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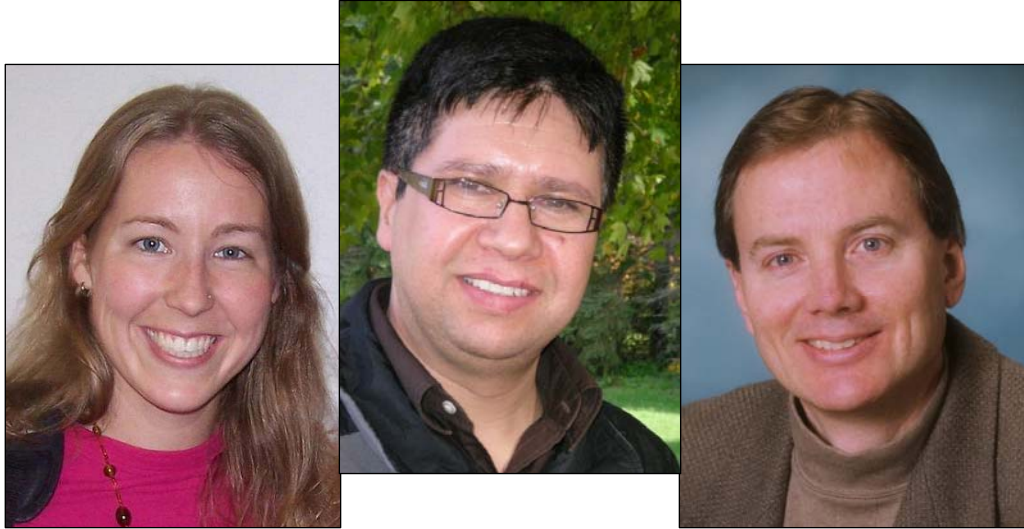
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Succeeding Through Collaborative Conflict: The Paradoxical Lessons of Shared Leadership

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Introduction

With the advancement of technology and scientific knowledge, our world is experiencing change at a greater speed than ever before. For example, the World Wide Web, which was merely a fantasy two decades ago, now instantaneously connects people from every nation, allowing organizations to share knowledge on a global basis never known before. These dynamic trends and easy access to information are creating vast challenges and opportunities for leading human resources in the

knowledge age. Largely as a result of these forces, shared leadership has moved to center stage as perhaps the most promising new approach for successfully leading global knowledge workers.

Given the increasing movement toward diversity of cultural backgrounds, experiences, and expertise of members of modern organizations, the sharing of leadership in a coordinated and complementary way can be a challenging process. Yet sharing leadership is well suited for contemporary work environments that require flexibility and adaptability. An important part of many contemporary views of leadership, especially during times of significant change, centers on the establishment of a common set of values and facilitation and coordination of activities so that they align and serve those values. This is especially true when leadership is shared among a diverse set of team members. In order for the unfolding influence process to be reasonably coherent and useful to those involved, having members' efforts anchored to a values based purpose for their common work is an essential theme of shared leadership at its best.

Nevertheless, finding the keys for successful application of shared leadership in the workplace can be a tricky, surprising and counterintuitive venture. This article examines the revolutionary transformation of organizational leadership practices from traditional leadership styles to shared leadership. Then we focus on *conflict* as a not only acceptable, but a surprisingly important and necessary ingredient for the successful practice of shared leadership. Drawing from actual cases of shared leadership in a variety of contexts, paradoxical lessons are offered based on a new kind of conflict – collaborative conflict – the key that enables shared leadership to thrive.

Beneficial Conflict; Beneficial Collaboration

There was a time when leaders were viewed as the ultimate authority figures, providers of punishments and rewards, and the holders of all knowledge. For example, Mr. X is the company president and everybody knows it. He can fire or hire people on a whim and no one wants to be on his bad side. He is constantly telling people how to do their jobs and they must come to him to get every last detail approved. Mr. X holds all of the power and authority in the organization and expects his staff to follow his orders without question. This rather extreme caricature of the traditional authoritarian style of leadership still exists today, at least to some degree, in a variety of settings. However, leadership has long since undergone a striking evolution in many organizations that has spread power throughout the workforce through participation, empowerment, and knowledge sharing.

Despite these notable changes, the emergence of shared leadership has moved influence processes to an even more advanced, revolutionary level within knowledge work contexts. The concept of shared leadership first appeared formally in the writings of Gibb in 1954. He posited that organizations were formulated on the basis of shared or “distributed leadership,” and that leadership is best conceived of as a set of functions which must be carried out by a group, as opposed to one individual leader. While many authors have written about the topic, Pearce and Manz (2005), offered a representative description when they defined shared leadership as “a simultaneous, ongoing, mutual influence process within a team, that involves the serial emergence of official as well as unofficial leaders” (p. 134).

