

The Review of Shared Leadership

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Abstract: As one of contemporary leadership theories, shared leadership theory emphasizes collective responsibility among team members, which enhances collaboration, innovation, and organizational effectiveness through the decentralization of authority and responsibility. This article reviews the concept of shared leadership, its historical development, measurement scales, and empirical research at the individual level, team level, and organizational level, along with practical organizational case studies. With these achievements, this paper also discusses future research directions for shared leadership to promote theoretical development and practical application.

Keywords: Shared Leadership; Collective Responsibility; Cross-cultural Team.

1. Shared Leadership's Concept and Development

Shared leadership, as one of the emerging leadership theories, which has received widespread attention. Gibb (1954) proposed the concept of "distributed leadership", which, as one of the cornerstones of shared leadership theory, emphasizes the decentralized nature of leadership. Gibb's research demonstrates that leadership is not the exclusive responsibility of a single individual but a dynamic process involving shared accountability among multiple participants. This perspective breaks through the limitations of traditional leadership models and has inspired scholars to rethink leadership concepts. Gibb's research is significant because it not only provides a foundational framework for theories of shared leadership but also offers a theoretical basis for the diversity and dynamism of leadership. Based on Gibb's research, Pearce (2004) further developed the concept of shared leadership. Pearce argues that leadership responsibility should be shared by all team members rather than borne by a single leader.

The research from Pearce provided theoretical evidence for the allocation of leadership responsibility among team members, in particular with in environments that request high levels of interaction and collaboration, such as innovative enterprises or cross-functional teams. It is significant of Pearce's research, because it changes leadership from a single leader to collective participation, thereby promoting team collaboration and innovation. The research from Wu et al. indicates that factors such as team culture, trust among team members, and task complexity significantly affect the implementation of shared leadership. Their study's innovative significance lies not only in exploring the multidimensional influences of shared leadership, but also in revealing its adaptability and flexibility under different environmental conditions. With the development of globalization and digitalization, shared leadership is increasingly being adopted in multinational corporations and distributed teams, gradually becoming an indispensable leadership model in modern organizations.

2. Measuring Shared Leadership

Initially, scholars measured shared leadership through self-report questionnaires, in which participants assessed their

leadership roles and the sharing of responsibilities within their teams using Likert scales. Although self-reporting is simple and easy to administer, this method has limitations due to strong subjective perception bias, making it difficult to fully reflect the actual distribution of leadership responsibilities within teams (Wu, Cormican & Chen, 2020). Hoch (2013) developed the Shared Leadership Questionnaire (SLQ) specifically for this purpose; it covers multiple dimensions, including shared leadership accountability, intermember collaboration, and team communication. The strength of the SLQ scale lies in its ability to quantify leadership sharing among team members, providing reliable data support for research. This tool has been widely adopted across various industries, particularly in technology companies and innovative teams. As research progressed, more measurement tools emerged to provide comprehensive and objective assessments, such as 360-degree feedback and peer evaluations. 360-degree feedback, a commonly used tool for measuring shared leadership, gathers input from colleagues, supervisors, subordinates, and even external stakeholders. This multi-perspective approach helps identify various dimensions of shared leadership behaviors (Gockel & Werth, 2011).

3. Empirical Research on Shared Leadership

Empirical research on shared leadership primarily focuses on its impacts and effects across different levels—individual level, team level, and organizational level, it involves multiple variables, including antecedent variables, such as team member traits, team culture, external motivators; mediating variables such as team trust, cohesion; moderating variables such as task complexity, team collaboration, and outcome variables, such as team performance, team effectiveness.

Research on individual level, the empirical research mainly examines the influence of shared leadership on individual behavior, psychological states, and job performance. Bligh, Pearce, & Kohles (2006) further studied the relationship between self-leadership and shared leadership, and found that self-efficacy plays a driving role in the implementation of shared leadership. Their research also found that individual self-efficacy and team trust are key factors for the successful implementation of shared leadership. This distinct finding

also implies that when you want to promote shared leadership, your attention should be paid to cultivating self-efficacy and psychological capital of team members. Sweeney, Clarke, & Higgs (2019) took a research on shared leadership in business organizations, they explored its enhancing effect on team innovation potential. Their empirical research found that team members under a shared leadership model can stimulate creative thinking, thereby improving the team's innovation capabilities. This study's innovative significance lies in its explicit identification of the positive relationship between shared leadership and team innovation, further indicating that the active participation of each team member is crucial for team innovation. The research from Liu, Hu, Li, Wang, & Lin (2014) found that shared leadership helps improve the learning behavior of team members, thereby promoting the overall innovation and efficiency of the team.

In team research, Wang, Waldman, & Zhang (2014) demonstrated that shared leadership among team members positively correlates with team efficacy, enhancing innovation, problem-solving capabilities, and decision-making efficiency. Sweeney, Clarke, & Higgs (2019) found through empirical studies on business organizations that shared leadership significantly boosts team innovation potential by stimulating creative thinking and solution development.

