
Recognizing Collaborative Coordination as a Strategic Leadership Role

Collaborative success depends on matching coordination responsibilities, authority, and support to what each collaborative needs—from administrative and logistical functions to strategic leadership.

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ABOUT THE SERIES

Collaborative work does not happen on its own. Rather, the enabling conditions created by the often-overlooked but central roles of skillful coordination and collaborative leadership are essential. This article is part of the “Making the Invisible Visible: The Strategic Role, Leadership, and Practice of Collaborative Coordination” series, which explores the leadership functions required to build, sustain, and grow effective collaboratives.

From Core Responsibilities to Strategic Leadership

Effective land- and seascape collaborative^[1] coordination—including skillful partnership building, maintenance, and management—is critically important for delivering meaningful outcomes. Although these kinds of collaboratives have become an increasingly common approach to stewardship, the coordination role is yet to be fully understood. Rather, it is often inconsistently defined, undervalued, and not designed to strategically match the collaborative’s complexity.

In the first article in this series, we began to address these challenges by defining four responsibilities essential to this complex and demanding work: weaving a network, holding the big picture, activating collective action, and overseeing operations and administration. Together, these responsibilities reveal that coordination is far more than administrative and logistical support. It is a connective leadership function that allows collaboratives to turn relationships, vision, and shared commitment into concrete outcomes.

This article further explores collaborative coordination as a strategic, relational, and adaptive leadership function rather than simply an administrative and logistical support role. Our aim is to call attention to how the role is perceived, designed, and supported so that it can operate as the essential part of collaborative conservation and stewardship it truly is.

¹ In this article, “land- and seascape collaboratives” refer to collaborative conservation and stewardship approaches that bring together public agencies, Tribes, communities, nonprofits, private landowners, funders, and other partners to address cross-boundary social, economic, and ecological challenges.

A shift in how collaborative coordination is seen is not simply a matter of semantics or title. Table 1 highlights some of the differences between a role that focuses on administration and one that emphasizes strategic leadership functions. It is important to note that not every dedicated coordination role needs to focus solely on higher-order strategic leadership; administrative and logistical work remains essential. A position that blends these functions may even be appropriate, depending on the collaborative's needs. However, a predominantly administrative focus works only when relational, strategic, and adaptive responsibilities have been explicitly assigned to other clearly identified parties with sufficient capacity.

Table 1. Shifting perspectives: Collaborative coordination viewed through administrative versus strategic, collaborative leadership lenses

Aspects of the coordination role(s)	Coordination as an administrative position	Coordination as a strategic leadership position
Scope of role	Provides administrative and logistical support, maintains records, organizes tasks, and keeps routine processes moving.	Maintains focus on shared purpose and the larger context; connects relationships, strategy, governance, and implementation; and helps advance collective progress across partners.
Relationship to decision-making	Documents and executes decisions made by others and supports established decision-making processes.	Has clearly defined authority and helps shape agendas, priorities, collaborative processes, and adaptive decision-making.
Complexity of work	Works primarily within predictable, established processes and task-based responsibilities.	Navigates complex and changing conditions using systems thinking, diplomacy, patience, and sound judgment.
Relationship management	Coordinates communications, meetings, and partner participation.	Helps shape culture, build trust, steward partnerships, facilitate open and regular communication, bridge perspectives, and manage tensions.
Network weaving & collective action	Maintains and distributes partner information and supports participation in collaborative activities.	Builds and strengthens connections among partners, engages new voices and resources, identifies opportunities for mutual benefit, and helps mobilize partners around shared priorities and action.

Aspects of the coordination role(s)	Coordination as an administrative position	Coordination as a strategic leadership position
Governance & process stewardship	Documents decisions and supports established governance procedures and requirements.	Supports clarity of roles, authority, accountability, and decision-making; surfaces governance or process concerns; and helps maintain the integrity of collaborative processes.
Self-direction & judgment	Works from assigned tasks and follows established processes and direction.	Exercises independent judgment; anticipates needs and emerging issues; and designs processes, frameworks, and structures that help the collaborative move forward.
Accountability, learning & outcomes	Tracks tasks, deliverables, deadlines, and required reporting.	Helps partners track commitments and outcomes, reflect and learn, assess collaborative health and performance, adapt approaches, and communicate how collective efforts contribute to shared goals.

