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Exploring the dynamics of collaborative leadership and shared governance in higher education institutions

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ABSTRACT

Leadership in education and traditional management theories face significant challenges in evolving to meet the demands of 21st-century organizations. This study identifies specific challenges, such as balancing inclusivity and efficiency, while addressing gaps in participatory decision-making processes. This study examines the potential for new perspectives on leadership by exploring the relationship between the emerging concept of collaborative leadership defined as inclusive, team-based decision-making and the philosophy of shared governance, which emphasizes participatory institutional processes, within higher education institutions. By providing clarity on collaborative leadership, including its focus on decentralizing authority and fostering group efficacy, this research identifies pathways for advancing theoretical development. The integration of collaborative leadership into the framework of shared governance offers a transformative approach to leadership in postsecondary education. Similarly, shared governance enhances the practical application of collaborative leadership, fostering inclusive and participatory decision-making processes. The interplay between these frameworks not only holds promise for leadership in education but also contributes to broader advancements in organizational behavior (OB). Further development of this integrated perspective can strengthen leadership practices and organizational theory, paving the way for innovative and adaptive governance models in higher education.

Keywords: Collaborative leadership, shared governance, Higher Education Institutions.

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1. Introduction

The disciplines of organizational behavior (OB) and education are rich with leadership theories, many of which share overlapping foundations (see Birnbaum, 2002; Chance & Chance, 2018; Owens, 2014; Farnsworth, 2020; Bolden et al., 2018). Indeed, much of the leadership research in education draws heavily from concepts developed within the organizational sciences. However, educators frequently argue that leadership models rooted in business and management practices do not

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adequately address the unique contextual demands of educational settings. Despite the increasing adoption of managerial approaches in educational leadership, which are often grounded in traditional organizational science theories, there is a paradox: management professionals themselves often find these conventional theories insufficiently effective (Gibson et al., 2015). Yet, despite this shared recognition of inadequacies, the development of innovative leadership models that integrate both organizational and educational perspectives remains limited.

Leadership theory has faced considerable challenges, particularly regarding the contentious application of management principles to education, misinterpretations of key ideas, inconsistent translations of concepts, and the absence of universally accepted definitions. This has created a landscape where additional theories might seem more likely to add complexity than clarity. However, this study seeks to address these challenges by examining the connections between collaborative leadership and shared governance within postsecondary education. By engaging with and expanding upon discussions in recent literature, this work aims to refine the understanding of a new leadership model. Although uncertainties persist regarding the cognitive frameworks underpinning collaborative leadership, the research presented here offers a valuable roadmap for the development of this emerging theoretical approach.

2. Theoretical foundations

The principles of shared governance in the organization and management of higher education are closely intertwined with the concept of collaborative leadership. Spillane and Diamond (2017) define collaborative leadership as a term often used interchangeably with democratic leadership, shared leadership, and participatory leadership. However, as the theory gained traction in the discourse surrounding school leadership and management, its definitions have broadened and become more generalized (pp. 1–2). Drawing on insights from the social sciences and frameworks related to socially shared or distributed cognition (Spillane et al., 2011), the foundational work of Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond is widely recognized as pivotal in shaping this model. Similarly, Gronn's independent contributions have been instrumental in refining its conceptualization (Gold, 2010; Zepke, 2017; Mayrowetz, 2018; Bolden et al., 2018). While recent studies have extended the application of collaborative leadership to higher education, much of the existing scholarship continues to focus on its implementation and development within elementary and secondary education, where the theory has been most clearly defined and articulated.

The theoretical foundation underpinning collaborative leadership continues to play a pivotal role in advancing knowledge of its principles and practical application. Rooted in cognitive frameworks, collaborative leadership draws on insights from learning and social psychologists, notably Lev Vygotsky, whose work has significantly shaped theories of instructional design initially developed for elementary education. Unlike behavioral approaches to organizational and learning psychology, these psychologists contributed to the development of constructivist and social constructivist paradigms. However, their contributions fall short of forming a comprehensive and universally accepted theory of social cognition (see Flavell, 2016; Demetriou et al., 2002; Flavell et al., 2015). Despite this, these cognitive foundations remain integral to the continued evolution of collaborative leadership theory.

While collaborative leadership is increasingly recognized as a significant and emerging leadership model, it also faces challenges, including conceptual ambiguities and the need to address myths and misconceptions. Aligning collaborative leadership with shared governance in higher education presents valuable opportunities for mutual enrichment. This integration not only refines the leadership framework but also strengthens governance models. However, meaningful progress in these areas requires a well-informed understanding of both disciplines, emphasizing the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration in shaping effective leadership practices. Democratic ideals emphasize equality, participation, and accountability in governance, ensuring citizens influence decision-making and uphold the rule of law (Dahl, 2000). In contrast, managerialism prioritizes efficiency, standardization, and performance metrics, often applying private-sector management principles to public institutions, which can sometimes conflict with inclusivity and participatory governance (Pollitt, 1990).

