

The future of leadership: Combining vertical and shared leadership to transform knowledge work

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Executive Overview

Knowledge work is becoming increasingly team-based. The reason is clear. It is becoming ever more difficult for any one person to be an expert on all aspects of the work that needs to be done, and this is true in a wide variety of contexts ranging from the R&D lab to the executive suite. With the shift to team-based knowledge work comes the need to question more traditional models of leadership. Traditionally, leadership has been conceived around the idea that one person is firmly "in charge" while the rest are simply followers—what is termed vertical leadership. However, recent research indicates that leadership can be shared by team leaders and team members—rotating to the person with the key knowledge, skills, and abilities for the particular issues facing the team at any given moment. In fact, research indicates that poor-performing teams tend to be dominated by the team leader, while high-performing teams display more dispersed leadership patterns, i.e., shared leadership.¹ This is not to suggest that leadership from above is unnecessary. On the contrary, the role of the vertical leader is critical to the ongoing success of the shared-leadership approach to knowledge work. Thus, this article addresses the following questions: (1) when is leadership most appropriately shared? (2) how is shared leadership best developed? and (3) how does one effectively utilize both vertical and shared leadership to leverage the capabilities of knowledge workers?

Knowledge work—work that requires significant investment in, and voluntary contribution of, intellectual capital by skilled professionals—is increasingly becoming team-based.² The reason is clear. It is ever more difficult for any one person to have all of the knowledge, skills, and abilities required for all aspects of knowledge work, and this is true in a wide variety of contexts ranging from cross-functional task forces, to R&D labs, even to the executive suite.

This shift to team-based knowledge work is a result of both top-down and bottom-up pressures. The top-down pressures result from a more competitive and global environment causing firms to seek better ways to compete.³ This environment has resulted in firms reducing costs and improving efficiency in order to remain competitive. These measures have increased the need for a more flex-

ible workforce, a reduction in organizational response time, and full utilization of organizational knowledge, which can in part be achieved through the synergies of team-based knowledge work.

The bottom-up pressures faced by firms result from the changing nature of the workforce and the changing desires of employees. For example, a more highly educated workforce has greater knowledge to offer to organizations. Also, today's employees desire more from work than just a paycheck; they want to make a meaningful impact,⁴ which is increasingly achieved through team-based knowledge work.⁵

With the shift toward team-based knowledge work, we need to ask if our traditional models and approaches to leadership are still appropriate—or if they need revising and rethinking. For instance, while we typically think of leadership as one per-

son projecting downward influence on followers—what is termed vertical leadership—is it possible and desirable for teams of knowledge workers to contribute to the leadership process with what is termed shared leadership?⁶ Recent research evidence would suggest that the answer is a resounding yes—across a wide variety of organizational contexts ranging from the military, to the management of change, to virtual teams, to research and development labs, and even to top-management teams.⁷

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Shared leadership occurs when all members of a team are fully engaged in the leadership of the team and are not hesitant to influence and guide their fellow team members in an effort to maximize the potential of the team as a whole. Simply put, shared leadership entails a simultaneous, ongoing, mutual influence process within a team that is characterized by “serial emergence” of official as well as unofficial leaders. In this sense, shared leadership can be considered a manifestation of fully developed empowerment in teams.⁸

There are three very important questions regarding the role of shared leadership in knowledge work. First, when is leadership most appropriately

shared? Second, how does one develop shared leadership? Third, how does one effectively utilize both vertical and shared leadership to leverage the capabilities of knowledge workers? These questions frame the discussion that follows and are expanded upon and briefly addressed in Table 1.

When Is Leadership Most Appropriately Shared?

Because shared leadership is a more complex and time-consuming process than relying only on traditional vertical leadership from above, shared leadership should be developed only for certain types of knowledge work that require team-based approaches. Three characteristics of knowledge work that are particularly related to the need for shared leadership include: (1) interdependence; (2) creativity; and (3) complexity.

