Self-managed teams (SMTs) are becoming more common in the workplace—but their usefulness depends on how well people in various leadership roles can communicate and unify toward a common goal.

Managing the Bossless Team: Lessons in Distributed Leadership

DAVID BARRY

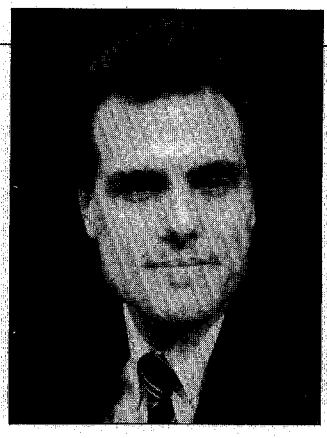
The use of self-managed teams (SMTs) in work settings not only has gained momentum but appears to be at a record high. These teams appear in many forms, such as quality circles, task forces, communication teams, new venture teams, and business brand teams. They are widely used among such companies as Digital, FMC, Frito-Lay, GE, General Foods, GM, Hewlett–Packard, Honeywell, and Pepsi-Cola, as well as among many smaller firms. SMTs have been credited with saving hundreds of millions of dollars, achieving conceptual breakthroughs, and introducing unparalleled numbers of new products. Increasingly, these "bossless teams" seem the key to solving complex problems, increasing productivity, and heightening creativity.

Although their proliferation has not been problem-free (especially in the case of quality circles), there are several basic forces that will continue to make teams an increasingly popular organizational device in the 1990s.

One driver is the technological information explosion. The logarithmic growth of technologically based information has resulted in unprecedented numbers of highly educated, self-motivated, self-directed specialists; most of these workers come to know far more about their given work area than their managers. For such specialists to work efficiently and effectively, highly participative and flexible work structures such as SMTs are necessary. This trend is gradually eclipsing the need for close, directive leadership in many settings.

Another force is the increased use of extremely expensive equipment and technology in all industries, ranging from laser-based cutting systems in heavy manufacturing settings to high-priced delivery and information systems in the service sector. The expense of interrupting such systems mandates that groups of operators be able to make real-time decisions and interventions on their own rather than relaying problems up to a supervisor.

Lastly, many companies, faced with growing levels of both domestic and global



David Barry teaches strategic management and organizational behavior at the School of Management at Syracuse University. He received his Ph.D. in management from the University of Maryland. Dr. Barry has done consulting work for numerous organizations; he specializes in holistic approaches to executive and organizational development. In this capacity, he has worked with both small firms and *Fortune* 500 companies on issues ranging from team development to strategic planning. Dr. Barry's research centers on managerial work, with a particular emphasis on management systems that join logical decision processes with social, physical, and intuitive processes.

competition, are turning to SMTs as a means of reducing middle management costs and fostering more rapid product innovation.

Despite the growing popularity of SMTs, a significant question has gone unanswered: How should leadership be exercised in these leaderless settings—that is, in settings where differences in formal authority either do not exist or are downplayed? The demand for leadership does not simply disappear once the boss is gone. In many ways, actually, the opposite holds true; SMTs require even more leadership than conventional organizational units. In addition to needing task-based leadership (such as project definition, scheduling, and resource-gathering), they require leadership around group development processes (developing cohesiveness, establishing effective communication patterns, and so forth). Without the presence of formal authority, power struggles and conflict around both task and process issues surface more often, adding to the overall leadership burden that must be handled by the group. Because many members of SMTs never receive formal training in group process skills, these groups are frequently unstable, tending toward fission rather than fusion.

An added problem is that most of the existing leadership theories are inadequate for guiding SMT efforts. Currently, most leadership theories adopt a person-centered approach, in which leadership is a quality that exists in one person—the leader. In this category are universal trait theories (that interpret characteristics that all leaders must have), universal behavior theories that describe behavioral leadership styles (that apply across all situations), situational trait theories (that suggest that a leader needs different traits in different situations), situational behavior theories (that advocate the use of distinct, learned leader behaviors depending on the type of subordinates being supervised), and functionalist theories (that suggest that leader behavior should vary with the function being performed). Although certainly useful in classic

supervisory settings, these theories tend to ignore leadership dynamics within a group context where the development of the group almost always requires frequent shifts in leadership behavior.

Leadership theories that are more group-centered include the Robert Tannenbaum-Warren Schmidt leadership model and Ken Blanchard's situational leadership theory for group development. The Tannenbaum-Schmidt model focuses on the extent to which decision-making is centralized in a group. On one end of their scale is the leader who dominates decision-making activity; on the other is the leader who permits a group to make decisions within prescribed limits. Their model highlights the importance of focusing on a group's decisional process, particularly in managerial groups, where decisions are the main outputs. Only marginal mention is made, however, of how leadership should change as a group evolves; further, these decisional tasks form only part of the group leadership picture. Another dimension consists of social leadership roles that are acted out in a group, such as the management of participation and conflict. Current leadership research suggests that such roles are critical for effective group functioning.

