Bringing people together usually follows Bruce Tuchman’s stages of team development: Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing and Adjourning. Over the past 7 months, Global School Leaders (GSL), Dignitas, and Africa Educational Trust (AET) worked together to jointly pilot the Ustadi School Leadership Institute (USLI), a program aimed at improving student learning outcomes through developing instructional leadership competencies amongst formal school leaders. We refer to this program as Ustadi.

Ustadi was collectively piloted in 27 private low-cost schools in Nairobi and 27 rural public schools in Laikipia North sub-county. In both locations, leadership coaches support school leaders through monthly professional development trainings and school-based coaching. The project administrators coordinate the logistics across the program.

Initially, collaborations may feel like putting the donkey in front of the cart, however in our shared case, the collaboration journey started off more as cooperation, a year ago in July 2018 at a RELI regional convening. GSL decided to leverage Dignitas as a partner and AET as an implementing partner (Dignitas and GSL had similar curriculum. Why reinvent the wheel when we can work together? Our outcomes on impacting on school leadership would better be achieved through partnerships. This is exemplified in saved costs of setting up an office/hiring for GSL since Dignitas already had a ground experience in Nairobi and AET already had established relationships with schools in Laikipia County).

This partnership progressed from the cooperation stage characterized by informal relationships, lengthy conversations around school leadership to a coordination stage moving towards more formal relationships, a willingness to listen and share ideas, some planning on possible project implementation and an agreement to execute a shared project. We are now at the collaborative stage. We define collaboration as, “the act of working together with other people in a mutually beneficial and well defined relationship between two or more organizations to achieve common goals”. Beyond, GSL-Dignitas-AET sharing a vision to see transformation in schools, how would we professionally collaborate more deeply, in ways that achieves greater impact?
The initial professional training launched on a Saturday afternoon, a pleasant day in the heart of Laikipia’s most beautiful town. Mount Kenya shyly hides behind the clouds as a team of school leaders, trainers, and support administrators crack their minds in theories of leadership in the new age. Teams from the three organizations gather for the first time to review the training content: Daniel Goleman’s Emotional Intelligence, Carol Dweck’s Mindsets, and techniques to conduct effective meetings. The content is heavy laden and at the back of our minds remains the questions, “How will it all pan out?”

The two-day training starts and ends well. The team meticulously takes notes for purposes of improving future facilitation and the feedback is shared at the end of the first leadership academy. This feels like the typical forming stage, everyone is polite and rather quiet. Prior to this first team training, a couple of meetings, correspondences and training on the program that involved the three organizations have taken place, but the team still feels uptight? How do we break the ice and make everyone feel relaxed? A plan is quickly hatched and the three teams settle for a meal in the early chilly evening of 26th Saturday. Team building is an important step in collaboration and as the team participated in a couple of group games, the ice breaking moment leads to small grouping being formed. Intimate conversation at play, exchange of numbers and interests. Developing, building and maintain trusting and accountable relationships are an essential component in any collaboration. Our synergetic relationship in implementation of Ustadi begins here and the first step is marked.

Subsequent weeks see the Ustadi team schedule regular calls to set expectations around practices and routines that will feed the building blocks towards a successful working culture. Commitment and ownership is guaranteed as this is obtained through senior management signoff and involvement across the three organizations. Another important stage in the collaboration process is birthed. That of building a shared culture. The conversations during training of school leaders are more engaging revolving around transformative change. The coaches from both locations are eager to share and compare experiences with questions such as “how have your school leaders responded to . . .?” “have you thought of . . .? “ . . . best practice state . . .”. Learning, exchange of ideas continuous to grow the collaboration.

While on the one hand, this collaboration shared a lot of successes such as a deeper appreciation of each organizations expertise, deeper insights of supporting school leaders from both rural marginalized public schools and low cost private schools with different dynamics, ability of individuals across the three teams to offer and receive constructive feedback.

On the other hand, the collaboration had its share fair of challenges especially around norming and the alignment of coaching processes across two locations, creation of structures around data collection, analysis and reporting. Honest and frequent communication on what needs to improve, regular scheduled exchange visits between the two locations, shared systems to monitor, measure and learn, trust between team members, committed leadership and shared ownership of Ustadi project contributed in overcoming the hurdles.

Six months down the line the question that lingers is how do we keep this going and what next? A common goal is paramount, the will to learn and grow is central to the success of any future joint programs.