Interdependence

The more interdependent the knowledge workers, the greater the need for shared leadership. Research clearly shows us that teams outperform individuals when the tasks of the individuals are highly integrated and interconnected.⁹ On the other hand, if the tasks of the individuals are entirely independent, the need for shared leadership is minimal. For example, in the auto industry, where I have spent considerable time as a man-

Table 1
Key Questions and Answers in the Development of Shared Leadership

Key Questions	Answers
What task characteristics call for shared leadership?	Tasks that are highly <i>interdependent</i> . Tasks that require a great deal of <i>creativity</i> . Tasks that are highly <i>complex</i> .
What is the role of the leader in developing shared leadership?	<i>Designing the team</i> , including clarifying purpose, securing resources, articulating vision, selecting members, and defining team processes. <i>Managing the boundaries</i> of the team.
How can organizational systems facilitate the development of shared leadership?	<i>Training and development systems</i> can be used to prepare both designated leaders and team members to engage in shared leadership. <i>Reward systems</i> can be used to promote and reward shared leadership. <i>Cultural systems</i> can be used to articulate and to demonstrate the value of shared leadership.
What vertical and shared leadership behaviors are important to team outcomes?	<i>Directive leadership</i> can provide task-focused directions. <i>Transactional leadership</i> can provide both personal and material rewards based on key performance metrics. <i>Transformational leadership</i> can stimulate commitment to a team vision, emotional engagement, and fulfillment of higher-order needs. <i>Empowering leadership</i> can reinforce the importance of self-motivation.
What are the ongoing responsibilities of the vertical leader?	The vertical leader needs to be able step in and <i>fill voids</i> in the team. The vertical leader needs to continue to <i>emphasize the importance of the shared leadership approach</i> , given the task characteristics facing the team.

agement consultant both in the US and abroad, there are three fundamental types of development projects: introduction of a new model, model-year changes, and what are termed "running changes." For simplicity I will focus on new models and running changes.

Introduction of a new model requires extensive coordination and integration of the development of the vehicle's various subcomponents and of the knowledge workers who create them. For example, testing of body components is dependent on having a developed and tested chassis. Subsequently, the design of the body will affect chassis performance, and trade-offs will need to be made between the interfaces of the two systems. And so it goes throughout the various sub-systems of the vehicle. Navigating this type of project to successful completion often requires dynamic prescription, feedback, encouragement, and inspiration between skilled professionals who have clear and compelling expertise to share—in other words, shared leadership.¹⁰

On the other hand, managing the introduction of running changes involves considerably less integration. Running changes are incremental improvements that are introduced ad hoc to a vehicle that is already in production. The collection of running changes for any given model is generally managed as a single project. If, for example, an air conditioning control switch has high warranty claims, engineers will be assigned to develop a sturdier replacement. Similarly, if customers complain of excessive wind noise, engineers will be assigned to develop a way to reduce wind noise. Clearly, the engineers working on the disparate running changes to an existing vehicle are not nearly as interdependent as those working on the development of an entirely new vehicle, and thus there is less need for the dynamic give-and-take of shared leadership.¹¹ For extremely simple changes, say, the upgrade of windshield wiper blades, the use of shared leadership might, in fact, prove disadvantageous. Thus, the level of task interdependence of the knowledge workers is one factor to consider in the decision to develop shared leadership.

Creativity

Tasks requiring great levels of creativity can also benefit from the development of shared leadership. Creative knowledge work, by its very nature, generally requires inputs from multiple individuals. For example, one study found that teams with participative leaders generated more alternatives than teams with directive leaders, suggesting that

participative leadership may be more appropriate for teams with creative tasks.¹² Since shared leadership can be conceived as an extreme form of participative leadership, it appears that shared leadership would be quite useful for teams with creative tasks. Let us look, for example, to the publication of hard-science discoveries in the latest volume of *Science*—a premier publication in the hard sciences. Of the 195 articles published, a mere 3 per cent were published by individuals, while 77 per cent were published by three or more co-authors, and some were published by more than 100 co-authors, thus clearly suggesting that shared leadership may be an important component in cutting-edge scientific discovery. Similarly, and directly relevant to shared leadership, a recent study of high-tech research and development concluded that flow, creativity, and shared leadership were inextricably linked.¹³

