

DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP: A CASE STUDY OF AN AUSTRALIAN VOLUNTARY NONPROFIT ORGANIZATION

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Abstract

The paper discusses a topic raised in recent leadership literature, that of distributed leadership. This concept is an alternative to the current focus on individual, sole leaders, and proposes that leadership is often distributed among two, more or many members of an organization. The literature on distributed leadership is discussed, with particular emphasis on the writings of Gronn (1999; 2002) who classifies distributed leadership as either numerical or concertive action, containing the properties of interdependence and coordination. A case study of an Australian nonprofit organization follows. This study seeks to determine if distributed leadership exists in this organization and if it could be understood using Gronn's concepts. The study indicates that distributed leadership does exist with three individuals being responsible for various leadership roles. The distributed leadership is seen as concertive action which is institutionalised in the organization. Distributed leadership succeeds, in this case, because of the interdependence of the roles of the leaders and because they work hard at coordination of their roles. The study concludes that while distributed leadership appears in this case, more research on the topic is needed.

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INTRODUCTION

Leadership has long been viewed as the prerogative of one individual in an organization. However, more than 75 years ago, Whitehead (1926:61) warned against accepting concepts as if they exist in a “simple location” of space and time and while an understanding of systemic thinking has broadened many studies of organizations, there is still has a tendency in leadership theory to see it as an isolated phenomenon. A few writers, however, have been able to see leadership as dispersed or distributed within organizations rather than centred in one individual. Gibb (1969) proposed two forms of leadership, focused and distributed, with distributed leadership being an alternative to the usual leadership studies focused on one leader. A number of more recent writers have developed this idea using terms such as democratic leadership (Bass 1990), collective leadership (Burns 1998), shared leadership (Judge and Ryman 2001), dispersed leadership (Bryman 1996), distributive leadership (Brown and Gioia 2002) or distributed leadership (Brown 1989; Brown and Hosking 1986) to describe situations where leadership functions are believed to be shared. Other writers (Chityayat 1985; Denis, Lamothe and Langley 2001; Gronn 1999; Heenan and Bennis 1999; Stewart 1991a; b; Yukl 1999) have discussed this concept, calling it dual leadership, dual control, collective leadership, co-leadership, or the leadership (or management) couple.

However, distributed leadership has received greater attention recently, particularly in *The Leadership Quarterly*. This attention is caused by two factors. First, it is linked to the criticism of modern leadership research specifically because it concentrates on the activities of individual leaders, and tends to give inordinate attention to the Chief Executive Officer (CEO). For example, Yukl (1999:292) maintains that there is a bias in modern leadership theories to “heroic leadership”, ignoring the role of “reciprocal influence processes or shared leadership”. Yukl (1999) attacks modern leadership ideas, such as transformational and charismatic leadership theories, as conceptually weak because of their assumption that one individual leads all others to achieve the goals of the group or organization. Similarly, Gronn (1999) criticises Jermier and Kerr's (1997) research on substitutes for leadership, by asserting that a fundamental flaw in their argument is the assumption that there is always a solo leader. This assumption, both Yukl (1999) and Gronn (2002) suggest underlies most leadership research.

Second, distributed leadership is the subject of renewed interest because it sits comfortably in contemporary organizations, where the competencies required are often greater than any one person is able to possess (Gronn 1999) and where team structures and increasing empowerment of individuals is becoming the norm (Edmonstone and Western 2002). These changes result in a situation where leadership may no longer be exclusive to any one individual, but distributed among members of the organization. Yukl (1999:292) suggests that “an alternative perspective would be to describe leadership as a shared process of enhancing the collective and individual capacity of people to accomplish their work roles effectively”. Yukl (1999) asserts that all leadership theories could be improved if they included the implications of distributed leadership in organizations. We now address the concept of distributed leadership in more detail.

