

## **Exploring the antecedents of shared leadership in event organisations**

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### **Published version**

ABSON, Emma and SCHOFIELD, Peter (2022). Exploring the antecedents of shared leadership in event organisations. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, 52, 439-451.

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## **Exploring the antecedents of shared leadership in event organisations**

### **Abstract**

This research explores the antecedents of sharing leadership throughout an event management organisation. Previous research into shared leadership has been shown to improve team performance and effectiveness in organisations with team-based structures, involved in knowledge work and operating within high pressured environments. We propose therefore that shared leadership offers a useful solution to the problems presented by the rapidly changing and challenging event industry environment. However, little is known about how shared leadership happens within project multi-teams and research into the antecedents of shared leadership is still in its infancy. To enrich the current understanding, we employed exploratory qualitative research involving three case study organisations. Our findings were drawn from 34 in-depth interviews and 33 hours of observation with participants from all layers of the management hierarchy and employees from across experiential event management agencies. We identified the antecedents of shared leadership at all levels of management: at the leadership team level, organisational leaders must communicate a clear vision, and act with transparency whilst empowering staff to enact leadership. At the project multi-team level, team members must be willing to collaborate with, and recognise the expertise of other team members and, at an individual level, employees must interact with empathy and good communication. Our findings illuminate how the sharing of leadership relies on multi-level interactions in which management, teams and individuals participate. Based on the findings, the implications for both theory and management practice are discussed and, given the exploratory, qualitative, nature of the study, future research directions are recommended.

**Key words: shared, leadership , projects, events, teamwork, antecedents**

## 1. Introduction

The event sector is now operating within a new working landscape. Recent macro and micro influences in business, including the devastating effect of the coronavirus pandemic on the events, hospitality and tourism industries, have required the event sector to demonstrate its resilience and agility in adapting to ever-changing situations (Eason-Bassett & Reic, 2020; EventMB, 2021; Zopiatis et al., 2021). Lund et al., (2021) suggest that the leisure and tourism industries were some of the most likely to see continued, and potentially long, disruptions but should bounce back rapidly. As the sector begins to recover from the pandemic and navigate the 'new normal' in which potential restrictions, legal requirements, and virtual teams, as well as virtual or hybrid events, become common place (EventMB, 2021), a range of challenges have emerged for the event sector, and the need for strong, efficient and effective leadership has become clear.

One of the ways in which leadership can help to improve organisational performance is via collaborative, or shared leadership. This nuanced view of leadership focuses on the relational aspects of leadership, on influence and empowerment, and acknowledges that leadership can be a collaborative act, in which leadership is shared around an organisation to improve efficiency and effectiveness of team performances (Lorinkova & Bartol, 2021). These shared leadership theories have grown from the acceptance that the changing conditions within the workforce have created a need to 'spread' key leadership practices, such as decision making, power and influence, to those within the organisation that are best equipped to deal with them at the right time (Spillane, 2006).

There is growing evidence that shared leadership is useful in a range of business organisations, but it is still limited in focus – a systematic literature review by Sweeney et al., (2019) identified only 39 empirical studies that looked at shared leadership in

commercial organisations, and to date, no research has considered shared leadership in the context of event management. Whilst there has been a focus on providing empirical evidence for the outcomes of shared leadership, few existing empirical studies investigate the antecedents that enable, or inhibit the sharing of leadership within teams (Wu et al., 2020). Sweeney et al. (2019) identified that only 11 of the 39 studies in their meta-analysis explored antecedent conditions to any extent and, in their review, both Wu et al. (2020) and Zhu et al. (2018) suggest that research into the antecedents of shared leadership is still in its infancy, with much space left for exploration.

At the same time, research into leadership within events has not kept pace with wider leadership research (Abson, 2021) and, instead of acknowledging that there is a range of leadership within organisations, event research still tends towards the traditional view of leadership as a top-down phenomenon, and focuses on those in formal leadership positions, with much of the research focusing on leadership competencies and behaviours needed to run events (Abson, 2017; Giudici & Filimonau, 2019; Leigh et al., 2021). This emphasis on those in formal leadership positions has faced increasing criticism within leadership literature, as scholars have begun to reject the idea that one primary leader can be solely responsible for the outcomes of an entire organisation or project (Abson, 2021).

To address this gap, this study examines the use of shared leadership in three multi-team event management organisations. To explore how leadership is shared in the context of experiential event agencies, the following research questions were developed, based on the extant literature.

- 1) What can organisational leadership teams do to facilitate the sharing of leadership among multiple cross-functional and interdependent teams?

2) What antecedents do multi-teams need for team members to participate in shared leadership?

3) What antecedents do individuals need to participate in shared leadership?

