

Shared Leadership in Practice

*Visual framework outlining shared leadership principles,
case studies, and recommendations from the
Urban Waters Learning Network*





About the Urban Waters Learning Network (UWLN)

The Urban Waters Learning Network (UWLN) is a national network of people across the country working to restore and improve urban waterways. Since our founding in 2010 through a collaboration between Groundwork USA and River Network, we've built a space where water leaders across the country can come together to learn from one another, support each other's work, and pursue lasting change.

Shared Leadership at UWLN

The success of our programming is contingent on collaboration and collective action, and from the outset, we recognized that this vision calls for a leadership model that embodies this commitment to honoring individual contributions and collaborating across a range of perspectives and experiences. Shared leadership has become the foundation of how we make decisions, support each other, and stay accountable to our mission and to the communities we serve.

Instead of relying on one organization or individual setting direction, our decisions are made together. At the organizational level, Groundwork USA and River Network co-lead UWLN, sharing roles in program design, facilitation, funding, and communications. At the individual level, every team member is trusted to shape the work, take initiative, and make decisions regardless of their title. In some cases, this also requires deferring to another's experience and expertise. No one person or organization holds the vision alone – we carry it together.

Forming a shared leadership system that works for us took time. We spent years learning, adjusting, and building trust to have the foundation necessary for a strong partnership. Through that process, we developed seven pillars of shared leadership, which we return to when we feel stuck in our work. These seven pillars help us stay aligned in our mission, and shape the reasoning, process, and product of the work we do every single day.

Shared Purpose

Establishing a clear and mission-driven foundation for your partnership provides teams with a shared reference point for guiding decisions. Teams can use this shared vision to create a collective identity, align around long-term goals, scope roles, prioritize efforts, and navigate through conflict.

Clear Communication

Frequent and consistent internal communications systems keep everyone on the same page and help reduce conflicts. Establish regular check-in meetings or project management tools to provide updates on progress, work through challenges, and celebrate successes.

Trust

Interpersonal relationships based in trust are key for efficient and effective projects. Prioritize relationship building through calls and in-person meetings when possible. Trust at both the organizational and personal levels increases buy-in, reduces conflict, and makes consensus-building easier.

Collective Decision Making

Clear processes are key for making decisions. It's important to have transparent planning processes, clearly defined workflows and team member roles, systems to address conflict openly and early, and consistently applied decision-making practices. This works when teams are proactive and adaptable to reduce urgency.

Authenticity and Individual Accountability

Shared leadership is at its strongest when diverse perspectives and lived experiences inform a project, so it's essential that everyone brings their whole self to the partnership. Establish norms that encourage team members to be present, speak up, and take ownership of their commitments, growth, and contributions.

Collaborative Financial Systems

While all partners may not play the same role in managing the finances, the process for doing so should be transparent. All partner organizations should have a relationship with the funders and the budget should be shared, co-developed, and accessible to all.

Collaborative Knowledge Systems

All team members need the same level of access to key information. Develop shared systems for storing strategic documents, organizational knowledge, and other important information. Facilitate frequent team meetings, build shared agendas, and disseminate data collaboratively. Engage actively and bring external learnings back to the team.





Shared Purpose

Establishing a clear and mission-driven foundation for your partnership provides teams with a shared reference point for guiding decisions. Teams can use this shared vision to create a collective identity, align around long-term goals, scope roles, prioritize efforts, and navigate through conflict.

- **Putting the mission first:** The team shares a mission with the program and prioritizes that mission over other influential factors.
- **Building shared commitment:** Everyone understands their role and the value of the partnership, and how their success contributes to the team's and program's success.
- **Listen actively to the people you serve:** Integrate the knowledge and expertise of those you serve to shape your strategic visioning and stay accountable to their priorities. Periodically adjust the shared purpose and work plan based on new information and priorities.

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- **Individual and organizational level:** Individual commitment doesn't work without organizational backing, even if the organization follows a hierarchical leadership model. Organizational leadership needs to be flexible and open to input from a shared leadership program. In return, team members must be mindful of existing organizational structures and obligations to relationships with funders.
- **Power sharing:** Sharing power requires taking the time necessary to collaborate and discuss projects and a commitment to final decisions not belonging to one person alone. Adhering to the other Pillars helps to keep the team on track without getting mired in delays or disagreements.
- **Interpersonal relationships and successes:** Working on teams should be fun! People should take the time necessary to get to know each other, and celebrate individual and collective successes. When possible, plan in-person strategy sessions, incorporate team building activities, and attend events such as conferences together.

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- **Individual Strengths:** Team members recognize and rely on each other's expertise.
- **High performance:** Team members are all leaders. They must show up, engage, and maintain a high level of accountability and follow-through.
- **Flexibility:** Even though each person brings unique skills and qualifications to the team, they must be willing to shift roles as circumstances change that impact the program (funding, staff needs, priorities, political landscape).
- **Know when to step up and step back:** Team members practice a great deal of mindfulness and reflective ability. Listening, being able and willing to create space or step back, and being willing to change your mind in response to new information are all key leadership skills. It's also important to assert your perspective and voice at strategic moments.

Collaborative Knowledge Systems

All team members need the same level of access to key information. Develop shared systems for storing strategic documents, organizational knowledge, and other important information. Facilitate frequent team meetings, build shared agendas, and be sure to manage and disseminate data collaboratively. Engage actively in learning, pursue professional development opportunities, and bring information back to the team.

