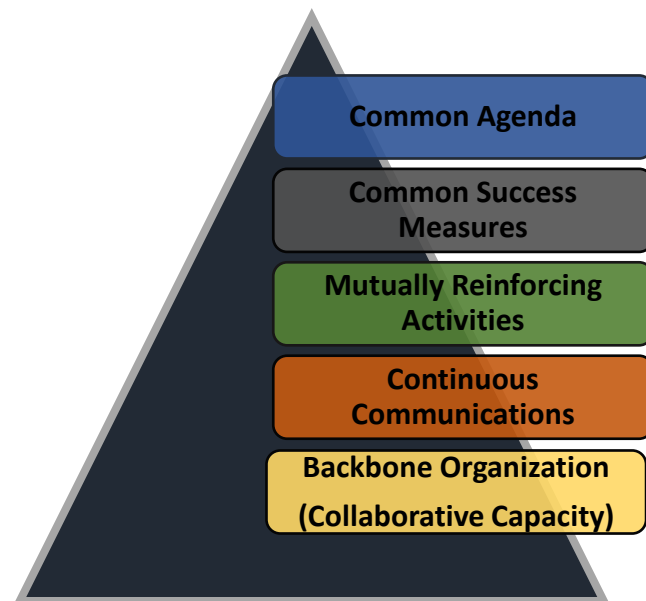


Successful Economic Development Leadership is All About Collaboration

Ted Abernathy, Summer 2019

Economic development is a profession where much is expected. To be successful you need many abilities, among the most important, individual and group leadership skills. Regardless of how your organization is structured, (government department, committee of 100, chamber of commerce or a public private partnership), you work within several crowded and complicated ecosystems. Think about the task of mapping the workforce development, entrepreneurial support, talent attraction, product development or business attraction ecosystem for any community or region. Economic developers work daily within that jumble of groups and individuals, and we need their cooperation to accomplish our goals.

Successfully navigating this complex environment is a challenge and takes exceptional interpersonal skills. But just surviving is not enough. Economic developers are regularly expected to provide leadership and be the catalyst for alignment and synergies. Leadership is a popular research topic, but over the years I have found a few models and approaches to be helpful.



The **Collective Impact Model**, originating at Stanford University, is a group of actors, from different sectors, committing to a common agenda to solve a specific problem. Fifteen years ago, this model was the framework for the Research Triangle Regional Partnership (RTRP) first strategic plan, *Staying on Top*. More than 100 institutional partners rallied around a common plan to improve the region's competitiveness. RTRP acted as the plan's backbone organization and focused heavily on common measurement and communication. Today the principles are used by many organizations such as Davie County's EDC work with the local Chamber of Commerce and Community College on workforce improvement.

Using a structured form of collaboration for multiple organizations can be a powerful tool. If you can convince multiple groups to agree to the five principles of Collective Impact: a common agenda, shared measurement systems, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and backbone support organizations, you can often achieve positive results. Regardless of how a collaborative process is labeled, many of the components are similar when multiple organizations work together. Recently Google spent two years studying what makes a team effective. *Project Aristotle* found that high-performing teams had clear goals, defined roles for those collaborating and members felt safe sharing ideas.

Sometimes the bigger challenge is not with organizations collaborating but how to get individuals to cooperate. Is there a magic phrase that can be said? Probably not, but we can continue to add tools to our personal leadership toolbox. A technique developed more than 50 years ago might help.

The **Johari Window** helps people better understand their relationship with themselves and with others. It was created by psychologists Joseph Luft and Harrington Ingham in 1955 and is used primarily in corporate settings. The Johari Window proposes that in all interactions between people four “windowpanes” are always present. Being aware of the nature of the interaction can improve your individual skill. The four panes are the façade, the blind spot, the space, and the arena.

- 1) In an interaction, there is information I know, and the other person does not know and if I do not share, there is a *façade*.
- 2) There are things the other person knows, and I don't know, which creates a *blind spot* for me.
- 3) Things that neither of us know, provides a **“space” for possibilities**.
- 4) When we both know the same things, we have an *arena* between us. The greater the arena, the stronger the relationships.

By working to share more information we can expand the arena, allowing for mutual regard, mutual understanding, and clearer communication. This does not mean complete agreement or lack of conflict. It means we are committed to no hidden agendas, to acting as a team to achieve common goals. The next time you are having difficulty

communicating with someone that you need to collaborate with, think about which windowpane is dominate in your interactions.

Finally, in our role as economic developers, our leadership success is often a product of our organizational success. Our goal is not just to be viewed as a good leader, but to have a high-performance organization. High-performance is defined as an organization that is extremely focused on its specific goals and that achieves superior results.

We have developed a checklist for high-performance organizations. A good exercise is for you, your staff, and your board to regularly rate the organization on these factors.

- ✓ Has a high-performance board of directors (focused on specific priorities)
- ✓ Has board members with strong alliances and networks that improve the organization
- ✓ Is efficient with funding and has enough resources to meet stakeholder expectations
- ✓ Operates with a strong strategic plan
- ✓ Rigorously measures results and adjusts based on information
- ✓ Continuously shares results with all stakeholders
- ✓ Focuses on the future and takes risks
- ✓ Has high-performance staff leadership
- ✓ Invests sufficiently in staff development
- ✓ The organization is considered to be a thought leader in the community

Very few economic developers operate as white knights that ride into a community armed with magic and omnipotence. Developing better leadership and collaboration skills is a career-long quest. While successful leadership styles can vary widely, good leaders typically follow a path detailed by John Kennedy in his last speech in Dallas in 1963, **“leadership and learning are indispensable to each other.”**