

ALIGNING LEADERSHIP STRUCTURE WITH
INDIVIDUAL & ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY:

5 INSIGHTS FROM DIRECTORS SHARING POWER

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As part of a two-year long project to reflect on our role in the field of executive transition management (ETM), CompassPoint convened a discussion in August of 2016 among five progressive organizations that have formal shared leadership structures.

This made sense as part of CompassPoint's reflection process because not only had we been exploring alternative structures internally, we were increasingly concerned that our external practice of ETM, in focusing on the search for an organization's next, single leader, was in part serving to uphold traditional assumptions and practices of leadership that in the rest of our work we had been questioning for some time. We wanted to understand the motivations, benefits, and challenges the leaders saw in moving away from the traditional, single executive director model.

The leaders we interviewed and their organizations are listed below:

BUILDING MOVEMENT PROJECT

<http://www.buildingmovement.org/>

Sean Thomas-Breitfeld and Frances Kunreuther, Co-Directors

COMMUNITY UNITED AGAINST VIOLENCE (CUAV)

<http://www.cuav.org/>

Lidia Salazar and Essex Lourdes, Co-Directors

HOUSING RIGHTS COMMITTEE

<http://www.hrcsf.org/>

Fred Sherburn-Zimmer and Aileen Joy, Executive Director and Administrative Director

MANAGEMENT ASSISTANT GROUP (MAG)

<http://www.managementassistance.org/>

Susan Misra and Elissa Sloan Perry, CoDirectors (spelling intentional)

ROCKWOOD LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE

<http://rockwoodleadership.org/>

Akaya Windwood and Darlene Nipper, Partner Leaders

It's important to note that the organizations had differences in how they were unpacking and distributing the single executive role: there were variations on "co-directorship," and some had even broader committee or collective structures they were experimenting with. Despite these differences, there were powerful commonalities across the organizations' motivations and aspirations for sharing power. It's also important to note that none of the organizations is putting itself forward as expert or as having "figured it out" by any means. Rather, we share these reflections to open up a conversation with others questioning aspects of traditional leadership and exploring alternative frameworks and approaches.

1. Sharing leadership is an expression of our individual and organizational identities.

Soon into our conversation, we noted that of the 10 leaders, 9 are people of color and all identify as queer. Darlene Nipper of Rockwood reflected, "The thing is that we're just different from white guys. **We're different people from the folks who have informed the thinking about organizational leadership and management over the last 100 years. We come at it differently.**" And Susan Misra of MAG put it this way: "I think our innate approach is collaborative and collective. When the organization was thinking about who should be the next leader, it just felt wrong to think of one executive director."

Sean Thomas-Breitfeld of Building Movement Project linked shared leadership to feminist theory: "I'm curious if people have thought about the interest and appetite for alternatives to very top-down, hierarchical, one-person-in-charge models as informed by feminism in terms of a world view, but also the organizational theory that might be coming out of that branch of academic research?"

Others referenced past experiences of traditional leadership that were oppressive. Essex Lordes of CUAV reflected, "That's also part of the motivation—having this bad experience of power." It was clear that in part, the organizations are experimenting with shared leadership because traditional, hierarchical leadership is not resonant for the individual leaders themselves.

They are also experimenting with shared leadership structures because top-down leadership is in contradiction to the work that they do as organizations. In various ways, each of the organizations is trying to change the way that people, organizations, and systems relate to one another. They are all concerned with elevating the voices and wisdom of marginalized people and communities. They are all concerned with the conscious, responsible use of power. Given that, they feel a responsibility to structure themselves to the reality they are working towards. Elissa Sloan Perry at MAG put it this way: "**We were really, really clear that MAG needed to shift its internal practice behavior and culture to reflect the world that we are contributing to making.**" Fred Sherbern-Zimmer of Housing Rights Committee talked about developing a committee-based structure that keeps decisions with those most involved and impacted by an issue: "So while we do all effect each other's work,

it doesn't make much sense that folks who are not in public housing and working with public housing tenants or come from public housing have much say so over the public housing program."

And Sherbern-Zimmer continued that engaging tenants is their next challenge in sharing leadership system-wide: "We have tenant leaders who are not only taking on their own eviction, but are taking on evictions of everyone on their block. These people need to have a part in our decision-making, strategy, and vision."

Similarly, CUAV came to the realization that internal leadership composition and structure is directly linked to external impact. According to Lidia Salazar, "We were noticing that our programmatic work wasn't reaching marginalized communities. So, in our transition, we also changed our mission to center black and brown people, people of color. Then, in turn, it made sense to have a leadership model that reflected this in order to reach these communities and in order to make informed decisions for the organization." These evolutions of leadership structure are breaking down the false distinction between the organizations' external organizational identity and their internal practices.

2. Sharing leadership is not only about the individual leaders sharing power, it is an organization-wide ethos.

Each of the organizations is working to include the voices of all staff in decision-making and direction-setting for the organization and to adopt practices that deepen equity on all fronts. Susan Misra at MAG reflected, "**Shared leadership does really work and when it's working well, it's not just about the few people who are the co-directors, but it's actually about the whole organization.**"

Essex Lourdes of CUAV shared: "Unless you have a certain background or training, often times in organizations you're not allowed to bring whatever your lived experience is. For us, it's having a structure that allows people to embody more of their leadership; to be able to bring the fullness of their experience; to bring in that wisdom that we inherently have as oppressed people in different ways and turn that into insight into how we can support the broader community."

