

## The advantages and disadvantages of different implementations of shared leadership in organizations: A qualitative study

Leadership

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### Abstract

The leadership literature has mainly considered shared leadership as a unified concept, overlooking the fact that it comes in many forms. However, the shift to shared leadership may not always yield favorable outcomes (Mumford et al., 2012). Knowing the benefits and challenges of different shared leadership implementations is crucial as it can either strengthen or undermine the overall effectiveness of shared leadership. To gain insights into the perceived (dis)advantages associated with different implementations of shared leadership, 35 qualitative interviews were conducted with employees across diverse organizational contexts. Participants were prompted to envision different shared leadership formats and to evaluate these hypothetical formats by articulating their potential (dis)advantages: (1) formally appointing peer leaders versus informal leadership (providing insights on the role of jealousy experienced by the formal leader and the ideal selection method of peer leaders); (2) having one peer leader versus several peer leaders take on leadership; and (3) having one versus multiple peer leaders for a leadership role. A thematic analysis revealed several benefits and challenges of each implementation, providing a more balanced view of this leadership model.

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Based on these findings, we formulate four suggestions to address potential challenges of implementing shared leadership; (1) to involve the formal leader in all stages of implementation, (2) to adopt a transparent selection process for peer leaders, (3) to provide clear role definitions for role clarity, and (4) to have leadership (roles) fulfilled by multiple peer leaders to reduce reliance on a single leader.

### **Keywords**

shared leadership, teams, peer leaders, formal leader, leadership roles, qualitative research

## **Introduction**

The widespread adoption of cross-functional teams and the growing recognition of the importance of shared leadership have contributed to the rapid expansion of shared leadership theory and practice (Pearce and Conger, 2003). In the literature, shared leadership has been defined as “a dynamic, interactive influence process among individuals in groups for which the objective is to lead one another to the achievement of group or organizational goals or both” (Pearce and Conger, 2003: page 1). It is important to emphasize that formal leaders are not made redundant when leadership is shared with the team (Barry, 1991). Rather, scholars argue that formal leaders play an important role in its effective implementation as they can initiate shared leadership in teams (Seibert et al., 2003). Furthermore, formal authorities can ensure that deadlines are met, decisions are made, and the desired output is achieved (Ulhøi and Müller, 2014). Given that both formal leadership and shared leadership can complement each other (e.g., team members taking up leadership aspects that the formal leader cannot fulfill properly due to a lack of time or skills; Zhu et al., 2018), the present study will focus on shared leadership in teams including a formal leader, as opposed to self-steering teams.

### *The advantages and disadvantages of shared leadership*

Although numerous empirical studies show that different structures of shared leadership have a direct positive impact on work outcomes such as team effectiveness, job satisfaction, and team cohesion (Drescher and Garbers, 2016; Mathieu et al., 2015; Pearce and Sims, 2002), some studies have failed to find these relations (e.g., Gressick and Derry, 2010; Fausing et al., 2013; Mehra et al., 2006). Due to the raising concerns that shared leadership may not always yield the expected benefits in practice and thus is not uniformly positive (e.g., Hanna et al., 2021; Lanaj and Hollenbeck, 2015), leadership researchers increasingly point to the potential dark side of shared leadership (e.g., Pearce et al., 2007). Recent empirical research has demonstrated that shared leadership fosters positive outcomes, but at the same time can be detrimental to team performance (e.g., Boies et al., 2010) and may have negative impacts on team members like role stress, within-team power struggle, interpersonal conflicts, and knowledge hiding (Ji, 2018; Wang and Peng, 2022; Zhao, 2013). According to the team power literature, the continuous shift of influence between team members typical in shared leadership might lead to ambiguous power boundaries, thereby increasing friction, interpersonal conflicts, and competition (e.g., Greer et al., 2018). For instance, with the numerous dualistic relationships that emerge in shared leadership structures with multiple peer leaders (i.e., team members being a leader in one role, but a follower in other roles), the leader-follower boundaries can become fuzzy (Nicolaidis et al., 2014). In turn, shared leadership might lead to decreased team performance and team creativity due to groupthink,

inefficient decision-making processes, and dispersion of team responsibility (Chen and Zhang, 2022; Zhu et al., 2018).

For formal leaders, shared leadership is considered a powerful supplement as it alleviates their work pressure (Shane Wood and Fields, 2007). But at the same time, Chen and Zhang (2022) state in their review that shared leadership might also be detrimental to formal leaders, as it may lead to psychological territorial loss and declined motivation to lead. In addition, formal leaders can face contradictory demands when introducing shared leadership structures. Paradoxically, formal leaders are expected to create a less hierarchical system and to act as an integral part of the team, while also setting themselves apart and above the team (e.g., to initiate and coordinate the process of leadership delegation; Fletcher and Käufer, 2003). This contradiction can in turn hamper team members' belief in the principles of shared leadership.

