

The Three Sisters Garden Analogy for Servant Leadership Based Collaboration

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According to Morgan (2006), “Metaphor is central to the way we ‘read,’ understand, and shape organizational life,” and “most modern organization theorists have looked to nature to understand organizations and organizational life” (p. 65). In the garden metaphor for an organization (Grahn, 2008), the leader’s role is that of a gardener who takes care of the garden and nurtures the growth of the plants such that lasting fruit is produced. The gardener’s focus on the healthy growth of each individual plant in the garden resembles the servant leader’s focus on the healthy growth of each individual person in the organization. According to Greenleaf (1980), the growth of the people in the organization is the best test for practiced servant leadership. The question he raises is “Do those being served grow as persons: do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?” (p. 43). The Three Sisters Garden (Formiga, 2010) is an ancient method of gardening using an intercropping system, which grows corn, beans, and squash crops simultaneously in the same growing area. Taking the Three Sisters Garden as an analogy for a three-partner collaboration provides a new perspective on the determinants of highly effective collaboration. The analogy suggests that Greenleaf’s question also applies to situations in which a servant leader facilitates collaboration between organizations. Greenleaf’s question then becomes, “Do those partners being served grow as individuals/organizations?”

The Three Sisters Garden is an example of a highly efficient and effective combination of different plants. “Ideal plant combinations are combinations in which either the blooms or the leaves of the plants harmonize such that the plants complement each other in their impact and look more beautiful together than alone” (Stuart, 2004). Usually plant combinations are judged by their blooms, but there are a number of ways how to combine plants effectively. It can be the design of the leaves, the flowering times, or the flowery scents of the plants which complement each other. For example, the scent of the Italian honeysuckle is strongest in the evening when the scent of the rose fades. Stuart noted, “It is an art to combine plants in such a way that no partner receives more attention than another” (p. 102).

The Three Sisters Garden stands for a plant combination that is unique in its mutual efficiency and productivity. “Early European settlers would certainly never have survived

without the gift of the Three Sisters from the Native Americans, the story behind America's Thanksgiving celebration" (Formiga, 2010). To Native Americans of the eastern woodlands, the term "Three Sisters" referred to corn, beans, and squash, which were grown simultaneously in an intercropping system in the same growing area. The garden was typically organized around a rounded mound of soil with corn planted at the center. Beans ring the corn, and squash is planted at the edges. Corn is the oldest sister; she stands tall in the center. The corn provides a natural pole for the bean vines to climb. Corn and bean vines together give shade to the squash. Squash is the second sister; she grows over the mound, protecting her sisters from weeds, and shades the soil and the corn's shallow roots from the sun with her leaves, keeping the soil cool and moist. Beans are the third sister. Bean vines help stabilize the corn plants, making them less vulnerable to blowing over in the wind. Beans help keep the soil fertile by converting the sun's energy into nitrogen.

The three sisters are planted in a small area so that space can be utilized to the fullest extent. These three plants can be very aggressive growers and like lots of sun. The unique symbiotic interactions of the three plants allow them to produce more fruit using less water and fertilizer. Corn, beans, and squash complement each other not only in their growth process, but also in meeting the nutritional requirements of humans. Corn provides carbohydrates while the dried beans are rich in protein, balancing the lack of necessary amino acids found in corn. Finally, squash yields both vitamins from the fruit and healthful, delicious oil from the seeds.

All three sisters are necessary to get this result. Any combination of only two of the three sisters would not be sufficient for optimal growth of the plants. Without corn, the bean vines had nothing to climb on. Without beans, the corn and the squash would not have enough nutrients. Without the squash, the roots of the corn would run dry and die, because the squash leaves provide shade for the shallow roots of the corn.

Servant Leadership and Collaboration

Servant leaders encourage collaboration and teamwork among individuals (Spears, 2005). Moreover, after studying the relationship between team effectiveness and servant leadership, Irving and Longbotham (2006) concluded that "The servant leader's role of fostering community and a collaborative work environment is essential in effective team leadership" (p. 8). However, servant leaders are not only effective in fostering collaboration within their own organization but also in facilitating collaboration and partnership between different organizations. Butler (2005) highlighted the importance of the role of the partnership facilitator: "lasting partnerships need a committed facilitator" (p. 319). Butler dedicated a whole chapter of his book to laying out the principles of effective servant leadership based facilitation.

Collaboration, partnership, alliance, cooperation, coalition, and network are terms used in organization theory to describe the "working together" of two or more partners. In organization literature, authors often use different terms with different definitions to describe "partnership," and sometimes the same term carries different meanings for different authors. Here, partnership and collaboration are used to describe any kind of working together of two or more organizations. In the concrete realization of a partnership, the partners themselves need to create a mutual understanding of the specifics their working together shall entail.

