When is Sharing Leadership in Teams Effective?
Sandra Pintor, Technische Universität Dresden

Today, many companies are using teams to do important work. Because of this, most employees belong to (at least) one team. Thus, when we talk about company performance, we must talk about team performance. Strong team performance requires that employees, both individually and as team members, quickly adapt to the daily demands of a fast-paced environment. It is rare that any one person (or leader) on a team has all of the knowledge and skills necessary to direct or carry the entire team’s performance, so teams must learn to effectively work with all members’ diverse contributions.

Some teams overcome this problem by relying on the leadership of more than one employee for different tasks and challenges, sometimes simultaneously. This means that different employees assume leadership duties and functions whenever their area of expertise is needed to successfully accomplish the tasks and demands faced by the team. Thus, different team members influence each other to accomplish team and company goals. Despite their formal positions or titles on the team, more than one employee may assume (formally or informally), in different moments, leadership behaviors and be seen by each other as leaders. This process is called shared leadership.

When successfully implemented in the appropriate circumstances, research on teams in various contexts suggests that shared leadership may garner the following results:

- Managers and team members perceive the team as more effective;
- managers perceive their team as performing more innovative and proactive behaviors;
- team members perceive they are implementing higher quality problem-solving;
- clients rate teams with whom they interact as more effective;
- sales teams generate higher amount of dollars-per-financial-quarter; and
- new ventures achieve higher annual revenue and employment growth rate.

Additionally, shared leadership is a better predictor of team results and success than when one leader alone influences all other team members.

Is shared leadership right for your team?

Although the benefits of shared team leadership have been established, not all teams or circumstances are a good fit for it. Shared leadership is particularly beneficial in environments characterized by:
1. Highly complex tasks that require knowledge and skills in different areas.
2. Interdependent tasks where the work of different employees affects and depends on each other.
3. Creativity: tasks that require producing alternative ideas.
4. Highly committed employees: team members are required and willing to “go the extra mile.”
5. Non-urgent tasks that do not require an immediate action, and provide enough time to learn and adapt.

Do these characterize your team tasks? If so, then implementing shared leadership may help to improve your team results. Otherwise, if not, it is cautioned that shared team leadership can take more time to finish tasks and can increase conflict between team members.

How can shared leadership be put into practice?

You should be aware beforehand that implementing shared leadership is a complex and time-consuming process. To successfully develop it, you need:

- Team members who will claim leadership and are willing to influence the team;
- The manager, individual team members, and the team as a whole to be willing to grant leadership to different members.

Considering that companies usually formally designate a team leader, managers can facilitate the willingness and acceptance of shared leadership from different team members by:

1. Carefully selecting team members – Choosing those with knowledge, skills and abilities that complement each other and fit team goals.
2. Training team members in leadership skills – This may be formal training, focusing on (a) the development of desired leadership behaviors (for example, self-goal setting, self-development) and how to engage in positive leadership, (b) acceptance of influence from others, and (c) teamwork skills. Informal training, too, can be done on a daily basis by modeling behaviors to influence team members as well as show acceptance of other members’ influence.
3. Providing supportive coaching – Support and reinforce desired behaviors and achievements.

As shared leadership is a group process, both managers and team members can facilitate it by:

1. Developing a common view about how leadership should be structured in the team – Promote an internal team environment that fosters the view that leadership is not exclusive to the manager but other team members can step up as well.
2. Developing a shared purpose in the team – The manager and team members must all share their views and define clear objectives for individuals and for the team, and all must be aware of them.
3. Providing emotional and psychological support within the team – Recognize and reward
members and team efforts and achievements, encouraging each other.

4. *Learning to work together and developing coordinated work* – Take time to get to know the strengths and weaknesses of all team members.

5. *Identifying demands and resources in each situation* – Scan the situation and understand what resources it requires, so you can allocate the most suitable ones.

6. *Stimulating leadership shifts within the team* – Verbal behavior seems to have an important role in facilitating leadership shifts in daily interactions. Through open-ended questions, you can invite other individuals to participate, and you can show them that you accept leadership from them. For example, “What do you think we should do?” is better than declarative and imperative statements such as, “Let’s move forward with Plan A”, through which you attempt to lead the group.

7. *Building trust within the team* – Members should act and facilitate behaviors that promote confidence in the words and actions of each other.

It should be noted that where there is low team member commitment and lack of motivation, shared team leadership practices can foster destructive relationships among team members and have negative consequences, such as increased conflict and diminished team and organizational performance. The above steps are not an exhaustive list and should not be interpreted as a singular recipe to implement shared leadership. As always, a careful diagnosis of the particular team members and situation is necessary.
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