

Does sharing leadership actually work? An evaluation of the benefits and drawbacks of shared leadership

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Abstract

Shared leadership is being utilized in increasing measures across a spectrum of organizations. It appears to afford numerous advantages within the context of the evolving modern workforce. Most of the studies on shared leadership have focused on its benefits, but few have considered potential weaknesses. This research sought to ascertain whether the benefits that have been correlated with this leadership model are valid and what drawbacks and limitations might be associated with it. This was accomplished by surveying prominent leaders from several faith-based organizations in the United States that utilize shared leadership. Thirteen leaders from 7 organizations were interviewed. An emergent design and a qualitative approach were employed, along with a purposive sampling technique. A descriptive approach based on semi-structured interviews was adopted to help elucidate the benefits and drawbacks these groups encountered. Ten benefits that were found in the academic literature had also been observed in the organizations surveyed. These included exceptional outcomes, enhanced decision-making, complex problem solving, creative innovation, team-member fit, team synergy, organizational vitality, healthy organizational culture, individual wellbeing, and sustained growth. Five drawbacks were also discovered. These included the difficulty of the model, a potential lack of follow-through, a possible lack of efficiency, a general lack of acceptance of the model, and the danger of immature or usurping team members. The description of these five limitations is a novel contribution to this field of inquiry.

Keywords: Leadership, Shared leadership, Collaborative decision-making, Team leadership, and Decentralized leadership

1. Introduction

There has been significant interest in the topic of shared leadership in recent years. A growing body of research has accompanied this (Barnett & Weidenfeller, 2016). Much of the research on shared leadership has noted its benefits. The accompanying literature review will provide a sampling of that

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material. Potential drawbacks associated with the model have received far less attention. This study was designed to evaluate both benefits and limitations.

2. Literature Review

Shared leadership can be defined as distributed leadership on a team (Carson, Tesluk, & Marrone, 2007; Ensley, Hmieleski, & Pearce, 2006; Pearce & Sims, 2002) and collective influence within a team (Sivasubramaniam, Murry, Avolio, & Jung, 2002). It “entails a simultaneous, ongoing, mutual influence process within a team” (Pearce, 2004, p. 48). This paper will use the term shared leadership in a general way that refers to the distribution of leadership and influence on a team rather than a specific organizational structure.

There has been an emerging trend away from the top-down leadership models of the past and towards collective approaches (Friedrich, Griffith, & Mumford, 2016). Serban and Roberts (2016) note, “Leadership research, traditionally focused on the behavior of an appointed/elected leader, is rapidly shifting towards a distributed, group process form of leadership known as ‘shared leadership’” (p. 181). The focus on shared forms of leadership has been increasing steadily (Friedrich et al., 2016).

Many benefits with this model have been observed and were previously categorized under the following ten groupings (Herbst, 2017). These include exceptional outcomes, enhanced decision-making, complex problem solving, creative innovation, team-member fit, team synergy, organizational vitality, healthy organizational culture, individual wellbeing, and sustained growth.

Shared leadership has been associated with exceptional outcomes, such as team success (Shipper, Manz, Nobles, & Manz, 2014), improvements in performance (Carson et al., 2007; Daspit, Ramachandran, & D’Souza, 2014; D’Innocenzo, Mathieu, & Kukenberger, 2014; Sivasubramaniam et al., 2002), motivational and cognitive advantages (Solansky, 2008), leadership behavior and efficiency (Bergman, Rentsch, Small, Davenport, & Bergman, 2012), effectiveness (Daspit, Tillman, Boyd, & Mckee, 2013; Haward, Amir, Borrill, Dawson, Scully, West, & Sainsbury, 2003; Hiller, Day, & Vance, 2006; Wang et al., 2014), proactivity and productivity (Erkutlu, 2012; Olivia & Shao, 1996), quality and service (Olivia & Shao, 1996; Manz, Skaggs, Pearce, & Wassenaar, 2015; Perry, 2000), and exponential growth (Hesselbein & Goldsmith, 2009). These benefits are more frequently observed in knowledge and information related work (Fausing, Jeppesen, Jønsson, Lewandowski, & Bligh, 2013).

