

# Distributing Leadership

By Olivier Serrat

## Fossil Fuel

Modern humans (*Homo sapiens*) evolved in East Africa some 200,000 years ago. They lived in tightly knit nomadic groups of 10–30 individuals, perhaps as large as 30–50. (Seasonally, they may have assembled in social collectives of 100 or more when resources were abundant.) To subsist, they foraged edible plants and sometimes caught wild animals—without much recourse to the domestication of either—in adaptive strategies.

These band societies had nonhierarchical and egalitarian<sup>1</sup> social structures: individuals had no authority over one another and, barring gender, distinctions based on power, prestige, wealth, or rank did not exist. Individuals came forward when their expertise was needed. Elders were looked to for advice but decisions were consensual. There were no written laws and none of the specialized coercive roles played in more complex societies; customs were transmitted orally.

Some nomadic groups began the transition to sedentary life in built-up villages and towns, then in early chiefdoms and embryonic states, about 6,000 years ago—most likely following the appearance of agriculture (and domestication of animals) some 4,000 years before that.<sup>2</sup> Once begun, the process of agriculture-driven social, economic, and technological expansion led to more densely populated and stratified societies and, eventually, the development of Byzantine governments. However, only in the last 100–500 years have there been state-level polities.

## Fast Forward

The Neolithic Revolution was, in effect, the first agricultural revolution and the mother of all changes.<sup>3</sup> Other agricultural revolutions followed the early move from hunter-gatherer to agrarian societies, including the Muslim Agricultural Revolution that unfurled from the



The prevailing view of leadership is that it is concentrated or focused. In organizations, this makes it an input to business processes and performance—dependent on the attributes, behaviors, experience, knowledge, skills, and potential of the individuals chosen to impact these. The theory of distributed leadership thinks it best considered as an outcome. Leadership is defined by what one does, not who one is. Leadership at all levels matters and must be drawn from, not just be added to, individuals and groups in organizations.

<sup>1</sup> The mobility of families on the move demanded that material possessions be minimized. For that reason, single members could not accumulate surpluses of resources.

<sup>2</sup> When the last glacial period ended about 10,000 years ago, much of the earth became subject to drier spells. The new climate favored the emergence of annual plants that die in the dry season, leaving a dormant seed or tuber. It is the availability of readily storable wild grains—especially cereals—and pulses that may have enabled some hunter-gatherers to settle in villages. Evidence points to the Fertile Crescent of the Middle East, viz., the Levant and Mesopotamia, as the site of the earliest planned sowing and harvesting of plants. Development of agriculture also seems to have occurred in northern and southern China (as early as 10,000–11,000 years ago, findings now suggest), the Sahel Belt, the island of New Guinea, and regions of the Americas.

<sup>3</sup> The sedentary societies that the Neolithic Revolution engendered modified their natural environment with specialized cultivation and storage technologies that made surplus production possible. This laid the basis for high population densities; centralized administrations and political structures; hierarchical ideologies; labor diversification; trading economies; the advancement of nonportable art, architecture, and culture; and depersonalized systems of knowledge.

8th to the 13th century, later manifestations in 17th and 18th century Europe, and the Green Revolution of the mid-20th century. In the 18th and 19th centuries, an Industrial Revolution in the United Kingdom sparked major transformations in agriculture, manufacturing, mining, and transport, and sped advances in natural, social, and interdisciplinary sciences, e.g., astronomy, biology, chemistry, human anatomy, mathematics, and physics, that had come to light from the 16th century. Later tectonic shifts in human progress included the Commercial Revolution—a period of European economic expansion, colonialism, and mercantilism that lasted from the 16th century until the early 18th century; and the Digital Revolution—brought about by sweeping changes in computing and communication technology from the 1980s. In all instances, creativity and innovation were born of opportunity and necessity that gradually, then ever more rapidly, transfigured the planet. Their offspring is the phenomenon of globalization.