The above findings show that shared leadership can have both positive and destructive effects on the team. According to Roth (2022), the overly optimistic view on shared leadership is the result of experimental studies that are often too brief to accurately mirror everyday organizational life. As a result, the social context and boundary conditions that usually develop over longer periods (e.g., social relationships, routines, cultures) are systematically excluded when studying the emergence of peer leaders (Roth, 2022).

However, there is ample evidence that contextual factors do play a role in determining leadership effectiveness (Podsakoff et al., 1996). In shared leadership in particular, the claiming and granting process of leadership (Holm and Fairhurst, 2018) can be influenced by biases, such as amicable relationships among team members. A friend is considered more legitimized in the eyes of a team member to take up leadership than merely a colleague (Casciaro et al., 2014). Other biases that can affect the effectiveness of shared leadership include self-similarity and (gender) stereotypes (Roth, 2022). Another social factor that appeared to be relevant to leader emergence is the degree to which there is a shared team vision (Zhang et al., 2012).

On the task level, research has demonstrated that shared leadership is more effective in job contexts characterized by higher levels of task interdependence (Nicolaidis et al., 2014), a greater variety of required skills (Liu et al., 2014), increased task complexity (Bligh et al., 2006), and a greater need for task creativity (Lemoine et al., 2015). With respect to team characteristics, the effects of shared leadership on desired work outcomes were stronger in virtual teams (Drescher and Garbers, 2016), teams with shorter tenure (Nicolaidis et al., 2014), greater diversity (Hoch, 2014), and higher levels of required task-related competence (Chiu et al., 2016).

Given that leadership and context are naturally intertwined, researchers and practitioners need to bear in mind contextual factors to fully understand why shared leadership structures can be successful (or not), thereby maximizing intervention effectiveness (Kwamie et al., 2014). Moreover, scholars have proposed to look at more precise forms of shared leadership and different role configurations based on social network measurements (e.g., Zhu et al., 2018). For example, maximally centralized networks consist of only one peer leader in the team, while in minimally centralized networks the leadership is equally dispersed among the team members (Borgatti et al., 2013). Research indicates that excessive sharing of leadership might have a negative influence on work teams (Chen and Zhang, 2022). In this regard, the effectiveness of shared leadership may vary depending on the specific forms of leadership dispersion employed.

Yet, one major shortcoming within the existing shared leadership literature is the tendency to treat shared leadership as one unified construct, without making distinctions between different implementations when investigating its effectiveness. This issue becomes evident when considering the diverse terminology utilized in the shared leadership literature, such as collective, distributed, emergent, or co-leadership (Offermann and Scuderi, 2009), which lacks clear delineation and is

inconsistently applied by researchers. As observed by [Offermann and Scuderi \(2009\)](#), these terms have been used interchangeably or have been employed with varying meanings by different researchers. This inconsistent concept usage causes ambiguity and complicates the already vague nature of shared leadership ([D’Innocenzo et al., 2016](#)). This unclarity calls for research in which distinctive conceptualizations are concretized and empirically studied.

Moreover, the literature varies in terms of the form and degree to which leadership is shared. First, some shared leadership articles include the vertical leader as part of the shared leadership dynamic (e.g., [Ali et al., 2020](#); [Edelmann et al., 2020](#); [Seibert et al., 2003](#)). In contrast, other articles do not mention the role of the vertical leader at all (e.g., [Acar, 2010](#); [Bligh et al., 2006](#); see [Manheim, 2017](#)) possibly because some authors argue that shared leadership is most effective in self-steering teams *without* a formal leader (e.g., [Barry, 1991](#); [Seers, 1996](#)). Second, shared leadership is conceptualized either as a role structure with multiple leadership functions and roles or as a process of sharing influence (see [Contractor et al., 2012](#); [Manheim, 2017](#)). Third, some scholars follow the notion that shared leadership is mainly an informal interaction among peers who exert influence on each other as equals (an effortless, non-systematic, and unplanned course of action, [Carson et al., 2007](#); [Morgeson et al., 2009](#)), while others view it as a formally adopted and planned approach implemented by a team or organization (e.g., with a designated leader or set of leaders [Friedrich et al., 2009](#); [Klein et al., 2006](#)). This poses a problem, as employing the same term (i.e., shared leadership) for different concepts is likely to yield divergent conclusions regarding the effectiveness of shared leadership ([D’Innocenzo et al., 2016](#)).

In addition to the ambiguity surrounding its definition and form, [Zhu et al. \(2018\)](#) note that shared leadership has also been operationalized in distinct ways. Some researchers measure “the extent to which team members collectively engage in leadership behaviors [...], while others intend to capture the extent to which leadership is decentralized [...]” (page 835). [DeRue et al. \(2015\)](#) go even further to assert that previous shared leadership research predominantly focuses on the extent to which leadership is shared within the team (i.e., density) rather than how leadership is shared within the team (i.e., centralization). Consequently, prior research on shared leadership has not comprehensively assessed the leadership structure within teams, and further insights are needed into how leadership (roles) are distributed among team members (e.g., implementations where leadership is fulfilled by one vs multiple team members). Investigating those distinct implementations in greater nuance constitutes a key step to moving towards a more balanced perspective of both positive and negative implications of shared leadership.

