Rising above Crisis through the Power of Distributed Leadership: Leadership Insight from Covid-19 Pandemic for a Better Led Third Sector

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Review paper

Abstract: *This research argues that distributed leadership has the potential to precipitate a more effective leadership during times of crisis like we witnessed during Covid-19 pandemic with specific focus on the Third Sector (voluntary sector). It has been contended that during uncertain, critical time, which is christened volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) era, leadership style can be instrumental in shaping organisational behaviour and actions for a better operation, stability and success in the long haul. As COVID-19 struck, governments, the world and organisations including the third sector faced unprecedented challenges ushered in by the pandemic. Prospectively, in rising above these challenges and in contrast with the conventional, managerial-driven management practice in the third sector, this article contends that distributed leadership can engender effective change management as well as facilitate third sector organisations to rise above this quandary, leading to a better led Third Sector. The methodology adopted in this research is anchored in review of secondary sources that consequently aided development and justification of the conceptual framework appropriated here, which has the capacity to shed new light on how to navigate crisis of leadership during critical moment like the COVID-19 and related organisational challenges. It is believed that this argumentation would guide institutions, policymakers, and governments in times of uncertain times to lead more effectively.*

Keywords: *Covid-19 Pandemic; Distributed Leadership; Crisis Management; Third Sector.*

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Introduction

COVID-19 pandemic has had unsettling, devastating impact on the historical, economic, social and political configurations of nations, institutions and governments globally (Shukla, Sufi, Joshi, & Sujatha, 2023; WHO, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). Given the remit of this research, the impact of the pandemic can be found elsewhere (see McKinsey, 2020; Sahu, 2020). Likewise, the pandemic has implications for leading organisations effectively; it also epitomised a huge leadership challenge for organisations globally (Grint, 2022). As such, COVID-19 pandemic signifies another global management/leadership crisis of immense stature and dimension (Shukla et al., 2023). Contemporary leadership theorising and practice is focused on adjusting to a more result-oriented leadership style that can militate against the challenges stemming from the pandemic and comparable events moving forward (Mather, 2020). Consequently, there is a need for leadership re-conceptualisation at operational, systems and organisational level that can stem the tide (Pearce & Conger, 2003), because the pandemic represents a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) problem, of a type generally referred to as 'wicked problem' (Grint, 2022; Rittel & Webber, 1973). Resonantly, Grint (2022, p. 1518) calls these times 'Age of Uncertainty'.

'Wicked problem' triggered by the pandemic entails issues and scenarios that are difficult (or impossible) to solve because of contradictory, incomplete, and fluctuating requirements, which are frequently difficult to recognize (Grint, 2022; McKinsey, 2020). Accordingly, the ace *Time* magazine howled about this problem: 'seldom has a nation been confronted with such a congeries of doubts and discontents' (in Grint, 2022, p. 1522) in the wake of the pandemic. Interpreting the VUCA era (world) from the prism of leadership theorising enables us to offer a leadership recipe and strategy for curbing the impact of such volatile, devastating era and can engender a new method of leading change (Kotter, 1990) grounded in collegiality, engagement, participation, capacity building, power distribution and mutual respect, which can enhance organisational success and sustainability (Cronje & Bitzer, 2019; Nwagbara, 2022, 2013, 2012, 2011; Nwagbara & Brown, 2021). This conceptualisation lends itself to the architectonics and tenets of distributed leadership (Nwagbara, 2022; Gronn, 2008; Robinson, 2008). Therefore, this article is motivated to interrogate the role distributed leadership can play in uncertain times to effectively tackle organisational challenges within the purview of the third sector, which has a preponderance of leadership challenges as opposed to traditional organisations (Mumbi & Obembe, 2021; do Adro & Leitao, 2020). The third sector can also be called the 'voluntary sector', civil society or the not-for-profit sector, whose sole aim is to create social impact in the communities rather than making profit (Jacklin-Jarvis & Rees, 2021; Mumbi & Obembe, 2021). Henceforth, it will be referred to as third sector.

