

Shared Leadership and Its Implications for Nonprofit Leadership

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Abstract

Shared leadership can provide a foundation for nonprofit organization sustainability. A culture of shared leadership can enhance an organization's resilience and adaptability and help ensure its ability to navigate turbulence and uncertainty. A literature review on key concepts and research on shared leadership is provided in this article. This background is then used to frame recent trends in the nonprofit sector and how shared leadership might enable nonprofit organizations to navigate current and future trends more effectively. Finally, specific suggestions for developing a culture of shared leadership are provided.

Keywords: *leadership; organizational change; organizational sustainability*

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Literature Review

Shared leadership can be defined in many ways, and Pearce and Conger (2003) summarized its essence: "Leadership is...not determined by position of authority but rather by an individual's capacity to influence peers and by the needs of the team (organization) in any given moment" (p. xi). In an organization that truly exemplifies shared leadership, all levels of employees are trusted to make informed choices to advance organizational mission. Employees are recognized for the unique knowledge and talents they bring to the organization, and they are encouraged to use this knowledge and talent to improve processes and outcomes.

Shared leadership frameworks tend to cluster around four common themes (Hickman, 2010; Pearce & Conger, 2003):

- Leadership is broadly distributed among a set of individuals instead of concentrated in one or a few organizational executives.
- Decision making is decentralized wherein individuals and groups make decisions that govern and impact the work they perform.
- Recognition that diverse and unique knowledge exists throughout the organization and that individuals closest to points of information should be included in analysis, decision making, and implementation.
- Complex issues require collective input, deliberation, and decision making for decision quality and implementation effectiveness.

Main Concepts and Research

According to Pearce and Conger (2003), the principles behind shared leadership significantly predated the use of the term. The earliest writings using the term *shared leadership*, with respective frameworks and constructs, appeared in the 1990s (Aviolo, Jung, Murray, & Sivasubramaniam, 1996; Seers, 1996). Initial theoretical models followed, with applications to specific sectors including sales (Perry, Pearce, & Sims, 1999) and even nonprofit organizations (Pearce, Perry, & Sims, 2001).

Shared leadership is generally presented as a contrast to traditional leadership ideologies in which leaders are noted as key executives with broad decision-making power. Shared leadership is offered as "a dynamic, interactive influence process among individuals in groups for which the objective is to lead one another to the achievement of group or organizational goals or both" (Pearce & Conger, 2003, p. 167).

A number of related terms parallel the concepts and intent of shared leadership. An overview of these concepts is provided in Table 1, with brief definitions of each and key sources for more information.

Table 1*Terms and Concepts Related to Shared Leadership*

Term / concept	Definition / explanation	Key sources / references
Collective Leadership	“Collective leadership: a way for diverse groups of people in our communities to hold purpose, direction, and action cooperatively” (Center for Ethical Leadership, 2014, para. 3). Focused on broad community engagement for integrated solutions to community concerns.	http://www.ethicalleadership.org/concepts-and-philosophies.html http://www.collectiveleadership.de/apex/cli/collective-leadership
Distributed Leadership	“Distributed leadership is first and foremost about leadership practice rather than leaders or their roles, functions, routines, and structures” (Spillane, 2005, p. 144). The author is clear that this is not synonymous with shared leadership or collaborative leadership. Focused on educational organizations, emphasizing decision making and influence practices at levels other than the school principal.	Spillane, J. P. (2006). <i>Distributed leadership</i> . San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. Spillane, J. P. (2005) Distributed leadership. <i>The Educational Forum</i> , 69(2), 143–150.
Connective Leadership	“Connective leaders bring precisely these leadership strengths to the table. They have the insight and skills to help divergent, even adversarial, individuals and groups come together initially around limited areas of mutuality” (Connective Leadership Institute, 2014). Focused on the processes of bringing divergent and conflicting perspectives and approaches together to create new understanding and approaches to community concerns.	Lipman-Blumen, J. (2000). <i>Connective leadership: Managing in a changing world</i> . Oxford, England: Oxford University Press. https://www.connectiveleadership.com/connective-leadership/

Table 1 (cont.)