What It Means to Elevate the Collaborative Coordinator Role

Elevating coordination means first, deliberately defining the full mix of administrative, logistical, relational, operational, and strategic leadership functions that the collaborative needs. Secondly, deciding how those functions will be distributed and aligning expectations, authority, resources, compensation, and support accordingly. It also asks partners to recognize collaborative coordination as a form of leadership in its own right, and to ensure that the authority entrusted to coordinators matches the functions they are expected to perform.

What does this recognition look like in practice? The following guidance can help a collaborative design and support effective coordination.

BE INTENTIONAL IN DEFINING THE ROLE

Begin by moving beyond narrow assumptions about what the role entails. As discussed in the first article in this series, collaborative coordination includes weaving networks, holding the big picture, activating collective action, and overseeing operations and administration. These responsibilities require a broad range of leadership skills that extend well beyond logistics and administrative support.

Job descriptions, scopes of work, funding proposals, and governance documents should identify collaborative leadership and coordination responsibilities alongside traditional leadership and administrative roles, including:

- relationship stewardship and partner engagement

- facilitation and process design
- governance support and decision-making support
- strategic planning and situational assessment
- communications and narrative development
- learning, adaptation, and accountability

Defining these responsibilities helps those in coordination roles maintain alignment, build trust, support decision-making, and create conditions for collective action across complex partnerships. It also reduces the likelihood that they will be compensated and evaluated only on administrative outputs while being expected to also perform complex leadership functions.

RECOGNIZE COORDINATION AS STRATEGIC COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP

Collaborative leadership is different from conventional hierarchical leadership, which often relies on formal authority, supervisory relationships, and the ability to direct action. Collaboratives usually operate through voluntary participation, distributed expertise, shared ownership, and relationship-based influence. Their leaders cannot simply command alignment; they must cultivate it. They help people with different mandates, histories, priorities, and forms of power make sense of complexity and move together without erasing differences.

Coordination therefore requires facilitation and negotiation rather than command, and adaptive management rather than rote execution. Individuals in this role often work at the intersection of strategy, relationships, governance, operations, communications, learning, and implementation. Seeing this work as collaborative leadership clarifies why treating it solely as administrative support creates risk for both the people doing the work (e.g., burnout, sense of being unappreciated) and the partnership (e.g., ongoing turnover of leadership, loss of institutional knowledge, undermining of internal trust).

Those in coordination roles often serve as a collaborative's connective tissue. They may be among the few people with a thorough understanding of how its relationships, governance, and priorities interact. Their perspective can be essential to understanding what the collaborative is capable of doing, where further discussion is needed to move through tension points, and what conditions are needed for partners to move forward together. Recognizing this means including the coordinator's perspective when the collaborative is shaping its direction, making sense of changing conditions, stewarding relationships, allocating resources, and evolving.

As previously noted, this work may be carried by one person or distributed among multiple staff, partners, or volunteers. What matters is not the title or staffing structure, but whether the full function is covered effectively, and whether each person has the authority, support, and recognition they need to be successful.

MAKE INVISIBLE WORK VISIBLE

The most visible outputs of coordination are also the easiest to recognize: meetings are held, agendas are prepared, notes are captured, reports are submitted, work groups convene, and partners remain informed and connected. These activities are important, but they represent only one layer of the work. Beneath them lies a much larger body of often-unseen effort. Coordinators invest substantial time in

building relationships, designing and facilitating collaborative processes, engaging partners, resolving conflicts, translating across organizational cultures, connecting opportunities and resources, listening for emerging challenges, and helping diverse interests align around shared priorities. Much of this work happens between meetings and outside formal decision-making processes, yet it is often what enables collaboratives to function effectively.

"Coordination as strategic leadership is about creating space for reflection; celebrating the wins, learning from the losses, and giving voice to the extreme challenges we face. A space to remind ourselves that nothing truly important can be accomplished in a lifetime, but our strides are much greater and far more joyful when doing the work together."

- Ashley Traut, Greater Baltimore Wilderness Coalition

The coordinator's influence can also be seen in the group's more tangible outcomes, but the connection is not always clear. Collaborative projects move from concept to restored acres and improved habitat, new partners become engaged in project implementation, and funding opportunities are identified and secured. Coordination helps create the conditions for successful outcomes that no single organization could have achieved alone.

