

Chapter 1:

Leadership and the KLC Framework



We all have aspirations.

You have aspirations – for your family, your community, the company you work for or own, the organization whose mission you believe in, the people you’ve been elected to serve. And at some level, you know that bridging the gap between your current reality and your aspirations is going to take leadership.

WHAT IS LEADERSHIP?

Leadership is mobilizing people to make progress on complex, adaptive challenges.

ADAPTIVE CHALLENGES AND TECHNICAL PROBLEMS

An adaptive challenge is a problem, issue or opportunity that demands a response outside your current repertoire – you don’t have the information you need or a checklist you can follow to make the problem go away. Your usual tools won’t work and your expertise is not enough. Addressing an adaptive challenge requires motivating people to change by engaging and challenging both their hearts and their minds. Making progress means helping people navigate loss and helping them do what is necessary instead of what is comfortable.

Most often, we try to treat adaptive challenges as if they were technical problems. Technical problems are easy to recognize, because you’ve seen them before. You either know the steps to solve them or you can depend on someone else to make it happen.

Adaptive challenges are different; they are not clearly defined and require learning to understand what is going on. The solution also requires developing new tools, methods and ways of communicating. People will need to change. Systems will need to reinvent themselves.

All this learning and reinvention is going to take time.

For example, you go to the doctor with a broken arm. The problem is complicated – you can’t fix it yourself – but the doctors and nurses have seen it before. There is a clear solution.

But what if you have high cholesterol? That is a different kind of problem. Your doctor can prescribe medication, but she can’t solve the problem. This is an adaptive challenge: your long-term success may require hard work in the form of lifestyle changes for you and your family, or even policy changes in your workplace or community that support healthy choices related to diet, exercise and stress management.

Adaptive challenges are about changing priorities, beliefs, habits and loyalties for the sake of a compelling purpose.

Let's look at another example. If the brakes on your car are failing, there is an easy fix: Take the car to a repair shop and hire an expert, a mechanic, who has skills and knowledge that are probably beyond your competence. For you, the problem is beyond your capacity. For the mechanic, it is right in his or her wheelhouse and can be tackled with a high degree of certainty that the intervention will be successful. But let's say that your 85-year-old father has recently moved in with you. He has been driving your car and, given his failing eyesight, prefers to keep his foot on the brake all the time just in case he needs to stop quickly. Getting new brakes will provide only a temporary fix.

Like most complex problems, your brake problem has elements that are technical — the brakes do not function properly — and aspects that are adaptive — your father has been driving a car for more than 60 years, and for him driving symbolizes his continuing to lead an independent life, an important part of his self-identity. For him to stop driving would rip part of his heart out.

Neither type of challenge is better or more important than the other. We all need to learn to address both technical and adaptive problems. We need to get the car fixed and energize the family to support Dad through a difficult transition. Leadership means recognizing where the technical ends and the adaptive begins.

DISTINGUISHING TECHNICAL AND ADAPTIVE

	TECHNICAL WORK	ADAPTIVE WORK
THE PROBLEM	... is clear	... requires learning
THE SOLUTION	... is clear	requires learning
WHOSE WORK IS IT?	experts or authority	stakeholders
TYPE OF WORK	efficient	act experimentally
TIMELINE	ASAP	longer term
EXPECTATIONS	fix the problem	make progress
ATTITUDE	confidence and skill	curiosity

Technical problems live in people's heads and logic systems. You solve them by gathering facts and applying authority or expertise. Adaptive challenges live in people's hearts and stomachs. They are about values, loyalties and beliefs.

Progress on them requires the people with the problem to do the work, and the work involves refashioning those deeply held beliefs.

You can see why there is always pressure to interpret challenges as technical problems.

Most of us are not making adequate progress on the adaptive elements of the complex challenges facing our organizations and communities. Too few people are exercising leadership. Current leadership practices are inadequate. We all need to be more purposeful and provocative. We need to take more risks and engage more people.

Leadership Principles

It starts with getting your mind around five underlying principles about leadership.

