

Shared Leadership: What is it, why is it important, and who wants it anyway?

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Wading into the leadership literature, even with a fairly refined subtopic like “shared leadership” is a little like trying to embrace the proverbial multi-armed octopus...where do you grab hold and which piece of the octopus do you have when you have finally grabbed it? It seems that everyone who has thought or written about leadership has their own version of what leadership is, how it is displayed or enacted, the role of followers, whether it ultimately makes a difference or not in the larger scheme of things, how much of it is in-born and how much can be learned, the degree of psychological insight into oneself and others necessary for effective leadership, and other similarly complex issues. The purpose of this paper will be to attempt to locate a good sampling of the current writing and research about the concept of “shared leadership” within a context of fairly contemporary thinking on leadership and then further, to discern some of the most significant differences and similarities in the field. At the same time, I will explore some of the conditions and situations in which a shared leadership approach is most likely to be effective. I take some comfort in the fact that no less an authority than Henry Mintzberg acknowledged in a recent interview that the whole notion of shared leadership is less than easily categorized. When he was asked what he thought of connected or shared leadership, he responded by saying “It depends on what it means and on who’s saying it and what they have in mind.” (Rush, 2003). Thank you, Henry.

I think it is important that I acknowledge the personal biases that I bring to this review. Much of the work I have done professionally emerged from the socio-technical redesign theory base (relying on theory developed by Emery, Trist, Pasmore, Hackman and others) and eventually morphed into the empowered and self-managing teams models common in many organizations today. In the past five years or so, I have become well-acquainted with the Appreciative Inquiry philosophy and style of organizational intervention developed by Cooperider, Srivasta, Whitney, and others. I am trained as a mediator and mediate between management peers with significant organizational responsibilities. These approaches all share a fundamental assumption that individuals and groups of individuals have within them the seeds of their own solutions to complex issues and it is the task of the facilitator/mediator/leader to help move them towards ends they can create themselves, rather than claiming to have a “right answer ” or a prescription. In that sense then, it is not surprising that I would be drawn to the portion of the leadership theory spectrum that would be most in alignment with democratic, liberal, and humanistic values as they are played out in the workplace. However, our own unexamined assumptions and past experiences with leadership make this a more difficult task than we might wish, and I have been struck by the number of the writers in this field who seem to earnestly believe they are writing from a shared leadership perspective, when in fact, I think they are not.

Locating shared leadership in a historical context

Numerous authors have noted that traditionally, thinking and research about leadership has been conceptualized around a single individual, i.e. the leader, and the relationship of that person to subordinates or followers (Pearce & Conger, 2003a; Raelin, 2003; Yukl, 2002). Various terms have been coined to convey the essence of this special individual and over time we have heard about charismatic, heroic, visionary, Stage 2, etc leaders. This conception of leadership shares some common assumptions, i.e. that the primary relationship is dyadic, that the source of the leader's wisdom is some special inner knowledge that he and only he (or rarely, she) happens to possess, that the leader's values are right and worthy. Some have framed this idea as "...leadership is something leaders possess as a individual attribute... (Drath, 2001). While there has been a distinct evolution over the past few decades away from the view of leaders as all-powerful, permissibly autocratic, and answerable to essentially only the Pope (or, in certain circumstances, the Board of Directors), the prevailing view of leadership that seems to be most popular today is what might generally be referred to as the "visionary hero" (Manz & Sims, 1991). Both in most of our large organizations and in our political system, we continue to look for the larger-than-life figure able to ride in astride a white horse and rescue us from our most complex issues and problems. This is a somewhat more enlightened version of the command-and-control leader of yore, but it is still an authority figure imbued with behaviors, traits, and characteristics we seek to study and emulate. Although we seem to prefer a bit less arrogance and imperiousness in our leaders these days and a small amount of consensus-seeking is tolerated, it is still easily criticized as weakness and "unleaderlike". As Lipman- Blumen points out about Bill Clinton, "Clinton has received an even heavier barrage of criticism for his propensity to consult widely

