

Shared Leadership in Voluntary Organisations: An Exploratory Survey using Internal Stakeholder Perspective

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Abstract

Management research has predominantly focuses on vertical leadership, which is synonymous with top-down management. Increasingly however, other forms of distributed leadership are observable across organisations. In this research, we explore the involvement of stakeholders in the functions of leadership through the shared leadership paradigm. Using a quantitative approach, the research surveyed 126 respondents in the voluntary sector with a view to assess the level of shared leadership among organisation stakeholders and identify key factors that affect the shared leadership process. Findings suggest relatively high level of shared leadership with stakeholder involvement more prevalent at consultative levels rather than participative levels. Furthermore, stakeholder status within the organisation is identified as a significant factor in determining the level of shared leadership.

Keywords: Shared leadership, stakeholders, voluntary organisations

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Introduction

Leadership in voluntary sector organisations has been identified as a significant role as it involves leaders being tasked with motivating and influencing an eclectic mix of followers with diverse interests in order to contribute to the organisation's success (Rowold and Rohmann, 2009). For similar reasons, Hudson (1999) points out that it is important to recognise that managing voluntary sector organisations is subtly different from managing in the private or public sectors. According to Macmillan and McLaren (2012), these sectoral differences have however become increasingly apparent due to radical shifts in the political and economic environments that have made the operational environment for voluntary sectors very challenging. As such, the sector has to find new ways of operating and negotiating for sustainability purposes. Macmillan and McLaren (2012) also argue that under the current political and economic conditions, the scope for leadership in the sector is highly contested and constrained in terms of alliance development within a diverse sector with divergent interests.

Furthermore, according to the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) and the Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations, not enough is being done to develop and retain leaders in the voluntary sector, and the NCVO further described efforts made towards personal and professional development in the sector as being patchy at best (Bolton and Abdy, 2003; NCVO, 2013). The additional challenge faced by the sector is that although there is a clearly visible leadership presence in the sector, which ensures that the sector is appropriately represented, there is the view that the very nature of the sector has traditionally meant that in practice there is only a small and selected group, which might be considered as the 'third sector elite' who have the capacity to actually exert any significant influence (Buckingham et al, 2014). The existence of such sector elites in whom leadership is vested invariably gives rise to barriers to leadership development within the sector. Moreover, others such as Paton et al (2007) have noted that even where development programmes aimed at leaders in the sector are in place, such programmes may not yield significant opportunities for participants to become part of the leadership cadre.

It is against this backdrop, that we seek to gain insight into leadership dynamics within the voluntary sector by exploring diverse contributions of different actors to the leadership process drawing on the concept of shared leadership. Within leadership discourse, shared leadership as a concept has become increasingly popular among both academics and practitioners and it arguably offers an avenue to transcend the traditional leadership – followership dichotomy that exists in the leadership literature (Manz et al, 2010; Khasawneh, 2011; Erkutlu, 2012; Barnes, 2013; Hoch and Dulebohn, 2013; Pearce et al, 2013). As such, our objective in this paper is also to investigate the involvement of actors other than recognised formal leaders in the achievement of organisational objectives.

Leadership is typically founded on a human behaviour approach and can be viewed as a social process based on the interactions of the different actors involved. In this regard we chose to adopt a stakeholder perspective in order to gain deeper insight to the leadership phenomenon among voluntary organisations. This is because leaders are often involved in managing the needs of diverse categories of individuals and/or collectives who have different expectations and interests in the organisation. Furthermore, Manz et al (2010) argue that leadership changes per time dependent on expertise, experience and interests, and that leadership is not an exclusive preserve of designated leaders. Rather, other individuals may step forward and lead as at when they are required. This suggests that leadership

responsibilities and functions can then be transferred to those that are not necessarily in formal leadership positions. Pursuant to this view, we set out to investigate how three internal stakeholders of the voluntary sector; volunteers, employees and trustees, participate in the leadership process by exploring key factors that could affect the shared leadership process among the various stakeholders.

