Chapter 13

Leading Local Cocreation of SDG Solutions

Abstract

This chapter argues that despite the horizontal and self-organizing character of cocreation processes, leadership is essential for initiating and facilitating collaboration and securing the production of effective SDG solutions. Leadership is defined as a two-way street between leaders who guide their followers and enable them to reach their goals and followers who provide valuable input to leaders in a bottom-up process. Five crucial leadership functions are identified and the role of power in leadership is discussed. The chapter also considers the particular strategies for leading cocreation networks and partnerships and the skills and competencies necessary for pursuing these strategies. Finally, the chapter describes the importance of building leadership capacity through the recruitment of leadership teams.

Keywords: Leadership; leaders; leadership functions; power; leadership competences; interactive leadership

The Importance of Leadership

The cocreation of local SDG solutions is all about collaboration, which is "horizontal" in the sense that none of the involved actors can dictate what to do and how to do it. The actors' sense of interdependence and necessity is what commits them to work together and honor joint decisions. The absence of formal hierarchy, however, does not imply that there is no need for leadership in cocreation. Leadership refers to an effort to assist a given group in formulating and pursuing a collective goal. In the case of cocreation, what leaders do is to produce narratives that surface and clarify interdependencies, create a sense of shared destiny, emphasize the advantage of collaboration, build trust and mediate

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conflicts, and highlight and celebrate achievements to encourage further collaboration. This kind of cocreation leadership calls for rhetorical and entrepreneurial skills rather than hierarchical authority based on command and control. Leadership enhances the likelihood that a group of actors will join forces and create something together. Sometimes attempts to cocreate fail because the forces that divide a group of actors are stronger than the ones that keep them together. At other times, the lack of leadership explains why collaboration fails to materialize or to produce expected results.

In previous chapters, we have explored what changemakers can do to get actors to cocreate solutions to local problems and promote the SDGs. In this chapter, we frame this activity as a specific form of leadership. We explain what leadership means in the context of cocreation and clarify how it is exercised and why it is important. We also discuss how it is possible to lead otherwise self-governing networks and partnerships, how to build the necessary leadership capacity to do so, and who might be able to exercise cocreation leadership. We conclude with a set of recommendations for changemakers who aim to engage networks or partnership in the promotion of the SDGs.

What Is Leadership?

Leadership refers to a relationship between leaders and their followers. Leaders are those who are able to muster support for a collective project from a group of actors, and followers are those who look to a leader for guidance (Uhl-Bien, 2011). Research has different understandings of what leadership entails. Some regard leadership as an ability to achieve a goal through and with others (Buell, 2012) while others view leadership as enabling a group of actors to formulate and achieve their own objectives (Nye, 2008). Each of these understandings captures central aspects of what leadership entails. Leaders may also have their own agenda and mission that motivate them to encourage others to take action, such as the realization of one or more SDGs. However, in order to be able to lead others, it is necessary to understand and speak to the needs and aspirations of followers and to advance their ideas and experiences in developing a viable strategy for moving forward (Burns, 2003). Leaders rarely have all the necessary answers, but they can identify them through dialogue with their followers. In this sense, leadership can be seen as a dynamic alliance between leaders and followers. In short, *promoting the SDGs through the leadership of a group of local actors involves guiding and enabling them to reach specific goals while simultaneously learning from and actively engaging them.*

From this follows that leadership differs from management, which is more about ensuring that people do what they are obliged to do. Leadership involves a conscious effort to mobilize a group of actors, inspire and motivate them to act collectively, give direction to their joint endeavors, create momentum by promoting and supporting joint activities, boost the impact of such activities and celebrate successful outcomes to encourage further action. Theories of leadership

Table 13.1. Five Key Leadership Functions.

- Create a group – Construct a "we"
- Diagnose a pressing problem or aspiration – Create a necessity
- Propose a solution – Give direction
- Mobilize for action – Secure resources
- Generate results – Achieve and broadcast success

identify five key leadership functions, which are summarized in Table 13.1 (Burns, 2003; Tucker, 1995).

