

**ALTERNATIVES TO THE “HEROIC” LEADER: AN  
INVESTIGATION OF DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP IN  
NONPROFIT ORGANISATIONS**

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*Working Paper 49/04  
October 2004*

**DEPARTMENT OF MANAGEMENT  
WORKING PAPER SERIES  
ISSN 1327-5216**



**Abstract**

Most leadership literature is based on the idea of one single, heroic leader. However, there is an alternate view in the literature, emphasised recently, that leadership is not the prerogative of one individual, but is likely to be distributed among different members of an organization or team. This paper discusses the literature on a range of leadership ideas relating to this theme. Much of this literature assumes the empowerment of others by a leader in order for them to take a leadership role where appropriate; yet in some organizations it is clear that two, or more leaders at executive management level are actively involved in sharing the leadership of the whole organisation. Distributed leadership, and other similar terms, is particularly evident in the literature related to nonprofit organisations in the educational and healthcare industries, but there is little discussion of distributed leadership in community member benefit nonprofits. This paper seeks to identify if distributed leadership exists in a range of community nonprofit associations. The study outlines the structure of six nonprofit associations showing the number of leaders involved and how leadership functions are performed. This reveals that there is no single leader paramount in these organisations, and rather than a hierarchical structure, with one individual leader being recognised, leadership in these organisations is exercised by at least two people working together in some form.

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# **ALTERNATIVES TO THE “HEROIC” LEADER: AN INVESTIGATION OF DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP IN NONPROFIT ORGANISATIONS**

## **INTRODUCTION**

There is still has a dominant tendency in leadership theory to see it as a phenomenon isolated in one person in an organization. Writers on leadership have been very much influenced by Classical Management Theory, presented by such writers as Fayol (1949) where the concept of a single chain of command within organizations, and that every individual should only have one boss, is emphasised. In adhering to a single chain of command, House (1970) suggests, managerial control increases and role conflict with the organization is reduced. More recently theories of transformational or charismatic leadership (Bass and Avolio, 1994; Conger, 1999; Hunt, 1999) emphasize that influence flows from the leader to followers, and effective leaders will be able to inspire their followers to make self-sacrifices and apply exceptional effort to achieve organisational goals. Both classical and new theories of leadership are based on the assumption of one dominant leader, and this both Yukl (1999a) and Gronn (2002b) suggest, underlies most leadership research.

Alternatives to the single heroic leader, such as distributed leadership, are receiving some attention in the literature at present because of two factors. First, they are linked to the criticism of modern leadership research specifically because it concentrates on the activities of individual leaders, and tends to give inordinate attention to the Chief Executive Officer (CEO). Yukl (1999a:292) maintains that there is a bias in modern leadership theories to “heroic leadership”, ignoring the role of “reciprocal influence processes or shared leadership”. Indeed, Yukl (1999a) attacks modern leadership ideas, such as transformational and charismatic leadership theories, as conceptually weak because of their assumption that one individual leads all others to achieve the goals of the group or organization. Second, distributed leadership is the subject of interest because it sits comfortably in contemporary in organizations where the competencies required are often greater than any one person is able to possess (Avery, 2004; Gronn, 1999; Yukl, 2002) and where team structures and increasing, empowerment of individuals is becoming the norm (Edmonstone and Western, 2002). These changes result in a situation where leadership may no longer be exclusive to any one individual, but distributed among members of the organization. Yukl (1999a) asserts that all leadership theories could be improved if they included the implications of distributed leadership in organizations.

This paper outlines the research on distributed leadership, particularly as it relates to the nonprofit sector. There is a range of literature on distributed leadership as participative, or empowering, but most still focuses on the leadership of senior management, particularly as it relates to educational, health institutions. This literature points more to the existence of situations where leadership is distributed among a small number of individuals in an organisation, usually the senior management. This paper therefore, seeks to discuss distributed leadership in nonprofit organizations and to extend the exploration beyond education and health to study community, member benefit organizations.

The research aims to:

- identify if distributed leadership exists in these organizations, and if so
- determine who is involved in the distributed leadership and
- observe how it works in practice.

