

Citation: Kendrick, Michael J., "Leadership, Alliances and Change",
Interaction, Vol. 20/2, 2006, Australia

Leadership, Alliances and Change

A Keynote Presentation:

For A Conference On Alliances, Leadership And
Change, Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland, November
25-26, 2005

Hosted By The National Institute For Study On
Learning Difficulties, Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland

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Change And Individual Action

It is difficult to accomplish change simply upon the basis of one person's efforts. This is because change is a profoundly collective process in which the shared conditions of existence are altered, even if not all people experience these changes in the same way. Life in the year 2000 is clearly different in an overall sense from life in the year 1900, though the specific experiences of given individuals may vary widely throughout this transition, and even in the same historical period. It is also important to recognize that, while change can be understood in comparative and collective terms, it can also be understood as distinct individual experiences set in the backdrop of time and place. In this regard, individuals are a part of the historical change process, but the process itself transcends even the most influential of people.

Notwithstanding the preceding characterization of the limits of individual action, it does ultimately matter what individuals do with their lives, and it is also true that individual leadership can have extremely important effects. Without the distinct actions of given persons, there is no history, as its reality is a composite and summation of what effect individuals have on their society, and on each other. Leadership, in its essence, must at the most seminal of levels arise from individuals, as aggregates of persons are simply abstractions if they are divorced from the exercise of human will and decision-making. This is why it is somewhat misleading to speak of organizations and systems as "persons", since they are essentially a composite of many persons interacting, rather than having human freedom in their capacities as "entities".

The Role Of Leadership

Leadership is a human accomplishment that results in purposes being formed, and directions being taken or advanced. These directions and purposes may not always be fulfilled in the sense of an impact on events, but the acts of leadership are always attempts to shape matters. Leadership is normally not all that associated with compelling events to occur, but rather with influencing events, such that specific outcomes are achieved.

Change involves mobilizing people to perceive their world differently and to eventually act in new ways. This is rarely achieved overnight, though pressures may build for years towards changes that seemingly happen quite rapidly. Leadership is the actions taken to achieve direction and purpose, thereby helping to bring about change that takes on a particular intended order. Change without established direction would simply be volatility, and might not have any enduring effect.

It is not uncommon, at any given moment, that there would be considerable differences of view as to which directions should be taken, and this may bring with it disputes of all kinds with all of their attendant tensions and divisions. Such divergences of view will often be expressed as competing messages offered by various factions. These differences will be the sources for competing leadership claims, each attempting to prevail in the dispute through the acquiring of greater levels of support than their rivals.

Supporters, for their part, will test leaders and their claims in order to better gauge whether, and to what degree, they should provide a given leadership hopeful their support and allegiance. Consequently, the purposes and directions of change will be contested and eventually resolved through the gaining or losing of support within the key constituencies in play.

The Role Of Alliances In The Change Process

If a leader is to gain sufficient support so as to settle the direction of change, he/she will need to form alliances with supporters that ensure that they will act in accord with the purposes and directions being advocated. Alliances are common to all change processes because they help the people and interests at work to either accelerate or withstand the pressures for change.

Alliances occur when there is a convergence of interests between people and groups such that cooperation and mutual assistance for each other is seen by both as beneficial, and thus becomes more likely. These alliances become more probable when the parties share common values, ideologies, purposes and vested interests. Alliances make strengthened collective leadership more possible, just as leaders without allies are likely to be isolated and unable to gain a viable mandate.

Alliances are ultimately forged by individuals, and these will link groups, organizations and institutions in ways of collaborating that might have not otherwise occurred. These “alliance-makers” and alliances can be found and forged at any level, and may occur in ways that transcend formal organizational boundaries and pathways, since they can often initially emerge informally, and in unsolicited and unapproved ways as long as there is advantage seen in pursuing them. As they say “politics can make strange bedfellows”.

It is also important to recognize that not all alliances are for good things, and that alliances directed to malevolent purposes will have perverse fruits. It is undoubtedly true that a “deal with the Devil” is most certainly possible, so good leadership and discernment will always be needed to assess the moral character of oneself and one’s apparent allies.

