Addressing Common Obstacles to Effective Shared Leadership: A Five-Year Follow Up

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Abstract

Previous research done for a doctoral dissertation five years ago evaluated shared leadership in seven American Christian churches and ministries (Herbst, 2017). It found ten of the common benefits associated with shared leadership in the academic literature were present in these organizations. These included exceptional outcomes, enhanced decision-making, complex problem solving, creative innovation, team-member fit, team synergy, organizational vitality, healthy organizational culture, individual health, and sustained growth. It also surfaced five potential obstacles to successful shared leadership. These included the difficulty of the model, a potential lack of follow-through, a possible lack of efficiency, a general lack of acceptance of the model, and the danger of immature or usurping team members. Limitations, drawbacks, and difficulties associated with shared leadership remain understudied and insufficiently understood. The goal of this research was to help fill that gap by doing a five-year follow up investigation into each of the previously interviewed organizations. Survey results confirmed that all five obstacles had been experienced over the past five years but none had kept these organizations from continuing to effectively share leadership. Successful shared leadership, along with the benefits it proffers, is not elusive but it does require the intentional mitigation of potential pitfalls.

Keywords: Leadership, Shared Leadership, Collaborative Leadership, Distributed Leadership and Leadership Obstacles.

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1. Introduction

A decentralized and shared approach to leadership has been growing in popularity in recent years (Friedrich, Griffith, & Mumford, 2016; Serban & Roberts, 2016). Unsurprisingly, academic interest in the topic has accelerated proportionally. Zhu, Liao, Yam, and Johnson explain, "a rapidly growing body of research has started to examine shared leadership, which is broadly defined as an emergent team phenomenon whereby leadership roles and influence are distributed among team members" (2018, p. 834). Not long ago, a popular publication captured the ethos and energy of the movement with the headline, "Bye-Bye, Heroic Leadership. Here Comes Shared Leadership" (Tams, 2019).

Previous research for a dissertation classified many of the benefits associated with this model of leadership into the following ten categories: exceptional outcomes, enhanced decision-making, complex problem solving, creative innovation, team-member fit, team synergy, organizational vitality, healthy organizational culture, individual health, and sustained growth (Herbst, 2017). That original investigation confirmed these attributes in each of the organizations surveyed. The qualitative approach used in that investigation also surfaced five potential obstacles including the difficulty of the model, a potential lack of follow-through, a possible lack of efficiency, a general lack of acceptance of the model, and the danger of immature or usurping team members. These were further elaborated on in a related academic paper.

The original dissertation research was conducted in 2016 and defended in 2017. A five-year follow up with the original organizations has provided new information about the potential obstacles that were previously uncovered.

2. Literature Review

Shared leadership is an approach to organizational administration that involves shared influence and distributed roles (Torres, Bulkley, & Kim, 2020; Zhu et al., 2018). This influence sharing is done with mutual, organizational goals in mind (Park & Seo, 2019). Craig Pearce (2004) explains:

> Shared leadership occurs when all members of a team are fully engaged in the leadership of the team and are not hesitant to influence and guide their fellow team members in an effort to maximize the potential of the team as a whole. Simply put, shared leadership entails a simultaneous, ongoing, mutual influence process within a team that is characterized by "serial emergence" of official as well as unofficial leaders. In this sense, shared leadership can be considered a manifestation of fully developed empowerment in teams. (p. 48)

This style of organizational administration has been shown to have unique benefits across a diversity of organizations but more research still needs to be done.

2.1 Benefits associated with shared leadership

Numerous academic papers have described the exceptional outcomes that have been associated with distributed forms of leadership. Recently, Edelmann, Boen, and Fransen (2020) surveyed 146 employees from various organizations and found that sharing leadership can lead to increased team effectiveness, higher perceived peer leadership quality, and other "positive outcomes" (p. 1). They described "broad evidence based on the positive impact of shared leadership on team level outcomes" (Edelmann et al., 2020, p. 2). They attributed this to the quality of peer leaders and the ability of those leaders to engender a sense of ownership in the team (Edelmann et al., 2020). Another recent publication found that teams who share leadership make fewer errors and experience higher levels of quality performance (Müller, Pintor, & Wegge, 2018). These findings are hardly surprising to anyone familiar with shared leadership. Plenty of other publications have described similar outcomes.

