

Collective Leadership

What Is Collective Leadership?

Collective leadership is an inclusive leadership approach, which distributes and shares power so that leadership comes from many different corners of the community or organisation. It encourages everyone to use their unique skills, talents, and experiences to work together and achieve the vision that they have for their local community.

Types of Leadership

- **Traditional Leadership**

Traditional leadership styles give considerable power and influence to one or more individuals, who control major decisions, and have authority over staff in their organisation or enterprise. This is also known as ‘top-down’ management, when goals, projects and tasks are decided by senior leaders in the organisation, and then communicated to others.



The attributes associated with traditional leadership are based around being a strong and effective individual leader, whose charisma and aspirations inspires people to work for them, and towards their vision.

Advantages: Top-down decisions create a clear vision for goals and expectations. Having a strong leader guiding the organisation can create a drive which might not otherwise exist.

Disadvantages: Decisions are made by one or two people, and are not informed by the views of everyone in the community. People may feel less confident to share their perspectives and opinions, as they feel that these will ultimately not be considered or valued.

- **Collective Leadership**

Collective leadership is suited to community-led enterprise, where people come together to identify their issues and aspirations, and create a collective vision for the future - using social enterprise to create positive change.



Collective leadership is similar to a bottom-up leadership style, where organisation direction is largely informed and decided by employee feedback.

Advantages: Because everyone’s views are heard and considered, staff and volunteers will feel engaged and involved. Allows people to share knowledge and experiences, and set their own goals and tasks which align with their skills and interests.

Disadvantages: It can sometimes be difficult to reach a final decision which everyone agrees with. This is especially the case in community organisations, which have to represent the views of everyone. (We introduce tools in ‘How to Reach a Consensus’ below).

Which Style is Best?

Different social enterprises use different leadership styles, mainly depending on the structure of the business and whether it was started by an individual entrepreneur, or by a community group.

Community social enterprises often favour a more collective approach to leadership, where power is distributed more equally between community members.

The traditional individual leadership model often does not work well in the community context because there may not be a willing or natural leader within the community, and so leadership has to be pooled and shared.

This is often the case within the rural context, where communities come together to identify solutions to problems associated with their rural or remote geography, such as market failure. Collective leadership is especially important in these scenarios because decisions and outcomes can directly impact whole communities.

Inclusive community change cannot be generated through uncoordinated actions taken by isolated organisations and individuals. To be successful, it has to involve anyone and everyone who wants to have a role in supporting and improving the wellbeing of their community.

This podcast from Impact Boom discusses the power of *place* and *purpose* in social enterprise leadership. This is particularly relevant for community projects, where participants are driven by a common purpose which is tied to their local community.

- [Impact Boom Podcast](#) (length: 29 minutes)

The Characteristics of Collective Leadership

The characteristics of collective leadership differ from traditional leadership styles because they require much more consideration for the opinions and beliefs of other people, and an ability to see beyond your own perspective and be aware of the wider community.

- Because collective leadership relies on shared decision making and everyone having an equal voice, it is really important to be able to understand the views of other people.
- Just because you might have a different opinion, it doesn't mean yours or theirs is wrong.
- Sometimes it can be useful to take a step back, and consider why that person might prioritise or value certain things.
- This way, you can better understand what motivates this person, and come up with a solution which appeals to everyone.
- The table below summarises some of the key characteristics of collective leadership.

Be a Good Listener	Awareness of Self & Others	Awareness of Community
Be able to listen and learn from others without judgement.	Be aware of your own motivations and beliefs, and those of other people and consider how these help or hinder activities.	Have a good understanding of the different groups and needs in your community, and be aware and open to the ever-changing nature of these needs.
Shared Responsibility and Decision Making	Seek Diverse Perspectives	Be Adaptive & Learn from Mistakes
Responsibilities should be shared by all, and everyone should have an equal say in decision making.	By including everyone's views, there is potential for conflicting opinions to generate discussion resulting in innovative solutions which satisfy everyone.	Reflect and learn from your own actions and patterns of behaviour before deciding on a solution.
Have an Open Mindset	Empower Others	Be Resourceful
Be open to change and learning from others. Take on board new ideas or feedback with an open mindset and willingness to change and adapt.	Cultivate an environment where people feel comfortable and supported to challenge themselves and try new things.	Consider what resources are available to you and how best these can be used for the community's common purpose.

