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# Shared Leadership: Can It Work in Schools?

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## **Abstract**

*Over the past couple of decades, K–12 schools have courageously struggled with the concept of shared, or distributed, leadership; however, the basic landscape of K–12 school leadership remains heavily hierarchical. Nonetheless, teachers can share leadership. This article explores productive forms of teacher leadership that are models of collaboration, integration, encouragement, learning, modeling, challenging, building consensus, and displaying professionalism.*

Over the past couple of decades, K–12 schools have courageously struggled with the concept of shared, or distributed, leadership. This is not a new concept—Mary Parker Follett (2001) introduced it over half a century ago, under the title of “The Law of the Situation.” Though much of Ouchi’s (1981) Theory Z often was rejected as a nonculturally relevant translation of Japanese shared leadership practices in U.S. corporations, the concept of shared leadership has since gained some acclaim in modern business and in nonprofit organizations. Shared leadership is a concept that is often (Schwadel 1991; Katzenbach 1998; Gardner 2000; Pearce and Conger 2003; Raelin 2003; Coleman and Earley 2004), but by no means universally (e.g., see Locke 2003), touted in the business world, where arrangements such as co-leadership, leaderless project teams, and functional matrices have been lauded for flattening the leadership hierarchy and maximizing the leadership contributions of all members of the organization, thereby increasing productivity and morale.

As much as K–12 schools have tried, however, they have failed to establish a model of shared leadership that can be diffused across a wide range of schools. In the 1980s and early 1990s, site-based team leadership became a popular concept, and many schools experimented with it. In most cases, the experiments

were less than fruitful or satisfactory to the participants (Mirel 1994; Weise 1995; Beadie 1996; Leech et al. 2003), and the schools all too quickly reverted to the traditional, hierarchical structure of principals, assistant principals, teachers, and staff, with the principal expected to provide the great bulk of the leadership.

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Over the past decade, the concept of teacher leadership gained popularity in K–12 schools. Many universities have established graduate programs in teacher leadership to encourage and equip selected master teachers with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to enable them to take leadership roles in K–12 schools beyond those traditionally exercised in their classrooms. Some states have created licensure for teacher leaders, and some give stipends for selected teachers to assume formal teacher leader roles. The basic landscape of K–12 school leadership remains heavily hierarchical, however, and teacher leadership continues to struggle to find its identity.

### ***Why Have K–12 Schools Struggled with Shared Leadership?***

Against the background of commonsense reasoning that “many minds are better than one,” it is necessary to ask *why* shared leadership has struggled for acceptance and identity in K–12 schools. The answer is profound in its simplicity: Schools have not differentiated well between the concepts of *administration* and *leadership*. Though great attention has been given to defining and differentiating between these two concepts (Bennis and Nanus 1985; Owens 1995; Yukl 1998; Coleman and Earley 2004), often the distinction was overlooked in designing the work of site-based management teams or of teacher leaders.

All too often, site-based management teams became bogged down in the minutia of administrative decisions—for example, schedules, curriculum development, and accreditation processes. This consumed so much of their time and became so unsatisfying that teachers gladly relinquished their shared governance roles in favor of concentrating their time and efforts back in their classrooms and returning the administrative duties to the principal and assistant principals, who had been relieved of classroom responsibilities to have the time necessary to attend to the administrative duties.

Similarly, teacher leaders often were asked to assume administrative roles—such as peer supervision or evaluation, staff development, or improving parental involvement—often with minimal or no release time from classroom duties. Principals viewed teacher leaders as contracted labor for these roles; fellow teachers often viewed them with confusion between their classroom and administrative roles; and great satisfaction arose only when the teacher leader, principal, and faculty all operated within an extremely healthy organizational culture. With the mounting pressures for external

accountability, even the healthiest of cultures are threatened, and schools are continually challenged to focus the best teachers' efforts at the classroom level (i.e., prepare students for standardized testing).

Admittedly, it is difficult to separate leadership from administration because in hierarchical administrative structures, often the same individuals are called on to exercise both roles. Gronn (2003) found them to be fundamentally different concepts. Owens (1995, 132) attempted to differentiate between them, stating, "one manages things, not people, and one leads people, not things." Bennis and Nanus (1985, 21) defined the difference as "managers are people who do things right and leaders are people who do the right thing," although this provides little guidance concerning specific roles.