- 1. Leadership is an activity, not a position.** We're not saying get rid of the presidents, pastors, board chairs and CEOs. We need to have people in positions of authority. But, when it comes to the really difficult, complex challenges – the problems that keep us up at night, the issues that make us worry for future generations – it is going to take more than authority to make things better.
- 2. Anyone can lead, anytime, anywhere.** When it comes to adaptive challenges we all have a part to play. Lots of people need to get involved. Lots of people need to contribute time and energy. Many people need to change. More people need to exercise leadership.
- 3. Leadership starts with you and must engage others.** Some things an expert can fix or the boss can order done. But as a culture, we've gotten into the bad habit of waiting for others to act, "to lead." For you, if you embrace this principle, the waiting is over. No matter what your position, age or level of experience, there is something you can do to mobilize others.
- 4. Your purpose must be clear.** People have to care. You have to care enough to do something different. Without a clear sense of purpose, nothing is going to change.
- 5. It's risky.** We'd be irresponsible if we didn't share this one final principle. If you've ever attempted to get people to work together on a difficult challenge, you know that leadership is risky. You'll need to identify and navigate those risks.

Authority and Leadership Are Two Different Things

Before we get into KLC's four leadership competencies, let's get clear about this: *authority* and *leadership* are two different things.

Authority is a position. People hold it.

Leadership is an activity. People do it.

Another way to think about authority is as a contract. We grant someone (our boss or an elected official, for instance) a certain level of authority and, if they meet certain minimal expectations, we let them do their job.

Sometimes people with authority exercise leadership. Sometimes they don't. Sometimes, for real progress to happen, leadership must come from somewhere else. If the work is adaptive, authority only gets us so far.

Perhaps you are the person in authority. You've been hired (or elected or appointed) to a lofty position. Those who chose you for the job expect you to set the vision and direct the way forward. Others look to you for the sense of order they need to feel secure about their place in the world. They expect you to facilitate their efforts and use your authority to protect them from outside threats.

Direction, order and protection. That's the skeleton of any contract giving one person authority over others. If the right people stay happy, the contract holds and the person in authority keeps their job. The temptation, then, for people in positions of authority is to keep people happy by treating every problem or opportunity as if it is technical – something to be fixed, solved or pushed along with a minimal amount of discomfort among the ranks. An approach like this may keep people happy in the short term, but it often doesn't solve the actual problem.

If you are facing an adaptive challenge, authority is rarely enough. The person in authority needs to do more than protect, direct and order. The person in authority needs to lead.

To make progress on adaptive challenges, people at all levels – in communities, companies and organizations – need to exercise more leadership.

What Kind of Leadership Will It Take?

Back in 2007, when KLC was getting started, we asked people like you (plus a few leadership experts): What kind of leadership does it take to make progress on the deep, daunting challenges that serve as barriers to a healthier, stronger, more prosperous state? Responses fell into four simple yet profound categories:

Diagnose Situation

- Explore tough interpretations
- Distinguish technical and adaptive work
- Understand the process challenges
- Test multiple interpretations and points of view
- Take the temperature
- Identify who needs to do the work

Manage Self

- Know your strengths, vulnerabilities and triggers
- Know the story others tell about you
- Choose among competing values
- Get used to uncertainty and conflict
- Experiment beyond your comfort zone
- Take care of yourself

Energize Others

- Engage unusual voices
- Work across factions
- Start where they are
- Speak to loss
- Inspire a collective purpose
- Create a trustworthy process

Intervene Skillfully

- Make conscious choices
- Raise the heat
- Give the work back
- Hold to purpose
- Speak from the heart
- Act experimentally

Diagnose Situation

If you are trying to make progress on a tough issue, understanding what you are getting into is critical. The biggest single mistake people make is misdiagnosing the situation. For starters, you've got to identify the problem correctly – technical, adaptive or both? Otherwise, as one friend reminds us, “You are working on the wrong thing!”

Why do people misdiagnose so often? Three reasons stand out.

1. **“Don’t just stand there; do something.”** Communities and organizations exert tremendous pressure, especially on those in authority, to act. Others’ anxiety makes it difficult to spend the time necessary to do a deep diagnosis. How often have you felt that kind of pressure? How often have you clamored for a solution, complaining that someone in authority is taking too long to act?
2. **“Find a pain-free fix, please.”** We want positive change with as little cost or pain as possible. As a result, we make the single biggest diagnostic error: we treat adaptive challenges as if they were technical problems.
3. **“I want to be the hero.”** Superheroes rarely stop to engage unusual voices or identify who needs to do the work.