The originality of this study stems from the identification of seven antecedents for shared leadership in event organisations, drawn from multiple levels across the organisational settings (three antecedents from the organisational leadership team, two from the multi-team project working group, and two from individuals). In doing so, it is among the first studies to expand the focus of shared leadership beyond immediate team boundaries and shows that in organisations where high levels of team interdependence exist, the synergistic effects of the antecedents from across the multiple levels make a critical contribution to enabling shared leadership.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows – in the next section, we explore evidence that shared leadership will be a useful model for organisations within the service industry and focus on the extant knowledge of antecedents for shared leadership. We then set out our methodological choices, before presenting the findings. We conclude with a discussion on the implications for theory and practice and highlight both the limitations within our work and future research directions.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Shared leadership in events**

Whilst leadership is widely studied by management scholars focusing on a wide range of industries, including the closely related fields of hospitality and tourism (see for example Ali et al., 2022; Qui, 2019) current research within the field of events has neglected investigations into event leadership (Abson, 2021). So, whilst there remains an implicit agreement in the event literature that leadership is central to the successful delivery of

experiences (e.g. Bladen, Kennell, Abson, & Wilde, 2018; Getz & Page, 2016), there is only a handful of empirical studies that focus on leadership in events (Abson, 2021). This lack of research is notable given that good leadership has been shown to have a significant effect on both the productivity and the profitability of organisations (Yukl, 2010).

Event leadership research is also important because of the service-led focus of the event sector, in which the human resource is a central element for success (Nickson, 2013). In addition, the distinctive characteristics of events work make it an interesting lens through which to study leadership – this is because event work is iterative and episodic in nature and the business model centres around the production of intangible experiences within highly pressurised, urgent, creative environments (Bladen et al., 2018; Brown, 2014). Events also require a variety of leadership processes and practices due to the intricacies and complexities of their stakeholder networks, the reliance on highly interdependent teamwork, the labour-intensive nature of the sector, and the complex design and delivery of event experiences (Mair, 2009; Bladen et al., 2018). As such, effective leadership is crucial, but challenging in a dynamic environment such as that of events (Imam & Zaheer, 2021).

Moreover, the event sector is now operating within a new working landscape; recent macro and micro influences on business, including the devastating effect of the coronavirus pandemic and the resultant changes to economic forecasts and to event organisational operating structures, have required the sector to demonstrate its resilience and ability to adapt (Eason-Bassett & Reic, 2020; EventMB, 2021). As the events industry begins to recover from the pandemic, and to navigate the ‘new normal’ in which potential restrictions, legal requirements, and virtual teams as well as virtual or hybrid events become common place (EventMB, 2021), it faces a range of challenges, and the need for strong, efficient and effective leadership has become clear.

As scholars have looked for solutions that will help to address and improve the changing conditions in the workplace, shared leadership has emerged as a useful solution to the problems presented in changeable and challenging industries such as events (Pearce & Conger, 2003). As Zhu et al. (2018) explain, shared leadership can be enacted in multiple formats – it can mean that group members work together to co-perform the same leadership activities, or that leadership rotates around a group, with the person with the right skills enacting leadership when required. It can also mean that group members take on differentiated leadership roles – so each member will be responsible for a few of the leadership activities. For the purpose of this study, we follow Pearce and Conger’s broad definition of shared leadership as: “a dynamic, interactive process among individuals in work groups in which the objective is to lead one another to the achievement of group goals” (Pearce & Conger, 2003, p. 286). Shared leadership is particularly useful in that it enables the ‘spread’ of key leadership practices, such as decision making, power and influence, to those within the organisation that are best equipped to deal with them at the right time (Spillane, 2006). Four meta-analyses demonstrate that shared leadership has a positive effect on team performance and team effectiveness (D’Innocenzo et al., 2016; Nicolaidis et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2014; Wu et al., 2020) and, more specifically, the sharing of leadership has the potential to improve performance and efficiencies in relation to decision making, team effectiveness, knowledge creation and innovation (Bligh et al., 2006; Carson et al., 2007; Hoch, 2013).

Despite the growing evidence that sharing leadership might be a useful solution to issues created by conditions within industries such as events the, to date, there have been no published studies that focus on shared, or distributed, leadership in any area of event



management - indicating a noteworthy gap in the literature. Given the lack of attention to shared leadership in the events literature, it is necessary to look to bodies of work in similar, related industries. A review of the literature found few studies specifically related to shared leadership in the hospitality, tourism or leisure industries. Two studies (Benson and Blackman, 2011 and Hristov and Zehrer, 2019) focused on whether the related concept of distributed leadership was beneficial to destination management organisations. Both studies concluded that tourism organisations might find the adoption of distributed leadership advantageous in order to increase organisational performance. Fu et al., (2020) concluded that shared leadership positively affects team members proactive behaviour and, in hospitality, Wu and Chen (2018) found that collective psychological capital partially mediates the relationship between shared leadership, organisational commitment and creativity. Finally, Ali et al., (2022) found that participative leadership improved team performances in frontline staff in chain hotels. Whilst these studies are useful in explaining how and why shared leadership is useful in an event setting, they do not investigate the conditions within the team or the wider organisational environment that impact on shared leadership (Wu et al., 2020) – it is this gap that this study seeks to address.

