actively invest energy to connect the parts of the collective to create a true network.
3. **Prioritize deep relationships.** Great leadership teams seek to genuinely care deeply for one another, and work to build the kind of trusting, giving—even loving—relationships that can stand the test of time and VUCA stress.
4. **Mutual accountability and ownership.** Each member "owns" (sees themselves as accountable for) the success of all.
5. **Make resources and information fluid and mobile.** Leaders work to make organizational boundaries permeable so resources and information flow easily to where most needed. (e.g., "signals and sources")
6. **WYSIWYG.** Interpersonal Communication is transparent, direct, supportive, vulnerable, and generous.

H+H+O=H₂O: The principle of the whole being greater than the sum of the parts is easily understood when we remember that when hydrogen and oxygen come together, they create an entirely different phenomenon: a liquid called water. Water has properties that neither of

the gasses has; in bonding, the oxygen and hydrogen gasses have evolved to a higher realm of complexity and usefulness. The same is true in social and organizational systems which prioritize **Collective Leadership**.

Everything is connected. Like it or not, collective leadership is always present. For better or worse, each individual leader's choices and actions influence the effectiveness of the other leaders in the organization. For example, one highly controlling, autocratic leader almost always makes it harder for other leaders to empower and mentor those they lead. Trust goes down, fear rises, and the long-term wellbeing of many others suffers in the presence of autocrats. The opposite is also true. A leader who humbly serves the whole system, sharing their wisdom, resources, and energy for the sake of others will encourage others to do so as well. All boats are lifted in a rising tide of generosity and mutuality.

The importance of nurturing deep relationships. When leaders work to create trusting, honest, transparent relationships with each other, energy is freed that was previously frozen in caution, defensiveness, and anxiety. As humans, when we feel safe in the presence of others, we open and relax making available our best thinking to our collective work. This allows innovative and creative solutions to vexing problems to emerge. Deep relationships also allow leadership teams to persevere together and survive the challenges of the VUCA world. This creates a durable agility so necessary these days.

Which will it be? Conscious or Unconscious? Intentional or Unintentional? Collective leadership exists whether we recognize it or not. The question is whether a group of leaders who need to work together across functions, departments, strategies, and stakeholder groups can teach themselves to become aware of how their collective impact is greater than the sum of their individual efforts. And then to find the will to intervene where needed to improve collective effectiveness, choosing conscious strategies to leverage their collective effect in the organization.

Collective Leadership: Reactive or Creative? Our research on individual and collective leadership shows that the Creative mindset is an evolutionary step beyond the Reactive mindset and enables leaders to overcome the survival habits of self-protection and self-promotion.

When we're in our Reactive way of leading, we tend to focus on our own and our team's success first, and only secondarily on the whole system. Our need for approval, respect, bonuses, promotions, etc., tend to keep our primary focus on how well we're doing in our narrow silos. In fact, we hide out there.

In strict hierarchical organization structures of the past, this was designed into the system; everyone was a part in a machine; it made sense when the business context was more static.

In today's high-VUCA environment, this mindset is a liability.

The Crux: As we collectively develop the mental and behavioral practices of Creative leadership, we commit ourselves to a cause that is bigger than our own comfort, success, or reputation. An inspiring, concrete, collectively held vision can pull us out of our individualism and invite us to take our part alongside every other leader, accomplishing something greater.

Five Dimensions of Creative Collective Leadership

Relating:

A healthy collective leadership team knows that everything is done through relationships. It knows that, in an agile network of leaders, relationships must be nurtured in both depth and quantity. Relationships are not engineered or predetermined. Creating a well-working set of leadership connections is more like gardening than manufacturing: it takes patience, attention, good soil, energy, and resources.

- An extended leadership team with healthy collective leadership makes building relationships across their network a priority. They do not take relationships for granted.
- They intentionally spend time, effort, and financial resources to increase the number and strength of the connections between them.
- They ensure that mutual care and feeding, cross-boundary collaboration, and intergenerational mentoring are happening.
- These are people-oriented leadership cultures: the inclination is to show vulnerability of heart, ask for help when needed, offer information and resources to whomever needs them.
- A healthy collective of leaders sees its members as whole people, not roles or tools to accomplish their objectives.
- They invite and expect the full diversity of voices, ideas, and personalities to show up and participate in the collective act of leading. There is no room for patriarchy, in-groups, and out-groups.
- Everyone belongs and is invited to bring their influence and perspectives. Conflict is not avoided but rather seen as a resource to fuel learning and creation.
- A high-trust, diversity-safe culture marks a healthy collective of leaders and encourages each member to take risks to bring their full contribution to the organization. Only when this is the case, will ownership be shared.

Self-Awareness:

Collectively, our “self” is our leadership team’s “we.” We are an entity that is more than the sum of our individual selves. At that level of community identity, we can see that high collective self-aware leadership teams...

- Ask for, and give, frequent feedback to help each other, and the group as a whole, to improve for the sake of the vision and mission.
- They know that they’re always learning and growing together. They consciously invest in helping each other grow into their best individual and collective selves.
- They spend time together focused on improving the collective wellbeing of the whole. They question and monitor themselves on: How healthy are their interactions? How is the level of trust and vulnerability? How are they handling tensions and conflict? How balanced and sustainable are their ways of working with each other?
- They give each other compassion and grace, knowing that imperfection is always the state of things and that pressure to be perfect only forces people into hiding.

Authenticity:

In a healthy collective of leaders, courageously and authentically speaking truth is the norm.

- They have tough conversations directly and in a supportive way so that they get the best potential out of each area of conflict.
- In each interaction, direct communication is asked for and given, and the members believe that vulnerability is the price of admission to high performance as a team.
- They know that high integrity and courageously authentic communication will not always be comfortable. Yet, they choose the discomfort to false comradery built on half-truths and insincere praise.

Systems Awareness:

Systems Awareness is the capacity to see the big picture of the organizational design and performance. It is the ability to see how the many parts work together positively and problematically. This allows for lasting and dramatic improvements rather than temporary or incremental fixes. Breakthrough change requires a new paradigm for organizing, distributing power, information and access, and involvement of stakeholders. This level of awareness is too complex for individual leaders to comprehend; it takes everyone, collectively.

- A collective leadership team takes ownership of the fact that they are the architects of the systems and structures they operate in. They refuse to use the current system design as an excuse for underperforming.
- They help one another see the big picture of how the organizational system works by sharing their individual perspectives, objectives, interests, and concerns. Only when each of their perspectives are shared fully and frequently can an accurate understanding of the system guide their decisions and actions. Only together can the leaders discover leverage points for significant organizational improvements in performance.
- A healthy collective of leaders does not jump to fix symptoms but looks for the root causes of organizational underperformance.
- Leaders on the team are willing to suboptimize their area to help optimize the performance of the whole, for the sake of the highest level of vision achievement. It goes without saying that this level of mutual sacrifice and reprioritization takes courageous authenticity and high integrity.

Achieving:

In Creative Collective Leadership, Achieving is the result of a deep intrinsic motivation to make a valuable contribution together for the sake of all stakeholders. It is a collectively felt pull toward an ennobling vision and purpose, rather than a fear-based urgency to perform to avoid failure. A healthy collective of leaders work from the premises that...

- Purpose and Vision are created, owned, and pursued collectively (not created by a small group of senior leaders and pushed down from the top).
- Strategies evolve in the crucible of the action and are the product of a continual dialogue between the members of the collective leadership team.
- Decisions affecting the whole are made collectively (via a Consult & Decide process involving all affected stakeholders)
- Mutual accountability for collective results is strengthened by frequent, ongoing performance feedback with offers of help.