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Yukl (1998, 5) concluded, "Even defining leading and managing as separate processes may obscure more than it reveals if the processes are not mutually exclusive." This was echoed by Coleman and Earley (2004), who concluded that the concepts of leadership, management, and administration overlap and vary across time, nations, and organizational cultures. Because of this, the boundaries between leadership and administration may be blurred, but they must constantly and carefully be established in defining teachers' roles in schools as

leadership roles, rather than administrative. Because administrators have so readily fallen into the trap of involving teachers in shared administrative roles rather than in shared leadership, they have promulgated retrospectively predictable models of failure.

Teachers simply do not have the time to participate effectively or with satisfaction in shared administrative roles. Though many teachers are tremendously generous with their time and talents, designing school climate surveys and analyzing their results for accreditation processes or collaboratively setting secondary school schedules are not productive and satisfying uses of teachers' time; they are administrative duties best left to administrators (who, admittedly, often do not have sufficient time to do them either, thereby making them unsatisfying duties for administrators as well). The traditional assistant principal roles of "busses, books, and bathrooms" are not leadership roles—they are administrative.

Teachers *can* share leadership, however. In schools, leadership can be shared among many people, not only the select few who might be formally designated as administrators or teacher leaders. Why might such a shared leadership arrangement be important?

### **Why Is Shared Leadership Necessary?**

Sarason (1996) wrote that the failure of school reform was predictable because of the power relationships that exist in schools. Yukl and Lepsinger (2007, 11) further claimed:

*In the face of complex challenges, a leader, no matter how skilled and otherwise effective, cannot simply step into the breach, articulate a new vision, make some clarifying decisions, and proclaim success. Because a complex challenge requires a whole system and all the people in it to change, it lies beyond the scope of any individual person to confront.*

Pearce and Conger (2003, 2) also noted, "Seniormost leaders may not possess sufficient and relevant information to make highly effective decisions in a fast changing and complex world." Furthermore, these authors posited that the organization's response may need to be made more quickly than traditional hierarchical leadership arrangements might permit. As Bergmann, Hurson, and Russ-Eft (1999, x) stated, "Organizations need people at every level with the courage and skill to step up to leadership opportunities, whether they're formally designated leaders or not."

### **What Is Shared Leadership?**

Bass (1990, 19–20) defined leadership as "the interaction of two or more members of a group that often involves a structuring or unstructuring of the situation and the perceptions and expectations of the members. ... Leadership occurs when one group member modifies the motivation or competitiveness of others in the group." Spillane (2006, 11) employed a very similar definition, noting, "Organizational members influence the motivation, knowledge, affect, or practices of other organizational members" in activities tied to the core mission of the organization. Pearce and Conger (2003, 2) framed leadership as an activity that can be shared or distributed among members of the group. As such, it is not determined by formal authority or even by depth of expertise, "but rather by an individual's capacity to influence peers and by the leadership needs of the team in a given moment."

Fletcher and Kaufer (2003, 23) noted that "shared leadership signals a shift from individual achievement and meritocracy toward a focus on collective achievement, shared responsibility, and the importance of teamwork." Harris (2005, 258) added a highly descriptive definition of shared leadership: "multiple sources of guidance and direction, following the contours of expertise in an organization, made coherent through a common culture." Similar definitions can be found in the works of Coleman and Earley (2004), Fullan (2001), Glickman, Gordon, and Ross-Gordon (2001), Gronn (2000), Hopkins and Jackson (2003), Louis (1996), and Spillane, Diamond, and Jita (2003), all of whom contended that shared leadership would produce positive results in schools.

Shared leadership can take many forms, from co-chief executive officers (Schwadel 1991); to small groups of top executives (Katzenbach 1998; Ostroff 1999); to more widespread empowerment (Owens 1995); and even to the most extreme form, with no formal, hierarchical leader (Yukl 1998). Spillane (2006, 4) is one of the few authors to have distinguished shared leadership from distributed leadership. He contended that shared leadership involves a

formal leader plus other leaders, whereas distributed leadership is about “the many and not just the few. It is about leadership practice, not simply roles and positions. And leadership practice is about interactions, not just the actions of heroes.” Though Spillane’s points are well taken, the literature often applies the same issues to shared leadership; so, for the purposes of this article, Spillane’s semantic differentiation will not be observed. Similarly, Senge (1990; 2000) used the term *learning organization* to describe many of the same practices as shared leadership; Crowther et al.’s (2002) *parallel leadership*, Raelin’s (2003) *leaderful practice*, and Yukl and Lepsinger’s (2007) *connected leadership* all closely mirror the tenets of shared leadership.