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In some situations, however, knowledge work does not necessarily entail great creativity. Consider, for example, a teaching hospital where a team of medical students is routinely challenged by a lead physician to determine the proper diagnoses of patients' medical ailments. In this scenario the students' task is to assimilate the knowledge required to make correct diagnoses of underlying medical problems. In this situation it may be best to rely primarily on the knowledge and experience of the lead physician, rather than attempting to distribute the leadership process throughout the cohort of students, although even in this scenario there may still be a role for shared leadership to emerge. Thus, the degree to which the knowledge work requires creativity is related to the importance of shared leadership for the enhancement of team outcomes.

Complexity

As the complexity of knowledge work increases, the need for shared leadership also increases: The more complex the task, the lower the likelihood that any one individual can be an expert on all task components. For example, consider teams at the top of organizations in fast-paced industries, such as bio-technology. These teams are confronted with overwhelming amounts of vague, and often conflicting, information regarding both their

internal and external environments. The challenge for any one individual to be the leader on all aspects of this type of organization—ranging from human factors, to scientific matters, to the regulatory milieu—is daunting, at best. However, this is a type of scenario where shared leadership may provide the means to navigate the rapidly changing waters of a highly complex industry more effectively. For example, Dell Computer Corporation has successfully adopted a shared-leadership approach to grappling with their swift-moving and complex industry through the creation of the “office of the CEO”—rather than simply relying on the leadership of just one individual.

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On the other hand, under extremely routine task conditions, the need for any type of leadership—vertical or shared—is minimal.¹⁴ For example, for a group of accounts receivable personnel, once the initial task structure is developed and performance routines are in place, the need for dynamic leadership is unnecessary at best and detrimental at worst. Thus, the need for shared leadership is related to the overall complexity of the work.

How Does One Develop Shared Leadership?

It is one thing to say that we need shared leadership, but another thing entirely to develop it effectively. The following sections focus on the role of the vertical leader, that is, the designated leader of a team, who wishes to develop shared leadership, as well as more broadly on organizational systems that can facilitate the development of shared leadership.

Roles of the Vertical Leader in Developing Shared Leadership

There are two important issues for the nascent developer of shared leadership to consider. First, the vertical leader has the responsibility for the team’s design, and this is a critical role if shared leadership is to flourish. Second, the vertical leader has the main responsibility for managing the team’s boundaries.

Team Design

The team leader is largely responsible for the design, and re-design, of the team, and team design

has been inextricably linked to long-term success.¹⁵ The team leader’s initial responsibilities upon joining an existing team or forming a new team include collaborating with key constituents to clarify task specifications, securing necessary resources, identifying team-member roles, and officially launching or re-launching the team. Although there may be little initial opportunity for shared leadership in a newly formed team, the leader’s design decisions and, later, the expectations that the leader sets for team interaction and performance will contribute to the ultimate development of shared leadership.

The team leader must also articulate the vision of the team’s overall purpose. Communication of a unifying vision is perhaps the single most important task of the leader in the design process.¹⁶ The leader must also articulate how the team will approach its task and function as a team. At the same time, the team leader must articulate trust and confidence in the team.

To the extent possible, team leaders should select team members based on their technical, teamwork, and leadership skills. If shared leadership is to be developed, the right people must be on the team. Team size is also important here. Research clearly demonstrates that larger teams experience greater dysfunction than smaller teams.¹⁷ While stating an optimal team size is impossible, because it will always depend on the nature and scope of the team’s task, research indicates that for teams with decision-making responsibility, restricting team size to five or fewer members is probably best.¹⁸ Naturally, one could also deploy sub-teams if the scope of the team’s task demands a significantly larger number of members. The key here is that for shared leadership to thrive, members should be added to the team only if they have mission-critical knowledge, skills, or abilities.

