



Spotlight on Distributed Leadership



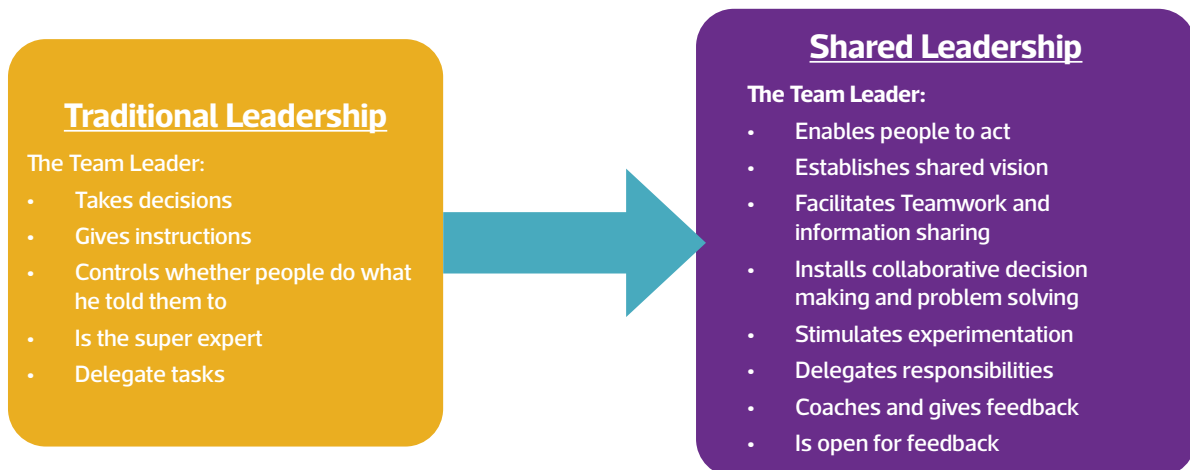
The shared leadership model conceptualizes leadership as a set of shared practices that can and should be enacted by people at all levels. Leadership is understood as a dynamic and multi-directional group process rather than a role exercised by a select few at the top.

Carsten Tams (2018)

Adopting Leadership Roles

Distributed, or shared, leadership is a model which is centred on people adopting leadership roles rather than having a designated title of “leader” (Spillane, 2006). It is behaving as a leader rather than having a designation. The old days of the “complete leader” have long since vanished to be replaced by a more informal network of people capable of flexing “into” and “out of” leadership roles as the organisational or operational demands change. Teams with a shared vision, a “can do” attitude and capable of networking and innovation, constantly outperform those with a more traditional “command and control” structure (Karriker et al 2017).

Leadership development also has moved from grooming those capable of “great things”, a human capital approach, to social capital, one which focusses on developing the skills and willingness to lead from within a team based on function or a mission-critical time. For example, health care has changed from a medical model dominated by physicians leading a team of “handmaidens” to an integrated team which delivers care:



“The idea of distributed leadership goes beyond the classical idea of delegating responsibilities to team members, but introduces the idea of an organizational culture that allows people to take leadership in areas or at particular moments they feel that it is beneficial for the organisation, they are well equipped to do it, they have the energy for it and others are willing to support them and collaborate to reach the expected results. In that sense it is a very different view of leadership which was advocated in past decades with a lot of focus on people like Steve Jobs.”

Leemans, C. (2020)

Behaviours For Distributed Leadership

Firstly, and perhaps an essential component, is the investment in the development of leadership capacity throughout an organisation enabling stronger networking and confidence in a wide range of staff to take on a leadership role. Bolden (2007) refers to this as investing in social capital of an organisation and not solely the human capital.

Ancona et al (2007) suggest four essential capabilities in developing distributed leadership:

- 1. Sensemaking:** Developing a shared understanding of the business context, the people, markets and dynamics in the market. This is so that contributions and leadership have a shared focus.
- 2. Visioning:** Building on a shared understanding, developing a clear picture of the future which is powerful, connected to everyone and owned. To begin every new project with a clear "end in mind" is the best predictor of success.
- 3. Relating:** The practice of choosing teams, finding people with the right skills, sharing ideas so that others might build on them where then the whole becomes greater than the sum of the parts.
- 4. Inventing:** Being constructively dissatisfied with the way things are so that constant re-invention takes place. New ideas are put forwards without fear and failure is an opportunity for learning. Without a culture of experimentation new developments can't take place.

Other behaviours demonstrated by successful distributed leadership include:

- A sharing of ideas, including ideas for improvement
- Evaluating what went well
- A willingness to defer to someone with, for example, specialist knowledge or expertise even though you may have a higher status or role in the organisation
- Inclusive working such that the person closest to a problem can give their analysis directly rather than working up a hierarchical system

People also need time to share, their skills, ideas and experiences. Taking time to talk, but not holding meetings for the sake of, it is essential in any successful distributed leadership approach.

Distributed leadership is also one manifestation of an organisation which sees itself as a learning community, and whilst it may be adopted by an organisation to solve a strategic or an operational issue (recent research in the NHS has suggested it has been effective in solving waiting times for surgery, where decision-making about lists has been devolved to the lowest point possible), it can then be adapted to a community where learning is continually shared to provide better outcomes for the organisation and its customers.

As Karriker et al (2017) suggested from research on 241 teams, shared leadership delivers more benefit in terms of best performance than any other HR measure currently available.

References

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