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## **Leaders as Lead Learners: A Case Example of Facilitating Collaborative Leadership Learning for School Leaders**

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## Leaders as Lead Learners

### A Case Example of Facilitating Collaborative Leadership Learning for School Leaders

**Abstract** *Distributed leadership is increasingly desired in traditionally top-down organizations. This article bridges a gap between theory about distributed leadership, which addresses not only how leadership is exercised through collaborative practices, but also where and by whom it is undertaken. The idea of distributed leadership highlights the need for new and congruent development methodologies, without which calls for distributed leadership will flounder. Distributed leadership involves systemic change and cannot be achieved through individualized leadership development alone; people throughout the organization need to revise ideas about leadership, including top leaders. Top leaders need a safe learning environment that mirrors this new mode of working, offering opportunities for re-examining leadership and learning. Through an exploration of the psychological challenges of distributed leadership, a learning design that supports learning for distributing leadership is proposed. This incorporates attention to system dynamics and a collaborative learning methodology. It is illustrated by an example from school leadership. **Key Words:** collaborative learning; distributed leadership; top leader/system dynamics*

#### Introduction

This article explores the idea that as distributed leadership is demanded in many organizations, top leaders need to learn how to support distributed leadership

through the exploration of their own corresponding leadership change. It argues that this cannot be achieved through traditional development activity focusing on individual development. Leaders need the experience of working collaboratively in a group in which leadership is distributed rather than merely 'talking about' these concepts. They need a learning design that may promote new approaches to leadership and organization learning, congruent with the distributed leadership concept, and which moves away from leadership conceived as individual style or personal characteristics. Learning design must address the systemic aspects of distributed leadership. In addition to offering alternative concepts of leadership, the design must also acknowledge the differences between top leader roles and other leadership roles in the organization.

The concept of distributed and collaborative leadership requires development programmes to be specifically designed to address the challenges of leading in these ways. The school leadership case presented suggests how this may be achieved. There is a gap between much leadership development practice and scholarly descriptions of learning theories (Tsang, 1997). This article aims to provide an understanding of the kind of methodology that might meet this gap, described by Burgoyne and Reynolds (1997: 330):

shifts in our understanding of learning as a more collective and social process, and of managing and organizing as arranging things in a pluralistic context, contribute to a new and much more emancipatory agenda ... facilitating collective learning ... looks like a promising way forward, demanding a whole new set of methods and approaches to practice.

## Distributed Leadership

The idea of distributed or shared leadership is that not only top executives lead but that leadership can also be exercised throughout an organization. Distributed leadership can be conceived less as a set of personal attributes or style and more as a practice enacted by people at many levels. The terms shared and distributed leadership are widely used to describe a concept of leadership which is a departure from traditional top-down leadership. The terms are broadly interchangeable with some authors preferring the term shared rather than distributed. The idea that leadership can be exercised by a group of people collaborating together—often but not invariably associated with the term shared leadership—and by individuals at many levels in an organization—often but not invariably how the term distributed leadership is used—is central to post-traditional leadership models (Kouzes and Posner, 2003; Pearce and Conger, 2003; Pearce and Sims, 2000; Raelin, 2003; Senge and Kaeufer, 2001). Pearce and Conger (2003: 4) offer an historical account of how the concept has emerged from notions such as emergent leadership, participative decision making, mutual leadership, empowerment and self-managed teams. While leaders may be figureheads at the top, Fletcher (2004) argues that in practice these 'visible heroes' are supported by leadership shared across the organization. This collaborative subtext is not recognized and is often mistaken for individual achievement. She calls for 'post-heroic' models of leadership, involving distributed leadership practices such as collaboration between those identified as leaders with those who enact leadership but may not be labelled leaders.

Collaboration within a group or across organizational levels is central to the idea of distributed or shared leadership, without which there can only be fragmentation and conflict. In shared and distributed leadership patterns of behaviour must change: such leadership requires the emergence of collaborative interaction and the possibility of being influenced by peers and of acquiring lateral influence, as compared with traditional top-down leadership. Conflict among peers must be replaced by collaborative practices and ways of managing conflicts and rivalries that do not simply refer back up to top leaders. This change from peer competition to peer collaboration must be learned or, as Cox et al. (2003: 65) suggest, this new leadership may have a darker side in which the difficulties of maintaining relationships may divert effort from achieving tasks. This would have the opposite effect from the creative and energizing effects often hoped for when distributing leadership is imagined. This changed leadership concept has distinct learning challenges if emerging new leadership practices can result in collaborative behaviour.