Boundary Management

The team leader’s responsibilities include facilitating positive relations with the outside constituents and securing resources.¹⁹ Boundary management is critical for the success of team efforts, no matter what the organizational level of the team. For example, a recent study of software development teams found positive relationships between leader efforts to manage external relations and external perceptions of team performance.²⁰ Since external perceptions are linked to the team’s ability to garner resources and gain buy-in for team ideas, the leader must actively manage the team boundaries. Effective boundary management may

spell the difference between team success and failure.

Boundary management is perhaps nowhere more important than in teams at the top of organizations. For example, article after article documents the importance of the CEO–investor relationship, particularly in publicly traded firms.²¹ Successful boundary managers provide a context in which shared leadership can develop and flourish by providing the necessary resources for the team and simultaneously developing positive relations with important external constituents.

Organizational Systems That Facilitate the Development of Shared Leadership

While the team-leader role is critical to the implementation of shared leadership, organization-wide systems can also facilitate or impede the development of shared leadership. At least three broad organizational systems can be used to pave the way for shared leadership: (1) training and development systems; (2) reward systems; and (3) cultural systems.

Training and Development Systems

Organizations rarely provide sufficient training and development for knowledge workers. Most employees receive less than 24 hours of training per year.²² From newly minted college graduates to seasoned technical workers, employees are routinely thrust into leadership positions with little to no formal training in team leadership. It is little wonder that after satisfaction with pay, satisfaction with leadership is generally the second most dissatisfying aspect of many employees' organizational lives. This result is quite consistent across a wide array of careers ranging from professional and technical employees to service workers, to employees in the machine trades, and even to the ranks of management.²³

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Formal leaders, those in vertical positions of authority, may view the shift to shared leadership as a potential loss of control, and thus they may require training, development and ongoing coaching. I recently spoke with Dave Berkus, chairman of Tech Coast Angels—an organization of more than 200 high-net-worth angel investors—about this is-

sue. He recalled with great angst an occasion when the resistance to shared leadership caused the failure of a large business deal. He stated, "You know, that's one of the biggest problems entrepreneurs face. They have great difficulty giving up control. I had this situation once where we were literally about to close a deal worth half a billion dollars, and the CEO simply refused to accept leadership from anyone else. The deal fell through."

As an organization moves from vertical leadership to shared leadership, the need for training and development increases exponentially. If teams are to succeed at implementing shared leadership, not only do the vertical leaders need training and development but so too do the team members themselves. According to Leslie Stocker, president of the Braille Institute of America, "Education is the key. You've got to educate people that it's not just business as usual. It takes a lot of development before they are ready to stick their necks out."

The training and development required in support of shared leadership includes three fundamental areas: (1) training on how to engage in responsible and constructive leadership, including multiple types of influence and understanding potential reactions to the various types of influence; (2) training on how to receive influence; and (3) training in basic teamwork skills (e.g., goal setting, status reporting, citizenship behavior).²⁴ There are many ways to deliver training, but one method that is particularly fruitful is to immerse the team in experiential development exercises, particularly if it can be done early in the life of the team. Ongoing development might also be achieved through periodic utilization of skilled facilitators to diagnose the team and make targeted recommendations regarding areas for improvement. However delivered, it must happen. Teams cannot be expected to succeed without adequate preparation. Training and development for shared leadership is an issue to be taken quite seriously.

Reward Systems

People search for cues about what is and what is not rewarded in their organizations. They subsequently engage in (or at least create the appearance that they engage in) those behaviors that they believe are rewarded. Unfortunately, organizational reward systems are often out of sync with what organizational leaders hope employees will do.²⁵ When we move to a team-based knowledge work environment and desire shared leadership, we find that formal reward systems often actively

discourage such activity. Most merit pay, for example, is individually based and rewards individual accomplishment at the expense of cooperation and teamwork.²⁶ A study by the American Productivity Center found that only 14 per cent of the firms surveyed had some type of small-group incentive plan, but they projected a 70 per cent increase in their use.²⁷ While no subsequent studies have confirmed this projected increase in the use of group-based compensation, it seems clear that reward systems must include team-based components to enhance the dynamics of the team.²⁸