How do you diagnose situations effectively? How do you distinguish technical and adaptive, especially when everyone around you wants to accept the technical fix?

First, as your organization or community struggles to deal with a difficult issue, it is an act of leadership to **keep open interpretations that are tougher, more adaptive and take into account the whole system.**

Here’s an example. When a company or community faces a severe budget shortfall it is tempting to explain the situation as simply having less money than anticipated to meet projected expenses. That interpretation might lead to across-the-board cuts, or scapegoating an individual or department. But a more uncomfortable and systemic interpretation might be about our unwillingness to make hard decisions about priorities. That (tougher) interpretation would lead to a different set of approaches.

Making adaptive, systemic and conflictual interpretations means pushing beyond conclusions and opinions that come automatically, almost unconsciously. You may need to get more skeptical (or keep an open mind). You might need to thoughtfully question the perspective of the person in authority. You may need to look at the situation from someone else’s point of view. You may need to reexamine values and priorities.

The key thing to remember about an interpretation (yours or someone else’s) is that it is only a guess. Even your best guess might not be right. So when your group is trying to frame an issue, it is important to name and hold on to multiple interpretations rather than gravitate toward the first one you hit that people like.

Adaptive challenges are often **more about process than content.** The details of an issue are relevant, but it is people who make the difference. Leadership means thinking more about how you are going to engage others than about marshaling the facts and making the best argument.

Finally, if you are trying to find the underlying adaptive challenge, **take the temperature.** Look for where there is conflict or pain, where the heat is in the system, where the disequilibrium is high, or where people are bored or checked out. All of those signal the need for leadership.

So why spend time in diagnosis? Why make multiple interpretations? Why think about process and heat? Because the more you diagnose, the more options you have for action. The more you get to know the problem, the more opportunities you have to solve it.

Manage Self

Exercising leadership requires knowing yourself well enough to choose when and how to intervene. So, what do you need to know about yourself?

With a cool, clear, realistic eye, you need to be able to **identify your own strengths, vulnerabilities and triggers.** Everyone has these. Everyone has hot buttons that others can press to take us out of the game. Who you are is both a resource and a constraint. If you are a well-spoken male, there might be situations where a plainspoken female would be more effective. If you have a big unfulfilled need to be liked, you may not be well suited for delivering unwelcome news with clarity.

Regarding triggers, one wise person said, “We need to have a commitment to not give up, get mad, take our toys and go home!” Understanding what might trigger you to “take our toys and go home” is critical to managing yourself.

Closely related to knowing your strengths, vulnerabilities and triggers is **knowing the story others tell about you.** How are you understood? What is your formal authority? What is your informal authority? Are you considered an expert on certain issues? What is your reputation? What is the folklore about your past performance and involvement? If you are new to the community, you have certain advantages and certain disadvantages. If you supported the winning candidate for mayor, you are in a different place than if you supported her unsuccessful challenger. If you are a businessperson, then stepping out on an issue that is seen to be pro-business will be less effective than if you are a prominent environmentalist.

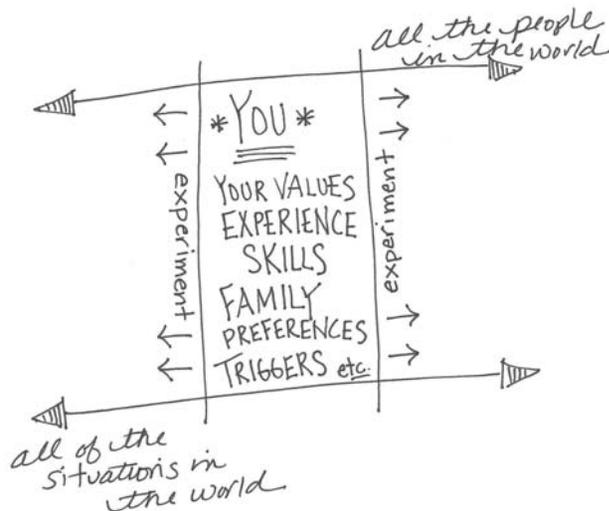
Part of this is distinguishing *yourself* from your *role* in their story. When you put yourself out there, people will come at you personally, with both praise and pushback. But you are neither saint nor sinner: It is not about you. People react to your role. When a community or team is facing a tough situation emotions run wild, and some of them will get directed at you. Taking them personally won’t get you anywhere.

