Exploring antecedents and outcomes of shared leadership in a creative context: A mixed-methods approach

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ABSTRACT

Leadership research, traditionally focused on the behavior of an appointed/elected leader, is rapidly shifting towards a distributed, group process form of leadership known as "shared leadership". Since empirical research supporting this approach is limited, we extend prior work exploring antecedents and outcomes of shared leadership and develop a framework examining its role as a mediator between task and team characteristics (internal team environment, task cohesion and task ambiguity) *and* task and team-level consequences (task satisfaction, team satisfaction and team performance). Analyzing experimental data through a mixed-methods approach (quantitative via regression-based analysis and qualitative using thematic analysis for unstructured data in NVivo 10), our results indicate that, in the context of a creative task, internal team environment and task cohesion predict shared leadership, which, in turn, determines task satisfaction. We discuss implications of these findings and future paths for exploring shared leadership antecedents and outcomes.

Introduction

Over the past decades, the nature of corporate work has been changing to become more global and increasingly focused on service and knowledge-based activities rather than production (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002). Within this context, organizational work has become predominantly team-based (Avolio, Kahai, Dumdum, & London, 2001; Kozlowski & Bell, 2003; Pearce, 2004) and leadership has shifted from the solitary leader to the team (Pastor, Meindl, & Mayo, 2002). As such, leadership research, typically focused on the behavior of an appointed or elected leader (Bass, 1990), has been moving towards a distributed, group process form of leadership known as "shared leadership" (Pearce & Conger, 2003; Pearce & Sims, 2000).

Shared leadership has been defined as "a dynamic, interactive influence process among individuals in groups for which the objective is to lead one another to the achievement of group or organizational goals or both" (Pearce & Conger, 2003, p. 1). Under the shared leadership approach, leadership is also viewed as a shared responsibility among members working within a formal or informal team structure (Yammarino, Salas, Serban, Shirreffs, & Shuffler, 2012) or as a set of role functions that can be accomplished by multiple individuals (Gronn, 2002). As such, the actions and decisions of a team are not the result of a single leader acting toward the team, but of the team itself, and leadership can be distributed around the team equally, unilaterally, or in any other way (Yammarino et al., 2012). Bligh, Pearce, and Kohles (2006) suggest this form of leadership may be particularly powerful and potentially successful especially in a cross-functional team setting, which either lacks hierarchical authority, or has a formally appointed leader, but is highly dependent on the team members' unique knowledge, skills, abilities and backgrounds.

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Theoretical and empirical work has only recently begun to explore the antecedents and consequences of shared leadership (Bligh et al., 2006; Yammarino et al., 2012). In an attempt to enhance our understanding of when shared leadership is likely to appear and when it is required, Pearce and Sims (2000) have proposed several antecedents of shared leadership in the form of team characteristics (e.g., team size, team member ability, member maturity, and familiarity), task characteristics (e.g., interdependence, urgency, complexity, need for creativity), and environmental characteristics (e.g., organizational support systems and rewards). Carson, Tesluk, and Marrone (2007) have also examined internal team environment and external coaching and Hoch (2013) has explored vertical transformational and empowering leadership and team member integrity as predictors of shared leadership.

As for the outcomes of shared leadership, prior literature has examined team performance and effectiveness (Carson et al., 2007; D'Innocenzo, Kukenberger, & Mathieu, 2014; Ensley, Hmieleski, & Pearce, 2006; Nicolaides, LaPort, Chen, Tomassetti, Weis, Zaccaro, & Cortina, 2014; Pearce & Sims, 2002; Wang, Waldman, & Zhang, 2014); innovative behavior (Hoch, 2013); knowledge creation (Bligh et al., 2006), use of leadership behavior and autonomy (George et al., 2002); reliability of performance and novice team member skills (Klein, Ziegert, Knight, & Xiao, 2006). The study of Mehra, Smith, Dixon, and Robertson (2006) has also established a positive relationship between shared leadership (as a distributed-coordinated vs. distributed-fragmented leadership structure) and team satisfaction.

