

Dual Leadership as a Problem-Solving Tool in Arts Organizations

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Abstract

This article discusses cases in which dual leadership, a formal arrangement in which two people have equal rank at the top of an organizational hierarchy, is implemented in an organization with the object of solving a management crisis. While dual leadership is known in the management literature, it is commonly assumed that one person dominates and that the formal structure does not allow two leaders to have equal rank.

It is shown that arts organizations frequently feature dual leadership without equal rank — the artistic and the business director. However, it appears that a temporary equal rank can assist in situations of crisis.

Keywords

Dual leadership, management crisis, artistic director, arts museum, cruise ships.

Leadership Couple

A discussion of leadership is complicated by a plethora of definitions of the term. These definitions serve equally diverse theories and arguments. According to Yukl (1994), “Most definitions of leadership reflect the assumption that it involves a social influence process whereby intentional influence is exerted by one person over other people to structure the activities and relationships in a group or organization.” One aspect of this assertion is given center stage here, which is that in most definitions the leader is singular.

In recent studies (see Gronn, 2002), it is generally agreed that the concept of a singular leader is a simplification. Although one leader commonly holds ultimate authority, it is not necessarily so that one person leads all the time or in all cases. Gronn’s (2002:423) criticism focuses on ‘the unit of analysis consisting of a solo or stand-alone leader’. He suggests distributed leadership as a unit of analysis instead. This criticism from an analytical point of view follows his earlier work (Gronn, 1999) in which he introduces ‘the neglected role of the leadership couple’. It is this latter, more descriptive, discussion to which dual leadership in arts organizations may make a contribution.

The descriptions of plural leadership provide the literature with leadership couples and co-leaders. This is in addition to leadership teams or other groups of leaders consisting of more than two. Co-leaders as defined by Heenan & Bennis (1999) merely include the second-in-command as a sometimes prominent leader in the organization. Leadership couples include many types of partnerships in which leadership is shared. In one possible case this couple has equal rank and together they form the leadership of the organization. Such a construction is best compared with a country that has two kings or a ship that has two captains.

The leadership couple is immediately problematic, from a logical point of view, if they not only have equal rank but also meet on each other's turf. If the formal head-of-operations is two persons then a disagreement between the two kings or captains may lead to war, anarchy or an organization out of control. Such dual leadership, at first sight, creates an impending management impasse, dual becomes a duel, a battle for leadership.

As it appears, the two-king country, the two-captain ship and the dual leadership of an organization have all existed. In arts institutions dual leadership does not appear far removed from normal practice (see also Reid, 2003). In the following cases, the dual leadership structure is temporary and used as a solution to a management impasse rather than as a creator of such an impasse. This dynamic of changing leadership structures to solve a management crisis is not new but the introduction of dual leadership with equal rank to successfully address this situation was so far unknown in the management literature.

Dual Leadership History

A well-known practice of dual leadership is the hereditary dual kingship of the Spartan society around five hundred BC, which was in place during a number of centuries. Two hereditary kings would rule the city state. In practice, both would be part of a council in which the other council members did not have permanent status and influence (Cartledge, 2002:61). Either king could lead armies into war but only with the approval of certain councils which would appoint either king as army leader. In other words, their dual leadership was entrenched in a more complex system of governance. Still, conflict could and did arise. But, according to Herodotus, enmity between the two kings from two different royal houses was part of the traditional fabric of Spartan life (Cartledge, 2002:86).

A second example is found on ships. Here the captain and the chief engineer may have equal rank but it is customary that the captain takes the overall lead. On cruise ships the management has become even more complicated since not only the ship and the engine room but now also the hotel and its hotel rooms become part of the captain's responsibility. The chief purser has gained increasing importance for the cruiseline since the passengers have become central in the ship's operations. A crisis between chief engineer and captain would be rare or unheard of since their interests rarely differ, but a crisis between captain and chief purser, or better between captain and the shore-based cruiseline management would be more serious. In such cases the captain could and would pull rank and overrule the chief purser.

The removal of a captain is a difficult task but an introduction of a so-called hotel manager with equal rank would neutralize the power of the captain over the hotel department. This is the beginning of dual leadership as a problem-solving tool in management crises.