In the next sections we will review the evolution of leadership from the traditional authoritarian leader figure to more participative and empowering forms of leadership, culminating in the process of shared leadership and how it contributes to the facilitation of knowledge creation and use. Ultimately we will suggest several paradoxical lessons for successful implementation of shared leadership drawn from actual experience represented by three diverse case studies.

The Past – Traditional Leadership

Human history depicts rich accounts of leadership events: exploring new lands, establishing ancient civilizations and fighting impossible battles. Leadership has always played a crucial role in the countless events in the evolution of humanity, and these deep historical roots shape the origins of leadership as we know it today.

The primitive concepts of leadership relied more on physical might, aggressiveness and the heroism of individual leaders. Subjugation and the ability to bend the will of others were seen as defining characteristics of leadership which were manifested through a tightly controlled, guided and directive approach. This concept of leadership as command and control has been practiced by authoritarian leaders since earliest recorded history and is still alive and well in the world today. Authoritarian leaders ruled by tyranny and oppression and used the fear of their subordinates to obtain obedience. Powerful empires (Greek, Roman, British) as well as infamous leaders (Ghangis Khan, Napoleon, Hitler, etc.) have applied this leadership style.

In this traditional view of leadership, all of the power is vested in a single individual who dictates the roles and responsibilities of his followers. The authoritarian leader does not tolerate conflict and seeks to bend the will of any people or ideas that run contrary to his commands. There is very little room for creativity and innovation under this type of leadership style as followers' roles are dictated by the leader, and questioning the authority figure is strongly discouraged or forbidden. The notion that leaders and their followers might mutually influence one another is largely unthinkable and undesired under the traditional style of leadership.

The Evolution – New Leadership Views, Participation, Empowerment, and Teamwork

Over time, driven by increased competitive pressures, expanded demands and expectations of workers, and a generally dynamic environment, the dominant traditional views of leadership began to change. New concepts emerged such as quality circles, cross functional task forces and committees, self-managing teams, and other participation and empowerment HR vehicles for greater productivity and effectiveness. Especially starting in the 1960s and 1970s, human resource management began to recognize and adopt more empowering leadership concepts that tapped the wider potential of the employees in organizations. These new leadership trends were meant to promote higher performance and quality of life for organization members through participation, teamwork, and a collegial working environment.

Meanwhile, the emergence of globalization and related concepts such as the “global village,” helped foster the rise of vast international organizations whose operations spread around the world. In order to compete in the global market, organizations became multi-faceted, geographically diverse and politically and culturally conscious organizations. Consequently the focus of leadership shifted from models of “power and position” to “relational and interactive” models which focus on expanding teamwork and organizational leadership built on a diversity of viewpoints, orientations and expertise.

As teamwork and empowered teams emerged as successful new components of many organizations, it became apparent that full benefits could not be realized unless members of the teams shared a common “purpose and passion” for the work they do. Teams needed an inclusive and cohesive environment that enabled everyone to contribute and feel they were an important part

of the organization. As a result, the role of leaders evolved toward an empowering style that instilled greater self-reliance and a sense of ownership for teams and their members, frequently built on cohesiveness and consensus.

Nevertheless, this was not the end of the journey. In fact, at times, attempts to empower workers and foster cohesive teamwork have proven counterproductive, especially when such efforts resulted in over conformity and discouraged the kind of idea challenge and conflict necessary for creativity and innovation. The looming threat of Groupthink that arose in teams that prioritized agreement and mutual personal support over reaching the best solutions and decisions is especially reflective of this unexpected pitfall (Janis, 1982). With the exponential growth of knowledge and the consequent need for tapping the expertise and experience of the wider workforce, a new more complex mutual influence process was required. This set the stage for the revolutionary transition to shared leadership.

The Revolution – Everyone a Leader: Shared/Self Leadership

The progression of leadership from traditional and authoritarian to more participative and empowering continued to evolve as thinking about and practice of influence processes progressed. Nevertheless, this evolutionary progression of leadership was not entirely adequate to meet the challenges of the global knowledge-based environment of contemporary organizations. Consequently, a new more robust and complex leadership perspective has emerged. Specifically shared leadership, which balances a team approach to leadership influence with individual self-leadership (Neck & Manz, 2010); an approach where everyone is a leader.

Shared leadership implies that all members of a team are fully engaged in the following ways:

- ✓ Members of a team work together to mutually influence one another creating synergy;
- ✓ Team members are self-leaders and encouraged to step up and take charge at the appropriate time;
- ✓ Power is shared among team members and may transfer from person to person depending on the needs of the team and the individual skills of the team members;
- ✓ Each individual's role is related to their knowledge or expertise thus optimally utilizing organizational knowledge ;
- ✓ Team members are fully empowered by the recognition of their unique capabilities and the power they wield to influence the development of the team.

