LEADERSHIP

How Shared Leadership Changes Our Relationships at Work

by Declan Fitzsimons

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Consider the challenges of the 21\textsuperscript{st} century enterprise: things change too fast for one individual to know how to best respond; there are many explanations for any event, and multiple perspectives are needed to understand what that event means and decide what to do; a pipeline of future leaders is essential to companies’ long term success. No wonder organizations today are drawn to the benefit of leadership that is shared, rather than concentrated in a
single, charismatic individual. Regardless of the exact organizational structure or what it’s called, the times seem to call for leaders who can be first among equals.

This is more than delegation. It has to do with a team sharing a sense of purpose and responsibility for the overall leadership of the company. Different people may spearhead different aspects of the team’s work, but everyone is in charge, always.

Recent research on change management teams, virtual teams and new startup teams has shown that teams in which leadership is shared, rather than vested on a single individual, can be very effective, demonstrating through quantitative methods that shared leadership can, and does, lead to improved organizational performance. And yet organizations remain stubbornly hierarchical. Anyone who has tried to share the burdens and privileges of leadership in their teams has probably noticed that doing so is far from straightforward.
Over the last decade, assisting the leadership development of many senior executives attempting the transition to shared leadership, I have often noticed the same phenomenon. While everyone welcomes the idea, a culture of shared leadership does not easily flourish.

To learn more and answer the questions above, I embarked on an in-depth study of the transition to shared leadership. Specifically, I followed, for 18 months, the top management team of an international professional services firm in which the formal leader, the Managing Director, had resolved to share leadership with the whole team. This consisted of three functional heads of Finance, HR and Marketing, and four Executive Directors with Profit & Loss responsibility for separate sales divisions.

The study involved: (1) over 250 hours of team observations including 18 monthly full-day team meetings, 56 meetings of a sub-group of the top team, and 3 off-site team development meetings; (2) three rounds of interviews
with all team members at different times in the process; (3) official minutes and supporting documentation for each meeting. This large amount of data was rigorously analyzed following established methods in qualitative research, which involve moving back and forth between specific material and emerging generalizations about the transition to shared leadership.

The findings suggest that despite its appeal in the accounts of management gurus, sharing leadership does not make the life of the CEO any easier. But it does make it very different.

The transition requires you, the formal boss, to shift focus from interpreting information and formulating decisions to understanding and managing emotional tensions and shifting relationships: between executive team members; between them and you; and across the team’s boundaries. Below are some of the patterns to look for in each of these three relationship domains, based on the research findings.
Recognizing when and how these patterns occur, bringing them to the team’s attention, and managing the emotions that underpin them is the CEO’s main challenge in successfully implementing shared leadership.

**Relationships between team members.** Moving to shared leadership transforms the way decisions are made and changes relationship between team members. While they may welcome having the authority to oversee the whole business, Executive VPs will find it harder to oversee each other. Used to reporting directly to you, they may be reluctant to accept and exercise the authority to hold each other accountable for the performance of their function or business unit. They may collude in not giving each other a hard time, waiting for you to step in. This will box you into being the bearer of bad news, unless you make it clear that they must both support and challenge each other, rather than doing the former only.
Groups generally have a couple of ways of dealing with the unease of these new relationships; both have their dysfunctions. The first is for team members to form sub-groups and talk mostly with those with whom they are already comfortable, while ignoring or undermining the others. The second is to scapegoat a particular individual or team, and to make him or her the reason for all delays and dysfunctions. HR and IT are favorites, but it could be anyone. The worst thing you can do is join in. Your job is to judge when sub-groups are a useful way to split the team’s load, and when they’re a destructive way to avoid controversial issues. Faced with what appears a subpar team member or underperforming group, you need to work out to what extent the scapegoat is not up to scratch, and to what extent the rest of the team is simply labelling them incompetent so they can feel superior.

**Relationships with you.** Transitioning to shared leadership will inevitably change your relationship with your team. Many times, you will be missed. This may be obvious and
openly expressed. Most often, however, it will appear more subtly.

Finding the responsibility that comes with shared leadership difficult, the team may wish you to take the helm as a traditional leader who makes most decisions. Reassuring the team that shared leadership doesn’t mean you’re abdicating your authority is not always as easy as saying it. You may underestimate the capacity of a team to set you up to take a decision so that they can then say it was your idea. In a related vein, shared leadership threatens to undermine an important source of recognition in the workplace. Much as we deny it, many of us look up to leaders like we once looked up to a beloved parent, and enjoy their appreciation for a job well done. The worst possible response is to dismiss such needs as childish and unprofessional, chiding the team to “pull together” and stop waiting for you to say “good job.”
There is no reason to stop meeting with team members one-on-one, or providing individual recognition or criticism. However, make sure that one-on-one meetings are not meant to address issues that should be discussed by the whole team. You must be mindful of what belongs in one-on-one conversations, and what needs to be dealt with everyone present. Otherwise you’ll subtly disempower the team, and by implication, yourself.

**Relationships with the levels below.** On the road to shared leadership, you may find that the top team begins relating differently across its boundaries, especially with managers one or two levels below. By implication this could affect teams at all levels as the impact cascades downwards. For starters, you may notice attempts to export conflicts. Difficult conversations that the team is avoiding may get acted out in the level below. The classic sign is that while your team celebrates its harmony, those who report to them develop increasingly acrimonious relationship among each
other. Your job is to ensure that good feelings in the senior team do not come at the expense of confusion and frustration in the level below.

Also, a senior team going through the transition to shared leadership may prefer to keep its doors more firmly closed to other managers than usual, while they sort out their relationships. We learn early to keep our team’s struggles behind closed doors, and this is normal to an extent. However, it may contribute to feelings of confusion in the levels below, and adversely influence motivation and performance. Finally, executive team members may bolster their view of themselves as truly sharing leadership by developing a story that blames the levels below for the very difficulty described above. You may hear complaints about middle managers’ lack of mutual accountability, dependency on their boss, resistance to change, and so on—the very same issues you and your team may be struggling with.
Finally, moving from individual to shared leadership calls for a shift in mindset among all members of the executive team—including the CEO. The dynamics I have described are usually considered dysfunctional, and indeed, if left unexamined, they can achieve their covert aim—keeping the much dreaded, yet familiar, old leadership model in place. While our impulse may be to ignore these tensions or try to fix them quickly, the transition to shared leadership requires that you bring them up in the open and treat them as opportunities for collective learning. A top team that is openly able to address and manage these dynamics models for the rest of the organization the kind of directness, resilience, and responsibility that are needed across all levels in the contemporary business world.

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