before acting....Thirsty for the reassurance that saturates authoritarian decision making, the fourth estate has repeatedly misread consultation, collaboration, and compromise as indecision” (Lipman-Blumen, 1996 p. 252). So while it is perhaps a sign of progress that a man like Clinton could have been elected in the U.S. in the 1990’s when he probably would not have stood a chance earlier in our history, the deep ambivalence many people felt about Clinton long before the Monica Lewinsky debacle, in my view, stems in part from his style of leadership which seems to be uncomfortable for many to embrace. In corporate life as well, we still seem to prefer the man who will “show us the Way”. The leader’s certainty dispels our deeply felt but unconscious anxiety and doubt in the view of Lipman-Blumen and others such as Ronald Heifetz. He points out that “We rally to a person, a point, or a symbol; in so reacting we expect to discover, or to be told, how to respond....We do not realize that the source of their charisma is our own yearning” (Heifetz, 1994 p. 65, 66).

Why Shared Leadership?

Against this backdrop then, how and why did a different paradigm of leadership begin to emerge? What does this new paradigm look like and what are some of its unique characteristics? While these issues are addressed by a fair number of writers, there are few areas of clear agreement, right down to how to refer to this new phenomenon. Shall we call it shared leadership, distributed leadership, connective leadership, post-heroic leadership, or something else? For a talk on leadership I recently delivered to a professional women’s group, I compiled a list of more than twenty-five terms for

leadership theory/models that purport to be a part of the “new paradigm” on leadership. For our purposes here, let’s use the term ‘shared leadership’ to refer to that form of leadership where leadership is essentially conceived of as an *activity* that can be shared or distributed among the members of an organization or group depending on the needs of the situation and the capabilities of the people involved. There are certainly differences with regard to how this is most effectively accomplished, but I think it is significant that there does appear to be agreement on the notion that leadership can be thought of separate from its incarnation in an individual person exerting downward influence on others.

Pearce and Conger offer several reasons for the emergence of this notion at this point in time. Although they point out that there have been flirtations with this idea as early as Mary Follett’s “law of the situation” in 1924, where she argued for following the lead of the person with the most knowledge of the situation at hand, shared leadership has not received a great deal of attention until fairly recently. They cite the extraordinary rise of cross-functional and other teams in recent years, as well as the need for speed and sufficient, relevant information throughout contemporary organizations as compelling reasons for a new way of thinking about leadership to begin taking shape (Pearce & Conger, 2003a). Additionally, they note that the complexity of the jobs held by some senior executives as being almost impossible to be handled by one person in today’s global and dynamic marketplace, leading in some situations to a very distinct form of shared leadership i.e. actual co-leadership in the executive suite, which may or may not ultimately prove successful.

A somewhat more political perspective on the rise of shared leadership is offered by Lipman-Blumen. She argues that the tensions of two contradictory forces, a furiously accelerating global interdependence and escalating demands around diversity, render traditional leadership practice obsolete. She claims that simply infusing traditional conceptions of leadership with more collaborative or participative options is an inadequate remedy for the challenges of leadership in our interconnected and extraordinarily complex world. In America in particular, we have been predisposed to a leadership model profoundly influenced by the frontier experience with its individualistic, power-oriented, competitive style. As we move into what she refers to as the Connective Era, she claims that nothing short of a radically new notion of leadership will suffice. Anita Roddick of the Body Shop is her prototypical example of a connective leader who merges personal, holistic ecological and socially responsible values with her company's operational philosophies and practices in the developing world. She emphasizes the full scope of "instrumental strategies" that Roddick uses like a virtuoso to ensure that all aspects of her staggeringly complex network of business/personal relationships align towards the goals she has for her company. Making money is certainly part of that goal in that it makes everything else possible, but it is viewed as insufficient by itself. She notes, in fact, that the most distinguishing feature of Stage 3 (Connective Era) leaders is their willingness to call upon "ethical instrumental action" to accomplish leadership tasks (Lipman-Blumen, 1996, p. 229).

And just how shared do we mean exactly?

