SHARED LEADERSHIP AND ITS DYNAMICS: A NEGLECTED MECHANISM

Bumpei Sunaguchi, Kobe University

ABSTRACT

Research on temporal dynamics has been gaining more attention in recent years. However leadership, one of the important ingredients for teams, organizations, and task-performing processes, has been lacking in studies of temporal dynamics. This article attempts to focus on the mechanism of shared leadership in an attempt to integrate temporal dynamics and leadership.

The concept of shared leadership was coined about one hundred years ago, but it was not until the 1990s that researchers began to direct their attention to it. Empirical studies that explored the relationship between shared leadership and team effectiveness, and investigated the effectiveness of shared leadership utilized a theoretical approach. However, little is known about how members in a group share leadership roles or functions in the task completion process.

Researchers in the field of shared leadership have struggled theoretically and empirically to address the dearth of studies related to the process of shared leadership. The results of extant research have shown that there are both facilitators and barriers that influence the process of shared leadership, and moreover the process of shared leadership changes because of the facilitators and barriers. Previous research has revealed factors influencing the process, but the existing research has directed little attention to the transition from a situation where group members share leadership to a situation where one person predominately exercises leadership in a group. Thus, research is needed to understand the mechanism of transition and factors related to it.

The purpose of the study is to explore the factors that influence transitions where the distribution of shared leadership decreases. In order to achieve this, I draw on past literature in group development and shared leadership, and illustrate transition with an example. Moreover, advancing the research, the present study offers some insightful theoretical and practical implications. Especially, in regard to the theoretical implications, this article responds to calls for research to explore the relationship between temporal dynamics and leadership. In addition, with regard to the practical implications, the present study offers factors, that under some situations, promote the aforementioned transition. Furthermore, the study suggests practical implication for managers in charge of goal attainment in a limited period, and suggests ideas for future research on issues still needing to be tackled.

INTRODUCTION

Recognizing the need for study on the influence of temporal dynamics (e.g., Hackman, 2012; Wageman, Gardner, & Mortensen, 2012), researchers in the field of leadership have sought the process in which people in a group exercise leadership along with the process (Zaccaro, & Klimoski, 2002). In order to capture the process or dynamics of leadership, previous studies have explored leadership dynamics in a various settings (cf. Hackman, 2002). For instance, some of situations are top management teams (e.g., Srivastava, Bartol, & Locke, 2006; Wageman, Nunes, Burruss, & Hackman, 2008), the entrepreneur teams (e.g., Ensley, Hmieleski, & Pearce, 2006;
Hmieleski, Cole, & Baron, 2012), and virtual teams (Hambley, O’Neil, & Kline, 2007; Kirkman, Rosen, Gibson, Tesluk, & McPherson, 2002).

In order to capture dynamics of leadership, this study focuses on the concept of shared leadership (cf. Pearce, & Conger, 2003), because if the author focuses on one person who would exercise leadership in a group, it makes more difficult to discuss how leadership emerges and changes during the process of a group activities. Moreover, I show that because of changes of the nature of work (i.e., the trend to knowledge work; cf. Pearce, 2004), it is becoming much difficult for one person to exercise leadership alone. According to Pearce (2004), “it is even more difficult for any one person to have all of knowledge, skills and abilities for the tasks” (p. 47). In short, researcher has difficulty determining who has leadership role in advance (cf. functional approach: Morgeson, DeRue, & Karam, 2009; Zaccaro, Rittman, & Marks, 2001).

This paper addresses two issues. First, after reviewing the theoretical methods that the existing research employed and discussing what extant research has investigated, the study points out that previous research has been likely to overlook the process in which people share leadership roles and functions in a group. Secondly, I argue that due to the first point, the researchers need to explore the possibility that there are some opportunities where it is likely one person that exercises leadership.

The remaining sections of the paper are structured as follows. First, I outline how the concept of shared leadership has been discussed. Second, the present study reviews what the existing research has explored empirically by a theoretical approach. Third, drawing on the results of extant research, this article provides the neglected issue in shared leadership, and explores the neglected issue theoretically. Fourth, given the discussion, a series of potential theoretical and practical implications are discussed, as well as a series of limitations. Finally, advancing the research, this study suggests some points to be tackled in future research.

