

# Challenges of Leadership

## Who is in Charge Here, Anyway?

What does it mean to be a leader of the team? What happens when the team wants to head in one direction and you want to head in another? What do you do when the team members don't seem to be getting along? Being the leader puts you in the unique position of simultaneously leading and following the energy of the team. A good leader will pay equal attention to process (how the team does its work), relationships (conflict resolution, team spirit) and results (what comes out of the work the team does).<sup>1</sup>

CAT leaders can be paid staff people. The obvious benefit of this arrangement is the financial support of an organization for salaries, office supplies and a meeting space. Leadership is not limited to paid people, however. Anybody who cares about the issue, possesses leadership skills and has the time to do so, can organize a CAT. An advantage of not being affiliated with a particular service organization might be greater freedom from funding guidelines or organizational restrictions.

At Transforming Communities Marin ("TC Marin"), a project of Marin Abused Women's Services ("MAWS"), certain responsibilities fell to the CAT leaders because the organization convened the team. Initially, they took responsibility for facilitating CAT meetings and conducting the trainings, but they also invited other CAT members to participate in these tasks with the leaders. As time went on, the CAT members developed as public leaders. Currently, CAT members regularly make public presentations and are taking a more active role in facilitating community meetings.

## Building Strong Leadership

A primary responsibility of the CAT leaders is to build leadership skills among the CAT members. One way to do this is to create opportunities for CAT members to test the waters of leadership by asking them to help record the discussion on butcher paper or to lead a brainstorming session. This way, their leadership skills develop organically and they are more confident and effective when organizing the larger community on the activism campaign.

Many people who join the team will bring tremendous leadership skills with them. It is a good idea to try to discover these talents and to utilize these skills to advance the entire team. For example, if they are comfortable with co-facilitating a meeting or helping to run a mini-training on a topic in their field, we encourage you to create opportunities for this to happen as often as possible.

## Developing Relationships

MAWS and TC Marin promote the principles of respect, equality and safety in the larger community, therefore they want the CAT to reflect these values. This can be challenging, however, because the CAT is usually a microcosm of the community, complete with a diversity of opinions. TC Marin has found that as team members get to know each other personally, they are a lot more open to exploring the differences between them. In order to build these authentic relationships, we need to break through our assumptions about each other.

Consider creating space in your meetings for team members to get to know each other. One idea is to schedule time at the beginning of meetings for group members to check in with each other informally before jumping into the meeting agenda. You may decide to have members take turns bringing food to the meeting, which contributes warmth to the environment. Also consider including team-building exercises as a part of each meeting to promote trust.

## Decision-Making

When TC Marin first started their CAT, they tried to involve the team members in every element of decision-making. The leaders met with team members weekly to plan meeting agendas and to determine the training needs of the team. Ultimately, it proved more effective for them to ask for input into the following week's agenda at the end of each meeting, and then finalize the agenda before the team reconvened. The CAT members agreed that this left their time free for the more interesting community activities.

In the beginning, whenever TC Marin's CAT had to make a decision about the activities of the campaign, the leaders wanted to have everyone in the group agree on the decision. Sometimes this model worked great. Other times, there would be long discussions, debating the issue from every angle and decision was still not reached. It became clear that every member of the team did not need to be involved in every decision. About a year and a half after the CAT was formed, the staff leaders attended a training on leadership where they were introduced to a new decision-making model which was adopted for the CAT.

In the new decision-making model, the leader presents the boundaries of the decision-making process to the group and evaluates how much group input is required for each decision. For example, if the decision is small (whether to buy more butcher paper for sign-making), the leader can "decide and announce." Some decisions may require group input but must be made immediately. In this case, the leader could seek out input from a few team members and then make the decision. For more important decisions where consensus is appropriate, the leader can inform the group that they should try to reach a consensus decision within a certain period. If the group cannot reach consensus, the leader weighs all input from the discussion and decides. This is called the "fall-back" option. This system eliminates endless discussions that don't result in a clear decision, gives the leader the authority to move the work of the team along, and allows group members to focus most of their time on important issues.<sup>2</sup>

## Managing Group Conflict

Most people who join a CAT come to the group with a strong desire to create change in the community. What they may not be prepared for, however, are the challenges of being part of a cohesive work team. Anyone who has ever been part of a group can testify to the fact that there will inevitably be some conflict. The positive side to all this is that the group gets a chance to work on their conflict resolution skills!

The group will undoubtedly look to its leaders to calm the waters when things get rough. Generally, leaders are facilitators (*facil = to make easy*) whose job is to help the group deal with the problem at hand. One way of dealing with conflict is to try to name the problem in the moment. It might be as easy as noting that people in the group seem uneasy, tense or upset and asking the group if this is true. By asking the simple question, "What is going on here?" you can create a space where the group can talk about the issue.

Often team members will want the staff to handle a situation rather than dealing with it themselves. TC Marin's CAT leaders were able to turn such a situation into a positive experience for the team:

*"When we first started the team, a member approached the staff leaders to say that she was having a hard time participating in the group because she felt another member was aggressive, critical and domineering in group discussions. We quickly realized that we hadn't discussed any group agreements with the team that would have made it easier for this member to deal with the other member in the group setting. We encouraged her to raise the issue of group agreements at our next meeting. The team created the agreements together, one of which was, "Don't interrupt." From then on, the team members had a tool to use for holding each other accountable when they felt someone's behavior violated the group agreements."*

There are some situations in which team leaders may have to take responsibility for talking individually with team members about specific behaviors or group dynamics. This technique may be used, for example, to share feedback gently with someone who consistently breaks group agreements or with people who are uncomfortable expressing their views within the large group. Holding individual "consultations" is most effective when done right after meetings or over the telephone shortly afterwards. TC Marin used this technique with a team member who often veered from the agenda topic or interrupted people when she got excited about an issue. When team leaders mentioned the problems to her, she asked the group to help her by telling her when she did these things. Some schools of thought say the leader should always deal with group dynamics with the entire group but other CATs have found that you should, "Do whatever works!"