Dual Leadership as a Solution on Ships

The problem-solving effect of dual leadership of equal rank is one of neutralizing power. This neutralizing effect is not meant to be related to neutralization as it is understood in the leadership theory of Kerr & Jermier (1978). Yet, in both cases the leadership attributes and actions are addressed. Neutralizing in dual leadership prevents the director from overruling the other partner(s) in management, either a second-in-command or an entire team.

The cruise industry was confronted with a formal system that gave captains ultimate power as soon as the ship would leave the harbor. They exercised this power by interfering with the

entertainment department, changing or otherwise interfering with featured shows, or the program for the passengers. The chief purser or other responsible employees were instructed by shore operations but at sea the captain would be in total command. This authority included access to the radio room which could bring the chief purser in contact with shore operations.

The introduction of the hotel manager resulted in an immediate change. His or her equal rank would provide immediate access to the radio room and now shore operations could gain complete control over the hotel department. The hotel, deck and engine department rarely clash but with three positions of equal rank problems of leadership would seem more likely. The introduction of shore operations as a referee in such cases prevented any unmanageable crisis in the short run.

Once this change had taken place the captains were no longer in a position to interfere in matters outside their expertise. According to shore operations this expertise was limited to the safety and navigation of the ship. Shortly after, the cruise companies introduced a distinguishing rank for the captain so that the ceremonial higher rank returned. The direct links with shore operations and the clear message that captains were to stay in their own theater of operations prevented future problems in this area.

Dutch Art Museums

Arts organizations, in this case limited to Dutch art museums, make a clear distinction between business and artistic leadership. Directors of art museums are commonly art historians. At the same time, these organizations have a distinct management division in which financial and logistical organization are crucial. Rarely the two skills of business and artistic management are combined in one person, moreover, the tasks are seldom limited enough to be undertaken by one person only. Necessarily, but sometimes unwillingly, arts organizations have a need for two directors: one to lead in terms of mission and ambition, one to lead the financial and logistic operations.

Dutch art museums show a number of possible management arrangements. The managers appear in different hierarchical arrangements. A common arrangement which is found in the large art museums such as the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam and the Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo is the management team. This team has an artistic director in charge who is assisted by a head of business and a head of collections, although these terms differ per organization. Clearly, the artistic director takes the lead and his or her tasks are partly taken over by the other members of the management team. Together they address all the management issues while one person is still in command.

The management team has a hierarchy and the distance between director and other team members determines whether we can still speak of a team. The Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, for instance, has team members but their subordination is much stronger than in the Kröller-Müller Museum. Also, one may state that the distance between artistic director and the rest in the Rijksmuseum is considerable. This distance is not always clear from the formal management structure. The distance may only be measured by a study of the management practice rather than the formal arrangement.

Nevertheless, it is possible to speak of three different arrangement in Dutch arts museums. The management may consist of three members (team leadership), two members (dual leadership) or in essence one member who merely instructs the other members whether they be one or

more (singular leadership). Interestingly, the chair of the management teams is not always the artistic director. The business director may be the chair, particularly when a strong team of curators is present or when the manager in question has no degree or experience in art history.

In the last twenty years the above management structures have been in place. The business directors have entered the management teams quietly but permanently and in some, though few, cases that expertise is given the lead of the team. In all cases, a general manager or director in charge is present and identifiable. One person will ultimately decide, even if the rest of the management team does not agree. If this one person continuously decides against the advise of the others, the management partners will commonly protest and if they lose the power battle they usually resign. In short, one needs to be in tune with the director to be comfortable in the team. A crisis in the management team rarely affects the position of the director.

The Directors' Crisis

Dutch art museums are subsidized institutions. Municipalities, foundations or the state government may be part of a supervisory board or even make up the supervisory board. This board appoints directors. Those institutions that provide the museum subsidy may control the management when it comes to long-term decisions and investments.

As a counterbalance to the stronghold of the subsidizing institutes the museum director has prestige, political influence in other boards of note and advanced knowledge of the complexities of the museum. This interplay of board and director is a common though complex part of many arts organizations. Without providing a review of the literature on governance in nonprofit organizations, it is possible to state that conflicts between board and director exist and do not automatically lead to the dismissal of the director. On the contrary, the director of the museum is a long-term presence who exerts control and who cannot be controlled easily.

