



## Vertical flow of collectivistic leadership: An examination of the cascade of visionary leadership across levels

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### ABSTRACT

This study explores the connection between formal leaders and collective leadership in teams through the examination of how collective strategic vision flows downward in organizations and the function that formal leaders play in the resulting cascade of collective leadership. Building from a sensemaking framework, we propose that a supervisor's perceptions of the collective navigator role (the establishing and enacting of strategic vision among members of a team) in their immediate supervisor-level work group ultimately links to the collective leadership navigator role in the lower-level team he or she leads thereby illustrating the vertical flow of collective leadership across organizational levels. To understand how this cascading process operates, we propose that two key characteristics of supervisors, their job satisfaction and empowering leadership behaviors, mediate the linkage between collective strategic visions at these different levels. We find support for this connection in our study of teams within a large manufacturing company.

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Collectivistic leadership is inherently a multilevel phenomenon as it emerges from individuals within teams resulting in distributed leadership processes (Yammarino, Salas, Serban, Shirreffs, & Shuffler, 2012), yet examinations within this domain that span across multiple organizational levels are rare. The existing literature on collective leadership has largely concentrated on its connection with team effectiveness within a single level, and these studies have been critical to the understanding of the proximal effects of collectivistic leadership on immediate team outcomes (D'Innocenzo, Mathieu, & Kukenberger, 2014; Denis, Langley, & Sergi, 2012; Friedrich, Vessey, Schuelke, Ruark, & Mumford, 2009; Yammarino et al., 2012; Nicolaides et al., 2014; Wang, Waldman, & Zhang, 2014). However, as no single organizational level operates in isolation (House, Rousseau, & Thomas-Hunt, 1995; Klein & Kozlowski, 2000), it is important to understand how constructs at multiple levels link together to influence the emergence of collective leadership (Hackman, 2003; Yammarino, Dionne, Chun, & Dansereau, 2005). Accordingly, the current study examines collective leadership across organizational levels as it trickles down from one level to another. We focus on the supervisor and the role that formal leaders play in connecting collective leadership across these levels in order to foster robust forms of collective leadership within the lower-level team.

To examine this cascading process, we adopt a role perspective (Contractor, DeChurch, Carson, Carter, & Keegan, 2012) within collective leadership (Yammarino et al., 2012). Role perspectives to collective leadership are particularly applicable for teams as they allow for the examination of “a dynamic set of recurring behavior, both expected and enacted, within a particular group context” (Contractor et al., 2012, p. 995). We focus on the collective nature of the navigator role within a team, which is a role that addresses collectively establishing and enacting strategic vision among members of a team (Contractor et al., 2012). Given our

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collective leadership approach (Yammarino et al., 2012), we focus on this navigating role for the team as a whole, both within and across teams, as well as the role of the formal leader in facilitating these strategic visionary behaviors.

Examining collective strategic vision in terms of the collective navigator role is particularly relevant for several reasons. First, existing models have demonstrated that charismatic behaviors such as collective vision cascade between individual leaders across organization levels (Bass, Waldman, Avolio, & Bebb, 1987; Chun, Yammarino, Dionne, Sosik, & Moon, 2009); we seek to build from this foundation and expand these findings by examining the trickle down of collective strategic vision. Second, given our multilevel focus, we seek to examine leadership behaviors that exist across levels of analysis. Strategic vision has been conceptualized and examined across various levels (Chun et al., 2009; Klein & House, 1995; Murphy & Ensher, 2008), lending this particular role to be well suited for the study of the cascade of collective leadership.

Through examining the cascade of collective strategic vision, this research makes several intended contributions to the collective leadership literature. First, the research on the antecedents of collective leadership has largely concentrated on how vertical leadership and self-leadership within the same level of analysis influence collective leadership within a team (Carson, Tesluk, & Marrone, 2007; Denis et al., 2012). However, despite the importance of multilevel factors in understanding organizational processes (Hackman, 2003; House et al., 1995; Klein & Kozlowski, 2000) and leadership (Yammarino et al., 2005), research has yet to fully examine how variables at higher organizational levels impact the cascading of leadership roles. Building from a collective leadership perspective that highlights that nominal or formal leaders are crucial in facilitating collective leadership (Carson et al., 2007; Friedrich et al., 2014; Klein, Ziegert, Knight, & Xiao, 2006; Yammarino et al., 2012), the current study examines how perceptions of collective strategic vision at upper organizational levels are channeled through formal leaders to influence the emergence of the collective navigator role at lower organizational levels. Through explicating this cascading model, the current study broadens the scope of research on collective leadership by demonstrating collective forms of leadership have important theoretical and practical implications for both the immediate team where the collective leadership occurs in addition to other teams lower in the organization. As a result, we establish that the “long arm” of collective leadership extends to both proximal and distal organizational teams thereby highlighting the multilevel nature of collective leadership.

