An Expanded Model of Distributed Leadership in Organizational Knowledge Creation

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Based on a three-year qualitative, longitudinal case study of a social venture partnership, we extend the understanding of distributed leadership in organizational knowledge creation. We develop an expanded model of distributed leadership that identifies the antecedents, different forms, and enablers of distributed leadership in knowledge creation. Our findings move beyond a static and monolithic understanding of distributed leadership to illustrate how an expanded model informs the situational leadership framework and spiral of knowledge creation across an organization's hierarchy and boundary in the context of social entrepreneurship.

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Introduction

The ability to create and sustain knowledge is of long-standing interest to academics and practitioners. Over the past few decades, organizational knowledge creation theory (Nonaka, 1994) has approached near-paradigmatic status in management and organization studies (e.g., Choo and Bontis, 2002; Le Breton-Miller and Miller, 2014; Peterson, 2002; Tsai and Li, 2007). It provides an explanatory framework that integrates knowledge processes, assets, context, and leadership (e.g., Kodama, 2005; Nonaka, 1994; Nonaka et al., 2000; Von Krogh et al., 2012). While the importance of leadership in knowledge creation is widely recognized (e.g., Bryant, 2003; Lakshman, 2005; Politis, 2001; Zarraga and Bonache, 2003), it has often been perceived as an auxiliary factor (Von Krogh et al., 2012), resulting in an oversimplified and naïve view of its impact (Gourlay, 2006; Tsoukas, 1996).

Leadership is generally treated as a static component of the organizational knowledge creation process, often as a centralized function controlled by the upper echelon of the organization (Gourlay, 2006; Lado and Wilson, 1994; Tsoukas, 1996). Such an approach is consistent with traditional research in the area of leadership that has often focused on a single leader (Gronn, 2000). However, more recent research calls attention to distributed leadership as "an integral part of organizational knowledge creation" (Von Krogh et al., 2012: 269). Distributed leadership is defined as an emergent group where two or more individuals share the roles and functions of leadership (Bolden, 2011; Gronn, 2000). Although its acknowledgement is an important step forward, our understanding of distributed leadership in organizational knowledge creation remains embryonic[1] for a number of reasons. First, distributed leadership research has grown substantially in organizational studies over the last two decades but has only recently been acknowledged in organizational knowledge creation (Von Krogh et al., 2012). Second, our understanding is limited by treating distributed leadership as a monolithic construct, which fails to account for a wider and more complex range of possible forms of distributed leadership. Third, the role of distributed leadership in organizational knowledge creation has yet to be examined empirically, thereby limiting our understanding to its proposed rather than actual role in the process. To address these gaps, we conducted a three-year qualitative, longitudinal case study of a social venture partnership to understand how distributed leadership emerges and develops within the process of knowledge creation transcending across an organization's hierarchy and boundary over time.

Our study makes three primary contributions. First, we examine and extend the situational leadership framework of organizational knowledge creation, calling attention to the importance of distributed leadership. As a first empirical study of distributed leadership in knowledge creation, we extend the theorized view of distributed leadership as monolithic and static by offering an expanded model of distributed leadership that accounts for its evolution and effects over time. In so doing, we

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[1] We thank a reviewer for calling our attention to the nascent stage of distributed leadership in organizational knowledge creation.

identify the antecedents, different forms, and enablers of distributed leadership in organizational knowledge creation and show how the different forms of distributed leadership develop across multiple cycles over time. Second, we contribute to an understanding of how different forms of distributed leadership and knowledge creation occur across organizational boundaries. We show how leadership transcends organizational boundaries as a means of creating a new context for the continuous spiral of organizational knowledge. Finally, we illustrate how the context of social entrepreneurship complements our understanding of organizational knowledge creation by focusing on organizations with more porous boundaries and a stronger social orientation, by explaining how organizational knowledge creation influences who an organization becomes, and by informing the scaling of social value.