Again, it is important to emphasize that such a shared approach does not minimize the importance of individual perspective and influence. That is, self-leadership (Manz, 1986) serves as an important foundation for shared leadership as it offers the potential to enable shared leadership to more optimally tap the resources of all involved (Pearce & Manz, 2005). Self- and shared leadership are two relatively new approaches that are shaking up traditional views of organizational leadership. Shared leadership is carried out by a group of interrelated self-leaders who mutually influence one another, work towards a common group goal, and share a common value system. Where you find shared leadership, you find team members who are fully engaged and fully empowered to work towards team goals and lead when they are needed.

The following is an example of shared leadership in practice:

Majeed works for a well known international relief organization and is very satisfied with his work personally, professionally, and ethically. He is working in the emergency environment of

a post-conflict country, which demands quick responses to the needs of war-affected populations. The existence of shared support and leadership amongst the manager, and other staff, who are hierarchically superior and inferior in ranks from each other, has made the work of this organization effective and valuable. The relief work is very meaningful for Majeed and the rest of his team members. They are working for communities who are in dire need of aid in order to ensure their survival. Therefore, in their daily assignments, all employees of this organization experience a deep involvement and a common sense of purpose and direction.

This organization works in an extremely unstable political environment. Most of the time, the staff deals with issues of corruption, mismanagement of aid supplies, and embezzlement of funds by various actors. These issues are complex but they are addressed reasonably well as a result of the sharing of information, participation, decision making and direction which exist in this organization. The internal strength of the organization has helped minimize the effects of negative external pressures and has allowed it to create a shared purpose and value of serving the needy. As a result, the local population has great esteem for the work of this organization. Much of this positive perception can be traced to the organization's use of shared leadership; a truly revolutionary practice in this environment.

Taking Charge and Effecting Change: The Power of One Becomes the Power of Many

In order for shared leadership to be successful, there are certain conditions that must be met. Shared leadership implies the diffusion of leadership responsibilities to many people. If all members of a team are to participate as leaders, and to share leadership responsibilities, a prerequisite set of skills centers on self-leadership. Self-leadership enables members to have the confidence and capacity to step up and take charge when dealing with an issue pertaining to their specific area of expertise. Taking charge is preceded by feelings of self-efficacy. If individuals are confident in their abilities, they are more likely to assert themselves and practice leadership when their influence is required by immediate circumstances. Taking charge is also tied to a sense of responsibility to bring about change, which indicates a certain level of ownership in the work being done.

In effect, self-leadership may well be the precursor to shared leadership. This might seem paradoxical at first, as self-leadership is inherently an individual enterprise, but many of the qualities embodied by self-leaders also lead to enhanced shared leadership practices when those individuals are placed in a team setting. For example, Bligh, Pearce and Kohles (2006), suggest that developing self-leadership among members of a team encourages the development of other necessary behaviors needed for shared leadership. In their article on the importance of self and shared leadership, they argue that trust, potency and commitment are three important elements that derive from team members practicing self-leadership which in turn encourage a ripe environment for shared leadership.

Members of a team must be comfortable with sharing power if shared leadership is to succeed. The idea of mutual influence is what makes shared leadership so appealing. People who make up a team each have different areas of expertise and unique skills that can benefit the group and the project. By combining forces and making use of each individual's unique knowledge, not only is the process more efficient, but organizational knowledge sharing is also optimized. Finally, team members are more fully empowered as they are recognized for their unique abilities and are given

the power to influence the team when dealing with their areas of expertise. This in turn leads to greater commitment to the team and ownership of the process.

The revolutionary shared leadership perspective requires both the self-influence needed to enable members to step forward to share in the leadership process as well as a collaborative stance that equips members to step back and allow others to lead as needed. Thus, members need to be adept in both individual self-leadership and in collaborating with others. Yet there is still one other key ingredient needed for shared leadership to yield real benefits – in addition to getting along with one another members need to be willing to disagree. That is, they need to be willing to have conflict over ideas.

Collaborative Conflict: The Paradoxical Key to Success with Shared Leadership

Most of us feel about conflict the same way we do about snakes – it's best to avoid them at all costs. And this kind of reaction is especially likely when we think about collaboratively sharing power and influence with others. When you hear the word "conflict," what's your first association: anger, tension, discord, dispute? What about diversity, innovation, creativity and organizational growth? As John Dewey once stated, "Conflict is the gadfly of thought. It stirs us to observation and memory. It instigates to invention. It shocks us out of sheep-like passivity, and sets us at noting and contriving" (Dewey, 1922, p. 300).

