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# Making shared leadership work: The importance of trust in project-based organisations

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# Making shared leadership work: The importance of trust in project-based organisations

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**ABSTRACT**

The role of shared leadership in improving project success has received increasing interest, yet there is still insufficient understanding of the contextual factors that enable – or prohibit – the emergence of shared leadership within project-based organisations. Based on primary data drawn from three experiential marketing agency case studies using 34 semi-structured interviews and 33 hours of observation, this paper examines how project-based organisations can effectively facilitate the sharing of leadership. The findings show that trust is a key antecedent to shared leadership in project teams. Specifically, we propose that to enable shared leadership to emerge, individuals should establish intragroup trust - trust with co-workers within their project teams and inter-group trust – trust between members of different project teams, and between project teams and the leadership team. This research is among the first to closely examine whether factors which enable the emergence of shared leadership occur at multiple levels within project-based organisations, and through the use of qualitative approaches, offers a deeper understanding of why trust matters so much within shared leadership in these organisations. The theoretical and practical implications of the findings are discussed, and given the exploratory nature of the study, avenues for further research are proposed.

## 1. Introduction

Project-based organisations face increasing challenges, and the interconnectedness of work, coupled with complex contemporary social and technological change, means that dominant paradigms of traditional leadership no longer provide clear routes to success in this new landscape (Scott-Young et al., 2019). It has become clear that formally appointed leaders are unlikely to have all the skills, knowledge or expertise required to effectively direct the range of tasks that exist within teams (D'Innocenzo et al., 2016; Pearce & Conger, 2003; Sweeney et al., 2019). Work by scholars such as Scott-Young et al. (2019), Müller et al. (2017, 2018), Iman and Zaheer (2021) and Agarwal et al. (2021) has therefore shifted the focus towards shared leadership as a useful alternative for project management, providing new theoretical understandings of project leadership (Scott-Young et al., 2019). Research into shared leadership has mostly been researched through the lens of single, static teams with clear membership boundaries (Sweeney et al., 2019) but that is not how most project teams look - transient or variable team membership is common, yet there has been little research that explores how leadership might be shared in project teams operating in this way.

This research focuses on experiential marketing agencies (EMA) and their delivery of event projects. Experiential marketing refers to "staging and creating offerings for the purpose of facilitating extraordinary experiences" (Osterle et al., 2018:71), in which brands use live event experiences to establish and maintain relationships between brands and consumers (Crowther, 2011). Live events play a crucial strategic role in enhancing and positioning brands within competitive markets and the use of EMA to design, produce and deliver these live experiences has become a key tactic in marketing and communication strategies (Crowther, 2011).

EMA have complex organisational working practices which offer an insightful context within which to explore shared leadership within project management. The delivery of live event projects is both iterative and episodic, characterised by a discontinuation between activities (Bladen et al., 2023); the industry is highly competitive and agencies

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rely on interdependent, cross-functional internal teams and a network of multiple stakeholders, ranging from clients, sponsors, suppliers, other agencies and the participants themselves (Tiew, et al., 2015). It is this combination of industry and agency related factors within EMA that indicate that their project teams are a useful lens through which to study shared leadership – as Scott-Young et al. (2019) suggest "The practice of shared leadership broadens the options for leading project teams, especially in complex, innovative, or knowledge-intensive projects, beyond the traditional practice of a single project manager exercising formal vertical power over team followers." (p. 578).

Viewing project teams as a potential source of leadership, with leadership performed by those who have the most appropriate set of skills or expertise to undertake the required tasks (Ensley et al., 2006) represents a shift from viewing leadership as a vertical, top-down activity towards leadership as a horizontal, shared process. From a shared leadership perspective, leadership can therefore be seen as an influence process that emerges from social interaction and which can be shared throughout a team or organisation (Pearce & Manz, 2005). Group members work together to co-perform the same leadership activities, or leadership can rotate, moving to those with the appropriate expertise for particular elements or tasks within the project (Zhu et al., 2018). For the purpose of this study, we follow Pearce and Conger's (2003: 286) 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".

Shared leadership theory suggests that different forms of leadership and leadership styles can co-exist within organisations and may in some circumstances be reinforcing one-another (Empson et al., 2023). In a project management context, researchers have noted that the knowledge sharing and cohesion promoted by shared leadership amplifies a project's success (Iman & Zaheer 2021) and that organisations with enabling, collaborative cultures that support knowledge sharing enable the sharing of leadership within project teams (Agarwal et al., 2021). However, there is little understanding of which organisational factors influence the sharing of leadership in project-based organisations - in order to extend theoretical understanding, this study inductively examines the antecedent nature of trust in the development of shared leadership, both within project teams, and between organisational leadership and project team members.

Trust has frequently been the subject of organisational behaviour research, both generally regarding organisational trust and its importance for workplace outcomes (Verburg et al., 2018), and specifically, when considering its role in effective leadership (Chen & Lin, 2018). Previous studies suggest that trust is a consequence or moderator of shared leadership (Bergman et al., 2012; Robert Jr & You, 2018; Q. Wu et al., 2020) but it has not been confirmed as a potential antecedent. This research explores this in the novel context of non-static teams with frequently unclear membership boundaries, which are a common feature of the live experiential event sector. In order to achieve this, three research questions were posed to guide this study:

RQ1: How does trust between project team members affect the development of shared leadership?

RQ2: How does project team members' trust in organisational leadership affect the development of shared leadership?

RQ3: How does leaders' trust in project team members affect the development of shared leadership?

The following section reviews the literature on shared leadership in project teams and the findings of previous research that has investigated this.. We then present our methodological approach, before discussing our findings and theoretical and practitioner implications. We finish with a discussion of the paper's limitations and, given the inductive, exploratory nature of this work, we indicate directions for future research.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Shared leadership in project teams

As increased competition, global integration and competing stakeholder environments have driven organisations to consider new modes of organisation, flatter structures have become more common (Pearce et al., 2009). Flatter structures are useful in project organisations where specialised workers have the knowledge, skills and expertise to share the leadership load and where speed of decision making is essential (Wendt et al., 2009). Flatter organisations often rely on teams as the primary unit for organisational structures – most project organisations use forms of teamwork to deliver outcomes (Morgeson et al., 2010a; Scott-Young et al., 2019) and teamwork has become ubiquitous (Morgeson et al., 2010b).

Teams are composed of two or more individuals and exist to perform organisationally relevant tasks, share one or more common goals, exhibit task interdependencies and are embedded in organisational contexts that set boundaries for teams (Kozlowski and Bell, 2003). Many teams still have individuals who hold formal leadership positions and are primarily responsible for achieving team goals – and many scholars suggest that these leaders are the key factor in team success (Nicolaides et al., 2014). In our study, we draw distinctions between leadership within project teams and leadership teams themselves – these are teams that have responsibility for running organisations at a senior level (e.g. CEO / MD and functional leads e.g. Finance director). So within the study we have project teams – teams that consist of members with different functional responsibilities, who work together often on a temporary basis in order to complete the projects and leadership teams - who have vertical, formal, responsibility for the leadership of the members of the project teams.

Given the move towards team-based, dynamic – and often flat - structures in organisations (Hoch, 2013), the increase in knowledge work (Pearce & Conger, 2003) and increased workplace complexity (Avolio et al., 2009), the notion that there are multiple sources of leadership has become more prominent. Shared leadership has emerged as one effective solution to ensuring project teams work - the central argument of shared leadership is that leadership can occur anywhere within in a team or organisation – it is an influence process in which members seek to motivate, share knowledge and support other group members in order to achieve team goals (Scott-Young et al., 2019; Yukl, 2010). Given the intricacies of project leadership and the growing reliance on interdependent, networked teams, if project teams are willing to engage in this mutual influence process (Pearce and Conger, 2003), then shared leadership may well offer a solution to improving efficiency and performance (Scott-Young et al., 2019; Clarke, 2012).