Recognizing at the outset that this is a less than exact process, I have grouped most of the writers I reviewed for this paper into three broad categories which I will refer to as Shared Nothing, Shared Some, and Share All to indicate the degree of distribution of leadership activities and responsibilities I perceive in their theories/models regardless of the words chosen to express their ideas. In the Shared Nothing group, the focus remains on an individual leader with sufficient wisdom and expertise to control, however benevolently, an organization. Elliot Jaques is perhaps the clearest example of this group. Although he claims that the focus of his elaborate structural arrangements (codified in his Stratified Systems Theory model) is to enhance trust and release creativity and imagination, many of his positions seem to me to be quite the opposite. I found some of his organizational diagnosis to be provocative and insightful, but his solution comes in the form of a positivist approach with absolute and universal rules which prize rationality above all. When he claims, for example, categorically, that managers cannot mentor or deal with the potential of immediate subordinates because they have neither the breadth of perspective nor the articulated understanding of their own level of work, my own experience as a “mentee” for a terrific boss in a large corporation makes that position not credible to me. In my consulting practice, I have also seen numerous examples of managers mentoring subordinates very effectively and sometimes at considerable effort. No where does Jaques allow for the co-creation of knowledge but rather it is “out there” in the expertise of the SST formula which must be adopted in total and with no deviations (Jaques, 1996).

While Jaques expects no change in the psychological makeup of a leader because with the right structure that is essentially irrelevant, Koestenbaum places a great deal of

emphasis on that very notion. In his view, leadership can be learned by “waking up” the leadership mind and cultivating a kind of philosophical and psychological depth that allows one to embrace paradox and manage polarities. The elitist streak in his thinking is revealed however, quite clearly when he says, “Theoretically speaking then, leadership is for everyone. In practice, however, only a few understand it, and even fewer choose it” (Koestenbaum, 2002, p.200,). What is offered here is a prescription that entails using the Leadership Diamond methodology to achieve “greatness” in all things and ultimately, what is referred to as a higher state of being. Koestenbaum offers an interesting variation on the heroic model but in essence, he is coming out of that same frame of thinking where there is Shared Nothing because all the power/knowledge/emphasis stays with the individual leader.

Shared Some

In the Shared Some category I would place writers like John Kotter and Jim Collins. These authors are advocates for empowerment and fairly broad sharing of leadership roles and responsibilities. At the same time, they do not seem to me to be quite as radical in their views of the appropriate roles for leaders and managers, which is to say that neither of them seems to be advocating a fundamental change in the way business is conducted in most progressive organizations today. There is little or no emphasis on the co-creation of knowledge as a key activity of leadership, which I regard as one of the distinguishing characteristics of the Share All group. As a practitioner, I have always found Kotter’s views of organization change (i.e. his well-known Eight Step Process for

organizational transformation), as well as his distinctions between management and leadership as complementary but different systems of action, both useful and eminently reasonable (Kotter, 1996,; 1999). What troubles me now when I read his thinking is that it doesn't go quite far enough to challenge the prevailing structures of power and privilege. Perhaps it isn't an accident that Kotter has been so frequently published in the Harvard Business Review, an audience that is likely to consider themselves enlightened leaders and managers but probably not likely to be in the market for wholesale change.

Collins follows a somewhat similar path with an even keener eye to what would be marketable to the typical senior executive than I think Kotter would ever dream of doing. Collins has developed a point of view many will find seductive and inspiring, based on research that studied the performance of a select number of companies with extraordinary sustained market results over fifteen years. From an original pool of more than 1,400 companies, twenty-eight were selected for further study. Collins says he did not intend to study leadership as a particular variable, believing that there is already too much simplistic thinking on this issue, but that it emerged from the data as a significant factor in differentiating the eleven really successful firms from the others. Collins advocates a series of strategic steps with catchy names like the Hedgehog Concept, the Flywheel and the Doom Loop, getting the Right People on the Bus, etc. that allow a company to make the leap to greatness. In terms of what he has labeled Level 5 leadership, he claims that there are many people who have within them the seeds of this greatness, and it just takes the right circumstances to bring it forward. He writes that there is no "...dearth of potential Level 5 leaders. They exist all around us, if we just know what to look for" which turns out to be "...where extraordinary results exist but where no individual steps

forth to claim excess credit” (Collins, 2001,p.37). The very essence of the Level 5 leader is the paradoxical combination of “the triumph of humility and fierce resolve”.

