

## **SHARE Leadership to Solve Global Problems**

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### **Abstract**

The COVID-19 pandemic provided a modern example of a global catastrophe that necessitated an international response. Since the world is made up of a multitude of countries, organizations, and leaders, global solutions will inevitably require leadership sharing. There is not an individual nation, organization, or leader sufficient for a universal mitigation. A collaborative approach is necessary. As with any leadership style or method, shared leadership can be done poorly or it can be done well. When it is done well, it often leads to incredible results. This paper presents a review of a collection of the literature that exists on shared leadership. This review has surfaced five elements that are crucial for effectively sharing leadership. These can be summarized into the SHARE acronym: Strengthening relationships, Having a clear structure, Addressing problems collaboratively, Releasing information, and Enlisting diverse strengths. A more robust implementation of these five features could have led to stronger shared leadership and better outcomes in the coronavirus pandemic. Fostering these attributes in the global community will undoubtedly make the world better prepared to adequately address future crises. The human toll, economic costs, and worldwide risks at stake should encourage politicians, professionals, and people of the world to SHARE leadership.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Coronavirus, Pandemic, Shared leadership, and Collaborative decision-making.

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## **1. Introduction**

In a world with nearly 200 countries, thousands of agencies, and hundreds of thousands of leaders at all levels of society, any approach to the resolution of a global problem will inevitably require a collaborative endeavor. Worldwide crises do not permit the luxury of individualistic leadership; they demand the coordinated response of leaders and organizations who work together for a common, global good. Fortunately, shared approaches to leadership have been associated with many positive results, including exceptional outcomes, enhanced decision-making, complex problem solving, creative innovation, team-member fit, team synergy, organizational vitality, healthy organizational culture, individual health, and sustained growth (Herbst, 2017).

The COVID-19 pandemic has provided an example of an international problem that requires a unified, collaborative response. Shared leadership is a practice that can help. It has proven useful in many different areas, including crisis health situations (Pearce, Manz, & Sims, 2014). There are features of shared leadership that, if implemented correctly, can dramatically improve outcomes to pandemics and other global catastrophes. There were examples of positive shared leadership during this crisis, as well as ones in which leadership could have been shared more successfully. The most fundamental elements of successful shared leadership will be the focus of this paper.

## **2. How to Effectively SHARE Leadership**

Leadership can be shared poorly or it can be shared well. Experiencing success with this model of governance requires sharing leadership effectively. The potential of shared leadership is related to the specific ways the approach is undertaken. Important elements of successful shared leadership include relationships, structure, collaboration, information sharing, and utilizing the talents of a diversity of team members. Each will be considered in more detail below.

### **Strengthen relationships**

Leadership is relational in nature and various new genre approaches to leadership, like emotional intelligence, LMX theory, and transformational leadership, are overtly so. Friedrich, Griffith, and Mumford (2016) explain that a “network of relationships can be viewed as collective leadership itself” (p. 315). Shared leadership is also highly relational (Wood & Dibben, 2015).

Shared leadership has been described as “a relational phenomenon whereby leadership and influence are distributed and reciprocated” (Barnett & Weidenfeller, 2016, p. 341). Unsurprisingly, Barnett and Weidenfeller (2016) have demonstrated that the strength of shared leadership in a group is related to

the prevalence of relationships on a team (p. 341). Friedrich et al. (2016) found that team interconnectedness, trust, and cohesion were essential to leadership sharing. As team cohesion improves so can team performance (Bjornali, Knockaert, & Erikson, 2016; Danish, Aslam, Shahid, Bashir, & Tariq, 2015). This can also lead to individual team member success (Carboni & Ehrlich, 2013).

Leadership sharing requires strong relationships. Attention to relational attributes is an important antecedent of successful shared leadership. It should not be overlooked in collaborative approaches to global-scale problem solving.

### **Have a clear structure**

How decentralized organizations structure themselves impacts their overall performance as well (Mehra, Smith, Dixon, & Robertson, 2006). Laloux (2014), Robertson (2015), and Pearce et al. (2014) have described specific shared structures in much more detail.

Laloux (2014) outlines three main structures: parallel teams, webs of individual contracting, and nested teams (p. 325). Each will be briefly considered here.

The parallel team structure is epitomized by collaboration between teams composed of team members with specific roles that are determined by the team (Laloux, 2014). Teams oversee their own planning, finances, and staffing (Laloux, 2014). Buurtzorg, a Dutch healthcare provider that employs more than 7,000 nurses, is an example of the parallel team structure (Laloux, 2014). Within this structure, teams of 10-12 nurses provide care for up to 50 patients in a given area. They are self-managed and responsible for all the aspects of their work.

