Moving beyond the ‘Chosen One’ approach to collective leadership

A shift away from the ‘heroic’, hierarchical structure to collaborative, collective leadership is more effective in volatile, uncertain environment.

By Koh Cheng Boon

Over the past 2½ years, the world has been primarily disruptive, volatile, uncertain, complex, and diverse (D-VUCAID). This is expected to continue in the foreseeable future. Coupled with recent changes in global business and governance, contemporary leadership research has signalized a dramatic shift in the way organizations are led and managed. The traditional ‘heroic’ approach of appointing one person to lead others appears to be giving way to an emergent paradigm of collective leadership.

A D-VUCAID environment creates a weak structure

In the 1990s, Hebrew University of Jerusalem Professor Boaz Shamir made several predictions about leadership styles of the future. His projections about leadership and organisational structures appear to have materialised in recent years, supported by an abundance of modern research as well as real-world cases.

According to Prof Shamir, strong hierarchical structures led by ‘heroic’ leaders would shift or fade away in the 21st century, while weak structures held together with strong collective leadership would emerge as the dominant operating paradigm, not only in organisations but around the world.

This notion of the weak structure goes against the grain of traditional management practices espoused by many organisations, in which the chain of command rules supreme and leaders are perceived as know-all and all-powerful. However, leaders, organisations, and nations are increasingly aware that collective leadership is more effective than the traditional ‘heroic’ approach in a D-VUCAID environment.

Collective leadership emerges from swarm intelligence

In its most simplified form, collective leadership may be defined as the process of distributing leadership authority and shifting the locus of power away from a central leadership node to the collective. Developmental Swarm Intelligence Theory describes self-synchronisation by various groups (or “swarms”) toward a shared vision or destination, which is paramount for the successful execution of a shared vision or destination. For example, from “What’s your purpose?”, “What’s your cause?” to “Who do you get on in the morning?”, “Why should anyone care?”: crystallisation awareness of important intra-organisational motivators that shape the way employees think, act, and communicate with each other.

The “why” is in the heart

It is not always easy to explain the “why” because words are usually received by more than just the heart—they are first processed by the head, (sometimes) the biggest protagonist of the heart, perceived just 30 centimetres away from it. Attaining a good balance between the heart and the head is essential, yet perhaps the most challenging tightrope to walk, as emotions are among the most difficult things to manage in this world.

In his public lecture, leader- ship expert and acclaimed author Simon Sinek has discussed the different levels of trust that exist in an organisation. Reliable and trustworthy team members and leaders are vital to getting things done together. In determining whom to entrust with greater responsibilities, management should consider trust as a key metric.

An employee who has a moderate level of performance and a high level of trust from their peers would generally be more effective a leader than one with a high level of performance but low level of trust from other staff, due to their psychological capital that is, trust and confidence created over time. Trust is the glue that holds teams together, the trust that every- one on the team puts in their best to achieve the team’s overall objectives, that everyone can rely on the assessments and information they receive from each other, and that everyone will follow through with their responsibilities and ask for help if needed.

Without trust, people are merely an armistice of individuals with potentially conflicting agendas, carrying out tasks half heartedly and even opportunistically in a piece-meal fashion. Sinek’s views on trust have been supported by extensive research that leaders need to have high trust and high performance, or high trust and mediocrity, to have the respect and support of their team members.

“What”, “relationships building and the integration of leadership roles

To build a highly collegial, collaborative culture that fosters a sense of togetherness, leaders must facilitate the achievement of desired collective outcomes through goal clarity, autonomous delegation, and team cohesion. Team building, task coordination and relationship maintenance are key to that end.

From extensive interviews and surveys, one of the most crucial traits for collective leadership to emerge is self-awareness. Another important trait is a high level of openness among leaders and team members. This is correlated with greater team effectiveness during decision-making tasks. A high level of agreeableness in the team also has a generally positive impact on team cohesion.

“Hear”: clarity of vision and communicating to influence and stimulate action

Leaders’ abilities to sense-make and meaning make, and ultimately create a clear shared vision are key success factors for collective leadership.

One of the biggest challenges faced in leadership is translating the vision or “big idea” to the ground. Bridging the gaps between the abstract vision and actionable details relevant to the various levels of employees is both a science and an art.

Communicating to influence is another task that can sometimes be more arthritic than scientific, especially in a weak structure or D-VUCAID environment where leaders are expected to translate complex issues into compelling messages that engage both the heart and brain, and spur followers to take action on the ground.

Challenges faced in collective leadership

For collective leadership to work, formal leaders need to have a certain level of psychological safety to empower team members who have the necessary knowledge, expertise, and skills to take the lead for assigned tasks. Leaders should thus engage in systems thinking to determine the skillsets and tools needed to seize opportunities. This entails visualising causal loops and linkages, identifying connectivity and inter-dependencies, synthesising solutions, and communicating insights about systems—whether parts of a system or systems as a whole.

Studies have found a correlation between openness to experience and flexibility in leadership style, which is vital to effective collective leadership.

The road ahead

As a society, we need to curb our reliance on the traditional hierarchical leadership style that has served us well in relatively stable times but no longer delivers sustainable results in our increasingly D-VUCAID environment. To move with the tides of change, we need to learn the ropes of collective leadership.

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