"Collaborative" and "conflict" are two words that are not normally used in the same sentence. Conflict generally has a negative connotation and is described along the lines of fighting or disharmony between incompatible ideas, people or interests. However, the attitude that conflict is negative or harmful is only a part of the story. If we only view conflict from this limiting perspective we will miss out on powerful opportunities to take advantage of the creative forces of conflict. To reap the fullest benefits from conflict, we have to change how we think about it, and consider it in a whole new light. In particular what is needed is a radical new concept we refer to as "collaborative conflict." So what does collaborative conflict actually mean? In the following section we review three current organizational cases that not only provide specific examples concerning the practice of shared leadership in different team contexts, but also reveal insights about how constructive disagreement (collaborative conflict) plays a key role in enabling the potential benefits of shared leadership to be realized.

Three Case Studies of Shared Leadership

Case Study 1: The Center for International Education.

The Center for International Education (CIE) is part of the School of Education at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. CIE offers graduate level professional training, service and research opportunities in the areas of International Development Education, Education Policy and Leadership and Nonformal/Popular Adult Education. Graduates come from all over the world, including the USA, Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean or Latin America.

CIE's mission states that, "Although part of a traditional university system, the Center is committed to operating as a participatory community where all members take an active role." CIE embodies the principles of shared leadership even though they don't use this specific terminology. If we define

shared leadership according to the previous section as including the following characteristics: (1) reliance on self-leaders, (2) mutual influence through recognition of individual strengths and expertise, (3) power sharing, (4) making the most of organizational knowledge and (5) empowerment, CIE fits every category.

Faculty, staff, current students, and graduates all hold the title of Center member. This includes everyone from the Director of the Center (a title that is seldom if ever used), to the faculty, masters and doctoral candidates, as well as the many graduates who reside all over the globe. Center Members retain that status for life and are expected to contribute long after they leave the physical presence of the Center. Many take leadership or advisory roles on development projects that are established in their countries, others come back on occasion to share experiences and lessons learned, and still others provide valuable apprenticeship opportunities for younger Center members. It is a network that is deeply interconnected and highly valued and which operates on a horizontal playing field.

Classes are run in such a way that it is often difficult to differentiate the professor from the students. Professors drop their titles and “Dr.” status and go by their first names which also serve to flatten the hierarchy of power. Classes are generally held around a common table where animated discussions draw on everyone’s input, or in smaller breakout groups where members then come back and present to the larger class. Since students are all professionals with at least two years of experience working in the developing world, they often have more recent field experiences than the professors, although the professors are all practitioners as well. As such, students frequently lead classes on subjects of which they are knowledgeable, and CIE class structures facilitate a horizontal sharing of knowledge between the professor and students, and among the students themselves. Center members are recognized for their particular skill areas and treated as experts in those fields.

Students are even encouraged to develop and co-teach courses that are of particular interest to them. For instance, in a recent semester, several students with an interest in popular education found that no classes were offered at the Center to fill this need. These students then took the initiative to enlist a faculty sponsor to oversee their work, and developed a syllabus and readings for a Popular Education course which was then offered the following semester.

The Center truly functions as a learning community and a community of practice. All on-campus members meet weekly for dialogue on professional issues, to listen to guest practitioners, and to manage Center activities. They also attend a yearly retreat to reflect on CIE’s history and to plan for its future. Everyone is involved in this process and everyone’s voice is heard.

All Center members have the opportunity to participate in the leadership of the Center. Everyone is expected to pitch in and generally the efforts are spread out across the many Center members. Faculty and staff alike hold equal positions on all committees and students serve on committees ranging from Academic Matters, which helps make decisions about which courses are offered as well as about the course content and format, to the Admissions Committee, in which they, alongside the faculty, review applications for admission to the Center. Students even have a voice in selecting new faculty. When a recent faculty position became available, all Center members had the chance to hear the candidates present at a Tuesday meeting and to interview the candidates as well. All members were encouraged to then provide input as to the preferred candidate. Students are not viewed as students, but as Center members, and as such they are given a role and a responsibility for taking part in anything that will affect them as members of the Center.

There is also a “simultaneous, ongoing, mutual influence process” occurring within the Center. There is constant interaction among members both in and out of the classroom. Members draw on

the incredible diversity of experience among the students and faculty to enhance their own learning. The many committees formed at the Center provide another space for the interchange of ideas and experience. The Center seeks to fully employ its organizational knowledge “by liberating all organizational members with key knowledge to contribute via the potential of both self- and shared leadership” (Pearce & Manz, 2005, p.132). Organizational knowledge is fully employed as each member is expected to take a leadership role and is given the power to influence decisions in their area of expertise.

