

ENABLING AND SUSTAINING SHARED LEADERSHIP IN AUTONOMOUS TEAMS

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Abstract

A proliferation of autonomous teams across industries entices researchers to examine the transformation of emergent leadership into sustainable shared leadership as an optimal condition for team effectiveness. Little, if any, in-depth research has surfaced in the literature to explain shared leadership. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine specific organizational dynamics most likely to enable and sustain shared leadership in autonomous teams. In this exploratory study, empirical feedback representing personal team experiences of 18 autonomous team members was collected and arranged in themes. What resulted was evidence that top-leader support, an institution-wide focus on team outcomes, face-to-face communication and frequent feedback, and equity in team-member recruitment processes were perceived to be the most critical organizational dynamics shaping shared leadership in autonomous teams.

Keywords: Autonomous teams, emergent leadership, shared leadership

Introduction

Scholar-practitioners recognize that traditional, hierarchical forms of leadership are no longer congruent with the multi-faceted challenges in the contemporary business environment (Carson, Tesluk, & Marrone, 2007; Houglum, 2012). Recently capturing researchers' attention, in particular, has been the prolific use of autonomous teams in transitioning organizations into flatter, more adaptive structures (Devaro, 2008; Jiang, 2010). The pervasive presence of autonomous teams across industries has driven considerable research on emergent leadership within teams as a replacement for traditional leadership elevated by hierarchy. Thus, surfacing in the literature have been *behavioral* analyses (Usoff & Nixon, 1998), as well as *trait* analyses (Taggar, Hackett, & Saha, 1999), of emergent leaders. Attention has even been given to the *effects* of emergent leadership on team performance (Kozlowski, Watola, Jensen, Kim, & Botero, 2009). Yet, little research, if any, exists on the actual transformation of emergent leadership into

sustainable shared leadership as an optimal condition for team effectiveness. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study is to advance shared leadership in the literature by examining specific organizational dynamics most likely to enable and sustain shared leadership in autonomous teams. This connection will provide organizational leaders with a framework for fostering organizational conditions most conducive to improved organizational performance.

Review of Literature

Studies have recently surfaced that attempt to tighten the link between emergent leadership within autonomous teams and the empowering leadership of team-external leaders in steering the development of shared leadership (Gilstrap, 2013; Srivastava, Bartol, & Locke, 2012; Zhang, Waldman, & Wang, 2012). What has resulted are discussions of shared leadership as a sign of elevated feelings of empowerment, resulting from high levels of emergent leadership across multiple team members, with only a broad, general analysis of any antecedents for shared leadership (Bergman, Rentsch, Small, Davenport, & Bergman, 2012; Gilstrap, 2013). However, prior to examining specific organizational dynamics most likely to enable and sustain shared leadership in autonomous teams, a brief review of the literature on empowering leadership, emergent leadership, and shared leadership is warranted.

Empowering Leadership

Through empowering leadership, organizational leaders nurture an entrepreneurial climate, promoting autonomy in teams as well as a psychological sense of ownership and shared perceptions of tasks, coordination, commitment, and interdependence among team members (Lorinkova, Pearsall, & Sims, 2013). The literature reveals that descriptions of empowering leadership remain consistent. For example, Hakimi, van Knippenberg, and Giessner (2010) defined empowering leadership as “the delegation of authority and responsibilities to followers” (p. 702), while Martin, Liao, and Campbell (2013) associated empowering leadership with “granting employees a fair amount of autonomy so they are able to make independent decisions regarding how to achieve desired outcomes” (p. 1373). As the literature reveals, the level of empowering leadership dispersed to teams depends largely on two dimensions: (a) the organizational context and (b) organizational leader behaviors.

Organizational Context

An array of factors collectively define organizational context, including but not limited to communication methods, technology

implementation, hierarchical structure, delegation of authority, and the transformation of inputs into outputs (Allen & Hecht, 2004). The coordination of contextual factors can significantly shape team processes, such as when new technologies enhance communications to improve team coordination when dispersed team members replace management layers, for example. Yet, according to Bacon and Blyton (2000), team members' expectations for specific team outcomes are also dependent on certain elements of organizational context. As a result, team members might alter team objectives and the level of effort to achieve them if contextual elements conflict with achieving desired team outcomes. Further, Kozlowski and Ilgen (2006) suggested that organizational context guides the difficulty, complexity, and timing of team tasks. Therefore, the alignment of a team with the organization's philosophy cannot be performed haphazardly.

