

Shared Leadership Emergence in Product Development Project Teams—A Reflective Practice Perspective

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Abstract

Many researchers believe that leadership is “the most critical ingredient of team success”. The paper presents a shared leadership emergence in product development project teams. We conducted two steps research, by applying reflective practice perspective approach in the semi structured interviews and workshops within the German company which represents a dynamic and changing environment, and practice shared leadership in product development project teams. Results show alignment with previous theory about the topic, but also added new viewpoints through glasses of practitioners. They believe that complex environment is the main driver for shared leadership, where emergence as an informal process and factors in practice are hard to be influenced. The findings show that interactions between people and team dynamics play a central role in shared leadership emergence and the resulting increase in the complexity of the leadership construct. This paper contributes to shared leadership research by adding a reflective practice dimension and bridging the theory with practice.

Keywords

Shared Leadership Emergence, Complex Environment, Reflective Practice, Narrative Research

1. Introduction

Avolio, Jung, Murry and Sivasbramaniam (1996: p. 175) considered that “the

most critical ingredient of team success is its leadership". Many empirical studies and meta-analyses confirm the statement from Avolio and his colleagues. For example, leadership is a significant success factor and influences project performance (Aga, Noorderhaven, & Vallejo, 2016; Larsson, Eriksson, Olofsson, & Simonsson, 2015; Müller & Turner, 2007). Leadership research grew up in a linear, mechanical, and simplified world (Marion & Uhl-Bien, 2001) and in the long history of leadership research, many answers were provided to the question of what makes an effective leader. But the world become more and more complex and the rules for effective leadership have changed. There is a shift from an individual leader to a collective leadership. In the early 2000s, a concept called shared leadership emerged. One of the first and common definitions is from Pearce and Conger (2003) and they said, shared leadership is a dynamic, interactive influence process among individuals in groups for which the objective is to lead one another to the achievement of group or organizational goals or both. Many empirical research on shared leadership has shown a positive relationship with effectiveness (Wang, Waldman, & Zhang, 2014), and performance (D'Innocenzo, Mathieu, & Kukenberger, 2016; Nicolaides et al., 2014) in teams. Researchers have also shown that teams with shared leadership present higher performance versus teams with vertical leadership (e.g. Ensley, Hmieleski, & Pearce, 2006; Pearce & Sims Jr, 2002).

The main difference between leadership and shared leadership is the perspective. Most traditional leadership theories are person-centric by focusing on traits (e.g. personality), behavior (e.g. relation-oriented or task-oriented behavior) or styles (e.g. laissez-faire, democratic, autocratic, and bureaucratic) of leaders (DeRue, 2011). The shared leadership perspective is a whole system and more holistically view (Lichtenstein et al., 2006) and the focus is more on the interactions among agents (Lichtenstein et al., 2006) and their dynamics (Lichtenstein & Plowman, 2009).

In general, the concept of shared leadership is a valuable mechanism to the dynamic and changing environment (Sweeney, Clarke, & Higgs, 2019) and in most projects (Clarke, 2012).

In the last decades, shared leadership becomes more attention in research. Anyhow, compared to other leadership concepts, shared leadership needs still more research and especially on the research gap on the divergence of research and practice in the specific research topic shared leadership emergence in a complex environment like a product development project.

The purpose of the research is to reduce the deviation between shared leadership emergence research and practice (Crevani, Lindgren, & Packendorff, 2010) by filling the gap by a reflective practice approach by answering the research question (RQ):

RQ: What is the viewpoint from practice to the concept of shared leadership emergence?

To address this question, we conducted the study with two-phases semi-structured interviews based on reflective practice perspective approach. A reflec-

tive practice approach is well suited for learning through and from experience towards gaining new insights of practice (Finlay, 2008). The practical partner is a German company EDAG which represents solid example of business environment which practice shared leadership in product development project teams.

The main findings of this research can be summarized as follows, in the context of the state of the research on the topic:

- The practitioners' narratives confirmed that the complex environment is the main driver for shared leadership.
- The practitioners consider shared leadership emergence as an informal process and factors in practice which are hard to influence.
- The narratives show that interactions between people and team dynamics play a central role in shared leadership emergence and the resulting increase in the complexity of the leadership construct.
- The practitioners see value in the transparency of the internal and external factors of the shared leadership emergence process and the value for the whole organization.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Background

Pearce and Manz (2005) highlights that leadership occurred from the industrial age and can be viewed as a top-down approach to increase the efficiency in production factories.