## **2.2. Antecedents of shared leadership**

### **2.2.1. Organisational level antecedents**

The extant research has found evidence that a creative, uncertain environment is a pre-condition for shared leadership (Binci et al., 2016; Pearce & Manz, 2005; Wang et al., 2017) and that organisational support systems and rewards must be in place to facilitate its sharing (Binci et al., 2016; Pearce & Manz, 2005). Moreover, vertical, transformational and empowering leadership is needed to encourage shared leadership – both internally - within the team - (Fausing, et al., 2015; Friedrich et al., 2016; Hoch, 2013; Zhang et al., 2014) and

externally -within the organisation or wider network - (Carson et al., 2007; Fausing et al., 2013).

### ***2.2.2. Team and individual level antecedents***

Carson et al. (2007) noted that the internal team environment contained several predictors or precursors of shared leadership emergence. Their first precursor - shared purpose - suggests that all team members should have a similar understanding of their team's primary objectives and ensure that they are focused on collective goals. This common shared purpose will result in different team members co-ordinating their individual roles effectively. Consistent with this are the findings of Serban and Roberts (2016), which suggest that in the context of a creative task, the internal team environment is a predictor of shared leadership.

Related to this is Carson et al.'s (2007) second precursor - an enabling environment. They found that a positive, supportive internal team environment facilitates the emergence of shared leadership, alongside ensuring that team members have a 'voice' – the opportunity for participation and input. Later research by Daspit et al. (2013) and a meta-analysis by Wu et al. (2020) confirmed that when Carson et al.'s (2007) shared purpose, social support and voice existed within groups, the potential for participating in shared leadership increases.

Other studies have noted that varieties of team composition, in relation to team size, team member ability, member maturity, and familiarity, influence shared leadership in teams (Binci et al., 2016; Hoch & Dulebohn, 2017; Kukenberger & D'Innocenzo, 2019; Lorinkova & Bartol, 2021; Siangchokyoo & Klinger, 2021). Examinations of the team setting have also shown that high levels of team communication, collaboration, and cohesiveness

are important antecedents to shared leadership (Friedrich et al., 2009; Friedrich et al., 2016), as are team member integrity (Hoch, 2013), conscientiousness, openness to experience of diversity (Zhou et al., 2017) and intrinsically felt empowerment (Grille et al., 2015). Trust can also be an antecedent to shared leadership (Engel et al, 2010; Lyndon et al., 2020).

To summarise, the few studies that have been undertaken into shared leadership antecedents have mainly focussed on team-based conditions and characteristics. This neglects organisational level, individual action and structure-based factors that can promote or inhibit the sharing of leadership (Zhu et al., 2018). This gap in understanding is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, since shared leadership is defined as an emergent process, it follows that certain conditions must exist for the dynamic to develop. Secondly, studies which exclusively focus on team-based antecedents ignore the likely impact of wider contextual factors such as the organisational culture, the relationships between leaders and their teams, team inter-dependence, team variety and the current context of the industry where shared leadership takes place. We therefore propose the conceptual framework in Figure 1 as the basis of our study.

## **INSERT Figure 1: Conceptual framework of shared leadership**

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. *Research design***

Both shared leadership and event management studies are largely dominated by positivistic, quantitative, large sample studies (Binci et al., 2016; Klenke et al., 2016; Sweeney et al., 2019). In their systematic review, Sweeney et al. (2019) note the lack of qualitative based shared leadership research in commercial organisational contexts and that qualitative studies are therefore needed to complement the prevailing quantitative

discourse, not least because shared leadership research in events is still exploratory in nature. This study addresses this imbalance by employing qualitative, semi-structured interviews to obtain rich information on this topic. Table 1 explains the choices adopted in the study, the purpose and rationale of those choices and their internal consistency.

### **INSERT Table 1: Research design**

#### **3.2. Case study participants and data collection**

The study took the form of a multi-case study and followed the Eisnehardt Method (1989, 2021) to guide the data collection, analysis and theory development. We viewed the case study approach as a series of strategic choices, made through the selection of institutions on a critical case basis, as suggested by Patton (2015), and followed the advice of Eisenhard (2021) by focusing on cases that were most likely to demonstrate examples of shared leadership and where both similarities and differences would help towards building theory. As such, we focussed the research on identifying antecedents that enable shared leadership to emerge in experiential event agencies. These UK based agencies were considered a useful setting because they typify the pre-existing context established as being necessary for shared leadership. In other words, they work within creative, uncertain and challenging environments (Ensor et al., 2011) and are required to undertake high levels of spontaneous problem solving, performing tasks that are high pressured, risky and involve the temporarily coalescing of multiple stakeholders (Clarke, 2012; Fransen et al., 2015; Pearce, 2004; Wang et al., 2017). In addition, the case study agencies used agile, collaborative ways of working in which multiple teams came together into a single project working group to deliver experiential events; this made them an interesting setting to study

the concept of shared leadership, which to date, has almost exclusively been researched through the lens of single and static teams with clear membership boundaries.

Following the advice of Flyvbjerg (2006), the selection strategy included consideration of the requirements of the research design and the exemplifying cases, which were chosen because of their similarities across a number of factors. The key criteria for selection are listed below:

- The organisations designed, developed and delivered experiential events as an agency, for clients.
- The organisations were of similar size and structure – 80-150 staff members, with teams consisting of leadership team; client management team; production team; creative team; and strategy team.
- The organisations consisted of multiple teams, that worked independently but also came together as multi-team working groups to deliver projects.
- That leadership is shared around the organisation, and that employees recognised the concept of shared leadership.

