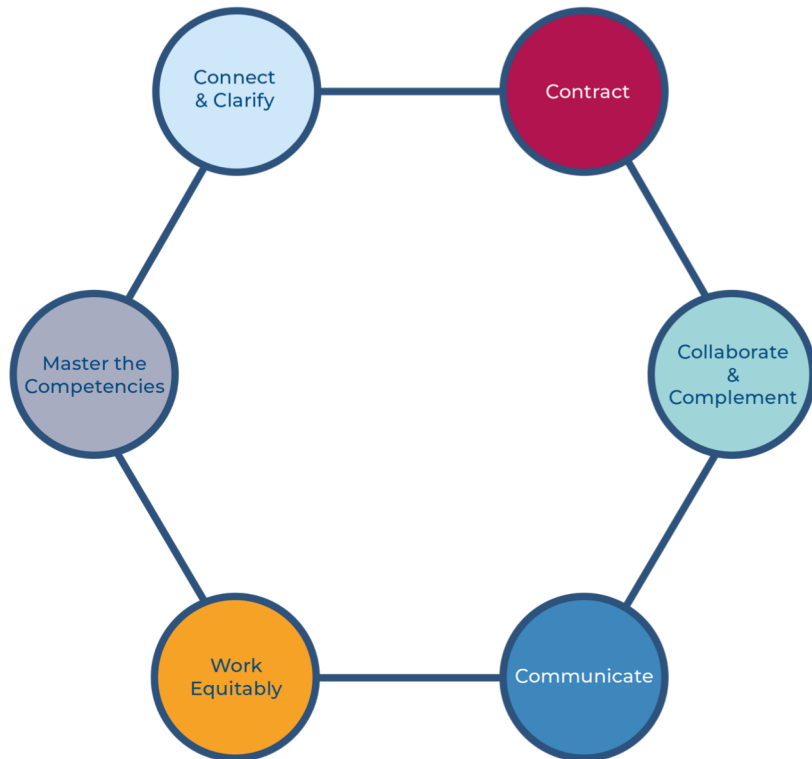


Principles for co-leadership: a quick guide for new co-leaders



From my interviews with experienced co-leaders and reviewing the wider research into co-leadership, I've identified 6 core principles which underpin successful co-leadership.

The following guide offers an overview of these principles and is designed to provide a helpful checklist for those setting up new co-leadership arrangements, or reflecting

on an existing working arrangement.

You can find out more about co-leadership including case study and free resources at my website I've created: www.coleadership.info

I also offer tailored coaching-based support packages and Action Learning sets for co-leaders – get in touch to find out more.



RESOURCE

Claire Antrobus

| claireantrobus.com

| claire@claireantrobus.com

Contract

Agree how you want to work together. Do this at the outset, and review this regularly, adjusting your responsibilities and ways of working as the roles evolve. Stay flexible so you can support one another, and respond to organisational need. It's a good idea to discuss how long you both commit to the role and your potential exit strategy at the outset.

Agree how you will disagree. Many co-leaders don't disagree publicly, preferring to maintain a united front to avoid confusion or risk undermining one another. Others suggest it can be helpful to voice different opinions at times, if you want to encourage others to share their different perspectives and challenge one another constructively.

It can be helpful to differentiate between how you handle subject and status conflict.

Subject conflict is about different ideas and is generally helpful – unlike status conflict which is about winning by being 'right' or having more power. Perfect the art of agreeing to disagree. Know when a difference of perspectives is important to you or helpful and so deserves attention and when to let things drop.

Collaborate

Define where you both want to be involved and make decisions jointly – and where you can lead autonomously. Collaboration is at the heart of co-leadership and it's natural to want to work together as much as possible to learn from and support one another. Realistically though, you'll need to prioritise carefully where two people add value, and that's usually in complex situations.

Complement

Work with a partner who brings different experience, expertise and perspectives to your own, and agree where you want to work together and separately. Work separately where you can, to preserve time together for collaboration, planning together and review. Having multiple perspectives on more routine tasks is often counter-productive and inefficient, causing confusion and even friction. Play to your individual strengths, but be mindful to share workload fairly.

Communicate

Be practical, honest and efficient in how you communicate. You'll need to keep one another informed so find smart ways to convey factual information to one another and preserve your time together for more discursive conversations. Honesty and high levels of trust are essential for working at pace and at your best.



RESOURCE

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| claireantrobus.com

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Work equitably

Keep it equal: watch out for others treating you or your partner less favourably, or situations where one of you has privilege. This includes making sure co-leaders receive equal recognition and development opportunities. Keep an eye on your work-loads which should be equitable.

Responsibilities may need to be re-allocated between co-leaders, or other colleagues, temporarily or permanently to ensure both co-leaders are able to equally contribute to your shared role.

Agree your boundaries: these will be personal to you as individuals but other co-leaders suggest they are often available to one another (but not other colleagues) outside of working hours, on the agreement that the other will respond if they can.

Competency

Master collaborating: develop brilliant listening skills, and the ability to embrace difference, navigate complexity and power imbalances, build trust and confidence. Make sure you know yourself well – ask for regular feedback, make it easy for others to speak honestly with you by showing you value their feedback and act on it where possible. Work with coach individually. Connect with other co-leaders to compare ways of working and share learning.

Connect and clarify

Work closely with the chair and wider staff. The chair should be available to speak/ meet with you both jointly every 1-2 weeks. Agree clear and joint performance targets with your board, and meet at least twice a year to discuss progress. External support from a coach can be useful in devising and reviewing your working arrangements.

A new co-leadership arrangement may be confusing to external and internal stakeholders who are used to having a full-time solo leader. Make sure everyone understands which co-leader is responsible for each area, and where both have authority to act. Be clear with others who does what, and who can decide what. Watch out for others expecting you to double-up when not needed, either by both being involved or by asking second opinions.

Senior colleagues, and the board, can feel excluded when co-leaders work well together and discuss and agree matters between themselves which previously might have involved a wider circle. Beware of excluding wider stakeholders when working closely with a co-leader - be mindful about who else needs to be informed or consulted, or who else might add value to conversations.



RESOURCE

Claire Antrobus

| claireantrobus.com

| claire@claireantrobus.com