
Risk Taking, Decision Making, & Distributed Leadership



A brief exploration on how each informs the others

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.

Introduction

Distributing leadership in an organization brings more people to the table to contribute to and make decisions. The more an organization distributes leadership, the more ideas can inform the ways it allocates resources, experiments with programs, and determines its strategic direction. Bringing more people and possibilities into decisions can lead an organization in unknown and therefore riskier directions, more often for the better, but sometimes for the worse. We have observed that distributing leadership in its most realized form (see call-out box below) can also help mitigate consequences from decisions gone wrong. The collective responsibility that individuals feel when an organization distributes decision-making processes and power motivates them to do their part to ensure the best possible outcome. Further, should a decision go awry, more people—rather than a sole decision maker—absorb the fallout from subsequent ripple effects.

Leaders in positional authority help facilitate **democratic** and **collaborative** decision-making processes by allowing others in the organization to step up while they intentionally step back. This creates opportunities for ideas outside of their own to proliferate and influence the decision-making process. Executive-level leaders' roles, then, establish a clearly articulated shared organizational vision before engaging in more collaborative decision-making processes. Leaders are also responsible for communicating necessary information, particularly as it relates to risk, e.g., an organization's financial state. This transparency and communication engenders the trust, rapport, and mutual confidence necessary for people from different parts of an organization to come together to collaboratively and democratically make decisions.

When does a decision-making process distribute leadership, and when does it not?

- ✓ Distributed leadership: When a decision is **democratic** among multiple people in an organization—each voice gets one vote, and the majority choice becomes the decision.
- ✓ Distributed leadership: When a decision is **collaborative**—multiple voices come together, compromise, and synthesize into one decision. This is often called collective sensemaking.
- ✗ Not distributed leadership: When different opinions and input are sought or solicited, but one person ultimately makes the final decision.

The risks that distributing leadership can prompt are particularly acute for performing arts organizations that depend on audiences buying tickets—and responding well—to their performances. A new direction for a production could drive some audiences away, but it could also bring new audiences in. For the performing arts organizations we talked with, distributing leadership brought more people into the decision-making process and engendered a sense of shared responsibility, helping leaders shoulder risks related to their productions that they would not have taken on their own.

“I’ve grown to love performing more because of our process. When we do multiple performances, it gets better and better ‘cause things are changing up. There’s magic in something where we can all have such a sense of ownership and participation.”

– Member Musician, Orpheus



Orpheus Chamber Orchestra plays at Carnegie Hall.
Photo courtesy of Orpheus Chamber Orchestra. Credit: Brian Hatton

Off-Center: A Case of Distributing Leadership to Introduce Risk

Off-Center was formed as part of Denver Center of Performing Arts (DCPA) with the purpose of making art that deviates from DCPA’s traditional repertoire and appeals to new audiences, as well as providing leadership opportunities for emerging leaders to participate in making decisions about programming. Off-Center uses distributed leadership to shape high-stakes choices: individuals across different departments and from different levels of positional authority throughout DCPA each have a voice and role in making decisions for Off-Center programming.

At Off-Center, feedback and learning are crucial to managing risk. Practices of pre- and post-mortems become doubly important to informing the next collective decision made by the planning group. The collaborative Off-Center approach to decision making influenced the larger DCPA artistic team as well. After an interim period of reorganization, DCPA modified the larger organizational structure, opening up more



Off-Center productions such as The Wild Party help generate new audiences.
Photo courtesy of Denver Center for Performing Arts. Credit: AdamsVisCom.

“We come together and we say, ‘It’s truly okay that we experienced challenges with this production because we learned x, y, z.’ ... It’s not punitive, and no one’s in trouble. That has been really critical to grow Off-Center as well as the trust and a sense of teamwork that I think is really healthy, especially when you’re trying to do new work.”

– Member of Off-Center Planning Group

opportunities for staff to work collaboratively across theater productions. For example, Off-Center’s associate producer now works side-by-side with other members of the artistic team to shape programming on DCPA’s main stages.

On The Move & Terrain: Cases of Distributing Leadership to Mitigate Risk

Distributing leadership both facilitates risk taking and helps mitigate the weight and repercussions when risks don’t pan out as planned. In this way, it can help organizations healthfully go in new—and in some cases essential—directions, bringing their staff and community along.

For example, the Carr Fires in Napa County, CA in 2017 prompted the leadership team at On The Move to make quick and potentially risky decisions about how to allocate resources for their programs and, ultimately, structure their organization to best support the community. At the same time, they needed to maintain ongoing core programming. They managed to be responsive in the midst of a crisis through distributed leadership and decision-making responsibilities based on a foundation of trust, self leadership, and compassion to get things done under tight time constraints. This foundation was critical to a collaborative decision-making process that shared and buffered the risks introduced by these minute-by-minute decisions. In our conversations with them, leadership team members agreed that riskier decisions feel better because they have taken a distributed leadership approach to making them.

While On The Move provides an example of an organization internally distributing leadership to make decisions, Terrain distributes leadership beyond its small staff. As it formalizes into a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, Terrain continues its tradition of distributing leadership by involving community members and artists in many of its decision-making processes. All of Terrain’s programming has been spurred by close conversation with and in response to its artist community by way of informal feedback or solidified committees. To ensure these conversations continue to take place in meaningful ways, Terrain expanded their board of directors to include five working artists from the local community. Their voices are now part of high-stakes organizational decisions. Thus, new directions that emerge from distributed processes come with both buy-in and shared responsibility for outcomes among leaders in positional authority at Terrain, as well as members of the artist community.

“I don’t orient to risk. What I orient to is to buy-in. I care because my colleague cares about risk and I care about my colleague... I think it goes back to shared ownership—we own the decision.”

– Member of On The Move’s Leadership Team



Distributed leadership practices enable Terrain to remain true to its community-oriented roots. *Photo courtesy of Terrain.*



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