

# Shared Leadership and Learning

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**Abstract:** The aim of this study is to describe the links between shared leadership and learning. The method of this study is an integrative review that combines the results and findings of chosen studies focusing on the keyword "shared leadership" from the Scopus database and their relations to learning. As a result, this paper presents three basic topics – shared leadership as a stimulus for training and development, shared leadership as an incentive for learning and a summary of conditions supporting the relationship between shared leadership and learning.

**Keywords:** adult learning, integrative review, learning, shared leadership, training.

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## 1. Introduction

The aim of this study is to describe the relationship between shared leadership and learning. Shared leadership is defined differently by various authors, so we appreciate the efforts of some authors to provide a comprehensive view. Thus, from the summary provided by Wu and Cormican, we can conclude that shared leadership is a way of organizing the work of a team in which the role of leader is assumed alternately by individual team members or by the team as a whole. Leadership in this type of leadership is distributed among the individual team members both in the form of the role of the leader and in the form of the responsibilities and functions of this position. Decision making may also be distributed among individual team members (Wu and Cormican, 2021, p. 3). A similar review of definitions and theories is provided by Zhu et al (2018, p. 836) who place more emphasis on the phenomenon of peer influence. Fletcher and Kaüfer define shared leadership versus vertical team organization and single leader models through three differences in leadership approach. According to them, shared leadership is distributed and interdependent, embedded in social interaction, and leads to more intensive learning for individual team members (Fletcher & Kaüfer, 2003, p. 22). A very condensed overview of definitions and characteristics is also provided by Kocolowski (2010).

The areas where shared leadership can be applied are varied according to Pearce and Manz and include "top management teams, change management teams, teams of volunteers, research and development teams, virtual teams, and even military squads", finding it particularly beneficial "in the knowledge-worker context" (Pearce and Manz, 2005, p. 134). This list is interesting by mentioning military squads, which in the classical management literature tend to be considered the domain of the autocratic approach. The scope of the use of shared leadership according to Pearce and Manz above is complemented by O'Toole, Galbraith and Lawler with examples of big organisations (Intel, Apple, Citigroup) in which leadership was shared by two co-leaders (O'Toole, Galbraith and Lawler, 2002).

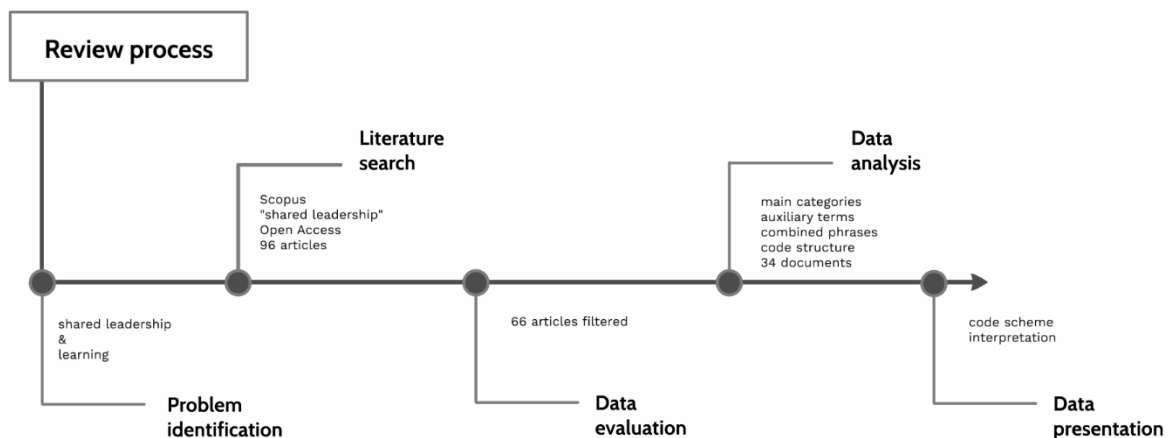
Some authors present results on leadership effectiveness research. Pearce and Manz (2005, p. 134) state that the more dispersed leadership patterns the higher performing teams, while low performing teams are "dominated by the team leader" (Pearce and Manz, 2005, p. 139). However, it is questionable whether the use of dispersed leadership patterns is a consequence of the development of the team while looking for its most effective position, for example in the form of shared leadership, or whether the success of the team is determined by the leadership style chosen. This question is partly answered by Bergman et al. who found in empirical research that "shared leadership among team members can increase team effectiveness, and teams that overlook this potent source of leadership are likely left at a disadvantage" (Bergman, 2012, p. 37). The positive impact of shared leadership on team performance and trust is also described by Drescher et al (2014, p. 778) and Wang, Waldman, and Zhang (2014, p. 192), who highlight that this approach is particularly appropriate for complex tasks.

