

**So, What is Shared Leadership Anyway?**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines a portion of the leadership theory spectrum purporting to describe shared leadership models. The paper suggests that some researchers carry their images of heroic and charismatic leaders into their models of shared leadership in such a way as to negate the essence of a leadership conception that genuinely distributes leadership work throughout the organizational hierarchy. In this conception, leadership theory is focused less on individuals and more on the social processes that occur in and through social interactions. The paper divides shared leadership models into three categories that differ with respect to the degree of control retained by the nominal leader.

## So, What is Shared Leadership Anyway?

Wading into the leadership literature for anyone other than a bona-fide leadership scholar 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 his or her own version of what leadership is. Theorists present claims regarding how it is displayed or enacted, the role of followers, whether it ultimately makes a difference in the larger scheme of things, how much is in-born, how much can be learned, the degree of psychological insight into oneself and others necessary for effective leadership, and other similarly complex issues. Even within the more contemporary realm of leadership theory emphasizing collaborative models, there is so much confusion regarding terms that for most people that the ability to discern significant differences and similarities in the field becomes over whelming. Within the even more restricted domain of what some theorists call “shared leadership”, how does someone make sense of competing claims for this *brand* of leadership over that *brand*?

No less an authority than Henry Mintzberg acknowledged this in a recent interview. 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). If someone who has devoted his life’s work to studying leadership finds it less than clear, how does anyone else interested in organizational improvement begin to think about it? Well, one way is to look beneath the labels and rhetoric and to discern the underlying assumptions that inform the thinking about shared leadership.

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 often mediate conflicts 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. If we cannot help the people in organizations who want to expand their leadership capabilities to make informed judgments about the appropriateness and utility of any given leadership model for their organization, how can we expect to raise the bar regarding the quantity and quality of organizational leadership?

### *The Myth of the Lone Ranger*

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, 2003; Raelin, 2003; Yukl, 2002). Writers used or coined various terms to convey the essence of this special individual. 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). 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 almost magical 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 we tolerate a small amount of consensus-seeking, consensual leaders are still often criticized as weak 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). The deep ambivalence many people felt about Clinton long before the Monica Lewinsky debacle, in my view, stems in part from their discomfort with his style of leadership. Social psychologists have demonstrated that public consistency translates to a perception of trustworthiness and reliability, whereas someone who is inconsistent is viewed as uncertain and unstable (Cialdini, 2001). The last presidential election demonstrates that notion amply.

In corporate life as well, we still seem to prefer the man (or rarely, even now, the woman) 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? For all of the discussion about leadership, 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, post post-heroic, 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 growing agreement on the notion that leadership can be conceptualized as a set of distributed activities separate from their incarnation in an individual person exerting downward influence on others.

Pearce and Conger offer several reasons for the recent emergence of this notion. 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, 2003). 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. Particularly in America, 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 Roddick sees that as insufficient by itself. Lipman-Blumen 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 (1996, p. 229).

*And just how shared do we mean... exactly?*

One way to think about the shared leadership spectrum is to group writers on leadership into three broad categories. This could entail an enormous list so I have selected just a few of those who claim to be offering shared leadership models. I refer to these as *Share Nothing*, *Share 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 Share Nothing group, the focus remains on an individual, benevolent leader with sufficient wisdom and expertise to control an organization. Elliot Jaques is perhaps the clearest example of this group.

Although he claims that the focus of his Stratified Systems Theory model (SST) is to enhance trust and release creativity and imagination, many of his positions suggest quite the opposite. Some of his organizational diagnoses are 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. In my consulting practice, I have also seen numerous examples of managers mentoring subordinates very effectively and sometimes at considerable effort. Nowhere does Jaques allow for the co-creation of knowledge. Rather, knowledge is “out there” in the expertise of the SST formula, which must be adopted in total and with no deviations (Jaques, 1996).

Jaques expects no change or growth in the psychological makeup of a leader because with the right structure built into the organization that becomes essentially irrelevant. Peter Koestenbaum, in contrast, places a great deal of emphasis on that very notion. In his view, we can learn leadership by “waking up” the leadership mind. This permits the cultivation of 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). He offers a prescription that entails using the Leadership Diamond methodology to achieve “greatness” in all things and ultimately, what he refers to as a higher state of being. Koestenbaum offers an interesting variation

on the heroic model but in essence, he too comes from the frame of *Share Nothing* because all the power/knowledge/emphasis stays with the individual leader.

### *Share some*

In the *Share Some* category, I would place writers like John Kotter and Jim Collins. These authors are advocates for empowerment and a broad sharing of leadership roles and responsibilities. At the same time, neither of them seems to be advocating a fundamental change in the way most progressive organizations currently conduct business. 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 often used 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 (Kotter, 1996; 1999). However, Kotter does not go very far in challenging the prevailing structures of power and privilege. Perhaps it is not an accident that Kotter has been so frequently published in the Harvard Business Review. The audience reading HBR likely consider themselves enlightened leaders and managers but they are probably not 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. 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, he selected twenty-eight 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. However, it emerged from the data as a significant factor in differentiating the eleven most 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 with the seeds of this greatness. 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" (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.

