

# MAKING SENSE OF SHARED LEADERSHIP

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## ABSTRACT

**Making Sense of Shared Leadership. A case study of leadership processes and practices without formal leadership structure in the team context**

Leadership is essential for the effectiveness of the teams and organizations they are part of. The challenges facing organizations today require an exhaustive review of the strategic role of leadership. In this context, it is necessary to explore new types of leadership capable of providing an effective response to new needs. The present-day situations, characterized by complexity and ambiguity, make it difficult for an external leader to perform all leadership functions successfully. Likewise, knowledge-based work requires providing professional groups with sufficient autonomy to perform leadership functions.

This study focuses on shared leadership in the team context. Shared leadership is seen as an emergent team property resulting from the distribution of leadership influence across multiple team members. Shared leadership entails sharing power and influence broadly among the team members rather than centralizing it in the hands of a single individual who acts in the clear role of a leader. By identifying the team itself as a key source of influence, this study points to the relational nature of leadership as a social construct where leadership is seen as social process of relating processes that are co-constructed by several team members. Based on recent theoretical developments concerned with relational, practice-based and constructionist approaches to the study of leadership processes, this thesis proposes the study of leadership interactions, working processes and practices to focus on the construction of direction, alignment and commitment.

**Keywords:** shared leadership, team leadership, relational leadership, self-managing team, team work, case study, grounded theory

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 On the need to revisit team leadership studies

Teams play an increasingly essential role in the functioning of organizations (e.g. Goodwin, Burke, Wildman & Salas 2009; Hills 2007; Kozlowski & Bell 2003), and leadership becomes a crucial factor in the effectiveness of these teams (e.g. O'Reilly, Caldwell, Chatman, Lapiz & Self 2010; Zaccaro, Rittman & Marks 2001). The basic idea behind the use of teams is that team implementations involve some degree of empowerment of members. The team members are provided with increased behavioral discretion and decision-making control as a part of the organizational work system design. Teams typically work on distinct and relatively whole tasks, possess a variety of skills within their membership, and have authority and autonomy to make decisions about how and when work is done, and by whom (e.g. Cohen & Bailey 1997; Katzenbach & Smith 1993; Wellins, Byham & Wilson 1991). Through the decentralization of power, authority and decision-making responsibilities, organizations find flexibility and quick response capabilities necessary to stay competitive in their business (e.g. Ancona & Bresman 2007; Houghton, Neck & Manz 2003; Lipman-Blumen & Leavitt 2000).

Teams tend to reduce the dependence on traditional leader authority figures. Establishing effective influence processes that enable teams to achieve positive outcomes usually requires nontraditional approaches to leadership – involving empowering others and sharing influence. Perhaps more than any other factor associated with work teams, empowerment has created demands for radical evolution of leadership practices (Manz, Pearce & Sims 2009). In particular, the increasing emphasis on team-based knowledge work, or work that involves significant investment of intellectual capital by a group of skilled professionals, makes it necessary to expand the traditional models of leadership (Houghton et al. 2003). Also, the growing complexity, the uncertainty of present business situations, and the speed of response to environmental pressures make the actions of a single leader impracticable and require multi-professional teams with work autonomy and leadership emerging from the team itself (Day, Gronn & Salas 2004). This kind of demands suggest that organizations cannot wait for leadership decisions to be pushed to the top for action. Instead, leadership has to be more evenly shared across the organization to ensure faster response times to environmental demands (Pearce, Manz & Sims 2009).

## 2. Shared leadership in teams as a subject of inquiry

This chapter concerns theoretical frameworks that could support studying shared leadership in the team context. In the research process, where theoretical perspectives and data analysis intersect, three perspectives have been selected that best seem to support studying shared leadership. The building blocks of the theoretical discussion are self-management as a team work design concept, the concept of shared leadership, and the relational nature of leadership as a social construct. Basically the paradigmatic backgrounds of these perspectives are different, but there are interfaces that touch upon each other. They all illuminate some angles of the phenomenon under study.