As we can see, shared leadership is a debated topic. We can observe its use in different forms in different teams, and we can expect higher team effectiveness, which is partly correlated with the type of tasks that are solved by the team. When using shared leadership, team members often have to divide their roles or acquire competencies that allow them to participate in the work of the team both as a member and as a (temporary) leaders. Not only the acquisition of these roles but many other competencies are developed in the team through learning, which can be considered at a general level almost synonymous with consciousness (Jarvis, 2009, p.

187). For this reason, we have focused on how the literature views the combination of these two processes - shared leadership and learning. For this study, learning is defined by UNESCO as a "complex and long-term psychosocial process consisting of individual acquisition or change in information, knowledge, understanding, attitudes, values, skills, competencies or behaviour" (UNESCO, 2022).

## 2. Methodology

For this paper, the integrative review method was chosen, which allows "the simultaneous inclusion of experimental and non-experimental research to more fully understand a phenomenon of concern. Integrative reviews may also combine data from the theoretical as well as empirical literature" (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005, p. 547). Whittemore & Knafl (2005) define the steps in which this method is to proceed. These are Problem identification, Literature search, Data evaluation, Data analysis and Presentation (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** Integrative review process

First, we identified the problem/phenomenon to be investigated - this is the link between learning and shared leadership. Subsequently, a strategy for selecting appropriate literature was chosen. Here we decided to use the Scopus database with the following search strategy. The keyword phrase was "shared leadership", thereafter articles in Open Access mode in English were filtered. The number of articles with these criteria was 94. Articles were then downloaded (when available) and subjected to data evaluation. Articles related to shared leadership only vaguely and some articles focusing on shared leadership directly in teaching were eliminated. After this step, the remaining 66 articles were uploaded into the MAXQDA software. In this program, a support structure was created through lexical search and the results of this search were coded. The terms "shared leadership" and "learning" were selected as the main categories, and the auxiliary terms - information, knowledge, understanding, attitudes, values, skills, competency, behaviour, and others (need, requirement, etc.) were added following the definition of learning. All terms were used for the search in shortened form to capture other variants with the same word root. These terms were then also encoded. Combinations of terms (e.g., leadership, skill, learn) were also searched to identify more saturated passages of all articles. The documents were then explored with the support of the established code structure and significant passages for the study objective were coded with new separate codes – these were present in 34 documents. The cluster of these new codes was then processed in MAXQDA's Creative Coding tool, creating a scheme of relationships between the individual themes and subthemes (see Figure 2). The coded passages within each theme were then analysed, and the results of this analysis are presented in the Results section of this paper.