First task is to *create a group with "we" identity*. The members may face the same problems or have similar dreams and aspirations, or they may find themselves in the same situation at a given point in time. Maybe they live on a street with bad air quality, or in a neighborhood haunted by crime or they might lack adequate health care. It can also be that they are concerned about the education prospects for their kids, dangerous working conditions, or unsanitary water supplies. Leaders help a group of people recognize their commonality – be it a problem or an aspiration – that distinguishes them as a group and motivates their joint action. If the group identity is already strong, this group-forming leadership function may be less important. When stakeholders are more dispersed or divided, leaders play a crucial role in forming of group identity. This task is particularly challenging if the potential members of cocreation process belong to different organizations or groups and where the formation of group identity is challenged by deep-rooted antagonisms. For example, it can be difficult to get people with different religious beliefs or socioeconomic backgrounds to focus on shared problems and aspirations, even if they share the inconvenience and health hazards related to living on the shores of a heavily polluted river.

A second, somewhat overlapping, leadership function is *problem diagnosis* that aims to set the agenda for joint action by means of describing present problems or unrealized potential for improvement. If the goal is to achieve the SDGs, the problem diagnosis requires leaders to help identify the issues or factors that block or hinder sustainability in particular local contexts. Helping a group of people think about the shortcomings of the present and the promise of the future is important because human beings tend to accept the status quo out of habit or resignation. Most of the time, people focus on their immediate needs without questioning even highly troubling basic conditions, and when they do question them, they may make demands that do not reflect their real needs. Coal miners who protest mine closure hardly enjoy the hard labor and risks of mining. What they need is a job and maybe even one that is fulfilling. Engaging a group of people in a discussion of their problems, fears, and dreams, and linking these discussions to the SDGs, can help set a common agenda for shared action.

The third leadership function is to *inspire and guide a shared search for solutions* to the problem at hand that contributes to meeting the aspirations of the involved actors as well as to those of the leader, i.e. to create a more economically,

socially, and environmentally sustainable world. Just as it tends to be necessary to push actors to think about what it is that they need and do not get, it is important to actively stimulate peoples' ability to think beyond existing alternatives and engage them in a joint exploration of new and more productive and effective ways to make things better. Earlier, we described how cocreation can stimulate innovative thinking but did not consider the role of leadership in getting people to look for and test new strategies. Leaders can stimulate the search for solutions by asking probing questions. Sometimes leaders will highlight the benefit of incremental adjustments to existing practices, for example, by asking "how to make it easier for homeless people to find a shelter to get them off the street?" At other times, leaders may have a more bold and radical ambition, asking questions such as "how do we reduce the number of homeless people?" These questions should direct and inspire participants to think about workable solutions that are responsive to the local state of affairs. Sometimes an incremental approach to a problem creates a momentum for more ambitious projects.

A fourth leadership function is to mobilize the followers to *implement the new solution*. This function requires creating broad support for the solution as well as empowering those who must act to make things happen. Winning support for a solution calls for a focused effort to convince people that the proposed solution will make their lives better and enhance sustainability. Empowerment entails assuring followers that they can implement the solution and that collaboration and adaptive learning are the key to success. It may also entail training people to master specific tasks, giving them hope and building their courage and self-confidence. Getting the first people to commit themselves to implementing the solution may take a lot of persuasion and strategizing. People tend to be reluctant to be first movers out of fear that they will fail or be exploited by so-called free riders who want the benefits of the new solution without contributing. If the goal is to stop people from dumping their garbage in the local river, few will change their practice unless they are sure that others will do the same, and even fewer will push for viable alternatives in terms of a local garbage collection system. In these situations, leaders often build support by using the tactic of referring to the conditional support of other actors. Another tactic is to give first movers the status of pioneers and then recruit them as ambassadors for getting more people onboard.

The fifth and final leadership function is to *generate results*. Regardless of how successful a leader is in mobilizing local followers, their support will be short lived if the cocreation does not produce results valued by participants or society at large. The results do not have to be exactly the intended, but they must give the participants something that they need or free them from their burdens. Highlighting the achievement of preliminary and partial results to keep people onboard is an important leadership skill. For example, if a river has become somewhat cleaner but not completely clean, leaders must be able to celebrate those who produced the improvement to demonstrate the efficacy of the group. Highlighting related achievements can also help to maintain support and mobilize people for action even when these achievements are not strictly an outcome of the activity in question. Since results are often mixed, they tend to trigger critical

voices that leaders need to address. Although addressing such criticism can be challenging, it can also convey invaluable information that can help improve cocreated solutions.

These five leadership functions indicate that leaders play a crucial role in promoting collective action, and that serving these functions relies on an ability to form a group of people and get them to do something that they would otherwise not have done. In other words, leadership involves the exercise of power, although it is a particular form of power.

