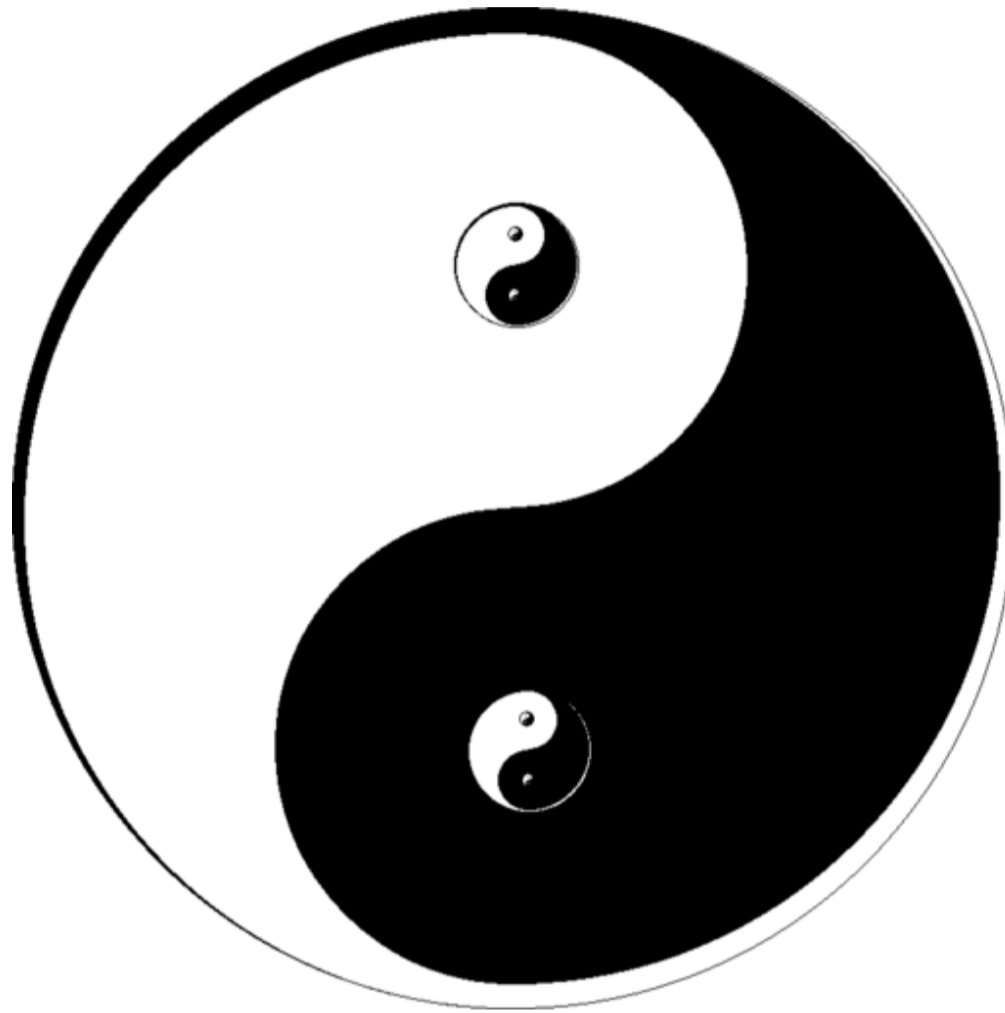


MANAGEMENT

Five Insights from Directors Sharing Power



By Vtsarev (Own work) [CC BY-SA 4.0], via Wikimedia Commons

This article comes from the Nonprofit Quarterly's spring 2017 edition, which addresses ways of thinking differently about a variety of issues affecting the sector. If you're interested in this subject, you can read two other articles in a similar vein: "[Reflections on Executive Leadership and Transition Data over Fifteen Years](#)" and "[Nonprofit Leadership Transitions and Organizational Sustainability: An Updated Approach that Changes the Landscape](#)."

As part of a two-year project to reflect on our role in the field of executive transition management (ETM), [CompassPoint Nonprofit Services](#) convened a discussion in August 2016 among five progressive organizations that have formal shared leadership structures. This made sense as part of CompassPoint's reflection process for two reasons: First, we had been exploring alternative structures internally. Second, we had become increasingly concerned about our external practice of ETM—which, in focusing on the search for an organization's next, single leader, was upholding some traditional assumptions and practices of leadership that in the rest of our work we had been questioning for some time. We wanted to understand the motivations, benefits, and challenges the leaders saw in moving away from the traditional, single-executive-director model. The leaders we interviewed and their organizations are as follows:

- [Building Movement Project](#)—Sean Thomas-Breitfeld and Frances Kunreuther, codirectors
- [Community United Against Violence](#) (CUAV)—Lidia Salazar and Essex Lordes, codirectors
- [Housing Rights Committee of San Francisco](#)—Fred Sherburn-Zimmer, executive director, and Aileen Joy, administrative director
- [Management Assistance Group](#) (MAG)—Susan Misra and Elissa Sloan Perry, codirectors
- [Rockwood Leadership Institute](#)—Akaya Windwood and Darlene Nipper, partner leaders

