

# Leadership in Social Care

Edited by  
Zoë van Zwanenberg

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS **51**



Jessica Kingsley Publishers  
London and Philadelphia

Research Highlights in Social Work 51

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First published in 2010

by Jessica Kingsley Publishers

116 Pentonville Road

London N1 9JB, UK

and

400 Market Street, Suite 400

Philadelphia, PA 19106, USA

*www.jkp.com*

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#### **Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data**

Leadership in social care / edited by Zoë van Zwanenberg.

p. cm. -- (Research highlights in social work ; 51)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-84310-969-3 (pb : alk. paper) 1. Social work administration. 2. Social case work--Management. 3. Social service. 4. Leadership. I. Van Zwanenberg, Zoë.

HV41.L354 2010

361.3068'4--dc22

2009017874

#### **British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 84310 969 3

Printed and bound in Great Britain by

Athenaeum Press, Gateshead, Tyne and Wear

# The Work of Leadership in Formal Coalitions: Embracing Paradox for Collaboration

Sonia Ospina and Angel Saz-Carranza

I'm just thinking of the tension sometimes between Rainbow Network<sup>1</sup> and its partner agencies, as we try to work within a coalition framework, an active coalition, you know? Part of my work right now...is exactly that... And that is difficult...is challenging, there's times [when] we all just clash because we're moving from a director's model, 'here we want to give you a helping hand' to an organizing model, to 'how can you empower yourself'? So there's bound to be clashes and we're not going around demanding 'Look you've got to change your ways', but we're trying to work with other groups that have been through a different type of framework, and that requires a lot of cooperation and patience, and being willing to negotiate and figure out what their interests are... (Rainbow Network Executive Director)

This chapter explores challenges associated with the paradoxical nature of coalition work, as illustrated by the quote above from the executive director of one of the coalitions studied. We draw from a study about how leaders in successful coalitions face collaboration demands to ensure member engagement so as to make things happen. We used narrative inquiry (Dodge, Ospina and

1 Real names of the calitions have been changes to protect confidentiality.

Foldy 2005; Reissman 2002) – a kind of qualitative interpretive research based on stories – to illuminate these challenges in a particular type of successful action network, urban immigrant coalitions, and in a particular US policy arena, immigration.<sup>2</sup>

Formal coalitions like those in our study are inter-organizational action networks (Ebers 1997; Ring and Van de Ven 1994). Their coordinating units<sup>3</sup> advance the network's goals by promoting collaborative work among coalition members and supporting their activities to influence external actors. In the context of action networks, these efforts correspond respectively to inward work (engaging inside actors) and outward work (engaging outside actors) (Shortell *et al.* 2002). In this chapter we explore the inherent tensions leaders in these coordinating units faced when addressing contradictory but necessary requirements of collaboration with internal and external stakeholders. Scholars define these generic tensions as paradoxes (Ford and Backoff 1988; Lewis 2000; Ofori-Dankwa and Julian 2004; Smith and Berg 1987).

We found that coalition leaders faced the unity and diversity paradox when doing inward work, and the confrontation and dialogue paradox when doing outward work. However, rather than trying to reduce, resolve or cope with these paradoxes, leaders seemed to engage in a type of work that allowed them to fully embrace them. They thus developed what we call *leadership practices* (Ospina and Foldy 2008) that honored both sides of the paradox at the same time, in the name of the broader organizational mission, in this case, enhanced quality of life for immigrant communities.

Paradox has been an important area of interest in organization science (Ford and Backoff 1988; Lewis 2000; Poole and Van de Ven 1989). Managing paradox has also been identified as a key dimension of coalition work (Mizrahi and Rosenthal 2001). But there is little empirical work in the context of inter-organizational collaboration (Faulkner and DeRond 2000; Huxham 2003). Attention to *how* inherent challenges and tensions associated with action networks are managed successfully is an exception rather than the rule (Huxham and Beech 2003).

That most people attribute failure in networks to poor management (Park and Ungson 2001) suggests the urgency of learning from effective leaders.

2 For information about the broader national, multi-year, multi-method research project about social change leadership in the United States, please go to <http://leadershipforchange.org> (accessed 8 May 2009).

3 The coordinating unit is 'a separate administrative entity...set up to govern the network [and] plays a key role in coordinating and sustaining' it (Provan and Kenis 2007, p.236). It is also known as the network administrative organization (NAO).

This is particularly true given the relevance of this governance mechanism (Agranoff and McGuire 2001) to address acute social problems in a shared-power world (Crosby and Bryson 2005). Empirical studies of successful cases offer an opportunity to produce actionable knowledge about effective leadership of formal coalitions.

The chapter is structured as follows. We first introduce the concept of paradox and connect our research question to the received literature. Next we briefly describe the methods used in our study, as well as the cases and their policy context. We then present the findings, structuring them around the challenges of inward and outward work. A discussion and a conclusion highlight the implications and promise of linking leadership, paradox and collaboration when considering the challenges of inter-organizational work. We then offer, in a post-script, some personal reflections about the practical implications of accepting the notion that embracing paradox might help to effectively address the challenges of collaboration.<sup>4</sup>

## **Paradox, inter-organizational collaboration and leadership**

Lewis (2000) defines paradox as some ‘thing’ that denotes contradictory yet interwoven elements (for example perspectives, feelings, messages, demands, identities, interests, or practices) – elements that seem logical in isolation but absurd and irrational when appearing simultaneously. A paradox, then, is a duality – consisting of two parts – of opposing poles, poles standing in contradiction, which create a tension or a strained condition.<sup>5</sup> The paradoxes explored in this paper are empirical realities, ‘demands’ that occur when organizations need to collaborate. Leaders experience their impact directly, because, while contradictory, these demands coexist. Organization and management theory offers valuable insights about paradox, but few studies have explored empirically how organizational actors respond to them.

