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The Paradox of Power In Collective Leadership – Implications For Management Education

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Abstract

Power remains a contentious issue within discussions on collective leadership. On the one hand, it has been argued that collective leadership innately addresses organisational power inequities by embracing inclusivity, and through recognising that leadership is distributed beyond those who hold formal senior roles. On the other hand, collective leadership literature has been criticised for appearing to neglect unequal power relations within organisations. Our purpose in this paper is to argue that, rather than seeing the issue in binary terms, there is greater insight to be gained from viewing power in collective leadership as paradoxical. Drawing from three insider action research studies, we present a series of vignettes to explore tensions, contradictions and interplay between formal and collective leadership. Collaborative effort is recognised as essential to high performing organisations, which therefore has clear implications for how managers learn to circumnavigate and influence collective leadership in ways that appreciate such nuances of power. Our intention is to offer further insight for an epistemology of practice predicated on paradox.

Introduction

Power remains a contentious issue within discussions on collective leadership. On the one hand, it has been argued that collective leadership innately addresses organisational power inequities by embracing inclusivity, and recognising that leadership is distributed beyond those who hold formal senior roles. On the other hand, collective leadership literature has been criticised for appearing to neglect unequal power relations within organisations. Our purpose in this paper is to argue that, rather than seeing the issue of power in binary terms, there is greater insight to be gained from viewing power in collective leadership as paradoxical. Paradox has a valuable history of use in organisation studies (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989; Smith et al, 2017). Defined as tensions that derive from ‘persistent contradictions between interdependent elements’ (Vince et al, 2018:91), the idea of organising paradox is presented as

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one of several options for navigating apparently unresolvable tensions or contradictions (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Drawing from insider action research studies, we present a series of vignettes to explore tensions, contradictions and interplay between formal and collective leadership. Recognising that collaborative effort is essential to high performing organisations, there are clear implications for how managers learn to circumnavigate and influence collective leadership in ways that appreciate such nuances of power.

We proceed in the following way. Firstly, we look at the rise in interest in collective leadership and the diverse meanings that are encompassed by this term. Next, we consider the treatment of power within writing on collective leadership, and some of the critiques that have been levelled at an apparent neglect of inequalities. We introduce the use of paradox in organisation studies before moving to explain the empirical contexts and approach for the insider action research studies from which we draw. We position our thinking on collective leadership as social constructionist and we align ourselves to the relational and practice perspectives on leadership and power as a process of becoming (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). This underlies the approach to selecting empirical illustrations though collecting ‘moments’ of collective leadership from emersion in the field. We make three major contributions. The first is to provide a rare insider empirical processual study of the emergence and functioning of power in organizing. Our second is to advance understanding of the interplay between formal power and collective leadership, as well as to illuminate dynamics of exclusion and collective leadership. Our third contribution is to illuminate implications for management development and education.

Theoretical background

Practice and process in collective leadership

Collective leadership has emerged as a significant post-heroic perspective that decouples the practices and effects of leadership from the formal hierarchical roles occupied by individuals (Margolis and Ziegert, 2016). It is, unsurprisingly, not without its own diversity. Thinking on collective leadership has been influenced by the relational turn (Uhl-Bien, 2006), the practice turn (Raelin, 2016), relationships between power and process (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002), criticality and dialectics (Collinson, 2014), collective and network approaches (Ospina and Foldy, 2015), shared leadership and distributed leadership (Friedrich et al, 2014), to name the main. Whilst they vary, these approaches share a view on leadership as emergent patterns of influence that derive from the dynamics of ongoing social interaction, and a shifting of power away from traditional hierarchical constraints. A practice perspective on leadership conceives

it as activities resulting in direction, or as future-oriented influence processes constructed in interaction with organizing processes. This resonates with a processual conception of leadership as the manifestation of processes rather than the property of individuals (Crevani et al, 2010). Endres and Weibler (2017) offer a helpful categorisation of approaches to collective leadership, differentiating between constructivist entity perspectives (such as leader-follower exchange, shared and distributed leadership) and social constructionist perspectives (such as practice and relational approaches to leadership). We use the latter to position our focus on the flows of influence that derive from socially constructed processes and practices.