It's important to note that the organizations had differences in how they were unpacking and distributing the single executive role: there were variations on codirectorship, and some were experimenting with even broader committee or collective structures. Despite these differences, there were powerful commonalities across the

organizations' motivations and aspirations for sharing power. It's also important to note that none of the organizations is by any means putting itself forward as expert or as having "figured it out." Rather, we share these reflections to open up a conversation with others who are questioning aspects of traditional leadership and exploring alternative frameworks and approaches.

1. Sharing leadership is an expression of our individual and organizational identities.

Soon into our conversation, we noted that of the ten leaders, nine are people of color, and all identify as queer. Darlene Nipper of Rockwood reflected, "The thing is that we're just different from white guys. We're different people from the folks who have informed the thinking about organizational leadership and management over the last one hundred years. We come at it differently." Susan Misra of MAG put it this way: "I think our innate approach is collaborative and collective. When the organization was thinking about who should be the next leader, it just felt wrong to think of one executive director." Sean Thomas-Breitfeld of Building Movement Project linked shared leadership to feminist theory: "I'm curious if people have thought about the interest and appetite for alternatives to very top-down, hierarchical, one-person-in-charge models as informed by feminism in terms of a world view, but also the organizational theory that might be coming out of that branch of academic research." Others referenced past experiences of traditional leadership that were oppressive. Essex Lordes of CUAV reflected, "That's also part of the motivation—having this bad experience of power." It was clear that, in part, the organizations are experimenting with shared leadership because traditional, hierarchical leadership is not resonant for the individual leaders themselves.

They are also experimenting with shared leadership structures because top-down leadership is in contradiction to the work that they do as organizations. In various ways, each of the organizations is trying to change the way that people, organizations, and systems relate to one another. They are all concerned with elevating the voices and wisdom of marginalized people and communities. They are all concerned with the conscious, responsible use of power. Given that, they feel a responsibility to structure themselves to the reality they are working toward. Elissa Sloan Perry of MAG put it this way: "We were really, really clear that MAG needed to shift its internal practice behavior and culture to reflect the world that we are contributing to making." Fred Sherburn-Zimmer of Housing Rights Committee talked about developing a committee-based structure that keeps the decisions with those most involved and impacted by an issue: "While we do all affect each other's work, it doesn't make much sense that folks who are not in public housing and working with public housing tenants, or come from public housing, have much say-so over the public housing program." He added that engaging tenants is their next challenge in sharing leadership system wide: "We have tenant leaders who are not only taking on their own eviction, but are taking on evictions of everyone on their block. These people need to have a part in our decision making, strategy, and vision." Similarly, CUAV came to the realization that internal leadership composition and structure are directly linked to external impact. According to Lidia Salazar, "We were noticing that our programmatic work wasn't reaching marginalized communities. So, in our transition, we also changed our mission to center black and brown people, people of color. Then, in turn, it made sense to have a leadership model that reflected this in order to reach these communities and in order to make informed decisions for the organization." These evolutions of leadership structure are breaking down the false distinction between the organizations' external organizational identities and their internal practices.

2. Sharing leadership is not only about the individual leaders sharing power; it is also an organization-wide ethos.

Each of the organizations is working to include the voices of all staff in decision making and direction setting for the organization and to adopt practices that deepen equity on all fronts. Susan Misra said, "Shared leadership does really work, and when it's working well, it's not just about the few people who are the codirectors, it's actually about the whole organization." Essex Lordes reflected, "Unless you have a certain background or training, oftentimes in organizations you're not allowed to bring whatever your lived experience is. For us, it's having a structure that allows people to embody more of their leadership; to be able to bring the fullness of their experience; to bring in that wisdom that we inherently have as oppressed people in different ways and turn that into insight into how we can support the broader community."

Building equity internally extends to organization-wide practices such as compensation, which most of the groups had lately rethought. As Elissa Sloan Perry described it, "Internally, we are working to get closer to a practice where the highest paid do not make more than three times the lowest paid. We have also created a decision-making guide so that people understand where and how they can make decisions on their own." Darlene Nipper added, "We, too, have a policy of no one making more than three times anyone else. And there are others besides the codirectors who have lots of decision-making authority. Give lots of different people the opportunity

to make decisions [we say] and move me and Akaya out of the center of decision making for lots of the work.” Institutionalizing shared leadership and equity means giving everyone, not just the codirectors, the power to step into their capacity to lead.