However, to suggest that simply paying people as a team will miraculously result in shared leadership and highly effective knowledge worker teams is naïve. Realistically, we can expect that some people may become “free riders” if the level of their individual effort is not a significant component of their remuneration.²⁹ Moreover, simply paying people for their team efforts, in all but perhaps small entrepreneurial ventures, ignores the issue of careers and promotions. In this regard, and in keeping with the idea of shared leadership, 360-degree feedback³⁰ may prove to be a useful tool, not only for enhancing performance but also for determining individual-based rewards and promotion candidates. Thus, if shared leadership is desired, one needs to seriously consider the design of reward systems, by incorporating both team and individual components.

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Cultural Systems

Culture is an elusive component of organizations. It has a powerful, yet oft times unconscious, effect on individuals.³¹ Changing from a culture where vertical leadership is the norm to one that embraces shared leadership will pose considerable challenge.³² For example, one challenge faced by firms in the US is the overall cultural emphasis on individualism.

How does one develop a culture that supports shared leadership? According to Darin Drabing, COO of Forest Lawn Memorial Parks and Mortuaries—one of the largest organizations in their industry, an industry characterized by an extreme service orientation—“It’s all about trust. And it starts at the top. People have to trust that you have their best interests at heart. Without trust there is

no hope of developing shared leadership.” At Forest Lawn, they have been slowly moving toward a model of shared leadership. “We brought in coaches,” stated Drabing, “because we recognized that we could achieve more collectively, but we didn’t have all of the tools in place to make it happen.”

Bringing in consultants may, in fact, be part of the answer for many organizations. Several other partial answers to the question are found in the previous sections on organizational systems and roles of the vertical leader. The key is to have integrated and aligned systems that collectively support the development of shared leadership and symbolically communicating its importance.

Top leaders play a particularly important role in the development of a shared-leadership culture. To begin with, they must serve as role models and stress the importance of shared leadership. How can they do this? They can start by using the four most important words in leadership—What do you think?—as the first step in empowering others to share in the leadership of their collective destiny.

Selection of employees, particularly those in leadership positions, is also quite important. This point was brought home in a recent interview with Michael Crooke, the CEO of Patagonia, a manufacturer and distributor of outdoor clothing, technical apparel, and gear. He stated, “My most important job as the CEO is selecting the right people for the right jobs. Then, and only then, can shared leadership take hold.” People can, for instance, be selected based on their aptitude for and disposition toward shared leadership. Clearly, shared leadership has little chance of development under the strong hand of an authoritarian team leader.

How Can Both Vertical and Shared Leadership Leverage Knowledge Work?

While understanding the mechanisms for developing shared leadership is important, equally important is understanding the mechanisms through which vertical and shared leadership can leverage the knowledge, skills, and abilities of knowledge workers. The following sections describe several specific leader behaviors through which both vertical leaders and members of knowledge work teams can successfully lead one another to mutually beneficial gains.

Vertical and Shared Leadership Behaviors and Team Outcomes

Decades of research on leadership have identified a range of leadership strategies or behaviors that

serve as the bases of influence between leaders and followers.³³ In the context of shared leadership, these strategies continue to be relevant, with one important caveat: The agents and targets of influence are often peers. Recent research has identified at least four important types of leadership behavior that can emanate from the vertical leader or be shared and distributed among the members of a team: Directive, transactional, transformational, and empowering.³⁴

Directive Leadership

Directive leadership involves providing task-focused direction or recommendations.³⁵ Directive leadership has been advocated in knowledge-worker contexts as providing much-needed structure for inherently unstructured tasks.³⁶ Highly skilled knowledge workers, be they vertical leaders or other members of the team, might well find a receptive audience among less-experienced or less-knowledgeable members for well-meaning and constructive prescription and direction. Vertical directive leadership is particularly important in newly formed or recently re-formed teams. Shared directive leadership might also be expressed in conversation as peers test each other with a directive give and take about how to approach assignments, allocate roles, or resolve conflicting points of view. Indeed, task conflict, which is highly related to shared directive leadership, has been positively linked to the performance of a wide variety of knowledge worker teams, including top management teams.³⁷