Co-leadership or collective leadership (Denis et al., 1996, 2001) is often used in relation to co-responsibility, for example a strategic team in which all members bear shared responsibility for the organization.

At the same time as discussions about distributed leadership are flourishing, the notion of strategic leadership is emerging. However, strategic leadership is not a simple reinvention of top-down leadership, and indeed strategic and distributed leadership appear to be related concepts. For example, Sosik et al. (2005) argue that outstanding strategic leadership creates a culture of shared leadership, in which the organization as a whole shares and participates in the leadership tasks of the organization and this contributes to an organization's ability to learn and transform for continuous change. While distributed leadership has been observed in self-managed teams (Barry, 1991) the discussion has now moved towards a broader re-conceptualization of distributed leadership needed for realizing strategic change. Strategic leadership requires an element of distributed leadership and strategic leaders are thought to be more effective when they are willing to learn along with others (Ireland and Hitt, 2005). The leader needs to be involved in collaborative learning and distributing leadership but strengthening and revising their role, not abdicating or simply delegating.

The ideas of shared, collaborative or distributed leadership are not simply styles of leadership but contain an additional element: understanding *who* is doing the leading, *where* and *when*, with leadership residing in a dynamic system rather than single leader. Distributed leadership involves different assumptions about the role of leaders, the way leaders should use their authority, the way followers should relate to leaders and the way the leaders relate to each other and the outside world. One of the central challenges of distributed leadership turns on the ability to acknowledge and manage the necessary uncertainties and ambiguities surrounding one's own role in relation to those of others. Where such acknowledgement and management are lacking, the consequence can be an explosion of difficult relations with colleagues and/or superiors, in which the tensions around the *location* of leadership get played out in accusation, hostility and recrimination (Bion, 1961; Hirschhorn, 1997; Klein, 1959). Thus the psychological dynamics of distributed leadership are important in supporting a change to leadership patterns and these involve the top leader role.

## The Impact of Distributed Leadership on Top Leaders' Roles

The role of the top leader in the distributed leadership concept is important: Locke (2003) identifies the difference between top-down, bottom-up, shared egalitarian and integrated models of leadership. He argues for the integrated form in which a top leader works with staff, and staff with each other, to lead an organization, but the top leader's role remains distinct. Locke's integrated model is valuable as it draws attention to two aspects of this new approach to leadership; first, collaboration is essential if the organization is not to be fragmented, and second, the top leader's role is different from that of others and is not eroded but made more complex. The leader at the top has specific duties and functions both externally, such as relating to key external stakeholders, and internally in terms of creating strategic direction.

Leadership is not solely concerned with the rational side of organization life but also with the emotions that drive group and organization dynamics. Obholzer and Miller (2004) identify the leader's role as including: reviewing the organization's primary task; keeping this from being corrupted by the emotionality present in the organization; having a boundary-keeping function; avoiding the enactment of unconscious personal dynamics which interfere with institutional functioning; and paying attention to organizational dynamics.

Huffington et al. (2004) discuss the new organizational dynamics arising from distributed leadership and suggest that, while there are considerable potential benefits to be gained from sharing, collaboration and devolution downwards of decision making in and between organizations, simultaneously there are anxieties and conflicts to be contained. Far from diluting the influence of the leader in the central role, it appears even more important for the person in this role to offer a singular inspiring vision or idea to integrate and in particular to *contain* the elements of leadership distributed to others. Distributed leadership changes the leadership dynamics and, where the individual leader may have been imagined to hold the organization together once leadership is distributed among many, the top leadership team must also integrate across the organization. Distributed leadership, if it is to mean more than just delegation and is to contain potential fragmentation and avoid the dynamics of conflict and evasion of responsibility, implies a measure of acceptance of accountability for the overall functioning of the organization and its direction. As Kets de Vries argues (1999: 75), however participatory one might like to be as a top leader, there is need from the top for clear direction and priorities in an authoritative rather than authoritarian manner.