Term / concept	Definition / explanation	Key sources / references
Collaborative Leadership	“Collaborative problem-solving and decision-making. It’s not the leader’s job to decide what to do and then tell the group. Rather, the group considers the problem, decides what to do, and counts on the leader to help them focus their effort” (Community Tool Box, 2014, What Is Collaborative Leadership? section, para. 3). Focused on group decisions and implementation.	Chrislip, D. D. (2002). <i>The collaborative leadership fieldbook: A guide for citizens and civic leaders</i> . San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/leadership/leadership-ideas/collaborative-leadership/main
Network Leadership	“Network leadership, unlike conventional leadership approaches, is collective, distributed, bottom-up, facilitative and emergent” (Leadership Learning Community, 2012, para. 1). Focused on grassroots efforts to build capacity and collaboration in addressing community (or organizational) issues.	http://leadershiplearning.org/blog/clair-reinelt/2010-05-18/how-network-leadership-different-organizational-leadership-and-why-un

These concepts overlap in key fundamental ways, most clearly in terms of emphasis on decision making. Within each of these concepts is the notion that effective leadership generally entails elements of shared decision making. Instead of having decisions centralized with a few individuals in key positions, decisions that impact organizational priorities and resources are broadly dispersed. Individuals and groups/teams at many levels of the organization are given the tools and trust to make decisions that impact their work and the services/functions they provide. As indicated in the table, these concepts can be applied beyond the organizational level, focusing on teams or units or even broader communities.

Concerning application of concepts of shared leadership beyond organizational boundaries, emphasis can apply to the inclusion of constituents of specific services or functions in the decision processes. Ideally, the inclusion of such broad perspectives and input into decisions helps to ensure more holistic, proactive, strategic decisions. Such decisions are also expected to improve buy-in and support for decisions, improving implementation and ongoing commitment to organizational initiatives. These concerns are vital to most nonprofit organizations, which serve and are accountable to many constituents.

A limited but broad base of research has been conducted on shared leadership. This research has been focused on a variety of industries and settings, including educa-

tion (Lambert, 2002), change management (Pearce & Sims, 2002), consulting (Carson, Tesluk, & Marrone, 2007), sales (Perry et al., 1999), and healthcare (Judge & Ryman, 2001). A majority of this research has been focused on team settings (Koccolowski, 2010), though there is a growing body of research with a focus on shared leadership within and across organizations. Articles and research with a focus specifically on non-profit organizations are scarce (Pearce et al., 2001).

The scarcity of research on shared leadership in nonprofits should not imply that nonprofits have not used principles of shared leadership. From my experience and research, nonprofits across a range of subsectors indicate widespread use of shared leadership principles. However, although many nonprofit organizations have used shared leadership practices to better serve clients and communities, systematic implementation of shared leadership throughout an organization is likely limited.

Shared Leadership and Organizational Culture

Organizational culture can be examined in many ways and along many dimensions or processes—referred to by Schein (1997) as levels of culture. These levels include artifacts (visible structures and processes), espoused values (strategies, goals, philosophies), and basic underlying assumptions (beliefs, perceptions, thoughts, and feelings). Each of these levels of culture has direct and indirect impact on decision making in an organization. They impact how decisions are made, communicated, implemented, and evaluated.

From an organizational culture perspective, a culture of shared leadership is characterized by collective and collaborative processes of information gathering, analysis, decision making, and implementation. An organization with a strong culture of shared leadership will equip and encourage staff (and even volunteers) at all levels to take part in discussions and decisions about organizational priorities. These processes will be infused into work teams, work units, and the organization as a whole. And when confronted with the need to make immediate decisions, employees and work teams at all levels will feel confident in taking action.

Clearly, this culture of shared leadership does not come naturally to all organizations or individuals. Most nonprofits, like most for-profit businesses and government agencies, have clear structures and processes in place that limit authority and autonomy. These structures and processes are important for ensuring consistency and quality in carrying out programs and organizational activities. As such, they are vital to organizational success. However, they also create potential hindrances to organizational advancement and adaptability.

For example, a nonprofit organization might have a long history of a strong executive director (ED) culture. In this organization, nearly all major decisions are either made by the ED or need to be reviewed and approved by the ED before they are implemented. Individuals learn early upon joining the organization that decisions made without executive input and approval will be met with resistance and/or negative consequences. When queried about the decision-making culture of the organization, staff might note how this approach constrains their ability to do their work and fulfill the mission of the organization.