Ironically, this can result in a common paradox: the better the coordination, the more invisible it can be. Because collaborative leadership is often quiet and relational, people may see a well-run meeting or a well-oiled partnership without also seeing the trust-building, preparation, judgment, and alignment behind it. As trust deepens, partnerships strengthen, projects advance, and resources flow, success can begin to look effortless, even inevitable, while the leadership that helped make those outcomes possible fades into the background.

The stewardship and conservation field can begin to correct this pattern by naming collaborative leadership, valuing it, and making its contributions visible.

Collaborative governing bodies have an important role in making the contributions of coordination clear, tangible, and sustained. What that looks like may vary, but the goal should be to celebrate the leadership of coordinators and illuminate the inner workings of collaboration. It should also be to strengthen the group's understanding of how those accomplishments are truly achieved and how coordination contributes to the potential for broader systems change.

INVEST IN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Effective coordination requires a diverse skill set that spans multiple disciplines. This may include facilitation, systems thinking, conflict transformation, collaborative governance, adaptive leadership, community engagement, project management, assessment, communications, fundraising, partnership development, and various kinds of technical expertise.

Collaboratives increase their chances of achieving long-term success when they invest in peer learning, mentorship, training, reflective practice, and professional development for individuals serving in coordination roles. This investment is not a bonus. It is part of building the collaborative infrastructure needed for sustained collective action.

In conjunction with training and skill building opportunities, collaboratives should also budget time for coordinators to participate in professional networks that provide opportunities to build community and share knowledge with other people in the field. Examples include Sierra to California All Lands

Enhancement (SCALE), the California Landscape Stewardship Network, the Regional Conservation Partnership Network, the Western Collaborative Conservation Network, the Stewardship Network, the Network for Landscape Conservation, and more.

ALIGN COMPENSATION, AUTHORITY AND EXPECTATIONS

Perhaps most importantly, collaboratives should ensure that a coordination role's authority, compensation, and organizational support are aligned with the responsibilities assigned to it. If the person in this role is expected to provide strategic leadership, manage complex partner dynamics, guide collaborative processes, support fundraising, oversee implementation, and represent the collaborative externally, then compensation, title, supervision, and decision-making authority should reflect those expectations.

Alignment among these elements creates more sustainable and effective conditions for both those serving in coordination roles and the collaboratives they support. It also helps avoid the common pattern of assigning expansive leadership responsibilities to a role that is compensated, resourced, supervised, or understood primarily as administrative support, which can contribute to staff burnout and turnover.

The Risks of Undervaluing Coordination

When a collaborative defaults to an administrative understanding of coordination even though it needs strategic, relational, and/or leadership functions, those in the role may face chronic ambiguity; unrealistic workloads; and accountability without adequate authority, resources, compensation, or support. Their work may also go unnoticed or be treated with insufficient respect, contributing to dissatisfaction and turnover. The collaborative as a whole may suffer from fragmented communication, weak partner engagement, inconsistent follow-through, loss of institutional and relational knowledge, and reduced capacity to respond to changing conditions, emerging challenges, and new opportunities.

These risks can become self-reinforcing. Because effective and strategic coordination often makes collaboration appear easier and more seamless, its value may become most visible only when that capacity is diminished or lost. Collaboratives should therefore honestly assess who is doing this work, including when it is invisible or unofficial, and whether their leadership structure, resources, and expectations adequately recognize and support it.

What's in a Title?

Titles communicate a position's level of authority, responsibility, leadership, and expertise. Yet changing a title alone does not elevate a role. The title should match the works' actual scope, decision-making responsibility, accountability, and organizational standing.

"We often hear from coordinators providing strategic leadership that their "coordinator" title does not convey the authority, standing, or complexity of their role. When the title and the work are misaligned, such individuals must spend valuable energy overcoming perceptions rather than exercising the collaborative leadership the group needs. In short, titles should reinforce, rather than diminish the ability to lead – and make visible, rather than obscure, the leadership being provided."

