



Shared Leadership

Shared leadership is a dynamic, interactive influence process among individuals in teams in which the objective is to lead one another to the achievement of team goals. Shared leadership often involves peerbased, or lateral, influence although at certain times it involves upward or downward hierarchically based influence. The fundamental distinction between shared leadership and traditional, top-down models of leadership is that influence does not merely move downward from leaders to subordinates or followers. On the contrary, with shared leadership, influence is broadly distributed among the members of the team.

Historically, theories of leadership have focused on a single individual and the relationship of that individual to his or her subordinates or followers. In recent years, however, that conceptualization of leadership has been challenged. Now, some scholars say that leadership involves behaviors, roles, and activities that can be shared or distributed among members of a team. According to this alternative conceptualization of leadership, individuals who are not formally designated leaders can rise to the occasion to exhibit leadership and then step back at other times to allow others to lead.

WHY THE INCREASED INTEREST IN SHARED LEADERSHIP?

Globalization of markets, hypercompetition, and shortened product life cycles are but a few of the forces driving organizations toward new modes of organizing. At present, the fastest-growing type of organizational unit is the team, specifically the temporary cross-functional team, which is valued for its flexibility and its ability to generate solutions to problems faster than traditional organizational units—flexibility and speed being of the essence in a hypercompetitive globalized market. What distinguishes a team of this type from traditional organizational units is the absence of formal hierarchical authority. While a cross-functional team may have an appointed team leader, this individual is quite commonly a peer, and is treated as such. Outside of the team, the team leader often does not possess hierarchical authority over other members of the team. Moreover, because cross-functional teams bring people with diverse backgrounds and types of expertise together for a common purpose, the leader is often at a knowledge disadvantage—that is, his or her expertise normally represents only one of the numerous functional specialties brought to the task at hand. Thus, the team leader is highly dependent upon the expertise of the other team members. Leadership in these types of settings is therefore determined by an individual's capacity to influence peers and by the needs of the team in any given situation. Because the team members bring unique perspectives, knowledge, and capabilities to the team, at various crossroads in the team's life, there are moments when each may be called upon to provide leadership.

Shared leadership is also common in virtual teams, another sort of team that is popular at present. Virtual teams consist of individuals collaborating and working from geographically dispersed locations. Members may occasionally meet in person, but normally they rely on modern communication technology (e-mail, conferences in chat rooms, and so forth) for interaction. Importantly, research has shown that technology-mediated communication differs from face-to-face communication: Communication becomes depersonalized and more taskfocused in technology-mediated team environments. When communication is more focused on the task and less preoccupied with authority relationships, leadership can be shared by several team members, with each providing leadership for different components of the team's tasks.

There are four fundamental types of leadership that team members might share—directive, transactional,

transformational, and empowering. For example, shared directive leadership might be expressed as peers test one another with a directive “give-and-take” about how to resolve conflicting points of view, approach specific tasks, or assign accountability. Similarly, shared transactional leadership might be expressed through collegial recognition of efforts and contributions or through awarding valued rewards based on key performance metrics. Additionally, teams might engage in shared transformational leadership through peer exhortation or by appealing to desires to create break-through products or services. Finally, shared empowering leadership might be expressed in a team through peer-based encouragement and support of self-goal-setting, self-evaluation, self-reward, and self-development.

To lead people, walk beside them ...

As for the best leaders, the people do not notice their existence.

The next best, the people honor and praise.

The next, the people fear;

and the next, the people hate ...

When the best leader's work is done the people say, "We did it ourselves!"

Lao-Tzu

Ironically, while the need and appreciation for shared leadership has been steadily growing, scientific examination of shared leadership lags seriously behind. In large part, this is due to widely held romantic notions about leadership: Many people—journalists, reporters, historians, the public at large, and even leadership scholars—focus on the individual “heroic” leader, disregarding shared forms of leadership.

EVIDENCE OF SHARED LEADERSHIP

To date, there have been very few studies of shared leadership. Nonetheless, the initial evidence suggests that shared leadership can have a powerful effect on team behavior, attitudes, cognition, and performance, as outlined below.