More applicable to SMTs is Blanchard's extension (developed with Paul Hersey) of situational leadership theory to stages of group development. This framework demonstrates how both directive and socially centered support functions might vary as a group matures. Thus, in the first stages of a group's life, commitment is likely to be high and task competence to be low. Here, leadership that is high in directiveness and low in supportiveness would probably work best. Conversely, a style high in supportiveness and low in directiveness is probably most effective during the third stage of a group's life when both morale and competence are high.

Though these two approaches are better fitted to group processes than most, both tend to ignore situations in which a formal, legitimate leader is absent, thus

Research on the Distributed Leadership Model

The distributed leadership model was derived from observations and interviews of 15 SMTs over a three-year period and from conversations with a number of other consultants and educators who have worked with SMTs. Observations were usually made while I was in a consulting or training role; thus I often experienced the various stages of the model firsthand. During the course of the research, company executives and participants requested and were promised strict confidentiality with respect to data collected. Thus, no real names are given here.

A qualitative, grounded theory approach was used while conducting the research. Thus interviews and observation sessions were carried out in an open-ended way to facilitate the discovery of new relationships. Theoretical sampling was used to identify new field sites until subsequent observations failed to contribute meaningfully.

Specifically, 11 teams in manufacturing and four teams in education were studied (see Table 1); all but two were located in the upstate region of New York. Of the manufacturing teams, six were from firms specializing in electronics; the remaining five operated in moderately heavy, more traditional manufacturing settings. One of the teams from education was part of an ongoing student organization while the other three were comprised of part-time MBAs engaged in a class project for a semester.

Four of the teams were judged extremely successful, both by their own assessment and by others that had to work with them. Five were considered to be good to strong performers. Six were judged problematic; of these, three terminated prematurely. The teams engaged in a wide variety of activities. Some were product teams, others were task forces, and still others were free standing strategic business units.

making their application to SMTs somewhat difficult. Indeed, application of any of these person-centered approaches to an SMT can spell disaster as they tend to intensify power struggles among those believing that someone needs to "take charge."

There is a third class of leadership theory, the leadership substitutes school of thought, which has relevance for some aspects of SMT functioning. First popularized over a decade ago, this school suggests that certain individual, task, and organizational variables can reduce a group's need for leadership. In particular, it argues that the need for formal leadership decreases when team members are able, experienced, trained, and knowledgeable; when tasks are routine, intrinsically satisfying, and results-driven; and when the organization possesses high levels of formality, inflexibility, cohesiveness, staff support, managerially independent reward structures, and spatial distance between workers and managers. My experience suggests, however, that at most this theory predicts when SMTs will require less formal task leadership; it virtually ignores the needs that most SMTs have for other leadership forms, such as social and boundary-spanning leadership.

In sum, it is evident that each existing approach to leadership has certain drawbacks when applied to the SMT. In the paragraphs below, I offer a different model of leadership that is uniquely suited to SMTs—a distributed leadership model (see the box). At its heart is the notion that leadership is a collection of roles and behaviors that can be split apart, shared, rotated, and used sequentially or concomitantly. This in turn means that at any one time multiple leaders can exist in a team, with each leader assuming a complementary leadership role. It is this characteristic that truly differentiates this approach from the person-centered approaches described earlier. Also, unlike leadership substitute approaches, where attempts are made to reduce or eliminate the need for a leader, the distributed leadership model emphasizes the active cultivation and development of leadership abilities within all members of a team; it is assumed that each member has certain leadership qualities that will be needed by the group at some point.

The distributed leadership pattern that arises in an SMT is necessarily an emergent one. It normally begins with different members initiating directions in areas they are naturally predisposed toward and that are needed by the team. Thus, for example, someone having a strong organizing bent might suggest that the team develop an agenda for its meetings, or that a set of minutes be kept. If, over time, this person is able to get the group to regularly follow along with his or her suggestions, this person will gradually be accorded leader status in the area of organization. Similarly, someone who is quite innovative might come up with methods for enhancing overall group creativity. If these suggestions are consistently introduced in ways acceptable to other team members, this person will likely come to assume the status of an envisioning leader.

As different people seek—and are tacitly or openly granted—responsibility for different leadership functions, a dynamic pattern of distributed leadership gradually takes form. Over time, the predominance of various leadership types shifts as the team's needs shift. Thus, envisioning leadership is usually needed when project ideas are being developed; as the project takes form, this need diminishes and the envisioning leader is supplanted by team members exercising other leadership forms. Distributed leadership requires that attention be given not only to the type of leader behavior required at a given time but also to the interrelatedness and availability of leader behaviors. For example, SMTs frequently need social leadership early in their lives, especially in the area of conflict management. If no team members possess training in this area, several members having good networking skills might work together to fill this need, as skills needed to network frequently facilitate development of social abilities—that is, networking that requires