The Possible Benefits of Alliances

Alliances would not be pursued if they did not bring advantages and benefits. While some of these benefits relate to the support they engender for various purposes and directions, there are many other gains that can be obtained that contribute to the well-being of the parties. These gains are not always automatically present, but they do tend to accompany strengthened and expanded alliances. These include examples such as the following;

- **Broader And More Diverse Base Of Support**

The extending of alliances typically helps expand the base of supporters and may add greater diversity in this base. Additionally, a broader base of support will help attract and influence prospective allies.

- **Strength In Numbers**

It is often said that people are weaker when divided and disunited, and that their ability to prevail increases with the degree to which they act as one. It is alliances that make this coordination possible with their resultant massing of strength.

- **Greater Number Of Resources To Draw Upon**

Expanded and growing alliances tend to bring with them an increase in the resources that they mutually can draw upon. Whether these will eventually be used well does not in any way diminish the fact that they are available in greater amounts in human and financial terms.

- **Greater Possibilities For Further Growth And Expansion Of The Effort**

With greater resources come ever greater possibilities for generating yet more resources and expanding whatever efforts are already underway. Resources, properly used, beget ever more resources. With growth will come other opportunities that can be pursued.

- **Greater Potential Supply Of Innovators And Leaders**

Innovators and leaders can be important because they are the sorts of people who can help serve as catalysts to advance many important purposes. Having a greater pool of these is like any other asset, it brings with it an advantage.

- **Opportunities For The Coalescence Of Leadership**

It is when leaders join forces that a new scope of possibilities emerge as well as it can provide the mutual stimulation of leaders to grow and develop in their vision and capacities. What one leader lacks, the other may possess, thereby enhancing projecting their capacities.

- **Greater Resilience In The Face Of Adversity**

The presence of layers of alliances provides greater “depth”, insulation and robustness in the ability of the people and groups involved to withstand the many costs and difficulties involved in tackling problems that may bring adversity with them.

- **Greater Array And Density Of “Connections”**

The ability to connect in diverse ways with a large variety of people due to many relationship pathways is in many ways an “asset” as it opens up possibilities for all manner of ways for people to collaborate and to make advantageous new forms of cooperation.

- **Greater Likelihood Of Challenge And Open Ended Thinking**

Alliances tend to bring into contact people that might not otherwise have cooperated before. It also makes them more likely to have to incorporate thinking and perspectives that are broader than might be the case in more insular settings and associations.

These are, of course, examples of only the potential or probabilistic benefits of alliances, but they do help make the case that alliances, properly steered, can lead to the accrual of a variety of possible advantages beyond that of broadened support. Not all such advantages will be fully developed in practice, as the capacity to do this cannot be assumed to be universally present.

Some Of The More Important Implications Of The Link Between Alliances And Leadership

There would be many implications of this recognition that successful leadership and alliances are linked, but here are a few of the more important ones.

- Leadership is not solely about the leader but rather the relationship of the leader to others who he/she may have to rely on for support if they are to accomplish what they hope to.

- Leadership arises out of shared purposes and interests, and helping people see and understand these other interests creates a platform for forging strong alliances.
- Leadership is needed for change because it is a catalyst to help orient people to needed purposes and directions, particularly where they may be failing to address key concerns and interests.
- Sound leadership can be held back by the weaknesses of followers to properly perceive the need for change, thereby denying such leadership the mandate for change.
- Not all changes are likely to be intrinsically beneficial and both leaders and followers who support these may both be mistaken in doing so.
- Change cannot easily be imposed upon people, or compelled by leaders, as it more typically comes about through negotiation with constituents.
- Change can be partial, diluted and compromised due to an inability of leaders to secure the extent of necessary support for more thoroughgoing change.
- Constructive change is impossible if there is no vision provided by leaders to unite, challenge and inspire both other leaders and supporters.
- Enduring change will require that both leaders and supporters to be in favor of investment in “people building” and personal transformation if it is to be authentically embraced.
- The more demanding and costly the process of change, the more that the support base of leaders will be tested, and the greater the value of commitment.

Some Of The Implications For Change In The Field Of Disability

Vision

It is very unlikely that the field of disability can afford to have its vision of what people with disabilities deserve by way of a good life diminished in any way, given the deprivations they routinely face. There is, if anything, almost an imperative to invest in an expansionary and visionary leadership vision if progress is to extend beyond our present circumstances. Vision will require that we be devoted to the hard task of “imagining better” in a world that will settle for much too little.

