Examining the cross-level relationship between shared leadership and learning in teams: Evidence from China ☆

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ABSTRACT

The current study extends the literature on shared leadership by exploring the questions of *whether*, *how*, and *when* shared leadership makes an impact on team and individual learning behaviors. Specifically, the current research proposed that shared leadership has a positive impact on both team and individual learning and this impact was realized through the mediating role of team psychological safety. Furthermore, the study introduces job variety as a potential moderator in the relationships between shared leadership on team and individual learning behaviors through team psychological safety, such that the indirect effects are more positive when team members perceived high job variety. Using 263 members from 50 teams in China, the hypotheses were largely supported. Theoretical contributions, practical implications and future research directions are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Leadership has long been considered as one of the key contributors for organizational effectiveness (Yukl, 2012). Work teams are widely used in organizations (Hackman, 2002) and team researchers have generally suggested that team leadership plays a major role in shaping both individual members' attitudes and behaviors and the overall team's climate and actions (see Kozlowski, Gully, Salas, & Cannon-Bowers, 1996; Morgeson, DeRue, & Karam, 2010; Zaccaro, Rittman, & Marks, 2001 for reviews). To date, prior research has primarily focused on the role of formally assigned or vertical leaders in teams, while giving much less attention to an important form of leadership—shared leadership. Shared leadership is an emergent leadership style resulting from the distribution of leadership influence across multiple team members (Bowers & Seashore, 1966; House & Aditya, 1997). As Carson, Tesluk, and Marrone (2007) noted, shared leadership can be conceptualized along a continuum with the degree from low to high. It means that shared leadership may exist in every team but at different levels, rather than a rigid either–or category. The omission of shared leadership in teams is unfortunate due to the increasing demands of collectivistic leadership and the growing emphasis on cooperation and coordination within teams (Day, Gronn, & Salas, 2004; Friedrich, Vessey, Schuelke, Ruark, & Mumford, 2009; Hackman, 2002; Hiller, Day, & Vance, 2006; Yammarino, Salas, Serban, Shirreffs, & Shuffler, 2012). Indeed, as Yammarino et al. (2012) noted, "these new collectivistic leadership approaches are an important development for both science and practice" (p. 383). A handful of studies have confirmed the important role of shared leadership in teams (Avolio, Jung, Murry,

& Sivasubramaniam, 1996; Carson et al., 2007; Mehra, Smith, Dixon, & Robertson, 2006; Sivasubramaniam, Murry, Avolio, & Jung, 2002) and some even found that shared leadership was more influential than traditional vertical leadership for team performance (Bowers & Seashore, 1966; Pearce & Sims, 2002).

Extending this line of research, the current study seeks to enrich our understanding of how shared leadership influences not only the overall team's behavioral outcomes but also individual members' perceptions, interactions, and learning within the team. While empirical support has begun to accumulate regarding the relationship between shared leadership and team performance (e.g., Carson et al., 2007; Mehra et al., 2006), the existing research fails to more fully consider the potential impact of shared leadership on both individual members' and the teams' behavioral outcomes. In particular, we focus on team members' actions to improve their future performance by greater knowledge and understanding of their work—learning behaviors at both the team and the individual levels (Ellis, Hollenbeck, Ilgen, Porter, West, & Moon, 2003; Fiol & Lyles, 1985; Weiss, 1990). Team learning behaviors are seen as critical for improving a team's overall effectiveness and enhancing its future competitiveness (Edmondson, 1999). While scholars have documented that team formal leadership is powerful for promoting team learning behaviors (Burke et al., 2006), there is little work studying shared leadership and team learning. This is an important unaddressed gap, since with shared leadership responsibilities, team members are both leading and following one another at the same time (Carson et al., 2007), which involves frequent knowledge and information exchange and encourages the team to form a climate of learning at the team level. In addition to team learning, individual learning is also a potentially important issue as teams do not behave, and it is the individual members within the teams who behave and perform (Kozlowski & Bell, 2003), and only when individual members learn and improve their skills and performance can their team and organization grow (Cohen, 1991; Ellis et al., 2003; Kim, 1993; Yukl, 2009). However, it does not say that individuals' learning behaviors are developed in isolation. Instead, individuals are nested within teams (Hackman, 1992), and it is likely that when individual team members all share part of their leadership responsibilities, they have more opportunities to learn from each other and from their work (Ellis et al., 2003). Thus, it is critical to fully consider learning behaviors at both individual and team levels. Research focusing on one level of the learning behaviors within teams may result in an incomplete understanding of how shared leadership influences both the team as a whole and the individual members within the team and how learning behaviors are formed within the team contexts.