### Organization, Activity, and Knowledge

Individuals group when the perceived benefits from collaboration outstrip those from going it alone.<sup>4</sup> The reverse is that groups act in ways that benefit the group before the individual. Since the Neolithic Period, humans have organized to face a fast-changing environment. Even so, their multifaceted ways have been nothing more (and certainly nothing less) than endeavors to harness and balance innate (self-centered and other-centered) human drives<sup>5</sup> in contexts of scarce resources. From the mid-1990s, to cite an example, the multiplication of communities and networks of practice (not to forget virtual teams)—driven by computing and communication technology as well as globalization—has propagated radically new forms of organization and stimulated thinking about working in groups.<sup>6</sup>

*The strongest human instinct is to impart information, the second strongest is to resist it.*

—Kenneth Grahame

Clearly, learning is in the relationships between people in their environment and the links between organization, activity, and knowledge are intimate. The more successful approaches to organizational structuring have been anthropologically sensitive and recognized that human beings are biological entities that cannot, and therefore should not, be overly controlled. Since knowledge work now demands that we organize better for change, interest has grown in a long-forgotten modus operandi that harks back to the Neolithic Period: it is that of self-organizing teams.

### Organizing for Change

In a globalizing world, innovation is more than ever associated with organizational survival. For innovation to thrive, people need to be immersed in flexible social environments, not chained in cause-and-effect constructs. (When it comes to knowledge workers, traditional concepts of management seldom work: knowledge workers carry their means of production—meaning their intelligence—with them.) In self-organizing teams, members eschew reliance on traditional, positional leadership<sup>7</sup> to spontaneously take the lead. If, as evidence shows, most

<sup>4</sup> People join groups for many reasons. A primary motive is that membership often satisfies basic needs. First, activities that enhance survival, such as hunting and defense against predators, are usually best accomplished collectively rather than on one's own. Second, man has a biological need for social contact. Third, group membership often fills the need for power (which relates to the capacity or potential to influence the behavior of others). Besides gratifying needs, membership can also give a person more opportunity to accomplish goals. A last reason, perhaps related to the third need mentioned earlier, is that being close to others can provide comfort and support. To repeat, individuals do not join groups randomly: they do so for instrumental reasons. Their membership may also serve several purposes simultaneously, while they may belong to several groups at the same time.

<sup>5</sup> See Charles Ehin. 2000. *Unleashing Intellectual Capital*. Butterworth-Heinemann. The self-centered drives that Charles Ehin distinguishes are rank, status, discipline, control, territory, possessions, fear, anger, and sex. The other-centered drives are attachment, affiliation, care giving, care receiving, altruism, remorse, shame, and guilt.

<sup>6</sup> The potency of communities and networks of practice, and reason members join them, is that they offer a way to theorize tacit knowledge. By so doing, they decrease the learning curve of new employees, enable professional development, reduce rework and prevent reinvention of the wheel, permit faster problem resolution and response time to needs and inquiries, illuminate good practice, spawn new ideas for products and services, enable accelerated learning, connect learning to action, and make for organizational performance improvement.

<sup>7</sup> The presumption that underpins the near-universal practice of positional leadership is that certain people are eligible or can be groomed for leadership. Indeed, most positions are by appointment. The practice is rooted in the great man model of leadership and more recent, related theories concerned with the traits, behaviors, or styles of successful leaders; the contextual nature of leadership and the role of followers; and the interactions of traits, behaviors, and situations (as well as group facilitation) that empower leaders to transact or transform for excellence. In the 21st century, such conceptions of leadership seem more and more outdated.

organizations have reached a point in their evolution when they no longer need leaders in front and followers at the back, efforts and money<sup>8</sup> would be better spent on fortifying leadership as a mutual, social phenomenon.

### The Orpheus Chamber Orchestra

The Orpheus Chamber Orchestra<sup>9</sup> was founded in 1972 by cellist Julian Fifer and fellow musicians to bring chamber music's ideals of democracy, personal involvement, and mutual respect into an orchestral setting. It has no conductor.<sup>10</sup> However, being conductorless does not mean that it is leaderless—far from it: the orchestra has developed a system of musical chairs that invites each of the 27 permanent members to assume leadership positions, either by leading the group in rehearsal and performance as concertmaster or by heading one of the orchestra's many different formal or informal teams.

