

# Case Studies in Distributed Leadership

*A framework for exploration, organizational snapshots,  
and tools and applications*

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## A Framework for Examining Distributed Leadership

There are several dimensions of distributed leadership to examine within organizations. For this series of case studies we chose to focus our inquiry on decision making, where distributed leadership appears in the ways groups and teams make decisions together. For all organizations, regardless of whether or how leadership is distributed, individuals play different roles in making decisions and therefore exhibit different amounts of leadership. These roles may shift depending on:

- The **scope of the decision**, which can range from being routine with few ripple effects to being high stakes and affecting the whole organization (e.g., decisions related to organizational sustainability, priorities, values, or strategic direction)
- An individual's level of access to **information** about the decision
- An individual's **responsibility** for the repercussions and benefits of that decision



We define distributed leadership along a spectrum, with a sole individual making all decisions—high-stakes or not—at the least distributed end, using information that is exclusive to them (i.e., leadership is singular). This person, in turn, bears complete responsibility for those decisions.



At the most distributed end, many people at an organization have a voice in making decisions, including those that are high stakes. Just as these people have access to information that enables them to effectively contribute to these decisions, they also share responsibility for their decisions' ripple effects. Knitting a fully distributed organization together requires a culture of transparency and ongoing feedback, in which information-sharing and mutual trust enable individuals to truly share responsibility for their decisions. This responsibility must also be coupled with a greater diffusion of authority within organizations.

Variability in the scope of a decision combined with differences in the information available to individuals and their responsibility for that decision results in the myriad ways different organizations practice distributed leadership. Turning up the dials on these aspects—scope, information, and responsibility—for more people drives an organization toward the more distributed end of the spectrum, while excluding individuals from these aspects moves an organization to a more singular mode of leadership.

This framework for examining distributed leadership emerged from in-depth conversations with staff at seven organizations, each located at different places on the distributed leadership spectrum. Some are just beginning to open up decision-making processes to more staff, while others are building on long-held, founding principles of distributing responsibility and leadership. Whether they are experimenting with these processes or have completely codified them, the organizations we studied pursue distributed leadership to some degree because of the promise it holds: distributing leadership has the potential to create a more meaningful, productive organizational culture based on trusting relationships among staff. Not only that, organizations that distribute leadership do so to make smarter, more informed decisions that benefit them and their communities.



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# Ramping Up for Distributed Leadership

## *A Brief Exploration of Two Cases*



This case study is one in a series of five exploring the practice of distributed leadership. Commissioned by the Hewlett Foundation's Performing Arts Program, Open Mind Consulting and Informing Change describe the experiences and insights shared by seven organizations that demonstrate distributed leadership.

### INTRODUCTION

The processes for distributing leadership provide opportunities for leaders at every level of an organization to decide how to use and allocate organizational resources—for example, time, money, and talent. Each organization distributes leadership in its own unique ways, influenced by different organizational histories, the processes they choose for distributing leadership, and the opportunities and challenges unique to their contexts. Through conversations with California Shakespeare Theater (Cal Shakes) and Terrain, we discovered different factors that shape and reshape how these two organizations ramp up to distributed leadership over time and to different degrees.

**The factors that shape distributed leadership** processes for these organizations fell into three categories:

**Inflection Points:** Organizations adopt distributed leadership processes at key inflection points and continue to adapt them as the organization evolves.

**Timing:** The particular moment when an organization initiates distributed leadership processes (e.g., changing their leadership culture after many years versus building on a tradition of distributing leadership) presents different opportunities and challenges.

**Staff Hierarchy:** Implementing distributed leadership processes often takes more time when many layers of authority already exist within an organization.

### SNAPSHOT: TERRAIN

Terrain was established in 2008 to reinforce artistic vitality in Spokane, WA by knitting together a community of artists and innovators across generations. From the start, Terrain was a collaborative endeavor. Founding members relied on work groups and volunteer committees to carry out the organization's work: offering gallery space to local artists, developing affordable event venues, and running a storefront business featuring the work of local artists. Nevertheless, as Terrain began to expand its offerings and role in the community, board members and many of the early founding artists identified a need for increased oversight of day-to-day activities while still remaining committed to their grassroots beginnings. Formalizing distributed leadership processes felt like the perfect fit as they considered staffing up. They hired a full-time executive director in 2017 and have since increased the number of paid staff positions to 2.5 FTEs.

#### **Terrain: Factors Influencing Distributed Leadership**

**Inflection Point:** Rapid growth has required more staff and formalized systems

**Timing:** Founding tradition of collaborative leadership

**Staff Hierarchy:** Very little, but introducing positional authority as it formalizes

Distributed leadership manifests most profoundly in Terrain's collaborative decision-making processes. Despite her positional authority, the executive director includes volunteers, board members, artists, community members, and now paid staff members in making significant decisions. Staff describe a common practice of coming to shared conclusions, where everyone involved in decision making shares their perspectives, proposes various solutions or courses of action, and asks questions of one another, ultimately reaching unified agreement within the group. This process takes time, but the ED acknowledges that the benefits of building trust within the organization and with community members far outweigh the costs of a slower process.

### Terrain Quick Facts

**Location:** Spokane, WA

**Board of Directors:** 15

**Staff:** 2.5 FTE

**Formal Volunteers:** 18

**Budget:** \$343,000

### Challenges & Possibilities

***“I think that we would be doing a disservice to the organization if we didn't continue to embrace that idea of really strong collaboration.”***

— Terrain Board Member

Terrain is at a unique inflection point. It is moving from a completely volunteer-run organization to one with paid staff and an executive director. This has brought up questions about how to make decisions and formalize staff and board roles in what had been a completely decentralized organizational structure that relied heavily on collaborative processes.