Gu, Chen, Huang, & Liu (2018) revealed that proactive participation in leadership roles fosters greater accountability and motivation for innovative ideas, establishing a significant positive relationship between shared leadership and team creativity—a finding particularly evident in cross-organizational teams. Research shows that shared leadership promotes team flourishing by strengthening transactive memory systems (TMS) and cultivating positive emotional climates (Chen Lifang & Yu Guilan, 2023). In shared leadership, collaboration levels and clear task distribution directly impact team performance (Han, Kim, & Beyerlein, 2024). A team culture that supports open communication, collaboration, and shared responsibility effectively facilitates the implementation of shared leadership. Conversely, in a more closed and hierarchical team, the implementation of shared leadership encounters more obstacles (Muethel & Hoegl, 2010).

Muethel & Hoegl (2010) explored the cultural and social impacts of shared leadership in globally dispersed teams, revealing how cultural differences influence shared leadership practices. In particular, cross-cultural teams face greater challenges in distributing leadership responsibilities. Thus, their study offers valuable insights and strategies for implementing shared leadership in such teams, with significant practical implications.

In organizational research, studies indicate that in the face of rapidly changing market environments, shared leadership within organizations can significantly enhance organizational flexibility and responsiveness, while decentralized leadership structures facilitate faster decision-making and execution (Avolio & Walumbwa, 2009). Through further research, scholars have gradually recognized that shared leadership is not merely a decentralization of power or responsibility, but also a cultural and institutional transformation that involves changes in organizational structure, communication methods, and the establishment of trust and cooperation among team members (Wu, Cormican & Chen, 2020).

Sidhu (2024) researched the impact of shared leadership on corporate innovation, emphasizing that distributing

leadership responsibilities among team members, he found that shared leadership can stimulate greater innovation potential, also he revealed how shared leadership enhances team innovation capabilities and adaptability in complex environments through qualitative analysis.

Bligh et al. (2006) found that organizational cultural support and resource provision are key factors to drive the successful implementation of shared leadership. And, the organizational trust & collaboration culture directly affect the effectiveness of shared leadership. When the organizational culture encourages more innovation, collaboration and autonomous decision-making, their teams can better achieve shared leadership responsibilities, thereby enhance organizational adaptability and innovation capabilities. Peng Zhongyi and Wu Xiaolin (2009) found that shared leadership promotes more scientific and rational organizational operations by introducing more decision-making entities. Klasmeyer & Rowold (2020), found that organizational support and resources are key variables to promote the effectiveness of shared leadership through a multi-level analysis of teams, especially in supportive organizational environments, which shared leadership can effectively improve team and organizational performance.

4. Shared Leadership Practices

The core concept of shared leadership is the distribution of leadership responsibilities among multiple team members or leaders. HUAWEI, as one of famous Chinese company, their alternate chairman system exemplifies this concept by distributing leadership duties among multiple senior executives. Under this system, each alternate president holds relatively independent decision-making authority and responsibilities during their term. This means that leadership power is no longer concentrated in a single individual, but it is shared by a group of senior leaders in turns. This method aligns with the fundamental principle of shared leadership, which emphasizes dispersing leadership responsibilities to teams or multiple leaders.

The alternate president system requires different leaders to make key decisions during their term of office, and each president takes responsibility on communicating and collaborating during the strategic decision-making process. This collective decision-making model fosters collaboration among leaders, ensures that each member's diverse perspectives and experiences are fully expressed and integrated to improve decision quality. Additionally, it solves the challenge of matching senior talent with appropriate roles, and helps the company reduce top executives' turnover rate. Ultimately, the alternate president system makes HUAWEI to maintain an adaptable leadership structure and rapid response capabilities in global, particularly in the face of market competition. These benefits align with shared leadership's benefit of enhancing organizational adaptability and flexibility.

Meanwhile, there is something different between typical shared leadership models and HUAWEI. Shared leadership is usually applied within teams, according to specific tasks and situations, team members assume leadership responsibilities. HUAWEI's alternate president system, however, is more about the collective leadership structure for the senior management level. Its focus is on the distribution of power and the rotation of leadership responsibilities among senior managers, rather than simply sharing responsibility among all team members. Nevertheless, HUAWEI's alternate president

system can be seen as an practice of shared leadership, because its decentralization and sharing of power and responsibility are highly consistent with shared leadership theory , and they have achieved significant results in practice.

5. Summary

As on of new leadership theories, shared leadership theory has achieved significant theoretical and practical breakthroughs. Its definition and core dimensions have been clearly defined, while measurement tools and evaluation methods continue to evolve. Research at the individual level shows that shared leadership enhances members' job engagement and innovation potential. At the team level, studies demonstrate its ability to strengthen collaboration and creativity. At the organizational level, it improves adaptability and flexibility. To advance the theory of shared leadership, several research directions deserve attention: integrating theories from psychology, sociology, and management to build a more comprehensive framework; addressing cultural differences to implement shared leadership effectively across diverse environments (Muethel & Hoegl, 2010); leveraging information technology and AI to optimize leadership distribution, enhance team interaction, and improve decision-making efficiency; and exploring the relationship between shared leadership and organizational resilience (Gichuhi, 2021). These research directions will provide new perspectives and frameworks for both the theoretical development and practical application of shared leadership.

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