

This case study explores the journey of an executive leadership team seeking to become more collaborative, innovative, and adaptive in their approach to organizational leadership, using a values-based collaborative leadership program.

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# **A Journey into Collaborative Leadership: Moving Toward Innovation and Adaptability**

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This case presents a study of an executive leadership team seeking to become more collaborative, creative, and nimble in the fast-growing, dynamic field of health care in the United States. We refer to this company by the pseudonym Bay Area Health Care (BAHC) and to the chief executive officer (CEO) as Sharon. Sharon sees developing a more collaborative leadership culture as essential for continuing the organization's growth and innovative work. Toward that end, in January 2016 she enrolled in a master of arts (MA) in leadership program. She soon realized that what she was learning was exactly what her team and organization needed. In May 2016 she contracted with the Leadership Center at Saint Mary's College of California, of which the authors are co-directors and faculty in the MA program, to develop a more collaborative leadership culture within the four-person executive team and, ultimately, to embed collaborative leadership and learning throughout the organization. In presenting the values-based collaborative leadership program designed for BAHC, along with definitions of the terms used, we describe two domains of learning—as individuals and as a team. A narrative account of the executive team's learning journey highlights the CEO's personal journey, followed by a discussion of the outcomes, learning, and next steps for the team and the organization.

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# Cultivating Collaborative Leadership in BAHC

Sharon was hired as the chief executive officer (CEO) of BAHC, a regional healthcare organization, to turn around the organization in a time of crisis. Her ability to be decisive, directive, and authoritative was exactly what the Board felt was needed for the organization's survival. After a few short years the organization had not only survived, but was beginning to thrive. In four years, revenue grew tenfold from \$12 million to \$120 million with a potential for much more. For Sharon this meant that she and the organization needed to grow beyond crisis leadership to a practice and culture leadership that fosters collaboration, innovation, and learning.

## How It Began.

As the CEO of BAHC in this time of transition and rapid growth, Sharon's believed if more collaboration and innovation in the organization was to take root, she would have to model what she envisioned for the organization.

Toward this end, Sharon enrolled in a graduate leadership program in January 2016, expecting to bring knowledge and practices to her team and organization. She was attracted to the program because it promised to move beyond "role-based managerial leadership" to develop competencies "in relational and collaborative leadership," moving the leadership role to every stakeholder (Saint Mary's College, 2016, para. 1).

## Focus on Values.

The Saint Mary's College program emphasizes attention to values in developing leadership potential. Understanding values helps in the following ways:

- Provides a road map for leadership development
- Brings language to our highest aspirations
- Creates a measurement tool for tracking our progress
- Fosters compassion via knowing ourselves and others more fully
- Shines healing attention on the unconscious blocks that can hold us back
- Moves us into more effective and prioritized action on what matters most to us

In the program's Values in Action course, each person takes the 125-question Hall-Tonna values survey, which provides a holistic report of one's

priorities, spanning foundation values such as Food/Warmth/Shelter to vision values such as Global Harmony across four phases of human development and consciousness (see Figure 3.1) and the relevant leadership necessary for each phase (Hall, 2006). The values portrait shows people where they are operating with their leadership, highlights the vision values calling them into their future leadership practice, and illuminates the foundation values that need to be fulfilled for them to learn and grow. By making visible the constellation of values in people and teams, the instrument reveals a learning and development pathway toward their aspired future (Otter, in press). As one member of Sharon’s leadership team put it, “Our values work helps us bring intentional mindfulness to our highest priorities.” For cultivating a more collaborative leadership practice, the consciousness, behaviors, and skills reflected by these values are central to adult learning and transformation (Kegan, 2000; Mezirow, 2000).

Figure 3.1. The four phases and eight stages in the Hall-Tonna Values Map



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## The Program Design.

The collaborative leadership program with BAHC was designed with the following elements: individual and team values survey; coaching and exploration; creation of individual and team leadership development plans (LDP); development of a team and organizational vision statement based on shared values and aspirations; and regular consulting conversations with Sharon to adapt the work to changing circumstances and needs in the organization. Before providing the narrative of the program’s first 6 months, we pause to define terms.

## Defining Our Terms.

The terms *leader/leadership* and *manager/management* are often used interchangeably. We view leadership as a verb, not a noun: an action in motion that can arise anywhere within a system and is not determined by positional

authority. Management and leadership are distinct yet complementary functions within an organization, and people are likely to engage in both forms of action (Otter, 2017). Understanding the distinctions allows us to develop and attend to their respective competencies (Otter, 2012). Following Heifetz and Linsky (2002), *management* involves the exercise of authority and expertise to resolve technical and well-understood challenges, whereas *leadership* involves non-coercive influence in addressing adaptive challenges where there is no known solution. By this definition, technical challenges require the mobilization and application of existing knowledge in the diagnosis and intervention, for example, of completing an audit or performing surgery. Adaptive challenges require shifting habits of heart, mind, and behavior (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002).