DEFINING DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP

Gronn (2002) proposes a definition of leadership which allows for a different interpretation of leadership from the traditional, one person, heroic leader. According to Gronn (2002:427), leadership is “a status ascribed to one individual, an aggregate of separate individuals, sets of small numbers of individuals acting in concert or larger plural-member organizational units”.

While many writers have acknowledged the existence of distributed leadership, attempts to define it specifically are few. Yukl (1999:292) states, very broadly, that distributed leadership:

Does not require an individual who can perform all of the essential leadership functions, only a set of people who can collectively perform them. Some leadership functions (e.g., making important

decisions) may be shared by several members of a group, some leadership functions may be allocated to individual members, and a particular leadership function may be performed by different people at different times. The leadership actions of any individual leader are much less important than the collective leadership provided by members of the organization.

House and Aditja (1997:457), in their lengthy review of the study of leadership, also acknowledge distributed leadership, stating that:

The process of leadership cannot be described simply in terms of the behavior of an individual: rather, leadership involves collaborative relationships that lead to collective action grounded in the shared values of people who work together to effect positive change.

Barry (1991:34) in his study of distributed leadership in self-managed teams, clearly differentiates distributed leadership from the solo leader-centred leadership predominant in the literature and describes leadership as,

A collection of roles and behaviors that can be split apart, shared, rotated, and used sequentially or concomitantly. This in turn means that at any one time multiple leaders can exist in a team, with each leader assuming a complementary leadership role.

However, none of these definitions give any indication of how to identify distributed leadership in organizations. In their attempts to classify distributed leadership further, House and Aditja (1997) assert that it exists in three different forms, namely delegated leadership, co-leadership, and peer leadership. While attempting to increase knowledge of the concept, House and Aditja (1997) acknowledge that understanding of these three forms is limited and they provide very little empirical evidence which would enable an investigation of the three forms in organizations.

On the other hand, Gronn (2002) does attempt to refine the concept further through an analysis of empirical studies of 20 organizations, where leadership by more than one executive leader is evident. Studies where Gronn identified distributed leadership include:

- An Australian study of school heads and head of campus (Gronn 1999),
- a Canadian study (Denis et al. 2001) of hospitals with boards, CEOs, medical councils and health care professionals sharing leadership,
- university governors, presidents, managers and staff (Birnbaum 1992),
- CEOs and sport coaches (Heenan et al. 1999), and
- CEO and Board Chairs (Chityayat 1985).

Identifying Distributed Leadership

Through his meta-analysis, Gronn (2002) classifies distributed leadership as a numerical or concertive action. Numerical action suggests that all individuals in an organization may be leaders at some time, while concertive action results from conjoint agency where members synchronise their actions to those of others. Concertive action is either spontaneous, intuitive, or institutionalised.

Numerical Action

Distributed leadership is numerical, or multiple actions, where leadership is dispersed among many, or all, members of an organization and there is the chance that all members may be leaders at some stage (Miller 1998). Distributed leadership, in this case, may be seen as a sum of all individuals' activities (Wenger 2000).

Concertive Action

Distributed leadership, as a concertive action, is a complex web of patterns and interactions of two, more or many individuals. The defining attribute of concertive action, Gronn (2002:432) suggests is “conjoint agency” where “the agents constituting the membership of the units act conjointly . . . synchronise their action by having regard to their own plans, those of their peers and their sense of unit membership”.

Gronn (2002) identifies concertive action as occurring in three ways: either as spontaneous collaboration, intuitive working relations, or as institutionalised practice. For example, Gronn (2002) sees spontaneous collaboration between individuals, occurring regularly and being anticipated in such activities as budget or planning meetings, or occurring unexpectedly because of crises in the organization. Intuitive relations between colleagues who work closely together are more likely to emerge over time when members of an organization are dependent on each other and develop a close personal relationship. The tendency to institutionalise distributed leadership is observed when there is a leadership team and it is seen as inappropriate for a sole individual to be in charge (Gronn 2002). Gronn (2002) observes that distributed leadership often begins spontaneously, or intuitively, in an organization but goes on to become institutionalised.