Transactional Leadership

Transactional leadership entails influencing followers by strategically supplying rewards—praise, compensation, or other valued outcomes—contingent on follower performance.³⁸ Typically the source of such rewards has been the appointed, vertical leader. However, shared transactional leadership in a team of knowledge workers might, for example, be expressed through collegial praise for contributions. Colleagues might also award valued assignments or recommend financial distributions based on individual- or team-level attainment of milestones, quality targets, or other key performance metrics. One management team in charge of an engine production facility, with whom I worked in my consulting practice, actively campaigned for and successfully changed its compensation system from an individually-based-bonuses system to one that contained team-based bonuses.³⁹ Naturally, the incorporation of

team-based bonuses led to positive team outcomes. This organization recently won their State Senate Productivity Award.

Transformational Leadership

While transactional leadership emphasizes rewards of immediate value, transformational leadership adopts a more symbolic emphasis on commitment to a team vision, emotional engagement, and fulfillment of higher-order needs such as meaningful professional impact or desires to engage in breakthrough achievements. One of the vertical leader's task is clarifying the vision for the team. On the other hand, knowledge-worker teams might engage in shared transformational leadership through peer exhortation or by appealing to collegial desires to design groundbreaking products, launch an exciting new venture, or outmaneuver the competition to capture the most market share in the industry.

Shared transformational leadership may be particularly effective in the knowledge-worker context because this context depends on significant, and necessarily voluntary, intellectual contributions of highly skilled professionals. In this context, intellectual stimulation itself may promote effective performance.⁴⁰ Beyond intellectual stimulation, the creation of a shared vision is an especially important manifestation of shared leadership in knowledge-worker teams: An article in *Fortune* magazine declared the creation of a shared vision to be the most important leadership idea of the twentieth century.⁴¹ This idea was echoed in an interview with Leslie E. Stocker, president of the Braille Institute of America. He claimed, "We all have a voice in creating our common mission. The key is to help others lead you, when they have the relevant knowledge."

The creation of a shared vision is an especially important manifestation of shared leadership in knowledge-worker teams.

Empowering Leadership

The last type of leadership presented here, empowering leadership, emphasizes employee self-influence rather than top-down control. In many ways, empowering leadership epitomizes the role of the designated, vertical leader under conditions of team-shared leadership. Following are excerpts from interviews with successful leaders of re-

search and development teams from my consulting practice. One team leader claimed, "My most important role is building the team—getting them to interact without being directed." Another team leader stated, "You have to play cheerleader sometimes, and you have to be careful not to be a dictator." One team leader summed up his role in creating shared leadership by stating: "I have told them [the team members] that their goal is to replace me."

Like the other leadership strategies discussed above, empowering leadership can also be shared and projected laterally among peers. Examples of shared empowering leadership in a team of knowledge workers might include peer encouragement and support of self-goal-setting, self-evaluation, self-reward and self-development. Shared empowering leadership emphasizes building self-influence skills that orchestrate performance while preserving autonomy. As such, it may be particularly suited to knowledge workers, who often desire autonomy on the job.⁴²

Specific Roles for Vertical Leaders in the Ongoing Development of Shared Leadership

Without ongoing support and maintenance from the vertical leader, shared leadership is likely to fail. Thus, the following sections describe how the team leader can encourage the ongoing development of shared leadership in knowledge work teams.