Enhanced decision-making can be another benefit of shared leadership. Distributed decision-making can be advantageous (Petrovia & Hristov, 2016). Information and knowledge sharing can help teams make better decisions (Brodbeck, Kerschreiter, Mojisch, & Schulz-Hardt, 2007; Supovitz & Tognatta, 2013). While increased bureaucracy will often impair decision-making, empowering team-members may cultivate positive change and advancement (Hamel & Zanini, 2017). The benefits of collaborative decision-making require information sharing (Panahifar, Heavey, Byrne, & Fazlollahtabar, 2015) and a diversity of team members that are proficient in communication (Deng, Lin, Zhao, & Wang, 2015). A team’s ability to share, evaluate, and process information has been reported as a critical factor affecting the quality of collaborative decision-making (McLeod, 2013).

Complex problem solving is another advantage associated with shared leadership. While the benefit is related to decision-making, it also entails information sharing. Problem-solving in complex and challenging situations requires knowledge sharing, a key feature of shared leadership (Clarke, 2012; Han, Lee, Beyerlein, & Kolb, 2018). Knowledge sharing is related to creative problem solving (Carmeli,

Gelbard, & Reiter- Palmon, 2013). Wang, Waldman, & Zhen (2014) write, “the effects of shared leadership are stronger when the work of team members is more complex” (p. 181). When decisions must be made regarding the use of limited resources, “egalitarian” teams have functioned better than hierarchical teams, with reduced conflict and greater team unity (van Bunderen, Greer, & van Knippenberg, 2018).

Creative innovation has also been associated with shared leadership (Nurmi, 1996). Shared leadership can lead to increases in creativity (Pearce, 2007; Pearce & Conger, 2003; Mohammed & Thomas, 2014; Oswald, 2018) and a “high level of administrative creativity” (Alanezi, 2016, p. 50). Hierarchical constraints can limit information sharing, creativity, and innovation, while teams that collaborate in relational ways can thrive (Tzabbar & Vestal, 2015). Information sharing can lead to significant increases in creativity (Lee, Lee, & Seo, 2011; Lee, Lee, Seo, & Choi, 2015). Shared leadership also fosters innovation (Bligh, Pearce, & Kohles, 2006; Shipper et al., 2014; Hoch, 2013), and it can even do so in a way that increases with task complexity (Hui-ying & Jian-peng, 2013). As with previous benefits, information sharing is instrumental to experiencing these benefits of shared leadership (Jiang, Gu, & Wang, 2015).

Team-member fit, a term that describes a team member’s satisfaction, involvement, and commitment levels, is another outcome of shared leadership. Job satisfaction has been related to shared leadership (Hansen & Høst, 2012; Steinert, Goebel, & Rieger, 2006; Woods & Weasmer, 2002). That can lead to ownership, participation, and involvement (Bamford-Wade & Moss, 2010; Moe, Dingsøyr, & Kvangardsnes, 2009). The benefits mentioned above can engender team-member commitment (Devos, Tuytens, & Hulpia, 2014; Lee- Davies et al., 2007) and retention (Kleinman, 2004).

Shared leadership can also improve team synergy (Somboonpakorn & Kantabutra, 2014) and has been associated with increased team performance (Carson et al., 2007) and effectiveness (Wang et al., 2014). Teams experience this as a consequence of increased trust (Drescher, Welp, Korsgaard, Picot, & Wigand, 2014). Shared leadership also fosters team coherence (Mathieu, Kuenberger, D’Innocenzo, & Reilly, 2015) and can improve team accountability (Bamford-Wade & Moss, 2010).