Conceptualising Shared Leadership

The concept of shared leadership is premised on the notion that leadership could be distributed to other people rather than being the function of a single individual. This marks a departure from positional leadership and is centred on shared values and shared responsibilities. For instance, Manz et al (2010) suggests that organisational experience is a positive relationship between shared leadership practice and sustainable performance that is underpinned by a philosophy of shared values reflected in creativity and the consideration of individuals as valuable resources. Whilst the notion of all individuals as valuable resources is appealing, the challenge rests with achievement of shared leadership as an approach.

Different terms are employed in describing the phenomenon of sharing or distributing leadership: for instance; collective leadership (Harris, 1999; Hiller, Day and Vance, 2006), collateral leadership (Alexander et al. 2001), distributed leadership (Gronn, 2000; Currie, Lockett and Suhomlinova, 2009; Burke, 2010), authentic leadership (Walumbwa et al. 2008; Costas and Taheri, 2012), team leadership (Day, Gronn, Salas, 2006; Solansky, 2008; Gupta, Huang and Nranjan, 2010; Scott DePure, Barnes and Morgeson, 2010), and delegated leadership (House and Aditya, 1997). The key point of departure in the conceptualisation of shared leadership from the other similar concepts however is in the view that it constitutes dynamic and interactive processes of influence whereby different individuals undertake momentary leadership roles dependent on task requirements and group or organisational goals (Pearce and Conger, 2003). Jackson (2000) similarly argues that shared leadership is predicated on shared governance whereby individuals responsible for task performance are deemed to be best equipped to provide meaningful improvement. This view is supported by Hoye (2006) who found that a significant relationship exists between firm performance and leadership engagement across firm boards and top management.

Going by Pearce and Conger's (2003) conception of shared leadership, it is possible to articulate the phenomenon in relation to teams, whereby the term mainly describes situations in which teams collectively exert influence. Shared leadership has also been described as an emergent team property, a consequence of distributing leadership influence among multiple team members (Carson et al., 2007; Erkutlu, 2012). In this case, team members are perceived as having ownership of leadership processes whereby they collectively influence change and team outcomes. Manz et al. (2010) however argue that the shared leadership term should not be restricted to describing leadership in teams alone as the process of shared leadership could be applied in any organisational or collective setting.

Dimensions of Shared Leadership

As with other leadership constructs, in order to illustrate the pertinence of shared leadership as theoretical construct, it is important to identify the construct as encompassing traditional elements such as power, organisational culture, vision, mission, goals, values and processes. Liden and Antonakis (2009) have argued that the most important element of leadership is the organisational culture as it affects behaviours within the organisation. Erkutlu (2012)

similarly argues that if shared leadership in particular is to thrive, such organisational cultures must embody collaboration, trust and reciprocal accountability. Furthermore, in exploring dimensions contributing to shared leadership, Khasawneh (2011) found that the phenomenon had a positive effect on organisational citizenship behaviour, to the extent that individual actors are more inclined to identify with the organisation and demonstrate a sense of belonging, where they are in some form of leadership engagement. Khasawneh's research further three key elements or dimensions of shared leadership as communication, power relations and decision-making; the three representing the highest mean value in decreasing order.

Steinheider et al. (2006) also assert that shared leadership would involve power-sharing arrangements in which workplace influence is shared among individuals who are otherwise hierarchically unequal. In this regard, sharing power could possibly be the most important mechanism that allows leaders to establish a collective leadership base (Alexander et al., 2001). Whilst this may occur within upper echelons of leadership, the extent to which power is distributed to individuals that do not occupy formal leadership positions however remains unknown.