With events like its annual flagship performance, Terrain has contributed to a thriving arts community in Spokane. *Photo courtesy of Terrain.*

The early stages of formalizing any nonprofit organization come with many decisions on how to structure roles and reporting. Adding the layer of distributing responsibility for these foundational decisions could muddy an organization's clarity and resolve during a period when momentum and clear-sighted vision are necessary to moving to the next stage of organizational growth. Terrain's board of directors recognize these challenges associated with distributed leadership. To mitigate them, they are working with the executive director and staff to develop an organizational structure that carefully balances processes for distributing leadership with ensuring the organization can still move at a pace that is responsive to change, both internal and external to Terrain. Board members are developing an organizational chart and complementary guidance documents that will reflect its practice of cultivating many decision-makers throughout the organization.

***“I don't want to lose our connection to community. We're here because we love our community and we want to serve our community. Right now, of big importance to me is how do we maintain and preserve the essence of who we are as an organization but also formalize in a way that allows us to be sustainable and grow?”***

— Terrain Executive Director

## SNAPSHOT: CALIFORNIA SHAKESPEARE THEATER (CAL SHAKES)

In the last five years, Cal Shakes, a regional theater in Orinda, CA, has set out to make its programming, staffing, and audience base more diverse, equitable, and inclusive. Rather than producing a season that consists of classically framed Shakespeare plays, Cal Shakes reorients Western classical works to be rooted in contemporary cultures and times, and complements its programming with adaptations and plays by living playwrights of color. Now, narratives and playwrights from beyond Western classical theater are a more visible part of Cal Shakes' programming, and the organization prioritizes initiatives that bring to the theater audiences who range in race, income level, and age, for example.

Taking a more inclusive approach to programming, however, was not a simple matter of the artistic director unilaterally deciding on what plays to produce. To make good on its commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion, staff at Cal Shakes came to recognize and embrace the value of honest communication, shared decision making, and more participatory leadership within the organization. Given the interconnections between the programs they put on, the staff they hire, and audiences they reach, and the extent to which those elements reflect values of diversity, equity, and inclusion, the two co-directors (artistic director and managing director) at Cal Shakes saw an opportunity to bring more staff into decision-making processes.

Cal Shakes began exploring different processes and structures for facilitating a more participatory decision-making process. Already, Cal Shakes had structural opportunities for distributing leadership, at the very least, among its artistic director and managing director. Using this co-director structure, the managing and artistic directors could model and refine practices of honest communication, collaboration, and shared decision making for the rest of the organization. Co-directorship allows for a distribution of positional authority between senior leaders, but it was not going to be enough to move Cal Shakes toward the level of inclusion and participation it sought from the rest of its staff; they needed additional processes and tools to bring more people into decisions that matter.

Rather than seeing his position as at the top of a triangle, the artistic director emphasizes the metaphor of a circle, where individuals can choose to step up and speak or step back and listen, regardless of their formal place in the organizational chart. For example, to decide on the most recent season of its programming, Cal Shakes introduced a programming matrix.<sup>1</sup> All staff could contribute to the matrix, adding plays they wanted Cal Shakes to produce, and weighing in on considerations like market demand and alignment with its commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. The matrix provided a place for staff to go to bat for a play they felt passionate about in a format that wasn't overwhelming to take in. From this input, the artistic director could work more collaboratively with the managing director and board of directors to make final decisions on the season's programming. For several plays in Cal Shakes' 2018 season, these leaders made decisions they wouldn't have otherwise made without collaborative engagement with staff. In addition to processes like the programming matrix, Cal Shakes assembles an Artistic Circle to discuss programmatic decisions and their implications for the theater—as a way of including

### Cal Shakes: Factors Influencing Distributed Leadership

**Inflection Point:** Renewed commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion in their work

**Timing:** Exploring distributed leadership practices while undertaking a series of efforts to expand diversity, equity, and inclusion

**Staff Hierarchy:** Several layers of positional authority throughout organization

### Cal Shakes Quick Facts

**Location:** Orinda, CA

**Board of Directors:** 22

**Staff:** 50 FTE

**Formal Volunteers:** 150

**Budget:** \$4.5M

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<sup>1</sup> Learn more about Cal Shakes Season Planning Matrix in the case study, *Cultivating Distributed Leadership: Tools and practices that build a participatory culture*.



more staff in the artistic direction of the organization. The Artistic Circle includes staff from across several departments: artistic, production, education, community engagement, marketing and fundraising.

## Challenges & Possibilities

Much of Cal Shakes' audiences have come to expect a British canonical repertoire, so Cal Shakes' departure from the Western canon in an effort to incorporate more diverse voices in its productions runs a risk of losing some audience members. The programming decisions, however, don't happen in a vacuum. Staff are advocating for more diverse and inclusive productions. Because more people in the organization weigh in on decisions, leaders feel more confident in making decisions that differ from the theater's history.



Participatory decision-making processes rallied Cal Shakes' staff around productions such as Octavio Solis's *Quixote Nuevo*, directed by KJ Sanchez. Photo courtesy of California Shakespeare Theater. Credit: Kevin Berne

At the same time, in bringing more staff into the decision-making processes, directors and the board grapple with the degree of responsibility that this widened circle of leaders should carry, especially when it comes to the financial health of the organization. Departmental directors are still developing their abilities to lead through more distributed practices. Many in this widened circle do not have access to the organization's financial details, nor are they compensated equally with directors. Therefore, individuals with positional authority (i.e., the artistic and managing directors and the board), still have the final say on decisions. Distributed leadership at Cal Shakes remains an ongoing process of experimentation and learning.