The first one, self-management as a teamwork design concept has taken the boldest steps toward articulating the concept of shared leadership. Self-management team designs have promoted the development of shared leadership e.g. through increased self-management, heightened trust and autonomy. Such designs in themselves do not necessarily result in widely distributed leadership influence in a team, however, as other factors, e.g. the internal or external team environment, may also influence shared leadership, or there is a need for some kind of a cognitive framework through which leadership might be shared. The second perspective, the concept of shared leadership considers shared leadership as a property of the 'system' and not of a single member. It can be said that "the effectiveness of leadership becomes more a product of those connections or relationships among the parts than the result of any one part of that system" (O'Connor & Quinn 2004, 423). The third one, the relational nature of leadership as a social construct, calls attention to the implications of the idea that leadership belongs to a community, such as a team, rather than to an individual. Instead sharing only some leadership attributes or tasks, the team should work actively together on leadership tasks.

On the basis of these perspectives, this chapter ends by the formulation of points of departure for the empirical inquiry into aspects of leadership interactions, processes and practices.

### 2.1 The nature of team work

The reawakening of interest in teams is related to wider changes in the world of work and organizations driven by economic, strategic and technological imperatives. The pressures of global competition, the need to consolidate business models in complex and shifting environments, and the pursuit of continuous innovation have led to a reappraisal of the team as a key element of the basic organizational architecture (e.g. Ancona & Bresman 2007; Kozlowski & Bell 2003). In this context, the joint action of individuals working together in a cooperative manner to attain shared goals through the differentiation of roles and

functions, and the use of elaborate communication and coordination systems, are now viewed as essential to effectiveness and competitive advantage. This surge of interest in the use of teamwork has focused upon improving the performance outcomes of business processes. Teams are used in organizations for example to reduce costs and to improve such outcomes such as quality, productivity and process dependability as well as psychological benefits for the team members concerning self-belief and intrinsic motivation (for an overview, see e.g. Cohen & Bailey 1997; Kauffeld 2006; Tata & Prasad 2004; Yukl 2006).

they employ in doing their work. Improvement teams, on the other hand, do work that sets the stage for others in the organization to change the way they do things. They can be successful only to the extent that others accept their ideas. Thus it is important that legitimacy be attributed to these teams by the groups who will be impacted. Their mandate has to come from formal leadership at the level at which the improvements are going to be made. The same matters arise for integrating teams that are not management teams. Their authority to integrate the work of various performing units comes from the formal leadership of a more inclusive unit. Thus, when an organization uses teams rather than individual workers to perform tasks, it gives the team some power and authority to control the operations of its members.

environment of self-direction and self-management that fosters “more open and

## **2.2 The concept of shared leadership**

### **2.2.1 Development towards the collective leadership approach**

Gibb (1954, 884) states that “Leadership is probably best conceived as a group quality, as a set of functions which must be carried out by the group”. While the notion of leadership being shared among individuals in collectives is not new, its focused study is a relatively new phenomenon. The predominant amount of work that has been conducted on the leadership of collectives examines leadership as a vertical influence process, as it has been e.g. with self-managed team concepts. Shared leadership is a type of leadership approach which has come under greater focus with “the new leadership approaches” (House & Aditya 1997; Parry & Bryman 2006). As discussed above in chapter Approaches to leadership research in teams, the main approaches that have dominated leadership research at different times have been the trait approach, the behavioral approach, and the contingency approach (e.g. Levi 2007; Parry & Bryman 2006). The main focus of leadership research has thus shifted during the years, partly due to inconsistency in research results within each approach and the consequent need to find better models.