Since you are likely to be part of any system you are trying to change, you are part of the problem and will need to change as well. This suggests two other elements of managing yourself. One is **choosing among competing values**. What has held you back from intervening in the past, and what risks have you not been willing to take? If you can figure out what your own values are and how they compete (being liked versus being direct, perhaps) then you can assess whether you are willing to take the losses that come with choosing.

Embedded within this fourth concept is the need for courage and self-awareness. Leadership scholar Joe Harkins claims it is human nature to do what feels right.

Every human being, according to Sigmund Freud, is hard-wired to seek pleasurable experiences and avoid unpleasant ones. ... But that very instinctive drive in human beings is the Achilles heel for leadership. So you have to find people who have the ability to recognize the instinctive response when they experience it and override it. Leadership requires acting in unnatural ways. You have to willingly, consciously take on unpleasant tasks because they probably got to be a problem because everyone else was avoiding them. And that requires an extraordinary degree of self-awareness.

That's why you'll need to **get used to uncertainty and conflict**. Beware of making a moral principle out of being reluctant to do something uncomfortable. For example, most people do not like to ask difficult questions of their friends, colleagues or bosses. But sometimes, that is exactly what is necessary to make progress. It may be tempting to convince yourself, "It's not right to put people on the defensive that way."



It takes courage to think instead, "I know the right thing to do here, but it just makes me feel uncomfortable and I don't want to do it." Exercising leadership on tough challenges will **get you out of your comfort zone**. You have to experiment with doing what is needed, not what is comfortable. Again, Harkins' words help:

All of us have an incredible ability to rationalize our behavior. We can sidestep and avoid unpleasant situations with grace and dignity and convince ourselves that it's the right thing to do. We're deceiving ourselves and avoiding leadership. We talk ourselves into avoiding it and go on with our business. So the ability to recognize and override the pleasure principle is a fundamental leadership characteristic.

Finally, you can't manage self, let alone exercise leadership, without **taking care of yourself**. Exercising leadership will wear you down. Making progress on adaptive challenges requires you and others to stay engaged for the long haul. Burnout is not a leadership behavior. Make hard choices about when and for what purpose you get involved. Take care of yourself — physically, emotionally, spiritually, socially — and you'll be able to exercise leadership more effectively.

Energize Others

Remember the leadership principle *it starts with you and must engage others*? The best idea or intervention goes nowhere without others taking up the cause. For example, someone passionate about creating an innovative culture in a company doesn't get very far if he can't embolden dozens of additional champions — from the receptionist to the CEO — to support the cause. No one can tackle a daunting challenge alone. You have to energize lots of people to take up the work of leadership.

Energizing starts with figuring out where people are coming from: What do they care about and what do they need? People get energized when they know you care about their situation. To be effective at energizing others, you need to **start where they are, not where you are**. The temptation, of course, is to make little effort at understanding where your opponents are coming from. It is easier to vilify than to seek to understand. But with complex challenges one faction can't make progress alone.

Notice, by the way, this competency is called *energize others*, not *sell other people on your great idea*. You have to be open to possibilities that go beyond your initial preferred solution. Don't defend your idea. Instead, let others work on it, make it better or even throw it out.

People effective at exercising leadership intervene in ways that engage people from diverse factions in a collaborative and inclusive way. Their actions bring disparate individuals together to address daunting issues facing a broader community or organization. One of the people we interviewed as we developed the leadership competencies described **working across factions** as "the ability to go from their own universe to the next."

Working across factions means purposefully seeking ways to **engage unusual voices** rather than relying on the same small group of individuals to develop and implement solutions. For example, rather than relying on city officials to devise a plan for the revitalization of downtown, an individual skilled in leadership would instead engage numerous individuals or factions (including city officials) who have a stake in downtown. Skillful leadership recognizes that diverse minds, reflective of the many factions in the broader community, devise more sustainable solutions.

In addition, people are energized when they can envision progress and what the future will look like as a result of their hard work. Leadership looks like **inspiring a collective purpose** big enough to energize all the relevant factions. High-performing companies and communities are high-hope companies and communities.