The selection of cases was therefore instrumental because they provided insight into the particular issue of antecedents of shared leadership (Stake, 2005). Table 2 provides a description of the three cases and details of the primary data, which comprised transcripts of 34 semi-structured interviews with employees from each of the three case study organisations, alongside the notes from approximately 33 hours of observation.

#### **INSERT Table 2: Description of cases**

Additionally, this study reflects calls in the leadership literature to undertake multi-level research, in which data is gathered from participants in all layers of the management hierarchy and also incorporates employees from across the business (e.g. Dionne et al., 2014; Yammarino et al., 2005; Yukl, 2010). Participants representing the depth and breadth of the three case study organisations were selected accordingly. Patton (2015) suggests that a method of sampling for qualitative research is to select those whose experiences to be

studied are especially clear - this is straightforward in this instance – the role of the participant was the central selection criteria. In each organisation, a call was sent out from the Human Resource team to request participants for the study. Responses were passed to the principal investigator, and selection was based on the role within the organisation, the teams the participants worked within and the projects they worked on. The aim was to include a cross-section of staff members who worked in project teams to deliver events, held a variety of roles and had a mix of management and non-management responsibilities. A full, anonymised, list of interviewees, including job role and level of management from each organisation is included in Table 3.

### **3.3. Interviews and observation**

#### *Interviews*

All interviews lasted between 20-60 minutes (with over 19 hours of interview data collected).

#### **INSERT Table 3 – list of interviewees, with job title and level of management**

Interviews were designed using Patton's (2015) typology of qualitative interview questions.

The questions guiding the interview were:

- When do you share leadership with a co-worker?
- How does your team share leadership?
- What barriers do you find when attempting to share leadership across a number of different teams, all working on the same project?
- What helps you when you participate in shared leadership?
- What would prevent you from taking on a non-formal leadership role?
- Why might others not take leadership roles?
- How do you think team dynamics and leadership changes at different stages in your event planning life cycle?

Utilising the semi-structured nature of our interviews, questions were adapted when interviewing members of the organisational leadership team, and when meeting with

project team members together and individually. See Appendix A for an example interview protocol.

### *Observation*

In order to identify relationships with participants, and to develop an understanding of the context of each case study, passive participant observation was also used to observe the participants, activities, interactions and subtle factors (Creswell, 1998; Bryman, 2016). While the processes of leadership itself is hard to observe (Parry 1998), observation of the participants in their work environment was important to this study because it facilitated an understanding of how participants interact with each other, in order to gain a holistic view of the phenomena being studied (Schensul et al., 1999). As such, time was spent immersed in the working environment by sharing the office spaces of each case (table 2).

A participant observation guide was prepared for the observation sessions (See Appendix B) which helped to describe both the general information (who / what / when) and the specific details (verbal behaviours such as who speaks to who /who initiates the conversation / language / tone of voice; physical behaviours such as human traffic and communication behaviours such as how do they communicate and how often). Observation enabled the researcher to spend more time in close contact with the participants (Bryman, 2016) and facilitated insights about the organisation from their perspective, which, in turn, provided an enhanced understanding of the contextual environment within which leadership was occurring (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2012). For example, it allowed for the learning of the native language of each organisation – the formal and informal use of language that needed to be understood in order to penetrate and begin to comprehend each organisation's culture (Bryman, 2016). In particular, observation helped to confirm findings from the interviews, in which participants described incidences when leadership

behaviours and processes happened. It also revealed hidden activities – moments when leadership occurred which participants might not have described as leadership.

### ***3.4. Data analysis***

All interviews were audio recorded and fully transcribed before being transferred to NVivo. The data analysis process consisted of two stages – the first of these was the development of initial categories followed the Eisenhardt Method (2021) and started with within-case analysis, in which an intensive analysis identified the core idea of each part of the data and a category was developed to describe it. This was followed by cross-case searches for patterns, during which we iteratively organised and grouped the data together before looking at the data in two ways. Firstly, we used the constant comparison of data and theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967), which requires the researcher to constantly compare the data collected with previous data analysis in an evolving and overlapping process. We moved backwards and forwards between data collection and analysis, in order to compare later analysis with previous iterations, and gather further data to clarify the emerging theoretical relationship between the concepts and categories (Parry, 1998). In practice, this meant that we staggered the data collection – in the initial round of data collection, we conducted similar numbers of interviews at each organisation. Then, after the within case analysis, we started on the cross-case searches for patterns. At this stage, we selected two organisations to return too, and these organisations were used for clarification of themes and member checking and validity purposes (see below). This iterative and interactive process of data collection and data analysis moved the analysis beyond the descriptive data and into a deeper interpretation and articulation of the categories. Examples of how the identified categories were drawn from the data are given in Table 4 and the quotes in the findings sections are illustrative of the axial coding process in action.



