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**Multi-Leader Teams in Review:**

**A Contingent-Configuration Perspective of Effectiveness**

**ABSTRACT**

Multi-leader teams are characterized by multiple leaders exhibiting mutual influence on each other while working towards a common team goal. An unexplored assumption in this literature is that increasing the number of leaders is related to heightened team effectiveness. We propose that this notion is oversimplified and suggest a contingency model of multi-leader team effectiveness. We suggest that the context determines the effectiveness of a particular multi-leader team configuration because each formation has unique internal team mechanisms. To investigate this perspective, we review the multi-leader team literature (175 articles) by categorizing extant theory and research as falling within nine multi-leader configurations along two key dimensions: (1) the proportion of leaders within a team; and (2) the dispersion of leadership through role co-enactment of team leaders. This framework enables a more coherent understanding as to the benefits and the costs of each specific multi-leader team configuration and a clearer evaluation of the contexts in which varying configurations are most effective. Four emerging themes related to configuration-contextualization are explained and theoretical implications for interpreting leadership effectiveness in multi-leader team settings are discussed.

**Key Words:**

Multi-Leader Teams; Shared Leadership; Collective Leadership; Distributed Leadership

**Multi-Leader Teams in Review:**

**A Contingent-Configuration Perspective of Effectiveness**

There is an emerging paradigmatic shift in leadership theory and research. Replacing the traditional view of a nominal leader, a growing perspective in the literature is to consider multiple members within a team as leaders. These multi-leader teams entail two or more members of a team engaging in leadership roles or behaviors whereby multiple member-leaders exhibit influence on each other while working towards a common team goal (Bolden 2011; Denis et al. 2012; Yammarino et al. 2012). Findings suggest that multi-leader teams are related to higher levels of team functioning (Bergman et al. 2012), effectiveness (Hiller et al. 2006), and organizational success (Ensley et al. 2006), and that these effects can exist above and beyond traditional forms of nominal leadership (Pearce and Sims 2002). While the results are promising, a main concern is that given the preponderance of research illustrating that multi-leader teams results in team effectiveness (D’Innocenzo et al. in press; Wang et al. 2014), there is an assumption that “more is better.” However, we contend that in actuality, the situation dictates *when* having more leaders is better as well as *how many* more leaders is better. For example, authors have cautioned that while multi-leader teams are helpful in novel (Ensley et al. 2003; Patton and Higgs 2013) and knowledge-intensive (Pearce 2004; Senge 1993) work environments, they are redundant and counter-productive in less complex environments (Fausing 2013; Pearce and Manz 2005).

Explicating the configuration types of multi-leader teams is a necessary first step in understanding the contingency of their usefulness. The general lack of precision regarding the configuration of the multi-leader team makes it difficult to predict the conditions under which it is effective. The literature includes a variety of configurations ranging from dyadic leadership, to more than two leaders, to an entire team enacting leadership (Denis et al. 2012; Yammarino et al. 2012). Additionally, the manner in which leadership is dispersed among these multiple leaders differs greatly and is relatively underdeveloped (and often unclear) in much of the literature. Articles range from a supplementary perspective where multiple members participate in all leadership roles (e.g., Carson et al. 2007; Ensley et al. 2003; Hoch et al. 2010; Pearce and Sims 2002) to a complementary viewpoint where members divide up leadership roles (e.g., Crevani et al. 2007; Denis et al. 2001; O’Toole et al. 2002). Taken together, two foundational dimensions of multi-leader teams exist that are quite variant and at times non-explicit in the extant literature: (1) the proportion of leaders within a team; and (2) the dispersion of leadership through role co-enactment among the team leaders.

When the underlying multi-leader team configuration is not explicitly detailed, it can lead to a variety of difficulties in understanding its situational effectiveness. Researchers may have a mismatch between the multi-leader team conceptualization and the theoretical arguments as to why the configuration is effective given the situation at hand. For example, perhaps overcoming complex circumstances that require creative solutions through the collective coordination of multi-leader teams is more likely to result from an entire team of members acting as leaders as opposed to joint leadership among two hierarchical leaders (i.e., dyadic leaders, co-leaders). Thus, failure to ensure that conceptualizations match theoretical arguments will result in investigations of mis-specified explanatory mechanisms for why multi-leader teams are effective in specific contexts (Sutton and Staw 1995; Whetten 1989; Weick 1995).

Researchers may also have a mismatch between the multi-leader team conceptualization and the operationalization of the construct. For example, a common approach to operationalizing the extent to which there are multiple leaders within a team entails aggregating the number of leadership roles undertaken by members of the team (e.g., Acar 2010; Heck and Hallinger 2010a; Hiller et al. 2006; Wahlstrom and Louis 2008). If one team has many leadership roles enacted by a few key members and another team has many members enacting a few leadership roles, the operationalization of the two multi-leader teams produce similar ratings using the aggregation approach. However, these two teams have a distinct configuration with unique internal processes that may or may not be appropriate given the work environment. This conceptualization-operationalization mismatch can result in findings that do not accurately reflect the relationship between hypothesized constructs, making it difficult to understand the circumstances in which multi-leader teams are effective.

To address these roadblocks within the literature, we offer a review and explication of the various multi-leader team configurations thereby enabling a more accurate understanding of the circumstances in which varying multi-leader configurations lead to team effectiveness. Therefore, the purpose of this manuscript is to offer a contingency-based perspective to multi-leader team effectiveness. More specifically, this contingency-based perspective employs a configuration-contextualization approach, where we explain why varying multi-leader team configurations are likely to be effective (or ineffective) in varying contexts. First, we provide a framework that delineates the types of multi-leader team configurations. Then, we offer an extensive review of the literature that categorizes studies into the multi-leader team configuration framework. Next, we analyze the trends and themes related to specific configuration-contextualization arguments of multi-leader teams. Finally, we offer suggestions for future research that build upon the findings of the review. As a result, this review seeks to advance multi-leader team research by assisting future research in making a priori clarifications of multi-leader configurations and giving a more precise theoretical foundation for the situational contingencies for multi-leader team effectiveness arguments.

**MULTI-LEADER TEAMS**

**Background**

Our review encompasses various “approaches” (Denis et al. 2012; Yammarino et al. 2012) to investigating how multiple leaders operate. Across these approaches, we focus on teams, defined as collective units consisting of two or more individuals who are interdependent in their tasks, part of a social entity, share responsibility for an outcome, and are embedded within a larger organizational system (Kozlowski and Bell 2003; Mathieu et al. 2008). Given the multiple approaches, and in order to consider an expansive view of leadership within multi-leader teams, we focus broadly on leadership as an influence process toward some goal directed behavior or outcome (Bass 2008). As Bass notes, the definitions of leadership vary among scholars, with the focus being styles, behaviors, or roles. Similar variation exists within the underlying form of leadership employed within multi-leader team research.

Although there is a high degree of overlap, the various approaches to multi-leader teams each have a unique focus. The shared leadership approach, primarily employed in organizational sciences, focuses on multiple leaders within a unit, and the aggregated amount of leadership within that unit (e.g., Pearce and Conger 2003). The pooled leadership approach, commonly used in management-focused social science research, investigates multi-leader influence at higher levels of the organizational hierarchy, such as co-CEOs, or any other formally appointed, dual-leadership relationship (e.g., Gronn 1999). The spreading leadership approach, typically called distributed leadership and popularized in education research, investigates the spread of leadership across multiple hierarchical levels (e.g., Bolden 2011). The producing leadership approach takes a sociological perspective and investigates the interaction and emergence of multiple leaders within a unit or organization (e.g., Marion and Uhl-Bien 2001).

Each of these approaches can fall victim to the same critique: there is a lack of clarity regarding the proportion of members participating in leadership and/or the extent to which leadership roles are co-enacted. Additionally, each approach offers its own perspective of the internal mechanisms and situational constraints of multi-leader teams and is therefore likely to offer some form of critical insight into reconciling the configuration-contextualization inquiry. Thus, our review includes all of these approaches. We build from these varying conceptualizations and offer the following broad, inclusive definition of multi-leader teams: an organizational unit whereby more than one individual assumes one or more leadership roles in an effort to influence other team members towards a common goal.

