Available online at www.sciencedirect.com
ScienceDirect
The Leadership Quarterly 18 (2007) 281 – 288
The Leadership Quarterly
www.elsevier.com/locate/leaqua

Theoretical and Practitioner Letters

Shared leadership theory

Craig L. Pearce [a,*], Jay A. Conger [b], Edwin A. Locke [c]

[a] *Claremont Graduate University, 1021 N. Dartmouth Avenue, Claremont, CA 91711, USA*
[b] *Claremont McKenna College, 850 Columbia Ave., Claremont, CA 91711, USA*
[c] *University of Maryland, 32122 Canyon Ridge Drive, West Lake Village, CA 91316, USA*

Abstract

Edwin Locke contributed a chapter to the critique section of Craig Pearce and Jay Conger's (2003a) edited book, *Shared Leadership: Reframing the Hows and Whys of Leadership*, published by Sage. In this letter exchange, they continue their dialogue on this important topic. They focus in particular on clarifying what each means by "shared leadership" and on what shared leadership can and should look like at the top of organizations.

Keywords: Shared leadership; Integrated leadership; Top-down leadership; Lateral influence

Letter 1

Edwin A. Locke
Dean's Professor of Leadership and Motivation (Emeritus)
University of Maryland
32122 Canyon Ridge Drive
West Lake Village, CA 91316

Dear Ed:

We found the ideas in your critique chapter (Locke, 2003a) in our book, *Shared Leadership* (Pearce & Conger, 2003a), challenging and provocative. As you know, the purpose of the book was to put a stake in the ground, so to speak, on shared leadership theory: We wanted to advance inquiry into leadership processes outside the typical top-down paradigm of leadership. Thus, in this letter, we summarize some of the main points you made in your critique chapter and offer alternative perspectives to further clarify the research agenda for shared leadership theory.

The four leadership models you described present a particularly useful foil for describing the mechanisms through which leadership and influence may be exercised and "travel" within a group of people: Top-down; bottom-up; lateral (what you termed shared leadership); and integrated — a combination of top-down, bottom-up, and lateral leadership.

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: Craig.L.Pearce@gmail.com (C.L. Pearce).

1048-9843/$ - see front matter © 2007 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.
doi:10.1016/j.leaqua.2007.03.009

As you suggested, most research and practitioner thinking on leadership focuses on the top-down model. We believe the top-down model of leadership is but a seductive siren song relative to the real-life enactment of leadership in organizations. Clearly, leadership *is* a far more complex process, involving a dynamic give-and-take that shared leadership theory attempts to describe and address.

We agree, in large part, with your final conclusions—that what you term the integrated model is the appropriate lens through which to view leadership. In fact, your integrated model is fairly consistent with the definition of shared leadership we offered in our introductory chapter: Shared leadership is "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. This influence process often involves peer, or lateral, influence and at other times involves upward or downward hierarchical influence" (Pearce & Conger, 2003b, p. 1). Nonetheless, while much of your discussion is consistent with ours, a few areas exist where we have divergent opinions — particularly concerning the section of your chapter where you enumerate the tasks of the top leader and point out which of these tasks can be properly shared with others and which cannot. We wish to explore several of these issues with you further.

For one, we feel that your model of leadership best describes the senior level leadership of vertically-integrated bureaucratic organizations. In reality, these types of leadership scenarios are increasingly rare, even in the world of business. More organizations today are a set of coalitions, networks, and strategic alliances. As Dunphy (2000) points out, this newer generation of organizations do not have a centralized, unitary command structure rather they are often a loose alliance built around a common interest. Leadership is often shared across the various partners or members making it difficult for a single individual of one entity to truly lead the alliance or network. For example, Microsoft and Intel have a deep, historic partnership and Bill Gates of Microsoft does not alone determine the strategies and tactics of that partnership. What are your thoughts on this perspective?

You also clearly state that one of the tasks of leadership – the creation of the vision for the organization – is the sole prerogative of the top leader. Again, we feel that the new generation of organizations built around alliances and joint ventures require strategic visions shaped by multiple parties — in these cases, the senior leaders of the partnership. In such cases, there is rarely if ever a single senior leader shaping the alliance vision. It is more often the product of shared leadership across a set of senior executives representing the different enterprise partners to the venture.

Even in the case of entrepreneurial leaders, the strategic vision may be profoundly shaped by an executive who is not the CEO founder. One illustrative example would be the fast food company McDonalds. Harry Sonneborn, the chief financial officer to company founder Ray Kroc, envisioned the real estate component of the company's strategic vision which in turn enabled McDonald's to become a viable competitor in fast food and ensured its profitability. Sonneborn formulated a novel way for McDonalds to be profitable without conflicting with Kroc's concept of fairness to suppliers and franchisees. Sonneborn's vision was built around a separate real estate company which located and leased restaurant sites from landowners willing to build McDonald's stores. This company then entered into 20-year leases with the property owners and in turn subleased the stores to the franchisees, with a markup charged for the real estate services McDonalds provided to the latter. This practice provided a stream of long term predictable profits to McDonalds which in turn allowed Kroc to successfully implement the other elements of his own vision for the company (Love, 1986). In this case, the actual strategic vision for McDonalds was the product of at least two individuals excluding the McDonalds brothers who laid much of the earlier groundwork for the company's strategic vision. Similarly, research by Nadler (1998) found in publicly traded companies that the executive team is vital to the formulation of the strategic vision. They possess a wide range of creative and viable perspectives given their breadth of experience and seasoned judgment in the business. In many different ways, members of the executive team are direct contributors to the formulation and articulation of the strategic vision.

Furthermore, on the dimension of vision, emerging research suggests that vision created collectively through shared leadership can have a powerful influence on many team dynamics as well as team performance (e.g., Pearce & Ensley, 2004). Moreover, research has found that top management team member involvement in creating the organizational vision can be more important than the actual vision itself in explaining firm performance (Ensley & Pearce, 2001). Thus, it appears that if people are properly motivated, and have the necessary knowledge skills and abilities, a vision shaped collectively by the team is not only possible but also potentially more powerful than one imparted from above. We wonder what your thoughts might be on these issues related to vision formulation.

Another dimension where our views diverge is in the area of motivating people. We agree that while a degree of responsibility for motivation rests with the top leader of any group or organization, this does not preclude the