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Leadership modes: Success strategies for multicultural teams

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Summary Organizing work in multicultural teams has gone from rhetoric to reality, leaving international organizations with challenging tasks and little strategic guidance. A wealth of multicultural team research reaches the conclusion that management matters, but less is known about team leadership. Drawing on recent leadership research, we focus on leadership modes and multicultural team composition. Two identified dimensions – ‘focused versus distributed leadership’ and ‘vertical versus horizontal leadership’ – are utilized to develop four leadership modes (‘single’, ‘paired’, ‘rotated’, and ‘shared’). Multicultural team composition is examined in terms of ‘faultlines’ and ‘status cues’. We formulate propositions predicting which team leadership mode will enhance team outcomes given different multicultural team composition and we argue that leadership modes should be an informed strategic choice.

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Introduction

In organizations – whether private, public or humanitarian, national or international, virtual or co-located – working in teams is no longer ‘the management fad of the month’ but has become the contemporary *modus operandi*. Balancing global integration and local responsiveness is arguably the linchpin in multinational companies’ international strategies. Culture is viewed as a critical localization force (Pudelko, Carr, & Henley, 2007) contributing to the complexities of doing business across national borders. Firms perceive multicultural teams as an attractive way of dealing with local specifics while achieving global coordination. These teams are at the ‘heart of globalization’ (Snow, Snell, Canney Davison, & Hambrick, 1996) and are expected to provide

efficiencies, be the source of creative initiatives (Galbraith, 2000; McLeod & Lobel, 1992) and overall act as ‘glue’ across country and culture borders. The need for high-performance teams is a reality for many organizations (DiStefano & Maznevski, 2000; Ravlin, Thomas, & Ilsev, 2000) and expectations run high on multicultural teams to be successful.

Achieving desired outcomes in multicultural teams has however proved difficult (Butler, 2006; Milliken & Martins, 1996; Williams & O’Reilly, 1998). Govindaran and Gupta (2001) found that only 18% of the 70 studied global teams were successful while as much as one-third were largely unsuccessful, with the rest finding it difficult to fulfil intended goals. This distribution is a fairly typical description of organizational outcomes of multicultural teams (e.g., Earley & Mosakowski, 2000). Multicultural teams vary in terms of diversity along a range of dimensions such as nationality, ethnicity, and religion (Marquardt & Horvath, 2001). In a recent comprehensive meta-analysis of 108 empirical studies of both intra- and cross-nationally diverse teams, Stahl, Maznevski, Voigt, and Jonsen (2010) find that

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cultural diversity leads to process losses through decreased social integration and increased conflict but also to process gains from increased team creativity and member satisfaction. With this article [Stahl et al. \(2010\)](#) convincingly demonstrate the commonly professed resolution that process management matters (see, e.g., [DiStefano & Maznevski, 2000](#)). Management obviously matters but yet multicultural team research, in stark contrast to single-culture team research, is curiously silent on the topic of team leadership.

[Burke et al. \(2006\)](#) alert us to the need for specific 'team leadership' research, arguing that traditional leadership theories are often applied in team research ignoring the complexity and dynamics of managing a team instead of individuals. Such concern is of particular relevance for multicultural teams as culture increases the complexity by kind, not just in degree, resulting amongst other in different interpersonal dynamics.

Inspired by recent work to focus on leadership rather than leaders ([Crevani, Lindgren, & Packendorff, 2009](#); [Morgeson, DeRue, & Karam, 2010](#)), we identify and outline leadership modes. We also draw on leadership research suggesting that leadership is becoming a shared phenomenon in organizations ([Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009](#); [Carson, Tesluk, & Marrone, 2007](#)). By using two leadership dimensions – 'focused versus distributed' leadership activities (specifically practices and functions) and 'vertical versus horizontal' leadership authority (specifically decision-making authority) based on work by [Gibb \(1954\)](#), [Pearce and Sims \(2002\)](#), and [Carson, Tesluk, and Marrone \(2007\)](#) – we identify and outline four leadership modes. We specifically examine (1) single leadership, (2) paired leadership, (3) rotated leadership, and (4) shared leadership as possible team leadership modes for multicultural teams. Instead of contrasting one extreme of the archetypical hierarchical authoritarian individual-based leadership with the archetypical truly contemporary collective leadership (where all team members are involved) and pushing for a one-best-leadership (as is common in the leadership discourse), we advocate for a contingency perspective.