**Multi-Leader Team Dimensions**

Scholars have discussed the importance of considering the proportion of leaders within a team in terms of recognizing the leadership concentration among team members (Contractor et al. 2012), by highlighting that leadership can be engaged by a few (i.e, focused) or by many (i.e., distributed) (Zander and Butler 2010), and calling for evaluations of the extent to which leadership is shared within a group (i.e., leadership strength) (Hannah et al. 2011). While these perspectives illustrate that it is important to consider the proportion of leaders, these conceptualizations vary significantly in the literature. Some studies focus specifically on dyadic, co-leadership (e.g, Gronn 1999) or illustrate that leadership typically emerges from a maximum of two members (e.g., Bergman et al. 2012; McIntrye and Foti 2013; Mehra et al. 2006). Some research examines the group as a whole, assuming that all members are part of a leadership process (e.g., Pearce and Sims 2002), while other research considers any number of individuals (between two and all) to be leaders (e.g., Carson et al. 2007). Given this range, we propose a framework that explicitly considers the proportion of leaders within a team. We propose that existing approaches to multi-leader teams fall along a continuum of how many members enact leadership: (1) *all* members are leaders, (2) *three or more, but less than all* members are leaders, or (3) *two* members are leaders.

Another structural dimension of multi-leader teams that we consider for our framework is the dispersion of leadership through the role co-enactment of participating leaders. A role is an individual’s established pattern of behavior within a group context (Katz and Kahn 1978; Zigurs and Kozar 1994). Roles have consistently been used to describe leadership in team settings, because roles encompass identifiable and stable sets of expected behaviors (Barry 1991; Gibb 1954; Hollander 1985; Zacarro and Marks 1999). Roles are particularly useful for multi-leader team conceptualizations, because they are dynamic sets of behaviors that can individually or collectively be enacted in a group setting (Contractor et al. 2012; Seers et al. 2003). Various approaches to investigating multi-leader teams use roles as a mechanism for evaluating the mutual influence process of leadership in units (Friedrich et al. 2009; Gronn 2002; Hiller et al. 2006; Pearce and Sims 2002). However, the research does not elaborate about the varying degrees of role overlap (see Contractor et al. 2012 for a notable exception). In general, examinations of multi-leader teams do not explicitly discuss whether team members participate in influencing others through one particular leadership role or through overlapping leadership roles (e.g, Pearce and Sims 2002; Carson et al. 2007). Given these different approaches, we propose that multi-leader teams fall on a continuum of role co-enactment: (1) *complete* role co-enactment when each leader participates in all of the leadership roles; (2) *some* role co-enactment when leaders have some, but less than complete role overlap; and (3) *none* whereby leaders have unique, non-overlapping roles.

Incorporating these two structural elements, we integrate the proportion of leaders dimension (all; three or more, but less than all; two) and leadership dispersion dimension (complete; some; none) to create a framework consisting of nine different types of multi-leader team structures: (a) multi-comprehensive (all; complete); (b) multi-partial (all; some); (c) multi-independent (all; none); (d) limited-comprehensive (three or more, but less than all; complete); (e) limited-partial (three or more, but less than all; some); (f) limited-independent (three or more, but less than all; none); (g) dual-comprehensive (two; complete); (h) dual-partial (two; some); and (i) dual-independent (two; none).

**REVIEW METHOD**

We reviewed the existing literature on multi-leader teams using a multi-faceted approach. First, we developed twelve search terms after reviewing articles that discussed various historical streams and approaches to multi-leader teams: co-leadership, collaborative leadership, collective leadership, distributed leadership, dyadic leadership, integrative leadership, mutual leadership, pooled leadership, post-heroic leadership, relational leadership, shared leadership, and triadic leadership (Day et al. 2004; Denis et al. 2012; Yammarino et al. 2012). Second, using the search terms from step one, we conducted a title, abstract, and keyword search within multiple academic databases (e.g., PsychInfo, Business Source Premier, Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, etc.) for published articles, irrespective of the date published or journal outlet. We focused on peer reviewed academic publications and excluded book chapters and books which typically offer overarching analyses of varying conceptualizations of multi-leader teams within one text. Third, we searched for select leadership topics based upon their conceptual similarity with multi-leader teams: adaptive leadership, complexity leadership, and network leadership. As a result, we identified 308 potential articles for inclusion in this review. Fourth, we reviewed each article and omitted results that: (a) did not coincide with our definition of multi-leader teams (e.g., multi-team systems were excluded because multiple leaders offer influence within more than one unit); (b) focused on multi-leader teams in passing (e.g., as a future direction in a discussion section); or (c) did not align with Bass’ (2008) influence-oriented definition of leadership (e.g., style, behavior, role, etc.). We also exclude articles that review specific approaches to multi-leader teams (e.g., shared, distributed). These articles summarize the findings related to a multi-leader approach, but do not elaborate on the varying configurations within the particular approach. This partitioning resulted in 175 articles (see Appendix A). Fifth, we reviewed and coded articles by: (a) the proportion of leaders; and (b) the dispersion of leadership in terms of role co-enactment. Finally, we reviewed each multi-leader team category for themes related to effectiveness and/or contextualization arguments.

A coding scheme was developed that aligned with the two dimensions of interest. For the proportion of leadership dimension, coding options included: (1) all; (2) three or more, but less than all; and (3) two. For the co-enactment of leadership dimension, coding options included: (1) complete; (2) some; and (3) none. The coding process consisted of meetings between the authors and a research assistant to discuss the codes and the coding process. Based on these discussions, a sample of nine articles representing a range of codes was chosen for pilot coding. The pilot articles were independently coded and then discussed to evaluate the extent to which there was alignment and understanding of the categories. The first author and the research assistant then independently coded each of the remaining manuscripts. In addition, both raters indicated their confidence level in their coding of each dimension as well as notes for explaining their category coding determinations. For quantitative articles, the operationalization was the determining factor for categorization coding. For qualitative articles (e.g., interviews, case studies, observations, etc.), categorization coding decisions were based upon the inductive descriptions of the phenomenon. For conceptual articles, the definition (if offered) and the theoretical rationale and arguments employed were used to make coding determinations. Overall, we were guided by the authors’ choices in how they operationalized, described, and defined their approach to the multi-leader team phenomenon. The second author reviewed coding discrepancies and determined the most appropriate final code. Specifically, the second author independently reviewed and coded the article while referencing the confidence levels of the first author and research assistant as well as their written notes for their coding decisions.

Table 1 offers a breakdown of studies by configuration type and study type. For the proportion of leaders dimension, the majority of studies (67.4%) are categorized as all members participating as leaders. This breakdown may represent an assumption within the literature; if members are given the opportunity to act as leaders, they will. Interestingly, two quantitative studies that purposefully investigate member-leader emergence offer findings that contradict this assumption; only a few members actually surface as leaders (Bergman et al. 2012; Mehra et al. 2006). Investigations of three or more, but less than all members as leaders are less common (25.2%) and investigations of dual leadership are rare (7.4%). While all members participating in leadership may have its benefits, the effectiveness of this configuration is contingent on the complexity of the context. Future research investigating varying proportions of leadership may help uncover these contingencies.

With respect to the role co-enactment dimension, relatively few studies are categorized as having a complete division of labor with no role overlap (9.1%). Among those studies with no role co-enactment, many are paired with the dual leadership configuration (3.4%). This may signal that as the proportion of leaders increases, member-leaders struggle to decipher appropriate role boundaries and/or maintain a strict division of labor. Overall, these trends may explain why there is a high percentage of multi-comprehensive studies (44.6%). Perhaps studies using a multi-comprehensive framework assume that all members would participate in all leadership roles, when in reality this is an unlikely scenario.

This breakdown of studies highlights the need for future studies to incorporate the temporal perspective (Ancona et al. 2001; Marks et al. 2001) of multi-leader teams. It is unlikely that multi-comprehensive teams include all members enacting all leadership roles at one moment in time. It is more reasonable to assume that multi-comprehensive teams have member-leaders engaging in a specific leadership role at one time point, and then engage in followership while another member-leader engages in the same role at a different time point (Friedrich et al. 2009). Thus, the temporal perspective to multi-leader teams may help clarify the unlikely situation in which all members are leading, but no members are following.