Table 1
CHARACTERISTICS OF SMTs STUDIED

Team	Type of firm	Number of team members	Team lifespan (in years)	Overall successes*	Type of SMT	Primary operations performed by SMT
1	Electonics	5	2	4	SBU	projects, some policy making
2	Electonics	5	.33	1	SBU	projects, some policy making
3	Electronics	7	3	3	Strategy Development Group	policy making
4	Electronics	6	3	4	SBU	project, some policy making
5	Electronics	8	1.5	4	SBU	project, some policy making
6	Electronics	4	1.5	2	Task Force	problem solving
7	Glass Mfr	5	5	3	Quality Team	problem solving
8	Machinery Mfr	7	1	1	Quality Team	problem solving, some project work
9	Machinery Mfr	5	3	3	Quality Team	problem solving
10	Paper	8	1	4	SBU	projects, some policy making
11	Paper	6	1.5	2	Task Force	problem solving
12	Class Group	6	.5	2	Project Team	projects
13	Class Group	6	.5	3	Project Team	projects
14	Student Organization	4	.75	3	Task Force	problem solving
15	City Government	6	.5	1	Task Force	problem solving

* **4**=very successful, **3**=strong performer, **2**=problematic, **1**=very problematic, early termination

the ability to quickly size up others and find a way to communicate with them; these same social leadership skills can be used to encourage dialogue between members having a conflict.

The distributed leadership model applies to three generic classes of SMTs: project teams, problem solving teams, and policy making teams. While functionally these classes can overlap (e.g., a project team will move into a problem solving mode from time to time), experience has shown that collectively, these categories cover most situations in which SMTs are found. Further, numerous observations of successful and unsuccessful SMTs suggest that performance is maximized when certain basic leadership roles and behaviors are differentially enacted at specific times during the team's life. Thus, SMT performance is, in part, a function of having the right roles present at the right time.

TYPES OF LEADERSHIP NEEDED IN SMTS

The leadership roles and behaviors required for proper SMT functioning fall into four broad clusters: (1) envisioning, (2) organizing, (3) spanning, and (4) social. The clusters tend to be mutually exclusive; skills needed to master one area often interfere with mastery of the others. Further, each cluster serves a critical function in maintaining team dynamics; if any one is under or over-represented, the SMT's overall performance will usually suffer.

Envisioning leadership. Envisioning revolves around creating new and compelling visions. Leading this process requires facilitating idea generation and innovation, defining and championing overall goals, finding conceptual links between systems, and fostering frame-breaking thinking. In terms of problem solving, people with strong envisioning abilities typically have many solutions—of which only a few may be acceptable to others. Because they usually march to a different drumbeat, these people can have trouble functioning in a group, preferring instead to invent and create independently. As an example, an SMT set up as a strategic business unit within Unitron Electronics had two engineers who were highly envisioning, especially with product ideas. However, because they felt they could be more creative when working alone, they would frequently miss team meetings. Others on the team would become angry and would resort to a variety of retaliatory gestures, such as ignoring or denigrating the engineers' ideas. This created a spiraling conflict that ultimately ended in disbandment of the group.

The inexperienced envisioning leader is likely to do most of the envisioning alone and will continue to surface new ideas after the group has committed itself to specific actions. Conversely, the mature, more effective envisioning leader will help others in the group work through the envisioning process, thus fostering group ownership of central ideas. This person will also try to ground new ideas in what is currently known about a given problem or situation, link developing visions to previous ones, and ensure that everyone in the group clearly understands those visions that are agreed upon.

Organizing leadership. This role brings order to the many disparate elements that exist within the group's tasks. Behavior and characteristics associated with the cluster include a focus on details, deadlines, time, efficiency, and structure. People successfully occupying this role often have an exacting nature and are usually concerned with making things predictable and clear, getting the task done, and not wasting time. They prefer well-structured situations. When solving problems, they favor working with a few, well chosen solutions. A strong organizing leader can help an SMT forge ahead once a direction has been set

The organizing role is necessary in SMTs, but it can become counterproductive when a completely new and innovative direction is needed by the team.

and, then, can keep the group from straying off-task. For instance, a product development SMT within a paper company floundered for a year, unable to launch any new products. Its members produced many ideas but could not agree on which ones would receive the most attention or on how product development efforts should be sequenced. Recognizing the problem, upper management added a highly goal-oriented woman who had established a good track record as a project manager. Within six months, due to her organizing leadership, the group had translated its ideas into three new product launches.

The organizing role is necessary, but it can become counterproductive when a completely new and innovative direction is needed. During such times, organizers may become impatient with what they perceive to be an impractical casting about for ideas and can consequently act to choke the search for alternatives. Going back to the team noted above, it accorded the leader considerable power. The result? She strengthened her inclination toward "safe," low-risk ideas. Responding to her guidance, the team gradually ceased to come up with any truly innovative products.

Spanning leadership. Spanning leadership involves facilitating the activities needed to bridge and link the SMT's efforts with outside groups and individuals. Associated behaviors include networking, presentation management, developing and maintaining a strong team image with outsiders, intelligence gathering, locating and securing critical resources, bargaining, finding and forecasting areas of outside resistance, being sensitive to power distributions, and being politically astute. As with envisioners, people predisposed toward spanning can be self-centered, looking after their own needs first. In its extreme, this can be dangerous; it can quickly sabotage group efforts. That is why spanning leaders are most effective when they perceive that payoffs for the group are directly linked to their personal success. At the same time, these leaders must be well-informed and sensitive to the needs of other members, requiring they spend time with the group, even though the natural tendency is to circulate in the outside environment. Spanning leaders who maintain too wide an orbit will collect information and make deals that fit poorly with the team's needs.