Heifetz and Laurie (1997) and Huffington et al. (2004) argue that one of the key functions of leaders is to manage differences, conflicts of interest and tensions inherently part of normal organizational life. These include those 'under the table' system dynamics such as differences, stress and anxiety. Leading an organization through transformational change requires the leader to provide the emotional capacity to work out the broader differences and interests within the organization as a whole. The leader has to contain the emotional dynamics of the organization as well as their own internal issues and personal concerns, providing the psychological glue for the organization.

It is important to note that the dynamics referred to are systemic. Systems psychodynamics focuses not on each separate individual's feelings but on the collective emotions that are created unconsciously in the organization. From this perspective

the leader is not simply called upon to be empathetic or aware of individuals' feelings but is required to understand the anxieties and tensions inherent in any collective enterprise, arising from the tasks of the organization and relations between people in their collective endeavour. Many centre on authority relations and so involve leaders; these include collective fantasies of the leader the organization wants or fears. These fantasies serve to contain aspects of the emotionality of the organization that are too difficult to address. The leader can be idealized, revered or feared, and this acts to contain some of the emotionality of the organization. Any idea an individual has of giving up a heroic leader role inevitably changes these dynamics and, unless the leader intervenes to contain the anxiety that is generated, it is likely that the change will be subject to overt and covert pressures to revert to the known role. The uncomfortable emotions that can be contained by a distant leader or a leader imagined to have the answers need to be held differently by leaders changing to a more personal presence and asking for collaboration in generating solutions to problems.

Where, in fantasy, the organization 'requires' the leader to have heroic or ideal qualities, this may be a habit or resolution of difficulties that have not been explored in any other way. For example, the organization may have collective concerns about its ability to survive or compete, and the leader can have accumulated heroic fantasies that they may even identify with sufficiently to believe that it is in fact their role and responsibility to ensure the organization's survival. The heroic leader should be 'perfect' and the leader can be relied on to take the organization into a rosy future (Gabelnick, 1998; Gabriel and Hirschhorn, 1999). This fantasy is largely unconscious and, as the leader is only human, can result in the actual leader being seen as fallible and falling from this idealized position. The leader therefore has to manage the dynamics of projection and fantasy and this is difficult for leaders when distributed leadership is needed. Psychological safety achieved through projections onto the leader becomes more complicated when leadership activity is distributed: to take up a top leader role in an organization sharing leadership requires the leader to face up to and dismantle established assumptions and relations which their staff has of their leader. In giving up the idea that a charismatic or strong leader is their role, the leader becomes more in touch with the risks and the potential failure, as well as success, associated with exercising shared/distributed leadership. The leader has to give up some fantasies and realities of being in control. The leader also needs to face more challenges from staff as they engage in leadership. The difficulties may unconsciously encourage people to revert to familiar patterns and seek the apparent, if illusory, protection afforded by more hierarchical structures. Hirschhorn (1997) talks about the shifts in leadership required; in contrast to emphasizing external authority—the chain of command—these new organizations require people across the organization to exercise much more personal authority, including the top leader.

Huffington et al. (2004) argue that this shift from external, hierarchically embedded authority to a more personal and laterally distributed exercise of leadership is psychologically demanding. The leader is not simply changing their own behaviour; their change in leadership interferes with established institutional dynamics and leads to psychological and political upheaval as power and authority relations are in flux. For followers it presents challenges to individuals' competence; it may involve the dismantling of projections onto and expectations of others—the external authority figures whom one has previously looked to for containment or direction: idealized,

envied or denigrated. For top leaders this means that, as the organization changes, people can resent what they perceive as the abdication of their leaders—the buck does not get passed back up the command chain in emotional terms. Top leaders need to be able to have confidence and support to manage this experience.

### **Developing Distributed and Collaborative Leadership**

Collaborative and distributed leadership encompasses more than a set of competences or a leadership style. Whereas the idea of transformational leadership (Bass and Avolio, 1994), for example, can be translated into behaviours that leaders can adopt in order to get the best performances and motivate staff, the ideas about collaborative and distributed leadership should not be seen as simply another concept that could inform competences and suitable behaviours for leaders. To develop collaborative leadership requires more than individual development through, for example, executive coaching, action learning projects (Revans, 1982) or attendance on personal leadership development programmes: individualized development may risk collaborative and distributed leadership as being construed as leadership of change rather than change of leadership concept. The design must reflect the systemic change required.