One major component of organizational context is organizational culture, represented in the evolution of shared norms, beliefs, and values of all organizational members (Hofstede, 1998). Yet, often challenging is the coercion of team members to perform beyond established norms to generate an innovative, entrepreneurial climate (Lumpkin, Cogliser, & Schneider, 2009). Effective autonomous teams warrant empowering leadership unhindered by existing norms and traditions. Another contextual component is how time is allocated for teamwork. Team members develop positive perceptions of teamwork when given time during work hours to meet (Pfaff & Huddleston, 2003); therefore, team members may feel less cohesive and less committed to team tasks if required to devote personal time for teamwork. Also defining organizational context is job design and, thus, team design (Delarue, Van Hootegeem, Procter, & Burrige, 2008). Job design determines the team cross-functionality and the allocation of tasks since assigned tasks are often aligned with the team members' levels of expertise. Finally, organizational context can influence the psychological state of team members. According to Rasmussen and Jeppesen (2006), attitudinal variables such as feelings of satisfaction and team commitment positively correlate with such contextual components as communication processes, resource availability, and leadership style; whereas, behavioral variables such as creativity and conflict handling positively correlate with performance, interdependence, and team autonomy.

Organizational Leader Behaviors

Also influencing empowering leadership are organizational leader behaviors. Though attitudes toward external leaders affect team members' willingness to accept external leader influence (Martin et al., 2013), a critical role of external leaders is to nurture team-member motivation and capabilities (Hoch & Morgeson, 2014). Therefore, the onus is on

organizational leaders to create a leadership culture. External leader behavior influences team-member perceptions of the functionality of the leadership culture (Aitken, 2007). Thus, clear cues for guiding autonomous behavior are observed, shaping what is important and how team members should act. Further, distinct leader behaviors have emerged that shape organizational dynamics that positively influence team processes and outcomes. They include: (a) bestowing appropriate levels of autonomy on teams, (b) promoting team orientation, and (c) generating support and feedback.

Bestowing autonomy. Too much or too little autonomy may negatively impact autonomous team outcomes. *Too little* autonomy prevents team members from optimizing their skill and talent use (Parker, 2003), while *too much* autonomy increases team-member stress in meeting external leader expectations (Godard, 2001). Kuipers and Stoker (2009) proposed that appropriate levels of autonomy can improve team-member well-being and organizational performance. With appropriate levels of autonomy, team members can develop their personal levels of knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs), which are complementary resources in tapping into the experiences of other team members to make the most effective decisions. Appropriate levels of autonomy also enhance team-member motivation; Morgeson and Campion (2003) argued that empowering self-directed decisions pushes team members toward higher expectations of themselves and other team members. Finally, appropriate autonomy can result in increased team-member satisfaction and productivity. Leach, Wall, Rogelberg, and Jackson (2005) credited autonomy for fostering satisfaction and productivity by reducing team-member stress resulting from fewer encounters with team-external interference.

Promoting team orientation. A vital role of empowering leadership is to integrate team orientation throughout organizational processes. Morgeson, Lindoerfer, and Loring (2010) cited that weak team orientation is one of the most significant causes of failed empowering leadership. For empowering leadership to be effective, for example, leaders must encourage knowledge sharing among all organizational members (Hakimi, et al., 2010). In doing so, leaders relinquish some control and become dependent on subordinates for surrogate leadership. Yet, particularly rewarding is the level of team-member coordination that knowledge sharing promotes. According to Zhang et al. (2012), team-member coordination fuels shared vision among all team members, resulting in higher team efficacy.

Generating support and feedback. Team-external leaders encourage team-member empowerment by providing appropriate support and feedback. First, organizational leaders transfer supportive knowledge to team members when assuming roles as coaches and mentors (Gaur, 2006; Hakimi et al.,

2010). High standards are set through coaching and mentoring, empowering teams to raise expectations to shape self-directed responsibilities. Srivastava et al. (2006) revealed that empowering teams through coaching and mentoring repositions external leaders from being perceived as forces of control to valuable team resources. Second, organizational leaders are responsible for nurturing social-support systems. Van Mierlo, Rutte, Vermunt, Kompier, and Doorewaard (2006) placed responsibility on organizational leaders to support paradigms that identify themselves and fellow team members as predominant sources of social support. De Carolis and Saporito (2006) further argued that social support builds network relationships which ignite levels of emotional support found to stimulate innovation, trust, and self-enforcing norms. The challenge, however, is for organizational leaders to identify what support and feedback mechanisms work within the organizational context.

