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# Distributed Leadership: Theorizing a Mindful Engagement Component

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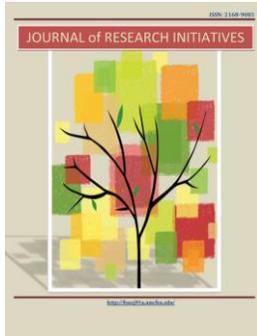
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## Keywords

## Cover Page Footnote

# DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP: THEORIZING A MINDFUL ENGAGEMENT COMPONENT

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## Abstract

The distributive leader cannot influence organizational performance without taking into consideration the capabilities of team members to achieve a common goal (McIntyre, 2003; Harris, 2003). To leverage the capabilities of teams, distributive leaders need to be mindfully attentive in establishing a collective interpretation of the current organizational situation. However, establishing a collective interpretation may not be effective if distributive leaders do not initially consider the importance of creating group learning environments to engage diverse group members (Ashford & DeRue, 2012). The purpose of this integrative literature review is to explore theoretical and empirical research examining the potential of mindful engagement as a prospective component of distributed leadership. It considers the existing knowledge base on distributed leadership at the group level, addresses some assumptions and misconceptions associated with leadership practices across diverse groups, and highlights a few areas for further attention, including diverse groups in the workplace and leadership practices in group settings. The review concludes by proposing mindful engagement as a potential component of distributed leadership that could significantly enhance the future development of leadership practices in organizations.

## The Changing Nature of Organizations

Perhaps at no other time has there been more discussion about the importance of group learning (Davies & Nutley, 2018; Draft & Weick, 1984; Marquardt, 2011; Lawrence et al., 2005), and mindful engagement in organizations (Hezlett & McCauley, 2017; Ashford & DeRue, 2012; Langer, 2000; Langer, 2016). Of major concern is the question of how an organizational leader can create a value-driven organization that fosters collaborative learning and mindful engagement, particularly in diverse groups within organizations.

With the advancement of technology and automatization of processes, organizations face several challenges to be competitive. One of the most significant challenges that organizations face is the understanding of how to be mindful of diverse individual voices when creating a learning environment that takes into consideration meaningful and engaging dialogues (Tsoukas, 2009; Jones, Harvey, Lefoe & Ryland, 2014; Harris, 2014; Deflaminis & Harris, 2016).

Since organizational leaders influence organizational culture, and, consequently, behavior (Schein, 2010), leadership cannot be limited to the delivery of information; rather organizational leaders need to implement conscious efforts to engage all group members (Schein, 2010; DeRue, 2012). According to Ashford and DeRue (2012) mindful engagement, "describes a process for how individuals can approach their experiences, go through their experiences, and reflect on their experiences in ways that enhance the lessons of experience" (p. 149).

**Distributed Leadership and Mindful Engagement**

Distributed leadership and mindful engagement theories may offer an integrative lens to bring together diverse groups more effectively and may assist 21$^{st}$ organizational leaders in fostering learning and collaboration in organizations. Harris and Spillane (2008) explained that "at a theoretical level, distributed leadership is an analytical frame for understanding leadership practice" (p. 32). This integrative literature review seeks to theorize mindful engagement and its potential effects on group learning, as it concerns diverse groups in organizations.

**Diverse Groups in Organizations**

Bennett, Wise, Woods, and Harvey (2003) indicated that "distributed leadership highlights leadership as an emergent property of a group or network of interacting individuals" (p. 5). This type of leadership fosters learning and collaboration especially at the group level, and it advocates for the importance of group learning in the success of organizations (Bennett et al., 2003; Deflaminis & Harris, 2016). The theory fails to take into consideration the needs of diverse groups within organizations.

To truthfully acknowledge the dynamic nature of organizations and societies, leaders need to focus more on the many facets of diversity within organizational groups (Mehra, Smith, Dixon, & Robertson, 2006). Diverse groups are not limited to race, and it also incorporates a variety of backgrounds, cultural capital, aspirations, religious beliefs, personalities, ideas, functional expertise, education, languages, and many other dimensions (Mehra, et al., 2006). Concerning the debate over diversity in the workplace, researchers have already determined over the past fifty years that diverse backgrounds and personalities can strengthen group effectiveness (Mehra et al., 2006; Yeung, Lee, & Yue, 2006).