Theoretical background

Leadership and organizational knowledge creation theory

According to organizational knowledge creation theory, new knowledge is created through the interaction of tacit and explicit knowledge in the four-phase process of SECI (*Socialization*, *Externalization*, *Combination*, and *Internalization*) in the context of Ba (the place where knowledge creation occurs) to generate new knowledge assets (Nonaka, 1994; Nonaka et al., 2000). A knowledge asset is defined as any explicitly qualified source of knowledge that can solve problems relevant to the organization's success and offer input to future knowledge accumulation (Dyck et al., 2005; Nonaka, 1994; Nonaka et al., 2000). The SECI cycle is completed when knowledge assets become embedded in organizational routines (Dyck et al., 2005). Knowledge creation is a continuous process where individual and organizational boundaries are transcended to develop a new context for knowledge (Von Krogh et al., 2012).

Despite its importance, leadership has received little systematic scholarly attention in organizational knowledge creation theory (Nonaka et al., 2000). Leadership "is often mentioned in passing as an auxiliary factor or a practical implication of theory development … concepts of leadership have received limited systematic, analytical exposure in the study of organizational knowledge creation" (Von Krogh et al., 2012: p. 240). Past research has been criticized for focusing on centralized leadership of a privileged few senior executives in the upper echelon of an organization (Gourlay, 2006; Lado and Wilson, 1994; Tsoukas, 1996). Such an approach obfuscates leadership activities throughout different levels of the organization and fails to account for the move beyond the 'great man' view of leadership to a more distributed perspective (Von Krogh et al., 2012). Furthermore, research has focused on specific parts of the SECI process without considering the entire model (e.g., Bell DeTienne et al., 2004; Gagné, 2009; Kulkarni et al., 2006; Liebowitz, 1999) or the integration of knowledge processes, contexts, and assets (Lakshman, 2005; Robertson et al., 2003). Much of this research has focused on knowledge creation in an organizational vacuum (House and Aditya, 1997; Von Krogh et al., 2012), without accounting for contextual contingencies. While scholars have recognized that organizational knowledge creation is context-dependent (Becerra-Fernandez and Sabherwal, 2001; Chou and He, 2004; Nonaka and von Krogh, 2009), they have only recently theorized about how different forms of leadership may enable or constrain knowledge creation (Von Krogh et al., 2012).

Situational leadership model of knowledge creation

To address these shortcomings, scholars developed a situational leadership approach to organizational knowledge creation (Von Krogh et al., 2012). This model builds on contingency theories (Fiedler, 1964; Fiedler and Garcia, 1987) that suggest different forms of leadership depend on the specifics of the situation, including the knowledge creation activity (Cole and Engeström, 1993). The situational leadership approach explains how centralized and distributed leadership connect the knowledge process, context, and assets (Von Krogh et al., 2012). Similar to organizational knowledge creation theory (Nonaka, 1994), this approach was developed as a formative framework to guide future theoretical and empirical research on the relationship between leadership and knowledge creation (Von Krogh et al., 2012).

Centralized leadership provides vision and organizational structure for organizational knowledge creation. Centralized leaders shape vision, goals, and incentives in formulating the organization's overall knowledge strategy (March 1991; Nonaka and Toyama, 2002; Von Krogh et al., 2012). Centralized leaders stabilize the *Ba*, gain assets beyond the group's control, design and implement systems, and fill voids of necessary skills through training and experience (Von Krogh et al., 2012). As considerable research in organization studies and emerging research in knowledge creation have focused on centralized leadership, we shift our attention to distributed leadership to better understand how it develops and informs knowledge creation.

Distributed leadership

Distributed leadership is seen as a "…group activity that works through and within relationships rather than individual action" (Bennett et al., 2003, p. 3) and endows the network with a capacity for leadership distinct from the aggregation of its members' individual activities (Gronn, 2000). From its inception, it has been considered as a group quality (Gibb, 1954).

The distributed leadership perspective may be thought of as a direct reaction to counter the "heroic" individual leader approach by emphasizing the structures and processes of leadership in the context of organizational activities (Badaracco, 2001; Leithwood et al., 2009; Northouse, 2007). By nature, it is malleable across organizational boundaries and relationships (Bennett et al., 2003). It relies on the relationships and configurations that surround and enable multiple people to