Power and collective leadership

The collective leadership literature appears imbued with an optimism that, by virtue of moving away from the exclusive focus on individuals in formal leadership positions (Freidrich et al, 2009), shared leadership brings power to ‘followers’ (Hernandez et al, 2011). Contrast is made with autocratic leadership through a shift of ‘*power away from traditional hierarchical constraints*’ (Margolis and Ziegart, 2016:336). The frequent mention in the collective leadership literature of a variety of mechanisms, such as empowerment, delegation and the giving of voice further belies an expectation of power sharing.

Such enthusiasm has been challenged as naïve, if not ideological by some. McCabe (2010) levelled the criticism of neglect of unequal power relations to practice research in strategy. Similarly, Collinson (2018) reproaches leadership-as-practice (LAP) advocates for giving power dynamics scant attention, reinforcing Collinson’s (2014) advancement of a Critical leadership perspective for understanding power. Several collective leadership authors counter that they implicitly turn their gaze to power relations through the attention they pay to micro-practices and inter-relationships as leadership emerges as people get work done (Carroll & Nicholson, 2014; Ospina and Foldy, 2015).

In part, the controversy over whether and how satisfactorily collective leadership pays attention to power dynamics, derives from how collective leadership is defined and what we choose to observe. For example, does ‘collective’ refer to the cumulative activity of multiple individuals in leadership positions as they interact with others? Or is leadership the consequence of interactions that we can only observe as it happens or in retrospect? This is where we find Endres & Weibler’s (2017) distinction between leadership as an entity or as socially constructed, helpful. Whilst acknowledging the rich potential for attending to the micro-detail of power relations, they nevertheless echo the critique that power issues and asymmetrical

relationships have been over-looked across collective leadership approaches. We will draw on this distinction in the full paper.

Paradox

The apparent contradiction between collective and hierarchical power is an organising paradox (Smith and Lewis, 2011), where paradox is understood to be a tension that derives from ‘persistent contradictions between interdependent elements’ (Vince, 2018:91). A practice theory perspective on paradox conceptualises ‘paradox as continuously unfolding ... within ongoing interactions’ (Jarzabkowski and Lê, 2017: 437), and consequently amendable to study through embedded research. Applying the notion of paradox to collective leadership as practice and process, led to our question: how is power evident in the collective relationships and practices that produce leadership? We chose to look at this question through the lens of paradox because of the potential to avoid simple binaries between individual/collective or structure/agency.

From the discussion so far, hierarchical power and collective leadership can seem antithetical. Critical leadership typifies this dichotomous positioning, typically drawing attention to a binary of control/ resistance and structure/agency (Carroll & Nicholson, 2014; Harding et al, 2017). However, even within the critical leadership literature there have been calls to go beyond dualistic either/or thinking (Collinson, 2018). So, how can we have both/and? To answer this, we draw on Poole and Van de Ven’s strategy of temporal separation where ‘one side may create the conditions necessary for the existence of the other’ (1989: 567).

Methodology

The paper draws from three insider-action research studies, each conducted over the course of 1-2 years. Described as ‘at home ethnography’ (Gorli et al, 2015), the value of action research is that organisation members can simultaneously be part of the action and attentive researchers, with unparalleled in-situ access to emergent activity. This is particularly strong with insider-action research (Coghlan 2011), where complete organisation members work in collaboration to negotiate changes and to enquire into their individual and collective organisational practice. We liken this to Shotter’s (2006) ‘witness thinking’ through which ‘moments’ of change ‘can only become available to us if we stay in living motion’ (Shotter,2006:599).

The three projects we focus on here took place in different organisational contexts. The first involved intervention to increase customer service orientation within a Kenyan bank. The

second was an organisation development project within an international political agency. The third related to culture change within a Caribbean civil service agency. Our rationale in this paper for drawing from the three studies is not to make a cross case comparison, but to present a rich selection of vignettes that illustrate interplay of hierarchical and collective power over time during the change project.

