Collective Leadership: Thinking About Issues Vis-à-Vis Others

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We have long recognized that leadership is a distinctly social phenomenon. As Yammarino, Salas, Serban, Shirreffs, and Shuffler (2012) pointed out, in studies of leadership our focus has more often than not been on the leader rather than the social context in which leadership occurs. The significance, substantively, of collectivistic approaches to leadership is that they all, in one way or another, attempt to take others into consideration in attempts to account for leader performance (Yammarino et al., 2012). Yammarino and colleagues summarized the main approaches and their consequences for science and practice well. However, in this commentary we would like to highlight a few important points we feel were missed in the discussion of the collective leadership model (Friedrich, Vessey, Schuelke, Ruark, & Mumford, 2009).

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An Integrative Model

In the 2009 review article in which our model is outlined, we describe the ways in which it contributes something beyond the relevant extant models. Yammarino and colleagues (2012) also highlight the similarities and differences between the models. What both of these discussions appear to imply, however, is that all of these models are similar in scope in terms of the antecedents, outcomes, and moderators included. We feel that it is important for understanding the nomological network of this body of research to point out that the collective leadership model incorporates many of the concepts and relationships proposed in the other four models within it. For instance, the team leadership literature and findings are present in the team processes, team performance parameters, and team performance capabilities components of our model. The network literature is present in the leader network, team network, and communication components. The shared leadership and complexity theories are represented predominantly in the leader/team exchange and communication components.

What we believe is of greater importance, however, is that these models

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are not just subsumed within the collective leadership model. We have added to this collectivistic body of literature by evaluating the relationship among each of the concepts, and thus the theories tied to them. For instance, we proposed relationships between knowledge of network characteristics (network theory) and exchange of information and duties between the leaders and followers (shared leadership theory). In this sense, we believe that the collective leadership model serves as an integrative model of the collectivistic literatures reviewed in the Yammarino et al. (2012) article.

Cognition and Collectivistic Models

Although many of the concepts and relationships found in the bodies of literature associated with the other four theories are incorporated in our model, there are several critical ways in which the assumptions of our model differ from those of the other four. The main way in which our model differs is only briefly alluded to in Yammarino et al.'s (2012) focal article, thus we felt it necessary to expand on this key difference further. Essentially, our model is ultimately a model of cognition in a social context—not social cognition (Bandura, 1986). In our view, this model differs from the other available models of collectivistic leadership in the ways in which information and communication play a critical role. Leader performance depends on the leader creating conditions that promote effective exchange of information and expertise among team members, and between team members and leaders. Thus, in our model, the role of leaders is to promote effective exchange of information and expertise vis-à-vis mission requirements.

Shared leadership (e.g., Pearce, Manz, & Sims, 2008) stresses empowerment of followers. In the collective model, however, empowerment is only desirable to the extent that the individual being empowered possesses unique information or expertise vis-à-vis the mission at hand. Thus, in the context of the collective leadership model, shared leadership is not a good unto itself. Rather, shared leadership is held to be valuable only when followers possess mission critical information or expertise. The contrast with complexity leadership (e.g., Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009) is starker, in that complexity theory stresses the value of relationships, especially emergent relationships. In the collective model, formal exchanges of information and expertise are considered as important, if not more important, than emergent relationships. Indeed, we would argue formal organizational structures are created to establish conditions in which collective leadership can operate, specifically by providing information on how members should communicate information about expertise and signal the relevance of information flowing through social systems.

Although it is clear that the collective model draws more heavily from both network theory (e.g., Balkundi, Kilduff, & Harrison, 2011) and team leadership (e.g., Burke, Fiore, & Salas, 2003), we make different assumptions about how teams operate and networks are used. With regard to networks, our model proposes that networks are not stable but instead are created and restructured by leaders and teams to improve the exchange of information and expertise vis-à-vis the mission at hand. Thus, leadership may arise from actions taken on networks rather than being a result of placement in a network structure. With regard to teams, we see team capacities, such as monitoring, backup behaviors, team orientation, and trust, all team activities informed by leaders, as critical variables influencing the likely effectiveness of collective leadership.