In shared leadership theory, leadership can be shared laterally among peers, as well as vertically, from the top of the organisation down (Pearce & Conger, 2003). Shared leadership therefore broadens the expertise available within organisations, increasing capacity and sharing knowledge resources. As four meta-analyses demonstrate, leadership that encourages anyone within the project organisation to take ownership, control and responsibility for their own contribution can be productive for improving team performance effectiveness (D'Innocenzo et al., 2016; Nicolaides et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2014; Q. Wu et al., 2020). This is true even in complex project-based organisations where multiple leadership approaches and styles might co-exist across different project teams (Empson et al., 2023). In particular, it has proven advantageous in knowledge-based group work, where teams are interdependent and tasks are interrelated and complex (Carson et al., 2007; Hoch, 2013; Wang et al., 2017) as is the case for the project-based organisations used within this study. In addition, it has been shown to be particularly effective when teams are involved with complex, dynamic, creative work (Pearce & Conger, 2003; Northouse, 2017). Researchers have also found that teams with shared leadership experience less conflict, greater consensus and higher trust and cohesion than teams

without shared leadership (Bergman et al., 2012; Fransen et al., 2015).

A number of studies into shared leadership in project teams have been conducted. These studies include contexts as diverse as new product development (Cavazotte & Paula, 2021), engineering design (Wu & Cormican, 2016), student projects (Wang et al., 2017), change management (Binci et al., 2016) and information systems (Hsu et al., 2017). Each of these studies demonstrated that shared leadership led to improved performance, either from a team or organisational perspective, but none specifically explored how interactions within project teams, and the wider organisation, impacted on the sharing of leadership.

Scott-Young et al. (2019) offer a comprehensive review of the extant literature and propose a multi-level conceptual model of shared leadership in project management teams. The model (Fig. 1) draws on systems theory and is an integrative model that uses an input-mediator-output-input perspective to provide a holistic understanding of how shared leadership develops and how it might impact individual, team, project and wider organisational performance.

The model demonstrates that there are important interactions between organisations, teams and individuals as antecedents to shared leadership. It is evidence based, and useful for consolidating the extant literature into one model that can be viewed specifically through a project-based lens. However, the authors suggest that it needs to be empirically tested in a project context, given the heterogenic, changeable and complex nature of project management. This research uses the model to provide a foundation on which to build theory on how shared leadership emerges in project teams. Scott-Young et al. (2019) suggest that antecedents to the emergence of shared leadership exist at multiple levels within an organisation, and following their encouragement to test this model empirically using a variety of research alternatives, we have adopted qualitative research in order to advance our understanding of shared leadership in project teams.

To explain why shared leadership positively impacts team performance, previous research focused on conditions that may influence this, suggested by the mediation stage in Fig. 1, where moderators can affect the development process of establishing shared leadership. For example, some scholars have noted that the complexity of the work or specific tasks can be a moderator of shared leadership and team performance or effectiveness, In a study that looked at the dynamics between shared and vertical leadership in change management, Binci et al. (2016) found that shared leadership was more prevalent when the work became more complex, but less goal orientated. Findings from a study by Zhou and Vredenburgh (2017) indicated that it was complex tasks (not complex workplaces) that had a moderating effect on shared leadership for

entrepreneurial teams undertaking new ventures; when tasks undertaken were more complex, the relationship between shared leadership and team performance was stronger. In a globalised economy, where knowledge intensive services proliferate through organisations with less formal, permanent structures (Verburg et al., 2018), it is important to understand whether shared leadership offers more benefits than would be the case with more traditional firms. Research by Fausing et al. (2013) found a moderating effect of the teamwork function on the relationship between shared leadership and team performance. They concluded that when the nature of the tasks varied and were sometimes unfamiliar, the relationship between shared leadership and team performance was positive.

In work that examined moderators and mediators of shared leadership and team performance in virtual teams, Hoch (2014) found that shared leadership correlated with team performance when there are high levels of team demographic diversity. In their meta-analysis, Wu et al. (2020) proposed that the relationship between shared leadership and team outcomes is more positive when it is moderated by intra-group trust and task interdependence, and Iman and Zaheer (2021) found that trust within IT project teams had a strong and positive effect on project success, though they suggest that how and why a higher degree of trust affects the relationship between knowledge sharing and project success needs further exploration.

### 2.2. Antecedents of shared leadership

Whilst research on the outcomes of shared leadership has begun to reach agreement that – in specific contexts – shared leadership improves team performance and effectiveness, less attention has been given to antecedents that facilitate the sharing of leadership within teams (Wu et al., 2020; Zhu et al., 2018). Although some recent studies have developed a focus on the dynamics and dimensions of shared leadership for project management (e.g., Iman and Zaheer, 2021 and Agarwal et al., 2021), this is still an emerging area of study.

Antecedents of shared leadership have most frequently been researched through the lens of a single level within an organisation. For example, Binci et al. (2016) found that organisational level antecedents of support systems and rewards were important factors in the emergence of shared leadership. However, it is at team level that antecedents have received most attention. Carson et al. (2007) noted that a supportive and shared purpose within internal team environments is a critical precursor for the emergence of shared leadership; these findings were confirmed by Daspit et al.(2013) and Wu et al. (2020), while Grille et al. (2015) found that intrinsically felt empowerment and perceptions of fair reward
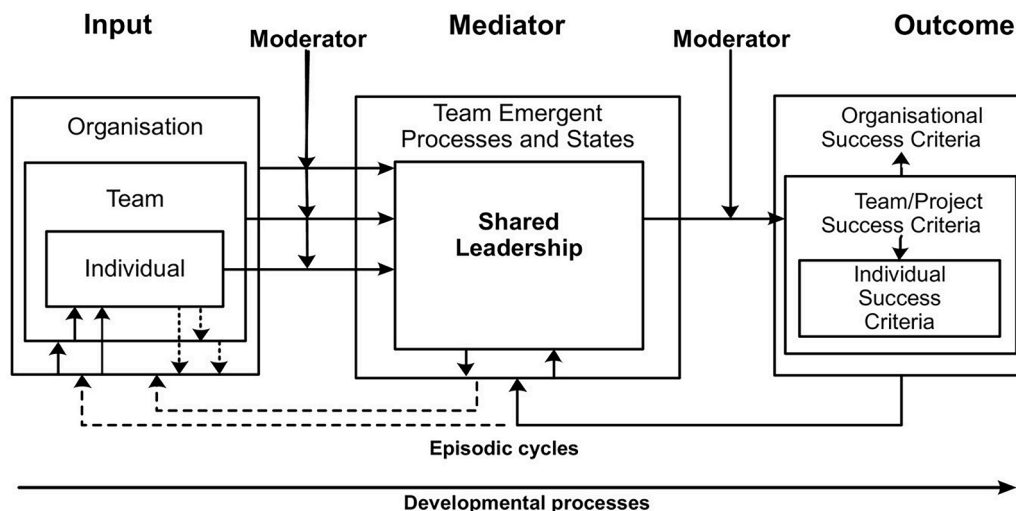


Fig. 1. Scott-Young et al.'s (2019) conceptual multi-level systems model of shared leadership in project teams.

preceded the sharing of leadership. Other studies have noted that varieties of team composition – consisting of team size, team member ability, member maturity, and familiarity - contribute to shared leadership in teams (Hoch & Dulebohn, 2017; Siangchokyoo & Klinger, 2021).

Other team-based research has established that shared leadership is more likely to occur when there are high levels of team communication, collaboration, and cohesiveness (Friedrich et al., 2009; Friedrich et al., 2016); team member integrity and supervisory support (Hoch, 2013) and task interdependence (Fausing, et al., 2015). Relatedly, Endres and Weibler (2020) and Siangchokyoo and Klinger (2021) found collective identity among teams to be related to the emergence of shared leadership. Kukenberger & D'innocenzo (2019) found that functional diversity (variety in knowledge / background) results in high levels of shared leadership, when teams work within a cooperative climate and Small and Rentsch (2010) found that when intragroup trust developed during early team interactions, it was positively related to shared leadership exhibited later in the team's life.