In contrast, a nonprofit organization might be characterized by broad levels of empowerment wherein decisions are made by the individuals or groups responsible for implementing them. Decisions regarding client services, budget allocations, poli-

cies and procedures, and staffing may be delegated to those who deal with the impact of those decisions. In this organization, individuals learn early that they play a key role in how the organization operates and that they are accountable for the decisions made. When asked about the decision-making culture of the organization, staff may indicate a sense of being valued by the organization and their ability to directly impact fulfillment of organizational mission.

Benefits of Shared Leadership and Recent Trends

According to Hickman (2010), organizations are “better able to meet the challenges of their complex and rapidly changing environments by developing the capacity of participants to share responsibility for leadership” (p. 164). In addition, Hickman noted other driving forces for shared leadership, including

the realization that senior leaders may not and often cannot possess sufficient and relevant information to make highly effective decisions, the requirement of a faster-paced environment to make high-speed decisions, and the complexity of the job held by the senior leader. (p. 164)

Undoubtedly, most executive directors and other senior executives of nonprofit organizations can relate to these statements.

Many authors have addressed the importance and benefits of shared leadership (Bradford & Cohen, 1998; Pearce & Conger, 2003). Teams and organizations that use shared leadership have been shown to better serve client needs, improve innovation and creativity, adapt to change more quickly and effectively, and navigate the ebbs and flows of turbulent environments more proactively and effectively (Hickman, 2010).

Organizations that have already developed a broad culture of shared leadership might be able to respond to emerging realities more effectively and efficiently. Unfortunately, there is not enough evidence on shared leadership at the organizational level to make these claims. What is known is that recent years have been challenging for most nonprofits, and many have had to take adaptive measures to deal with these emerging realities. Many of these recent trends (Gowdy, Hildebrand, La Piana, & Mendes Campos, 2009; *The Nonprofit Times*, 2012) indicate that organizations with cultures of shared leadership will be better positioned for sustainability.

The first and most noticeable trend over the past 6 years has been the strain on funding sources, including government and foundation funding (Nonprofit Finance Fund, 2013). Nonprofit organizations across most subsectors have been impacted by changes in amounts and priorities for funding. These changes have put pressure on nonprofit organizations to reexamine missions, programs, and operations to improve efficiency and try to maintain the quality and impact of services. In adapting to these changes, organizations with a strong culture of shared leadership may have better integrated diverse perspectives into development of new methods and systems.

The second trend is the increasing emphasis on collaborative efforts for greater and more efficient impact. Over the past 10 years, funders have increasingly revised guidelines to focus on collective impact and combined efforts in addressing community needs. This shift in priorities encourages nonprofits to work collaboratively with other organizations to ensure continuum of services and enhance positive impacts on communities. Doing so requires networking and collaborative skills at all levels of an organization. Organizations with broad shared leadership cultures may be better suited

to building and maintaining mutually beneficial partnership and collaborations. From this, clients may receive better services and organizations will be more likely to garner funding to build capacity for these efforts.

The third major trend is the impending retirement of a significant percentage of current executives. Recent economic factors may have delayed the projected mass retirement of baby boomers in executive positions, but most organizations face the imperative of succession planning (Nonprofit HR Solutions, 2013). From presidents and executive directors to other senior managers and board members, nonprofit organizations need to develop a cadre of new senior executives and middle managers. To do so, decision-making efforts will need to be more broadly shared throughout organizations and be conducted more collaboratively than may have been the norm in the past. Organizations that have already moved to a culture of shared leadership and decision making will have stronger human capital and be better positioned for smooth and effective transitions to new management.

The fourth major trend also relates to demographic shifts. In many areas, particularly most metropolitan regions, there are increasingly multigenerational and cross-cultural workforces and constituencies. These demographic shifts heighten the need for organizational leaders to develop new skills in working across generational and cultural boundaries (Alliance for Strong Families and Communities, 2014). Consistent with generational decision-making patterns, younger nonprofit professionals and the constituencies served by nonprofits increasingly expect to be involved in decisions that affect them. This expectation for collaborative decision making requires shifts in how many organizations and current nonprofit executives operate. Nonprofits with shared leadership practices in place are already in line with these changing expectations and demands.

