

# 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 a volatile, uncertain environment

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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-VUCAD environment. To move with the tides of change, we need to learn the ropes of collective leadership. PHOTO: PIXABAY

OVER the past two and a half years, the world has been primarily Disruptive, Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous, and Diverse (D-VUCAD); this is expected to continue in the foreseeable future. Coupled with recent changes in global business and governance, contemporary leadership research has signalled a dramatic shift in the way organisations are led and managed: the traditional “heroic” approach of appointing one person to lead others appears to be giving way to a new paradigm of collective leadership.

## A D-VUCAD environment creates a weak structure

In the 1990s, Hebrew University of Jerusalem Professor Boas 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 for organisations 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 be-all Übermenschen. However, leaders, organisations, and nations are increasingly aware that collective leadership is more effective than the traditional “heroic” approach in a D-VUCAD environment.

## Collective leadership from swarm intelligence

In its most simplified form, collective leadership may be defined as the process of distributing leadership authority and shifting the nexus of power away from a central leadership node to the collective. Derived from Swarm Intelligence Theory, collective leadership describes self-synchronisation by various groups (or “swarms”) toward a shared vision or destination, which is paramount for the successful execution of a task. This has far-reaching implications for management, organisational behaviour, corporate governance, and government as a whole.

Take Singapore’s Multi-Ministry Taskforce (MTF) - the city state’s whole-of-government response to the novel coronavirus outbreak – as an example: its “collegial and partnership approach to governing” empowered the taskforce to engage in decentralised decision-making, instead of keeping to the traditional practice of centralised, hierarchical decision-making. Its success in keeping Covid-19 at bay in the nation through rapid and well-coordinated community action is a testament to the effectiveness of collective leadership.

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Another quintessential example is how Microsoft facilitated two years of digital transformation worldwide in a mere two months, in response to widespread pandemic lockdowns. The tech giant was able to achieve this thanks to a drastic paradigm shift from a hierarchical structure and “chosen one” leadership style to a collective leadership style, allowing it to stay in touch with the ground, ahead of the curve, and to do more, quicker, with less.

## Science and art of collective leadership: why, what and how

To reap the myriad benefits of collective leadership, leaders need to adopt systems thinking and consider the multitude of perspectives in the organisation, as well as to tap on the collective wisdom of those with the relevant and appropriate experience, knowledge, skills, and aptitude to lead task forces and solve problems.

In a mixed-methods study conducted by the author of this essay, most participants indicated that the reasons why - the purposes, causes, or beliefs involved in an endeavour - were more important in developing an organisation’s core identity and shared mental models, rather than the “what” and “how”.

The “inside out” approach (a series of questions that ranges from the intrinsic to the extrinsic, for example, from “What’s your purpose? What’s your cause? What are your beliefs?” to “Why does your organisation/team exist? Why do you get out of bed in the morning? And why should anyone care?”) crystallises awareness of important intrinsic 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 antagonist of the heart, perched 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 lectures, leadership expert and acclaimed author Simon Sinek has discussed the different levels of trust and performance 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 other employees 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 the psychological capital (that is, trust and confidence) created over time.

Trust is the glue that holds teams together: the trust that everyone 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, a team is merely an assortment of individuals with potentially conflicting agendas, carrying out tasks half-heartedly or even opportunistically in a piecemeal 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 medium performance, to have the respect and support of their team members.

## **“What”: Relationship 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, astute delegation, and team cohesion. Team building, task co-ordination, 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.

## **“How”: 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 is a key success factor 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 art than science, especially in a weak structure or D-VUCAD 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, experience, 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 interdependencies, 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-VUCAD environment. To move with the tides of change, we need to learn the ropes of collective leadership.

Collective leadership demands precision and competency in defining and conveying the “why” in terms of clarity of goals and shared visions. What to do and how to do it can be developed later. However, many organisations, leaders, and leadership development programs still emphasise “how” and “what” first, and then follow up with the “why”, if it is mentioned at all.

For greater effectiveness, it is time for a shift in the way we approach our work. In the ethos of collective leadership, we should first ask ourselves “why”, before “what” and “how”. We do not have to stop at the workplace: these concepts may be integrated into our daily lives as well, to create our desired personal outcomes and to set a lasting example for those around us and our future generations.

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