The term 'new leadership' has been used to describe and categorize a number of approaches to leadership that emerged in the 1980s, and which seemed to exhibit

common or at least similar themes (Parry & Bryman 2006). Together these different approaches seemed to signal a new way of conceptualizing and studying leadership. The writers employed a variety of terms to describe the new kinds of leadership they were concerned with: e.g. transformational leadership (Bass 1985), charismatic leadership (Conger 1989), and visionary leadership (Sashkin 1988; Westley & Mintzberg 1989). Parry and Bryman (2006) argue that these streams of thought present a perspective on leadership as the articulation of visions and the management of meaning. It has also been often emphasized that the leader is a member of a group and leadership is actually a series of interaction processes wherein leaders inspire followers by creating common meaningful images of the future. In essence, these

### **3 Research methodology**

In this chapter the philosophical underpinnings of this study are discussed first. This discussion includes the ontological and epistemological viewpoints as well as the overall research setting in this case study. Secondly, the views and limitations of the researcher are described. The third part will focus on the methodology and data gathering methods. This chapter ends with discussing the analysis of the data.

#### **3.1 Paradigmatic issues associated with the research**

All research work is based on a certain vision of the world, employs a methodology, and proposes results aimed at predicting, prescribing, understanding or explaining (Creswell 2003). The net that contains the researcher's epistemological, ontological and methodological premises may be termed a paradigm, or an interpretive framework, a basic set of beliefs that guides action (Denzin & Lincoln 2003). The paradigm also determines how the researcher creates new knowledge and thus guides the selecting of methods that comply with the paradigm. Klenke (2008) suggests that it is not possible to conduct rigorous research without understanding its philosophical underpinnings. The researcher's philosophical assumptions about ontology, epistemology, methodology, and axiology are critical in framing the research process and require transparency. Each paradigm makes assumptions about the nature of reality (ontology), how knowledge is constructed (epistemology) and assumes that the values (axiology) the researcher brings to the selection of the method, participants, analysis, and interpretation influence the research process.

How then to study an abstract phenomenon called shared leadership? Traditionally, leadership research has solved the question by studying individual leaders. Traditional approaches to leadership research are characterized by the positivist perspective that seeks to distil the essence of leadership – to identify the composite qualities/behaviors/competencies, which together constitute leadership (Ford & Lawler 2007; Girod-Séville & Perret 2001; Gummesson 2000; Klenke 2008). From an ontological perspective, positivist frameworks view reality as something 'out there' to be apprehended (Lincoln & Guba 2003).

### **3.2 Methodological issues surrounding this research**

When viewing leadership as a social construct, as something that is relational, something that emerges out of a meaning-making process in a particular context, the attention needs to be refocused away from the individual leader to the experience and work of leadership. To inquire into the nature of leadership and how it happens in the team context requires an approach to research that makes it possible to understand e.g. the particular processes, practices and principles a team uses as it engages in the work of leadership. The approach that is proposed here rests on three principles. First, it could be seen that a phenomenological form of inquiry where it is possible to regard those engaged in the work of leadership as ‘co-inquirers’ will allow for the richest understanding of experience. Second, a broad understanding of shared leadership in a team will come from eliciting a range of perspectives within this community. Thus, a qualitative approach to research, one that engages diverse methodologies, is best suited to this task.

## **4 Results: shared leadership in the case team**

This chapter presents the empirical results of this study. First, the case team and the case organization are described. Section 4.2 approaches the results at a fine-grained level, focusing on the critical incidents from the level of lived experience that have facilitated shared leadership development in the case team. Section 4.3 presents the results of the empirical study at a more holistic level. This section concentrates on how the case team members have worked together in practice to form and develop leadership in their team. Finally, as a conclusion, a framework resulting from the analysis is presented in section 4.4.

### **4.1 Case description**

The data collection was conducted in one case team. The case team is one of the business teams in the case organization, which has since 1984 facilitated the people side of change and development processes with different organizations. The main business area of the case team is to offer consulting in team-based organizational work arrangements with teamwork and leadership training and coaching. The case team also takes care of product development in these areas. The team was formed specifically for that purpose in spring 2005. The team was created as part of a new strategy developed in the case organization to improve consulting services in growing markets. Nowadays the case organization is a part of a group which is composed of 130 experienced management consultants in 15 European countries.