Much leadership development currently has a ‘deficit model’ underpinning the design—even where the programme allows for personal/experiential learning, the starting point from most organization perspectives is a framework outlining the key characteristics sought in leaders, such as competences. Assessment centres and learning activities in line with these are then arranged. The underlying assumption is that the individual lacks a skill, competence, insight or knowledge and then gets assistance in correcting this deficit through leadership development. Conger (1993) is critical of the concept that leadership development is about developing fully rounded individuals as if these would be the most effective leaders. This type of personal development for leadership is insufficient to help leaders understand how leadership is exercised in relation to the organization as a whole. Thus this form of leadership development is not appropriate for enabling distributed leadership that requires that leaders not only exercise personal authority but also understand and operate within the wider strategic intent and capability of the organization.

The deficit model has also been challenged by those who wish to suggest alternative approaches; cooperative inquiry is a model that eschews ‘doing’ development or research to others (Dentico, 1999; Heron, 1996; Kakabadse and Kakabadse, 2002; Reason, 1988). This is now reinforced by ‘positive organization behaviour’ (Luthans, 2002a, b); development is about identifying and nurturing people’s strongest qualities and an appreciative inquiry to help them work out how they can best live out those strengths (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987; Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Appreciative Inquiry, while essentially an organizational change model, might be considered as an appropriate basis for a collaborative leadership development methodology as it enables peer learning without the resistance often found when learning involves personal exposure of thought and experience. Some elements were incorporated into the programme presented in this article: principles of being appreciative, applicable, provocative and collaborative. While positive approaches can be contrasted with individual ‘deficit’ models of development, the top leader

also needs to understand the group and organization dynamics that may derail change and strategic intent (Neumann and Hirschhorn, 1999; Neumann, 1999). Indeed it might be argued that a relentless pursuit of the positive would drive problematic dynamics ‘under the table’ where they could be destructive, unconscious and unattended to. Collaborative leadership learning therefore needs to draw from both these traditions, modelling collaboration and helping leaders understand how to work effectively with top leader/organization dynamics that changing leadership concepts will provoke.

This requires a learning design for people from traditionally hierarchical settings, learning with peers, which allows for a systemic rather than individualized understanding of leadership dynamics. The learning design must mirror and be congruent with the concept of collaborative leadership in order to implicitly model this concept of leadership. Heifetz and Laurie (1997) affirm the importance of providing what Winnicott (1965) described as a ‘holding environment’ in leadership roles. Where learning opportunities for distributed leadership emphasize, implicitly and explicitly, the importance of a holding environment for exploring tensions, difficult experiences and emotions, leaders will acquire both the experience of a holding environment and the capacity to provide such an environment for others.

Thus learning for top leaders in situations of increasing distributed leadership must incorporate the challenges of:

- a collaborative, network, shared mode of operating rather than individualized practice;
- the psychological role of top leaders in the emotional life of the organization;
- the leader’s role in providing the organization glue or focus on core task (in schools the task of leading learning)—what can or cannot be distributed;
- their own history, experience and local context.

### **School Leadership: Collaborative Leadership Learning Groups Project**

The need for distributed leadership and associated development challenges can be explored through the particular case of school leadership. The role of head teacher has been one of a powerful leader within a community of teachers and pupils. Yet the need for distributed leadership in schools is thought to be a timely idea (Gronn, 2000, 2003). Educational reform, the requirement for schools to work collaboratively on key improvements, the need for teachers to work with other agencies—for example, in the UK, the Government’s Every Child Matters agenda—mean that the traditional head teacher role could be a bottleneck to the change agenda. Teachers at many levels, particularly experienced and senior teachers, have leadership roles both within their schools and across organizations, both in and out of educational establishments. The need for change has been growing: Sergiovanni, (1992, 1996) and West-Burnham (1997) each relate the notions of unpredictability and rapid change to the need for schools to be flexible and led in distributed, non-hierarchical ways. Fullan (2001) explores the distribution of leadership which he considers to be requisite for successful negotiation with an environment that is changing both rapidly and in unpredictable ways. Lambert (2002) also argues strongly for a model of shared leadership,

re-conceptualizing leadership in schools as a responsibility that is organization-wide, or 'the professional work of everyone', and this is echoed by Lambert et al. (2002), Gronn (2003), Spillane (2003), Spillane et al. (2004). Harris (2003) provides evidence from her research on school improvement projects and proposes that good teacher leadership is distributed leadership where collaboration and collegial ways of working enable all teachers to take up leadership and enhance a school's capability for change and development.