The Role of Power in Leadership

In traditional understandings of leadership, the basic idea is that leaders decide and followers obey. Leaders secure compliance from followers through a skillful use of "hard power," i.e. the disciplining and punishment of those who do not follow rules, orders, and instructions. Leaders may also use "soft power," which refers to an ability to get others to want or accept what you want and thus to recruit committed followers. However, in most traditional accounts, soft power was viewed as secondary to hard power (Dahl, 2017; Machiavelli, 2003; Weber, 2019). In the last decades of the twentieth century, this approach to leadership met increasing criticism for being not only ineffective, because sovereign leaders tended to make decisions that were not seen as legitimate and tended to produce resistance.

New understandings of leadership emerged that turned things around by introducing what Nye (2008) calls "smart power." A smart power approach to leadership views soft power as the most effective and legitimate leadership tool, while hard power is seen as a supplement that should be used in small doses and with considerable care because it tends to scare away followers. Hard power resources are mainly valuable for capturing the attention of followers, but soft power is what steers a group of people in a certain direction by setting a concrete agenda and framing action (Rothman, 2011). Helms (2014) goes as far as to state that hard power is what leaders use when they have failed to lead by means of soft power. Among the soft power tools available to leaders are positive inducements that motivate followers to act in a desired way. These incentives can include financial support or other kinds of rewards or advantages. Another tool is to form the hearts and minds of the followers through the production of captivating narratives that add meaning and direction to people's lives. These narratives may include the promotion of organizational missions that serve the public or create public value.

The early twenty-first century saw the formulation of an *interactive* approach to leadership (Sørensen, 2020). Building on the smart power approach to leadership, this new strand of leadership parts way with the idea that leadership is a matter of getting followers to comply. It claims that we cannot understand leadership without understanding followership (Uhl-Bien, 2011). Hence, it is intensely interested in the role of followers in leadership – how the followers contribute to forming and enabling leadership, and how leadership is conditioned

by who the followers are and what they think and do. Followers are no longer seen as objects subjected to leadership but as influential participants in performing the five leadership functions mentioned earlier. They take part in forming the "we," they contribute to defining problems and strategies, and they play an active part in mobilizing others for action and selling the results. In this relational approach to leadership power, both leaders and followers employ soft and hard power. They both come up with visions, ideas, arguments, and objections, and while leaders may be in a position to punish their followers, followers can employ different forms of resistance and ultimately exit the relationship. Seen from this relational perspective, leadership is a product of ongoing negotiations between leaders and followers in which all parties employ smart power.

A leader may come up with a vision for how to extend the access to sustainable energy production to all the households in a local community. The leader may support this vision with a strategy for bringing it about, and advance persuasive arguments and narratives that incentivize a group to accept or even to contribute, and sanction those who object. For their part, followers may bring insights and ideas to the table, voice criticisms, and use different tactics for avoiding and resisting compliance if their input is not taken into account. Ultimately, they can choose to exit the leadership relationship and look for other leaders to follow. Hence, a productive leadership relationship is one in which both leaders and followers adapt and innovate their positions. Fig. 13.1 illustrates this basic pattern of interaction between leaders and followers, which can be conceived as a relational balance between the use of hard and soft power.

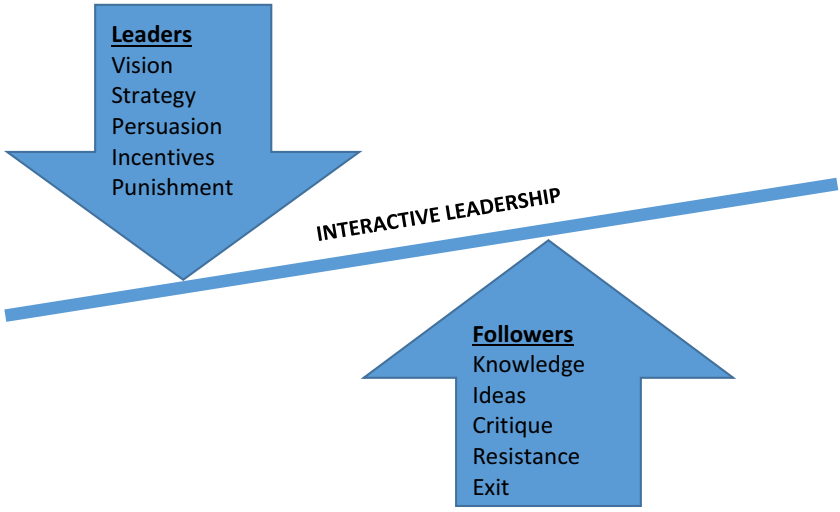

Fig. 13.1. Interactional Leadership Production.