## **DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP**

A number of researchers have viewed leadership as distributed, or shared, in an organization rather than centred in one individual. In searching the literature for discussion of this concept,

difficulties occur in identifying it, as the writers tend to use different terms, or the same terms with different meanings. Terms such as democratic leadership (Bass, 1990), collective leadership (Burns, 1998), shared leadership (Judge and Ryman, 2001), dispersed leadership (Bryman, 1996), distributive leadership (Brown and Gioia, 2002) or distributed leadership (Brown, 1989; Brown and Hosking, 1986) are used to describe situations where leadership functions are believed to be shared in some way. Other writers (Chityayat, 1985; Denis, Lamothe and Langley, 2001; Gronn, 1999; Heenan and Bennis, 1999; Stewart, 1991a; b; Yukl, 1999a) have discussed this concept, calling it dual leadership, dual control, collective leadership, co-leadership, or the leadership (or management) couple. The many different terms make identifying literature in the area a challenge, but there is a small amount of research which investigates shared or distributed leadership in teams, networks and hierarchies.

Defining the term precisely is difficult, given the range of different terms and different understandings of the different terms. Yukl (1999a:292) states, very broadly, that leadership “Does not require an individual who can perform all of the essential leadership functions, only a set of people who can collectively perform them”. He (Yukl, 1999a:292) goes on to paint a picture of distributed leadership existing in different forms: “Some leadership functions (e.g., making important decisions) may be shared by several members of a group, some leadership functions may be allocated to individual members, and a particular leadership function may be performed by different people at different times”. Gronn (2002a) also identifies two broad meanings of distributed leadership. He (2002a:656) observes it as a numerical action involving many or all members of an organisation, and suggests that in this form distributed leadership is really “a euphemism for collaboration or participation”. He (Gronn, 2002a) also suggests distributed leadership can a concertive action of a group of people who choose to divide leadership functions between them. This is similar to Yukl’s (1999a) recognition of different forms, or methods of operation of distributed leadership. The literature on alternatives to the single, heroic leader concept tends to discuss it in the two different ways. First are the range of ideas based on the concept of participative leadership, or as Yukl (1999a:292) suggests, “leadership functions are allocated to individual members” or may be performed by different people at different times” and in this way many, or even all members of an organization, are involved in leadership at some time. The second concept of shared, dispersed or distributed leadership relates to leadership being “shared by several members of a group” (Yukl, 1999a:292) and is particularly evident where the group consists of executives of an organisation who join together in leadership. Unfortunately, in the literature, these ideas are intertwined. A first objective of this paper is to clarify these ideas of alternatives to the heroic leader.

### **Distributed Leadership as a Participation/Empowerment**

A range of literature has for many years discussed ways of involving workers in leadership through participation in decision making. Early work, such as that of Argyris (1955) focuses on participative or democratic leadership where the importance of involving subordinates in decisions making is emphasised (Sivasubramaniam, Murry, Avolio and Jung, 2002). This concept has evolved into ideas of delegation, where employees are given the power and responsibility for certain decisions, and empowerment where organisation members have some control over their work roles and influence on decision making. However, this idea seems to limit the sharing of leadership to one that exists only at the manager’s discretion.

In the same vein, Manz and Sims (1991) and Sims and Lorenzi (1992:295) suggested that the heroic leader is being superseded by the “SuperLeadership”, which emphasises “leading others to lead themselves”. Such leadership, Manz (1990) asserts leads to self leadership with the leader acting as a coach. Similarly Kouzes and Posner (1993:156) believe that credible leaders develop capacity to lead in others by turning “their constituents into leaders”. A similar idea is discussed as the empowered workforce, particularly in self-managed work teams (Cohen and Bailey, 1997; Kirkman and Rosen, 1999; Yukl, 2002) where leadership may be rotated among members, or a member may assume responsibility for certain activities. Nevertheless, even within self-managed teams there is usually a need for a leader, perhaps external to the team, to have a role in

encouraging leadership participation, and writers such as Hackman (1990) contend that an external leader is necessary to keep teams functioning by setting direction, assisting the team where necessary and acting as an advocate to the rest of the organisation. Overall, these alternative perspectives emphasise the importance of recognising the need for leadership to be viewed as a widely dispersed activity and not necessarily the province of the formally designated leader. Yet, all these ideas are still based on the premise that there is one leader who is encouraging, motivating, and/or coaching others to be involved in traditional leadership functions.

### **Distributed Leadership among Senior Management**

This paper is more concerned with looking at shared or distributed leadership at the executive level of organisations, where a number of top management people share the functions of leadership. Ancona and Adler (1989) and Yukl (2002) suggest that sharing power within a top management team is increasingly popular in major corporations, though the literature on this topic is sparse. What is available is a range of literature on this type of leadership in nonprofit organisations such as educational and healthcare establishments.