Ideally, the spanning leader will provide the group with a constant source of reality checks, thus insuring that the group's outputs will be well received by others in the organization. An example of excellent spanning leadership was provided by a veteran salesman who was in an SMT responsible for a line of high-end audio products. He used his contacts with several industry trade associations to secure information about potential markets, competition, and regulatory information, all of which greatly shortened the time the team needed to create and launch products. He also set up team visits to trade shows and retail outlets, which provided members with firsthand information about how their products were being received.

Social leadership. Social leadership focuses on developing and maintaining the team from a socio-psychological position. Related behaviors include surfacing different members' needs and concerns, assuring that everyone gets his or her views heard, interpreting and paraphrasing other views, being sensitive to the team's energy levels and emotional state, injecting humor and fun into the team's work, and being able to mediate conflicts. The effective social leader is adept at slowing the group down if it is working too hard, at talking about the emotional aspects of group work and development, at providing encouragement and reinforcement for individual efforts, at encouraging celebration of team accomplishments, and at fostering an environment where individual differences are respected and constructively used. This type of leadership is the most exhausting of the four. It demands constant vigilance and activity. If other types of leaders in the SMT are extreme in their orientation, the team will tend toward high levels of tension and

Table 2

DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP DYNAMICS IN EFFECTIVE SELF-MANAGED TEAMS

Team Phases	**Project Based Leadership Dynamics**		**Problem Solving Leadership Dynamics**		**Policy Making Leadership Dynamics**	
	Team Activities	*Leadership Requirements*	*Team Activities*	*Leadership Requirements*	*Team Activities*	*Leadership Requirements*
Phase 1	• getting acquainted • resource discovery • develop goals & vision • assess realism of vision	• Social • Spanning • Envisioning • Organizing & Spanning	• getting acquainted • resource discovery • finding & assessing problems • locating causes	• Social • Spanning • Organizing & Spanning • Spanning & Envisioning	• getting acquainted • resource discovery • issue finding	• Social • Spanning • Spanning & Organizing
Phase 2	• surfacing of differences; conflict • scheduling • securing outside resources	• Social & Envisioning • Organizing • Spanning	• finding solutions • getting ideas from everyone	• Envisioning & Spanning • Social	• developing policy & strategy alternatives • idea clarification	• Envisioning & Spanning • Social
Phase 3	• enactment of vision • establishing control mechanisms • presentations to outsiders • maintenance of cohesion & commitment	• Organizing • Organizing • Spanning • Social	• asessing costs & benefits • summarizing positions	• Organizing & Spanning • Social	• assessing consequences • tracking team progress • interlinking ideas	• Organizing & Social • Organizing • Envisioning & Spanning
Phase 4	• project completion • presentations • getting closure, looking at total effort • team disbanding	• Organizing • Spanning • Social & Envisioning • Social & Envisioning	• solution testing • further search for causes & solutions • presentations • disbanding	• Organizing • Envisioning & Spanning • Spanning • Social	• presentations • coping with outside resistance • preparing formal reports • disbanding	• Spanning & Organizing • Spanning • Organizing • Social

conflict, making the social leader's job even more taxing. Because the social leader works in a fuzzy and ill-defined area, other members may question the level of his or her contributions or may simply discount the usefulness of the contributions altogether, labeling them as "touchy-feely" or "soft-hearted." Yet it is evident that when social leadership is absent, decisions are made prematurely, groupthink is common, and team life tends to be shortened. This was clearly the case with the team at Unitron Electronics, described earlier. Although this team possessed an abundance of envisioning and organizing leadership potential, a general absence of social leadership resulted in a great deal of unprocessed animosity among team members. The engineers in the group felt they were contributing by coming up with new product ideas. The other members, however, were so angry over the engineers' frequent absences that they tended to discount or even sabotage these ideas. An effective social leader would have persuaded these factions to talk through their differences, rather than letting the conflict escalate.

APPLICATION OF TYPES OVER TIME

It is not enough for different types of leadership merely to be present; for optimal team performance, they must be differentially emphasized during the various phases of an SMT's life. Although some initial leadership activities are needed by all SMTs, different kinds of SMTs go through different phases, resulting in the emergence of varying leadership patterns. Table 2 summarizes these patterns, depicting the basic phases encountered in each class of SMT and the kinds of leadership required.

Although this framework is certainly not definitive, my observations suggest that when these leadership types are present at the designated times, an SMT is much more likely to succeed in its mission; the highest performing teams in my sample always had sizeable amounts of the needed leadership types during critical phases. In contrast, when one of the four types was missing, performance fell off, often dramatically. Among all failed SMTs (those that did not complete their assigned tasks), at least one of the leadership types was continuously absent or was diminished when a member enacting the role was transferred out of the team.