Leadership of Cocreation

The interactive approach is highly relevant for coming to grips with the leadership of cocreation processes. This particular form of leadership departs from other leadership strategies in several crucial ways (Ansell & Torfing, 2021a, 2021b; Sørensen, Bryson, & Crosby, 2021). For starters, organizations tend to have clearly demarcated memberships, well-established purposes and goals, and clear divisions of labor. In contrast, cocreations are composed of actors from different organizations or communities whose common purposes and goals are emerging and whose internal division of labor is relatively fluid. Therefore, leaders of cocreation need to invest a lot of energy in creating a "we" among actors who do not at the outset have much sense of shared destiny and belonging, and to propose and negotiate a mission statement that is attractive and meaningful for the participants. They must also spend time and effort on recruiting actors who have something to contribute. Engaging a local community in fighting the spread of a nearby desert, they must repeatedly emphasize that they will all be affected in a bad way if nothing is done about it. Moreover, it is important to engage them in formulating a shared goal and in considering how different participants can contribute and how more actors can be mobilized.

Another difference between leadership of organizations and leadership of cocreations is that access to hard power tools tends to vary considerably. While organizations tend to have a formal and hierarchical leadership structure, the leadership of cocreation processes tends to be more horizontal and informal. In organizations, leaders have a specific leadership domain and a particular group of followers, which can include employees or members. If the followers are employees, leaders can hire and fire, promote and demote, or change the distribution of tasks to the advantage of some and the disadvantage of others. If the followers are members, leaders can formulate membership rules and distribute funding, and sometimes even exclude members from the organization. Leaders of cocreation processes are in a different position because they must exercise leadership without formal leadership authority over the participants who come from different groups and organizations. This creates a more horizontal pattern of interaction between the participants and between them and their leadership, thus necessitating the reliance on soft rather than hard power tools.

A final difference is that while leaders of organizations operate within their own leadership domain, leaders of cocreation are constantly trespassing into other organizational domains. The participants in a network or partnership will tend to have strong commitments to the leaders of their own organizations or communities. Engaging fishermen, those who transport fish, retail and fishery experts in innovating a more sustainable fishery may meet resistance from boat owners, business leaders, and leaders of knowledge institutes if participation is time consuming for their employees or produces ideas and strategies out of tune with their own agendas. Therefore, leaders of cocreation processes must take into account these dispersed organizational domains and secure support from their leaders.

Building Leadership Capacity to Promote Cocreation of the SDGs

As seen above, leadership of cocreation is a complicated and multifaceted activity. Hence, there is good reason to consider how it is possible to build the leadership capacity needed to employ cocreation as a tool for promoting the SDGs. Let us start by considering what kind of skills and competencies actors need to perform effective and legitimate leadership of cocreation (McCallum & O'Connell, 2009; Puccio, Mance, & Murdock, 2010). Such leadership is effective if leaders are able to meet their goals through the mobilization of others, while simultaneously helping those others to advance their objectives. Leadership is legitimate when leaders establish broad acceptance and support for what they do from the participants in the cocreation project as well as from the surrounding society. In the following, the focus will be on building capacity to lead by means of soft power. A short list of skills and competencies is found in Table 13.2.

Insights into SDGs: In local cocreation, it is easy to lose sight of the SDGs. Concrete local problems and issues can easily take over the agenda and lead to projects and activities that have very little to do with developing a more socially, economically, and environmentally sustainable local community. To avoid this fate, it is important for a leader to know the content of the SDGs and their targets and indicators well enough to be able to apply them in a way that is relevant to the local context and can guide concrete efforts to solve local problems and inspire visionary projects. If a cocreation process aims to build a school, a leader may not only guide participants toward the use of sustainable building materials or granting employees acceptable working conditions, but may also point out that the project has the potential to enhance gender equality by providing education to girls.

Knowledge of local community: Another important competence is knowledge of the local community and its inhabitants. Leaders who are ignorant of the people and groups who inhabit a local community, and who fail to appreciate the relationships between different actors, will have a hard time identifying relevant

Table 13.2. Skills and Competencies Important for Leaders of Cocreation.