In my view, Collins’s descriptions of the people he has come to label as Level 5 leaders put them in the category of enlightened leaders certainly, but they are at the same time so clearly “in charge” and in control, that shared leadership as a primary driving notion is not possible. Collins declines to speculate on what steps a person would need to go through to become a Level 5 leader and while he maintains that such a person is clearly not the egocentric, larger-than-life type often preferred by corporate boards, his “non-heroic heroes” seem to be different more in style than in substance. Raelin notes that these quiet but resolute people often function like more flamboyant, charismatic leaders with similar impact on their followers who are quite clear who is in charge and what the agenda is (Raelin, 2003).

Share All

In this last category of Share All, my sense is that the writers are calling for a more fundamental paradigm shift in the both the philosophy and exercise of leadership. Raelin writes that “leaderful practice” is more than empowerment—it is a far more radical notion (Raelin, 2003). I believe that the people in this category are advocating leadership that is less tightly-controlled and allows for more unexpected possibilities. It carries higher risks precisely because it is less predictable but it also transfers more of the responsibility for outcomes to the people engaged in the venture. Fundamentally, it is less ego-centric in that the leader is less concerned with his or her own agenda and more oriented towards helping others face a challenge of some variety. There is a shift away from individual achievement towards shared responsibility and collective achievement.

There is a deep sense of a relational “whole” and the relational interactions that lead to individual and organizational learning.

...Models of shared leadership envision the *who* and *where* of leadership by focusing on the need to distribute the tasks and responsibilities of leadership up, down, across the hierarchy. They envision the *what* of leadership by articulating leadership as a social process that occurs in and through social interactions, and they articulate the *how* of leadership by focusing on the skills and ability required to create conditions in which collective learning can occur. (Fletcher & Käufer, 2003, p. 24).

Some of these authors I found deeply moving as they caused me to examine my own beliefs and assumptions. Of these, I found no one more provocative and deeply insightful than Ronald Heifetz. Heifetz brings a truly original and interdisciplinary voice to the discussion of leadership, which he argues is the process of facilitating and mobilizing people’s adaptive capacity, i.e. their ability to clarify values and make progress on the problems those values define (Heifetz, 1994). Using examples from multiple arenas including business, politics, and health care, he frames leadership as an activity that can and should be performed at multiple positions in any social structure. He notes that position, title, and formal authority may often be more of an impediment than helpful in creating the “holding environment” that facilitates adaptive work. One of his most powerful examples is the story of a doctor helping a family face the implications of a diagnosis of a particularly lethal form of cancer in the husband/father. Heifetz writes that the doctor’s “...mode of operating shifted *away* from answer-giving authority toward the use of her authority to construct a relationship in which to raise and process tough

questions” (p. 85). She uses her considerable expertise not to craft a solution but to frame the questions by which the people with the problem achieve the resolution for themselves. This example also points to another premise that Heifetz insists upon, which is that the person in the leadership role must assume the strategic task of maintaining a suitable level of tension that is sufficient to mobilize people but not to overwhelm them.

Another writer whose work falls into this category for me is Karl Weick. His work on sensemaking is about “ navigating by means of a compass rather than a map” in a world that is unknowable and unpredictable. A compass makes it clearer that direction rather than location is what will assist people in determining the process that needs to be set in motion. He argues that the effective leader is one who helps others make sense of what they are facing by searching for better questions, admitting their own ignorance, channeling decisions to those with the best knowledge of the matter at hand, and crafting a compelling story. In the final analysis, Weick sees knowledge is co-created as he states “...knowledge is not something people possess in their heads but rather something people do together” (Weick, 2001, p.102).

Drath offers a point of view that compliments Heifetz and Weick in some ways, yet has a somewhat different twist. In his metaphor, he says that although we see the white caps on the ocean as “leading”, in reality it is the deep blue sea that determines the direction and capabilities of the ocean. He places a strong emphasis on the shared creation of knowledge and notes that leadership should be framed as both a communal capacity and a communal achievement. Using a social constructivist view, he explores leadership from a relational perspective with an emphasis on what he calls “relational dialogue”. It is this particular leadership principle which helps to bridge conversations

across worldviews so as to allow for sensemaking and thus, ultimately, for new possibilities to emerge. He strongly advocates developing leadership in organizations as a systemic capacity and increasing the "... capacity of the whole system to make sense of direction, commitment, and adaptive challenges...(Drath, 2001 p.165). What is perhaps a bit confusing about Drath is that he takes the position that "All leadership is shared leadership" (p. 61) in the sense that all the participants in any and every situation contribute to the set of expectations that shape the actions of leaders and followers in that situation. I think the point he is making about co-construction and collusion is probably quite valid, but his language does little except make an already messy delineation even messier.