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Based on this coding, the percentage agreement for codes for the proportion of leaders was 79.4% and Cohen’s Kappa was .554, representing “moderate” agreement. The percentage agreement for codes for role co-enactment was 53.7% and Cohen’s Kappa was .234, representing “fair” agreement (Landis and Koch 1977). These results suggest that a noteworthy portion of the multi-leader teams articles are vague in their conceptualizations of leadership dispersion. To further explore this finding, supplemental agreement statistics were calculated based upon the exclusion of articles where both coders rated low confidence in their codes (i.e., a rating of four or less on a seven point confidence scale). Excluding 19 articles that were unclear in their conceptualization of the proportion of leaders results in a revised percentage agreement of 87.1% and a Cohen’s Kappa of .711. Excluding 46 articles that were not clear in their conceptualization of leadership dispersion results in a revised percentage agreement of 72.41% and a Cohen’s Kappa of .502. The revised Cohen’s Kappas for both proportion of leaders and leadership dispersion represents “substantial” and “moderate” agreement, respectively (Landis and Koch 1977). The modest increase in agreement for the proportion of leaders dimension suggests that researchers are fairly clear in their determination and description of the proportion of leaders participating in leadership roles. However, the substantial increase in agreement for the dispersion of leadership dimension suggests that multi-leader team studies have been particularly vague in describing the behaviors exhibited by multiple leaders.

This finding is likely the result of studies employing measures of multi-leader teams with a generalized conceptualization of leadership (e.g., Mehra et al. 2006; Pearce et al. 2009), and others utilizing a specific leadership style (e.g., transformational leadership) with multiple, bundled behaviors (e.g., Boies et al. 2010; Sivasubramanian et al. 2002). The studies in the review that were the most clear in their explanation of leader dispersion through role co-enactment employed terminology, arguments, and explanations related to the concepts of supplementary (e.g., Ford 2010; Wood and Fields 2007; Yammarino et al. 2010) versus complementary (e.g. Bhansing et al. 2012; Crevani et al. 2007; Denis et al. 2001; O’Toole et al. 2002) interaction. Due to this general ambiguity, future research on multi-leader teams should consider clarifying whether one or both of these role co-enactment perspectives is being employed (Currie and Lockett 2011; Rawlings 2000; von Krogh et al. 2012) particularly because each will be a benefit and/or detriment to team effectiveness in different contexts.

**BENEFITS AND COSTS OF MULTI-LEADER TEAM CONFIGURATIONS**

The extent to which there is an increasing proportion of leaders within the team, and/or leadership roles are co-enacted, will equate to unique internal team mechanisms. Before employing a contingency model to multi-leader teams, it is necessary to specify these internal team processes in order to understand which configurations are most suitable in varying context. During the review and categorization of articles, three themes emerged that were relevant to configuration-contextualization arguments: the benefits of diversity of thought, the benefits of backup behaviors, and the costs related to communication and coordination difficulties.

Studies propose that one beneficial outcome of multi-leader teams is the synergistic effect, where the interaction of multiple leaders is greater than the sum of its parts (e.g., Brown and Gioia 2002; Carson et al. 2007; Ensley et al. 2006; Heck and Hallinger 2010a; Hiller et al. 2006; Mehra et al. 2006). Our review indicates that this synergy likely surfaces in teams with higher proportions of leaders as well as higher levels of role co-enactment, because both of these structural elements foster *diversity of thought* (Carson et al. 2007; Crosby and Bryson 2010; Mehra et al. 2006). Grubb and Fleesa (2006) aptly illustrate this phenomenon, with member-leaders citing the benefit of “having somebody that you can really talk to as an equal, who’s in the exact same position as you, at the site who you can totally trust and throw ideas off of” (pp. 533-534). This diversity of thought benefit builds from the information processing perspective (Williams and O’Reilly 1998; van Knippenberg et al. 2004; van Knippenberg and Schippers 2007), which suggests that as leaders from different backgrounds and experiences work together, the team experiences a more information-rich perspective on work tasks (Follett 1924). Indeed, research in the team diversity literature suggests that heterogeneous backgrounds and perspectives allow for teams to pull from a greater variety of information, which facilitates novel perspectives (e.g., Ancona and Caldwell, 1992; Bantel and Jackson 1989; Dahlin et al. 2005). Thus, as the proportion of leaders increases, the multi-leader team capitalizes on the unique knowledge of a growing number of member-leaders. This diversity of thought benefit can also be applied within a specific leadership role. As leadership dispersion increases and multiple members engage in a specific leadership role, it is more likely that new and unique ideas for effectively administering the role will be uncovered (Laughlin et al. 1991; Miner 1984). Thus, multi-comprehensive and limited-comprehensive configurations foster diversity of thought through both increased proportions of leaders and leadership dispersion, while multi-independent and limited-independent configurations fosters diversity of thought through increased proportions of leaders.

A second multi-leader benefit is specifically germane to high levels of role co-enactment: *backup behaviors* (Friedrich et al. 2009; Gronn 2002; Klein et al. 2006). When the leader who is currently engaging in a specific leadership role is not available, having another member readily available allows for a continuation of that leadership role (Bigley and Roberts 2001; Bechky 2006). Similarly, if the current leader has short-term difficulty with the role, another member who feels more equipped to handle the task can momentarily take over the role (Ramthun and Matkin 2014). Klein et al.’s (2006) qualitative study of emergency trauma unit teams offers a prime example of this phenomenon. Medical residents at a teaching hospital are the primary leaders to take action and make decisions; however, if the situation becomes too complicated, a more experienced attending physician takes over. This “dynamic delegation” (Klein et al., 2006, p. 602) purposefully employs backup behaviors to balance the need for learning though hands-on responsibility with the need for quality patient care. All comprehensive configurations (i.e., multi, limited, and dual) have this backup benefit. However, multi-comprehensive and limited-comprehensive configurations have multiplicative benefits given the greater number of leaders engaging in backup behaviors.

While diversity of thought and backup behaviors engender benefits to the team, they must be weighed in relation to potential costs. Multi-leader teams with higher proportions of leaders and higher leadership dispersion will incur higher levels of costs associated with increased needs for *communication and coordination* that surface from difficulties related to self-managing and negotiating leadership roles (Denis et al. 2001; Locke 2003; Muethel and Hoegl 2012; Pearce et al. 2008; Spillane 2006). If more than one leader takes on a leadership role, these individuals will need to expend time and effort discussing and coordinating when each individual will participate in that role (Brass and Krackhardt 1999). For example, in a qualitative case study of distributed leadership in high schools, Rice (2006) highlights the potential for miscommunication as members begin “talking past one another” (p. 95), citing the difficulties of developing a coordinated perspective and approach for accomplishing shared objectives. Weibler and Rohn-Endre (2010) further illustrate these issues in their study of non-profit associations in which they highlight that the challenge for member-leaders is to develop a “learning conversation” (p. 182); dialogue that involves high quality interaction through other-awareness, cooperation, and coordination. Thus, the increased amount of information that surfaces from this communication and coordination strains information processing abilities (Carneiro 1967). Further, multiple leaders in different leadership roles will have to coordinate their efforts to ensure they are pursuing their individual roles in ways that are strategically coordinated with the overall goals of the group (Friedrich et al. 2009).

**MULTI-LEADER TEAM CONFIGURATION-CONTEXTUALIZATION**

The contingency approach proposes that there are many ways to organize organizational resources, none of which are perfect, and none of which will be equally effective under all conditions (Galbraith 1973, p. 2). Coupling this perspective with our assertion that different multi-leader configurations incur different types and amounts of benefits and costs, we propose that varying configurations should be more or less effective in different contexts (Fausing et al. 2013; Hoch et al. 2010). Aligning with previous literature reviews (e.g., Donaldson and Luo 2014), we employ the contingency approach to help structure our evaluation of the implications of varying organizational configurations. The contingency approach has been applied at the organization (Burns and Stalker 1961; Pennings 1975), leader (Fiedler 1964), and group (Keller 1994) level of analysis, and has helped clarify situational conditions in which varying structures, approaches, and configurations are effective. We apply a similar approach to multi-leader teams, specifically focusing on complexity as our situational context of interest, given its common invocation as a situational variable likely to affect multi-leader team effectiveness (Brown and Gioia 2002; Clarke 2012; Cope et al. 2011; Fausing et al. 2013; Ford 2010; Klein et al. 2006; Manz et al. 2013; Pearce 2004; Pearce and Manz 2005; Perry et al. 1999; Shuffler et al. 2010; Worley and Lawler 2010; Yammarino et al. 2010).

Figure 1 provides an illustration of the configuration-contextualization approach to multi-leader teams. The figure illustrates that as multi-leader configurations entail higher proportions of leaders and role co-enactment, the configurations may result in both greater benefits and costs. Each configuration is considered efficient when the benefits and costs associated with that configuration aligns with the appropriate complexity context. As a result, this illustration helps depict two unwarranted assumptions being made in the multi-leader teams literature: (a) that it is ideal for all members to participate in all leadership roles; and (b) that dual leadership configurations behave similarly to multi configurations.