In the context of the pandemic, rethinking leadership system and processes involves business leaders, institutions, politicians, and practitioners to made bold effort in this regard. It also requires rethinking various contexts, where leadership is framed and enacted, as well as its political, historical, and national configurations and consequent impact on people's commitment, motivation, and engagement for more collegial, effective human relations (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017; Gronn, 2008). Grint (2022) argues that re-conceptualising leadership from the lens of distributed leadership resonates with the principles of 'post-heroic' model of leadership (Pearce & Conger, 2003; Roth, 1994), where a leader's approach places less premium on hierarchy and the importance of such leader and balances this with more emphasis on followership and the distributed, shared, and participatory form of leadership practice (Drysdale, Bennett, Murakami, Johansson & Gurr, 2014). Also, this leadership model prides itself on negotiation, empowerment, power diffusion and consensus-building and 'collaborative leadership practices' (Fletcher, 2004, p. 648) dispersed across the third sector in times of crisis (Drysdale et al., 2014; Kezar & Holcombe, 2017).

Guided by the preceding argument, it can be gleaned that effective leadership, which is anchored in distributed leadership (Morrissey, 2021; Gosling, Bolden, & Petrov, 2009; Northouse, 2007), can facilitate managing/leading change successfully in the VUCA world (Grint, 2022), particularly in the third sector (Mumbi & Obembe, 2021), leading to successful transformation (Gosling et al., 2009; Bass, 1984; Kotter, 1996), organisational resilience (Nwagbara, 2011; Harris, 2005, 2003), innovation (Bolden et al., 2009; Senge, 1990) and success (Robinson, 2008). Leadership style mediated by distributed leadership creates and nurtures an organisational atmosphere that is inclusive (Spillane, 2005), relational (Morrissey, 2021), shared (Robinson, 2008), and empowering (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017; Jones & Harvey, 2017) producing a community of professionals who are motivated by collective goal attainment and fostering a culture of altruistic value system and practice for the betterment of humanity in the communities (Mumbi & Obembe, 2021). This is against the backdrop of traditional management style of profit maximisation (Freeman, 1984; Jacklin-Jarvis & Rees, 2021).

This leadership philosophy resonates with motivating followers to go extra mile, as leaders gain their trust, loyalty, support and leader-follower commitment (Spillane, 2005; de Kadt, 2010; Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978). Accordingly, effective, distributed leaders need to have the capacity to drive change within the third sector so as to confront head-on the challenges of coronavirus pandemic as volunteers, workers, and stakeholders will be mobilised, empowered, and motivated to rise above self-interest than they would (in traditional and/or transactional context) (Mumbi & Obembe, 2021; Terry, Rees & Jacklin-Jarvis, 2020; Kirchner, 2006).

UK Voluntary Sector Organisations and Leadership Challenge

The Third Sector is an important lever of the welfare state, which comprises a substantial facet of many countries' economy and GDP (Terry et al., 2020). This sector has a history of frequently doing more with fewer resources (Jacklin-Jarvis & Rees, 2021). Therefore, the issues of leadership, culture and organizational innovation become essential when it comes to ensuring the sustainability of these non-profit organizations (Terry et al., 2020). While leadership in the third sector has comparable tenets with that of the business sector; it, however, faces peculiar specificities resonating with limited resources, managing volunteers, and typically lower salaries, as well as competition coming from voluntary organisations and other talent-seeking sectors (Terry et al., 2020; Jacklin-Jarvis & Rees, 2021).

