



# Collective leadership behaviors: Evaluating the leader, team network, and problem situation characteristics that influence their use

Tamara L. Friedrich<sup>a,\*</sup>, Jennifer A. Griffith<sup>b</sup>, Michael D. Mumford<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Warwick, UK

<sup>b</sup> Alfred University, United States

<sup>c</sup> University of Oklahoma, United States

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## ABSTRACT

The focus on non-hierarchical, collectivistic, leadership has been steadily increasing with several different theories emerging (Yammarino, Salas, Serban, Shirreffs, & Shuffler, 2012). While most take the view that collectivistic approaches to leadership (e.g., shared and distributed leadership) are emergent properties of the team, a recent, integrative framework by Friedrich, Vessey, Schuelke, Ruark and Mumford (2009) proposed that collective leadership, defined as the selective utilization of expertise within the network, does not eliminate the role of the focal leader. In the present study, three dimensions of collective leadership behaviors from the Friedrich et al. (2009) framework – Communication, Network Development, and Leader–Team Exchange were tested with regard to how individual differences of leaders (intelligence, experience, and personality), the team's network (size, interconnectedness, and embeddedness), the given problem domain (strategic change or innovation), and problem focus (task or relationship focused) influenced the use of each collective leadership dimension.

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## Introduction

### Overview

Leadership scholars have been hailing a paradigm shift from vertical, hierarchical leadership towards more horizontal, collective processes for the past 10–15 years (Friedrich, Vessey, Schuelke, Ruark, & Mumford, 2009; Gronn, 2002; Pearce & Conger, 2003), with particular fervor picking up in the last few (D'Innocenzo, Mathieu, & Kukenberger, 2014; Nicolaidis et al., 2014; Wang, Waldman & Zhang, 2014; Yammarino, Salas, Serban, Shirreffs, & Shuffler, 2012). The focus on this form of leadership, however, is not entirely new. It has been studied since the early parts of the 20th century (Fitzsimons, James, & Denyer, 2011) and was a key part, in some form, of many of the major leadership theories such as the Vroom and Yetton (1973) model that included involving subordinates in the decision-making process.

There are many different forms of collectivistic approaches to leadership, such as shared leadership (Pearce & Conger, 2003), distributed leadership (Gronn, 2002), collective leadership (Friedrich et al., 2009), emergent leadership (Kickul & Neuman, 2000) and team leadership (Day, Gronn, & Salas, 2004). A complementary trend is an increased focus on a role approach to leadership, and the potential distribution of those roles amongst different individuals (Morgeson, DeRue, & Karam, 2010). As a result of the

\* Corresponding author at: Warwick Business School, Coventry, CV4 7AL, UK. Tel.: +44 024 7652 8104.

E-mail address: [tamara.friedrich@wbs.ac.uk](mailto:tamara.friedrich@wbs.ac.uk) (T.L. Friedrich).

rapid development of these theories, often in parallel with one another, there have been some growing pains in this domain, as there is frequent overlap in definitions and use of the same words interchangeably (e.g., shared and distributed leadership). This has led to several attempts to clearly define the different perspectives (e.g., Yammarino et al., 2012) and find ways to distinguish their underlying mechanisms, such as examining differences in the content, process, formality, locus or mechanism of the collectivistic leadership (D'Innocenzo et al., 2014; Hernandez, Eberly, Avolio, & Johnson, 2011; Morgeson et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2014). For clarity, we will utilize Yammarino et al.'s (2012) definition of collectivistic leadership as a general term to refer to forms of leadership that involve multiple individuals within a team or organization taking on a formal or informal leadership role over time. Collective leadership, on the other hand, refers to the specific theory (Friedrich et al., 2009) that will be partially tested in the present study.