To categorise antecedents in a comprehensive way, Hoch and Dulebohn (2017) theorise that there are three types of antecedents for shared leadership in teams – the first is related to structural supports, including perceived team support, information and rewards. The second describes how vertical leadership facilitates shared leadership behaviours through a variety of leadership styles, including transformational, empowerment and Leader-Member Exchange (LMX). The final category of antecedents is team member characteristics and compositions. In their review of antecedents of shared leadership, Scott-Young et al., (2019) take a similar approach to conceptualising antecedents; they define them through a multi-level perspective, highlighting how antecedents to shared leadership occur at organisation, team and individual levels. This multi-level view of antecedents reflects calls in the leadership literature to undertake multi-level research (e.g Dionne et al., 2014; Yukl, 2010) and informed our approach to data collection.

The role of trust in project teams, beyond leadership and shared leadership research, has been extensively researched. Trust is an important factor to analyse to explain the operation of social relationships in the workplace and has been investigated in contexts as diverse as organisational behaviour, employee psychology, justice, psychological contracts, and voice, as well as team dynamics and effectiveness (Dirks & De Jong, 2022). Trust has been conceptualised as psychological mechanism involving two parties – the trustor and trustee – which enables individuals to make assumptions about the future behaviour of others and to therefore make judgements about the outcomes of their own behaviour, leading to improved cooperation and effectiveness (Chen & Lin, 2018). There are typically two dimensions of trust that are frequently explored; firstly, cognition-based trust, based on a rational assessment of previous behaviour; secondly, affect-based trust based on emotional responses and likely to be rooted in an individual's subjective appraisal of both a situation and their colleagues (Applebaum et al., 2004).

This inter-personal understanding of trust has been extended to cover the nature of trust within teams, or organisational trust (Verburg et al., 2018), and there have been a number of studies that have looked at trust within partnerships responsible for delivering projects (Cerić et al., 2021). Much of this research has built on earlier conceptualisations of individual trust, although some studies have developed team-specific constructs to better understand the specific issues relating to trust in workplace teams. Pavez et al. (2021) emphasise the importance of trust for project teams by demonstrating the high likelihood of teams facing an increase in adversity in unpredictable project-based environments. They suggest that trust is a key factor allowing project team members to become resilient, and to perform at a high level in these settings, a finding reinforced by Babu et al. (2023) who demonstrated that trust in senior leadership contributed to employee well-being during the uncertainties of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The relationship between team trust and leadership has been extensively researched, but mostly with a focus on the collective trust held by teams and hierarchical leadership, or the trust between leaders and teams (Babu et al., 2023). A relatively small body of empirical studies focus on the relationship between trust and shared leadership, and most of these studies have examined trust as an outcome or consequence of shared leadership, rather than as an antecedent or contextual influence. For example, research has shown that teams with shared leadership experience have less conflict, greater consensus and higher trust and cohesion than teams without shared leadership (Bergman et al., 2012; Fransen et al., 2015). Drescher et al. (2014) examined the relationship between collective forms of leadership and trust, and found that the act of leadership among team members improves trust. The more members influence each other, and accept influence from one another, the more they are likely to accept that other team members are consistently doing their job well. These positive judgements on competency often result in positive social exchanges, and this is likely to result in trust; trust is therefore considered a positive outcome of shared leadership. Robert JR and You (2018) also argue that the more a team relies on shared leadership, the more likely its team members have followed through on leadership commitments. Thus, shared leadership facilitates the creation and sustainment of trust in individual team members. This is supported by Wu et al. (2020) who found that intragroup trust had a moderating role in improving the relationship between shared leadership and team outcomes.

Reviewing the literature on shared leadership in project teams, and on the role of trust in project teams and in shared leadership has revealed knowledge gaps relating to the understanding of shared leadership in contexts where team membership is not fixed, and where teams are engaged in complex knowledge economy projects. Trust has been identified as an important factor in leadership research, and for the effectiveness of teams, but it has previously been viewed as a likely outcome of shared leadership process, and not as a factor that can contribute to its development. The following section sets out our methodology for developing new knowledge in relation to these gaps, through a comparative case study of EMA in the events sector.

## 3. Methodology

The constructionist paradigm emphasises that knowledge is constructed by people (Easterby-Smith, et al., 2015) and that this knowledge is a product of both social processes and social interactions (Burr, 2003). We acknowledge the essential difficulties of understanding what leadership is and the difficulties of isolating leadership processes as a distinct phenomenon (Langley, 1999). In this study, social constructionism proved useful in reframing thinking around leadership, and how we make sense of what happens in organisations, as we attempted to make sense of leadership by viewing it as socially constructed - an attribution by followers and the observed (Fairhurst, 2008). This position echoes the paradigm shift in leadership studies towards understanding that leadership is a relational process of influence that can emerge from team members who might be sharing leadership responsibilities (Cullen-Lester & Yammarino, 2016).

To generate rich, context specific knowledge about the factors that influence shared leadership in project teams, this study employed a qualitative, inductive, multi-case study. A multi-case study approach was appropriate because the research was exploratory in nature, and to build theory, it required a research design that allowed for exploration of complex issues with a holistic in-depth investigation. In addition, a contextualised qualitative study ensured that we were able to gain rich understandings of the phenomena within the specific context of a project-based organisational setting (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and to challenge the dominant discourse of positivism that exists in leadership studies (Klenke et al., 2016).

In line with the Eisenhardt method (Eisenhardt, 2021) to multi-case theory building, which was developed in response to a lack of guidance on theory-building research within qualitative studies, and with

particular focus on their careful case selection, this research focused on cases most likely to demonstrate examples of shared leadership and where both similarities and differences would help towards building theory. Three EMA were therefore purposely selected based on the following common antecedents that are likely to influence the sharing of leadership: each organisation had a comparable structure, similar numbers of employees and revenue, and all worked within the same type of business. In addition, prior to the start of the research, each case confirmed that the leadership team and staff members recognised shared leadership as a concept; that it was both favourable and useful for teams to share leadership in their organisation; and that leadership was currently shared within teams. In line with the Scott-Young et al. (2019) conceptual model, our study consisted of project teams that functioned with "…individual project team members embedded in networks of interaction between each other, and the project team further embedded within a wider network of interactions with other teams, business units and leaders from the wider organisations" (2019: 572). These similarities ensured the selection of cases was instrumental because they provided insight into the particular issue (Stake, 2005) and were likely to reveal common patterns across the focal areas. Each organisation, whilst similar, had differences in their organisational culture and values, in the way in which the teams were inter-related to each other and in the variety of clients that they worked with. So, as Eisenhardt (2021) suggests, whilst the research design involves similar cases, they may well reveal useful differences in their processes which will help to further develop the conceptualisation of shared leadership within project-based organisations. See Table 1 for a description of the cases.

As set out in the introduction, EMA were also chosen because of the close match between the type of work they do, and the type of work most suited to shared leadership. Specifically, along with the common similarities already discussed, these organisations design, produce and deliver live experiential projects for clients who are working in either the B2B or B2C sector.

### 3.1. Data sources

The primary data for this study were transcripts of 34 semi-structured interviews with employees from each of the three case studies, alongside notes from 32 hours of observation. As shown in Table 1, each organisation is made up of a number of core teams which have particular responsibilities for each project the organisation runs. These live projects involve a network of interdependent multi-team systems, the size and make up of which change depending on the nature of the project, but within which there exists little formal authority (Bladen et al., 2023). These multi-team systems are often cross-functional and multi-disciplinary – typically they include employees responsible for the creative concept design, strategic planning, client management, production, operations and logistics, HR management, audience management and on-site delivery.

