

# Reimagining Positional Authority to Advance Distributed Leadership



## *How Distributed Leadership & Positional Authority Influence One Another*

This case study is one in a series of five exploring 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.

*“We are collectively responsible for whatever is going on if we are leading this organization together. And I think that’s different. There’s a lot of leadership teams that are out there and it’s like, we’re responsible for doing the work, but not – we collectively are responsible for the successes and we all get to take part in that, and when we fail, we fail together. And I think that’s just something that’s been a part of our culture ... you have to have a certain level of trust”*

– Leadership Team Member, On The Move

Many organizations turn to distributed leadership because of a belief that staff in all parts of the organization have the potential to lead in some way, to some degree. Ideally, when staff across an organization feel empowered as leaders in their own right, they become, by extension, more collaborative, trusting, and committed to the work. Rather than eliminating positional authority, the seven organizations we studied distribute leadership to varying degrees and through different processes, requiring them to examine and sometimes reconfigure how they allocate positional authority.

**Positional authority** refers to individuals in formally recognized leadership roles with a high degree of responsibility and power for decision making within an organization.

## Distributed Leadership Within & Beyond Positional Authority

Most decision making in hierarchal organizations depends upon the positional authority one holds. This positional authority is often defined by an individual’s knowledge about and responsibility for high stakes decisions. In organizations that distribute leadership, positional authority still plays an important role, but is no longer solely defined by an individual’s knowledge and responsibility. Instead, individuals with positional authority serve as communicators, facilitators, and models for effective decision-making processes.

One way to examine how positional authority and distributed leadership influence one another is to use descriptive categories for staff roles that correspond to the decision-making process. We classify these differences according to three types of roles:

- **Makers** make decisions and are responsible for their ramifications. They have full access to necessary information (e.g., organization financials) to make the best possible decision. Makers make ultimate decisions.

- **Participants** inform decisions and are part of the decision-making process. They have a genuine voice and stake in the outcome of decisions. Their level of access to information surrounding a decision varies. Participants frequently inform Makers' decisions.
- **Observers** know when and why decisions are being made, but rarely inform decisions and have limited access to the information that shapes them.

Organizations that distribute leadership bring more Makers and Participants into high-stakes, organization-wide, or departmental decision-making processes, regardless of their level of positional authority.

## The Role of Positional Authority in a Distributed Leadership Organization

Distributed leadership reconfigures—but still requires—positional authority. As more Makers and Participants are represented in decision making, leaders with positional authority need to show up differently during decision-making processes. In being able to rely on others in the organization to contribute to decisions, executive directors' primary role becomes enabling the conditions for distributed leadership to thrive. Tasked with sharing information and distributing decisions to more Participants and Makers within an organization, executive directors reflected upon the different purposes and functions of their roles to support and sustain distributed leadership during our interviews:

- The executive director at Destiny Arts Center is steadfast in her effort to build and maintain trust among her leadership team. This allows her to share decision-making responsibility but remain the ultimate decision maker in the organization.
- The executive director at On The Move encourages her leadership team members and horizontally positioned leaders to question her and poke holes in ideas to help strengthen decisions. She is committed to a firm practice of leading both up front and from the back. Exhibiting a high degree of what is often called flexible adjustment, she leads from the front when required and steps back when working in groups to allow those with less positional authority an opportunity to lead.
- The executive director at Orpheus Chamber Orchestra invests much of his time in communicating information, both to equip orchestra members and staff with what they need to make decisions and to communicate about the decisions themselves. Communication has become a primary contribution to maintaining distributed leadership processes.
- At Thousand Currents, everyone learns to follow. Staff with greater positional authority often take direction from a project coordinator with less positional authority. The executive director and the management team see their role as central facilitators, ensuring everyone has time and capacity to participate in more distributed leadership processes. They emphasize that, in addition to their grantmaking and project work, patience, listening, and learning are the core of what they do—practices informed by their partnership with grassroots groups in the Global South.

Terrain, an organization that supports the arts and cultural landscape of Spokane, WA, showcases the interplay between positional authority and distributed leadership. Recently formalized as a nonprofit 501(c)(3), Terrain is at an interesting inflection point. Founded as a completely grassroots, volunteer-run organization with a tradition of collaborative decision making, its first choice as a formal 501(c)(3) has been to create a level of vertical authority—an ED. The Board is in the process of negotiating how much positional authority is necessary and important for the organization without hamstringing its collaborative roots.



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## Makers & Participants in Action

Compared with more hierarchical organizations, organizations that exhibit distributed leadership adopt structures and processes that broaden and support the number of Makers and Participants in an organization. Committees, self-managed teams, and working groups allow more opportunities for collaboration and distributed decision making over the use of resources, for example. Through these structures, more people contribute to and influence difficult decisions, the production of complex services, or even creative artistic endeavors. Leaders with positional authority participate in and help maintain these structures and processes, which often require them to share power and build relationships with those who are horizontally positioned to them.

Leaders at Cal Shakes have been building new structures to help advance processes for more Makers and Participants to inform decisions. One way they are doing this is through the formation of the Artistic Circle, in which the Artistic Director is just one of many voices contributing to a programming rubric. This process is structured to be more transparent and to allow for diversity of thought, giving voice to members of the organization who may have been historically excluded from or less involved in artistic decision-making discussions. The Artistic Circle has become more inclusive and more participatory as Cal Shakes continues to pursue diversity, equity, and inclusion activities across the entire organization. This more distributed process for artistic decision making is shaping new programming choices for the theater while maintaining a level of oversight for these choices by the Artistic Director.

Cultivating Makers in an organization requires more time for decisions; however, the time it takes to move through these processes does not mean they are less efficient. Implementers of this practice have come to view time as an investment that brings more staff buy-in into a decision from the beginning. Several executive directors in our study pointed out that when they made a decision that didn't include other Makers in the past, they spent quite a bit of time addressing the consequences (e.g., more one-on-one follow-up conversations to elaborate on the decisions made, addressing allegations or criticisms regarding a lack of transparency).

Most organizations maintain some tiers of positional authority; organizations rarely distribute leadership completely (i.e., where every staff member is a Maker, regardless of their degree of positional authority). More commonly, staff are Makers within their own arenas (e.g., a communications manager is a Maker of communications decisions). Often, organizations use leadership teams, co-directorships, or rotating directorships and staff board member positions to carve out pockets of distributed leadership. This expands the number of Makers and Participants in particular arenas.

***“Off-Center was created to be a testing center... emphasizing data collection and feedback loops and adjusting our strategy based on what we learn. We created a start-up inside of this big organization and we continue to operate that way. The culture and the rules don't always apply to us in the same way because of that.”***

– Associate Artistic Director, Denver Center for Performing Arts

Off-Center at the Denver Center for Performing Arts offers an example of distributed leadership that flourishes within a larger organization where there is a strong reliance on positional authority and a tradition of vertical leadership. The organization has carved out a niche of Makers that is not necessarily top or bottom of the organizational chart. Makers for Off-Center are horizontally-positioned with one another, brought together by an early-career Associate Artistic Director. This highly collaborative, self-managed team allows for experimentation and higher risk theatrical production choices that have paid off, both by providing emerging leaders new opportunities to exercise authority, and through both increased revenue and audience attendance.