Since all Center members are empowered, the Center seeks out potential applicants with self-leadership capacities. That is, potential center members should be independent, yet able to work as a team, initiators, yet able to step back when necessary. They should also show a clear responsibility for pursuing their own learning and demonstrate the ability to pursue that learning independently. Demonstrating the initiative to lead you is a prerequisite for joining a team of self-leaders who then share the leadership process. The environment created by this type of power sharing and mutual influence inspires commitment and ownership because everyone is given a voice and everyone is in part responsible for the proper functioning of the Center.

The diversity within the Center is one of its greatest assets. Because everyone comes from such different backgrounds with so many unique experiences, this often leads to conflict. Heads butt and ideas clash but this happens within an environment of trust and collaboration, and this idea conflict leads to much creativity and innovation. Personal conflict is discouraged by the creation of such a tight knit community that develops through shared vision, weekly Tuesday meetings and an atmosphere of collaboration. Conflict is absolutely encouraged, but it’s the kind of constructive conflict that leads to greater productivity.

For example, a Center member who is currently working on an education project with a large International Non-Governmental Organization recently presented about his organization’s work at a Tuesday meeting. At the end of the presentation he fielded lots of seemingly aggressive questions about assumptions implicit in the project design, the lack of local involvement in the project planning, as well as questioning the sustainability of the project itself. An outsider might see this as unkind treatment, but as Center members, there is an implicit agreement to constructively challenge each others’ ideas in order to achieve excellence in everything we do. This kind of collaborative conflict is not only desired, but encouraged, and not taken personally, as illustrated by the pats on the back and hand shakes which took place immediately after the presentation.

Case Study 2: School Management Committees (SMCs) in Afghanistan.

Bringing about change in any context requires a gradual process of evolution. It rarely happens all at once and through the influence of a few individuals. Rural communities in Afghanistan are traditional societies which have resisted social changes in the past which were contrary to their strong imbedded norms and values. These, unilateral, vertically imposed approaches of the past resulted in “development in reverse”. The failure of the authoritative leadership approach to development has led to increasing interest among development organizations to induce change through more participatory mechanisms in order to bring about long-term social development. Participation by all people is a crucial element in the change process. People form groups, teams, unions and associations, and the scale of support or opposition decides the fate of the desired change. We argue that the essence of shared leadership develops within this pluralistic environment, when shared values are developed by inclusion of all voices, and collaborative conflict is encouraged. The following case study of School Management Committees (SMCs) in Afghanistan supports this aspect of collaborative shared leadership.

Since 2004, the Ministry of Education in Afghanistan has adopted a new approach of “Community Grants for School Development” which aim to shift the management of educational activities to communities at the school level. In this new approach, funds are transferred to School Management Committees (SMCs), which are formed through a shared decision making process by community members, teachers and school administrators. Historically, the education system in Afghanistan was based on traditional and vertical leadership models, which were rigid and ineffective in dealing with the harsh educational challenges posed by three decades of conflict.

The aftermath of this extended conflict, which completely dismantled the entire education system, and left behind a substantial lack of technical, human, and financial resources, demanded “out-of-the-box” thinking and interventions to help reconstruct an effective and efficient education system in Afghanistan. The period of conflict also severely weakened the social fabric of the country.

In the beginning, the leadership at the Ministry of Education didn’t buy into the concept of establishing School Management Committees run on a shared leadership model. However, the success of the ancient “Jirgas,” or informal council or convention which is an active decision making forum following shared leadership principles found in most communities in Afghanistan, convinced the Ministry to give it a try. To test its effectiveness, a group of experts started the intervention of SMCs on a small scale. The idea was first piloted in four of Afghanistan’s 34 provinces. Ultimately, the concept became a successful national strategy that is now being implemented in all schools throughout all the provinces of Afghanistan.

In the formation of SMCs, communities are encouraged to share, participate and empower themselves to manage their own schools in order to improve the quality of education for their children. These efforts demand that SMCs work in a participatory, shared environment where all members strive to achieve a common goal of sustainable quality education within their school. Despite many challenges, SMCs have proven to be the most successful educational intervention in the development of education in post-conflict Afghanistan.

SMCs are established by the Ministry of Education (through its provincial and district education offices) through a series of comprehensive social mobilization activities which encourage and guide communities in the participatory processes of managing a school. SMCs normally consist of 7-8 members from diverse interest groups; a school administrator or principal, parents, teachers and community elders. Since every community member cannot participate in the SMC, the community selects members of the committee through a shared decision making process.

After the SMC members are selected, they must prepare a school improvement plan which is then submitted to the Ministry of Education. Once the proposal has been approved, the Ministry of Education transfers funds to the SMC to carry out the proposal. The finances are utilized and managed through a shared leadership process by the SMC members, who equally represent the wishes of their fellow community members. This model of shared leadership, joint teamwork, broad participation, and shared accountability has resulted in a unique sense of ownership and empowerment of communities. SMCs have not only attracted extra community contributions (about 25-40 %, in kind or in cash), but are also further strengthening the core democratic values in traditional communities of Afghanistan. The impact of the SMCs is very powerful in bringing about community development as every member of the community is involved in participative and collaborative ways to understand the change process, and empower themselves to bring about social change or reform.