Webs of individual contracting also utilize autonomous teams but handle roles differently (Laloux, 2014). Within this model, the team members themselves, not the team, decide their own roles but the team is then responsible for ensuring accountability for the responsibilities associated with those roles (Laloux, 2014). Morning Star, the world's leading tomato processing company, uses this type of structure (Laloux, 2014). Morning Star is composed of 23 teams, each made up of self-managing co-workers who all have decision-making authority, provided they consult the co-workers their decisions will impact. There is no hierarchical management whatsoever at the company.

Teams within the nested team structure operate like teams in the parallel team structure but are organized into a larger organizational network (Laloux, 2014). Holacracy is a type of nested team structure (Laloux, 2014). Zappos, which uses Holacracy, is a successful online shoe and clothing sales company (Denning, 2015; Useem, 2015). Zappos has 1500 employees with individually defined roles who work on different teams that collaborate together.

Holacracy is a meticulously engineered shared leadership structure that has become more and more popular in recent times (Robertson, 2015). In fact, as of the time of this publication, more than 1,000 organizations are using this model of shared leadership (“Holacracy worldwide,” 2020). Holacracy utilizes a roles-based approach to leadership sharing (Robertson, 2015). This is a feature that is common in decentralized structures and it will be further addressed shortly.

Pearce et al. (2014) categorize shared leadership structures into four main models. These are rotated shared leadership, integrated shared leadership, distributed shared leadership, and comprehensive shared leadership (Pearce et al., 2014). Rotated shared leadership involves transitioning leadership according to a timeframe or plan. Alcoholics Anonymous, an organization which helps members overcome addiction, uses this approach (Pearce et al., 2014). Integrated shared leadership happens when leadership is shared according to the abilities, talents, or availability of specific leaders. Southwest Airlines employs integrated shared leadership (Pearce et al., 2014). Distributed shared leadership involves allocating leadership to specific roles and spreading those “roles widely within an organization” (Pearce et al., 2014, p. xvii). Some Christian mega-churches have successfully implemented distributed models (Pearce et al., 2014). Finally, comprehensive shared leadership is an approach that involves sharing leadership broadly throughout an entire organization and “combining all of the types in a highly advanced shared influence process” (Pearce et al., 2014, p. 107). The Panda Restaurant Group and Panda Express chain have experienced success with this type of structure (Pearce et al., 2014).

These descriptions and examples of shared leadership structures have all included, in varying degrees, a focus on roles. Roles are an important part of shared leadership (Youngs, 2014). The modern workforce has evolved to utilize the strengths and abilities of individual team members embodying specific roles and collaborative teams (Deng, Lin, Zhao, & Wang, 2015). Role differentiation can help establish effective teams (Ancona & Caldwell, 1988) and team members can approach these roles with unique personality traits, talents, skills, goals, and contributions (Mathieu, Tannenbaum, Kukenberger, Donsbach, & Alliger, 2015). Mathieu, Tannenbaum, Kukenberger, Donsbach, & Alliger (2015) summarize, “team composition serves as the foundation upon which other team factors are built, and represents a key enabling feature of teams” (p. 7).

There are different approaches to establishing team roles. Some have articulated specific team roles (Belbin, 1993; Batenburg, Walbeek, & Maur, 2013). Others envision roles as “emergent phenomena” that develop according to “situational demands, members’ work histories, or the extent to which teams have rigid or loosely defined positions (if positions at all)” (Mathieu et al., 2015, p. 25).

Shared leadership structures attempt to meet the leadership needs of an organization by dividing them up across a larger group of leaders (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004). The structural element is an important feature of shared leadership and team member roles are a fundamental aspect of organizational structures. When relationships are strong and the structures are clear, problems can be addressed collaboratively.

### **Address problems collaboratively**

Collaborative decision-making has been associated with real benefits (Petrovia & Hristov, 2016). A formal shared decision-making process can help achieve the benefits of collaborative decision-making (Bourgault, Drouin, & Hamel, 2008). Shared decision-making can lead to better results than individual decision-making but these outcomes necessitate the sharing of information among team-members (Brodbeck, Kerschreiter, Mojisch, & Schulz-Hardt, 2007; Supovitz & Tognatta, 2013). Information sharing will be discussed in more detail soon.

There are different ways to approach collaborative decision-making. Some rely on consensus (Pearce et al., 2014). Others delegate it to responsible roles but require those roles to solicit the input of team members (Laloux, 2014). Either way, collaborative teamwork can improve problem-solving and creativity (Nurmi, 1996). It does this by inviting the input of a wide variety of expertise to contribute to a solution. It can also improve accountability (Bamford-Wade & Moss, 2010). It ensures a plurality of team members can safeguard decisions from oversight and biases. Groupthink, which can be disastrous, can be magnified in hierarchy (Bénabou, 2013; Rhode, 2006). Shared decision-making is not always the easiest and not always the fastest approach to decision-making but its benefits can make the up-front costs worth it (Hong & Banerjee, 2012).