### **Paradox in organizational studies**

That paradox has gained considerable momentum is reflected in the special issue of the *Academy of Management Review* dedicated to ‘paradox, spirals, and ambivalence’ (Eisenhardt 2000). The construct itself is complicated and

4 We choose to frame these final reflections as a post-script to signal our awareness of the tentativeness of our findings, and the fact that we cannot make definitive statements based on our research.

5 A dilemma, on the other hand, is the choice between two alternatives (poles), either of which is equally (un)favorable.

scholars use it differently, as it is only emerging as a subject of theoretical and empirical study.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, it offers great promise to illuminate the dynamics of organizing in today's complex and interdependent world.

Paradox has been considered in a variety of organizational arenas. For example, Smith and Berg (1987) argue that group life is inherently paradoxical. They document instances where individuals pursue conflicting goals and engage simultaneously in contradictory processes of equal relevance for organizational life. At a more macro-level, the idea of the network society (Castells 2000) is grounded in the contradicting yet simultaneous realities of high fragmentation but also interdependence (Kickert *et al.* 1997).

Between these two levels of action, scholars in the strategic alliance field highlight the tensions between vigilance and trust and between individualism and collectivism (de Rond and Bouchikhi 2004). Similarly, the strategic management literature documents the tension between competition and cooperation (Brandenburger and Nalebuff 1996). Managers' responses to the challenges posed by these paradoxes are less interesting to these scholars, given their focus on organizational strategy.

## Paradox in inter-organizational contexts

Ambiguity and complexity in the network governance form underscores the pervasiveness of paradox in networks and their management. Given the multiple factors associated with network formation, the resulting governance structures are the repository of a diverse and often contradictory set of expectations, aspirations, and goals (Huxham 2003; Huxham and Beech 2003; McGuire 2002; Saz-Carranza 2007; Saz-Carranza and Serra 2006).<sup>7</sup>

Scholars of inter-organizational collaboration acknowledge the presence of conceptual paradoxes, anomalies, and ambiguities (Huxham and Vangen 2000; Rainey and Busson 2001). For example, Vangen and Huxham argue that managing trust in network collaborations demands 'dealing with many

6 For example, some scholars use 'paradox' to identify contradictory yet valid and coexisting theories regarding organizational phenomena, while others refer to a concrete and identifiable phenomenon in organizational life, and yet others use the term when contradictory findings are empirically documented (Poole and Van de Ven 1989).

7 Factors associated with goal attainment include ownership over goals (by the network, its members, and individual representatives), openness of the aims (implicit, explicit, and hidden), and means of achieving them (using the network, its members or individuals) (Huxham and Vangen 2000). Goal complexity has practical implications. For example, goal clarity influences which tasks a network manager decides to undertake (McGuire 2002).

paradoxes inherent in collaborative activities' (2004, p.23). They are inherent because the potential for collaborative advantage depends on each partner's ability to bring different resources (Huxham and Beech 2003). This need is, however, a function of differences in organizational purpose, which reduces the incentives for collaboration (Eden and Huxham 2001). Moreover, diversity slows progress towards common goals because adjustments, such as trust and familiarity, take time and energy (Mizrahi and Rosenthal 2001). Inter-organizational action networks – such as coalitions – need both unity and diversity.

Social work scholars Bailey and Koney (1996) discuss paradoxical management in coalitions. This is a way, they argue, for managers to address tensions such as the need to be both responsive to and assertive with the membership. Nevertheless, despite some exceptions, exploring how social actors experience and address paradox in a context characterized by dynamic tensions remains a rare occurrence in the received literature.

### Responding to paradox

If addressing paradox is not the object of empirical work, organizational scholars do discuss theoretically the forms this may take. An actor can simply favor one pole over the other, or she can try to reach a balance between poles. Moreover, managing each pole could be alternated (Poole and Van den Ven 1989; Van den Ven and Poole 1988) – as when two companies have their development departments cooperate in product design and compete in product sales. Similarly, poles may be applied at alternate times according to context, as suggested by the situational leadership literature (Hersey and Blanchard 1982).

Another way of managing paradox is to make the inherent tensions apparent and to accept them (March and Weil 2005). Some scholars argue that the edge of chaos created in coping with paradox is healthy (Eisenhardt 2000), and that specific mindsets and dispositions, competencies and skills can be developed to reframe and live with paradox (Quinn and Cameron 1988). March and Weil (2005) lament that the potential benefits of ambiguity for organizational performance are undermined because rational frameworks dominate organizational studies. Similarly, Kaplan and Kaiser (2003) call for versatile leadership, that is, the capacity to function well while holding opposites.

