



Beyond the noise & rushing around: The role of Distributed Leadership in 'Getting things done'

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Arguably one of the most difficult aspects for organisations to manage is that of getting things done on a daily basis. A myriad of priorities and activities compete constantly for our attention, leaving too little time and energy to actually do what needs to be done.

Distributed leadership is a key factor in lessening the impact of “too much to do and too little time to do it in”. It provides an approach to overall leadership in organisations that addresses issues resulting from decentralised decision-making or from different/specific local circumstances.

Amongst the many benefits of **distributed leadership** are: structural cost savings, enhanced organisational agility, and preventing the wastage of individual potential through under-utilisation.

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Bioss Southern Africa, a leading research consultancy, uses appreciative approaches to help build capacity, assist in unlocking potential and in realising organisational outcomes. Bioss Southern Africa has been working with a global client base since the early 1990's. Areas of specialisation include leadership development, organisational structuring, talent and succession management.

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The Problem

Towards the end of the 20th century we looked forward to a different world-of-work. Technology held promises of the 'paperless-office' and increased productivity whilst working fewer hours. Innovative organisational practices were reflected by ideas such as flexi-time and telecommuting. Many of us hoped for an improved work-life balance.

Almost a decade into the 21st century our attention has shifted to topics such as globalisation, diversity management and dealing with the practicalities resulting from the acceleration of technological innovations.

Ironically:

- Cheaper communication has escalated the price of staying on top of the available information deluge.
- 'Laboursaving' devices have resulted in an escalation of activities. We may spend less time on what we used to, but we have created more things to spend time on.
- The drive for increased productivity has led to 'lean-and-mean' delayed organisations, leaving less people to do more with fewer personal boundaries. It has become simpler to take your work with you on holiday or

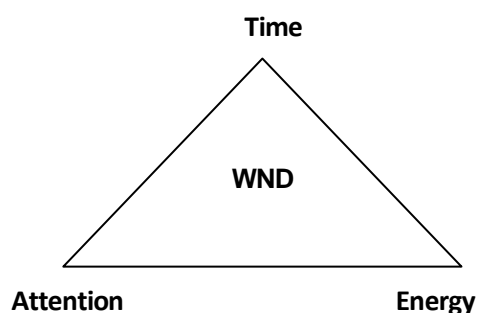
home on the weekend, as opposed to handing over to someone else (assuming of course there is a 'someone else' to hand over to).

- Compliance in terms of legal and financial regulatory frameworks has increased to the point of becoming a nightmare.

The reality of the situation has been an intensification of things to do; too many activities, too many priorities, yet so little constructive work being done and seemingly so little time to do it in. Hamsters on a treadmill needing a caffeine-rush to keep going ... our attention is diffused by looking into too many directions at once ... our energies are dispersed over time as we address the same problems over and over again ...

Time and opportunity are not renewable resources. Once lost, they are gone forever. The good news is that more opportunities may arise, provided we can escape the traps which prevented us from grasping those already lost.

With too much to do and too little time to do it in, the questions we need to ask are – **what do we need to focus our attention on, and where and when should we expend our energy?** Our investment of attention, energy and available time can be summarised as 'what-needs-doing' (WND):



Part of the solution may be **distributed leadership**...

The Case for Distributed Leadership

The Distributed leadership Land-and Mindscape

Distributed leadership is implicit in our views of leadership. However, like so many other ideas in life, we have to name it and put a spotlight on it in order to explore and appreciate its contribution.

In essence, our view of **distributed leadership** is about recognising that whilst senior leaders in an organisation cannot be everywhere at once, daily decisions still have to be made – everywhere and all the time. It is the quality of these decisions that determine the effectiveness of the organisation, not just with regard to achieving its goals, but also in terms of critical aspects such as risk management, safety and reputation.

Thus the relevance of **distributed leadership** can be summarised in the form of the following question:

How do we raise the consistency and quality of daily decision-making in our organisation?

The idea of **distributed leadership** is not yet well established, yet it is conceptually rich in potential interpretation and application. The term is used in two broad categories:

- **Decentralised leadership**, where it is seen as the solution to dealing with decentralisation and the abundance of related opportunities. Geographical dispersion of operations, knowledge workers and technological support mechanisms are all factors that encourage a **distributed leadership** approach. Decentralised leadership includes the need to ensure faster reaction time to the client needs or changes in the environment and is often interpreted as an 'agile' organisation that can respond to or initiate interventions quicker than its competition.
- **Local leadership**, where it typically refers to decision-making within specific environmental settings or circumstances. This normally requires interpretation and adaptation of company policy based on these specific conditions. Examples include managing a production plant or decisions made by a school principal.

The Case for Distributed leadership

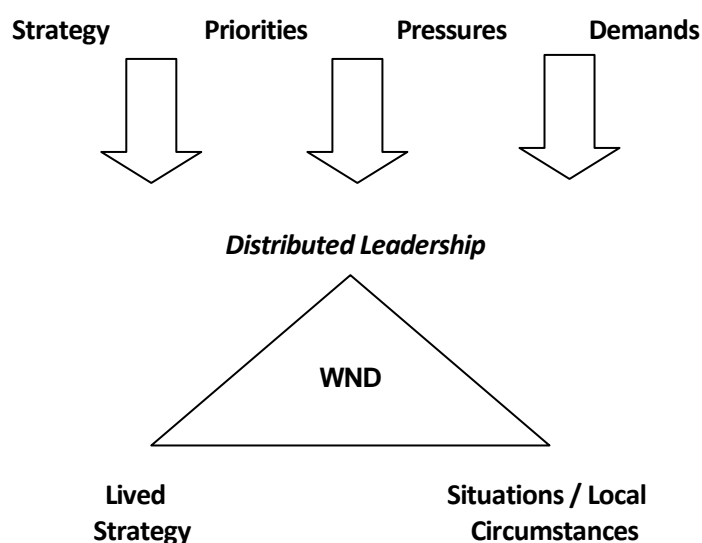
Whilst there are many definitions of and approaches to leadership, two elements seem to be most generally accepted. Firstly, leaders should make a difference and, secondly, leaders need to achieve results through others.

