

# The Leaderless Leadership Style

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## ABSTRACT

Leaderless leadership style is a leadership style that emphasizes a decentralized approach to decision-making and guidance within a group or organization. In this style, there is no singular figurehead or formal leader who takes charge; instead, the leadership is distributed among the team members, with everyone taking responsibility and contributing to the direction and success of the group. Through desktop research, this paper has discussed the characteristics, benefits, disadvantages and challenges of the leaderless leadership style. The paper proposes the Stanley Kavale theory; **The Leaderless Leadership Style Implementation Theory** for implementing the leaderless leadership style. The study concluded that leaderless leadership style offers significant benefits including increased engagement, enhanced innovation, better decision-making, skill development, team resilience, and a strong sense of ownership and accountability. Finally, it concluded that the leaderless leadership style should be encouraged in organizations that require new breath to spear them up.

**Key words:** implementation, leaderless, leadership, style, theory

## The Research Gap

While the concept of leaderless leadership is gaining attention, there is limited research that examines how this leadership style functions and its effectiveness across diverse organizational contexts and cultural settings. Specifically, understanding how leaderless leadership works in hierarchical versus flat organizational structures, or its impact in individualistic versus collectivist cultures, could provide deeper insights. The questions would be; how is the acceptance and effectiveness of leaderless leadership vary between different cultural settings? For example, does it work better in cultures with a strong hierarchy or in more egalitarian cultures? How does leaderless leadership function in different organizational models? Does it thrive in startups or creative industries with informal structures, but struggle in more traditional, hierarchical corporations? Does the absence of a clear leader affect employee motivation, job satisfaction, and productivity? How do employees perceive autonomy and accountability in leaderless systems? How are decisions made in leaderless leadership models, and how is conflict managed without a central authority figure? What tools or processes ensure cohesion and direction in such environments?

## INTRODUCTION

The leaderless leadership style, also known as shared leadership or distributed leadership, is a management approach where leadership roles and responsibilities are distributed among group members rather than centralized in a single leader. This style emphasizes collaboration, empowerment, and collective decision-making. It is a management approach where leadership roles and responsibilities are distributed among group members rather than centralized in a single leader. This style emphasizes collaboration, collective decision-making, and the shared responsibility of guiding the team towards achieving its goals. It involves empowering all members to contribute to the leadership process, leveraging their individual strengths, skills, and expertise. The focus is on creating an environment where leadership is a collective activity, fostering a sense of ownership, engagement, and mutual support within the team (Wang, Waldman, & Zhang, 2014).

## Characteristics of the Leaderless Leadership Style

The leaderless leadership style is characterized by the decentralization of leadership roles and responsibilities among team members. This approach contrasts with traditional hierarchical leadership, where a single leader holds primary responsibility for guiding the team. The leaderless leadership style is characterized by;

- i. Decision-Making is decentralized as it is a collective process rather than being concentrated in the hands of a single leader. Team members collaboratively contribute their insights and expertise, leading to more democratic and inclusive decisions. This approach encourages a sense of ownership and accountability among all members, as seen in studies of team-based leadership in organizational settings (Carson, Tesluk, & Marrone, 2007).
- ii. Team members have increased empowerment and autonomy to take initiative and make decisions within their areas of expertise. This empowerment fosters a sense of autonomy and can enhance motivation and job satisfaction. Research indicates that when individuals feel empowered, they are more likely to engage actively and take responsibility for their work (Seibert, Wang, & Courtright, 2011).
- iii. There is shared leadership responsibility distributed among all members, promoting accountability and ownership. Each member is encouraged to step into leadership roles as needed, leveraging their unique strengths and skills. This distribution of responsibility helps in building a more resilient and adaptive team (Pearce & Sims, 2002).
- iv. Leaderless leadership styles mostly operates in a collaborative environment as leaders emphasizes collaboration and teamwork. Open communication, mutual trust, and respect are fundamental to this approach. Teams practicing shared leadership are often more innovative, as they benefit from the diverse perspectives and collective brainstorming of all members (Hoch & Dulebohn, 2013).
- v. There is increased flexibility and adaptability and direction can shift based on the needs of the group and the skills of its members. This flexibility allows teams to adapt quickly to changing circumstances and challenges. Such adaptability is crucial in dynamic environments where responsiveness is key to success (Day, Gronn, & Salas, 2004).
- vi. There is collective efficacy as members belief in their collective ability to achieve goals. This collective confidence can enhance team performance and cohesion. Studies have shown that teams with high collective efficacy are more likely to set challenging goals and persist in the face of obstacles (Bandura, 2000).

