

COMMENTARY

Teamwork Is the New Leadership

by David D. Hart

Is it just me, or has the world gotten more complicated? Even as businesses are increasingly expected to focus on growing quarterly profits, many customers and investors also expect them to demonstrate an unwavering commitment to local communities and environmental stewardship. Elected officials are under enormous pressure to deliver a wide range of high-quality government services while lowering taxes. Universities and colleges are not only supposed to provide students with a direct pathway to successful careers, but also to prepare the next generation of broadly trained citizens and leaders for the challenges of an increasingly complex and rapidly changing world.

What kinds of leadership are needed to address these challenges more effectively? For the last 12 years, I've had the privilege of working with extraordinary faculty, students, senior administrators, and external partners and funders to grow the capacity of the University of Maine and other institutions of higher education to help solve sustainability problems: that is, problems requiring a dual focus on improving human well-being and protecting the environment. Because sustainability problems involve a tangled mix of economic, social, and environmental issues, they are a good example of the kinds of problems that can benefit from innovative leadership models. Here, I highlight some of the lessons we have learned about teams and leadership and the ways we are applying these lessons to help develop a new generation of more capable leaders.

KNOWLEDGE AND KNOW-HOW

Complex societal problems have many moving parts, so efforts to solve them require teams with a wide range of knowledge and know-how. That's why there is so much emphasis on the value of cross-functional or interdisciplinary teams. Regardless of the specific label, the researcher Scott Page (2017) has demonstrated that these teams have an abundance of "cognitive diversity," which allows them to draw upon a wider range of information, experiences, and ideas regarding the causes of complex problems and propose a richer mix of strategies for solving them. In essence, diverse teams are less likely to get stuck in blind alleys or miss the forest for the trees.

But determining the kinds of expertise that are needed to solve a complex problem is a problem in itself. In our sustainability projects, we usually begin by reaching out to relevant stakeholders, including representatives from the public and private sectors, nongovernmental organizations, and local citizens, to understand their perceptions of the problem, its causes, and its impacts on the local community. This process not only helps us gain a richer understanding of the problem (including past efforts to tackle it), but also the kinds of expertise required in the search for lasting solutions. For example, efforts by municipalities to increase real estate development without damaging wetlands may need experts in economics, conservation biology, and public policy (see for example, Calhoun et al. 2014). Similarly, stakeholders considering the

development of tidal energy but concerned about risks to commercial fisheries can benefit from a team whose expertise includes energy policy, engineering, and fisheries science (Jansujwicz and Johnson 2015). Another one of our projects focuses on how to prepare for the expected arrival of the emerald ash borer, an invasive forest insect pest that poses a major threat to ash trees as well as the economic and cultural well-being of Wabanaki basket makers (Hart et al. 2015). This team has included experts in tribal sovereignty, forestry, indigenous knowledge, and social science.

Institutions of higher education are fortunate that they can potentially draw on widely diverse resources to assemble a team whose expertise matches a particular problem. In fact, there may be few other places in society where such a remarkable breadth and depth of knowledge can be found in a single institution. That's why we began our work by engaging with faculty from different academic disciplines who expressed an interest in collaborating on interdisciplinary teams. After 10 years, more than 175 faculty, 200 graduate students, and 500 undergraduates drawn from more than 35 academic fields have participated in nearly 50 interdisciplinary projects. We're also sharing the lessons we learn via innovative networks of colleges and universities that are committed to solutions-driven interdisciplinary research (Hart et al. 2016).

In our experience, teams that combine faculty and students with experts from government, business and industry, and nongovernmental organizations

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(NGOs) are often better equipped to understand how all the pieces of the puzzle fit together. Although university researchers can often contribute unique methods and insights to help understand the causes and consequences of complex problems, their skills need to be combined with nonacademic stakeholders who bring their own critical knowledge to the table. Incorporating the real-world experience of government officials, business leaders, and local community members early in the process increases the likelihood of finding viable solutions that make sense at a practical level. Including the very people and organizations that will implement any identified solutions helps ensure that the work will actually be used. That's why we've worked with over 400 stakeholder organizations representing local, state, and federal government, business and industry, and a wide range of NGOs.

ART AND SCIENCE

Growing the collaborative capacity of teams is both an art and a science. Finding individuals with different kinds of expertise and skills to work together is just one step in the process of growing a team's ability to collaborate. In contrast to some cake mixes where you "just add water," the recipe for effective teamwork involves many steps and is much more nuanced. In our work with faculty and students from different academic disciplines, building effective teams takes time: time to get to know each other, both personally and professionally; time to appreciate the strengths that each team member brings to the problem; time to develop a common language that can help overcome each field's jargon.

Of course, this challenge is not unique to universities. Most organizations are composed of departments or

divisions that have different functions, habits, and reward systems, so efforts to form collaborations that span these disparate groups must overcome differences in organizational subcultures. For example, businesses often face important challenges that require the creation of cross-functional teams, including employees from manufacturing, sales, R&D, accounting, and human resources, as well as their customers.

