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SHARED LEADERSHIP: CREATING THE CONDITIONS TO MAKE IT REALLY WORK

The distributed ownership and responsibility that comes with shared leadership has many benefits, but there are several things that can get in the way. Maria Brown and David Ringwood from MRG share their research into the common blocks to shared leadership and describe how coaches can help leaders reduce their reliance on those patterns.

Shared leadership has many upsides when it works effectively in practice. Responsibility is distributed, people are empowered to deliver with a greater level of ownership, and organisational resources are, in theory, used to the greatest effect. There is also less pressure and fewer expectations placed on one person. Although there are many different approaches to shared leadership, none will work if leaders are not open to the idea of sharing command and involving others in the decision-making process. Shared leadership also relies, at least to a reasonable extent, on the willingness of the group to step up and assume the level of ownership that is transferred to them. Shared leadership is especially susceptible to the 'lowest common denominator' effect, where those who are less motivated or experienced might contribute less, increasing the time needed to assess the team's readiness and to ensure that tasks and responsibilities are shared with a reasonable degree of equity. Therefore, the imperative for facilitating shared leadership is greater than ever. Benefits include:

Facilitating workplace changes post-pandemic
The Covid-19 pandemic taught many leaders the importance of collaboration and distributing work more efficiently. For some, the realisation may have come from finding themselves isolated and not having regular contact with team members. For others, it may have come from an increased need for collaboration as they balanced work and new personal responsibilities.

Continued leadership development
Change is the only constant, and leaders need to make sure they are practising and learning new skills. Shared leadership allows everyone to participate and gain proficiency in a variety of leadership areas and organisational processes. Additionally, leaders can gain a new perspective from observing rather than steering every process. The experiential learning that comes with shared leadership not only allows leaders to sharpen their skills, but it ensures that the organisation will have a well-trained pool of leaders with expertise across a broad range of areas.

Improved employee engagement
Engaged employees go the extra mile for their teams and organisations. Increasing individual's level of participation in leadership processes can increase their appreciation for and understanding of organisational goals. This broader understanding can increase engagement with and investment in the organisation.

Enhanced approaches to diversity
Diverse teams make more effective and better decisions. The different experiences, ways of thinking, perspectives and knowledge represented in diverse teams ensures a variety of expertise and qualifications. Shared leadership allows qualified individuals the control and freedom to do and learn. Leaders can make the most out of the diversity in their teams by giving everyone the opportunity to participate and apply their skills.

There are a variety of approaches to shared leadership and the best way for leaders to engage in this practice will depend on their particular contexts. Therefore, this paper does not prescribe or endorse one way of practicing shared leadership.

THE STUDY METHOD

A global sample of 8,568 leaders who completed the Leadership Effectiveness Analysis 360 (LEA 360™) (see panel) between 2018 and 2021 was included in this research. Most of the leaders in the sample (91%) completed the assessment as part of a development or coaching programme. Approximately 41% of the sample came from the United States, 32% from Europe and 5% from Australia and New Zealand. Of those who self-reported their gender, 61% identified as male and 39% identified as female. Most (73%) were at a department/unit manager level or above, and a variety of industries and functions were represented.

Participants were evaluated by their observers on each of the 22 LEA 360 behaviours, including the five blockers to shared leadership, and on their effectiveness in 31 leadership areas. Observer scores were combined (means) and weighted by an observer group to ensure that all observer types (i.e., bosses, peers and direct reports) had equal influence on participant's combined scores.

Participants were then categorised based on the number of blockers to shared leadership they demonstrated (see panel). Those with two or fewer blockers were considered to have the least amount of difficulty engaging in shared leadership, and to be the most prepared for practising shared leadership.

Leaders with three or more blockers were considered to be at risk of having difficulty engaging in shared leadership. They were classified into three groups: leaders with three blockers to shared leadership; leaders with four blockers; and leaders with five blockers

The groups described above were analysed and compared in order to answer three research questions:

1. How common it is for leaders to have blockers to shared leadership?
2. Does having any number of blockers to shared leadership have a negative impact on a leader's ability to be effective?
3. What are the specific behaviour patterns most likely to be exhibited by leaders with three or more blockers to shared leadership?

RESULTS

How common are blocks to shared leadership?
Overall, more than a quarter of leaders (25.7%) had at least three blockers:

- Three blockers: 10.8%
- Four blockers: 10.1%
- Five blockers: 4.7%

Therefore, coaches are highly likely to encounter leaders with blockers to shared leadership, making this a relevant area of leadership development.