In this team-based case organization, the teams are the core performing units. The teams were adopted in this organization because they were seen as the best way to enact the organization’s strategy and because they fitted with the nature of the work. The teams in this case organization are responsible for the whole work process or segment that delivers a product or service to an external customer. Determining the extent to which the teams should assume management responsibilities and what the basic leadership model for the teams is, is a design choice of the organization, not the choice of a team.

The structure of the case organization is presented in Figure 11.

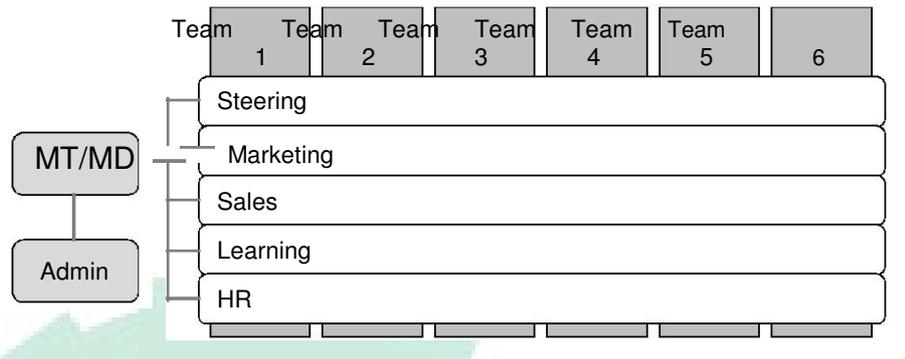
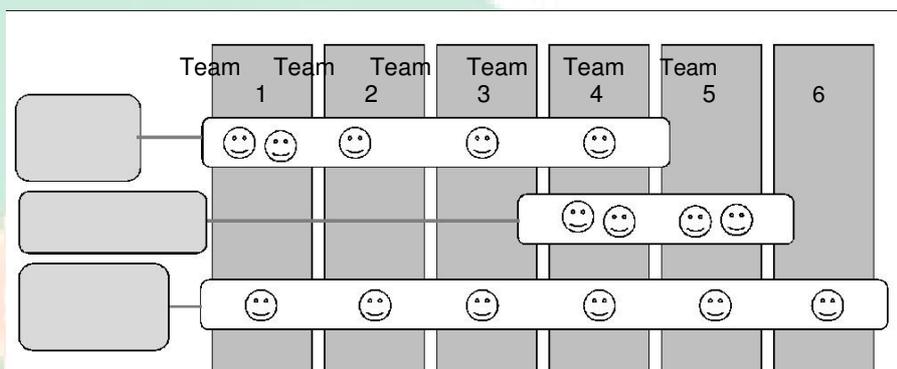


Figure 11. The case organization

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The second design element of the case organization is the nature of leadership and the use of a rotated leadership model since 1998. The roles of the managing director, process owners and team leaders have been in rotation in three-year periods. With this background, a climate of shared leadership is fostered and this promotes the overall capacity of the team to function and perform effectively. The third design element of the case organization is to work as a networking organization as presented in Figure 12. For example in client projects, internal strategy work and development work projects are organized across different teams.



member of this team. In the end of the data collection period in 2010, the team consisted of seven people. Four team members had been working in the team from the beginning. One new team member started in January 2006, another in May 2007 and the third one in December 2008. The participants in this study were six current team members and two ex-team members. For the sake of anonymity, the team members' names are labeled with tags "TM1, TM2, TM3, TM4, TM5, TM6, TM7 and TM8". The team members' pre-understanding of team-based work arrangements, team working and leadership is based on their work as consultants from 1 year to over 20 years, but also on work in different leadership roles in different kinds of organizations in industry and services, in the private as well as the public sector.

When doing their consulting, training or coaching work in customer projects, the team members work typically alone, in pairs or in small groups. Together as a team they meet each other on about 30 days per year. In these meetings they do planning work with customer and development projects, strategy work, and learning. The team members are located in different towns in Finland, and the meetings are typically organized in the office of the case organization. Also other working environments are used yearly.