Another important dimension in shared leadership is the notion of self-leadership which relates to individuals self-perceptions as possessing the ability to influence and manage oneself (Hauschildt, 2012; Erkutlu, 2012; Pearce et al. 2013). Arguably, the prevalence of such self-influence in an organisational environment is dependent on the firm's flexibility in promoting engagement in the leadership process (Hoch and Dulebohn, 2013). However, because individuals are categorised into core and peripheral groups in flexible organisations (Taylor, 2014), shared leadership may prove more challenging where there are clearly disparate groupings such as in voluntary organisations.

As a relatively new theory, a lot of questions remain unanswered regarding shared leadership. Whilst a number of scholars have provided expositions on the benefits of shared leadership; in terms of boosting innovation (Pearce and Ensley, 2004), team effectiveness (Pearce, 2004; Ensley, Hmieleski and Pearce, 2006), and reduction in work overload, conflicts and stress (Wood and Fields, 2007). Others regard it as no more than an idealistic conceptualisation (Barnes et al 2013). Furthermore, few underpinning empirical research have focused on meso-level team analyses with lack of research at both organisational and individual levels (Crosby and Bryson, 2005; Bligh, Pearce and Kohles, 2006). The case for concerted theoretical and empirical research in this area is however made by Pearce et al. (2013) who argue that the shared leadership construct has the potential to significantly contribute to organisational sustainability. In contributing to this field of research, we explore two overarching research questions and propose three hypotheses as follows:

- What is the extent of occurrence of shared leadership among stakeholders in voluntary organisations?
- What are the key factors that could affect the process of shared leadership among stakeholders in voluntary organisations?

H1: Internal stakeholders are consulted and/or actively involved with the leadership process with consultation occurring at a higher degree.

H2: The level of involvement in shared leadership is proportionate to the level of stakeholder affiliation to the organisation.

H3: The type of internal stakeholder will have an impact on the process of shared leadership.

Methodology

Questionnaire Design, Sampling and Data Collection

A two-part research instrument was adopted for the data collection. In the first part, we captured the demographic data of the respondents and the second part of the instrument was an adaptation of the Shared Leadership Questionnaire (SLQ) developed by Khasawneh (2011). The latter consisted of three leadership constructs; decision making, communication, and power, identified to be the three most significant dimensions impacting the shared leadership process. However, we chose to include strategic planning as a fourth construct due to its relative importance to leadership. The adapted SLQ consisted of ten items and was designed to measure the four constructs using a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ‘Extremely agree’, to 7 ‘Extremely disagree’ (Table 1).

Table 1: Shared Leadership Questionnaire (SLQ) Descriptors

Variable/ Item No.	Descriptor	Questionnaire Statement
1	Consultation on decision-making	I am consulted in the decision-making process.
2	Active involvement in decision-making	I am actively involved in the decision-making process.
3	Consultation in strategic planning	I am consulted in future strategic planning of the organisation.
4	Active involvement in strategic planning	I am actively involved in future strategic planning of the organisation.
5	Power delegation	Power is delegated to me from formal leaders of the organisation.
6	Power sharing	I share and delegate power with other members of the organisation not in formal leadership positions.
7	Consultation on vision formulation	I am consulted regarding the organisation’s vision.
8	Active involvement in vision formulation	I am actively involved in the formulation of the organisation’s vision.
9	Problem-Solving responsibility	I am consulted regarding responsibilities and how to handle problems.
10	Leadership self-perception	I regard myself as a leader in the organisation.

All the items in the SLQ were tested for reliability using internal consistency of participant responses and items that did not fit were removed. Cronbach’s alpha coefficient was employed in measuring the overall reliability of the scale and a coefficient score of 0.94 was obtained. This indicates the existence of a high degree of reliability which is in concert with De Vaus’ (2002) view of an expected minimum value of 0.70.