Leadership competences, skills and expertise and viability have been widely explored in both public and private sector (Northouse, 20017), but there is still much to be done in the third sector (Terry et al., 2020). Rather, there seems to be a 'scattered' method to leadership approach and philosophy in the sector (Mumbi & Obembe, 2021). As argued by Paterson, Jegers, & Lapsley (2023) there remains few studies shedding light on the sector frustrating attempt to have a more nuanced, rigorous and insightful knowledge of the leadership challenges in the sector (Paterson et al., 2023). As the third sector organisations' board end up deciding the strategy, vision and direction of these organizations (Kirchner, 2006), it is subject to criticism about leadership style and values (Howieson & Hodges, 2014). To this end, expanding the frontiers of scholarship in the sector is crucial to map out the sustainable future of the sector (Howieson & Hodges, 2014), at an epoch marked by the pressures of the VUCA world and intractable leadership challenges (Mumbi & Obembe, 2021; Northouse, 20017; Kotter, 1990). Notwithstanding increasing attention given to interrogating the dynamics of leadership configuration, operationalisation and enactment in the sector, there is need to further explore this phenomenon (Jacklin-Jarvis & Rees, 2021; Kirchner, 2006; Howieson & Hodges, 2014).

Studies suggest that there are inadequate contextually aligned leadership practices and styles in the sector (Terry et al., 2020). Additionally, there is the prevalent notion that whilst these organisations are led/managed by a selected group of people, who are experienced in leadership

challenges, these leaders have been sarcastically dubbed the 'third sector elite' (Mumbi & Obembe, 2021; Howieson & Hodges, 2014). Consequently, there is urgent need for leaders who are qualified to address the ever rising, complex challenges confronting the expanding sector, principally in crisis contexts like the Covid-19 pandemic (Paterson et al., 2023). Against this backdrop, Jacklin-Jarvis & Rees (2021) are of the opinion that there is need for shared vision, participation, collegiality, and concerted effort in these organisations with multiplicity of interests, operating in a contested, ambiguous, uncertain, and complex settings focusing on humanitarian and related socio-political goods rather than financial results (Kirchner, 2006).

Given that the third sector relies largely on public funding as compared to free market operating organisations, their accountability and transparency is crucial as leaders in these organisations are conventionally rather accountable to funders rather than the public or beneficiaries (Jacklin-Jarvis & Rees, 2021). As noted by Howieson & Hodges (2014) such accountability is essentially premised on trust; regrettably, the Charity Commission (2018) and Terry et al. (2020) observed that public trust in the sector has waned considerably in recent time. Comparable view has been expressed by Diamond (2010) calling for an investment in partnerships, transparency, collaboration, engagement, collegiality, participation, shared vision and mutual interest seeking in the sector for a more sustainable future and capacity building (Paterson et al., 2023). Jacklin-Jarvis & Rees (2021) admonished that leadership is crucial in this situation. It is therefore based on the above premise that a distributed form of leadership theorisation is necessary in reshaping the contours of leadership practice in the sector as has been mooted in the preceding sections as it has the potential to advance the tenets of dispersed power, shared vision and collegial actions (Jones, 2014; Gronn, 2008).

Leadership and Need for Change During ahe Pandemic: from an 'Essentially Contested' Construct to Distributed Theorising?

A new type of coronavirus stared humanity in the face in December 2019, and apparently it started in Wuhan, China. This pandemic quickly spread to several other countries and triggered global panic by destabilising humanity, threatening our collective existence and jeopardising businesses, institutions, governments, and public health around the globe (WHO, 2020) as well as, leadership practice (Terry et al., 2020). Following this, the World Health Organisation (WHO) urged nations and societies to take necessary, urgent actions to reduce the spread of the disease, lessen contamination and curb fatalities (UNESCO, 2020). Global steps taken to ameliorate this pandemic included strict social distancing rules, 'lock-down' measures, public health rules and restrictions, flexible working (working from home) and isolation. Businesses where deeply affected, our existence was plagued, and leadership was challenged across all sectors including the third sector (Terry et al., 2020; Sahu, 2020). Thus, the pandemic has been labelled a 'colossal test of leadership', determination, resilience and character of leaders (Grint, 2022; Shukla et al., 2023). We thus argue in this paper that distributed leadership style can be the magic wand to navigate the labyrinthine gaze of the challenges of the pandemic and for humanity to have a more resilient, effective, and thriving post-pandemic third sector leadership landscape.

Leadership is frequently described as an 'essentially contested' notion (Juntrasook, 2014; Northouse, 2007); entailing there is no definitive way of explaining its import (Bennis & Nanus, 2004). In the context of this article, leadership dovetails with a process of encouraging, empowering, motivating, and influencing people to act without coercion towards achieving collective goals and aspirations (Bennis & Nanus, 2004; Kotter, 1990; Yammarino & Bass, 1990). Extant, relevant studies outline that there are three main styles/types of leadership comprising democratic, laissez faire and autocratic styles (Northouse, 2007). Democratic style is stakeholder-oriented, empowering, participatory, and engaging; while autocratic leadership is marked by exclusion and authoritarianism as well as precludes stakeholders' inputs, views, and

voice (Yammarino & Bass, 1990). Lastly, laissez faire style chimes with delegating work, responsibilities, and duties, with the purpose of evaluating how subordinates carry out such duties delegated by the leader (Northouse, 2007).

However, types/styles of leadership are not the same as theory of leadership; the latter is concerned with the different methods/approaches to leading people; while the latter is about various form of conceptualising leadership models and practices (Bennis & Nanus, 2004). Nevertheless, available studies have acknowledged several theoretical models/perspectives to explaining and/or conceptualising leadership (Kotter, 1990), which are contingency theory, situational theory, trait theory, transactional theory, great man theory, behavioural theory, transformational theory, servant theory, participative theory, and distributed leadership amongst others (Northouse, 2007; Bass & Avolio 1994). To this end, present-day models of leadership that contrast with top-down leadership models suggest that efficacy and organisational effectiveness within the purview of knowledge-based and people management setting, leverage less the dialectics of 'heroic' tendencies and behaviours of a few people at the top and more on collegiality and power dispersion (Pearce & Conger, 2003). This constitutes the kernel of distributed leadership (Gronn, 2008; Kezar & Holcombe, 2017).

Therefore, in rising above the vagaries and challenges of the managerial, hierarchical, and disempowering leadership models in the third sector (Howieson & Hodges, 2014), distributed leadership is essential (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017). This entails that a leader with distributed leadership ratiocination and values contrasts markedly with managerially oriented and transactionally driven leader (Burns, 1978). This argument throws up the binary between management and leadership. Whereas the former is premised on achieving objectives, targets, control, planning and eclipse of stakeholder involvement (Northouse, 2007); the latter is based on mutuality, collegiality, collective ownership, engagement, and shared goal attainment (Kotter, 1990). In lending credence to this rationality, Yukl (2006) argues that such leadership philosophy finds resonance in the capacity of a leader to build loyalty, solidarity, trust, and collective vision (Petrov & Gosling, 2009; Yammarino & Bass, 1990).

By extrapolation, the ability of those in position of authority to influence followers to participate in the leadership process and be persuaded by the leader's personal example, contributions and qualities to achieve collective vision, is the hallmark of authentic, effective and distributed leadership (Robinson, 2008; Bennis & Nanus 2004). This is the mainstay of distributed leadership (Gronn, 2008; Robinson, 2008). Unambiguously, distributed style of leadership suggests a context in which multiple leaders interact with followers in a relational, dynamic, collegial, and reciprocal way to collectively achieve organisational goals by mutually exerting power and influence (Grint, 2022; Grant, 2010). It is based on this rationality that distributed leadership conceptualisation and enactment is a 'hot' concept and 'in vogue' emerging as a foil to popular, orthodox forms of conceptualizing leadership (Grant, 2010). Harping on this new-fangled form of leadership that is reliant to the pressure of the VUCA world, Grint (2022) opined that it places premium on moving away our gaze from the pristine, dichotomous nexus between leaders and followers by emphasising distributed power, shared vision, equal relationships, and power diffusion (Grint, 2022) especially within the third sector (Howieson & Hodges, 2014).

