Exploring the processes, practices and relationality of shared leadership from a follower perspective.

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Introduction

Shared leadership belongs to a research stream exploring pluralistic forms of leadership, marking a shift away from the overriding influence and authority of an individual leader. This changing dynamic characterizes the 21st century knowledge economy, where increasingly no one person has all the answers, thus driving collaboration at all levels (Fletcher, 2012). It also characterizes this action research study, considering the changing nature of leadership, as a situated, collaborative activity, within a UK Housing Association, where front-line staff and middle managers have co-created organisational strategy.

Shared leadership may be defined as a process of shared influence between groups, seeking to lead one another towards the achievement of group, and/or organisational goals (Beyerlein et al., 2000). This research stream typically explores team effectiveness, emphasising organisational antecedents and outcomes and examining the contribution, or otherwise, of discrete leadership variables to improve team performance (Denis et al., 2012). However, beyond the consideration of discrete variables, deemed necessary for such an undertaking, such research tends to draw a blank, concerning the process itself, how those involved experience and operationalize such leadership.

 Significantly a number of leadership studies still privilege the senior leaders' perspective and the " nature and impact of followers and following in the leadership

process" remains relatively unexplored (Uhl-Bien, 2014, p. 89). If the followers' 'voice' is therefore expressed, we may better embrace the "thinking, experimentation and arguments of those who have experienced", working collaboratively on this leadership process (Roth and Kleiner cited in Gearty, 2014, p. 3). This paper presents a broader exploration of shared leadership as a social process, i.e. concerning the 'when', 'where' and how leadership is being shared and 'with whom', to understand more fully what may therefore constitute successful shared leadership practice?

Shared leadership is considered an extension of vertical leadership (Beyerlein et al., 2000). Therefore, decentering overriding leadership influence away from a given individual becomes potentially significant, in terms of understanding how such influence may be shared between followers and their 'superiors'. Assuming such leadership influence is an expression of power, a corollary question is raised?: How is such influence, or power experienced through these relationships? The significance of power dynamics in leader/follower relations tends to be ignored, or positively conceived (Gordon, 2002, Uhl-Bien, 2014). Where leadership responsibility is actively being devolved, this presents a unique opportunity to appreciate how followers are experiencing such dynamics, inherent in these working relationships.

Additionally, in shared leadership research, there is an assumption that positive, supportive working conditions simply exist (Denis et al., 2012). This paper seeks to explore organisational conditions that have informed this undertaking.

Methodology

Participatory Action Research was adopted and emphasises participation and dialogue, directly giving 'voice' to followers' experience (Denzin, 1989). As a pragmatic problem solving tool, it has enabled co-inquirers to reflect on their recent experience of shared leadership, to understand and develop this practice further (Elliott, 1991). A learning history is being created and draws on oral history, "listening, voice and story" (Gearty, 2014, p. 3). Such personal stories can usefully "bring specificity, detail and feeling..surface that which is tacit" (ibid).

However locally conceived, such stories are also in their way universal (ibid). A learning history therefore seeks to offer more than a general account of 'best practices' in shared leadership, providing a more finely grained account of events, thinking and arguments of those directly involved, to stimulate deeper insight and learning.

Findings

These are preliminary however, a number of themes are emerging.

Influencing processes and practices

Concerning how followers may embrace such devolved leadership influence, certain organisational processes have enabled a supportive cultural climate, for this work. Devolved decision-making processes already exist within service functions, akin to those outlined in Follett's Law of the Situation, thus devolving leadership responsibility and expertise locally (Follett, 1924). Subsequently, this devolved, collaborative undertaking has not come as a complete 'cultural shock' to those involved.

Additionally a formalized approach to peer-based negotiation has informed a more rigorous and dynamic exploration of strategy discussions, between peers and with senior leaders. This dialogical method encourages systematic exploration of strategic proposals, and cross-pollination of influence, laterally and upwards. Staff have also expressed much greater confidence in "challenging" peers and senior leaders .

Relationality

Findings here have been informed by Fletcher's work on relational theory, which emphasises the cultivation of interdependence as a key leadership achievement, as opposed to individualism, or independence (Fletcher and Kaufer, 2003, Fletcher, 2012). Achieving such interdependence raises another issue concerning how power with, as opposed to power over others is thereby achieved (Follett, 1924)? Interestingly, the Chief Executive was deliberately absent from the process, except for setting out certain principles or strategic boundaries e.g. pursuit of a growth strategy etc. No further review with staff occurred, until the end of the process. However vertical influence was arguably present, via other senior leaders facilitating, or participating throughout the process.

Cultivating such interdependence arguably has other consequences, including staff experiencing pressure and stress, due to increased work pressure and to self-imposed pressure to perform well, and "not to let colleagues down".

Conclusions

This paper presents a different account of a shared leadership experience, from the perspective of those directly involved, describing how *they* have engaged and developed *their* thinking and *their* activities. It highlights contextual factors, more usually overlooked, with implications for managing such innovative interventions overall. This approach to sharing leadership also raises distinct challenges, in terms of resource implications, including significant time and investment to facilitate these leaders' development.

How shared leadership may therefore be operationalized by front line staff demonstrates a practices perspective, more usually found in Distributed Leadership studies and analysed at organizational level, rather than between individuals working in group settings (Fitzsimons et al., 2011).

Finally, in relational terms, staffs' experience of influence, starts to draw out certain power dynamics that have had to be negotiated differently by all involved.   These findings will ideally inform recommendations concerning the development of shared leadership practice here and more widely.

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