3. Sharing leadership is not about less work; in some cases, it may be about more.

For the majority of us, neither the primary motivation nor the result so far of shared leadership is having less work to do. As Darlene Nipper put it, “It’s not that you are doing less work or that somehow having two people is going to reduce the work. It actually is a lot of work, but the results are exponentially better, in my experience. What we’re able to accomplish together is way more than I believe any one person could accomplish.” Interestingly, some codirectors were attempting to split the job into fairly distinct domains, while others have the same job description and work out where they intend to co-decide and where they can act on their own. And co-deciding, of course, can add time to decision making—a challenge that was raised by some. Sean Thomas-Breitfeld said, “I think among staff under us there is frustration sometimes around the length of time it takes to make decisions that lead to action.” Susan Misra added, “Theoretically, you could have one person do it faster, but I think that Elissa and I are doing it better collectively. It’s not a time-sharing strategy, though I think initially we thought it would be.” Shared leadership can challenge the notion that decision-making efficiency, rather than decision-making quality, is the desired end game.

Though it’s not less work, the leaders spoke to another kind of burden being lessened: the psychological burden of solo positional leadership. Frances Kunreuther, who had led Building Movement Project on her own before joining forces with Sean Thomas-Breitfeld, described the difference this way: “It’s not fewer hours, but it is less pressure and isolation. I can’t even say how different it is. It’s dramatically different, which is a big sustainability issue for me.” And Darlene Nipper said that although she and her codirector consult each other constantly and “partner-lead,” their distinct role clarity “brings me a lot of psychological space to really focus on what I bring to the table in terms of my gifts and attributes for our work.”

4. Sharing leadership requires balancing individual and collective voice.

All agreed that shared leadership requires ongoing attention to the issue of voice. Elissa Sloan Perry asked, “Where do we speak as ourselves individually and where do we speak together? For example, one of the things we have talked about is creating a codirectors e-mail address so that there are things that people cannot attach to just one of us.” Darlene Nipper added, “I think, depending on how we demonstrate and use our voices differently, it can create some fissures—a little bit of different people aligning in different ways. So that just takes a lot of care and attention.” And there is the outside world, of course, that often expects one voice. As Frances Kunreuther said, “Funders can sometimes be a challenge in that they expect to talk with the person they know; I wouldn’t underestimate that.” Clear and frequent communication between the leaders is the foundation for their clarity of voice with others.

5. Sharing leadership is both relational and replicable.

When it came to the question of whether the organizations would continue with shared leadership if one or more of the people currently sharing power were to leave, to a person the folks in variations of the codirector model were clear that the quality of the relationship between them, which often pre-dated their current leadership partnership, was a critical success ingredient. Elissa Sloan Perry said, “Susan and I are pretty clear that one of the things that really makes this work is that we knew and trusted each other pretty deeply before we came into these roles.” Similarly, Darlene Nipper said, “I’d been working with Rockwood as a consultant and trainer for a number of years. Akaya is someone I had gotten close to and really respected.” And Sean Thomas-Breitfeld said, “Frances and I had a very strong relationship, mutual trust, and admiration. I was really looking forward to learning with and from Frances.”

The group grappled with what these stories of close relationship meant for adoption of codirectorship and other shared leadership structures across the nonprofit sector. Sean Thomas-Breitfeld challenged us—and by extension the sector—eloquently: “I’m thinking about how many of us can’t imagine doing this with someone else. How do we reframe that as not a barrier to replicability? How do we instead lift up the virtue of relationship and of incorporating a value of relationship into leadership structures in our organizations? How do we make it a virtuous thing instead of saying, well, if people can’t find the right match, then this model is just this quixotic thing that only applies to a few random POC, queer-led organizations?” That’s a powerful reframe of who leads and how.

We left the conversation inspired to continue with our respective efforts and to stay in dialogue with one another and others wanting and needing something different from organizational leadership—something more closely aligned with our individual and organizational identities.

The authors thank the David and Lucile Packard Foundation and the Annie E. Casey Foundation for their generous support of this project.

ABOUT JEANNE BELL



[Jeanne Bell](#)

Jeanne Bell, MNA directs NPQ's Advancing Practice program to advance critical conversations about nonprofit management and leadership. She is the former CEO of CompassPoint, where she stewarded the strategic evolution of the organization to focus on emerging leaders and emergent leadership practice with an explicit orientation to social change. She is the author of numerous articles on nonprofit leadership, strategy, and sustainability and co-author of several books, including most recently, *The Sustainability Mindset* (Jossey-Bass, 2015). Jeanne's board leadership has included officer positions at the Alliance for Nonprofit Management and Intersection for the Arts. She currently serves on the Advisory Board for the Master of Nonprofit Administration program at the University of San Francisco's School of Management.

ABOUT PAOLA CUBÍAS



[Paola Cubías](#)

Paola Cubías is an associate project director at CompassPoint Nonprofit Services.

ABOUT BYRON JOHNSON



[Byron Johnson](#)

Byron Johnson, CFRE, is a senior project director at CompassPoint Nonprofit Services.
