POWER PLAYS AND PARTNERSHIPS:
RETHINKING LEADERSHIP ASSUMPTIONS

By Daniel Kahl, PhD., Associate Director, Blueprint Kentucky
Associate Professor, Department of Community and Leadership Development (CLD)

Everyone loves to win. But to have winners, there need to be losers, right? Not necessarily. However, our assumptions on winning may shape our leadership behaviors. Understanding outcomes as win/lose is typical with competition. **Competition** is so familiar to many of us that it is a default perspective from which we approach the world. Competition dominates many aspects of our lives - among businesses, in athletics, and even shaping how we relate to our siblings, neighbors, or coworkers. Competition is a great motivator and can drive change. But seeing everything as competition can also influence our assumptions about who we can trust and how to best respond in a world of limited resources.

Alternatively, working closely with partners in highly collaborative efforts may be necessary to achieve a desired result. **Collaboration** is an approach that moves beyond communication and cooperation to seek a shared win between participants. High levels of collaboration require deep trust, shared power, and constant communication. How we approach collaboration differs from how we approach competition.

Our assumptions on winning outcomes can define our working relationships and even shape the approaches we use as leaders. For example:

o   **COMMUNICATION** – *Debate* presumes someone will dominate and win an argument, whereas *dialogue* seeks to reach a foundation of common understanding.

o   **NEGOTIATION** – *Distributive negotiation* seeks to gain at the expense of the other party, where *integrative negotiation* uses tactics that seek mutually beneficial outcomes.

o   **DECISION MAKING** – *Voting* is a win/lose decision making process (typically determined by majority), while *consensus* processes are designed to find solutions agreeable to all parties.

o   **ASSERTION OF POWER** – Traditional *command* and *control* methods of leadership assert that power is fixed and tightly held. Shared power approaches like collaborative leadership are characterized by the belief that sharing power with others expands power for everyone.

How we define who wins or what constitutes winning is an important consideration for leadership. Certainly, there are both costs and benefits that are associated with competition vs. collaboration, but there are also levels of winning that range from individual wins to organizational wins, and even victories for the entire community. When leading, remember that the shared fundamental assumptions of the rules of the game will influence group process and outcomes.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

Take a moment to consider your own assumptions about competitive or collaborative relationships and how those assumptions may influence leadership relationships:

o   *What is an example of a competitive leadership relationship you have experienced? How did the competitive relationship come about? How did you feel about the outcome/s?*

o   *What is an example of a collaborative leadership relationship you have been in? How did that collaborative relationship come about? How did you feel about the outcome/s?*

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS CONTINUED:

Think about the issues *in your community* over the last few years that have led to disagreement or disputes:

o   *What leadership approach – competition or collaboration - did community leaders seem to use when addressing this dispute?*

o   *Why do you think they chose this leadership approach rather than the alternative?*

o   *What are situations where a competitive approach may work better as a leadership strategy?*

o   *What are situations where a collaborative approach may work better than a competitive strategy?*

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

In "*The Collaboration Spectrum Revisited"* (Weaver, 2021) expresses a range of ways to describe working relationships, ranging from competition to integration. Recognizing that relationships will vary by project and intended outcomes, Weaver emphasizes the importance of being intentional about identifying the most appropriate working relationship early in the project. Defining the working relationship and methods of working together can have impacts on shared investment and longer-term outcome sustainability.

Many community or social issues are larger and more complicated than any one entity can address by themselves. When aligning multiple organizations from across the community, the approach of "*Collective Impact"* (Kania & Kramer, 2011) provides a tested working framework for supporting collaborative efforts.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Chrislip, David D. The Collaborative Leadership Fieldbook. (2002) San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Kania, John, and Mark Kramer. "Collective Impact." *Stanford Social Innovation Review* 9, no. 1 (2011): 36–41. https://doi.org/10.48558/5900-KN19. Accessed 5/25.

Weaver, Liz. (2021) The Collaboration Spectrum Revisited. Tamarack Institute. https://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/hubfs/Resources/Publications/Collaboration%20Spectrum%20Revisited_Liz%20Weaver.pdf

KENTUCKY COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP PROGRAMS NETWORK provides an idea-sharing and networking platform for leadership program designers and facilitators to expand the leadership capacity of residents of Kentucky. The following organizations are supporting partners: