

Shared Leadership. A Review and Re-synthesis

John P. Ulhøi* and Sabine Müller
Business and Social Sciences, Aarhus University, Denmark
Email: *jpu@asb.dk; **sabm@asb.dk

Abstract

The aim of this paper is twofold. First, this paper comprehensively will review the conceptual and empirical literature to identify such critical underlying mechanisms which enable shared or collective leadership. Second, this article identifies the antecedents and outcomes of shared leadership according to the literature review to develop a re-conceptualised and synthesized framework for managing the organizational issues associated with shared leadership on various organizational levels. The paper rectifies this by identifying the critical factors and mechanisms which enable shared leadership and its antecedents and outcomes, and to develop a re-conceptualized and synthesized framework of shared leadership. The paper closes with a brief discussion of avenues for future research and implications for managers.

Introduction

Pearce and Conge [1] define shared leadership as “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 of both” (*Ibid.*, p. 1). Despite the interest shown by organization and management scholars, surprisingly little attention has been given to the underlying organizational processes and mechanisms that enable shared leadership. Although scattered information is available in the existing literature, very few papers have tried to produce a more complete picture. The aim of this paper is twofold. First, this paper comprehensively reviews the conceptual and empirical literature to identify such critical underlying mechanisms which enable shared or collective leadership. Second, this article identifies the antecedents and outcomes of shared leadership according to the literature review to develop a re-conceptualised and synthesized framework for managing the organizational issues associated with shared leadership on various organizational levels.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 explains the methodology and terminology used in this study. Section 3 presents an analysis (including descriptive statistics) of the extant literature of collective and shared leadership. Section 4 presents a more detailed and focused analysis of the phenomenon of shared leadership from an organizational perspective, which identifies the main enabling mechanisms, followed, in section 5, by a synthesized framework of shared leadership, its major antecedents, coordinating mechanisms and outcomes. The final section discusses the limitations of the paper, its managerial implications and directions for future research.

Methodology

The primary source of the review was the ISI Web of Science, but the references were also cross-checked with the EBSCO, JSTOR and ELIN databases. To ensure scientific

quality, the search was restricted to publications that had undergone peer review and been accepted in journals with a traditional anonymous peer-review process. The following terms were included in the title, key words and abstract of the search: “shared leadership”, “distributed leadership”, “distributive leadership”, “collaborative leadership”, “dual leadership”, “co-leadership”, “collective leadership”, “connective leadership”, “delegative/delegated leadership”, “shared management”, “distributed management”, “participatory management”, “shared governance” and “democratic leadership”.

The literature review follows the guidelines set out by Hart [2]. While it is recognized that there may be some overlap between research published under the above terms and ‘team leadership/management’, further investigation revealed that, of the 224 publications using the term ‘team leadership’ and ‘team management’.

The initial search resulted in a total of 899 references (title, name of journal, ISBN, authors, keywords and abstract), 426 of which met the peer review criteria. These references were then independently examined, and an additional 153 papers that did not address the topic of shared leadership in any detail were excluded (a complete list of papers is available on request). Finally, an analytical reading was carried out and afterwards the remaining 271 papers were systematically categorized. In order to code the articles thematically, a reading guide was developed prior to reviewing the articles as shown in table 3.

Collective, Shared and Distributed leadership research

The total population of peer-reviewed papers in mainstream (high-impact) and specialized (low-impact) journals in the period of 1966-2008 has been tracked and categorized . The evaluation of mainstream and specialized journals was carried out by researchers in the respective academic disciplines (e.g. ORG/MAN, HEAL or EDU).

