RESEARCH BRIEFS

SHARED LEADERSHIP IN PRACTICE: WHEN DOES IT WORK BEST?

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RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Leadership is generally thought to flow from the top to the bottom in organizations. In fact, a cursory glance at the popular press shows very clearly that top organizational leaders—the Chief Executive Officer or Managing Director—are often glorified as being the brains behind the success of the entire organization (e.g., Ray Kroc of McDonald's, Bill Gates of Microsoft) or vilified as the cause of an organization's downfall (e.g., Kenneth Lay of Enron). A look behind the scenes, however, shows a far more complex situation. At McDonald's, for instance, it was the Chief Financial Officer, Harry J. Sonnenborn, who spearheaded the financial, franchising, and real estate model that drove much of the company's success. At Microsoft, Steve Ballmer is another example of a key leader who played an important role in success of the business. On the flip side, the crestfallen Enron was not driven into the ground by Lay alone. Andrew Fastow, as well as others (e.g., Jeffrey Skilling), led them into the abyss of disgrace and bankruptcy. The reality at McDonald's, Microsoft, and Enron was that there were many other people sharing the lead in either the success or the failure attributed to the CEO.

Recently, there has been a growing recognition that leadership is not a solo act. As we drive further into the age of knowledge work, for example, there has been an increasing use of team-based organizational structures. Indeed, this shift in the way work is organized has caused many people to rethink the old, top-down perspective on leadership. More specifically, perspectives about leadership have evolved away from "leadership as a role" to something closer to "leadership as a shared social process." This new paradigm on leadership has typically been labeled *shared leadership*, although a few other related terms have also been used (e.g., collaborative, collective, connective, distributed, networked, rotated, and so forth). Nevertheless, all of these terms readily fit under the umbrella term of shared leadership.

While scholars have presented considerable theoretical discussions of shared leadership (see Pearce & Conger, 2003 for a thorough foundation), there has been far less empirical study of the phenomenon. Nonetheless, the early evidence seems to suggest that shared leadership is a potent predictor of group outcomes. That said, each empirical study, taken on its own, only offers a discrete contribution to understanding the possible positive influence of shared leadership on group outcomes. Fortunately, a recent study by Danni Wang, David Waldman, and Zhen Zhang, all of Arizona State University, picks up the mantle of the empirical examination of shared leadership. What is impressive about this study is that Wang and her colleagues have tied together the existing empirical studies of shared leadership in a comprehensive, holistic assessment of the literature.

In particular, Wang and her colleagues addressed a series of important and fundamental questions about shared leadership. Does shared leadership predict group outcomes? What kinds of shared leadership behavior are more or less potent? Is shared leadership more predictive of different types of group outcomes? Are certain types of contexts more or less suited for shared leadership? How does the way in which shared leadership is assessed impact its predictive utility? And, finally, is shared leadership a better predictor of group outcomes than top-down, hierarchical leadership?

STUDY DESIGN AND METHOD

Wang and her colleagues employed a meta-analytic approach to examine their research questions across a wide range of previously conducted studies. Their search of the literature identified 42 studies that addressed at least one of their research questions. The majority of these studies (23 in total) had been published in journals or as book chapters, while the rest were unpublished. The sample from the combined set of studies included more than 3,400 participants.

Most of these participants were employees on work teams. Indeed, 31 of the included studies focused on work teams, while 11 used student teams. The work teams varied considerably, ranging from management consulting teams to virtual teams to top management teams. Finally, while most of the studies included in their meta-analyses relied on participants based in the United States, some included participants from other countries (e.g., Canada, Germany, and Turkey).

KEY FINDINGS

Wang and her colleagues' analyses produced some fascinating results and formal, hierarchical leaders would be well-advised to take note of their findings. One of the most important results from their meta-analysis is that shared leadership is a moderately strong predictor of positive work group outcomes. Wang and her colleagues also found that context does indeed matter when it comes to the importance of shared leadership. Not surprisingly, shared leadership has a more dramatic positive influence on group outcomes in complex environments.

Other interesting findings included how shared leadership is assessed may shape its apparent impact and that specific types of leadership behavior have differential effects on group outcomes. For example, what Wang and her colleagues call "traditional" leadership behaviors (directive and transactional leadership) have less impact than "new-genre" leadership behaviors (transformational, empowering) on work group outcomes. This finding aligns well with the results of previous studies examining hierarchical leadership behavior.

Perhaps the most striking and revealing result that Wang and her colleagues present has to do with the impact of shared leadership vis-à-vis hierarchical leadership. Put simply, shared leadership is a better predictor of work group outcomes than hierarchical leadership. In fact, shared leadership accounts for additional unique variance in work group outcomes after the effects of hierarchical leadership are partialled out. Accordingly, leaders and leadership development professionals need to take serious note of the growing importance of shared leadership for translating organizational action into positive organizational outcomes.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Wang and her colleagues offer us some keen insights into the changing nature of leadership in organizations. Their findings clearly show that shared leadership is an important predictor of work group outcomes. Moreover, they document that shared leadership is a better predictor of work group outcomes than is traditional

hierarchical leadership. Perhaps the ancient wisdom of Lao Tzu was spot on for modern organizations: "a leader is best. . .when [the work group says] we did it ourselves."

Importantly, two other recent meta-analyses of shared leadership found similar results to Wang and her colleagues, lending further credence to their investigation. Specifically, D'Innocenzo, Mathieu, and Kukenberger (2014) published their meta-analysis in the *Journal of Management*, while the meta-analysis done by Nicolaides, LaPort, Chen, Tomassetti, Weis, Zaccaro, and Cortina (2014) was published in *The Leadership Quarterly*. Similarly, Pearce, Manz, and Sims (2014) published a book assessing qualitative studies conducted in 21 organizations and, once more, found results consistent with the findings of Wang and her colleagues, as well as those from the two meta-analyses mentioned above.

Collectively, these studies demonstrate that leadership is not simply a top-down affair. Indeed, they underscore that organizational leaders must think very carefully about how to share the lead if they want positive results. Put simply, this is the dawning of a new age for leadership. Gone are the days of centralized, command-and-control leadership. Today's workforce is ever more educated and ever more desirous of autonomy and latitude for influence. To harness these changing dynamics, both organizational leaders and organizational development experts need to have shared leadership skills in their tool kit, particularly if they want to enhance the performance of their employees, work groups, and organizations.

SOURCE

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