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Leadership is like fine wine: It is meant to be shared, globally



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*If you want to go somewhere fast, go alone,
If you want to go somewhere far, go together.*
— Nigerian Proverb

THE GROWING IMPORTANCE OF GLOBAL LEADERSHIP

The overwhelming majority of leadership theory and research has been developed in North America. Having said that, it cannot be overstated that we are living in an ever more tightly connected global economy. Appropriately, scholars have been giving more attention to the global context of leadership, particularly focusing on the rise of team-based structures, the need for intra-organizational cooperation across distance, a widening scope of competition, and managing diversity and cultural perspectives. Still, most of the theory and research on leadership to date has been hierarchical in nature, i.e., how hierarchical leaders can influence those below them. Because of this, we believe it is timely to broaden the dialog to include the ever increasing phenomenon of peer-based influence, or what has come to be known as shared leadership. We caught up with Bruce Barkus, senior advisor for LEADFIRST and Angelo, Gordon & Co., and former CEO (chief executive officer) of RGIS, which is a massive company of more than 40,000 employees in 40 nations. Here is what he had to say:

The entire reason for our success is that we unleash human potential, no matter where it is in the world, through shared leadership: Shared leadership has been the key to our success and it is difficult for our competitors to copy, especially in cultures that overemphasize the importance of hierarchy.

WHAT IS SHARED LEADERSHIP?

In this article we will define and describe shared leadership theory, report some research evidence on shared leadership,

identify a few caveats about shared leadership, specify the challenges of implementing shared leadership in the global context, and wrap up with some concrete advice for global leaders. First, let us come to a common understanding of what we are discussing: Shared leadership is a dynamic, interactive influence process among individuals where the objective is to lead one another to the achievement of collective goals. This process often involves peer influence and engagement from group member to group member and can shift based on the situation, status of the project or task or the expertise of one person or another.

Shared leadership can also involve upward or downward hierarchical influence. This movement up or down from leader to follower is typically initiated by the hierarchical leader empowering an individual or group, but once the notion of dynamic leadership shift has settled in, it can flow organically in multiple directions. The fundamental distinction between shared leadership and traditional notions of leadership is that the influence process involves more than just downward authority over subordinates/followers by an appointed or elected leader. Shared leadership involves broadly sharing power and influence among a set of individuals rather than centralizing it in the hands of a single individual who acts in the clear role of a dominant superior.

This perspective on leadership flies in the face of traditional views of leadership. Historically, leadership has been conceived and centered on a single individual—the leader—and how that person cajoles, influences, controls and governs followers. In many societies, leaders inherit their roles, and in many others, leadership is an earned status that can be difficult to relinquish, once attained. This has been the predominant paradigm of leadership for many millennia, and this slanted view has been reinforced by popular media throughout history in their coverage of prominent leaders, either good or bad.

In recent years, however, a few scholars and some practitioners have challenged this conception that leadership is or

should be centered exclusively on just one person, arguing instead that leadership involves roles and activities that can be shared among members of a team or organization. For example, depending upon the demands of the moment, individuals who are not formally appointed leaders can rise to the occasion to exhibit leadership and then step back at other times to allow others to lead. This line of thinking is gaining increasing traction in both the academic and practitioner communities. According to Charles C. Manz, noted thought leader on organizational leadership, and endowed chair of leadership at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst:

The research on shared leadership is clear. It is the key to success in the age of knowledge work. Knowledge workers want and *need* to be part of the leadership equation, no matter where they exist on the world stage.

This perspective was echoed by Juergen Wegge, the former president of the German Psychological Association, and a thought leader on the topic of employee engagement:

In Germany we have typically had a command-and-control system of management. Having said that, we have been consistently finding, through both experimental research and field studies, that employees truly want to be fully engaged in their work, and shared leadership is the key to that engagement.

WHY SHARED LEADERSHIP?

Why has the interest in shared leadership suddenly increased? Competition, be it domestic or global, is inexorably driving firms into new forms and new modes of organizing—and teams are central to this perspective. For example, we recently completed a study of *Inc. 500* companies that was designed to measure various predictors of growth and performance, particularly at the start-up phase. While we found the leadership of the CEO to be an important predictor of financial outcomes, we found that the truly high performing companies were the ones who organized in top management teams (TMTs) and practiced effective shared leadership.

Tom Davin, CEO of 5.11 Tactical explains his view on shared leadership this way:

“If we are going to address the opportunities we face now and will face in the future, it is by leveraging our individual talent through disciplined teamwork and shared leadership. . . . We are very focused on the leading indicators of success—things like customer satisfaction and associate development—and are confident the lagging indicators—the financials—will follow. Our strategy of focusing on people has worked brilliantly so far.

Such insights from people like Davin are inspiring, and thought provoking. His goal of developing people is admirable, but what he did not mention is his own role in this process—the fact that he must also be willing and able to empower those around him. This requires him to understand how to share responsibility for decision-making and that his modeling of shared leadership will, in turn, create an environment where collaboration in leadership becomes the norm, not the exception.

Speed of response to environments that are today more turbulent than in the past is now an organizational imperative.

Many companies, for example, have incorporated speed as one of their core values, i.e., speed to market, speed of delivery, speed for service, just to name a few. This requirement for speed dictates that often organizations cannot wait for leadership decisions to be pushed up to the top for action. Instead, senior leadership has to purposefully design an environment where latitude for decision-making is more evenly shared across the organization to ensure faster response times to environmental demands. This requires each person, both at the top and in the lower echelons of the organization, to clearly understand the ramifications of his or her decisions. It requires a sense of ownership and responsibility to be present, since it is much more difficult to point a finger at the senior leadership and say, “Who knows why they wanted it that way. . . I was just following orders.”

Another truly crucial factor driving the need for shared leadership has to do with the sheer complexity of the job held by the senior-most leader in an organization—the managing director or chief executive officer. Increasingly, this individual is hard-pressed to possess all the leadership skills and knowledge necessary to solely guide complex organizations in a dynamic and global marketplace. They are called upon to be experts in all aspects of the business, and while it is true that they should have a good understanding of their organization, it also means that they are not spending as much time as they should looking out to the future, learning about their competition or focusing on more strategic aspects of their business.

In response to this dilemma, there have been a growing number of experiments where leadership is being shared at the very top. For example, the leadership team of Southwest Airlines openly discusses how they practice shared leadership, in all aspects of their airline, and it has long been considered one of the primary driving forces of their competitive edge. They refer to their employees as coworkers, which in most cases, they are. They openly discuss how they garner some of their best ideas for efficiency and management from their front line employees, even going so far as to chronicle their employees’ interactions with the public in two different cable television shows.

In South Korea, under the guidance of former CEO H.K. Moon, Yuhun-Kimberly, a paper-products manufacturer, vaulted into the No. 1 industry position through the purposeful application of shared leadership, both at the top echelons, but also throughout the hierarchy in the organization. Another successful Korean business leader is Sung Won Hong, head of a division of the Hyundai Chaebol, Hyundai H&S. According to Mr. Hong:

Everything depends on innovation; we are constantly trying new things [through] grassroots leadership [and] Leadership by Asking Around (LBAA). . . Middle management can sometimes act like a filter. . . I want to hear from those on the front line. They are the first ones to hear what our customers want.

In summary, a powerful set of dynamics within organizations across the globe is fostering the demand for shared leadership across all levels.

Given the strong historical emphasis on a definition of leadership that stresses one person projecting downward influence on followers, a natural question is, “can leadership be shared effectively?” We would argue that yes, it can

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