Distributed Leadership

A powerful engine for organizational performance

By Clement Leemans

The performance model of our organizations is dramatically changing. In our VUCA world, the recipe for sustainable business performance is ‘LEARNING & INNOVATION’. Not only process, product or service innovation, but also innovation of the organizational architecture, job design & collaborative processes, including leadership.

Most organizations today are shaped by choices that have been made in the past and in quite different circumstances: industrial production, a poorly educated workforce, relatively easy to defend home markets, gradual technological changes, no internet & social media, an identifiable investor with an industrial plan, seemingly unlimited prospects for growth, etc. That has led to vertical, mechanistic organizations, build around bureaucratic and scientific management principles such as: specialization, task attribution, a split between ‘thinkers’ and ‘doers’, a lot or rules, instructions, best practices, etc.

But the performance model has drastically changed. It is no longer about being good at something and then trying to produce faultless, cheap, standard products with a large and stable market share. It’s no longer about copying the recipes of the past. It’s now about invention, disruption, agility, innovation, creativity, learning, capacity to change, … it’s about reinventing us as organizations… and then this traditional, mechanistic organization ‘lay-out’ is doomed to fail. Already today, many organizations are trying to ‘shift’ into the direction of an organic, learning organization that produces the culture and behaviors you need for change, learning and innovation, enabling you to find new answers for old and new issues at hand.

One crucial element in the organizational architecture towards innovation, change and creativity is the Leadership paradigm applied in the organization. The traditional paradigm, that is still in place in most organizations is a hierarchic, positional leadership where the roles to decide, command, control and communicate are concentrated in ‘positions’ attributed to individuals and implying at least some sort of ‘power distance’ with people who execute their decisions. And even if over the years, it has become ‘common managerial sense’ to involve and empower others, the decision to do that or not and very often also the ‘final call’ remains with ‘the boss’.

The problem with that paradigm is that it is slow, that it disengages large populations in the organization, that it underuses the expertise available in the organization and ultimately that it is not capable of taking the right decisions timely nor to produce very creative solutions.

In their Cynefin framework, Snowden & Boone show how complexity changes the leadership mechanism in organizations.

“… in a complex situation, where there are so many variables simultaneously influencing each other that it’s impossible to know what the impact of decisions and actions will be until after the fact, the gather data-analyze-problem-solve-implement change approach doesn’t work very well. (…) by supporting an illusion that all that’s needed to make the right decision is the right data and smart people”.

In a VUCA world, positional leadership, based on command & control principles no longer seems to work.

Relatively recently an alternative leadership paradigm emerged, and was mainly implemented and researched in schools: Distributed Leadership. Although not many corporations actively experimented with this concept, it seems to fit a lot better with the challenges for change, agility, learning and innovation most organizations are confronted with.

“This approach argues for a more systemic perspective, whereby leadership responsibility is dissociated from formal organizational roles, and the action and influence of people at all levels is recognized as integral to the overall direction and functioning of the organization”.

The main elements of the distributed leadership concept are:

- It is a ‘system feature’ and not the role, quality or power of an individual person or position
- The mandate for taking leadership and initiative is linked to the expertise
- It is distributed over all ‘participants / stakeholders’ in the organization
- Knowledge, insight and judgement is the result of ‘co-creation’ and the one who takes the initiative is invited to bring all the relevant
parties together in order to ‘lead’ the initiative further. In that sense, it is a truly ‘dialogic’ concept.

It’s not an ideological choice, simply built on ‘democratic principles’, but it is a trigger for adaptability, innovation, speed, new knowledge, shared ambition and energy, and a condition for sustainable performance and development.

The impact of distributed leadership is:

- A better use of ‘professionals’ who are now at liberty to act when and how they see fit.
- Co-ownership and responsibility of all into the organization.
- Improved speed of decision, support and action in line with the ‘shared ambition’.
- Savings. Control is a very expensive burden and creates a lot of counterproductive effects.
- More opportunities for professionals to ‘craft their own job and role’ in the organization, thus creating meaningful work and reducing stress.
- ‘TRUST’ that creates the cultural soil for challenge, feedback and therefore creativity and innovation.

What could Distributed Leadership Look Like?