### **Benefits of the Leaderless Leadership Style**

The leaderless leadership style offers numerous benefits that can enhance the performance, cohesion, and innovation of a team. By decentralizing leadership roles and responsibilities, this approach fosters a collaborative and inclusive environment where every member has the opportunity to contribute and lead.

First, leaderless leadership supports increased engagement. When team members feel that their voices are heard and their contributions valued, they are more likely to be invested in the group's success. This heightened sense of involvement can lead to greater motivation, commitment, and overall job satisfaction (Wang et al., 2014). Secondly, this leadership style enhances group innovation. Diverse perspectives and collective brainstorming sessions often generate more creative and effective solutions than a single leader could achieve alone. For instance, the tech giant Google employs a shared leadership approach in many of its projects, encouraging team members to contribute ideas and take the lead in areas where they excel. This has led to numerous innovative products and services, such as Google Maps and Gmail, which emerged from collaborative efforts rather than top-down directives (Garvin, 2013). The pooling of different ideas and approaches encourages out-of-the-box thinking and adaptability, essential traits in a rapidly changing world. Better decision-making is another hallmark of the leaderless leadership style. Decisions made collectively tend to be more balanced and well-rounded, as they incorporate the insights and expertise of multiple team members. This reduces the risk of bias and blind spots that can occur when decisions are made by a single individual. A study on decision-making in self-managed teams found that groups practicing shared leadership made more effective and higher-quality decisions compared to those with traditional hierarchical structures (Pearce & Sims, 2002).

Furthermore, this leadership style promotes the development of individual skills. Team members have the opportunity to step into leadership roles, gaining experience and confidence in areas they might not have

explored otherwise. This not only benefits the individuals but also strengthens the overall capacity of the team. For example, at W.L. Gore & Associates, the company behind Gore-Tex, employees are encouraged to take on leadership roles based on their interests and expertise, which has resulted in a highly innovative and adaptive organization (Hamel & Breen, 2007). Lastly, shared leadership fosters a strong sense of ownership and accountability among team members. When everyone feels responsible for the success of the group, they are more likely to take initiative, address issues proactively, and support one another in achieving their collective goals. The leaderless approach also contributes to a more resilient team structure. By distributing leadership responsibilities, the team becomes less dependent on any single person. This means that the team can continue to function effectively even if one member is absent or leaves, ensuring continuity and stability. Research in organizational behavior supports this, showing that teams with distributed leadership are more adaptable and better able to handle disruptions (Carson et al., 2007).

Lastly, shared leadership fosters a strong sense of ownership and accountability among team members. When everyone feels responsible for the success of the group, they are more likely to take initiative, address issues proactively, and support one another in achieving their collective goals. This was demonstrated in a study of distributed leadership in educational settings, where teachers who shared leadership responsibilities reported higher levels of commitment and accountability, leading to improved student outcomes (Spillane et al., 2004).

### **Disadvantages and Challenges of the Leaderless Leadership Style**

The leaderless leadership style offers numerous benefits, it also comes with several disadvantages that can pose significant challenges. By distributing leadership roles and responsibilities among team members rather than centralizing them, this approach can sometimes lead to issues related to coordination, accountability, and decision-making. One major disadvantage of the leaderless leadership style is the potential for coordination challenges. Without a central leader to guide and oversee activities, teams may struggle to coordinate their efforts effectively. This can lead to confusion and inefficiencies, particularly in large or complex projects. For example, in a study of shared leadership in project teams, researchers found that teams without a clear leader often experienced difficulties in aligning their efforts and maintaining a coherent strategy, which adversely affected their performance (Hoch & Dulebohn, 2013).

There has been evidence of a significant drawback is the difficulty in resolving conflicts in leaderless leadership styles. In the absence of a designated leader, disagreements among team members can be harder to manage and resolve. This can lead to prolonged conflicts, reduced morale, and a decline in productivity. A case in point is the experience of some self-managed teams in the tech industry, where the lack of a clear conflict resolution mechanism has sometimes resulted in unresolved disputes that hinder team progress (O'Toole, Galbraith, & Lawler, 2003). Accountability is another area where the leaderless leadership style can face challenges. With leadership responsibilities distributed among all members, it can be unclear who is ultimately accountable for the team's performance. This ambiguity can lead to a diffusion of responsibility, where team members assume others will take charge, resulting in a lack of ownership and commitment. Research has shown that teams practicing shared leadership may sometimes struggle with accountability issues, leading to lower performance and goal attainment (Pearce & Manz, 2005).