### ***What Form Should Shared Leadership Take in Schools?***

Shared leadership in schools can occur in a variety of arrangements (Crowther et al. 2002). Spillane (2006) identified three primary variants: division of labor, co-performance, and parallel performance. He noted that more than one arrangement may coexist in a school at a given time, in conformance with the specific leadership function being performed. A variety of factors can play a role in determining which arrangement(s) will best serve the school: the culture of the school; specific contextual issues such as history, setting, and age level of the individuals in the organization; the size, homogeneity, and cohesiveness of the group; motivation and morale; or turnover (Gardner 2000). From the viewpoint of maximizing the contributions of the greatest number and diversity of leaders, building

a culture where all organizational members are expected to exercise leadership at appropriate times would seem ideal; however, this is a lofty goal that can be accomplished only over time. Most definitely, shared leadership must be implemented in close harmony with the hierarchical leadership functions of the principal, assistant principal, or even of teacher leaders (Leithwood et al. 2004).

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In an attempt to distinguish leadership roles from administrative roles, some leadership schemas from the professional knowledge base may be of assistance. It is interesting to note the striking similarity among these schemas. Devaney (1987) singled out six ways teachers could contribute leadership to their school:

- continue to teach and improve their own teaching;
- organize and lead well-informed peer reviews of school practice;
- participate productively in school-level decision making;
- organize and lead in-service education that is meaningful to the student population and school program;
- advise and assist individual teachers through mentoring, coaching, or consultation; and
- participate in the performance evaluation of teachers by providing appropriate appraisal and feedback.

Bergmann et al. (1999) listed five ways shared leadership could be exercised:

- create a compelling future;
- let the customer drive the organization;
- involve every mind;
- manage work horizontally; and
- build personal credibility.

In their research on teacher leaders, Lieberman, Saxl, and Miles (2000) identified six key sets of teacher leader skills:

- building trust and rapport;
- organizational diagnosis;
- dealing with the process;
- using resources;
- managing the work; and
- building skill and confidence in others.

Crowther et al. (2002) proposed six very similar arenas for teacher leadership:

- convey convictions about a better world;
- strive for authenticity in their teaching, learning, and assessment practices;
- facilitate communities of learning through organization-wide practices;
- confront barriers in the school's culture and structures;
- translate ideas into sustainable systems of action; and
- nurture a culture of success.

Most recently, Beach (2006) listed six leadership responsibilities:

- assessment;
- culture;
- vision;
- plans;
- implementation; and
- follow through.

Clearly, these are generally feasible ways for teacher leaders to contribute to their schools. For example, following Beach's (2006) schema, although *assessment* has become almost synonymous with *standardized testing* since the advent of the 2001 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, teachers have long conducted a wide variety of ongoing assessments in their classrooms—assessments of student academic progress, social progress, and needs. They conduct assessments of both the curriculum and their own instruction in ongoing action research designed to improve practice. Teacher leaders are in a unique position to design these assessments, interpret their results, make changes to their own practice, and recommend changes to other teachers or to the school's curriculum. Similarly, teachers are deeply immersed in the school's culture, which is a prerequisite to being able to assess that culture. Through their actions and words, they are able to reinforce or modify that culture over time. They can share their understanding of the key values and beliefs of the school's culture with newcomers to promote their successful assimilation into the culture. They can challenge aspects of

the school's culture that they consider to be less productive or healthy. The proposition that it is the formal leader who must set the school's vision is heavily rooted in the hierarchical, heroic model of leadership.

Though it is clearly crucial that the formal leader prominently articulate and model the vision for a wide range of stakeholders, teacher leaders can, and should, have a strong voice in formulating the vision; they also can take leadership roles in modeling the vision in their classrooms and bringing it alive to students, parents, and peers. Teacher leaders must be included in school planning—not operational planning for administrative functions, but planning how the vision should be translated into classroom and curricular practice and in the school culture. Planning of this nature without strong involvement and leadership from teachers greatly threatens both implementation and institutionalization of the changes desired.

Teachers can contribute to the planning process by providing ongoing assessment feedback during implementation, which can inform the planning process of needed adjustments. Teacher leaders can play key roles in experimenting with new classroom ideas that offer promise for realizing the school's vision or for attaining its goals. They can model the implementation of the school's action plan and can provide mentoring, peer assistance, or even just encouragement to colleagues in their own implementation of the plan. They can support the follow through (institutionalization) of the plan by modeling consistent utilization of the new ideas and providing verbal encouragement to their colleagues.

Though these comments relate to almost all the leadership schema presented in this paper, this author questions Devaney's (1987) recommendation that teachers participate in the evaluation of their peers; though this may be successful when shared leadership is extended only to selected teacher leaders placed in formal positions of authority (e.g., department chairs), it is not a practice that has functioned well when more widely distributed forms of leadership are the goal (see Little 2000).

