

YOUR LEADERSHIP

EDGE

LEAD ANYTIME, ANYWHERE.

ED O'MALLEY
AMANDA CEBULA

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CHAPTER 18

ENERGIZE OTHERS

*Inspire a
Collective Purpose*

You can't make progress on adaptive challenges without inspiring a collective purpose. Leadership means finding ways to get more and more people to care. Amanda is part of a nonprofit organization that helps children learn through the arts. The organization is dedicated to inspiring a collective purpose among school administrators, teachers, parents and financial supporters. What's challenging is that each faction — administrators, teachers, parents, financial supporters — has its own values and loyalties.

For example, administrators value easy, low-cost programming that fits with their established curriculum. Teachers are loyal to the routine they create for their classes. Parents expect a quality education, and financial supporters want to know their dollars are being used in ways reflecting their values.

To be more than just a do-gooder arts organization, the board and staff must inspire a collective purpose among all the factions.



WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO INSPIRE A COLLECTIVE PURPOSE? CONSIDER THESE SCENARIOS.

- ▶ A pastor's sermons on doing more for the poor are just rhetoric unless she convinces listeners to act differently.
- ▶ A nonprofit board member's concerns about the financial future of the organization are irrelevant unless she can get others, like board members and staff, to care too.
- ▶ A CEO's call for departments to appreciate each other more is mere management speak unless employees companywide embrace the idea.
- ▶ A young professional's frustration about the little opportunity for career advancement in his company is just a single complaint unless he can get others, such as the human resources department or senior staff, to care.

Efforts involving multiple factions tend to be like circles that all overlap just a bit (think of a Venn diagram). Each faction has its own purpose, and all those purposes have at least something in common that unites the factions and makes collective work possible.

So now, take the young professional from the example above. He might discover that the HR manager doesn't much care about advancement opportunities but does get fired up about the prospect of not having to train new people every year or two. He may learn the sales force cares

deeply about employees generating leads from friends and family. The sales force knows young professionals are more likely to do that if they feel they can grow and succeed in the company. Stitching together these different purposes into a collective purpose becomes an exercise of leadership.

HOW DO YOU INSPIRE A COLLECTIVE PURPOSE?

- ▶ **UNDERSTAND THE FACTIONS YOU NEED ON BOARD.** What do they care about? How much do they care? What will it take to get them at the table? What are the connecting interests between their work and yours?
- ▶ **ENGAGE THOSE FACTIONS EARLY AND OFTEN.** Don't wait until you are desperate for their involvement. (Then it's all about what YOU need.) Rather, engage them over time, finding ways to help them advance what they care about.
- ▶ **CARE AS MUCH ABOUT THEIR CAUSE AS YOURS.** Otherwise, you are just using them to advance your effort. Contribute your time to their cause.
- ▶ **IGNITE IMAGINATIONS.** If you have convening power, build momentum by inviting everyone to dream about, contribute to and create a shared vision.
- ▶ **BUILD TRUST ALONG THE WAY.** Allow time for stakeholders to share stories and ask questions. Create space for people to be heard.
- ▶ **MAKE THE GOALS ATTAINABLE.** The purpose may be lofty — the work of a lifetime, perhaps. Keep people energized by breaking it into achievable chunks.
- ▶ **TAKE ACTION.** Nothing is less inspiring than a whole lot of talk and no action. Harness the momentum by starting to experiment before you have all the answers.

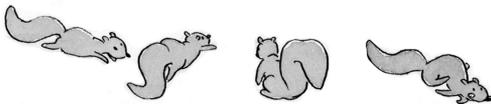


HOW DO YOU KNOW WHEN A COLLECTIVE PURPOSE EXISTS?

- Divergent factions have united behind one vision.
- A common language (abbreviations, jargon, etc.) arises among the group.
- You celebrate successes, large and small.
- The talents and connections of various groups get leveraged to make more progress.

Remember, inspiring a collective purpose doesn't mean everyone agrees about everything. Adaptive challenges need lots of people doing lots of things. No one idea will suffice. In adaptive work, it's often not possible to get all the stakeholders to agree to one specific plan of attack. It wouldn't be smart either because it would limit experimentation, providing fewer chances to learn what works.

Perhaps Ed's Aunt Kathleen — a Loretto nun whose life was dedicated to the common good — understood this best. At her funeral she was described as “someone who encouraged us not to conform, but to head in the same direction, differently.” Sometimes, inspiring a collective purpose requires you to step back, look at the broader picture and find a purpose everyone can hold onto.



WANT TO LEARN MORE ABOUT INSPIRING A COLLECTIVE PURPOSE?

Watch closely as any political official works to cobble together votes to pass controversial legislation. The give and take of the legislative process is an explicit demonstration of what inspiring a collective purpose looks like.

For a different and more personal take, check out Stacy Horn's book “Imperfect Harmony: Finding Happiness Singing With Others.”



A recent neighborhood association meeting I attended basically just consisted of planning events like a community potluck and garage sale. This is great, but I feel like we could have a lot of power if we came together on an issue. How do we shift to that kind of thinking?

- NEIGHBORHOOD NORA

Dear Nora,

What is the adaptive challenge? What is the thing you are trying to mobilize people around?

Yes, you and your neighbors could have a lot of power, but not without a shared purpose. Start asking big, open-ended questions such as, "When you think about the future of our neighborhood, what concerns you the most?" Talk to enough people, listen carefully, and you'll soon determine the challenges crying out for more leadership. By engaging your neighbors in such an open-ended way, you will ignite imaginations and build trust. You'll be on your way to inspiring a collective purpose.

Onward!