

Shared Leadership: A Primer for Nonprofits

07.29.21 | Linda J. Rosenthal, JD



“What have the Romans ever done for us?” *

— “Reg” aka John Cleese, *Monty Python’s Life of Brian* (1979)

One of the hottest topics in philanthropy today is something you’ve likely never heard of – or imagined possible.

“Shared leadership” takes the historical model of organizations and leadership and turns it on its head. Gone is the rigid, top-down, vertical command-and-control hierarchy with a sole “heroic” leader at the helm.

So what takes its place? Lots of experts are trying to figure that out, but the answer seems to be in a horizontal model of co-leadership and team decision-making. Of course, the traditional Western model is so ingrained in our psyches that it’s almost jarring to consider any alternative. But social scientists have spent the last few decades toying with this formerly “unthinkable” notion, whether it’s called “shared,” or “distributive,” or “co” leadership. There is a strong consensus emerging that the old rigid model is “unsustainable,” out of step with modern thinking, and not all that effective in any event.

It began with a dribble of new scholarship in the 1980s and 1990s. One of the seminal references on point is Shared Leadership: The Hows and Whys of It (2002) edited by Professors Craig L. Pearce and Jay A. Conger [“This volume is but a beginning for research on shared leadership. One thing that is clear is that shared leadership will not merely be another blip on the radar screen of organizational science. Its time has arrived.”]

“Shared leadership is a leadership style that broadly distributes leadership responsibility, such that people within a team and organization lead each other.” While this concept applies to organizational

structures generally, it holds particular promise for the nonprofit sector. The team-centric focus melds well with the growing movement in philanthropy to expand governance beyond insulated and privileged boards of directors.

In the last two decades, there have been advances in the theoretical realm with significant academic research and scholarship. And there's also been progress in the field with pilot programs. A perceived obstacle, though, is the apparent dearth of practical experience from which to draw.

Actually, though, there's a treasure of real-world, time-tested, knowledge. But it requires digging into antiquity. (You were wondering – perhaps – when we'd get back to those Romans?)

John Cleese's "Reg" asks his ruffian band of acolytes: "What have the Romans ever done for us?" He gets an earful from them. "All right," concedes "Reg," "but apart from the sanitation, the medicine, education, wine, public order, irrigation, roads, a fresh water system, and public health, what have the Romans ever done for us?"

"Peace," they add. **

And "shared leadership," we add.

For over 400 years, republican Rome "had a successful system of co-leadership It "was so effective that it extended from the lower levels of the Roman magistracy to the very top position, that of consul." See *Co-Leadership: Lessons from Republican Rome*, (July 2002) Professor David Sally, *California Management Review*. From the Abstract: "The Roman Republic embraced a system of co-leadership that thrived for over four centuries before dissolving into the dictatorship of the Empire....This article identifies ten key lessons that the republicans of Rome understood and that are extremely relevant for the modern organization attempting to institute or sustain" co-leadership.

Suggested References

This being a primer, here's a reading list to get the ball rolling:

Scholarly Research

- Shared Leadership: Reframing the Hows & Whys of Leadership (2002) Professors Craig L. Pearce and Jay A. Conger [The Amazon listing includes a generous "sample" worth reading, especially for the history of the entrenched Western hierarchical model of leadership particularly beginning with the early Industrial Revolution and through most of the twentieth century]
- Co-Leadership: Lessons from Republican Rome (July 2002, uploaded online 11/29/17), Professor David Sally, *California Management Review*
- Distributed leadership in organizations: A review of theory and research (September 1, 2011) Professor Richard Bolden et al, *Int'l Journal of Management Reviews* (UK)

Nonprofits & Shared Leadership

- Doing More with More: Putting Shared Leadership into Practice (Summer 2011, reprinted 2014 and June 25, 2018) Michael Allison, Susan Misra and Elissa Perry, *The Nonprofit*

Quarterly

- [Sharing the Hard Decisions: How Co-Leaders Can Do More Together](#) (April 16, 2015)
Frances Kunreuther, *Buildingmovement.org Blog*
- [Five Insights from Directors Sharing Power](#) (March 28, 2017) Jeanne Bell, Paeola Cubias and Byron Johnson, *The Nonprofit Quarterly*
- [The Future of Nonprofit Leadership: Worker Self-directed Organizations](#) (March 31, 2017)
Simon Mont, *The Nonprofit Quarterly*
- [Is a Shared Leadership Model Right for Your Nonprofit?](#) (March 8, 2019) Joanne Fritz,
thebalancesmb.com
- [The Rise Of Shared Leadership](#) (September 18, 2019) Karen Buck, conservationimpact-nonprofit.com
- [Executive Transitions: Replacing One with Two](#) (January 27, 2020) Ruth McCambridge,
The Nonprofit Quarterly
- [Can Co-Leadership be the future of philanthropy?](#) (June 14, 2021) Donika Dimovska, Simon Sommer, and Fabio Segura, alliancemagazine.org

Miscellaneous

- [Shared Leadership: A Lawyer's Perspective](#) (May 30, 2017, reprinted September 27, 2019)
Gene Takagi, Esq., *NEO Law Blog*
- [Bye-Bye, Heroic Leadership. Here Comes Shared Leadership](#) (March 9, 2018) Carsten Tams, *Forbes*

Conclusion

"In most analyses of co-leadership," Professor Sally observes, "the analysis is on the personalities of the partners. Yet, this cannot be the whole story...." He explains: "The fact that the Roman Republic sustained co-leadership for more than four centuries means that there were structures, norms, and behaviors that supported an immense variety of personalities in consulship, quaestorship, and so on...."

Credits:

* This is a clip [1:26] of the original movie scene, courtesy of the Monty Python Official YouTube Channel. Or, if you prefer, there's the "[What Have the Romans Ever Done for Us](#)" musical scene [2:08] from the comic-oratorio version of *Life of Brian* that features Eric Idle, full orchestra, and classical soloists.

** The tie-in of the *Life of Brian* scene to the "shared leadership" concept courtesy of [Sabre Team Building](#) and its "[When in Rome, do as the Romans do](#)" program.

— *Linda J. Rosenthal, J.D., FPLG Information & Research Director*