But, how is this done? What does the work look like when leaders encounter paradox on a daily basis and respond to it? How does this relate to the work that advances the mission? And how does it happen in contexts that are inherently paradoxical? Despite an increasing awareness of the presence of

paradox and its potential role in organizational performance, these questions have yet to be answered. One way of exploring them in action networks, particularly in coalitions, is by focusing on the work of leadership (Heifetz 1994).

### The work of leadership in managing paradox

A focus on the work of leadership presupposes a particular approach to leadership. Traditional understandings tend to emphasize leaders' attributes or the relationship between leaders and followers, what Uhl-Bien (2006) calls an 'entity' perspective of leadership. More appropriate to the task is a 'relational' (Uhl-Bien 2006) or constructionist (Ospina and Sorenson 2006) approach, which represents novel thinking in the leadership field (Jackson and Parry 2008).

In a constructionist approach leadership is relational, emergent and contextual (Ospina and Sorenson 2006). It is a collective process of meaning making that produces shared direction, commitment and alignment to achieve agreed upon common purposes (Drath 2001). Leaders and followers *construct* each other as leadership *happens* when the group agrees upon ways to move forward to achieve these (Hosking 2007). When leadership happens it is thus a collective achievement and, as such, it belongs to the group (Dachler and Hosking 1995). It is found in the group's work, not in specific individuals. This meaning making in communities of practice (Drath and Palus 1994) is embedded in historically grounded structures of power and influenced by the dynamics of exclusion that characterize social relationships (Ospina and Sorenson 2006; Schall *et al.* 2004).

That leadership is socially constructed does not imply always taking a collective form. Always rooted in collective processes, leadership can nevertheless emerge in the form of strong charismatic individuals; or in dyads, as in the case of co-leaders; or in committees with decision-making authority; or in organizations with democratic governance structures where it is made collective by design. Similarly, the work of leadership can be distributed among individuals taking up different roles, it can also be rotated over time or it can occur in many places within a given system. Finally, all social actors have the capacity to exercise leadership, but not all do. Those who do may enact different styles, such as democratic, autocratic, laissez-faire and so on (Ospina and Sorenson 2006).

Illuminating leadership work in coalitions made up by multiple organizations requires focusing on the efforts that emerge in response to situations that call forth what some scholars call 'relational work' (Fletcher 2008). Relational work aims to promote conditions for concerted action by fostering



connectedness and emphasizing interdependence (Fletcher 2008). We can illuminate the actions associated with this type of work by inquiring into what we call 'leadership practices'. As a social construct, 'practice' is located within the collective rather than the individual realm. Practices are the outcome of collective meaning making; they rest upon a shared knowledge, largely implicit, historically and culturally specific, which transcends individual cognition (Reckwitz 2002; Swidler 2001). A focus on leadership practices offers a way to make operational the work of leadership, viewed as a social construction.

To sum up, interest in paradox has a high pedigree in organizational studies, and it is considered an important dimension of collaborative work in the received literature. But how leaders address paradox when confronted with it has not received sufficient research attention, and even less in the context of inter-organizational collaboration. We contribute to this agenda by illuminating the leadership practices of staff in the coordinating units of formal coalitions supporting immigrant organizations. A relational approach to leadership allows us to draw from practice theory to explore the work of leadership as it emerges in response to the challenges of collaboration.

## **Methods**

Our study used narrative inquiry as the primary methodology (Clandinin and Connelly 2000; Ospina and Dodge 2005; Reissman 2002) to answer the research question 'how do leaders in successful coalitions manage collaboration challenges to make things happen?' We collected data – stories about inter-organizational collaborative work – from members of two coalitions that supported immigrants in large urban centers of the US. These coalitions had public recognition as successful networks achieving effective change in their domain.

## **The cases**

The studied coalitions supported the immigrant communities of two large cities in the US. Immigrant Policy Network (IPN) and Rainbow Network (RN) were respectively located in two major urban centers, one in the North East coast and the other in the Midwest. Both represented large portions of their city's immigrant population, including the traditional Mexican, Dominican, Eastern European and Chinese immigrants as well as Latin American, African, South Asian and the Middle Eastern newcomers. Both networks aimed to improve immigrants' quality of life and to provide a forum

for their voice and collective action. Figure 7.1 offers a description of the coalitions' mission and work.

These coalitions represent a specific inter-organizational governance mode – a network, that is, a long-term cooperative relationship among organizations, in which each entity retains control over their own resources, but jointly decide on their use (Brass *et al.* 2004; Ebers 1997).<sup>8</sup> Coalitions are a specific type of action network (Agranoff 2003).

### SAMPLING CRITERIA

The decision to focus on only two cases responded to the exploratory nature of a topic with scant empirical research: the work of *leadership* in response to collaboration challenges in a type of action network, *coalitions*. These are not representative cases, but a purposive sample, chosen to explore in depth the richness and complexity of inter-organizational collaboration and to surface themes that merit further research.

The coalitions were comparable along two key dimensions: policy domain (immigration) and location (large urban centers). Their governing bodies were also similar, including a core coordinating unit with an executive director accountable to a board of directors that included membership representation.

There were also key differences. Their local and state policy contexts differed. Despite comparable annual budgets (\$1.3 million and \$1 million, respectively), their funding sources also differed slightly.<sup>9</sup> Their membership size and structure (20 and 150 members) and the complexity and size of the staff working in the coordinating unit (9 and 17) also differed. Their age (5 and 15 years) evidenced different life cycle stages, one relatively young and maturing (Rainbow Network), and the other well established (Immigrant Policy Network).