3. Shared governance

As an organizational framework, shares notable similarities with the concept of collaborative leadership, despite some critical distinctions. Collaborative leadership emphasizes leaders acting as motivators and servants, decentralizing power and decision-making in a manner that parallels how shared governance distributes authority and responsibilities within post-secondary education institutions (Morrison, 2012). While both models have unique features, their overlapping principles highlight the potential for mutual enrichment. Despite contemporary critiques of shared governance as an organizational model and the presence of reforms that challenge its ideals, the theoretical foundations of shared governance help elucidate the core values embedded in collaborative leadership.

Although its foundational philosophy dates back further and institutions worldwide share a similar heritage (Coaldrake et al., 2016; Altbach, 2011), shared governance as a formalized concept emerged with the development of the American Association of University Professors' (AAUP) 1915 Declaration of Principles. This foundation was later solidified with their 1925 "Statement of Principles of Academic Freedom and Tenure." During this period, university faculties underwent a process of professionalization, leading to increased expectations for college and university presidents, as well as governing boards, to acknowledge their accountability to a community of independent scholars (Rudolph, 1990: 415). These changes occurred against the backdrop of laissez-faire economics and the growing labor union movement. The structures and processes of shared governance that subsequently evolved were rooted in democratic ideals, emphasizing collective decision-making involving administrators, governing boards, faculty senates, and, later, student representation. This inclusion of students, which gained momentum following the two world wars and the U.S. civil rights movement, further expanded the principles of shared governance to align with broader social and political progress.

The concept of academic freedom gave rise to the AAUP's Statement on the Government of Colleges and Universities, a foundational framework for the governance of educational institutions. This statement outlines key principles for the management of post-secondary institutions, emphasizing collegial and participatory involvement by stakeholders in processes such as the selection of administrators, budget planning, policy formulation, curriculum development, and enhancing student learning outcomes. While shared governance has faced criticism for its perceived inability to provide adequate checks and balances, managerial approaches, particularly those aligned with the corporatization of higher education, are also criticized for undervaluing collegial and democratic processes within post-secondary institutions (e.g., Tierney & Minor, 2013; Rich & Merchant, 2019; UNESCO, 2020). Across the globe, institutions with shared governance traditions are grappling with similar contentious transformations (e.g., Guthrie & Pierce, 2000; Coaldrake et al., 2016). In light of increasing accountability demands from local and national governments, these administrative and managerial shifts are impacting not only higher education but also institutions at all levels of learning. Educational institutions lacking a robust tradition of shared governance are especially susceptible to managerial reforms and trends, making them more vulnerable to external pressures.

It is noteworthy that organizational behavior (OB) and the organizational sciences are increasingly recognizing the importance of adopting democratic and collective management models. These approaches aim to enhance individual capabilities across the organization (Flood, 2019; Hammond, 2022; Bowditch et al., 2011). Such models align more closely with the principles of shared governance than with traditional management theories. Scholars contend that organizations are inherently more complex than conventional theories suggest, necessitating the decentralization of leadership across various levels (Morrison, 2012). When adapted appropriately to the context of post-secondary education, collaborative leadership emerges as a promising framework for shared governance. This approach has the potential to foster consistent and deliberate collective actions, thereby cultivating collegial relationships and strengthening institutional dynamics.

Practical examples of shared governance and collaborative leadership in higher education provide a more concrete understanding of these frameworks. For instance, the University of Saskatchewan implements shared governance through its University Council, where faculty and administration collaborate on academic policies and initiatives, including the development of strategic plans. Similarly, the University of Alberta demonstrates collaborative leadership through its General

Faculties Council, which unites stakeholders to address critical institutional priorities. At the University of Toronto, shared governance is evident in the Governing Council's inclusive approach to decision-making, involving faculty, students, and staff to ensure equity and innovation. Additional examples include the University of Michigan and the University of California System, both of which employ shared governance structures that emphasize faculty involvement in strategic decision-making processes. Internationally, Queensland University of Technology (QUT) in Australia exemplifies collaborative leadership by prioritizing transparency and collective responsibility in its governance practices (Coaldrake et al., 2016; UNESCO, 2020).