To effectively lead diverse groups, distributive leaders need to acknowledge and embrace diversity through policies and practices to protect employee rights (McIntyre, 2003; Yeung et al., 2006). Mehra et al. (2006) noted that bridging diversity in the workplace requires distributive leaders to create an atmosphere of collaboration in which goals and expectations are visible to the whole group regardless of their cultural differences. Langer (2016) further indicates that promoting collaboration among diverse groups cannot be achieved without periodically reevaluating leadership practices.

While the concept of distributive leadership is often based on collective engagement, further attention is required to understand this phenomenon from a multicultural perspective (McIntyre, 2003; Yeung et al., 2006), and to truly respond to the needs and expectations of different stakeholders (Harris, 2003; Harris & DeFlaminis, 2016). Thus, mindfully attentive leaders should be reflective and able to understand and empathize with the many challenges that diverse groups in organizations (i.e., cultural, social, ethical, and economic challenges) may face, and adjust accordingly its distributed practices to meet diverse group's needs (Mehra et al., 2006; Yeung et al., 2006).

**Distributed Leadership Practices**

Spillane and colleagues (2004) indicated that the distributed leadership perspective, "offers substantial theoretical leverage in studying leadership activity" (p. 28). Harris and Spillane (2008) later elaborated that, "in a theoretical sense, distributed leadership offers little

more than an abstract way of analyzing leadership practice. In a practical sense, it could be contended that it is nothing more than shared leadership practice" (p. 32).

While some distributed leadership research examined distributed leadership and context (Bolden, 2011, Ray, Clegg, & Gordon, 2004; Yeung, Lee, & Yue, 2006; Melnick, 1982), other studies examined the extent to which the components of distributed leadership affect leadership effectiveness in organizations (Bolden, Petrov & Gosling, 2008; Goslin, Bolden & Petrov, 2009; Grant, 2011; Harris, 2006; Heck & Hallinger, 2010; Van Ameigde, Nelson, Billsberrry, & Vanmeurs, 2009). In addition, a wealth of studies also examined how distributed leadership is experienced and perceived in the working environment (Waterhouse, 2007; Pelletier, 2011) and its impact on organizational learning (Jaimes, 2009; Delp, 2012; Nonaka, 1994). However, distributed leadership is also about sharing the decision-making process between organizational members, and organizations, which have been changing their composition over the years (Bryman, Collinson, Grint, Jackson, & Uhl-Bien, 2011; Chatwani, 2018). The American workforce has become more diverse with a significant mix of background factors such as genders, ethnicity, religious beliefs, and age (Yeung et al., 2006; Pelletier, 2011). Also, organizations often no longer follow traditional hierarchical structures that prevent team collaboration (Bryman et al., 2011). Therefore, the role and responsibilities of organizational leaders must also change to meet organizational and contextual demands and shifts (Bryman et al., 2011; Yeung et al., 2006; Harris, 2006).

In the past, leadership roles were often associated with traditional, homogeneous, and hierarchical structures of power and oppression (Bryman et al., 2011; Chatwani, 2018). Ambiguity and contextual challenges in organizations require alternative forms of leadership that could be disseminated to a larger, often diverse audience that goes beyond the individual level (Harris, 2006). Mindful engagement may catalyze this process (Ashford & DeRue, 2012; DeRue & Wellman, 2009).

## Mindful Engagement

Ashford and DeRue (2012), defined mindful engagement as a "process" that, "…explains how individuals can approach, engage in, and reflect on their lived experiences in a way that allows individuals to unlock their leadership potential and engage in continuous learning through experience (p. 147). Ashford and DeRue offered a new viewpoint on leadership development, focusing on "developing a leadership identity and mindfully engaging in learning experiences" (p. 147). In this novel approach, the research conceptualized leadership development as an "ongoing process" in which informal leaders see themselves as formal leaders recognized by everyone in the organization and have the capability to "take on leadership roles when the need for leadership arises" (Ashford & DeRue, 2012, p. 147). Figure 1 summarizes the key steps in the mindful engagement process, which include "approach, action and reflection" (Ashford & DeRue, 2012, p.149).

