

BY Judy Anderson and Shelli Bischoff

BUILDING AN EFFECTIVE TEAM Through Shared Leadership

All successful land trusts have one thing in common: effective leadership. However, in many land trusts the top-down approach to leadership is changing, moving toward a leadership model that no longer relies on leaders issuing “commands” or being the only decision-makers. Rather, the land trust community has reached a level of complexity and resource scarcity where effective leaders will nimbly respond to organizational challenges by encouraging and facilitating a team approach. These leaders steadfastly carry out the *functions* of leadership, but are also committed to developing a culture of shared leadership based on trust and empowerment.

This starts with the board chair and the executive director, but also means building an engaged and empowered team among staff, board and increasingly with community partners. Shared leadership optimizes the collective strengths, talents and energy of all human resources to achieve mission success. It builds stronger, more responsive, resilient and thoughtful organizations based on energized relationships and enthusiasm for the work of land conservation.

Director and Chair as Leadership Partners

As leadership partners, the executive director and the board chair work together

to carry out the functions of leadership. Key functions include setting the direction of the organization, communicating that direction and inspiring and engaging others to move in that direction—often using a strategic plan or annual action plans to build consensus. Increasingly, leadership also includes the tone, organizational culture and values with which the organization strategically engages its constituents and the broader community.

A solid partnership is based on knowing each other’s strengths and weaknesses, communication styles and learning styles, and on an honest and respectful working relationship. The executive director, while

“Leadership is not about how many emails, memos and transmittals are sent under your signature—it’s about relationships, service and engagement.”

-Mike Myatt, Chief Strategy Officer, N2growth (leadership development and advisory firm)

reporting to the full board, is considered a peer to the board chair and part of the organizational leadership team. And while moving in the same direction, the partners also need to understand the opportunities and obstacles to achieving success.

Five signs that indicate the director and the chair are operating as leadership partners.

1. They take time to get to know each other and build trust through honest and open dialogue. This means they are able to discuss differences. They model respectful dialogue to foster substantive discourse and engagement among those with varying ideas, opinions and expertise. While there is great respect, neither the director nor the chair solicitously defer to the other.
2. They regularly check in with each other. Communication is frequent and meaningful,

Following Board

Strong Board



Strong Leader

Following Leader

not only in emergencies or right before the board meeting. Often the board chair as the manager of the board and the executive director as the manager of the staff will discuss how to ensure that the board and staff have the resources and management needed to help lead the organization forward. They have a commitment to fostering constructive conversations when the organization is going through tough times in addition to when things are going well. Their shared goal is to keep everyone fully motivated, learning and moving forward.

3. They respect each other. As good partners they would never speak unkindly about the other and they would have “each other’s back.” They create a culture where the staff and board ask how they can support each other.

4. They jointly set the board meeting agenda. There is a fluidity in the board meeting facilitation. It is clear that the director and board chair are in sync and one doesn’t need the spotlight over the other.

5. The language is about “our organization” rather than “the board” and “the staff,” as if they are two separate entities.

“Management gives leadership a foundation to work from. Leadership keeps us growing and relevant.”

-Michael McKinny, Leading Blog, 2012

Going Deeper: Building an Effective Team

Shared leadership goes beyond board chair and executive director as leadership partners. It also extends to the full board and staff and in many cases to volunteers, donors, partners and members of the community.

To create a shared leadership culture, directors and chairs need to gain a deep understanding of board, staff and partner interests, time availability, ideas and connections, typically through one-on-one discussions. This leadership strategy also finds ways to incorporate staff, board and partners into discussion and idea sessions throughout the year.

Brian Price, executive director of the Leelanau Conservancy in Michigan, remarks, “We really do believe in shared leadership around here. It’s allowed us to recognize more opportunities, adapt to new situations and discuss in creative ways what has worked well in conservation and what may need to change in the future. It’s easier if one or two people call all the shots, but it’s not as effective. So getting it right is a real balancing act, but well worth the effort.”

A CONVERSATION WITH KEVIN CASE

Northeast Director, Land Trust Alliance and former chair of Winchester Land Trust (CT)

SL: Are you seeing more shared leadership in the land trusts you work with?

