

Collective leadership: where nothing is clear and everything keeps changing

An invitation to inquiry

- 1 What excites, interests or resonates with each of us in these provocations?
- 2 What values and qualities would we want to take into the future?
- 3 And if that were to happen, what might it look like in practice? What would be the implications for us, our close collaborators or team and the wider system of which we are a part?
- 4 What would we need to let go of? Who and what will help us to discard those things we no longer want?

<https://collectiveleadershipscotland.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/collective-leadership-where-nothing-is-clear-and-everything-keeps-changing-february-2019.pdf>

Dr Cathy Sharp, November 2018



1

Treat inquiry as a form of intervening, not a separate, detached process

We adopt a reflective stance and endorse self- and peer-participant observation and self-evaluation to increase the probability of success of a programme.



2

Be practical and pragmatic

Learning is available to us in the very work that we are involved in as we engage and improvise around uncertain and complex problems in our work environment or community.



3

Adopt a future forming focus

We believe that what we focus on becomes our reality – we get more of what we study. A focus on the shared desirable future is a better guiding star for evaluation and learning than a focus on what went right or wrong in the past, and why.



4

Embrace complexity

We don't rush to problem-solve but take time to understand problems and issues in our local system from multiple perspectives and create feedback loops to enable our real-time learning.



5

Emphasise systemic thinking, rather than systematic inquiry

We seek knowledge directly useful to our actions, rather than as a stable description of the field of inquiry. We are systematic in the sense of seeking to co-create knowledge based on a variety of perspectives.



6

Support experimental action

We test out working assumptions and new ideas in practice and gather evidence of the impact. We seek to nudge or perturb the system and keep testing. We pay close attention to understanding the unintended consequences of actions within organisational systems.



7

Seek the stories behind every action

As participants, we are observers of experience – our own and others – and recognise that we make interpretations of actions as they occur, rather than see ourselves as controllers of our environment.



8

Value the articulation of desired outcomes to develop our shared purpose and goals

We seek to be accountable for our learning, rather than for specific outcomes.

9

Take a relational perspective

We work from a position of positive regard, intrinsic motivation and agency and assume that everybody has good reasons to behave the way they do, seen from their own perspective. We assume agency, not passivity – everyone is co-responsible, competent and obligated members of the organisation. This shifts the focus from individuals to relationships and to our various and shared visions of a better future.

10

Work with care

We seek to promote relationships and avoid damaging them in the process of creating useful knowledge.

11

Promote appreciative dialogue

We seek to understand what is working well and what is valued in the 'here and now' to support emergence and explore aspirations. This understanding is the foundation for the future and having fresh eyes and ears helps to check whether our existing practices support and motivate us in our vision to build a better future. We recognise that 'improvement' may not always be needed.

12

Recognise that 'words create worlds'

We believe that the language we use creates our realities, so we seek to pay attention to how our language might position people and the inter-play between language, power and emotion.



13

Promote generativity

We listen with empathy and see old issues with new eyes. We recognise the part that emotion plays in creating cultures and seek to integrate acknowledgement of our feelings more explicitly into our work.



14

Focus on real-time learning through collaborative inquiry

We reflect-in-action to discover more about our thinking and actions. This supports us to question our underlying assumptions and values to improve our immediate interactions and allows us to examine tacit or previously undiscussed assumptions and patterns of behaviour and reasoning.



15

Talk about how to be comfortable with uncertainty, tentativeness and adopt humility in inquiry

We recognise and work with the complexity, ambiguity, uncertainty, paradox, tensions and contradictions revealed by inquiry as offering vital opportunities to learn. We resist certainties, closure and finality through precise measurement or hasty judgement of the phenomena we observe.



16

Explore theory

We believe that theory helps us conceptualise our experience in ways that may be useful for ourselves and others; through inquiry, we can develop, and test out new theory based on our experience and communicate what we learn, in ways that make sense to us. Inquiry is an opportunity to test existing research and theory and to create new contributions to knowledge.



