

PAR Interview

Part of what makes PAR a rewarding experience is the process of creation, the exploration and debate behind the literature. Each issue presents for readers numerous articles, but each author has a story to tell about their experience. The PAR Interviews are one way to capture some of those stories about exploration and debate, helping us share in the experience and connect with one another. Each issue, we will ask one or more authors to answer a few questions about their contribution to PAR and what it means to them.

For the first interview, Jim Heichelbech talked to Rosemary O’Leary and Lisa Blomgren Bingham about their work with Catherine Gerard on the December 2006 Special Issue of PAR – The Symposium on Collaborative Public Management.

Jim Heichelbech: Thanks for the opportunity to learn more about the thoughts behind the PAR Special Issue on Collaborative Public Management. I’d like to start with a couple of questions about you and then dive into some questions about the subject of collaborative public management. Can you tell me a little bit about your backgrounds? What aspects of your work experience and academic training lead to an interest in collaborative public management?

Rosemary O’Leary: Prior to earning my Ph.D. in public administration at the Maxwell School of Syracuse University in 1988, I worked as an environmental lawyer and an administrator in Kansas State government. With JD and MPA degrees from the University of Kansas, I ended up as the director of policy and planning for the Kansas Department of Health and Environment at the age of 28. It was “baptism by fire” as I learned about the real world challenges of public management: It is interorganizational and interpersonal. There are multiple forums for decision-making. There are multiple parties and multiple issues. Often times there is technical complexity. There often is unequal power and resources.

My job included administering the review and development of legislation and regulations, aiding the agency head in developing policies and procedures and serving as an environmental policy consultant to the Governor’s staff and the National Governors’ Association. I tell my students I continually “got hit on the head with a 2 by 4” by concerned citizens, members of non-governmental organizations, and those from the private sector who were upset about policies that were handed to them by our agency or the legislature. What ensued were often very predictable “vicious attack dog” sessions where each side would be represented by an attorney. The problem would emerge, sides would form, positions would harden, communication would stop, resources would be committed, the conflict would go outside the small group in which it originated, perceptions would become distorted and eventually a sense of crisis would emerge. I learned the hard way that while this “conflict spiral” (Carpenter and Kennedy, 2001) is not inevitable, it is predictable when public conflict is not

managed at an early stage. There had to be a better way. That is when my interest in collaborative public management started and I’ve been studying it, teaching it, and doing it for nearly 20 years now.

Lisa Blomgren Bingham: I came to academics after ten years as a labor lawyer, negotiating daily on behalf of public employers. I became a mediator and arbitrator, and this naturally influenced the direction of my scholarship at Indiana University. The years in collective bargaining taught me that negotiation happens in a context: all stakeholders have constituents, operate within a legal framework and rule system, have resource constraints, and have leaders with a vision. Workplace democracy is a microcosm of our larger democracy. Much like a fractal, I came to see its patterns repeating themselves in other policy contexts as you scale the negotiation up to collaborative management. What intrigued me was the connection between networks and the legal framework for our democracy, including issues of civic engagement, transparency, and accountability. I was also surprised to discover how much scholarship on collaboration was occurring in silos both within PA and across disciplines.

Jim Heichelbech: What brought you and your co-editors together to work on collaborative management in general and this special issue of PAR in particular?

Rosemary O’Leary: Lisa and I have worked together for years, first meeting at Indiana University in the early 1990’s. Together we founded the Indiana Conflict Resolution Institute (ICRI), which became a statewide program fostering collaborative public management initiatives. Under Lisa’s lead, the Hewlett Foundation became interested in what we were doing and funded nine years of initiatives aimed in part at fostering greater collaboration in public administration.

When I returned to the Maxwell School in 1999, Catherine Gerard and I connected through her work as the assistant director of executive education there. Prior to joining the Maxwell team Catherine had been a trainer of high level public executives for New York State. We had many discussions and debates about teaching and training, asking, “How can we best teach

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collaborative problem solving and collaborative public management?” We are now co-directors of the Program on the Analysis and Resolution of Conflicts (PARC), which has as its main emphasis “collaborative governance”. That is where the idea for the special issue of PAR on collaborative public management started. I got Lisa and Catherine together and the rest is history.