**INSERT Table 4: Antecedent categories with examples of how they were drawn from data**

Secondly, to further strengthen the validity and trustworthiness of the findings, we adopted the use of member checking. In practice, this meant that the final articulation of the findings were presented to participants directly, allowing them to correct interpretations and clarify their own experiences (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Maxwell, 2013). In this way, construct error and poor validation of concepts, categories and theories were minimised, thus improving the reliability of the findings. Trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was also ensured through the documentation of each step, the use of a reflective diary and a critical, and iterative reflection on both the data collection and analysis.

The findings emerged from the concept of theoretical saturation, which involved moving backwards and forwards between data collection and analysis stages until no new concepts, categories or relationships emerged (Eisenhardt, 2021).

#### **4. Findings**

This exploratory study identified seven distinct antecedents that enable the emergence of shared leadership within the context of experiential event agencies. In addition, it confirms that shared leadership requires facilitation from three levels within an organisation – the organisational leadership team, the project team, and the individual team members. As such, this research confirms the theoretical position expressed in the general literature (Clarke, 2012; Pearce, 2004) but not hitherto explored empirically in shared leadership, that a multi-level view of shared leadership is necessary to fully understand how it works. It also highlights that the multi-level model is relevant within an events industry context, with specific reference to experiential event agencies. Figure 2 presents the findings relating to requisite shared leadership antecedents at each of the three organisational levels.

## **INSERT Figure 2: Shared leadership antecedents in event organisations**

In this section, we explain how the labelling of these antecedents came about and also identify the formal leadership levels within the data, by classifying participants by their agency (Agency A; Agency B; Agency C) and their role (LT = Leadership Team; TL = Team Leader; TM = Team Member).

### **4.1. Organisational leadership team antecedents**

Despite the democratisation of leadership offered by shared leadership theory, vertical leadership remains an important driver of shared leadership (Ensley et al., 2006; Pearce, Manz, & Sims, 2008) and formal leaders represent a significant contribution to team success (Friedrich et al., 2016; Locke, 2003). As such, at the organisational level, we examined what organisational leadership teams do to facilitate the sharing of leadership among multiple cross-functional and interdependent teams.

#### **4.1.1. Vision setting**

The first identified antecedent is related to the way in which the leadership team must enhance the meaningfulness of work. Leadership teams need to provide a set of well-defined business values and ensure there is a clear vision for the organisation, which needs to be effectively and consistently communicated. By doing so, they ensure that the employees understand why they are doing their job, which increases motivation and engagement. Members of the leadership teams at all three organisations were clear on how important setting and guiding the vision were; they felt that a key element of their role was to create the vision for the business, and to ensure that employees were on board with that vision.

*“So there does require a vision, you know some sort of plan, why we're all doing this, and somebody standing up saying, go with me on this or at least trying to get behind*

*the people. So telling them that 'we are going to do this, because it's going to help us in this way'. That's where a leader does some leading.” (A2, LT).*

Our findings indicate that the leadership team must do more than just decide on the direction of the business and aim towards it; they must make the vision inclusive and apparent to everyone, to help participants understand the organisational goals, values and mission. This understanding helped to build feelings of value and created a perception that their work was meaningful and important. We found that when the participants felt the organisation was going in the right direction, they talked very positively about their own work, why it was important and how much enjoyment and value they got from it. And, if the participants felt their work was valued, then they expressed a desire to take on informal leadership responsibilities, to continue to do a good job.

#### **4.1.2. Transparency**

Related to vision setting, we found that the leadership team's transparency was an antecedent to the willingness to share leadership. Transparency in this context means the leadership team engaging in open communication and demonstrating honesty and approachability to their employees. Participants felt it was important that the leadership teams were being open and honest about what was happening with the business. In turn, this transparency prompted accountability from the leadership team, and loyalty from the employees.

*“We have an annual meeting, where the board generally present about what we're doing, where the company's going, the things that we are focusing on, new big initiatives things like that...we are kept up to date with where things stand financially and ... which sectors we need to move into, what we need to improve on. I think that's really transparent in terms of what they are doing in terms of leadership of the company” (C1, TL).*

Conversely, we found that a lack of open, honest communication from the leadership team created feelings of frustration among employees, which manifested itself as feelings of a

lack of control over their work. Transparency from the leadership team is therefore vital to the employee's willingness to undertake leadership duties.

#### **4.1.3. Empowerment**

Empowering staff to take control, ownership and responsibility for their work and to be accountable for the sharing of leadership, i.e. making a commitment to enabling leadership to be shared among team members, is also critical.

*"It's about treating people like adults - we want people to work here because they genuinely want to work here and they want to do well, for their own career progression, but also for the greater good of the business. Sort of the idea that if everybody works really hard then the end goal is reachable - and everybody succeeds out of it" (A1, LT).*

Employees are therefore encouraged to lead, to identify opportunities and to share decision making and problem solving. Empowerment demonstrates a belief and investment in an organisation's people and creates an environment where employees feel supported and able to do their jobs with freedom.