Are blockers to shared leadership associated with lower leadership effectiveness?
A key goal of this research was to determine whether blockers to shared leadership had a negative impact on leadership effectiveness. Participants from each of the categories described above were compared to leaders with fewer blockers on 31 measures of leadership effectiveness.

ABOUT THE LEA 360™

The LEA 360™ is a multirater leadership assessment that measures 22 leadership behaviours and effectiveness in 31 leadership areas (mrg.com/assessments/leadership/).

The 22 behaviours measured by the LEA 360 are specific, discrete and observable, making them easy to identify when providing a leader with feedback on how they are behaving in their role. It is critical to note that the behaviours are descriptive, not evaluative – high scores are not good or right, nor are low scores bad or wrong. This study specifically focuses on observer perceptions, providing insight into how leaders appear to their colleagues (rather than their self-evaluations).

The LEA 360™ also measures leadership impact with 31 leadership competency items. In contrast to the behaviour measures, these items are evaluative and ask observers to rate leaders on a seven-point scale indicating their level of effectiveness at delivering the outcomes associated with each competency. Studying these measures in relation to behaviours can provide insight into which behaviours may contribute to effectiveness in specific contexts.

BEHAVIOUR PATTERNS THAT BLOCK SHARED LEADERSHIP

When over- or under-emphasized, five of the behaviour measured by the LEA stand in sharp contrast with the spirit of shared leadership.

- High emphasis on making decisions independently and working autonomously (61st percentile or higher on Self)
- High emphasis on being competitive, authoritative and forceful (61st percentile or higher on Dominant)
- Low emphasis on delegating and then giving others freedom to learn without interference (40th percentile or lower on Delegation)
- Low emphasis on helping others and putting the team's interests first (40th percentile or lower on Cooperation)
- Low emphasis on seeking opinions from others and adopting their ideas, encouraging democracy (40th percentile or lower on Consensual)

RISK-LEVEL YELLOW
Leaders with 3 blocker behaviors

Rated less effective* in **11** areas of leadership
*when compared to leaders with 2 or fewer blockers

RISK-LEVEL ORANGE
Leaders with 4 blocker behaviors

Rated less effective* in **14** areas of leadership
*when compared to leaders with 3 or fewer blockers

RISK-LEVEL RED
Leaders with 5 blocker behaviors

Rated less effective* in **17** areas of leadership
*when compared to leaders with 4 or fewer blockers

FIGURE 1
The relationship with blocker behaviours and perceived leadership effectiveness

Leaders with more than three blockers to shared leadership were consistently rated less effective on 11 leadership areas (see panel) when compared to those with fewer blockers (see Figure 1). They are less effective at understanding people, establishing rapport and working with others, all of which are essential leadership skills for achieving almost any outcome in the modern workplace. Not surprisingly, they are also less self-aware, a skill that can help leaders recognise where they might benefit from teaming up or even delegating to a colleague with more appropriate skills or experience.

What are the most common behaviour combinations in leaders with blockers to shared leadership?
The specific blocks to shared leadership vary across individuals. However, some combinations are more common than others. We describe and name those patterns here to help coaches know what to look for when identifying leaders who need help in this area. This is important because these blockers can risk a leader's ability to work with others to achieve organisational objectives and to achieve more goals than a leader would working on their own – and that can have organisation-wide effects.

Risk level: Yellow

- All about me and what I want: makes decisions independently, challenges others, less likely to accommodate for others.
- Commanding from a distance: makes decisions independently, less likely to accommodate for others, less likely to request and use input from others.

Risk level: Orange

- Competitive lone operator: makes decisions independently, challenges others, less likely to accommodate for others, less likely to request and use input from others.

Risk level: Red

- Makes all the decisions and does all the work: makes decisions independently, challenges others, less likely to accommodate for others, less likely to request and use input from others, less likely to delegate fully.

Are there benefits to having blockers to shared leadership?
One area where leaders with three or more blockers to shared leadership excelled was in conveying self-confidence. Behaviour patterns often exist because they are reinforced and may even convey some level of fitness for a particular role. Leaders who are perceived as self-confident may get promoted because it is obvious and observers assume that their self-confidence is a proxy for competence.