Organizational vitality is also related to shared leadership. Shared leadership helps organizations utilize their team members' strengths, abilities, and leadership potential (Miles & Watkins, 2007). Distributing leadership can also help them make the best use of all the talent that exists across their staff (Lee-Davies, Kakabadse, & Kakabadse, 2007). This can be better achieved on shared leadership teams since these teams distribute the expertise needed for organizational success across a broader array of qualified leaders (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004).

Organizational culture is something that evolves from the leadership of an organization (Schein, 2009). Shared leadership, like any other type of leadership model, has the potential to uniquely impact the organizational culture in which it operates. Indeed, this leadership model is related to knowledge sharing cultures (Taylor, 2013), and cultures of inquiry and collegiality in school settings (Khourey-Bowers, Dinko, Hart, 2005). Shared leadership can also foster cultures of organizational adaptability (Laloux, 2014). Adaptable cultures can also accommodate positive organizational change, something evident in shared leadership (Park & Kwon, 2013). Shared leadership can also help facilitate organizational sustainability (Pearce et al., 2013).

Individual wellbeing has also been associated with shared leadership. As previously noted, shared leadership can improve job satisfaction, participation, involvement, commitment, and retention. One

study even found that it can lead to reduced role confusion, role overload, role conflict, and job stress (Wood & Fields, 2007). Shared leadership can also lead to fitness benefits, healthful regeneration, increased engagement, and stress management (Lovelace, Manz, & Alves, 2007).

Sustained growth is another benefit of shared leadership. Pearce, Manz, and Akanno (2013) surmised, “decentralized, shared leadership was a better predictor of firm growth rates than centralized, vertical leadership” (p. 250). Malburg (1997) described “explosive growth” as a typical feature of “flat organizational structures” (p. 67). David Thompson explained that sharing leadership between co-directors with different but complementary strengths was a common feature of billion-dollar enterprises (as cited in Hesselbein & Goldsmith, 2009). Marcus Buckingham (2005) has also noted how this has been typical in many successful technology companies (p. 274).

3. Theoretical Framework

Although the academic literature on this topic was full of research that supported the benefits of shared leadership, there was a conspicuous absence of research on its drawbacks. This project attempted to investigate the benefits mentioned above and probe for possible limitations.

4. Methodology

This qualitative investigation employed a descriptive approach, which utilized semi-structured interviews. This allowed for a better understanding of the antecedents and outcomes of shared leadership in Christian organizations, a sector that has not received adequate attention in this field. Shared leadership is a model of leadership that can be found in the Christian New Testament (Hellerman, 2013; Strauch, 2003). A significant number of Christian churches and organizations are embracing this type of leadership, but there have only been a small number of studies on shared leadership in this arena. There has also been minimal research concerning the drawbacks of shared leadership. For these reasons, the focus of this research was centered on Christian ministries utilizing shared leadership. A strategy of emergent design was employed. Purposive sampling led to the selection of 13 leaders from seven evangelical organizations in the United States that utilize shared leadership. The participants’ data have been kept anonymous to minimize bias and ensure accuracy. The following four questions provided the foundation for the semi-structured interviews.

Question 1: Which benefits associated with shared leadership have you observed in your organization?

Question 2: What impact has shared leadership had on your organization (include quantifiable outcomes like innovative solutions, organizational growth, etc., and climate outcomes like work environment, relationships, etc.)?

Question 3: What impact has shared leadership had on you (personal growth, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, motivation, etc.)?

