Cass Business School
CITY UNIVERSITY LONDON

Centre for Professional Service Firms

Leadership in the plural: Forms, practices and dynamics

A symposium at the 2011 Academy of Management Conference designed to showcase scholarship in this developing area, and to examine the potential for learning across different kinds of professional organisations.

This symposium was organised in conjunction with a research study "Understanding Leadership Dynamics in Professional Service Firms" funded by the Economic and Social Research Council of Great Britain (RES-062-23-2269)

Presenters:

Graeme Currie, University of Warwick, UK
Laura Empson, Cass Business School, UK
Heidi Gardner, Harvard Business School, USA
Ann Langley, HEC Montréal, Canada
Andy Lockett, University of Warwick, UK
Wendy Reid, HEC Montréal, Canada

The symposium was designed to showcase studies by a number of leading scholars engaged in an emerging body of research concerning leadership in the plural. This concept represents an attempt to think about leadership beyond the actions and traits of a single, heroic leader, and focus instead on leadership as a process of interactions within an extended group of individuals not governed by conventional hierarchical relations between leaders and followers.

Co-chairs and organisers Laura Empson and Ann Langley brought together a group of researchers investigating different forms of plural leadership in the context of professional organisations. They were joined by an audience of 50 other academics with an interest in this area. A question underlying the symposium as a whole was, *how does plural leadership enable or inhibit change?* Specifically, under what conditions will a leadership group be successful in implementing change and when (and why) will it fail? What emerged from the presentations and the discussion was the importance of two major factors: power and trust.

As **Ann Langley** described in the first presentation (*Perspectives on leadership in the plural.* Co-authors: Jean-Louis Denis, ENAP, Canada and Viviane Sergi, HEC Montréal, Canada*)*, leadership in the plural encompasses a variety of concepts including distributed, shared, and collective leadership, as well as dual or co-leadership. Ann Langley's presentation drew a number of distinctions between the different ways in which plural leadership is practiced in different organisations. In some instances it has developed organically; in others it has been mandated. In some organisations, plural leadership is a choice - there is a hierarchy, but the formal leaders make the decision voluntarily to share power with others - but it can also be adopted by necessity. Typically in professional service firms a large number of senior professionals enjoy high levels of autonomy - but a crisis or some other need for concerted action demands the emergence of plural leadership. Leadership roles can be highly interdependent and synergistic, or dispersed across space and time, allowing the leadership responsibility baton to be passed between individual leaders. And in some contexts, as the symposium studies demonstrate, plural leadership can be seen as the ideal solution, while in others it is clear that plural models of leadership can be highly dysfunctional.

The second presentation, by **Laura Empson** *(Navigating ambiguity: Collective leadership processes in professional service firms),* examined the emergence and role of collective leadership among partners within a large professional firm undergoing dramatic change – the fundamental restructuring of the partnership. Her study found that the authority structure within the firm was highly ambiguous. The boundaries of roles were negotiated on an ongoing basis between the senior executives and practice heads who shared responsibility for leadership, while power was concentrated within an inner circle of which most people were unaware – including some of the people in senior leadership roles. Laura Empson explained how, starting with the people at the centre, the leadership group repeatedly cycled through the process of analysis and planning, progressively expanding the number of people involved in the ultimate decision. Laura Empson argued that, rather than depending on clarity and differentiation in leadership roles, the group thrived on ambiguity, which functioned as an integrating mechanism. She also pointed out the importance of the roles of the two senior executives: the Managing Partner and the Senior Partner. Their decisions about when to push and when to step back proved significant, and threw interesting light on both individual and co-leadership models.

Heidi Gardner provided a contrast to some of these issues in her paper, *Emergence of distributed leadership during strategic organisational change*. She presented initial findings from a study of a management consulting firm where the executive team had decided to diversify its client service offerings and develop an additional practice group. This entailed new work requirements for the professionals in the firm. Used to working autonomously, they were now being asked to collaborate with new colleagues, which challenged the existing culture and power structures. As with Laura Empson's study, change was thus precipitated by a crisis, and the executive team initially positioned themselves as *drivers* of change. There was no 'inner circle' or ambiguity about where power was concentrated. However, Heidi Gardner described how growing distrust of the formal leadership was matched by the emergence of an informal distributed leadership around this change initiative, culminating in the election of a Partnership Council. Membership of the new leadership group arose not from formal authority or the previous power structure, but more from commitment to the new order.