Properties of Distributed Leadership

Gronn (2002) also notes two properties of distributed leadership: interdependence and coordination. Interdependence reveals itself in two ways: by the overlapping of members’ responsibilities and also by these responsibilities being complementary. Overlapping has been identified as a problem due to unnecessary effort (Stewart 1991a) but also as strength, providing “mutual reinforcement” and a reduction of decision-making mistakes (Heller and Firestone 1995). Complementary interdependence is seen as positive because it enables individuals to capitalise on their own and others’ individual strengths (Gronn 2002).

The second property of distributed leadership suggested by Gronn (2002) is coordination. This involves the managing of dependencies to ensure that people and resources are all coordinated to achieve the required performance. Formal coordination is often explicitly noted in job descriptions and duty statements for example, but coordination in a distributed leadership situation is far more likely to be implicit, perhaps lead to problems, or more likely to be taken for granted.

DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP AS A UNIT OF ANALYSIS

Gronn (2002) proposes that distributed leadership should be used as a unit of analysis in leadership studies as an alternative to the focus on individual leaders. His identification of the existence of distributed leadership in many situations, and his assertion that this is a unit of analysis worthy of further research adds to the case for leadership to be examined in context (Bryman, Stephens and a Campo 1996), particularly in nonprofit organizations. Gronn's (2002:430) study does reveal a preponderance of nonprofit organizations identified as having leadership performed by more than one person and his term, distributed leadership, has been connected with nonprofit organizations in the past (Brown 1989; Brown et al. 1986).

While there is a body of work discussing distributed leadership, Gronn (2002) and House and Aditja (1997) note that there is little research which provides evidence of the dynamics of the process. This paper, therefore, seeks to study a nonprofit organization to:

- identify if distributed leadership does exist,
- determine if distributed leadership is numerical or concertive action,
- observe if the concertive action is spontaneous, intuitive and/or institutionalised, and
- discern how interdependence and/or coordination work in practice.

METHOD

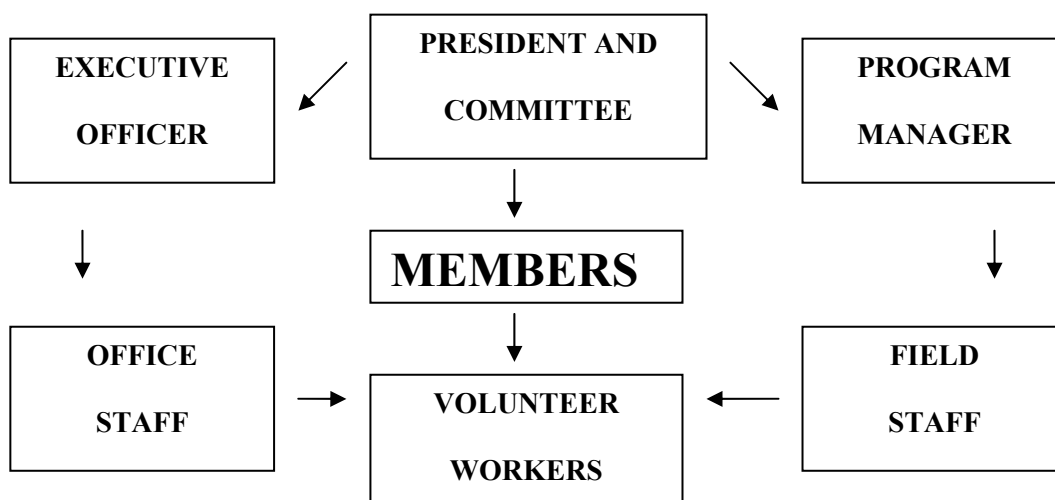
The case study method was used as it allowed us to conduct an in-depth study into the organization and its leadership. Case study methodology is an invaluable tool for conducting research in social and behavioural sciences and is a traditional vehicle for nonprofit management research (Crittenden and Crittenden 2000; Yin 1994). We began our study by identifying a community-based, volunteer, nonprofit association where, at first glance, there appeared to be some type of distributed leadership, particularly as it had an Executive Officer (EO) and a President/Chair of the Management Committee. In order to obtain a deeper understanding of the organization we reviewed primary and secondary documents such as annual reports, minutes of management committee meetings, newsletters as well as organizational histories, mission statements, organizational charts, and descriptions of the association's programs. We then prepared a semi-structured interview schedule and interviewed the President, and the EO, another member of the Management Committee and two other staff members. Additionally, we observed a Management Committee meeting, a staff meeting and a meeting between the President and the EO, and their meetings with other staff.