Depth And Authenticity

Like many times in history, ours is also awash in fraudulence, fakery and false promises, and many of us are invariably taken in by superficial and unsound remedies as we are led by our hopes and wishes rather than by something more judicious. For this reason, we need to invest in depthful people, and only changes that deserve respect because of their inherent merit. There is also a need to assist people to be able to discern the authentic from the proliferation of trendy, gimmicky, self serving and essentially illusory frauds and fads that enchant and delight us in the present, but leave us betrayed.

Paying Our Dues

It is very unlikely that substantial and enduring change will arise from efforts that are characterized by taking the path of least resistance, or other forms of short cuts. The more traditional way to overcome difficulties and adversity is to persevere and to meet each problem with an equal measure of the same effort and inspiration that the problem itself presents. In regards to change, we need to recognize that we will need to earn change by engaging, discovering and responding to each of the concerns that the many constituencies whose support are needed if assent to progress is to be reliably obtained.

Linking Innovators To Those Who Need Them

Innovations do not always arise happenstance, simply because they are needed. They can be intentionally facilitated by ensuring that competent innovators can appreciate and become well attuned to the actual unmet needs of people with disabilities. To have this occur with any predictability this will require deliberate strategies that recruit and link genuine innovators to the people and needs that might benefit from innovation.

Building Understanding

If alliances are to come into being they will be deeply dependent upon whether people have forged a good understanding of each other and a common sense of why and how they see change occurring. In order to succeed with alliances people must come to some sense of unity, and this will require a necessary measure of thoughtful dialogue, the building and earning of mutual respect and the sorting through of critical issues and differences. All of which will require commitment and perseverance.

“Right Relationship” And Ethical Partnering

The most optimal basis of forming and sustaining alliances is that of establishing trust and mutual confidence that the other party is behaving honorably. This outcome will require that the conditions of ethical partnering are in place such that each believes the other to behave ethically such that neither party has to “look over their shoulder” on the premise that they cannot trust the other. A field that cannot partner ethically will not establish “right relationship” with all that comes from this.

Resolving Conflicts Properly

Conflicts will occur in any relationship, and thus are normal enough even in otherwise fruitful alliances. On the other hand, if they are not properly handled and resolved in a timely way, they can very quickly undermine alliances, no matter how important these are. Consequently, these inevitable conflicts must not be left to fester and irritate, and so it is important that we equip ourselves to manage them in a way that resolves conflicts as effectively and as promptly as possible.

Expecting Meaningful Change Prematurely

We will need to be careful to not attempt change prematurely, as much dialogue and testing must necessarily occur before support is genuinely won. While this might mean that a measure of endless talking without any useful conclusion will supersede bringing people to decision, it might also mean that change only be attempted when there is ample evidence that real conviction has been achieved, and it is their internal pressure that is propelling the change.

Broader Rather Than Narrow Constituencies

While it may be easier to rely on narrow, familiar and comfortable constituencies in the change process, this may actually serve to diminish the chance of real success with change. Alternatively, if we intentionally fashion alliances that are as inclusive as possible, between such key constituencies as service users, families, professionals, staff, academics, administrators, advocates, public servants, politicians, and community leaders, we substantially increase the likelihood that a broader and more compelling alliance of constituencies will result. This is not meant to uphold an inadequate and uninspired consensus at any cost, but rather to forge the most robust one possible.

Rome Was Not Built In A Day

Though people who are interested in change are by nature impatient and usually endowed with a sense of the urgency of the many issues that affect people's lives, it is also true that sound solutions cannot be summoned into existence, simply because this would be desirable. Time and substance are constant companions, and attempting to divorce these from each other in the interest of pace, may well help undo that which may need to be carefully and soundly built.

Conclusion

While alliances also bring with them constraints and other burdens, this does not in any way minimize the fact that alliances, properly struck and steered, can be extremely important if leaders in the field are to achieve many of the changes that people with disabilities need in order to realize their potential. We very much need to be able to define what a good leader is, what are moral and worthy alliances, and grow better at fashioning and upholding these.