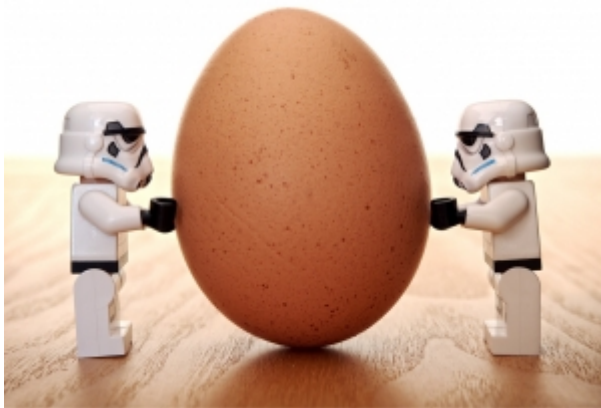


How to co-lead a team

We don't lead alone. We lead with others. The days of the 'Great Man' theory of Leadership – where one sole leader rules over the masses from their ivory tower, are long gone.

Some of us quite literally lead with another person – we co-lead a project, a team, or an organization with a peer. A study by Pearce and Sims (2002), published in *Group Dynamics*, found that shared leadership is a useful predictor of team effectiveness. Other research suggests shared leadership can also lead to greater team interaction, increased collaboration and coordination, as well as novel and more innovative solutions. But while co-leadership can be energizing and rewarding, if the relationship isn't strong, the arrangement can easily become draining and frustrating.



Success in co-leadership begins with commitment. When colleagues and I designed and facilitated the first collaborative training between the police forces of two polities with a decades-long history of conflict, we had the opportunity to see co-leadership in its most intense and most powerful form. Not merely “putting the past aside” but rather prioritising a joint, peaceful future, the leaders from each of the forces ensured a successful training that rolled out throughout their communities. Their joint success was not only a result of their commitment to the program and its objectives, but their visible commitment to one another, which

began with a steeled choice and ended with a valued relationship that would go on to impact countless others.

Whether we are recruited or promoted into a role to lead with someone else, we start a new project or venture with a chosen partner, or we actively bring someone on board to lead alongside us, co-leadership is a skill that most of us need to strengthen.

There are a number of keys to making co-leadership effective, enjoyable and sustainable:

- **Share ownership of the goal but divide roles and responsibilities.** Explore and understand each other's strengths and expertise, then go through a detailed process of agreeing who is responsible for what. After studying multiple corporate examples of shared leadership, O'Toole, Galbraith and Lawler in *Shared Leadership: Reframing the Hows and Whys of Leadership* (Pearce and Conger, 2003), suggest that co-leadership is much more likely to be successful with clear and agreed differentiation. This isn't a one-off conversation. Make co-leadership sustainable by regularly re-evaluating your roles and effectiveness.
- **Remember that there are more than two people affected by co-leadership.** We tend to focus on how we navigate this relationship for ourselves, but it can be equally tricky for others to navigate “us.” Be mindful of your joint impact on others. Clients, our leaders, and especially our combined team can find co-leadership arrangements challenging and confusing, especially at first. Be clear about communicating your roles and responsibilities to others, and seek regular feedback on how they experience you not just as individuals, but also as a pair.
- **Be first to re-allocate praise for successes and first to pick up responsibility for failures.** Whether others correctly or incorrectly assign success to you personally, offer praise to your co-leader for any

success. When failures happen, own and address them together, regardless of your direct input into the situation.

- **Be open to renegotiating your roles based on changing circumstances and ambitions.** Over time, our skills grow and we want to expand our leadership capacity. So a task that may once have been unappealing to your co-leader may eventually become a stretch goal they would like to embrace. Whether it's directing part of the business function, taking the lead on large client projects, fronting presentations and pitches, or owning one-to-one development meetings for the team, there's endless ways both you and your co-leader may want to change the dynamic of your relationship. Be open to these changes in your partner, and share your own evolving goals.
- **Recognise that of all people, it's likely you personally have the greatest impact on your co-leader's experience of work.** And that they have the same impact on yours. Honest conversations exploring the reality of this impact – what's great, what's challenging, and what feels limiting or restrictive — may be emotional and very likely will be uncomfortable, but will be worth it.

Investing time and energy into this co-leadership relationship beyond just the scope of your role will almost certainly make it a better one. It will also mean that not only for the organization, but for you both personally, two heads really can be better than one.

Notes:

- This article was initially featured on the *Harvard Business Review* on 14 July 2015 and is re-posted with the author's permission
- The author of this blogpost, Rebecca Newton has chaired the public lecture with Richard Reed on 1 November 2016 entitled 'Lessons in how to create and how to succeed'. [Listen to the podcast.](#)



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