Jim Heichelbech: Let’s talk about the special issue. In your introduction, you talk about pushing the field toward reflection, innovation, questioning and theorizing. I’d like to draw from the articles throughout the issue to ask questions that fit some of these. But, first, I’d like to ask about the definitions you provide at the beginning.

*“Collaborative public management is a concept that describes the process of facilitating and operating in multiorganizational arrangements to solve problems that cannot be solved or easily solved by single organizations. Collaborative means to *co-labor*, to cooperate to achieve common goals, working across boundaries in multisector relationships. Cooperation is based on the value of reciprocity.”*

“Participatory governance is the active involvement of citizens in government decision making. Governance means to steer the process that influences decisions and actions within the private, public, and civic sectors.”

I guess the first thing that stands out for me is that you define collaborative public management as a secondary alternative, with the expectation that folks look for solutions through single organizations first. I’d like to get a sense of where you see an attitude of collaboration emerging. Is it possible or desirable to look at every problem as single organization challenges and a collaborative lens simultaneously at the outset? Or do we know that we have a challenge appropriate for collaborative management only after we fail to handle it alone? Is it possible to enter every situation with a collaborative outlook?

Lisa Blomgren Bingham: It is necessary and desirable to cultivate both the skills and capacity to collaborate; the question is when do you need to use them. Our definitions stem both from scholarship and the experiences of practitioners. Our authors tell us it takes time, resources, external constraints, and will to

collaborate, among other initial conditions. If you think about all the negative connotations associated with 'working by committee,' these connotations tell you managers have autonomy needs, for example the need to just 'get it done.' Cultivating the skills and capacity to collaborate means learning to see your context as a manager, identify boundaries, and recognize when your goals require you to cross these boundaries by working with others.

However, we also see a link between collaboration and participatory governance. There is a role for the public even in hierarchical management in a single agency, although the agency may limit this role to a traditional public involvement process like a hearing. When you think about how civil society manifests itself through non-profits, voluntary associations, and other organized stakeholder groups, the public is already participating in networks. Moreover, the networks are doing outreach to individual citizens. Thus, we think it is important to look at collaboration in this broader context.

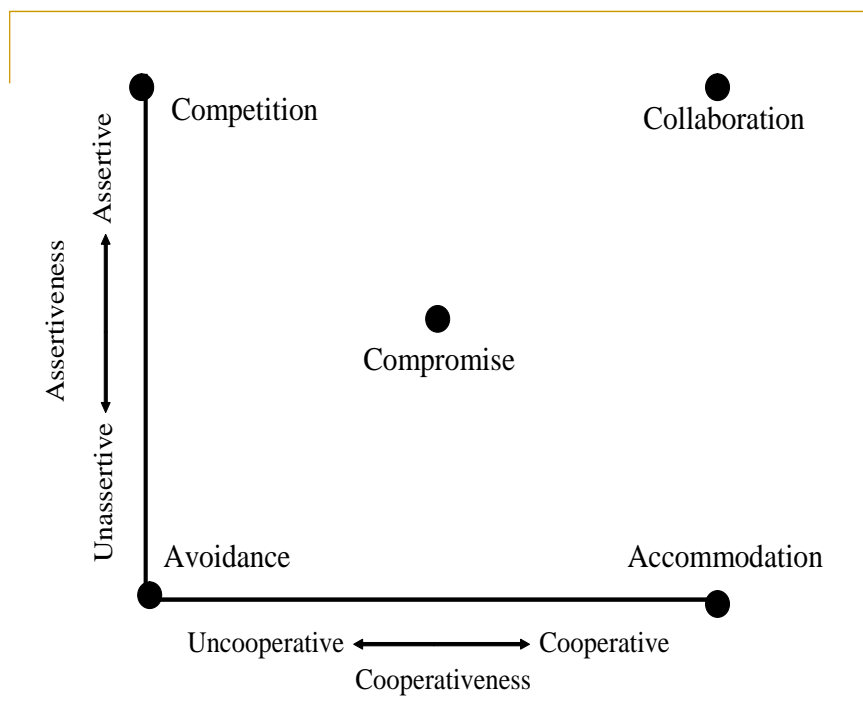
Rosemary O'Leary: David Connelly, Jing Zhang and Sue Faerman (forthcoming) write of the paradox involved in being a collaborative manager. As managers work both within their own organizations and within networks, they are challenged in very different ways. These challenges demand different skill sets from managers. Borrowing from Connelly, Zhang and Faerman, here are some of the most compelling paradoxes of being a collaborative manager.