***“What I love about this model is it often makes me a braver person. Left to my own devices, I wouldn’t be as inclined to take risks. But, when there’s a collective embrace of a choice, there’s a shared sense of commitment—to the success of the work, to the opportunities the work affords. You recognize that you’re not alone in your love of it, and that brings courage.”***

— Cal Shakes Artistic Director



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# Adapting & Expanding Distributed Leadership

## *A Brief Exploration of Two Cases*

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### INTRODUCTION

The processes for distributing leadership provide opportunities for leaders at every level of an organization to decide how to use and allocate organizational resources—for example, time, money, and talent. Each organization distributes leadership in its own unique ways, influenced by organizational histories, the processes they choose for distributing leadership, and the opportunities and challenges unique to their contexts. Through conversations with Orpheus Chamber Orchestra and On The Move, we discovered different factors that shape and reshape how these organizations distribute leadership over time and to different degrees. Different factors compel these organizations to adapt and grow their distributed leadership processes in response to internal shifts, such as a new cadre of leaders joining the organization, as well as external shifts, such as changes in market demands.

**The factors that shape distributed leadership** processes for these organizations fell into three categories:

**Inflection Points:** Organizations adopt distributed leadership processes at key inflection points and continue to adapt them as the organization evolves.

**Timing:** The moment when an organization initiates distributed leadership processes (e.g., changing their leadership culture after many years or building on a founding tradition of distributing leadership) presents different opportunities and challenges.

**Staff Hierarchy:** Implementing distributed leadership processes often takes more time when many layers of authority already exist within an organization.

### SNAPSHOT: ORPHEUS CHAMBER ORCHESTRA

Since its founding in 1972, the conductorless Orpheus Chamber Orchestra has used distributed and democratic processes to plan, produce, and deliver world-class orchestral performances. Rather than a conductor at the artistic helm of the organization, member musicians collectively decide which pieces to perform and the artistic choices for each performance. They perform at major concert venues in the United States, tour internationally, and host a number of renowned visiting performers.

Orpheus's democratic approach is the product of decades of refining a set of core practices that have built a strong internal capacity for participatory, distributed leadership. Three orchestra members ("musical trustees") serve three-year terms on the board of trustees, a practice that is codified in the organization's bylaws. Up to three rotating artistic directors also serve three-year terms on an artistic planning group (APG), which collaboratively sets the artistic direction alongside the executive team. The APG makes choices related to performance schedules and musical programming, more recently with an eye to the financial well-being of the organization.



The performing arts landscape has shifted dramatically since Orpheus was founded in 1972, and the organization has had to adapt its processes for making decisions to remain agile and relevant. As new generations of performers and musicians participate in the organization, Orpheus has also had to shift their practices to respond efficiently to changing market demands, while preserving the democratic ethos cherished by the board, staff, and performers.

## Refining Practices

Understanding the most recent shifts in Orpheus's distributed leadership practices requires a quick overview of how it gives everyone a voice in decisions that matter. On the artistic side, member musicians have developed deep levels of artistic trust with one another and a shared commitment to the organization. Turnover is low. Each member carries a sense of responsibility for producing high quality performances. Concertmasters and section leaders, which rotate depending on the performance, generate a creative musical direction. Then the orchestra as a whole shapes and further defines that direction through small group dialogue among sections, musical expression during rehearsals, and intuition during live performance.

All staff also have ways to get involved in administrative decisions, for example:

- The Orpheus marketing team seeks input from all staff on the design of marketing materials.
- Orchestral members elect three artistic directors to participate in board governance as non-voting members, in addition electing three Musician Trustees who serve in full voting positions on the board.
- The current executive director spent significant time to plan a "field trip" for all staff to assess a potential office space and to engender a shared decision with staff on a final choice about whether or not to relocate.

## Factors Influencing Distributed Leadership

**Inflection Point:** Adapting long-held distributed leadership practices to respond to a new generation of member musicians and changing market demands

**Timing:** Founding tradition of distributing leadership

**Staff Hierarchy:** Layer of supervision between Artistic Director and Executive Director, Executive Director, and Board of Trustees

## Orpheus Quick Facts

**Location:** New York, NY

**Board of Directors:** 22

**Staff:** 9 FTE

**Orchestra Members:** 34

**Budget:** \$3.7M

***"Orpheus can be seen as a kind of microcosm of democracy in action.... When it works, it allows for a freedom and evolution that really nothing else comes close to. But it also... puts a tremendous responsibility upon the individual to participate. Because there's no place to hide."***

– Orpheus Artistic Director

Distributed leadership and democratic decision making has worked at Orpheus for over 46 years, thanks in large part to the organization's core commitment to communication, self leadership, and time management practices.

## Communication

Administrative staff and member musicians alike have honed their ability to share their opinions, convey respect even when disagreeing, and remain honest with each other about what works or is not working. The executive director prioritizes communication in his own role; he sees himself as the "central communicator," listening and linking people and ideas throughout the organization. Communication skills also rank high in their hiring practices. Traditional orchestras and symphonies audition performers from behind a screen, judging candidates

purely on technical and artistic skills. In contrast, Orpheus does not even consider its hiring process an audition, let alone use a screen. Instead, member candidates have short-term roles in a concert set or tour. If member candidates demonstrate communication skills in addition to their technical talent, Orpheus invites them to join as formal members. These interpersonal skills are essential to respectfully engaging with other orchestra members, participating in discussions related to creative decisions, and giving and accepting feedback.

### Self Leadership

Orchestra members are constantly modulating the extent to which they speak up or listen and let others contribute. They describe the importance of knowing when their contribution is valuable, and when it only takes up airtime. This awareness helps members use their time judiciously.

### Time Management

Because making decisions democratically takes time, setting boundaries for the time around and for decision-making processes is crucial for keeping the organization moving forward. These boundaries take the form of regular meetings for groups to deliberate and make decisions, such as the APG. Artistic decisions that musicians make, for example, during rehearsals, have boundaries thanks to the rehearsal time limits, outlined in the group's collective bargaining agreement; performers, then, are incentivized to use their rehearsal time wisely.