Though *collaboration* is a familiar word, it is easier said than done in a world oriented toward hierarchy, certainty, and technical solutions. Given the focus on innovation and multistakeholder engagement in addressing adaptive challenges, leadership implicates the need for both collaboration and learning (Paxton & Van Stralen, 2015). Enhancing collaborative leadership capacity fosters culture change. As Schein (2010) illustrated, “culture and leadership are two sides of the same coin... leaders first start the process of culture creation when they create groups and organizations. After cultures exist, they determine the criteria for leadership” (p. 22). Consciously creating a culture of collaboration, innovation, learning, and leadership is crucial for shifting deeply held habits of hierarchy. *Transformative learning* in adults is a process of expanding one’s “habits of mind” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 5).

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## The Executive Team: A Collaborative Leadership Learning Journey

We begin the narrative account with Sharon’s individual learning journey; as CEO, she was the catalyst for the executive team’s journey. She drew upon her role authority to promote more shared leadership among the executive team members.

### Sharon’s Journey.

Early in her studies, Sharon took a values survey assessment and had a personal coaching session, through which she gained insight into the values that underpinned her leadership orientation and effectiveness. She realized that for the organization to manifest its fuller potential, she must move beyond the hierarchical and authoritative crisis leadership skills she had honed, moving from a sense of

“I/me” to “we/us” and helping others throughout the organization practice their way into a more collaborative and innovative leadership culture. Through creating her LDP, Sharon had several realizations:

1. More collaborative leadership practice would require the full participation of her leadership team and the larger organization as well.
2. People throughout the organization, at both individual and collective levels, could benefit from a similar values-based learning in developing the capacities and skills for collaborative leadership.
3. Reaching for shared leadership during times of rapid change and growth is an adaptive challenge in itself.

These realizations formed the basis for Sharon’s intention to shift from being an effective crisis leader to building a more collaborative culture for leadership. Her LDP became the blueprint for bringing the leadership curriculum into her organization. She described six elements of her expanding definition of leadership:

1. Attention and Intention: understanding how people’s “inner space” affects their outcomes and work
2. Creating Space for Transformation: engaging in empathic and generative listening to create shared ownership and whole-person participation, inviting body, mind, and soul
3. Open Mind: suspending judgment by maintaining a separation between observations and evaluations
4. Express Vulnerability: through identifying feelings and needs
5. Deeper Communication: creating a culture for exploring both content and how people feel about the content
6. Encourage Critical Thinking: by asking unexpected questions and speculating about new possibilities

Though she had not thought of herself as particularly “touchy feely” as a CEO, Sharon saw that these interpersonal skills were crucial for the development of the executive team’s collaborative and adaptive capacities. She increasingly understood that the development of the executive team, and the individuals within it, was her highest priority as CEO.

## **Catalyzing the Team.**

Here we describe and illustrate the intersection and mutually enhancing relationship between the individual and team learning. As Sharon did in her MA program, each executive team member took the values survey assessment, had ongoing individual coaching, and used the results to create their own LDP. Each person was able to design specific action experiments to embody the values they sought to develop in their leadership behaviors and actions.

Concurrent with the individual LDP work, the executive team engaged in monthly team meetings on values and leadership development facilitated by the faculty consultants/coaches. These conversations explored how the team could understand and put to use the individual coaching and LDP work of all four executive team members. The intentions of these facilitated conversations included:

1. To develop and articulate a shared vision for the organization and an envisioned future as a collaborative executive team
2. To enhance each person's collaborative capacity as a team member through support and accountability for their individual LDP plans
3. To articulate a team LDP, including practical steps to embody this future
4. To bring collaborative leadership into their respective teams and next tier of management

## **The Team's Evolution.**

The first four monthly facilitated executive team meetings provided a foundation for the emergence of a collaborative leadership and learning team in the last 2 months of the program.

### **Creating the Foundation, the First 4 Months.**

Once their LDPs were complete, monthly team meetings became focused on shared and collaborative leadership. In its second meeting, the team reflected on the combined values of the team and what aspirational team values would best serve the organization's purpose and well-being. Team-level values arose, generating an unexpected and uplifting vision of their future as a team and as an organization. Through a process called a "group vision dialectic" (Hall, 2006), the executive team used values to create a starting point for their organizational vision work:

Truth/Wisdom (a goal value working at the cutting edge of knowledge) supported by Community/Personalist (a means/skill value representing the highest level of team) leads to Global Harmony (a goal value addressing humanity and ecology at a global systems level). (Hall, 2006)

During the third meeting the team created the following organizational and team vision statement:

Fearlessly pursuing human equality, a better life and equity by transforming worldviews through pioneering methods and technologies, including:

- Collaboration with accountability

- Fierce honesty
- Agility in the face of change
- Deep respect and support for one another

This statement provided the fertile soil from which significant individual and team learning emerged in the later months of the program.