Emergent Leadership

The emergence of team-internal leaders is not a new phenomenon in team literature. Seminal studies of emergent leadership began around 1920 when the first study of “leaderless groups” appeared (Bass, 1954). Contemporary researchers continue to study emergent leadership in autonomous teams. Seers, Petty, and Cashman (1999) recognized that emergent leadership naturally develops from general role consensus when team members send verbal and nonverbal cues for leader behavior to other team members who, in turn, display expected leader behaviors. Gilstrap (2013) further revealed that “team members...transfer their own power to those they feel will be most able to achieve goals” (p. 40). Taggar et al. (1999) attributed emergent leadership to the distribution of leader behaviors among team members, also indicating that more than one team member can exhibit leadership behavior at any given time.

Typical in autonomous teams is the significant influence team members have on other team members, though no formal authority is vested in emergent leaders (Taggar et al., 1999). Emergent leader roles mostly involve facilitating team processes, such as setting goals, procuring team resources, encouraging interdependence, and acting as coach, for example. However, the dynamic resulting from emergent leadership remains unique in each team situation. For example, team effectiveness is dependent on team members’ abilities to recognize each other’s types and levels of expertise (Karakowsky & Siegel, 1999), which drives expectations for team-internal leadership among team members. In fact, emergent leadership often starts when team members gravitate toward other team members who have already displayed previous leadership acts (Ammeter & Dukerich, 2002). Druskat and Pescosolido (2006) also suggested that emergent leaders who build

emotional competence among team members are more likely to positively influence desired team outcomes than leaders with directive styles of leadership. Finally, according to Berson, Dan, and Yammarino (2010), team cohesion appears to be a dependable predictor of effective leader emergence. Team members who perceive themselves as highly cohesive tend to share a higher degree of emergent leadership within their teams.

Also mentioned in the literature is team-external leadership as a significant influence on emergent leadership. According to Hoch and Morgeson (2014), emergent leadership can surface even when an external leader has been designated. Team members observe external leader behaviors and are prompted to engage in similar behaviors or react with what they perceive to be more effective behaviors. In addition, leader emergence is driven by a positive leader-member exchange (Zhang et al., 2012). Perceived fairness in the naturally-occurring, one-on-one relationships between organizational leaders and subordinates strengthens a team culture within organizations, prompting more secure levels of cohesion and shared vision in autonomous teams. Carson et al. (2007) do warn, however, that emergent leadership in empowered teams can still be stifled if team-external leaders provide most of the leadership influence.

Shared Leadership

Shared leadership is regarded as the optimal level of emergent leadership teams. For example, Jessup (1990) stated that “the best arrangement for many teams is shared leadership with defined duties assigned to all team members” (p. 80), while Carson et al. (2007) defined shared leadership as “leadership influence across multiple team members” (p. 1218). Taggar et al. (1999) even suggested that the most effective teams require an even distribution of leadership among all members. Shared leadership enables team members to collectively engage in complementary leader behaviors, resulting in reciprocal patterns of team-internal support that reinforce trust, coordination, and shared vision of intended team outcomes. According to Pearce (2004), low-performing teams tend to be influenced by only one or a few emergent leaders, while top-performing teams mostly exhibit shared leadership as a sign of full empowerment.

Contemporary researchers have only recently attempted to discuss some antecedents for shared leadership. Carson et al. (2007) indicated that shared leadership is dependent on emergent leadership as its most powerful determinant but that emergent leadership takes time to develop and must be culturally ingrained. Gilstrap (2013) argued that shared leadership only begins when team members feel truly empowered, suggesting that autonomy bestowed on teams must be genuine and not merely symbolic. Further, Bergman et al (2012) warned that shared leadership can be inhibited if team

members maintain traditional expectations of team leadership, believing that only one or a few people are responsible for the team's fate. Finally, Zhou (2013) contended that shared leadership is most effective when emergent leader roles are complementary. Yet, absent in the literature is any detailed discussion of specific organizational dynamics that can be nurtured to enable and sustain shared leadership, inviting researchers to engage in more in-depth studies.

Methodology

Three team members from each of six autonomous teams, all ranging in size from six to eight members, were interviewed separately to capture their perceptions of work in designing and implementing a quality initiative in their respective higher educational institutions; these 18 participants represented a range of administrators, faculty members, and staff. The open-ended questions invited participants to assess the prevalence of specific organizational dynamics surrounding their team experiences and their perceived impact on the degree of shared leadership in their teams. Data were coded and arranged into meaningful categories, followed by use of thematic analysis to combine data categories into themes that reflected participants' experiences across the data set.