The history of leadership studies is leader-centered oriented, focusing on the individual leader and his/her traits, abilities, and actions (Lindgren & Packendorff, 2009). Manville and Ober (2003) commented that we are in a knowledge economy and leadership needs a different consideration. Uhl-Bien, Marion and McKelvey (2007) found little explicit discussion of leadership models for the knowledge era. It is no longer enough to concentrate on the leader-follower interaction (Küpers, 2007). Organizations are becoming increasingly complex, volatile, and ambiguous, and it is unlikely that a single leader will own all the knowledge and skills that are necessary to successfully cope with emerging threats and opportunities in every situation (Day, Gronn, & Salas, 2004; Hollenbeck, McCall Jr, & Silzer, 2006; Pearce & Conger, 2003). Cullen-Lester and Yammarino (2016) have called for a paradigm shift from vertical, single leadership to horizontal, collective leadership.

Many researchers have followed this call. In the recent years has been an emerging debate on the notion of shared and distributed leadership (Pearce & Conger, 2003). The concept of shared leadership reacts on the pressure for leading in a complex world. There are already similar concepts going in the identical direction like shared leadership. Collective leadership (e.g. Denis, Lamothe, & Langley, 2001), collaborative leadership (e.g. Rosenthal, 1998), distributed leadership (e.g. Bolden, 2011), team leadership (e.g. Zaccaro, Rittman, & Marks, 2001), or balanced leadership (e.g. Müller, Packendorff, & Sankaran, 2017) are just a few. All mentioned concepts have the same intention. They are focusing on sharing

leadership duties among more than one person in suitable situations (Pearce, 2004).

Empirical research has shown that shared leadership has a positive impact on individual, team, project, and organizational levels (Scott-Young, Georgy, & Grisinger, 2019). Three meta-analyses identified that shared leadership has a positive relationship with team effectiveness (Wang et al., 2014), and team performance (D’Innocenzo et al., 2016; Nicolaides et al., 2014).

Viewing shared leadership as an emergence phenomenon plays a central role in the concept of shared leadership (D’Innocenzo et al., 2016; Nicolaides et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2014). A basic assumption is to consider leadership as a dynamic social process where leader can emerge (Lord & Dinh, 2014). Small and Rentsch (2010) defined shared leadership as an emergent process where members of teams mutually influence one another, sharing leadership functions between two or more people.

To understand the concept of leadership emergence a view into the concept of emergence is needed. The emergence theory has his roots in the complexity theory (Acton, Foti, Lord, & Gladfelter, 2019). This theory assumes that tiny changes in crucial parameters can lead to dramatic consequences, also known as the butterfly effect. Like a butterfly stirring the air today in Peking can transform storm systems next month in New York (Gleick, 1988). Emergence creates new properties of a collective level through the sum of their individuals. Currently, the goal of the emergent phenomena is to simultaneously understand the process of emergence through systems dynamics across multiple levels (Kozlowski, Chao, Grand, Braun, & Kuljanin, 2013). The literature review on shared leadership emergence highlights the relevance of leadership research in practice (Crevani et al., 2010; Raelin, 2011; Raelin, 2016). The contextual actions and interactions, but also the feedback and viewpoints from practice is necessary to give contributions to research and enhance the shared leadership theory, but this is still not given (Clifton, Larsson, & Schnurr, 2020).

To answer the research question, a practice research approach was chosen, that is called “reflective practice”. The main reason for the reflective practice approach is the following: to make the tacit processes explicitly for different roles in the organization, to explore the mindset, to get new ideas and to gain multiple viewpoints.

The purpose of reflection is to allow the possibility of learning through experience (Amulya, 2004) and this is central to developing practices (Loughran, 2002). In general, reflection is an active and cognitive process of own experience in order to spot and explore it in greater depth (Amulya, 2004). The key is to learn how to take perspective on one’s own actions and experiences (Amulya, 2004). A reflection can be done in the middle of an activity or after an activity (Amulya, 2004).

Schon (1984) highlighted reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action as the two forms of reflective thinking. Reflection-in-action categorized an implicit process of thinking which accompany doing, and which continuously interact

with and adapt ongoing practice in such a way that learning takes place (Schon, 1984). The reflection-in-action is in the most cases during the situation/action. Reflection-on-action, instead, is viewed as persons' thoughtful consideration and retrospective analysis of their performance in order to gain knowledge from experience (Leitch & Day, 2000). This reflection is in the most cases after the situation/action. Recent research has shown drawn attention to collective reflection with organizations (e.g. Jordan, Messner, & Becker, 2009).

3. Methodology

This paper focuses on the reflection-on-action in form of reflecting shared leadership emergence itself, by focusing on the internal and external factors that foster shared leadership emergence and the identified process framework of shared leadership emergence.

To discuss the external and internal factors as well as the process of shared leadership emergence, an additional phase before the reflection itself was needed, to create documents which can be shared, discussed, and reflected with the practitioners. **Figure 1** shows an overview about the preparation of the reflection practice and the reflection practice itself.

To address this research question, two phases were conducted. The first phase served to develop the internal and external factors of shared leadership emergence and a shared leadership emergence process framework and the aim of the second phase reflect it via a group discussion organized by the authors. The participants were practitioners working at EDAG company. EDAG is an engineering service provider for the automotive industry, representing one dynamic business environment where shared leadership can emerge and live. The most projects at EDAG are product development projects and can be a software unit for an electrical control unit or a development of a total vehicle. The environment of new product development teams has well framework conditions for shared leadership research (Cox, Pearce, & Perry, 2003; Muethel & Hoegl, 2016). Especially when the task characteristics are: highly interdependent, a great deal of creativity is required, and high level of complexity (Pearce, 2004). This is the case at EDAG, because many cross-section teams like design, marketing, chassis, electrics, exterior, interior, body in white, aerodynamics, perceived quality, and many are needed to synchronously develop the product. In a study from Mueller (2021) shared leadership could be observed in all eight PDP teams at EDAG.

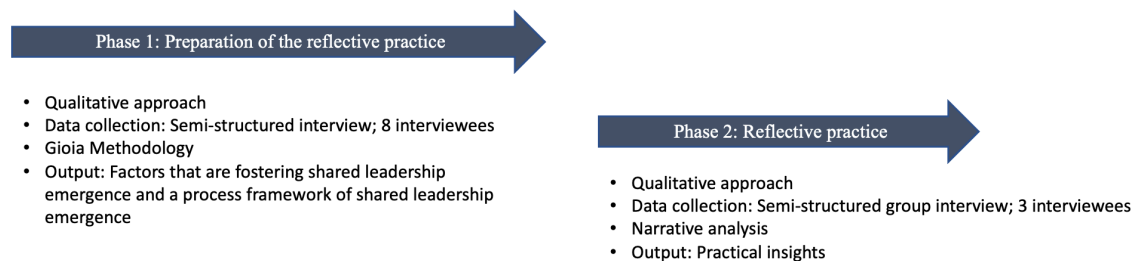


Figure 1. Overview of the phases of reflective practice.

3.1. Phase 1: Preparation of the Reflective Practice

The reflection data was collected via eight semi-structured interviews from two different product development project teams in the period from May-October 2022. **Table 1** presents the demographical and professional data about the interviewees. The interviewees are chosen because they are members of the two PDP teams, and they took over functions of leadership at least temporarily.

The questions of the semi-structured interview were:

Introduction part

- When do you join the project?
- What is currently your role in the project team?
- What is your scope of work?
- What are your challenges?

Perception

- What do you believe are the strength/weakness of your team?
- What do you believe is your strength/weakness?

Detailed understanding of activities and interactivities

- Could you please describe in detail, what are your daily actions?
- Could you please describe in detail, what are your daily interactions?

Leadership Emergence

- Can you describe step-by-step how you became a leaders/follower for the topic A, B, C?
- Is your team leader or someone outside of your team involved during these activities?
- Do you believe there is a pattern/are many patterns behind when a leader/follower emerge in this project team?

Table 1. Demographical and professional data about the interviewees.

Team 1				
Role	Project manager	Development Engineer	Sprint planner	Jun. Development. Engineer
Age	31	30	32	28
Experiences in years	9	5	7	4
Gender	Male	Male	Female	Male
Nationality	German	German	German	German
Team 2				
Role	Project manager	Technical project manager	Project manager	Software Developer
Age	36	33	39	29
Experiences in years	11	5	1	3
Gender	Male	Male	Male	Male
Nationality	German	German	German	German

- What do you have in your mind, when speaking about a good leader/follower?

Conclusion

- Before we finish, is there anything you would like to discuss in the topic of emergence of shared leadership?

The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analyzed via the Gioia Methodology (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2012). The Gioia Methodology is a two-order concept with a third aggregated dimension. The first-order data includes open codes from the semi-structured interviewees. The open coding was carried out by analysing the transcription, line by line, to find out the key ideas in each sentence (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). With the open coding approach, the major themes and concepts were identified (Neuman, 2014). The data from the second order emerge from the first order-data and are suggested concepts, which should explain the phenomenon (Gioia et al., 2012). According to (Gioia et al., 2012), later, all the similar themes and concepts were aggregated into the third-order concept.

The output were internal and external factors of shared leadership emergence (Table 2) as well as a process-oriented framework of shared leadership emergence (Figure 2).

Table 2. Factors of shared leadership emergence.

Internal factors				
<i>Cognitive</i>	<i>Competences/ Skills</i>	<i>Relational</i>	<i>Team</i>	<i>Environmental</i>
Willingness to grow	Self-management skills	Regular and close communication	Team cohesion	Team leadership availability
Want to have and sharing responsibility	Leadership skills	Involvement of team members in meetings	Team size	
Optimistic view to do leader activities	Technical competences	Satisfaction of team leader/member performance	Reliability of the team Team characteristics	Fluctuation of the team
Openness for new work	Contextual skills		Implicit expectation of the team towards leadership	
External factors				
<i>Organization</i>	<i>Strategical decision</i>	<i>Organizational</i>	<i>Client</i>	<i>Scope of work</i>
Competencies of the organization	Strategical decision from organization to develop a leader or recruit a leader from outside the organization	Number and size of processes in the project	Acceptance of client of team members	Scope of work in the project team
Coaching program for leaders from the organization		Role definitions for the project		
People orientation from the organization		Hand over time from person with leadership activity		Changes during the project in the scope of work

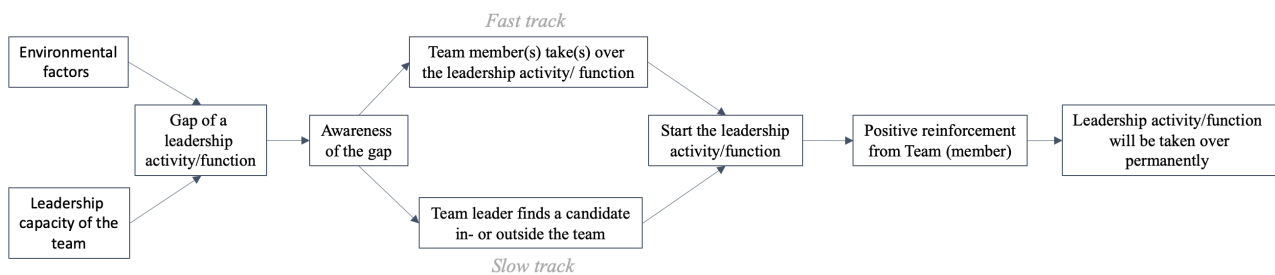


Figure 2. Shared leadership emergence process.

Based on preparation of the reflective practice done through phase 1, the authors conducted next step, phase 2.

3.2. Phase 2: The Reflective Practice

For having the reflective practice, the authors invited for a workshop the department manager vehicle engineering electrics/electronics, one project manager vehicle engineering electrics/electronics, and one development engineer vehicle engineering electrics/electronics. **Table 3** presents the demographical and professional data about the workshop team. The aim of the three different roles was to get three different perspectives. At EDAG the department manager is responsible for all projects in his department. The project manager and the development engineer were already part of phase 1 and were interviewed. This brings an additional value for the reflective practice because it is known that they (especially the development engineer) took over leadership functions in their current PDP team.

Before the workshop started some slides were created with the output from the preparation phase, but also with additional introduction slides about the concept of shared leadership. The introduction slides were created based on a literature review.

A physical meeting was chosen to present the slides, discuss it and answer upcoming questions. The start was the introduction about shared leadership. After being on the same page and having a common understanding of the shared leadership concept, we continued with the internal factors of shared leadership. In a group arise a discussion about the presented factors of shared leadership within the team, but also the factors of shared leadership outside the team (**Table 2**). Finally, we have shown the process-oriented framework of shared leadership emergence (**Figure 2**) and we had a discussion again, especially regarding practical relevance and how EDAG can have a value of that knowledge. The appointment was on the 8th of September 2022 in Fulda (Germany) in an EDAG (name of a company) location and lasted two hours.

The questions were designed to guide the reflection of the practitioners:

- Do you understand the concept of shared leadership?
- Are the factors clear for you that fostering shared leadership emergence?
- Do you have something in your mind which we can add?

Table 3. Demographical and professional data about the workshop team.

Role	Department manager	Project manager	Development Engineer
Age	62	31	30
Experiences at EDAG in years	29	9	5
Gender	Male	Male	male
Nationality	German	German	German

- Is the process clear for you or do you have any questions?
 - Do you can imagine this can be a process we can officially implement?
- We opted for a narrative thematic analysis. The main findings are presented in the next session.

4. Main Findings

The narrative analysis reveals the following practitioners' perceptions about the shared leadership concept.

Sharing leadership is the unavoidable in today's business environment

All participants didn't hear the theoretical concept of shared or distributed leadership but were sure that in the most projects are shared leadership applied. They underlined that sharing leadership functions in the team is important and have many advantages, because the business environment become so special and there is no other way. The discussion focused on the role of the project leader. They highlighted, a good leader must empower employees and distribute leadership activities, to breath and to keep a clear head. The project leaders who are seeing it different will fail and as the result the project will not successful.

“If you (as a project leader) are not motivated to hand over knowledge, to hand over responsibility, your whole project team will collapse. Pulling up someone who can do similar work to you at some point or run parallel to you”.

The concept of shared leadership emergence is a black blox

The concept of shared leadership emergence was at the beginning of the discussion a black box and the term coincidence came up a few times or that project leaders know what they must do to become a project leader.

“You must be in the right place at the right time. It sounds like a coincidence, but that's just the way it is. If they're looking for someone and you're there at the time they're looking at you, you might be lucky. If you're abroad for a year, I don't know, your sabbatical year, and no one thinks of you, you're just had bad luck. And you must wait five years again.”

The concept of shared leadership emergence is a complex construct

With the ongoing discussion about the process of shared leadership emergence, the practitioners thought about different factors which are influencing this emergence process. The project leaders' character and especially his/her attitude against sharing power and responsibility or the team member character

like introverts versus extroverts were discussed extensively. At the end, all participants confirmed the importance of human factors and the team dynamics, which leads to a much more complex construct of viewing leadership.

“That is absolutely a question of character. Depending on what kind of project manager you have. Who has the human skills to give up power and sees his advantage in it. Or do you have someone who clings to power. They want to be the boss every day.”

“It would have been exciting to see what would have happened if person A hadn't been there. And then really only have introverts. I'd like to see that.”

Sensibilize and push the organization is important for employees and the organization

All practitioners agreed to share the shared leadership emergence findings (external and internal factors, process framework) to sensitize the project members and leaders to push the emergence of leaders. On the one hand, that will motivate the employees, because they know what they should do to bring themselves in a better position and increase the likelihood becoming a project manager. On the other hand, it is beneficial for the organization having many project members with leadership skills for the project success.

“In principle, it would not be bad if we sensitized the staff in this direction (processes). Even if someone doesn't necessarily want to become a project manager.”

“If you don't encourage that as a project leader and don't give them the opportunity, then they will leave”.

“Having leadership skills, it also makes life easier for themselves (team members). At the end of the day, if you have these 20 skills, things will go better in the project.”