Some research indicates that shared leadership is particularly relevant to and an essential driver of team performance when teams operate under particularly challenging conditions in terms of time pressure or degree of risk (e.g., extreme action teams in Klein et al., 2006). Other scholars however, suggest that shared leadership is a complex and time-consuming process (Pearce, 2004), that should be developed only for certain types of knowledge work (e.g., interdependent, creative, complex), with authors going as far as concluding that flow, creativity and shared leadership are inextricably linked (Hooker & Csikszentmihalyi, 2003).

Creative knowledge work implies, by its very nature, collecting inputs from multiple individuals, which is time-consuming (Pearce, 2004). Moreover, complex cognitive processes in general take time even when performed individually and studies indicate that "when creativity is under the gun, it usually ends up being killed" (Amabile et al., 2002, p. 52). We attempt to answer the question of what happens when a task requires creativity, but time constraints are particularly challenging, as is the case with many design or software development firms (Amabile et al., 2002). Does shared leadership manage to "save" team creativity? The purpose of our study is thus to examine shared leadership in the context of a challenging creative task and extend the line of empirical research bringing support to the shared leadership approach.

Since shared leadership is viewed as a team-based collective phenomenon, the majority of research on this topic is at the team level of analysis. However, prior research also suggests that, in challenging situations, task variables can impact organizational outcomes more than team variables do (Rispens, 2012). Therefore, we examine task and team antecedents and outcomes of shared leadership. The key substantive contribution of our study is thus the development and testing of a framework that integrates both task and team characteristics that lead to the emergence of shared leadership (task cohesion, task ambiguity and internal team environment) and identify task and team-level consequences of it (task satisfaction, team satisfaction and team performance) during a time challenging creative task (see Fig. 1). Three very recent meta-analyses, using both published and unpublished work and focusing on the relationship between shared leadership and team performance have established a positive link between them, but have focused on two main task related boundary conditions: task complexity and task interdependence (D'Innocenzo et al., 2014; Nicolaides et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2014). To the best of our knowledge, the role of task cohesion and task ambiguity as antecedents of shared leadership and the role of task satisfaction as an outcome of shared leadership have yet to be empirically examined. Moreover, this is among the few empirical studies that have looked at the mediating role of shared leadership so far (for exceptions see Carson et al., 2007; Hoch, 2013), especially in a creative context.

Another major contribution our research makes to the shared leadership literature is exploring this phenomenon through both a quantitative and a qualitative lens. Our study followed a concurrent strategy (Creswell, 2003) with simultaneous collection of both qualitative and quantitative data via an online survey containing both closed and open-ended questions. Although definitions of mixed method research vary, our preference and hence working definition is in agreement with that of Johnson et al. (2007: 123),

> 'mixed methods research is the type of research in which a researcher or team of researchers combines elements of qualitative and quantitative researches (e.g., the use of qualitative and quantitative viewpoints, data collection, analysis, inference techniques) for the broad purpose of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration'.

Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) note the appropriateness of mixed method research and position it as a complement to the traditional polar research paradigms of quantitative and qualitative methods (see also Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005a). Though
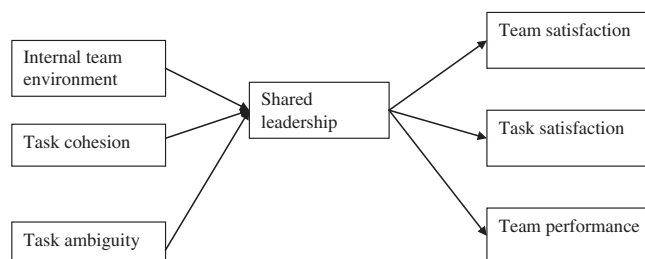

Fig. 1. Hypothesized team-level model of shared leadership.