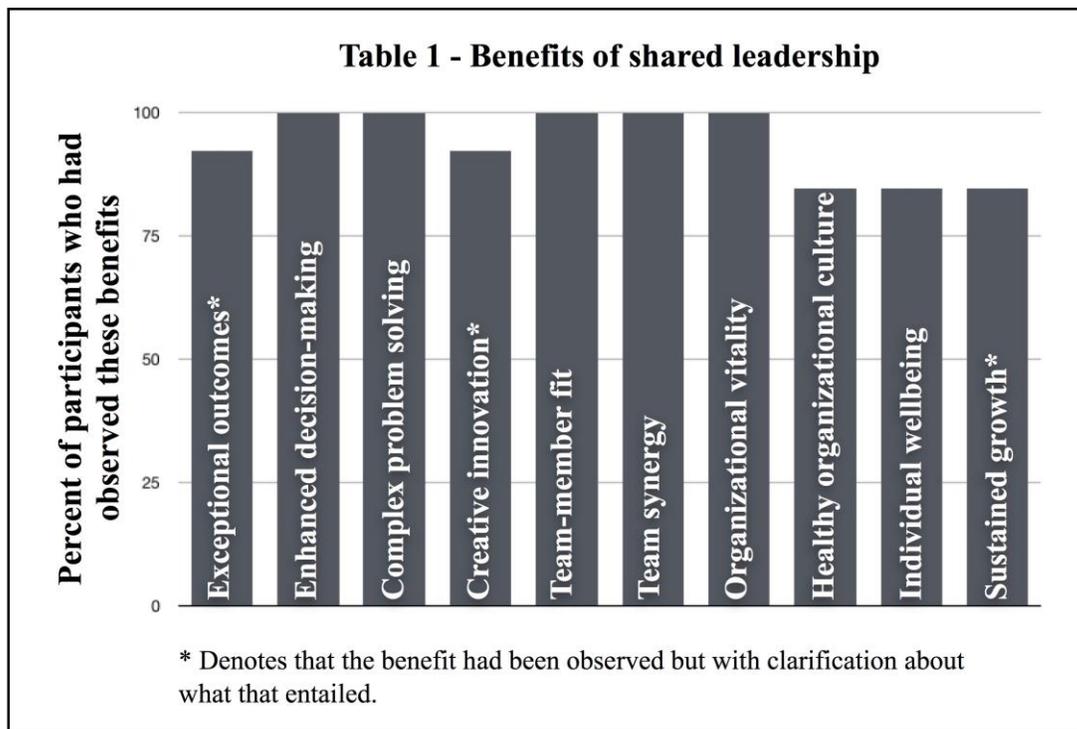
Question 4: What negative outcomes associated with shared leadership have you observed in your organization?

5. Data Analysis

Three interviews were conducted in person, and ten were administered by phone. All interviews were consensually recorded. Transcription was done with Trint software. Analysis was completed with MaxQDA-12 qualitative data analysis software.

6. Results of the Study

All of the participants had observed enhanced decision-making, complex problem solving, team-member fit, team synergy, and organizational vitality. A total of 92.3% of the leaders surveyed affirmed their experience of exceptional outcomes. Two respondents mentioned that this was true, but that the term “exceptional outcomes” could be interpreted in different ways. Similarly, 92.3% of the participants reported creative innovation, with one respondent mentioning that the term could be interpreted in different ways as well. A total of 84.6% of the participants had observed healthy organizational culture, individual wellbeing, and sustained growth. Concerning sustained growth, 4 leaders were careful to mention that growth could be interpreted in different ways. Some of those surveyed experienced numerical growth while others perceived this benefit in other legitimate capacities. Table 1 below provides a summary of these data.



The potential drawbacks of shared leadership also needed to be considered, since there has been far less attention given to these in the academic literature. The leaders interviewed were queried on this subject as well. In this case, five potential drawbacks surfaced. These included the difficulty of the model, a potential lack of follow-through, a possible lack of efficiency, a general lack of acceptance of the model, and the danger of immature or usurping team members. More attention will be given to each below.

One drawback that became evident was the inherent difficulty of the shared leadership model. One of the respondents stated that sharing leadership is the hardest way to do leadership but clarified that it is also the best way to do leadership. Another participant explained the difficulty his team had experienced in learning how to lead collaboratively. The structure that had evolved on their team was somewhat

complex and had not come easy to them. Although these leaders believed in the model and had experienced success with it, they were also aware that making shared leadership work took time and effort.