We thus met Yin's (1994) requirements for construct validity by using multiple sources of evidence. Examining the findings against the initial theory that had been assembled ensured internal validity. Compiling a protocol for the cases that included set research questions and schedules as well as analysing the data collected using Gronn's (2002) forms and properties of distributed leadership as criteria, ensured consistency and enhanced the reliability of our study. We recognise the limitation of generalizability imposed on all case study research, but suggest that the results of this study may have implications for other nonprofit organizations.

The organization

The organization that participated in the study is the Early Childhood Recreation Association (ECRA) (a pseudonym). ECRA is an umbrella association for approximately 3,000 small community self-help groups operating throughout one of the larger Australian states. In 2002, over 30,000 families were members of the Association. The organization is governed by an elected Committee of Management, with elections being held once a year where a third of the members must resign or stand for re-election. The Committee meets monthly. It employs 25 staff, with a volunteer workforce of over 350 running most activities. The paid staff are either administrative, or professionals, in the field who work with the grassroots groups assisting with the running of their programs, however the volunteers do most of the operational work. All of the individuals involved in this organization are women. The organizational structure of the association is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Structure of ECRA



FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are presented in the same order as the research questions that form the focus of this study.

Does Distributed Leadership Exist in this Organization?

Distributed leadership exists if leadership is shared among members of an organization. When asked who the leader of the organization was, all interviewees responded that leadership was shared. The EO, President and Program Manager all, independently, produced a copy of the organizational structure as shown in Figure 1. "I lead the admin staff", said the EO, "and the President leads the Board, and the Program Manager leads the field staff". Both the EO and the President emphasised the importance of the Program Manager's role. "The Program Manager has a really important leadership role with both staff and volunteers. She is widely respected by everyone" reported the EO. The President went further: "The Program Manager is the most important person in the Association".

This existence of distributed leadership was confirmed by a study of situations where a public spokesperson was required by the organization. Documentation showed that the EO was the spokesperson in financial and staffing matters, the President in relations to other organizations, publicity for fund-raising and policy issues, and the Program Manager spoke about any matters to do with the organization's programs and when comments were required about children's activities. It was also observed, that although the EO was chief of staff, it was the Program Manager who dealt with the field workers who worked on a daily basis with the members. The EO had very little to do with this group, while having a daily role with other staff. The President was careful to delimit her role to dealing with the Management Committee, members and volunteer workers, and only worked with other staff through the EO or Program Manager.

The three leaders were asked if one of them was more obviously the most dominant leader. All were adamant that this could not be the case. All three emphasised that this was a voluntary organization and the President was most important as the leader of the volunteers, but that the EO was equally important as the leader of the staff and the manager of finances. The Program Manager position, they felt was different, but because of her influence with the field workers and through them with the volunteers and members, her role was equally important. The EO felt, at first, that this could be unique to their situation, but then thought of other nonprofit organizations where there was a similar role. While all three struggled to find the words, they all, individually, felt that this type of leadership was the best form for nonprofit, voluntary organizations. "In the past we have had an EO or a President, who tried to dominate and it has always been caused problems, major problems," the EO reported. A study of the organization's historical documents showed two periods of time where there was a continual turnover of either EOs or Presidents leading to periods of crisis in membership and finances and, at one stage, the organization nearly folding. "One dominant leader just doesn't work here" the President felt. "We are an association of people who all should have a say and if one person dominates that can't happen".

