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Shared Leadership: Is it Time for a Change?

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This paper investigates shared leadership and seeks to determine if more organizations should consider adopting a shared leadership model. Leadership affects the success and failure of every type of organization, and the complexity of today's business environment makes leadership increasingly more challenging. It is becoming more difficult for any single individual to possess all of the skills and abilities required to competently lead an organization today. A review of the literature indicates that while shared leadership has been practiced in some form for centuries, research on the subject is still in its infancy. An abundance of shared leadership studies fall in the domains of healthcare and education, two industries especially open to the concept. Studies outside these two industries are scarce, but include a diverse collection of organization types and groups. While research indicates that shared leadership has its challenges and can be difficult to implement, overall the benefits of shared leadership hold promise. Organizations of all types should take notice and consider implementing a shared leadership approach.

Leadership is a pivotal issue that affects the success and failure of every organization, country, and religious movement. The speed of change and complexity in today's business environment make leadership increasingly exigent, placing unrealistic expectations on heroic leaders (Yukl, 2006). Ostensibly, it is becoming more difficult for any single individual to possess all of the skills and abilities required to competently lead organizations today (O'Toole, Galbraith, & Lawler, 2002). O'Toole et al. affirmed, "Frequently, organizations learn the hard way that no one individual can save a company from mediocre performance—and no one individual, no matter how gifted a leader, can be 'right' all the time" (p. 67). Pearce (2007) pointed out, "As organizations have steadily progressed into the knowledge economy we can no longer rely on simple notions of top-down, command-and-control leadership, based on the idea that workers are merely interchangeable drones" (p. 355). Hence, this paper investigates the case for shared leadership and seeks to determine if more organizations should consider adopting a shared leadership model.

An initial search of the phrase *shared leadership* in the Academic OneFile database yielded 75 articles in academic journals. The search results of similar phrases are as follows: *distributed leadership* (24), *collective leadership* (22), *horizontal leadership* (0), *team leadership* (97), and *leadership team* (182). An evaluation of all articles referenced took place, followed by a thorough search in ABI/Inform, Academic Search Complete, and Business Source Complete using the identical terms and phrases. Again, I examined all articles and their reference lists for relevance and applicability to the topic. When no new articles turned up, I considered the search complete.

Many of the studies on shared leadership fall in the domain of healthcare (Jackson, 2000; Konu & Viitanen, 2008; Merkens & Spencer, 1998; Spooner, Keenan, & Card, 1997; Steinert, Goebel, & Rieger, 2006) and education (Boardman, 2001; Hall, 2001; Meyers & Johnson, 2008; Prather, Hartshorn, & McCreight, 1988; Rice, 2006; Wallace, 2001). Studies outside these two domains are scarce, but include a diverse collection of organization types and groups: new ventures (Ensley, Hmieleski, & Pearce, 2006), road maintenance teams (Hiller, Day, & Vance, 2006), churches (Wood, 2005; Wood & Fields, 2007), equipment and engine manufacturing (Anderson, Anderson, & Mayo, 2008), technology (Hsu & Sharma, 2008), local government (Berman, 1996), consulting teams (Carson, Tesluk, & Marrone, 2007), sales teams (Mehra, Smith, Dixon, & Robertson, 2006; Perry, Pearce, & Sims, 1999;), police departments (Steinheider & Wuestewald, 2008), and banks (Walker, Smither, & Waldman, 2008). While research indicates that shared leadership has its challenges and can be difficult to implement, overall, the benefits of shared leadership often outweigh the limitations. Organizations of all types should take notice and consider implementing a shared leadership approach.