During one of the author’s visits to various schools where SMCs were established, he noticed that some were much more effective than others at effecting change in their communities. SMCs that

developed an environment of collaborative conflict were also the ones who had accomplished the most. In these committees, every member had the chance to argue his point and to offer his/her best ideas for the development of the school improvement plan (SIP). These SMCs followed a strong shared leadership model where all actors had the opportunity to advocate for their points of view and leadership was passed from one person to the next depending on the topic.

In the past, schools were all managed by the principal who was himself managed directly by the provincial education offices and Ministry of Education officials. Farmers, who make up the majority of parents in rural schools, were never involved in school management decisions before the establishment of SMCs. Under the old system, there was not much incentive for a farmer to visit school and ask about the education of his children. His illiteracy along with the low-status of farming as an occupation was enough to keep him away from the school environment. That is why the traditional perception about education – educating our children is only the school's obligation - remained so dominant and resulted in the slow promotion of education, especially for girls.

The SMCs reduce the power distance between the principal, teachers and parents regardless of their education level or social status, and create a participative and collaborative environment which encourages ownership in the education process. In this collaborative environment, the opinions of each member are valued, respected and questioned until common consensus is achieved. The shared responsibility of managing school activities has resulted in incentives for engagement for both parents and students.

The second type of SMC observed was dominated by the personal influence of the powerful or influential members. In these SMCs there was less participation, involvement and little sense of ownership among the SMC members. For example, in these SMCs the traditional dominant role of the principal (as a formal leader and educational expert), and in some other SMCs the presence of former military commanders (for whom the incentive to be in the SMC was keeping their political influence), left little space for the evolution of shared leadership.

One of the main challenges which came to the surface during the implementation of the SMCs was how to organize the committee so that the voices of the powerless, less influential and marginalized members were heard in the presence of more powerful or influential community members. The shared leadership model was crucial but it didn't happen overnight and in many places the transition from an authoritative style of leadership to shared leadership is still in the early stages.

In all 34 provincial education departments, the Ministry of Education has deployed teams of consultants with technical knowledge in education management, social mobilization, finance and procurement to assist and support the SMCs to effectively implement their projects. These technical support teams help to build capacity in provincial and district education offices, and to empower the SMCs to become self-managed committees. Despite some evident challenges, SMCs are becoming important community based educational organizations which have already demonstrated their effectiveness for achieving sustainable quality education in many rural communities and schools in Afghanistan.

Case Study 3: W.L. Gore and Associates.

Sometimes shared leadership is driven by a strong foundation of individual self-leadership. W.L. Gore and associates is a particularly notable case. Gore is characterized by shared leadership through out the organization with a heavy reliance on employee self-influence within a team oriented culture. This highly successful and innovative provider of wide ranging product offerings from electronic wire

and cable, to industrial and medical products, to fabrics for outdoor sporting activities, relies upon the initiative of all Gore employees (referred to as “associates”). Elsewhere described as being an “unstructured” company that practices “unmanagement,” W. L. Gore encourages its workforce to creatively explore possible applications and uses for the primary material for its products – Gore-Tex – which leads to a continuously growing and evolving array of product offerings. In an article appearing in *Fast Company* (issue 89, December 2004, p. 54) one newly hired associate described her surprise, especially having come from a traditionally run business, that she had no clear sense of who did what and was not formally assigned a boss. She kept asking who her boss was until her sponsor (the person who brought her into the company) told her to “stop using the B-word.”

Gore may well be the flattest substantial organization in the world. Shared and self-leadership are its central influence principles. Organization members are allowed and encouraged to initiate new product ideas by going directly to and teaming with whom ever they feel can help their project without having to go through a chain of command. And, as needed at different stages, these associates step forward to offer leadership based on their expertise and experience without needing to be formally designated as a leader within the firm’s structure. All associates are treated as knowledge workers that are capable of helping to create a promising future for the company through the discovery and creation of innovative new products. And they are allowed and encouraged to provide leadership for one another as the situation and work process requires.

Usually leadership is viewed as an outward process involving the influence of formally designated leaders on followers. However, Gore embraces the kind of self and shared view of leadership described in this article, recognizing that all associates have some capacity to lead themselves and each other. This self-influence based view is reflective of the new requirements of knowledge based work contexts and is a critical part of capturing the optimal potential of leadership influence in contemporary organizations. Going beyond more common participative and empowerment approaches Gore has truly created a whole company of leaders. Even CEO Terri Kelly views herself as primarily an associate just like everyone else at Gore even though she is the top executive. Kelly points out that Gore is so diversified that it is not practical or feasible for a CEO to have the knowledge needed to lead in a leader-centered way. According to Kelly, traditional leadership models not only don’t fit Gore but would impede the innovation process that serves as the lifeblood of the company. She tries to set an overall direction for the firm and to make sure the right people are in the right positions to tap the full knowledge of the organization but empowerment and distribution of authority are key leadership themes for her. And the shared influence example she sets is visible and noticed throughout the company.