Cross-sector partnerships in particular are partnerships where at least two of the partners come from different sectors. The three sectors commonly distinguished in leadership literature are the public or government sector; the private or business sector; and the social, nonprofit or

third sector. As Tennyson (2004) observed, the public sector tends to be “rights” driven, the business sector tends to be “profit” driven, and the civil society to be “value” driven (p. 3). Organizations often consider partnerships a way to save on own resources, to expand their network and their reach, and to increase their impact and competitiveness. According to Austin (2000), partnerships between businesses and nonprofits must be built around a strategic fit. Standard operating procedures and processes, which result in effective partnerships with peer organizations within the same sector, do not ensure successful results in cross-sector partnerships. Nonprofits and businesses must adapt their relationship-building approaches to the special nature of cross-sector partnerships (Austin). The motivations for organizations committing themselves to a cross-sector partnership vary. In many instances, a mix of self-interest and altruistic motives drives the nonprofit partner, whereas the business partners come more from a self-interest and marketing driven motivation (Selsky & Parker, 2005).

For a partnership to be mutually beneficial, it is important that both partners share certain goals and values. In his study of successful and effective cross-sector partnerships, Austin (2000) observed that the cornerstone for building a richer value exchange among partners is the identification of overlapping missions and compatible values. Austin et al. (1999) and Sagawa and Segal (2000) agreed on six ingredients, which are the “sine qua non” of successful cross-sector collaborations: (a) clarity about each partner’s needs; (b) clarity about each partner’s strengths; (c) compatible values; (d) overlapping missions; (e) a commitment to a partnership process; and (f) the development of a trusting relationship between the partners.

The Gardener as Partnership Facilitator

Comparing the six determinants of successful cross-sector partnerships with aspects of successful plant partnerships reveals a number of analogies between facilitating collaboration of organizations and gardening. Successful plant combinations have in common that the individual plants share the same soil requirements and have the same need for sunshine—or, if not, that one of the plants provides shade for the other partners. Moreover, they share resources which are necessary for the growth of each partner, and each plant brings into the partnership its unique contribution. Often a certain distance between the plant partners is required such that the roots of the plants do not compete with each other for vital resources like water and nutrients. Sometimes a certain age is necessary to ensure that the strong growth of one partner will not overgrow the other partner. “Success with a Three Sisters Garden involves careful attention to timing, seed spacing, and varieties. In many areas, if you simply plant all three in the same hole at the same time, the result will be a snarl of vines in which the corn gets overwhelmed!” (Formiga, 2010).

Clarity about each partner’s needs and strengths corresponds to the individual contribution of each plant and what is required from the partner plant to complement the other. Building on each partner’s individual strengths is crucial for the success of both the Three Sisters Garden and the collaboration of organizations.

Compatible values refers to potentially very different organizational cultures, which corresponds to compatible soil requirements. The organizational cultures need not to be the same, but they need to support and encourage compatible values in the same way as the soil requirements of the plants may vary but must be compatible such that each plant can grow in the soil, even if it is not its preferred set of soil composition.

The *overlapping missions* of the partners corresponds to the goal that plant partnerships are making a greater impact in partnership—produce more fruit or a longer enduring flowery scent—than each plant alone.

The *commitment to the partnership process* goes together with the commitment to the natural growth process of the plants, accepting also that not all partners benefit at the same time from the partnership. However, if one plant quits its contribution in the process, the whole partnership would be over. Partnership is considered an ongoing growth process, not a single event. Commitment to the process requires investment in trust, communication, and conflict resolution.

The *development of trusting relationships between the partners* can be interpreted such that each plant grows in partnership with the other plants, trusting, but not knowing, that each partner will finally contribute the hoped-for nutrient that is crucial to the success of the plant partnership. In the Three Sisters Garden, each plant serves another plant's growth without any immediate benefit. Serving the other partners beyond your self-interest in the partnership process distinguishes servant leader facilitated partnerships from other partnerships. Moreover, if the partnership facilitator comes from one of the partnering organizations, as it is often the case, then the facilitating role can easily turn into a litmus test for the facilitator being either a servant leader or a transformational leader. While servant leadership and transformational leadership in many aspects are very similar, one major difference is the focus of the leader. The servant leader's focus is on the growth of the individual in the organization, whereas the focus of the transformational leader is on the growth of the organization rather than on the growth of the individual person (Stone et al., 2003). Facilitating collaboration is a process in which the difference between the focus of a transformational leader and the focus of a servant leader becomes more obvious. For the success of the partnership, it is crucial that the leader serves the higher common purpose of the partnership and not his personal or organizational interests. The Greenleaf question for servant leaders—"Do those being served grow as persons?" (Greenleaf, 1980)—then turns into a question for servant leader facilitators: "Do those partners being served, whose interests often are even less in my organization's interest than the interests of my subordinates, grow as individuals/organizations?"

About the Author

Thorsten Grahm holds a Ph.D. in Mathematics from the University in Heidelberg (Germany), and a M.A. in Organizational Leadership from Azusa Pacific University (USA). Thorsten has 15 years of experience in international and intercultural management of non-profit organizations. He is currently coordinating the international ministries of ERF Media (Germany) in more than 40 languages in Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America. Thorsten has a special interest in servant leadership and in facilitating effective win-win collaborations between organizations.

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