Leaders with three, four or five blockers may appear to be more self-confident because they are assertive, less likely to relinquish tasks or pull back from their responsibilities, and tend to trust their own hunches over anyone else's input. Unfortunately, the perception of self-confidence is useless if not supported by actual skill.

As this research has shown, leaders with blockers to shared leadership are less effective across a diverse set of areas, even if they seem to be more self-confident. Leaders with fewer blockers to shared leadership only conveyed less self-confidence. There were no differences in how self-confident leaders in each group felt. This suggests a need to help leaders focus on conveying more self-confident. MRG research on self-confidence has found several ways that leaders can appear more self-confident, which also align with shared leadership:

- Use their communication skills and ability to build connections to exert influence and persuade others.
- Make it clear that they are willing to take command of the project they are best qualified to manage.

- Trust their technical knowledge and expertise when making decisions and providing input to others.
- Not be overly reliant on the opinion of more senior members of the organiwation as good advice can come from any level.
- Take the time to consider all options and consider the implications of their decisions.

> **Areas of less leadership effectiveness in leaders with three or more blockers**
>
> When compared to leaders with fewer blockers, leaders with three, four or five blockers were consistently less effective in the following leadership areas:
>
> - Willingness to listen
> - Straightforward, open communicator
> - Ability to work with diverse people
> - Effectively inclusive
> - Insight into people
> - Conflict management
> - Promotes employee engagement
> - Credibility with peers and direct reports
> - Displays self-awareness
> - Capacity to contribute to team performance
> - Demonstrates ethical leadership

COACHING INSIGHTS

This research describes the specific leadership practices that empirically demonstrate negative implications for effective shared leadership. By implication, there are particular leadership behaviours that are more likely to foster a shared leadership environment, and to do so most effectively. So what should coaches be encouraging their coachees to embrace and to avoid behaviourally that will increase the probability of making shared leadership work in practice?

The research indicates that, where a shared leadership approach is desired, a more inclusive, democratic approach to decision making is critical. This entails making decisions more collectively and ensuring that everyone has a voice in those decisions, increasing their engagement and sense of ownership of whatever objectives have been collectively agreed. The fact of this is unlikely to be enough; team members need to understand that expectations are changing and that the way the team will work is changing. Explaining the rationale can really help – and understanding people more individually, and how to get the best from them in a shared leadership scenario, really matters. Hence the need to have or to deepen the leader's insight into others.

Coaching here often centres around exploring how self-aware the leadership is, how objective and complete they are in their observations of others, and the extent to which areas of bias such as assumptions and mindsets might limit their ability to 'read the room' most effectively. People can be quite unique and diverse in many ways, and this becomes an asset if the leader is sufficiently lucid in their observations of others, and therefore able to calibrate their behavioural choices more sensitively towards the team.

If a shared leadership approach is likely to work, a few behaviours are important to avoid overutilising. An overtly competitive and assertive

approach, or a more autocratic 'my way or the highway' approach, will probably not foster the ideal focus on shared responsibilities. The leader should be willing to place less focus on their own individual deliverables, focusing instead on what best serves the greater good of the team.

Therefore, there are three main areas that merit some focus in the coaching conversation:

- The ability of the leader to objectively observe and to understand their team beyond their own individual assumptions and biases.
- The awareness of the leader of the leadership practices that might fundamentally undermine or 'block' any endeavours towards a shared leadership approach.
- With supporting conditions in place, what behaviours will most effectively foster and sustain shared leadership in their context?

One message needs to be clear; shared leadership is not about lowering the bar; it is about a different and more distributed way of achieving the same outcomes. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, greater technology enablement, and changing expectations around remote and virtual working makes shared leadership an interesting and increasingly relevant proposition, but not one that necessarily can benefit from a significant degree of historical practice or precedent. As with many topics in coaching, starting by trying a few things and seeing what works in a given context is probably the best approach, and this research should provide some insights about where to start and what to potentially avoid.
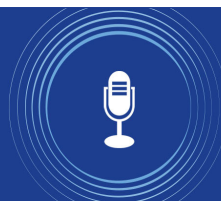
ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Maria Brown is Head of Research at MRG. She is passionate about using research insights to help people reach their potential. Maria's research explores contemporary themes in leadership, motivation, and professional development. She regularly speaks at conferences across the United States and Europe and is published in several peer-reviewed journals. Maria earned her PhD in Psychology from Vanderbilt University.

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