*"(it)...is ultimately about empowering people to make decisions more collaboratively. And whilst there is still a degree of ownership over role and ownership over output, from my own personal experience and other experiences that I've seen here, when people work in a much smaller unit, taking collective responsibility for it, you don't get that same sort of friction between departmental lines." (C11, LT).*

In summary, and in line with previous studies (e.g. Pearce et al., 2008; Clarke, 2012), our findings at the organisational level suggest that vertical empowering leadership is essential for developing shared leadership in teams. Our findings have shown that, within events, leadership teams are the key to creating and maintaining antecedents which enable team members to share in leadership and here we align with the work of Fausing et al. (2015a) and Wassenaar and Pearce (2012) who identified empowering leadership as an antecedent to shared leadership.

## **4.2. Project team antecedents**

Carson et al. (2007), Serban and Roberts (2016) and Wang et al. (2017) found that the internal team environment is a predictor of shared leadership. To explore this further at the project team level, we determined why participants were willing to engage with shared leadership beyond their immediate team boundaries.

### **4.2.1. Expertise**

The willingness of team members to be the expert, and to recognise other team members' expertise was an important antecedent to shared leadership. Across all three case studies, discussions around working together with other teams within the organisation invariably resulted in dialogue around how people rely on others to do aspects of the job, because they are the experts in those tasks.

*“Surrounding yourself with the best people for the job, and also it comes up again and again, not being an expert in everything but having someone that is an expert in that one thing and having the absolute trust in that person that they know what they are doing, and they are going to deliver on what we've tasked them to deliver.” (B1, TM).*

From an employee point of view, having a network of experts has two benefits. First, colleagues feel assured that someone with expertise will lead on their areas of knowledge during the delivery of the project, and second, people realise that their expertise is valued and respected – that they are important, and their work matters. Participants felt that working with networks of experts enabled them to either participate in leadership, or to accept leadership from others who are not in formal leadership roles.

*“Yeah, I think I'm listened to and I've got my voice in terms of, if we are talking about what people do, I do the design. So I'm going to know more than anyone...So they'll come to me and ask about my expertise in that field. Just like I would come to them and ask about their expertise....It's a team thing” (C8, TM).*

### **4.2.2. Collaboration**

We found that the ability to contribute to leadership decision making is an important antecedent to shared leadership - collaboration was seen as the key to getting the best out of team members. Teams had to be willing to approach projects as a multi-team working group, meaning they would cross departmental boundaries to collaborate. Moreover, teams that worked with traditional linear process approaches to project teamwork were identified as being less effective than those which adopted collaborative approaches and the sharing of leadership. Having this collaborative approach had a number of positive outcomes. In particular, it enabled people from different departmental teams to feel part of one united project team, which resulted in a willingness to share leadership.

*“Generally, we have a close working relationship with the creative team and the more collaborative that you can be with them and the more you can include them in the discussions and the feedbacks that the client give and make sure everyone's part of the journey, then the more you're like one team, pushing everything forward and the better the project outcomes tend to be.” (C1, TL).*

In summary, at the project team level the importance of team-based relationships formed through a willingness to work together in a collaborative way and to use or accept expertise, was clear.

#### **4.3. Individual team member antecedents**

For the individual team members, we identified a link between individual's empathy towards each other, and their ability to communicate effectively as being antecedents to their willingness to participate in the sharing of leadership – both as leaders, and as followers.

##### **4.3.1. Empathy**

Firstly, participants often referred to a lack of empathy for co-workers as one specific reason why they weren't willing to work with other departmental teams. Contextual understanding of the processes and procedures of other teams' roles is therefore critical for

encouraging empathy for co-workers and improves both team relationships and the effectiveness of working together. Without this understanding, sharing leadership is constrained; for example, if an account management team member doesn't understand the design process, they place unreasonable demands on the designer:

*I'm sorry - there are people who are in account management who are like 'give a shit, get it done, this is what it needs to be' and they have input on design which is purely subjective and not based on an understanding of the creative process. (B8, TM).*

Consequently, these demands are frequently unable to be met, resulting in designers losing self-confidence about their ability to do their part of the job. On the other hand, contextual understanding relating to other team member's roles increases empathy and improves team relationships.

*"It's that empathy, because they [the creative team] sit there having to empathise with the world to then come up with an idea that will speak to them. Whereas we [the account / marketing teams] are more about time constraints, and this is the deadline and so a lot of the time, they're in this land and we're in this land. [moving hands to show two separate places]. It's like they think that you aren't really understanding their space, so they want to reject you." (B11, TM).*

#### **4.3.2. Communication**

Not surprisingly, good communication formed the basis for establishing and maintaining relationships between the team members, and throughout the data set there was a clear focus on the importance of inter-department communication:

*"There is a lot of cross working with people in different teams; communication is really key so obviously people get busy and that communication drops a bit, and that can cause friction where it wouldn't have had to...sometimes you've got to respond and there isn't much time, and therefore people get busy and therefore someone doesn't get the sort of notice that everyone would have liked to have given them and they can get a bit miffed". (B5, TM).*

For communication to flow well, individual team members needed specific communication strategies, i.e. they had to acknowledge that each project team is different and therefore they had to consider, on a practical level, how they would communicate in order to work

well together. This strategizing of communication processes allowed individuals to develop a set of 'common practices' that ensured that they worked well together. In particular, the participants acknowledged the importance of effective communication when working across inter-departmental teams, because that is where the 'friction can happen', when people have different approaches to things or different personality types.