Changes in generational expectations are also reflected in an increased need and desire for rapid response times to client needs and funder demands. This trend is accelerated by the ever-increasing roles of technology and multimedia channels. As the workforce and communities become more immersed in constant communication, expectations for individualized, rapid response by nonprofits become more ingrained. Nonprofit organizations that are slow to act or respond will increasingly see their clients and supporters look to more responsive organizations. Thus, organizations with a well-developed culture of shared leadership will have more people trained and empowered to meet these expectations.

Finally, recent trends point to an ever-increasing demand for accountability and transparency (GuideStar, 2010). This trend connects with many of the other trends, including tightening of funding, shifts toward collective action and impact, and generational changes. It also connects with expectations for rapid information transfer and communication wherein outcomes and impact are expected to be reviewed and disseminated much more frequently than the traditional annual report. Cascading the responsibility to gather and track outcomes throughout an organization becomes an important element of dealing with clients and supporters. A culture of shared leadership provides a nonprofit with embedded infrastructure for adapting to these demands.

Combined, these recent trends and emerging realities indicate that organizations with broad cultures of shared leadership will be better positioned for adaptability and sustainability. As noted in the highly regarded and circulated report *Convergence: How*

Five Trends Will Reshape the Social Sector (Gowdy et al., 2009), the convergence or collective impact of these trends needs to be understood to truly adapt to create successful, sustainable organizations.

Framework for Creating a Culture of Shared Leadership

For an organization's culture of shared leadership and decision making, it is likely that levels of shared leadership (shared decision making) will vary depending on the decisions being made. Differences in decision making along specific decisions and levels of organization can be used to describe and classify the culture of shared leadership for an organization. This approach can be used to create a culture map that can graphically illustrate an organization. This approach can also be used to aggregate responses to contrast culture patterns across work units or organizations.

Nearly all nonprofit organizations routinely make decisions in the following areas:

- Hiring and staffing, including recruiting, interviewing, and selecting
- Performance reviews of individuals and work units
- Budgeting and other financial decisions
- Client/customer service and handling of complaints and problems
- Policy development and enforcement regarding employee and client activities and behaviors

As common decision areas across organizations, these areas can be used in clarifying and comparing cultures of shared leadership. Mapping how the different decisions are approached provides a unique picture for any organization reflective of that organization's culture of shared decision making.

For example, a human services organization might empower client service staff with some decision-making power regarding client care. However, individual staff members might find their ability to serve clients impacted by limited influence on decisions regarding budget and policy constraints set by senior management or regulatory agencies. Thus, although the organization practices some level of shared leadership on client services, limited shared leadership in other areas more fully describes the unique culture of shared leadership in the given organization.

Each organization will develop its own unique culture regarding shared leadership, but there may be patterns across organizations and subsectors. For instance, healthcare delivery organizations are highly regulated and guided by extensive policies and procedures. They also tend to be large compared to other nonprofit subsectors. As a result, shared leadership practices may have more limited application potential in healthcare than in arts and culture organizations. Trying to infuse a culture of shared leadership into areas with significant constraints may not be practical or realistic.

Implications for Practice: Steps in Developing a Culture of Shared Leadership

The literature review and framework presented above provide background for the primary purpose of this paper: helping nonprofit organizations develop a culture of shared leadership to carry out their missions more effectively and efficiently. The list of practices and procedures presented below is not intended to be exhaustive. It is meant

to highlight the key systems and processes that will need to be aligned to begin to effect culture change.

Change in each of these areas alone can be challenging and integrating all of these changes will take time. However, making these changes concurrently will have mutually beneficial and enhancing ramifications. The more an organization can integrate the principles and practices into the planning, decision making, and implementation, the more the change process will jump-start the development of a culture of shared leadership.

A culture of shared leadership will be guided by senior executives who provide clarity of direction with flexibility in implementation. For many, this shift will be difficult based on learned behaviors and ingrained mind-sets. Balancing the reality that the president/executive director's primary role is achievement of mission, with the trust and faith in others needed to empower and delegate, will require ongoing leadership development, coaching, and support for these senior executives.