Shared Leadership

Sally (2002) pointed out that shared leadership has existed since ancient times: “Republican Rome had a successful system of co-leadership that lasted for over four centuries. This structure of co-leadership was so effective that it extended from the lower levels of the Roman magistracy to the very top position, that of consul” (p. 84). However, over the course of history most organizations have been led by one central leader in a hierarchal fashion (Wood, 2005). Indeed, O’Toole et al. (2002) observed, “For most people, shared leadership is counterintuitive: leadership is obviously and manifestly an individual trait and activity” (p. 66). Furthermore, they added, “The identities of American corporations are often viewed as mere reflections of the personalities of their leaders: entire organizations are portrayed as shadows of the ‘Great Men’ who sit in the chief executive chairs” (p. 66). Bennis (1999) complained, “In our society leadership is too often seen as an inherently individual phenomenon” (p. 72). This viewpoint has unfortunate side effects. The common assumption that one leader (the CEO) rules everything is responsible for the singular manner in which leadership is taught in business schools and the fact that academic research literature on shared leadership is sparse (O’Toole et al.).

However, times may be changing. O’Toole (2001) suggested that leadership is not only an individual trait, but is also an institutional trait. Avolio, Walumbwa, and Weber (2009) observed that shared leadership is gaining prominence in organizations as team-based structures replace hierarchical structures. Furthermore, O’Toole et al. (2002) affirmed, “The trend over the last half-century has been away from concentration of power in one person and toward

expanding the capacity for leadership at the top levels of corporations” (p. 67). Moreover, Yukl (2006) recognized that those who subscribe to shared leadership approaches understand that “important decisions about what to do and how to do it are made through the use of an interactive process involving many different people who influence each other” (p. 4).

Defining Shared Leadership

The quest for developing an integrative definition of shared leadership has been elusive. Avolio et al. (2009) declared that the most widely cited definition of shared leadership comes from Conger and Pearce (2003): “A dynamic, interactive influence process among individuals in groups for which the objective is to lead one another to the achievement of group or organizational goals or both” (p. 1). Conger and Pearce added, “This influence process often involves peer, or lateral, influence and at other times involves upward or downward hierarchical influence” (p. 1).

It is important to recognize the terms often associated with shared leadership. In research literature, shared leadership, collective leadership, and distributed leadership are used interchangeably, while team leadership is commonly viewed as a slightly different stream of research (Avolio et al., 2009). However, shared leadership definitions often include the term *team*, coupled with the concept of a process, property, or phenomenon. Carson et al. (2007) examined antecedent conditions that lead to the development of shared leadership in a sample of 59 consulting teams comprised of MBA students and concluded, “Shared leadership refers to a team property whereby leadership is distributed among team members rather than focused on a single designated leader” (p. 1217). Day, Gronn, and Salas (2004) called attention to team outcomes that emanate from shared leadership. Furthermore, Bligh, Pearce, and Kohles (2006) affirmed, “Shared leadership thus offers a concept of leadership practice as a team-level phenomenon where behaviors are enacted by multiple individuals rather than solely by those at the top or by those in formal leadership roles” (p. 305). To summarize, a review of the literature reveals shared leadership as a relational, collaborative leadership process or phenomenon involving teams or groups that mutually influence one another and collectively share duties and responsibilities otherwise relegated to a single, central leader.

Components of Shared Leadership

There are many dimensions, components, and factors which affect shared leadership. Carson et al. (2007) proposed that “shared leadership is facilitated by an overall team environment that consists of three dimensions: shared purpose, social support, and voice” (p. 1222). Internal team environment and external coaching work in unison to drive team performance (Carson et al.). Wood (2005) studied top management teams in churches with three or more pastors and determined that shared leadership involves four distinct dimensions: “joint completion of tasks, mutual skill development, decentralized interaction among personnel, and emotional support” (p. 76). He found that while “empowering team behaviors related positively with shared leadership” (p. 64), surprisingly, team structure (horizontal) did not have a significant effect on shared leadership. In a qualitative study involving 69 individuals working at St. Joseph’s Health Care Hospital, Jackson (2000) determined that four constructs vital to the

understanding of shared leadership highlight the significance of its relational aspects: “accountability, partnership, equity, and ownership” (p. 168).

