
Cultivating Distributed Leadership

Tools and practices that build a participatory culture



This case study is one in a series of five that explore the practice of distributed leadership. Commissioned by the Hewlett Foundation's Performing Arts Program, Open Mind Consulting and Informing Change describe the experiences and insights shared by seven organizations that demonstrate distributed leadership.

Introduction

Organizations distribute leadership for many reasons, chief among them to:

- Include more voices in decision making
- Share responsibility among multiple leaders for risks, successes, and failures
- Bring more perspectives and insights into solving complex problems
- Share power, resources, and authority more equitably

“We move at the speed of culture- and values-building. It’s not about time... so initially we will go slow so that in the long term we can go fast.”

– Director of Philanthropic Partnerships,
Thousand Currents

To ensure that distributing leadership results in forward movement, organizations need tools and practices that enable people and teams at different levels of authority to work together and make decisions without sacrificing efficiency. These tools and practices ideally provide opportunities for people to challenge one another's ideas, and engender the requisite honest communication, transparency, and trust to make these conversations productive. Taken together, tools, practices, and deeper levels of trust help build the participatory organizational culture that enables distributed leadership to thrive.

Tools & Practices for Inclusive Conversations

With more leaders participating in an organization comes a need for more information sharing, reflective learning, and collaborative decision-making processes among staff. When organizations have tools and practices for inclusive conversations, all of these processes become more productive. California Shakespeare Theater, Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, and Thousand Currents provide examples of these tools and practices, which allow multiple viewpoints to inform their conversations and support their efforts at distributing leadership.

California Shakespeare Theater's Season Planning Matrix

California Shakespeare Theater (Cal Shakes) created a process for bringing more people and perspectives into its artistic season planning processes through its season planning matrix. A theater company rooted in the Bay Area, Cal Shakes has been exploring distributed leadership practices as an expression of its commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Cal Shakes leaders use the season planning matrix to gather feedback from staff about the plays they are considering producing. In addition to production details such as cast size, cost of production, venue, and form (e.g., play, musical), staff add to the matrix:

- The play’s culture of origin
- The cultural lens of the writer
- Whether the script advances—or has potential in production to advance—equity by race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and age
- A production’s opportunities for civic engagement and programming
- Potential audiences

By weighing in on these elements of a play and season, staff provide crucial feedback about the direction in which they want programming to move. The tool is limited in that it brings more staff into the decision-making process, rather than bringing people of different levels of authority directly into final decision making. Nonetheless, having more staff participate in this aspect of the decision-making process is an important step toward distributing leadership. Both the managing and artistic directors believe they would not have made the decisions they did without the season planning matrix, and staff feel more involved in selecting the season’s programming.



The season planning matrix informed Cal Shakes’ 2018 programming decisions, such as producing an adaption of Shakespeare’s *War of the Roses*. Photo courtesy of California Shakespeare Theater. Credit: Jay Yamada

Thousand Currents’ Performance Review

Thousand Currents distributes leadership by cultivating in staff, from day one on the job, the sense that each of them are leaders within their own sets of responsibilities. In line with Thousand Currents’ values that emphasize courage, humility, creative collaboration, experimentation, and interdependence, two-way feedback is an important aspect of this culture. Thousand Currents has baked their commitment to learning across levels of positional authority into their performance review process. A template guides the process, which begins with a set of guiding principles stating that the review process at Thousand Currents:

- Is a developmental rather than punitive tool
- Reinforces and builds on year-round performance management
- Emphasizes self-reflection
- Helps align values, priorities, strategies, and roles at Thousand Currents



Two-way feedback enables a culture at Thousand Currents for distributed leadership to thrive. Photo courtesy of Thousand Currents.

Questions in the review template reinforce these principles and focus on self-reflection. For example:

- “What three accomplishments/achievements are you most proud of? What did you learn?”
- “List one or two tasks/projects where the outcome was less successful than your goal. What would you do differently next time? What did you learn?”
- “Which Thousand Currents values did you practice most frequently in the past year?”

These questions reinforce learning regardless of whether the staff member is reflecting on a success or a challenge. Further, feedback explicitly moves in two directions; one line of questioning is entirely devoted to feedback for supervisors:

- “What has your supervisor done well to help you do your job? What have they done to hinder your performance? Please be candid. Feedback is essential and solicited. What is one thing that can enhance your work with your supervisor even further?”

In facilitating two-way feedback between staff members and supervisors, Thousand Currents’ performance review process is an example of how Thousand Currents proactively stimulates challenging, reflective conversations. Within the context of the performance review, as well as in weekly check-ins and daily practices, these conversations give staff the tools and mechanisms to speak up and contribute to the organization, regardless of their level of formal positional authority.