Underlying Management and Leadership Philosophy

Developing and maintaining a culture of shared leadership must begin with the overall philosophy and approach to organizational leadership. A culture of shared leadership includes a view of leadership as active and engaged involvement in the health, well-being, and sustainability of an organization and its services. Senior executives are often referred to as the leadership of the organization, but this mentality and terminology will need to shift. This shift in mind-set will require persistent and ongoing dialogue and behavior modification. Senior executives will need to encourage others to use the term *leadership* more broadly. Staff at all levels will need to reset their reference to senior executives as leaders by default. And staff at all levels will need guidance and training on informed decision making.

One way to start making this shift is to create “leadership teams” that are cross level and cross function. These teams must be more than the traditional committees or task forces. They must be empowered to take on and address issues related to organizational strategies and priorities. They will need to focus on addressing current problems or concerns and on envisioning future states that better serve clients and ensure organizational sustainability.

Undoubtedly, adopting this change in philosophy will be challenging for many organizations. It will require personal adjustments not only in mind-set, but also in “letting go” of power and influence that senior executives and board members may have worked long and hard to acquire. It will require a level of trust and transparency that may take time to develop. It will require those who are risk averse to learn to better accept and navigate uncertainty. It will require employees at all levels to think more strategically, to understand the interconnectedness of organizational functions and operations.

Recruitment and Hiring

This change in mind-set and philosophy will need to be infused into the recruitment and hiring processes. As structures and culture begin to shift, some turnover is likely to occur. In fact, turnover in key senior executives or board members can provide a catalyst for these shifts in structure and culture. Nonprofit organizations that approach turnover in key positions as opportunities for redefining organizational culture

will not just go out and hire replacements. They will reconsider position descriptions, qualifications, necessary experience, and other factors with an eye to the future before the search process begins.

As new members are recruited and hired, a strong element of anticipatory socialization can be infused that encourages a mind-set and culture of shared leadership. Ideally, recruiting and hiring decisions should be based on finding board members, executives, and staff (and even volunteers) who think strategically and creatively. Leadership teams that are cross level and cross function can be used in these processes to provide additional momentum in shifting culture. For example, consider the implications of having staff members help in recruiting and selecting new board members. In addition, during the interview process leadership teams might ask prospective staff and volunteers to envision ways to capture new opportunities for organizational growth and sustainability. Doing so would send a strong message about the culture and climate of shared leadership.

In addition to hiring for specific skill sets based on the work to be done, employees at all levels need to be exposed beyond their specific functions to understand how they impact and are impacted by other areas. Some of this knowledge will come with potential employees who have worked in different sectors (government or private sectors) or in different subsectors of nonprofits. Potential employees with diverse educational experiences and prior work in divergent disciplines will more readily think strategically. Potential employees should be expected to think in terms of programs, budgets, and workforce dynamics. Use of scenarios and case studies in the selection process can be used to help assess these capabilities.

Ongoing Training, Development, and Mentoring

Not all employees (new or current) will have all of the knowledge and background to think strategically. Nor will they all be comfortable right away in a culture of shared leadership. Developing a culture of shared leadership will require unique and often individualized training, development, and mentoring.

This process starts with clarity and continual emphasis on the three key elements of nonprofit organization success: mission/impact, financial health, and workforce dynamics. Leadership teams and individuals should constantly revisit these three elements. When evaluating options and making decisions, employees at all levels should consider how the decision they are about to make will affect mission (outcomes), finances (budget), and workforce dynamics (engagement and satisfaction). This holistic strategic thinking will take time to develop throughout an organization.

Individual training will need to be focused on enhancing skills in key disciplines related to organizational operations. These disciplines might include details on service delivery, budget formulation and adaptation, information system design and maintenance, and other job-specific skills. Ongoing development for all employees in areas of group dynamics, conflict management, problem formulation, and group decision making will further develop the culture of shared leadership. Informal and ongoing mentoring across organizational levels and functions will further enhance efforts to instill this culture of shared leadership. Ongoing efforts to improve the skills needed for collaboration, including emotional intelligence, systems analysis, and systems design, will need to become commonplace.

