What are you afraid of: Collective leadership and its learning implications

Joseph A Raelin
Northeastern University, USA

Abstract

In this provocation, the author attempts to cite the advantages of collective leadership while acknowledging the objections and fears of challengers. Collective leadership is seen as remote because it defies the traditional view of leadership as an individualistic attractive quality that not only protects us but is efficient when applied. Nevertheless, the collective alternative may not only be advisable but required in a connected world featuring a networked economy. The contemporary socio-politico-economic environment requires the contribution of, creativity from, and collaboration among multiple agents providing a dynamic concentration of management and knowledge. If we are to accept and recognize the contribution of a collective leadership, its development would require an entirely different learning model. In particular, collective leadership development occurs as an acute immersion into the practices that are embedded within in situ material–discursive relations—in other words, among people, objects, and their institutions.

Collective leadership has gotten a 'bad rap' in some quarters because it is thought to be too slow and, even more, can lead to chaos. It brings up other complications that make it seem a poor cousin to the dominant ethos of individual leadership—the form discernibly preferred in some Western cultures, especially those with Anglo-American roots. Collective leadership is thought to be lethargic and bureaucratic and, further, can lead to aimlessness because organizational outcomes are rightfully dependent on the decisions of our top leaders. These individuals are there for a reason, and they know what is good for us. It is no wonder that the shift to a collective form would be a move to be afraid of.

I would like to explore in this provocation why collective leadership has assumed this, if not fearful, then idealistic image that comes across as so remote as to defy serious consideration as a basis for group and organizational agency. Of course, there are many supporters of this leadership

Corresponding author:
Joseph A Raelin, D'Amore-McKim School of Business, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115, USA.
Email: j.raelin@neu.edu

alternative among both researchers and practitioners. Given the increasingly complex forms of organization prescribed by technology, professionalization, and specialization, collective leadership—a co-construction of activated work opportunities by those involved in the practice at hand—may be the one most appropriate behavioral response. Yet, detractors persist in denigrating its potential, citing a range of defects which I will lay out. I will then offer a word about its advantages. If by any chance my advocacy loosens some of our readers' resistance, we might then turn to a consideration of how leadership development would need to shift to accommodate a more collective leadership approach. In particular, rather than focus on individual psychological development, it would animate dialogic methods to reflect on collective practice.

Why the fear?

There is a fear of collective leadership, first of all, because it uproots a potential need in most people, brought to light perhaps initially by Sigmund Freud in his conception of transference. Accordingly, we seek to repeat in an adult relationship what we expected from our parents during childhood (Maccoby, 2004). The net effect of transference not resolved through maturation or, if needed, through therapy is that many of us prefer the security of someone looking out for us. This tradition has a long history in Western thought that Keith Grint (2010) refers to in his Durkheimian reference to the 'sacred.' Monarchs have consistently legitimated their rule and even their mystique through their connection with God. For this right, they are accorded a degree of distance and reverence in exchange for followers' obedience.

A second related reason for our fear of collective leadership is the media-inspired mythology surrounding the 'great man' theory of leadership, a 19th-century shibboleth that still exists in the hearts and minds of many people and cultures (Carlyle, 1888). According to this blatantly sexist theory, the currents of history are controlled by the charisma, intelligence, and political actions of the 'great men' of history. Wedded to this mystique, popular culture and even social science fail to unearth the entire enterprise of leadership allowing it to remain elusive and resistant to attempts to define it. Accordingly, leadership is presented to consumers as a simplified binary relationship between the leaders and the led (Collinson, 2005). The result is a 'romance of leadership,' in which leaders and followers conspire to use the media to dramatize issues, manifest the formers' sincerity, and build up the leader's charisma in order to project a larger, more powerful, and more moral image than actual presence would imply (Bensman and Givant, 1975; Meindl, 1990).

There is also a specific American cultural norm that sustains an individualistic mentality. I refer to the archetype of 'rugged individualism,' a more extreme form of political individualism, which holds that individuals should be free to make their own decisions against collective obligations imposed on them by social institutions, such as by the state or even as ordained by religious morality (Hofstadter, 1948). Of course, the individualistic attribution may be overstated, given the focus on associational life in America initially cited by Alexis de Tocqueville (2000). Nevertheless, social commentaries such as by the authors of the now classic *Habits of the Heart* (Bellah et al., 1985), who outlined the defects of 'utilitarian' individualism, or those of the earlier cited Emile Durkheim (1957), who feared an overemphasis on 'egoistic' individualism at the expense of moral individualism—leading paradoxically to a decline in the collectively shared respect for the individual—portended a showdown in identity politics.

