Adaptive leadership in ARD

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The success of multi-stakeholder ARD (Agricultural Research for Development) partnerships is often attributed to stakeholder interaction and knowledge exchange, reflective learning and establishment of mutual trust between the partners involved. Achieving these outcomes depends very much on the leadership of the partnership, and how this leadership relates to partnership facilitation and also project coordination and/or management. This brief explores the different skills and attitudes required by leaders of ARD partnerships, and how these relate to different contexts.

Leadership normally implies giving direction by going in front or bringing a group or organization to a particular destination. A good leader is proactive in creating a vision of where to go, as well as guiding followers on how to get there. Being a leader usually implies formal authority, the power of decision over group/team members, and responsibility for decisions taken by the group. Leaders can also have informal authority that is given to them by their followers as recognition of their skills and ethics. Leaders can hold both formal and informal authority at the same time, with an overlap of both, depending on only formal authority without the requisite skills and ethics, can lead to lack of respect and difficulties in asserting that authority. Leadership is more about nurturing change, engaging and inspiring followers – rather than just supervising them.

Facilitation literally means “to make something easy” (from the Latin “faccio”, which means easy). In ARD partnerships, this means helping a team or a group of diverse stakeholders work together to clarify their different perspectives, agree on shared objectives, and to formulate joint actions. A good facilitator has a thorough understanding of process and communication issues, and requires analytical skills, strategic planning skills, process or “soft” skills, skills in guiding group reflection and learning, and documentation skills. It is often argued that a facilitator who is external to the team or group is less likely to be emotionally involved with the issues and team personalities, and so can focus on the process rather than the content of the team tasks. However, it is unrealistic to expect even professional facilitators not to have their own values, interests, relationships and methodological assumptions that determine the facilitation process. So a good facilitator will at least make these interests transparent to the larger group.

Management of projects or organizations is mainly about control and responsibility for ensuring the organization or project meets its mandate, objectives or “deliverables”. Skills required by managers include planning, budgeting, sourcing and allocating resources, monitoring and accounting for these resources, managing risks, problem-solving when needed, and reporting (to those financing the organization or project).

These definitions are rather simplistic. In practice, and in ARD partnerships, it is not always easy to separate the different functions or tasks of “leaders”, “facilitators” and “managers”, and there are a multitude of different terms for different leadership styles. Four leadership types are explored below.

Types of leadership

Transformational leaders support others to think differently and work in new ways to face challenges and promote innovation. It is contrasted with transactional leadership, where leaders focus more on compliance by their followers through rewards and/or punishments.

Transformational leaders lead teams, networks or organizations where individuals need to apply innovative thinking to solve problems and develop new products and services. They focus more on articulating a vision for the future, and communicating this to followers, developing their trust and inspiring their confidence and motivation. They solicit ideas from followers while at the same time challenging assumptions and changing the way they think about and frame challenges.

Through coaching and mentoring, the transformational leader provides opportunities for motivating each team member and building on their strengths allowing team members to grow and become fulfilled in their positions.

Facilitative leaders build collaborative relationships and create a supportive environment for teams and networks to achieve their goals. They focus on mobilizing energy and enthusiasm to generate innovative thinking and stimulate strategic action. They encourage open suggestions and constructive feedback, allowing everyone to be involved and share their thoughts and opinions. They promote reflection to promote questioning and listening and expand learning, challenge comfort zones, create ownership, channel action and create and sustain a learning culture.

This kind of leadership is not based on formal authority or control. Partners, stakeholders and team members share ownership of ideas when there is collective agreement and clarity in the direction of where the project or organization is heading.

Facilitative leaders need to be empathetic and have strong active listening and communication skills. They need to be able to question in such a way as to seek clarification and promote critical thinking, as well as structure and record the learning by the group. Good facilitators are aware of how the members of a group are interacting and feeling, are able to intervene and build rapport and synergy within the group, and also manage the conflicts which inevitably arise in any diverse group.

Collaborative leaders are “connectors” who have the ability to link people, ideas, and resources that may not normally come together and who have different values and interests, but nevertheless realize that they can all benefit by sharing experiences and strategies. Collaborative leaders recognize the importance of interpersonal relationships and cross-functional collaboration as crucial for the success of the networks which form and reform as new challenges or opportunities emerge.

In general, people gravitate to collaborations where they know and share similar values and perspectives—which can stifle innovation. Collaborative leaders ensure that teams stay fresh by bringing in new actors and infusing new ideas.

Successful collaborative leaders have skills in stakeholder management, strategic planning, quantitative analysis, communication and ability to motivate. They can empathize across sectors, cultures, and languages. They understand a particular issue from the point of view of different actors. They can handle inter-sectoral and complex problems, because they have the ability and well-rounded subject matter expertise to understand multiple perspectives of the same issue.