Governance and Dealing with Dominant Characters

Governance in collective leadership models can be tricky to get right, due to the need to accommodate a diverse range of views and opinions. Often in community-led organisations, it can be even further complicated by local politics or existing tensions between people or groups.

- One of the challenges in rural social enterprise is that there often isn't one individual who is willing or able to be identified as a leader.
- It is often the case that a group forms as a response to an opportunity (e.g. to develop an area of enterprise for community benefit) or in light of the threat of losing something important to the community (e.g. sustaining an essential service).

Leadership often has to be shared amongst group members, to allow decisions to be made and responsibility to be shared. It is important to remember that within a collective leadership model, the decision making process will be undertaken collectively, but people will still have to assume individual roles and responsibilities.

This does not give individuals more power or authority in decision making, but simply means that they are responsible for their own role in the enterprise.

Community-run social enterprises are a hybrid of many different things (a business, a corporation, a community development trust, a charity, a social community) and this can make it difficult to work out how they should be governed or managed.

- It is important to remember that there is no absolute fixed model for how your community enterprise should be operated or structured, and that your community has the power to change or adapt as they see fit.
- It is helpful to be flexible and adaptable when it comes to the evolution of your community plan and enterprising solutions, as you may well identify positive opportunities for change as you proceed.



It can be useful to have an agreed-upon code of conduct, which outlines both the appropriate and inappropriate behaviours for your group. The code of conduct will prohibit inappropriate behaviours which are deemed to be anti-social, hostile, or exclusionary.

This means that participants have a good idea of how to behave, and you have a clearly written set of social rules, which participants are expected to follow and can refer to at any time.

Due to their inclusive nature, and encouragement of local participation, community groups can often attract members of the local community who are particularly vocal or dominant in their views and opinions. Assertive or dominating behaviour in this setting can create a hostile environment which deters other community members from voicing their opinions, or participating in future meetings.

The case study below gives an example of a technique used by a community group to deal with a highly vocal participant, whose behaviour was dominating the group's actions. This shows how the group thoughtfully considered the opinions of all participants and reached a majority decision.

Project	The Community Foundation for Merseyside (CFM)
Issue	One of their panel members complained about the way an award had been made. This panel member had continually fought the decision to award the grant, however his reasons and actions were not in keeping with the panel code of conduct. Being a highly vocal member, CFM was concerned that others might be deterred from speaking.
Solution	They carried out a questionnaire to establish the views of other panel members, and whether they were happy with the award being made.

Outcome	The feedback from the panel was overwhelmingly positive, and CFM was confident that everyone’s voices had been heard.
Considerations	While obviously not practical to undertake a survey to gauge every decision, this is a pragmatic solution to a specific problem, enabling panel members to state their views frankly and in confidence while showing the dominant member that his opinion - while relevant - was not that of the group.

Identifying Skills and Talents

It is important to identify the unique skills and talents held by community members. This helps to delegate tasks so that each person is suited to the job they are doing and feels that their time and effort is being spent meaningfully.

It is worth holding an activity session where you aim to discover the talents, skills or experiences held by your community members. You may be surprised to discover attributes which might prove to be very valuable to your community action or enterprise.

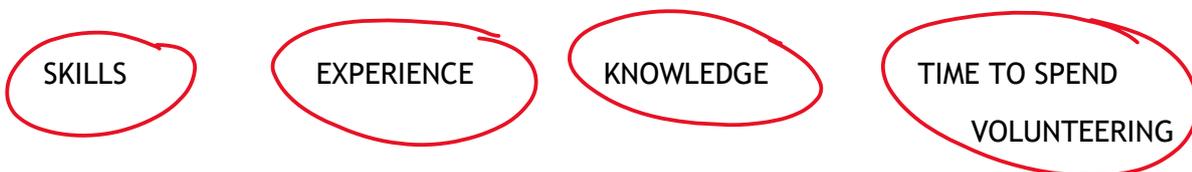
- It is worth bearing in mind that some people can be reluctant to boast about their own skills or talents, especially in front of a group, so partner work is useful for this task.

Activity:

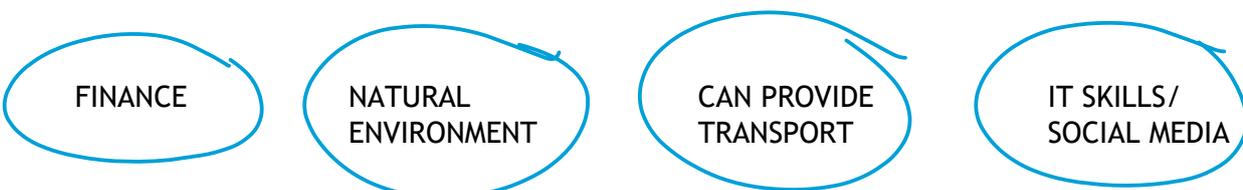
In pairs, find out 2-3 things your partner is good at and then as a pair, discuss how those skills, experiences or knowledge could be useful or valuable for collective action.

Feedback to the whole group about the skills, talents, or experiences that your partner has and as a group, you could put these into relevant themes alongside the person’s name.

It can be useful to use simple headings like which might prompt people to suggest their own knowledge or skills which they might not have though were relevant:



Or group them into more specific categories, depending on what your goals are:



Delegating Tasks and Activities

Now that you have identified the range of skillsets within your group and grouped them into categories or themes, you can collectively delegate tasks and activities. To do this, it is useful to coordinate sub-groups related to the categories or themes of people's skills and experiences.

This means that rather than trying to immediately assign large tasks to individuals, you can see how many people fall into one or more category and work out how many people are required to fulfil the tasks that you have identified in your Action Plan, and who is best suited to which task. See Chapter 4: Prioritising and Action Planning in Module 1, Community Involvement, for how to prioritise your community needs and goals.

When making sub-groups, you could consider using categories such as:

- Communication/Social media
- Finances/Budgeting
- Transport
- DIY/Maintenance skills
- Organising rotas
- Working with groups of people/children

It is important to consider a number of factors when collectively assigning tasks:

- Will these people work well together?
- What is the relative timeframe for this task?
- How many people should this task require?
- Different people have different strengths and weaknesses.
- Will everyone be happy with their role in the community project?

Of course, it is equally important to take into consideration people's personal preferences, as they will have a good understanding of their own capabilities or skills, or have a preferred role.

If a person has no preferred role but does have a skillset which is identified as being valuable for a particular task, you can use persuasion to try and convince them that their time would be well spent here.

However, be careful not to accidentally force or coerce people into a role that they are unhappy with, as this can generate feelings of mistrust and negativity towards the project.

Take care to listen to your colleagues and respect their opinions and suggestions. You might find that a bit of compromise is necessary to ensure that everyone involved is enthusiastic and passionate about their role in the project. Assigning tasks to one another should be a collective negotiation, and not a top-down decision.

Dividing Tasks into Manageable Chunks

It is important to create tasks which have a defined purpose and a clear and concrete beginning and ending to encourage participation and engage volunteers/staff in roles that they feel connected to.

Clearly defining tasks gives people a clear understanding of exactly how they will be supporting their community project and increases the personal value of their contribution.

It also gives people the opportunity to consider whether they have the skills or knowledge for that task - volunteer work is a negotiated process and should adapt to suit community members.

When tasks are clearly defined and there is a well-planned timetable for carrying out each task, engaging community members in voluntary activities is much easier.

- Similarly, giving a clearly defined role and timescale for volunteering work is essential to allow community members to coordinate volunteer work with other commitments.
- A major obstacle for many people considering becoming involved in their community project is the worry that a commitment will drag on, and have no firm ending. Providing a clear timescale will reassure potential volunteers and make them more likely to donate their time.
- By reducing the chances of someone being overwhelmed by a task which is either poorly defined, or takes longer than expected, you enhance the activity and commitment of community volunteers, making them more likely to volunteer again.
- This is particularly important, as most community-led projects rely on volunteers and require a good community base in order to ensure sustainability.



Defining and Sharing Responsibility

An essential part of collective leadership is about sharing responsibility, and to do this effectively, you must begin by clearly defining people's roles and responsibilities. This will give people clarity and ensure that people do not assume too much or too little responsibility, or that the same task is not being completed by different people.