Within each phase, there exists a need for at least one primary form of leadership and usually one or more secondary, back-up forms. Because the leadership types require such different skills, there are normally at least two people acting as leaders at any given time. Thus, in describing the different leadership types, reference is made to the kind of leadership required (for example, spanning leadership) and/or to a specific kind of leader (for instance, the spanner or the spanning leader). This is not to say that multiple leadership roles cannot be handled by the same person; it is just that in high performing teams, they are frequently person-specific.

LEADERSHIP DYNAMICS ACROSS ALL SMTS

Perhaps the most important initial step in all SMTs is the establishment of an acceptable leadership pattern. Since, by definition, no single designated leader is present to guide this process, progress is almost always difficult and occurs in a trial-and-error fashion. To establish an effective distributed leadership system, members must learn about the personal qualities of one another; a working knowledge of the different orientations, beliefs, and skills of the others is necessary so that those with leadership skills in a certain area can gain the team's consent to use those skills.

Unfortunately, we are often socialized in ways that prevent us from providing the kinds of questions and answers that would facilitate this process, questions such as "How do you like to work?" or "In what

ways are you creative?" Consequently, the first few times together are usually awkward. Members end up trying to find out about one another in very roundabout ways—by talking about sports, outside company events, new hires, or practically anything that does not deal directly with the present reality of the group. In some SMTs, there is almost a taboo against talking about personal and social factors; the team norm is one of being "tough" or "staying cool." In such settings, leadership development can be painfully slow, with many subtle (and not-so-subtle) attempts for dominance taking place.

This was the case with a quality control SMT in a firm that manufactured industrial moving equipment. The team was made up of very rugged, competitive men who had a great deal of difficulty in handling their disagreements; either they would carefully avoid situations that they knew were likely to be conflicts or they would get into heated yelling matches filled with threats of physical violence. An unstated norm was that the "winner" of these bouts would set the team's direction, at least until another match occurred. One of the team members tried to minimize tensions through the use of humor, but, often as not, the effects were short-lived. In contrast, the company SMT that came up with the most quality improvements engaged in more open and even-handed interpersonal exploration early in its formation. This resulted in faster leadership development and, ultimately, more rapid team development.

Because so much of an SMT's success depends on effective distribution of leadership—and because this in turn is dependent on discovering and coordinating the team's untapped leadership resources—the early presence of someone with good interpersonal skills is critical. This person, who normally becomes the team's social leader, draws out other team members' values and needs and makes sure that everyone gets a chance to talk. She or he might simply suggest that some time be spent talking about each other's thoughts and about what things each person does best. In more effective teams, others concur with this kind of request by describing themselves in fairly comprehensive ways and by listening well to each other's comments. In less effective teams, either the request to talk about one another is never made or else is met with superficial responses. It is common for these latter teams to jump immediately to the task at hand, skirting the exploration phase altogether.

As the various qualities and skills of each member are brought out, the person exercising social leadership can begin identifying commonalties between members, which can in turn boost feelings of cohesiveness. This person can also point out how differences within the team can be complementary. This effort can be supplemented by team members having good networks. These people, who tend to emerge as spanning leaders, may have previous knowledge about others in the team and can help to surface where different skills lie. Since people with strong spanning skills tend to be self-assured, they can also impart a sense of confidence to the team. In one high-performing SMT, a spanner greatly boosted team confidence by providing assurance of needed outside resources. This freed the team from being overly anxious about resource issues and consequently allowed members to spend more time getting to know one another.

As different kinds of potential leaders emerge, the team gets to a point where it must learn to use these differences effectively. This entails developing genuine respect for the diverse styles and learning when and where different styles are needed. From here on, required kinds of leadership become specific to the task the SMT is working on.

PROJECT-BASED SMTS

In addition to needing good social leadership, project-based SMTs initially require development of overall team goals and a

vision or grand plan that will accomplish these goals; this naturally falls into the province of the envisioning leader. Secondary activities center on making sure that the vision is realizable and providing various reality checks, roles occupied by the spanner and organizer. The spanner provides assurance that the vision will fit with the requirements of outsiders while the organizer detects logical stumbling blocks. Care must be taken, however, that these individuals do not overly criticize alternative visions, especially while they are being formed; this can result in plans that are stale or status quo. The social leader can often provide this check.

During the second phase, the team begins to experience differences among members, as various ideas on how to proceed come to the surface. Social leadership is needed to make sure that these differences are constructively handled and that an emphasis is placed on developing win-win alternatives. The effective social leader, recognizing that constructive conflict is needed to make good decisions, tries to create a climate where differences are openly expressed and respected. The envisioner can assist by integrating the different opinions into the overall vision and showing how each view has its use. During this time, the tasks of scheduling and securing resources also become important. Leading scheduling efforts is most ably conducted by the organizer while finding outside resources requires spanning leadership.

During the third phase, the team is engaged in enacting the plans and schedules created earlier. This phase often lasts the longest and requires good organizing leadership throughout. From a task perspective, control procedures are primary. Feedback channels and ways of making corrections need to be developed and maintained. As the team begins formulating its products, the results will need to be presented to outsiders who will either use the products and/or provide additional resources. Consequently, spanning leadership is also required. From a group development perspective, social leadership is needed to maintain cohesion and commitment, especially from those having an envisioning bent; once the project is well under way, these people are likely to become bored and may unconsciously sabotage efforts by trying to impose new directions. The social leader can increase cohesion by making sure that the team has fun and that members do not overwork themselves.

