

Distributed Leadership

Critique from a Catholic Perspective

**Notes to accompany Conference Presentation and
Podcast [Powerpoint handouts also available]**

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Introduction

Much is written and talked about the theory and practice of distributed leadership in the area of educational leadership. The work of Spillane (2006), Harris (2006), Mulford (2006) and Elmore (2000) are preeminent among theorists in the area. Many principals I talk to also report that they engage in distributed leadership practice. I support the orientation and intentions of those theoreticians and practitioners who argue for greater distribution of the responsibilities and practices of leadership in school communities but wish to query the ways in which the term 'distributed leadership' is often promoted and supported unquestionably and uncritically as 'the way to do it.' In fact, I will argue that the label 'distributed leadership' may actually, in both theory and practice, be supporting, perhaps unwittingly, leadership mindsets, paradigms and practices that perpetuate control-oriented approaches to leadership. The language of distributed leadership may actually provide many practitioners with the comfortable and comforting sense that if they distribute duties, tasks and responsibilities, the leadership density, capacity and quality of their organisation will be greatly strengthened. They may indeed be right but there is also the distinct possibility that this is not the case.

While I do not want to be overly negative toward an encouraging development in educational leadership (it constitutes a genuine attempt to move away from control-approaches to and economic-rationalist perspectives on leadership), I argue that, at the very least, we need to be clearer in terms of the language we use, its meaning(s), and especially its interpretations by and implications for educational leaders as practitioners. My prime purpose in this paper is to encourage readers to reflect on and critique the concept and practices referred to in literature as 'distributed' leadership, which currently forms an important part of the language and rhetoric of many policy makers and practitioners.

When I say that I support those who advocate widening the leadership net and deepening the pool of leadership talent in schools and educational systems, I do so from the perspective that no single person (for example, the CEO or principal) should, or is capable of, providing the breadth and depth of leadership required to lead complex organisations, such as contemporary educational systems and schools. It seems sensible and practical to actively engage with key stakeholders so as to generate in them an increased sense of commitment, responsibility and ownership for the success of their organisations. I believe that we all generally accept (at least the idea has become part of received wisdom) that many heads are better than one and that diversity of opinions and advice help protect us from what is often referred to as 'group think.' I am not persuaded, however, that the approach labeled 'distributed' leadership, as it is currently promoted, necessarily fulfills its often lofty promises. Indeed, as it is currently practiced by some educational leaders, it may, in fact, promote and support mindsets and practices that are antithetical to what is actually intended.

Structure of Presentation

I will structure my presentation around the following six points. Drawing on recent research (Duignan, 2007; Duignan and Bezzina, 2006; LTLL, 2005-06), relevant literature, my own experiences as an educational leader, and my observations of, and conversations with, a large number of educational leaders in Catholic schools across Australia, I will argue that:

1. the idea of sharing the leadership responsibilities more widely in schools is desirable because leadership of contemporary schools is too much for any one person;
2. there is a need in any discourse on leadership to operate from clear definitions of what it means in practice;

3. some of the assumptions underpinning the concept of distributed leadership need to be challenged;
4. the label 'distributed leadership' may well be an oxymoron and/or involve conflicting assumptions and a clash of paradigms;
5. a number of Catholic imperatives strongly support the desirability of a sharing of leadership practices in Catholic schools and actually provide a useful framework for a shared approach to leadership practices;
6. a way forward for leadership in Catholic schools is to develop ways of thinking and doing that focus on building, nurturing and sustaining leadership capabilities and capacities in individuals and groups, widening the net and deepening the pool of leadership talents, and then engaging with and using these talented people to transform what we do and how we do it.

Leadership is too much for one person.

Flockton (2001) suggested that in the school setting the principal is expected to be legal expert, health and social services coordinator, fundraiser, diplomat, negotiator, adjudicator, public relations consultant, security officer, technological innovator and top notch resource manager, whose most important job is the promotion of teaching and learning. Other labels that are relevant are confidant, marriage counselor, architect, engineer, sanitary contractor. Given the complex nature of the principal's role and the very heavy workloads reported by incumbents in the role, then it would seem both sensible and necessary for them to engage with others in meeting the expectations of the job. The 'Lone Ranger' approach is no longer, if it ever was, desirable or practical.

Diversity matters.

According to Surowiecki (2004) in his book called *Wisdom of the Crowds* diversity of people and their information helps in coming to a better decision or resolution because it actually adds perspectives that would otherwise be absent and because it takes away, or at least weakens, some of the destructive characteristics of group decision making (e.g., group think). (p. 20) Grouping only smart people (experts) together doesn't work that well because they tend to resemble each other in what they can do. You're better off entrusting a diverse group with varying degrees of knowledge and insight with major decisions rather than leaving them in the hands of one or two people, no matter how smart those people are. (30-31)

No one best way of making decisions.

There is no evidence that one can become expert in something as broad as 'decision making.' A group of diverse individuals will make better and more robust forecasts and more intelligent decisions than a 'skilled decision maker.' (Surowiecki p. 31)

Involvement can lead to commitment and ownership.

It has been long recognised in research and literature on educational change that it is wise to engage those affected by a decision or a change in its formulation. Those who are engaged in making key decisions about a change (or development) are more likely to be committed to its implementation.

Engagement and involvement builds trust.

People feel valued when they are included and involved and this helps in building a culture of trust. Such a culture is necessary for a professional learning community to be developed and sustained.

Leadership is an influencing process.

Authentic relationships are at the heart of influential leadership practice. It is difficult to see how a relational, trusting culture can be built in a school if key stakeholders do not feel valued, included and engaged. The formula seems simple to me: *no relationships = no influence = no leadership*.

It is evident, therefore, that I support shared approaches to leadership practice, so why then the critique of distributed leadership? I will now present five reasons to support my critique.

Problematic assumptions.

It is unwise to assume because we share a common language or use a specific term that we all share a common meaning. The term 'distributed leadership,' even 'shared leadership,' can mean different things to different people within a system or organisation (Duignan and Fraser 2005). One's view or perspective can be influenced by one's viewing point. Those who are located within system central offices may have a different perspective from those in schools and even within schools teachers may have a different perspective or understanding of a concept like distributed leadership, than do members of the executive.

What is it we are distributing?

Are we referring to distributing knowledge, tasks, responsibilities, power, authority or, perhaps, blame. Are we referring to delegating? Traditionally in schools those in leadership pathways (e.g. subject coordinators, department heads, assistant and deputy-principals) have been delegated specific tasks and responsibilities; for deputies it is often student discipline and/or timetabling. Is this distributing or distributed leadership? Some research by d'Arbon et al. (2003) and Dawson (2003) seems to indicate that the answer is, 'not really'. d'Arbon et al. found that those who were in the pool from which principals are drawn (many were assistant and deputy principals) stated that they did not have the confidence to apply for a principals position. What does this say about their leadership development? Dawson surveyed every department head in state secondary schools in New South Wales as to their engagement in curriculum leadership and found that they did not see themselves as leaders and acted accordingly. I submit that that the traditional pathways toward principalship within schools may have failed to generate the breadth and depth of leadership required to run a complex contemporary school. A new approach is required.

Can leadership be distributed?

If leadership is, essentially an influencing process primarily effected through relationships (leadership is relational), then it is fair to ask: can influence be distributed. Are we actually asking the right question and using the right language?

Is the term 'distributed leadership' an oxymoron?

It can be argued that the words 'distributing' and 'distributed,' when used to qualify the word leadership, reflect a centralist and/or control paradigm of

leadership. In fact, based on a number of studies and reviews in which I have been recently involved, I put it to you that hierarchical, bureaucratic and forms of control paradigms are alive and well in many Catholic systems and schools, yet the language of distributed leadership is everywhere. While there is no doubt that many schools have embraced shared leadership practices (IDEAS schools being one example), there are too many, despite their rhetoric, who have not. The concept of leadership as presented in this presentation (an influencing process effected through relationships) seems to me to come from a different paradigm , one that promotes and supports substantial involvement of all key stakeholders in the decisions that affect their lives.

Distributed Leadership and related concepts.

There would appear to be some confusion about how a number of seemingly similar concepts relate to distributed leadership. It is seen by some to equate with such concepts, processes and practices as shared decision-making; collaboration and consultation (e.g., on planning); delegation; teamwork; and empowerment of others. Of course, all of these too can be rhetoric and not reality if control paradigms are operating. It all depends who is doing the collaborating and empowering (what is their paradigm and philosophy of leadership?) – some leaders genuinely engage others meaningfully and productively while others may merely use the rhetoric. In terms of empowering others, I am always reminded that ‘The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away.’

So far, I have mainly focused on a critique of the concept and practice of distributed leadership. I think you are entitled to ask of I have positive alternative frameworks and recommendations. In fact, I do. In the remainder of this presentation, I will propose a philosophically, theologically and scripturally driven, different framework for leadership in Catholic schools using a number of ‘Catholic imperatives’. Finally, I will sketch a ‘way forward’ based on my critique of distributed leadership and these imperatives.

CATHOLIC IMPERATIVES

Perhaps you may think that the word imperative is too strong but there are a number of key Catholic concepts that are so engrained (embedded) in scripture and Vatican documents that, in themselves, they form a framework for a different approach to leadership in Catholic schools. While you will no doubt wish to include other important ones in such a framework (and please do so), I will select five that I personally believe should be central to leadership in a Catholic system or school.

The Catholic School as Community

The Catholic school as a ministry of the Catholic Church is not just an institution or organisation, it is a community of the 'people of God'. This is made absolutely clear in the Declaration on Christian Education (1965, par. 8)"

What makes the Catholic school distinctive is its attempt to generate a community climate in the school that is permeated by the Gospel spirit of freedom and love.

This is a view that has been repeated in a number of Vatican documents on the Catholic school in the ensuing years. Leadership of such a community requires a relational and collective framework and the use of the talents of all members. We are reminded in Romans (12: 4-5) that:

Just as each of us has one body with many members, and not all the members have the same function, so too we, though many, are one body in Christ and individually members of one another.

The Catholic school is a community in another sense as well. David Ranson (2006) suggests that the Catholic school ". . . has become the primary

manifestation of the local ecclesial community, the parish, and the principal means of that community to religiously enculturate its young members.” (p. 417)

The concept of ‘*communitas*’ is also a useful way of understanding a Catholic school as a community. It can be interpreted as an unstructured human community based on principles of unity (beyond the needs of individuals or groups) and a common purpose and experience as well as an intense community spirit. The community members associate to achieve purposes and objectives that exceed individual capacities. (United States Conference of Catholic bishops, chapter 2, Article, 1882). Love of God and of neighbour are defining characteristics of Catholic communities.

The Common Good

The Catechism of the Catholic Church points out that the good of each individual in a community or society is, of necessity, closely tied to the common good. The common good, according to the Catechism (1906), is to be understood as “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily. The common good concerns the life of all. It calls for prudence from each, and even more from those who exercise the office of authority.”

The common good comprises three essential elements (*italics in original*):

1. It presupposes *respect for the person*;
2. It requires the *social well-being and development* of the group itself;
3. It requires peace, that is, the stability and security of a just order.

The idea of the common good is, for me, an important dimension of a framework for distributed leadership in Catholic schools.

Positive Subsidiarity

The Catholic Church has strongly enunciated the principle of subsidiarity in encyclicals *Rerum Novarum* of Leo XIII, 1891 and *Quadragesimo Anno* of Pius XII, 1931), which proposes that “a community of a higher order should not interfere in the internal life of a community of a lower order, depriving the latter of its functions, but rather should support it in case of need and help co-ordinate its activity with the activities of the rest of society, always with a view to the common good.” (CA 48 # 4; cf. Pius XI, *Quadragesimo anno* I, 184-186)

In practice it implies that a central authority should have a subsidiary function making those decisions that cannot be made more effectively at a more immediate or local level. Currently, it is a principle at the heart of European Union law (Treaty of Maastricht, 1992) stating that the EU may only make policy or decisions in situations where member states agree that action by individual countries is insufficient.

The concept of ‘positive subsidiarity’ demands that higher order institutions and communities create the conditions necessary for the full development of the human person and provide mediating processes and structures to empower individual and small group action, thereby linking them to their community and to society.

Leadership as Service

Scripture provides us with an important insight and perspective:

. . . rather let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. For which is the greater, one who sits

at table, or one who serves? Is it not the one who sits at the table?
But I am among you as one who serves. (Luke 22: 24-27)

There is an important symbolic meaning attached to the concept of leadership as service. When Jesus washed the feet of the disciples at the Last Supper he was making a deep and meaningful gesture about how we should treat each other in community. He wasn't merely implying that the disciples should copy what he had done, but he was providing them with a broader framework for action and interaction based on respect for the dignity and worth of each individual and also on the need for the collective to behave as a community of love. As a servant leader, Jesus was driven by love and clearly demonstrated that leadership is above all else relational.