Shared leadership can lead to greater innovation (Bligh, Pearce, & Kohles, 2006; Hoch, 2013; Shipper, Manz, Nobles, & Manz, 2014; Tzabbar & Vestal, 2015). In a survey of 285 people on 95 innovative teams, Hui-ying and Jian-peng (2013) found that “shared leadership has a more significant impact on innovation performance under the condition of high task complexity.” Shared leadership can also result in increased creativity (Alanezi, 2016; Mohammed & Thomas, 2014; Pearce, 2007). Both innovation and creativity are commonplace in collaborative teamwork (Nurmi, 1996). Creativity and innovation

are important attributes of collaboration and they are essential in today's dynamic environment. The opportunities and obstacles associated with rapid global change are important reasons for emphasizing "a flat organization with little hierarchy" (Karlgaard & Malone, 2015, p. 219).

### **Release information**

Information sharing is an important aspect of shared leadership. As stated previously, collaborative decision-making can be beneficial but its benefits depend on the sharing of information (Brodbeck, Kerschreiter, Mojisch, & Schulz-Hardt, 2007; Supovitz & Tognatta, 2013). Team members cannot adequately address problems in a collaborative way when they do not have all the information that is available.

Information sharing is important in the modern work setting (Brodbeck et al., 2007; Hollmann, Scavarda, & Thomé, 2015; McLeod, 2013; Panahifar, Heavey, Byrne, & Fazlollahtabar, 2015), but can be stifled in hierarchical contexts (Reitzig & Maciejovsky, 2015). It is integral to collaborative decision-making (Hollmann et al., 2015; Panahifar et al., 2015). This is true generally but even more so in the information age (Pearce & Manz, 2005).

Information sharing is essential to experiencing creativity in shared leadership contexts (Carmeli & Paulus, 2015; Lee, Lee, Seo, & Choi, 2015). Lee, Lee, and Seo, (2011) surveyed 249 people across 40 teams and found that "shared leadership, knowledge sharing and cognition-based trust significantly influence team creativity." Teams that share information and evaluate the information brought by different team members in systematic ways can make better decisions (McLeod, 2013) and sharing information can contribute to creative problem solving (Carmeli, Gelbard, & Reiter-Palmon, 2013). It can also improve problem solving in challenging and complex situations (Clarke, 2012). Information sharing is a characteristic that is associated with shared leadership across much of the academic literature.

### **Enlist diverse strengths**

Diversity among team members is another feature that should be considered. Shared leadership has been "strongly associated with team performance in more diverse teams" (Hoch, 2014, p. 541). Hoch (2014) adds that shared leadership can:

enhance the benefits inherent to diversity, such as the sharing of non-redundant and non-overlapping information. Specifically, higher levels of shared leadership may help team members draw upon their information and knowledge related to their diverse experience backgrounds, which will enhance team performance. (p. 545)

Diversity can improve performance on top management teams, but that requires cohesion among team members (Bjornali et al., 2016). Diversity can produce both positive and negative effects in teams (Nederveen, Van Knippenberg & Van Dierendonck, 2013). It is not always easy working with or successfully integrating with people who are different from oneself. Diversity can lead to “ambient disharmony” among team members (Chua, 2013, p. 1545). But, there can be great value in diversity. Teams that are not diverse are more likely to experience “average effectiveness,” whereas diverse teams can be either “highly effective” or “highly ineffective” (Alder & Gunderson, 2008, p. 140).

Deep-level diversity is a term that describes psychological diversity; this is very different from surface level diversity (Price, Harrison, Gavin, & Florey, 2002). Mathieu et al. (2015) explain:

Teams that have an optimal mix of members’ knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics (KSAOs) are better positioned to work well together and to perform effectively than are teams composed of a less-optimal combination of members. (p. 7)

Teams with deep level diversity, composed of differences in experience, abilities, education, talents, expertise, and skills, can thrive.

Sometimes different perspectives within a diverse team can lead to a level of conflict in problem solving. This can actually be a good thing. Schulz-Hardt, Jochims, and Frey (2002) explain:

Decision-making groups in organizations are often expected to function as a ‘think tank’ and to perform ‘reality testing’ to detect the best alternative. A biased search for information supporting the group’s favored alternative impairs a group’s ability to fulfill these requirements. (p. 563)

Solution-oriented conflict “can have a productive impact upon the creative process” (Crossley, 2006, p. 33). Lê and Jarzabkowski (2015) explain that “conflict leads to increased scrutiny of information and, consequently, better decisions” (p. 440). In summary, “some conflict actually helps bolster and refresh organizations” (Flink, 2015).