A particular point of contention in this area of leadership research is the role of the focal, or formal, leader. While shared and distributed leadership research typically focuses on the collectivistic process as an emergent state or evaluates the overall level of distribution of different roles and leadership behaviors amongst members of the team, other theories such as Friedrich et al.'s (2009) collective leadership framework, maintain the importance of the focal leader in either explicitly sharing aspects of the leadership role with others, or in creating the conditions in which individuals may emerge as an informal leader. Locke speaks to this in both his critique of shared leadership theory (2003) as well as in his theoretical and practitioner letter exchange with Pearce and Conger (Pearce, Conger, & Locke, 2007) in which he asserts that it is risky to ignore the focal or formal leader altogether as that is how most teams and organizations are still structured. In addition, in a recent review of the ways that leadership research is conceptualized, Hernandez et al. (2011), asserted that we should not ignore the focal leader or disregard what we have learned about focal leaders as we progress in our study of shared and collective leadership. They call for an increased understanding of what characteristics make leaders better equipped to engage in collectivistic leadership and taking the "leader locus" perspective can help us "explain when and how shared leadership can emerge successfully" (pg. 1177).

There is evidence, in fact, that both forms of leadership, hierarchical and collectivistic, are necessary in some form and contribute, together, to team effectiveness. For instance, a study by Mehra, Smith, Dixon, and Robertson (2006) found that it was not simply the distribution of the leadership role that was beneficial to team performance. They found that it was the coordinated efforts between focal leaders and emergent leaders that was the best for team effectiveness. In addition, research on the relationship between vertical and shared leadership typically finds that shared leadership contributes to team performance beyond vertical leadership, but that vertical leadership remains a significant contributor to team success (Ensley, Hmieleski, & Pearce, 2006; Pearce & Sims, 2002). In light of this, Friedrich et al.'s (2009) framework takes an integrative approach (Mumford, Friedrich, Vessey, & Ruark, 2012) that incorporates processes from several collectivistic theories, such as shared leadership, distributed leadership, complexity theory, emergent leadership, and team leadership, along with theories related to focal leadership, such as trait- and skills-based leadership theories. In this, the collective leadership framework integrates both vertical and collectivistic approaches to leadership and presents the focal leader as the orchestrator that either explicitly shares the leadership role, or creates the environment in which individuals may emerge into informal leadership roles.

While there is some early indication to the validity of the relationships presented in the framework (Friedrich et al., 2014), more empirical work is necessary, particularly regarding how the proposed relationships may vary across different contexts. Thus, in the present effort we seek to test three elements of the Friedrich et al. (2009) framework that focus on collective leadership behaviors in which focal leaders may engage – Communication, Developing the Network, and Leader–Team Exchange, as well as how these different forms of collective leadership may exhibit different antecedents, including the leader's personal characteristics, as well as characteristics of the team network and problem situation. We do this using measures developed for use of the framework in the United States Army (Yammarino et al., 2014). We turn now to a general overview of the framework and description of the specific aspects being studied in the present effort.

### *Overview of the collective leadership framework*

In the development of the collective leadership framework, Friedrich et al. (2009) provided an integrative review of the collectivistic leadership literature, including the individual, team, network, and organizational factors that may influence the emergence of collective leadership. They define collective leadership as a dynamic process in which a defined leader, or set of leaders, selectively utilizes the skills and expertise within a network as the need arises. An important difference in this framework, from other collectivistic theories, was that the focal leader plays a key role. As can be seen in Fig. 1, they contribute to the emergence of collective leadership through their specific knowledge, skills and expertise that facilitates the collective leadership process, their development and use of the network around them, and their actions to share the leadership role, either explicitly with individuals or in a generalized way, with the whole team (Mumford et al., 2012). The framework was not intended as a single, testable model (Friedrich et al., 2009), but rather as a birds-eye-view of the multilevel factors, such as the individual leader's skills, team's cohesion, or organizational culture, that may influence the emergence of collective leadership. A summary of the original 2009 model is presented below, with the dimensions we focus on in this study highlighted in grey.

As shown in the model, the central aspects of the framework most closely tied to the emergence of collective leadership include the leader's characteristics, the performance parameters and climate, the leader and team's network, communication and Leader–Team Exchange (Friedrich et al., 2009). The authors assert that *the leader's characteristics*, such as intelligence, experience and personality, will determine how capable they are in building the network and communication conditions that facilitate the emergence of collective leadership and whether they can recognize the opportunity and advantages of exchanging elements of the leadership role with team members. In addition, the *development and use of the network* is critical for exchange of

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