Review of the book Shared Leadership: Reframing the Hows and Whys of Leadership

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Article:

This book opens with the aspiration to jump-start the reader's knowledge of the shared leadership phenomenon and closes with an editorial assessment that only the surface has been scratched. In my estimation, the authors have accomplished their mission and have accurately assessed the state of the field.

Before reading Shared leadership: Reframing the hows and whys of leadership, my familiarity with this research stream was basic and limited. Following this engaging and in-depth read, I came away with a deep appreciation for the breadth of prior research that can be leveraged to underpin the study of shared leadership, the complexity in the conceptualization of the topic, the measurement challenges associated with conducting high quality shared leadership research and the importance of temporality (long neglected in most streams of leadership research) to studying the shared leadership phenomenon.

Editors Craig Pearce and Jay Conger have assembled a strong collection of 14 essays discussing different facets of shared leadership. The chapters are authored by a balanced lineup of long distinguished leadership scholars and some newer leadership scholars. The volume opens with an introductory chapter followed by four thematic sections. In my opinion, the introductory chapter alone is worth the price of the book.

In the introductory chapter, Pearce and Conger provide a masterful review of 75 years of research beginning with Follet's (1924) "law of the situation" to identify the theoretical underpinnings for shared leadership research and detail the former dalliances of the field with the topic. The introduction is useful for scholars seeking a broad literature-based review and is a useful demonstration for advanced students of how streams of academic research build over time to make increasingly complex streams of research intellectually accessible.

Following the introduction, the four parts of the book are Part 1: Conceptual models of shared leadership (6 articles, 141 pp.), Part 2: Methodological issues in shared leadership (3 articles, 74 pp.), Part 3: Shared leadership in applied settings (3 articles, 54 pp.) and Part 4: Critique of shared leadership theory (2 articles, 35 pp.). Rather than linearly detailing a brief summary of the contribution of each chapter, five (representative rather than exhaustive) organizing observations are presented.

First, the field of shared leadership is clearly still in its infancy. One striking example of the stage of development is the similarity but lack of consistency in defining the phenomenon. In this volume, shared leadership is defined (in chapter order) as:

- a concept of leadership practice as a group level phenomenon. Shared leadership is: (1) distributed and interdependent; (2) embedded in social interaction; (3) is leadership as learning (Fletcher and Kaufer)

- the condition in which teams collectively exert influence (Cox, Pearce, Perry)

- the extent to which more than one individual can effectively operate in a distinctively influential role within the same interdependent role system (Seers, Keller and Wilkinson)

- a leadership process in which the leadership function is dynamically transferred within the team (Burke, Fiore, Salas)

- [for purposes of this chapter] the transference of the leadership function among team members in order to take advantage of member strengths (e.g. knowledge, skills, attitudes, perspectives, contacts and time available) as dictated by either environmental demands or the developmental stage of the team (Burke, Fiore, Salas)

- a process through which individual team members share in performing the behaviors and roles of a traditional hierarchical leader (Houghton, Neck and Manz)

- how all members of a team collectively influence each other toward accomplishing its goals" (Avolio, Sivasubramaniam, Murry, Jung, Garger)

- how influence is not solely the prerogative of formal leaders but may be shared by members of the group or teams. ...[shared leadership] thus bridges the distance between theories that focus on the effects of formal leaders on group performance and those that focus wholly on self-managing teams (Siebert, Sparrowe, Liden)

- an approach that considers the role of mutual influence among team members as another source of leadership for the group (Mayo, Meindel and Pastor)

- a process of shared influence between and among individuals that can emerge in a group context as an alternate social source of leadership (Hooker and Csikszentmihalyi)

- a reciprocal influence processes among multiple parties (e.g. designated leader and his subordinates) in a systems context (Shamir and Lapidot)

- a dynamic exchange of lateral influence among peers rather than vertical downward influence by an appointed leader (Locke referencing Cox, Pearce, Perry)

- a dynamic, interactive influence process among individuals in groups for which the objective is to lead one another to the achievement of group or organizational goals or both. This influence process often involves peer, or lateral, influence and at other times involves upward or downward hierarchical influence (Conger and Pearce).