**THE LITERATURE**

The Concept Of Shared Leadership

Some researchers have mentioned that ideas similar to the concept of shared leadership have been discussed before. For example, Pearce and Conger (2003) showed that there had had been some theoretical ideas underlying the notion of shared leadership. According to Pearce and Conger (2003, p.6), the earliest researcher who mentioned the similar idea to the concept of shared leadership was Mary Parker Follett (1924). She introduced the idea of the law of the situation, and showed under some situations; people follow the person who is not appointed leader.

Although this related idea was identified about 90 years ago, it was not until about the 1990s those researchers have been increasingly interested in the concept of shared leadership (cf. D’Innocenzo, Mathieu & Kukenberger, 2014). Table 1 (adopted from D’Innocenzo et al. (2014)) shows some of definitions to which previous researches have referred. Table 1 shows the current situation in which researchers have stated different dimensions of shared leadership. Researchers have mentioned the slight different definitions of shared leadership, however, previous research has proposed that there are some features underlying the different definitions of shared leadership among the previous studies. Although the interest has been increasingly on shared leadership, there exist no united definitions about shared leadership.
D’Innocenzo et al. (2014) identified five themes that previous research on shared leadership had had in common. The first theme is the locus of leadership. It states whether the locus of leadership is inside or outside teams, and especially the later is related to the study on team leadership (cf. Zaccaro et al., 2001) and self-managed team (cf. Manz, & Sims, 1993). The second theme is about the authority of leadership, that is, whether or not leadership is formal within organization. According to D’Innocenzo et al. (2014), the first and the second theme are about the sources of shared leadership.

In addition, the third is “the extent to which team members participates in leadership” (pp. 4-5). For the third theme, previous studies have employed two approaches: the aggregation approach and the social network theory approach (cf. D’Innocenzo et al., 2014). The aggregate approach of shared leadership assumes that shared leadership entails several leadership styles (cf. Pearce & Sims, 2002). Pearce and Sims (2002) suggested shared leadership entailed aversive leadership, directive leadership, transactional leadership, transformational leadership and empowering leadership. On the other hand, the social network theory approach is literally the methodology based on the social network theory. The approach attempts to capture the concept of shared leadership by using the concepts of density and centricity, and shows how people connect each other and who mainly exercises and shares leadership.

The fourth theme is the dynamic quality of shared leadership. This theme is related to the assumption that leadership is static. The concept of shared leadership struggles to capture dynamics in which different people perform the leadership role along with task-performing
processes and during the team’s life cycle (e.g., Erez, LePine, & Elms, 2002). Thus, the research on shared leadership needs to pay attention to the influence of time on dynamics and the temporal shift of leadership roles among team members. Thus, the concept of shared leadership is partially contrasted with the traditional leadership concept (i.e., vertical leadership) in that shared leadership assumes that all members, not only the person who is at the appointed position, can exercise leadership. The final theme is the involvement of multi roles and functions. It suggests that to facilitate the task completion, shared leadership consists of multiple leadership roles and responsibility. Thus, shared leadership assumes that whether same or different, members in a team perform multiple leadership roles for completing the task. The aforementioned themes are typical characteristics found in previous definitions, however, the salient difference between vertical leadership and shared leadership remains unclear.

In order to make the notable difference between vertical leadership and shared leadership clear, this article sheds light on the study that discussed the relationship between shared leadership and vertical leadership. As for vertical leadership, there are two salient characteristics. The first is that vertical leadership assumes the downward influence from the top or the person who is in the hierarchical position (i.e., managers). On the other hand, shared leadership considers the multidirectional influence. In other words, shared leadership literature captures three different influences; downward and upward, lateral, and diagonal (cf. Pearce, Conger, & Locke, 2008). The second is, as aforementioned, that shared leadership assumes that members in a group can exercise leadership. This point is related to the first in that members include not only managers, but also subordinates in a group. Hence, shared leadership supposes that there is a lateral influence between subordinates.

Given the characteristics mentioned above, in this article, the author proposes the following definition: Shared leadership is an emergent and dynamic phenomenon in which, regardless of the direction of influence, team members share leadership roles, functions, and influences.