The fourth presentation, by **Graeme Currie** and **Andy Lockett** *(Distributed leadership, professional hierarchy and organisational accountability),* examined plural leadership in a very different context -- UK health care networks. It drew on comparative case studies of three health and social care networks of different groups of professionals that deliver children's services in England. These were analysed to identify and explain patterns of distributed leadership. Once again, the presentation showed how a critical incident – such as, in this context, a series of child deaths – was important in exposing strengths and weaknesses in the differing distributed leadership models. Distributed leadership in health and social care was promoted by policymakers through encouraging the creation of networks. However, it was complicated by the interaction of different professions (doctors, nurses, social workers, etc.) and the hierarchies that existed within them and between them. The study showed that leadership was most effective where formal leadership and accountability to the policymakers was aligned with the professional hierarchy. Where the formal leadership was out of step with the professional hierarchy, the networks tended towards fragmentation because the leader lacked legitimacy with other professions. However, it was not always clear-cut because professional hierarchy was not necessarily distinct, particularly when the relevant expertise of groups of professionals was contested. The study described the following example in response to a crisis; a newly appointed independent chair - perceived as neutral by all stakeholders - was able to strike the balance between clear accountability and being able to co-ordinate actions across both social care and healthcare organisations.

The final presentation, by **Wendy Reid** *(Seeking governance in dual executive leadership),* also raised the question of asymmetric leadership roles in a study of leadership and governance in performing arts organisations. In this context, the Board of Directors, (usually volunteers with

little knowledge of the business model), appointed two separate and supposedly equal directors to lead the organisation: an artistic director and an executive director. Wendy Reid suggested that this tactic was rooted in fear of the artistic director, a powerful figure who was central to the strategic vision, reputation and artistic success of the organisation, but who was difficult to manage from the perspective of running a business. The Boards therefore appointed executive directors effectively in order to control the artistic directors. This introduced a level of distrust into the relationship dynamic. In addition, as they themselves closely monitored the executive directors, comparatively more than they did the artistic directors, the balance of trust and power was upset. The dual leadership model became a triad.

Discussion following the presentation was prompted by a question from the audience about how organisations with plural leadership project a single organisational voice. This was quite simply but tellingly answered in the case of the arts organisations that Wendy Reid studied. She explained that the artistic director was invariably the symbolic leader of the organisation, and accepted as the vision-maker. Naturally, she said, much of this was the result of a lot of behind-the-scenes work – for example, helping to craft the artistic director's 'script', and deciding when to bring him or her into play during fundraising. For key stakeholders such as major sponsors the executive director was in reality their primary contact, but publicly the relationship was with the artistic director. As long as the artistic and executive directors were able to solve any problems between them, everything went well. As soon as conflict overflowed beyond this central dyad, however, it 'exploded the whole organisation'.

Laura Empson explained that her research in professional service firms had demonstrated that there was a great deal of discomfort around the word 'leadership'. She explained that, 'the moment a senior professional sticks his or her head above the parapet, the response from their colleagues is 'who are you to be talking for us?''. So members of the leadership group may not describe themselves as leaders and they may not acknowledge each other as leaders. Indeed, Laura Empson suggested they can seem to collectively 'hide behind each other'. This contrasted with the assumption implicit in Ann Langley's initial discussion of the concept of plural leadership – that some people want authority and power. This discrepancy may partly be because professionals in fee-earning roles regard leadership duties as a 'service' they have to fulfill, that has taken them away from their primary activity. It may also be because, as a formal leadership role in a partnership is a case of *primus inter pares,* holders of these roles perceive they do not have any real power, so tend to be happy to share that lack of power.

The role of trust was also discussed as a foundational element in plural leadership. In Heidi Gardner's study, the dissolution of trust had been a pivotal moment and the trigger for the emergence of an informal leadership group. In Laura Empson's study, the Managing Partner and Senior Partner, who had known each other for many years and spend many hours a week together at work, were still so close that they chose to go on holiday together with other partners in the firm.

The participants expanded on this to explore the subtle but crucial difference between *being* a plural leader and plural *leading*. In some cases it is clear that people adopt leadership behaviors if no one else is performing the role – but at what point is leadership actually conferred? When do acting leaders become people of whom leadership is expected? How does the need for trust and relationship-building sit with the question of power? Many of the cases discussed hinged on people apparently having different levels of power – and in the context of plural leadership, how much power do people really have?

Despite the wide variation in context and the different research questions being asked, the symposium pinpointed interesting points of contrast and potential areas for further research relating to the common themes of power and trust.