

WHAT IS SHARED LEADERSHIP?

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As I've talked with people in recent weeks, and even as I've introduced our new model to stakeholders, followers, and other community artists – I've discovered that everyone thinks a little differently about what Shared Leadership is, looks like, and should be. Most think it means we've divided responsibilities evenly, and that we're all doing different work, responsible for different equal areas of operations. That's pretty far from how we actually want this model to work.

This post explores the definitions of Shared Leadership Flying V is using, and, on a surface level, how those definitions impact the Flying V's Leadership Team.

Management academics Michael Ensley, Keith Hmieleski and Craig Pearce, suggest that now is the time to move “beyond the moribund myth of the single heroic entrepreneur as the sole leader of an [organization].” To do so, we must formally acknowledge the informal, emergent, and collective acts of influence [in organizations], as well as those from people in positions of authority.

In his article, “Shared Leadership and Its Implications for Nonprofit Leadership” Hamline University's Robert Routhieux credits Avolio, Jung, Murry and Sivasbramaniam with first using the term Shared Leadership in the 1990s while exploring organic growth of leadership team structures. In the decades since the term's arrival in leadership studies, a multitude of variant and evolving definitions have emerged. For the purposes of our work, I've been relying on Burke et al.'s definition: Shared Leadership is the shift in the leadership function of a team between members in order to take advantage of member strengths, dictated by environment demands or the developmental stage of the team or project. Ensley et al. simplify this somewhat by defining Shared Leadership as the “serial emergence of official and unofficial leaders” and Declan Fitzsimons adds that “individuals may spearhead different aspects of a teams' work, but everyone is in charge, always.” Leadership is shared and passed organically based on expertise rather than positional authority, and within a team leaders will switch between the roles of coordinators, facilitators, coaches, and communicators, but always eschew the role of authoritarians.

When we were considering new structures for Flying V – this set of definitions literally sang (squawked?) to me. It is an absolute manifestation of ducks, in a flying v formation: as needed and warranted, the team passes leadership off to one another – never granting universal control to any one individual, and always working as a unit to reach a shared

destination, drafting off one another to make the journey easier, and granting support to each member as their needs and skills require it. It doesn't mean we're all always agreeing – Shared Leadership isn't necessarily democratic decision making, but it does mean there's always multiple voices in the room, deciding who is leading and when.

What does that mean for us?

It means that despite having multiple Artistic Leads with different areas of expertise, and one administrative leader, we are not all siloed into our respective arenas. We are constantly working in service of a shared mission statement, shared artistic vision, and shared set of values that we as a team are collectively building. It means that while our AL's have great amounts of artistic autonomy in their areas of specialization, they rely on the rest of the AL team for advice and support, while they are also held accountable by one another to those shared visions/values/goals. It means that this group of people will collectively work to fairly allocate and divide organizational funding between the projects and initiatives they choose. It means that the priorities of the organization, what we do AND our procedures for doing it, are crafted in conversation with one another, instead of handed down from a singular source.

So, does that mean that our AL's get to veto each other's projects?

Nope. It just means that they've all agreed, as a team, to work toward the set of goals we're establishing – if the team can agree that those goals remain centered in the work we present to one another (including my work as an administrator!) then how they're manifested artistically still remains entirely up to the artistic lead (or administrator) heading each project.

Why would we choose something so....messy? How do you know who is responsible for what and when?

This design IS a little messy. And it is complicated. It involves overt communication, and communication ABOUT communication. And we're still an infant leadership team. Kelly just joined on the 29th, so there's LOTS of "how do we make philosophy reality" questions still happening. We're literally having a meeting tomorrow with agenda questions that include:

- “- How does the full Leadership team discuss and determine budget sharing for the season?
- How does the AL team discuss and direct season planning and programming?
- How is that presented to the Ex. D?
- How does the full Leadership team finalize a season?
- How does the AL team foster shared direction of FV content in a season? (programming, marketing, social media presence, etc)
- What are the guidelines and best practice for communicating shared direction in a way that encourages departmental ownership, while still providing AL oversight?
- How does the Ex.D engage with these conversations?”

AL= Artistic Lead

Ex. D = Executive Director

Full Leadership Team = ALs + Ex. D

Overall, this model is the culmination of a set of learned behaviors, influenced by other environmental and behavioral factors. It requires both “extra effort and individual and organizational commitment” to succeed. But we think it will be worth it.

Why?