Adaptive leaders incorporate many of the functions, skills and attributes of collaborative and facilitative and transformational leaders. They promote the adaptability that allows an organization or network to grow, reflect and build on experience to improve future success. They are able to diagnose the challenges in the system, mobilize the resources that exist in the system, and understand their own role within it.

Adaptive leadership engages and inspires ARD partners to get on board for impact

The demands of ARD partnerships and innovation mean that leaders of these partnerships need to be more than just project managers. Core activities of ARD Partnerships also include facilitating communication, team-building and conflict resolution, encouraging others to jointly find solutions and resources, and promoting joint reflection and continuous learning (see Table 7 next page). The types of leadership described above (facilitative, collaborative, adaptive) are well suited to ARD partnerships. ARD leaders need to help partner organizations and networks successfully adapt and respond to a changing environment. Innovation calls for changes in attitudes and behaviours, processes and structures - not only among the members of a network that is formed around a common challenge, but also for the organizations that support such networks.

At the same time, the tasks of leadership in ARD partnerships do not necessarily have to be invested in one person. A “leader” can be anybody within the partnership who leads specific tasks, regardless of their formal position or even informal role within the partnership. When several different people undertake these different tasks of leadership, this is sometimes referred to as “shared”, “collective” or “distributed leadership”. In fact, the leadership tasks and skills described in Table 1 are difficult to find in one person, and particularly if that person is also expected to be a project manager. Managers and leaders often have different skill sets. A project manager needs...
TABLE 1. Leadership tasks, skills and attitudes required in ARD partnerships. (Source: the authors)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ARD LEADERSHIP TASKS</th>
<th>ARD LEADERSHIP SKILLS</th>
<th>ARD LEADERSHIP ATTITUDES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Partnership brokerage</td>
<td>Networking</td>
<td>Motivating, enthusiastic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collective vision setting</td>
<td>Systems thinking</td>
<td>Visionary, considering of diverse views and courses of action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resource mobilization</td>
<td>Proposal development, negotiation</td>
<td>Proactive, persistent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partnership facilitation</td>
<td>Communication, team-building and decision-making</td>
<td>Flexible, respectful, positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust building</td>
<td>Listening, conflict resolution, mediation</td>
<td>Open, calm, empathetic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge exchange, collective learning</td>
<td>Facilitation of joint reflection and learning</td>
<td>Orientation to lifelong learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promotion of organizational, systemic change</td>
<td>Strategic planning, business planning</td>
<td>Innovative, risk-taking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External communication, advocacy</td>
<td>Documentation, social media</td>
<td>Confident, audience-oriented</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Tools for exploring and assessing leadership

Personal assessment of leadership skills

There are a number of frameworks for individuals to assess their own leadership skills and related personality types. These include:

- The Leadership Assessment Tool Inventory from the Kellogg School of Management describes a number of exercises to “assess your ability to apply critical management skills to identify and solve key organizational problems”.
- Collaborative Leadership: Self-Assessment Questionnaires, from Taming Paint, which focuses on assessing the environment, visioning and mobilizing, building trust, sharing power and influence, developing people, and self-reflection.
- The Myers-Brigg Type Indicator (MBTI) Assessment, which “gives you a framework for understanding yourself and appreciating differences in others.” It is one of the best-known personality type assessments (of which there are many).

Adjusting leadership style to context

The “situational leadership” model of Hersey and Blanchard (1969) promotes the use of different leadership styles depending on the situation, rather than assume that one leadership style is always the best. Four different styles are commonly represented in a matrix, categorized according to degree of directive (task) and supportive (relationship) behavior needed by followers (see Figure 1).

Directive leadership is focused more on the task than the relationship. The leader defines the roles and tasks of the follower, and communication is largely one-way. For followers who lack competence but have enthusiasm, the leader tells them what to do, while giving them encouragement to build their self-esteem and involvement in decision-making to improve their commitment.

Coaching leadership is focused both on the task and the relationship. The leader still defines the roles and tasks but seeks ideas from the follower. Communication is more two-way. For followers who have some competence but lack commitment and need support, the leader provides guidance and direction to help the follower develop their competence and commitment.

Supportive leadership is focused on the relationship more than the task. The leader facilitates, but control is more with the follower. For followers with competence but lack confidence, so support is necessary to bolster confidence.

Delegating leadership is where the follower is in control and decides how and when to involve the leader. For followers who have both competence and commitment.

Ensuring task-team-individual functions

One of the better-known models for leadership is John Adair’s Action-Centred Leadership Model. It is often graphically represented by his trademark of three overlapping circles shown in Figure 2 representing the core management responsibilities of task, team and individuals.