An important point that was not made explicit in our original proposal of the model is just how critical leader cognition becomes in instances of collective leadership. In addition to standard problem solving, leaders must add the element of social and network cognition. In fact, Vessey et al. (submitted for publication) found that leader skills, especially cognitive

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skills, such as intelligence, creative problem solving, and domain expertise were found to be especially effective predictors of performance in incidents of collective leadership. In other words, collective leadership will increase rather than decrease the cognitive demand placed on both leaders and team members.

When Collective Leadership Is Possible

What should be recognized at this point is that collective leadership is difficult. It requires monitoring, wisdom, sensemaking, network creation, and substantial thinking skills. This point is of some importance because it implies that collective leadership may not be possible at all times, in all teams, in all situations, or in all organizations. Thus, to expand on our original article and the summary provided by Yammarino et al. (2012), we would like to outline four critical conditions that must be met for collective leadership to be possible: (a) professionalism, (b) exposure, (c) open exchange, and (d) time.

The term professionalism refers to the embedding of the leader and team in a professional field accompanied by the experience that flows from a profession (Damanpour, 1991). The significance of professional experiences is perhaps obvious—it provides a basis for monitoring, evaluation, analysis of causes, and an understanding of the implications and significance of a person's own, and others', networks. Moreover, within a profession underlying assumptions make it easier to formulate shared mental models and engage in sensegiving and sensemaking actions.

Collective leadership also requires an awareness of others' unique expertise and an understanding of others' networks and their implications. Little research is available on network comprehension. Nonetheless, one would expect that if others do not have sufficient sustained exposure to others in relevant performance units this understanding is unlikely to emerge (Ericsson, 2009). Thus, collective leadership is more likely to emerge, and prove effective, in teams or organizations characterized by stability. Put somewhat differently, transfers, turnover, and frequent rotations will limit the potential for collective leadership.

Collective leadership, moreover, requires ongoing, open exchange among leaders and between leaders and team members. Leaders, of course, can at times create conditions, for example through positive affective climate, trust, and perceptions of safety (Friedrich et al., 2009; Hunter, Bedell-Avers, & Mumford, 2007), that promote open exchange. What should be recognized here, however, is that not all issues, and missions, that emerge in organizations permit open communication within and across networks. Under these conditions collective leadership will prove less effective if it is even possible.

Finally, collective leadership is an unusually demanding cognitive activity. It is cognitively demanding for both leaders and team members. This suggests that when time is not available and stress is high, people will not have the resources called for in our model. As a result, collective leadership is unlikely to be observed and may, in fact, prove counterproductive (Fiedler & Garcia, 1987). This negative effect can be diminished, however, through increased awareness of networks and available expertise provided through increased exposure and open exchange of information.

Yammarino et al. (2012), in their analysis of the significance of collectivistic approaches to leadership, make an important point: These approaches call for new interventions in leader assessment and development. The four parameters we have just outlined point to one set of interventions that might prove of value. When collective leadership is deemed desirable, organizations should seek to establish professional structures, stabilize teams, establish a climate characterized by safety and trust, and provide people with time to think.

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Conclusions

We believe that our model is an important contribution to the collectivistic leadership paradigm shift, and that the original review provided by Yammarino and colleagues (2012) summarized our conclusions well. However, we feel that there were some critical points that needed to be made to understand our model in the context of the others. First, we believe our model can serve as an integrative model within this broader body of literature. Second, there are key differences in the assumptions our model makes with regard to cognition and the use of information. Third, and finally, there are certain conditions under which our model is more appropriate and likely to be valuable.

Although our model is relatively new and has, at this juncture, a limited base of research support, a study by Vessey et al. (submitted for publication) has provided rather compelling evidence for the plausibility of this model. More specifically, it has shown that performance differences observed in leadership incidents across the career of one historically notable leader, George C. Marshall (Army Chief of Staff, Secretary of State), could be accounted for by his use of collective leadership strategies—for example, communication, network exploitation, effective interpersonal exchange with team members, and definition of viable team missions through sensemaking and sensegiving. We hope that the present effort, along with the work of Yammarino et al. (2012) will serve as an impetus for additional research on this model and others within the collectivistic leadership literature.

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