



## A framework for understanding collective leadership: The selective utilization of leader and team expertise within networks<sup>☆</sup>

Tamara L. Friedrich<sup>a,\*</sup>, William B. Vessey<sup>a</sup>, Matthew J. Schuelke<sup>a</sup>,  
Gregory A. Ruark<sup>b</sup>, Michael D. Mumford<sup>a</sup>

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

<sup>b</sup> U.S. Army Research Institute, United States

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### ABSTRACT

To date, the dominant approach to leadership research assumes that all aspects of the leadership role within a team are embodied by a single individual. In the real world, however, this is rarely the case. Rather, multiple individuals within the team may serve as leaders in both formal and informal capacities, and the shifting of leadership responsibilities is often rooted in which individual's expertise is most relevant to the given problem. In the present effort, we add to the rapidly growing body of work that focuses on the distribution of the leadership role among multiple individuals. We have reviewed relevant extant literature and proposed an integrated framework for understanding the collective leadership process. Also, in developing this framework we have taken an information and expertise-based approach such that we propose that collective leadership, or the distribution of the leadership role, is a function of selectively utilizing the information or specialized expertise that individuals within the network possess. In reviewing the framework, 55 propositions with regard to the collective leadership process are outlined and suggestions for future research are provided.

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### 1. Introduction

The long-standing conceptualization of leadership, both among researchers and the general public, is that it is a leader-centric or individual level phenomenon. When asked to define leadership, it is difficult not to think of a single individual providing direction and inspiration to a group of followers. Among the three main ways of defining leadership, as a person, role, or process (Yukl, 2009), it is most often studied in terms of the person (Hunter, Bedell-Avers, & Mumford, 2007; Rost, 1993). In reality, however, leadership rarely plays out at only the individual level. Rather, leadership is a complex, dynamic process in which the behavioral roles that often fall under the leadership umbrella may be taken up by multiple individuals (Gronn, 2002) and exchanged across the leader and team level (Dansereau & Yammarino, 1998; Day, Gronn, & Salas, 2004). It is this exchange, and the selective and dynamic emergence of individuals whose skills and expertise are most appropriate to a given situation, that we propose to be the crux of collective leadership.

The definition of collective leadership that will be used as we move forward in our discussion of the proposed framework is that it is a dynamic leadership process in which a defined leader, or set of leaders, selectively utilize skills and expertise within a network, effectively distributing elements of the leadership role as the situation or problem at hand requires. In addition to defining the collective leadership process, our goal in the present effort is to draw attention to the multi-level nature of this phenomenon, and to highlight the criticality of information and communication to the emergence of collective leadership. Also,

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\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [tfriedrich@psychology.ou.edu](mailto:tfriedrich@psychology.ou.edu) (T.L. Friedrich).

through a series of propositions, we hope to guide future research in this area. We begin by addressing assumptions made in the literature that we believe are limiting our understanding of collective leadership. We will then provide evidence for the benefits of collective leadership and provide a general overview of the framework. The main focus of the article, however, will be a review of each concept within the framework along with propositions on the concept's role in the emergence of collective leadership. We conclude with a review of limitations of our approach, implications for research and application, and general conclusions.

### 1.1. Assumptions of the extant literature

Given the shift towards a role perspective of leadership, there has been significant advancement in work on both the sharing or distribution of the leadership role (Gronn, 2002; Hiller, Day, & Vance, 2006; Pearce & Sims, 2002) and the interaction between leaders and team processes—recognizing that there is an important interplay between the leader and the members of a team (Day et al., 2004; Taggar, Hackett, & Saha, 1999). The development of these theories has been an important step in understanding the complexities of leadership; however we feel these areas do not fully account for the ways in which leadership is actually shared in real-world settings and are limited by some critical assumptions.

First, most research on shared or distributed leadership takes the approach that it is a static condition in which the role behaviors may be explicitly divided or entirely shared (Yukl, 2009). In reality, however, it seems that the sharing of leadership, as an influence *process* rather than a defined position, is likely much more dynamic and occurs as the need arises. Rather than a defined set of two or more leaders sharing the leadership role, it may be more like a “whack-a-mole” game in which the person with the most relevant skills and expertise “pops up” at any given time. This selective emergence of individuals can arise through informal channels but may be explicitly activated by a leader or set of leaders.

Additionally, much of the work on the interaction between leaders and teams appears to make the assumption that the members that the leader is acting on are a homogenous unit in which individuals are assumed to have similar characteristics and respond to the leader in the same way (Zaccaro, Rittman, & Marks, 2001). However, we believe this is not to be the case in the real world. Rather, team members typically bring diverse skills and expertise to the table, which is an important precondition to the selective emergence of different individuals into the leadership role. Put another way, if there is no difference among team members, then there is no reason for different individuals to take on different aspects of the leadership role at different times. While there has been advancement in both shared and distributed leadership and the interaction between leader and team processes, we believe the proposed framework will further advance our understanding of the phenomenon by reconsidering these assumptions.

### 1.2. Evidence for the benefit of collective leadership

Conceptualizing leadership as a role, and a role that can be selectively distributed among individuals within a team depending on the expertise required, is a critical theoretical transition given several important trends in modern organizations. Specifically, organizations have seen an increased use of teams (Zaccaro et al., 2001), more problems that are rapidly emerging and complex (Hannah & Lester, 2009; Mumford, Zaccaro, Harding, Jacobs, & Fleishman, 2000), and an increase in the importance of innovation and adaptability (Friedrich, Mumford, Vessey, Beeler, & Eubanks, *in press*). The benefit of utilizing collective leadership with regard to these organizational developments is evidenced in a number of studies on research and development teams and top management teams.

Findings with regard to research and development teams and leadership are particularly relevant to the organizational shifts identified above. Not only do these studies provide empirical evidence regarding project teams, but they also focus on a domain that deals with highly complex and dynamic problems, which by the processes innate to these problems, are related to innovation and organizational adaptability (Drazin, Glynn, & Kazanjian, 1999; Mumford, Scott, Gaddis, & Strange, 2002). The findings of several compelling empirical studies point to a substantial benefit of collective leadership to R&D project teams, and project teams in general.

Two recent studies on research and development teams highlight the benefit of having multiple leaders. Hauschildt and Kirchmann (2001) evaluated 133 new innovations within the plant construction and engineering industry and the effects that having multiple “champions”, or leaders, taking on different elements of a leadership role, would have on the technical and financial success of the projects. Their findings indicate that having a set of individuals, taking on different championing responsibilities—specifically, the ‘power promoter,’ ‘technology promoter,’ and ‘process promoter’—was beneficial to team outcomes. As more leaders were involved in the development process, gains in performance increased by a factor of 30% to 50%. In a related study, Howell and Boies (2004) evaluated the role of product champions in the R&D process and found that project performance is significantly influenced by the participation of multiple leaders that bring unique skills and expertise to the table. This second study speaks directly to the importance of not only having multiple individuals in a leadership capacity, but the importance of selectively utilizing their diverse skills and expertise.

Speaking more generally to the effectiveness of sharing leadership roles are findings in the area of top management teams. Although these studies often focus on a division of responsibilities, rather than a leader, or core leadership team, selectively utilizing expertise within a network, they are critical in demonstrating the benefit of leadership not residing entirely in one individual. This is a central tenet of collective leadership. In a study of top management teams (TMTs), Carmeli and Schaubroeck (2006) demonstrated that the behaviors of a TMT, and in particular the integration of their behavioral roles, were related to positive organizational outcomes. Behavioral integration, as operationalized to include information exchange, collaboration, and

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