Exploring team roles

Meridith Belbin recognized the diversity of team needs and described nine types of behaviour or team member that are needed to make up an effective team. Each of these team types has strengths and “allowable weaknesses”:

- Coordinator: self-confident, knows how to listen, promotes decisions - but is a bit manipulative;
In practice, it was not always easy for consortia partners to separate the different functions of leadership and facilitation (see Box 1). Some consortia used and appreciated the role of “neutral” facilitator provided with PAEPARD support in bringing public and private sector partners together and helping them establish a common agenda. In other cases, however, the AIF role was either not seen as necessary, seen as overlapping or clashing with that of partnership coordinator, leader or “principal investigator” (when a university or research organization had initially taken the lead in mobilizing the partnership). In spite of the “neutral” role for the AIF, however defined, the different tasks and competencies expected of them (mobilizing stakeholders, facilitating team meetings, identifying funding sources, drafting research proposals, building capacities, facilitating and documenting mutual learning) were not always clear to all involved, and probably overly optimistic. In addition, the sustainability of the AIF role – what sort of organization they should come from, how can they be financed on a longer-term basis during any project implementation - remained an unanswered question. It was expected that such costs would be written into any research proposal, but this was generally regarded as insubstantial. In common with other projects in Africa, the demand for services provided by professional innovation partnership facilitators is not yet fully recognized or regarded as a basis for a dedicated profession. The facilitation role in ARD partnerships is therefore taken up, if at all, by one of the organizational members of the partnership (e.g. the research organization, a farmer’s group, a local or international development NGO).

Perhaps the most successful PAEPARD consortia were those that had an energetic “champion” – or adaptive type of leader as described above. The Ilenen soybean partnership, for example, successfully used the services of an external facilitator to enable initial exchanges of views between partners, but it was the lead organization, the Soybean Association SOJAGNON, and in particular its dynamic and committed coordinator, who provided the leadership to this successful consortium. Ultimately it was this coordinator who played the role of project manager, as well as internal innovation broker/facilitator who communicated information to partners, fostered collaboration between African and European partner organizations, enabled knowledge co-creation, and built trust among the partners to ignite the innovation process as a whole.

Typically, the roles and types of leadership in ARD partnerships remain “tacit knowledge”. That is, they are well known to team members and partners, but rarely expressed, evaluated dispassionately, the overall argument of this brief is that – while difficult - paying more explicit attention to leadership and facilitation would benefit future ARD projects and partnerships.

Leadership and facilitation in PAEPARD teams

The PAEPARD project was designed assuming that effective ARD partnerships would require the services of independent, neutral “Agricultural innovation facilitators” (AIFs). Accordingly, one of the main project activities was to build the capacity of a core group of individuals across Africa that could undertake this role. Terms of reference for this role were developed, ARD partnerships (proposed consortia) who were given seed money to come together and develop project proposals to submit for (3rd party) funding were initially encouraged to nominate individuals who could undertake this AIF role, and several workshops were held to induct and build the capacity of these individuals.

Experiences with brokerage / facilitation role in PAEPARD partnerships

- **IN BENIN**, the external facilitator was important in bringing different players together in the soybean value chain, as these were not used to collaborating.
- **FOR THE BURKINA PASO** Richardson consortium, the PAEPARD facilitator brought together research, agribusiness entrepreneurs and agricultural and non-agricultural business service providers.
- **IN THE COLEACP** mango waste consortium, “the role of the AIF was major... as private consultant, they were contracted for their knowledge of the mango industry and their capacity to facilitate the process along the different steps. Their role stopped due to limited budget available.”
- **IN THE NIGERIAN** Poultry Feeds Research and Development consortium (NPIFFER), the AIF were able to build a “wonderful camaraderie spirit in all participants” that gave the farmers enough boldness to air contrary stances to those of the researchers when necessary; and at the end bonding resulted in fund-raising.
- **IN THE MALAWI** fish consortium, the AIF was not seen as useful. Rather, the consortium expressed a need for someone to link them to potential donors.

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Agricultural Research for Development (ARD) partnerships face a number of leadership challenges, including achieving consensus and building trust among diverse partners and stakeholders. Leadership issues are rarely explored explicitly in ARD partnerships, and the various leadership tasks may not get the attention necessary or get confused with the more traditional roles of programme or project management.

A facilitation role, which may be taken on by external and impartial individuals (Agricultural Innovation Facilitators) or by an internal leader, requires a skills set that enables the smooth interaction of multiple actors; respects diverse opinions; and encourages reflection and co-creation of knowledge. A leader, in addition, needs to inspire and build enthusiasm among the partnership members, as well as catalyse the necessary change of mindset and attitudes while also nurturing structures and organizational cultures that will be more conducive to the innovation process.

In ARD partnerships it is not always easy to separate the roles of leader, partner and/or project coordinator, facilitator, and of project manager. Different partnerships need to more explicitly recognise the various leadership tasks required, and then find the most appropriate ways of distributing these leadership tasks between team members. Considering the experience of PAEPARD, the ARD partnerships tend to be more successful when they have strong “champions” who adopt a collaborative or adaptive leadership style.

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