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**Event leadership matters: why a shared approach might be the answer to improved working practices in events**

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### **Abstract**

This research note addresses the substantial theoretical and empirical gaps in understanding event leadership and highlights the need for urgent scholarly attention in this area. In both the events industries and event studies there still exists a prevailing view that leadership is conducted only by those in formal leadership positions. In the wider frame of leadership studies, this view has been largely dismissed. We therefore challenge the conventional view of leadership in the event sector, and call for engagement with contemporary, rather than traditional perspectives of leadership, and a shift in understanding of leadership as an integral aspect of the creation and delivery of event experiences. Specifically, we propose that one of the contemporary theories of leadership, that of shared leadership, provides an effective model that could be developed further by other scholars in order to empirically understand how this theory can improve working practices in events.

**Keywords – Events, leadership, shared leadership, leadership studies**

### **Event leadership matters: why a shared approach might be the answer to improved working practices in events**

Leadership is one of the most researched, but arguably least understood, subjects. Debates have raged about definitions of leadership, whether leadership is a distinct phenomenon and even if leadership really matters at all (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012; Blom & Alvesson, 2015). Masses of leadership theories have emerged, with each new 'school of thought' either building on, or dismissing, those that have come before it. Leadership is undoubtedly complex, difficult to understand and unwieldy to measure (Northouse, 2017; Yukl, 2019), however, whatever our views are on what leadership is, most scholars of business, management or organisational behaviour agree that it matters.

So why then have we, in the event sector, been so slow to try to understand how leadership influences the design, delivery and management of events? Research into events has grown exponentially over the last two decades and now incorporates a wide range of topics (Park & Park, 2016; Lockstone-Binney, 2018). Notwithstanding the important and timely expansion in event research, scholars still seem to be preoccupied with researching the tangible outcomes of the event industry. We believe that the current focus of event research, with some notable exceptions, largely neglects the people and organisations that design, deliver and create events, despite them being an essential element of event management. In this research note, we make the case that to truly understand the process of creating an experience, we must study those who lead the process of design, delivery and creation of the events in which experiences occur.

We, therefore, call for scholars to expand their research focus beyond the outcomes of events. For us, a particularly pressing concern is the lack of research

into the role of leadership within the process of event management. Our review of the literature revealed only a handful of empirical research papers that focused on leadership, including some of our own work, e.g., Abson (2017); Abson & Schofield (2022); Megheirkouni (2018, 2021, 2022); Wahab, et al.(2014). This lack of research into event leadership is understandable given the dynamic and complex environment in which event managers work (Imam & Zaheer, 2021). However, it is notable because of the significant impacts good leadership can have on productivity and profitability (Northouse, 2014).

Of particular concern is that the current discourse within events appears to be out of step with the more general scholarly discussions of leadership. Much of the latter acknowledges the various forms of leadership and looks beyond the traditional view of leadership as a top-down activity, conducted by someone formally appointed to lead. See, for example, research into ethical, servant and shared leadership in tourism and hospitality (e.g., Dhar, 2016; Elche et al., 2020; Fu et al., 2020). Event scholars, however, are still too often focused on descriptive characteristics and skills needed to manage events; this is true even of the empirical studies which focus on leadership styles (Megheirkouni, 2018, 2021, 2022; Wahab et al., 2014) or the competencies and skills needed to lead events (Abson, 2017; Giudici & Filimonau, 2019; Werner et al., 2022; Padron & Stone, 2019). They also often fail to engage with the particular challenges that surround leadership in events.

Much of event design, production and delivery happens through a complex network of stakeholders, an interdependent collection of teams, and pulsating organisations that expand and contract as event design and delivery progress (Lockstone-Binney et al., 2020; Bladen et al., 2022; Nickson, 2013). Leadership within such multifaceted activities, organisations or networks is almost certainly not

going to always present itself as traditional, top-down leadership. Therefore, to keep pace with current thinking on leadership and to reflect what likely happens in practice, we suggest that event scholars should adopt a more nuanced view of leadership. We propose – as many leadership scholars now agree - that leadership should be viewed as a process, which can be enacted by anyone and which is more than just a singular behaviour or natural skill (Yukl, 2019; Northouse, 2017; Abson, 2021).

In our opening statements, we have argued that event scholars are out of step with the latest leadership theories and that the unique nature of the event sector makes it an interesting lens for leadership studies. Next, we will outline why the theories of shared leadership should be of particular interest to event scholars.