The Result of Prior Empirical Studies

As the interest in temporal dynamics has been gaining more attention in recent years, researchers have acknowledged the importance of shared leadership and investigated the effectiveness of shared leadership. Moreover, the exploration of the influence of shared leadership, previous studies have sought to identify those situations in which the influence of shared leadership is effective or ineffective. The accumulated results related to shared leadership have shown the effectiveness of shared leadership, however, this article argues that the previous study has been likely to overlook the mechanism related to the centrobaric concept of shared leadership. In short, extant research has directed little attention to the issue of how members share leadership within a group or during task-performing processes. In this study, I review the previous empirical researches that have investigated the effectiveness of shared leadership and identified the certain situations in which shared leadership behaviors are effective or ineffectively. Furthermore, the study points out that previous research has focused little attention on the mechanism in which members in team share leadership role or functions.

To demonstrate empirically the effectiveness of shared leadership, the previous research has employed either the aggregation approach or the social network theory approach. In addition, the previous research has shown that shared leadership is related positively to team performance, and that shared leadership is effective or ineffective under some circumstances. Among the accumulated studies, researchers have mainly focused upon team performance (e.g., Carson,
Tesluk & Marrone, 2007; Nicolaides, LaPort, Chen, Tomassetti, Weis, Zaccaro & Cortina, 2014; Erez et al., 2002; Hoch & Kozlowski, 2014; Mehra, Smith, Dixon & Robertson, 2006; Hmieleski et al., 2012; Ensley et al., 2006; Muethel, Gehrlein & Hoegl, 2012). For example, Nicolaides et al. (2014) supported that shared leadership has a positive effect on performance based on the result of the meta-analysis. Furthermore, they found that when task interdependence was high, the relationship between shared leadership and performance got stronger positively.

Further, in addition to the investigation of the relationship between shared leadership and team performance, some previous studies have struggled to find the situations in which the influence of shared leadership is weaker. For instance, Muethel et al. (2012) investigated some factors that had influence on the effectiveness of shared leadership in dispersed teams. From the results, they first found that teams with high female to male ratio had positive relationship with shared leadership behaviors, because “women might be particularly likely to demonstrate shared leadership behaviors, as they prefer team-oriented leadership styles” (p. 531). Second, drawing on a socialization perspective, they demonstrated that team’s high mean age was negatively related to shared leadership behaviors. A socialization perspective states that older members might be used to hierarchical leadership style (i.e., vertical leadership). Finally, the results of the study supported national diversity positively related to shared leadership behaviors from an information-processing perspective.

As the current study noted, researchers on the study of shared leadership have sought to investigate the effectiveness of shared leadership and how shared leadership behaviors are effective or ineffective in some situations. However, in light of these concerns, it is not surprising that relatively limited research attention has been directed toward the mechanism of shared leadership. In other words, researchers have focused little attention on how members share leadership along with the task completion process or among members in different situations. Thus, the study suggests that the mechanism of shared leadership process needs to be explored and discussed theoretically. In the following section, the study reviews a few studies that explored the mechanism, and further demonstrates that there has existed an implicit assumption held by researchers in the field of shared leadership.

**The Mechanism Underlying Shared Leadership**

During the last several decades, there have been some studies that explored the missing (i.e., the mechanism) of shared leadership. Those studies have demonstrated how shared leadership developed during temporal task-performing processes or within the team members. In this section, via reviewing the studies that explored the mechanism, this article suggests that extant research, even the literatures that dealt with the process of shared leadership, has not fully focused on the mechanism. Overall, the study suggests that researchers need to pay further attention to the neglected side of the mechanism, that is, the process in which the situation of shared leadership changes into the one where one person predominately exercises leadership, rather sharing leadership among people.

As for whether leadership can be shared, researchers suggest theoretical and empirical explanations. For example, Seer, Keller and Wilkerson (2003) addressed the research issue. Drawing on the role making theory and social exchange theory, they offered theoretical framework for how influence can be shared. Moreover, based on the theoretical model, they suggested that there were some facilitators and barriers for shared leadership. Some of the facilitators were group size, generalized exchange norms, tasks that require role differentiation and exchange relationship. On the other hand, some of the barriers mentioned were implicit
leadership theory, group’s demographic composition, and the different preference in status seeking.