### Data collection and analysis

Stories were collected via two rounds of individual and group in-depth interviews during site visits to the coalition coordinating units. Individual leaders from this unit were interviewed independently and then joined group inter-

8 Similar cooperative arrangements have been studied under the rubrics of partnerships, strategic alliances, inter-organizational relationships, cooperative arrangements, or collaborative agreements (Provan, Fish and Sydow 2007, p.480).

9 Immigrant Policy Network depended almost entirely on foundations, while Rainbow Network drew also on government and corporations. Only the latter accepted governmental money, reflecting ideological differences.

## **Immigrant Policy Network**

Mission: 'to provide a forum for the immigrant community to discuss urgent issues and provide a vehicle for collective action in addressing these issues.'

Programs:

- Policy Analysis and Advocacy – practices, policies and laws affecting the quality of life of immigrant communities
- Civic Participation and Voter Education – large-scale voter registration project, multiple voter education events, recruitment of bilingual poll workers
- Immigrant Concerns Training Institute – workshops and seminars on relevant issues to immigrant communities
- Community Education – develops multi-language educational materials on immigration law, the citizenship process, school registration, health care access and voting rights

## **Rainbow Network**

Mission: 'to improve the quality of life for immigrants and refugees and to ensure dignity and respect by organizing and uniting communities through education, leadership development and direct services and by promoting a voice of community in public policy.'

Programs:

- English Literacy and Civics – integrated English literacy and civics education to immigrant and other limited-English-proficient population with a focus on promoting active community participation
- Community Organizing – develops community groups to work towards social justice for immigrants and refugees
- Independent Monitoring Board – active participation to ensure that the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) is accountable to the public
- Computer Technology Project – bridges the Digital Divide for its partner agencies
- Citizenship and Voter Training School – a 'gathering place' where community leaders share their concerns

FIGURE 7.1: DESCRIPTION OF THE IMMIGRANT COALITIONS' MISSION AND WORK

views with representatives of stakeholder members (such as other staff from the coordinating unit, and representatives of the board, member organizations, clients, funders, allies and public officials). Twelve hours of conversation with 12 individuals associated with the coalitions yielded about 500 pages of transcripts. These were complemented with archival material such as independent analytical memos about the leadership challenges in each coalition and documentation of the organizations' accomplishments.<sup>10</sup>

Data collection and analysis focused on organizational strategies and activities revealed in the stories, including evidence of collaboration challenges. Interview protocols included questions about the organizations' issue focus, the activities conducted to attain the mission, and leadership challenges in their particular arenas of operation. They did not include explicit questions about collaboration, which nevertheless emerged spontaneously in the stories. Neither were there questions about paradox, which also emerged as a pattern in the analysis.

The analysis identified and explored patterns grounded in the data. We canvassed interview transcripts to explore the challenges of collaboration within the context of the organization's work. The method was interpretive, with systematic and recurrent readings of the narratives to find meaning and identify patterns. We alternated deductive and inductive analysis, first coding categories using concepts from the received literature, and then developing 'grounded' codes reflecting ways to address the challenges of collaboration emerging from identified stories. Embracing paradox as a way to address the challenges of collaboration was an unexpected finding.<sup>11</sup>

## Policy context and organizational achievements

Immigrant Policy Network and Rainbow Network represent successful efforts of immigrant communities to participate in the polity and offer a new model of work with immigrants in their respective cities.

Urban political machines, religious institutions, social service nonprofits and settlement houses have offered assistance to immigrant communities over the past 200 years in the US. Immigrant service and advocacy organizations

10 These materials were drawn from the data set of the Leadership for a Changing World program's Research and Documentation Component. The coalitions participated between 2001 and 2003.

11 The literature identifies many paradoxes of organizing, including the ones described in this paper. Only two emerged from the stories as a concern of leaders in the studied coalitions. This does not imply the absence from their work of other paradoxes, but we cannot consider them given our inductive approach.

focusing on services for refugees and targeted immigrant groups (for example legal assistance involving citizenship and work permits) have mostly worked independently and in isolation.

The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA) altered the demographic landscape of many urban and rural areas of the US, including those of the studied coalitions. IRCA made 3 million undocumented workers and their families eligible for legal status, broadening the demand for services and collaboration among organizations (Federation for American Immigration Reform 2003; Moran and Petsod 2003). Service organizations quickly adapted to include assistance in language skills, workforce integration, training and other social services.

Emerging from this fertile ground that created many new nonprofits, a small group of immigration reform advocates in a large north-east city gave birth to Immigrant Policy Network in 1987. The new locally based immigrant advocacy organization offered support to immigrants and newly made citizens, while also responding to IRCA's goal to deter illegal immigration to the US. Twelve years later, propelled by the anti-immigrant tone of the 1996 federal welfare reform initiative, several immigrant groups coalesced around an unresponsive local Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS)<sup>12</sup> office and became the Rainbow Network in another large Midwest urban center.

IPN and RN developed within the dispersed, atomized and isolated immigration environments in two of the largest US cities. Their sustainability, the stability of their staff, boards and budgets and the strong reputation and public credibility they enjoy are evidence of their success. Figure 7.2 illustrates mission specific achievements for each coalition.