As can be seen from the growth in the total number of publications, there has been a rather slow development in the field from the mid-1960s up to the present decade. There has been renewed interest in shared leadership since the late-1990s. However, it appears to be a relatively equal distribution between contributions published in general and more mainstream journals (within ORG/MAN, HEAL and EDU respectively) and more specialized and narrowly focused journals. During the coding process, it became clear that collective leadership has mainly attracted the attention of scholars in the following areas : (i) economics, organization and management theory (private sector); (ii) health care, hospital and nursing management; (iii) education and educational research; (iv) public administration (local and national governments); (v) interdisciplinary studies; and (vi) law and juridical studies. Collective, Shared and Distributed leadership concepts and definitions

Leadership can take place both at the individual and the collective level. In the former, leadership is referred to as self-leadership/self-management, which is the act of leading oneself to perform intrinsically motivating tasks [3]. Although self-leadership is admittedly interrelated [4] with shared leadership, it still remains an individual level concept proposing endogenous influences and this dimension of leadership will not be addressed further here. Shared leadership thus is a concept which includes different agents at the inter-individual level. Whereas self-leadership is associated with an individual’s ability to get help from other organizational members in carrying out a common task, shared leadership involves dynamic social interaction during which the participants lead one another in attempts to achieve collective (group or organization wide) goals [5].

Gronn [6] identified three forms of concertive agency that are associated with shared leadership: (i) spontaneously arisen collaborative modes of engagement, (ii) the development of intuitive understanding as part of close working relations between colleagues and (iii) various structural relations and institutionalized arrangements which may lead to distributed action [6: 429]. In addition, conjoint agency has been introduced to describe how agents synchronize their actions by considering their own plans and those of their colleagues, and by using their sense of organizational membership [6: 431].

As observed above, the terms sharing and distributing are used interchangeably, which may cause some confusion. According to The Cambridge Dictionary (<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/>), to share an activity means that two or more individuals each do some of the activity. To distribute, on the other hand, means to give something to others, or to spread or supply. This implies that someone (a supra-individual) is responsible for giving, spreading or supplying — in this case, leadership responsibilities and/or tasks. We argue that sharing leadership implies that no single individual in the collective (team or department) gives or distributes all or part of leadership responsibility to anyone. That everyone in the collective has an equal opportunity to undertake leadership, and overall responsibility for leading the collective is shared and supported by everyone. Moreover, different leadership roles can emerge in a group, and these roles may differ in importance over time [7], even though leadership is fully shared. This means that no one is assigned a specific role or leadership responsibility; rather, these roles emerge. Of course, it might be possible to have a single leader in a team or department who distributes (some) leadership roles and decision-making power to the other members. While this might be difficult to disqualify as distributed decision-making and localized shared leadership (on purely etymological grounds), under shared leadership (either localized in a team or department or organization-wide), it would (or should) be unthinkable not to share authority (decision-making power) completely among all participants.

An integrated framework: antecedents, agency and outcomes

There are two fundamental characteristics associated with leadership in general: influencing the direction of a deliberate and/or wanted movement, and mutual dependency between members during the movement and related task performance. Secondly, and contrary to hierarchical task assignment and coordination, shared leadership involves autonomous, yet mutually interdependent task performance. By mutual interdependence is meant reciprocal dependence between two or more members, thereby allowing for overlapping and complementary responsibilities [6]. This complementariness enables interdependent organizational members to make use of the different technical and/or emotional strengths available [6 :433]. O'Toole, Galbraith, & Lawler [8 :79] have captured the essence of mutual interdependency as "the more interdependent the work of co-leaders the more input they should solicit from affected others, and the more they need to coordinate between themselves."

Mechanisms ensuring internal alignment include interdependence and coordination [6]. The coordination of knowledge sharing, for example, is achieved via the development of a common language, understanding and mindset, and the open-ended and flexible division of labor [9]. Other mechanisms such as lateral (peer) influence [10] and co-responsibility [11] have also been identified in the literature.

Furthermore, empirically validated characteristics of shared leadership can also be found in the literature. For instance, antecedent conditions leading to the development of shared leadership were recently investigated among a sample of 59 consulting teams by Carson et al. (2007). The internal team environment (manifested as a shared purpose and social support) and external coaching support, however, were found to be key factors likely to influence the development of shared leadership [12].

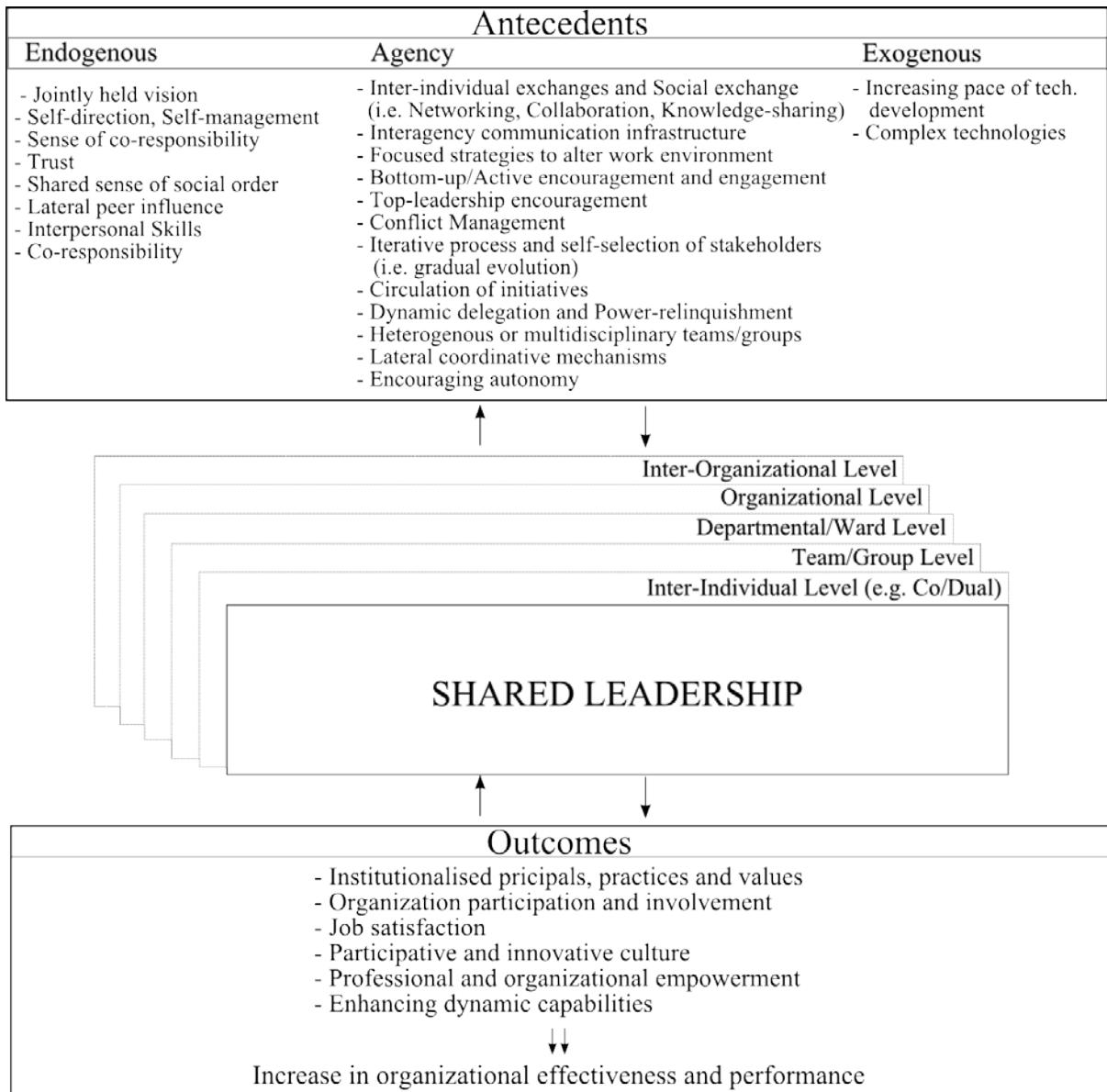
Other empirical studies have found that sharing leadership practices has important implications for discussion patterns and information-sharing in groups [13]. In particular, these studies showed that information possessed by all group members (shared information) was brought into the joint discussion earlier, and was more likely to be mentioned overall, than privileged information possessed by only one member (unshared information). Moreover, it was found that groups with a participative leader to a higher extent discussed information (both shared and privileged) than groups with a directive leader.