In the final phase, the team completes its project and either disbands or goes on to a new effort. During this time, there are usually many details to be handled: reports to be filed, product transfer arrangements to be made, final presentations to be given. Strong organizing and spanning leadership are essential at this phase. The organizer ensures that all the details are covered while the spanner smoothes the path for the transfer of the product, and, should the team disband, transfer of individual members. The envisioner can help bring a sense of closure to the project by emphasizing the project's overall image and showing how past events contributed to that image. Lastly, the social leader can help members to cope with the feelings of loss or emptiness that usually accompany successful project completion by fostering times of celebration, by helping members to focus on future events and outside contacts, and by encouraging members to voice their emotions.

PROBLEM-SOLVING SMTS

In problem-solving teams, early work usually focuses on finding problems, getting a sense for their impacts and urgency, and discussing their causes. Here, organizing and spanning leadership are most necessary. The organizer's function is to facilitate detection of what things are off track and the extent of the deviations. He or she can also lead a systematic probe through probable causes. The spanner helps to represent outsider's concerns and can facilitate more

realistic prioritization of problems. The envisioner can sometimes aid in finding less obvious causes. Lastly, the social needs of the team are much the same as in project-based SMTs; consequently, social leadership is required to bring the team together as a social unit. The social leader can also facilitate a more comprehensive search for causes by making sure that everyone's input is heard.

In the second phase, different solutions are sought. Creative, frame-breaking solutions can result from envisioning leadership. Other possible solutions can be imported into the team with the help of the spanner. If true breakthroughs are going to be found, the social leader must work to minimize early criticism of alternatives. Where opposing solutions are developed, social leadership is needed to allow the differences to coexist at least temporarily.

During the third phase, choices are made around the existing alternatives. This requires determining and evaluating costs and benefits. Organizing leadership is most needed at this juncture, followed by spanning leadership. The organizer is typically adept at sorting, comparing, and passing judgement in an unemotional way; the spanner can help the team determine how outsiders may view different alternatives. Lastly, the social leader can facilitate a comprehensive review of alternatives by offering everyone a chance to participate and by paraphrasing and summarizing different conclusions.

In the last phase, the team tests out its solution, and, depending on whether it works, may move on to a new problem, return to an earlier phase, or disband. The organizer usually leads the first testing efforts. Should the solution not prove workable, the envisioner and/or the spanner may assume the search for new causes and solutions. Finally, the social leader can help ease the tenseness that may surround testing efforts; she or he can also help with transition efforts should the team need to break up.

POLICY-MAKING SMTS

Policy-making SMTs are less likely to follow a clear sequence of team phases than project or problem-solving SMTs. They usually have multiple issues, events, and areas to consider simultaneously, and they tend to build up relevant policies and strategies in an incremental fashion. For example, one strategy-making SMT was comprised of three division managers, a manufacturing general manager, and a marketing vice-president. For the first two months of its existence, the team's biggest problem was to figure out its focus—whether to upgrade and expand the distribution systems used by the product divisions, which of several related companies to purchase, what kind of image they wanted the company to portray, and so forth. In the course of talking about these things, different ideas would constantly come up. Some would get dropped immediately, but others would be modified and expanded. By the fourth month, a fairly cohesive strategy had emerged, and it was clear to team members where the strategy fit with current operations and where change would have to be effected. The team didn't seem to follow a clear progression of decision-making steps in developing this strategy, but there was evidence of some broad leadership shifts.

During the issue-finding period, an SMT needs to make sure that the right issues are being surfaced and that the ramifications of these issues are explored. Consequently, spanning and organizing leadership tend to be somewhat more dominant in the beginning. The spanning leader is normally sensitive to what issues are most important in a company and has the necessary contacts to get more information on a given issue. Similarly, good organizing leaders are aware of those things that are "off track" and usually have the skills needed to quickly and efficiently audit a given situation. Once the various issues have been identified, the SMT might engage in issue prioritization. Again, the spanning leader can help identify how

issue importance is represented in other parts of the company.

As the team begins to center on certain issues, members begin coming up with alternative actions, futures, strategies, and the like. Here, strong envisioning leadership becomes helpful, especially where the issues being faced are complex and the future is uncertain. If current policies and strategies are not working well, intuition and an ability to see beyond the status quo are required if the team is to succeed. Thus the envisioner must be able to foster an atmosphere that allows new and creative views to emerge. Helping him or her in this can be the spanner who might know of alternatives that have worked well in other places. Good social leadership is also needed to help team members understand one another's ideas. As more and more ideas begin to develop, organizing leadership becomes increasingly essential. The organizer helps the team to think through the consequences of different alternatives and can help the group to keep track of its progress. In a similar fashion, the social leader can assist the team by pointing out how their decisions might make others feel and how the social fabric of the organization will be affected. In addition, different ideas need to be interlinked and cross-checked so that the implementation of one alternative does not negatively affect another. Therefore, the skills of both the envisioner (who focuses on the big picture) and the spanner (who can see how different alternatives connect to various parts of the organization) become necessary.