Collaborative managers must work both with autonomy and interdependence. As a leader of a single program or organization, managers often work with independence, setting the rules and calling the shots. As a member of a collaborative network, a manager is typically now one of many managers with numerous intertwining interests that must be met.

Collaborative managers and their networks have both common and diverse goals. Each member of a network has goals that typically are unique to that member's organization or program. At the same time, as members of a network, managers typically share common goals.

Collaborative managers must work both with a fewer number and a greater variety of groups which are increasingly more diverse. When organizations combine to form a network, they become one body – hence the fewer number. Yet within this one body typically is a great variety of organizations with different cultures, missions and ways of operating – hence the greater diversity.

Collaborative managers need to be both participative and authoritative. Behavior within a network is typically participative as the members make decisions concerning the direction of the group. Yet as a manager of a single program or organization, a manager is expected at times to take command and call the shots as he or she sees them. (Connelly, Zhang and Faerman emphasize that authoritative is the key word here, not authoritarian which connotes a more dictatorial style.) The following graph demonstrates how assertiveness and cooperativeness come together in the skill set of the collaborative manager.



Source: Thomas (1976).

Collaborative managers need to see the forest and the trees. A manager of a single program or organization needs to master the details and fine points of what they do on a daily bases. At the same time, as a member of a network, that same manager needs to think holistically and laterally.

Collaborative managers need to balance advocacy and inquiry. Every manager has an obligation to promote, support, and act in favor of his or her organization. Yet behavior and especially decision-making in a network, because of the intertwining interests, suggests the need for probing and questioning in order to gather the information necessary to act in the best interests of the network.

Jim Heichelbech: You suggest in your conclusion that one of the barriers to understanding and promoting collaborative management is reluctance among academics to work collaboratively themselves, for example addressing one another’s literature. Attitudes about the role of academic research vary a great deal, especially among academics. There is a sense in which the academic challenge of pulling together a comprehensive understanding of collaborative management requires that we harness the energy and enthusiasm of those who want to help. Yet, we also encounter those who believe they have the answer and who primarily want to make sure everyone understands the answer they have. Talk about the attitude you believe is necessary for academics to work together collaboratively. How can academics balance the need for confidence in their results as a product of independent specialized expertise with the need for humble participation in something larger, something directed toward a collaborative process.

Rosemary O’Leary: One of the reasons I left the practitioner world in 1985 to work on a Ph.D. was that I thought, “If only I had a Ph.D. I would have all the answers.” Ha. The longer I am in this business the more I realize that no one has all the answers. And I mean no one.

As I wrote in my most recent book (O’Leary, 2006) both academics and practitioners alike can easily become imprisoned in, and blinded by their own thoughts and analyses concerning a particular issue because they are locked into their own worlds. They may be concerned solely with the particulars of their own careers, their own programs, or their own experiences. In the day-to-day grind of public service, managers’ overwhelming preoccupation with what comes across their desks may ignore another more fundamental level of reality. When we fail to see the whole picture, when we neglect the perspectives of open systems and networks, of wholeness and connectedness, we tend to see only one part of a problem, and eventually only one part of the solution. When we identify only with a permanent, impermeable view of an organization or an issue, including what ideas are appropriate for that organization or that analysis, it is a form of blindness. It takes true work to break out of the prison of these narrow thoughts.

In our concluding essay to the PAR special issue we criticize the field of public administration for “parallel play.” By this we essentially mean ignoring relevant advances made by other disciplines. While pointing out the tremendous intellectual progress that is apparent in recent public administration research and recent public management innovations, we conclude that there is a missing synthesis among sister fields and literatures. There is a need for what Sean O’Keefe, former NASA administrator calls “diversity thinking.” One sociologist, for example, recently concluded that new ideas often come from managers’ contacts outside their immediate work group (Erard, 2004). Part of the problem lies in the incentive systems for professors who feel pressure to build their reputation in one field and for whom interdisciplinary research is rarely rewarded. But if we are serious about solving society’s most pressing public policy problems, we must foster more interdisciplinary research across fields and with practitioners. This may very well be the ultimate collaborative challenge for public administration.