Another way to help instill strategic thinking is creating a practice of ongoing job shadowing. For a few hours every month, employees should be encouraged to work alongside and shadow other members of the organization. Staff should be invited to attend board meetings. Executive directors should sit alongside web designers as they revise elements of the organization's website. Development staff should shadow direct service providers. Financial staff should work alongside volunteers as they help to plan and staff an event. This practice, if done consistently and with purposeful intent, will break down silo thinking and do more to encourage a culture of shared leadership than perhaps any other practice.

Accountability and Performance Assessment

A strong culture of shared leadership has significant impact on accountability and performance assessment. One of the key challenges in sharing leadership is that accountability for successes or failures can become more muted. Existing mental models on responsibility, recognition, and blame get tested and need to shift. Nonprofit members at all levels need to think beyond the specific functions they perform for the organization and look to the impact and implications of those functions on outcomes, finances, and organizational dynamics.

Historically, organizations have been encouraged to create clear job descriptions and clear duties that can be readily assessed. Organization and group performance is often a consideration in performance assessment, but key indicators tend to revolve around individual functions and operations. And although individual performance is just as important in a culture of shared leadership, the context in which that performance is assessed changes. In an organization with a strong culture of shared leadership, organizational members at all levels are assessed on how they handle "moments of truth," critical points at which a decision needs to be made that impact clients, budgets, and other employees.

This accountability and performance assessment cannot be reinforced with standard approaches to performance assessment. Annual reviews by direct supervisors will be of limited use. Regular ongoing assessment and dialogue by extended role sets (the range of people and roles with whom an organizational member comes into contact regularly) are necessary in this culture. In doing so, individuals need to be open to a broader array of positive and critical feedback. Those providing the feedback need to develop skills in using supportive communication principles that limit defensiveness and enhance understanding and acceptance. These skills need to be built into ongoing training, development, and mentoring.

Putting It All Together

The domains discussed above are a starting place. If all areas are addressed collectively and concurrently, culture shift can happen in relatively short time frames. However, all organizations should realize that implementing these practices and creating a culture of shared leadership will be an ongoing process. Each organization will need to choose key areas in which shared leadership might already be practiced and build from these successes as efforts are expanded.

Developing a culture of shared leadership is not about reaching an ideal future state. As with any domain or view of culture, it will be an ongoing and evolving process. At times, due to constraints or reaction to current events or emerging realities, organi-

zations may feel the need to move away from shared leadership principles. This might result from key personnel changes, unexpected changes in funding, or significant legislation changes that impact an organization's ability to execute or adapt. In such cases, difficult decisions might best be made by a small group of individuals who have the most context and information on which to make these decisions.

Developing a culture of shared leadership in nonprofit organizations requires broad involvement and engagement in conversations about leadership. Taking at least a few minutes at the beginning and/or end of each and every meeting to review core organizational values can help. Requiring all individuals and leadership teams to clarify how their decisions were based on organizational values and priorities is important. Including individuals at all levels and in all roles in the ongoing conversations on leadership development will be critical. And, most important, developing trust and support across levels and functions will provide the foundation for a culture of shared leadership.

Limitations and Future Directions

The focus in this article was on shared decisions. Shared decisions are a critical component of shared leadership, but the concept and application of shared leadership extends beyond decision making.

This article was designed as a means for engaging dialogue and as an initial guide for organizations that would like to create or enhance existing cultures of shared leadership. Organizational culture is an inherently complex and evolving dynamic. There is not an end point where an organization can claim, "We have arrived and are now an exemplar of shared leadership." As with developing personal leadership, developing a culture of shared leadership will vary depending on the organization. Strengths will be different, and resulting leverage points and areas for implementation will vary. Different organizations will have different barriers and challenges in developing a culture of shared leadership.

I hope that this article will provide impetus for further study and exploration of shared leadership in nonprofit organizations. As stated, much of the research and application of shared leadership has been conducted at team levels. Studying and understanding shared leadership at the organizational culture level will require new approaches. It will also require access to and involvement with a variety of nonprofit organizations. Luckily, there appear to be many nonprofit organizations in many subsectors that are willing to take part in such research. I am thankful for these organizations.

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