The leaderless approach can also lead to decision-making challenges. Without a clear leader to make final decisions, teams may experience delays and indecisiveness. This can be particularly problematic in situations that require swift action. For example, in emergency response teams, the absence of a central leader can lead to delays in critical decision-making processes, potentially endangering lives and property (Moynihan, 2009). Additionally, the leaderless leadership style may not suit all team members. Some individuals may struggle to adapt to a more fluid and less hierarchical structure, particularly if they are accustomed to traditional leadership models. This can lead to frustration and disengagement among team members who prefer clear directives and structure. A study on distributed leadership in educational settings found that teachers who were not comfortable with shared leadership often felt less satisfied and more stressed, impacting their overall effectiveness (Spillane et al., 2004). Finally, implementing a leaderless leadership style requires a strong foundation of trust, clear communication, and mutual respect among team members. Without these elements, the approach can quickly unravel, leading to dysfunction and poor performance. Teams that lack these foundational elements may find it difficult to succeed with a leaderless leadership model (Kocolowski, 2010).

Lastly, there can be resistance to change when transitioning to a leaderless leadership style. Team members accustomed to traditional hierarchical structures may resist the shift to a more collaborative and shared approach. This resistance can create friction and slow down the adoption of the new leadership style, as seen in various organizational change initiatives where employees are reluctant to move away from established norms (Kotter, 1996).

## Implementing the Leaderless Leadership Style

Implementing the leaderless leadership style requires careful planning and a shift in organizational culture. This approach decentralizes leadership roles, encouraging team members to share responsibilities and collaborate more effectively for the benefit of the organization. This paper proposes the following new theory (**The Leaderless Leadership Style Implementation Theory**) to be used in implementing the leaderless leadership style.

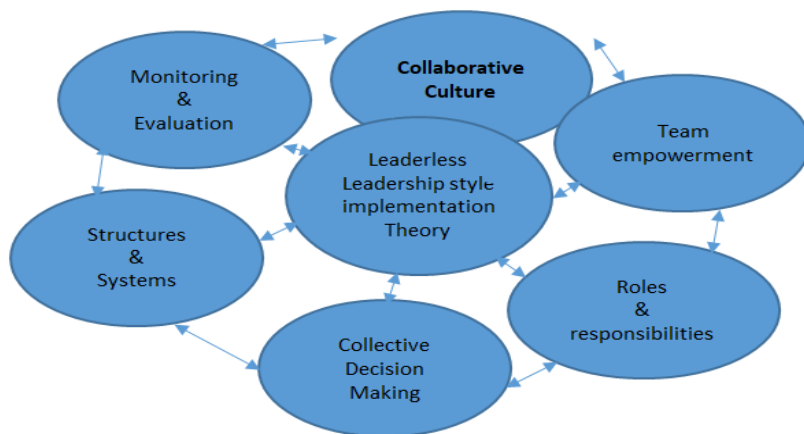


Fig. 1.1 Leaderless Leadership Style Implementation Theory (Dr. Stanley Kavale, 2024)

## Establish a Collaborative Culture

**Foster Trust and Open Communication:** A foundational element of leaderless leadership is a culture of trust and open communication. Team members must feel comfortable sharing ideas, giving and receiving feedback, and discussing issues openly. Organizations can build this culture through team-building activities, transparent communication practices, and leadership that models trust and openness (Edmondson, 1999).

**Encourage Mutual Respect and Inclusivity:** Promoting an inclusive environment where diverse perspectives are valued and respected is crucial. This can be achieved by implementing policies and practices that ensure equal participation and by providing diversity training programs (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006).

## Empower Team Members

**Provide Autonomy and Decision-Making Authority:** Empower team members by giving them the autonomy to make decisions within their areas of expertise. This can be facilitated by decentralizing decision-making processes and encouraging initiative and innovation (Seibert, Wang, & Courtright, 2011).

**Invest in Training and Development:** Equip team members with the skills and knowledge needed to take on leadership roles. This includes providing training in leadership, communication, conflict resolution, and project management. Continuous professional development opportunities help team members grow and adapt to their roles (Conger & Kanungo, 1988).