Richard Boldon listed several ways distribution of leadership can be perceived. We only list a few very different ways of organizing distribution:

- **Spontaneous collaboration**: where groups of individuals with differing skills, knowledge and/or capabilities come together to complete a particular task/project and then disband (Gronn)
- **Pragmatic distribution**: where leadership roles and responsibilities are negotiated and divided between different actors (MacBeath)
- **Strategic distribution**: where new people, with particular skills, knowledge and/or access to resources are brought in to meet a particular leadership need (MacBeath)
- **Collaborated distribution**: where two or more individuals work together in time and place to execute the same leadership routine (Spillane)

Depending on what variant of distributed leadership you want to practice in your organization, it might well be compatible with formal leadership roles. Only their ‘function’ will no longer be ‘command and control’ but they will rather focus on facilitating the distribution of leadership & dialogue in the organization, on coaching people and on enabling them to take that step, etc.
What are Conditions to Make this Work?
- You need to build a ‘shared purpose’ for the organization in co-creation with all the stakeholders. That is the alternative for ‘top down guidelines’ and should enable all professionals to take their decision autonomously (and in concertation with other professionals) without losing coherence and alignment in the organization.
- Create an open and collaborative culture, where challenge and diversity are welcomed and at the same time people feel a strong sense of belonging and an ‘Ethic of contribution’
- Develop all kinds of dialogic practices where people develop meaning and knowledge in collaborative relationships (communities of practice, large group interventions, networking etc.)
- Develop strong internal customer-supplier relationships where people contract on their ‘mutual contributions’ and are held accountable for their contribution to the Shared Purpose.
- Be coherent. Trust is a binary thing. All your organizational features need to ‘breath’ trust in the autonomous (and collaborative) professional. Only a little bit of control here and there will not do the trick!!!

Where do you Start with Distributed Leadership?
Since obviously each organization has a specific architecture and culture, the strategy for developing distributed leadership needs to be tailored to that specific situation. However, and that goes for all organizations distrust, suspicion, power distance, silos, red tape, … are some of the biggest enemies of distributed leadership, innovation, learning and indeed organizational and business performance. So that is a good place to start. A few examples of things you could do:
- Identify a few very ‘visual’ or ‘frustrating’ cornerstones of your ‘command & control’ culture such as attendance tracking, employee time clocks, rules on when & where people need to work, permission to buy a pen or pencil, etc… and simply get rid of it (trust people they can do without them).
- Create an ongoing & co-creative process for building business strategy, including all stakeholders. It’s a way (1) to bring all relevant information and analysis to the table, (2) to think out of the box and come up with creative and innovative strategic options, (3) to build ownership that enables you to implement the strategy, (4) and is the groundwork for autonomy and leadership since it enables people to make autonomous choices and still contribute (without orders) to the shared ambition of the organization.
- Develop a pool op process facilitators and coaches who can support individuals and teams in taking on ownership and leadership
- Ask teams to build their own contribution strategy in co-creation and challenged by their internal or external customers. Help them create a ‘dynamic function definition’ focusing on what they want to bring about with their customers’ and not so much a classic mission statement that is often worded in terms of responsibilities and tasks.
An Example: if your organization defines itself as ‘we produce records’ then the whole organization is geared to that and when the market is shifting towards CD’s and later MP3 formats it is likely those new developments are seen as ‘the enemy’ attacking ‘our business’ (records). So therefore, we call this a static function definition. If you formulate it as ‘we enable customers to enjoy great music’ then evolutions like CD and MP3 are more likely to be welcomed as an additional tool to accomplish our ‘common ambition’ and people are triggered to come up with more great ideas and inventions for experiencing music.

It’s a way to put the complexity and diversity of your organization to good use (therefore dynamic) and it creates space for development, innovation and autonomy.
- Ask individuals to engage in a job crafting exercise for their own role in the organization and take out systems like individual objectives and bonuses, job descriptions, job classification,
- Change the approval and budget allocation procedure and replace it with a consulting process where every professional who wants to take an initiative can also ‘use the necessary budget’ (he is the professional, he can assess the need) at one condition that he takes advice and seeks challenge from all involved stakeholders. He still decides, but he needs to collect input, and create dialogue first.
The most heard argument against distributed leadership, next to ‘but does everybody wants this?’ is ‘this will lead to chaos, less productivity’, … Well, the most organizations that did seriously implemented widespread practices related to distributed leadership show an opposite picture. Poult[10], Favi, Buurtzorg, Wit-Geel Kruis, Goretex, … are examples that show that distributed leadership in different forms and shapes, is absolutely worth looking into. LE

Notes
1 www.leaningorganization.be (on this website you find information on several lenses for organizational learning such as distributed leadership, co-creation, Communities of Practice etc.)
10 This short video explains the way Poult has transformed the leadership and management culture (in French) : https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UN0G6t6Qzyw&feature=456

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