It can be summarized that the concept of shared leadership is practical applied in projects and pushed by the organization for many reasons. But there is no knowledge about how shared leadership emerges. For practitioners it is perceived as a black box and complex construct, but all practitioners are motivated to open the black box and understand the phenomenon of leadership emergence.

5. Theoretical and Practical Implications

In the first part, this paper explores shared leadership emergence in practice in two PDP teams and the practical viewpoint on that topic in the second part. The theoretical contribution and practical implications of the study are presented further.

Theoretical contribution:

(Shared) leadership emergence is still seen as an unmeasured magical process. Then magic happens and leaders emerge (Guastello, 2007). The first part of this paper is demystified it by creating the internal and external factors as well as a process-framework of shared leadership emergence. Our framework enhances the work form Lyndon and Pandey (2021), by researching an additional envi-

ronment (PDP teams) and focusing on the emergence of leadership functions and not leadership identities. Lyndon and Pandey (2021) took up the claiming and granting idea of leadership from DeRue and Ashford (2010). Our value is based on the definition of shared leadership as an emergent phenomenon by sharing leadership functions between two or more people (Small & Rentsch, 2010). Our paper gives additional input to the research work from Acton et al. (2019) and their research in development of a process-oriented framework of leadership emergence. The second contribution of this paper is to give practical insights to the concept of shared leadership emergence. The practitioners confirmed the relevance of shared leadership in PDP teams, because of the complex environment. They consider shared leadership as an informal process which is hard to influence because of the team dynamic and the many unpredictable factors. The practitioners support the fact to open the black box of shared leadership emergence. Our paper creates a better understanding of the practice, to enhance the shared leadership theory (Pearce & Conger, 2003) and as well the complexity leadership theory (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007) by getting feedback from practitioners by focusing on the emergence of the shared leadership.

Practical implication

Many things happen when leaders emerge during and cross-project and, it is hard to catch for practitioners, because shared leadership emergence is a complex process. However, shared leadership emergence was identified in both project teams and next to the internal and external factors of shared leadership emergence a practical framework could be developed. Sharing with practitioners the concept of shared leadership is sharing a new complex view of leadership. Most people from practice still think of roles when speaking with them about leadership. Based on that, creating an open mind that leadership is not only a single dedicated person topic. Instead, leadership should be seen as an interactive process shared between people and a more complex construct with many factors influencing this process.

This shared leadership emergence view will influence the satisfaction and motivation of team (in line with the findings from D’Innocenzo et al., 2016) and individual member (in line with the findings from Robert Jr & You, 2018). Companies (also EDAG) must prepare the organizations by enabling people to become leaders or have leadership skills. Shared leadership brings benefits for the whole organisation (in line with the findings from Scott-Young et al., 2019). The emergent leaders must be specifically promoted. Focusing on the development of dedicated leaders and fostering emergent leaders will be necessary for the projects and the organizations success.

6. Conclusion

Empirical research and especially feedback from practice are needed to enhance the shared leadership theory because of its contextual relevance. In this study, shared leadership was applied in the two observed project development teams,

which was the database for the practical reflection. The study's scientific contribution is enhancing the shared leadership theory through a practical lens of shared leadership as an emergent phenomenon. The value for practice is (next to the new perspective of leadership) the transparency of shared leadership emergence for practitioners by exploring the internal and external factors and the development of a process-oriented framework. Our study has limitations that call for additional research to refine and extend this study. The participants of the reflective practice are from one department of a company called EDAG, which should represent a dynamic and turbulent business environment. The socio-cultural dynamics of the country might influence the results. In our case, it was Germany. Finally, there is a limitation of the documents (factors and process of shared leadership emergence), which were reflected. Additional empirical insights would be beneficial. The overall aim is to understand the phenomenon of shared leadership emergence through empirical research. Shared leadership brings the most value in complex environments. Therefore, it is crucial to understand the complex environment and its impact on leadership using observation methods (like team meetings) over a long period. Additional teams from different organisations and countries can also bring insights and will improve the shared leadership theory.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

Ethical Statement

All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of AME University, Slovenia and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed consent: An informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the research and the data used in this study are completely anonymized.

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