***“As I've gotten a little older, I'm more interested in listening and not being part of white noise: of too many people speaking and too many opinions. So I try to really choose—as I say, pick your battles. Like I really want to make sure I'm saying something that will affect the bigger goal or inspiration to the group. And I try not to let just the fact that I can talk be a reason to talk.”***

— Orpheus Orchestra Member

In order to streamline some of its processes to remain agile, Orpheus has had to adapt over the years. Artistic directors remain central to leading major artistic decisions within the organization, but they now report to the executive director; previously, they were horizontal to the executive director. The board of trustees fully supported the change, realizing they needed administrative leaders to align more seamlessly in order for Orpheus to remain agile and relevant in the fast-paced and competitive New York City arts environment. At the same time, as new generations of musicians join Orpheus, the organization remains committed to nurturing the skills musicians need to thrive in their participatory and democratic culture. All members learn to practice time management, self leadership, and honest communication and apply these skills during meetings and rehearsal sessions. Cultivating these practices over many years helps Orpheus remain healthy, vibrant, and responsive to the needs of new members and the changing life experiences of veteran members.



For Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, rehearsal time comes at a premium.  
Photo courtesy of Orpheus Chamber Orchestra. Credit: Matt Dine

*“Having a place where both organizationally and musically, everyone has the ability to speak up and put their ideas forward is really valuable. There’s a pretty healthy understanding that just because someone has an opinion like, ‘I don’t like the programming for the last three years,’ they can say that and offer suggestions and know that their next ideas may not be implemented, but they are still able to say it in an open way and not have any penalty attached to it. This is of huge value, that either directly or indirectly, we are choosing what we play, who we play with, where we do it, for a living wage.”*

– Orpheus Orchestra Member

## SNAPSHOT: ON THE MOVE

Founded on a commitment to building a community pipeline for leadership, On The Move has established a deep bench of leaders tackling some of the most pressing challenges within local and regional communities: LGBTQ rights, foster care youth emancipation, immigrant integration, and advancing social equity. The organization cultivates early-career leaders by developing their self leadership and building their skills for participating in distributed leadership processes within their own communities. On The Move does this work through its flagship On The Verge program, and the organization has established a diverse cadre of leaders to serve at every level of the organization. At present, 51% of staff identify as people of color and 65% as women. Further, 42% are under age 30, establishing a deep bench of new leaders.

The organization’s core commitment to communication, self leadership, and a culture of deep interpersonal relationships has driven the ways it has cultivated distributed leadership over their 14-year history. Some aspects of inclusive and distributed leadership have been part of On The Move’s DNA since from its inception. As the founding director stepped back in 2015, and the current executive director stepped up that same year, the organization expanded and deepened its distributed leadership practices.

### Deepening Distributed Leadership

A six-person leadership team meets regularly to oversee and manage the overall direction of the organization, while a five-person program team works collaboratively to manage day-to-day program operations and management. Both of these teams operate around a core set of values they uphold throughout the organization, thus building a culture of sharing responsibility for decision making, program learning, and interpersonal equity.

### Factors Influencing Distributed Leadership

**Inflection Point:** Expanding leadership across generations, building alliances with community partners

**Timing:** Founded with a community pipeline of leadership to develop a leaderful organization

**Staff Hierarchy:** Executive Director relies on a six-member leadership team, which absorbs additional members from within the organization as new leaders develop and mature

### On The Move Quick Facts

**Location:** Napa, CA

**Board of Directors:** 10

**Staff:** 84 FTE

**Formal Volunteers:** 300

**Budget:** \$6.1M

## On The Move Values

1. **Integrity:** We work to develop processes, values, and standards in pursuit of social equity in every community; we expect that all On The Move staff operate by these same processes, values, and standards across all programs and services.
2. **Inclusion:** We intentionally create and embrace environments that are inclusive and equitable.
3. **Experiential Learning:** We take risks, learn together, reflect on experiences, and grow from failure.
4. **Shared Leadership:** As we create new opportunities together, we share power and decision making in addition to responsibility.
5. **Relationship:** In order to do great work in the world, we must be known and know others. Healthy and authentic relationships create shared purpose.
6. **Impact:** We intentionally focus our efforts on actions that make a difference.

## Self Leadership & Advancement

On The Move builds on the early leadership development experiences of their staff to cultivate and continually develop self leadership. This early development carries leaders from entry-level roles to roles with more positional authority, such as coordinators, managers, and directors. Sixty percent of the staff have advanced positions within the organization during their individual tenure, and retention has remained high—on average, staff remain at On The Move seven or more years.

The current executive director is herself a graduate of the On The Verge program, which places high value on honest communication and reflection through giving and receiving feedback. Good coaching practices within the organization further reinforce the early investment in self leadership. On The Move allocates time and invests resources in professional coaching for staff at all levels, whether identified by leadership team members or requested by staff. Sometimes internal staff, who have experience coaching and training, carry out these coaching duties. At other times, consultants or even board members with professional coaching expertise provide such support. This spills over to support groups and teams as necessary, where coaching circles for teams and groups provide individuals support around communications, group decision making, or time management.



On The Verge participants build self-leadership skills such as honest communication.  
*Photo courtesy of On The Move.*



*“Some days my work would be easier if I made decisions by myself, but what we are doing is too expansive for any one individual to carry alone. We have vast differences across programs. Content is widespread, the value and the power of bringing together those diverse perspectives is critical to [good] decision making.... Staff teams consult with me on making critical decisions and sometimes consult with the board but at the end of the day, they have responsibility and therefore must have authority too. It requires a great deal of strength on the part of the ED and the board.”*

– Executive Director, On The Move

## Culture

Looking at the relationships between staff and among the leadership team allows for a more holistic perspective on what enables everyone to collaborate and take risks when challenges arise, as well as feel a deep sense of trust between staff during times of stress. Observations of On The Move’s leadership team offer a glimpse of the deep rapport established among leaders. Time is designated on every agenda for sharing personal updates; values are reflected through written agreements stated on leadership team meeting agendas; and leaders spend time exploring one or more values through meeting business, using meeting space to both get things done and reconnect with the values that allow distributed leadership to pervade across the organizational culture. Rooted in a set of core values, the culture at On The Move allows it to continually develop robust and shared decision-making practices through deepening relationships among staff.