The adoption of shared leadership appears to be especially important in organizations that opt for continuous innovation [14]. More interestingly, the nature of the relationship tends to change from peer competition towards peer collaboration [15].

Differences in shared leadership structures have also been found to affect performance. The empirical study by [16] used social network analysis to investigate shared leadership in teams. Findings based on socio-metric data from 28 field-based sales teams showed that differences in shared leadership structures may affect team performance. A distributed-coordinated structure, for example, was found to be associated with higher team performance [16].

Efficient coordination and inter-individual influence, which have typically been studied in physical settings, suggest that context matters. Shared leadership has also been looked at in relation to virtual teams, which enables the researcher to determine whether a virtual context hinders team members' abilities to coordinate activities and influence others [17]. Longitudinal data were gathered over the course of a semester from virtual teams comprised of students from three North American universities. Findings indicate that high-performing self-managed virtual teams demonstrated significantly more leadership behavior over time compared with their low-performing counterparts. In particular, these teams displayed significantly more concentrated leadership behavior focused on performance (producer behavior) and shared leadership behavior focused on keeping track of group work (monitoring behavior) than the lower performing teams [18]. Departing from the literature above, allows us to identify key antecedents, mechanisms and outcomes of shared leadership. In figure 1 below we have sketched out a synthesized framework of the antecedents and outcomes of shared leadership. The antecedents are divided into endogenous, agency and exogenous factors. The summaries of the studies above show that shared leadership can take place at different organizational levels: (i) the inter-individual level (in the literature often referred to as co- or dual-leadership), (ii) the team or group level, (iii) the departmental level (in the hospital sector referred to as ward or unit level), (iv) the organizational level and (v) the inter-organizational level.

Figure 1. Antecedents, Coordinating Mechanisms and Outcomes of Shared Leadership



Endogenous antecedents

Endogenous antecedents appear among the individuals involved in collective and shared leadership. In order to enable shared leadership, group members need to have a joint vision, trust each other and have a sense of co-responsibility [11]; [15]. Individuals need to circulate the initiative for tasks and responsibilities [6], which creates a sense of co-responsibility within the team/group. Through partnerships and self-selection, leadership can be emergent and continuously negotiated and distributed across team/group members [11].

Furthermore, individuals must be able to take a leadership initiative, which in turn means that they must be capable of self-management and have a sense of self-direction [19] and a shared sense of social order and interpersonal skills to facilitate a mutual understanding about helping each other and reciprocity of exchange.

Agency antecedents

Agency antecedents are those activities that precede and facilitate shared leadership. Such agency antecedents include permission to select partnerships, which can lead to a more natural collaboration between all the parties involved [11]. Processes of inter-individual exchange or collaborative interaction (i.e. networking, collaborating and knowledge-sharing) may support a shared leadership culture. One of the requirements of shared leadership is that both top management and team/group members (i.e. bottom-up) must encourage autonomy [20].

Exogenous antecedents

Exogenous antecedents are external factors that influence shared leadership, such as the pace of technological development and technological complexity. Faster and more complex technology requires more than one individual to make the ‘right’ decisions. Similarly, the increasing trend towards flat organizations (and parts thereof) and longer and more formal education of the workforce are likely to affect the conditions for shared leadership.

Outcomes

The outcomes of shared leadership can be manifold. Shared leadership practices, for instance, can become institutionalized, so that sharing leadership responsibilities gain an almost ‘rule-like’ status and become an embedded part of the organizational culture in question. Another possible outcome is a more participative and innovative culture in the organization [20], which would make it more nimble in times of change and faster technological development. In addition, diverse and/or multidisciplinary work teams increase creativity due to different perspectives, better ideas and less groupthink [21]. Since the inherent nature of heterogeneous or multidisciplinary teams/groups requires different capacities, an organization’s dynamic capabilities can be positively influenced by shared leadership. Here, potential emerging conflicts need to be formally managed to ensure that they can be resolved and the team/group can move forward [22].

Multiple studies suggest that shared leadership and the responsibilities this practice encompasses improve employees’ job satisfaction, increase employee involvement and lead to greater professional and organizational empowerment, which optimally results in an increase in the organizational effectiveness [23]; [24].