Another remaining gap in the shared leadership literature is the boundary conditions of the effects of shared leadership on individual and team outcomes. Although recent empirical work has demonstrated the positive influence of shared leadership on team performance (e.g., Avolio et al., 1996; Carson et al., 2007; Ensley, Hmieleski, & Pearce, 2006), the literature remains silent about under what conditions shared leadership plays a stronger or weaker role in shaping team members' behaviors. The classic contingency to leadership perspective suggests that the influence of leadership on subordinate outcomes is bounded by situational factors, such as task structure (Fiedler, 1967). Job variety, an important characteristic of task structure and defined as the extent to which a job requires the use of a variety of skills to accomplish tasks (Hackman & Oldham, 1976), may be especially relevant to individual learning because learning requires the addition of new knowledge and skills and job variety may boost individual members' motivation to learn more at work and through their peers and then strengthen the positive influence of shared leadership on learning behaviors.

Taken together, drawing on social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), the current study aims to answer the questions of *whether*, *how*, and *when* shared leadership impacts learning behaviors within the team and to extend the literature on shared leadership and work teams in at least four ways. First, joining the small group of research on shared leadership, the current study is a response to the recent calls on more research on shared leadership (Day, Gronn, & Salas, 2006; Day et al., 2004; Pearce & Conger, 2003; Pearce & Manz, 2009; Yammarino et al., 2012) and explores the role of shared leadership in shaping learning behaviors within the team. While individual learning is demonstrated to be valuable to organizational effectiveness (e.g., Cohen, 1991; Kim, 1993; Lankau & Scandura, 2002, 2007; Liu & Fu, 2011) and individual outcomes (Lankau & Scandura, 2002; Olivera & Straus, 2004; Ragins, Cotton, & Miller, 2000, research on how learning behaviors are formed within the team contexts remains scarce. Work teams are seen as the most influential social contexts for individual members (Hackman, 1992) and shared leadership among individual members are likely to create the conditions for team members to learn. Drawing on social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), we propose that shared leadership promotes both team learning and individual learning through enriching their direct and vicarious experiences at work.

Second, as Burke, Diza Granados, and Salas (2011) stated, "most of the work focuses on the relationship between shared leadership and team outcomes, with little attention on process" (p. 347). The current study aims to fill this important gap by exploring *how* shared leadership impacts individual and team outcomes and identifying team psychological safety (i.e., a shared belief among individual members within the team regarding whether they feel safe for risk taking; Edmondson, 1999) as an important mediating mechanism. Specifically, we contend that shared leadership facilitates the formation of a psychological safety climate within the team; and this psychological safety climate creates a positive learning environment within the team and guides team members to learn and acquire new knowledge and skills.

Third, the current study also advances our knowledge of the effects of shared leadership on individual and team learning by introducing job variety as an important boundary condition. We propose that although the psychological safety climate generated by shared leadership may be conducive to both individual and team learning, feeling safe alone may not be sufficient to encourage team members to learn. This is because that learning helps to acquire new knowledge (Fiol & Lyles, 1985) and when a job requires such acquirement of new knowledge, learning behaviors are more likely to occur. Thus, the current study integrates the perspectives of both shared leadership and task structure to provide a deeper examination of the motivators of individual and team learning.

Fourth, the theory and construct of shared leadership is primarily developed in the United States, and it remains unclear whether the theoretical development holds up in other cultural settings. To respond to the call of Whetten (2009) for a proper