Crisis (Leadership) and the Third Sector: Towards a New Form of Leadership

Rapid, shifting organisational change, fluctuating economic conditions, technological transformation and socio-political dynamics have triggered instability in the current business world and operating environment (Grint, 2022). These issues characterise crisis in today's fast paced business world. Leadership is not devoid of this ever-changing operating environment

and in particular the third sector (Terry et al., 2020). The ability of leadership enactment and philosophy to rise to the occasion in this setting resonates with crisis leadership (Durst, Dinler, & Ulvenblad, 2022). Also, crisis leadership denotes timely, critical, and optimal assessment procedures and mechanics of hostile condition's impact (Durst et al., 2022) and in this context the third sector. These uncertainties and crises seemingly disrupt corporations and the third sector. Given the burgeoning chaos, ever unrelenting uncertainties, change from managerially driven leadership via teamwork, which stifles effort at sustainability, there is need to redraw the map of leadership style for better outcomes in the third sector (Gronn, 2008). This transformation trajectory brought about by the dynamics of the VUCA world has transformed traditional crisis leaders to new forms of leaders with the mindset, skillsets, and knowledge to make scenario analysis and in tandem work collaboratively by listening to every voice as well as gathering multiple, disparate perspectives to create optimal solution.

Faced with the uncertainty and rising intensity of the coronavirus pandemic, leaders in the third sector are more than ever challenged to make tough leadership decisions to strategically mobilise and lead corporate bodies and volunteers successfully in these uncertain times (Grint, 2022). These decisions have profound effect on leader-follower dynamics including effective leadership that could elicit rising above these crises and/or uncertainties like we witnessed with the pandemic (McKinsey, 2020). Arguably, institutions like the third sector applying an effective, distributed leadership method have benefitted immensely from greater degree of agility, resilience, innovation, agility, collaboration, and effective response and could benefit from superior peer support in times of crisis than is likely in organisations clinging to the managerial, hierarchical, and shareholder-centric paradigm or model (Howieson & Hodges, 2014). Accordingly, Grint (2022) has instructed that the traditional models of leadership detonating with authoritarianism, disempowerment and lack of participation are not effective in the VUCA world, specifically during the pandemic (WHO, 2020).

Rethinking Leadership in the Third Sector: Prospecting for Change and Moving the Debate Forward

The effect of the pandemic has greatly increased the pressure on the third sector, limiting the choices and leverage provided to organisational leaders (Grint, 2022). These leaders face multi-faceted challenges in implementing continuous improvement given the challenges of resistance; for example, a change initiative can be perceived by stakeholders as threat; also, organisational culture challenge in which there is apparent lack of formal procedures and professionalization; and innovation pressure, where there is need to do things unusually (McKinsey, 2020). Therefore, it is imperative that to invest in development initiatives and activities ensuring these leaders are prepared, mobilised and equipped predominantly when it comes to recruiting and/or placing volunteers, who often face myriad of challenges orchestrated by new operating environment ushered in by the pandemic and related crisis situations (Durst et al., 2022) for them to establish long-term links with these organizations and above all for efficacy (Juntrasook, 2014).

In this line of argument, distributed leadership is becoming a dominant model for rethinking engagement (Spillane, 2005), inclusion (de Kadt, 2010), performance (Kirchner, 2006), effectiveness (Durst et al., 2022), success (Terry et al., 2020) and sustainability in times of crisis (Paterson et al., 2023). Consequently, within the third sector, there is burgeoning studies explicating the literature and debate bothering on the interface between distributed leadership a more innovative, resilient, and sustainable third sector operation (see Grint, 2022; Juntrasook, 2014; Paterson et al., 2023; Jacklin-Jarvis & Rees, 2021). Specifically, in an insightful study, Barattucci et al. (2010) revealed how a re-conceptualisation and refuelling of leadership model in times of crisis via the conduit of distributed leadership can precipitate innovation, agency, trust, satisfaction, and commitment for a better leadership practice and outcomes (do Adro &

leitao, 2020). Similarly, Howieson & Hodges' (2014) book explores empirically and conceptually shedding light anew on the utility of the concept in the contemporary era of third sector leadership and management. This article is moored to this scholarly intention, persuasion and experimentation.