**Reflection**          Approach

Mindful
Engagement

**Action**
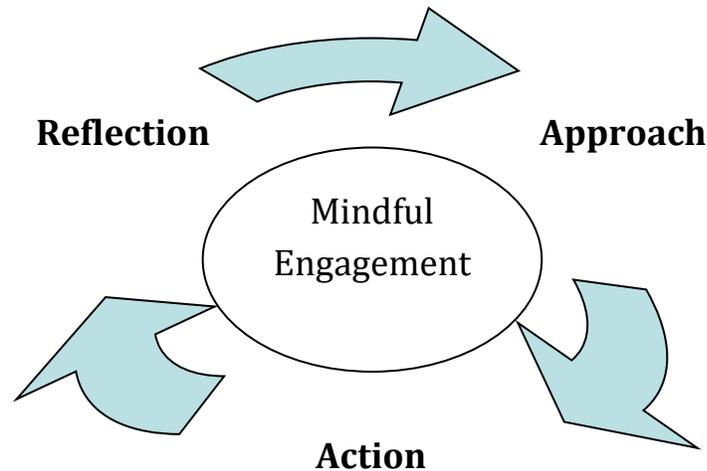
*Figure 1*. The Mindful Engagement Model of Ashford and DeRue adapted from 'Developing as a leader: The power of mindful engagement,' by S. J. Ashford and D.S. DeRue, 2012, *Organizational Dynamics, 41*, p. 149.

Earlier research on the concept also discussed the notion of seeing oneself as a leader as an essential motive for continuous development and learning (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Along with the benefits of developing a positive identity as a leader, Ashford and DeRue (2012) elaborated on the notion of mindfulness as a "state of being where people are actively aware of themselves and their surroundings" (Ashford & DeRue, 2012, p. 148). This study argued that effective leaders are ready to digest new information and learn new leadership techniques, are willing and able to reflect on their own experience from different lenses, and are interested in feedback (Ashford & DeRue, 2012; Ellis & Davidi, 2005).

Similarly, Quinn (2005) established that the power of mindful engagement could go beyond influencing existing leaders to include new talented individuals who may have failed initially to exhibit effective leadership. Organizational leaders need to employ leadership practices that could add more value to leadership development experiences (Ashford & DeRue, 2012). The practice of mindful engagement across diverse groups requires organizations to develop its leaders to be more attentive and reflective in their leadership practice (Quinn, 2005).

**Mindful Engagement to Support Distributed Leadership Practices**

Harris and Spillane (2008) cautioned that "flattening the hierarchy or delegation of leadership does not necessarily equate with distributed leadership, nor does it automatically improve performance. It is the nature and quality of leadership practice that matters" (p. 33). Mindfully attentive leaders must rethink their distributed leadership practices aiming to reshape the methods being used to meet the new demands of the modern world (Harris & Spillane, 2008). As Harris and Spillane cautioned, "distributed leadership is not a panacea or a blueprint or a recipe. It is a way of getting under the skin of leadership practice, of seeing leadership practice differently and illuminating the possibilities for organizational transformation" (Harris & Spillane, 2008, p. 33). In this vein, mindful engagement may support distributed leadership and serve as an important component to distributed leadership as it may produce better outcomes. Figure 2 explains the mindful engagement component to lead diverse groups in ambiguous contexts and organizations.

*Figure 2*. Theorizing the process. This figure illustrates a mindful engagement component to lead diverse groups in complex organizations.

Thinking holistically, mindful distributed practices may shed light and open the doors to a new perspective of the leadership of diverse groups using a modified distributed leadership frame. A modified distributive leadership frame could be based on Ashford and DeRue's (2012) model of mindful engagement, especially in an ambiguous organizational environment, particularly those with diverse groups.

At the onset, learning distributive leadership skills starts with approaching the learning experience through developing a "learning mindset and goals setting" (Ashford & DeRue, 2012, p. 149). Ashford and DeRue suggested that the way individuals approach their experiences affects the learning process. Often, diverse groups and leaders may become overwhelmed by the learning experience as they focus on avoiding mistakes rather than overcoming cultural challenges (e.g., beliefs, values, language) when dealing with diverse groups (Mehra et al., 2006). To become more mindfully attentive to overcome challenges with diverse groups in organizations, distributive leaders need to think critically as they learn (Ashford & DeRue, 2012) and engage with their organizational groups (Hulpia & Devos, 2010). These leaders must reflect and learn from their experiences (Anseel, Lievens, & Schollaert, 2009), take on more challenging situations (DeRue & Wellman, 2009), and engage wisely with other team members (Ashford & DeRue, 2012).