Robert Greenleaf (1977), the man usually acknowledged as introducing the concept of servant leadership to the business world established the acid test for leadership as service when he asked:

Do those served grow as persons? Do they, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? (p. 14)

For me this is also the test for any form of leadership in Catholic schools, including the concept of distributed leadership. Such leadership must be emancipatory, elevating, mutually empowering, and driven by love. It requires careful stewardship and husbandry of very valuable resources (people) in the tradition of the Jesuit leadership framework.

Love-Driven Leadership

Lowney (2003), explained that the Jesuit model of 'love-driven leadership' required their leaders to have their eyes open to the talent and potential in their organization:

Love was the lens through which individual Jesuits beheld the world around them. It changed not only the way Jesuits looked at others but *what they saw*. (italics in original) Their vision became more acute, their eyes open to talent and potential. (p 170)

He summarises love-driven leadership as:

- the *vision* to see each person's talent, potential, and dignity
- the *courage, passion, and commitment* to unlock that potential
- the resulting *loyalty and mutual support* that energize and unite teams (p. 170, italics in original)

Lowney argues that the Jesuits turned the notion of leadership as referring to those who are in charge on its head by exhorting them to “. . . stop behaving as if they're leading followers and start acting as if they're leading leaders by doing what helps others lead.” (p. 285) The Jesuit founders built their leadership and their 'company' by finding and nurturing “as many as possible of the very best (*Quamplurimi et quam aptissimi*). This Jesuit passion about and commitment to *aptissimi* ensured that they tapped into the talent and potential of the collective and elevated all to leadership in their company.

I believe that these Catholic imperatives require, even demand, a sharing of leadership practices based on a leadership paradigm that is different from the one that I have argued often underpins contemporary approaches to distributed leadership in, essentially, hierarchical contexts. I believe that these imperatives should inspire us all to embrace a love-driven approach to leadership and all that it entails. I now want to turn to some recommendations for a way forward for leadership in Catholic schools. These recommendations are derived from both my critique of distributed leadership and the Catholic imperatives.

Ways Forward: Ways of Thinking and Doing

I suggest that a way forward is to start with a critique of the existing language and meaning of leadership, including the concept of distributed leadership. The following points should assist:

- Don't assume too much about agreed meanings around leadership and surface and critique existing assumptions in open dialogue;
- Create the conditions that encourage both principals and teachers to openly discuss meanings, purposes, anxieties; this will help build an enabling and trusting culture;
- Identify a moral purpose for sharing leadership practices around maximising opportunities and outcomes for all students;
- Use teachers as leadership ambassadors for other teachers with the intent of generating a critical mass and a 'tipping point' for whole-school staff engagement and involvement.

I then advise you to draw heavily from the Catholic imperatives I identified earlier (add your own preferred ones) to provide a specific frame for sharing leadership practices within a Catholic school. The following point should assist you:

- stop behaving as if you're leading followers and start acting as if you're leading leaders;
- use your generous, loving eye to ensure that your vision becomes more acute, and your eyes are wide open to talent and potential in your organization;
- generate a passion and commitment for *aptissimi* to ensure that you tap into the talent and potential of the collective and, in this way, broaden the net and deepen the pool of leadership capability in your system or school;
- ask yourself: Do those who work with me grow as persons? Do they, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servant leaders?

- how well do you create the social conditions which allow people, either as groups or individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily?
- do you provide user-friendly and effective mediating processes and structures to empower individuals and small groups, especially with regard to making (or having major input into making) decisions that have a profound effect on their lives?

Brief Summary

The key argument I have tried to make is that leadership is an influencing process effected through authentic relationships and, as such, does not lend itself to distribution, especially if this term is interpreted within a hierarchical and/or control paradigm. If you are intending to increase leadership capacity and density in your system or school, develop, grow, nurture leadership from the ground up. You need to build an 'allowed-to-be-a-leader culture,' especially with new and younger staff. Seek out and nurture *aptissimi* and generate a 'dare to lead' ethos. Have the vision, courage and commitment to see each person's talent, potential through love driven leadership.

To me it is not really a matter of distributing or distributed leadership, it is more a matter of developing capabilities in self and others and building capacities within groups, and organisations. For some, such an approach comes easily, others may require a 'paradigm transplant.'

Let me conclude with a quote from Mother Teresa:

You can do what I cannot do. I can do what you cannot do. Together, we can do great things.

That's the result of partnership in Jesus

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