## **The Emergence of Team Learning and Development, the Next 2 Months.**

During the November facilitated meeting, the executive team spoke honestly about how to develop the team's capacity to execute BAHC's strategic vision over the following 12 months during a time of anticipated turbulence and change. They described their current reality as, "We do things but we are not together," their envisioned future reality as, "We consistently ask, what can I do differently in order to do the work we need to do?," and identified next action steps to take, such as, "We are going to experiment with how to live this vision and how to share it with others."

During this meeting, Sharon shared her frustrations. She assumed that the quest for shared leadership meant the whole team would take responsibility to create and communicate the vision, yet others believed it was her responsibility as CEO to do so. This was an important moment: as the members grappled with what collaborative leadership really meant for their team, they realized they were still operating from a leader-centric mind-set, reflecting prevailing patterns of their past and present organizational culture. To operate from a more relational and collaborative leadership mindset would require something different Sharon said, "If not us, who? We have to make the space for doing the work that only we can do. Otherwise, what we're doing isn't scalable." This shift in understanding was palpable in the room that day. The team later identified the facilitated November meeting as a watershed moment, bringing forth a new level of openness, engagement, shared understanding, and commitment to become a collaborative leadership team.

### **From Cooperation to Collaboration:**

On November 28, the executive team met alone to create a vision for the organization's next year, to be presented the following day to senior leaders in the organization. The chief innovation officer (CIO) described that meeting as an example of "us working together as a team.... We started writing words on Post-it notes, and it became a story by 5 pm." This new way of working together continued to the following day's meeting. As Sharon described it,

[The November 29 meeting] was different because of [the November 28 meeting]. When we were presenting as a team in the past, we didn't used to be ready. This time, we came in with a shared vision and made space for others to contribute to it.

The CIO added, "Being prepared allowed us to show up and be relaxed, open." Also reflecting on the November 29 meeting, the chief operations officer (COO) commented, "It was a fine but crucial line, the shift [in the executive team] from cooperation to collaboration." The team spoke about the November 29 meeting as an instance when the collection of individuals moved from "a hierarchical version of us" to becoming a team of "interchangeable parts," in which any one of them could have made the presentation without the others being present. Senior leaders reported that at that meeting they experienced the executive team as relaxed, unified, and open.

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## **Making Sense of the Journey So Far: Initial Outcomes, Learning, and Next Steps**

Several themes have emerged during the first 6 months that help us make sense of the learning journey of the executive team at BAHC toward collaborative leadership. We discuss them through three bodies of literature: individual adult learning and development (Hall, 2006; Kegan, 2000; Mezirow, 2000), team learning and development (Kasl, Marsick, & Dechant, 1997), and adaptive and collaborative leadership (Denis, Langley & Sergi, 2012; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002).

### **Personal Vision—a Catalyst for Cultural Change.**

As CEO, Sharon had an intuition that the only way for her organization to survive and thrive in a period of disruption and rapid change was to cultivate a more collaborative leadership culture in the organization, beginning with transformative change in herself and her team if it was to eventually become organization-wide. Part of her personal vision was to seed the development of, and then participate in, a collaborative leadership team.

### **Team Visioning as Adaptive Work.**

Over the course of 6 months, Sharon's vision for building a more collaborative culture became shared by the entire executive team. Creating a team and



organization-level vision statement contributed to cultivating collaborative capacity in the team—highlighting the importance of both process and content. The values-based collaborative program not only provided a road map for the rest of the organization, it also galvanized the team’s commitment to meet the dynamic and emerging future with greater innovation and agility. The team shifted from a habit of focusing predominantly on the reliability dimension of organizational life to the practice of attending to the more adaptive dimension, reflective of both management and leadership (Otter, 2017).

## **Developing New Competencies.**

With the shift in old habits and patterns came new practices. For example, the executive team began to shift from spending their meeting time “getting caught in the weeds” of urgent matters to spending more time “getting on the balcony” (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002, p. 51) to reflect on their work and development as a collaborative team. Being on the balcony helped them be more skillful in discerning between exercising authority/management and leadership, between technical and adaptive challenges, and recognizing when they were avoiding the adaptive work of the team because it was uncertain and difficult.

Given the rapid change in the healthcare field, and the pressure to perform, the executive team took important steps in identifying and attending to their own distress and disequilibrium as a necessary part of working adaptively. Self-care, as well as providing support and resources to each other, became a regular focus in both conversation and practice.

Members were increasingly able to name interpersonal and team dynamics as they arose, which resulted in more effective choices for action. This reflects a growing capacity for members to take what is subject and make it object, which signals a qualitatively more complex mind-set, what Kegan (2000) refers to as a shift from a “socialized” to a “self-authoring mind” (p. 59).