Studies where distributed leadership is identified at executive level in nonprofit organisations include an Australian study of school heads and heads of campus (Gronn, 1999), a Canadian study (Denis, Lamothe et al., 2001) of hospitals with boards, CEOs, medical councils and health care professionals sharing leadership, CEOs of sports organisations and the coaches (Heenan and Bennis, 1999), and CEOs and Board Chairs (Chityayat, 1985) of community nonprofit organisations. Gronn's (2002b:430) analysis suggests that many nonprofit organizations have leadership performed by more than one person. His term for this, distributed leadership, has been connected with nonprofit organizations in the past (Brown, 1989; Brown and Hosking, 1986).

Distributed leadership discussion is particularly evident in the literature on educational and health care institutions. An examination of the literature on distributed leadership in these types of organisations follows and seeks to identify if distributed leadership in these environments is of the participatory type, or is leadership distributed among the executives.

### **Distributed Leadership in Educational Institutions**

Gronn (1995; 1999; 2002a; 2002b; 1996) has written extensively on distributed leadership in education and has developed a taxonomy for it. He (2002a) sees distributed leadership in education institutions as both participatory involving many people, and focussed in a small group of leaders, believing that it is seldom the prerogative of one single leader acting alone in this environment. Gregory (1996) discusses distributed or shared leadership observed in an education setting, specifically tertiary colleges in the United Kingdom. His major belief is that the single, dominant leader at the top of an organizational hierarchy is not appropriate in a professionally staffed, value-laden environment and that leadership should be shared throughout all levels of the organisation. Clift and Thurston (1998) suggest that distributed leadership in schools is a process that shares leadership among many individuals. Becher and Kogan (1980) point out that a dual system of hierarchy exists in education with the principal being the senior academic, but also the chief executive officer, and in many of the larger institutions the role is split between two or more people. Gronn (1999) uses a large private school to argue that the leadership couple is a common alternative to a single leader in an educational environment, with his study being of two senior leaders. Apart from Gronn's (1999) study, most of the education studies of distributed leadership suggest it is similar to participatory, democratic, team or empowered ideas of leadership.

### **Distributed Leadership In Health Institutions**

Spooner, Keenan and Card (1997) represent a number of studies, in nursing journals, of shared leadership based on the expectation that leadership is shared between nurse manager and staff members. Judge and Ryman's (2001) study of the US healthcare industry identified a trend away from the solitary leader to a shared mode of leadership particularly among top executives, with

Stewart's (1991a) study of the UK National Health Service revealing a sharing of leadership functions by district general managers and district chairman. Similarly, Denis, Lamothe and Langley (2001) studied health care organisations in Canada and found that a collective leadership group in which leaders play complementary roles is often part of the structure, as hospitals, in particular, have dual structures with a chief executive officer and a chief medical officer, and in some cases other officials who share leadership. The nursing literature suggests leadership shared as a means of participation, or empowerment of employees, however Judge and Ryman (2001) and Denis et al (2001) indicate that distributed leadership exists among top executives in healthcare organisations.

### **Distributed Leadership in Community Nonprofits**

There are only a few empirical studies of distributed leadership in nonprofit community organisations including CEOs of sports organisations and the coaches (Heenan and Bennis, 1999), and CEOs and Board Chairs (Chityayat, 1985) of community nonprofit organisations. Gronn's (2002b:430) analysis suggests that many nonprofit organizations have leadership performed by more than one person but evidence is sparse, apart from Brown (1989) and Brown and Hosking's (1986) studies of the sharing of leadership in women's groups.

### **METHOD**

The study began by identifying four Australian community nonprofit member benefit associations, with an elected, voluntary Board, and paid officials. In order to obtain an understanding of the organizations information was gathered from secondary sources, such as information published in annual reports and newsletters as well as organizational histories, mission statements, organizational charts, and descriptions of the organisation's programs. Interviews were held with the identified leaders of the organisations who were usually the chief executive officer (or similar title), the senior elected official, either the President or Chairman of the Board, and, other senior management people identified as having a leadership role. A protocol for the cases that included set research questions as well as analysing the data collected using Gronn's (2002b) forms and properties of distributed leadership as criteria, ensured consistency and enhanced the reliability of the study.