We suggest that the ambiguity surrounding previous conceptualizations and operationalizations of multi-leader teams and the associated failure to consider these configurations within the context is the cause of these unwarranted assumptions. That is, one must simultaneously consider the particular configuration as well as the particular context in order to evaluate the appropriateness of the multi-leader team approach. This configuration-contextualization approach helps address these potential assumptions and offers clearer explanations regarding why and when multi-leader teams are effective.

To expand on this position in more detail, we discuss four trends within the literature that offer insight into these multi-leader teams considerations. First, we discuss why multi-leader team configurations higher in leadership proportion and leadership role co-enactment are ideal for certain types of complex work environments. Second, we discuss how increased role co-enactment reduces the effectiveness of multi-leader teams in certain complex work environments. Third, we discuss specific types of workplace complexity that necessitate a limited number of leaders. Fourth, we discuss the varying complex situations in which multi-leader complementarity can be leveraged for increased effectiveness.

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**Complexity and Multi-Leader Configurations**

Authors of the reviewed articles suggest that multi-leader teams generate social capital (Gupta et al. 2011) through collective responsibility, flexibility, and proactivity (Benson and Blackman 2011; Erkutlu 2012), enhanced cohesion and cooperation (Bergman et al. 2012; Erez et al 2002; Gupta et al. 2010), and shared mental models (McIntrye and Foti 2013). Further, when more than one person participates in leadership roles, multiple perspectives emerge which leads to more diverse information and better processing (Hoch 2014; van Knippenberg and Schippers 2007; Williams and O’Reilly 1998). For example, multiple studies within the review suggest better information processing when multiple team members of varying ages, genders, or cultures are engaging in leadership (Acar 2010; Hoch et al. 2010; Muethel et al. 2012; Porter et al. 1985; Ramthun and Matkin 2012; Zander and Butler 2010). These diverse teams experience more “balance” in that they will maximize the chances of each role being fulfilled by at least one individual who is qualified for that role (Follett 1924; Belbin 1993; Partington and Harris 1999; Senior 1997). In total, the diversity of thought and backup behaviors inherent in *multi-comprehensive*, *multi-partial*, and *multi-independent* teams, creates additional team synergy because multiple leaders with unique perspectives can step in and participate when needed (Brown and Hosking 1986; Friedrich et al. 2009).

A common contingency perspective within the reviewed articles is that multi-leader teams with higher proportions of leaders and/or higher levels of role co-enactment such as multi-comprehensive structures, are particularly well-suited for fast-paced and quickly changing organizations and industries that require adaptability and innovativeness (Brown and Gioia, 2002). For example, authors suggest that multi-leader teams help manage organizational change (Taylor 2011; Camburn et al. 2003; Copland 2003; Denis et al. 2001; Fitzgerald et al. 2013; Ford 2010; Gregory 1996; Hoch and Dulebohn 2013; Kempster et al. 2014; Ng and Ho 2012; Pearce and Sims 2002) and survive the novelty and complexity of entrepreneurial ventures (Ensley et al. 2003; Hmieleski et al. 2012; Patton and Higgs 2013). Multi-leader teams also support virtual teams (Carte et al. 2006; Lambropoulos et al. 2011; Shuffler et al. 2010), creative and artistic environments (Murphy and Ensher 2008), knowledge worker environments (Lindgren and Packendorff 2011; Pearce and Manz 2005; Pearce 2004; Senge 1993; Fausing et al. 2013), and complex organizational structures (Lee et al. 2012). In these complex settings, it is a necessity to have diversity of thought, in which multiple individuals are capable of generating unique ideas and pursuing new opportunities (Hunter et al. 2012; Murphy and Ensher 2008; Pearce 2004; Yang and Konrad 2011). Similarly, environments characteristic of urgent and highly consequential outcomes require configurations with higher leadership role co-enactment, which generates backup behaviors, enabling multi-leader teams to handle the difficulties implicit with the environment (Klein et al. 2006).

Empirical investigations of multi-leader teams have measured effectiveness in a variety of unique contexts, including consulting teams (Carson et al. 2007), road maintenance teams (Hiller et al. 2006), non-profit entities (Pearce et al. 2004), new ventures (Ensley et al. 2006), educational institutions (Heck and Hallinger 2010a), and student projects (Sivasubramanian et al. 2002). Rarely evaluated, however, is how these teams are enhanced or constrained given the complexity (or lack of complexity) within the work environment (Bligh et al. 2006; Fausing et al. 2013). When examining this question post hoc across a variety of studies, Wang et al.’s (2014) meta-analysis found that context had a positive moderating effect, such that shared leadership was more strongly related to effectiveness in complex environments.

Yet to be investigated, however, are the underlying mechanisms that enhance multi-leader teams effectiveness in complex environments. For example, diversity of thought within multi-leader teams could be investigated in a similar manner as experience or background diversity within traditional teams (Hambrick et al. 1996). Evaluating knowledge heterogeneity and the extent to which decisions are nuanced, contextualized, or information-driven, through varying degrees of leadership proportions and/or role co-enactment, may offer insight into these internal processes. The study of role negotiations (Graen and Scandura 1987; Miller et al. 1999) may offer a starting point for investigations of backup behaviors. For example, using experimental or quasi-experimental methodologies to evaluate leadership roles as opposed to teamwork behaviors may allow for manipulation and evaluation of multi-leader team backup behaviors.

Future research should investigate whether or not role co-enactment is actually taking place within a multi-leader team. The review highlights that the majority of studies assume that all leaders are participating in all leadership roles; perhaps due to the ambiguity inherent in current multi-leader team conceptualizations. We suggest that this is an unwarranted assumption that leads to mis-specified explanatory mechanisms. As illustrated in Figure 1, when placing multi-comprehensive teams within contexts that are best suited for multi-independent teams, the costs incurred from the multi-comprehensive configuration outweighs its benefits (as illustrated by it falling below the efficiency line). For example, if the situation is novel, a configuration with higher proportions of leaders addresses this complexity because it fosters exchange of unique information. However, if the situation is also non-urgent, configurations with higher levels of role-enactment creates frequent and unnecessary leadership role exchanges. This particular context would therefore be ideal for multi-independent configurations as opposed to multi-comprehensive configurations. This consideration illustrates the need for simultaneously considering both the multi-leader team configuration as well as the characteristics of the context in order to understand the appropriateness of the particular approach.

**Role Ambiguity and Independent Configurations**

Upon review of the articles, a theme emerged related to the potential issues of increasing proportions of leaders and leadership role co-enactment. In particular, issues related to communication and coordination from role overlap and role ambiguity were thought to be present in multi-leader teams. Studies suggest that moving toward multi-leader arrangements cause members to redefine their roles (Goldstein 2004), leading to confusion regarding who is in charge or responsible for specific tasks (Grubb and Flessa 2006; Wood and Fields 2007). Authors also suggest that power and status conflicts resulting from redefined roles will lead to communication and coordination issues (Ingvaldsen and Rolfsen 2012). For example, negotiating who has power, or in what situations specific individuals have power (or shared power), could lead to adverse inter-group communication or coordination (Harris 2012), especially if no consensus is reached (Shelley 1960).

To overcome these issues, authors suggest that member-leaders must be direct, socially intelligent communicators (Scribner et al. 2007). These member-leaders must be capable of properly exchanging and integrating information (Iles and Feng 2011) and be comfortable with relinquishing power through reciprocal interactions (Harris 2012; Heck and Hallinger 2010b). Additionally, member-leaders must engage in proactive relational dialogues (Cunliffe and Erikson 2011; Vine et al. 2008) so that everyone knows when it is appropriate to lead or follow (Jameson 2011). It will be necessary for multi-leader teams with higher role co-enactment to continually re-evaluate current roles and responsibilities to ensure the group is flexible and responsive to the needs of the situation (Scott and Caress 2005).

Given these potential issues, from a contingency perspective, less complex environments benefit from having less leadership influence through fewer overlapping roles (Kerr and Jermier 1978), via *multi-independent* and *limited-independent* configurations. For example, the leadership activity of problem solving does not need to be widely shared when the team’s problems are remedial. Any individual team member should be successful in that role because the decision and its outcomes are obvious (Pearce 2004; Pearce and Manz 2005). Similarly, less urgent situations make it unlikely that a leader with a specific leadership role is unavailable, further reducing the necessity for backup behaviors.

Multi-independent and limited-independent team structures consist of some or all members participating in unique leadership roles (e.g., Barry 1991; Collinson and Collinson 2009; Denis et al. 2001; Ingvaldsen and Rolfsen 2012; Sveiby 2011). These multi-leader team configurations benefit from diversity of thought, but not backup behaviors, and thus are useful for reducing the communication and coordination issues associated with role sharing. It can be difficult for a member to manage the expectations of multiple roles simultaneously (e.g., Kahn et al. 1964), and if unique roles are unclear and begin to blur with other roles, role ambiguity can reduce individual performance (Tubre and Collins 2000). In total, from a contingency perspective, we suggest that configurations with moderate to high levels of leader proportion and lower levels of leadership dispersion, such as multi-independent and limited-independent, are ideal for complexity contexts that necessitate diversity of thought, but not backup behaviors.

Future research should investigate the extent to which communication and coordination issues arise in multi-leader teams with varying levels of role co-enactment. While previous research suggests that role ambiguity and role conflict is detrimental (Kahn et al. 1964; Tubre and Collins 2000), applying these perspectives to leadership and multi-leader teams is needed in differing contexts (Helstad and Møller 2013). In particular, future research should test varying levels of role co-enactment within non-urgent, simplistic, or specialized work environments. Evaluating the amount and type of communication, the length of time to make decisions, and the quality of decisions, based upon varying degrees of role co-enactment in different situations, may highlight communication and coordination redundancies in less complex contexts. Additionally, evaluating individual difference characteristics that influence how well member-leaders claim leadership roles or grant leadership roles to others may supplement our understanding of efficient role co-enactment (DeRue and Ashforth 2010). Communication and coordination issues becomes less of an issue if member-leaders are capable of artfully claiming and granting co-enacted leadership roles. This consideration has been overlooked in the multi-leader team literature; authors assume each member-leader is equal in terms of their ability to engage in productive, efficient reciprocal interactions. Figure 1 helps exemplify the importance of this phenomenon. If member-leaders are aware of self, others, and context it will reduce these communication and coordination costs, ensuring that the configuration remains efficient in light of the particular configuration.

**Dual Configurations**

Aligning with prior leadership research (e.g., Shaw 1964; Krackhardt 1994; Simon 1981), the review illustrates that the emergence of leadership in teams can be centralized as opposed to completely distributed (Bergman et al. 2012; Mehra et al. 2006). In Bergman et al.’s (2012) study of students participating in a team-based decision making task, the majority of the 45 teams had only a few leaders participating in one or two leadership behaviors. Similarly, in Mehra et al.’s (2006) study of 28 financial sales teams, only two leaders in each team were overwhelmingly perceived as leaders by their team members. This perspective mimics Gronn’s (2002) discussion of conjoint agency, “in which a few individuals emerge as leaders within a group and are able to synchronize their actions through reciprocal influence (pp. 431–432)”. While multi-leader team structures such as *dual-comprehensive* and *dual-independent* sacrifice a degree of thought diversity and backup ability, these authors suggest that there are contexts in which fewer leaders are more effective.

Research suggests that fewer leaders and less role co-enactment creates an increasingly centralized hierarchical structure that enables more rapid action and quicker decision making (Fishbach et al. 2007). Further, when dual-leaders balance the burden of "day-to-day" responsibilities they can focus on more imperative, executive-oriented responsibilities (Rosengren and Bondas 2010; Rosengren et al. 2010; Steinert et al. 2006). Limiting leadership roles to a few key members is ideal, because these individuals are more knowledgeable or in-tune with the objectives of the organization (Gronn 1999). Additionally, having every member within a team act as a leader is unnecessary, because some individuals have characteristics that make them uncomfortable emerging as leaders (Judge et al. 2002a) or because some individuals feel that their greatest contribution towards team effectiveness is as a good follower (Collinson 2006; Conger et al. 2000; Gronn 2002).

From a contingency perspective, our review also suggests that low proportions of leaders and low role co-enactment are ideal in work environments where multiple members are working together towards a collective goal; however, members’ everyday tasks vary in intellectual complexity (Currie et al. 2009; Day and Harrison 2007). For example, consider a team consisting of employees at executive, managerial, and administrative levels. A configuration where only the executive- or managerial-level members emerge as leaders will be more effective because they are more knowledgeable as to the strategic environment of the organization (Bolden 2011; Collinson and Collinson 2009; Gronn 2009). Aligning with this perspective, Cope et al. (2011) suggest that while the overall initiative benefits from the diversity of ideas resulting from higher leadership proportions, relying upon a narrower set of leaders is necessary and more efficient during crisis or strategic change. In these situations, a clear hierarchy with limited leaders is beneficial because it provides guidance and order to team members (Halevy et al. 2011).

Limited leaders or limited role co-enactment is also ideal in non-urgent contexts. In non-urgent situations it is less necessary for the entire team to be available to backup each other’s leadership behaviors (Yammarino et al. 2012). For example, an inefficient allocation of human capital exists when the entire team emerges as leaders on an everyday basis for pre-scheduled, production-oriented environments with team members that complete specialized work tasks. In this situation, if the organizational goal is to produce a strict, well-defined output, the most resource-efficient approach is not more leaders, but talented followers who are capable of specializing in low energy-producing tasks (Carsten et al. 2010; Potter et al. 2001). Thus, there are circumstances when specialized and competent workers is more important than diversity of thought, and having backup behaviors creates unnecessary redundancies (Pearce et al. 2009).

This position has generally been overlooked in the multi-leader team literature because of the ambiguity in multi-leader team conceptualizations. As we detail, multi-leader teams comprised of a few leaders do not entail the same benefits and costs as multi-leader configurations with higher proportions of leaders and role co-enactment. Figure 1 helps exemplify the problem with making this second unwarranted assumption. Configurations such as dual-comprehensive and dual-independent have lower communication and coordination costs, but they do not possess the same magnitude of benefits in terms of diversity of thought and backup behaviors. This differential highlights the importance of being purposeful in dictating the actual proportion of members who will engage in leadership, thereby connecting considerations of the configurations within the appropriate context. Giving everyone the opportunity to engage in leadership, but only having a few actually surface as leaders may not overcome the novel or urgent complexities inherent in the situation. Alternatively, multi-leader configurations with lower proportions of leaders are ideal for contexts requiring strategic decision making, executive-oriented responsibilities, and less urgent work cycles. This perspective suggests that if a team with a few member-leaders morphs into a team where the majority or all of the member-leaders engage in leadership the team will likely struggle to make efficient and productive decisions.

Future research should examine the situations where configurations with fewer leaders outperform configurations with more leaders. In particular, investigating multi-leader teams with varying levels of member-leaders (i.e., two versus three or more) within non-urgent contexts or organizational structures requiring task specialization, may illustrate the detriments of member-leader oversupply. Future research should also investigate why certain individuals emerge as leaders within multi-leader teams while others do not. Understanding whether a member surfaces as a leader, based upon knowledge, skills, or abilities, versus an individual characteristic such as extraversion or dominance (Judge et al. 2002b; Taggar et al. 1999), will help uncover whether multi-leader teams with limited proportions of leaders are maximizing effectiveness. Additionally, future research should investigate the composition of the team in terms of each member’s hierarchical placement within the organization. Employees from lower-levels within the organizational hierarchy that are given a leadership role without actual leadership authority may equate to sub-par leadership influence (Bolden 2011; Bolden and Petrov 2014; Pieterse et al. 2010). Similarly, if the leader hails from a higher level of the organizational hierarchy and retains a presumption of authority, it may negate the benefits of sharing leadership roles (Harris 2012).

**Complementarity and Independent Configurations**

It is unlikely that an individual member-leader will exhibit all of the necessary qualities for successfully overcoming the complexities of the environment (Hodgson et al. 1965). Thus, partnering with another key leader with complementary skills through *dual-independent* or *limited-independent* configurations is ideal (Gronn 2002; O’Toole et al. 2002). Complementarity is defined as matching heterogeneous resources whereby the returns of the combined resources are greater than what each resource can generate on its own (Milgrom & Roberts, 1995). Complementary arrangements allow leaders to ensure all key leadership roles are given adequate attention (Chen et al. 2007). Further, it allows for a more productive division of roles that creates the most efficient use of their personal resources (Cosner 2011) as opposed to comprehensive structures with higher degrees of overlap. For example, co-leader arrangements are often characteristic of each member focusing on their strengths, with one leader being responsible for more relational-oriented aspects of leadership and the other being responsible for more task-oriented aspects of leadership (Reid and Karambayya 2009; Waldersee and Eagleson 2002). Aligning with this perspective, authors suggest that as member-leaders engage with other member-leaders with complementary knowledge, skills, or abilities, they can overcome obstacles previously deemed insurmountable (Gronn 1999; Hodgson et al. 1965; Krantz 1989).

Additionally, dyadic or triadic leadership can lead to team effectiveness because it fosters a more productive form of team cognition (Miles and Kivlighan 2010). For example, Hunter et al. (2012) suggest that the reciprocal interaction of co-leaders is likely to generate innovation through the complementary cognitive orientations of each leader. This complementarity enables diversity of thought, whereby each leader channels their own unique set of experiences and backgrounds to create a more distinctive and nuanced perspective on problem solving and strategic decision making (Bhansing et al. 2012; Friedrich et al. 2014). In total, from a contingency perspective, these configurations are ideal when a challenging situation is presented that requires novel solutions that can only be uncovered through coordinated and reciprocal interaction with another key member-leader.

Research suggests that it is a natural tendency for individuals to attempt to partner with others who embody perceived weaknesses in themselves, because it will improve their own performance (Horwitz and Horwitz 2007). Thus, member-leaders within dual-independent or limited-independent configurations can improve team effectiveness if they are self-aware of their limitations and partner with someone who can complement their shortcomings (Atwater et al. 1995; Manz 1986). Another benefit of complementary, non-overlapping leadership roles, is that it creates a checks and balance system (Pearce and Manz 2011). Contexts with conflicting goals (e.g., increased revenue versus decreased risk) are best paired with dual-independent or limited-independent configurations. The division of leadership roles between a few key leaders ensures that the member-leaders work together, negotiate, and compromise, so that outcomes are maximized through a balance of conflicting goals (Denis et al. 2001). While complementarity may be beneficial in these scenarios, the socio-political precursors and repercussions of this arrangement should be evaluated. The leaders within this configuration are asked to share power, which may cause the leaders to be competitive, as opposed to cooperative, or engage in status contests (Berger et al. 1972; Bunderson and Reagans 2011).

Future research should examine situations where individuals have the discretion to choose leadership partners. If member-leaders plan to alter current multi-leader team configurations in order to match a specific work context, it will be necessary for member-leaders to be familiar with the existing and potential quality of leadership within their team (Endsley 1997). Future research should also evaluate how the power and status of members influences their ability to successfully engage in complementary leadership roles (Bunderson and Reagans 2011). The benefits inherent in complementary role co-enactment may be mitigated if each member-leader prefers to be the nominal leader or consistently attempts to claim the leadership roles of other member-leaders.

Research should also investigate the extent to which member-leaders are proficient in accurately evaluating their own and others leadership abilities, and how this information is used to create complementarity. This perspective again highlights the necessity for multi-leader team participants to be aware of self, others, and context. Awareness ensures leaders engage in roles that leverage the knowledge, skills, and abilities of themselves and their colleagues. For example, assume co-leader one is a talented navigator and co-leader two is a talented liason. The configuration benefits are maximized when member-leader role participation aligns with these talents. However, if co-leader one is the liason and co-leader two is the navigator, the configuration is less than optimally efficient because it fails to fully leverage the talents of the member-leaders. As illustrated in Figure 1, while it is necessary for a configuration to match its context in order to be considered efficient, awareness of the member-leaders facilitates ideal role distributions, ensuring the configuration remains optimally efficient. Prior research investigating complementarity suggests that it’s not the complementary resources per se, that generate effectiveness, but the totality of the social system in which these complementary resources are embedded (Ennen & Richter, 2010). This perspective aligns with the configuration-contextualization approach in that complementarity in and of itself is not what leads to effectiveness, but the combination of that complementarity within the appropriate configuration and environmental context.

**DISCUSSION**

**Theoretical Implications**

In addition to recognizing the positive effects of multi-leader teams, we assert that it is also necessary to consider two structural dimensions in order to understand the construct and its contingencies: (1) the proportion of leaders; and (2) the amount of leadership dispersion through role co-enactment. To date, theory and research has not specified exactly how many leaders exist and how they share leadership roles. Thus, it is difficult to pinpoint theoretically appropriate mechanisms for accurately explaining situational conditions in which multi-leader teams are effective. We address this gap through a review based upon varying multi-leader team configurations in order to highlight more clearly the differences of each in terms of its costs and benefits. The literature within the review suggests that teams with higher proportions of leaders will benefit from diversity of thought and backup behaviors, while teams with higher levels of role co-enactment will benefit from backup behaviors.

The literature suggests that as these multi-leader team dimensions reach higher levels, costs will increase given the growing need for communication and coordination. Given this variation between different configurations, it is problematic to study multi-leader teams with the assumption that all multi-leader team configurations are effective at reaching all types of goals in all situations. Understanding the overall organizational system and context surrounding the team will assist in determining the manner in which leadership should be shared. Without a clear understanding of the structure of the team and its associated benefits and costs, it is difficult to explicate the specific contexts in which multi-leader teams will be effective. Our review suggests that the form and amount of complexity plays a key role in determining whether increased amounts of member-leaders will lead to effectiveness. A clear definition of the multi-leader team configuration establishes the foundation for the theoretical rationale as to why the team should be effective. This configuration can then be situated within a contextualized model whereby situational arguments can be clearly detailed and tested.

This review highlights the general lack of specificity regarding what exactly effective leadership looks like within multi-leader teams in a variety of contexts. Investigations of multi-leader teams are limited when simply evaluating the extent to which the team collectively enacts a specific leadership style (e.g., transformational leadership) or common leadership roles (e.g., navigator, engineer, social integrator, liaison). Within multi-leader teams, effective leadership goes beyond an aggregation of each member’s ability to fulfill the obligations of a particular leadership style, behavior, or role. Multi-leader teams engage in dynamic, reciprocal interaction that facilitates diversity of thought and backup behaviors with the potential for communication and coordination issues. Thus, effective leadership within multi-leader teams requires the ability to mindfully co-exist as leaders; recognizing that certain members should or should not participate as leaders and recognizing when and if it is appropriate to have leadership role overlap or division of labor. Further, effective leadership entails being conscious of the complexity of the environment in which the multi-leader team operates. In total, this review highlights the fact that effective leadership at the individual-level is not isomorphic to effective leadership in multi-leader team settings. Effective leadership in multi-leader teams entails a sense of self-, other-, and context-awareness, as this awareness facilitates appropriate choices for maximizing the benefits and minimizing the costs of multi-leader teams.

**Practical Implications**

This review uncovers a number of practical considerations for leaders and team members. An important conclusion is to consider the most beneficial number of leaders within a team. It is typically considered positive when team members emerge as leaders; however, too many leaders may lead to unnecessary communication or coordination. Team members should begin by clearly stating their collective goals and then creating the multi-leader team configuration that best matches their environment. For instance, in urgent or intellectually challenging work environments, putting together teams with members who are willing and able to engage in a variety of leadership roles fosters optimal effectiveness.

This review also highlights the importance of understanding each team member’s leadership preferences and abilities. Being more precise in the evaluation of leadership roles, as opposed to generalized leadership, ensures that team members have the appropriate amount of complementarity or supplementarity within each multi-leader team. Additionally, teams comprised of individuals who are self-aware and who are skilled at claiming or granting leadership roles when appropriate will be more likely to work in unison and maximize the benefits of multi-leader teams while minimizing costs from role ambiguity.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

While our framework serves as a building block for future research on multi-leader teams and highlights several areas that need more attention, our review makes a number of assumptions. Our framework is a snap-shot of the aggregate settling of leadership role enactment, as opposed to the process in which this snap-shot of the settled state came to fruition. DeRue and Ashford’s (2010) role taking perspective is a helpful lens for understanding how, why, and how well, certain team members grant or claim certain work roles. Additionally, Freidrich et al.’s (2009) information and expertise approach to leadership allows for a more robust appreciation for how a singular event is shared and handled by a team’s member-leaders. These perspectives of relational exchange are useful complementary approaches that provide a more dynamic perspective to our multi-leader teams framework (Fitzsimons et al. 2011; Hackman 2012). As a related matter, our study does not investigate the organizational variables that influence why certain members participate in leadership roles. For example, there is likely a significant difference between multi-leader teams where participation in leadership roles surfaces spontaneously, perhaps through an adaptive organizational culture or structure (Shamir and Howell 1999), as opposed to a declaration from a hierarchical superior that one must act like a leader. There may be a moderating effect on the relationship between multi-leader configurations and internal team mechanisms such that organically surfacing multi-leader participation enhances the relationship and mandated multi-leader participation diminishes the relationship.

