

## Distributed Leadership in a Higher Education setting

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*Distributed leadership is a collaborative approach where leadership responsibilities are shared across various individuals and groups rather than being concentrated in a single leader or hierarchical position.*

### **Culture of collegiality**

This model recognises the expertise and contributions of staff at all levels, fostering a *culture of collegiality, trust, and shared accountability*. The idea centres around the notion of breaking up the key activities and processes within the organisation and sharing (distributing) the responsibility to ensure maximum involvement. In the higher education context - it usually emphasises the need for staff (particularly full-time staff) to be involved in decision making through committee membership.

### **Developing initiative**

In the higher education environment, distributed leadership can be applied by empowering academic and professional staff to *take initiative* in decision-making, curriculum development, and research projects. This can take on many forms including - cross-disciplinary teams to tackle complex challenges; encouraging faculty members to lead teaching innovation; and/or involving students in governance processes. The idea of developing initiative is critical to the success of an organisation. There is a *close link with good succession planning*.

## Enhancing engagement

This approach enhances engagement, supports professional growth, and ensures diverse perspectives are considered in shaping institutional strategies. The model attempts (and usually ensures) higher levels of *commitment and ownership* across the organisation – and also provides the opportunity for staff to become more ‘involved’.

## Non-hierarchical challenges

Developing the notion of shared leadership is not without its *challenges*. It is based on the premise that the senior management group is comfortable with devolution (sharing decision making and ownership) – and that staff (and students for that matter) are enthusiastic and keen to commit to the added responsibilities. Along with the opportunity to participate – comes the responsibility to *accept the outcomes of that process* – and not simply ignore the recommendations/changes.

## Advantages of Distributed Leadership

There are a number of advantages of the approach including -

- *Enhanced Collaboration*: Distributed leadership fosters a *collaborative work environment* where team members share responsibilities and contribute to decision-making.
- *Improved Innovation*: By leveraging the diverse skills and perspectives of multiple leaders, organisations often see *increased creativity and innovative solutions*.
- *Greater Flexibility*: With leadership roles spread across the team, organisations are *more agile and able to respond quickly to change*.
- *Staff Empowerment*: Distributed leadership empowers individuals at all levels, *promoting ownership, motivation, and professional growth*.
- *Resilience and Continuity*: Sharing leadership responsibilities *reduces dependence on a single leader*, ensuring continuity during absences or transitions and *enhancing succession*.
- *Improved Morale*: Involving more people in leadership *encourages engagement and boosts staff morale*.

## Challenges of Distributed Leadership

Distributed leadership, while offering many advantages such as increased engagement and shared responsibility, also presents unique challenges. One major issue is ensuring **clear communication across all levels**, as misunderstandings can arise when multiple individuals are involved in decision-making. Additionally, there may be difficulties in maintaining **consistency and alignment with organisational goals**, especially when leaders are geographically dispersed or working across different teams.

Another challenge is **balancing autonomy with accountability**. Individuals may struggle to take ownership of their roles without regular guidance, potentially leading to gaps in performance or duplicated efforts. Building trust and fostering collaboration among distributed leaders takes time and effort, and there is a risk that some voices may dominate while others are overlooked. Addressing these challenges requires deliberate strategies, ongoing support, and a strong organisational culture.

*By embracing **distributed leadership**, higher education institutions can respond more effectively to rapid changes, promote a sense of ownership among staff and students, and create a more dynamic, inclusive learning environment. Ultimately, this leads to improved outcomes in teaching, scholarship, and community engagement. It does, however, require a degree of courage on the part of the senior management because it will involve change and alternative perspectives.*

Also worth reading –

Non-Hierarchical Management Systems -  
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10 traits of a good leader -  
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