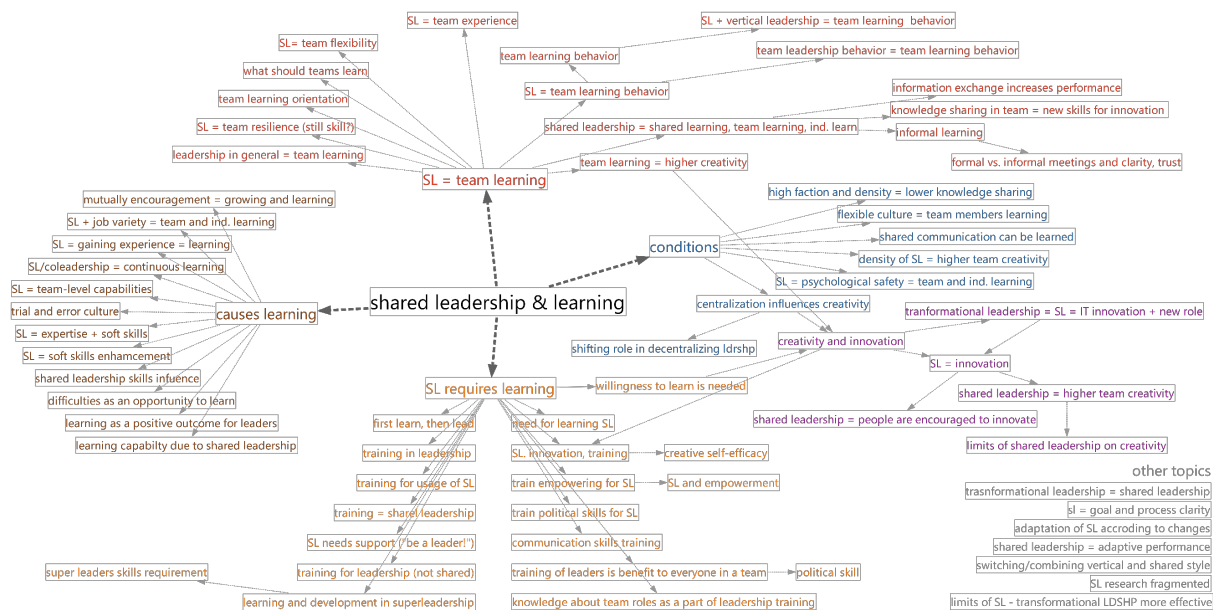


Figure 2: Creative coding result (created in MAXQDA 2018)

### 3. Results

As a result of the analysis of the literature, there are four main areas that the shared leadership literature addresses in conjunction with the issue of learning. Shared leadership was revealed as a stimulus for training and education, as a concept that promotes learning, and the conditions that are conducive to learning and development were identified. The last section deals with other interesting findings but of a rather marginal nature. It is important to mention that the areas overlap or build on each other either loosely or very strongly in some parts.

#### 3.1 Shared leadership as a stimulus for training and development

Shared leadership offers opportunities for training and development. A general impulse may be to expand the portfolio of leaders' behaviour. "In general, organizations should consider the concept of shared leadership and facilitate the emergence of this phenomenon. Team development and training programs can help teams to utilize shared leadership for their team and task work" (Klasmeier & Rowold 2022, p. 51). A common situation that may arise that requires training leaders for shared leadership is the absence of prior experience with shared leadership combined with a desire to use this style. This situation is mainly related to novice leaders whose "previous experiences included vertical leadership with the formal leader being hierarchically placed above the followers. Therefore, there was also a demand for learning shared leadership" (Toivonen et al., 2021, p. 7). As we will show later in this text, "other personnel besides formal leaders may benefit from leadership training" (Tafvelin et al. 2019, p. 40) which would have probably helped these novice leaders to acquire required skills earlier. Agnihotri & Kapoor highlight a key activity of leaders - sharing responsibility - in their article on Super Leaders (which according to Manz and Sims describe leaders who lead others to lead themselves). This approach creates a double opportunity for learning. The first facet of this approach is the acquisition of experience by the managers themselves; the second is the need to train other team members in taking responsibility for shared decisions. Through this opportunity, the leader "encourages initiatives taken by the team members and their creativity (...) because this is how team members can develop their skills of sharing in responsibility of leading" (Agnihotri & Kapoor, 2018, p. 881). Support for shared leadership through training is also expressed by Tillmann et al. (2022), who argue that organisations can focus on gradually incorporating these practices into formal leadership because there is already evidence of the trainability of this empowering leadership. However, Toivonen et al. (2021, p. 2) point out in the development of leaders that "giving (...) autonomy and responsibility too early in their training, and without providing them with sufficient instruction (...), may negatively impact their ability to cope with their role and may also undermine their confidence. Therefore, responsibility and leadership should be shared (...) when they are ready for it and to the extent, they are ready" (Toivonen et al., 2021, p. 2). This approach also points to the importance for leaders to acquire this skill gradually.

Another skill requirement for leaders is formal communication skills. "The cost of developing this skill may be just as important as pilot funding that covers direct costs" (Morgan et al, 2021, p. 104). However, these authors

do not stop with their recommendation only for team leaders. "Team trainings should focus on communication practices that improve shared leadership and shared communication. Additionally, teaching best practices for formal (task-oriented) meetings can help improve goal clarity and decrease role ambiguity" (Morgan et al., 2021, p. 84). Agnihotri & Kapoor confirm the requirement for a developed skill of communication - "oration, way of communication, language competence may help in motivating the team" (Agnihotri & Kapoor, 2018, p. 882). Other authors claim that shared communication is a skill which "can be taught and enhanced through practice" (Morgan et al., 2021, p. 101) which can lead to development of this important skill.