- Insights into how the SDGs and their targets indicators are applicable to the local context
- Familiarity with the local community and its inhabitants
- Social capital in terms of trustful relationships and wide-ranging network connections
- Experience in communicating with diverse groups to foster motivation
- Ability to negotiate, mediate conflict, and facilitate discussions
- Perseverance to operate in a complex, uncertain, and unpredictable environment

and affected actors and motivating them to collaborate. There might be long-term conflicts between different groups that hinder collaboration, and there is a high risk of excluding or marginalizing people who possess resources or knowledge that are important for success.

Social capital: Another leadership competence is possessing trustful relationships with key actors that allow leaders to bond, bridge, and link different groups in the local community. Without trust or connections, a leader will be unable to recruit followers, because people will be less likely to listen to and engage with their ideas. For example, inviting consumers, food producers, and restaurants to a workshop to discuss how to reduce food waste will attract more participants if the host is well-known and well-liked and holds a reputation for being reliable and supportive rather than unreliable and judgmental, and it is easier to get old enemies on speaking terms if the person who brings them together is known as impartial, fair, and open-minded.

Communicative skills: The key to good communication with stakeholders is to clearly state what a diverse group of actors can achieve from working together and to clarify the relative contributions of each actor. The ability to translate between the perspectives of multiple participants and to align these perspectives with one or more SDGs is also a crucial communicative competence. Good listening and open minded, friendly and respectful communication can facilitate translation and alignment. Leaders should avoid dominating discussions to ensure that everyone has a chance to speak. Finally, leaders must be able to communicate enthusiasm and hope. For example, if a network of diverse actors tries to solve a traffic congestion problem to reduce CO2 emissions and encounters a major set-back when the city council rules against their proposed solution, leaders must swiftly communicate the existence of alternative and equally valuable and feasible strategies for goal achievement.

Conflict mediation: A key skill for leaders of cocreation is to master the craft of getting people to negotiate in a constructive manner and assist them in overcoming differences. For example, if there is disagreement regarding how to best protect a national park threatened by excessive tourism, as the Galapagos Islands faced a few years ago, it may be possible to get environmentalists and those working in the tourism industry to reach a compromise that allows for regulated tourism. To forge such a compromise, the leader must be able to propose solutions that reflect the concerns of all sides of the conflict while keeping the goals of sustainable life on land and below water in mind (Goals 14 and 15). Enabling compromise calls for skill in conflict mediation.

Perseverance: A final really important leadership aptitude is the perseverance to operate in the context of complexity and uncertainty. It is often not possible to plan a cocreation process. Things happen from one day to the next and it takes personal and professional robustness to move the process forward without knowing what is around the next corner. Complexity and uncertainty are both a product of unpredictable events within the cocreation process and constant changes in the external environment. Some participants may suddenly change their mind on a subject or even decide to leave the collaboration. The local government may make decisions that change the conditions for carrying out a

given project; a donor organization may cease, reduce, or redirect funding; and ethnic or political conflicts may erupt and jeopardize the project. It takes perseverance to stay on course and overcome obstacles.

Who Takes the Lead?

The sheer magnitude of the required leadership capacities is likely to scare people from the both challenging and rewarding task of leading cocreation. This reaction is due in part to the common assumption that leadership is an individual responsibility of omnipotent and multiskilled superheroes. In reality, leadership is often shared among a number of ordinary but motivated people. Moreover, there is a tendency to assume that leaders are formally appointed, though in fact, leadership may simply be exercised by informal leaders who happen to be part of the process and are willing to undertake some basic leadership tasks. Recognizing that leadership is a multiactor endeavor performed by unappointed leaders may make engagement in leadership less scary and overwhelming. It is something that everybody can do and support each other in doing.

Recent strands of leadership theory point out that the distributed character of leadership is not simply a reality but also a good thing because it tends to make leadership more effective and legitimate ('t Hart, Kane, & Patapan, 2009; Spillane, 2012). These benefits are more easily achieved if those who are involved in leadership do not compete but join forces and coordinate and align their goals and strategies (de Bruin & Tukker, 2013; Morgeson, DeRue, & Karam, 2010). Acting as a team, distributed leaders can draw on a wider range of skills and competencies. However, if one leader focuses on achieving the SDGs while another is more interested in promoting local solutions, their competing objectives might end up creating confusion. It takes teamwork among leaders to make sure that the distributed leaders speak with one voice, for example, by finding ways of demonstrating that local solutions are connected to the SDGs.