Both coalitions have received prestigious awards, one of which characterizes their work as effective, systemic, strategic and able to sustain results beyond individual efforts. Their ability to engage in effective inter-organizational collaboration to attain their goals makes these coalitions excellent cases for study.

12 After the interviews, in 2003, the functions of the former Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) were incorporated into the US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) of the US Department of Homeland Security.

## Findings: Addressing paradox for inter-organizational collaboration

In answering our original question – how do leaders in successful coalitions manage collaboration challenges to make things happen? – paradox emerged as a key reality of the work.

As staff in the coordinating units of the studied coalitions tried to respond to the challenges of collaboration within a network governance structure, they spent time and energy doing leadership work that was distinct from, but supported, the critical tasks required to address the public problem of concern. This leadership work was meant to ensure that apparently competing demands, which seemed essential to advance the mission, were honored. In particular, coalition leaders faced and addressed the paradoxes of unity and diversity and of confrontation and dialogue. In describing their work, leaders thought of themselves as solving puzzles around what one of them called ‘the ironies of the work’, what we call here the artful management of paradox.

### Immigrant Policy Network

- Immigrant voter education and mobilization campaign for the 2000 elections (enrolled over 60,000 members of immigrant families; registered more than 200,000 new citizens)
- Won millions of city and state dollars in recent years to expand legal services and English classes for its city’s immigrants

### Rainbow Network

- Organized a petition campaign for INS reform (more than 19,000 signatures collected), contributing to create a watchdog and reform organization (Independent Monitoring Board)
- By 2000 the board had sent approximately 800 documented cases to INS and to members of Congress, detailing the experiences of immigrants and refugees with INS backlog

FIGURE 7.2: SELECTED ACHIEVEMENTS

We have structured this section around Shortell *et al.*'s (2002) distinction between inward and outward work in organizational networks. Inward work refers to explicit efforts to build community, that is, to nurture and maintain the network and the effective coordination of members' work. Outward work is about actions to influence external actors in order to achieve the network's goals.

### Inward work: Honoring the competing demands for unity and diversity

Rainbow Network worked with 13 different communities, and programs for its 20 organizational members were executed in 11 different languages. This coalition included organizations whose clients ranged from a couple of thousand up to 20 thousand a year. Members in Immigrant Policy Network also covered most ethnic communities in the city, and included, at one end of the spectrum, a federation of 81 Latino health and human services agencies, serving more than 800,000 vulnerable Latinos annually, and a small Korean neighborhood organization serving a narrow catchment area, at the other end.

Membership and size differences were exacerbated by the coalitions' focus on immigration. Organizations served people of multiple ethnicities, with diverse religions, cultural and linguistic characteristics. Some member organizations provided services and others did organizing or advocacy work. Problems tackled ranged from comprehensive services to very specialized issues, like health, ageing, problems for specific immigrant communities, or very narrow issues like HIV. Given this diversity, it is no wonder that an education specialist at Rainbow Network argued: 'There's a lot of politics among the [coalition members] and to get everybody to agree [is] not easy.'

While making agreement potentially hard, this diversity accounted for the coalitions' strength. At Immigrant Policy Network, a cofounder argued that internal diversity was a key factor for effectiveness: 'whatever the process has been, we've been able, for the most part, to bring so many different groups to the table that don't normally advocate together'. The executive director reinforced this: 'we had all of these different groups coming...with the shared message on these issues, and then they [actors of the target agency] all scratched their heads saying: "So, Central American Refugee Center is...in on this with UJA and with...?" ...and that's when they realize that they have to pay closer attention.' Diversity thus played a strategic role for the coalitions to attain sufficient leverage as an interlocutor at the policy table.

However, if not managed, this diversity could hinder the unity required for the coalitions to act with a single voice. The diverse characteristics, strengths,

goals and hence interests of the membership made reaching common ground and collaboration harder. The basic experience afforded by the common 'immigrant' identity provided a starting point to build community, but it was not enough. The advocacy director at Immigrant Policy Network said about the differences between big and small organizations: 'all of them don't really get along [but] they're all together because there is a strong consensus, you know, on the agenda, as it really brings people together'.

Creating common ground required managing differences in a creative way, such as finding agreement in respecting disagreements by taking no position in regard to controversial issues. This is the case when the Immigrant Policy Network carefully assessed the consequences of addressing school vouchers as part of its education reform work. After analyzing the pro-voucher position, the anti-voucher position and the no-position, the coalition agreed to take no position, thus upholding the ideological diversity while finding unity in the way the decision was made. The Executive Director commented: 'It would have really been a "make or break" issue for [some organizations], and we just decided that 'vouchers' wasn't an important enough issue on our agenda for us to lose major players of the Coalition over it.'

The functional need to maintain and honor the needed diversity without threatening the needed unity to ensure collaboration required deliberate and strategic work. Three leadership practices emerged from the analysis: nurturing and facilitating member interaction, fostering openness and participatory processes and paying attention to personal relationships.

#### FACILITATING INTERACTION

The coordinating unit played a facilitating role that encouraged member interaction. Activities like setting up a press conference, identifying and proposing immigration-related issues as the source for common work, or setting the structure and processes for organizational exchanges reminded coalition members of a shared platform geared toward united action.

