Collective and network approaches to leadership: Special issue introduction

Kristin L. Cullen-Lester [a,*], Francis J. Yammarino [b,1]

[a] *Research, Innovation, and Product Development, Center for Creative Leadership, One Leadership Place, P.O. Box 26300, Greensboro, NC 27438-6300, United States*
[b] *State University of New York at Binghamton, Binghamton, NY 13902, United States*

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ABSTRACT

In this introduction to the special issue on collective and network approaches to leadership, we begin by discussing the state of research and practice in this burgeoning area to clarify the need for the empirical articles compiled in this issue. We then describe each article, how it contributes to the goals of the issue, and some common themes across the articles. We close by identifying some important areas for future research on collective and network leadership approaches.

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This special issue of *The Leadership Quarterly* focuses on collective and network approaches to leadership. These views identify leadership as collective behavior resulting from a number of interdependent entities interacting with one another, typically in a non-linear way, and have the characteristics of emergence (i.e., macro-level properties arise that are not reducible to micro-level properties) and self-organization over time (i.e., dynamical processes that explain the emergence of these properties). As such, in organizations and other collectives, leadership resides in the interactions between people thereby constituting a network of relationships that emerges and shifts over time.

The nine studies in this special issue draw on a variety of theoretical perspectives (e.g., complexity theory, shared leadership, collective leadership) as well as a range of methods (e.g., advanced network analysis, mixed methods, agent-based models and simulations) and settings (e.g., lab and field). They demonstrate how research in this area is pushing forward to empirically test our theoretical understanding of collective and network approaches to leadership. They also are illustrative of the commitment of the *Leadership Quarterly* to publishing new and innovative research on leadership.

Goals of the special issue

A paradigm shift has occurred within the field—many scholars now view leadership as a property of the collective, not the individual. Yammarino, Salas, Serban, Shirreffs, and Shuffler (2012) describe the collectivistic phenomena of leadership as involving multiple individuals participating in and divesting themselves of leadership roles over time as constituted by both formal and informal relationships. As interest in this area has increased, multiple theories have emerged. These approaches recognize that

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collectives are complex relational systems, and as such leadership consists of interdependent connections that ensure the fulfillment of leadership roles through interactions that create larger structural patterns, often with both stable and dynamic characteristics (i.e., a network of leadership relationships). Although relationships are inherent to historical, heroic conceptualizations of leadership and in other traditional and contemporary leadership approaches, what is distinct about the approaches highlighted in this special issue is that they recognize that teams, organizations, coalitions, communities, networks, systems, and other collectives carry out leadership activities and functions through collective social behaviors and processes that are distributed and change over time.

Collective engagement in leadership by multiple individuals through both formal and informal relationships is a required capability for facing increasingly complex workplaces, business challenges, and social problems. The notion of collective and network leadership is taking hold in both academia and practice. Recent events including the Thought Forum on Network Leadership and Leadership Networks hosted by the Center for Creative Leadership in 2014 (Cullen, Willburn, Chrobot-Mason, & Palus, 2014) and the Collective Leadership Research Workshops hosted by NYU Wagner School of Public Service Leadership Initiative in 2014 and 2015 ("Bridging the Individual and Collective Dimensions of Leadership", 2015) revealed that advancements are being made in both theory and practice, but empirical research needs to be emphasized and enhanced. Recent literature reviews have also documented substantial advancement in theory regarding how collectives engage in leadership as well as a need for empirical testing and theory refinement (cf. Carter, DeChurch, Braun, & Contractor, 2015; Denis, Langley, & Sergi, 2012; Paunova, 2015; Yammarino et al., 2012).

Table 1
Overview of studies.

Authors	Theory	Method	Key findings
Theme 1 — emergence of collective and shared leadership in various forms			
Serban and Roberts 2016	Shared leadership	Mixed methods: Experiment	Identified team and task antecedents and outcomes of shared leadership and provide support for mediation model.
Drescher and Garbers 2016	Shared leadership	Experimental policy-capturing design	Provided initial evidence that virtual teams benefit more from shared leadership than face-to-face teams.
McHugh et al. 2016	Collective decision making	Agent-based simulation; Content-coded field study	Demonstrated a positive relationship between individual and collective intelligence as well as collective intelligence and collective decision quality.
Marion et al. 2016	Complexity theory	Interviews; Network analysis and simulation; Response surface methods	Found that systems achieve environmentally stable states in the face of internal and environmental volatility by ensuring high levels of information exchange, informal leaders move information through the network, and cliques process the information.
Will 2016	Complexity theory; Flock Leadership	Agent-based modeling	Identified behavioral norms within collectives that are needed to achieve both adaptive and technical capacity. They include individuals developing their own unique ideas, communicating those ideas and being exposed to others ideas. Adaptive capacity also requires members of a collective to work together to develop shared ideas and perspectives.
Chrobot-Mason et al. 2016	Social construction of leadership	Network analysis; ERGMs	Found that individuals who identified with the organization were more likely to grant and be granted leadership by others.
White et al. 2016	Social exchange and entrainment	Network analysis; ERGMs	Examined the alignment of formal and informal and found that formal influence co-occurs with advice seeking, suggesting a channeling of informal leadership and that leadership may be embedded in multiple forms of network relations.
Theme 2 — role of formal leader in collectivistic forms of leadership			
Friedrich et al. 2016	Collective leadership theory	Experimental scenario-based design where participant acted as the formal leader	Showed that the use of collective leadership behaviors differs in predictable ways across individuals depending on cognitive ability and prior experience because the use and development of the network is cognitively demanding. The use of different collective leadership behaviors also differed across different types of tasks.
Margolis and Ziegert (2016)	Sensemaking; Leadership roles	Survey of team members and team leaders	Demonstrated how collective leadership practices cascade down organizational levels to lower-level teams through formal leaders' own experiences with collective leadership, job satisfaction, and empowering behaviors.