Team leadership is characterized by a variety of items that set it apart from vertical leadership. Walker et al. (2008) identified the following team leadership indicators in a three-year qualitative study of 68 regional bank branch managers: (a) the work team resolves difference to reach agreement, (b) work is distributed properly to take advantage of members’ unique skills, (c) information about the company and its strategy is shared, (d) teamwork is promoted with the team itself, and (e) the team works together to identify opportunities to improve productivity and efficiency. Chen, Kanfer, Kirkman, Allen, and Rosen (2007) sampled 445 members from 62 teams in 31 stores of a national home improvement company, and asserted that in order to empower team leadership, “team leaders should ensure they delegate enough autonomy and responsibility to all members in their team, involve the team in decision making, and encourage the team to self-manage its performance to the extent possible” (p. 343). Abiding by such principles give teams a better chance for success. McIntyre (1999) insisted that emerging leadership teams become effective only when they are characterized by “strategic goals, extensive networks, collaborative relationships, effective information processing, and focused action” (p. 40).

Shared Leadership Studies

Organizational studies investigating shared leadership expose the complexity of issues surrounding this model, the conditions which engender successful implementation and practice of shared leadership, the importance of communication, and problems associated with shared leadership. Much of the research in organizations, other than education and healthcare, actually focuses more on aspects of leadership teams and teamwork (Anderson et al., 2008; Darling & Fischer, 1998; Gorla & Lam, 2004; Hiller et al., 2006; Koivunen, 2007; Lovelace, Manz, & Alves, 2007; O’Connell, Doverspike, & Cober, 2002; Pearce & Herbig, 2004; Thamhain, 2004; Wang, Chou, & Jiang, 2005) rather than shared leadership in its purest form. Therefore, a brief review of studies and observations concerning shared leadership in education and healthcare will shed light on what is known about this topic.

Shared Leadership in Education

Harris, Leithwood, Day, Sammons, and Hopkins (2007) lamented the lack of exceptional leaders in today’s schools and thus declared, “The hope of transforming schools through the actions of individual leaders is quickly fading” (p. 345). However, research concerning several elements of shared leadership in the realm of educational institutions reveals mixed results. In a qualitative study of students in three universities, Carte, Chidambaram, and Becker (2006) examined virtual teams and suggested shared leadership behavior is positively associated with monitoring group work, but not with increasing performance. Moreover, Boardman (2001) investigated shared leadership processes in Tasmanian schools and discovered that leaders were significantly more enthusiastic about a shared leadership model than the teachers they engaged with. Furthermore, in a study of co-principalship in New Zealand primary schools, Court (2003) found the presence of power struggles and the notion of “contrived congeniality,” which refers to the manipulation teachers feel when forced to participate in decision-making without any

guarantee their ideas will be heard. Indeed, while one of the key benefits of shared leadership is the ability to draw from the diversity of thought and talent possessed by a entire team (Miles & Watson, 2007; Rice, 2006), Kezar (1998) noted that “when members of leadership teams did not fully embrace the principles of fostering differences and encouraging multiple opinions, most teams slipped into groupthink” (p. 68).

The benefits and limitations of shared leadership in educational institutions lead Wallace (2001) to say, “School leadership should ideally be extensively shared but, because school leaders do not live in an ideal world, the extent of sharing which is justifiable in practice depends on empirical factors” (p. 153). Emotions cannot be ignored, especially when a school is attempting to change or undergo a renewal process (Beatty, 2007). In addition, a collegial climate (Rice, 2006) and clear communication are both paramount in all shared leadership decision-making processes (Meyers & Johnson, 2008). Finally, for shared leadership and teamwork to be effective, it is crucial that group members understand their individual roles and do not underestimate the complexity of a shared leadership arrangement (Hall, 2001).