Future research should use the configuration-contextualization approach to investigate whether multi-leader teams are more effective than traditional teams led by a nominal leader. For example, for change management teams attempting to overcome ambiguity and resistance, shared leadership was found to be more effective than a formal, nominal leader (Pearce and Sims 2002). However, in non-urgent contexts with pre-defined and specialized work tasks, perhaps nominal leadership is more effective than multi-leader teams. Similarly, additional investigation is needed to clarify situations where dual configurations are more effective than nominal leadership. For example, in contexts requiring strategic decision making, dual leadership is more effective than when every member participates in leadership (Cope et al. 2011; Halevy et al. 2011). However, nominal leadership may be even more effective than dual leadership in these contexts, even though nominal leadership may not have the benefit of diversity of thought.

Another important limitation of the study is that using nine pre-defined categories to explain a continuum of configuration possibilities may cause interpretation challenges. The depiction of multi-leader teams with all or two members participating as leaders is clear. Role co-enactment categorized as complete or none is clear as well. The other categories – *three or more leaders, but less than all* and *some* role co-enactment – could vary widely given the continuum of possibilities. The recommendations within this review focus on the likely benefits and costs associated with the extremes of the two dimensions (multi-comprehensive, multi-independent, dual-comprehensive, and dual-independent). We then suggest that multi-leader teams falling within the intermediary categories will have benefits and costs commensurate with their position along the continuum. For example, a team of ten with three members participating as leaders is more closely associated with dual leadership than if all the members were participating as leaders. Similarly, a team of ten with nine members participating as leaders is more closely associated with all members participating as leaders than dual leadership. Future research should also investigate the interdependencies of the two multi-leader dimensions. In particular, the relationship between the proportion of leaders and role co-enactment may be inversely related, making it increasingly harder for multi-comprehensive configurations to actually exist.

This continuum grows larger as the number of members and/or leadership roles is increased. Research suggests the optimal team size is between four and five members (Hackman and Vidmar 1970) and that there is an inverse relationship between team size and team effectiveness when teams are larger than six members (Gallupe et al. 1992; Mueller 2012). This framework is therefore best suited to address appropriately sized teams. Additionally, the larger the team, the more likely it should be conceptualized as a multi-team system. Within a multi-team system, smaller teams with overlapping, proximal goals are interconnected with other smaller teams through a singular, distal goal (e.g., organizational profitability) (Mathieu et al. 2001). This review is more focused on evaluating the smaller sub-units within organizations that have numerous, reoccurring interactions addressing micro-level tasks and initiatives.

The size of the team is also likely to affect the benefits and costs associated with certain multi-leader team configurations. In a large team (e.g., 10 or 20 members), the benefits from diversity of thought or backup behavior will dwindle because of the difficulty in managing the increased number of relations and communication ties (Carneiro 1967; Mueller 2012). As a related issue, there may be other pertinent benefits and costs resulting from increasing the proportion of leaders and leadership role co-enactment. We focused on internal mechanisms related to configuration-contextualization arguments (diversity of thought, backup behaviors, and communication and coordination) based on the articles reviewed. Additional internal mechanisms should be considered when investigating the extent to which multi-leader teams are effective in light of varying organizational contexts.

Another concern is the possibility for including followership, the capacity of an individual to effectively follow a leader (Collinson 2006; Lundin and Lancaster 1990; Potter et al. 2001), as a leadership role. In that case, all member-leaders could technically be perceived as participating in a leadership role. This concern speaks to the future research direction discussed earlier; the dynamic nature of multi-leader teams. The configurations have limited utility, especially in multi-comprehensive or limited-comprehensive teams, if we assume that followership is in fact a leadership role. If the participation of multiple leaders within a team becomes the norm, and subsequently followership as leadership becomes a necessity, then it becomes more difficult to delineate configurations.

**Conclusion**

Before describing the casual or moderating relationships of a construct, it is critically important to first offer a clear description of the construct (Sutton and Staw 1995; Whetten 1989; Weick 1995). Only after this foundation has been laid is it possible to accurately assess its situational dependencies (Sutton and Staw 1995; Whetten 1989; Weick 1995). To date, the multi-leader team literature has encountered a variety of approaches, each with its own assumptions regarding the extent to which leadership is enacted and dispersed. This lack of purposeful delineation makes it difficult for future researchers to build upon their work by offering theoretically grounded hypotheses regarding the situational contingencies of its effectiveness. Our review and categorization of the existing literature on multi-leader teams provides a necessary framework that will assist in advancing future theorizing and research on why and when multi-leader teams are effective. Further, our analysis of configuration-contextualization trends offers a more nuanced perspective of multi-leader teams; the complexity of the context determines when and if having more leaders is better.

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**TABLE 1**

**Breakdown of Review Studies by Configuration Type an Study Type**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Configuration Type | Study Type | | |  | |
|  | Conceptual | Quantitative | Qualitative | | Total |
| Multi-Comprehensive | 28 | 37 | 13 | | 78 (44.6%) |
| Multi-Partial | 14 | 10 | 10 | | 34 (19.4%) |
| Multi-Independent | 3 | 0 | 3 | | 6 (3.4%) |
| Limited-Comprehensive | 4 | 5 | 5 | | 14 (8.0%) |
| Limited-Partial | 17 | 2 | 7 | | 26 (14.9%) |
| Limited-Independent | 3 | 0 | 1 | | 4 (2.3%) |
| Dual-Comprehensive | 1 | 0 | 4 | | 5 (2.9%) |
| Dual-Partial | 0 | 1 | 1 | | 2 (1.1%) |
| Dual-Independent | 2 | 2 | 2 | | 6 (3.4%) |
| Total | 72 (41.1%) | 57 (32.6%) | 46 (26.3%) | | 175 |

