



Improving leadership in Higher Education institutions: a distributed perspective

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Abstract:

This paper reports the findings of a qualitative exploration of distributed leadership expressions within project teams in a Higher Education institution. It investigates the characteristics and mechanisms of distributed leadership in higher education and identifies the enablers and barriers to its efficacy. The study presents its results via a holistic distributed leadership model, providing a unifying structure for future investigations. The conclusion addresses both the theoretical implications for understanding distributed leadership and the practical recommendations for Higher Education institutions seeking to cultivate proficient leadership.

Introduction:

Higher Education institutions are currently contending with a landscape marked by relentless change and evolving dynamics. Over the past few decades, the traditional foundations of academic leadership and collegial governance have swiftly given way to managerial principles borrowed from the private sector. This transition aligns with the concept referred to by scholars as 'New Public Management' (Chandler et al., 2002). Consequently, Higher Education institutions no longer enjoy the sanctuary of unchallenged legitimacy; instead, they face the intricate task of reconciling market-driven pressures, expanding student enrollments amid financial constraints, all the while striving to preserve their time-honored traditions of academic excellence and educational quality. Moreover, the adoption of private-sector solutions in Higher Education institutions often entails outdated principles and management fads that have long been discarded in their original context (Birnbbaum 2000a, b). These challenges are further exacerbated by the unique cultural traits of Higher Education institutions, making the transfer of private-sector management principles into a higher education context a challenging endeavor. Several scholars have emphasized the distinct cultural aspects of higher education establishments (e.g., Birnbbaum 1988; Bergquist 1992) and underscored the importance of aligning change leadership with the university's culture (Kezar and Eckel 2002; Lueddeke 1999; Middlehurst 1997). Instances of clashes between management principles and the traditional culture of collegial leadership have been widely documented (Chandler et al. 2002), emphasizing the need to tailor leadership and management principles to the unique context of higher education.

Distributed leadership principles present a potential solution to the complex challenges faced by Higher Education institutions. This shift towards distributed leadership aligns with the traditional values of collegiality and professional autonomy that have historically defined leadership in the realm of higher education. Moreover, it acknowledges the broader institutional needs for managing changes amid the ever-shifting landscape of Higher Education.

Before delving into the objectives of our study, which investigates distributed leadership within a UK higher education institution, let's offer a literature overview of distributed leadership.

Distributed Leadership:

In the field of leadership studies, there's a growing body of research dedicated to comprehending leadership as a shared or distributed phenomenon. While this shift is not entirely unprecedented in the leadership domain, which has traditionally entertained various theories, a fundamental assumption has been prevalent in most conventional leadership theories. This assumption posits leadership as a vertical process, drawing clear lines between leaders and followers as distinct and mutually exclusive categories (Pearce and Conger 2003, p. 1; Rost 1993, p. 70; Yukl 2002, p. 2). Distributed leadership challenges this conventional view by focusing on the mechanisms through which various individuals contribute to the leadership process, shaping collective action. In doing so, it offers a more nuanced understanding of leadership in real organizational settings.

Several factors have contributed to this shift from viewing leadership as a vertical process to comprehending it as a distributed phenomenon. First, the increasing interest in complexity sciences has exposed the limitations of traditional reductionist approaches in explaining real-world phenomena. The prevailing paradigm has a profound impact on how phenomena are studied and what questions science can legitimately address. In the scientific examination of leadership, the reductionist paradigm has elevated the distinction between leaders and followers to an ontological level, striving to explain leadership phenomena through simplistic cause-and-effect relationships between these two discrete categories. It has often paid limited attention to the intricate contextual factors that shape the leadership process. Recognizing these limitations, there has been a recent shift away from the reductionist paradigm, which historically aimed to dissect social phenomena into isolated components and examine them in isolation. This shift is driven by the belief that it fails to capture the genuine complexities and subtleties of leadership processes, where influence processes are frequently shared among different individuals (Gronn 2002; Spillane et al. 2001, 2004).

Second, the growing reliance of organizations on team-based work has led to dissatisfaction with traditional leader-centric approaches when explaining the complexities of leadership within team-based settings. Organizations now heavily rely on cross-functional, self-managing work teams to tackle the growing complexities of work and maintain their competitive edge (Cummings and Worley 2004, p. 341). The use of project teams for managing tasks, including new product development and organizational change (Thamhain 2004), has become more prevalent. Knowledge work increasingly involves team collaboration, demanding the coordination and integration of expertise from diverse professionals across various fields (Pearce 2004). While the literature on

team dynamics has provided valuable insights into the factors shaping team success, it has not fully addressed the complexities of leadership within these team-based environments.

The primary goal of our study is to explore how distributed leadership patterns manifest within project teams in a Higher Education institution, and whether higher levels of leadership distribution correlate with successful project outcomes. Higher Education institutions have traditionally embraced collaborative cultures, suggesting that these collaborative work patterns continue to influence the conduct of project work. As Higher Education institutions increasingly incorporate project-based approaches to address the growing challenges within the higher education context, comprehending these dynamics becomes imperative. Such insights are crucial for extracting valuable lessons on how Higher Education institutions can effectively function and enhance their workforce development.