The study population was voluntary organisations based in the UK; including charities, NGOs and community groups and we obtained the sample frame through the Voluntary Sector Studies Network. 300 questionnaires were distributed to members of the network by email and data was collected using the online survey tool Survey Monkey. A total of 126 usable questionnaires were returned by the respondents from across fifty-five voluntary organisations, which represented a response rate of 42%. However, of the total questionnaires returned, fifteen respondents failed to respond regarding the organisation to which they belonged. Also notable from the responses was that a sizeable proportion of the respondents (35%) were from two of the fifty-five organisations. This was as a result of the large size of these particular organisations as well as us leveraging on personal networks. As such, we acknowledge that this may have a direct effect on the survey findings. Out of the 126 respondents, thirty were volunteers, fourteen were trustees, and eighty-one were paid employees with one respondent not indicating status. Table 2 below is the breakdown of the organisations and respondents.

Table 2: Respondent Survey Breakdown

Number of Organisations	Respondents	Accumulated Total
43	1	43
1	26	26
1	13	13
2	5	10
3	3	9
5	2	10
Total =55		Total No. of Respondents =111

Data analysis was undertaken using the SPSS statistical package. The analysis method was decided upon as a result of the categorisation of the data as nominal, ordinal or numerical and numbers of independent/dependent variables following Fink (1995). Codes were allocated to allow for quantification of categorical variables as well as speedy and accurate data input (Saunders et al, 2003). Low Likert scale scores (1 to 3) were indicative of strong shared leadership practise, while scores 5 to 7 suggested weak shared leadership practise. An additional value (8) was also added to the code to indicate non-response. Cross tabulation, correlations and multiple regression analyses were conducted in order to explore variations among the variables, to test for significance through examination of relationships and differences, and to determine the outcome of predictors impacting shared leadership, respectively (Field, 2005). Tables 3 below show the frequency distribution of the SLQ variables.

Findings

Table 3: Frequency Distribution of Survey Variables

	EA	MA	SA	CA	PCA	N	SD	MD	ED	CD	PCD	N/A
Consultation on decision-making	35	42	23	100	79.4	7	4	6	5	15	11.9	4
Active involvement in decision-making	28	36	24	88	69.8	10	9	6	9	24	19.0	4
Consultation in strategic planning	38	33	20	91	72.2	6	6	6	11	23	18.3	6
Active involvement in strategic planning	32	26	22	80	63.5	8	10	7	15	32	25.4	6
Power delegation	32	38	17	87	69.0	6	7	4	12	23	18.3	10
Power sharing	33	34	26	93	73.8	6	5	6	7	18	14.3	9
Consultation on vision formulation	39	30	16	85	67.5	11	8	10	9	27	21.4	3
Active involvement in vision formulation	32	21	16	69	54.8	12	10	11	21	42	33.3	3
Problem-Solving responsibility	38	33	20	91	72.2	14	9	4	6	19	15.1	2
Leadership self-perception	35	20	18	73	57.9	13	6	6	25	37	29.4	3
EA	Extremely Agree			SD	Slightly Disagree							
MA	Moderately Agree			MD	Moderately Disagree							
SA	Slightly Agree			ED	Extremely Disagree							
CA	Cumulated Agreement			CD	Cumulated Disagreement							
PCA	Percentage Cumulated Agreement			PCD	Percentage Cumulated Disagreement							
N	Neutral			N/A	Not Applicable							

In the first hypothesis, we proposed that internal stakeholders are consulted and/or actively involved with the leadership process with consultation occurring at a higher degree. Our findings showed that a majority of respondents (79.4%) agreed to being consulted in decision-making process of the organisations. A slightly lower proportion (69.8%) however felt that they are actively involved in decision-making process. Similarly, with regards to strategic planning, 72.2% responded favourably to being consulted while 63.5% agreed with being actively involved. As with decision-making, there was a notable decrease for respondents being involved with active strategic planning. Furthermore, 67.5% of respondents felt they are consulted regarding formulation of organisation vision while 54.8% at least agreed with active involvement in the vision formulation process.