Shared Leadership is a first step arts organizations can implement for structural, operational ways of meeting social justice goals. It not only actively distributes power, it also helps distribute workload and responsibility in ways that focus on responsible, sustainable capacity building that’s employee-focused and not product-focused. The model represents and encourages procedural and institutional justice values, helps to build diversity mindsets (note: we must still be intentional about putting diverse people with diverse skill sets in Shared Leadership teams for this to be true), and supports larger aesthetic goals like boldness and innovation. An environment in which people feel that the organization itself, not just it’s artwork, is centered around principles that they want to see modeled in the world around them is one step closer to the environment that supports “creative, innovative, artistic outcomes” that truly serve organizations, the audiences they reach, and their collaborators.

Fundamentally, Flying V is hoping that Shared Leadership will help us make the jump from “an Ego-System to an Eco-System,” separating the company’s identity from the goals of individuals, and instead focusing in on our mission and they ways our artistic programming works to serve that mission. Shared Leadership additionally builds social exchange capital by generating more opportunities for interactions up and down the positional authority ladder of the organization, creating more “ins” to communication with a more diverse organizational leadership, that should, with care and stewardship, help us generate a more open/welcoming environment for creation.

“Organizations,” Russ Vince remarks, “are often thought of and experienced as if they’re stable containers of rational decision-making and problem solving.” He goes on to claim that this is a “fantasy” of control exerted by organizations to resist change. Vince’s concept, action learning, the art of learning about oneself and the people around you by resolving a project with group reflection, will teach Flying V otherwise. Is action learning just academic mumbo jumbo for figuring it out as you go? Yes. But it means figuring it out as you go with a team of people around you and with mindfulness to the “as you go” discoveries – instead of focusing solely on the product and finish line.

Flying V is both getting ready for, and already traveling on the road ahead. Some things are barreling forward in practice/production and some are still in the brainstorming arena. We’ve built a team of diverse collaborators who are focusing on both artistic and procedural embodiments of values we are collectively agreeing to prioritize. With work centered on measures and generators of trust and voice, Flying V feels, honestly, really excited to get the flock up and flying again. Because at the end of the day there is no other way for us to move forward; ducks fly together, trading off roles and responsibilities as they innately know they need traded, each assuming lead position as they are willing and able. Ducks fly together.



Questions about this topic, or comments on it, can be sent to Katherine directly at katherine@flyingvtheatre.com, or submitted to info@flyingvtheatre.com.

Purpose of these types of posts:

While we love having fun, exciting announcements for our audiences every few weeks, we felt that what the arts need more of right now, from large and small organizations, is transparency. We're making big and wild and small and thoughtful and important choice at Flying V right now. We felt it was disingenuous just to show you the "Final Products" (even though we do like the big shiny announcements). We are working to give an honest glimpse into the conversations we've had and are having, the things that we're struggling with, and the things we're arguing about. So that you can celebrate both the big shiny announcements with us, but also the journeys we're taking to get to them.

Other Topics and Explorations – here's a list of just some of the conversations we're having and thoughts that we're thinking right now. Expect to see them turn up on the FV website in the future.

- How is Flying V building a shared vision?
- What ARE the values you're collectively agreeing to prioritize?
- How do we know who is responsible for what and when?
- What does successful communication look like in a shared leadership team?
- What makes Shared Leadership work and what stands in the way?
- What do arts organizations owe to artists?
- Early problems and the "solutions" we've encountered in this model
- Exploring Voice Behavior and how Flying V can be more aware of who speaks up in what spaces, about what, and why.
- Unbalanced: why we opted out of a Managing Director/Artistic Director model.

Is Shared Leadership actually inherently democratic?

Breaking down decisions into all their parts to welcome more voices

Rotating Leadership – why term limits for staff positions can be important for arts organizations

Shared Leadership can be more equitable, but it doesn't instantaneously create Equity – how Flying V is working to be aware of power dynamics within our own Shared Leadership team and the rest of the organization.

Why talking about money is one of the most important parts of making equitable artistic decisions

How does the title Executive Director impact my work in a Shared Leadership team; is it inherently anti-Shared Leadership

How are we looking to maintain organizational identity for outward facing communications/marketing with so many voices helping to guide the company?

Why we should show artists the full budgets for the projects that they work on with us

How do we make sure our Code of Conduct does what its supposed to do, and our conflict resolution paths are really safe and useful options for artists and collaborators?

How do administrative choices reflect artistic organization's values?

How do we acknowledge the need for volunteer support without exploiting volunteer labor, and with care for why and how people come to volunteer roles with the company?

-“The Myth of the Capitalist Ticket Sales Model, and Why It's Doesn't Build Community/Why We Think Audiences with Familiar Faces are “Less Legitimate (and that's nonsense)”

-Philanthropic Connection and Why We Don't Really Want Your Money If You Don't REALLY Want To Give It To Us”