Teams with deep level diversity are able to analyze problems from a variety of perspectives. This can contribute to synergy and performance (Rink & Ellemers, 2010). It is an important feature of successful teams but it does take time to develop (Price et al., 2002).

Shared leadership can produce tremendous benefits. Strengthening relationships, having a clear structure, addressing problems collaboratively, releasing information, and enlisting diverse strengths have all been associated with effective shared leadership. Each of these approaches could have been better utilized in the mitigation of the COVID-19 crisis.

### 3. Conclusion

Five elements of successful shared leadership have been addressed. These attributes can be summarized with the SHARE acronym: Strengthening relationships, Having a clear structure, Addressing problems collaboratively, Releasing information, and Enlisting a diversity of strengths. Each will be considered in light of the coronavirus pandemic below.

Strengthening relationships is critically important. The world is a diverse place and its nations have numerous languages, complex histories, unique cultures, different needs, and occasionally conflicting objectives. Addressing global issues, like the COVID-19 pandemic, necessitates a level of collaboration that can be greatly enhanced by strengthening international relationships. Unfortunately, longstanding disagreements can prevent needed cooperation. For example, the United States offered assistance to Iran (“United States Offers Assistance to the Iranian People,” 2020), but previous tensions seem to have limited the ability for these two nations to work together. A healthier relationship might have mitigated this. Stronger relationships are integral to a shared global response.

Having a clearer structure could have helped as well. Certain organizations, like the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations (UN), have provided a level of structure for the international effort. For example, the UN has been overseeing a global, science-based response to the coronavirus (“UN mobilizes global cooperation” 2020). Still, the structural element of the worldwide endeavor could have been handled better.

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the importance of addressing problems in a more collaborative way. The American travel ban on Europe was one glaring example of the need for global teamwork. On March 11, United States President Donald Trump issued a travel ban for non-American citizen travelers coming from Europe (“Homeland Security,” 2020). European Union leaders were frustrated that President Trump had not consulted them first and noted that the response to the crisis required “cooperation rather than unilateral action” (“Coronavirus: EU condemns Trump travel ban,” 2020). A collaborative approach could have safeguarded strategic relationships while also enabling partners to determine the best plan of action.

Information sharing, especially at the onset of the pandemic, could have been much better. Releasing information on the contagious nature of the coronavirus could have saved lives and might have helped mitigate the outbreak at an early stage. Chinese authorities had at least some evidence of potential human-to-human transmission in the first week of December. Huang et al. (2020) explain:

The first fatal case, who had continuous exposure to the market, was admitted to hospital because of a 7-day history of fever, cough, and dyspnoea. 5 days after illness onset, his wife, a 53-year-old woman who had no known history of exposure to the market, also presented with pneumonia and was hospitalised in the isolation ward. (p. 500)

Although more research needs to be done, upticks in hospital traffic and search engine data in Wuhan indicate that the virus may have been spreading as early as October (Okanyene, Rader, Barnoon, Goodwin, & Brownstein, 2020).

Whatever the case, at least some research seems to indicate there was evidence that the virus was spreading long before it was publicized. It is also hard to imagine that it could have taken China and the WHO anywhere from six weeks to three months to determine the contagious nature of this virus. Still, the WHO continued to advise against China travel restrictions as late as January 9th (“WHO Statement,” 2020), and Wuhan health authorities continued insisting, into late January, that human-to-human transmission was not suspected (“Wuhan Municipal Health Commission,” 2020). More transparent information sharing could have made a drastic impact on how the world prepared for and responded to the pandemic.

Enlisting diverse strengths has become a global response need too. The pandemic spread beyond the realm of biology and health and affected global economies, power structures, food supplies, and more. The importance of procuring a diversity of medical, scientific, economic, political, and other support is evident.

Future research should consider these five attributes of effective shared leadership. It should evaluate these in relationship to the many domains that were affected by this crisis. Leadership sharing across social, economic, scientific, and geo-political domains should be considered. Investigations like these could help nations develop and implement better protocols for sharing leadership practices on an international scale and it might help prepare them to better handle global crises.

In summary, any response to a global problem will require shared leadership. Sharing leadership well requires strengthening relationships, having a clear structure, addressing problems collaboratively, releasing information, and enlisting a diversity of strengths. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted many of these issues. Promoting the competent practice of shared leadership and continuing to improve in areas of weakness will undoubtedly help prepare the world to better address future international calamities.

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