## 5. Discussion

The purpose of this thesis was to advance the understanding of the phenomenon of shared leadership in self-managed work teams, and especially to create understanding of shared leadership in team settings when all team members

participate in the leadership process without formal leadership roles. The aim was to explore critical incidents from a phenomenological viewpoint, i.e. from the level of lived experience that facilitates leadership development in the team context. This chapter presents the theoretical contributions of the study and the central results related to the research questions. The chapter also evaluates the quality of the research process and its outcomes and describes how quality criteria were taken into account when carrying out the research.

## **5.1 Contribution of this study**

There is much discussion by leadership scholars about the emergence of alternative models of leadership that go beyond the heroic, charismatic individual as a leader, for example leadership conceived as a process, leadership as a role, or leadership as a discourse (e.g. Grint 2005; Gronn 2002; Hosking 2007; Uhl-Bien 2006; Wood 2005). An important and developing aspect of the leadership theory has in recent years been the effort to conceptualize shared leadership, where the team members are empowered and leadership responsibilities are shared. Shared leadership from a team's perspective has provided a new definition of leadership as a set of practices that can be distributed by all members of the team, not only by the appointed leader.

The problem has been that the focus of shared leadership research has been on possible new practical arrangements rather than on formulating new basic perspectives on leadership. Most research on shared leadership has taken the approach that it is a static condition where the role behaviors may be explicitly divided or entirely shared.

## **6 Conclusions**

In this concluding chapter, some practical implications of the study are briefly described, and some ideas for future research are presented.

### **6.1 Practical implications**

If undertaken genuinely and effectively, shared leadership will tend to transform organizations to become more inclusive places through synergistic, dynamic processes of active engagement in the vision and values of leadership while being empowered with knowledge, authority, responsibility and goal-directed problem-solving to find flexibility and quick response capabilities necessary to stay competitive in their business. Shared leadership can, if done effectively, change the entire organization by enabling everyone to be seen as a leader of a particular domain of work. This study has explicitly focused on the development process of shared leadership in the team context, and some practical implications for managers and other practitioners can be put forward.

The first implication concerns the basic structure of team work. Typically the members in a team represent functions, specialties, and professions. Boundaries define independent domains and provide sources of identity for independent individuals. In this kind of work structure, work is often pursued in a boundary-crossing mode to get everyone involved represented 'at the table'. The value of team-based projects that deliver tangible products is easily recognized, but it is also easy to overlook the potential cost of their short-term focus. The value of using shared leadership practices in a team is not only in 'projects' but also in its 'strategic' work. Organizations must therefore develop a clear sense of how the role of a team is linked to business strategies and use this understanding to help teams articulate their strategic value. The purpose of crossing boundaries goes beyond "inclusiveness"; teams aim at creating emergent, new ideas using the various existing perspectives as tools toward this end (rather than as ends in themselves). Holding teams, in addition to individuals, accountable for outcomes supports the development of shared work, emergent roles, mutual inquiry, and the integration of differences.