Built on eight supporting principles, the Orpheus process has reportedly unleashed the vision, talent, creativity, innovation, energy, and leadership potential of each member. (The free-spirited energy of its keenly attentive musicians results in an edgy spontaneity, and proves that size is less important than vigor.)<sup>11</sup> Apparently, the orchestra is also uncommonly responsive to changing conditions in the listening public or in its membership. Finally, although they play in other groups too, the permanent members consider playing in the orchestra their most fulfilling musical experience. According to Eric Bartlett, one of its cellists, “Orpheus has removed a barrier between the audience and the music, the conductor himself.”



<sup>8</sup> Executive training is about transfusing leadership into a chosen few, so that they might be transformed and then change their organization. But, even though the anointed may learn, no one else in their organization is likely to by virtue of their nonselection: sending a changed person in an unchanged environment is not necessarily effective.

<sup>9</sup> See [www.orpheusnyc.com/](http://www.orpheusnyc.com/)

<sup>10</sup> In traditional orchestras, conductors wield unquestioned authority over those who perform under their baton. They select the repertoire, organize rehearsals, and instruct the musicians how to play. In a survey of symphony orchestra musicians and workers in other professions in East Germany, West Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States, conducted in the late 1980s and early 1990s, orchestra musicians scored the highest in terms of having personal, self-directed internal motivation. However, they ranked seventh out of 13 occupations in terms of job satisfaction, below prison guards and just above industrial production teams. When asked if their job provided for personal growth and development, responses were even more distressing: they ranked ninth. (The occupations surveyed were airline cockpit crews, airline flight attendants, amateur theater companies, beer sales and delivery teams, economic analysts in the government, industrial production teams, mental health treatment teams, operating room nurses, prison guards, professional hockey team, professional string quartets, semiconductor fabrication teams, and symphony orchestra musicians.) See Jutta Allmendinger, Richard Hackman, and Erin Lehman. 1996. Life and Work in Symphony Orchestras. *Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 80, pp. 194–219.

<sup>11</sup> *The Economist*. 2006. Headless—Orpheus Chamber Orchestra. 5 August. The Economist Newspaper Limited.

**Table: The Orpheus Process**

Principle	Rationale
Put power in the hands of the people doing the work.	Those closest to the ground are in the best position to know market needs and make decisions that impact these. Organizations that empower personnel with true authority can expect better products and services; more satisfied clients, partners, and audiences; and higher profits.
Encourage individual responsibility for product and quality.	The converse of giving authority to those closest to the ground is requiring them to be accountable. Personnel who are entrusted to lead must feel a real and personal responsibility for outcomes.
Create clarity of roles.	Before personnel can comfortably and effectively take on leadership duties, it must be assigned well-defined roles and know what each one is responsible for. These roles must be communicated widely throughout the organization.
Foster horizontal teamwork.	No one has all the answers to every question. Horizontal teams—both formal and informal—that are not artificially constrained by the need to focus attention on narrow issues or opportunities can reach and tap expertise across organizational boundaries to obtain inputs, act on opportunities, solve problems, and make decisions.
Share and rotate leadership.	In most organizations, authority for leadership is vested in certain positions (and not in others): leaders are expected to lead and followers are expected to follow. The higher-up an individual's location on the organizational chart, the more authority his or her position wields. By moving personnel in and out of leadership positions, an organization can tap the leadership potential that exists in individuals and is more often than not ignored or discarded, if not at times punished. Leaders should be selected based on what attributes, behaviors, experience, knowledge, skills, and potential they bring to the table on propitious occasions.
Learn to listen, learn to talk.	Communications oxygenate the bloodstream of high-performance organizations. Individuals must listen to the views and opinions of others, respect what is said and the person saying it, and know when to talk. Two-way communications must be expected and cultivated constantly.
Seek consensus (and build creative systems that favor consensus).	Consensus is built on trust and that is born of participation. Involving personnel in discussions does not take the edge off results; it sharpens them (if participants are willing to listen, be flexible, and compromise on positions). In most organizations, the number of people involved in decisions decreases in direct proportion to the increase in the latter's importance.
Dedicate passionately to your mission.	Passionate personnel care about their organization; its clients, partners, and audiences; and the way they perform to meet needs.

Source: Author.