An unusual, yet understandable competence is brought by Tillmann et al. It is a political skill, which they define "as a unique set of social competencies that enable team members to appear as prototypical leaders and thus get others to rely on their leadership, as well as to appear as prototypical followers, which allows them to rely on others for leadership." (Tillmann et al., 2022, p. 4). With this definition, we see that the authors do not only focus on the position of leader but also emphasize development for the role of follower, which supports the definition of shared leadership. This focus on team members at the time outside the leader role is also one of the key perspectives of Bunjak et al. who point out the appropriateness of linking hierarchical transformational leadership and shared leadership behaviours. The authors reveal "an alignment between followers' active behavior (i.e., taking a role of leader) with a perception of leaders' encouraging vision and a supportive management innovation from an organization-level perspective" (Bunjak et al., 2022, p. 7). However, the stimulation of team members to engage in shared leadership behaviour is only a marginal issue, so we will not explore it further.

Leadership competence should include some knowledge in addition to skills. For example, Bachmann (2022) states that part of the training of leaders should include knowledge of how group dynamics models work and the principles applied in collaborative processes. This recommendation is complemented by (Hoch, 2013) with an emphasis on innovative behaviour and its implementation in the life of teams.

### **3.2 Shared leadership as an incentive for learning**

The definition of shared leadership is based on one of its fundamental characteristics - the interaction of team members with each other. "Under this circumstance, team members can serve as behavioral models for others when providing leadership for certain aspects of team functioning and also learn from others when following others' leadership guidance for different functions" (Liu et al. 2014, p. 285). The effect of shared leadership on organizational learning climate due to members learning from each other is mentioned also by other authors (Fu et al., 2020). This mutual influence is likely to have a greater effect if there are competence differences within the team, which according to Döös & Wilhelmson brings not only "synergy through complementary skills" but also "capacity to continuously learn, create ability to handle change and development" (Döös & Wilhelmson, 2021, p. 729). The relationship between shared leadership and learning is also confirmed by (Antinluoma et al., 2001), who, among others, cite an increase in staff expertise as a positive impact of shared leadership. Positive impacts on learning are confirmed by Döös & Wilhelmson (2021) who cite enhanced learning as the most frequently mentioned positive impact of shared leadership on the leaders themselves in the articles they reviewed. Similar findings are presented by Klinga et al. on the topic of co-leadership (practised by pairs of managers) who talk about emerging continuous learning. However, impacts can also be registered for rank-and-file team members. Charernnit et al. come up with the finding that the higher the level of shared leadership, the more soft skills enhancement occurs along with problem-solving, work ethics, flexibility, and interpersonal relationship (Charernnit et al., 2021, p. 9). At the broadest level, there is also an enhancement of team-level capabilities such as team reflectivity (Fu et al., 2020).

An important element of shared leadership mentioned by individual authors is mutual encouragement, which promotes "taking initiative, diligently share information, support each other in decision making and help others understanding new challenges and topic" (Sousa et al., 2016, p. 4). Encouragement is also closely related to the willingness to make mistakes, which is a central quality in the so-called experimental culture. The latter promotes learning through informed trial and error (Rose et al., 2021, p. 9). The positive effects of encouragement are then also e.g. learning by less knowledgeable members (Sousa et al., 2016). This theme also touches on the topic of conditions, which is the topic for the next chapter.

### **3.3 Conditions suitable for the development of shared leadership**

In the previous section, we outlined some suitable conditions for individual and group learning. Apart from the actual possibility to alternate between the roles of leader and follower, there is diversity (of roles, functions and

competencies) and appropriate organisational culture as other convenient conditions. The first set of conditions (i.e., shared leadership and the associated role rotation) is associated with key characteristics - centralization, density, and faction. The result of the study of Wu & Cormican implies that in shared leadership networks where centralization is strong, the level of interdependence and cooperation among team members is reduced, which hinders team creativity" (Wu & Cormican, 2016, p. 9). Wu & Cormican go on to look for links and argue that high density of a team also brings a positive effect - "a large number of interactions among team members can effectively accelerate the process of information flow, and consequently, promote team creativity" (Wu & Cormican, 2016, p. 9) This is supported by Sun et al. (2021) who state that a lower number of communication nodes (members) reduces the possibility of sharing the expertise of individual members, which negatively affects team creativity. This, according to these authors, is negatively influenced by a high number of factions in a group.

Another prerequisite for the positive effect of shared leadership on learning is diversity - the diversity of competencies/skills in the team has already been mentioned, but we can also talk about job variety, which positively affects both team and individual learning (Liu et al., 2014).

