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When and How Are Multiple Leaders Most Effective? It's Complex

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Collectivistic approaches to leadership focus on the beneficial impact of various combinations of multileader units (Denis, Langley, & Sergi, 2012; Yammarino, Salas, Serban, Shirreffs, & Shuffler, 2012). These ''we'' approaches to ''leadership in the plural'' suggest that the mutual influence of multiple members within a unit should enable potential performance benefits because of increased cognitive and structural resources (Friedrich, Vessey, Schuelke, Ruark, & Mumford, 2009). Yammarino and colleagues provide a detailed overview and useful categorization resulting in an increased conceptual understanding of the varying approaches to collectivistic leadership; however, the extent to which leadership should be distributed and how it is enacted among members in light of situational boundary conditions remains relatively unclear (Yammarino et al., 2012). How should leadership be distributed among team members (e.g., should 25%, 50%, or 100% of the members engage in leadership functions)? Further, when should this influence process consist of overlapping roles or unique roles among members (e.g., should multiple members both engage in initiating structure and consideration or should one member engage in initiating structure and another member engage in consideration)? We address these challenging questions through focusing on how and when collectivistic leadership is effective by considering various forms of multileader units in conjunction with the situational context of complexity.

The increasingly complex work environment is a main driver of collectivistic forms of leadership (Yammarino et al., 2012) and should be considered as a boundary condition of its effectiveness (Denis et al., 2012; Pearce, 2004). Highly complex environments call for a variety of skills and expertise among leaders, which are provided by collectivistic forms of leadership. However, these attributes may be harmful in less complex environments given that ''once the initial task structure is developed and performance routines are in place, the need for dynamic leadership is unnecessary at best and detrimental at worst'' (Pearce, 2004, p. 50). We build from these perspectives to examine how and when the distribution of multiple leaders may be more or less effective under various types of complex conditions. We first discuss efficiency as a core element of effectiveness before examining both the costs and benefits of multileader unit configurations in complex environments.

Efficiency as Effectiveness

To understand the extent to which multileader approaches are most *effective*, we suggest considering when they are most *efficient*. The complexity of an environment is directly related to efficiency in multileader units. What is appropriate in a complex environment, in terms of the extent to which leadership is distributed and roles are coenacted, may not hold in a non-complex environment, and *vice versa*. We position this conditional work environment perspective

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in Katz and Kahn's (1978) social systems theory. Katz and Kahn argue that an organizational system is most effective when it is more efficient than its competitors. Efficiency is defined as the ratio of energic output to energic input. Increasing the number of leaders within a team entails higher levels of energic input through costs such as increased coordination and communication, especially when leadership roles are coenacted by multiple leaders. In order for increased multileader influence to remain efficient, output must increase by a proportionate amount. In complex environments, the increase in input may be worth the cost because the corresponding benefits enable increases in output in terms of reliability and performance. However, in noncomplex environments, the increase in input may not be worth the costs because output does not increase proportionately and may actually decrease output due to increased opportunities for problems. To incorporate the efficiency as effectiveness perspective, we consider the benefits and costs of multileader influence in conjunction with complex environments.

The Benefits of Multiple Leaders

The presence of multiple leaders within a unit may influence effectiveness. Shared and collective leadership literature suggests that diverse perspectives from multiple leaders may lead to more valuable information being offered and applied to an event. This information processing perspective (Williams & O'Reilly, 1998) facilitates knowledgeable leaders exerting influence at the most appropriate time (Friedrich et al., 2009). The increased levels of knowledge through multiple perspectives should be especially valuable in complex environments with characteristics of novelty and disruption. When an event is novel or disruptive, having an increasing number of perspectives and prospects for exerting influence gives the unit the best chance of understanding and dealing with the event.

Role coenactment may also be beneficial when each leadership role is taken on by multiple leaders because this structure enables members to offer backup behaviors. As more leaders overlap in role responsibilities, the likelihood of missing key environmental cues is reduced, thereby minimizing the negative impact of an unavailable team member (Weick & Roberts, 1993). These backup behaviors should be particularly valuable in complex environments that are characteristic of urgency. When an event is urgent, the backup behaviors of multiple leaders ensure that someone is always available to address the event (Klein, Ziegert, Knight, & Xiao, 2006). With short work cycles in time sensitive situations, waiting for one leader to participate in a specific role may be ineffective. Backup behaviors ensure that processes can seamlessly continue and keep pace with time demands in urgent work environments.

The Costs of Multiple Leaders

Although multiple leaders can lead to increased effectiveness in novel and disruptive environments and role coenactment can be beneficial in urgent environments, multiple leaders within a team may also incur costs that make it more difficult to operate from an efficiency perspective. The network leadership literature suggests that additional relational ties are costly due to increased communication and coordination (Brass & Krackhardt, 1999). When one leader influences another team member it takes time and effort. If multiple leaders are influencing multiple members, the costs become exponential due to the additional layers of expectations and functions. Similarly, team leadership research suggests that increased members lead to additional opportunities for miscoordination (Ilgen & Hollenbeck, 1991). The more influence being offered, the more opportunity for misinterpretation as well as the potential for resistance if the direction does not coincide with another member's perspective. This challenge corresponds with the complexity leadership literature, which suggests dysfunctional collective processes may arise given the difficulties in aligning

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objectives, incentives, and understandings of multiple leaders (Crevani, Lindgren, & Packendorff, 2010).

In support of these concerns, research suggests that in spite of diverse knowledge structures characteristic of multiple leaders, this variety of information is often not pooled efficiently, given that members tend to focus on common information (Stasser & Titus, 1985). This lack of perspective integration can be compounded in novel and complex environments such as emergency response teams (Mesmer-Magnus & DeChurch, 2009). Urgent environments may also cause members to make biased leader attributions because they do not have time to appropriately evaluate the expertise of each leader (Berger, Fisek, Norman, & Zelditch, 1977).

Future Consideration of Multiple Leaders and Complex Environments

We suggest that collectivistic approaches to leadership should consider multileader configurations in conjunction with the complexity of the environment along two key dimensions: (a) the number of leaders and (b) the coenactment of behaviors among leaders. We believe that more specific theoretical and empirical attention to these issues will help advance understanding of collectivistic forms of leadership. Although some collectivistic leadership studies focus on a particular number of leaders sharing leadership (e.g., Gronn, 1999), others test the group as a whole and make the assumption that all members participate as leaders (e.g., Pearce & Sims, 2002). Understanding how many leaders are exerting influence allows scholars and practitioners to better recognize both the benefits of multiple perspectives along with the costs of additional relational ties, which are particularly important in novel and disruptive environments.

Further, although network leadership has studied leader-follower relations and varying numbers of leaders, the approach generally does not examine multiple leadership roles being occupied by each member within the team in terms of coenactment (e.g., Carson, Tesluk, & Marrone, 2007). Shared and collective leadership studies have also yet to test the extent to which team members participate in influencing others through one specific leadership role or coenactment of multiple leadership roles. Understanding the distribution of leader role behaviors allows scholars to incorporate the potential benefits of backup behaviors, as well as the inherent costs of coordination, which are particularly important in urgent work environments.

By considering collectivistic leadership along the dimensions of the specific number of leaders and the coenactment of roles, researchers and practitioners may be able to better pinpoint the amount of costs and benefits incurred by a multileader unit. This starting point may enable more appropriate estimates of the efficiency of the multileader unit in light of different types of complex environments. Our hope is that by overlaying the efficiency perspective in terms of unit configurations of multiple leaders and role coenactment, scholars can obtain a clearer understanding of when and how collectivistic leadership is most effective.

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