### **Gronn's Model of Distributed Leadership**

Gronn's (2002b) taxonomy of distributed leadership is the first clear attempt at understanding how distributed leadership functions. Through his meta-analysis, Gronn (2002b) classifies distributed leadership as a numerical or concertive action. Distributed leadership, as a numerical action, or multiple actions, exists where leadership is dispersed among many, or all, members of an organization and there is the chance that all members may be leaders at some stage (Miller, 1998). Distributed leadership, in this case, may be seen as a sum of all individuals' activities (Wenger, 2000). Distributed leadership, as a concertive action, is a complex web of patterns and interactions of two, more or a group of individuals. The defining attribute of concertive action, Gronn (2002b:432) suggests is "conjoint agency" where "the agents constituting the membership of the units act conjointly . . . synchronise their action by having regard to their own plans, those of their peers and their sense of unit membership". Distributed leadership in this case is a number of individuals interacting to provide leadership.

The view that distributed leadership exists as a numerical action, where all individuals in an organization may be leaders at some time, or as a concertive action occurring where some members synchronise their actions, is similar to Yukl's (1999b) division of forms of distributed leadership into that which exists throughout an organisation, or that which exists within a small group. This also concurs with the view that distributed leadership can exist as participation or empowerment, or as shared leadership among senior management. The research also accords

with Gronn's (2002b) proposal that distributed leadership should be used as a unit of analysis in leadership studies as an alternative to the usual focus on individual leaders.

Four nonprofit member benefit organizations were studied. All had a mixture of leadership including the Chair of a board of directors or committee of management. It is important to note here the nonprofit boards differ from boards of for-profit organizations. They have been identified by Steane and Christie {, 2001 #175} as having a stakeholder approach to governance, being very likely to be involved in operational management. The Boards, Steane and Christie {Steane, 2001 #175} assert will focus on day-to-day issues as well as strategic issues, and therefore have a large involvement with the staff. The organizations studied are:

- a large sporting club with a CEO, coach and a Board,
- a youth organization with a chief activities officer, a CEO and an Executive Council,
- a national self-help organization with a CEO and a Board and
- a national membership organization of professionals with a CEO and a Board.

## **FINDINGS**

The organizations studied are outlined below, identifying if distributed leadership exists, who is involved in it and how the process works.

### **The Sporting Club**

The sporting club is a large membership organization with an elected Board, led by a President, a number of staff, led by a CEO, and the sporting teams, led by a senior, salaried coach. There appears to be a clear division of affairs which is formalised in the club's structure, with distributed leadership being apparent. The three report having almost daily contact with each other. The division of leadership functions is apparent when the club has to issue public statements. The President, who is involved in the day-to-day running of the club, often speaks for the club on a range of social and general sporting issues. The CEO also speaks for the club on financial and facilities matters, and the coach is clearly the spokesperson on matters relating to sporting performance. The present arrangements works well, though all commented that the situation could be difficult at times, depending on the personalities of the individuals involved. To avoid conflict the club had developed written and detailed job descriptions for each leadership role, with the first statement being the need to work with the other leaders "on an equal basis".

### **The Youth Organization**

The youth activities organization is also a membership organization governed by an appointed or elected council which has a Chairman. The organization also has a senior Youth Activities Officer, who is a volunteer, and a salaried CEO. These three people are responsible for different activities and the lines of authority for each are clearly shown in the structure. The organisation is nearly 100 years old, a shared leadership model exists at all levels of the organisation, and all leaders commented on being used to leadership being shared among at least two people and that they were comfortable with the concept. The Youth Activities Officers overseas the activities of the many local groups running programs for young people. The CEO is responsible for support services to these groups (publications, insurance, purchasing of major equipment, administrative support) and the Chairman is responsible for the finances, sponsorship and government liaison. The CEO and official in charge of youth activities talk three to four times a week and meet fortnightly. The Chairman also attends the fortnightly meetings, meets with the CEO formally at least once a week (and informally more often) and talks with the activities officer regularly. Conflict between the leaders "doesn't happen. We all know our duties".

## The Self-Help Association

This organization had a Board which was heavily involved with its day-to-day running. Each Board member had responsibility for an area, which means working with staff regularly. The CEO and President consulted every day. Yet it was clear that the President was considered the leader of the organization and was spokesperson for it on all matters, or else this power to speak was delegated to members, but not to the CEO. The CEO was clearly in charge of staff, administering the office and overseeing finances, but if distributed leadership existed it was among the Board members. As there were 12 of them and they were based in different areas, this led to problems. Opportunities to communicate were limited. While each had a leadership role, this organisation had more difficulty in making it work, conflict was common and there was a regular turnover of Board members and CEOs.