In addition to the theoretical explanation for the process of shared leadership, researchers have struggled to demonstrate how people share leadership by focusing on the influence of time empirically. For instance, Avolio, Jung, Murry, and Sivasubramaniam (1996) investigated how different the effectiveness of shared leadership would be at different level of team development. Via two samples of the undergraduate students, they posited that leadership was related positively to the level of group development. The result showed that as groups developed, leadership within teams would be shared.

Moreover, in light of the changes in the process of shared leadership over time, Drescher, Korgaard, Welpe, Picot, and Wigand (2014) explored how shared leadership changed over time by focusing on the concept of trust. Building on literature of dynamic leadership and adopting the functional leadership approach, they showed that shared leadership had a positive relation with the group effectiveness, and the relationship between shared leadership and group effectiveness was full mediation. According to Drescher et al. (2014), “not all groups demonstrated growth in shared leadership” (p. 8). In other words, the results showed that shared leadership could not always be distributed among group members over time.

While Avolio et al. (1996) and Drescher et al. (2014) investigated the relationship between group development and shared leadership, Hoch and Morgeson (2014) explored the process by focusing on the relationship between vertical leadership and shared leadership. Drawing on the social learning theory (cf. Bandura, 1977) and the falling dominos effect (cf. Bass, Waldman, & Avolio, 1987), they investigated some hypothesis related to the relationship between two types of leadership (i.e., vertical leadership and shared leadership) and the effectiveness of them via a sample of 62 projects teams from three different organizations. The results supported some of hypothesis and revealed that some behaviors of shared leadership mediated the relationship between vertical leadership and team effectiveness. In other words, the results of Hoch and Morgeson (2014) showed that vertical leadership behaviors could enhance the distribution of leadership (i.e., enlargement of shared leadership) within teams and organizations.

As the article reviewed above, previous research has collectively investigated and supported that as groups’ task processes goes forward or groups develop, compared to the beginning, people share leadership roles and functions increasingly (cf. Drescher et al., 2014). In short, researchers have suggested how members would facilitate shared leadership behaviors. But, does the mechanism of shared leadership mean just the process of facilitation of sharing leadership roles and functions? In order to reply to the question, the study suggested that until recently, scholars have focused scant attention on how the situation of shared leadership changes into the one where one person predominate exercises leadership within team or during the task completion process. In the following section, drawing on empirical and theoretical research, the current study suggests that there exists a possibility that the aforementioned ignored mechanism would occur and posits that researchers need to direct attention to it.

DISCUSSION

The present article suggests that even though extant research has directed little attention to the mechanism in which the distribution of shared leadership decreases, such a mechanism occurs. In seeking to show the possibility of the mechanism, this article focuses on the literature of group development (e.g., Gersick, 1988,1989; Tuckman, 1965; Tuckman, &
Jensen, 1977). Researches in the field have mainly explored how groups develop over time, or how groups perform over the task completion process, and the results of the literature have shown the useful insight for discussing the neglected process of shared leadership. Drawing on the results of the conceptual and empirical researches, the present study reveals the need for exploring the mechanism in which a person predominately exercises leadership, rather sharing it among members.

To address the aforementioned purpose, the present study focuses on the concept of urgency. Some researchers have discussed the influence of urgency on group development and the members’ behaviors (e.g., Berkowitz, 1953; Gersick, 1988, 1989, 1994; Gersick, & Hackman, 1990). As for the relationship of leadership and urgency, via the mixed methods of qualitative and quantitative study, Berkowitz (1953) demonstrated that when the urgency of situation was low, members in a group were likely to share leadership among them. Although Berkowitz (1953) showed that the influence of urgency related to leadership roles within a group, how urgency influenced leadership remained unclear.

Gersick (1994) examined the relationship between pacing behavior and leadership behavior over task-performing processes. The results of the study demonstrated that when leaders assumed their own schedule, they were more likely to do pacing behavior while considering the end of task-performing processes. Given the results of Gersick (1994), as task-performing processes comes to the end of the task completion, the issues that leaders should address become more obvious, compared with the beginning. But, it is true to members in a group. In other words, it becomes easier for members, as well as leaders, to assume what is to be done by the end of the task completion, as task-performing processes goes forward. Moreover, Lim and Murnighan (1994) examined Gersick’s group development model (i.e., the punctuated equilibrium model), and stated that as the deadline of task-performing processes came closer, members tended to act even quickly.