At the other end of the scale, 11.9% of the respondents at least disagreed with consultation on decision-making in comparison with 19% who disagreed with active involvement. Similarly, 18.3% of respondents disagreed with consultation on strategic planning in comparison with 25.4% disagreeing with active involvement and 21.4% that at least disagreed with

consultation on organisation vision in comparison with 33.3% disagreeing with active involvement.

These observations would suggest that individuals are more likely to be consulted than to be actively involved in organisational leadership activities thus confirming Hypothesis 1. Furthermore, in comparison with the percentage of respondents disagreeing with active involvement in decision-making (19%), there was an increase in the proportion of those who disagreed with being actively involved in strategic planning (25.4%) and in setting organisation vision (33.3%). This further indicates a greater tendency for the involvement of individuals to decrease with what can be termed as an organisation’s more critical strategic leadership functions.

The frequency distribution also shows that 69% of the respondents felt that power was delegated to them from formal leaders and 73.8% stated that they share and delegate power within their organisations. Furthermore 72.2% of the respondents acknowledged being consulted regarding responsibilities and how to handle problems but only 57.9% regarded themselves as leaders within the organisation. These figures would suggest that whilst the notion of power is a crucial entity in the determination of influence, the possibility exists for individuals to play leadership roles at multiple levels without overt acknowledgement of themselves operating in such roles.

Variations in Participation and Involvement among Stakeholders

Table 4: Cross-Tabulation of SLQ variables and Respondent Roles

SLQ Variable	Respondent Role					
	Volunteer		Employee		Trustee	
	Frequency Agreeing	Percentage (%)	Frequency Agreeing	Percentage (%)	Frequency Agreeing	Percentage (%)
1 Consultation on decision-making	20	66.0	66	81.4	14	100.0
2 Active involvement in decision-making	16	53.3	58	71.6	14	100.0
3 Consultation in strategic planning	17	56.6	60	74.0	14	100.0
4 Active involvement in strategic planning	16	53.3	50	61.7	14	100.0
5 Power delegation	17	56.6	64	79.0	6	42.8
6 Power sharing	12	40.0	62	76.5	14	100.0
7 Consultation on vision formulation	16	53.3	55	67.0	14	100.0
8 Active involvement in vision formulation	11	36.6	44	54.3	14	100.0

9	Problem-Solving responsibility	18	60.0	59	72.8	14	100.0
10	Leadership self-perception	15	50.0	52	64.2	14	100.0

The second hypothesis proposes that the level of involvement in shared leadership is proportionate to the level of the stakeholder's affiliation to the organisation. Based on the cross-tabulation to explore variations in attitudes between the internal stakeholders being researched (employees, trustees and volunteers) and the shared leadership dimensions, we observe that 66% of volunteers agreed to being consulted and 53.3% to being actively involved in the decision-making process compared to 81.4% and 71.6% of paid employees respectively. With regards to strategic planning, the volunteer figures for consultation and involvement were 56.6% and 53.3% compared to the respective employee figures of 74% and 61.7%. Similarly, with respect to formulation of organisation's vision, the volunteer figures for consultation and involvement were 53.3% and 36.6% compared to the respective employee figures of 67% and 54.3% for employees. This was also a consistent pattern for the other parameters under investigation; 40% of volunteers agreed that they share and delegate power compared to 76.5% of employees. Furthermore, 60% of volunteers agreed that they are consulted regarding responsibilities and problems compared to 72.8% of employees and 50% of the volunteers perceive themselves as leaders in comparison to 64.2% of employees.

In almost every instance all of the trustees responded in the affirmative to the question statements with the exception of the question on delegation of power, where 56.6% of volunteers viewed that power is delegated to them compared to 79% of employees and 42.8% of trustees. A plausible explanation for the response by trustees in relation to this question would be that some trustees perceive themselves to be at the top of the influence hierarchy and as such, they are the ones in the position to delegate power to others with the reverse being non-existent. Based on the foregoing, we can infer that status/position is an important determinant in the extent to which individuals engage in shared leadership as employees were more likely to be involved in the leadership process than the volunteers, with trustees almost always involved and more so than both employees and volunteers.