The emphasis on fostering conditions for dialogue shows up also in the work of Lipman-Blumen when she focuses on the instrumental set of leadership behaviors she refers to "denatured Machiavellianism". This is a set of strategies and political savvy used ethically and altruistically to bridge chasms between people. Stressing that the cultural reservations of Americans towards instrumental action are not uniformly shared by other cultures, she notes that for Stage 3 or connective leaders who must deal with conditions imposed by the new global environment, this is critical for transcending the "melting-pot model" and managing the paradox of interdependence and diversity. Connective leaders easily perceive common ground and possibilities where more traditional leaders can only see division and difference. They have the ability to construct multiple and shifting coalitions and do not see the need for colleagues or constituents to support their every issue. By calling supporters to join them in the quest to make the world a better, more just place, they present others with the opportunity to make a

difference, appealing to a deeply felt need for meaning and legacy in most of us. One of the biggest obstacles to furthering connective leadership, she notes, is that confused or frightened followers or constituents may continue to demand more familiar and traditional leadership behaviors particularly in times of crisis or stress. One has only to look at the current national political scene in the U.S., particularly since 9/11, to see the validity of her claim. (Lipman-Blumen, 1996).

Raelin's work on developing "leaderful" groups (in contrast to much of the language on self-directed or leaderless teams) brings the thinking about shared leadership in business organizations to a very practical level. He stresses the notion of learning as a continuous and collective process, the key to which is transforming the attribution of incompetence in not knowing the answer to that of competence in the capacity to learn. Like Heifetz, he notes that developing a level of collective consciousness in a community is not a quick or simple process and not for the faint-of-heart. He characterizes leaderful behavior as concurrent, collective, collaborative, and compassionate in contrast to conventional leadership that he notes as serial, individual, controlling, and dispassionate. While much of his thinking I found applicable for relatively stable teams in a reasonably bounded environment, and highly appropriate for learning groups like communities of practice, some of his notions strike me as perhaps unrealistically idealistic in more transient communities like a church or political group. Since I am myself a member of a community of practice for a small group of Organization Development practitioners that has met continuously once a month for about seven years, I found his distinctions between "leaderless" and "leaderful" to be both accurate and affirming. That shift, however, was not evident in the beginning years of the group regardless of the relative

sophistication of the members with respect to group process, and that is why I question the applicability of some of his ideas to less stable groups. Some of the same notions of shared leadership are illustrated in a well-known essay by Kets De Vries where he shows how in the pygmy society of central Africa, egalitarianism and the sharing of leadership responsibilities is embedded in the fabric of life to the extent that they are “...probably as egalitarian as human societies can get” (Kets De Vries, 1999, p. 73).

Some Current Debates

While there are numerous debates within the shared leadership arena, two stand out to me as having particular salience. The first concerns the notion of co-leadership at the top of an organization. Some would agree with the view of Handy who argues that while it is fine to have distributed leadership in the middle of an organization, at the top leadership must be “personalized” because the nature of the task at this level is to provide the glue that holds the organization together (Handy, 1996). Quite an opposite view is put forth by those who say that when the challenges a company faces are so complex that they require a set of skills too broad to be possessed by one individual, co-leadership is a viable option (O'Toole, Galbraith, & Lawler III, 2002). They argue that joint leadership may not be labeled as such because “outsiders” and the investment community insist on a more traditional and formal hierarchy but that in fact, there are numerous cases where co-leadership of well-matched but differently-skilled peers has proven to be a very effective strategy. They observe that ultimately the success of co-leadership depends on how the roles originate, how complementary the skills and emotional orientations of the leaders are, how they work together, role clarity, and how they involve others on the

management team. One of the most visible examples of a situation where this form of leadership is widely acknowledged as successful is the historic partnership of William Hewlett and David Packard. Goldman Sachs is cited as an example of a company that has long used co-leaders as a matter of course. The authors conclude that despite assertions to the contrary, there are enough successful combinations that the real issue here is to “...identify the factors that improve the odds that a particular combination of leaders will succeed” (p. 82). Additionally, and not inconsequentially, in organizations using co-leadership there is also a strong emphasis on what O’Toole calls “leadership as an organizational trait”, i.e. an institutional capacity to be developed and cultivated (O’Toole, 2001).