Harris (2005) also asserts that the idea of distributed leadership is fuelling the contemporary debate about leadership and organization development in schools. While Bennett et al. (2003) caution that there is little agreement on the meaning of distributed leadership in schools, and Leithwood and Riehl (2003) and Bennett et al. (2003) note that there is little evidence about its effectiveness, there is a growing impetus for this leadership practice in schools.

Wallace (2001) explores the risks of sharing leadership in schools and his analysis is useful in understanding the challenges: head teachers need to depend on empowered leadership among their team members and yet at the same time head teachers alone have the legal responsibilities for running the school within the oversight of their governing body. Accountability measures now mean that head teachers may end up being publicly vilified if their school does not achieve targets and central government reforms. Wallace suggests that the training and development offered to head teachers does not address the issues of accountability and delimiting the boundaries of shared leadership when it is needed. It is hardly surprising then that head teachers often construct leadership sharing as empowering colleagues to achieve their own agenda (Hall and Southworth, 1997; Southworth, 1995). The difficulties for teachers in changing practice should not be underestimated; educational reform is highly visible. The desire to hold them to blame when things go wrong—a school fails a child or fails to improve its standard—is seen in the press and in public debate. Schools are in competition with each other for local education authority resources and for pupils in their catchments. There are many reasons for head teachers to feel the need to hold on to power and leadership in their school and to avoid sharing ideas with their head teacher peers. New ideas about leadership may sound rational in response to the changes in the education sector, but is it likely to evoke a strong reaction from head teachers? The effectiveness of distributed leadership may not be evident or capable of being fully evaluated until the support for adopting this (perhaps risky) practice is also fully developed, enabling leaders to embrace the challenges.

## **Background to the Project**

Shared, collaborative and distributed leadership and the policy initiatives aligned with it have become a significant driver in the development activity led by the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) in England, which opened in November 2001. In its early days, an especially commissioned Think Tank of recognized national and international leaders in the field outlined a set of Ten Propositions for School Leadership. Included in this were the propositions that leadership should be dispersed throughout the school community and should build capacity as a learning community (Hopkins, 2001).

NCSL had established a number of programmes on which the collaborative leadership learning project could build. For example, the Networked Learning Communities (NLC) programme is a partnership initiative led by NCSL in which groups of schools have formed learning networks as a force for knowledge-sharing and innovation. NCSL described this learning as communities, schools, teachers, pupils and leaders 'learning from each other, with each other and ultimately, on behalf of each other'. These phrases suggest systemic rather than individualistic notions of learning and capture the idea of collaborative learning without jargon, government directive or academic language and were developed as an accessible and memorable 'signature' for school leaders.

The NLC programme had recognized that insufficient energy had been put into creating contexts where school leaders could regularly reflect on the impact of their leadership and develop understanding of themselves as leaders.

### Setting up the Project

This acknowledgement led to the development of the collaborative leadership learning programme. To date there have been three iterations of this programme. A Collaborative Leadership Learning pilot was co-designed and delivered in partnership with Cranfield School of Management. The later iterations built on this experience and included learning from other NCSL work.

Any intervention in school leadership at a national level needs to be done on a large scale. It would not be possible for college staff and associates to facilitate collaborative leadership learning groups across the country. The collaborative leadership learning groups programme was therefore conceived as a process for developing skills in peer facilitation of collaborative leadership learning groups. NCSL would provide a collaborative leadership learning group for those who would be peer facilitators of their own group in their region. These individuals would work at the task of collaborative leadership learning. This would be in parallel to the work they would facilitate with their own groups and these in turn would be in parallel to the facilitation that those head teachers who were members of their regional collaborative leadership learning group would be doing in their own schools in creating distributed leadership patterns and leading learning.

The pilot project thus involved a group of LEA/school leaders, each of whom would be facilitating a Collaborative Leadership Learning Group (CLLG) of their own. The aim was to enable participants to understand their role in leading/co-leading their CLLG and develop learning which could be disseminated to others.

The way the programme was developed was important for its delivery. The tutors, who had never met before, recognized that their situation was parallel to that of the co-leaders they would be working with; they had no idea what the programme would look like, they had relevant and different experience to bring to the work, they were doing this amongst a variety of other tasks competing for their time and they were committed to collaborative learning principles. They therefore decided that the way they would work together would be a mirror of the CLLGs. In practice the tutors spent many hours conducting their own inquiry into the nature of CLLGs before the programme was established.