In summary, our findings confirmed that individuals need to commit to open communication practices and a deeper understanding of others' work in order to enable the emergence of shared leadership.

## **5. Discussion**

### **5.1. Contribution to knowledge**

Scholars disagree about how much high-level leader behaviours should be considered within the theoretical development of shared leadership, but extant research has largely focused on the collectivistic action of emerging leadership in teams (Friedrich et al., 2016). This focus on leadership between team members is problematic as it means that questions around the fit of vertical, hierarchical, and formal leadership with shared leadership have been largely ignored in the literature. As Locke (2003) suggests, it is risky to ignore the role of a formal leader when – in nearly every type of organisation – they are still an essential part of the structure. Our findings therefore support those scholars who have conceptually noted the importance of the formal leader in the process of sharing leadership, to ensure there is a more complete view of leadership processes (Day, Gronn, & Salas, 2004; Friedrich et al., 2016). Moreover, this indicates that, to understand leadership processes more fully, scholars need to consider an integrated model of both vertical (top-down leadership) and shared (or lateral) leadership.



Studies have shown that event organisations are reliant on a complex network of internal and external stakeholders who are integral to the event success (O'Toole, 2011; Tiew, Holmes, & De Bussy, 2015). Our findings showed that employees were willing to participate in shared leadership across team boundaries when they recognised expertise in others, and when their own expertise was recognised. This relates to the enabling environment that Carson et al. (2007) described, but extends this concept to recognise that in event teams, it is expertise that matters. Our findings also align with Pearce et al., (2010) and Hoch and Dulebohn (2017) who suggest that the most effective shared leadership occurs when those with the right expertise take on leadership roles, and others within the team recognise that expertise and accept leadership because of it.

Carson et al. (2007, p. 1229) found that when a team has an internal environment that shares “a clear and unifying direction that is well understood within the team, a strong sense of interpersonal support whereby team members feel recognised and encouraged, and a high level of voice and involvement within the team”, it can develop the sharing of leadership responsibilities. Our findings also revealed that in events teams, it is the interpersonal support within a positive, supportive internal team environment that facilitates the emergence of shared leadership. Small and Rentsch (2010) reached similar conclusions, i.e. that team members must be willing to cooperate with each other in order for shared leadership to exist. They found: “a willingness to cooperate and work interdependently with others and to influence and be influenced by other team members is likely to be associated with engaging in shared leadership” (ibid. p.205). In our research, the importance of team-based relationships, formed through a willingness to work together in a collaborative way and to use or accept expertise, was clear.

Our findings confirmed that individuals need to commit to open communication practices and a deeper understanding of others' work, to enable the emergence of shared leadership. These findings add further weight to existing studies which suggest that communication is pivotal to shared leadership (e.g. Friedrich et al., 2016; Kramer & Crespy 2011), but go further in that they highlight the importance of two-way communication in enabling the sharing of leadership; communication exchanges must happen not just between individual team members but also between employees and leadership teams. The findings therefore offer a critical understanding, given the importance placed on communication by previous shared leadership scholars.

In the extant literature, intrinsically felt empowerment and the perception of being fairly rewarded and recognised for one's performance were found to be important antecedents to shared leadership (Grille et al., 2015). However, this was not supported by our findings. Instead, we identified a link between individuals' empathy towards each other, and their ability to communicate effectively. Extant research into the relationship between communication and shared leadership is still limited, but communication behaviours such as feedback exchange and establishing communication norms have been identified as key to the emergence of collaborative leadership (Friedrich et al., 2009; Kramer & Crespy, 2011) and communication has been described as both a prerequisite and the life blood of shared leadership (Friedrich et al., 2016).

Collectively, the findings of the study allow us to understand the necessary conditions that underpin shared leadership in event organisations. Whilst existing literature has suggested that shared leadership may be built on relational connections within the workplace (Edwards, 2011; Hannah et al., 2011), it has not adequately explained how event organisations can create collective responsibility or encourage shared leadership. This study

has shown that they can do so through seven multi-level actions, in which the organisation and the employees focus on the relationships that are formed through team-based working conditions.

## **5.2. Implications for practice**

We have noted the positive benefits of shared leadership on improved team performance and effectiveness. Our findings have identified seven antecedents that, if employed by event organisations, will ensure that shared leadership emerges. The findings therefore support practitioners to understand how the sharing of leadership is encouraged, or limited, by the dynamics within an organisation, the various teams and their individual members.

Based on this, we provide the following practical suggestions. First, in a marketplace as competitive as the event industry, facilitating and instigating shared leadership around teams, rather than relying exclusively on those in formal top-down leadership positions, provides a useful model to improve working practices in such a challenging environment. As such, event agencies, and other organisations that operate with multi-teams, should implement strategies that will enable the sharing of leadership throughout their organisation. Strategies might include providing working environments that remove team 'silos' and instead encourage collaboration – e.g. flexible seating, co-working spaces, and social spaces within offices. Organisations may also wish to consider removing red-tape so that those with the correct skills and experience feel able to step up to leadership.