**Table 1**
Description of cases.

|  | Case 1 | Case 2 | Case 3 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Business outputs | B2B and B2C live experiential projects for clients | B2B and B2C live experiential projects for clients | B2B and B2C live experiential projects for clients |
| Number of employees | 78 | 155 | 100 (approx.) |
| Organisational teams | Board of directors | Board of directors | CEO |
|  | MD & Leadership team | CEO | MD & Leadership team |
|  | Client account management | MD & Leadership team | Client account management |
|  | Creative studio | Client account management | Creative studio |
|  | Production team | Creative studio | Production team |
|  | Strategy team | Production team | Strategy team |
|  |  | Strategy team |  |

Patton (2015) suggests that one method of sampling for qualitative research is to select those whose experiences are especially clear, and this is straightforward in this instance – the role of the participant was the central selection criteria. In order to obtain a full range of views, participants were therefore drawn from the breadth of teams within each organisation, including interviews with entire teams (e.g. all the account management team were interviewed in case study 1 and 2) and from multi-disciplinary teams (e.g. in case study 3, interviewees were drawn from a multi-disciplinary project team). An anonymised outline of the participants is provided in Table 2.

Following the suggestion of Parry (1998) that interviews provide useful insights into leadership, semi structured interviews formed the major data collection method. The semi-structured Interviews were between 20–60 minutes long (with a total of over 19 hours of interview

**Table 2**
List of interview participants, job title, team and level of management.

| Case study | Job title | Core team | Level of management |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Head of Engagement | Leadership | Leadership Team (LT) |
| 1 | Managing Director | Leadership | Leadership (LT) |
| 1 | Project Director | Account management | Project team leader (PL) |
| 1 | Deputy Design Director | Creative | Project team leader (PL) |
| 1 | Event Project Manager | Account management | Project team member (PTM) |
| 1 | Event Project Manager | Account management | Project team member (PTM) |
| 1 | Exhibition Designer | Exhibition | Project team member (PTM) |
| 1 | Creative Artworker | Creative | Project team member (PTM) |
| 2 | Strategy Director | Strategy | Leadership team (LT) |
| 2 | Creative Director | Creative | Leadership team (LT) |
| 2 | CEO | Leadership | Leadership team (LT) |
| 2 | Senior Account Director | Account management | Project team leader (PL) |
| 2 | Account Director | Account management | Project team leader (PL) |
| 2 | Traffic Manager | Creative | Project team leader (PL) |
| 2 | Senior Account Manager | Account management | Project team member (PTM) |
| 2 | Comms & PR manager | PR | Project team member (PTM) |
| 2 | Design Director | Creative | Project team member (PTM) |
| 2 | Senior Account Executive | Account management | Project team member (PTM) |
| 2 | Marketing & PR manager | PR | Project team member (PTM) |
| 3 | Founding Partner & CEO | Leadership | Leadership team (LT) |
| 3 | Director - Creative and Strategy | Strategy | Leadership team (LT) |
| 3 | Director - People | HR | Leadership team (LT) |
| 3 | Account Director | Account management | Project team leader (PL) |
| 3 | Senior Production Director | Production | Project team leader (PL) |
| 3 | Creative Director | Creative | Project team leader (PL) |
| 3 | Group Design Head | Creative | Project team leader (PL) |
| 3 | Strategy Director | Strategy | Project team member (PTM) |
| 3 | Strategy Director | Strategy | Project team member (PTM) |
| 3 | Senior Account Manager | Account management | Project team member (PTM) |
| 3 | Senior Designer | Creative | Project team member (PTM) |

data collected) and the interview questions were developed using Patton's (2015) six types of questions that can be asked in qualitative interviews; see Appendix A for an example of the questions asked.

Observing leadership as a distinct phenomenon is difficult (Parry, 1998). In order to strengthen our findings, we used passive participation observation (Bryman, 2016) of participants in their work environment, to extend our understanding of how participants interacted, and to develop a more holistic view of shared leadership within the cases (De Walt & De Walt, 2002). Time was spent sharing the office spaces of each organisation, with the researcher being given desk space and therefore being able to fully immerse themselves in the setting. In addition, project team meetings, meetings with other interdependent teams within the organisation and meetings with clients were also observed. Observation created an understanding of the organisation as the participant sees it (Bryman, 2016) and therefore enabled a much clearer insight into the culture of the business, and the way in which relationships were enacted in the workplace. Table 3 summaries the data collection. This passive observation was supported by a guide which helped to describe the general – who / what / when – and the specific – who speaks to whom, who initiates the conversation, tone of voice etc. Whilst immersed in the three cases, a reflective research diary and field notes were kept – this enabled critical self-reflection on observation and interviewing, and the capture of detailed thoughts that occurred during the research process (King et al., 2019).

### 3.2. Data analysis

All interviews were audio recorded and fully transcribed, before being transferred to the qualitative data analysis software NVivo 12 (QSRInternational Pty Ltd., released in March 2020). The data analysis process followed the Eisenhardt Method (Eisenhardt, 2021) starting with within-case analysis, in which the interview data for each site was fully transcribed and compiled into a case document, which also included field notes and observational data. This enabled us to become close to the rich data to facilitate the emergence of initial patterns (Maxwell, 2013). This process was then followed by cross-case searches for patterns by iteratively organising and grouping data, as well as using a final case as an opportunity for member-checking and clarification of concepts.

Data analysis started with open coding, to generate names for ideas and concepts. To support this process, we used the constant comparative process - in this study, this meant that interviews and observation were conducted at case 1 first, then the data was transcribed and initial identification of categories was undertaken before being followed by data collection at case 2. The data from case 2 was analysed and compared to the emergent conceptual analysis of case 1 - this took place over a two-month period. During the analysis of the first 2 cases, several data categories were developed and these are detailed in Table 4. Next, axial coding was carried out using a descriptive summary of the concepts, drawn from data, combined with an interpretive analysis of the relationships between them and the emerging core concept of trust. This was further refined into three variations of trust. To demonstrate the conceptual merit of trust as a key condition for shared leadership in project-based organisations, and to explore in more detail the nature of that trust, we selected our third case. Case study 3 therefore represented an opportunity to both develop concepts further and to verify the findings. Finally, we returned to all three cases and presented our final findings to participants – this member checking allowed them to correct

**Table 3**
Data collection – summary of primary data collection.

|  | Case 1 | Case 2 | Case 3 | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Number of interviews | 7 | 12 | 15 | 34 |
| Interview hours | 4 hours 26 | 6 hours 58 | 7 hours 40 | 19 hours 4m |
| Observation hours | 5 | 21 | 7 | 33 |

**Table 4**
Eamples of how categories were drawn from the data.

| Categories | Data |
|---|---|
| Transparency | *You don't feel like it's kind of an impossible task or it's a pain to speak to those higher up. You know, when you have all got respect for each other and you talk on a level playing field, it's easier to talk to those in the leadership team.* |
| Expertise | *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.* |
| Collaboration | From researchers reflective diary: The ability and willingness to approach projects as group work through the removal of linear processes, which create team silos |
|  | *The account team work very collaboratively - as opposed to here is the brief for the creative team, and this powerful creative director saying, 'right you can do this, this and this' – at this agency it's very much more in partnership with everyone* |
| Empowerment | *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* |
| Vision setting | *We've certainly gone through some navel-gazing, I guess - looking at our culture thinking, about who we are and who we want to be as an employer and what matters to us. And it's that connecting the culture with the business outcomes and also checking whether or not that culture impedes our growth as an organisation.* |
| Empathy | *We are all trying to get to the same goal, why isn't he trying to help me* |
| 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.* |

our interpretations (Flyvberg, 2006) and enabled us to minimise construct error. This further strengthened the validity and trustworthiness of the study.