A distinctive part of the Gore culture is that it embraces the opportunity for any individual to challenge the status quo in the spirit of optimal creativity and innovation. This can lead to lively discussions with much give and take as associates on current product teams, consistent with healthy *collaborative conflict* that is focused on ideas rather than people, respectfully share counter views with each other in order to move the innovation process forward. In a recent visit to the corporate office of Gore one associate said that healthy debate is a sign of a good team in the company. Healthy disagreement around current thinking is an important part of the creative process at Gore. After singing the praises of the company’s flexible empowering and creative environment, another associate went so far as to say that at times “there is conflict at Gore. People disagree. People (sometimes) don’t get along. There are shake ups ...”

Gore from its inception has recognized the need to transcend traditional leadership approaches that vest control and influence within designated leaders that are assigned formal hierarchical authority. In fact, an associate specifically noted an ability to be selfless and to put the ego aside as being at the heart of identifying potential leaders at Gore. Meanwhile another pointed out that involvement in

leadership continuously varies such that one day you may be a leader 50% of the time and follower 50% in particular areas and then find these roles reversed the very next day. Overall, Gore has fostered less dependence on traditional leader authority figures and has helped fortify the company for successfully meeting the challenges posed in today's highly dynamic, competitive, and complex work environments through the sharing of leadership among highly self-led associates.

Paradoxical Lessons Learned

One overall theme that we can draw from these three case studies is that in order to create an environment where shared leadership can thrive, it is necessary to foster the expectation that each team member will participate and use their unique skills and knowledge to benefit the team. A flat power structure that gives more autonomy to each team member is a breeding ground for creativity and innovation and also leads to a heightened desire to participate and a sense of ownership and commitment to the team. But such a structure is not enough. Paradoxically, in environments where teamwork and power sharing are central to the culture, as in the case of shared leadership applications, constructive (collaborative) conflict is the key to the kind of knowledge sharing and development that is needed for peak performance.

The details of this overall theme of collaborative conflict can be communicated through a set of more specific themes or lessons. These paradoxical lessons of shared leadership reflect some initially unexpected yet, upon closer examination, surprisingly consistent features with a leadership perspective that asks that leaders, designated and emerging, both to lead and step back to allow others to lead within an overall shared influence process. Specifically, we offer five primary lessons and briefly connect them with exemplary details of the previous cases.

1) Optimal Collaboration with others requires a healthy focus on self.

The first paradoxical lesson is that sharing leadership with others in a way that allows collaboration to be at its best, is often founded on a degree of self-centeredness. That is, effective self-leadership of team members is a crucial part of achieving optimal collaboration. At Gore, initiative and self-influence are key parts of its high performance culture. Associates are not only encouraged but expected to lead themselves within a “bossless” “unstructured” system where it can be difficult to identify who you report to. By fostering a whole company of self-leaders who are on the lookout for new opportunities, innovations, and ways to uniquely contribute to the efforts of other associates and the organization's overall performance, an impressive ongoing kind of synergistic team collaboration results that is founded on the combined strength of individual members.

A primary theme that stands out in the case study of the Center for International Education (CIE) centers on a flattened power structure that creates an environment where each individual plays an essential role in maintaining and supporting the Center. All members are recognized for their strengths, skills and expertise which are vital to the proper functioning of the team. Not only are they recognized, but there is also an expectation of participation, involvement, and commitment, and that each member will use their expertise to the benefit of the team. Members are expected to be self-leaders who can step up and take charge when the need arises, and this includes respectfully challenging ideas of other members.

2) Vertical leadership is needed to help assure that leadership is shared.

At W.L. Gore the tone for shared leadership is effectively modeled at the top. While CEO Terri Kelly identifies a goal for her as providing overall direction for the organization, she is quick to point out that she is not about being the top leader of the company. Rather, she states plainly that she is an associate like everyone else who just happens to also be the CEO. Consistent with the remarkably

unstructured and free wheeling organization that she leads, empowerment and distribution of responsibility are primary themes of her leadership philosophy. Other associates look to her as a prime example of what it is to be a good associate at Gore – one who shares in the ongoing team oriented creative process and respects the talents and knowledge of others in the organization, each of whom have their own unique contributions to make. Paradoxically, Kelly’s vertical leadership role is a visible part of Gore’s ongoing shared success, yet she sees her most important contributions as being a good member of the organization, helping other associates find their own best roles and ways to contribute, and making sure they have the power, authority and support they need to excel in innovative ways.