## Learning Principles for the CLLG Project

A learning model developed at NCSL that gives respect, and broadly equal emphasis to, three types of knowledge, underpinned the design (Creasy, 2003; NCSL, 2002).

The three fields of knowledge privileged in this design are:

- Knowledge which the participants themselves bring—perspectives on their current experience or problems, their accumulated understanding and insights from prior experience, their enthusiasm for particular dimensions of their work and so on.
- Knowledge which is external, public, or validated—this might be national or international research, or the best that is known about practice, but is essentially both practical and theoretical public knowledge which might serve to frame, support, structure, illuminate or challenge participants' knowledge and thinking.
- Knowledge that is collaboratively constructed or developed through the processes and interactions in the programme. This third field of knowledge stems from a belief that the collaborative processes that characterize the programme's activities support the development of new understandings and insights which are both collectively understood and shared and which support deep learning for individuals about themselves and their leadership.

Throughout the year of the programme, participants would be working together with the tutors, to reflect on what they were doing and learning from the CLLGs they were facilitating. They were to learn from each other and on behalf of the CLLG group. That is to say, the distributed element of learning and leading was present from the beginning and the idea that this was about individual development alone was disabused. At all times the programme sought to embody the ideas of learning collaboratively and sharing learning throughout the organization system rather than simply talking about these ideas. The notion of learning and simultaneously sharing that learning with others needed to be established at the start and to do this a visual representation of the experiential learning cycle was produced (e.g. Dixon, 1994; Kolb, 1984) to link the live issues of participants which were the central focus of the programme to the CLL group work back in the field.

An important facet of the design lay in the use of the notion of parallel process adopted by the tutors. The tutors envisaged that the focus of inquiry on each of the programme days would reflect the stage that the participants were at with their own groups and would propose themes, questions and materials appropriate to that stage. At the same time, participants were expected to bring to the group the issues that they wanted to address with their colleagues. Experiences in the group would have parallels with the challenges in their CLL groups and, by exploring the dynamics of the programme group as it unfolded, there would be learning which would inform the CLL group work.

Therefore an additional and important source of learning was careful attention to the dynamics of the group when they met. For example,

- When the group seemed to get 'stuck' in conversations about how directive a co-leader of a CLLG could be, echoing their concerns about being directive as head teachers [identified by Wallace (2001) as a key issue in balancing shared

leadership with the need to be directive as contingencies dictate], the tutors asked the participants to explore directiveness both in relation to CLLG and head teacher experiences and in the context of their experience of the programme as participants in relation to the tutors' leadership.

- When the group, who had said at the outset that they wanted to have 'deep not superficial' discussions, seemed to be spending inquiry discussions on trivia, we asked them to explore what it might be about this particular group dynamic that made deeper discussion difficult, drawing them into the here and now of the programme group rather than the there and then of their back home groups, only later returning to these in discussion of the value of such discussions in promoting collaborative learning.
- When the group seemed to have difficulty keeping all members together for the agreed dates, when members talked about the difficulty of getting their home groups together or how to judge when groups had 'run their course', we focused the following programme day on the issue of sustaining collaborative leadership learning groups and used their experience of sustaining their own interest in the pilot as the basis for exploration.

Based on the framework of the three fields of knowledge, the programme days evolved a form, which included a variety of structures for exchange of experiences; an enquiry question around one of the thematic pillars (leadership, facilitation, learning); periods for reflection; and application for CLL groups. Between sessions, participants were offered appropriate readings that might challenge thinking and had a web-based conversation space for use by group members.

### **Learning from the Pilot**

The programme has subsequently undergone several iterations of development which has been informed by the experiences of the pilot event presented in this case. The first set of key learning points were the issues that were identified by participants.

They were able to identify three groups of issues that would benefit future CLLG members. Indeed their experiences could be passed on in the form of materials, cases, reflections and suggestions in the following areas.

- The preconditions and start up of groups; the most crucial issue for the facilitator at this point is that they are mandated by their peer group to lead it and that they understand that it is a leadership role not a 'chairing' role—'knowing just how much leadership is involved'.
- Sustaining and transforming the group; describing the kind of learning that might be available; notion of changing mindsets, new perspectives, providing learning opportunities for each other; contracting and capturing learning so that it really transforms other parts of the system.
- Paying attention to working processes; the facilitator/tutor becoming a 'narrator' of the group story and possible future scenarios; providing a range of learning methodologies, containing anxiety about whether learning is taking place and maintaining a safe space for learning.