## 4. Findings

This study examined how leadership is shared around an organisation, namely an experiential marketing agency comprised of project-based teams that are highly interdependent on other teams in the same organisation. The findings from the three case studies show that shared leadership is facilitated through the development of trust between - and within - the leadership team, the project teams, and the individual team members. Creating trusting relationships throughout an organisation is therefore the cornerstone of effective participation in the sharing of leadership.

In this section, we explain how the core concept of trust was identified within the data. To facilitate the identification of the formal leadership levels within the data, we have classified participants by their case (Case 1; Case 2; Case 3) and their level within the organization (LT = Leadership Team; PL = Project Leader; PTM = Project team Member).

### 4.1. Intragroup trust

We found that relationships in project teams within EMA need to be built on intragroup trust, for members to willingly engage in shared leadership of a team. Put simply, the relationships in project teams are constructed through trust in the other team members, and without trust there is little evidence of team members' willingness to influence and lead each other.

Early on in the data collection, we identified open and honest communication as a factor that affected the sharing of leadership within the project teams, and this became one of our initial categories emerging from the data. The quotation below exemplifies participants' views on communication:

*It's all quite organic and there is a lot of cross working with people in*

*different teams; communication is really key as obviously people get busy and that communication drops a bit, and that can cause friction where it wouldn't have had to. (Tim, PTM, Case 2)*

When considering this category of communication, it became clear that participants built their perceptions of which colleagues they were comfortable working with on how well communication flowed between them and how open they were with each other. Caroline (PTM, Case 1) explains why it is important to have open communication within her own team – and how that open communication makes her feel that she can trust her partners to support her in doing her job well.

*Yeah. I think trust is a big part of it, and it's on my team - everything's an open conversation. So the way we all sit round the desk; everyone's always chipping in all the time. So it might be that I'm advising someone on something but then actually someone else chips up and I feel like, because my issue personally is always I don't have much confidence in myself, so even though I know what to do, I'll ask people 'is that the right way to do' because I don't trust my own instinct or whatever. But then I actually feel like I can do it because I know if I'm telling someone this is what you should do, I know someone will chip in and wouldn't let me go down the wrong route if that makes sense? So I trust other people to let me make the right decision and stop me doing the wrong one if that makes sense."*

Elsewhere in the interviews, it became clear that participants placed importance on being willing to understand each other's areas of expertise and to respect each other's communication strategies. In, fact, analysis showed that one reason participants were reluctant to work together, or to accept leadership from other teams was that they associated it with a certain risk – that other team members might let them down by not doing their job properly. The quotation below highlights one of the issues with a lack of understanding:

*I think sometimes in a larger organisation like this, some of the project teams and account managers don't particularly - or aren't aware of - the work that goes into some jobs and they expect it to be done instantly and then they'll promise something to the client the next day where it physically can't be put into Studio for a week. And I think that is managing expectations... Maybe the account teams aren't simply aware of the work that goes into some stuff here.*

In this example, the account team member might feel let down by the delays in getting what they need, because they don't understand how long it takes another team to complete their tasks. This lack of understanding can easily become frustration about not being heard, which, in turn, can become entrenched, causing tensions that result in a lack of trust that the job will be done effectively. However, it was also evident that when the participants were comfortable with each other, and spent time getting to know each other, and understanding each other's expertise, then they were more willing to trust that team members would get the job done. Mark (PTM, Case 3) demonstrates this:

*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. Everyone has the same goal. I don't think anyone is out to make themselves look better or get that promotion on anything like that. I think it is just there's this one project that we want to do really well, because we're all invested in it.*

When we began the process of merging these categories, we realised that what our participants were telling us was that – if the members of the project team communicated openly, and were willing to develop an understanding of each person's expertise - then they began to trust each other. The following two quotes demonstrate how these dynamics can work together to create trust, or against each other which creates tensions:

*Because it's that empathy, because they [the creative team] sit there having to emphasize 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 (Charlotte, PTM, Case 3).*

*Having the absolute trust in that person [with the expertise] that they*

*know what they are doing, and they are going to deliver on what we've tasked them to deliver. (Hayley, PTM, Case 2)*

Once that trust was built, they became willing to share in leadership – stepping up to take the lead when their knowledge or expertise was required, and accepting leadership from others in the team when they were best placed to lead. As data collection continued, these concepts of trust and collaboration were explored further to try to unpick why it matters and how it impacted on participants' willingness to share leadership. This quote from Jane (PL, Case 2) demonstrates the central importance of trust to relationships in the workplace:

*Trust is one of the most important things in any relationship be it a work colleague, work team, or personal relationship too. You have to trust that your colleagues will deliver what they need to so you don't get exposed, screwed over or end up being left picking up the pieces. Sometimes people don't deliver how you feel they should have, but that's part of learning that individuals have different skills, and just because they do something not in your way, doesn't mean it's the wrong way. If someone doesn't do their part of the deal, then the trust is challenged, and it can take a while to rebuild that – causing some micro-management or pushing my oar into everything / more than I should have to. At my level, you have to trust your team or you'd end up doing all the work yourself which just isn't humanly possible.*

The importance of intra-group trust, formed through an understanding of each other's expertise and skills, and based on open communication, was clear.

A good example of the way that trust underpinned collaborative working occurred during the second visit to Agency 3, when participants discussed how they learnt to trust their colleagues over time. They felt that the more they got to know their colleagues, the more they understood them, on a personal level, and the work they do. The below quotations come from a conversation between Andrew and Jo (Case 3), which highlights how this familiarity supports the development of trust:

*Andrew: A lot of it is down to trust isn't it? And that I know a lot of the time that only comes about if you have worked with somebody for a long time and you've been delivering work for a long time. In that scenario it's easier to trust people, because a lot of the time you just have to take it as read that they're doing their job properly.*

*Jo: Yeah that is hugely important. It's the most important thing...We will always have favourite people to work with, because you trust them. And that is that is the biggest word in it for me. It's great when you've got people working on projects with you that you trust and you know will just get on with stuff.*

Here we can see that working together over a long period creates a trusting environment. We might have expected that when these project teams worked together over a long period, one person would be awarded a more formal leadership status but actually what participants felt was the opposite of this – the more familiar they were with team members and the more secure and trusted they felt within a team, the more likely it was that they would be willing to share leadership responsibilities.

### 4.2. Inter-group trust – leadership team's trust in project team members

Trust was built through the leadership team creating a trusting environment, through values and vision setting, transparent communication and through empowerment of their employees. A trusting environment was described by the participants as one where employees could communicate with the leadership team without fear of repercussions, and where employees felt the organisational visions and values were inclusive.

*Unlike any other marketing discipline, good experiential agencies put great trust in their people and ask them to take on considerable personal responsibility for the successful outcome of an event. This is achieved in often highly pressurised and dynamic environments. James (LT, Case 2)*

The analysis identified that when the organisations allowed employees freedom within their roles, and encouraged them to take responsibility and ownership, then employees used expressions that related to trust and being valued. This suggests that when organisations

take steps to empower staff, staff feel trusted by their employers and are willing to take on additional responsibility. In the quote below, Mandy (PTM, Case 2) had been talking about the freedom the organisation had awarded her, and how she could shape her role as she saw fit. She saw this as an allowance to take risks, and not have those risks come back to haunt her if they went wrong.

