

A Framework for Examining Distributed Leadership

There are several dimensions of distributed leadership to examine within organizations. For this series of case studies we chose to focus our inquiry on decision making, where distributed leadership appears in the ways groups and teams make decisions together. For all organizations, regardless of whether or how leadership is distributed, individuals play different roles in making decisions and therefore exhibit different amounts of leadership. These roles may shift depending on:

- The **scope of the decision**, which can range from being routine with few ripple effects to being high stakes and affecting the whole organization (e.g., decisions related to organizational sustainability, priorities, values, or strategic direction)
- An individual's level of access to **information** about the decision
- An individual's **responsibility** for the repercussions and benefits of that decision



We define distributed leadership along a spectrum, with a sole individual making all decisions—high-stakes or not—at the least distributed end, using information that is exclusive to them (i.e., leadership is singular). This person, in turn, bears complete responsibility for those decisions.



At the most distributed end, many people at an organization have a voice in making decisions, including those that are high stakes. Just as these people have access to information that enables them to effectively contribute to these decisions, they also share responsibility for their decisions' ripple effects. Knitting a fully distributed organization together requires a culture of transparency and ongoing feedback, in which information-sharing and mutual trust enable individuals to truly share responsibility for their decisions. This responsibility must also be coupled with a greater diffusion of authority within organizations.

Variability in the scope of a decision combined with differences in the information available to individuals and their responsibility for that decision results in the myriad ways different organizations practice distributed leadership. Turning up the dials on these aspects—scope, information, and responsibility—for more people drives an organization toward the more distributed end of the spectrum, while excluding individuals from these aspects moves an organization to a more singular mode of leadership.

This framework for examining distributed leadership emerged from in-depth conversations with staff at seven organizations, each located at different places on the distributed leadership spectrum. Some are just beginning to open up decision-making processes to more staff, while others are building on long-held, founding principles of distributing responsibility and leadership. Whether they are experimenting with these processes or have completely codified them, the organizations we studied pursue distributed leadership to some degree because of the promise it holds: distributing leadership has the potential to create a more meaningful, productive organizational culture based on trusting relationships among staff. Not only that, organizations that distribute leadership do so to make smarter, more informed decisions that benefit them and their communities.



© 2018 The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. This document is made available under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>