Stone and Cuper (2006) provided a wealth of examples of the contributions of effective teacher leaders in schools throughout the United States. Their study illustrated that there are myriad ways that teachers are leaders in schools. Their study also illustrated that shared leadership is not the re-creation of the heroic leadership model to involve more leaders; instead, it is more a model of collaboration, integration, encouragement, learning, modeling, challenging, building consensus, and displaying professionalism. When viewed as such, and when teacher leaders are rewarded for providing this kind of leadership, shared leadership *can* be a valuable contribution to school cultures and successes. However, the path to establishing such shared leadership is not without barriers.

### ***Barriers to Shared Leadership in Schools***

For most schools, moving to a shared model of leadership requires a significant change in culture. When cultures are strongly entrenched, they are resistant to change (Allen 1985; Deal 1985; Wilkins and Patterson 1985; Harris 2002). Raelin (2003, 91) noted that moving toward a shared leadership model "is not necessarily a natural process in cultures that elevate authority as the primary basis for control within communities." Because schools

have a deeply entrenched culture of hierarchical leadership, moving toward a shared leadership culture will not be easily or quickly accomplished. Principals were raised to their position largely on their strengths as hierarchical, heroic leaders; for many of them to embrace a vastly different leadership approach undoubtedly will be difficult.

Yukl and Lepsinger (2007, 11) noted two specific potential problems associated with shared leadership. One they labeled *too many chefs*, noting that shared leadership could lead to a "cacophony of differing visions and values." The second problem they termed *diffused accountability*, stating, "As everyone becomes accountable, no one is really accountable at all." Because teacher leadership likely will be implemented in tandem with hierarchical leadership in schools, another accountability problem might arise. Commonly accepted is that the principal is ultimately accountable for what occurs in the school; therefore, one can anticipate that many principals will resist sharing leadership because they feel that the ultimate brunt of accountability will fall on them.

Locke (2003) reflected that groups do not always come to agreement and that hierarchical leaders may need to decide on unresolved issues. Again, this must be a process built into the design of the coexisting hierarchical and shared leadership arrangements. Locke (2003, 278) also noted that hierarchical leaders may have to choose the shared leaders because "if team members were to choose each other, they could easily form a cabal to undermine the CEO and might also choose peers who do not have the breadth or outlook or skills that the CEO needs." This suggestion appears to run contrary to Little's (2000) findings that teacher leaders appointed by the principal gain little acceptance among the faculty. It also runs contrary to the concept of a widely distributed base of leadership or to the *learning communities* (Senge 1990; 2000) or *leaderful practice* (Raelin 2003) models.

Little (2000) identified a major barrier to shared leadership: the fact that it is a labor-intensive process that requires time for organizational members to interact on an ongoing basis. This will be a problem in schools, where teachers are all too isolated and where classroom responsibilities preclude ongoing interaction.

These are indeed problems and barriers that must be recognized and overcome. However, if changing to a shared leadership model in schools were easy, it would probably not represent a significant enough departure from current practice to offer potentially different, and hopefully better, results.

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## Summary

The potential for shared leadership in schools is largely untested. Many previous and current models have remained largely hierarchical, involving only a few, selected teachers or sublevel administrators in leadership roles. In other cases, the roles assigned to teachers were more administrative than leadership in nature and often proved to offer little satisfaction. With judicious definition of which leadership roles are most appropriate and satisfying to teachers; with delicate integration of these shared leadership roles with the hierarchical leadership model of the school; and with time, understanding, and proper attention given to the cultural change process, however, it is possible to move considerably further in the direction of shared leadership.

The question then remains: Is shared leadership a direction schools should pursue? There is no empirical answer to that question, as yet. However, Stone and Cuper (2006, xi) noted:

*The finest educational leadership does not necessarily happen behind the closed doors of principals' offices or during the late-night board of education meetings. In fact, some of the most dynamic leadership in schools today happens in broad daylight and with classroom doors flung wide open. It is the leadership of teachers—big spirited, compassionate, and inventive teachers who lead through their willingness to reach out to their colleagues and their communities. It is the leadership of teachers who are always on the lookout for ways to enhance their practice through the use of new technologies, through professional development, and through discovering and sharing the talents of the people living in their communities.*

Properly implemented, the shared leadership model could potentially provide the space, support, and opportunity for this type of leadership to grow." As Tony Thacker, Alabama State Department of Education (personal communication) so aptly noted, "Which has greater stability, a telephone pole or a pyramid? The secret is in how wide and strong the base is." So it can be with school leadership!

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