Coalition members appreciated the coordinating unit staff's constant follow up, setting of the stage, and looking at the small details, while giving each organization enough space to showcase its separate identity. A Rainbow Network member indicated that the message was not just of being welcome, but of understanding that 'if you're not here, there is going to be something missing. And it started a trend of feeling like you all needed to contribute in order to make something as successful as it turned out to be.' The practices to facilitate interaction also reinforced the importance of member participation. A staff member at Immigrant Policy Network said: 'it is less about [the executive



director] being a leader than nurturing other leaders and setting up the processes to nurture them'. The value of participation highlighted in this comment represents the second leadership practice.

#### PROMOTING OPENNESS AND PARTICIPATION

The Immigrant Policy Network's board discussion about school vouchers described above illustrates the importance of devoting efforts to ensure that all perspectives were heard before a decision was made. The process used reflects openness and participation. Decision making in both coalitions took the form of participatory processes, in particular when the stakes were high. A member of Rainbow Network claimed: 'The way we work together is [we] build consensus among us. And sometimes that takes longer.' Yet these lengthy deliberation processes ensured that the outcome was not arrived at at the expense of either unity or diversity.

Participation reflected the value of diversity and at the same time created ownership and commitment among coalition members, thus promoting unity. A staff member of the Immigrant Policy Network said: 'it's been really essential for us to show that we care just as much about the Russian, Korean, Chinese, Haitian and South Asian votes as we do about the Latino vote', and as a consequence, 'we've been able to maintain the sense of...multi-ethnic participation, and our agenda has always been inclusive.'

'There doesn't feel like a dominance of power in Rainbow Network [so] that one group has more say than the other group,' claimed a member. Promoting a relatively balanced power distribution was at the core of the work of leadership in these coalitions. The Immigrant Policy Network's executive director described her efforts to ensure that small grass roots organizations were not overpowered by the large powerful multi-service organizations represented in the board, while giving the latter their due. She explained: 'Instead of trying to take away power or suppress those that are powerful, you just elevate the emerging groups so that they're more on equal grounds. So you don't alienate, you know, some of the more established groups.' Inclusiveness, participation and open processes allowed leaders to turn differences that could produce conflict into sources of strength for the coalition, thus honoring both sides of the unity and diversity paradox.

#### CULTIVATING PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

'And when you get a group that's diverse as we are, staying...fairly friendly and really not having a tremendous difference of opinion about who did this and who didn't do that, that's pretty good testimony to your ability to keep us

all on track,' said a representative of a member organization to the executive director of Rainbow Network during an interview. This comment illustrates the consequences of the recurrent work he did to pay personal attention to each member, and investing time 'into building relationships with local leaders', as a coalition staff of the Immigrant Policy Network said.

This emotional work helped to build trust and respect in the face of differences. The advocacy director of Immigrant Policy Network described the executive director as very attentive to each new coalition member. She was always trying to help them find their way and their voice, sometimes, in the words of the staff, creating a 'a little personalized plan' that helped them best use their potential within the coalition. The advocacy director experienced directly the impact of this type of work, when her small neighborhood organization first started working with the coalition and the executive director sent them a personal note congratulating them for their contribution to their first campaign. She recalls, 'I just didn't expect the executive director of this large, broad-based group to be doing that, so I felt like she was really welcoming and seeking out our involvement.' She was impressed: 'we didn't know anybody and here she is writing us a letter...' and 'putting in that time to cultivate relationships and to take the time to have the conversations...'

The three leadership practices associated with embracing the unity and diversity paradox interact to produce the synergy required to create a sense of community, while maintaining diversity as a resource. A participatory process needs facilitation and nurturing. Similarly, personal relationships are an outcome of, as well as an input to, participatory processes. Together, these leadership practices helped to foster unity, despite the tremendous differences among coalition members, thus creating the fertile soil for collaboration. As a community, coalition members were then ready to influence key external organizations.

### **Outward work: Managing dialogue and confrontation to facilitate external collaboration**

Members in coalitions spent considerable energy engaging actors from the institutional targets that the coalition intended to influence. The goal of improving immigrants' quality of life demanded that coalitions influence the regional and federal offices of a public agency over which they had no direct power, the Immigration and Naturalization Service. This agency's power was far superior to that of either coalition, given its legal mandate and role in implementing immigration policy, the favorable political climate towards

increased control and the irregular legal status of some of the coalition's constituents.

To successfully influence the behavior of this powerful target, coalition leaders could not just engage in frontal attack or direct resistance. They also had to engage representatives of the target agency in dialogue and collaboration. This meant combining two contradictory engagement forms in the same relationship. Immigrant Policy Network's executive director justified the simultaneous use of dialogue and confrontation when she said: 'You're no good to anybody if you're someone's friend all the time. But you're also no good if you're the enemy all the time...'. In her view, the trick was to 'intelligently and ethically strike the balance between...maintaining relationships being important to people, and at the same time being able to be critical of them', so as to get them 'to do what you want them to do'.

In practice, confrontation implied questioning the target agency publicly regarding unacceptable behavior, inhumane policies or defective outputs of immigration processing tasks. But confrontation would not exclude collaboration efforts with either the INS or other administrative and political bodies. Leadership work was required to manage these competing demands. We identified three leadership practices that helped leaders embrace this paradox of engagement with influential targets: maintaining credibility, working at multiple levels and cultivation of multiple relationships.