Jim Heichelbech: Reflection is often a matter of thinking about questions. For example, confronted with the choice between describing deliberation as a structural output or an agential output, the collaborative management literature suggests that the right question concerns both (Feldman, Khademian, Ingram and Schneider, p. 87). As Michael McGuire suggests, collaborative management is not a radically new idea and is not incompatible with what we have seen. But isn’t it somewhat new and radical to begin talking about collaborative management as a value added process in conjunction with processes of deliberation that are primarily based on, for example, hierarchical command and control strategies? In a sense, the conversation is no longer about finding the primary theoretical question at all, but instead a process of borrowing from different traditions so that we can ask the right questions as we work through problems. Is there a sense in which the schools of thought that previously appeared incompatible have been transformed into tools in a toolbox to be used within a fairly pragmatic approach to problem solving?

Lisa Blomgren Bingham: As we build on the body of knowledge, there is a tendency to discover false dichotomies. To borrow Don Kettl’s fence metaphor, a fence does not simply keep something in, but also keeps things out. If you study only one side of the fence, you miss half its function. For example, understanding a network of public and nonprofit organizations requires theories from both public and nonprofit management, not one or the other. Moreover, the questions are not additive, but relational; it is all about interaction.

On your point about processes of deliberation based on hierarchical command and control strategies, there are several different streams of literature about deliberation. You refer to deliberation in hierarchy, and that might include deliberation among members or a board or commission, or among team members within an organization or agency. However, the past two decades have seen the emergence of deliberation in processes of negotiation and consensus-building among stakeholders in resolving conflict at various points along the continuum in the policy process, from upstream policy development to implementation midstream, and enforcement downstream. Collaborative public

management is related to this use of the term. Most recently, we are seeing an energetic discussion around the role of deliberation and dialogue among citizens and those who govern in the policy process. These are three distinct contexts for the same deliberative process, that is, exchanging information and points of view about an issue, ideally in an atmosphere of constructive civility. It is the complexity of context that drives us to be more pragmatic about theory, and context is evolving in response to the so-called ‘wicked problem.’

Jim Heichelbech: There is a sense in which collaborative management could be viewed as a necessary, but not sufficient condition for success. Is it possible that we need to maintain collaborative processes, but that such processes do not guarantee success?

Lisa Blomgren Bingham: Collaborative management is not a single, binary on-off thing. It is not simply present or absent. It is a complex interaction extended in time. Moreover, what happens in and as a result of that interaction is a function of context, constraints, resources, and fundamentally, design issues such as the composition of the network. There was a collaborative management process in New Orleans, but who was at the table? The negotiation literature tells us that outcomes and their quality and creativity depend in part on the interests of those who have a voice. It would appear that the people without cars did not have a voice in emergency planning before Katrina. So yes, in evaluating the effectiveness of collaborative management, we are looking at public management in general. The structure or design of a collaborative network includes decisions regarding participation, governance processes such as deliberation and consensus rules, uses and sources of information, resources and support, conflict management practices, the use of facilitators or neutrals, the role of the broader public, transparency and accountability structures, to name but a few of many design variables. These structural differences undoubtedly affect outcomes and success, but we do not know how. Thus, it is not sufficient to say, “But we collaborated!” We need to explore design issues so that we can begin to train future managers to collaborate well, that is to say, effectively.

Jim Heichelbech: Innovation is always a difficult challenge. Many of us have worked with those managers who have an intuitive feel for the terrain, understanding instinctively the variable and complex processes of collaboration. They understand the underlying structure, but deviate in ways that have a structure of their own. They “work it,” so to speak, but without really being able to articulate what broader goal their collaborative efforts are supposed to achieve. Is it possible that this is the sort of personality that is driven to getting results through collaborative processes? I think Thomson and Perry are right to say that we are better off to the extent that they can explain what they are doing, but is it possible to promote reflection among even the most gut-level decision-makers?