The results of Gersick (1994) and Lim and Murnighan (1994) showed that in order to make the task completion process progressed; members decided what to be done in the limited period, even if they felt stressed by the influence of urgency. In such a situation, since it enables members to decide what to do more quickly, it seems rational to show behaviors in the way that used to be. In short, when task-performing processes comes to the deadline (i.e., they feel urgency), they tend to take actions that they used to (cf. Gersick, 1988, 1989).

Considered the rationality of consistent behaviors, how could it influence the process of shared leadership? As the current study mentioned, according to the results of Gersick (1988, 1989), members in a group tend to follow prior behaviors. Thus, they are more likely to follow one person who takes leadership in directing task-performing processes, because, compared to other members, he or she can make it clear what to do. Therefore, the current study posits that as task-performing processes comes to the deadline (i.e., when urgency becomes higher), group members tend to rely on the person who has exercised leadership in directing the group activity. Moreover, it results in the situation where one person is likely to take predominantly leadership roles in a group (i.e., vertical leadership), rather to share leadership roles with other members (i.e., shared leadership).

The study exploring the process of shared leadership theory has investigated what mechanisms foster the distribution of shared leadership behaviors within a group. The results of the studies have shown some empirical and theoretical findings, however, researchers have directed little attention to the mechanism in which people tend to be dependent on one person who predominately exercises leadership within a group, and the trigger that makes such a
mechanism happen. In order to explore the mechanism, the present article focused on the concept of urgency, and offered how urgency can be the trigger.

LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The present article represented an attempt to deal with the process of shared leadership. Extant research has shown that shared leadership positively related to the performance, and that the effectiveness of shared leadership was effective or ineffective under some situations. However, there have existed the deaths of studies related to the process in which group members share leadership roles or functions (i.e., the process of shared leadership). Given the existing results of the research that explored the process of shared leadership, this article suggested that the previous research have been likely to focus upon how members in a group share leadership roles and functions. Furthermore, in a consequence, the article posited that the existing research have tended to overlook the process in which people are more likely to be depend on the person who mainly exercises leadership in a group.

In order to explore the mechanism, the article focused on the concept of urgency, and attempted to show how urgency influenced the process of shared leadership, via drawing on the results of the literature of group development. The results of the literature of group development have shown that urgency affected behaviors of group members. Considered the results of group development literature, this article suggested theoretically that as the deadline comes closer (i.e., when members recognize the urgency), in order to get task-performing processes done in the coherent way, members in a group tend to be dependent on the person who has played leadership roles or functions that were related to the direction of task-performing processes.

As with all researches, the current study is not without limitations. First, drawing on the results of the literature of group development and shared leadership, this article showed that there are some factors that enable people to rely on the person who predominately exercise leadership in a group. But, this article discussed one of the factors (i.e., the influence of urgency) conceptually, not empirically. Therefore, in the future, the research needs to show the influence of the factors empirically. The second limitation is that this study demonstrated only the influence of urgency, thus there are other factors that have the same influence on the process of shared leadership. For instance, as Follett (1924) already mentioned, the experience can be one of the factors. Referring to the work of Follett (1924), Pearce and Conger (2003) mentioned that “rather than simply follow the lead of the person with the formal authority in a situation, one should follow the lead of the person with the most knowledge regarding the situation at hand” (p. 6). When someone in a group has many experiences rather than other members, it would be more likely for them to rely on the person, because the person with experience could direct the group with a clear vision that others do not have. In terms of such factors that influence the process of shared leadership, researchers need to explore the mechanism.

Although this article has the limitations mentioned above, there are several important theoretical and practical implications from this research, especially in regard to exploring the process of shared leadership and exercising leadership in temporal task-performing processes. As for the theoretical implications, the study has two implications. First, this article responded to calls for research such as Zaccaro and Klimoski (2002) and Hackman (2012). Extant research has investigated the effectiveness and the antecedents of shared leadership, however, little research has directed attention to the process of the interface of shared leadership and temporal group process (cf., Zaccaro, & Klimoski, 2002). The study suggested how shared leadership could change into vertical leadership during task-performing processes.
Second, the study offered the possibility that under some situations, rather sharing leadership roles and functions, one person in a group could mainly exercise leadership. Previous research has attempted to explore the mechanism of shared leadership, however, they have tended to overlook the aforementioned possibility. Although a few existing research have demonstrated the facilitators and barriers, little is known about how the facilitators and barriers have influence on the process of shared leadership. In contrast to the previous research, via focusing on the concept of urgency, this study explored theoretically how those factors affects the mechanism of shared leadership.