KC: It varies. Larger staffed organizations seem to have intuitively embraced it. Land trusts that are just starting to add or grow staff, I think, are still figuring it out; the more exposure they have to the concept and how it can actually work on the ground, the more we’ll see shared leadership approaches grow.

SL: Why do you think the model is becoming more popular?

KC: I think it’s gaining in popularity in part because land conservation work is over time becoming more collaborative and that collaborative approach is trickling down into the operations of the land trusts themselves. I also think as land trust leaders gain more exposure to shared leadership approaches, they’ll appreciate the greater efficiencies and greater impact their organization can have by taking such approaches.

SL: What is its advantage over the traditional top-down leadership model?

KC: Shared leadership helps empower staff, creates clearer lines of responsibility and recognizes that land conservation and the business of running a nonprofit are complicated and challenging, and, as such, the board members and staff of a land trust each have certain skills and insights that are critical to successfully leading an organization.

Tips for increasing shared leadership within your land trust include:

1. Investing in the learning and skill building of everyone on the team, including entry-level positions and new board members. This involves helping people to look beyond “today” and thinking about what it will take to be successful in the future. Making sure people understand the roles of board and staff, related to the daily execution of work and agreed upon priorities, is also important, so that staff don’t become overwhelmed.

2. Creating the time for the director and the chair to meet with individual board members informally throughout the year, to discuss their roles in the organization. Also clarifying what training they would find helpful and areas where they feel they can make a difference.

3. Encouraging conversations with the board and staff on topics that stretch or expand the organization’s view of what strategic organizational and conservation work could look like (both long-term and short-term) and the resources or skills needed to take on new concepts or strategies.

4. Establishing processes that allow people to test new ideas and concepts, while respecting existing needs within the organization. This involves creating a safe place to experiment, and empowering people to share what they have learned from their successes and mistakes.

5. Facilitating meetings to encourage input from all those who wish to speak, and working to draw people into the conversation in a manner in which they feel listened to. Peter Senge, one of the nation’s leading experts in leadership who wrote the *Fifth Discipline*, which popularized the concept of a “learning organization,” observes:

“When you ask people about what it is like being part of a great team, what is most striking is the meaningfulness of the experience. People talk about being part of something larger than

Resources

“Doing More with More: Putting Shared Leadership into Practice,” *The Nonprofit Quarterly*: www.tccgrp.com/pdfs/180206_Reprint.pdf

“Achieving Better Results Through Shared Leadership,” *Philadelphia Social Innovations Journal*: <http://tinyurl.com/ckvld9>

Leading Blog: Creating a Community of Leaders: www.leadershipnow.com/leadingblog

Alliance for Nonprofit Management Conference session on shared leadership: www.leadershipforanewera.org/page/Alliance+for+Nonprofit+Management+Conference+Session

themselves, of being connected, of being generative. It becomes quite clear that, for many, their experiences as part of truly great teams stand out as singular periods of life lived to the fullest. Some spend the rest of their lives looking for ways to recapture that spirit.”

A Culture of Trust

A shared leadership culture fosters a belief in change, learning, discussion, risk-taking and adapting to new ideas and technology as appropriate to the organization’s scale and vision. At its base, it is a culture of trust.

Pat Powell, executive director of the Whidbey Camano Land Trust in Washington state, has worked for both small and large land trusts, and observes that “embracing a sense of shared leadership is what makes my job both challenging and rewarding.” Over the past 26 years, the land trust has grown and adapted to the changing needs of the community, as well as conservation. “Our board and staff work really well as a team, and we ensure that everyone is treated with respect and is listened to in an authentic manner.”

According to Robert Hurley, author of *The Decision to Trust; How Leaders Create High-Trust Organizations*, “We must all act as stewards of natural, human, and capital resources that were neither earned nor created by us. We have an obligation to accept accountability for being trustworthy agents and use these resources effectively for current and future generations.”

Powell credits her board for ensuring that the culture of shared leadership is continued over time, noting that “for it to work, we have to make sure that we bring both board and staff members onto the team who believe in this approach and embrace a cooperative and shared effort—within the organization and with the larger community. Our success as a land trust, and indeed our future success, is based upon our belief in shared leadership.”

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