Results

Interviewing three participants from each of six institutions allowed for validation of responses within the same institution. Every participant did acknowledge some level of *emergent* leadership in his or her team; however, only participants from four of the six teams represented in the study acknowledged *shared* leadership. None of the participants cited differences in gender, nationality, personality, or workplace longevity as having any significant impact on leader emergence in the respective teams. As Figure 1 reveals on the next page, four dominant themes emerged from the data that identify organizational dynamics with the most positive impact on enabling and sustaining shared leadership: (a) top-leader support, (b) focus on outcomes, (c) communication and feedback, and (d) approaches to member recruitment.

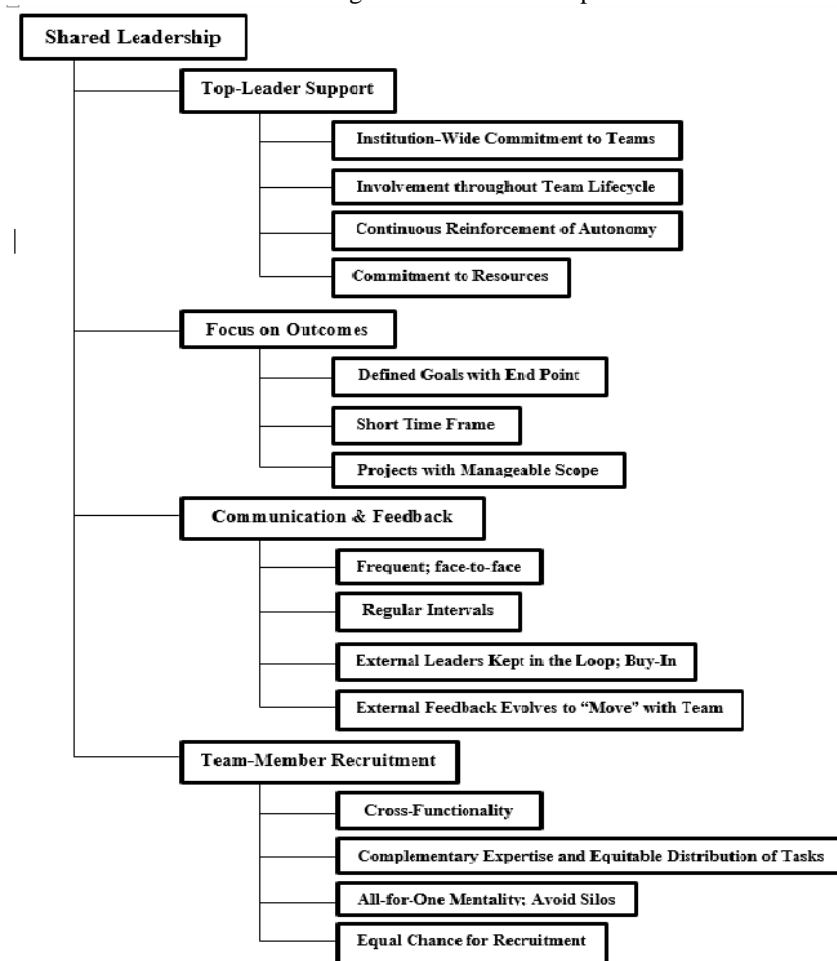
Top-Leader Support

Top leaders were recognized as the main catalysts in shaping team members' expectations by inspiring an institution-wide commitment to teams. Team members agreed that the more similar and consistent their teams' expectations, the more noticeable the degree of emergent leadership. Among teams with high levels of shared leadership, top administrators remained involved throughout the teams' lifecycles, providing an initial

ramp-up with high expectations and working to reduce various organizational barriers throughout the outcome-implementation phase. Though top administrators may fear being too “heavy-handed” in the beginning, particularly when teams are intended to be autonomous, team members expressed appreciation for greater involvement at the start as a clearer tone was set for what was expected.

Further, weakened shared leadership was noticeable if top-administrator interest appeared to wane between a team’s report-out and the actual implementation of outcomes.

Figure 1: Thematic Map



In addition, shared leadership prevailed in those teams in which autonomy was continuously reinforced by top administrators. Not all team members initially perceived the level of autonomy intended for them; therefore, at such a critical juncture, continuous reinforcement of

autonomous behaviors and processes was viewed by team members as a way for top administrators to optimize the level of autonomy bestowed on them. Team members who perceived optimal levels of autonomy, therefore, perceived higher levels of team-member collaboration and interdependence as foundations for shared leadership.