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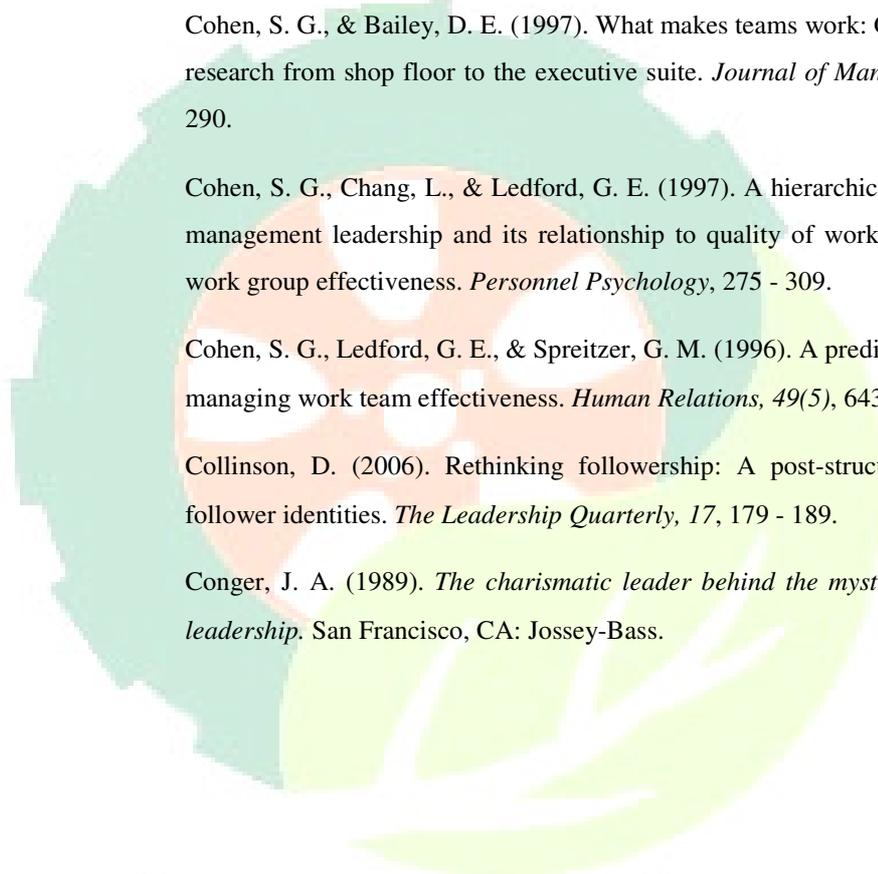
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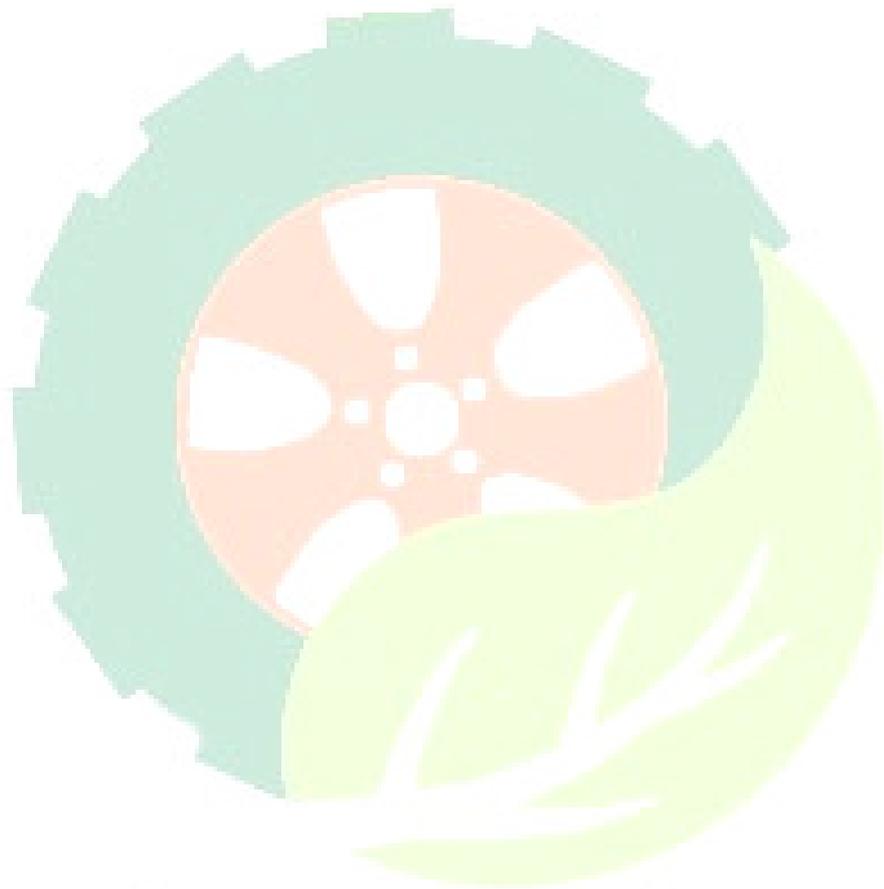
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