

Distributed leadership in teams: The network of leadership perceptions and team performance

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Abstract

This study uses social network analysis to examine distributed leadership in work teams. We used sociometric data from 28 field-based sales teams to investigate how the network structure of leadership perceptions considered at the team level of analysis was related to team performance. We failed to find support for the idea that the more leadership is distributed across the members of a team the better the team's performance: Decentralization of the leadership network (across three different operationalizations of network decentralization) was not significantly related to superior team performance. But we did find support for the idea that certain kinds of decentralized leadership structures are associated with better team performance than others. Our study suggests that distributed leadership structures can differ with regard to important structural characteristics, and these differences can have important implications for team performance.

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What enables some teams to outperform others?⁴ A longstanding approach to this question has focused on the effects of leaders on team performance. This is because team leaders play a pivotal role in shaping collective norms, helping teams cope with their environments, and coordinating collective action. This leader-centered perspective has provided valuable insights into the relationship between leadership and team performance (for a review, see Guzzo & Dickson, 1996). But the leader-centered perspective may be limited because it assumes that there is only one leader in a group, and because it views leadership as an exclusively top-down process between the leader and subordinates (Yukl, 1998: 459). Leadership research has been preoccupied with understanding how the style, personality, and other characteristics of the leader influence team dynamics and performance. Relatively little is known about what happens

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⁴ We recognize that the terms “teams” and “groups” may be distinguishable. However, in this paper we follow Guzzo & Dickson's (1996) example and use the two terms interchangeably.

when teams have more than one leader (some important exceptions are Day, Gronn, & Salas, 2004; Gronn, 2002; Pearce & Conger, 2003).

This is an unfortunate state of affairs because organizational teams, like human groups more generally, seldom have just one leader. Even when there is a formally assigned team leader, other, informal, leaders can emerge. Team members, like the wirebonders examined in the classic Hawthorne Studies, often choose leaders of their own, leaders who are "...different from the supervisors given them by the company" (Homans, 1950: 148; Wheelan & Johnston, 1996; cf. Whyte, 1943/1993: 255–276). Leaders, like the wirebinder Taylor, may lack formal power, yet they can mobilize both considerable support and considerable opposition. Indeed, emergent leaders can literally tear an organization apart (e.g., Burt & Ronchi, 1990).

In this paper, we join a small but growing number of researchers who take seriously the possibility of leadership in teams as a shared, distributed phenomenon in which there can be several (formally appointed and/or emergent) leaders. In re-conceptualizing leadership as a team-level construct, our focus is on the emergent network of leadership perceptions within work teams. We strive to make two contributions. First, we attempt to extend recent theoretical work on distributed leadership at the network level of analysis (Mayo, Meindl, & Pastor, 2003; Seibert, Sparrowe, & Liden, 2003) by conceptually distinguishing between three prototypic structural forms that the network of leadership perceptions within a team can take, and by providing a rationale for how these different network structures are related to both objective (team sales) and attitudinal (team satisfaction) measures of team performance. Second, our field-based study adds to the sparse empirical evidence on this topic. We collected sociometric data from a sample of 28 field-based sales teams to investigate how the network structure of leadership perceptions considered at the team level of analysis is related to team sales and team satisfaction.

1. Theory and hypotheses

The idea that leadership can be distributed across a number of individuals, rather than being focused in a single leader, is at least fifty years old (Gibb, 1954; also see Bowers & Seashore, 1966). Although it was largely ignored in the ensuing decades (notable exceptions are Brown, 1989; Brown & Hosking, 1986), the idea of distributed leadership has begun to receive increasing attention in recent years (for reviews, see Bennett, Harvey, Wise, & Woods, 2003; Gronn, 2002; Pearce & Conger, 2003). In this more recent line of work, distributed leadership is being conceptualized (and operationalized) in a number of different ways (see Day et al., 2004: 873–875), but there appears to be broad consensus on two issues: (1) leadership is not just a top-down process between the formal leader and team members; and (2) there can be multiple leaders within a group.

2. Social networks and distributed leadership

There is a long history of research that uses social network techniques to understand distributed leadership in team settings. Indeed, one could argue that social network analysis was born when Jacob Levy Moreno, a psychiatrist, in collaboration with Helen Jennings, a psychologist, collected systematic sociometric data at Sing Sing prison and at the Hudson School for Girls and used network diagrams to identify patterns of leadership within groups (Jennings, 1943; Moreno, 1932; see Freeman, 2004: 31–32 on the birth of network analysis). Other classics in this line of work can be found in the experimental work conducted at The Research Center for Group Dynamics at MIT in the 1940s and 1950s, which focused on such questions as how position in communication networks was related to the distribution of leadership perceptions within laboratory-based communication groups (e.g., Bavelas, 1950; Shaw, 1964). This research program "succeeded in producing a huge amount of important theory and data," but it fell apart as key contributors left MIT to work elsewhere (see Freeman, 2005: 74).

One of the goals of our study is to reinvigorate this classic line of work by extending some of its key insights to the study of distributed leadership in teams. Social network analysis is especially well suited to the study of distributed leadership because it is an inherently relational approach that allows for the possibility that there can be multiple leaders within a group, and because it provides methods for modeling both vertical (i.e., between formal leader and subordinates) and lateral (among subordinates) leadership relations within a team. Another strength of the social network approach is that relative to alternatives that aggregate team members' perceptions about how much influence the team members have over leadership (e.g., Pearce & Sims, 2002), it better preserves information about the actual pattern of leadership distribution within teams (Brass & Krackhardt, 1998; Mayo et al., 2003: 193–194; for a rich

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