We've worked hard to learn from the large and diverse body of research on the factors that facilitate and hinder teamwork (see for example, Pentland 2012; Thompson 2009) and have also turned the microscope on ourselves to enhance collaboration. One key finding from our research is that team members were more satisfied with collaborations and made more progress towards project goals when they used shared decision-making processes that included opportunities for multiple viewpoints to be shared and time to find common ground (McGreavy et al. 2015). This conclusion emerged from an in-depth study of 156 faculty and students who were involved in nearly 20 different sustainability projects, but I suspect it is even more widely applicable. For example, we are currently conducting a sustainability project in which a team of more than 25 faculty and 25 graduate students spanning 6 institutions of higher education are collaborating to improve the processes used to make decisions about the future of dams in New England.¹ One of our first steps in designing the project was to create a Committee for Shared Leadership that is broadly representative of the project's diverse participants, open to new ideas, and committed to consensus-based decision making.

But the art of collaboration is just as important as the science. So we look for opportunities to combine hard work

with relationship building, whether via shared meals, rafting trips, writing retreats, comedy skits, or long walks through the Maine woods and along its rugged coastline. By both strategy and opportunism, we have strived to create an organizational culture that is founded on, and advanced by, a shared commitment to open communication, mutual respect, and trust.

We're also incredibly fortunate that our program bears the name of one of Maine's most admired leaders, Senator George J. Mitchell. Every day, as students and faculty enter the Mitchell Center, they encounter a photograph of Senator Mitchell accompanied by this quote:

The ethos of the Mitchell Center's work reflects one of my deepest beliefs: the importance of public service. The many faculty and students involved in the Mitchell Center have committed themselves to a goal larger than their individual lives: the goal of helping to build a better world starting right here in our own communities in our own state.

PATIENCE AND PERSISTENCE

While we're on the subject of Senator Mitchell, his patience and persistence are also worth noting. Indeed, when speaking about his experiences chairing hundreds of meetings during the multiyear, conflict-ridden process that led to the Good Friday Peace Accord in Northern Ireland, Senator Mitchell once described it as "300 days of failure and one day of success."

Although Senator Mitchell has set a high bar, many of our research teams have also demonstrated uncommon staying power in working with collaborators from other fields, examining

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problems from multiple vantage points, and discovering that even when you make progress solving one part of a complex problem, another part sometimes pops up in whack-a-mole fashion. This kind of endurance is indispensable because teams are likely to encounter many obstacles on the road to solutions. Although a complete enumeration of these difficulties could fill a flash drive, let me offer just a few examples.

Teams often begin with what they hope is a clear understanding of the problem they are trying to solve, including the different kinds of expertise and partners they need. All too often, however, their interactions with stakeholders force them to question their fundamental assumptions about the nature of the problem, as well as its causes and potential solutions. When teams encounter this kind of snag, should they go back to square one, abandon ship, or try muddling through?

Many teams aspire to “craft usable knowledge” (*sensu* Clark et al. 2016) that they hope will lead to better decisions and a brighter future. But what if their work products end up being ignored in the decision-making process, which often happens when facts and values collide (Dietz 2014)?

Teams have a tendency to begin with high hopes when they embark on the road to solutions. They may have also competed successfully for a major grant that helps provide support for students and faculty to begin working with stakeholders. But these grants often last only a year or two, and it's harder than ever to find long-term support for their collaborations. So what happens when the funding runs out?

Did I mention that team members often end up with frayed nerves, which sometimes leads to the end of teamwork altogether?

Of course, there is no sure-fire approach for overcoming these and other challenges. Instead, we have learned that useful strategies for responding to obstacles often emerge organically as teams reflect on and draw inspiration from a set of core values that we first articulated in 2008 and that still guide our work:

1. Responsiveness to Maine's diverse stakeholders
2. Dedication to interdisciplinary collaboration and cooperation
3. Shared leadership and responsibility for research outcomes
4. Respect for Maine's communities, natural resources, and economic needs
5. Transparent communication processes that respect diverse values and viewpoints and build consensus
6. Commitment to excellence in innovative research

But even core values aren't guaranteed to help teams get back on track after major setbacks. I can't say exactly where they get their stamina when progress is better described as “two steps forward, three steps back.” Now that I've had the opportunity to work with nearly 200 faculty members and even more students, however, I know that many of them view this as deeply purposeful work that cannot be accomplished via the lone-scholar strategy that has been a more traditional professional pathway in academia.

There is also much to be said about the merits of learning by doing. As these teams gain experience, they often become more purposeful yet more patient, more focused yet more flexible, more confident even as their humility grows. Given the complex challenges we

face in and beyond Maine, there has never been a more urgent need for this kind of leadership. 

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ENDNOTE

- 1 For more information about this project, visit <https://umaine.edu/mitchellcenter/road-to-solutions/new-england-sustainability-consortium/the-future-of-dams-nest/>

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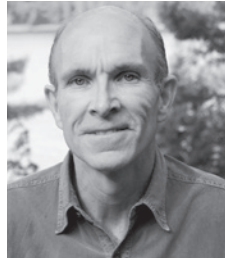
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