### **Shared leadership and events**

The benefits of examining shared leadership theory within the context of events relate not only to its potential for facilitating more effective and efficient working practices, but also expanding our understanding of how leadership is applied in this particular industry, and potentially identifying new theoretical dimensions and/or issues relating to existing theoretical components. Changing workplace conditions over the last two decades have created an opportunity to move away from traditional top-down leadership behaviours towards team-based structures that enable workforces to spread leadership to multiple or all team members in order to achieve team or organisational goals (Hoch and Dulebohn, 2017; Klasmeier & Rowold, 2020). This suggests that anyone within a team, group or network can take on a leadership role if they have the skills, opportunity and desire to do so. If, as shared leadership theory suggests, team members collectively share in leadership processes, or perform different types of leadership functions in order to achieve team

or organisational goals (Zhu et al., 2018), this model would be a useful solution to some of the issues with power, leadership and control within event delivery. In addition, shared leadership becomes an influence process in which members seek to motivate, share knowledge and support other team members in order to achieve goals (Petrie, 2014; Yukl, 2019). Again, this seems beneficial to the networked approach common in many areas of events.

Next, we list key aspects of shared leadership theory which provide further justification for our call for future research into the adoption of shared leadership in the event sector.

1. Shared leadership improves organisational and team performance when several pre-existing conditions exist. Most event organisations typify these conditions: a creative, uncertain and challenging environment (Ensor et al., 2011) which involves interdependent teams, undertaking high levels of spontaneous problem-solving and tasks that are highly pressured, risky and timebound (Baum et al., 2009; Bladen et al., 2022; Pearce & Conger, 2003). Scott-Young et al. (2019:578) suggest that “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”.
2. Shared leadership theory argues that leadership can be performed by any member of the team, group or network (Dinh et al., 2014; D’Innocenzo et al., 2016). This reflects the reality of the networked nature of events which involves the collaboration of a wide range of stakeholders who are both internal and external to the organisation (Getz & Page, 2016). Shared leadership can support this networked approach to event delivery since it can help teams absorb

information and increase knowledge creation (Bligh, et al., 2006), and enable effective performance over geographically dispersed teams (Muethel et al., 2012).

3. Event organisations now often use flatter structures, which are useful when those in formal leadership positions do not always have the right information to make decisions (Carson et al., 2007; Pearce & Conger, 2003). These flatter structures encourage the use of shared leadership which enables decisions and responses to be made more quickly (Abson, 2021). When shared leadership is applied, the person in charge at any moment is the person with the key knowledge, skills and abilities required for the job in hand, ensuring a faster response to the challenging demands. Further, if a change in knowledge, skills or expertise is required, a new person can take the lead. Shared leadership in organisations with flat structures therefore enables more flexible, adaptable and resilient working practices to emerge (Abson, 2021; Pearce et al., 2009).
4. At the core of shared leadership theory is the view that teams and individuals are a potential source of leadership (Ensley et al., 2006). When the right people are willing to informally take on leadership of their teams, research has shown that the teams have quicker decision-making processes and increased team effectiveness, knowledge creation and innovation. This is evidenced by multiple meta-analyses (D'Innocenzo et al., 2016; Nicolaidis et al., 2014; Wang, et al., 2014; Wu et al., 2020). Shared leadership has therefore emerged as a way for organisations to improve performance and operate effectively (Sweeney, et al., 2019), as the team members perform different types of leadership functions, and structure and plan their tasks together (Klasmeier & Rowold, 2020). Given the reliance on teams in the event industry, and the variety of knowledge, skills and



expertise needed to design and deliver event experiences, adopting approaches to leadership that encourage those with the right expertise to step into leadership roles at the right time is likely to improve efficiencies for event organisations as well.

5. Further, as Thorpe et al., (2011) suggest, the need to share leadership around a network comes from the rapid speed of external changes in technology, operations and strategy, and the increasing complexity of organisational structures. This is certainly true of event industries, in which organisations maintain their competitive advantage through the adoption of new technologies and rapid responses to market demands (Bladen et al., 2022). Shared leadership therefore offers a useful solution to the problems presented by these new working environments (Northouse, 2017) and for event organisations that are working at the cutting edge of technological, operational or strategic changes.
6. Importantly, unlike many other theories of leadership, shared leadership acknowledges that the context within which leadership takes place is an essential contributing factor (D'Innocenzo et al., 2016). Given the range of event typologies that exist, and the difference there is between running, for example, an international music festival and a small corporate networking lunch, a 'one size fits all' leadership theory is inappropriately inflexible and unrealistic. The latest iterations of shared leadership theory respond to this by acknowledging that where and when leadership takes place impacts on the way leadership is enacted and that the challenges to leadership may vary across organisations (Sweeney et al., 2019).

