

## The Four Axes of Collaborative Leadership

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The rise of communications technologies has flattened corporate structures around the world, fostering a new style for corporate managers: collaborative leadership. While the term remains somewhat loosely defined, at the end of the day this style is all about finding the proper balance between collaborating and leading.

Executives need to know how to build alliances across different levels of their organization, from the boardroom to the shop floor, and externally, with other stakeholders around the globe. That's collaboration; it becomes collaborative leadership when you learn to leverage that connectivity in pursuit of your organization's goals.

When planning your strategy for how you and your organisation are going to implement this new way of leading, it's helpful to think about seeking out partners along four axes: across different levels of the internal corporate hierarchy; across different geographies; with external stakeholders; and with diverse demographic groups.

### Collaborative Leadership – Axis 1 – Corporate Hierarchy

Working together across various levels of the corporate hierarchy means members of the management team have to be open to input from people in every position within their organisation; more than that, it means actively promoting a culture where speaking up is encouraged – and, crucially, establishing channels of communication (technical and otherwise) that allow such input.

In a [ground-breaking piece of research](#) on collaborative leadership, Herminia Ibarra of Insead and Morten T. Hansen of the University of California, Berkeley, describe how the management of Salesforce.com used an application inspired by Facebook to include all of the company's employees in its annual management off-site. The plan gave management insight into what workers at the coalface are thinking and experiencing; it also allowed workers to peer into and influence management's decision-making processes.

### Collaborative Leadership – Axis 2 – Geography

The second axis along which managers need to seek new partners is geography. While it's important to recognise that time zones will still pose a barrier, executives need to ensure that they're harnessing all possible communications tools to interact with colleagues from around the globe. Insights from different markets and cultures can help shed light on difficult issues, giving the collaborative leader an advantage over their more provincial rivals.

### Collaborative Leadership – Axis 3 – Cooperation outside of organisational boundaries

Of course, not every company has operations around the globe, but that doesn't have to stop anyone from being a global manager. This brings us to the third axis: cooperation outside organisational boundaries. In addition to relationships with suppliers and customers in other countries, executives need to be looking for innovative ideas and practices wherever they can be found, which today means interacting with industry experts and other thought leaders around the globe, regardless of how geographically limited an organisation's actual operations may be. That's the global aspect of working across company boundaries. Closer to home, reaching out along this axis means working with regulators, consumer groups, NGOs, influencers and other stakeholders. Reaching out beyond the company's walls is also key to driving innovation, [Ibarra says](#).

### Collaborative Leadership – Axis 4 – Diversity

The fourth and final axis is diversity: Collaborative managers need to ensure they're breaking down the boundaries of gender, ethnicity and age. While some of this will come automatically as a side effect of working together across geographies (ethnicity) and levels of the corporate hierarchy (age), managers need to make a conscious effort to avoid groupthink by surrounding themselves with people whose different life experiences give them different, valuable perspectives on the challenges facing the organisation.

### Collaborative Leadership – Beyond the Basics

Once you've mastered the four axes, there is still plenty to be learned about the nuts and bolts of this new way of managing. For example, leaders must be careful to make it clear that they retain ultimate decision-making authority (and responsibility): Ibarra and Hansen are careful to stress that collaboration isn't the same as consensus, providing a very useful [table](#) that outlines the differences.

Another good tip is to work on developing your [emotional intelligence](#). Managers with naturally high EQ will have a leg up in the process of transforming their organisations; others will have to work on developing a range of skills, which a number of experts have very helpfully identified. One that appears on just about every list: empathy.

Management consultant Jose Cabrera [explains](#) that unlike in a top-down, command-and-control style, where power flows from your position on the organisational chart, collaborative leadership is based on the leader's personal power and credibility. Cabrera identifies four key competencies for leaders and their organisations: in addition to empathy, he names netarchy, influence and adaptation.

Empathy is also one of the four key behaviours of effective collaborative leaders identified by Carol Kinsey Goman in [an article](#) providing advice on developing this style. The others are building relationships of trust (whose effects include encouraging others to engage and take ownership); sending nonverbal signals of inclusion (such as positive eye contact and genuine smiles) to project warmth and caring; and fostering an environment of psychological safety.

Alongside empathy, in their book *Collaborative Leadership – Building relationships, handling conflict and sharing control*, David Archer and Alex Cameron also point to [agility](#) and patience as key attributes for managers to develop.

Networks aren't built overnight, nor are the skills that managers need in order to benefit from them. But by focusing on developing empathy, executives can start working toward success as collaborative leaders.