On one hand, energizing others is about empowerment, engagement and collective purpose — all of which have a positive orientation.

On the other hand, overcoming difficult challenges will require significant change, and change usually means loss, or perceived loss. Rather than sugarcoat bad news or pretend it does not exist, it is actually energizing for others to hear someone **speak to their loss**.

Losses need to be acknowledged, not suppressed. And pay attention to pacing the work of a group. Don't ask people to sustain too much loss too fast. Prepare people for change. Nothing zaps energy faster than forcing too much change too quickly. Conversely, not asking enough out of people who are ready and willing is another recipe for failure in the energize others department.

Intervene Skillfully

If you keep doing what you have always been doing, nothing is going to change. Leadership is about change. The catalyst for change is often an intentional intervention, big or small. Intervening skillfully is the third of four leadership competencies.

Individuals and organizations *intervene* into systems to attempt progress on things they care about. A church notices an increasing number of homeless families and intervenes by opening a shelter and providing job training. At a homeowners' association meeting, an individual realizes meetings constantly revolve around technical issues such as dues and trash pickup and intervenes to focus conversation on how the association can begin building bonds among residents. A middle manager discovers unproductive tension between marketing and sales and intervenes to build bridges between those factions.

It is important to think of interventions, or leadership in general, as coming from anywhere, not just from those in formal positions. At the same time, expect those in authority to start exercising more leadership. Consider these questions: Are those in authority focusing attention on our most daunting challenges? Are their interventions effective? Is their behavior leading to real change?

What makes interventions effective? What do you need to do to make your interventions more successful?

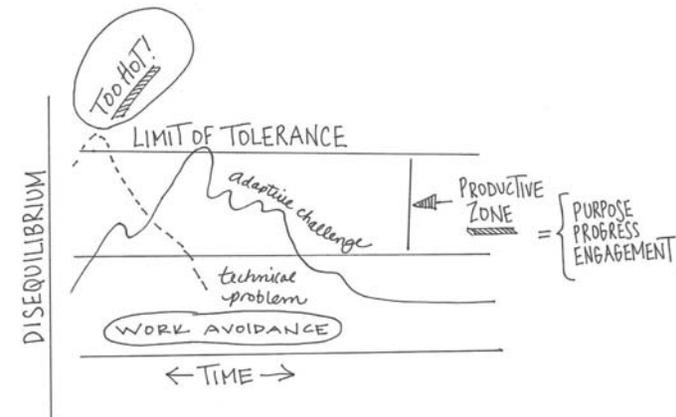
Be intentional about when, why and how you intervene into a system. Resist doing whatever feels most natural (see Manage Self), but instead **make conscious choices** about what type of intervention is needed to fit the situation.

People who excel at intervening skillfully calculate how best to capture the attention of their desired audience. They understand and appreciate the role of conflict in making progress on daunting issues. For them, conflict is not something to be avoided; rather it is a necessary part of the process. They have diagnosed the situation well enough to know whether their intervention should increase or decrease conflict. Most often, in order to mobilize all of the necessary factions, it is essential to **raise the heat**.

We use the word heat to mean an energizing combination of progress, purpose and engagement that gets people into a zone where they can be most productive.

Sometimes raising the heat requires naming the elephant and bringing conflict out into the open. Raising the heat also includes getting a critical mass of the right people paying attention and taking action on behalf of a shared purpose. If you want to exercise leadership effectively, you must get good at provoking the discomfort necessary to keep people engaged over time.

Intervening skillfully also means resisting the temptation to take all the work on your own shoulders. Instead, **give the work back** by empowering all of the different factions to diagnose the situation and experiment with possible solutions. This is different than delegating, which usually involves telling someone else exactly what you want him or her to do.



A few years ago, the Kansas Legislature was debating a bill to require young children to sit on a booster seat in automobiles. In the eyes of advocates, the cold, hard facts suggested the law should be passed. Several studies showed the law would immediately begin to save lives in Kansas. To the disbelief of these advocates, the bill had stalled for years. Finally, a state legislator who had a young family, including a child with special physical needs, went to the well of the House to speak passionately on behalf of the bill. His speech contained no facts. Instead, he spoke with first-hand knowledge of raising a child with special needs. As he **spoke from his heart** and touched the hearts of others, the bill’s passage became more likely. Toward the end of his speech, he implored, “It will be worth it if this bill helps just one child not face what my daughter has faced.” No facts. No figures. The bill passed later that day.