## The Association of Professionals

This large organization was governed by a council, and led by a full time president whose role was to liaise with members, employers, and government and ensure the professional integrity was maintained. The CEO's role was to administer and ensure the financial viability of the organization. Each had clear areas of responsibility while both acted as spokesperson for the organization when required, but keeping to their areas of responsibility. The two communicated on a daily basis and commented that their shared leadership was a real positive for the organisation. This model had worked well in this association for many years, though there had been occasions when conflict had occurred, but usually the roles of each leader were clearly understood and conflict was minimal.

Figure one summarises the findings of the study, outlines the governance undertaken by volunteers and the leadership roles they take, as well as the paid staff. It states whether distributed leadership exists or not.

**Figure 1: Summary of the Leadership of the Organizations Studied**

Organization	Governance	Paid staff	Distributed leadership?
The Sporting Club	Board: President	CEO Coach	Yes – all involved
The Youth Activities Organization	Council: President and Senior Activities Official	CEO	Yes – President, CEO and SAO involved
The Self-help association	Board: President	CEO	Yes – all Board members involved
The association of professionals	Board: President	CEO	Yes – both involved

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Leadership appears to be distributed in these four organisations, however, it was not numerical action, according to Gronn's (2002b) ideas, and there was little evidence of participatory leadership or empowerment, particularly of staff. Leadership lines were clearly written in the structure and backed, in most cases by guidelines or job descriptions which defined each role. In these organizations, leadership was confined to the leadership group. Leadership cannot be seen as a sum of all individual's activities as would be expected in distributed leadership presenting as numerical action (Gronn, 2002b; Miller, 1998) or as participation or empowerment. On the other hand, it was observed that leadership in these organizations was a concerted action among the people who formed the leadership group. In summary, distributed leadership, in these cases, is a

concertive action, according to Gronn (2002b), or as Yukl (1999a) suggests involves a small number of people, usually senior executives. Each leader was responsible for his own area, with the leaders acting in concert to direct the activities of the organization.

Figure Two defines the types of distributed leadership and summarises the evidence for its existence in these organizations, showing that it is a concertive action, often formalised in the structure of the organizations and clearly evidenced by those speaking for the organizations.

**Figure 2: Types of Distributed Leadership Recognized in the Four Organizations**

<b>Type of Distributed Leadership</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Organizations</b>	<b>Evidence within organizations</b>
Numerical Action	Leadership is the sum of individual actions of all members	None	Little evidence: All decision making deferred to leaders with little participation by others.
Concertive Action	Some or many members of an organization work together to provide leadership	All	The organization structure Each leader was the spokesperson for their own area Regular meetings (often daily) between leaders

This study reveals that, in these four nonprofit organizations, there is not a single leader who is paramount to the organisation. While the idea of a single “heroic” leader appeared to be an anathema to these nonprofits, leadership was confined to a small number of the senior executives, usually the CEO and the President. What was evident was that rather than a hierarchical structure, with one individual leader being recognised, leadership in these organisations is exercised by at least two people working together in some form. In these organizations, distributed leadership was a concertive action of a two, or more. The effectiveness of this type of leadership relied in most cases on the good relationships between the individuals involved and a change of personnel could lead to this relationship failing, or needing to be established anew. In order to avoid this failure, two of the organizations had written detailed guidelines and job descriptions which helped to determine the limits of authority and responsibility, but also defined the co-operation needed between the leaders. The third organization ensured that regular communication took place, while the fourth lacked either guidelines or regular communication and conflict was the norm.

Gronn’s (2002b) appealed for distributed leadership to be a unit of analysis in leadership research, rather than the single “heroic” leader. This study suggests that distributed leadership should be studied in nonprofit member benefit associations. It is acknowledge that these case studies are limited, and that the methods of recognising distributed leadership are still undeveloped. On the other hand, the study does indicate that, in nonprofit organizations at least, there is a need for leadership research to be targeted at more than one person. Further research is required in order to test the validity of the distributed leadership concept and a larger study of nonprofits is needed to identify if this is the norm. However, the body of literature in health, education as well as community nonprofit associations, does suggest that the lone “heroic” leader is not the norm.

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