Analysis

Our approach to analysis was firstly, to familiarise ourselves with the overall story of change within each action research project. Next and from the vantage point of knowing the direction these projects took, we identified ‘moments’ or turning points within the expansive accounts of the action research activity. We were interested in junctures, which, looking back, were evidently significant for the direction the project subsequently took. These included, for example, particular decisions, flurries of activity that took off independently of the project initiator, and instances of realisation that reframed a project. These moments drew our attention to crucial episodes and we examined what happened before, during and after to derive data about power dynamics within the collective practice of leadership.

Findings – illustrations of interplay of hierarchical and collective power

In the full paper, we will present a number of vignettes. In this abstract we present four vignettes to exemplify our approach, with some initial discussion. This will be elaborated in the full paper.

Vignette 1

Kenyan Bank 1

At a strategy review event for senior directors the improvement of customer service was given the status of "Must Win Battle" and [X] was assigned to lead this battle. The senior team discussion concluded that the traditional way of doing things at the bank must change in some way. There were significantly loud voices from as high as the board of directors and the executive team calling for an overhaul of the *kiundutho* way of doing things. [*This translates as "without structure"*]

In reflecting upon his discussions with fellow directors [X] is struck by the dissonance of there being an apparent diagnosis of this situation (an overhaul of "the *kiundutho* way of doing things"), without there being any sense of what to do. This creates an opening for a new approach. Whilst *kiundutho* translates as "without structure", he could not think *what* the new structure should be, although he could see *who* he might involve in this project. [X] pulled together a group of people from different departments in the bank for an exploratory discussion.

Here we see formal power naming the issue and creating the space for a project of change. However, decisions on how to proceed, what work to do, are taken on by a collectivity of

participants from different areas and levels of the bank. One of the main means by which they chose to galvanise support for the intention of becoming more customer centric was use of Christian metaphors of evangelising and confession. (*This was recognised as potentially exclusionary for non-Christians, and exclusion is a theme we will explore further in the full paper*). The second vignette illustrates this in practice.

Vignette 2

Kenyan Bank 2

The time came to announce the change programme to the wider bank. At this point, the MD offered to write a letter of support and inviting participation in the programme.

Nelly spoke up at the group meeting to discuss this idea “... *the apostles did not start by writing letters. They started by doing preaching from house to house ... it was much later that Paul started writing letters to the believers... the time for the MD writing emails to the staff will come much later after we have started evangelising... writing an email from the MD’s office now announcing the initiative may put people on the defensive....*”

The idea of not using an overt show of support from the MD, immediately struck the group as the correct thing to do. They embarked upon a plan to hold a series of communication sessions throughout branches across the country. Within months, they had engaged directly with all employees at the bank. Only then was a letter sent out from the Directors supporting the initiative.

In this vignette, the formal authority of the directors was kept aside by the burgeoning collective leadership of those involved in steering the change project. A statement of support from the M.D. was avoided, in favour of engaging directly with the workforce, contributing to the collective sense-making of what lay at the heart of this change process.

Vignette 3

International Political Organisation

[Y] presented his survey results [*of misalignment between senior and middle managers*] to the Commander, and with his encouragement the senior leaders decided that this was something they wanted to know more about and, critically, do something about. However, some felt that they should not even have asked the questions, others expressed scepticism about the project, others were worried about the additional workload dealing with this would bring. The Commander decided the results needed to be seen as being objective. He did not want to take the risk of senior leaders not taking this effort seriously. He decided that they would contract an organisational culture consultancy company to make an assessment through an all-staff audit. It was a risk to ask external consultants into the organisation, as it was not clear what they would find, but in the event their results echoed those of [Y].

This was a pivotal moment. [Y] and the other organisation members working on the culture change project relied on the commander at this juncture to use his authority to move the project to the next stage. From then on, however, the direction taken by the project was shaped by the collective activity stimulated by [Y].