- Jon Peterson, Network for Landscape Conservation

A single person carrying a broad coordination role may appropriately hold a title such as Collaborative Coordinator, Manager, or Director. In other collaboratives, the function may be distributed among several people, including topic-based coordinators, staff, partners, or volunteers. Table 2 illustrates titles such as Network Weaver, Network Steward, or Collaborative Strategist may be useful to emphasize particular responsibilities or when they are distributed among different people. The goal is clarity: A title should help people understand the work, authority, and accountability attached to each role.

Table 2. Possible Titles and When They May Fit

Title	When it may be a good fit
Collaborative Coordinator	Where the role organizes and supports collaborative processes; the job description should clarify any strategic responsibilities.
Collaborative Manager	Where the role includes responsibility for implementation, budgeting, work planning, and oversight of collaborative activities.
Collaborative Director	When the role carries substantial strategic oversight, operational authority, external representation, and potentially staff supervision.
Network Weaver or Network Steward	Where network-building and relationship stewardship are distinct or distributed functions within a broader coordination team.
Collaborative Strategist	When sensemaking, strategic alignment, planning, and adaptive management are distinct functions.

A useful title test: Would someone unfamiliar with the collaborative understand the level of leadership, authority, and responsibility this role actually carries?

Conclusion: Continually Examine the Role You Have Designed

As the number of land- and seascape collaboratives continues to grow, greater attention to the often-invisible work that makes collective action possible will be required. Coordination is a strategic leadership function, even when its responsibilities are distributed across several roles. The key is to avoid treating administrative support as the automatic default when the collaborative also needs to navigate complexity, sustain relationships, adapt to change, and achieve long-term impact.

Because effective coordination is essential to enabling collaboratives to realize their full potential, we recommend that they begin by more intentionally examining how they are designing and distributing

the coordination role. For example:

- What coordination functions do we need now?
- Who is responsible for each of the four core responsibilities (weaving a network, holding the big picture, activating collective action, and overseeing operations and administration)?
- Does the role's description reflect the work?
- Do the authority, compensation, supervision, resources, and title match what each person is expected to carry?
- Are partners actively demonstrating respect for the people who do this work?

The answers to these questions can identify necessary changes in governance, staffing, budgeting, evaluation, and partner behavior.

Coordination is not a single, uniform position for all collaboratives. It is more accurately thought of as a set of essential functions and a strategic leadership capacity that must be intentionally assigned, supported, evaluated, and sustained. For example, as a collaborative's needs and context change, its leadership should regularly assess how the coordination function is distributed and whether those roles remain aligned with the group's core functions and current needs. These assessments should also include overall capacity, specifically if the current team structure is sufficiently supporting the collaborative at its current size and activity level. If someone is carrying leadership responsibilities without adequate recognition, authority, support, or compensation, that should be addressed before it undermines the person or the partnership.

LOOKING AHEAD IN THE SERIES

The next article turns inward, examining the inner capacities that help coordinators sustain the relational demands of collaborative leadership in complex contexts. It explores the roles of self-awareness, relational awareness, emotional regulation, presence, humility, curiosity, comfort with uncertainty, and discernment, and considers how these capacities can be learned, practiced, and strengthened over time. Rather than treating these capacities as personality traits or expecting coordinators to develop them on their own, the next article asks what those in coordination roles, collaboratives, and host organizations can do to cultivate and support them as core infrastructure for effective collaboration.

About the Authors

As practitioners with a combined 60-plus years in the collaborative field, we ground these articles in our experience coordinating collaboratives from local to international scales, managing staff in coordination roles, convening peer learning opportunities for collaborative leaders, and conducting applied research that investigates critical collaborative capacity needs. For more detailed information about the authors and the series, please see the “Making The Invisible Visible: The Strategic Role, Leadership & Practice of Collaborative Coordination” [series website](#).

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to send a special thanks out to those who generously shared their time to review an earlier draft of this article. Your insights and experience were invaluable. They are:

- Bella Bledsoe, Director of Collaborative Engagement, Sierra Institute for Community and Environment
- Stefanie Covino, Executive Director, Blackstone Watershed Collaborative
- Challie Facemire, Program Director, Central Arizona Conservation Alliance
- Maiya Greenwood, Tahoe-Central Sierra Initiative Coordinator, California Tahoe Conservancy
- Tatjana Kudla, Joshua Tree Conservation Coalition Coordinator, Mojave Desert Land Trust
- Ashley Traut, Senior Advisor, Greater Baltimore Wilderness Coalition