Methodology:

In contemporary academic discourse, there's a growing recognition of the importance of studying distributed leadership within the social context of organizations (Day et al. 2006). As a result, we adopted a qualitative research approach to generate new hypotheses (Conger 1998) and contribute to a deeper understanding of distributed leadership in a real organizational context. This research approach is instrumental in providing rich and context-specific data, thus allowing us to explore the intricacies involved in distributed leadership and shed light on its underlying structures (Pettigrew 1990). The adaptable nature of qualitative research also positions it favorably for the exploratory examination of novel concepts (Bryman 2004).

At this juncture, our primary research objective was to conduct an exploratory analysis of the factors exerting positive and negative influences on distributed leadership within an organizational context. Our aim was centered on gaining a deeper insight into distributed leadership within the framework of an organization and augmenting the existing literature on this subject. To achieve this goal, we examined ten project teams, including five that successfully met their objectives and five that did not. This approach allowed us to make comparative assessments of these projects in terms of their distributed leadership dynamics.

The data collection process involved a combination of causal mapping and semi-structured interviews, providing a comprehensive foundation for understanding the intricacies and nuances of these ten distinct projects.

Research Context:

This study took place within a prominent university based in Coimbatore, a higher education institution that's not immune to the pervasive pressures aimed at improving efficiency, which often results in tensions between evolving managerial strategies and traditional university practices. The initial structure of the university was founded on a model of pluralistic decision-making, mainly represented by committees whose members were appointed based on their academic expertise. However, as the university expanded, the proliferation of committees created bottlenecks in decision-making processes. These bottlenecks reached a critical point where many faculty

members believed they hindered the university's ability to promptly respond and adapt to changing external conditions.

At the turn of the new millennium, with a decline in student enrollment, partly due to intensified national and international competition, the university initiated a flurry of activities and projects aimed at regaining lost student numbers and securing its financial stability. Presently, the university faces a landscape where it has articulated distinct strategic priorities and seeks a new overarching mission that can harmonize these disparate priorities into a cohesive whole. Furthermore, the faculty and staff members perceive an ongoing struggle between the traditional pluralistic culture, academic freedom, and the increasing imposition of top-down managerial practices.

The contemporary environment, marked by growing complexity and a surge of projects within the university, provided an ideal backdrop for a deeper exploration of the factors that promote or hinder distributed leadership. Notably, this is a concept that the university itself aims to foster within its organizational boundaries.

Data Analysis:

In our data analysis process, all causal mapping sessions were meticulously audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The causal maps themselves were imported into Decision Explorer, a specialized software tool for analyzing causal maps. The interviews were similarly recorded and then transcribed verbatim. These transcripts from both the causal mapping sessions and interviews were subsequently imported into Nvivo7, a computer-based program designed for qualitative data analysis. The primary source for our data analysis was these transcripts, while the causal maps served as supplementary tools for validation and augmentation.

In the analysis phase, the transcripts were systematically coded based on the perceived factors influencing distributed leadership. It's important to note that our unit of analysis was the project team as a whole, and no distinctions were made among different team members, regardless of their formal roles within the team. Content analysis techniques were applied to identify recurring themes, which were subsequently organized into categories representing the factors influencing distributed leadership. These factors were then subjected to in-depth discussion to achieve consensus and inter-subjectivity among the researchers.

Consensual inter-subjectivity, in this context, denotes the consensus reached among researchers regarding the interpretation of the data and serves as a critical tool in ensuring the reliability of qualitative research (Smaling 1992). Based on a randomly selected transcript, we calculated an interrater reliability of 87% using the percentage agreement method.

Results:

Throughout the iterative process of analyzing and coding the transcripts, we identified several factors believed to be related to distributed leadership within project teams. These factors were categorized based on the level at which they operated. At the organizational level, numerous factors pertaining to external activities and processes were discerned. These factors encompassed the team's interactions and relationships with significant stakeholders external to the team itself. These factors were identified as having a profound impact on crucial outcomes, which, in turn, served as foundational elements for perpetuating distributed leadership at the team level. At the team level, we recognized various factors related to the team's internal dynamics and operations. These factors were categorized as critical internal conditions and critical internal processes. A comparative analysis of successful and unsuccessful projects revealed that the factors identified at the organizational and team levels significantly influenced the success or failure of projects.

We have endeavored to encapsulate these factors within a distributed leadership model presented below. However, it's essential to acknowledge that while most of these factors appeared to play a role in all the projects, their relative significance and the specific manner in which they interacted varied across projects. One factor that appeared to particularly influence the configuration of these factors and their impact on project outcomes was the nature of the project itself, whether it was emergent or initiated from a top-down approach.