#### MAINTAINING CREDIBILITY

Credibility played an important role in using dialogue and confrontation successfully, in two different ways. General credibility made the coalitions more reliable in the eyes of the target organization. The coalitions' threats were more powerful during confrontation, and their offers for collaboration more convincing during dialogue. A Rainbow Network founder, currently the director of one of its member organizations, described the potential for dialogue as follows: 'We've demonstrated that we have the credibility... In fact, the INS regional local office director...has continuously sought out this body to communicate with...because he realizes that we're representing the voices of his customers.' Credibility represented a form of political capital that allowed coalitions to engage legitimately in confrontation without then being discounted as a potential collaborator by the same agency, as needed.

#### MULTI-LEVEL WORKING

Working at local, state and national levels via campaigns, lobbying and partnering with other nonprofits allowed the coalitions to keep up with the INS

own multi-level presence and operating arenas. The strategic importance of information was multiplied when the sources were broadened, as illustrated in the comment of the director of training and legal service at Immigrant Policy Network: 'We were the only group that knew what was going on because of our relationship with people in DC.'

Acting on and linking different levels of action allowed these coalitions to combine simultaneously, although at different levels, the engagement strategies of dialogue and confrontation within the same agency, as when Immigration Policy Network staff confronted federal officials while maintaining dialogue with the district office.

### CULTIVATING MULTIPLE RELATIONSHIPS

Having relationships at different layers of an agency and with multiple actors in the environment prevented 'burning bridges' (using the words of Immigrant Policy Networks' executive director) and safeguarded opportunities to introduce dialogue before or after confrontation. Moreover, relationships helped the coalitions stay in a political environment characterized by internal mobility associated with political changes. Forecasting a change of Commissioner in the INS, the executive director of Immigrant Policy Network said: 'There we would draw on our relationships with other groups around the country, the other immigration coalitions, and our partners nationally. Veronica goes to regular meetings down in DC that a lot of the groups have with the INS.'

In sum, maintaining credibility in the policy field, working with multiple actors from the same agency and from different jurisdictions, as well as maintaining an extended network of external relationships facilitated the simultaneous engagement in confrontation and dialogue. This way, leaders embraced rather than resolved paradox.

## Discussion and conclusions

The competing demands posed by the unity and diversity paradox, when doing inward work, and the confrontation and dialogue paradox, when doing outward work, represented significant collaboration challenges as coalition leaders tried to make things happen.

The functional need to honor both sides of each paradox demanded explicit and deliberate efforts – what we have called here leadership practices – for leaders to be able to leverage the coalitions' collaborative advantage (Huxham 2003; Huxham and Macdonald 1992).

This leadership work was distinct from the instrumental tasks and activities associated with effective management, like strategic planning or budgeting, and from the expressive strategies associated with social change work, like organizing, advocating or developing community. As *practices*, they were organic and purposive social interventions (Polkinghorne 2004) – embodied and routinized ways of *understanding, knowing how and desiring* (Reckwitz 2002, p.250) – that the group, bound together by collaborative challenges, enacted when making meaning out of their experience. As *leadership practices*, they mixed elements of both instrumental and expressive logics of action (Polkinghorne 2004). Moreover, these practices informed the managerial and strategic social change work.

The six leadership practices through which leaders embraced paradox were: purposively facilitating member interaction, promoting openness and participation and cultivating personal relationships ensured both unity and diversity inside the coalition. And purposively managing the coalition's credibility, working at various levels of action (multi-level), and cultivating multiple external relationships to engage successfully in confrontation and dialogue with the target.

Independently, each of these activities has been traditionally identified in the received literature as ways to effectively manage networks of organizations. For example, in the case of practices associated with unity and diversity, facilitating interaction has been viewed as a nurturing process to ensure inter-organizational collaboration (Agranoff and McGuire 2001; Huxham 2003; Kickert, Klijn and Koopjenan 1997). Similarly, openness is considered key to effective management in networks (Agranoff 2003), and cultivating personal relationships is a prerequisite to building trust (Agranoff and McGuire 2001; Mattessich, Murray-Close and Monsey 2001; Ospina and Yaroni 2003; Ring and Van de Ven 1994). However, scholars have not linked these activities to the paradoxical demands of inter-organizational collaboration. Our contribution lies in viewing them as practices embedded within a broader logic: together, they represent the work of leadership in the context of a complex governance structure characterized by paradox.

In the case of confrontation and dialogue, our findings also resonate with activities previously identified in the received literature. But they gain explanatory power when seen in the context of the need to address paradox. For example, scholars have indicated that collaboration represents only one of several possible strategies to engage a coalition's external environment (Mizrahi and Rosenthal 2001). Other strategies include compliance, contention and contestation (Hardy and Phillips 1998). Selection of a given strategy is contingent on factors like the nature of previous relationships with the

target, its power and the coalition's capacity to influence it. Our findings suggest that these engagement strategies functioned in an interdependent way: they belong to a coherent set of strategic practices reflecting a choice to embrace and live with paradox.

Together, the identified practices document the work of leadership as it emerges over time to face the challenges of collaboration. These practices are not just isolated tasks or activities, but visible, publicly enacted patterns of action (Swidler 2001) that have become habitual yet are quite purposive (Polkinghorne 2004). They reflect internalized collective understandings of how to perform the work (Drath 2001; Hosking 2007; Reckwitz 2002) to attain, in this case, collaborative work for social change.