In addition to the theoretical implications, the study has also practical implication. Given the discussion of this article, managers and team leaders should consider the influence of urgency. As task-performing processes goes forward, it might be effective for managers to predominately take leadership roles, rather than sharing roles with members, because the influence of urgency would make people rely on the person who take leadership role in directing the group. In the field situation, these individuals tend to be managers; therefore managers should pay their attention to the timing when they start predominately exercising their leadership over task-performing processes.

**FUTURE RESEARCH**

Given the aforementioned limitations and implications, future research is needed to address the limitations and strengthen the implications. This article presents two suggestions for future research. First, future research should attempt to examine the factors that enable people to rely on the person who predominately exercises leadership in a group. This article focused on the influence of urgency as one of such factors, however, as mentioned above, experience can be regarded as one of the factors as well. Moreover, the role of pacing behavior is critical for tasks that are temporal (e.g., Ericksen & Dyer, 2004; Gersick, 1988). In other words, the person who predominately shows pacing behavior may exercise leadership relatively more frequently rather than other members. Thus, future research needs to explore the factors that influence on the mechanism of change in leadership.

The second suggestion is related to the issue of methodology. The present study discussed the neglected mechanism of shared leadership, how shared leadership changes by reviewing extant research. In order to examine the possibility of a mechanism, future empirical research needs to be done. Future research should employ qualitative method to approach the process-issue of leadership (i.e., the mechanism of shared leadership). Issues related to qualitative method in the literature of leadership have been discussed. For example, Bryman (2004) mentioned that one of the things that are distinct between qualitative and quantitative research on leadership is that qualitative approach enables researchers to “... view over time the kinds of impacts that leaders make and how they respond to problems with which they face” (p. 752). That is, qualitative study will allow future research to investigate the process in which shared leadership changes.

There has been growing attention toward the qualitative approach to explore the process or temporal change of leadership; however, researchers need to address problems related to conducting research with the approach. Van de Ven and Huber (1990) pointed out some such problems, (i.e., the generalizability, an issue related to inference that process theory as well to a large population (cf. p. 216)). In addition, there are problems related to the qualitative approach that are specific and relevant to conducting qualitative research on leadership. For instance, the use of observation, Bryman (2004) mentioned that researchers have difficulty conducting
observations of leadership, because it requires a lot of time and may entail the issue of access and confidentiality. Future research should address the problems and attempt to examine the process of leadership phenomenon empirically.

Taken together, future research should address the two ideas suggested above. Although the two may seem independent of each other, the two are intertwined. In other words, on the one hand, future research needs to seek and identify the factors that influence the process of leadership, and on the other hand, researchers should investigate the influence of factors on the process using qualitative method. In addition, when the process of leadership changes is described using qualitative approach, it may be easier to find and examine the factors that have been neglected in the search of the process of leadership. Hence, future research should pay more attention to the two intertwined issue.

ENDNOTES

1 As for the concepts similar to shared leadership, researchers have argued. As examples of such concepts, Nicolaides et al. (2014) cited distributed leadership (e.g., Gronn, 2002), collective leadership (e.g., Hiller, Day, & Vance, 2006), and rotated leadership (e.g., Erez et al., 2002). Moreover, in terms of the relationship between the concepts, for instance, Ensley et al. (2006) mentioned that distributed leadership and shared leadership had had been used interchangeably. But, DeRue (2011) reviewed the relationship between the two (i.e., distributed leadership and shared leadership), and mentioned that “in the distributed model, multiple group members are engaging in acts of leading and following, but those acts are sequential and not concurrent. With shared leadership, however, the acts of leading and following are occurring simultaneously across time and actors” (p. 135). Since clarifying the similarities and differences between those concepts is beyond the purpose of this study, in the current study, I use the term of shared leadership interchangeably with the concepts similar to shared leadership.

REFERENCES