Developing new competencies is evidence of new learning taking place, which points to the mutually enhancing relationship between personal development and learning.

## **From Individual to Team-Level Learning:**

Alongside the executive team’s individual-level learning has been significant team-level learning. Indeed, a team’s capacity for adaptation is predicated on individual team member development that is carried into team-level interactions. As far back as 1990, Senge alerted us that team-level learning in organizations was key to their innovation and learning, declaring, “Unless teams can learn, the organization cannot” (p. 10). Kasl, Marsick, and Dechant (1997) defined team

learning as “a process through which a group creates knowledge for its members, for itself as a system, and for others” (p. 229). Their model identifies conditions and processes for team learning reflected in four modes of increasing complexity, which they named as fragmented, pooled, synergistic and continuous (p. 230).

Over the course of the project’s first 6 months, there was evidence of movement from pooled to synergistic learning. At the start of the program, members viewed the team as a valuable context for individual learning and a productive means for coordinating tasks and achieving their goals. There was openness to one another’s perspectives, yet the CEO’s voice garnered more consideration than others. Interpersonal conflicts were avoided, and experimenting with new behaviors took place largely at an individual level.

By the end of the 6 months, there was ample evidence of synergistic learning. Important insights emerged from the team’s work, not just from individuals within it. The team broke the habit of Sharon facilitating the executive team meetings. All members contributed their perspectives and views, which were considered equally. The team more frequently named and reframed operating assumptions, demonstrating a greater willingness to challenge and be challenged by one another. Conflicts and vulnerability were aired more readily, and leaps of insight were more common. Such experimentation with new behaviors provided further evidence of synergistic learning.

## **Leadership in the Plural:**

In retrospect, the team’s shift toward more collaborative leadership seemed deceptively simple, once they could see themselves from the balcony (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). From the onset, team members were interested in the idea of enacting collaborative leadership, yet continued to operate more independently in their roles as executives. Although there was coordination of their actions, they continued to focus on the technical challenges in the organization. This coleadership arrangement is what Denis, Langley, and Sergi (2012) refer to as “pooling leadership at the top,” in which “two, three, or more people jointly work together as co-leaders of others outside the group” (p. 3). Although this kind of coleadership is common, it would not suffice for BAHC’s current circumstances or its envisioned future. The quest for a collaborative leadership culture, which began as Sharon’s vision and became that of the executive team, ushered in a shift of paradigm in how they understood and practiced leadership, as individuals and as a team. Generating a change toward a more complex consciousness, or new “habits of mind, which are more open, inclusive, discriminating, and adaptive” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 9) is what happens in transformative learning theory.

The executive team’s journey presented here shows the emergence of another stream of coleadership that Denis et al. (2012) called, “producing

leadership through interaction” (p. 4). This represents the biggest shift in leadership, from the prevailing leader-centric view of leadership to a relational one. The shift involves reorienting leadership from the traits and actions of designated leaders to leadership being embedded in relationships and relational processes (Otter, 2012; Uhl-Bien, 2006). Indicative of such a shift were statements by group members, such as when the CIO said, “In our meetings, we need to leave our roles at the door,” or when the COO shared that she needs to rethink her understanding of responsibilities as “mine and yours, to ours.” Moreover, the COO, CIO, and the chief financial officer (CFO) all recognized that the team, not just the CEO, is responsible for developing, articulating and communicating the organizational vision along with being self-directed, sharing facilitation, and working together.

## **Toward a Culture of Collaborative Learning and Leadership:**

While the question of how to embed continuous leadership and learning in the organization was being explored at the team level (Kasl et al., 1997), the team began to cultivate this cultural shift in the next tier—the senior leadership team. According to Hall (2006), the development of leadership from leader centric and managerial to relational and collaborative “can occur only when there is a concomitant shift in organizational structures” (p. 154). Viewing this shift in terms of a collaborative action inquiry (Paxton & Van Stralen, 2015), the first action the executive team took was to model collaborative leadership when presenting the organizational vision to the senior leadership team. Another action involved the COO and CIO deviating from their standard practice of working with their teams independently to pair up and bring their respective teams together.

Moreover, a similar values-based collaborative leadership development program has begun with the individuals on the senior leadership team, who have started receiving values coaching. Plans are in the works to link immersive learning, such as workshops in adaptive and collaborative leadership, with action learning, via individual and team coaching, mentoring, and collaborative action inquiry (Allen & Roberts, 2011; Otter, 2012). Shifting how we think and act in the world and building more capacity to adapt, practice, and address challenges and uncertainty is the work of our times. As the CIO commented about the process: “This is subtle work with a huge impact.” The case study exemplifies just that.

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