Second, we suggest that organisational leadership teams ensure that they create - and effectively communicate - a strong set of business values and a clear organisational vision, to ensure that employees understand how and why their work is valued and meaningful. We know that, at the heart of every event is the team that creates, produces and delivers

the experience; therefore, reminding staff that they are important assets is likely to increase their commitment and loyalty to an organisation. Based on our findings, this vision setting and transparent communication will enable employees to engage in the sharing of leadership. Organisations may therefore wish to use strategies such as vision and mission setting and team building in order to create a collective identity and to encourage a sense of belonging throughout their organisation.

Third, we suggest that employees have an important role to play in the sharing of leadership. The dynamic environment in which event managers work means that leadership becomes crucial but also that enacting effective leadership can be challenging (Imam & Zaheer, 2021). In events, decisions and responses are required to be made quickly, and often event organisers cannot wait for leadership decisions to be made at the top of the organisation, or through agreement from multiple stakeholders (Abson, 2021). If shared leadership is applied, then the person in charge at any moment is the person with the key level of awareness, knowledge, skills and abilities required for the job in hand – this ensures a faster response to the challenging demands. And, of course, the benefits of sharing leadership mean that when there is a change in the required knowledge, skills and abilities, a new expert should step forward to take the lead (Abson, 2021; Pearce, Manz, & Sims Jr., 2009). Based on our findings, ensuring there is collaboration, the required expertise in the project team, effective communication and empathy from individual team members, will enable mid-level management and individual project team members to increase their leadership participation.

## **6. Research limitations and future directions**

Studies like this suffer from the restrictions imposed by the exploratory nature of the subject matter; because no research into shared leadership within the context of events

exists, it was necessary to use inductive, qualitative methods, despite their attendant limitations. Case study research consists of an inherent strength – the nuanced, deep, rich understanding of the observed, but also an inherent weakness – the closeness required by the researcher. This familiarity poses both risks of bias and issues with credibility and trustworthiness (Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 2015). In addition, the cases were selected on a convenience basis, though consideration was given to several factors in order to limit the bias from this approach – however, gaining access depended on personal relationships and the building of trust with key employees. The interview and observation process represented a significant commitment from all three organisations, and interviewing more people and spending even more time observing interaction in those workplaces was not pragmatically possible. While the potential limitations associated with the selection of case study organisations and participants, and the subjective interpretations of the data are acknowledged, we have nevertheless sought to mitigate this reflectively, and transparently. Following the Eisnehardt Method, the findings have been developed from the data collected, and not from thoughts on what should happen according to theory developed in previous literature. However, to further strengthen these exploratory findings, we recommend that these antecedents are explored in other settings within the event industry, using quantitative methods.

In addition, whilst we found the use of observational data useful in order to sense check our initial findings, it was particularly challenging to observe relationships and leadership within cross-functional teams which were located in different parts of the building or at further distance in other buildings, especially as much of the communication was done via emails or phone calls. Upon reflection, observation added little to the overall understanding of the nuances of shared leadership in practice, as it proved very difficult to ‘spot’

leadership without directly shadowing members of teams for long periods of time. Nevertheless, the time spent in observation was useful as it enabled a clear insight into cultural and relational interactions but future research may wish to reflect on the purpose and outcomes of using this method to observe leadership. It should also be noted that, whilst there was no noticeable impact of time of service, time spent in teams and participant ages on the antecedents, we would expect that these variables would have a significant impact on the participation of shared leadership. Finally, whilst our research found that those working in organisations with distinct but interconnected teams were, given the right antecedents, willing to both enact and accept leadership from other team members, can the same be said for those working in, for example, the public sector, where networks of organisations or communities are more common? The structure of these networks is ill-defined (Richards & Jarman, 2021) and therefore the application of shared leadership may not be as useful. Moreover, the diversity of event, tourism and hospitality work (Mair, 2009) indicates that any studies into leadership in these sectors will need to be clearly contextualised to take into account the distinctions between different roles in different parts of these industries.

## **7. Conclusion**

The ability to share leadership away from the top of an organisation is a useful practice, given the networked nature of events. Event planning usually includes a core team, supported by a wide network of internal or external teams, suppliers and clients and the collaboration of a wide range of stakeholders (Getz & Page, 2016). Shared leadership supports this agile, networked approach to event delivery. In addition, event organisations have recognised that individuals are unlikely to have all the skills, knowledge and abilities to lead every aspect of an event and specialised workers have become the norm (Thorpe et al.,

2011). These team members will take on leadership roles when they need to, if they have the opportunity and desire to do so (Ensley et al., 2006) - this sharing of leadership by people in non-formal leadership roles has been shown to result in quicker decision making, increased team effectiveness and improvements in knowledge creation and innovative behaviour (Bligh et al., 2006; Carson, Tesluk, & Marrone, 2007; Hoch, 2013). Shared leadership therefore offers a useful solution to the problems presented by the rapidly changing and challenging event industry environment and our study has explored how event organisations can make it happen.

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