The two sets described – for embracing unity/diversity and confrontation/dialogue respectively – seem to represent the purposive yet taken for granted responses to the contradictory pulls for the leaders' attention and energy in different directions. If such is the case they evidence the artful management of paradox, a type of leadership work that may be required for successful coalition building.

These findings are fairly tentative, given the data and design limitations of our exploratory study. For example, we did not include explicit questions about collaboration, so we might have missed other paradoxes and practices not captured by the data. Similarly, we do not know if the identified phenomena are specific only to immigration coalitions. Finally, our findings about the relationship between collaboration, paradox and leadership were unexpected. Hence the next step is to explore deductively that effective collaboration in formal coalitions involves explicit leadership work that allows embracing, rather than resolving, paradox. Research designs with more cases and different policy areas are needed to further develop and test this proposition.

If our findings hold, however, the implications for practice are exciting: awareness of the pervasiveness of paradox and its implications for the work of leadership can better prepare coalition participants to address the inherent challenges of collaborative work. Instead of viewing paradox as a problem to be resolved, practitioners can view it as a natural feature of coalition work that, embraced and honored, can contribute to develop collaborative advantage (Huxham 2003; Huxham and Macdonald 1992) and enhance collaborative capacity in the coalition and its organizational members (Bardach 1998).

At the risk of oversimplifying, we offer below some practical considerations for embracing paradox in the context of networked governance structures typical of today's world:

- Recognize that paradox is a normal state of organizational life, not something problematic or to be avoided.
- Identify those areas of the work where demands direct your attention in opposing directions: these are areas of paradox, and they are context specific.
- Understand the nature of the demands that pull you in different directions: Why do they exist? How does each help to move the work forward? What are the tradeoffs of *not* addressing each demand? Of addressing them simultaneously? How can these be minimized?
- Recognize that addressing both demands simultaneously will take time, energy and effort; be aware of the tradeoffs and of their consequences, and be prepared to manage them.
- Devise, or learn from others, leadership practices that you can adapt to honor both sides of the identified paradoxes.

And, finally, reframe, for yourself and for those to whom you are accountable, what it means to be effective and efficient. After all, embracing paradox means living with complexity and uncertainty in ways that may take the work through longer paths or may demand alternative logics. This contrasts with the quicker and more expedient ways to respond to paradox, such as favoring one pole over the other, or alternating their management, or focusing on each according to context. These ways of resolving the paradox might lead to simpler work, but not necessarily better, considering the potential benefits of honoring both poles of the paradox as part of your leadership work.

### **Post-script: A metaphor to explore the implications of embracing paradox**

A mathematician confided  
That a Möbius band is one-sided  
And you'll get quite a laugh  
If you cut one in half  
For it stays in one piece when divided<sup>13</sup>

13 Anonymous poet (cited in Emmer 1980, p.110).



This poem refers to the curious and counterintuitive Möbius band (Emmer 1980; Peterson 2000a and b), discovered by the mathematician August Möbius<sup>14</sup> and popularized by M.C. Escher's etching of ants crawling indefinitely on an eight-figure surface. Escher's ants walk indefinitely on a flat area with no edge in the direction of their movement, in what is clearly a Möbius band, with one side, one surface and one edge. The Möbius band offers a perfect metaphor to imagine what it means to face and embrace the paradoxical challenges of inter-organizational collaboration.

To create a Möbius band (or strip) half twist a strip of paper (a 180 degree twist) and secure together its ends to form a loop. The enigmatic result is a shape that has only one continuous side: if you place your finger in one side (point A) and follow the shape along without lifting it, you will return to a point marked in what appeared to be the other side of the band (point B). Both sides of the paper are actually the same side, or one continuous side. Moreover, if you try to cut a straight line in the middle of the strip (parallel to its two edges) instead of two parallel strips as expected, the result will be one single longer strip, also with a twist. As stated in the poem above, 'it stays in one piece when divided'.

In a sense, embracing the identified paradoxes of collaboration means treating them not as a reality with two separate poles, but instead viewing the poles as two dimensions of the same 'one-sided' reality. For example, honoring the poles of unity and diversity is like moving the finger from point A to B along the Möbius band without 'lifting the finger', to experience a one-sided, continuous loop, as unity turns into diversity, turns into unity, and so on, thus creating the desired result of *unity in diversity* (Saz-Carranza 2007). In contrast, in a normal strip with two sides, one for unity and one for diversity, the poles would coexist but never interconnect.

The Möbius band metaphor clarifies the practical implications of our findings about how to address the challenges of inter-organizational collaboration. The point is not to figure out how to resolve these inherent paradoxes, but to live them fully. This is particularly true when we refer to leadership at the network level of analysis, that is, leadership of organizing forms such as formal coalitions. Using the metaphor of the Möbius band to think of embracing paradox means inviting leaders to think of paradox counter-intuitively – as in the case of a band that has a three-dimensional shape but only one side that simultaneously captures all dimensions. Once this happens, it is only natural to

14 Simultaneously discovered by the mathematician J.B. Listing in 1858 and then by the visual artist Max Bill in 1936 (Emmer 1980).



consider both demands as part of the same reality. Moving carefully and deliberately through the enigmatic experience of thorough and concurrent consideration of what appear to be contradictory demands may contribute to support the coalitions' ability to carry out collective action.

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