## Rediscovering Distributed Leadership

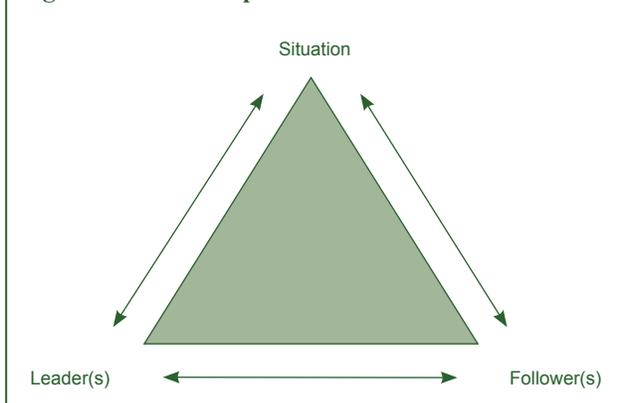
The widely distributed, interconnected, and virtual forms of organization that have emerged require that organizations unlock the knowledge of their members and empower them to act on their own behalf and on behalf of their organizations.

Positional leadership does not meet the needs of high-performance organizations: when working with knowledge workers, managers can have no direct authority over how their “subordinates” perform; they can at best coax them to do their best.<sup>12</sup> They will deliver more by not clutching the reigns and, instead, entice others to hold them as the situation warrants.

*Grant is the first general I have had. You know how it has been with all the rest. They wanted me to be the general. I am glad to find a man who can go ahead without me.*

—Abraham Lincoln

**Figure 1: Leadership as a Distributed Phenomenon**



Source: Timothy Hallett. 2002. *Micro Politics, Symbolic Power, and Leadership: The Case of Chicago Public Elementary Schools*. PhD Dissertation. Northwestern University.

The literature on distributed leadership is young and modest. It rests on a handful of articles written in the 1990s and 2000s, mainly in the field of educational leadership.<sup>13</sup> (Sometimes interchangeable notions of collaborative, delegated, democratic, dispersed, shared, teacher, and thought leadership<sup>14</sup> in these do not make for clarity.) Nonetheless, it constitutes a clear-cut break from the leadership theories that, from the 1980s, examined what combinations of traits, behaviors, and situations (as well as group facilitation) might allow individuals to transact or transform for excellence.<sup>15</sup> Quite simply, it is a different way of thinking about leadership, a new lens through which to view and study leadership as a phenomenon, not just as something that is brought to a team (or organization).

The starting point of distributed leadership is the division of labor that characterizes most organizations:<sup>16</sup> rather than limiting themselves to a binary division of leaders and followers, proponents prefer to examine

<sup>12</sup> There may not be much opportunity even there. Much of motivation theory assumes that people are static. They may be from a manager's perspective, but the answer rests with the individual who chooses whether and how to engage. If this argument holds, all that a leader might be able to do is circumscribe the contours of what self-centered and other-centered drives are already at play and help individuals channel these more efficiently and effectively to contribute more.

