

# Distributed leadership in complex situations: school development in the context of Covid-19

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In this article, we discuss the implications of a culture of distributed leadership for an organization facing an unexpected and complex situation. Our analysis is based on our experiences from collaborative research in a large municipal school system in Central Sweden. This system has been actively implementing distributed leadership as a developmental strategy over an extended period. Specifically, we examine how this school system handled the COVID-19 pandemic during the spring and fall of 2020.

In complex situations, there is often a call for a top-down, authoritative, and cohesive leadership, typically embodied by a dominant and guiding figure. This is often supported by regulations regarding leadership, such as the educational laws outlining the principal's management responsibility. While routine tasks can usually be delegated in everyday operations, when unexpected events occur, reliance tends to shift towards the formal leader or unit commander. We aim to present an alternative approach: placing trust in the distributed leadership culture developed over several years.

Distributed leadership is one of several theoretical concepts seeking to capture a similar idea—that leadership is a social and collective process that cannot be studied solely by focusing on a single formal leader. When researching leadership as something "distributed," it means studying leadership work as spread across various

actors within and around the organization, considering all of them as potential co-creators of leadership actions.

Research consistently supports the positive impact of distributed leadership on school development and outcomes. Despite varying definitions and uses of the concept, scholars emphasize the active "co-leadership" of teachers in contributing to school development. Strengthening organizational development through distributed leadership relies on explicit trust in the professional judgment of employees, expecting many to see themselves as co-leaders, taking responsibility for collective activities and acting accordingly rather than passively awaiting top-down guidance.

Implementing distributed leadership in educational organizations faces challenges, as it may clash with the increasingly explicit line management based on unit commanders and the professional tradition where each teacher autonomously "owns" their classroom, and each principal governs their school.

In the school system we collaborated with, distributed leadership was supported by sustained values work and new structural arrangements. To address the need for clearer quality management, they established a development organization gradually taking ownership of central issues. All principals in the municipality were also organized into sixteen learning groups, led by principals assigned as process learning leaders. These groups independently identified common learning and development needs, collaborating on practical aspects of how participating principals could further distribute leadership in their respective schools.

When the COVID-19 situation emerged in spring 2020, this school system, like others, faced numerous acute challenges, including increasing concerns, perceived information gaps among staff, parents, and children, and eventually absenteeism, illness, and even fatalities. The complexity arose from both familiar situations requiring new solutions and genuinely new and uncertain situations lacking routines, support, and knowledge.

Principals initially described facing each day at work with the unknown and different, with high uncertainty about the future. School development and distributed leadership were cast aside; the focus was on maintaining operations day by day.

Gradually, however, they observed how leadership teams, health personnel, and teachers "stepped forward," took responsibility, initiated actions, and performed leadership tasks without the need for detailed direction from the principals.

Distributed leadership emerged as an approach already existing within the schools, proving crucial for the functioning of operations. Our analysis of how the school organization tackled these challenges highlights several aspects of distributed leadership in complex situations.

*Established distributed leadership can connect the organization in complex situations.* If distributed leadership is established as an organizational cultural foundation in advance, it can effectively manage the tasks required in complex situations. Employees step forward, take responsibility, find solutions—provided they have already been given and accepted the mandate. The transition to digitalized teaching for the entire upper secondary school is an example illustrating the importance of contributions from many teachers. In environments upholding more formally hierarchical leadership values, organizations tend to wait for instructions and initiatives from formal leaders, who may be at a loss in the situation.

*Distributed leadership development builds useful communication channels and networks.* The learning groups, initially designed as collaboration forums for principals on specific development issues (including distributed leadership), proved central for operational collaboration, resource management, and mutual support in a challenging leadership role during the pandemic. This structure, built over several years through deepened relationships, mutual trust, and knowledge of each other's operations, practically served as an established system for horizontal information and discussion across formal unit boundaries—especially crucial when new collaborations and knowledge exchanges had to be rapidly established. This, however, required higher-ranking leaders to act based on similar values and actively embody distributed leadership, rather than merely advocating for it as increased responsibility among employees in schools.

*Formal leaders play a crucial role, but they need to understand and balance their contribution to the emerging leadership culture.* Principals noted that in the initial stages of the pandemic, they played a crucial structuring, translating, and comforting role when employees needed continuity, care, and sought information to manage

uncertainties. Distributed leadership could then be supported with minimal intervention, resisting the temptation of uniform top-down control. The organization's need for guidance from above had to be met—referring to requests for guidelines, decisions, information, support in following laws and regulations, removing formal obstacles, and organizing resources. However, leadership primarily needed to serve as a guarantor of shared values and a trustworthy conversation partner.

*Distributed leadership cannot solely be engagement and individual heroics;* otherwise, there is a risk of organizational fragmentation. When the pandemic hit, many employees at all levels wanted to take responsibility, even at the cost of becoming overworked or, in some cases, infected and sick. While this engagement is positive in many ways, there is a risk that individual employees try to handle their individual or local situations without the connections to the organization's shared values and norms needed for sustainable action over time. It is essential to remember that the notion of leaders as heroes is a widely embraced concept in society—and that the distributed leadership perspective questions the effectiveness of this concept for large organizations. The spontaneous or anarchic distribution of leadership that Alma Harris (2008) discusses—when employees act individually or in small groups without cohesive values—can be risky for the organization in the long run, even if it is grounded in significant and positive local engagement.

*Managing the unknown in a complex situation is a challenge even with distributed leadership.* Much of the work carried out during the COVID-19 situation was work that needed to be done, but under new circumstances. Additionally, the situation added complexity to existing issues related to integration, student health, equitable schooling, and more. In these new circumstances and increasing complexity, everyday and operationally close situations that are unknown, unforeseen, and require new knowledge to be handled are hidden. While a distributed leadership culture may provide a good foundation for quickly sharing, seeking, and developing such new knowledge, it does not automatically strengthen the organization's development capacity. Distributing not only co-leadership in daily work but also "co-responsibility" for challenging development issues, crisis management, and seeking knowledge beyond the organization, is crucial.

We have aimed in this text to discuss how a culture based on values around distributed leadership—i.e., trusting employees' judgment, capability, and responsibility to take initiatives aligned with the organization's mission, goals, and values—can be a functional and constructive strategy in emerging complex situations. Through long-term relationships, communication channels, mutual trust, shared responsibility, clear values, and a cross-border approach, many problems could be constructively addressed. This was established by creating new "organizational spaces" where the distributed leadership culture could develop alongside line management and unit commanders—in this case, the principal group's learning groups and the initiatives that the involved principals took in their respective schools.

The most challenging situations in a societal crisis are those where knowledge is entirely or partially lacking, where formal leadership functions are overwhelmed, and where individual employees or organizational parts try to handle their immediate problems locally without connection to the rest of the organization. In such situations, a well-established culture of distributed leadership— not hastily plastered as a motivational slogan—plays a crucial role, provided that it trusts its core values and does not erode the distributed aspect through micromanagement or encouragement of individual heroics.

If we can develop distributed leadership—towards more systematic ways of exploring our own operations in complex situations—there are, in our view, opportunities to further strengthen organizations' capacity to handle such situations in the future. Distributed leadership can thus be a path to build organizational resilience, allowing the organization to manage unexpected and prolonged disruptions while continuing its operations sustainably.

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