Consider the conversations: *"I am so tired of doing everything, can't anyone get this right?"* and *"How am I supposed to lead this project when all I seem to do is put on my overalls, pick up the shovel and sort out the chokes myself while everyone stands back and watches – I can't keep doing this and we can't afford for the machinery to fail!"* Of course, ranking high as most commonly heard: *"I can't understand how we continue to work 16 hour days on this and still seem to exceed cost and never meet target!"*

So does **distributed leadership** make a difference and achieve results through others? Would this help to get things done?

The answer lies in **distributed leadership** as the interface between organisational strategy/purpose and the different situations or local circumstances encountered in daily organisational life. It becomes the lived strategy for making the 'what-needs-doing' happen.

Distributed leadership as interface between organisational strategy, time pressures/priorities and decentralised/local decision-making:



It stands to reason then that ***distributed leadership*** is everyday leadership that can be seen everywhere across the organisation and at all levels, with the explicit purpose of:

- Ensuring that organisational strategy is carried out by making daily decisions that relate to its implementation and execution; as well as decisions regarding practical implications, consequences and risks of the strategy being deployed.
- Dealing simultaneously with normal operational risks, regulatory aspects and safety matters and professional standards and practices.
- Bringing into play the potential of the organisation and its people as different opportunities arise.
- Reducing misdirected and expensive activity-orientation by ensuring optimal utilisation of time and energy at appropriate levels in the organisation.

Team sports provide an analogy for understanding ***distributed leadership***. Each team has its head coach, assistant coaches and a captain. Modern trends lean increasing towards teams relying on their senior players to make the right judgement calls on the field during the game. They are acknowledged as a largely untapped source of experience, competence, expertise and wisdom that would waste away if not used. Under-utilised individuals are preventable wastage on the sports field.

From an organisational perspective, under-utilised team members do not only represent lost opportunity, but also reflect poorly on the quality of its leadership. From the individuals' perspective, under-utilisation leads to frustration, lack of job satisfaction, and could possibly result in unrealised career or professional possibilities.

For organisations therefore, ***distributed leadership*** represents a business imperative with regard to:

- **Cost savings.** As recognised in the Total Quality Management approach, the closer and quicker that decisions can be made to operational processes, the lower the costs of implementing such decisions. Conversely, the higher up the organisational hierarchy that these decisions are made, the more costly the implementation.
- Similarly, escalation of decision-making regarding organisational structure or hierarchy inevitably leads to **time related loss** through the resulting time lapses in these decisions being made. This affects response time and organisational agility, and may also open the door for additional complexities to affect or confuse the outcomes of the decisions once made.
- **Negating the risks of under-utilisation.** Enabling those with the expertise and ability to take on leadership roles and ownership of operational decision-making may be the biggest single counter to under-utilisation and wastage of potential that the organisation can make.

The Implications of *Distributed Leadership*

Distributed leadership is therefore not about reinventing leadership – it is about reframing it. For leaders to adopt a ***distributed leadership*** approach requires a mind shift from:

How does what I do as a leader ensure the success of the organisation?

To:

How do I as a leader ensure that others can make decisions that will ensure the success of the organisation?

Adopting a ***distributed leadership*** approach includes recognition and acknowledgment of the way things need to be done in the future, as opposed to the way things were done in the past. In practice this will include and require the following organisation-wide attention and systems:

1. Ensure that the individuals in ***distributed leadership*** positions are able to address the challenges they have to face. Rushing individuals into positions they are not ready for, or expecting people to deliver what they cannot, will benefit neither the organisation nor those affected, and the results may be disastrous for both
2. Provide sufficient space for individuals to take on and express accountability, ownership and leadership whilst also supporting their efforts.
3. Ensure appropriate structuring of organisational levels. This is a shift from an emphasis on the hierarchy to that of enabling decision-making where the decisions are required.
4. Manage mutual expectations. Providing a mandate as opposed to issuing instructions. Leaders need to understand issues, not to be told what to do.
5. Invest in individuals and their specific development. In a command-and-control structure it becomes easy to replace individuals with qualifications and experience that appear sufficient. In a distributed leadership situation the individual's ability to apply tacit knowledge is more important.
6. Ensure essential discipline. Just as fitness forms the cornerstone in sports achievement so does paying attention, for example, to what happens prior to, in and after meetings. Today, those neglected fundamental managerial practices are more relevant than ever before. They include preparing for and allowing others to prepare for meetings, utilising meeting time in a focused and appropriate way through clarifying roles and responsibilities and subsequent actions.
7. Respect the responsibilities and time of others. ***Distributed leadership*** recognises that everyone in the organisation forms part of a bigger whole and plays dedicated roles accordingly, as opposed to being at the beck and call of others.
8. Ensure that effective performance management systems are in place to measure and reward the success of ***distributed leadership*** in practice.

In summary

Distributed leadership is an overall leadership approach and supporting system that deals with the challenges of decentralised- or local leadership decisions. It is key to ensuring return of the overall organisational investment in strategy and structure, and a determinant in the longevity of such investment.

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