4. Collaborative leadership

The concept of collaborative leadership, while nuanced in its application to formal structures and processes, remains straightforward at its core. Traditional leadership theories predominantly focus on the power and authority of a single leader to direct followers and drive organizational activities. However, to cultivate autonomous and empowered individuals within an organization, leadership theory has evolved to emphasize the shared contributions of all members. This paradigm shift reflects the recognition that no single individual can effectively lead in every context (Morrison, 2012). While organizational theorists continue to grapple with unresolved challenges, it is evident that leaders cannot hold all the answers. Instead, they must rely on the collective expertise, implicit knowledge, and capabilities of the organization's members (Bowditch et al., 2011: 241, 368–71).

Collaborative leadership emerges as a response to the limitations and dissatisfaction associated with conventional leadership theories and practices. By acknowledging that no single leader can unilaterally command or oversee every aspect of an organization, this model promotes a more integrative and inclusive approach to leadership. In essence, if traditional leadership is characterized by the influence of an individual over a group to achieve specific goals, collaborative leadership redefines this dynamic as the shared influence of the group itself. This model offers a holistic perspective on organizational leadership, fostering adaptability, collective responsibility, and innovation in achieving institutional objectives.

The practice of leadership in educational settings is often characterized by an expansive and widely collaborative approach, prompting researchers to identify and categorize various methodologies and applications within the current theoretical framework. Collaborative leadership, as opposed to being merely a division of labor or cooperative effort, encompasses diverse patterns of collective action. These range from spontaneous collaboration and role-sharing to formalized relationships (Zepke, 2017). Additionally, some scholars delineate distinct applications of collaborative leadership, such as its use in fostering democratic practices, improving efficiency and effectiveness, and building human capacity (Mayrowetz, 2018). These varied perspectives expand the theoretical framework, enhancing its relevance and adaptability within organizational theory in higher education. However, the incorporation of new ideas and perspectives in the evolving stages of the theory has led to some discomfort about its direction. Despite ongoing concerns regarding its conceptual underpinnings, leadership, as inherently unbounded, underscores the necessity for a coherent framework of shared understanding and standardized logic to guide its application effectively.

To better understand the concept of collaborative leadership, let us consider a hypothetical scenario. Imagine two individuals noticing garbage scattered across a park. Whether prompted by spontaneous cooperation, their roles as volunteers for a cleanup initiative, or their responsibilities as sanitation workers, they decide to work together to clear the litter. By collaborating on this task, they demonstrate the essence of collaborative leadership through their shared effort. Contrast this with a scenario where one individual undertakes the cleanup solely for personal recognition or self-interest, refusing any assistance. Such an approach, while driven by individual motivation, would likely be less effective than a collaborative effort that distributes responsibilities and leverages the strengths of both individuals.

The situation cannot be fully described as collaborative leadership if individuals are not voluntarily taking on responsibilities but are instead assigned tasks as a form of strict disciplinary action. For leadership to be truly collaborative, individuals must have the autonomy to delegate tasks and decide on strategies that best enhance their capacity to perform effectively. This form of leadership practice requires active participation in the intentional creation of shared meanings within the

organization. This includes deciding how tasks should be approached, identifying opportunities for repurposing resources, and determining what is considered valuable to the organization. The importance of both individual and collective benefits in professional development and learning is evident, and this holds equally true for formal roles within the organization.

Instead of relying on a behavioral framework characterized by individualized, skills-based divisions of labor, the core cognitive principles of collaborative leadership continue to be pivotal, even as the theory remains debated. Rooted in psychological foundations, this perspective emphasizes the interconnectedness of individuals and their environments, arguing that collective action depends on the development of shared and socially distributed cognition (Spillane et al., 2011). This concept is equally relevant to structures and processes in education. For instance, there is a growing call among practitioners to rethink instructional leadership, which is traditionally viewed as an administrative role dictating teacher practices to enhance classroom instruction (see MacNeill et al., 2023). To achieve sustainable and effective outcomes, it is crucial to adopt collective decision-making approaches that actively incorporate the perspectives and feedback of those most directly impacted by organizational actions.

In any given context, the practice of collaborative leadership emphasizes recognizing and harnessing the collective potential of all participants. It extends beyond the expertise of a single individual, instead drawing on the shared knowledge and actions of the entire group (Spillane et al., 2011; Morrison, 2012; Manu 2020). However, the concept is not without its challenges and misconceptions. Collaborative leadership can lead to potential issues such as power imbalances, conflicts, groupthink, or the creation of an overly relaxed environment. For instance, disparities may arise if one individual assumes more credit while contributing less, or if actions occur that undermine the foundational principles of shared leadership. These complexities highlight the need for careful implementation to uphold the core values of collaborative leadership practice.

