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Subsidiarity as a guiding principle for shared leadership

Abstract

Shared leadership and related notions of collective leadership are attractive to scholars and practitioners seeking to overcome the limitations of mainstream leader-centric models (Pearce & Conger, 2003). Research investigating leadership as a joint endeavour has burst in the past few decades (Ospina et al., 2020). It has been proposed that to address sustainability challenges and other pressing contemporary issues, it is fruitful to view leadership as an emergent, relational process and to strive for new forms of shared, distributed leadership (Bendell & Little, 2015; Kempster & Carroll, 2016). However, if the idea of some actors being more influential than others is left out entirely, it becomes difficult to distinguish leadership from other types of social processes, such as teamwork or organising in general (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012; Alvesson & Blom, 2021). Leadership cannot be fully shared; if it is fully shared, it is better not called leadership, since the term loses any added value (Shamir, 2012: 487, cited in Uhl-Bien et al. 2014: 90). So we might ask: is there any particular role for leaders that is not easily or ideally shared or distributed? Is there any particular responsibility that falls on leaders in a connected world in need of reform (cf. Maak, 2016)?

This paper proposes that the political-philosophical principle of *subsidiarity* (Accetti, 2019: 111–138; Levay, 2022) is useful for rethinking the role and responsibilities of individual leaders when leadership is understood and meant to be practiced as a largely shared process. The concept is rooted in Catholic social teaching and in Christian Democratic political thought (Accetti, 2019; Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2014). The principle of subsidiarity means that higher levels of decision making, such as the state, should primarily support and coordinate lower levels, such as individual persons and voluntary associations, and only get directly involved in issues that lower levels cannot handle themselves. The principle also means that higher levels of decision making have a particular duty to assist lower levels and

to promote the interest of the whole. As formulated by philosopher Jacques Maritain: 'The state is that part, within the body politic, that *specializes in the interest of the whole*' (Maritain, 1951, 12–13).

When applied to leadership, the principle of subsidiarity implies that formal and informal leaders should not unnecessarily try to boost their influence on followers, but rather seek to respect their autonomy, coordinate their actions, and support them when needed (cf. Naughton et al., 2015). According to Melé (2005), the role of top managers in business organisations is crucial in putting the principle of subsidiarity into practice. They need to encourage employees' initiatives and 'strive to maintain unity within the diversity in order to achieve the goals of the whole organisation' (Melé, 2005, p. 303). From this viewpoint, then, shared leadership is primarily motivated on ethical grounds, and there is a specific sphere of necessary and legitimate activity for individual leaders, which consists of balancing priorities, deliberating dilemma, and reminding others of the wider picture. These conceptions may be combined with and inform current post-heroic, collective leadership perspectives, such as shared, democratic, or caring leadership (e.g., Levay & Andersson-Bäck, 2022).

This paper expounds the subsidiarity principle in societal, organisational, and leadership context (Accetti, 2019; Delsol, 1993; Melé, 2005; Naughton et al., 2015). It illustrates and explores how shared leadership in line with the subsidiarity principle may play out in practice through the case of politician Gro Harlem Brundtland's chairing of the UN-appointed commission commonly named after her, which launched the concept of sustainable development in the 1980s. As described by political scholars (Manulak, 2013; McChesney, 1991; Reid-Henry, 2021), the case shows a leader who engaged a range of influential actors with divergent backgrounds around a common goal. Through a pragmatic process of consultation, compromise, and political manoeuvring, Brundtland and the other members of the commission made an impact on the world scene. The case illustrates that even when leadership is essentially shared among several persons and collectivities, an individual leader can make a difference by helping others identify and gather around what they have in common.

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