Implementing a shared leadership model also has its challenges and downsides. For example, in the absence of traditional leaders, who ensure that deadlines are kept and decisions are made. What is the incentive to accomplish tasks if these are not assigned a priori and there is no formal authority to control the output and make sure that targets are achieved? Moreover, decision-making processes can be severely slowed down by a lack of clearly defined roles, responsibilities and areas of influence. Heterogeneity or diversity might also translate into mistrust within the leadership group due to stereotyping. Miscommunication due to language and translation problems can cause a lack of cohesion between group members and thus to ineffective decision-making [21]. Consensus may thus be difficult to accomplish, which means that these teams become less effective and productive [21]. Conflicts may also negatively affect the decision-making process and/or the effectiveness of the team [22]; [25]. Other research has pointed to leader corruption and power issue ([5] and a negative relationship between the cohesion construct, sense of belonging and cognitive conflict [26].

Implications

The demand for leadership does not necessarily disappear or become less simple because it changes from an individual to a collective phenomenon [7]. Rather, the lack of any formal authority is likely to give room for increased power struggles and conflicts. Consequently, there is a need for a stronger appreciation and deeper understanding of key constituents of shared leadership practice. Longitudinal process studies would enable us to expand our understanding of the important micro-dynamics at play and to learn how to deal with emerging conflicts and/or leader corruption.

Recent research has also found noteworthy cultural differences in the way shared leadership is approached and practiced. In a cross-cultural study involving information systems development in the US and Scandinavia, team abilities, contributions and knowledge transfer were found to be significant predictors of leadership emergence. More interestingly, this study also suggests that US and Scandinavian members do not use the same criteria for identifying remote team members as leaders [27]. Are some cultures more/less conducive to shared leadership? Additional theoretical and empirical work is thus needed to investigate the role of culture at both the organizational and national level.

Although the main contribution of this paper is theoretical and conceptual in nature, this article offers some crucial practical implications. Upper-echelon managers can actively promote and encourage shared leadership and they can ensure that employee training fosters shared leadership and disseminates experiences of what has or has not worked well. Managers can also undertake the role of internal coach to help the collectives (e.g. production team, R&D team or project team) keep a clear and shared sense of direction. Furthermore, they can help reassure employees that organizational norms will continue to encourage and support shared leadership.

This paper also has some important limitations. First, due to lack of space and simplicity, our framework does not take into account the role of industrial sector, nature of technology, type of ownership, firm size and age, cultural characteristics or the human capital characteristics needed for shared leadership to be successful. However, we recognize that collective forms of leadership are far from immune to significant changes and/or variations across such factors, and that these should be addressed in future research.

It can, of course, be debated whether shared leadership and distributed authority are truly democratic, since most organizations would probably recruit top managers who are not elected by those affected by their decisions. On the other hand, as argued by Gronn [28], de-monopolizing leadership and widening the sources and numbers of organizational members involved in decision-making lays the groundwork for increased democracy.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that the total volume, breadth and scope of publications on shared leadership have increased significantly, especially over the last ten to fifteen years, which suggests that shared leadership is a dynamic and expanding field. Similarly, the growing number of articles on collective and shared leadership in the more prestigious, older and more broadly focused management journals suggests that researchers have not only achieved a high scientific standard, but also that it is a healthy and mature subfield that is becoming widely acknowledged in the broader community of management scholars.

The paper makes three major contributions to the literature. Firstly, it provides a comprehensive in-depth review and analysis and profile of the field of collective and shared leadership. Secondly, it identifies a number of key enabling mechanisms and micro-foundational properties of shared leadership and outcomes, thus helping to close some of the gaps in the literature. Thirdly, this article offers a re-conceptualized and synthesized framework of the coordinative mechanisms and outcomes of shared leadership which may apply on multiple organizational levels. If shared leadership is to be perceived as a truly collective phenomenon, then there is a need to replace the simplistic leader-follower dichotomy of leadership. And, as argued in this paper, individuals are often perfectly capable of playing both roles.

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