- **Training and professional discourse:** Team members actively pursue opportunities to learn, research best practices, and engage in professional development opportunities, then bringing that knowledge back to the team to support the shared mission.
- **Capturing impacts and sharing results:** Team members have clear roles dedicated to tracking progress, documenting impacts of the work, communication and dissemination of results, evaluation, collecting feedback and contributions from members or practitioners.
- **Using shared systems:** Everyone on the team should be able to access strategic planning documents, shared notes, administrative tracking documents, metrics and impacts, and program-related content.

Collaborative Financial Systems

While all partners may not play the same role in managing the finances, the process for doing so should be transparent. All partner organizations should have a relationship with the funders and the budget should be shared, co-developed, and accessible to all.

- **Funding allocation:** Organizations share funding apportioned to level of staff dedication and time on the project – distributed equitably, which may or may not be divided equally. Where possible, both organizations have a relationship with the funder, but each organization may share in-kind resources and funding to support the program.
- **Budgets are co-developed:** The team works together to draft the budget, propose and discuss expenditures, and take the draft through the necessary approval process at each organization to ensure program alignment with organizational missions.
- **Access and tracking:** Everyone on the team has access to the latest budget and any scope of work, work plan, or other administrative documents. At least one staff person should be the designated lead on tracking spending and reporting the state of the budget to the team.

Collective Decision-Making

Clear processes are key for making decisions. It's important to have transparent planning processes, clearly defined workflows and team member roles, systems to address conflict openly and early, and consistently applied decision-making practices. This works when teams are proactive and adaptable to reduce urgency.

- **Clearly defined roles:** Teams can use proven project planning structures like MOCHA, REDI, DAI, etc. to make sure everyone understands and agrees what they are supposed to do. Teams should decide how to assign credit, benchmark milestones, and build in evaluative processes within the work. We also recommend leaning on each others' expertise to guide the decision making process.
- **Transparent work planning and tracking:** Teams collectively create meeting agendas and take notes collectively (or assign someone) in a document that is accessible to everyone. They build space and time to review and edit projects, planning ahead. The team decides (and revisits) how each organization integrates or builds on the shared work to avoid stepping on toes.

Clear Communication

Frequent and consistent internal communications systems keep everyone on the same page and help reduce conflicts. Establish regular check-in meetings or project management tools to provide updates on progress, work through challenges, and celebrate successes.

- **Transparent, dedicated, and consistent communication:** Team members communicate frequently, scheduling regular check-ins and having one-on-one calls as needed. Space is built for reflection and critical feedback on project progress. Everyone's contributions are acknowledged in the work. Facilitate frequent team meetings, build shared agendas, and be sure to manage and disseminate data collaboratively.
- **Working within and alongside hierarchical structures:** Many organizations, funders, and institutions are more accustomed to traditional hierarchical structures, which may unintentionally create tension with shared leadership approaches. Team members will need to advocate for the shared leadership arrangement, preserve transparent communication and other necessary systems, assess threats to the work and discuss risk, and listen to those served and be responsive.
- **Working through challenges:** To prevent conflict, team members should assume positive intent and discuss differing perspectives openly. The team can fall back on clearly defined roles, mutual respect and accountability, and transparent communication systems to value different perspectives.



3 Lessons from Our Shared Leadership Journey

While we have no doubts that shared leadership was the right model for this program, it has not always been a smooth, easy road. If you're considering how you may want to rethink your current structure or wondering why you can't find your groove in your current model, here are our three biggest pieces of advice.

Lesson 1: Utilize the built-in flexibility and adaptability to the fullest

One of the clearest strengths of shared leadership is how it creates built-in flexibility. Because every member of our team has the same access to shared tools, documents, and decision-making systems, we're able to support one another easily when someone has to step away. Whether it's caused by parental leave, health emergencies, severe weather events, or unexpected funding shifts, we have a successful system for stepping in when someone steps out. This support is a natural byproduct when individuals have a sense of personal investment in the work. When everyone understands the big picture and has what they need to lead, it becomes easier to adapt.

Lesson 2: Listen first, then lead

Our shared purpose is shaped by the needs and perspectives of the people we support. In our eyes, they have a seat at the decision-making table too. Our shared purpose starts, and is periodically adjusted, by hearing what our network members are up to, what they need, and where they feel stuck. By making space to discuss their needs, reflections, and feedback they have for us, we've been able to stay rooted in the on-the-ground needs of the people we serve. We carry these insights into our internal strategy, discussing priorities amongst ourselves and conversations with funders. This practice has helped us stay true to our mission and avoid – or at least limit – mission drift brought on by other external pressures.

Lesson 3: Recognize when you're working in systems that aren't designed for this model

Shared leadership isn't always easy, especially when it comes to money and formal authority. Although we work within a shared leadership system, we exist in a world of hierarchical structures and expectations, so it's important to understand how to share financial decision-making in a system that isn't really built for it.

We've felt this most clearly in how we manage grant funding, especially federal grants that require a single "prime awardee" to make financial decisions on behalf of all partners. This structure doesn't reflect how we actually work together, so we've had to develop ways to co-create budgets that align with our organizational priorities, clarify shared and separate costs, and understand thoroughly how to navigate funding requirements.

It takes a lot of trust and open communication to navigate this dynamic and ensure that all partners feel confident, but we are stronger for it. Over the past decade, we've successfully managed to switch the project leads twice, each time because it was the most sustainable move for the program. That willingness to center UWLN needs over "prime awardee" status is what trusting shared leadership looks like in practice.

Looking Forward

Leadership looks different in every organization, project, and community. But one thing we've found to be true time and time again is that when leadership is shared by the whole team, people thrive – and so does the work!

We hope that our shared reflections and framework have been a helpful launching point for you to consider shared leadership in your work. If you want to dive deeper into our work and better understand how each pillar is put into practice, visit our website at urbanwaterslearningnetwork.org.