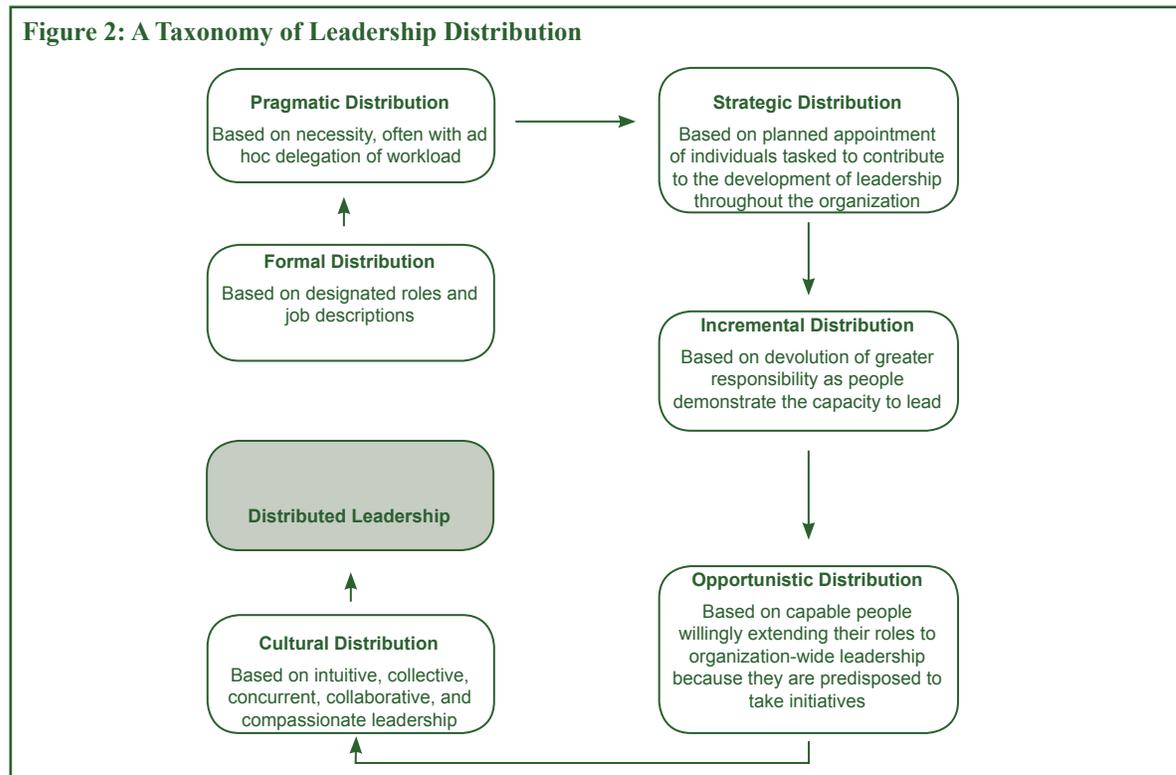
<sup>13</sup> Peter Gronn has done much to establish its foundations. Notwithstanding, he credits Cecil Gibb, an Australian psychologist, with the first use of the term in 1954 in his chapter on leadership in the first edition of the *Handbook of Social Psychology*. See Cecil Gibb. 1954. Leadership. In Gardner Lindzey (ed.). *The Handbook of Social Psychology*. Addison-Wesley. According to Gronn, Gibb discerned a crucial distinction between focused and distributed leadership. “Focused” stood for the way leadership can for various reasons be concentrated in or monopolized by one person as the focal point of a group's other members. However, because a group's membership and the patterns of influence across that fluctuate, Gibb intuited that leadership is as likely to be distributed as it is to be concentrated or monopolized. Indeed, the members of a group often develop a history or pattern of working during which different persons emerge as influential on account of their specialist knowledge or expertise. Sadly, Gibb's insights then lay dormant for over three decades. See Peter Gronn. 2002. Distributed Leadership as a Unit of Analysis. *The Leadership Quarterly*. Vol. 13, pp. 423–451.

<sup>14</sup> Proponents of thought leadership press that it must be cultivated as the key form of distributed leadership. The practical implication is that organizations should move beyond simply empowering employees to manage themselves, and start promoting organization-wide leadership conceived as the championing of new ideas.

<sup>15</sup> The unsustainability of a focused model of individual leader omniscience is widely recognized, especially in light of its limitations when dealing with adaptive change. Nevertheless, situational and contingency theories of leadership still shed insight, with a twist: much as situations and cultures, organizations call for different types of leadership and require different skills of that at different moments. The settings that leadership should address can suddenly change and call for norms, authority structures, and adaptive strategies beyond the ken of traditional leadership.

<sup>16</sup> Most theories of leadership only permit a twofold division of labor: people either lead or follow. (The theory of servant leadership is one exception.) Such naive dualism pays no heed to the reality and complexity of business processes and imposes a further layer of involvedness in the form of specialized role titles and job descriptions.

where organizations manifest leadership in their work practices and, when they do, the various forms that takes. To the extent that leadership is shared or dispersed, Gronn explains that it is likely to be aggregated or holistic.<sup>17</sup> Usefully, a recent study<sup>18</sup> isolated six ways to distribute leadership: (i) formal, (ii) pragmatic, (iii) strategic,



Source: Adapted from National College for School Leadership. 2004. *Distributed Leadership in Action*. Nottingham.