*Leadership is about just being there for guidance, and have an ear of experience and authority in what they do so that you trust them that they won't leave you in the lurch. Kind of like a good parent I guess, I don't know. They don't want to micro-manage you but you don't want them to disappear either.*

It became clear how important it was for participants to feel support from both the team and the organisation, which led to the conceptualisation of the idea that empowering staff was related to the concept of trusting relationships, in the context of shared leadership. We suggest that having an empowering leadership team that implements initiatives which encourage and empower team members to lead themselves and each other is an important element in creating trusting relationships within the workplace. This can be seen in evidence from this team member at case 1:

*"There's a lot of trust in people who work at [Case 1] to kind of get on with it and do it and which is nice…Trust is a massive part of working here; I feel valued as an employee and trusted to do my job. And that makes me want to do a better job, to take on more responsibility, to be a good team member and to take charge when I need to."*

Further, the findings indicate that trusting relationships, in which employees feel empowered by the organisation's leadership to take on additional responsibilities, will allow shared leadership to emerge. Martin, MD of Case 1, summarises the link between transparency, empowerment and trust:

*That whole element of trust in our teams to deliver. When you tie people up in red tape, what you're saying is 'I don't trust you and your own instincts here. You've got to abide by my rules' - and that takes away people's creativity. And their ability to think. Also it means that they don't take responsibility for what they're doing. Because they're in this hierarchical structure of blame, that goes all the way up to the top. It's very easy to do that. But this model of business doesn't work well like that.*

### 4.3. Inter-group trust – project team trust in the organisation's leadership

In addition, for empowerment to work, staff must be willing to trust the organisation – empowerment will only work if the employee feels that it is safe for them to accept additional responsibilities and that ownership will not be tied to outcomes. In other words, staff need to trust that the organisation will support them when things go wrong. Clare (PL, Case 1), talked about what happened when an event she was running went wrong, and highlighted how important it was that the organisation supported her in a situation in which she had been given responsibility, but had made a mistake:

*An example would be that I had a shocker of an event which went horribly wrong…I learnt a lot from the leadership team during their reaction, in that the way they approached the problem - yes, they got senior people involved but there was never any blame and I think that's quite important because it was my fault… But there was no blame. It was kind of like 'we're here to support you'. I was thinking 'please don't sack me'. And they were like 'no, it's fine. Don't worry'.*

The importance of support from the organisation was echoed at other agencies too:

*Lisa (PTM, Case 2): Oh yeah, it's so supportive at here - I think it's the kind of place that I've always felt that if something went wrong, if my direct manager, or even if [the person] above her, even if they weren't available and I had to call up someone completely random and just be like 'I really need your help because this is all going wrong' - especially when you are on site. I feel like someone would come, or someone would be like 'right, what can we do to help you. Who can we call in?' It's very much like that, everyone is in it together.*

Early in the data collection, we realised that communication was a recurring topic, and during the first round of data collection, communication as a theme came over so strongly that we presumed that it would be pivotal to our findings. However, as we explored the notion further in later rounds of data collection, it became clear that the participants had something quite specific in mind when exploring issues associated with communication from the leadership team. They were talking about communication as a relational factor that promoted accountability from the leadership team, and loyalty from employees. Specifically, participants explained how important they felt it was that leadership teams were being open and honest with them about what was happening with the business – they wanted communication that was transparent and that empowered and engaged them. The development of the relationship between communication and trust became apparent as much through the negative stories the participants told as through the positive ones. See for example this quote from a project team member at case study 1:

*So I think from a leadership point of view…I think it's important that they…be aware, to see what's happening and to communicate …They have been guilty in the past - they have, and they know they have - been guilty in the past of not communicating, or things happening and everyone knows the real reason why it's happened but they come out with another story and it's obviously not right. And that's when rumours start - people are thinking if they aren't saying this, what else are they not saying…if we know why, or we know what's happening, it makes more sense. You get it. If you don't know, you don't feel engaged…So I think especially in agency, in the industry that we in, you need to keep on it. And communicate out to people. And be honest. We are all grown-ups. We aren't daft.*

It was also important for employees to feel that the leadership team was visible within the business and that they could approach them to get support when necessary. But what was really insightful was what happens without approachability and visibility from the leadership team. Without it, participants identified a feeling of disconnection, which created feelings of 'us' and 'them'. Here Phoebe (PL, Case 2) had just been commenting on why open communication is so important, and then she said:

*You would expect to see a disconnect between what the senior people think and what the junior people, on the ground, think but here it's probably more closely aligned than in a lot of places.*

Whereas, for some employees at Case 1, that disconnect was really clear, and expressed in emotive and passionate language. Here is Caroline (PTM, Case 1) talking about the leadership team:

*I feel like they don't care about people of my level – I'm a project manager, what I do, say, anything – doesn't matter to them. There is still a divide.*

And here is Alice, (PTM, Case 1):

*Interviewer: So, you would never be able to sit in front of somebody on the leadership team [to ask for help]?*

*Alice: NO! Because you don't feel that safety in speaking to them. In the knowledge that you don't know if 1) they'll listen and understand and 2) there is still that thing where they are the leaders – you daren't say anything.*

If there is a lack of transparency from the leadership team, then that creates issues with trust. When employees perceived that there was transparency in the operational decision-making and processes, there was increased levels of inter-group trust. Rod (PTM, Case 3) demonstrates:

*It's quite transparent, but if you talk to a few more junior people, you see many times when there's a decision somewhere…and the senior team decide not to pass on this feedback to the creative or the strategist. So, they learn that a few days before, through a private channel. And then suddenly you've got a really demotivated team, a resentful team…you feel a lack of control and you lose that ownership.*

This lack of open, honest communication from leadership teams created feelings of frustration in employees, and that frustration manifested itself as feelings of a lack of control over their work. Transparency was a recurring topic, and was seen as really important in terms of the employee's capacity to undertake leadership behaviours in their

workspace. Alice (PTM, Case 1):

*Well personally, you'll go above and beyond when you need to because you know it's fine because they respect you for doing it…It does help. Mentally it helps.*

They were also reflected by the organisational leadership teams, who understood their role in being open and honest with employees:

*We are quite a hands-off managing structure. Most of the time I think that works really well for empowerment, people work well just being allowed to do it…You'll get the support of your managers, or your leaders, to do that…So leadership, I think, is about - well here, especially - about being open, nurturing and encouraging. As opposed to being constricting, framework setting people. Matt (LT, Case 2)*

## 5. Discussion

Defining trust is complex, and there is no universally accepted definition of trust (Castaldo et al., 2010). There are, however, two critical elements that are common across all definitions. These are the willingness to be vulnerable to another party, and to have positive expectations about the behaviours of others (Costa, 2003; Mayer et al., 1995). Trust, in an organisational context, is therefore related to the way individuals attribute other people's intentions and the motives underlying their behaviour (Castaldo et al., 2010). At the team level, trust manifests as expectations that team members are honest and competent and these expectations result in a willingness to influence each other and to accept influence from others (Small & Rentsch, 2010).

During the course of the study, trust emerged as a key antecedent in explaining how shared leadership emerged in teams. The data suggests that through the development of trusting relationships within project teams, individuals were willing to engage in extra responsibilities in order to help each other and to achieve both team and organisational goals. As trust spreads throughout the organisation, co-operative and collaborative behaviour increases and these behaviours result in a willingness to participate in the sharing of leadership responsibilities, though there are cross cutting factors and conditions that either cultivate or disrupt the process Our results highlight the need for a multi-level understanding of the relationships and connections that form within organisations – it important to understand relationships between the organisation and the individual and the relationships between individuals in teams. This intersection is demonstrated by the link between organisational trust and individual trust, where it is important to note that the trust, as an antecedent to shared leadership, flows in two directions. The leadership team should trust and empower team members to do their work, through removal of bureaucratic processes and through the provision of supportive, guiding environments. But it is also important for team members to trust the leadership team - when team members trust each other, and trust the organisation that they are working for, they display a willingness to engage in shared leadership.

The study has contributed to the theoretical understanding of shared leadership by highlighting the centrality of trust as an antecedent to the emergence of shared leadership. The study also exposes the significance of trust within intragroup project teams and trusting relationships between those working at different organisational levels. The study therefore offers advancement in theoretical understanding, which has typically identified trust as a consequence, or moderating factor, within shared leadership.