Beyond approaching the learning experiences through developing a mindful mindset, Ashford and DeRue (2012) stressed the importance of, "engaging in actions that facilitate the learning and development process" (p. 150). The authors suggested three major actions, including, "active experimentation, feedback-seeking, and emotion regulation" (Ashford & DeRue, 2012, p. 150). These emergent themes are discussed in many studies for decades, such as the works of Kolb (1984) as well as DeRue and Wellman (2009). These studies emphasized the benefits of experiential learning for building successful leaders.

Ashford, Blatt, and Vandewalle (2003) linked feedback to creativity and Dweck's (1986) study on emotion regulation. To be a mindfully attentive leader leading diverse groups, emotion regulation may be an area of future study and may complement the theorization ways to develop better leaders (Dweck, 1986).

Promoting mindful engagement in diverse groups may require individuals to reflect on their own experiences (Ashford & DeRue, 2012; Anseel, Lievens, & Schollaert, 2009) and practice emotion regulation (Dweck, 1986). This practice should encompass actions such as learning from previous successes and failures as an individual and a leader of a diverse group, with the aim of maintaining an ongoing awareness throughout the leadership's journey (Anseel et al., 2009).

Seeking team feedback and identifying new strategies of effective leadership for future application, should also be a part of the progress of becoming a mindfully attentive leader of diverse groups (Ashford & DeRue, 2012; Anseel et al., 2009). Since distributive leadership may depend on the ability of groups to achieve a set of organizational goals through establishing a meaningful collective dialogue (Ashford & DeRue, 2012; Anseel et al., 2009; Blatt & Vandewalle, 2003; Dweck, 1986; Nonaka, 1994; Gressick & Derry, 2010) it can be argued that there is a need to incorporate Ashford and DeRue's (2012) mindful engagement components. Overall, the power of reflection and regulation could reinforce the value of mindful engagement and distributed practices, and thus, raise more self-awareness for leading organizations (Ashford & DeRue, 2012; Anseel et al., 2009).

## Conclusions and Recommendations

From a mindful distributive perspective, mindfully attentive leaders need to step back, reflect on their leadership practices and practice emotional regulation as an effective manner to positively engage diverse groups. These leaders should also be aware of the many facets of group diversity. Diversity is not limited to race, it also incorporates a variety of backgrounds, cultural capital, aspirations, religious beliefs, personalities, ideas, functional expertise, education, languages, and many other dimensions (Mehra et al., 2006). 21st leaders must understand different components and practices of diversity. Also, practice is not just about the actions of individual leaders but instead is fundamentally about interactions between all group members and leaders.

Framing leadership from a mindful distributed perspective may produce mindfully, attentive leaders. Leaders must be willing to move beyond the individual level of analysis and consider the reciprocal interdependencies that involve individuals and diverse groups at all levels. Besides, leaders may need to gain a better understanding and knowledge about the learning process of diverse groups. For example, an open-door policy based on mutual dialogue within an organization may enhance and could foster the process of understanding and embrace perspectives from the individual, group, and organizational level, yet one must be mindful of the cultural component and the pitfalls of adopting a perspective that one size fits all. Furthermore, organizations may work best when knowledge capacity is built adequately across all levels, especially the group level (Marquardt, 2011). To this end, distributive leaders need to support and promote diverse learning opportunities as well as continuous mindful practices, such as dialogues. The understanding of the mindful engagement of diverse groups as a component of distributed leadership practices seems an important issue for future studies.

## Contributions and Relevance

Findings from this integrative review make a significant contribution to the process of learning as well as the field of leadership. From a distributive perspective, researchers clearly

defined and relied upon the distinction between formal and informal leadership and how this interaction affects peoples' perceptions of learning and behaviors at the group level. Based upon leaders' visualization and perspectives, mindful engagement may create positive organizational outcomes if used tandem with the distributed practice in diverse organizational groups.

The findings from this literature review indicated that the dynamic and ever-changing nature of organizations calls for an opportunity for mindful engagement and more attentive leaders. Researchers recognized that the capacity of distributed leadership to build commitment to learning changes individuals' practices, and improves learning outcomes (Bryman et al., 2011; Chen, 2018).

Distributed leadership promotes a sense of belonging among leaders and followers, a sense of being valued members of their school community, and a deep commitment to collective action for the success of the school as an organization (Chen, 2018). Leaders need to think creatively and critically and practice mindfulness when leading diverse groups in organizational settings. Future studies should examine the potential of mindful engagement as a component of distributed leadership and its impact on organizations.

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