Decentralized decision-making has also been correlated with beneficial outcomes. Kelman, Sanders, and Pandit (2017) explain the problem with individual decision-making writing, "In addition to difficulties gathering and evaluating complete information, cognitive limitations and biases preclude individuals from making fully value-maximizing choices when making decisions" (p. 245). They highlight the potential value that groups of advisors can bring to decision-making (Kelman et al., 2017). After considering a Nobel prize winner's psychological work, an organizational authority's expertise, and a business leader's insights in this field, Owen (2015) concludes, "collaborative decision making results in a significantly more valuable choice than the alternatives envisioned by any of the decision makers through the aggregation understandings" (p. 1). A collaborative approach can be helpful in situations that require complex problem solving. In fact, the benefits of shared leadership have even been shown to increase with work complexity (Müller et al., 2018; Wang, Waldman, & Zhen, 2014).

Today's dynamic work environment, with all of its complexities and uncertainties, demands creativity, innovation, and synergy, attributes that can accompany team-based approaches (Lyndon, Pandey, & Navare, 2020). Shared leadership can benefit the modern workplace but it can also do the same for modern workers, helping them find their fit in organizational life. Empowering and decentralized leadership has been associated with employee satisfaction (Edelmann et al., 2020, Wood & Fields, 2007) and improved job performance (Sunu, 2021). Creative innovation, team-member fit, and team synergy are all contributors to organizational vitality.

There is minimal research on the association between shared leadership and organizational culture. Knowledge sharing, an attribute of shared leadership, has been related to organizational agility (Samani, Sadeghiyan, Keshavarz, & Ziglari, 2017). Shared leadership has also been correlated with organizational justice (Park & Seo, 2019). Many of the positive attributes associated with shared leadership lend themselves to healthy organizational culture as well. Other research has shown a connection between shared leadership and individual health. For example, Wood and Fields (2007)

surveyed 200 employees from Christian organizations in the United States and found that "Shared leadership within a management team was negatively related to team member role overload, role conflict, role ambiguity and job stress" (p. 251). In summary, shared leadership can foster healthy organizations and healthy team members.

All of these benefits impact the bottom line; sharing leadership can positively impact an organization. It can even result in sustained growth. A recent article investigated 94 entrepreneurial teams from various industries and found a connection between shared leadership and new venture performance that resulted from team reflexivity (Chen, Chen, Yu, & Huang, 2020). This is not a shocking revelation about shared leadership. More than a decade ago, David Thompson described its connection to launching and growth of multiple billion-dollar companies (as cited in Hesselbein & Goldsmith, 2009).

Shared leadership can lead to positive results. Again, it has been associated with exceptional outcomes, enhanced decision-making, complex problem solving, creative innovation, team-member fit, team synergy, organizational vitality, healthy organizational culture, individual health, and sustained growth (Herbst, 2017). Each of the organizations that were originally surveyed reported these benefits in different degrees, but they also highlighted impediments that had at times become barriers to effective shared leadership (Herbst, Rios-Collazo, Denison, 2019). Like with so many things in life, experiencing success owes much to mitigating obstacles.

2.2   Potential drawbacks of shared leadership

Evans, Sanner, and Chiu (2021) acknowledge that the popularity of shared leadership has been growing but highlight the need for more research, especially into less explored aspects of the model. Some reviews in this field have merged findings across different domains and have extrapolated conclusions without regard for context (Sweeney, Clarke, & Higgs, 2018). For example, because of "proven performance-enhancing benefits" in certain management domains, shared leadership has been less explored in "the project management context" (Scott-Young, Georgy, Grisinger, 2019). Zhu et al. (2018) agree with the need for broader investigations into this model of leadership.