Shared Leadership Support

Although shared leadership in a team of knowledge workers can reduce the need for ongoing vertical leadership intervention, periodic leadership support, which is related to what has been termed servant leadership,⁴³ is likely to be required in most team efforts. In the context of shared leadership, a key role for the vertical leader—a role that distinguishes shared leadership from the hands-on leadership emphasis of traditional hierarchy—is judicious intervention on an as-needed basis.⁴⁴ The importance of judicious intervention by the vertical leader for maintaining a climate of shared leadership requires particular emphasis. For instance, according to Leslie E. Stocker of the Braille Institute of America, "Encouraging shared leadership does have some risk. For example, I recall a situation where some wanted us to become involved in a new initiative and secured the external funding to make it happen. However, to me the initiative represented 'mission drift,' and I had to try to refocus our volunteers on our mission. We

lost at least one volunteer over that issue." Thus, one type of vertical leader support is stepping in and clarifying the overarching vision for the organization.

On the other hand, a recent study of self-managing work teams⁴⁵ found that team-member withdrawal, dissatisfaction, and abdication of decision-making responsibility tended to follow when vertical leaders routinely exercised power or stepped too firmly into the decision-making process.⁴⁶ Thus, in shared leadership contexts, the challenge of vertical leadership support involves negotiating a gap-filling balance between abdication of responsibility for the team, at one extreme, and a disempowering seizure of control from the team members at the other.

Shared Leadership Maintenance

Whereas intervention with shared leadership support should be inherently cautious, maintaining shared leadership requires active encouragement of lateral peer influence among the team members and encouragement of upward influence from the team members to the designated team leader. The vertical leader can promote shared leadership by articulating an emphasis on follower self-leadership, lateral influence, and upward influence. For example, vertical leaders might focus teams by clearly describing shared leadership, illustrating appropriate leader behaviors, setting clear expectations, and evaluating performance accordingly. They might also ensure appropriate training in leadership skills or intervene directly with coaching on an as-needed basis.

An important strategy for the vertical leader is modeling empowering leadership.⁴⁷ For example, according to Dave Berkus of Tech Coast Angels, "You have to constantly demonstrate trust and confidence in people if you want to unleash their leadership potential." Accordingly, the vertical leader might ask for, rather than propose, solutions; encourage initiative, goal setting, and problem solving; model productive conflict management; and demonstrate application of strategies for both engaging in influence as well as being a willing recipient of influence.⁴⁸

The Future of Leadership

The use of teams to leverage the capabilities of knowledge workers in organizations has increased substantially.⁴⁹ With this increase, we must question whether our traditional models of leadership are still appropriate. This article has attempted to

clarify an alternate social source of leadership—shared leadership—that may provide insight into the leadership of knowledge workers.

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Shared leadership is not a panacea for the many problems that plague knowledge work. For example, if teams of knowledge workers, particularly team leaders, resist the notion of shared leadership, its potential is fleeting at best. This raises an important question. What should organizational leaders do with a technically sound and otherwise successful leader who refuses to abandon authoritarian rule in favor of a shared-leadership approach? This is not an easy question to answer. In the short run, it is most likely beneficial to keep the leader in place. In the long run, the organization must recognize that authoritarian control of knowledge workers can stifle the very innovation and creativity that one desires from them. Moreover, over-reliance on any one individual in the knowledge-creation process introduces considerable risk to the organization. What happens if that person leaves? Thus, over the long term, over-reliance on a vertical leadership model in the knowledge-worker context can undermine the robustness of the knowledge-creation process.⁵⁰

On the opposite end of the spectrum, renegade teams who successfully adopt shared leadership might work at odds with overarching organizational goals. Similarly, shared leadership seems unlikely to prove effective if the knowledge workers lack the requisite knowledge, skills, and abilities for their tasks. These are but a few of the potential limits and liabilities of shared leadership: Shared leadership is not a one-size-fits-all proposition.

Is the age of vertical leadership reaching its autumn years? No. The issue is not vertical leadership or shared leadership. Rather, the issues are: (1) when is leadership most appropriately shared? (2) how does one develop shared leadership? and (3) how does one utilize both vertical and shared leadership to leverage the capabilities of knowledge workers? It is only by addressing these issues head on that organizations will move toward a more appropriate model of leadership in the age of knowledge work.

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Endnotes

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