

Reflections On Shared Leadership
Written for NonProfit Day 2010
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When it comes to the topic of shared leadership, DataCenter had typically responded to small- to mid-size non-profit organizations eager to learn about our experiences in trying to promote a sustainable organizational culture of collaboration over competition, dialog over debate, and "power-with," over "power-over." In most cases, callers had observed a fair amount of unhealthy, challenging power dynamics play out in the organization, and felt the urgency to ‘*really* do something about it this time.’

But it’s not just a desire to problem-solve that draws the emerging post-boomer generation of non-profit leaders like the X-ers (like myself) and Millenials to Shared Leadership. A participant in a small group at a workshop I recently facilitated hit it on the nail when she exclaimed, “the younger leaders seem to have a whole different set of values – whether they be about work, or lifestyle—and the E.D. position the way it’s handed down to them is simply not what they want—at all!” Every one else was fervently nodding. At that point, I knew the one thing that brought us together: whether through our research inquiry, or being in the field, we shared a burning desire to know why that is –and what we can all do about it.

In the case of DataCenter, it took literally the hemorrhaging of our organizational leadership, from the Co-Directors up through the Board of Directors in its entirety, to incentivize a rather radical structural shift to a Shared Leadership Model. This organizational ‘rupturing’ in a way cracked open the space to take what was always a highly regarded “value” at the DataCenter into an actual “structure.” But it was also a necessary shift in order for the ‘leadership position’ to be an option for any of the remaining staff – and we knew somehow, it had to be filled. Our then-Interim Executive Director would sigh and say, “unbelievable...here you have an amazing leadership opportunity, and none of you want to take it. What is going on?”

In order to learn how to promote successful executive directorship at DataCenter, our co-founder, Fred Goff, conducted more than 20 interviews for the now available Executive Director position. Concerns the staff associated with the E.D. position reaffirmed the findings from those interviews. For example:

- the loneliness of the position, exacerbated by thanklessness of the job;
- fractured nature of the job – having to juggle so much– and having to remain composed and graceful at the same time;

- constantly dealing with a crisis, and being expected to resolve them by every one else.

We created Shared leadership so as to address all three of these challenges, not solely because they themselves were problematic, but because we felt they interfered with the ability of our organization to be an effective vehicle to embody values of collaborative leadership, democratic participation, and staffing sustainability, while promoting them through our program work.

The Shared Leadership that works for your organization should start with the following guiding questions: 1) what are our values and 2) how do they relate to the organization, and lastly, 3) what needs to be in place to help create them, and maintain them.

Your organization needs to articulate 1) Values & Principles, 2) systems and structure and 3) practice that to them help uphold the values and turn them from mere 'idea's into a 'thing' that trumps all pre-established 'norms' and dominant convention.

There was a keen interest in my small group to explore the question of whether equal pay, a commonly suggested practice of Shared Leadership, was really feasible. "I mean, does it really work?" asked a participant with a touch of skepticism. My answer would have to be, it depends. I would like to push back and suggest that we ask the question a different way. Pay Equity made sense to DataCenter, primarily because we wanted to reflect our belief that ALL knowledge (experiential to intellectual), ALL skills (financial projections to organizing), and ALL leadership styles – including one as obscure as "good followership"—as equally valuable to our collective ability to execute our mission. I think in a few years, we may be in a different place, where we no longer need Pay Equity to demonstrate DataCenter's core belief for whatever reason. For example, Asian Women's Shelter in San Francisco has its own way of honoring their belief that all experiential and intellectual knowledge are equally valuable among their staff body that reflect both their constituents and non-constituents. Organizations are living beings, and each uniquely lends to expressing similar values in different ways. The important thing is, that it's not a rule for those who have to live by it, but rather, an opportunity for ideological expression they're grateful to take.

One way to approach this question may be to ask "if we institute equal pay, what existing impediment to fostering collective leadership would it address/resolve?", rather than "does pay equity work?" Alternatively, one can ask, "what specific organizational value would this help manifest? Is this the best way to manifest that value, or is there another (perhaps more practical or culturally-appropriate) option?" The framing of the conversation should always be, "what is our value and how do we make it happen?" Pay equity, in other words, is a means to that goal—rather than an end in itself, or a static 'product' that gets placed on the moral pedestal of the organization, isolated from all others.

Also, anything with a strong 'practice' component means that, by nature, any tool must be nimble and adaptable. Policymaking is one possible route, but once formally

prescribed, it can sometimes be a setback when circumstances change (and boy, do they). What needs to be clearly articulated and adhered to as “the law of the land” is the organization’s *own* set of values. At DataCenter, we have a Shared Leadership “Constitution”. It is not a document with a Preamble and Articles—rather, it is a quilt, each piece representing a one-word value we carefully selected together. Aside from the Secretary of State, and the IRS, this quilt determines how we run and steward our vehicle for change in service of our mission, and how it will be modified over time to fit the changing context in which we operate.

This is the sort of topic that benefits from staff-wide (if not organizational-wide) engagement—the bigger picture rules that if not proactively defined, often starts looking mightily preferential to efficiency, profitability, and quantifiable outcomes even if nobody has named them as such. Incidentally, these qualities are also those unconditionally prized in the corporate sector (funny how that happens) from which we love to set ourselves apart in the name of public interest and social change.

It’s amazing how enriching the conversations can be, and also a tremendous catalyst of shared sense of investment and ownership across the board. The process, if done with intentional facilitation, yields biggest ‘sustainability’ dividends time and again.

“To my surprise, Shared Leadership in fact means more structure, not less,” observed a participant – and that cannot be more true. Facilitative leadership is one of the qualities we name as a leadership quality at DataCenter that helps sustain Shared Leadership. It may be considered perhaps more critical than my (arguably) dashing charisma as Executive Director – precisely for the reason that the space for growth of each and every person’s leadership (however way they come) as recognized asset to organizational strength is the proudest outcome of a “leader-ful” organization.