In summary, distributed leadership did exist in the organization. This was demonstrated clearly by the three leaders' responses and the actions of the staff and members. The three leaders felt that this situation was the most appropriate for their organization and that a sole leader would not be effective.

Is the Distributed Leadership Numerical or Concertive Action?

While leadership in ECRA was distributed among the President, EO and Program Manager, it was not numerical action. Leadership, as a numerical action is distributed among many or all members of the organization and it is possible for all members to be leaders at some stage. In this organization, leadership was confined to the leadership group with the other staff being observed to defer to either the President or the EO and the members of the Management Committee clearly deferred to the President. The staff were generally poorly paid and part-time workers, who were committed to the association but were not willing to take leadership responsibility. "I try to empower all my staff" the EO reported, "but they don't want responsibility for anything that is tricky, just the routine". The President was frustrated with her fellow Management Committee members: "All they want to do is come to meetings and go to the fun activities. They will work hard at fund raising but they don't want to do any hard thinking work, but I was like that too

before I became President and I know where they are coming from". There is little chance that other staff or association members will be leaders at some stage and leadership cannot be seen as a sum of all individual's activities as would be expected in distributed leadership presenting as numerical action (Gronn 2002; Miller 1998).

On the other hand, it was observed that leadership in ECRA was a concerted action among three people who formed a leadership group. It was observed that all members of staff deferred to one or other member of the group and the three leaders were careful to ensure that they did not cross the boundaries of their influence. "It is the President's job to run committee meetings and direct the members," the EO said. "My role is just to provide information and support to them".

In summary, distributed leadership, in this case, is a concertive action. Each leader was responsible for her own area, with the three leaders acting in concert to direct the activities of the organization. The leaders ensured they coordinated their activities and considered each other in all their planning.

Is the Concertive Action Spontaneous, Intuitive and/or Institutionalised?

Concertive action is evidenced by joint action, where each leader recognises that they belong to a unit and that they must synchronise their activities. It can, however, exist as spontaneous action, intuitive relations or institutionalised practice. The concertive action, in this case, was institutionalised as demonstrated by the structure of the organization which was designed to give some leadership roles to the EO, some to the President, and some to the Program Manager. The Program Manager tried to downplay her leadership ("I am only the Program Manager around here"), but was very strident in objecting to an approach made to the field worker by a committee member. This required intervention by the President and a clarification at a committee meeting to the members that they were not to approach staff unless authorised to do so, and a re-statement of the roles of the leadership group and other staff and volunteers.

While there was little evidence of spontaneous collaboration at a leadership level in the organization, there was evidence that intuitive working relations existed. The President and the EO have formed a close working relationship. The EO commented, "It is a real change from the last President who I did not get on with very well at all and that caused all sorts of problems". The two seemed very aware that they were co-leaders, and while they did not have the same intuitive relationship with the Program Manager, they both respected her contribution. "It is important that we three work well together as we are the decision-makers," the President commented.

Overall, all three leaders appeared to have different, but equally important roles. The fact that all members of the staff were aware of this demarcation was observed when a visitor to the office asked the receptionist if he could see the person in charge. The receptionist spent some time in finding out exactly what the visitor required before referring him to the Program Manager.

In summary, concertive action had been institutionalised in ECRA, with the leadership being part of the structure of the organization. There also existed a strong intuitive friendship between the President and the EO which further enhanced the effectiveness of the concertive action. Figure 2 defines the types of distributed leadership and summarises the evidence for its existence in this organization, showing that it is concertive action, with some signs of intuitive relations, but predominantly institutionalised in day-day-day activities.