The foundational concept of the leadership model is straight forward in theory. However, its practical application to formal organizational structures presents significant challenges. As highlighted by Valsiner (1992: 65), contemporary social cognitive theory delineates the overarching principles of what development involves but offers limited insight into the specific processes by which it unfolds. When applied to organizational frameworks in educational settings, this leadership theory rooted in cognitive theory necessitates a more robust research agenda to address these complexities and bridge the gap between conceptual understanding and practical implementation.

Built on principles similar to those of collaborative leadership, shared governance establishes a system of checks and balances by distributing power throughout an institution. This framework provides a robust structure for supporting collaborative leadership in any learning environment or organization. However, the unique complexities of post-secondary education, characterized by its high levels of differentiation, present specific challenges. The application of collaborative leadership relies heavily on factors such as the function and subject matter of leadership, the institution's type and size, and its stage of organizational development (Spillane, 2006).

Despite its potential, collaborative leadership and shared governance are not without their challenges. Misunderstandings and misuse can arise, and critiques of collective processes in organizational and social psychology raise valid concerns (Gerber, 2001; Ramo, 1997; Manu 2021; Dwumah Manu 2023). Similarly, while managerial approaches often fall short as viable alternatives, shared governance itself is not immune to limitations, with obstacles to effective implementation often surfacing. Given these considerations, it is essential to acknowledge the critical distinctions between collaborative leadership and shared governance, as well as the complexities of integrating ideas from both frameworks. Such nuanced understanding is vital to bridging their potential and fostering innovative governance models in education.

While shared governance emphasizes participatory decision-making, it does not inherently guarantee collective action or formal collaboration, particularly given that the competitive individualism rooted in classical management theory remains deeply ingrained in the culture of higher education. Despite its democratic ideals, the practical application of shared governance often fails to promote a positive perception of human nature. Instead, it organizes a division of labor designed to balance institutional power, yet this structure can lead to power struggles rather than equitable distributions.

Such tensions and conflicts often result in fragmented decision-making processes that undermine collegial relationships and collaborative efforts.

These organizational challenges highlight gaps in the theoretical and practical understanding of shared governance, pointing to areas that require further exploration. Unlike collaborative leadership, shared governance and its historical foundation in academic freedom were originally designed to shield faculty from administrative hierarchies, with principles reminiscent of workforce unionization during its early development. However, collaborative leadership theory has the potential to address these issues by fostering a more integrated and cooperative governance framework. Additionally, the embedded in shared governance can complement and enhance the development of collaborative leadership models, creating a mutually reinforcing relationship that strengthens institutional governance.

5. Conclusion

Institutions that fully embrace the principles of shared governance establish frameworks capable of supporting the theoretical application of collaborative leadership. Collaborative leadership offers promising solutions to challenges encountered within shared governance systems. Nonetheless, questions persist regarding how to effectively enable the social organization of cognitive interactions essential for producing consistent and reliable outcomes. In the face of rising managerialism across all levels of education, the collaborative leadership model provides a clear pathway for enhancing human capacity-building. This approach supports efficient and effective practices that uphold and further the core values of shared governance.

To further enrich the field, future research could investigate the long-term impacts of integrating collaborative leadership and shared governance on institutional performance and student outcomes. Additionally, exploring the role of technological advancements, such as AI and data analytics, in supporting collaborative decision-making would provide innovative insights. Comparative studies across different cultural and regional contexts could also identify best practices and unique challenges in implementing these frameworks globally.

For higher education institutions, actionable steps include developing training programs for administrators and faculty to enhance collaborative leadership skills and understanding of shared governance principles. Establishing pilot programs within departments to test collaborative governance models before scaling them institution-wide could yield valuable lessons. Creating platforms for ongoing dialogue between stakeholders, such as students, faculty, administrators, and external partners, would foster transparency and inclusivity in decision-making.

Policy recommendations include advocating for institutional policies that formalize shared governance frameworks and ensure consistency against external pressures. Government and accrediting bodies should consider supporting institutions adopting collaborative governance models through targeted funding or incentives.

The synergy between shared governance and collaborative leadership offers significant mutual benefits, enriching both frameworks. Furthermore, these concepts present organizational behavior (OB) and organizational theorists with valuable opportunities to develop alternative and innovative theories. By working toward an epistemological alignment, the often-debated intersections of education and organizational sciences can form a shared foundation for advancing leadership theories and practices.

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Biography

Blessing Dwumah Manu is currently pursuing a PhD in Educational Administration at the University of Saskatchewan.

Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest.