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# Role as a mechanism for rotating leadership in a group

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study seeks to propose that executives need to be prepared to adopt roles as a mechanism for rotating leadership if those groups of which they are a part are to perform to their full potential.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A validated framework provides insight into the leadership roles executives can adopt when part of formal, informal and temporary groups. The methodology adopted is qualitative, focusing on the application of previously developed frameworks.

**Findings** – Adopting a role is found to enable the rotation of leadership within a group, which in turn facilitates development of the group.

**Research limitations/implications** – A one-organisation intensive case study of a multinational engineering company engaged in the design, development and manufacture of rotating turbomachinery provides the platform for the research. The frameworks will require validating in organisations of different demographic profiles.

**Practical implications** – The concepts advanced and implications discussed provide an insight into the role-based nature of leadership. The practical steps individual executives can take to adopt a role, and in so doing develop the group of which they are a part, are highlighted.

**Originality/value** – This paper is an investigation into, and study of, the process by which executives adopt roles as a mechanism for rotating leadership within a group. In so doing, it is suggested that executives contribute more positively to the development of the groups of which they are a part by being more adaptive and responsive to changes in their surrounding context.

**Keywords** Leadership, Management roles, Group behaviour

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

## 1. Introduction

The premise is that anyone who presumes to step into a leadership role can learn to distribute and rotate the tasks of leadership, helping create and develop groups to solve organisational problems they would find difficult to solve alone. This article presents leadership in terms of complimentary roles, with choice of role being dependent upon context. The objective in doing so is to create awareness of the roles available, and the changing relative importance of those roles as a group develops (Sheard, 2007). The establishment of roles within a group is dependent upon a measure of self-discovery on the part of its members, combined with a perception of both the group's and wider organisation's needs as a whole (Sheard *et al.*, n.d.).

The concepts advanced here are extensions to a branch of the self development school of leadership known as the “functional” approach to leadership. The functional



approach to leadership focuses on the ability of an individual to influence, and be influenced by, a group in the implementation of a common task (House, 1977; Bass, 1985). In order for leadership responsibilities to be met, certain functions need to be performed with a function being defined as what you *do* as contrasted with what you *are* or what you *know* (Adair, 2003, p. 36). Aspects of the current study relating to group development and role theory are respectively extensions of theory reported by Parsons (1951) and Tuckman (1965).

## 2. The study

The inquiry into the extent to which a role-based perspective can provide insight into how leadership within a group can be shared and rotated was undertaken within an organisation manufacturing rotating turbomachinery. The longitudinal study that underpins this article has been based on over ten years of ethnography, action research and collaborative inquiry methodologies (Sheard and Kakabadse, 2002, 2004, 2007).

Qualitative inquiry uses various techniques in working to capture the nuances and complexity of the social situation under study (Flick, 1998; Johnson and Harris, 2002). Here, the social situation under study is the groups that executives form. The complexity of the social situations is the mechanism by which executives share and rotate leadership within those groups.

## 3. The six stages of role rotation

Leadership is contemplated in terms of four roles, and group development in terms of six stages of group development. Executives consciously choose to adopt one of the roles available, and attempt to remain aware of the stage a group has reached through its development. Contemplating leadership in terms of role and group development in terms of stage facilitates the rotation of leadership within a group, and as a consequence the progression of a group through the stages of its development. Before considering how leadership rotates amongst group members, however, it is first necessary to clarify why it is reasonable to conceptualise leadership in terms of role and stages of group development.

### 3.1 Group development

Over the last five decades, various models of group development have been advocated and whilst these models share some similarities, they also differ quite significantly from each other (Chidambaram and Bostrom, 1996). The most widely accepted class of group development models is, however, the linear progressive models, which advocate a group development sequence. The concept of a group development sequence separates out two aspects of group functioning:

- (1) the task activity a group is undertaking; and
- (2) the process of a group's life.

A development sequence focuses on the process of group life, asserting that a common development sequence exists for all groups. The most widely accepted sequence comprises five stages (Tuckman, 1965; Tuckman and Jensen, 1977). These are:

- (1) orientation/testing/dependence;
- (2) conflict;

- (3) group cohesion;
- (4) functional role-relatedness; and
- (5) individual loss and mourning.

These five stages may be labelled as:

- (1) mobilisation;
- (2) confrontation;
- (3) coming together;
- (4) behaving as one; and
- (5) mourning the past.

During the *mobilisation* stage, group members get to know each other and establish more personable relationships. During the *confrontation* stage, conflict happens. Conflict could emerge over rival leadership challenges or simply because of interpersonal behaviour. The group could split at this stage. Emerging with a single leader, the group moves into the *coming together* stage. Here, norms of behaviour and group cohesiveness are established. New group standards are set for members and roles are determined. The *behaving as one* stage occurs when members start performing tasks together. Role clarity has been established and members are now working together in a cooperative and complimentary manner. The *mourning the past* stage occurs as members realise that the group is about to complete the task for which it was originally created. They feel a sense of loss at the imminent destruction of the social system that the group has become.

The concept of a linear development sequence in small groups is important as it establishes the existence of generic stages through which all groups pass. However, Sheard and Kakabadse (2004) observed that the vast majority of groups do not pass smoothly through the stages of a linear group development sequence. In practice individuals opt-out, groups regress and in many cases never perform. It was also recognised that a linear group development sequence could more usefully be considered in terms of a process, specifically a process with two breakdown points.

The first breakdown point occurs as a group attempts to negotiate the transition out of the *mobilisation* stage and into the *confrontation* stage. The breakdown occurs as the extent of the non-shared assumptions between members becomes clear and each individual asks themselves "Do I agree with what this group is being asked to do?". Not everyone will agree, and some will opt out. The second breakdown point occurs as a group attempt to negotiate the transition out of the *coming together* stage and into the *behaving as one* stage. Individuals ask themselves "Do I accept the role I will have to play to work in this group?". The sudden realisation of what working in the group will actually mean in practical terms results in some instinctively answering "no". As a consequence the group will slip back into conflict, entering a new stage – *one step forward, two steps back* (Kakabadse, 1987a, b; Sheard and Kakabadse, 2004).

The *one step forward, two steps back* stage models the regressive behaviour so often seen in groups as in order to leave it, all must agree to do so. A reason why many groups do not perform to their full potential is that the group members do not wish to do so. Many groups find it difficult to progress beyond the *one step forward, two steps back* stage, and that is why they perform so badly when compared to the potential that

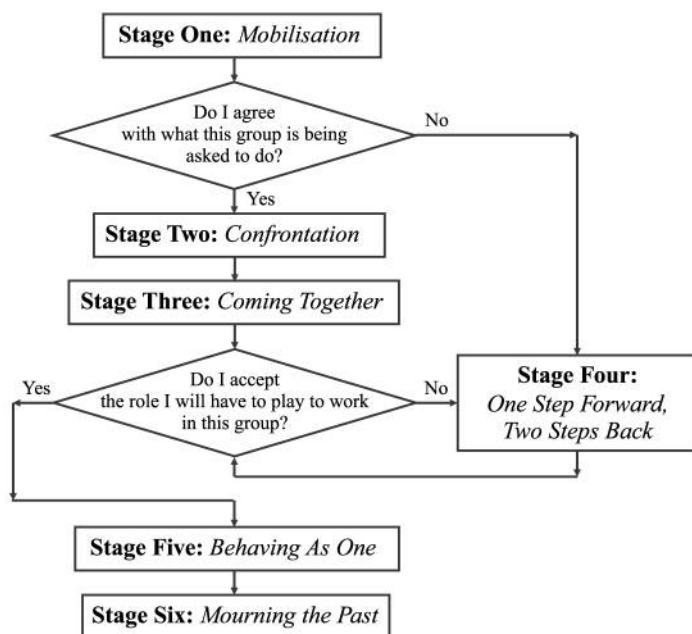
the capability of individual members would imply the group to be capable of. By identifying two breakdown points and an additional stage, i.e. the *one step forward, two steps back* stage, it has been possible to create an “integrated” group development process (see Figure 1) – “integrated” on the basis that it identifies all stages of, and breakdown points within, a group’s development. The stages are:

- (1) mobilising;
- (2) confrontation;
- (3) coming together;
- (4) one step forwards, two steps back;
- (5) behaving as one; and
- (6) mourning the past.

### 3.2 Leadership roles

When first working with executives, it was surprisingly observed that the boards of directors were consistently poor performers. Typically, the groups studied comprised of members who were both highly intelligent and hard working. Despite these necessary attributes for success, the majority of groups performed well below the level anticipated.

Over time it was observed that amongst those groups that did perform, a common characteristic was present: members divided leadership responsibility into blocks of tasks. In the highest performing groups, it became apparent that members were not only dividing the tasks of leadership, but were also adapting their behaviour. In so doing



Source: Sheard *et al.* (n.d.)

**Figure 1.**  
The integrated group  
development process

members were coordinating their leadership action, with specific “bundles” of behaviour being associated with generic sets of tasks enabling members to “know” who should do what without the need for extensive debate (Sheard and Kakabadse, 2007). Thus, the members were not just adapting behaviour in response to others who happened to be in one particular group; rather, they were choosing to adopt bundles of behaviours that could be characterised as “roles” that were generic across multiple groups with different memberships. It was observed that just as a group passes through generic stages of development, so group members chose to adopt roles that are complimentary to those of other members. This separates out two aspects of group functioning:

- (1) the task activity a group is undertaking; and
- (2) the group’s leadership.

Having recognised the existence of generic roles, four distinctly different, yet complimentary, roles emerged from the research, characterised using the metaphors “king”, “tactician”, “elder” and “warrior”. A group’s *king* is defined as the member who is accountable for delivery of a group’s goal. A group’s *tactician* is defined as the publicly appointed leader of the group who is responsible for delivery of its goal. An *elder* is a group member who undertakes to build a network of relationships with other group members. A group’s *warriors* derive their legitimacy to lead other group members from the formal allocation of responsibility to deliver a specific task by the group’s *tactician*.

When characterising the four roles, it was observed that the *king* and *warriors* consciously choose to give their attention to the group’s goal. In contrast, the *tactician* and *elders* consciously choose to give their attention to the establishment of good working relationships within the group. As such, the *king* and *warriors* were focused on goal attainment, in contrast to the *tactician* and *elders* who were focused on relationship building.

At the same time *elders* and *warriors* were unconsciously attracted to issues within the group. In contrast the *king* and *tactician* were seeing the bigger picture as a consequence of their unconscious interest in the group’s impact on the wider organisation. As such, *elders* and *warriors* were oriented towards the group, in contrast to the *king* and *tactician* who were oriented towards the wider organisation.

It is the combination of focus (*goal attainment* versus *relationship building*) and orientation (*intra group* verse *inter group*) that define the four roles of leaders, i.e. *king*, *tactician*, *elder* and *warrior* (see Figure 2). The *king*, *tactician*, *elder* and *warrior* roles collectively cover the need to attain a goal and build relationships plus work both within a group and the wider organisation. Any single individual would find it difficult to do all four. However, if different individuals choose different roles then it is possible for a group to do what no individual within it could do alone.

### 3.3 Role rotation

Whilst acknowledging that there are actions that leaders take that spring from a flash of genius, the research has identified that the most effective leaders focus on eight key functional areas (Sheard and Kakabadse, 2004):

- (1) clearly defining goals;
- (2) priorities;



**Source:** Compiled by the authors

Rotating group  
leadership

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**Figure 2.**  
The four roles of leaders

- (3) roles and responsibilities;
- (4) self awareness;
- (5) group dynamics;
- (6) communication;
- (7) context; and
- (8) infrastructure.

The conceptual foundations of the eight key functional areas, referred to as “key factors”, are rooted within the work of Adair (1986). It has been postulated by Adair (1986, p. 112) that “groups” at the most generic level tend to share certain common needs.

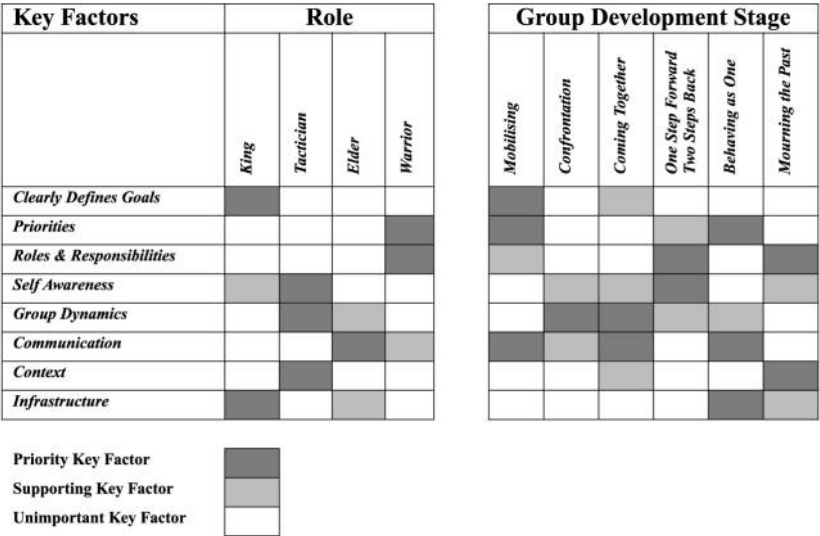
Sheard and Kakabadse (2004) have characterised the four roles in terms of the relative importance of the eight key factors. In so doing, insight into what group members should do when adopting each role is provided (see Figure 3). Also, insight is provided into what is important to a group as it progresses through its development.

It is the dual characterisation of roles and stages in terms of the importance of key factors that in turn provides insight into how leadership should rotate. As an individual joins a group they have a choice of roles, with their choice being dependent upon their reading of context. Having chosen a particular role, the key factors associated with that role become the focus of their action. The importance of those key factors changes as a group passes through its development process. By remaining aware of the stage a group has reached, the changing importance of key factors associated with the role adopted is highlighted. It is insight into the changing relative importance of key factors associated with the role adopted as a group progresses through its development sequence that identifies how leadership should rotate and to whom.

#### 4. Conclusions

A new role-based leadership framework and its practical application are presented. Leadership is described in terms of four complimentary roles – i.e. *king*, *warrior*, *tactician* and *elder* – with each group member adopting one of the four roles. None are characterised as adopting purely follower roles. Once the responsibilities and tasks of





**Figure 3.**  
The relative importance of the eight key factors to both role and stages of a group's development

Source: Compiled by the authors

leadership are shared, then the group amongst whom they are shared must work together.

A group's development is described in terms of six stages, i.e. *mobilising*, *confrontation*, *coming together*, *one step forward*, *two steps back*, *behaving as one* and *mourning the past*. The relative importance of each role at each stage of a group's development is clarified by characterising both in terms of eight key factors. The dual characterisation provides insight into which roles are most important at each stage of a group's development, clarifying from and to whom leadership should rotate.

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