Correlation of Shared Leadership Variables

All of the shared leadership variables were compared using two-tailed correlation techniques, specifically, Spearman's rho was used. The correlation results are shown in the R-Matrix Table below, with correlations of $\rho < 0.01$ and $\rho < 0.05$ flagged.

Table 5: *R*-Matrix

		Correlation among shared leadership variables									
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1	Consultation on decision-making	1.000									
2	Active involvement in decision-making	.909**	1.000								
3	Consultation in strategic planning	.740**	.745**	1.000							
4	Active involvement in strategic planning	.709**	.791**	.907**	1.000						
5	Power delegation	.522**	.578**	.585**	.630**	1.000					
6	Power sharing	.435**	.487**	.560**	.606**	.575**	1.000				
7	Consultation on vision formulation	.680**	.660**	.687**	.633**	.516**	.423**	1.000			
8	Active involvement in vision formulation	.645**	.688**	.667**	.684**	.553**	.405**	.836**	1.000		
9	Problem-Solving responsibility	.678**	.710**	.670**	.708**	.564**	.441**	.672**	.731**	1.000	
10	Leadership self-perception	.570**	.603**	.556**	.634**	.575**	.546**	.661**	.738**	.715**	1.000

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The analysis showed a strong positive significant correlation between all ten variables tested ($\rho < 0.01$). For instance, the first variable ‘consultation on decision-making’, shows a strong positive correlation to the second variable ‘active involvement in decision-making’, with a correlation of .909. This implies a coefficient of determination (R^2) value of .83, which tells us how much of the variability in consultation on decision-making can be explained by active involvement in decision-making. We can thus confidently say that consultation on decision-making accounts for 83% of the variability in active involvement in decision-making and vice versa. In addition, the tenth variable ‘leadership perception’ is positively correlated to the eighth variable ‘active involvement in vision formulation’ with a correlation of .738; the coefficient of determination (R^2) being .54. Similarly, this value indicates that ‘leadership perception’ accounts for 54% of the variability in ‘active involvement in vision formulation’ and vice versa. Moreover, the leadership self-perception variable is also positively correlated to the ‘active involvement in decision-making’ variable with a correlation of .603 and coefficient of determination (R^2) of .36 indicating that ‘leadership perception’ accounts for 36% of the variability in ‘active involvement in decision-making’ and vice versa.

The analysis shows that all of the shared leadership dimensions (SLD) are positively correlated using Spearman’s rho at the 0.01 level and the existence of multicollinearity between the dependent variables provides further support for reliability of the research instrument. Such significant positive correlation between the dimensions however also makes it difficult to determine the extent of importance of each variable as a predictor of shared leadership.

Nevertheless, the moderate to strong positive correlation among all the variables is indicative of the significance of the researched dimensions in articulating the shared leadership construct. A particularly telling variable is that of leadership self-perception with the correlations of .603, .634 and .738 for active involvement in decision-making, strategic planning and vision formulation respectively. The correlation between leadership self-perception and the corresponding consultation variables is lower in all instances, which implies that individuals are more inclined to see themselves as leaders where they are actively involved in core leadership processes than in instances where they are merely consulted regarding leadership functions. Similarly, with the correlations of .575 and .546, the self-perception as a leader will be greater where power is delegated to individual respondents by those that they regard as occupying formal leadership positions within the organisation hierarchy as opposed to such respondents sharing power with others not necessarily in leadership positions.