Intervene Skillfully is the riskiest of the competencies. Once you act, you lose control of the outcome. At the heart of this competency is the belief you can’t change people’s values; they have to change them. Intervening skillfully is about creating the conditions for change. That’s why a key dimension of this competency is **act experimentally**. That means, whatever you attempt, do it in the spirit of curiosity, and know that with adaptive challenges there is no such thing as failure, only learning. Each time you intervene make it a conscious experiment by considering, “If I do _____ on behalf of _____ purpose, I expect to learn _____.”

Then do it, reflect on it and make your next move.

MOBILIZING PEOPLE TO MAKE PROGRESS

We design KLC programs and materials to encourage you to practice mobilizing people to make progress on adaptive challenges. The distinction between technical problems and adaptive challenges was first described at length by Ron Heifetz in his book *Leadership Without Easy Answers*. Heifetz and his colleagues went on to describe several ways of exercising leadership on adaptive challenges. The people we talked to identified even more.

There are thousands of books about leadership with countless ideas about how to Diagnose, Intervene, Manage Yourself and Energize Others, and many more ways than KLC has listed in our competencies to live out the leadership competencies and principles. We’ve tried to identify the ones that we as humans find most difficult to put into action.

You already exercise leadership to make progress on adaptive challenges in your family, your community, your company or your organization. We hope the language we’ve provided in this chapter gives you a helpful framework for further experimentation. Through your leadership program you’ll gain greater understanding of the nature of the challenges you are facing and how to deal with them. At KLC you’ll learn more about the four competencies and practice getting your mindset in sync with the five leadership principles. You’ll learn to diagnose adaptive challenges, understanding who needs to be involved and the risks inherent in your particular situation. You’ll gain self-awareness, reflecting on the past experiences and characteristics that are your unique barriers to leadership success. You’ll practice managing yourself more effectively. You’ll experience what it feels like to act experimentally as you rehearse new behaviors for getting people moving in the right direction – together.

There may be no easy answers, but there are many ways to experiment, learn and make progress.¹

¹ For more about the KLC leadership competencies and how to apply them, read *Your Leadership Edge* by Ed O’Malley and Amanda Cebula. Available at <http://kansasleadershipcenter.org/KLCpress/>

THE NATURE OF LEADERSHIP AND AUTHORITY

If you have authority, use it wisely to make progress on what you care about. When the challenge is technical your authority or expertise may be enough to get the job done. With adaptive challenges, by all means, use authority to highlight issues and focus attention where it needs to be.

When authority is not enough, try the leadership activities listed in the right hand column, below.

AUTHORITY	LEADERSHIP
<p>Positional Influence</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use your role and position. 	<p>Earned Influence</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use relationships and earned credibility.
<p>Provide Expertise</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide direction and speak from your expertise. Demonstrate your knowledge. Act based on your expertise. 	<p>Model Not Knowing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explore what you and others don’t know. Demonstrate curiosity and learning. Take smart risks, even when unsure.
<p>Focus on Efficiency</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Efficient agendas. Tight timelines. 	<p>Focus on Process</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Loosen agendas and timelines. Ensure engagement and honest conversation.
<p>Provide Supervision</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Answer questions. Give direction. Provide accountability. 	<p>Provide Support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ask questions. Encourage ambiguity. Tolerate uncertainty. Encourage collective accountability.
<p>Manage Conflict</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Avoid. Manage and control. Resolve quickly. 	<p>Encourage Productive Conflict</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support and allow productive conflict. Help others explore sources of conflict. Stay curious and don’t rush to resolution.
<p>Use hierarchy or rank</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stay within your span of control. Decide who to engage. Engage those who have clear connection to the work. Make most decisions. Use authority to override undesired results. 	<p>Stretch beyond hierarchy or rank</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Act beyond your pay grade. Engage all levels in the system equally to identify and solve problem. Let others decide whom to involve. Give decision making authority to the group. Cede control of the outcome to the group. Trust the outcome even if it isn’t what you imagined.