Further, to explain the cascading process of collective strategic vision, we adopt a novel sensemaking perspective to trickle-down models. Sensemaking is a social construction process in which reality emerges as individuals try to make sense of what is occurring or what has occurred in the environment around them (Basu & Palazzo, 2008; Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1993). In the organizational context, leaders are thought to first make sense of their own environment through a sensemaking process and then convey this interpretation of reality to employees in a sensegiving process (Dutton & Jackson, 1987; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). We contend that this sensemaking and giving process represents a trickle-down model, such that the beliefs of leaders developed through sensemaking cascade to employees during the sensegiving process. We contend that supervisors' interpretations of the leadership dynamics with their co-workers influences their construal of reality and subsequently influence the manner in which they lead their subordinates (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Importantly, by applying this novel theoretical lens, we are able to examine the mechanisms of the cascading model of collective leadership rather than simply demonstrating that a cascading process occurs.

Accordingly, we go beyond prior work on the cascading effect of traditional forms of leadership (e.g., Aryee, Chen, Sun, & Debrah, 2007; Bass et al., 1987; Mawritz, Mayer, Hoobler, Wayne, & Marinova, 2012; Mayer, Kuenzi, Greenbaum, Bardes, & Salvador, 2009; Schaubroeck et al., 2012) by explaining *how* the cascade effect occurs for collective leadership. In making these arguments, the current study provides a nuanced understanding of trickle-down effects and how they apply to collective leadership. Specifically, we propose that supervisors' job satisfaction and empowering leadership behaviors are the key mechanisms of this cascading process that connect collective leadership across organizational levels. We contend that supervisors who have experienced collective strategic visionary navigator roles within their upper-level team are likely to internalize these norms during the sensemaking process and have greater job satisfaction as a result of their increased responsibility and authority within their team (Cotton, Vollrath, Froggatt, Lengnick-Hall, & Jennings, 1988; Friedrich et al., 2009; Konczak, Stelly, & Trusty, 2000). Based on this satisfaction and resulting positive framing, these supervisors will then be more likely to empower their subordinates during the sensegiving process to similarly share leadership responsibilities within their team (Arnold, Arad, Rhoades, & Drasgow, 2000). Because of increased feelings of empowerment, members of the lower-level team will assume additional responsibilities, leading to increased collective leadership on the lower-level team (Chen, Sharma, Edinger, Shapiro, & Farh, 2011; Lorinkova, Pearsall, & Sims, 2013; Zhang & Bartol, 2010).

Taken together, based on a sensemaking perspective, we propose that collective visionary leadership at upper organizational levels flows to lower organizational levels through influencing supervisors' perceptions (i.e., job satisfaction) and behaviors (i.e., empowering leadership). Because of their position as the formal leader of a team, we suggest that supervisors are the linking pins (Likert, 1961) that facilitate the transmission of collective leadership from the team they participate in with their immediate colleagues to the team of subordinates they manage. As linking pins, supervisors advocate for the success of each of these groups (Graen, Cashman, Ginsburg, & Schiemann, 1977; Likert, 1961) and facilitate communications and the flow of information between the teams (Graen et al., 1977; Likert, 1961). Because of this crucial linking role, we argue that supervisors connect and facilitate the cascade of collective leadership within an organization through a sensemaking process. Fig. 1 summarizes our theoretical model.

## Collective leadership

In contrast to the traditional view of a single nominal leader, a growing perspective in the leadership literature is to consider multiple members within a team as leaders in terms of collectivistic leadership (e.g., Carson et al., 2007; Contractor et al., 2012;

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