Without the supporting leadership role of the education minister in Afghanistan, the establishment and expansion of School Management Committees would have been an impossible task. The Ministry of Education had to create support mechanisms to foster shared leadership in the SMCs especially in a context where years of conflict had traumatized the education system. They established support offices at the Ministry and provincial levels and hired technical consultants to provide social mobilization and to develop the necessary capacity of the SMCs. Although the SMCs function in a collaborative manner, they are supported and maintained through vertical leadership structures provided by the Ministry.

3) Getting personal can ruin collaboration.

At CIE you learn very quickly to separate your ideas from yourself because your ideas most certainly will be attacked; you will not. The sense of community that is fostered at the Center allows members to feel very safe and comfortable with one another. So much so that when someone presents an opposing idea or viewpoint, it is not viewed as a personal attack, but as an attempt to push one another to consider every angle. The Center member mentioned in the CIE case in this article who presented on his organization’s education work and was greeted with several tough questions, doubtless returned to his organization with new insights which he was able to implement to improve his project. Had he taken those comments personally, not only would it have ruined the climate of collegiality that exists within the Center, but he would have also wasted the opportunity to bring some positive change to his organization.

4) It has been said that “Power Corrupts” but expression of shared power can prevent corruption.

Fortunately for Gore the culture has long since incorporated sharing power as a normal part of the kind of teamwork that pervades the organization. That means that the constructive expression of power by associates – by initiating projects when opportunities are identified, speaking up and challenging commonly accepted views, and generally communicating their unique perspective based on their specific background and expertise – is all part of being a good associate. For Gore, and other organizations that similarly allow shared expression of power, this tends to naturally inoculate the organization against power abuse and the rise of potential corruption. Unfortunately, in other environments where power sharing has not been the norm in the established culture, the issue of potential corruption is much more salient.

For example, in our Afghanistan case the weak institutional capacity, wide scale of corruption in civil service, strong vertical bureaucracy, and power abuse had allowed only very slow development of educational activities. The system was not able to deliver educational services to meet the tremendous needs of about six million school children in post-conflict Afghanistan. To avoid miss-use of power, SMCs are being established in all schools of Afghanistan to share power with schools which lie at the grass-roots level of the education system. The schools which are now being collaboratively led in a shared manner by parents, community members, teachers and school administrators are providing foundations for shared leadership in the primary educational setup of Afghanistan.

5) Creativity and innovation can be supported, not blocked, by idea challenge.

At W.L. Gore corporate performance is built on creativity and continuous innovation. A key part of this is constant search for technology breakthroughs and key innovations that form the basis for future firm performance. The innovation process is significantly driven by interactive challenging discussions of new ideas among corporate associates. As pointed out in the Gore case above, one sign of an effective team is healthy debate. Members frequently discuss creative opportunities and their views on solutions and alternatives for moving new technological and product opportunities ahead. Viewpoints shared are open to challenge and refinement from other Gore associates. A spirit of collaboration underscores the idea conflict that ensues. At Gore collaborative conflict helps promote creativity and innovation.

At CIE, members are constantly aspiring to come up with creative ways of teaching, thinking about problems, and tackling development issues in new and innovative ways. Center members are expected to participate in lively debates and discussions and to present their viewpoint even if, and especially if, it is contrary to the dominant view. This sort of collaborative conflict prevents groupthink where everyone goes along uncritically with the general consensus and squelches any individual dissent. Center members are in fact selected for their diversity of backgrounds, ideas and experience and are expected to use this diversity to challenge one another in the spirit of creative friction which is an essential ingredient of progress.

Conclusion

Shared leadership, founded on a common set of constructive values, may well represent the prototypical kind of influence process that is needed for an ever changing and increasingly knowledge-based world. Yet knowledge about shared leadership itself is still at a relatively early stage of development. In this article we have described three notable cases of shared leadership across a diverse set of work contexts. Based on the experiences reflected in these real life examples, we identified a set of paradoxical lessons reflecting important keys for enabling this challenging and complex team oriented approach to leadership to work. More specifically, we identified the seeming contradictory notions of collaboration and conflict as surprisingly important complementary work processes necessary for optimal shared leadership. In particular, the following are among the paradoxical ingredients of succeeding with shared leadership:

- balancing a focus on self with a focus on others;
- promoting the sharing of leadership through vertical leadership;
- restraining the wielding of power while simultaneously using power to contribute to shared progress;
- supporting others in the spirit of teamwork while also challenging their ideas to enhance the creative process; and
- most of all, getting along with other team members while introducing a healthy dose of constructive conflict.

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