Gradually, policies and strategies are shaped, and a time comes when the team's deliberations must be communicated to outside stakeholders. Presentations, reports, and informal hallway talk all become possible channels; if the team is to have its efforts well received and implemented, it must exercise some control over what is said. Thus, spanning and organizing leaders are especially important during this time. The spanner is most likely to know how different groups might receive the team's outputs, the preferred ways in which these groups get and use information, and where different pockets of resistance might lie. Where others might be especially antagonistic, the spanner can also help in softening the conflict by approaching them informally. The organizer can help the team put its proposals and decisions into a more formalized form, such as a written report or memo. Finally, as with the other teams, the social leader can facilitate the disbanding process.

A TALE OF TWO TEAMS

As is apparent from the preceding discussion, developing an effective distributed leadership system requires substantial, sustained effort. The two cases presented below illustrate how leadership distribution can occur in practice (although both cases are factual accounts, all names have been disguised). Both SMTs worked in the same division of a rapidly growing electronics firm. The teams were charged with creating products aimed at specific market segments that the company was trying to enter; team members were picked by senior management.

The first SMT, Team 1 (see Table 1) was extremely successful. During the first year of its existence, this five-person team developed three imaging products aimed at heavy equipment manufacturers; one of these products revolutionized the way equipment failures were diagnosed. Everyone in the team had a background in engineering, yet all five members possessed very different orientations and skills that ultimately translated into distinct, complementary leadership styles. Specifically, Ann, who possessed a cool but forceful manner, had decided to move into marketing and had spent the last year attending marketing seminars and reading up on the subject. Henry was known as an engineering genius and a social misfit. He was very inventive but disliked working with others because, in his words, "most guys here live blind—

they're incredibly slow to see new things." Ken was older than the others and was very easy-going and philosophical. Chuck, in addition to his engineering training, had a background in cost accounting. He was neat, precise, and methodical in his approach. Lastly, Jeff was a natural extrovert, having a strong social bent and many friends within the company.

Distinct forms of leadership began to emerge during the first week of the team's life. For instance, Ken exhibited social leadership by starting off the first meeting with the suggestion that members give each other some background information about one another's experiences and expectations of the team. From then on, discussion became animated as each person opened up. Later that week, the team met for four hours at Jeff's house; again, Ken demonstrated social leadership by making sure that Henry and Chuck, who were the quieter members, got their ideas out and that Jeff, who was the most vocal member of the team, did not monopolize the conversation. At the conclusion of this meeting, Ann began to exert spanning leadership by volunteering to set up a number of site visits with companies that might be interested in the product ideas the team was considering.

Within a month, team members had visited the plants of seven different customers; three of these visits were made as a whole team. By this time, a distributed leadership system was clearly in effect. Ann made initial contacts at outside firms and introduced the other members, thus acting as an external spanner. Henry, exerting envisioning leadership, would come up with different ideas that he would then try out on those visited. His efforts would spark others to generate ideas as well. Chuck exercised organizing leadership by keeping track of all the travel arrangements and expenses. He also would query clients about where products and systems were inadequate, carefully recording all their responses. Jeff, acting as an internal spanner, talked up the team's progress to other managers in the company and kept the team atmosphere upbeat with his humor. Ken, who became the team's social leader, spent a lot of time getting the others to share their ideas and summarizing the team's progress.

As the team moved toward developing a prototype imaging device, the amount that various leadership styles were used shifted, though the type of leadership exercised still gravitated towards specific individuals. For instance, people began to rely heavily on Chuck's organizing leadership for direction about what to do next and for information about each other's progress. Jeff continued to provide internal spanning leadership by initiating efforts to commandeer needed parts and get the team additional funds. During the creation of the prototype, Ann spent a lot of time discussing the team's progress with the customer groups that were visited earlier, still working as an external spanner. Social leadership became less important at this stage, and consequently, Ken remained comparatively quiet. Largely as a result of the mix of skills and leadership styles present, the group quickly moved on to demonstrate their prototype and transfer the imager into initial production.

During interviews conducted at this time, it was evident that team members and management considered the overall effort

Team 2 was disbanded after 4 months of endless bickering, low productivity, and only one semi-marketable product.

to be an outstanding success. Management was pleased with the quality of the team's ideas and with the speed at which the team moved. Team members reported the work to be exciting and satisfying—all remarked that they really enjoyed coming to the plant on Mondays. All also mentioned feeling very confident; Henry echoed this with his comment, "Sometimes I feel we could make anything we set our minds to. This group is that strong."

The second SMT, Team 2, was formed about the same time as Team 1; however, this five-person team was disbanded after four months of endless bickering, low productivity, and only one semi-marketable product.