If the supervisory organ challenges the director it is reasonable to speak of a crisis. The board has the power to cut subsidies or otherwise control the financial situation. The director has the prestige and knowledge of his or her field which far exceeds that of the board. A power struggle could develop which would be contrary to the interest of the museum in question. This, although in vague terms, is a situation in which the implementation of dual leadership has occurred twice in the recent history of Dutch art museums.

In the year 2000, the director of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and the director of the Museum Boymans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam were confronted with a new member of the management team, a business director in both cases, who was given equal rank. The director and his prestige remained in place but power was curtailed by a second director-in-chief (see Kunstredactie, 2000a/b; ANP, 2000; Klerck, 2001; Ter Borg & Schenk, 1999; Ter Borg, 2000).

Dual leadership as a Solution in Two Dutch Art Museums

During the cruise ship changes, which occurred around the 1980s, certain captains left the stage out of frustration. Indeed, the position of the captain had slowly but steadily been reduced to that of a bus driver while the earlier prestige had been close to that of a king.

This cruise ship case is similar to the two cases in Dutch art museums. The ship has clearly defined departments which require expertise that is rarely combined in one person. The captain

used rank to interfere in departments outside a captain's expertise. The hotel manager's focus consisted of optimizing the occupancy of the ship and the satisfaction of the passengers without the captain's interference.

The museum has distinct departments and the director could interfere in all of them. The Dutch artistic directors are rarely concerned with financial management but rather with prestige and the interest of the museum and its collections. The business director may have contrasting ideas.

In the two Dutch art museums the director was dominant in exercising his power. Both directors were in a museum that ran into serious financial trouble and showed conflicts with personnel and the supervisory board. The supervisory boards, in both cases the municipality, decided that the director's power to make decisions on financial matters had to be curtailed. A business director of equal rank, appointed by the board, would immediately neutralize the director's power where financial decisions were concerned without interfering with the artistic and art historical views on the museum and the museum collections.

These introductions of dual leadership did not lead to a management crisis or impasse as the management literature would predict. Like shore operations, the supervisory board could act as referee in cases of crises but these crises were not recorded, neither in the media nor as museums' gossip. Instead, the directors chose to co-operate with their new colleagues and create a partnership rather than a duel. Hugo Bongers, the adjunct financial director at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, would become co-director at the Museum Boymans van Beuningen in Rotterdam. In Amsterdam he was replaced by Stevijn van Heusden. Apparently, the financial problems created in Amsterdam were not attributed to their adjunct financial director Bongers. With added power he was chosen to control the director of the museum in Rotterdam.

The two museum directors in the Netherlands eventually left their positions after a few years of dual leadership. Once they left their co-directors left as well as soon as a new director was appointed. A new director would not accept dual leadership with equal rank. Rather than facing demotion, the co-director would choose another employer.

It is important to note that dual leadership of equal rank appears a temporary arrangement which curtails the power of the person in charge but mostly in the area where that person did not have much expertise in the first place.

Conclusion

Gronn (1999) provided a qualitative study of a leadership couple to illustrate dual leadership. Dual leadership of equal rank is a special case of dual leadership. It cannot exist, legally, due to the stalemate it creates in times of conflict between the two leaders. Gronn does not exclude such leadership since married couples that co-own a company are commonly in the same position. The difference is sought in the implementation of dual leadership to solve rather than create a management impasse. Here, it is necessary to observe organizations that already have dual leadership to a certain degree. Arts institutions — including museums, orchestras, opera and theater companies — provide a wealth of information concerning leadership arrangements. In these arrangements dual leadership of equal rank is a possibility open to the supervisory board to solve a crisis.

The example of the cruise industry cannot be seen as separate from the museum examples. Clear divisions of management and interests suggest that a cruise ship is to a large extent similar to the workings of such an arts organization. The necessary skills and qualifications to lead all departments on a ship are not easily combined in one person.

The dual leadership structures of arts and other institutions require further research and analysis. This analysis may only take place if the examples of dual leadership are made accessible and if the possibilities of dual leadership are acknowledged such as in the organizations discussed above.

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