Is Shared Leadership Shared?

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Abstract: This study examines the definition of shared leadership and how to measure it. Research so far defines shared leadership as possessing some basic common characteristics. However, the aggregation approach and the social network approach, which have different characteristics, coexist in terms of measurement methods. The former combines various existing leadership concepts and emphasizes the “leadership” part. The latter looks at how leadership is being shared; thus, the emphasis is on the “shared” part.

Keywords: shared leadership, aggregation approach, social network approach

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Introduction

Leadership plays a key role in corporate management.¹ Within the field of leadership, shared leadership has been the topic of many studies in recent years due to factors such as changes in organizational structures and the growth in knowledge work (Sweeney, Clarke, & Higgs, 2019). Previous studies have demonstrated how shared leadership enhances team performance and the like and have also incorporated meta-analysis (Wang, Waldman, & Zhang, 2014; Wu, Cormican, & Chen, 2020).

In contrast, this study examines shared leadership from the perspective of its definition and measurement methods. Specifically, this study focuses on the extent to which shared leadership is defined and measured from a common standpoint. Research so far defines shared leadership as possessing some basic common characteristics. However, in terms of measurement methods, there are two approaches with different characteristics. Therefore, although these approaches address the same concept of shared leadership, they can be divided into two groups: those that emphasize the “leadership” part and those that emphasize the “shared” part.

Definitions of Shared Leadership

Shared leadership first became a leadership research topic in the mid-1990s (Zhu, Liao, & Yam, 2018).² An early study on the subject was Pearce and Sims (2002), who defined shared leadership by comparing it with vertical leadership, calling it “distributed influence

¹ For example, Abe (2019), Kosuge and Takahashi (2016), Sato (2015), and Tsuda and Sato (2020) point out the importance of leaders in organizational transformation.

² However, the starting point can be found in older studies. See also Döös & Wilhelmson (2021).

from within the team” (Pearce & Sims, p. 172) and “lateral influence among peers” (Pearce & Sims, p. 176). Among other definitions that have been proposed are “an emergent state where team members collectively lead each other” (Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009), “an emergent property of a group where leadership functions are distributed among group members” (Drescher, Korsgaard, Welp, Picot, & Wigand, 2014, p. 772), and “an interactive influence processes in which leadership functions are dynamically shared among team members” (Liang, Knippenberg, & Gu, 2021, p. 68).

Previous studies have therefore not adopted completely uniform definitions. Consequently, we can say that there is “a proliferation of definitions” (Zhu et al., 2018, p. 840) and that there are “inconsistencies in the definitions adopted” (Sweeney et al., 2019, p. 120).

Concurrently, however, it has also been stated that there is considerable commonality in the content of these definitions (Zhu et al., 2018). According to them, in many prior studies, the definitions of shared leadership have the following three characteristics in common.

The first is a focus on lateral influence among peers. Compared with vertical leadership, where a specific, formal leader is assumed to be leading, shared leadership emphasizes horizontal influence among team members.

The second is the viewpoint of leadership as an emergent team phenomenon. In previous studies, discussions considered leadership to be wielded by a particular person. In comparison, shared leadership is regarded as being generated by the team as a group. Therefore, the unit of analysis is not the individual or interpersonal relationships; rather, it is at the team level.

The third characteristic is that leadership roles and influence are dispersed across team members. That is, leadership is broadly dispersed throughout the team, rather than being centered on a

particular individual.

Certainly, aforementioned studies do not all equally emphasize these three characteristics. For instance, Ensley, Hmieleski, and Pearce (2006) do not put any emphasis on the dispersion of leadership influence, whereas Lord, Day, Zaccaro, Avolio, and Eagly (2017) do not put any emphasis on lateral influence among peers. In addition, Nicolaidis, LaPort, Chen, Tomassetti, Weis, Zaccaro, and Cortina (2014) add the characteristic that “team leadership functions are voluntarily shared” to the other three characteristics. Nevertheless, we can observe a certain degree of commonality in these definitions, particularly those that consider it a team-level phenomenon.

Measurements of Shared Leadership

There are two major approaches to measurement (Sweeney et al., 2019; Zhu et al., 2018).

The first is the aggregation approach. For example, Pearce and Sims (2002) use a questionnaire survey of team members to measure various types of leadership, such as aversive, directive, transactional, transformational, and empowering. The focus of the survey was to compare shared and vertical leadership; therefore, respondents were asked to respond to the same questions about team leaders and team members, and the latter responses were aggregated under the concept of shared leadership.

In particular, for transformational leadership, in the question, “My team leader (members) provides (provide) a clear vision of who and what our team is” (Pearce & Sims, 2002, p. 192), when “my team leader” is the subject, it is measuring vertical leadership, and when “members” are the subject, it is measuring shared leadership. Other studies using this approach include Ensley et al. (2006), Hoch and Kozlowski (2014), Muethel, Gehrlein, and Hoegl (2012), and Song, Gu,

and Cooke (2020).

In this approach, “team member” can be used in place of “leader” for the leadership metric, which means that it is possible to use transformational leadership and other existing concepts of leadership. This approach therefore emphasized the “leadership” part of shared leadership.