Finally, according to participants, feelings of empowerment are strongly tied to significant levels of needed resources. Shared leadership appeared to be strongest and more widely dispersed in teams with greater availability of needed organizational resources and an upfront, unwavering commitment to those resources. Even in instances where re-allocation of resources became necessary, team members tended to be content in altering their team objectives impacted by the change in resources as long as organizational leaders made a concerted effort to be equitable in the re-allocation process.

Focus on Outcomes

Team-internal leaders emerged more quickly in teams that held a steadfast focus on outcomes, particularly when the outcomes were institution-wide priorities impacting multiple constituencies. Shared leadership and, thus, enhanced feelings of ownership in team tasks appeared in those teams with set goals, defined outcome measures, and a pre-determined end point. Further, participants stated that time constraints are “a good thing.” Projects with a manageable scope that were completed in a short time frame promoted team-member accountability, bringing team members to perceivably higher levels of collaboration and cohesion in their efforts toward shared leadership. Finally, performance indicators and benchmarks for outcomes can shift as a natural progression in a team’s life. However, participants observed that leader emergence waned when such shifts occurred in their teams.

Communication and Feedback

Also enabling and sustaining shared leadership in teams are the organizational dynamics created through communication and feedback processes. Frequent, face-to-face communication generated the most constructive feedback from external leaders and was viewed by team members as a significant means of positive collaboration and consensus. Participants also agreed that communication with external leaders and other constituents should be at regular and frequent intervals in order to generate constructive feedback not viewed as a threat to team autonomy and leader emergence. Further, as indicated in Figure 1, participants attributed shared leadership in their teams to a stronger bond with external leaders forged by seeking buy-in from them in decision making and keeping them “in the

loop.” In doing so, team members contended that external leader feedback evolved and “moves with the team” rather than being regarded as merely occasional criticism and derailling interference.

Member Recruitment

The manner in which team members are recruited also prompts leader emergence and, thus, shared leadership in autonomous teams. Maintaining cross-functionality in teams invited complementary levels of team-member expertise with recruits “each having something to bring to the table.” Participants also asserted that having an equal chance of being recruited, not being forced to participate, and working with an equitable distribution of tasks among members motivated shared leadership in their teams. What resulted was an all-for-one mentality, which ultimately reduces organizational silos that often impede team orientation as an ingrained element of organizational culture.

Discussion

Though a myriad of organizational dynamics impacting the development of shared leadership might have surfaced in this study, constructed themes emphasize that top organizational leaders inspire the most powerful dynamics enabling and sustaining shared leadership in autonomous teams. Shared leadership is contingent on team members feeling empowered to collectively embrace leadership roles and assume ownership of their work. Therefore, team members acknowledge the urgency of top-leader support, specifically through conscientious involvement in team efforts throughout the team’s lifecycle, consistent reinforcement of intended autonomy levels, and an indebted commitment to needed resources. In addition, a leader-driven, organization-wide obligation to teams lures team members to focus more intently on their final outcomes, accelerating the development of shared leadership while working under a short time frame and a defined end point as constraints. Further, frequent, face-to-face communication generates the most constructive feedback from external leaders and other constituencies; thus, team-member consensus and shared leadership develop since feedback at regular, expected intervals is less likely to derail the team’s momentum. Finally, when individuals perceive an equal chance of being recruited for team membership based on complementary levels of expertise, shared leadership evolves from an all-for-one mentality that prevails over leadership silos.

From a theoretical standpoint, leaders cannot solely rely on team structure to entice team members to engage in shared leadership; team-external behaviors and organizational dynamics appear to be more significant in determining the likelihood that shared leadership will develop

in teams. In addition, continued studies of shared leadership in autonomous teams will introduce new paradigms about empowering leadership and behaviors, strengthening the alignment of team-member and external-leader expectations of each other. More specifically, narrowing the incongruence between team-member expectations for external-leader involvement and the perceived level of autonomy bestowed on them may enable shared leadership within teams as an optimal condition for effective organizational performance.

Limitations

Some limitations come to light in this study. First, results from this study may not be generalizable across industries, inviting researchers to consider other organizational types in further studies. Second, the scope of participants' team projects may have varied and participants' institutional roles may have skewed their perceptions of their team experiences. Third, numerous *team* dynamics, personal biases, and conflicting leader-member exchanges may have collectively altered practices of shared leadership, though participants did not acknowledge them in this study. Finally, the researcher did not ascertain whether one particular organizational dynamic, or any combination thereof, was most responsible for leader emergence, providing a foundation for future research.

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