Shared Leadership and Team Behavior

Three studies have examined the relationship between shared leadership and team behavior. The first study, reported in 1996 (Avolio et al.), examined U.S. under-graduate project teams and found shared leadership to be significantly related to team members' willingness to put in extra effort on the project. Similarly, a study of change management teams in the auto industry in the mid-Atlantic United States (Pearce 1997), found shared leadership to be positively related to citizenship behavior—engaging in behavior that is above and beyond the call of duty—within the teams and increased networking behavior by team members. Finally, in a study of virtual teams of social workers in the United States reported in 2003 (Pearce, Yoo, and Alavi), it was found that teams characterized by shared leadership were more likely to be socially integrated than teams characterized by vertical leadership. Thus, the initial evidence seems to suggest that shared leadership is an important predictor of team behavior.

Shared Leadership and Team Attitudes

Two studies have examined the relationship between shared leadership and team attitudes. In the study of undergraduate students mentioned above, shared leadership was found to be significantly related to satisfaction on the part of team members. The second study, reported in 2003 (Shamir and Lapidot), examined officer

training in the Israeli military. It found that shared leadership was positively correlated to trust in and satisfaction with the vertical leader. Thus, shared leadership also appears to be an important predictor of positive team attitudes.

Shared Leadership and Cognition

Four studies have examined the relationship between shared leadership and team cognition. The study of undergraduate teams revealed a significant relationship between shared leadership and collective efficacy and potency. The study of change management teams found shared leadership to be significantly related to potency. The study of virtual teams found shared leadership to be a better predictor of potency than measures of vertical leadership. Finally, researchers in a 2003 study of research and development labs (Hooker and Csikszentmihalyi), reported a reciprocal relationship between creativity and shared leadership. Thus, the initial evidence suggests that shared leadership enhances teams' cognitive abilities.

Shared Leadership and Team Effectiveness

The study of undergraduate teams found shared leadership to be significantly related to self-ratings of effectiveness. The study of change management teams found shared leadership to be a better predictor of manager, customer, and team self-ratings of effectiveness than vertical leadership. The study of virtual teams found that members of those teams were more likely than people in vertically organized units to rate their own problem-solving ability and task effectiveness highly. Finally, a study, reported in 2000 (Ensley and Pearce), of entrepreneurial top management teams across a wide variety of industries in the United States found shared leadership to be more likely than vertical leadership to lead to increased revenue and improved venture growth rates. Thus, shared leadership appears to be an important predictor of a team's overall effectiveness.

MEASURING SHARED LEADERSHIP

To date, five alternate methods have been identified for examining shared leadership. Three of these are quantitative and questionnaire-based, and two are qualitative observation-based. Three quantitative, questionnaire-based approaches to the study of shared leadership have involved the study of the team as a (a) whole, (b) sum of its parts, and (c) social network. In terms of qualitative approaches, the two approaches to date include (a) leadership sociograms and (b) ethnographic methods. Each of these methods has its own strengths and weaknesses. While five methodological approaches have been identified for the study of shared leadership, this is not an exhaustive list of potential methodologies that might be employed in the future study of shared leadership.

THE FUTURE OF LEADERSHIP IN ORGANIZATIONS

As many leaders are well aware, true teamwork poses many challenges. In many cases it is difficult—even painful—to implement shared leadership. Ultimately, however, suboptimal teams and overburdened leaders result in even more pain.

Clearly, shared leadership is not a panacea for all organizational woes: It is only appropriate for certain team-based tasks. Moreover, if team members, particularly the team leader, are resistant to the notion of shared leadership, it will not be carried out effectively. Resistance to shared leadership is likely a cultural phenomenon, and cultural norms can be observed at the national, industrial, or even organizational level. As an example, the cultural attribute of power distance represents the degree to which members of a culture accept and expect that power will be distributed unequally. Clearly, people in cultures high in power distance are less likely to embrace the concept of shared leadership. Similarly, shared leadership will not work if the team members lack the requisite knowledge, skills, and abilities for their task. Another potential complicating factor is that a team may successfully employ shared leadership, yet work at odds with the overarching organizational mission. These are but a few of the potential limitations of shared leadership, but they make clear that shared leadership is not a

simple plug-and-play technology.

There continues to be a role for vertical leadership. For example, the ultimate responsibility for the making of meaning and the articulation of purpose continues to rest with vertical, hierarchical leaders. Nonetheless, it would be foolish to ignore the potential contribution of shared leadership. By examining how both vertical and shared leadership can be utilized more fully, organizations could move toward a more optimal model of leadership in the age of teamwork.

—Craig L. Pearce

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