Shared Leadership in Healthcare

Healthcare organizations seem especially open to the introduction of shared leadership. Many hospitals have responded to the need for new forms of leadership, leading them to adopt shared governance as a means to improve outcomes (Spooner et al., 1997). Shared leadership is highly practical in this domain, as the nature of the healthcare environment requires much collaboration (Merken & Spencer, 1998). The quality of patient care often depends on how well a diverse group of medical and administrative experts work together. Konu and Viitanen (2008) conducted a quantitative study involving 703 middle-level managers in Finnish social service and healthcare and cite shared leadership as a pathway to creating uniformity in decision-making and defining responsibilities. Scott and Caress (2005) asserted that decision-making and clinical effectiveness in a hospital can be improved through shared leadership and shared governance. They discussed the challenges of implementing a shared governance model and emphasized that “shared governance is an ongoing and fluid process, requiring continual assessment and re-evaluation in order to be flexible and responsive to an ever-changing environment” (p. 4).

An interesting finding among shared leadership research in healthcare organizations relates to the willingness of group members to accept governance changes and adopt new, more inclusive leadership models. In a study investigating the satisfaction of shared leadership at three psychiatric hospitals, Steinert et al. (2006) found that nonmedical staff members favored shared leadership more than physicians, but both groups were generally satisfied with the model. They say, “Shared leadership seems to provide nurse empowerment and good nurse–physician relationships” (p. 256). Konu and Viitanen’s (2008) study of the Finnish social service and healthcare industry found no connection between shared leadership experiences and age or work experience. However, they discovered that shared leadership was practiced most often by female managers in larger work units.

In an effort to increase understanding in the area of shared leadership development, one study (Black & Westwood, 2004) addressed the effectiveness of a group-based team leadership development program at a Canadian cancer care center. The program emphasized five objectives centering on trust, cohesiveness, communication, and conflict resolution:

1. The facilitation of team members learning how to relate to and communicate with each other on an interpersonal basis.
2. The facilitation of increased levels of trust among group members.
3. The facilitation of increased group solidarity.
4. The reduction of misunderstanding among group members.
5. The facilitation skills necessary for preventing and resolving intra-group conflict.

Overall, the workshop proved to be successful and valuable in developing group-based teams, but the researchers admit that ongoing maintenance will probably be required to maintain effectiveness.

Benefits of Shared Leadership

In many ways the research on shared leadership is still in its infancy, but noteworthy benefits and limitations have emerged from the few studies that have been undertaken. Perhaps the most commonly cited benefit concerns the synergy and expertise derived from a shared leadership model. Here, the old adage two heads are better than one seems appropriate. Leaders can utilize their individual strengths (Miles & Watkins, 2007), and organizations can benefit from diversity of thought in decision making. Bligh et al. (2006) posited that influence is fluid and reciprocal, and “team members take on the leadership tasks for which they are best suited or are most motivated to accomplish” (p. 306). O’Toole et al. (2002) noted that two or more leaders are better than one when “the challenges a corporation faces are so complex that they require a set of skills too broad to be possessed by any one individual” (p. 68). Indeed, Waldersee and Eagleson (2002) argued that during times of change and reorientation in a hotel corporation, shared leadership between two leaders, one task-oriented and the other behavior-oriented, would result in greater success than leadership by one person alone.

Reduced stress levels for key leaders also make this model attractive, as a more robust, shared leadership system does not unduly burden any single leader (Pearce, 2007). Furthermore, Lee-Davies, Kakabadse, and Kakabadse (2007) extolled the virtue of shared leadership as it exploits the wealth of talent present in an organization, capturing “energy and enthusiasm” (p. 253), thereby creating a distinct competitive advantage. Flow and creativity seem to flourish in a shared leadership environment (Hooker & Csikszentmihalyi, 2003). Moreover, teams often work better when leadership is shared (Carson et al., 2007; Mehra et al., 2006). In a study involving road maintenance teams, Hiller et al. (2006) found collective leadership to be positively associated with team effectiveness. Finally, Ensley et al. (2006) suggested, “Shared leadership appears to be particularly important in the development and growth of new ventures” (p. 228).