The original dissertation research in 2016 evaluated shared leadership in Evangelical churches and ministries in the United States, a domain that had previously received minimal attention. It also elucidated five potential obstacles to effective shared leadership, another important consideration that has not been adequately considered. The five drawbacks included the difficulty of the model, a potential lack of follow-through, a possible lack of efficiency, a general lack of acceptance of the model, and the danger of immature or usurping team members. These were the focus of this five-year follow up. Before proceeding with the current research, a brief consideration will be given to some of the literature concerning these potential drawbacks.

Sharing leadership can be difficult and even confusing and that can pose an impediment to this type of organizational structure. In their analysis of Massive Open Online Courses, Yang, Wen, Howley, Kraut, and Rose (2015) found that confusion often leads to dropout. They also found that

receiving support and finding resolution for confusion helped circumvent this danger (Yang et al., 2015).

A potential lack of follow-through is hardly intrinsic to shared leadership. Sull, Homkes, and Sull (2015) explain, "A recent survey of more than 400 global CEOs found that executional excellence was the number one challenge facing corporate leaders in Asia, Europe, and the United State" (p. 4). The risk this poses across the organizational spectrum can be accentuated in shared leadership contexts. As the old adage goes, if something is everybody's responsibility, it is really nobody's responsibility. This has been called diffusion of responsibility, and it is defined as a "diminished sense of responsibility often experienced by individuals in groups and social collectives" (APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2021). This group tendency can be a danger to effective shared leadership.

A possible lack of efficiency can accompany collaborative decision-making, but can be associated with better decisions (Hong & Banerjee, 2012). Expediency does not necessarily equal excellence. Even though teams might take longer than individuals to come to decisions, they typically arrive there with more input and that can be good. Still, the tendency for decision-making groups to stagnate in "paralysis by analysis" is a real danger (Kelman et al., 2017, p. 245).

A general lack of acceptance of shared leadership can also be a formidable hurdle. Brian Robertson (2015), famous for developing the Holacracy model of shared leadership, insists most of today's organizations are structured according to an early 1900s blueprint that has changed very little over the years. He refers to this as an "industrial-age paradigm" that is based on "up front planning, centralized control, and preventing deviation" (Robertson, 2015, p. 7). The prevalence of a standard centralized approach to governance can dissuade people from adopting decentralized models.

The danger of immature or usurping team members is another potential obstacle. Of course, this can encumber any group. Domineering team members can ostracize coworkers whom they perceive as threats to their personal and organizational goals (Howard, Cogswell, & Smith, 2020). That can hinder job performance on the team (Jahanzeb, Fatima, Javed, & Giles, 2019). Although a risk to all types of organizations, this danger can become pronounced in a shared context.

3. Theoretical Framework

A plethora of academic research has demonstrated the benefits of shared leadership but minimal attention has been devoted to the drawbacks associated with this approach to organizational governance (Herbst et al., 2019). Previous research surfaced five potential obstacles to effective shared leadership (Herbst 2017; Herbst et al., 2019). Those findings presented an opportunity for further analysis with the subjects of the prior research. Since that previous investigation was exclusively qualitative in nature, a mixed methods approach was selected for a five-year follow up study.

The purpose of this present inquiry was to revisit each of the organizations that were previously interviewed with a new survey that specifically considered the various obstacles the initial dissertation surfaced. A mixed methods approach enabled the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative component of the current research was selected to solicit a better understanding of how widespread and common the five potential obstacles surfaced in the previous survey were. The

qualitative element was chosen to better understand how each of the organizations surveyed responded to the aforementioned impediments. Conducting this mixed methods investigation five years after the initial survey was done to obtain a more robust understanding of how these barriers had been encountered and mitigated over time.