(iv) incremental, (v) opportunistic, and (vi) cultural.<sup>19</sup> The categories are neither fixed nor mutually exclusive: each, be it stand-alone or in combination with others, may be appropriate at a given time depending on circumstances. They can also be considered phases in a development process. To begin, an organization would need to create awareness of distributed leadership. In later phases, work to build trust, confidence, knowledge, and attitudes, enriched by feedback, would move it in increments from formal to cultural distribution.

Three elements distinguish distributed leadership from other theories of leadership.<sup>20</sup> First, it highlights leadership as an emergent property of a group or network of interacting individuals. Second, it suggests openness in the boundaries of leadership. Third, it entails that multiple types of expertise are distributed across the many, not the few. Fundamentally, however, it is the first of the three characteristics, viz., leadership as the product of concertive activity, that underscores distributed leadership as an emergent property of a group or network.

<sup>17</sup> An aggregated pattern is one in which individuals, on different occasions, as part of distinctive activities, for miscellaneous reasons, and for varying periods of time are deemed by their colleagues to exercise leadership. (To note, Gronn's numerical or additive perspective purposely extends no privileges to individuals or groups for providing more leadership than others, makes no assumptions as to what behaviors carry more weight with colleagues, and is prompted by awareness that more than one person counts in contributions to organizational performance.) A holistic pattern is one in which parts combine synergistically to form a new whole. (To note further, Gronn's holistic perspective acknowledges that intuitive working relations emerge when individuals and groups negotiate relationships over time and come to rely on one another. Institutionalized structures and structural relations act as concertive (or conjoint) mechanisms that pool distributed capacity, regularize distributed action, and incorporate these into an organization's governance.)

<sup>18</sup> National College for School Leadership. 2004. *Distributed Leadership in Action*. Nottingham.

<sup>19</sup> Key concepts in cultural distribution are agency and reciprocity. As organizations mature from individual control to collective activity married to internal accountability, each staff demonstrates respect, personal regard, competence, and integrity.

<sup>20</sup> See National College for School Leadership. 2003. *Distributed Leadership*. Nottingham.

*The basic idea of distributed leadership is not very complicated. In any organized system, people typically specialize, or develop particular competencies, that are related to their predispositions, interests, aptitudes, prior knowledge, skills, and specialized roles. [...] Organizing these diverse competencies into a coherent whole requires understanding how individuals vary, how the particular knowledge and skill of one person can be made to complement that of another, and how the competencies of some can be shared with others. In addition, organizing diverse competencies requires understanding when the knowledge and skill possessed by the people within the organization is [sic] not equal to the problem they are trying to solve, searching outside the organization for new knowledge and skill, and bringing it into the organization. [...] Distributed leadership, then, means multiple sources of guidance and direction, following the contours of expertise in an organization, made coherent through a common culture. It is the “glue” of a common task or goal—improvement of instruction—and a common frame of values for how to approach that task—culture—that keeps distributed leadership from becoming another version of loose coupling.<sup>21</sup>*

### Preamble

Distributed leadership is reminiscent of the ideal of the learning organization on account of the importance it ascribes to the collective. (It is also consistent with more familiar precepts of empowerment, such as subsidiarity.) With the burgeoning of communities and networks of practice, there is in modern organizations a sense that it is an idea whose time has come. At the end of the day, all leadership is collective: this underscores, indeed imparts new meaning to, concerns of interdependence and interactions.

Without a doubt, distributing leadership for organizational performance has to do with trust and accountability at individual and group levels. Studying requirements for building these surfaces tensions inherent in processes of consultation, command, and consensus building, but in so doing airs them out. In turn, this bolsters confidence to stop directing and intervening, and stand back. From there, one can initiate, then institutionalize, measures to promote distributed leadership and mitigate the factors that inhibit it.

Once again, trust has primacy among the factors that promote distributed leadership. But acceptance of the leadership potential of others pays too, as does work to foster shared goals and promote self-esteem. It goes without saying that visionary human resource management can do much to capacitate an organization: good staffing, continuity, and stability do hearten distributed leadership. Besides the absence of the foregoing promoting factors, inhibiting factors tend to be structural, with the exacerbating circumstance of all-too-commonly heavy workloads, as well as lack of time and space for reflection.

### Further Reading

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<sup>21</sup> Richard Elmore. 2000. *Building a New Structure for School Leadership*. The Albert Shanker Institute. Washington, DC.

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