## Develop Clear Roles and Responsibilities

**Clarify Expectations and Roles:** While leadership is shared, it is important to have clear roles and responsibilities to avoid confusion. Define the scope of each team member's role and establish expectations for collaboration and accountability (Pearce & Sims, 2002).



**Rotate Leadership Roles:** Implement a system where leadership roles are rotated among team members. This allows individuals to experience different aspects of leadership and develop a broader range of skills. Rotation can be based on project phases, specific tasks, or time periods (Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009).

### **Foster Collective Decision-Making**

**Promote Consensus-Building:** Encourage decision-making processes that involve all team members. Techniques such as consensus-building and democratic voting can be used to ensure that decisions reflect the collective input and agreement of the team (Hoch & Dulebohn, 2013).

**Facilitate Regular Team Meetings:** Hold regular meetings to discuss progress, share updates, and make decisions. These meetings should be structured to allow open discussion and active participation from all members. Effective meeting facilitation is crucial to ensure that discussions are productive and inclusive (Carson, Tesluk, & Marrone, 2007).

### **Implement Supportive Structures and Systems**

**Utilize Collaborative Tools:** Implement tools and technologies that facilitate collaboration and communication. Project management software, collaborative platforms, and communication tools can help keep everyone aligned and informed (Mäkikangas, Aunola, Seppälä, & Hakanen, 2016).

**Establish Feedback Mechanisms:** Create systems for regular feedback and reflection. This includes peer reviews, team debriefs, and feedback sessions that help identify areas for improvement and celebrate successes. Constructive feedback is essential for continuous improvement and learning (London & Smither, 1995).

### **Monitor and Evaluate Progress**

**Assess Team Dynamics and Performance:** Regularly evaluate the effectiveness of the leaderless leadership approach by assessing team dynamics, performance, and outcomes. Use surveys, interviews, and performance metrics to gather data and identify areas for improvement (Pearce, Manz, & Sims, 2009).

**Adapt and Refine Practices:** Based on the feedback and evaluation results, continuously adapt and refine the implementation of the leaderless leadership style. Be open to making changes and improvements to better meet the needs of the team and organization (Day, Gronn, & Salas, 2004).

### **Contributions of the Paper**

The paper challenges traditional hierarchical leadership models and argue that leadership can emerge from within a group rather than being centralized in one individual. It presents the concept of distributed leadership, where leadership roles are fluid and shared across team members based on expertise and the context of the situation. Further, it can be noted that leaderless leadership styles lead to increased collaboration, creativity, and autonomy among team members. Organizations that embrace leaderless leadership (such as certain startups or self-managed teams) may highly benefit from improved innovation, faster decision-making, and higher employee engagement due to less bureaucracy and more equal participation. It can also be noted that leaderless leadership style can foster a sense of flexibility and adaptability and collective responsibility, where all members are accountable for the outcomes of the group. This can lead to more empowerment, greater ownership of projects, and stronger interpersonal trust within teams. On the implications of leaderless leadership for the future of leadership development, it can be suggested that future leaders will need to develop more collaborative and facilitative skills, moving away from traditional command-and-control mindsets and embracing the capacity to empower others to lead in various contexts. Lastly, the paper provides a new theoretical framework for understanding leaderless leadership, offering fresh concepts or models that scholars and practitioners can use to explore non-traditional leadership structures in practice. The unique contribution of this paper lies in its exploration of how leadership can exist without a clear leader and how organizations can function and thrive with decentralized power structures.

## CONCLUSIONS

The leaderless leadership style offers significant benefits including increased engagement, enhanced innovation, better decision-making, skill development, team resilience, and a strong sense of ownership and accountability. These advantages make it a compelling approach for teams seeking to leverage the full potential of all their members. While the leaderless leadership style offers many benefits, it also presents significant challenges such as coordination difficulties, conflict resolution issues, accountability ambiguities, decision-making delays, and potential misalignment with team members' preferences. These disadvantages highlight the importance of carefully considering the context and readiness of a team before adopting this leadership approach.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The leaderless leadership style should be encouraged in democratic organizations that require new breath to spear them up. Thus, it requires careful planning and a shift in organizational leadership and culture for its benefits to be achieved. This style decentralizes leadership roles, encouraging team members to share and distribute responsibilities and collaborate more effectively. It brings a paradigm shift in the ever evolving leadership discipline by introducing a leadership style that can be recommended in postmodern organizations. Further, this paper proposes the Stanley Kavale theory; **The Leaderless Leadership Style Implementation Theory** for implementing the leaderless leadership style. The ball is out there, lets kick it.

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