To this we can add Locke's dilemma on "...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 do not think we have adequate answers to these concerns yet and until we do, resistance to shared leadership is likely to continue and rightfully so. Locke suggests that certain functions such as creation of a vision, determination and articulation of core values, evaluation of senior management staff and the over-all

structuring of the organization rightfully belong to the top person in the organization. In his view, shared leadership “supplements” but does not replace hierarchical leadership.

### *Share all*

In this last category of *Share All*, the call is for a fundamental paradigm shift in both the philosophy and actual exercise of leadership. The term “*Share All*” is a bit of an exaggeration but I use it to call attention to a key premise here. Raelin writes that “leaderful practice” is more than empowerment—it is a far more radical notion (2003). I believe that the people in this category are advocating leadership that allows for significantly more unexpected possibilities. It transfers considerably 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. It carries higher risks precisely because it is less predictable. 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 reenvision 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 reenvision 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).

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 an impediment to creating the “holding environment” that facilitates adaptive work. The role of leaders is to shift *away* from answer-giving authority toward the construction of a relationship in which to raise, frame and process tough questions. Heifetz insists 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.

Karl Weick’s 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. Weick sees knowledge as co-created, stating, “...knowledge is not something people possess in their heads but rather something people do together” (Weick, 2001, p.102).

Drath 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 allowing 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).

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 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 this learning is transforming the attribution of incompetence for not knowing the answer, to that of competence for 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. I find much of his thinking applicable for relatively stable teams in a reasonably bounded environment. It is also highly appropriate for learning groups like communities of practice. On the other hand, some of his notions are perhaps unrealistic for more transient communities with frequently shifting membership.

What is significant here is that there is a major shift running through genuine models of shared leadership. This shift moves the locus of power and control *away* from a single individual and *towards* the collective and collaborative wisdom of the group. In practice, this is proving to be a difficult leap to make not only for the ostensible leaders but also, for followers as well. Why should this be so?

Some have argued that the difficulty lies in a gender-linked shift in our understanding of how to achieve business success (Fletcher, 2003). At a very deep level, we continue to hold on to our assumptions and beliefs about gender, power, individual achievement and rewards. As organizations begin to confront issues of compensation for a product develop team for example, we must look at some of these assumptions. How do we view the contribution of say, eight people? Are they equal across the board? Is the team leader entitled to extra? What is the reward for those people who made sure that the team’s process for getting work done actually worked? Do the relational activities undertaken to ensure that people felt included and nurtured by the team have

any value? These relational practices can easily be dismissed as someone's natural inclination or personality, rather than being viewed as part of leadership competency. This is even more likely to be the case if the person performing this role is female.

### *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 Käufer (2003) group these into three major categories:

- a) Charging hierarchical leaders with creating less hierarchical organizations
- b) Shared leadership practices tend to "get disappeared" because of power and gender dynamics in the workplace that have a disproportionate effect on women
- c) The contradiction of skill sets to land the job (i.e. fast-track, competitive, individual achievement) vs. the skill set needed to be a relational leader (connecting with others in ways that foster mutual development and learning).

Of these, perhaps the least understood is the second of the three. Too often, organizations disregard the very practices they claim to value by not considering them as real work that facilitates the organizational agenda. One has only to look at the sad state of performance review systems in most organizations to see the obstacle this poses for those who are inclined towards a more collaborative model. What is still being rewarded is largely individual achievement. As Fletcher and Käufer note, because there is no language of competence in organizational discourse to describe the activities of relational practice as leadership, organizations typically do not describe people who practice relational leadership as *leaders*. More likely, we refer to them as "nice", or as thoughtful people who care about other's feelings. In a quick leap, it becomes easy to reject them as "weak" and thus not meeting the picture of the heroic leader. This is not

intentional nor a conscious decision to discredit specific individuals or groups. It is the result of a set of assumptions about human growth and development that privilege independence, competition, and self-sufficiency over the interdependence, mutuality and growth-in-connection model posited by the Stone Center Relational Theory (Miller, 1986).

### *Fundamental Elements of Shared Leadership*

Looking beyond the labels, there are at least five core elements characterizing models of leadership with genuine sharing of power and decision-making. These are:

1. Recognition of interdependency and mutuality as legitimate and basic conditions of life in the contemporary workplace.
2. Fostering the conditions and skills necessary for honest and generative dialogue leading to the co-creation of knowledge and organizational learning.
3. Recognition of the need for integration of a whole and real self, occupying multiple roles both in and out of the workplace.
4. Shifting from a “power over” notion to a notion of “power with, through, and on behalf of the collective good”.
5. Recognition of leadership as a set of activities and practices that can, and should be, separated from an individual person as the embodiment of “leader”.

### *Summary*

In my view, these core elements are only the beginning of a meaningful conversation about shared leadership practices. There are many remaining issues requiring deeper exploration including devising practical strategies of accountability and reward that integrate individual and group effort, grappling with the impact of

race, class, and gender individually and together on power dynamics, the development of appropriately “neutral” language to describe shared leadership behaviors, and others will require our best and creative thinking. It would be a tremendous loss if we do not move in this direction by providing fresh thinking to what has always been and probably always will be, a challenging and complex topic. At the very least, we need to be clear and honest about what we are trying to achieve when we advocate for shared leadership in our organizations.

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