The other approach is the social network approach. Mehra, Smith, Dixon, and Robertson (2006) view shared leadership in terms of the centralization of leadership influence networks and posit that shared leadership occurs when team members are asked whom they regard as their leader. The more a network structure is focused on a particular individual the more centralized it is, whereas shared leadership occurs when there is less concentration and more dispersion. In addition, these questions do not clearly specify what is meant by “leader” and do not delve into the content of leadership to better comprehend the understanding of the survey targets themselves. A similar study that focuses on centralization is Small and Rentsch (2010).

Carson, Tesluk, and Marrone (2007) look at networks from a different perspective.³ This study regards shared leadership in terms of network density. The higher a network’s density, the more likely it is that there will be shared leadership. The study asked each team member, “To what degree does your team rely on this individual for leadership?”, and possible responses were given on a five-point scale ranging from “not at all” to “to a very great extent.” The authors then calculated density by aggregating the team members’ leadership assessments and dividing the sum by number of possible ties among team members. However, to find the number of possible ties, it was not actually necessary to depict the network using a name

³ Some argue that both centralization and density should be measured, but there have actually been very few cases in which both were done in the same study (DeRue, Nahrgang, & Ashford, 2015).

generator; therefore, strictly speaking, this did not constitute measurement of a social network.

Subsequent studies use similar methodologies (Ali, Wang, & Johnson, 2020; Liu, Hu, Li, Wang, & Lin, 2014; Lorinkova & Bartol, 2021).

These social network approaches have the common characteristic of putting more emphasis on the impact within the team than on the leadership paradigm itself. Thus, they can be considered as emphasizing the “shared” part of shared leadership.

Discussion

As we have seen above, while studies of shared leadership have certain commonalities, their measurement methods take two approaches that possess different characteristics. Table 1 adds some newer studies based on Appendix S3 in Sweeney et al. (2019).

As for the differences in these two approaches, studies that take the social network approach show a stronger relationship with team performance more than studies that take the aggregation approach (D’Innocenzo, Mathieu, & Kukenberger, 2016; Nicolaidis et al., 2014; Wu et al., 2020).

In recent years, studies taking the social network approach have become more common than those taking the aggregation approach. Table 1 shows the increasing number of studies using the social network approach.

Conclusion

This study examined the definition of shared leadership and how to measure it. We found that the definitions have many commonalities, but that there are two types of measurement methods that possess different characteristics each. However, when

Table 1. Measurements of shared leadership

1996	Avolio, Jung, Murry, & Sivasubramaniam	Aggregation
2001	Ensley & Pearce	Aggregation
2002	Pearce & Sims	Aggregation
2002	Sivasubramaniam, Murry, Avolio, & Jung	Aggregation
2006	Mehra, Smith, Dixon, & Robertson	Social Network (Centralization)
2006	Ensley, Hmieleski, & Pearce	Aggregation
2007	Carson, Tesluk, & Marrone	Social Network (Density)
2008	Solansky	Social Network (Density)
2010	Hoch, Pearce, & Welzel	Aggregation
2010	Boies, Lvina, & Martens	Aggregation
2010	Small & Rentsch	Social Network (Centralization)
2011	Gupta, Huang, & Yayla	Aggregation
2012	Ishikawa	Social Network (Density)
2012	Muethel, Gehrlein, & Hoegl	Aggregation
2012	Bergman, Rentsch, Small, Davenport, & Bergman	Social network (Density)
2013	Huang	Aggregation
2013	Fausing, Jeppesen, Jønsson, Lewandowski, & Bligh	Aggregation
2014	Hoch & Kozlowski	Aggregation
2014	Liu, Hu, Li, Wang, & Lin	Social network (Density)
2014	Hoch	Aggregation
2015	Mendez & Busenbark	Social Network (Density)
2015	Fausing, Joensson, Lewandowski, & Bligh	Aggregation
2015	Zhou, Vredenburgh, & Rogoff	Social Network (Density)
2015	Lee, Lee, Seo, & Choi	Social Network (Density)
2015	Mathieu, Kukenberger, D'Innocenzo, & Reilly	Social Network (Density)
2017	Zhou & Vredenburgh	Social Network (Density)
2020	Ali, Wang, & Johnson	Social Network (Density)
2020	Klasmeier & Rowold	Social Network (Density)
2020	Kukenberger & D'Innocenzo	Social Network (Density)
2020	Song, Gu, & Cooke	Aggregation
2021	Liang, Knippenberg, & Gu	Aggregation
2021	Lorinkova & Bartol	Social Network (Density)
2021	Mitchell & Boyle	Social Network (Density)
2021	Sinha, Chiu, & Srinivas	Social Network (Density)

Source: Created based on Sweeney, Clarke, & Higgs (2019), Appendix S3. The papers in bold boxes were added by the authors.

we compare the two approaches, we found that the number of studies using the social network approach instead of the aggregation approach is increasing. It is possible that the measurement methods will not converge, but that one of these approaches will become the mainstream.

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