Distinguishing Top-Down and Emergent Projects:

A significant distinction that emerged from our analysis of the ten different projects revolves around the nature of the projects, categorizing them as either top-down driven or emergent. Four of the projects under analysis were distinctly emergent, signifying that they originated from a collective effort of two or more individuals, lacking any formal leadership status or formal appointment when initiating the projects. In contrast, five of the analyzed projects were unequivocally top-down in character, formally initiated by individuals or groups occupying senior management positions. The remaining project exhibited both emergent and top-down characteristics. While the initial idea for this project was generated through individual initiative, the subsequent project establishment was set in motion by formal management structures. The distinction between emergent and top-down projects was deemed essential because it appeared to influence the nature of leadership within these projects and the unique challenges faced by project leadership. Some of these distinctions will be illuminated as we describe the various factors below. However, we will commence by introducing our distributed leadership model, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Distributed Leadership Factors:

We will now provide a more comprehensive description of the factors depicted in Figure 1. As previously mentioned and presented in the model, the factors we identified pertaining to distributed leadership within project teams were categorized into factors associated with external activities (organizational level) and factors linked to internal team activities (team level). The factors at the team level can further be subcategorized into critical internal conditions and critical internal processes. We will first delineate the factors related to the inputs and

outcomes of external activities (organizational level). Following that, we will delve into the factors concerning team functionality (team level).

Organizational-Level Factors:

Our analysis underscored that none of the projects could be comprehensively understood without considering the broader institutional context within which they were situated. In every project, leadership extended beyond the facilitation of internal project team processes, involving the management of challenges that transcended the immediate project boundaries. Engaging with and negotiating with external stakeholders, the collection and dissemination of critical project-related information, and fostering alignment between the projects and the wider organizational context were all deemed vital in shaping the success of these diverse projects.

Discussion:

Leadership remains a complex and multifaceted concept, and approaching it from a distributed perspective does not simplify the intricacies of this phenomenon. Nevertheless, by embracing these complexities and investigating leadership as a distributed phenomenon within actual organizational settings, we have sought to comprehend some of the factors that shape the occurrence and success of distributed leadership. The inherent intricacies and interdependencies within project work have allowed us to explore the factors influencing project success or failure, examining these elements through the lens of distributed leadership. This approach has provided insights into how leadership is distributed across a spectrum of individuals.

By adopting a qualitative approach aimed at identifying factors influencing project outcomes and examining the processes underpinning collective actions in these projects, we have avoided adhering to any predefined conception of distributed leadership. Despite the exploratory nature of our study, our data align with several previous findings within the realms of distributed, shared, and team leadership. For example, Pearce (2004) emphasized the significance of expertise, the allocation of responsibilities, optimal team size, and a clearly defined goal or vision as essential factors for fostering and sustaining shared leadership. Our study similarly highlighted the importance of adaptability and mutual performance monitoring, aligning with the findings of Day et al. (2004). Moreover, their notion of team orientation closely resembles our concept of inclusiveness, which we also identified as vital for the development of distributed leadership. Burke et al. (2006) noted that empowerment is a pivotal factor in successful teamwork, consistent with our discovery that a degree of autonomy is necessary for effective distributed leadership within a team. Furthermore, our emphasis on inclusiveness as a key component of distributed leadership appears to resonate with Burke et al.'s concept of consideration.

Implications for Practice and Leadership Development in Higher Education:

As noted in the introduction, Higher Education institutions grapple with the challenges arising from the tension between traditional collegial models of leadership and the incorporation of management principles borrowed from the private sector. We contend that the principles of distributed leadership offer a promising avenue for mitigating these tensions, enabling Higher Education institutions to respond more effectively to the mounting pressures associated with the need to adapt to rapidly changing environmental circumstances. In practice, we have witnessed instances in several of our cases where academic and administrative staff have transcended cultural barriers and collaboratively engaged in initiatives. In these cases, they complemented each other, fostering successful endeavors that even extended to connecting in-house academic research with leadership and management practices within the organization.

However, some of our cases have also underscored the fragility of effective distributed leadership. For example, there were instances where team members ceased to actively participate in the leadership process due to authoritative influence exerted by senior team members on decisions affecting the entire team. In other cases, bureaucratic organizational procedures and influential groups within the organization repeatedly obstructed team progress, causing teams to abandon their efforts to contribute actively to project outcomes.

For distributed leadership to function effectively, it appears that organizations need to approach leadership development differently than traditional leadership concepts dictate. Rather than concentrating solely on enhancing the leadership capabilities of designated leaders within the organization, the focus should shift toward investing in the development of leadership skills throughout the workforce. Moreover, organizations should also create conditions conducive to the emergence of successful distributed leadership and the formation of informal networks of expertise. Developing the leadership skills of the workforce without facilitating these necessary conditions is likely to lead to frustration and hindered effectiveness and engagement. Conversely, focusing solely on creating these conditions without developing the requisite skills may result in confusion and misalignment of teams with the broader organizational context.

Conclusion:

Distributed leadership could potentially play a pivotal role in the evolving landscape of our knowledge-based society. It harnesses the strengths of diverse individuals and mitigates their weaknesses. In a world where work is increasingly collaborative, with no single individual possessing all the relevant knowledge for making crucial decisions, the competitive advantage of organizations is expected to hinge on their capacity to effectively integrate the widely dispersed knowledge and skills of their entire workforce into the leadership process.

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