In the field of organizational culture, flexible culture is often mentioned, which is characterized by diversified information-seeking paths, where people learn from each other in various unstructured ways (Sun et al., 2021). We should not forget about mutual trust or psychological safety (Liu et al., 2014) which can be associated with the already mentioned encouragement and trial and error culture. The mutual trust associated with the concept of empowerment is reflected e.g. by Ramstad (2014), who talks about a greater tendency of team members to take the lead. According to He et al. (2020), an openness to experiment regardless of the success of the experiment in unknown situations and a willingness to learn from these situations seem to be essential requirements for the development of creative exploration in individuals with the potential for high creative self-efficacy. Psychological safety climate is identified as a mediating mechanism by Liu et al. (2014), who consider it as an element that supports individual and group learning. These elements appear to be key to team members' willingness to take leadership and unlock the potential for creative collaboration.

### **3.4 Other findings**

This chapter presents topics unrelated to the main goal which are still interesting in the discussion about learning and shared leadership. A noteworthy conclusion is reached by Bunjak et al. (2022, p. 5), who argue that transformational leadership "has an implicit power to motivate employees to also lead themselves" and is thus a kind of acceleration factor (and perhaps a condition) for the realization of shared leadership. Koeslag-Kreunen et al. (2018) also come up with similar suggestions of alternating and linking styles. Tran & Vu (2018) come up with critical insight, presenting the finding that "to enhance team effectiveness including team performance, quality of team experience, and team viability, implementation of transformational leadership will create more effectiveness compared to the application of shared leadership" (Tran & Vu 2021, p. 158).

A large number of authors (He et al., 2020; Hoch 2013; Sun et al. 2016; Klasmeier & Rowold 2020; Cobanoglu 2021) talk about the high impact of shared leadership on creativity and innovation. This seems to be a very frequent topic, however, the articles view creativity as a process of generating creative solutions and implementing innovations rather than as a skill or competence of individuals and teams. For this reason, they are not discussed further in this article.

## **4. Conclusion**

The aim of this study is to describe the relationship between shared leadership and learning. This relationship appears to be inevitable - shared leadership appears to be both a cause (or impulse) of learning (education and training) and a consequence or phenomenon dependent on the development of individuals (leaders and followers). The conditions that support personal and team growth play an important role. Unsurprisingly, support for leader training is expressed, not only in the area of soft skills but also in the scope of knowledge of team roles etc. However, prior to the analysis, we expected to see more mentions of the need to prepare leaders and teams to practice shared leadership. However, this need is not presented in the literature (or was not captured by this review). Thus, the ability to practice shared leadership may appear to be an intuitively acquired skill that does not require any systematic education or training. This finding could be addressed in the future and the structure of training courses on shared leadership could be tested. Further research could also reveal a set of competencies important for all team members where shared leadership is applied and define a competency model for leaders of these teams.

The present studies attribute an important role to social learning from other team members. In this respect, shared leadership seems to be an inspiring approach in which, by rotating in the leadership position, members can learn from the behaviour of others. At the same time (although this is not directly linked to learning) they can help each other overcome their weaknesses and amplify the influence of their strengths by sharing their knowledge and skills. Through knowledge sharing, the development of the learning organization as described by Senge (1993) can occur. The effect of shared leadership on the creative process is often mentioned, but the studies do not primarily focus on creative ability. The effect of this style on the development of this particular skill is such a suitable topic for some future research.

Shared leadership as a stimulus for learning is followed very smoothly by terms that emphasize diversity as an important factor for learning. The greater the diversity of roles and competencies represented, the more opportunities members have for being influenced by other members in learning. Structural conditions such as high density, low faction, and low levels of centralization of decision making (which by the nature of shared leadership is low) play an important role here. These conditions can be also related to the term 'flexible culture'. Elements of the psychosocial environment - mutual trust and a sense of psychological safety - appear to be very important, and are linked to a culture of trial and error. The combination of these conditions, their specific settings and examples of good practice can be also a suitable topic for further research.

The results of this study should be put under discussion because of the research procedure used. A more detailed content analysis of the sources could be beneficial in the future as well as the searched database choice. It would also be possible to broaden the list of keywords, especially in the area of shared leadership and its synonyms, for a larger number of articles included in the analysis. Books dealing with this issue could also be added. The topic in general offers possibilities for exploration using different strategies (quantitative or qualitative) and different research approaches.

## Acknowledgements

The funding for the present publication was provided by the Czech Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports for specific research (IGA\_FF\_2022\_036)

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