Multiple Regression between Demographic Variables and Leadership Self-Perception

In the third hypothesis, we proposed that the type of internal stakeholder will have an impact on the process of shared leadership. In this view, the leadership self-perception variable was selected as it gives a better conceptualisation of being a leader. In order to find out more about the factors that may contribute to the variations in the attitudes regarding the dependent variables it was necessary to conduct a multiple regression analysis. The predictor variables from the survey were; age, gender, number of years worked or volunteered size of the organisation, ethnicity, and position in the organisation. These variables are mainly categorical in nature and not interval data. However, the individual category in the variable has been assigned a value to make it numerical data. An analysis was conducted in relation to the dependent variable 10 leadership perception as the latter is deemed to determine the conception of being a leader in the organisation. The analysis was conducted for individual predictor variables and the results showed that the predictor ‘Position in the organisation’ accounts for 17.2% of the variation in leadership perception, ‘Gender’ accounts for 7.3%, ‘Age’ accounts for 4.6%, ‘Number of years worked or volunteered’ accounts for 5.8%, ‘Size of organisation’ accounts for 1.6% and ‘Ethnicity’ had no effect. The predictor variables were then combined and a multiple regression analysis was conducted. Table 6 below is the summary of the model for multiple regression analysis and shows that the strength of the relationship between these independent variables and leadership perception. From the table, the R and R-squared values of .545 and .297 indicate that the combined predictor variables could account for about 30% (29.7%) of variation in self-perception as a leader. In other words, the strength of self-perception of being a leader is more influenced by a combination of these factors rather than one factor.

Table 6: Multiple Regression Analysis Model Summary between independent variables and Leadership Perception Variable

Model Summary^b									
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics				
					R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	.545 ^a	0.297	0.262	1.99269	0.297	8.395	6	119	0.000

a. Predictors: (Constant), Size of the organisation, Position in the organisation, Age group, Gender, Ethnicity,

Number of years worked

b. Dependent Variable: I regard myself as a leader

Discussion and conclusions

In this research, we have attempted to advance knowledge on the involvement of internal stakeholders in the leadership process through the concept of ‘shared leadership’ within the context of voluntary organisations in the UK. In this regard a major contribution of this research is to illustrate the complex nature of shared leadership. The concept of leadership itself is particularly problematic and more so in voluntary organisations due to the complex and dynamic nature of the sector. In part, the leadership challenge exists because of the perception that leadership is significantly a function of those in formal positions, with limited consideration for differences in how actors involved in the organisation’s processes are categorised. The diverse nature of internal stakeholders involved in voluntary organisations further shows that the traditional forms leadership may not be adequately suited to these organisations.

Primarily, the research findings indicate that leadership functions are largely distributed and shared in voluntary organisations. However, the extent to which such sharing takes place is mainly dependent on the types of internal stakeholders. This was evident as the sample characteristics showed statistically significant differences between paid employees and volunteers, with the former being more highly involved in leadership functions than the latter.

We also observed a trend whereby the volunteers saw themselves as being less actively involved in leadership processes than the paid employees, and all the surveyed trustees regarded themselves as leaders. The fact that the volunteer respondents perceived themselves as being less involved in the leadership process raises some concerns as being valued is a core reward for this category of stakeholders and this is an essential source of motivation for them. Additionally, one of the main reasons many individuals volunteer in organisations is in seeking an opportunity to make a difference. Involvement in leadership represents such an opportunity and if the volunteers are denied this experience, it may significantly affect their commitment to the voluntary role as well as the duration of their engagement in such roles. Furthermore, as Steinheider et al (2006) noted, the lack of perception of involvement in decision-making among both volunteers and employees would have a feedforward effect in promoting a sense of limited organisational support, organisational commitment and under par workforce-management relations.

In essence, voluntary organisations that wish to maximise the extent of engagement of their volunteers and employees stand to benefit by allowing this category of individuals to be more involved in the leadership process. However, the varying degree of the likelihood of involvement in such process between volunteers, employees and trustees also supports the existence of a categorical power/influence structure among voluntary organisation groupings, which such organisations need to be aware of and make every effort to bridge (Chadwick-Coule, 2011). If unaddressed, such disparities could constitute a potential loss to the organisation because key individuals who could otherwise be instrumental to the achievement of organisation goals may not be considered or indeed may be overtly omitted from key decision-making processes.