Rosemary O’Leary: At a conference sponsored by the Maxwell School of Syracuse University that Catherine, Lisa and I convened in September, 2006, in Washington, D.C. on collaborative public management, the 40 public administration scholars and practitioners present were asked to develop recommendations concerning what skill set is needed for today’s collaborative public manager. After two and a half days of deliberation and debate they concluded that the most important skills needed for today’s managers are negotiation, bargaining, collaborative problem solving, conflict management, and conflict resolution. Yet many public managers find themselves ill-equipped for management in a shared power world. Some people come to negotiation, bargaining, collaborative problem solving, conflict management and conflict resolution more naturally than others. The good news is that these are all skills that can be learned.

Jim Heichelbech: I’d like to get your thoughts on the emotional side of collaborative management. Several of the cases indicate the importance of trust and interpersonal familiarity among collaborators, but it seems that collaborative management really requires both academics and practitioners to step outside their comfort zones. In terms of planning, there is degree of relinquishing control and, what can be harder, the need to share control. This creates an unknown in the collaborative planning process. And, then, when response is required, there

is an inevitable shift in the success criteria – good enough is no longer good enough, and doing what was expected, planned, agreed upon...everything, must now be questioned and adjusted. Some of us thrive in environments of chaos and vague expectations, but I would imagine that for most there is an element of fear involved in collaborative management. As a practical concern, is collaborative management scary and is that something to consider as we work toward a more comprehensive understanding?

Lisa Blomgren Bingham: It is interesting that you suggest it is scary. It is true that managers have autonomy needs to control their work. What can be worse than responsibility for getting something done but no control over it? And clearly, collaboration will be a problem for the micromanagers and control freaks, but I am not sure we want to encourage them!

As to trust, the negotiation literature suggests there are at least two forms of it - identity-based trust and interaction-based trust. The former you may have going into the collaboration, because of who the other participants are and what you have in common with them. The latter may be an outcome of collaboration, as repeated dealings over time help you build good working relationships. Thus, if trust-building is a desired outcome, collaboration as a process is a good thing in and of itself, apart from any other goals. Think about the diplomacy literature and all the small steps that go into peace-making.

The flip side is what I would call the transparency/accountability paradox in collaborative groups. Collaborative management provides great political cover. Responsibility for outcomes is dispersed among the players. If the meetings are behind closed doors, people can make decisions that they would hesitate to make alone or in public for fear of political fallout. This can be a strength to the extent that the lack of transparency fosters creativity, but it can also be a weakness to the extent it hampers accountability. Thus, instead of being scary, collaboration may be precisely the opposite; it may get you off the hook.

Jim Heichelbech: One of the clear themes throughout the issue is the question of value, beginning with a wonderful insight into the life of Larry Terry. The last question I have concerns the focus on conservatorship, which was a strong focus throughout Terry's work, and the challenge of finding that balance between preservation and innovation. There is a sense in which we innovate successfully only to the extent that we conserve the underlying structure, maintaining solid values and relationships. What is the role of collaborative management in making that connection clearer? You suggest that, through collaborative management, students are to see themselves, essentially, as the backbone of our representative system of governance. But this requires a much deeper understanding of the role they play and the importance of their work. Does this all need to be an explicit part of the skill set for every graduate from a degree program in public administration or public policy, or is it enough that a few acquire this level of depth and vision?

Rosemary O'Leary: Absolutely collaborative problem solving, collaborative governance and collaborative public management need to be an explicit part of the curriculum in every degree program in public administration, public affairs, public management and public policy. At the September, 2006, Maxwell School conference that I mentioned earlier, the 40 public administration scholars and practitioners present were asked to develop recommendations about what collaborative public management and networks mean for public administration education. Once again, they concluded not only that we should be teaching negotiation, bargaining, collaborative problem solving, conflict management, and conflict resolution, but that these are the most important skills that every manager needs to master. That is why the Maxwell School of Syracuse University launched six new graduate courses in collaboration, negotiation, facilitation, and mediation in the Fall of 2006. We are also hiring a new professor of practice with expertise in these areas. Other schools are following suit. Yes, these are essential skills that every public management, public administration, public affairs, and public policy school should be teaching.

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Jim Heichelbech: Thank you so much for your time and your thoughts. This was very informative and interesting. And congratulations on a great special issue for PAR! There is clearly a lot to do and I’m sure we can look forward to great work inspired by your leadership in helping us gain focus in a rather complex area of public administration.

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