While the lack of precision on an agreed upon definition is endemic to the leadership field in general (c.f. Yukl, 2001), this list demonstrates that scholars are still seeking to define the parameters of shared leadership. Indeed, the variety of theories applied in this volume, to name

just a few, include a relational perspective (Fletcher and Kaufman), a shared cognition perspective (Burke, Fiore and Salas), social network perspective (Mayo, Meindl and Pastor), and flow perspective (Hooker and Csikzentmihalyi). The richness of theoretical treatments is evidence of the scholarly search to "get our arms around the topic" and the wealth of possibilities for integrating a shared leadership perspective with more developed streams of traditional micro and macro OB theory.

Second, as noted in the introduction, very few empirical studies of shared leadership have appeared in the literature (Mayo, Meindel and Pastor; Pearce and Conger), and most measures of shared leadership are based on self-reports (Burke, Fiore and Salas). This edited volume continues to reflect this bias. The majority of the chapters provide predominately theoretical rather than empirical approaches to the study of shared leadership.[1] A notable exception is the chapter by Avolio, Sivasubramaniam, Murray, Jung and Garger, which describes in detail the development and preliminary validation of a team multifactor leadership questionnaire. The chapter by Shamir and Lapidot, while not providing empirical data, does provide thick description from the framework of a larger study of 1100 cadets in 84 teams. Other chapters in part 2 (methodological issues) and part 3 (applied settings) provide theoretical arguments or author accumulated insights into the challenges and possibilities for shared leadership rather than empirical findings. This is not a criticism of the volume, as theory development should precede empirical testing. Rather, the dearth of empirical work identifies the tremendous opportunity, available to those who would undertake a more quantitative approach, to make a significant contribution to the shared leadership literature. Indeed, the volume offers five methods for studying shared leadership.

Third, early findings have speculated on the importance of selection and stage of group development to the study of shared leadership. Several authors in this volume have expanded on these speculations, offering that shared leadership requires the group to possess relevant and complementary technical and leadership skills, that members communicate those skills to the group and that the group then possess the transactive memory necessary to call on the correct person for the task over time (Fletcher and Kaufer; Burke, Fiore and Salas). With respect to time, authors in this volume recognize that the temporal stage of the team and the task environment require different technical and leadership competencies over time and that members must be willing to lead at the relevant times (Seers, Keller and Wilkinson; Avolio et. al.). A breadth of research questions could be developed from these foundational pieces related to how group members communicate technical and leadership competencies, how these communications are received and what facilitates group members emerging and accepting responsibility in ways that facilitate the practice of shared leadership.

Fourth, the necessity of vertical leadership in tandem with shared leadership is acknowledged by all of the volume authors. However, the relative emphasis placed on the vertical leader and the range of tasks suggested as appropriate for the vertical leader varies considerably across authors (Seers, Keller and Wilkinson; Houghton, Neck and Manz). From the chapters in this book, it is relatively easy to conjecture competing hypotheses regarding the role and impact of vertical leadership on shared leadership. Competing hypotheses are typically a fertile area for rich tests of theory.

Fifth, admirably the editors have not assembled a cast of authors who are shared leadership evangelists and have accepted as their charge to promote the theoretical positives and ignore the

gaps. Said another way, this is not a "sell shared leadership at all costs" book and the reader is better for it. Several chapter authors identify the general tendency of humans to resist the notion of shared leadership in their attempts to achieve personal power and influence (c.f. O'Toole, Galbraith and Lawler III; Siebert, Sparrowe and Liden; Shamir and Lapidot). Yet these same authors argue persuasively for the value of shared leadership in organizations. The two critiques of shared leadership (Locke, Conger and Pearce) are real critiques that assist the reader in thinking critically about when shared leadership makes sense (and when it does not), about the continued importance of vertical leadership in a shared leadership world and what shared leadership scholars need to explore next.

Shared leadership: Reframing the hows and whys of leadership is an essential read for scholars interested in understanding theoretical basis for shared leadership, the state of the art in shared leadership research and for those seeking stimulation for new research questions. I found the breadth of chapters to be stimulating as evidenced by the number of potential research questions I penned in the margins. Practitioners who are early adopters of self-managing teams and alternative organizational structures will also find the book useful. Practitioners will be interested predominately in the introductory chapter, the chapters in the applied settings section and in the critique by Ed Locke. This edited volume has earned a spot on my top shelf as a definitive reference on shared leadership and a useful reference for leadership research more broadly.

Acknowledgement

Reference
Yukl, G. (2001). Leadership in organizations (5th ed.). Pearson Education.