Another area of controversy within the shared leadership domain is which, if any, core tasks must be retained by the leader. This debate is sometimes framed as the vertical vs. the horizontal leadership models. Locke advocates a position that he claims is an integrated model of top down and shared leadership where the core leadership tasks include vision, values, structuring, selection and training, motivation, fostering communication, and others. In his view, “...shared leadership supplements but does not replace hierarchical leadership” (Locke, 2003,p. 281). Again, from my perspective, his formulation is a fairly traditional one with a dose of empowerment tossed in for the troops but always at the pleasure of the vertical leader. Others raise the question of to what extent can a vertical leader serve as a catalyst for the promotion of shared leadership? As Pearce and Conger observe, Houghton, Neck, and Manz argue that an enlightened vertical leader, i.e. one who is committed to the development of self-leadership as the pathway to shared leadership and ultimately to SuperLeadership, is still

the primary catalyst and therefore, indispensable (Pearce & Conger, 2003b). Pearce and Conger note this as one of the areas most in need of further research and study.

Paradoxes of Shared Leadership

Despite the urgency of the need for new models of leadership effective for today's challenges, there are clearly inherent contradictions in the adoption of shared leadership practices. Fletcher and Kåufer capture these as falling into three major categories: that hierarchical leaders are charged with creating less hierarchical organizations, that shared leadership practices tend to "get disappeared" because of power and gender dynamics in the workplace having a disproportionate effect on women, and that the skills it takes to get the job (i.e. fast-track, competitive, individual achievement) differ significantly from the skills needed to be a relational leader (Fletcher & Kåufer, 2003). Of these, I think perhaps the least understood is the second of the three where the very practices organizations say they value and want to reward are discounted and not considered real work or competence that facilitates the organizational agenda. One has only to look at the sad state of performance review systems in most organizations (what is still being rewarded is largely individual achievement) to see the obstacle this poses for those who are inclined towards a more collaborative model. As these writers note, because there is no language of competence in organizational discourse to describe the activities of relational practice as leadership, people who practice relational leadership are not generally described as leaders but as "nice" and thoughtful people who care about other's

feelings. In that sense, they are then easily rejected as weak and not meeting the picture of the (heroic) leader.

To this we can add the dilemma clearly articulated by Locke regarding what he terms “...an assault on the importance of the individual” (Locke, 2003, p. 273). One of the challenges that I have often faced as a consultant trying to move people towards more collaborative ways of functioning is to deal with the fears and concerns that individualism as well as individual effort and reward will vanish entirely. I don’t think we have adequate answers to these concerns yet and until we do, resistance to shared leadership is likely to continue and rightfully so.

Meeting the personal challenge of shared leadership

For almost anyone to embrace the complexity and challenges of shared leadership is, I think, a step into the unknown and therefore, both anxiety producing and a heady experience. No doubt we would hope that the experience would always produce the kind of flow and creativity that some argue characterizes shared leadership—exhilaration and extreme focus that can produce almost effortless results (Hooker & Csikszentmihalyi, 2003). In my own experience, it often feels less rewarding than that, particularly when I come up against the expectations of others who are pressing me to be more directive and to have more answers instead of questions. This is not an uncommon experience for me in my current role as the head of a non-profit board struggling to make a place for itself. In those situations I think I would do well to remember Lipman-Blumen’s point that while a highly diverse and interdependent world may be very frustrating, a regression to

traditional leadership is a foolish hope, a luxury that we simply cannot afford. I think we have much to learn about this new notion of leadership but I do believe it is both the way of the future and in our best collective interest to grapple with it.

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