An important element in this is scheduling regular communications and check-ins with staff/volunteers/community members of your social enterprise to ensure that everyone is informed and up to date, reducing the chances of confusion or exclusion.



It is important to share responsibility equally so that people are not overwhelmed by having too many projects or tasks to complete. This can lead to stress and burnout, and people may ultimately lose interest in the project because they feel that the responsibility is unfairly shared or is taking up too much of their time.

- Read [Outlining who will be involved](#) for more information on attracting and supporting volunteers.

On the other hand, some people may assume too much responsibility on purpose, try to instate themselves as the project leader, or attempt to steer the project in the direction that they want, regardless of the views of other people. Dominant community figures can be difficult to work alongside and if they are particularly vocal, can risk stifling the opinions of others or cause conflict.

- Read 'Governance and Dealing with Dominant Characters' above for information on dealing with dominant figures and opinions.

The [COMCOT project](#) in Estonia and Finland, discusses the risks of one person, or too few people bearing too much of the responsibility in a project and gives recommendations on how to share responsibilities.

How to Reach a Consensus

Consensus decision-making is a way of reaching agreements between all members of a group. Instead of simply voting on an issue and reaching a majority decision, consensus is committed to finding solutions that everyone actively supports, or at least can live with.

In consensus decision-making, no decision is made against the will of an individual or a minority. If significant concerns remain unresolved, a proposal can be blocked and prevented from going ahead. This means that the whole group has to work hard at finding solutions that address everyone's concerns rather than ignoring or overruling minority opinions.

Consensus looks for ‘win-win’ solutions which are acceptable to everyone, weaving everyone’s best ideas and key concerns to produce a collectively approved outcome. This gives people control over decisions which affect them and their community wellbeing and ensures that power is shared by all and is not just concentrated in the hands of a few.

- Seeking consensus to make decisions in a community-led group is useful because when everyone agrees with a decision, it is much more likely to be implemented successfully.

In the long run, community members are more likely to continue to be involved in the community project if they feel that the group is committed to hearing their views and meeting their needs. This is particularly important for community action which depends on volunteers, as most people will vote with their feet and leave if they don’t feel valued and respected.

This handy ‘Short Guide to Consensus’ gives a valuable how-to guide on consensus, including: Facilitation; The Decision-Making Process; A Consensus Flowchart; Dealing with Agreement and Disagreement; and How to Reach Consensus in Large Groups.

- [Short Guide to Consensus - Seeds for Change](#)

Monitoring Collective Leadership

As collective leadership relies on the equal distribution of power in decision making, this means that decisions are made collectively by individuals as a whole group. Especially in the community context, it may be difficult for participants to speak up or voice concerns about decisions made through collective leadership, and so there could be a lack of accountability or group consensus on decisions.

Having an outside perspective, where someone is designated to provide an alternative opinion, or play devil’s advocate can be very valuable as a way of giving feedback, providing perspective, or breaking up group mentality.

If everyone in the group is too single-minded and focused only on reaching their individual goal(s), then they may neglect to consider the voices and needs of others in their community in their decision-making.

Therefore, it is very important to have an individual or group to monitor the group actions and provide feedback, to critique or give recommendations when necessary.



Case Studies

- [Estonia and Finland: COMCOT - An Innovative Tool for Improving the Competitiveness of Community-Based Tourism](#) (*written in English*)
 - Page 7 of this document discusses the main risks associated with collective leadership and community action. Lists main risks to look out for and offers suggestions to avoid or remedy the consequences of them.
 - Major themes are about over-reliance on key people, how to efficiently delegate tasks, maintaining an inclusive mentality, the importance of welcoming new people and ideas, taking care to communicate community activity and remembering to make best use of volunteer and stakeholder time.

- [Finland Community Guide](#) (*written in English*)
 - A short guide of good practice to assist rural communities and village associations to take forward social enterprise activity. This guide helps you to understand the rural context, explaining how to get started and identify your motivation and mission.
 - It explains how to map out the needs and hopes of local people, touches on market analysis, and the business planning process for community-based social enterprise.
 - Also gives a useful insight into collective leadership and how to distribute responsibilities equally among your group.