Like Team 1, all members of Team 2 were engineers. Scott and Frank were both somewhat quiet and neither had been on a project team before. Both were well organized and methodical. Russ presented a friendly, outgoing appearance and had a number of important contacts in the company. He liked to be in positions of power and was seen by others as highly directive. Bill had the most outside contacts of the group and had frequently switched positions within the company. The fifth member was Kevin, an athletic individual who often served as captain of the sports teams he played on. He preferred lots of activity and was a self-proclaimed enemy of formal analysis and planning.

From the very first meeting, the team evidenced discord. Frank and Scott opened by stating that the whole idea of an SMT was stupid. Scott voiced doubts about whether such a team could work very fast, while Frank stated that he did not like working in groups. Russ interjected by saying that the team had to work together for better or worse. He then argued that the team would be best served if one person was in charge and then went on to give reasons why he should be the team's leader. Kevin agreed with the need for one leader but argued that he could do a better job. Later, the group became further polarized as Bill supported Kevin while Scott sided with Russ; Frank remained neutral. The meeting ended with Bill saying that he had another appointment to catch and Russ pushing for another meeting later that week.

During the second meeting, Russ presented a partially developed product idea and suggested that the group develop it further. Since none of the others had thought much about new products, the team ended up adopting the idea, after hearing a number of criticisms of the potential product from Kevin. Bill ended up leaving halfway through the meeting, which had the effect of cutting the discussion short. Once Russ's idea was accepted, Kevin became very withdrawn.

During the following week, Kevin discussed Russ' idea with several managers and, for the most part, told them why he thought the idea was a bad one. On the basis of this feedback, one of the managers approached Russ informally and suggested that he get the team to look for a different project. Consequently, the team's next meeting quickly erupted into a blaming session between Russ and Kevin. Bill was absent and Frank and Scott said little. After a while, the argument cooled down. Kevin suggested that everyone take some time to think about other alternatives and the team adjourned.

Subsequently, the group had a great deal of trouble meeting. Scheduling conflicts were the most frequently given reason for shifting meeting times; in reality, though, it was clear that team members were quite uncomfortable with one another. Within two months, stories of the team's arguments had spread throughout the company, and team members privately expressed embarrassment over their problems. Finally, after three months of virtually no progress, upper management asked the group if they would like to bring in an outside facilitator. The team turned down the offer but continued to spin its wheels. One month later, management disbanded the team, transferring the members back to their original units. In all, the effort was

deemed a total failure, both by management and by the team members.

COMPARISON AND CONCLUSION

Taken together, these two cases illustrate the extreme differences that leadership can make in an SMT's performance. With Team 1, all the necessary leadership resources existed from the start. Team members learned to respect and harness the different styles present and came to appreciate the need for different styles at different times. Leadership normally surfaced in a voluntary, non-domineering way. One person would offer his or her services and the others, recognizing that each person would get a turn to lead, accepted the offer. Over time, this led to a fluid, easygoing sharing of leadership and a truly synergistic effort—together, team members were able to accomplish much more than they could have done working by themselves.

In contrast, Team 2 was missing several key leadership resources, the most pronounced of which was social leadership. This deficit led to an inability to resolve member differences, especially the conflicts between Kevin and Russ. It also hastened the flight reaction illustrated by all the canceled meetings. At least three members of the team were convinced that groups should have a single leader and, unfortunately, two of these people, Russ and Kevin, competed for the job.

Although the potential for effective spanning leadership was present (both Russ and Bill had good networks and image management skills), a spanner never developed. Bill was much more interested in his own welfare than that of the team, and neither Bill nor Russ perceived that the team's success would result in significant personal benefit. Consequently, Bill rarely attended meetings, and Russ only used his outside contacts to bolster his own bid for power.

Similarly, while some envisioning leadership was exercised by Russ, it was perceived by the others to be self-serving, and hence it was not accepted. Finally, although both Frank and Scott had good organizational skills, the need for organizing leadership never emerged. The team broke up before a product was ever developed; even exercising control over meeting schedules became a moot point after the first month.

Overall, it is evident that implementing a distributed leadership system in an SMT can be time-consuming and difficult. Even having all the needed leadership resources does not assure success. In fact, distributed leadership presents something of a paradox. On the one hand, a team can benefit from increasingly heterogeneous leadership styles. Yet these differences heighten the potential for serious conflicts. The only way that the paradox can be resolved is if team members realize that different kinds of leadership can coexist if exercised at different times. When this happens, the team becomes positioned for breakthrough results. Envisioning leadership provides creative ideas, organizing leadership channels and implements these ideas, spanning leadership insures that the ideas fit with those of other stakeholders, and social leadership provides the interpersonal glue to keep the team together.

Because of the complexity and variation inherent in an SMT's leadership structure, an SMT's existence can be chaotic. Without conscious effort, they can easily degenerate into political battlegrounds. And when one member leaves or a new one is added, the team's balance can be thrown off. Hence, setting up SMTs should not be lightly undertaken. Team members should be carefully picked with an eye toward the varying leadership skills required. The team must also be given time to develop a viable system of distributed leadership. Management external to the group should encourage the use of multiple leaders and avoid jumping in and co-opting the team's leadership process. With the right leadership mix, enough time, and support from outside, an SMT can achieve remarkable results. Without these factors in place, an SMT can easily become one more fire to be extinguished.

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