Collective leadership is also defiant of a range of power dynamics serving to keep those at the top in place. From a pure career perspective, those who toiled to reach the seat of power are loath to give it up. There are many comforts to fealty, pecuniary and nonpecuniary, that sustain individual control and perseverance, including a sense of entitlement. Furthermore, leaders become adept at holding onto power through a variety of means to satisfy followers' real desires (Burke, 1986).

They amass resources to cope with the critical problems facing them through both substantive and symbolic expressions (Denis et al., 2000; Salancik and Pfeffer, 1977). Not infrequently, the actions of leaders to persist in office can be nefarious, as in the case of political machines and their abuse of voters through gerrymandering and cynical voting laws (Guinier, 2001).

Finally, there are some standard concerns that have already been well documented for some time in group decision making (Brahm and Kleiner, 1996; Maier, 1967). Many transfer to collective leadership (Bolden et al., 2007), in particular that anything done by a group is not only slower but less efficient. Decision making gets bogged down by members wishing to have their private preferences take priority. At the opposite extreme, at times, members go to great lengths to agree with one another especially in an effort to avoid conflict and produce an illusion of harmony. Referred to as groupthink, group members arrive at a consensus without critical evaluation of alternative points of view. Finally, if everyone takes responsibility for leadership, then no one becomes accountable. The resulting style may be laissez-faire, which in some instances can be catastrophic when critical decisions and action are required.

The collective opportunity

If we are able to lay aside our fears, even momentarily, to consider the collective alternative, we might not only see its value but also its appropriateness for 21st-century organization. Earlier, I characterized collective leadership as a co-construction of leadership by those involved in any undertaking. There is no need for any one person to make decisions and mobilize action on the part of those assembled (Raelin, 2011). It is a dynamic process in which constellations of individuals emerge, often within a network and across multiple levels, to contribute knowledge, skill, and meaning to the task at hand (Dansereau and Yammarino, 1998; Day et al., 2004; Friedrich et al., 2009). It is thus a plural phenomenon rather than a purely distributed or shared approach in which nonmanagers are assigned or assume managerial duties (Crevani et al., 2007; Denis et al., 2012). As a collective practice, there is a need to negotiate roles, resources, time and space, sociomateriality, divergences, and even definitions of reality. The interaction that occurs, however, is more than an exchange between individuals. It is often an in-the-moment intra-action—not inter, but intra-action—out of which a dynamic unfolding may emerge through some form of leadership agency that reorients the flow of practice (Barad, 2003; Raelin, 2016).

But can collective leadership improve our lives and organizations? We live in a world that is so unpredictable, complex, and uncertain that we cannot rely on a single source of expertise. Forms of organizing, in particular project management and professional service forms, enhanced through technology, globalization, knowledge intensity, and specialization, have refocused organizational design toward collaboration and collective practices within evolving networks of activities and players (Barley et al., 2017; Okhuysen et al., 2013). This environment requires the contribution and creativity of multiple agents, providing a dynamic concentration of management and knowledge while lowering the risk of suboptimal decisions. Ideas and actions can flow freely through a collaborative enterprise. Furthermore, this enterprise relies on the contribution of those who are interdependent and who need the enrichment and sharing of multiple points of view from varying sources of knowledge.

For collective leadership to then be sustained, it requires participants to keep an open mind to solicit everyone's diverse viewpoints, primarily through constructive dialogue. The parties need to continually work to earn each other's trust and cohesion while fostering creativity and timeliness. They need to see that any one person's actions are part of a bigger picture that can create a common good (Kasanicky, 2015). As can be discerned, the sustenance of collective leadership requires concerted activity at multiple levels. At the individual level, people have to be willing to find their

voice and contribute it to the growth of the community. At the same time, they need to be open to the inquiry of others. Within the exposition of voice should come shared expectations in which members acknowledge their respective strengths, leading to the emergence of provisional roles and responsibilities (Center for Ethical Leadership, 2007). To engage in this fashion, it is preferable that participants, bringing to mind what developmental psychologists refer to as 'post-conventional' thinking, be willing to lay aside their own worldviews (Kohlberg, 1984; Torbert, 2004). They need to consistently revise their mental models to incorporate the hopes and aspirations of others, often adjusting their will to the will of the team.