Forming leadership teams is also paramount for building leadership legitimacy. Leaders need acceptance and support from the participants in cocreation processes as well as from other relevant and affected actors in society. If those people who are central to the cocreation process take on leadership roles, it will increase the chances that other actors in the network will listen to them and commit to their ideas. Likewise, if actors who are highly esteemed by the local community are involved in leading a cocreation project, their involvement will help to achieve general support and acceptance from key societal actors. A project can go a long way on the shoulders of a group of well-respected community leaders who vouch for it and champion it.

What do these insights imply for changemakers? The important implication here is that changemakers do not have to carry the full leadership load by themselves. In some situations, they may take a back seat while allowing others to take the major burden of leadership. Changemakers should perceive cocreation leadership as a team effort, recognizing their own limitations as leaders, and rely on others when they can bring specialized skills to bear in the cocreation process.

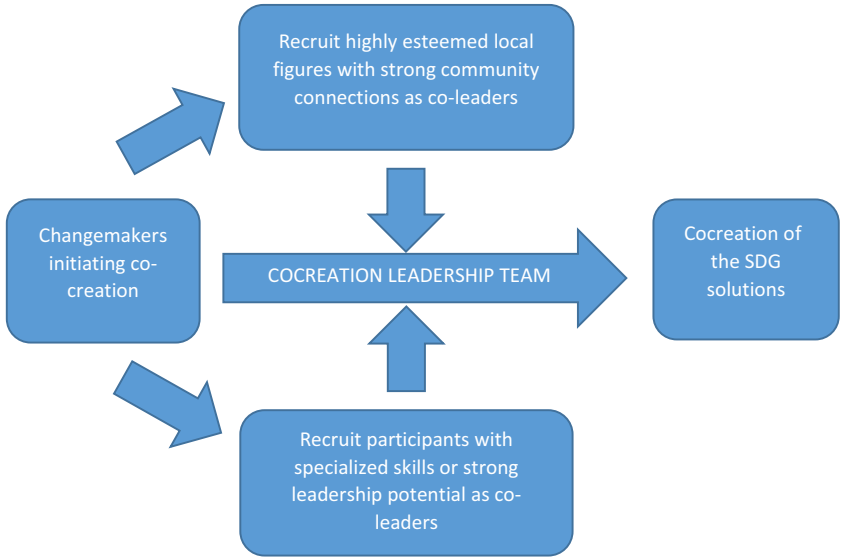

Fig. 13.2. Building and Leadership Capacity.

Important selection criteria for recruiting the leadership team are that participants should be well acquainted with the local community and have contact to relevant community actors. Another criterion is the possession of strong communicative skills that can help to create both internal cohesion and external support for the cocreation process. Since team-based leadership of cocreation may not be familiar to many participants, recruitment may also call for some degree of mentoring and leadership training.

In sum, team-based leadership of cocreation processes is a collaborative endeavor. As illustrated by Fig. 13.2, those who initiate cocreation should both recruit well-respected and well-connected figures from the local community and participants with specialized skills or competencies to serve as part of the cocreation leadership team.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have argued that leadership plays an important role in promoting successful cocreation. Leadership is important for creating a sense of shared destiny and purpose; diagnosing pressing problems and future aspirations calling for collective action; communicating potential solutions and building support; mobilizing resources for implementation and framing stressing results to spur self-confidence and further action. We have also pointed out that leadership of cocreation differs from other forms of leadership in that it tends to rely mainly on soft rather than hard power. This reliance stresses the need for skills and competencies that enable leaders to connect and communicate with the

Table 13.3. Recommendations for Cocreation Leadership.

Changemakers may benefit from:
• Paying attention to achieving the SDGs as well as to the needs and aspirations of the local community and actors involved in the cocreation
• Deciding how much time and energy needs to be invested in each of the five leadership functions and how they must be performed
• Employing all available soft power tools to enhance collaboration and drive the process to conclusion
• Encouraging others to take part in leading the cocreation, particularly those who possess skills and competences that the changemakers do not have or that have strong connections and enjoy respect in the community
• Mentoring and training actors with leadership potential
• Building reflexive leadership teams that can both share leadership tasks and speak with one voice

participants in a given network or partnership as well as beyond. Leadership of cocreation is a demanding task that will often gain in impact and reputation by involving several actors in a leadership team. We suggest that changemakers seek inspiration in the following recommendations listed in Table 13.3.