4. Methodology

For this project, the participants were individually given links to a SurveyMonkey survey. This helped ensure anonymity, minimize bias, and guarantee accuracy. It also enabled efficient surveying while following public health orders and guidelines existing during the COVID-19 pandemic. The surveys administered had both qunatitative and qualitative elements. This five-year follow up investigation was conducted with the same seven American Evangelical Christian ministries and churches that had been previously surveyed for the aforementioned prior research.
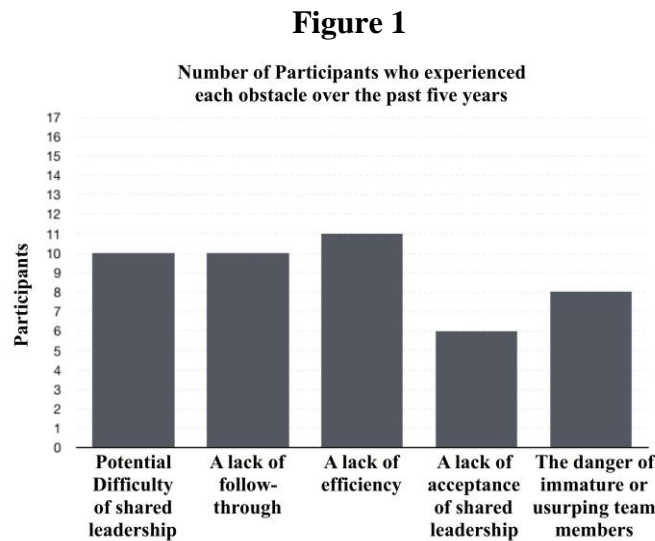
4.1 Participants

Seventeen organizational leaders from the same seven subject organizations investigated in prior dissertation research were surveyed. These leaders were previously selected through purposive sampling; for more on that earlier research, please review the dissertation (Herbst, 2017). These leaders and their organizations were surveyed in this follow up survey since they were the ones who originally identified the five potential pitfalls of shared leadership that merited further study.

4.2 Design

Participants were surveyed with a comprehensive questionnaire based on the potential pitfalls identified in past research. The survey questions can be viewed in Appendix A. Previous surveying identified five potential drawbacks to the shared leadership model (Herbst, 2017). These were: The difficulty of the model, a potential lack of follow through, a possible lack of efficiency, a general lack of acceptance of the model, and the danger of immature or usurping team members. In this investigation, participants were asked to identify ways in which these pitfalls had or had not impacted their organizations. This provided quantitative data concerning the prevalence of the aforementioned obstacles. Respondents then had the opportunity to explain in their own words how they addressed these situations and other obstacles that were not yet identified, and they were invited to share their thoughts on mitigating these pitfalls. This yielded qualitative data for a better understanding of how the surveyed organizations had circumvented these hurdles since the initial surveying five years prior.
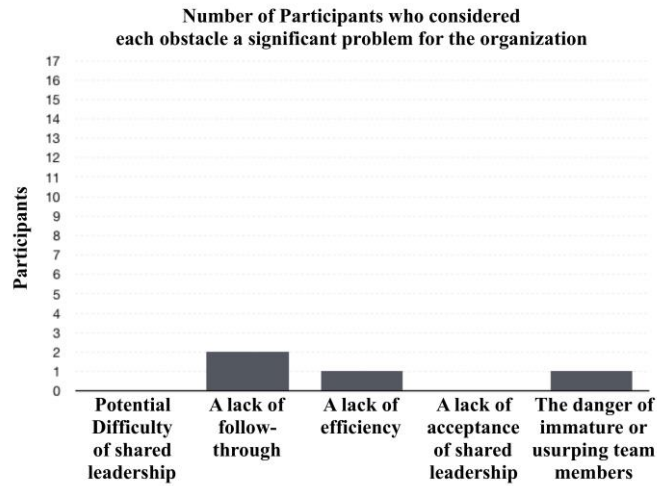
5. Results.

Surveying confirmed the relative prevalence of the aforementioned obstacles (see figure 1).

Figure 1

Number of Participants who experienced
each obstacle over the past five years

In spite of the presence of these obstacles, they did not seem to have posed major issues for those surveyed. Participants were asked whether each of these had posed a significant problem to the organization. Figure 2 shows how most of these drawbacks had been effectively mitigated by the organizations that were surveyed.

Figure 2

Next, survey results for each of the obstacles investigated will be further considered.