### Examples of On The Move Leadership Team Meeting Agreements

- Remember the work of leadership development is never over.
- We won’t have everything tied up with a ribbon at the end of the meeting.
- Be realistic with goals and action plans.



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# Reimagining Positional Authority to Advance Distributed Leadership



## *How Distributed Leadership & Positional Authority Influence One Another*

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***“We are collectively responsible for whatever is going on if we are leading this organization together. And I think that’s different. There’s a lot of leadership teams that are out there and it’s like, we’re responsible for doing the work, but not – we collectively are responsible for the successes and we all get to take part in that, and when we fail, we fail together. And I think that’s just something that’s been a part of our culture ... you have to have a certain level of trust”***

– Leadership Team Member, On The Move

Many organizations turn to distributed leadership because of a belief that staff in all parts of the organization have the potential to lead in some way, to some degree. Ideally, when staff across an organization feel empowered as leaders in their own right, they become, by extension, more collaborative, trusting, and committed to the work. Rather than eliminating positional authority, the seven organizations we studied distribute leadership to varying degrees and through different processes, requiring them to examine and sometimes reconfigure how they allocate positional authority.

**Positional authority** refers to individuals in formally recognized leadership roles with a high degree of responsibility and power for decision making within an organization.

## Distributed Leadership Within & Beyond Positional Authority

Most decision making in hierarchal organizations depends upon the positional authority one holds. This positional authority is often defined by an individual’s knowledge about and responsibility for high stakes decisions. In organizations that distribute leadership, positional authority still plays an important role, but is no longer solely defined by an individual’s knowledge and responsibility. Instead, individuals with positional authority serve as communicators, facilitators, and models for effective decision-making processes.

One way to examine how positional authority and distributed leadership influence one another is to use descriptive categories for staff roles that correspond to the decision-making process. We classify these differences according to three types of roles:

- **Makers** make decisions and are responsible for their ramifications. They have full access to necessary information (e.g., organization financials) to make the best possible decision. Makers make ultimate decisions.



- **Participants** inform decisions and are part of the decision-making process. They have a genuine voice and stake in the outcome of decisions. Their level of access to information surrounding a decision varies. Participants frequently inform Makers' decisions.
- **Observers** know when and why decisions are being made, but rarely inform decisions and have limited access to the information that shapes them.

Organizations that distribute leadership bring more Makers and Participants into high-stakes, organization-wide, or departmental decision-making processes, regardless of their level of positional authority.

Terrain, an organization that supports the arts and cultural landscape of Spokane, WA, showcases the interplay between positional authority and distributed leadership. Recently formalized as a nonprofit 501(c)(3), Terrain is at an interesting inflection point. Founded as a completely grassroots, volunteer-run organization with a tradition of collaborative decision making, its first choice as a formal 501(c)(3) has been to create a level of vertical authority—an ED. The Board is in the process of negotiating how much positional authority is necessary and important for the organization without hamstringing its collaborative roots.

## The Role of Positional Authority in a Distributed Leadership Organization

Distributed leadership reconfigures—but still requires—positional authority. As more Makers and Participants are represented in decision making, leaders with positional authority need to show up differently during decision-making processes. In being able to rely on others in the organization to contribute to decisions, executive directors' primary role becomes enabling the conditions for distributed leadership to thrive. Tasked with sharing information and distributing decisions to more Participants and Makers within an organization, executive directors reflected upon the different purposes and functions of their roles to support and sustain distributed leadership during our interviews:

- The executive director at Destiny Arts Center is steadfast in her effort to build and maintain trust among her leadership team. This allows her to share decision-making responsibility but remain the ultimate decision maker in the organization.
- The executive director at On The Move encourages her leadership team members and horizontally positioned leaders to question her and poke holes in ideas to help strengthen decisions. She is committed to a firm practice of leading both up front and from the back. Exhibiting a high degree of what is often called flexible adjustment, she leads from the front when required and steps back when working in groups to allow those with less positional authority an opportunity to lead.
- The executive director at Orpheus Chamber Orchestra invests much of his time in communicating information, both to equip orchestra members and staff with what they need to make decisions and to communicate about the decisions themselves. Communication has become a primary contribution to maintaining distributed leadership processes.
- At Thousand Currents, everyone learns to follow. Staff with greater positional authority often take direction from a project coordinator with less positional authority. The executive director and the management team see their role as central facilitators, ensuring everyone has time and capacity to participate in more distributed leadership processes. They emphasize that, in addition to their grantmaking and project work, patience, listening, and learning are the core of what they do—practices informed by their partnership with grassroots groups in the Global South.



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## Makers & Participants in Action

Compared with more hierarchical organizations, organizations that exhibit distributed leadership adopt structures and processes that broaden and support the number of Makers and Participants in an organization. Committees, self-managed teams, and working groups allow more opportunities for collaboration and distributed decision making over the use of resources, for example. Through these structures, more people contribute to and influence difficult decisions, the production of complex services, or even creative artistic endeavors. Leaders with positional authority participate in and help maintain these structures and processes, which often require them to share power and build relationships with those who are horizontally positioned to them.

Leaders at Cal Shakes have been building new structures to help advance processes for more Makers and Participants to inform decisions. One way they are doing this is through the formation of the Artistic Circle, in which the Artistic Director is just one of many voices contributing to a programming rubric. This process is structured to be more transparent and to allow for diversity of thought, giving voice to members of the organization who may have been historically excluded from or less involved in artistic decision-making discussions. The Artistic Circle has become more inclusive and more participatory as Cal Shakes continues to pursue diversity, equity, and inclusion activities across the entire organization. This more distributed process for artistic decision making is shaping new programming choices for the theater while maintaining a level of oversight for these choices by the Artistic Director.