**APPENDIX A**

**Multi-Leader Team Review Summary by Author(s) and Configuration Type**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Author(s)** | **Multi-Leader Team Configuration** |
| Acar (2010) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Ancona and Bresman (2007) | Limited-Independent (LI) |
| Anderson (2012) | Limited-Comprehensive (LC) |
| Barry (1991) | Multi-Independent (MI) |
| Benson and Blackman (2011) | Limited-Partial (LP) |
| Bergman, Rentsch, Small, Davenport and Bergman (2012) | Limited-Comprehensive (LC) |
| Bhansing, Leenders and Wijnberg (2012) | Dual-Independent (DI) |
| Bligh, Pearce and Kohles (2006) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Boies, Lvina and Martens (2010) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Bolden and Petrov (2014) | Dual-Comprehensive (DC) |
| Brown and Gioia (2002) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Brown and Hosking (1986) | Limited-Partial (LP) |
| Caldwell (2012) | Limited-Partial (LP) |
| Camburn, Rowan and Taylor (2003) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Carson, Tesluk and Marrone (2007) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Carte, Chidambaram and Becker (2006) | Multi-Partial (MP) |
| Chen, Cone and Cone (2007) | Dual-Independent (DI) |
| Clarke (2012) | Limited-Partial (LP) |
| Collinson and Collinson (2009) | Multi-Independent (MI) |
| Cope, Kempster and Parry (2011) | Limited-Partial (LP) |
| Copland (2003) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Corbin and Alleyne (2014) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Corrigan (2013) | Limited-Comprehensive (LC) |
| Cosner (2011) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Crevani, Lindgren and Packendorff (2007) | Limited-Independent (LI) |
| Crosby (2010) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Crosby and Bryson (2010) | Multi-Partial (MP) |
| Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Currie and Lockett (2011) | Limited-Partial (LP) |
| Currie, Lockett and Suhomlinova (2009) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Davies (1996) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Devos, Tuytends and Hulpia (2014) | Multi-Partial (MP) |
| De Vries (2000) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Denis, Lamothe and Langley (2001) | Multi-Independent (MI) |
| Dion (2012) | Multi-Partial (MP) |
| Drescher, Korsgaard, Welpe, Picot and Wigand (2014) | Limited-Partial (LP) |
| Edwards (2011) | Limited-Comprehensive (LC) |
| Ensley, Hmieleski and Pearce (2006) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Ensley, Pearson and Pearce (2003) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Erez, Lepine and Elms (2002) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Erkutlu (2012) | Multi-Partial (MP) |
| Etzioni (1965) | Dual-Independent (DI) |
| Fausing, Jeppesen, Jønsson, Lewandowski and Bligh (2013) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Fernandez, Cho and Perry (2010) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Fischbach, Smerz, Findlay, Williams and Cox (2007) | Dual-Comprehensive (DC) |
| Fitzgerald, Ferlie, McGivern and Buchanan (2013) | Multi-Partial (MP) |
| Flessa (2009) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Ford (2010) | Multi-Partial (MP) |
| Friedrich, Vessey, Schuelke, Mumford, Yammarino and Ruark (2014) | Limited-Partial (LP) |
| Friedrich, Vessey, Schuelke, Ruark and Mumford (2009) | Limited-Partial (LP) |
| Frost and Harris (2003) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Galuppo, Gorli and Ripamonti (2011) | Limited-Comprehensive (LC) |
| Gibbons (1992) | Limited-Comprehensive (LC) |
| Goldstein (2004) | Multi-Partial (MP) |
| Gosling, Bolden and Petrov (2009) | Limited-Partial (LP) |
| Gregory (1996) | Limited-Partial (LP) |
| Grint (2010) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Gronn (2000) | Limited-Partial (LP) |
| Gronn (2002) | Limited-Independent (LI) |
| Gronn (2009) | Limited-Partial (LP) |
| Grubb and Flessa (2006) | Limited-Partial (LP) |
| Gupta, Huang and Niranjan (2010) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Gupta, Huang and Yayla (2011) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Hannah, Walumbwa and Fry (2011) | Limited-Comprehensive (LC) |
| Harris (2004) | Limited-Partial (LP) |
| Harris (2012) | Limited-Comprehensive (LC) |
| Hartley (2009) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Hatcher (2005) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Heck and Hallinger (2009) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Heck and Hallinger (2010a) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Heck and Hallinger (2010b) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Helstad and Møller (2013) | Multi-Partial (MP) |
| Hiller, Day and Vance (2006) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Hmieleski, Cole and Baron (2012) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Hoch (2013a) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Hoch (2013b) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Hoch (2014) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Hoch and Dulebohn (2012) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Hoch, Pearce and Welzel (2010) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Holt, Palmer, Gosper, Sankey and Allan (2014) | Limited-Partial (LP) |
| Huang (2013) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Hulpia and Devos (2009) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Hulpia and Devos (2010) | Multi-Partial (MP) |
| Hulpia, Devos and Rosseel (2009a) | Multi-Partial (MP) |
| Hulpia, Devos and Rosseel (2009b) | Multi-Partial (MP) |
| Hulpia, Devos and Van Keer (2009) | Multi-Partial (MP) |
| Hulpia, Devos and Van Keer (2011) | Multi-Partial (MP) |
| Hulpia, Devos, Rosseel and Vlerick (2012) | Multi-Partial (MP) |
| Hunter, Cushenbery, Fairchild and Boatman (2012) | Dual-Independent (DI) |
| Hyer, Ivo , Mathy and Fulmer (2000) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Iles and Feng (2011) | Multi-Partial (MP) |
| Ingvaldsen and Rolfsen (2012) | Multi-Independent (MI) |
| Ishikawa (2012) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Ishimaru (2013) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Jain and Jeppesen (2014) | Limited-Partial (LP) |
| James, Mann and Creasy (2007) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Jameson (2011) | Limited-Comprehensive (LC) |
| Janson, Stone and Clark (2009) | Multi-Partial (MP) |
| Kempster, Higgs and Wuerz (2014) | Limited-Partial (LP) |
| Kerwin and Bopp (2013) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Khourey‐Bowers, Dinko and Hart (2005) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Klein, Ziegert, Knight and Xiao (2006 | Multi-Independent (MI) |
| Kotlyar, Karakowsky and Ng (2011) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Kramer (2006) | Multi-Partial (MP) |
| Kramer and Crespy (2011) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Lambropoulos, Bakharia and Gourdin (2011) | Multi-Partial (MP) |
| Lawler and Finegold (2006) | Limited-Partial (LP) |
| Lee, Hallinger and Walker (2012) | Multi-Partial (MP) |
| Leithwood and Mascall (2008) | Multi-Partial (MP) |
| Lindgren and Packendorff (2011) | Limited-Comprehensive (LC) |
| Lindsay, Day and Halpin (2011) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Liu, Hu, Wang and Lin (2014) | Multi-Partial (MP) |
| Lovelace, Manz and Alves (2007) | Multi-Partial (MP) |
| Manz, Manz, Adams and Shipper (2010) | Multi-Partial (MP) |
| Manz, Pearce, Mott, Henson and Sims (2013) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Manz, Shipper and Stewart (2009) | Limited-Partial (LP) |
| Marquardt, Seng and Goodson (2010) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Mayrowetz (2008) | Multi-Partial (MP) |
| McCallin (2003) | Multi-Partial (MP) |
| McIntyre and Foti (2013) | Limited-Comprehensive (LC) |
| Mehra, Smith, Dixon and Robertson (2006) | Limited-Comprehensive (LC) |
| Mifsud (2014) | Dual-Partial (DP) |
| Miles and Kivlighan (2010) | Dual-Partial (DP) |
| Muethel and Hoegl (2012) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Muethel, Gehrlein and Hoegl (2012) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Murphy and Ensher (2008) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Ng and Ho (2012) | Multi-Partial (MP) |
| O’Toole, Galbraith and Lawler (2002) | Limited-Independent (LI) |
| Osborn, Barrett and Dawson (2013) | Multi-Partial (MP) |
| Park (2012) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Patton and Higgs (2013) | Limited-Comprehensive (LC) |
| Pearce (2004) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Pearce and Manz (2005) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Pearce and Sims (2002) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Pearce, Manz and Akanno (2013) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Pearce, Manz and Sims (2009) | Multi-Partial (MP) |
| Pearce, Wassenaar and Manz (2014) | Limited-Partial (LP) |
| Perry, Pearce and Sims (1999) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Porter, Geis, Cooper and Newman (1985) | Limited-Comprehensive (LC) |
| Rai and Prakash (2012) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Ramthun and Matkin (2012) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Ramthun and Matkin (2014) | Limited-Partial (LP) |
| Rawlings (2000) | Multi-Partial (MP) |
| Rice (2006) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Rosengren and Bondas (2010) | Dual-Comprehensive (DC) |
| Rosengren, Bondas, Nordholm and Nordström (2010) | Dual-Comprehensive (DC) |
| Scott and Caress (2005) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Scribner, Sawyer, Watson and Myers (2007) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Senge (1993) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Shelley (1960) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Shondrick, Dinh and Lord (2010) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Shuffler, Wiese, Salas and Burke (2010) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Sivasubramaniam, Murry, Avolio and Jung (2002) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Small and Rentsch (2010) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Solansky (2008) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Spillane and Healey (2010) | Limited-Partial (LP) |
| Spillane, Halverson and Diamond (2001) | Multi-Partial (MP) |
| Steinert, Goebel and Rieger (2006) | Dual-Independent (DI) |
| Sveiby (2011) | Multi-Independent (MI) |
| Taylor (2011) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Thorpe, Gold and Lawler (2011) | Multi-Partial (MP) |
| Torrance (2013) | Limited-Partial (LP) |
| Vandewaerde, Voordeckers, Lambrechts and Bammens (2011) | Multi-Partial (MP) |
| VanVactor (2012) | Multi-Partial (MP) |
| Vine, Holmes, Marra, Pfeifer and Jackson (2008) | Dual-Comprehensive (DC) |
| Von Krogh, Nonaka and Rechsteiner (2012) | Limited-Partial (LP) |
| Wahlstrom and Louis (2008) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Waldersee and Eagleson (2002) | Dual-Independent (DI) |
| Wegge, Jeppesen, Weber, Pearce, Silva, Pundt and Unterrainer (2010) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Weibler and Rohn-Endres (2010) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Wood and Fields (2007) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Worley and Lawler (2010) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Yammarino, Mumford, Connelly and Dionne (2010) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Yang (1996) | Multi-Comprehensive (MC) |
| Zander and Butler (2010) | Limited-Partial (LP) |

1. References with an asterisk preceding the citation represent articles that were coded as part of the review. Appendix A includes the author citation for all reviewed articles. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)