5.1   The potential difficulty of sharing leadership

Not one of the seventeen participants saw the potential difficulty of sharing leadership as a significant problem for their organization. Six admitted it was difficult to understand, three acknowledged it was difficult to explain, four agreed that it was difficult to master, five recognized it was difficult to maintain, and one thought it would be difficult to scale. Seven affirmed that this had not been a significant issue during the past five years.

One person commented, "This model is foreign and counter-intuitive to virtually everyone in our organization. So it is hard to maintain the concepts as leadership involves new people and there is a string tendency to drift toward more authoritarian structures and processes." Another added, "Clarity of redefined roles and responsibilities has been a challenge. There is a lot of grey overlap in the shared spaces that isn't well defined. Lines of authority are blurred creating confusion and questionable trust."

5.2   A lack of follow through

Two out of the seventeen participants insisted a lack of follow through was a significant problem for their organizations. Seven realized unclear authority structures were part of the problem and eight believed unclear roles were. Only four admitted that unclear goals and action steps were an issue. Seven highlighted the problem of unclear accountability but only two believed unclear consequences were an issue. Seven affirmed that this had not been a significant issue during the past five years.

Only two commented further. One elaborated, "We have had good follow-through but the tendency toward old MOs continues." The other lamented a lack of accountability and noted.

5.3   A lack of efficiency

Only one participant considered a lack of efficiency a significant problem. Seven out of the seventeen admitted decisions have taken too long at times and seven also acknowledged that implementation has as well. Only four said the same of procedures and protocols. Seven thought that adapting to changes took too long and nine thought addressing tensions did. Six asserted that a lack of efficiency had not been a significant problem over the past five years. One person added, "We spend more time on clarifying expectations among our team."

5.4   A general lack of acceptance of this model of leadership

None of the seventeen participants considered this to be a significant issue. Only four participants said their co-leaders had struggled with accepting shared leadership; only three said staff members had; only three said long time ministry members had; and only one said new members had

struggled with it. None of the participants thought donors struggled with accepting this approach to leadership. Eleven said a general lack of acceptance of shared leadership had not been a significant issue in the past five years. The only additional comment was, "Ongoing education re a different way of doing things."

5.5   The danger of immature or usurping team members

Only one of the seventeen participants considered this a significant problem for their organization. One respondent claimed immature or usurping team members had divided the leadership team and one believed they had stonewalled or sabotaged decisions. Only two participants said immature or usurping team members had created a toxic work environment and only two claimed they had fractured the organization. Four people admitted immature or usurping team members had been removed from the leadership team. Nine participants claimed immature or usurping team members had not been a significant problem over the previous five years.

Five respondents added clarity. The first said, "So far, the model of shared leadership we have derived has worked. My perceived issue is gradual erosion of the intent similar to the erosion of the US Constitution intent." The second added, "The problem has not been immaturity but people bringing incompatible experience into leadership and expectations." The third added clarity, in light of the pandemic context, "It's a hard season to really evaluate in light of COVID. If it was the previous four years, most of these did not impact us. This last year we've had some issues, most notably the need to remove an elder who was not aligned with the rest of the team."

The fourth lamented, "Individuals choosing to take action in lieu of working through the leadership model." Finally, the fifth concluded, "We experienced problems with an immature member of our leadership team, who would not accept being held accountable. Unfortunately it took a long time to remove this team member and several other members of our church family were hurt in the process."

5.6   Other obstacles

Respondents were given the opportunity to highlight other impediments they have encountered. One highlighted the difficulty of co-leading with other leaders who have different involvement and commitment levels. Another mentioned a continuing need for structure while another noted the risk of a drift towards authoritarian structures. These issues could be categorized under the difficulty of the model. A final comment described the risks of avoiding confrontation, something that could fall under the danger of immature or usurping team members.

5.7   Mitigating obstacles to effective shared leadership

Respondents shared insights on how to ameliorate shared leadership practices for success. They emphasized the importance of leader humility, accountability, and maturity, adding clarity to roles and

procedures, and establishing clear structures. Multiple participants highlighted the need for training; clarity in the specific mechanics of the leadership team could help address some problems. Relational team building was also emphasized. One participant expressed the value of organizational culture and setting a culture in which shared leadership can be successful. Finally, one explained the importance of "speaking the truth in love." Having authentic conversations can be a key to accountability in shared leadership settings.