On The Move’s No Third Party Conversations Rule

In order to support smooth practices for distributed leadership, On The Move has instituted a No Third Party Conversations rule—i.e., individuals don’t have high-stakes conversations outside a team and always discuss conflicts directly between involved parties. This means that if two people haven’t reached a mutually agreed upon conclusion, one person doesn’t engage others in the conversation without the other person present. This practice is cultivated through an ethos of self leadership, which is often established with new leaders through early engagement in their On The Verge program. The No Third Party Conversations rule reinforces the organization’s principles for honest, direct, two-way communication, regardless of role or positional authority.

On The Verge: Kickstarting Self Leadership

Since 2003, On The Verge—the flagship program of On The Move—has supported emerging leaders in building knowledge, clarity, and strength at the personal, interpersonal, and professional levels. Many program graduates transition into formal positions of leadership at On The Move and many more participate in decision-making teams at various levels throughout the organization as staff members.

Tools & Practices for Transparency

In addition to prioritizing opportunities for challenging conversations, organizations that distribute leadership also incorporate tools and practices for transparency. In order for more people to have the power and authority to participate in and make decisions, they need information and clarity on pertinent information about those decisions. But transparency goes beyond enabling smart decisions. If an organization is distributing leadership, it is also distributing responsibility and power, and, through compensation, duties and accountability. Transparent financial practices, such as sharing salary information, help staff understand how resources at an organization are allocated, as well as their role and level of responsibility in allocating those resources.

Destiny Arts Center’s Salary Transparency

For Destiny Arts Center, distributing leadership does not mean equalizing leadership responsibilities. Instead, their distributed leadership practices manifest in the ways that department leaders have agency in creating their budgets, making decisions within their departmental scope, and informing organization-wide decisions.

When the leadership team at Destiny Arts Center began realizing their version of distributed leadership, their first order of business was sharing their salary information with one another. This was a key step in building trust among leadership team members; knowing one another's salaries helped clarify how resources supported them and their departments in the context of organization-wide priorities.

Sharing salary information also prompted leaders at Destiny Arts Center to grapple with what it would mean for everyone to feel the same amount of responsibility for decisions. Ultimately, different people on the leadership team felt they needed to have different degrees of responsibility.

In this case, transparency around salaries did not result in equitable, flat salaries among leadership team members, but it did result in a shared understanding about how and to what degree their different roles factored into the decision-making process.

“You can't say you're having a fully collaborative model and then not be fully collaborative in terms of salary. But the reality is that having fiscal responsibilities for the organization equates with a higher salary. As the questions around where is the equity around pay [are] coming up, we devolved back into much more of a hierarchical structure.”

– Executive Director, Destiny Arts Center

Orpheus Chamber Orchestra's Rotating Musician Board Members

Orpheus, a chamber orchestra that distributes leadership among its member musicians, has processes and protocols baked into its bylaws that make transparent different aspects of how the organization makes decisions. One of these processes is having three musicians elected to the Board of Trustees on a rotating basis. Musician board members access information about various aspects of the organization's financials and must square those realities with their artistic visions. Because musicians rotate on and off the board, they understand these realities even if they no longer hold these responsibilities, engendering trust throughout the organization for the decisions the board makes.

“It's really important for musicians to be on the board, especially in keeping the conversation going between artistic directors and the board. There's tension between artistic aspirations and having to justify this against cost.”

– Member Musician at Orpheus

In Service of Trust

The use of tools and practices alone do not define an organization that distributes leadership; a culture that prioritizes trust is just as important. Leaders in distributed leadership organizations champion a culture of seeing time as an investment, rather than a cost. While incorporating more people into the decision-making process may take longer, leaders see this time as valuable in building commitment and buy-in among all staff. Valuing time as an investment is not limited to leadership; anyone participating in a distributed leadership process must make intentional choices about how to best use theirs and others' time. This means that leaders actively consider when to speak up and when to step back, allowing time for others to participate in discussions and prioritizing listening within groups or teams, a form of self leadership. Distributed leadership organizations often develop these skills of self leadership among all their staff.

Ultimately, all of these practices help create trust across individuals at an organization. When leadership is distributed, each person needs to trust that the others with whom they share leadership are acting with intentions and information that serve the organization as a whole. Without trust, the culture of an organization may suffer, intentional choices to utilize and apply more tools will languish, and further distribution of leadership may be halted.

“There are players who are incredible leaders and are obviously very opinionated who have this ability when they're not in that seat to completely withdraw themselves... And if they have something that needs to be said, they'll find the right person to say it to, quietly, without occupying time or space or wasting other people's leadership time exerting that authority.”

– Member Musician, Orpheus



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