Vignette 4

Caribbean civil service

[Z]'s initial approach to involving wider organisation members in the project was to seek assistance from the highest ranked individual, who she thought would act as a gatekeeper. He sent out an email to potential participants, inviting them to volunteer.

... there was only one response.

[Z] had much more success in involving other organisation members when she used her own direct relationships to approach people to participate.

Discussion

In each of the three organisations referred to here, the most senior individuals were not directly involved in shaping the change projects as they unfolded. However, they had given licence for the projects to go ahead or instructed that 'something be done' about an ill-defined issue (in the bank). In [Y]'s organisation, a turning point occurred when some of the senior managers disputed his initial evidence of a misalignment between senior and middle manager experiences

of leadership. At this point, the Commander intervened to request an external audit of the entire workforce. When this echoed [Y]'s findings, it had the effect of silencing previous sceptics, though they were not necessarily persuaded. As one said: “...*if the General is interested in it then I'd better damn well be fascinated in it... whatever I feel about it is irrelevant because I'm going to do it.*” In this sense formal power can be seen as resource for [Y], clearing space for him to continue with the collaborative dialogic interventions.

In [X]'s organisation, we see a different interplay between the collective leadership of the enquiry team and formal authority when the team consciously decided not to draw on hierarchy when they chose to follow the Christian metaphor of ‘knocking on doors’ rather than issue a letter from the Chief Executive about the change programme. For [Z], her initial deferral to hierarchy, requesting the boss to invite participation in the change project, proved to be a deterrent to participation because, interpreted in the context of recent history, the letter was seen as an instruction rather than an invitation to collaboration. Through these varying examples, we argue that the relationship between collective and formal authority is not straightforward. It can be paradoxical, whereby at times hierarchical power can create space and freedoms within which collective leadership emerges and burgeons. At other times, it appears that for collective leadership to emerge and gather momentum, it is necessary for formal power to stay quietly on the fringes for a period.

The lens of paradox draws attention to the interplay between formal power and collective leadership. Our vignettes illustrate how both played a role over time; that they can co-exist and indeed needed each other. In the international political organisation, the hierarchical instruction protected the space for the collective activity to build up momentum. In the bank, the collective generated their own momentum and only invited communication from the CEO on their terms, to support their activity. In the Caribbean civil service, collective leadership proceeded with tolerance from the head, but without instruction or action to pave the way for wider momentum.

[Conclusion and implications for management learning and education](#)

The full paper will elaborate on the flux between hierarchical and collective power and explore how they exemplify temporal separation as a strategy for dealing with organisation paradox in the sense that each was necessary for the other. We will argue that there are particular project stages when formal authority may be particularly visible: ‘starting out’- giving permission to initiate; ‘meeting resistance’ – protecting the space for collective leadership when the emerging practice confronts and provokes a counter-challenge from other established power blocs; and

‘amplifying’ – reinforcing the direction of collective leadership as momentum builds. In contrast, we find at least one distinct stage in which collective power was more productive and hierarchical power was judged likely to stifle the change initiatives. This we term ‘diffusing meaning’ – as the work of collective leadership gathered momentum and stimulated wider involvement.

Our findings have implications for management education, which we will elaborate on in the full paper. Though learning to manage through paradox was first mooted almost twenty years ago (Lewis and Dehler, 2000), it has not been particularly well explored since. A few others have advocated recognition in the curriculum of such commonly co-existing organisation tensions as exploration and exploitation; integration and differentiation; stability and innovation, control and flexibility (Audebrand et al, 2017; Lips-Wiersma, 2004). Of most relevance to our focus, Waldman and Bowen added the paradox of ‘maintaining control while simultaneously letting go of control’ (2016:316). Despite these valuable proposals for curriculum development, we offer further insight for an epistemology of practice predicated on paradox. As such, we add to those who have been calling for a curriculum and pedagogy that better helps managers deal in practice with the convoluted situations they confront, characterised by intricacy, ambiguity, incomplete data and multiple interests.

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