6. Conclusions

The five drawbacks that were considered in this endeavor had been experienced fairly broadly and do pose legitimate risks. One respondent put it this way:

> We have experienced all of them. To address them we have had to demonstrate shared leadership with others and reiterate the principles with those that don't understand. Unfortunately that takes significant energy that hopefully will be able to be directed toward more ministry activities in the future.

Still, these organizations have continued experiencing success sharing leadership. Each of the seven organizations that were interviewed five years ago has continued sharing leadership. Few considered any of these obstacles to be significant problems and all had persevered with this model of leadership in spite of them.

Shared leadership has been associated with a myriad of benefits across many different domains. Experiencing these requires circumventing potential obstacles. Even though these limitations do exist and pose real risks, they can be mitigated. The organizations surveyed for this research have found a way to do just that and they have experienced many of the benefits of shared leadership in the process. One of their quotes summarizes this endeavor well, "We love shared leadership. Healthy and joyful in so many ways."

7. Acknowledgements

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Appendix A

Here are the questions that were included in this five-year follow up survey.

1. Please select any ways the potential difficulty associated with sharing leadership has impacted your organization over the last five years.
    a. The difficulty of sharing leadership has been a significant problem for our organization.
    b. This model of leadership is difficult to understand.
    c. This model of leadership is difficult to explain.
    d. This model of leadership is difficult to master.
    e. This model of leadership is difficult to maintain.
    f. This model of leadership is difficult to scale.
    g. The potential difficulty associated with sharing leadership has not been a significant problem for us over the past five years.
    h. Other (please specify)
2. Please select any ways a lack of follow-through associated with sharing leadership has impacted your organization over the past five years.
    a. The lack of follow-through has been a significant problem for our organization.
    b. Unclear authority structures have been a problem for our organization.
    c. Unclear roles have been a problem for our organization.
    d. Unclear accountability has been a problem for our organization.
    e. Unclear consequences have been a problem for our organization.
    f. A lack of follow-through has not been a significant problem for us over the past five years.
    g. Other (please specify)

3. Please select any ways a possible lack of efficiency associated with sharing leadership has impacted your organization over the past five years.
    a. A lack of efficiency has been a significant problem for our organization.
    b. Decision-making has taken longer than it should have.
    c. Implementation of plans and decisions has taken longer than it should have.
    d. Procedures and protocols have taken longer than they should have.
    e. Addressing tensions and problems has taken longer than it should have.
    f. A lack of efficiency associated with sharing leadership has not been a significant problem for us over the past five years.
    g. Other (please specify)

4. Please select any ways a general lack of acceptance of sharing leadership has impacted your organization over the past five years.
    a. A general lack of acceptance of shared leadership has been a significant problem for our organization.
    b. Our co-leaders have struggled to accept this model of leadership.
    c. Our staff members have struggled to accept this model of leadership.
    d. Our long-time members have struggled to accept this model of leadership.
    e. A general lack of acceptance of shared leadership has not been a significant problem for us over the past five years.
    f. Other (please specify)

5. Please select any ways the danger of immature or usurping team members has impacted your organization over the past five years.
    a. The danger of immature or usurping team members has been a significant problem for our organization.
    b. Immature or usurping team members have divided our leadership team.
    c. Immature or usurping team members have stonewalled or sabotaged decisions.
    d. Immature or usurping team members have fractured the organization.
    e. Immature or usurping team members have had to be removed from leadership.
    f. The danger of immature or usurping team members has not been a significant problem for us over the past five years.
    g. Other (please specify)

6. If you have encountered any of these five potential obstacles in the past five years, please list which one(s) and how you addressed the situation(s).

7. Please describe any other obstacles inherent to shared leadership that you have encountered in the past five years that were not listed here.

8. Please share any other thoughts you might have on mitigating the potential pitfalls of shared leadership.