Building equity internally extends to organization-wide practices such as compensation, which most of the groups had rethought of late. Elissa Sloan Perry of MAG shared, "Internally, we are working to get closer to a practice where the highest paid people do not make more than three times the lowest paid. We have also created a decision-making guide so that people understand where and how they can make decisions on their own without us." And, Darlene Nipper of Rockwood added: "We too have a policy of no one making more than three times anyone else in the organization. And there are other people besides the co-directors who have lots of decision-making authority. Give lots of different people the opportunity to make decisions and move myself and Akaya out of the center of decision-making for lots of the work." Institutionalizing shared leadership and equity means giving everyone—not just the co-directors—the power to step into their capacity to lead.

3. Sharing leadership is not about less work; in some cases, it may even be more.

For the majority of us, neither the primary motivation nor the result so far of shared leadership is having less work to do. As Darlene Nipper put it, **“It’s not that you are doing less work or that somehow having two people is going to reduce the work. It actually is a lot of work, but the results are exponentially better in my experience.** What we’re able to accomplish together is way more than I believe any one person could accomplish.”

Interestingly, some co-directors were attempting to split the job into fairly distinct domains, while others have the same job description and work out where they intend to “co-decide” and where they can act on their own. And co-deciding, of course can add time to decision-making—a challenge that was lifted up by some.

Sean Thomas-Breitfeld said, “I think there is frustration sometimes among staff under us around the length of time in making decisions that lead to action.” And Susan Misra at MAG added: “Theoretically, you could have one person do it faster, but I think that Elissa and I are collectively doing it better. It’s not a time-sharing strategy, though I think initially we thought it would be.” Shared leadership can challenge the notion that decision-making efficiency, rather than decision-making quality, is the desired end game.

Though it’s not less work, the leaders spoke to another kind of burden being lessened: the psychological burden of solo positional leadership. Frances Kunreuther, who had led Building Movement Project on her own before joining forces with Sean Thomas-Breitfeld described the difference this way; **“It’s not fewer hours, but it is less pressure and isolation. I can’t even say how different it is. It’s dramatically different, which is a big sustainability issue for me.”** And Darlene Nipper of Rockwood said that although she and her co-director consult each other constantly and “partner-lead,” their distinct role clarity “brings her a lot of psychological space to really focus on what she brings to the table in terms of her gifts and attributes for their work.”

4. Sharing leadership requires balancing individual and collective voice.

All of the leaders agreed that shared leadership requires ongoing attention to the issue of voice. Elissa Sloan Perry of MAG asked, “Where do we speak as ourselves individually and where do we speak together? For example, one of the things we have talked about is creating a CoDirectors email address so that there are things that people cannot attach to just one of us.” And Darlene Nipper of Rockwood added, “I think depending on how we demonstrate and use our voices differently, it can create some fissures—a little bit of different people aligning in different ways. So that just takes a lot of care and attention.”

And there is the outside world too, of course, that often expects one voice. As Frances Kunreuther shared, “Funders can sometimes be a challenge in that they expect to talk with the person they know; I wouldn’t under-estimate that.” Clear and frequent communication between the leaders is the foundation for their clarity of voice with others.

5. Sharing leadership is both relational and replicable.

Our conversation got particularly interesting when it came to the question of whether the organizations would continue with shared leadership if one or more of the people currently sharing power were to leave. To a person, the folks in variations of the “co-director” model were clear that the quality of the relationship between them, which often pre-dated their current leadership partnership, was a critical success ingredient. Elissa Sloan Perry at MAG said, “Susan and I are pretty clear that one of the things that really makes this work is that we knew and trusted each other pretty deeply before we came into these roles.” Similarly, Darlene Nipper at Rockwood said, “I’d been working with Rockwood as a consultant and trainer for a number of years. Akaya herself is someone that I had gotten close to and really respected.” And Sean Thomas-Breitfeld at Building Movement Project said, “Frances and I had a very strong relationship, mutual trust, and admiration. I was really looking forward to learning with and from Frances.”

The group grappled with what these stories of close relationship meant for adoption of co-directorship and other shared leadership structures across the nonprofit sector. Sean Thomas-Breitfeld challenged us—and by extension the sector—eloquently: “I’m thinking about how many of us can’t imagine doing this with someone else. How do we reframe that as not a barrier to replicability? **How do we instead lift up the virtue of relationship and of incorporating a value of relationship into leadership structures in our organizations?** How do we make it a virtuous thing instead of saying, well, if people can’t find the right match, then this model is just this quixotic thing that only applies to a few random POC, queer-led organizations?” That’s a powerful reframe of who leads and how.

We left the conversation inspired to continue with our respective efforts and to stay in dialogue with each other and others wanting and needing something different from organizational leadership—something more closely aligned with our individual and organizational identities.

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