The research also revealed that some stakeholders are more powerful than others and this has an effect on their involvement in the leadership process (Krishnan, 2003). In relation to power sharing, interestingly, we observed that whilst only 40% of the volunteers shared and delegated power, the proportion was more significant for the employees (75.5%) and all of the trustees indicated that they shared and delegated power. The fact that more of respondents viewed that power was not delegated to them and yet they tended to delegate power brings to question the nature of delegated authority. Arguably, this suggests that core leadership authority is preserved for the upper echelon of the organisation hierarchy. A testament to this perception is the fact that a sizeable number of the trustees saw themselves as delegating power but not requiring power to be delegated to them. However, if leadership is to be effectively shared and other stakeholders are to be empowered, there is a need for greater reciprocity, communicative interaction, openness and willingness to delegate power from leadership at the upper echelon of the organisation hierarchy (Kirkpatrick and Locke, 1991; Ford, 2005).

There are a number of similarities and also differences between our research in comparison to other studies conducted in the voluntary sector to explore leadership, control, organisational identity and related concepts. For instance, the study conducted by Kreutzer and Jäger (2011) involving 34 narrative interviews and focus groups also resulted in differing perceptions of how volunteers and employees identified with their organisations. They particularly noted that conflicting dimensions internal stakeholder identity among volunteers and management for example result in intra-organisational conflict. Our contribution further suggests that such conflict may result from the how the volunteers perceive the extent of their involvement in the organisation and this invariably impacts their attitude towards organisational activities. In this regard, there is scope for additional research to investigate how the perceptions of multiple stakeholders influence the extent to which leadership is shared with other stakeholder groups within the organisation.

In addition, Chadwick-Coule (2011) argues that approaches that assume the possibility of affecting theoretical views in practice will enable voluntary organisations to prosper and grow. However, such approaches ultimately fail to expose how members of voluntary organisations apply social values to management and governance practices as the argument itself is rooted in the notion that organisational control is a top-down phenomenon. We have attempted to demonstrate that shared leadership is not solely a theoretical construct but one that can find real application and positively contribute towards promoting inclusivity. As such, where shared leadership is prevalent, there is an increased potential for organisational prosperity and growth, especially in sectors such as that of voluntary organisations with their eclectic mix of involved stakeholders.

Whilst we acknowledge a limitation of our findings in terms of its generalisability due to the survey sample size and distribution, we view this research as catalyst for providing an appropriate conceptual framework for measuring the capacity of voluntary organisations to engage community members in perpetuating organisational goals and objectives. In this view, it is also imperative for further research to look at how such organisations engage stakeholders in decision-making processes. Given the complexity of stakeholder theory, we suggest that future research should be conducted to unpack the stakeholder perspective in order to shed more light on the nascent shared leadership concept and develop additional insight into the implications of distributing leadership functions among groups of individuals.

We conclude by stating that determining the level of shared leadership among stakeholders has broad implications for research, policy and practice particularly in voluntary organisations as volunteers play a crucial role in meeting organisational needs and achieving set goals. Our observation that volunteers are less actively involved in leadership processes raises particular concern for the top of the organisational hierarchy as this category of stakeholders rely mostly on motivation to carry out their duties. Trustees on the other hand provide the governance impetus of voluntary agencies and may be naturally expected to fully engage in the leadership process. The status of employees is however complicated as some will be part of management, tasked with the leadership responsibilities. The key factor therefore for voluntary organisations wishing to significantly improve their organisational effectiveness will be for them to ensure equitable distribution of leadership influence among the various internal stakeholder groups. Importantly, such distribution must transcend mere consultation to active involvement in the leadership process.

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