



Evidence Summary

Perceptions of Shared Leadership within Academic Libraries Suggest Room for Improvement

A Review of:

Cawthorne, J. E. (2010). Leading from the middle of the organization: An examination of shared leadership in academic libraries. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 36(2), 151-157. doi:10.1016/j.acalib.2010.01.006

Reviewed by:

Genevieve C. Gore
Liaison Librarian
Life Sciences Library, McGill University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada
Email: genevieve.gore@mcgill.ca

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Abstract

Objective – To survey middle managers' beliefs regarding their participation in shared leadership and their libraries' practices of shared leadership.

Design – Cross-sectional survey.

Setting – Twenty-two academic libraries within four-year public master's level institutions in the Pacific Northwest of the United States.

Subjects – A total of 115 middle managers were

invited to participate; 77 completed the survey for a response rate of 66.9%.

Methods – Selected middle managers were contacted by email a total of five times and were invited to complete a Web-based survey composed of three sections. The first section contained 10 statements for rating shared leadership within their own institutions, which they were asked to rate on an eight-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly agree) to 7 (strongly disagree), with 8 as an option for no opinion. The second section used the same scale to rate their levels of agreement with conceptual

definitions of shared leadership from Jackson's Framework. Jackson's Framework consists of four components for ascertaining levels of shared leadership from both managerial and staff perspectives: accountability, equity, partnership and ownership. The third section invited subjects to provide their own definition of shared leadership. A three-part pretest served to validate the survey instrument. Mean scores were calculated for each statement.

Main Results – In the first section, there was the highest overall level of agreement (1.52) with the statement "I am accountable for the decisions within the scope of my responsibility" followed by "I share information with the senior library administration" (1.71). There was the lowest overall level of agreement (3.65) with the statement that "Ideas presented at all levels of staff in the library are equally considered." In the second section, respondents' mean scores for Jackson's definitions of four concepts of shared leadership were 2.62 for ownership, 2.68 for both partnership and equity, and 2.77 for accountability. In the third section, respondents most often linked their definitions of shared leadership with communication, learning and collaboration.

Conclusion – Examining middle managers' perceptions of shared leadership may help us understand organizational trends and capacity for leadership within libraries. Future research could examine shared leadership at levels below middle management as well as the relationship between accountability and shared leadership throughout the organization.

Commentary

This study presents an impressive literature review of shared leadership, including significant cross-disciplinary references to information on the topic. However, references to LIS scholarship are limited, and the author does not explicitly state whether this is due to a lack of literature. The questionnaire design also

presents a number of challenges. The problem statement speaks in part of actual levels of shared leadership, but questionnaires can only gauge respondents' perceptions of shared leadership – an important distinction that seems to be somewhat blurred although acknowledged. The definition of "middle manager" is not entirely clear, which makes it difficult to replicate the study. The actual questionnaire is not included as a supplementary file, which makes it difficult to evaluate its design or replicate the study. Generally, it is preferable to use previously validated instruments when possible, particularly given the inherent difficulties of validating a survey instrument (pre-testing – which, to the author's credit, was done – does not guarantee validity or reliability, although it does contribute to face validity). The author references what appears to be an assessment tool of shared leadership and it is unclear why the tool was not used in this study. It is also unclear whether, in section two, the questionnaire sought to establish respondents' level of agreement with the definitions of Jackson's four components of shared leadership, or whether the respondents were being asked to rate the presence of each component within their own institution. Seeing a copy of the questionnaire may answer that question. There were also some discrepancies between the mean scores reflected in the text and the mean scores reflected in the figures when referring to the same statements, which added an element of confusion to the reading, as did the lack of consistency in the way the statements were presented in the figures. The author does not discuss the geographical sampling used in the study as a source of a possible lack of external validity; however, he does make explicit the study population used. The concept of shared leadership within libraries appears to be quite a challenging area of study. It would be very interesting to know how organizational models are changing and whether shared leadership is on the rise or decline relative to other organizational models, something to which the author draws attention.