Prior research has firmly established that team composition has an impact on team performance ([Morgeson et al., 2010](#)) and that team composition is often a given rather than a choice. Managing the 'cultural composition' of multicultural teams, as [Butler \(2006\)](#) argues, is critical to achieve positive team outcomes. Subsequently, [Butler and Zander \(2008\)](#) propose 'faultlines' ([Lau & Murnighan, 1998](#)) and 'status cues' ([Berger, Webster, Ridgeway, & Rosenholtz, 1986](#)) as two powerful theoretical approaches for understanding how team compositions underlies creativity in multicultural teams. In this conceptual article, we further these ideas and use faultlines and status cues to provide the theoretical underpinnings for our proposed choice of leadership modes.

We draw on conceptual developments and empirical findings in both the leadership and team literatures to develop a model and propositions around the relationship between multicultural team composition and effective leadership modes. Our contribution is to propose specific leadership modes that are geared to bringing out the best in multicultural teams. They precede, facilitate, and at best lessen the burden of management by making the leadership mode (single, paired, rotated, and shared) based on the team

composition (characterized by faultlines and status cues) a strategic choice at the outset. It is our contention that the team process will start off more smoothly and is more likely to facilitate team success when considering team leadership as a strategic choice.

The article is structured as follows: We will begin with discussing team leadership before identifying and outlining the four leadership modes (single, paired, rotated, and shared) by drawing on extant team research. We will then turn to faultlines and status cues when discussing multicultural team diversity and configuration. Subsequently, we develop propositions to determine which leadership modes could be more efficient for a given team composition and thus be predicted to lead to successful team outcomes. This is followed by a discussion about the model and its limitations before concluding the article.

Team leadership

Teams have proliferated in research and practice. [Morgeson et al. \(2010\)](#) report the results of a survey among high-level managers ([Martin & Bal, 2006](#)) stating that 91% agreed that teams are central to organizational success. Although team leadership has begun to receive attention, [Morgeson et al. \(2010\)](#) point out that this body of research is still far from any breakthroughs. They argue that more traditional views of leadership, which address leader-subordinate interaction instead of leader-team dynamics, are overrepresented and do not increase our understanding of team leadership. [Morgeson et al. \(2010\)](#) draw on functional leadership theory ([McGrath, 1962](#)) stating that whoever assumes responsibility for satisfying the teams' needs can be viewed as assuming a team leader role, and argue for the study of leadership rather than leaders.

Recent leadership research also echoes the need for theory-building to focus on leadership instead of leaders. For example, [Crevani et al. \(2009\)](#) propose to leave the preoccupation with leaders behind and discuss leadership as practices, process, and interaction. [Alvesson and Sveningsson \(2003\)](#) emphasise the need to explore everyday actions and interactions. They describe how in their interviews they found that "middle and senior managers gave accounts of their work in ways that are more in line with the mundane than with the grandiose and heroic leadership talk found, not only in the business press and among top-management, but also in the more academic literature" ([Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003](#), p. 1437). As another reflection of a more holistic and relational understanding, leadership has been conceptualised as a collective phenomenon in organizations (for reviews see, e.g., [Avolio et al., 2009](#); [Carson et al., 2007](#)). Arguments are put forth that this will increase the problem-solving capacity to handle tasks that require broader competence while simultaneously reducing pressure on managerial workload ([Crevani et al., 2009](#)).

The idea of collective leadership in teams has been around for at least 50 years ([Carson et al., 2007](#)) referring to [Gibb \(1954, p. 884\)](#) who argued that "[l]eadership is probably best conceived as a group quality, as a set of functions which must be carried out by the group. This concept of 'distributed leadership' is an important one". Distributed leadership is seen as opposed to 'focused leadership' where leadership functions typically are concentrated in one individual.

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