



# Free Yourself by Sharing Leadership Duties

**Overwhelmed? Lighten your load by sharing leadership tasks. You'll improve your organization's performance at the same time.**

By Barb Litchinsky and Tamasin Ford

**W**hat does it mean to be a nonprofit leader in the 21st century?

Those who take on nonprofit leadership positions embrace an opportunity to have a positive impact on clients, organizations, and the entire nonprofit sector. However, leading a nonprofit organization in today's world is also accompanied by huge challenges. Executive directors frequently encounter:

- **overwhelming accountability and reporting requirements** from partners, funders, and legislators
- **the paradox of competing with collaborators** for funding, board members, and volunteers
- **growing scale and complexity** in human resource needs
- **constant increases in financial requirements** such as rent and technology.

All these challenges exist within a complex and changing environment, marked by climbing government, public, and media scrutiny of nonprofit organizations.

With such an enormous scope of responsibility, executive directors may become overwhelmed, burnt

The executive director is still the formal leader.

out, or less effective than the organization needs them to be. In all fairness, the complex combination of leadership requirements is often too much to expect from any one person, no matter how skilled. A solution can be found in a management style that is rapidly gaining popularity: shared leadership.

## Why Share Leadership?

Shared leadership offers an approach in which power is distributed rather than assigned hierarchically. Leadership is built on a team of individuals who work together to create a common purpose or goal, with each person contributing skills and knowledge, and holding each other accountable for the collective result.

Shared leadership is based on interdependence, so it must be sensitive to diversity and cultural norms. It values democratic processes, honesty, and shared ethics.

There are many good reasons to adopt a shared leadership model. It helps solve the thorny problem of finding good successors to take over when people leave, since everyone on the team learns the organization's workings and gains experience in leading. Shared leadership helps people develop their talents and learn new skills, which raises morale. It provides a sustainable, robust approach to leadership, responding to research on the shortages of nonprofit leaders. Most important, shared leadership addresses the issue of the sheer vol-

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ume and complexity of work that must be carried out for a nonprofit organization to thrive.

For executive directors, sharing leadership is the most sustainable way to unchain themselves from the multitude of daily management decisions and find time to work on high level, strategic, and outward facing tasks such as finding champions in the community, advocating for change, and building partnerships within the sector. Allowing input and support from many sources also contributes to organizational success and the achievement of greater social goals within the community.

## How Do You Make It Work?

Although most nonprofit leaders will be intrigued by the idea of shared leadership, it can be challenging to determine how best to apply these ideas. Shared leadership requires a three-way partnership among the board, senior staff, and executive director. Each must have a well-defined role and the trust of the other parties to execute that role effectively. In addition, leadership must be distributed within the organization, empowering staff at all

levels to make decisions and drive processes forward.

To implement a shared leadership model, you must address five essential areas:

**1. Shared vision, purpose, and goals.** Vision exists at many levels, from the organizational vision down to the goals of a one-time project. It's critical for team members to agree on the vision and capture it in written form so that it can be circulated and referred to. Once a shared purpose is present, team members can exhibit commitment rather than simply compliance, resulting in greater buy-in and ownership of outcomes.

**2. Shared values.** Values guide team members in their interactions with each other. By making an explicit commitment to sharing power, respecting individuals, upholding ethical standards, and maintaining openness and honesty, the process can be rewarding for all involved. Shared values are also a key part of creating a safe, supportive environment for taking risks and encouraging people to grow and reach their full potential.

**3. Structural supports.** Vision and values may not provide detailed guidance on everyday tasks and decisions, so incorporating standardized management structures such as detailed policy and procedure manuals will yield many benefits. Leadership team members will appreciate the consistency of such an approach. Shared leadership is undermined when each individual in a leadership role appears to be operating with a different set of standards.

**4. Communications.** Shared leadership isn't the same as allowing every staff member to operate independently. Communication is critical to the effectiveness of this model, as it supports clarity, accountability for results, and sharing of knowledge. Formal processes for sharing information let board and staff know where to find documents and updates. Such processes also provide confidence that each person is fully informed.

**5. Redefined role for the executive.** Even though leadership is shared, the executive director is still the formal leader and can't abdicate the accountability this entails. In a shared leadership model, however, executive directors fulfill new roles. They act more as facilitators and educators, putting the environment and resources in place to allow creative problem solving and goal achievement. Trusting the team to handle most daily operations, the executive can work on relationships that will contribute to the organization's current and future success.

There is great potential for the nonprofit sector to be energized by the widespread adoption of shared leadership principles. Through shared leadership, people at all levels can contribute to driving the sector forward, finding innovative solutions, and delivering caring, effective service to those who need it. ■

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### Your Go-To List

Sharpen your shared leadership skills with these resources, available at [www.snpo.org/members](http://www.snpo.org/members):

- **Shared Leadership: A New Model** (Vol. 14, No. 5)
- **Creating a Values-Based Road Map** (Vol. 23, No. 2)
- **Zen and the Art of Team Building** (Vol. 20, No. 1)
- **Are You a Collaborative Leader?** (Vol. 15, No. 2)
- **Putting Vision to Powerful Use in Your Organization** (Vol. 13, No. 4)
- **How Do Leaders of Nonprofit Partnerships Foster Collaboration?** (Vol. 22, No. 3)
- **The Overwhelmed Office: Six Fixes** (Vol. 28, No. 4)