At the interpersonal level, participants in interaction seek to learn more about the self through others. They relish the exchange of diverse perspectives and out-of-the-box thinking. They seek to convert the team boundary into a safe container that can encourage adversarial positions. This takes a special form of relationship which Buber (1970) referred to as the 'I-thou' in contrast to the 'I-it.' The I-it, on one hand, is functional and instrumental taking the form, 'what I can do for you in exchange for what you can do for me.' The I-thou, on the other hand, is based on knowing oneself as seen through the other. It is a dialogue based on a shared sense of caring, commitment, and mutual responsibility. Furthermore, in the I-thou, there is every chance that the parties may be transformed by the relation between them, in which case the course of action may be changed, thus resulting in the occurrence of leadership.

A third level of activity might be called the systems level (including team and organizational) in which members agree to some common ground rules and structures to organize the effort. The participants need to hash out some priorities and agree on areas of mutual responsibility. Relying on a high degree of psychological safety initiated at the team level, members count on a 'permission to act' that at the point of advanced team development can accelerate the time to respond. Using structures such as holacracy, small groups or 'circles' manage themselves within their zones of autonomy, and systems are built to coordinate their activity without placing anyone in a position of hierarchical authority. Relying on information, leadership is restructured for decision making in the form of widely distributed knowledge. Workers have access to information that was once the exclusive domain of top management, and since work is increasingly interconnected, organizations are becoming more fluid relying on networks that challenge our conventional wisdom of what it is to be 'internal' or 'external' to the organization. Alliances and partnerships emerge across sectors and industries, often creating independent centers of competence and innovation, each pursuing its independent path of contribution and expertise (Bryson et al., 2006; Waddell, 2005). The networked economy characterized by webs of partnerships has become a functional reality along with a requisite change in leadership toward increasing collective and collaborative practices (Raelin, 2003).

Collective leadership and learning

If we are truly interested in developing collective leadership, the entire face of leadership development needs to change because we would no longer be focusing on the individual. We would be focusing on the collective and on their practices (Denyer and James, 2016). One immediate change would be that rather than locating leadership development away from the office, it would need to take place at the very setting where the group is performing its work. Using novel forms of conversation and reflection, participants focus on their interpersonal discourse, on the dilemmas they may be facing, and on the processes that they are using. Any training would be delivered just-in-time and in the right dose to be immediately helpful. Participants would thus learn how to address and solve their own problems in their own milieu, such as via work-based or action learning (Raelin, 2008). They would confront these problems with those who are directly and mutually engaged.

The workplace itself would come to be viewed as a perfectly acceptable place to learn about leadership. Leadership itself would be seen as a construction that could be self-correcting. As practitioners engage and learn with one another, they commit to reflecting on their own actions and consequently learn to reconstruct their practices according to their own interests. This more public form of reflection has the potential to not only advance new skills and attitudes but to open up space for innovative ways to accomplish the work or even to re-conceive how the work is done in the first place.

In the collective leadership domain, then, learning would not be derived from transferring knowledge from one mind to another, as in a classroom; rather, it is acquired from the activities, and oftentimes instant improvisations, that arise in the work itself. Even the consultation of 'best practices' may come to naught since it is the collective practice within the immediate setting that requires the most attention. Consequently, work-based developmental experiences, such as coaching, peer mentoring, apprenticeship, group process reflection, and action learning using learning teams, are likely to be most beneficial because they help learners acquire a situated understanding of what works, what does not work, and what might work.

The subject matter of collective leadership development is also of a different nature than what we can refer to as 'leader development' (Day, 2000). The team needs to focus on building its own social capital and collective leadership capacity through collaborative problem-setting and problem-solving norms and skills. Among the norms for collaboration might be openness and transparency in working relationships; mutuality of presence, participation, and benefits; open sharing even of 'undiscussable' issues; suspension of judgment when listening; valuing of differences; and accommodation of oppositional argument or dissent containing deeply held convictions (Gauthier, 2006; Raelin, 2012). Among the skills for collaboration, collective learning may be the most important, especially through the use of dialogue. In dialogue, participants commit to listen to one another, reflect on perspectives different from their own, and entertain the prospect of being changed by what they learn. The result of any engagement may thus either broaden or transform the practice in question, insofar as the participants through their discursive activities—giving opinions, establishing facts, and interpreting meanings—are developing their collective enterprise.