In moving the preceding debate forward, we signpost some of the essential issues that should be factored in from a distributed leadership perspective for a reinvented leadership landscape:

o There is need to rethink the notion of power relations, autonomy and equity and team empowerment through the lens of distributed leadership;

o Leaders in the third sector should align their practices, actions and behaviour to the ideals of leading by example and adjusting these to the realities of the moment;

o The traditional, hierarchical and disempowering leadership model prevalent in usual times should be changed for efficacy and performance in the VUCA world;

o Despite the mantra in the third sector for a renewed leadership enactment and values chiming with distributed leadership style, it should be made pragmatic and explicit what is actually distributed for agency, voice, power, and influence;

o Continuous stakeholder engagement, mutual support and inclusion should be made top priority in times of crisis;

o Participation, involvement and collegiality are not just mere sloganeering; they should be palpably implemented for continuous co-existence between diverse, multi-faceted interest-seeking groups for trust, cohesion, solidarity and loyalty;

o There should be quest for transparency and accountability not just to the funders but to all stakeholder groups, whose interests matter in the enactment of leadership practice;

o Times of crisis such as the pandemic presents different set of knowledge, skillset and competences, which distributed leadership can precipitate;

o There should be room for continuous innovation, creativity, and constant dialogue in times of crisis rather than the run-of-the-mill system that characterise the traditional management culture in usual times.

In realising the above, scholars are beginning to investigate power sharing mechanisms, stakeholder involvement strategies and various leadership mechanisms in times of crisis (Howieson & Hodges, 2014) to build capacity, erect bridges and rise above the clattering, divisive pressures of the VUCA world (Durst et al., 2022).

Moreover, motivating, empowering and mobilising volunteers and other stakeholders in the third sector with diverse interests, requires a distributed, shared leadership style (do Adro & leitao, 2020). Furthermore, Grant (2010) and Grint (2022) contend that power forges the landscape in which leadership emerges; yet there is paucity of studies and frameworks explicating the extent to which power could be distributed to stakeholders within the third sector (Paterson et al., 2023). In a nutshell, distributed leadership model advocates that leadership can be distributed to other individuals as there is no single person who has the moral high ground to lead – leadership is a dispersed business, fluid, dynamic and collegial – it does not recognise positional authority in times of crisis (do Adro & leitao, 2020; Juntrasook, 2014). This postulation argues that leadership is inhered in a departure from traditional, positional leadership model centring on shared responsibilities, concerted effort, and collective goal attainment. Kanninen, Häggman-Laitila, Tervo-Heikkinen, & Kvist (2019) referred to this as shared leadership governance that presupposes that people or teams performing tasks concertedly are best equipped to proffer meaningful, effective improvement (Gronn, 2008) and chiming with high-performing boards.

Conclusion

In this article, we have conceptually investigated how third sector organisation with divergent, contradictory interests and multi-faceted orientation can rise above the challenges stemming from the VUCA world as well as crisis through the power of distributed leadership. The COVID-19 pandemic was used to contextualise this exploration. The pandemic was an unusual, complex, and challenging time in organisations' history and operationalisation including leadership practice. We have thus argued that leadership practice in times of uncertainties, crises and ambiguities mediated by distributed leadership can precipitate a better led third sector. This paper has attempted to accomplish this intention by leveraging secondary sources to forge conceptually the path to a more sustainable, inclusive, and dialogic relationship between third sector leaders and their numerous stakeholders for more positive outcomes in this important sector, which completes when governments sometimes retreat of ineffective, to say the least. Accordingly, the events, disappointment and scenarios stemming from the pandemic graphically dramatize how ineffective governments, institutions and nations can be. Therefore, distributed leadership ratiocination is thus a clarion call for a more result-oriented public management and leadership especially in times of crisis.

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