Shared leadership effectiveness in independent professional teams

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Summary Firms make increasingly use of independent professional teams, i.e. teams that are staffed with self-employed experts with high levels of entrepreneurial orientation. As independent professional teams are regularly self-managed, they rely on all team members sharing leadership responsibilities. Existing theory on shared leadership silently assumes that team members always welcome influence by their fellow team members. However, we argue that independent professionals make conscious decisions regarding whether or not to adhere to other team members' influence attempts. According to social exchange theory, individual behavior is contingent on rewarding actions from others. In this vein, adherence to social influence by other team members has to be seen as rewarding for followership to occur. Applying social exchange theory, we thus point to the importance of taking a leader, a follower and a relationship perspective to understanding shared leadership effectiveness (i.e. actual social influence) in independent professional teams. From a leader-perspective, it is perceived responsibility for team outcomes driving individual influence attempts. From a follower-perspective, on the other hand, it is the appreciation of such attempts leading to their acceptance. Jointly, influence attempts and influence acceptance increase shared leadership effectiveness. Finally, from a relationship-perspective, there are three stages of relationship quality development, i.e. calculus-, knowledge-, and identification-based relationship that contribute to shared leadership effectiveness.

Introduction

Recent developments in the software industry point to the increasing importance of independent professionals, i.e.

self-employed experts with high entrepreneurial orientation (Bidwell & Briscoe, 2009; Gassmann, 2006; Kolvereid & Isaksen, 2006). Reutax, for example, an internationally acting staffing company with annual revenue of about 145 million dollars in 2011 (www.reutax.com) builds its intermediary business on a pool of 100.000 independent software experts. Dependent on the task requirements of the customer, Reutax identifies and staffs the best suited

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independent professionals to a software company's project (Mowshowitz, 1997). The result are project teams that consist partly, and in some cases exclusively, of independent professionals contracted by a company for a specific project, while intermediaries like Reutax serve as a broker between the organization looking for temporary help and the independent professional. However, this development toward an increased use of independent professionals seems to be not only relevant for software development, but also other knowledge intensive industries, such as consulting (see for example a-connect, a globally acting independent consultant staffing company www.aconnect.com). From the company's perspective, such independent professionals provide a rich source of outside knowledge as well as a reservoir to competently staff teams in peak times when their full-time staff is otherwise committed (Drucker, 1992).

Due to their high levels of expertise and experience (Bidwell & Briscoe, 2009; Eppler & Sukowski, 2000; Hoegl & Schulze, 2005), teams with independents professionals are mostly self-managed (O'Connell, Doverspike, & Cober, 2002), i.e. they do not have a formal project leader (Chambers, Drysdale, & Hughes, 2010; McCalman & Paton, 2010; Renn, 1998). Coordination between independent professionals therefore is likely to be achieved through shared leadership (Erez, Lepine, & Elms, 2002; Pearce, 2004), which is defined as a dynamic, interactive influence process among peers in which the objective is to lead one another to the achievement of group goals (Pearce & Conger, 2003). However, in teams with independent professionals, shared leadership might follow different rules than in traditional teams.

Independent professionals most often deliberately choose to work independently, rather than in a set employment relationship. Often, they have gained several years of work experience being employed in firms, but then decide to leave such more secure positions in order to gain autonomy (Lumpkin & Dess, 1996). However, although they focus on their own positive outcomes, independent professionals regularly depend on the collaboration and coordination with the other team members (Stewart & Barrick, 2000).

Effective leadership in project team occurs if one party exerts influence and the other party is willing to accept this influence (Chaleff, 2008). Shared leadership effectiveness thus refers to the coincidence of influence exertion by one team member toward a specific fellow team member and the acceptance of that influence attempt by the targeted team member. Most definitions of leadership only include the first aspect (see overview of leadership definitions in Yukl, 2005), silently assuming that social influence by the formal leadership is accepted by the subordinate. Recently, literature on leader influence strategies' effectiveness (Fu, Kennedy, Tata, & Yukl, 2004; Fu, Kennedy, Tata, & Yukl, 2004a; Fu, Kennedy, & Yukl, 2004b) goes one step further, pointing to employees' subordination being a matter of degree rather than being a naturally given reality. The role of the follower in enabling leadership effectiveness has consequently gained more interest recently (Collinson, 2006; Hollander, 1992; Howell & Shamir, 2005; Johnson & Dipboye, 2008; Kelley, 2004; Zhu, Avolio, & Walumbwa, 2009). Nevertheless, most research either focuses on one or the other perspective. Even concepts of shared

leadership in traditional in-house teams have mainly been considered from the influencing perspective with researchers implicitly assuming 'silent' (or unquestioning) followership, given the common organizational context and an informal (or even formal) status hierarchy within it. This assumption, however, is likely challenged as independent professionals get involved. Being independent-minded, they evaluate other parties' contributions in a collaborative project team and are likely to reject influence attempts by other team members, if they do not perceive it to be beneficial for their own work in the project.

Disentangling the interplay between leading and following in independent professional teams, we offer a more fine grained view on shared leadership effectiveness in teams, which so far has been neglected. Instead, extent research on shared leadership has focused on the sources and strength of shared leadership, applying a social network perspective (with a focus on *who* is exerting influence), as well as a leadership styles perspective (with a focus on *how* influence is exerted) (Carson, Tesluk, & Marrone, 2007; Mehra, Smith, Dixon, & Robertson, 2006; Pearce, 2004; Pearce & Conger, 2003; Pearce & Manz, 2005a). We argue that the mechanisms of shared leadership in independent professional teams should be analyzed through a social exchange lens (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Homans, 1958). In particular, we argue that leader-member-exchange (Dienesch & Liden, 1986; Sparrowe & Liden, 1997), which particularly distinguishes the leader, the follower, and a the relationship perspective of leadership (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), offers important insights into the development and effectiveness of shared leadership in independent professional teams. Although Hickman (2010) has pointed to the relevance of social exchange theory for shared leadership theorizing, a detailed concept has not yet been elaborated.

Conceptualizing shared leadership from a social exchange perspective (Dockery & Steiner, 1990; Pellegrini, Scandura, & Jayaraman, 2010; Seers, Petty, & Cashman, 1995) in the domain of independent professional teams, this article offers contributions to shared leadership and to entrepreneurship theory. We offer new insights into shared leadership processes by distinguishing leader, follower, and relationship perspective. Taking a leader perspective, we aim at specifying the broad term of influence within our domain, following Lowe (2006) call to define what is influenced by whom. We therefore show that for independent professional teams, the area of influence is determined by one team member's possible contribution to another's task accomplishment. Second, taking a follower perspective, we reason that team members evaluate the potential benefit of adhering to the advice given and then decide whether or not to adapt own behavior, rather than simply demonstrating compliance (Collinson, 2006; Kelley, 1992). Third, taking a relationship perspective, we contribute to the conceptualization of shared leadership development over time, as demanded by Carson et al. (2007), by specifying the construct of a relationship quality. Taking a social exchange perspective, we consider advice from other team members as valuable input to increase one's own task performance. Regarding shared leadership initiatives as valuable 'services' embedded in reciprocal exchange processes between peers, with leaders and followers being senders and recipients