Another problem some of those interviewed had encountered was the possibility for a lack of follow-through. One leader described this weakness, calling it an “organizational sand trap.” He added, “In every form of governance there is going to be weaknesses. In this one, it can be easy to hide behind one another, procrastinate.” He noted the need for accountability. Many agreed with that conclusion. One articulated that this way, “Absent of a real written, mutually agreed upon accountability culture, there is a great possibility that because everyone owns something nobody owns it and nothing gets done.” Several participants shared similar concerns and emphasized the importance of accountability.

Another drawback that was reported was the potential for a lack of efficiency. One leader summarized this risk admitting that his team had at times gone “round and round on certain things” in a way that could be described as “anti-productive.” Although many of those surveyed realized the risk of a lack of efficiency, they also noted that efficiency was not always the only consideration. In the context of education, Williamson and Blackburn (2019) noted, “When it comes to time, leaders have to weigh the slower decision process against the benefits that come from setting aside time for discussion and analysis of alternatives” (Williamson & Blackburn, 2019, pp. 22-23).

Another difficulty that surfaced was the general lack of acceptance of the model, in the public and even among followers. Some of those surveyed pointed to the status quo of hierarchy and top-down leadership, and the way these traditional styles had conditioned people to think about leadership. Many people, familiar only with a hierarchal approach, can have a hard time accepting a shared model. Concerning shared leadership, one leader noted that some people “just cannot embrace it. It is too much for them. It is just too foreign for them. It does not make sense to them. It is a culture clash.” Another agreed, saying that for most people, “This is a very foreign kind of thing.” Related to this general lack of acceptance is the finding that those with existing high distinctions within an organization tend to be the most resistant to adapting to shared leadership models. This was corroborated in a study of physicians within the Veterans Health Administration (Stewart, Astrove, Reeves, Crawford, & Solimeo, 2017).

A final risk that several participants noted with this model is the danger of immature or usurping team members. This drawback surfaced more than any other. This risk is also one that had been hinted at in the academic literature. Timperley (2005) warned of the danger of a “distribution of incompetence” in shared leadership (p. 417). One leader described this pitfall stating, “It is important not to have divisive people in there, though because divisive people can ruin the whole party really quickly.” Another added, “I suppose it could be a disaster if you got a bunch of people on the board that just want to argue with each other.” The leaders that highlighted this risk were adamant that teams had to get to a place of maturity, trust, and relational strength to be able to circumvent this obstacle.

7. Conclusions

The present study classified many of the benefits of shared leadership that have been found in the academic literature under ten specific categories. These included exceptional outcomes, enhanced decision-making, complex problem solving, creative innovation, team-member fit, team synergy, organizational vitality, healthy organizational culture, individual wellbeing, and sustained growth. The leaders interviewed in this investigation affirmed these outcomes in their organizations. These same

leaders also highlighted five potential drawbacks. These included the difficulty of the model, a potential lack of follow-through, a possible lack of efficiency, a general lack of acceptance of the model, and the danger of immature or usurping team members.

Future research should further investigate the five drawbacks this study uncovered. It would also be essential to expand on this investigation by considering other potential pitfalls to this model of leadership. This survey only interviewed leaders from shared leadership teams that were committed to this model and experiencing success with it. Future research might investigate attributes that have led to the failure of teams utilizing this model that did not succeed.

This investigation confirmed many of the benefits that have previously been associated with shared leadership. It also uncovered five potential drawbacks. It seems evident that experiencing the positive outcomes of shared leadership requires the ability to navigate past its drawbacks. Shared leadership really does work but, like most things, it works best when done correctly.

8. Acknowledgments

Alexander Strauch, Larry Osborne, and Joseph Hellerman were instrumental in designing and coordinating many of the details of this project. Brent Powell, Jon Thaddeus Harless, and Howard Owens were also extremely helpful in the dissertation phase of this research.

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