The second set of key learning points were the issues that were identified by the tutors.

- The idea of the tutors mirroring the process that participants were engaging with in their own groups was valuable.
- At every stage exploring feelings about the process and using these as part of the analysis to understand what might be needed in the group was an important part of the inquiry. For example, when participants wanted more input from tutors or more definitive instructional answers to their questions, the feelings associated with uncertainty or the perception that leaders might be withholding knowledge were explored both in the context of the group and in relation to experiences back in the organization as they might relate to distributed rather than strong top-down leadership.
- Sharing uncertainties and concerns with the group was a necessary part of the learning process, establishing the idea of working together at the learning task and not a 'top-down' direction of learning; yet at the same time there was an acknowledgement of the differentiated roles of tutor and participant. For example, were the tutors too directive, expecting too much input from busy participants, really co-learning or imposing a vision of an 'ideal' CLLG?
- It was important to incorporate shared leadership into the design and at the same time acknowledge that not all leaders have the same role in relation to the task.

The principle concern regarding the extension of the CLLG project by working with more groups and more leaders is that the structure, exercises and concepts will become too 'packaged'—and even that a myth will emerge that there is a right or best way to 'do' such learning. This is a particular conundrum as one output of the project was to be tools that could be passed on to future groups. The tutors' own inquiry process could be packaged as 'knowledge' and the process lost to new tutors. Tutors were concerned that the need to extend the reach of collaborative leadership learning might lead to the down playing of the emotional dynamics of distributed leadership in favour of a more easily captured idea about group facilitation for collaborative learning. Attention to unconscious dynamics—which by definition are not easy to pay attention to—is likely to be the first aspect of leadership learning to go when the leaders of such programmes do not prioritize their inclusion.

## Conclusions and Implications

Collaborative, shared and distributed leadership are ideas that are emerging as an important component of leadership practice and means that leadership development must explore new territory. The demands of collaborating rather than competing amongst peers in situations where top-down leadership is changing and where individuals are expected to exercise personal authority and influence across the organization should not be underestimated. It is important therefore to find a learning model that reflects these theoretical debates about leadership and is congruent with the type of leadership it purports to develop, allowing participants to learn to address the complicated emotions and challenges associated with taking up leadership roles where everyone, including top leaders, must re-evaluate their leadership roles.

These significant challenges to distributing leadership must be reflected in the learning design. Psychological understanding of the leadership role and the changes to leadership and organization dynamics resulting from changing leadership concepts are crucial to the design of learning opportunities that support top leaders in creating change. The learning design must implicitly model the concept of leadership to be developed. The methodology must be collaborative and recognize the difficulties of leaders engaging in this form of learning while leading in existing organizations which are yet to start this change process. This article proposes a design implicitly and explicitly paralleling the elements of distributed leadership that top leaders are required to address in their own organizations and that may promote new approaches to leadership and organization learning, congruent with collaborative learning and distributed leadership concepts.

Exploring assumptions about leadership and bringing the importance of emotionality and authority relations to the attention of top leaders enables them to understand that collaborative and distributed leadership requires more than just a participative or delegating style. To facilitate this significant organizational shift requires the leader to have spent some time understanding and reflecting on the leadership role and on systems psychodynamics in organizations. The ability to acknowledge and manage the necessary uncertainties and ambiguities surrounding one's own role in relation to those of others is crucial to facilitating staff taking up leadership roles at organization levels not normally associated with leadership. This helps leaders address difficult dynamics in which tensions around the location of leadership could be played out inappropriately.

Leaders need to learn how to provide a psychologically safe space necessary to bring about change in their organization and to do so they require an experience of this in their own development. Top leaders need to feel confident enough in their ability to work through leadership issues so that they can supportively engage with staff attempting to take up leadership roles. Therefore their own forum for discussing such issues as part of their and their organization's change is important. The paradox is that to distribute leadership, learning must be supported at the top too.

The case study outlined in this article provides a basis and some provisional principles of leadership learning that may be used by other organizations seeking to develop a congruent learning methodology for distributed leadership. In order that distributed leadership is realized, learning designs such as this are needed: without them we will see no immediate change to leadership practices.

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