

## **Common Myths about Shared Leadership**

**A. E. Ted Wall**

Over the past several years, certain myths have circulated about the nature of shared leadership. Let us take a closer look at the validity of the following three myths.

- Shared leadership is based on a laissez-faire style that often results in disorganized activity and, at times, chaos.
- Shared leadership often takes away influence and power from formal leaders.
- Shared leadership is relatively easy to implement in most settings.

Recent research on shared leadership sheds some light on the above three myths. In relation to the first myth that assumes that shared leadership often results in disorganized activity, the research evidence actually shows that formal leaders need to provide direction by developing a shared vision and establishing a common set of realistic and realizable goals that motivate people to work together to reach them. Moreover, formal leaders need to ensure people are flexibly aligned towards reaching this commonly developed vision and its related goals (Harris, Leithwood, Day, Sammons and Hopkins, 2007; Leithwood & Mascall, 2008; Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008; Muijs & Harris, 2006).

In relation to the second myth that states that shared leadership decreases the influence and power of formal leaders, recent research indicates that formal leaders need to be willing to relinquish some of their leadership activities to others, if shared leadership is to become a reality. Although some leaders find this difficult to do, those who are able to do so often find that they actually gain greater influence in their organizations. In fact, given the pace of change, formal leaders need the support of a network of leaders. Hence, in many situations, shared leadership is the only viable route for a leader to take. Quite simply, effective shared leadership allows formal leaders to focus their efforts on tasks that they alone can do, while empowering others to also lead in areas where they are competent to do so (Lambert, 1998, 2002; MacBeath, 2002; Muijs & Harris, 2006; Stoll, 2009).

The third myth may well be the most common one as it assumes that effective shared leadership is easy to implement. Again, research shows that in settings where there is a lack of collegiality and collaboration, it is very difficult to implement shared leadership practices. Formal and informal leaders need to have sufficient leadership knowledge and skills to effectively implement shared leadership. Hence, in many situations shared leadership requires the building of distributed leadership expertise if it is to be implemented in an effective and efficient manner (Harris, Leithwood, Day, Sammons & Hopkins, 2007; Lambert, 1998, 2002; Leithwood & Mascall, 2008). One of the major purposes of this website is to encourage formal as well as informal leaders to develop increased leadership expertise so that shared leadership can truly become a reality.

### **Selected References**

- Harris, A. (2004). Distributed leadership and school improvement. *Educational Management Administration and Leadership*, 32 (1), 11-24.
- Harris, A., Leithwood, K., Day C., Sammons, P., & Hopkins, D. (2007). Distributed leadership and organizational change: Reviewing the evidence, *Journal of Educational Change*, 8:337–347
- Lambert, L. (1998). How to build leadership capacity. *Educational Leadership*, April, 17–19
- Lambert, Linda (2002). A framework for shared leadership, *Educational Leadership*, 59, 8.
- Leithwood, K. & Mascall, B. ( 2008). Collective leadership effects on student achievement, *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 44, 4, 529-561.
- Leithwood, Kenneth, Harris, Alma and David Hopkins (2008). Seven strong claims about successful school leadership, *School Leadership & Management*, 28: 1, 27- 42.
- MacBeath, John (2006). A story of change: growing leadership for learning. *Journal of Educational Change*, 7:33-46.

Muijs, Daniel & Alma Harris (2006). Teacher led school improvement: Teacher leadership in the UK, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 22, 961-972.



[www.theleadershipwall.com](http://www.theleadershipwall.com)