There are a number of tools to assist a team in developing the aforementioned collective norms and skills. Gauthier (2006) calls for small group practice in empathic listening and in the delivery of high-quality advocacy and inquiry. Using effective team facilitation and coaching, participants can also learn how to surface and question their own mental models and attributions. Any form of work-based learning is anchored in lived experience within specific cultural and locals contexts. It is based on a dialectic epistemology that sees learning as arising from contested interaction rather than from pure expertise. In fact, whether it be action learning, action research, action science, action inquiry, appreciative inquiry, or any of the other 'action modes' (Anderson et al., 2015), work-based learning embraces a rationale that sees knowledge creation and practice improvement as arising from real engagements and collective reflection on the natural experience. When it comes to leadership development, perhaps most well known among the action modes is the aforementioned action learning. It makes use of action projects undertaken in teams; learning teams assembling participants working and reflecting on problems occurring within their projects and workplaces; and other interpersonal experiences, such as mentorships, which permit and encourage learning dialogues.

So, collective leadership development would start with managers immersed in their own settings. They would engage in special learning processes associated with second- and third-order learning that seeks to uncover the underlying assumptions and presuppositions guiding current practices. Such processes rarely arise from prepared scenarios, such as cases, controlled by training instructors. Rather, they arise from real, in other words, messy questions from practice. The

process is unpredictable requiring collective reflection-in-action and such associated activities as on-the-spot reframing, reevaluation of standard practices, and spontaneous testing of available knowledge (Schön, 1983; Raelin, 2008).

This is not to suggest that being exposed to simulated experiential activities solving problems via standard classroom training is inauspicious. Experiential learning can pre-season participants for the ultimate application of the metacognitive critical skills required in naturalistic settings. However, in work-based learning, whether through virtual or face-to-face interaction, participants learn to engage in concurrent reflective dialogue during which they become more critical about their leadership practices while enhancing their self-awareness and sociopolitical consciousness (Cunliffe et al., 2002; Dickenson et al., 2010).

Conclusion

Although some of our national political cultures may suggest a return to an individualistic mentality based on self-interest, the surge toward collective and collaborative practice seems inevitable. The currents in our political economy are not only changing, they are in veritable disarray. But if the move toward collective practice is inevitable—lest our very survival becomes at risk—we need to create change across our institutions, such as in our schools, governments, and businesses.

Lest I omit an especially critical issue in the contemporary scene, there remains the question about the sustenance of stakeholder participation and public engagement, democracy in particular. Collective leadership because of its spirit of connectedness presumes a moral philosophy of 'co-development' rather than dependence (Woods, 2016). In dependence, followers without discretion follow the 'right' leader who is assumed to be the beacon of moral rectitude. In co-development, people discover and unfold from within themselves as they engage with others in critical dialogue. The resulting interaction would be welcoming of multiple and contradictory voices that would need to come to terms with adversarial differences. Although newer leadership discourses, such as post-bureaucracy and its use of such processes as peer decision making, can lead to collegial surveillance, suppression of voices, and self-muting, the reliance on critical reflective processes rather than universalized prescriptions can optimally incorporate participants' collective voices and activities.

In the end, we will need to challenge our leadership behavior across a number of dimensions. It can no longer occur solely as a vertical transmission of instructions; it needs to occur laterally across a range of individuals connected to each other. It must consequently shift from being authority-based to practice-based or from procedure adherence to contestable moments. It will occur within a specific context rather than as a generic style, and apropos of this provocation, it will be anchored by a constellation of complementary co-leaders. Fear not: collective leadership has checked in.

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Author biography

Joseph A Raelin is an internationally recognized scholar in the fields of work-based learning and leadership. He holds the Asa S. Knowles Chair of Practice-Oriented Education at Northeastern University's D'Amore-McKim School of Business in Boston where he is also professor of management and organizational development.