DISTRIBUTED OR DUAL LEADERSHIP: DOES IT MATTER?

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There is increasing recognition in the leadership literature that conceptualising leadership as only embodied in one person is a simplification (Gronn, 2002), based on the individualistic bias which has dominated the field (Uhl-Bien and Ospina, 2012). The shift of focus away from individual leaders working alone has generated a greater interest in distributed leadership of various types (Bolden, 2011; Thorpe et al, 2011; Fitzsimons et al, 2011). The phenomenon is also called shared leadership, dispersed leadership, co-leadership, collective leadership and conjoint leadership (Heenan and Bennis, 1999; Spillane, 2005; Denis et al, 2001).

Since the seminal paper of Gronn (2002), there has been considerable interest in distributed leadership and research on it has gone “from strength to strength” (Bolden, 2011). This has involved a shift from a conceptualisation of leadership based on the person to the processes of leadership, with a focus on a collective set of interactions between multiple actors (Uhl-Bien, 2006). Fitzsimons et al (2011) note that the distributed leadership literature originates from two streams of enquiry: team-based leadership and the spreading of leadership practices in schools. Both of these streams have led to a strong focus on sharing leadership and on leadership as fluid and emergent but the literature has given less attention either to authority structures or to the formal roles held by those contributing to the exercise of leadership. This leaves open the question about how the fluidity of distributed leadership is enacted within particular roles and organizational structures.

Distributed leadership can be exercised in a variety of ways, yet dual leadership, as one form, is surprisingly under-studied, despite its prevalence across private, public and not-for-profit sectors. Gronn (1999) recognises this in an article on distributed leadership which he subtitled ‘The neglected role of the leadership couple’. Papers on distributed leadership in the special issue of International Journal of Management Reviews in 2011 made passing reference to
dual leadership, in early work (Becker and Useem, 1942; Etzioni, 1965) and in one article on ‘partnership pairs’ in private firms (Alvarez and Svejenova, 2005) but otherwise did not focus on this particular form of distributed leadership. Research is needed further to address dual leadership specifically since it is a prevalent form of leadership across all sectors, and particularly in the public sector.

There is a very small literature on dual leadership, which has been examined in the leadership literature in schools (Gronn and Hamilton, 2004; Gronn, 1999), in arts organizations (De Voogt, 2006; Reid and Karamayya, 2009) and in public services (Hartley and Manzie, 2013; Hartley et al, 2014) but there is a need to theorise more fully dual leadership. In political science literature, dual leadership is tacitly recognised in the long-standing debate about the ‘politics/administration dichotomy’ (Svara, 1998; Campbell and Peters, 1988) but this has not been conceptualised in leadership terms. This literature focuses on institutions and roles but not on leadership. Finally, a small literature has examined roles and relationships between chairs of boards and chief executives, in private firms, health, and the voluntary sector (e.g. Kakabadse, et al, 2006) but again has not conceptualised these in terms of leadership.

This paper draws on and synthesises these three literatures, making a contribution to understanding the roles and processes of dual leadership. It then turns to provide much-needed empirical evidence to examine how leadership is shared and exercised by the ‘leadership couple’ at the heart of public management. Dual leadership occurs at the head of many public organization: for example, where the politician has to lead political direction, social movements, stakeholders and political parties, while the managerial professional has to feed and support that political direction and exercise leadership to achieve outcomes for the politician, with due regard for legal, policy and technical frameworks, ethical conduct, efficiency and staff motivation. This can occur in local and national government and is developing in policing (at least in the UK). Other forms of dual leadership occur with two
professions - at the strategic apex in universities (chancellor/vice chancellor in US/Commonwealth universities alongside the registrar as the manager) and in hospitals (chief executive and medical director).

What happens at this interface, and how is the shared and separate leadership space negotiated? Interviews with 17 senior public managers, all chief executives in function, at both national and local level in the UK, are analysed to understand the degree to which they exercise dual leadership and handle the complexities of interdependence in working with elected politicians as the second half of the duo. The managers were all seen in reputation terms as successful and effective in their roles (by various indicators). Interviewees were selected from all four countries of the UK. They included both practising public managers (who could draw on their daily experience of working with politicians) and a small number who had left those jobs within the last three years (who had recent experience and might feel less constrained by existing working relationships). The interviewees include men and women, ethnic minority and ethnic majority, and a variety of professional backgrounds prior to the current job. They all worked closely and regularly (daily) with a lead politician (either the secretary of state in central government or the council leader in local government). Such elite interviewing is relatively rare (Rhodes, 2011; Rhodes et al (2007).

The paper aims to make three significant contributions to understanding these processes. First, it argues for greater attention to be paid to dual leadership processes in many organizations: that is, leadership exercised by and between leaders who constitute the duo at the strategic apex. The leadership is not by a single leader but by a pair, each exercising authority in their own domains of authority but working inter-dependently. It shifts the focus from the individual to the pair and to the processes of leadership interaction.
Second, it conceptualises dual leadership as occurring within an authority structure and roles and tasks which are partly pre-determined and partly negotiated. Far from dual leadership being “fluid and emergent”, dual leadership often operates within a clear division of labour, with separate roles, tasks and accountabilities and where a degree of overlap in leadership roles has to be negotiated between the duo. Gronn (1999) analysed a case study of dual leadership in a school. He noted that often dual leadership occurs where there is a superior and subordinate hierarchical relationship, with the superior responsible for the performance of both parties. This contrasts with some of the distributed leadership literature which has become so preoccupied with leadership processes that the hierarchical or network context of the shared leadership is ignored. This paper contributes to dual leadership by examining processes in an institutional and organizational context of roles, authority and accountability.

Third, the paper contributes empirical evidence on how dual leadership operates in practice. The paper uses the metaphor of ‘dancing on ice’ to evoke the delicate, symbiotic, sometimes precarious, process of working together between the leadership pair, as reported from the research interviews. The sense of moving together, giving each other space, sometimes one in the spotlight, sometimes the other, in an environment where sometimes the partnership may stumble and occasionally fall, and where the centre of gravity sometimes lies between the two so that each is reliant on the other, encapsulates how politicians and senior public managers inter-dependently exercise leadership on a daily basis. This is a relational view of leadership (Uhl-Bien and Ospina, 2012). We suggest that in this particular context of dual leadership, the metaphor of dancing on ice, makes much more sense than more static and formal role descriptions of leadership relationships.

Overall, our paper makes a contribution to the distributed leadership literature by arguing that there are different forms of such leadership. Rigour requires a recognition of the need to adequately conceptualise different forms of leadership and in different contexts. Relevance
requires recognition of how prevalent dual leadership is across all sectors. Dual leadership really does matter.

The paper concludes with reflections for further research in the dual leadership field. There are examples of dual leadership practices in the private, public and voluntary sectors yet the literature is surprisingly small. We make suggestions for further research in policing, in health and in the private and voluntary sectors. There is scope for examining and comparing a duo of elected politician and manager in contrast to situations which have two managers at the strategic apex (e.g. the co-heads studied by Gronn (2002) or two professions at the apex (such as in universities or health organizations). Finally, implications for leadership across a set of organizations (networked governance) are also considered.