### **Future research directions**

We therefore argue that shared leadership can potentially improve the performance of event teams and that the events sector is a viable and interesting setting to test the veracity of the theory. There is much we do not know about shared leadership, the meta-analyses highlight that the next key area to be explored needs to be how shared leadership emerges. This is further corroborated by calls for further research into various aspects of shared leadership (Kukenberger & D'Innocenzo, 2019; Wu et al., 2020; Zhu et al., 2018).

Whilst there is now a convincing argument that when shared leadership does occur it improves both team performance and team effectiveness, there is much more to discover about how shared leadership is enacted within event teams, and about the conditions that are needed for it to come about, to be effectively maintained and to achieve desired objectives. In particular, given the diversity within the event sector (Mair, 2009), this model of participatory leadership may not be suitable for all event typologies. Our own research findings (Abson & Schofield, 2022) has demonstrated that, shared leadership is effective in experiential marketing agencies. However, we found that, for shared leadership to take place in this particular context, there needs to be specific antecedents at all levels of management. For example, employees must exhibit empathy and communicate well both within teams, and with those in managerial positions. In addition, at the team level, event team members must demonstrate a willingness to collaborate with others, and to recognise other people's expertise in areas; this, in turn, allows them to accept leadership from those in non-formal leadership positions. We also found that, at the leadership team level, organisational leaders must communicate a clear vision, act with transparency, whilst empowering staff to enact leadership.

Though our findings have gone some way to establish how shared leadership might emerge in one event context, we believe there is much more to understand. For instance, we have yet to discover if those working in organisations which are supply-chain focused, or operating within a network of organisations delivering events to the public, or on a very large scale, will be able, or willing, to accept shared leadership across organisational boundaries. Future studies into shared leadership within events will therefore need to consider both organisational context and the typology of event studied – this will both extend our understanding of the theory of shared leadership, and our understanding of leadership in events.

We would argue that a focus on public sector events would prove particularly insightful, as there is currently little definition of roles, by comparison with the commercial sector (Richards & Jarman, 2021). Leadership in the form of collaboration, accountability, responsibility and capability is likely to vary greatly because of the extensive actors and networks within the public sector. The ties and flow of leadership between these actors is a completely different dynamic and so leadership must be adjusted accordingly. Investigation into how leadership is shared among event networks in the public and private sectors would, we believe, provide useful insights and facilitate understanding of how shared leadership adapts to these changing organisational and environmental conditions.

Another key area in which shared leadership remains unresearched is in the context of live event delivery, when the pressure to provide safe events and be accountable for decisions creates significant leadership pressures. This presents a particularly interesting setting to explore how the inherent strength of shared leadership - allowing those with the right knowledge and skills to have ownership over decision making - might also be an inherent risk, given the delegation of

authority, the implied lack of accountability in non-formal leadership (Zhu et al., 2018) and the sector's heavy reliance on volunteers (Wilks, 2015). Examining how, or even if, shared leadership would work during the pressures of live event delivery would therefore bring new and welcome insights into the development of shared leadership theory within events.

Finally, we would encourage scholars to focus on how shared leadership intersects with the key issues of equality, diversity and inclusion and with the associated issues of power (as suggested by Calver et al., 2023) in order to create research which can both shift academic thinking beyond that of operational issues and drive real change within the event industry.

## **Conclusion**

This research note has highlighted three key issues with event leadership research. Firstly, that the extant empirical studies are few and far between, and consequently are unrepresentative of the variety of event typologies. Secondly, the predominant focus of the research continues to be from a top-down leadership perspective, which is out of step with leadership research more generally. Finally, event scholars have so far failed to adequately address how co-workers, or those within the wider event network can affect leadership processes. As such, we know relatively little about who leads within events or about how the situational context of planning events impacts on the leadership process. We know even less about how leadership manifests itself in specific types of events, or how the different roles within events influence the enactment of leadership. This lack of understanding is problematic, given the primacy of human resources in the delivery of event experiences. When event scholars argue, as we often do, that the event sector is unique, it is not enough for us to apply leadership theory, that has been researched

elsewhere, to an events context. Instead, we need to understand event leadership in and of itself, and to develop more relevant theory that can be usefully applied to the event industry.

It is hoped that by highlighting these significant gaps in knowledge, our research note will encourage scholars to shift their attention towards leadership as an important aspect of creating and delivering event experiences. We have argued that shared leadership is an appropriate model for event scholars to evaluate further, but also acknowledge that this model represents only one aspect of the vast array of leadership possibilities that remain unexplored in relation to leadership in the event industry. We therefore make the call to other scholars to explore both shared leadership and other forms of event leadership that may offer a viable alternative to the traditional, vertical and hierarchical leadership structure that so often dominates the event industry and our discussions about it.

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