Shared leadership suggests that leadership behaviours can be exhibited by any team member, and the leadership that occurs is an influence process in which members seek to motivate, share knowledge and support other group members in order to achieve team goals (Scott-Young et al., 2019). It follows that, using both theoretical arguments and empirical support, we propose that relationships that exist within the team are an essential aspect of enabling shared leadership to emerge. Whilst existing literature has suggested that shared leadership may be built on relational connections within the workplace (Edwards, 2011), it has not adequately explained how project-based organisations can create collective responsibility, or how team members become willing to share in leadership. The findings from our research suggest that to enable shared leadership to emerge, individuals should establish intragroup trust (within project teams) and inter-group trust (between project team members and the organisation's leadership team) and leadership teams should empower employees to feel trusted to take on additional responsibilities. Therefore, the answer to how organisations create collective responsibility and the sharing of leadership seems to lie in the adoption of a multi-level perspective in which both organisations and individuals create trusting relationships.

The findings from our study also confirm a positive relationship between trust and shared leadership. However, in all three case study organisations, we found trust to be a critical antecedent in ensuring shared leadership emerges, not only in relation to trust among team members, but also in relation to project team members' trust in the leadership of the organisation. In our findings then, trust is an antecedent but, importantly, should extend beyond immediate project team boundaries. Two previous studies have found that trust can be an antecedent to shared leadership. Small and Rentsch (2010) conclude that a high level of trust within a group is positively associated with team members' willingness to take the risk of engaging in shared leadership. Similarly, Lyndon et al. (2020) found that the degree of cognitive trust, or the extent to which individuals believe they can rely on other team members to do their jobs, positively influences levels of individual engagement with shared leadership. In addition to supporting their findings on intragroup trust, our study also identified the critical importance of trust between team members and organisational leadership teams as an antecedent to shared leadership. Therefore, in acknowledgement of the findings from previous research on trust as a moderator, mediator and consequence of shared leadership, as well as our findings regarding trust as an antecedent of shared leadership, we propose that trust should be considered both an antecedent to shared leadership and an outcome of shared leadership. The findings of this research are summarised in Fig. 2.

Our study shows that through the development of trusting relationships, individuals are willing to engage in extra responsibilities to help other team members in order to meet both organisational and team goals. This expands on the findings of Hoch (2014) who identified employee integrity (which she equates to responsibility and trustworthiness) as an antecedent of shared leadership. She concluded that the sharing of team members' unique knowledge is more likely in teams where members are higher in trustworthiness. Hoch's research highlighted that integrity is important – our research has furthered this by concluding that trust encourages additional responsibility within employees. The prevailing view of trust suggests that it develops over time, and through repeated interactions (Small & Rentsch, 2010, Dirks & Ferrin, 2002). This was confirmed by our findings, which suggest that – at both the individual and team level – trust developed over time, as colleagues became familiar with both the way in which people worked, and their personal work ethics.

Theories on organisational trust indicate that, for it to exist, each member of a team must be willing to be 'vulnerable' to another party and to be positive in their expectations of other team members' behaviours (Costa, 2003, Mayer et al., 1995, Dirks & Ferrin, 2002). Our analysis identified that when the organisations allowed employees freedom within their roles, and encouraged them to take responsibility and ownership, employees used expressions that related to feeling trusted and being valued; here, we are therefore aligning with theories of organisational trust. Additionally, we were also able to link inter-group trust to a willingness to enact or accept shared leadership from each other; this suggests that when organisations take steps to empower staff, they feel trusted by their employers and are willing to take on additional leadership. Here, we are in line with previous studies such as Müller et al., (2017, 2018) in suggesting that vertical empowering leadership is essential for developing shared leadership in project teams.
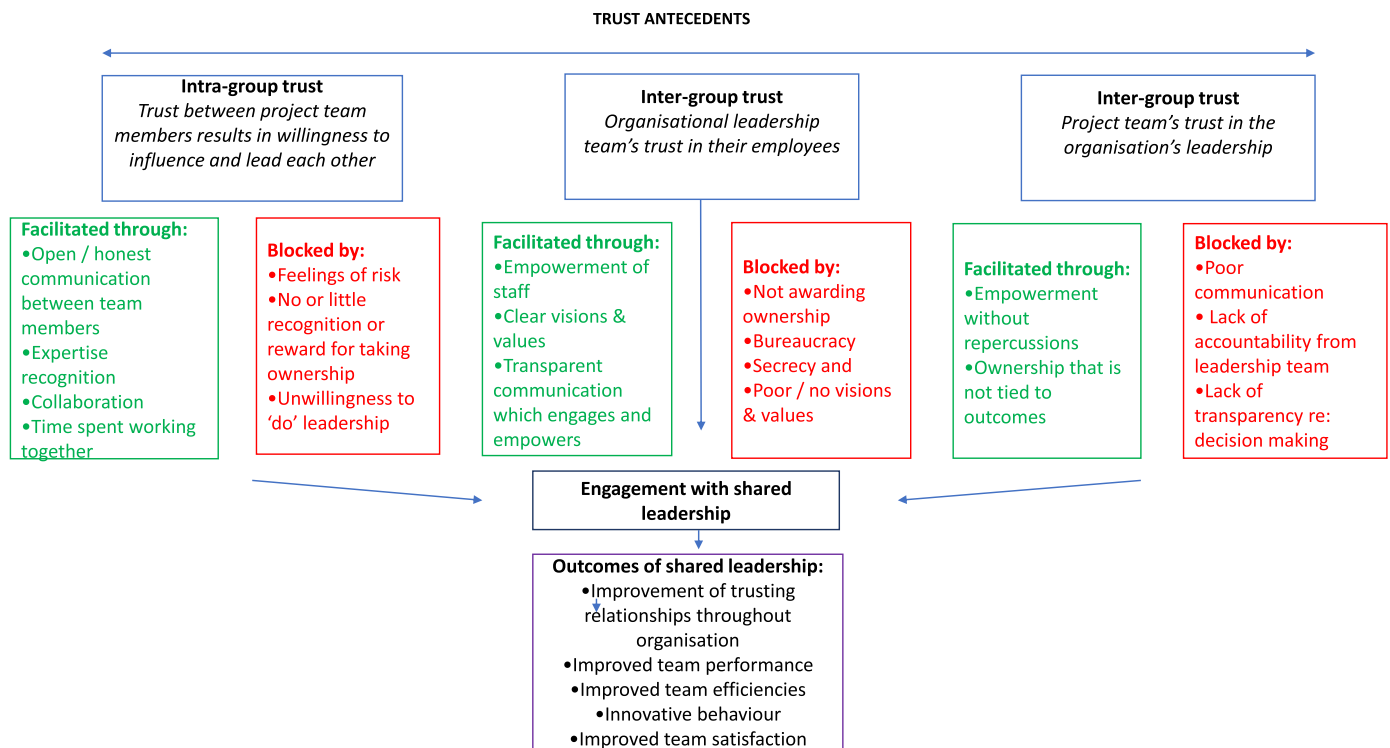
**TRUST ANTECEDENTS**



**Intra-group trust**
*Trust between project team members results in willingness to influence and lead each other*

**Inter-group trust**
*Organisational leadership team's trust in their employees*

**Inter-group trust**
*Project team's trust in the organisation's leadership*

Facilitated through:
•Open / honest communication between team members
•Expertise recognition
•Collaboration
•Time spent working together

Blocked by :
•Feelings of risk
•No or little recognition or reward for taking ownership
•Unwillingness to 'do' leadership

Facilitated through:
•Empowerment of staff
•Clear visions & values
•Transparent communication which engages and empowers

Blocked by:
•Not awarding ownership
•Bureaucracy
•Secrecy and
•Poor / no visions & values

Facilitated through:
•Empowerment without repercussions
•Ownership that is not tied to outcomes

Blocked by:
•Poor communication
• Lack of accountability from leadership team
•Lack of transparency re: decision making