Figure 2: Types of Distributed Leadership in ECRA

Type of Distributed Leadership	Definition	Evidence within organization
Numerical Action	Leadership is the sum of individual actions of all members	Did not exist: All Members, Board, volunteer workers, field and admin staff defer decision making to their nominated leader.
Concertive Action	Some or many members of an organization work together to provide leadership.	<p>Spontaneous: no evidence</p> <p>Intuitive: The President and EO met or talked daily, often for lengthy periods and enjoyed each other's company.</p> <p>Institutionalised:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The organization chart; • The clear statement of division of responsibility for the three leaders; • Each leader was the spokesperson for their area.

How Does Interdependence and/or Coordination Work in Practice?

The properties of distributed leadership include a degree of interdependence of the leaders, with the need for coordination of their activities. Interdependence can lead to overlapping of responsibilities. All three leaders were very clear that they did not think their responsibilities overlapped. "I know my role, and so does the President and my Program Manager," stated the EO. "All the staff are very clear about who they report to, and the members and Committee members know they should approach the President." However, they all acknowledge their interdependence. Both the EO and the Program Manager stated that their actions were limited by the policies of the Committee, and the President felt very strongly that she could not act without the understanding and cooperation of the EO and the Program Manager. They all, however, acknowledged the advantages of this situation. "I run most ideas I have past the EO and the Program Manager because they have both been in the job longer than I have," the President explained. The EO and Program Manager also regularly consulted with the President to assess the grassroots reaction to any of their plans. They appeared to have what Gronn (2002) termed complementary interdependence.

Coordination among the three was deemed to be essential by the three leaders. While they did not function as a leadership team and seldom met together as such, there were many meetings between them in pairs, particularly the EO and President who had telephone conversations almost on a daily basis and informal meetings at least twice a week. It was observed that the Program Manager did not have a strong intuitive relationship with either of the other two, but did have daily discussions, usually informal with the EO and met formally with the President once a week. The EO was always invited to this meeting but usually declined: "They are the experts in that part of the organization's work". The EO had instituted the formal meeting between the other two as she felt that she was being used as a "go-between" and felt that situation was not wise.

All three stated very strongly that they had to consult regularly with each other and through them with the rest of the staff. This, all three felt, was an opportunity to ask for help, offer advice and support to staff, particularly those with problems, and to celebrate success.

The leaders of this organization acknowledged their interdependence with each leader having a complementary role to play. They also demonstrated the importance to them of coordination, using formal and informal methods to ensure this occurred. Figure 3 defines and summarises these properties of distributed leadership, and outlines the evidence from this organization of their existence.

Figure 3: Properties of Distributed Leadership in ERCA

Properties of distributed leadership	Definition	Evidence within organization
Interdependence	Reciprocal dependence between two or more individuals. <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Overlapping• Complementary	No overlapping noted – clear delineation between roles. Special role of each outlined in organizational chart, job descriptions. Each leader had particular skills in their own area. Sharing of problems and successes.
Coordination	Managing the dependencies between activities	Formal cooperation outlined in policies and procedures, job descriptions, formal meetings. Informal cooperation existed in frequent phone calls and meetings.

CONCLUSION

This paper was written in response to Gronn's (2002) appeal for distributed leadership to be a unit of analysis in leadership research, rather than the solo leader. Our study showed that distributed leadership did exist in this nonprofit organization, however the notion that distributed leadership is a numerical action among all or many members of an organization was not apparent here. However, the study did find that distributed leadership was a concertive action among three people. The nature of this concertive action was recognised as being institutionalised in the organization. In fact, it was recognised as essential for the successful operation of the organization, with the concept of one dominant leader being seen as counterproductive. Distributed leadership, in this case, seemed to demonstrate complementary interdependence which was seen as positive because it enabled individuals to capitalise on their own and others' individual strengths. Coordination of their leadership activities resulted from constant interactions among the three leaders, a strong intuitive relationship between two of them, and the recognition that coordination was essential for the success of the organization.

We acknowledge that one case study is limited, and that the methods of recognising distributed leadership are still undeveloped. Further research involving studies of other organizations is required in order to test the validity of the distributed leadership concept.

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