Limitations of Shared Leadership

In spite of the many benefits derived from a shared leadership model, one must not overlook the inherent limitations found in the research. First, resistance to the model can make implementation extremely difficult. O’Toole et al. (2002) believed that resistance stems “from thousands of years of cultural conditioning” (p. 64). They said, “We are dealing with a near-universal myth: in the popular mind, leadership is always singular” (p. 64). However, Locke (2003) disagreed with this notion, instead saying, “I think the resistance stems from reality and the laws of logic. Core values must be pushed from the top down” (p. 278). Steinert et al. (2006)

agreed that implementation of shared leadership is a universal struggle, boldly stating, “All authors emphasize that the introduction of shared leadership requires extensive preparatory work to overcome traditional professional demarcations” (p. 251).

Another shared leadership issue to consider involves decision making. Since it is sometimes difficult for a group of leaders to reach consensus, decisions can take longer to make (Miles & Watkins, 2007). Jackson (2000) pointed out, “Team attitudes, turf battles, and individual career goals” are potential obstacles to efficient decision making. Locke (2003) noted that without a clear (and shared) group mission, nothing can be accomplished. The benefits of complementary leadership are negated when agreement about organizational priorities differ (Miles & Watkins) and irreconcilable differences impede decision making and forward progress. As has already been mentioned in this paper, teams that do not encourage the airing of diverse opinions often default into a mode of groupthink (Kezar, 1998).

A third major limitation of shared leadership stems from elements of apparent conflict between a single-leader structure and team structure. Katzenbach (1998) noted that creating a meaningful purpose, commitment to team performance, and team member accountability are challenges involved in shared leadership. Locke (2003) mentioned, “No successful, profit-making company that I know of has ever been run by a team” (p. 273). He further said that equal influence among team members is not only undesirable, but rarely attainable. Given all the contingencies related to group dynamics, Seibert, Sparrowe, and Liden (2003) declared, “We should expect shared leadership to benefit group performance only under certain conditions” (p. 175). Bligh et al. (2006) shared this sentiment, assuming “shared leadership is not ideal for every team environment” (p. 309). Scott and Caress (2005) emphasized, “Shared governance is an ongoing and fluid process, requiring continual assessment and re-evaluation in order to be flexible and responsive to an ever-changing environment” (p. 4). Proper planning, commitment, and adaptation to cultural change are required to successfully implement a shared leadership model (Scott & Caress).

Conclusion and Implications

Based on a review of the literature, shared leadership can be operationally defined as a dynamic, collaborative process (Conger & Pearce, 2003) whereby influence is distributed (Carson et al., 2007) amongst a plurality of networked individuals, often referred to as teams, for the purpose of achieving beneficial outcomes for the organization. Characteristics of shared leadership teams include decentralized interaction, collective task completion, reciprocal support and skill development (Wood, 2005), shared purpose, and a unified voice (Carson et al.), all enhanced via social interaction that involves mutual accountability, partnership, equity, and ownership (Jackson, 2000).

This literature review investigates the case for shared leadership and seeks to determine if more organizations should consider adopting a shared leadership model. So then, is it time for a change to a shared leadership approach? Well, the answer largely depends on the type of organization involved. Rice (2006) touted the benefits of shared leadership and affirmed, “The principles of shared leadership are thus applicable to leaders in all types of organizations, from schools and hospitals to nonprofit organizations and corporations to group homes and independent living centers” (p. 98). However, the literature seems to indicate that some

organizations and industries present a more conducive environment for shared leadership than others.

Yukl (2006) affirmed that more research is needed to examine the spectrum of issues surrounding shared leadership. Conger and Pearce (2003) agreed, pointing out that more research on the process of shared leadership needs to occur in at least five areas: (a) the roles that can be shared, (b) the events that trigger shared leadership, (c) facilitation factors, (d) the most conducive influence approaches, and (e) stages and life cycles in shared leadership settings. In addition, more studies that measure outcomes, limits, liabilities, and pervasiveness of shared leadership will aid our understanding of this leadership approach. For now, it seems clear that organizations are just beginning to capitalize on the many benefits a shared leadership approach can offer. There seems to be no doubt that shared leadership is here to stay.

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