**Engagement with shared leadership**

**Outcomes of shared leadership:**
•Improvement of trusting relationships throughout organisation
•Improved team performance
•Improved team efficiencies
•Innovative behaviour
•Improved team satisfaction

**Fig. 2.** Trusting relationships and shared leadership in project-based teams.

## 6. Conclusions

This study has provided a valuable examination of one antecedent of shared leadership within project-based EMA and therefore makes an important contribution to understanding leadership within project teams. In addition, because the findings provide a rich insight into leadership within creative, complex, team- and project-based organisations, the theory built here has transferability value both within diverse areas of the event industry itself and within wider project-based organisations. In line with existing research that emphasises the importance of organisational culture on shared leadership (e.g. Agarwal et al., 2021), this study suggests that shared leadership is an advantageous model for project teams, and that consideration should be given to how the sharing of leadership is encouraged, or limited, by the dynamics within project-based organisations. In particular, the study contributes to management practice by suggesting that senior management and leadership teams who create and maintain trusting relationships within their organisations and project-teams will enable the sharing of leadership. In addition, we have found that employees who feel a sense of trust within their organisation will be more willing to take on non-formal leadership responsibilities; this is important within project-based organisations in which project success is only ensured by collaboration within multiple teams, and across complex tasks and where knowledge sharing is paramount. To successfully facilitate shared leadership of projects, practitioners can ensure that project team members feel empowered by encouraging them to take responsibility and ownership of their work. This will allow those with the requisite expertise to lead on projects or parts of projects, and thereby improve team efficiencies (Han et al., 2021; Kukenberger and D'Innocenzo, 2019) and ultimately, project success (Iman and Zaheer, 2021).

*Limitations and further research*

Case study research such as this, undertaken with qualitative methods, has potential limitations of subjective interpretations of the gathered data and related issues around the selection of cases and participants. In our study, we are limited by the scope of the case studies, all of which are drawn from one industry, and by the relatively small number of participants and cases involved in the study. These limitations are acknowledged - we have nevertheless sought to mitigate this through a rigorous approach to data collection and analysis, and through member checking with participants to validate our findings and to correct any inherent bias. Still, we acknowledge the inevitability of bias from our position as researchers, and that the adoption of an interpretivist stance may mean these mitigations have not been wholly successful. We also stress, again, that the aim of this qualitative research was extending theory. In this work, we propose that trusting relationships are an essential antecedent to shared leadership in project teams, but that further research is now required to test this theory within a variety of contexts, and using a variety of research methods. In particular, a mixed methods approach might be useful in order offset the limitations of each method, as would studies that focus on the length of time needed to foster trusting relationships and / or shared leadership.

A notable weaknesses within empirical studies of shared leadership is the implied assumption that team members will be willing to participate in the sharing of leadership. Most studies do not address what happens when group members are either not willing to enact, to accept leadership from others in their group, or are excluded from the processes of participation due to discriminatory factors. The issue of participation may be particularly challenging in project management sectors, where networked approaches to teams are common, but formal authority is lacking. We suggest therefore that how and indeed whether shared leadership emerges in networked organisations and the impacts of willingness to participate need further examination.

In addition, shared leadership cannot be untangled from the issues of power, influence and domination that occur within and around it (Bolden, 2011). Indeed, Bolden (2011) questions whether power and influence can ever be shared among a team in a truly effective or fair way. As Zhu et al. (2018: 39) suggest, 'the implicit assumption in shared leadership research suggests it is a positive construct; future research should discuss when equal or differentiated involvement in shared leadership should be pursued or avoided'. We therefore join Bolden (2011) and Zhu

et al. (2018) in recommending that scholars investigate both the positive and negative consequences of shared leadership.

Finally, we propose that scholars should consider how the sharing of leadership is encouraged, or limited, by the relational dynamics within organisations. Our findings build on the conceptual work of shared leadership in project teams by Scott-Young et al. (2019) and extend the theoretical understanding related to trust and shared leadership by Iman and Zaheer (2021), Bergman et al. (2012) and Drescher et al. (2014), but there is more work to be done to further the understanding of the role that trust plays in shared leadership within project teams.

*Practical implications*

These findings can help practitioners by highlighting how, given that

shared leadership can be an advantageous model for team-based organisations, they can support its development. In particular, we encourage practitioners to ensure transparent, open and honest communication methods, which both empower and engage employees, are adopted throughout organisations and across interdependent project teams. We also recommend that individual expertise is recognised and fairly rewarded; that employees feel empowered to enact informal leadership without repercussions; and that organisational values and visions are clearly expressed and adhered to. Finally, we note that many of the constructs that support shared leadership need time to develop – giving teams the space to learn about each other will encourage trusting relationships.

## Appendices

### Appendix A

Examole interview protocol

| | |
|---|---|
| 1. **Agreement to participate** | **Ensure they have read participant information form** |
| | **Signing of consent form** |
| 1. **My research** | **Shared leadership definition:** |
| | To critically examine the opportunities and suitability of shared leadership in intra and inter-organisation event agency teams. |
| | - |
| **Theme 2: Organisation and role** | |
| 1. **Can you tell me about your organisation and its work?** | **What best describes your organisation - what sort of organisation is it?** |
| | • **Culture** |
| | • **Benefits of working there** |
| | • **Drawbacks of working there** |
| 1. **About you and your role here?** | **How long have your worked her?** |
| | • **Responsibilities** |
| | • **Who do you work with?** |
| **Theme 3:Team** | |
| 1. **Can you spend a few minutes describing to me the team you work in?** | **How big is the team?** |
| | **How long have you all worked together?** |
| | **How well would you say you know each other? Relationships** |
| | What helps for a good relationship with colleagues? What hinders it? |
| | How close are you to other team members? Do you have to interact with them daily? More / less? |
| | Do you work together on some tasks? |
| | **Who does what and when?** |
| | **How is this decided? How are decisions made in the team?** |
| | (Strategic planning, missions / vision and goal setting. Dealing with client and project design / development) |
| | **What are some specific ways that various members use their expertise and interests?** |
| | (Strengths and weaknesses – including self) |
| | **Sense of purpose / shared goal** |
| | Does it have a clearly understood direction or goal or sense of purpose? What is it? Who creates the vision? How is it created? How are collaborative goals determined? Are the group committed to the goal? Client? |
| | (Who determines the goals and objectives and strategies? Are the team members involved? If so, how) |
| 1. **Can you give me an example of a time when the team has faced a difficult problem and has come together to resolve it? What happened?** | **How would you describe the process members use to work together?** |
| | **What happens when there is conflict? How does communication happen?** |
| | **Is there a collaborative culture?** |
| **Theme 4: Leadership** | |
| 1. **Can you talk to me about what leadership means to you?** | **What is leadership?** |
| | **What is leadership like at your organisation?** |
| | **Give me an example of good / bad leadership** |
| | **What sort of leader is your formal leader of the team?** |
| | **What about the CEO** |
| 1. **My research is based on the sharing of leadership in teams - can you tell me whether you think leadership is shared in your team?** | If so, how? When? Does it work? |
| | If not, why not? What stops it happening? Could it work? |
| | **Do you think anyone else leads in your team?** |
| | How do they do it? What helps them and hinders them? When do they do it? |
| | **Why might others not take leadership roles?** |
| 1. **Would you describe yourself as a leader?** | **If so, When? How and Why?** What makes it happen? |
| | **If not, why not?** What prevents it from happening? |
| | **What would you need in order to develop your leadership practice?** |

*(continued)*

| 1. How do you think team dynamics and leadership changes at different stages in your event planning life cycle? | What happens at different stages of the project life cycle?<br>What happens when things become urgent / near to delivery? Do roles change?<br>What happens when the team experiences stress – for example, if the event is at risk? Or there is a sudden time pressure? |
| --- | --- |

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