17


Be a participant, not a spectator

We are 'active learners'. We anticipate that inquiry will lead to changes in ourselves and the wider system of which we are a part.

18

Mobilise the competencies of all participants in inquiry and build skills and capacities in inquiry practices


We can create new social capital and connection. We are always learning and seek to acknowledge and build on existing strengths, skills and capacities.



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Engage widely

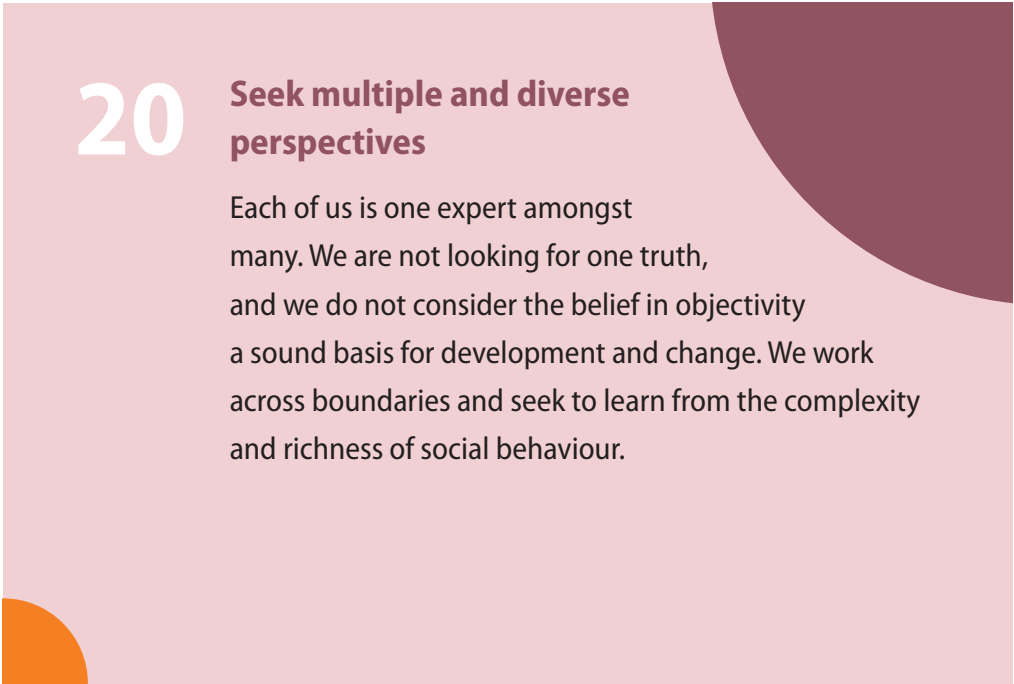
We adopt a participatory view of knowledge, that knowledge arises through our interactions and reflections on real-world experience and seek diversity of perspectives, bringing in different kinds of expertise, lived experience and previously unheard voices.



20

Seek multiple and diverse perspectives

Each of us is one expert amongst many. We are not looking for one truth, and we do not consider the belief in objectivity a sound basis for development and change. We work across boundaries and seek to learn from the complexity and richness of social behaviour.





21

Let the system own the outcomes

Our contributions to outcomes are likely to be at multiple levels, arising from our collaboration. It is probably unnecessary, undesirable or impossible to seek to isolate our contributions from those of others.



22

Seek data using multiple methods

We are methodological pluralists, but particularly value narrative, creative and visual methods to deepen inquiry, give voice and enhance participation.



23

Value evidence of all kinds and seek to use it to create dialogue

We value data generation and sense-making methods that create a dialogue and enable shared meaning making. We see data analysis as an ongoing process to help us understand what happens over time and use it to create further insights in ways that open up new possibilities for change.



24

Seek partnership in working relations

We rarely work alone, even if we think we can.