Cultivating Makers in an organization requires more time for decisions; however, the time it takes to move through these processes does not mean they are less efficient. Implementers of this practice have come to view time as an investment that brings more staff buy-in into a decision from the beginning. Several executive directors in our study pointed out that when they made a decision that didn't include other Makers in the past, they spent quite a bit of time addressing the consequences (e.g., more one-on-one follow-up conversations to elaborate on the decisions made, addressing allegations or criticisms regarding a lack of transparency).

Most organizations maintain some tiers of positional authority; organizations rarely distribute leadership completely (i.e., where every staff member is a Maker, regardless of their degree of positional authority). More commonly, staff are Makers within their own arenas (e.g., a communications manager is a Maker of communications decisions). Often, organizations use leadership teams, co-directorships, or rotating directorships and staff board member positions to carve out pockets of distributed leadership. This expands the number of Makers and Participants in particular arenas.

***“Off-Center was created to be a testing center... emphasizing data collection and feedback loops and adjusting our strategy based on what we learn. We created a start-up inside of this big organization and we continue to operate that way. The culture and the rules don't always apply to us in the same way because of that.”***

— Associate Artistic Director, Denver Center for Performing Arts

Off-Center at the Denver Center for Performing Arts offers an example of distributed leadership that flourishes within a larger organization where there is a strong reliance on positional authority and a tradition of vertical leadership. The organization has carved out a niche of Makers that is not necessarily top or bottom of the organizational chart. Makers for Off-Center are horizontally-positioned with one another, brought together by an early-career Associate Artistic Director. This highly collaborative, self-managed team allows for experimentation and higher risk theatrical production choices that have paid off, both by providing emerging leaders new opportunities to exercise authority, and through both increased revenue and audience attendance.

# Risk Taking, Decision Making, & Distributed Leadership



*A brief exploration on how each informs the others*

This case study is one in a series of five exploring the practice of distributed leadership. Commissioned by the Hewlett Foundation's Performing Arts Program, Open Mind Consulting and Informing Change describe the experiences and insights shared by seven organizations that demonstrate distributed leadership.

## INTRODUCTION

Distributing leadership in an organization brings more people to the table to contribute to and make decisions. The more an organization distributes leadership, the more ideas can inform the ways it allocates resources, experiments with programs, and determines its strategic direction. Bringing more people and possibilities into decisions can lead an organization in unknown and therefore riskier directions, more often for the better, but sometimes for the worse. We have observed that distributing leadership in its most realized form (see call-out box below) can also help mitigate consequences from decisions gone wrong. The collective responsibility that individuals feel when an organization distributes decision-making processes and power motivates them to do their part to ensure the best possible outcome. Further, should a decision go awry, more people—rather than a sole decision maker—absorb the fallout from subsequent ripple effects.

Leaders in positional authority help facilitate **democratic** and **collaborative** decision-making processes by allowing others in the organization to step up while they intentionally step back. This creates opportunities for ideas outside of their own to proliferate and influence the decision-making process. Executive-level leaders' roles, then, establish a clearly articulated shared organizational vision before engaging in more collaborative decision-making processes. Leaders are also responsible for communicating necessary information, particularly as it relates to risk, e.g., an organization's financial state. This transparency and communication engenders the trust, rapport, and mutual confidence necessary for people from different parts of an organization to come together to collaboratively and democratically make decisions.

### When does a decision-making process distribute leadership, and when does it not?

- ✓ Distributed leadership: When a decision is **democratic** among multiple people in an organization—each voice gets one vote, and the majority choice becomes the decision.
- ✓ Distributed leadership: When a decision is **collaborative**—multiple voices come together, compromise, and synthesize into one decision. This is often called collective sensemaking.
- ✗ Not distributed leadership: When different opinions and input are sought or solicited, but one person ultimately makes the final decision.

The risks that distributing leadership can prompt are particularly acute for performing arts organizations that depend on audiences buying tickets—and responding well—to their performances. A new direction for a production could drive some audiences away, but it could also bring new audiences in. For the performing arts organizations we talked with, distributing leadership brought more people into the decision-making process and engendered a sense of shared responsibility, helping leaders shoulder risks related to their productions that they would not have taken on their own.

***“I’ve grown to love performing more because of our process. When we do multiple performances, it gets better and better ‘cause things are changing up. There’s magic in something where we can all have such a sense of ownership and participation.”***

– Member Musician, Orpheus



Orpheus Chamber Orchestra plays at Carnegie Hall.

Photo courtesy of Orpheus Chamber Orchestra. Credit: Brian Hatton

## **OFF-CENTER: A CASE OF DISTRIBUTING LEADERSHIP TO INTRODUCE RISK**

Off-Center was formed as part of Denver Center of Performing Arts (DCPA) with the purpose of making art that deviates from DCPA’s traditional repertoire and appeals to new audiences, as well as providing leadership opportunities for emerging leaders to participate in making decisions about programming. Off-Center uses distributed leadership to shape high-stakes choices: individuals across different departments and from different levels of positional authority throughout DCPA each have a voice and role in making decisions for Off-Center programming.

At Off-Center, feedback and learning are crucial to managing risk. Practices of pre- and post-mortems become doubly important to informing the next collective decision made by the planning group. The collaborative Off-Center approach to decision making influenced the larger DCPA artistic team as well. After an interim period of reorganization, DCPA modified the larger organizational structure, opening up more opportunities for staff to work collaboratively across theater productions. For example, Off-Center’s associate



Off-Center productions such as The Wild Party help generate new audiences.

Photo courtesy of Denver Center for Performing Arts. Credit: AdamsVisCom.

***“We come together and we say, ‘It’s truly okay that we experienced challenges with this production because we learned x, y, z.’ ... It’s not punitive, and no one’s in trouble. That has been really critical to grow Off-Center as well as the trust and a sense of teamwork that I think is really healthy, especially when you’re trying to do new work.”***

– Member of Off-Center Planning Group



producer now works side-by-side with other members of the artistic team to shape programing on DCPA's main stages.

## ON THE MOVE & TERRAIN: CASES OF DISTRIBUTING LEADERSHIP TO MITIGATE RISK

Distributing leadership both facilitates risk taking and helps mitigate the weight and repercussions when risks don't pan out as planned. In this way, it can help organizations healthfully go in new—and in some cases essential—directions, bringing their staff and community along.

For example, the Carr Fires in Napa County, CA in 2017 prompted the leadership team at On The Move to make quick and potentially risky decisions about how to allocate resources for their programs and, ultimately, structure their organization to best support the community. At the same time, they needed to maintain ongoing core programming. They managed to be responsive in the midst of a crisis through distributed leadership and decision-making responsibilities based on a foundation of trust, self leadership, and compassion to get things done under tight time constraints. This foundation was critical to a collaborative decision-making process that shared and buffered the risks introduced by these minute-by-minute decisions. In our conversations with them, leadership team members agreed that riskier decisions feel better because they have taken a distributed leadership approach to making them.

While On The Move provides an example of an organization internally distributing leadership to make decisions, Terrain distributes leadership beyond its small staff. As it formalizes into a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, Terrain continues its tradition of distributing leadership by involving community members and artists in many of its decision-making processes. All of Terrain's programming has been spurred by close conversation with and in response to its artist community by way of informal feedback or solidified committees. To ensure these conversations continue to take place in meaningful ways, Terrain expanded their board of directors to include five working artists from the local community. Their voices are now part of high-stakes organizational decisions. Thus, new directions that emerge from distributed processes come with both buy-in and shared responsibility for outcomes among leaders in positional authority at Terrain, as well as members of the artist community.

***“I don’t orient to risk. What I orient to is to buy-in. I care because my colleague cares about risk and I care about my colleague... I think it goes back to shared ownership—we own the decision.”***

– Member of On The Move's Leadership Team



Distributed leadership practices enable Terrain to remain true to its community-oriented roots. Photo courtesy of Terrain.



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# Cultivating Distributed Leadership

*Tools and practices that build a participatory culture*

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## INTRODUCTION

Organizations distribute leadership for many reasons, chief among them to:

- Include more voices in decision making
- Share responsibility among multiple leaders for risks, successes, and failures
- Bring more perspectives and insights into solving complex problems
- Share power, resources, and authority more equitably

***“We move at the speed of culture- and values-building. It’s not about time... so initially we will go slow so that in the long term we can go fast.”***

– Director of Philanthropic Partnerships,  
Thousand Currents

To ensure that distributing leadership results in forward movement, organizations need tools and practices that enable people and teams at different levels of authority to work together and make decisions without sacrificing efficiency. These tools and practices ideally provide opportunities for people to challenge one another's ideas, and engender the requisite honest communication, transparency, and trust to make these conversations productive. Taken together, tools, practices, and deeper levels of trust help build the participatory organizational culture that enables distributed leadership to thrive.

## TOOLS & PRACTICES FOR INCLUSIVE CONVERSATIONS

With more leaders participating in an organization comes a need for more information sharing, reflective learning, and collaborative decision-making processes among staff. When organizations have tools and practices for inclusive conversations, all of these processes become more productive. California Shakespeare Theater, Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, and Thousand Currents provide examples of these tools and practices, which allow multiple viewpoints to inform their conversations and support their efforts at distributing leadership.

### California Shakespeare Theater's Season Planning Matrix

California Shakespeare Theater (Cal Shakes) created a process for bringing more people and perspectives into its artistic season planning processes through its season planning matrix. A theater company rooted in the Bay Area, Cal Shakes has been exploring distributed leadership practices as an expression of its commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Cal Shakes leaders use the season planning matrix to gather feedback from staff about the plays they are considering producing. In addition to production details such as cast size, cost of production, venue, and form (e.g., play, musical), staff add to the matrix:



- The play's culture of origin
- The cultural lens of the writer
- Whether the script advances—or has potential in production to advance—equity by race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and age
- A production's opportunities for civic engagement and programming
- Potential audiences

By weighing in on these elements of a play and season, staff provide crucial feedback about the direction in which they want programming to move. The tool is limited in that it brings more staff into the decision-making process, rather than bringing people of different levels of authority directly into final decision making. Nonetheless, having more staff participate in this aspect of the decision-making process is an important step toward distributing leadership. Both the managing and artistic directors believe they would not have made the decisions they did without the season planning matrix, and staff feel more involved in selecting the season's programming.



The season planning matrix informed Cal Shakes' 2018 programming decisions, such as producing an adaption of Shakespeare's *War of the Roses*. Photo courtesy of California Shakespeare Theater. Credit: Jay Yamada

## Thousand Currents' Performance Review

Thousand Currents distributes leadership by cultivating in staff, from day one on the job, the sense that each of them are leaders within their own sets of responsibilities. In line with Thousand Currents' values that emphasize courage, humility, creative collaboration, experimentation, and interdependence, two-way feedback is an important aspect of this culture. Thousand Currents has baked their commitment to learning across levels of positional authority into their performance review process. A template guides the process, which begins with a set of guiding principles stating that the review process at Thousand Currents:

- Is a developmental rather than punitive tool
- Reinforces and builds on year-round performance management
- Emphasizes self-reflection
- Helps align values, priorities, strategies, and roles at Thousand Currents



Two-way feedback enables a culture at Thousand Currents for distributed leadership to thrive. Photo courtesy of Thousand Currents.

Questions in the review template reinforce these principles and focus on self-reflection. For example:

- “What three accomplishments/achievements are you most proud of? What did you learn?”
- “List one or two tasks/projects where the outcome was less successful than your goal. What would you differently next time? What did you learn?”
- “Which Thousand Currents values did you practice most frequently in the past year?”

These questions reinforce learning regardless of whether the staff member is reflecting on a success or a challenge. Further, feedback explicitly moves in two directions; one line of questioning is entirely devoted to feedback for supervisors:

- “What has your supervisor done well to help you do your job? What have they done to hinder your performance? Please be candid. Feedback is essential and solicited. What is one thing that can enhance your work with your supervisor even further?”

In facilitating two-way feedback between staff members and supervisors, Thousand Currents’ performance review process is an example of how Thousand Currents proactively stimulates challenging, reflective conversations. Within the context of the performance review, as well as in weekly check-ins and daily practices, these conversations give staff the tools and mechanisms to speak up and contribute to the organization, regardless of their level of formal positional authority.

### **On The Move’s No Third Party Conversations Rule**

In order to support smooth practices for distributed leadership, On The Move has instituted a No Third Party Conversations rule—i.e., individuals don’t have high-stakes conversations outside a team and always discuss conflicts directly between involved parties. This means that if two people haven’t reached a mutually agreed upon conclusion, one person doesn’t engage others in the conversation without the other person present. This practice is cultivated through an ethos of self leadership, which is often established with new leaders through early engagement in their On The Verge program. The No Third Party Conversations rule reinforces the organization’s principles for honest, direct, two-way communication, regardless of role or positional authority.

### **On The Verge: Kickstarting Self Leadership**

Since 2003, On The Verge—the flagship program of On The Move—has supported emerging leaders in building knowledge, clarity, and strength at the personal, interpersonal, and professional levels. Many program graduates transition into formal positions of leadership at On The Move and many more participate in decision-making teams at various levels throughout the organization as staff members.

## **TOOLS & PRACTICES FOR TRANSPARENCY**

In addition to prioritizing opportunities for challenging conversations, organizations that distribute leadership also incorporate tools and practices for transparency. In order for more people to have the power and authority to participate in and make decisions, they need information and clarity on pertinent information about those decisions. But transparency goes beyond enabling smart decisions. If an organization is distributing leadership, it is also distributing responsibility and power, and, through compensation, duties and accountability. Transparent financial practices, such as sharing salary information, help staff understand how resources at an organization are allocated, as well as their role and level of responsibility in allocating those resources.

## Destiny Arts Center's Salary Transparency

For Destiny Arts Center, distributing leadership does not mean equalizing leadership responsibilities. Instead, their distributed leadership practices manifest in the ways that department leaders have agency in creating their budgets, making decisions within their departmental scope, and informing organization-wide decisions.

When the leadership team at Destiny Arts Center began realizing their version of distributed leadership, their first order of business was sharing their salary information with one another. This was a key step in building trust among leadership team members; knowing one another's salaries helped clarify how resources supported them and their departments in the context of organization-wide priorities.

Sharing salary information also prompted leaders at Destiny Arts Center to grapple with what it would mean for everyone to feel the same amount of responsibility for decisions. Ultimately, different people on the leadership team felt they needed to have different degrees of responsibility.

In this case, transparency around salaries did not result in equitable, flat salaries among leadership team members, but it did result in a shared understanding about how and to what degree their different roles factored into the decision-making process.

***“You can't say you're having a fully collaborative model and then not be fully collaborative in terms of salary. But the reality is that having fiscal responsibilities for the organization equates with a higher salary. As the questions around where is the equity around pay [are] coming up, we devolved back into much more of a hierarchical structure.”***

– Executive Director, Destiny Arts Center

## Orpheus Chamber Orchestra's Rotating Musician Board Members

Orpheus, a chamber orchestra that distributes leadership among its member musicians, has processes and protocols baked into its bylaws that make transparent different aspects of how the organization makes decisions. One of these processes is having three musicians elected to the Board of Trustees on a rotating basis. Musician board members access information about various aspects of the organization's financials and must square those realities with their artistic visions. Because musicians rotate on and off the board, they understand these realities even if they no longer hold these responsibilities, engendering trust throughout the organization for the decisions the board makes.

***“It's really important for musicians to be on the board, especially in keeping the conversation going between artistic directors and the board. There's tension between artistic aspirations and having to justify this against cost.”***

– Member Musician at Orpheus

## IN SERVICE OF TRUST

The use of tools and practices alone do not define an organization that distributes leadership; a culture that prioritizes trust is just as important. Leaders in distributed leadership organizations champion a culture of seeing time as an investment, rather than a cost. While incorporating more people into the decision-making process may take longer, leaders see this time as valuable in building commitment and buy-in among all staff. Valuing time as an investment is not limited to leadership; anyone participating in a distributed leadership process must make intentional choices about how to best use theirs and others' time. This means that leaders actively consider when to speak up and when to step back, allowing time for others to participate in discussions and prioritizing listening

within groups or teams, a form of self leadership. Distributed leadership organizations often develop these skills of self leadership among all their staff.

Ultimately, all of these practices help create trust across individuals at an organization. When leadership is distributed, each person needs to trust that the others with whom they share leadership are acting with intentions and information that serve the organization as a whole. Without trust, the culture of an organization may suffer, intentional choices to utilize and apply more tools will languish, and further distribution of leadership may be halted.

***“There are players who are incredible leaders and are obviously very opinionated who have this ability when they're not in that seat to completely withdraw themselves... And if they have something that needs to be said, they'll find the right person to say it to, quietly, without occupying time or space or wasting other people's leadership time exerting that authority.”***

– Member Musician, Orpheus



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