### *The present study*

The purpose of this study is to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the perceived (dis)advantages of different implementations. This will be done by inquiring about employees’ views on potential benefits and, especially, challenges of specific shared leadership formats. Despite its rather hypothetical nature, this approach enables us to capture the different risks that employees assume for each approach. We intentionally avoided selecting individuals with prior experience in shared leadership, as their experiences would have been limited to a specific situation or context. The experiences of one team in a particular scenario do not necessarily apply universally to all teams. Shared leadership can be implemented in various ways, and it is unlikely to find participants who have encountered different implementations. Furthermore, even if such participants were available, their experiences would still be influenced by the contextual factors at play, such as the quality of the formal leader overseeing the process. Therefore, to obtain an unbiased perspective, we opted for

participants without explicit experience in shared leadership and focused on examining the (dis) advantages in a broader sense, detached from any specific context.

In doing so, we heed the call of scholars to address how the potential negative impact of shared leadership can be mitigated through appropriate implementation strategies (e.g., [Zhu et al., 2018](#)), thereby contributing to the advancement of shared leadership theory. Based on scholar's suggestion to "further subdivide shared leadership when exploring its impact" ([Chen and Zhang, 2022](#): page 12), we distinguish between three forms in which leadership can be shared (i.e., as a formal vs informal process, spread throughout the team vs centered on one peer leader, and multiple leaders vs one leader per leadership role). In the following paragraphs, these three forms will be introduced in succession together with their corresponding issues (e.g., theoretical contradictions, potential drawbacks). Each paragraph then directly results in a research question that we seek to answer for the respective form of shared leadership. In addition to these three research questions, we will also explore the issue of jealousy encountered by formal leaders as an additional challenge when appointing peer leaders within the team. Examining discrete emotions such as jealousy can enhance our understanding of the role emotions play in organizational behavior when leadership is shared.

### *Formally appointed leaders versus informal leaders*

Researchers distinguish between shared leadership as an informal process (i.e., team members naturally emerging as peer leaders; [Morgeson et al., 2009](#)) and as a formal process, whereby team members are officially selected and appointed as peer leaders and thus hold a designated leadership position within the team ([D'Innocenzo et al., 2016](#)). Scholars have argued that when team members are not explicitly selected and appointed as peer leaders, this can lead to confusion and ambiguity regarding decision-making rights, possibly leading to conflicts within the team and further impairing team effectiveness ([Hogler et al., 2009](#)). Indeed, while traditionally only the formal leader has the authority to make (final) decisions, the presence of peer leaders in the team can create uncertainty regarding which team member holds the authority to make certain decisions. Such unclarity can be especially harmful in urgent situations in which there is limited time to reflect, and decisions need to be made quickly ([Manheim, 2017](#)).

Although formally appointing peer leaders in the team (rather than letting them naturally emerge) can possibly reduce this confusion about decision power, such a formal structure may have downsides as well. Not every team member who *can* take the lead *should* also take the lead. For example, team members' personality traits were found to predict leadership emergence perceptions more strongly than perceived leadership effectiveness ([Judge et al., 2002](#)). This implies that an individual who is perceived as highly extroverted may emerge as a leader but may not be effective in fulfilling their leadership responsibilities (i.e., leadership overemergence; [Lanaj and Hollenbeck, 2015](#)).

In contrast, those who are appointed as peer leaders against their wishes may experience role overload or exhaustion ([Hanna et al., 2021](#)). On a related note, peer leaders need to be recognized by their team members as occupying a leadership position. If team members disagree with the formal appointment of a peer leader, the leadership structure becomes fragmented. In turn, decisions are not based on the perspective of the team, which has a disruptive effect on the team's performance (e.g., conflicts arise; [Roth, 2022](#)). More empirical insights are needed about the consequences of inappropriate leader emergence as well as the appropriate selection method when formally appointing peer leaders.

[Hanna et al. \(2021\)](#) argue that the impact of shared leadership needs to be viewed from both the individual and the team level. Indeed, in their recent literature review, [Chen and Zhang \(2022\)](#) noted

that most researchers explore the negative impact of shared leadership from the perspective of individual team members, the formal leader, and the team as a whole. Similarly, shared leadership and hierarchical leadership by the formal leader usually coexist and are deeply intertwined (Holm and Fairhurst, 2018). However, the shared leadership literature has been criticized for its positivity bias, which tends to overlook the issues of competition and power that can potentially disrupt the interrelationship between leaders over time (e.g., Denis et al., 2012; Gronn, 2015). As Yammarino et al. (2015) point out, “given that hierarchical or vertical leadership and shared leadership are not necessarily mutually exclusive, there is a need for future work on the interaction between these two types of leadership” (page 391). This raises the question of the implications of formally appointing peer leaders, not only for the team members, but also for the formal leader of the team. For instance, when sharing leadership with their team, fewer opportunities remain for formal leaders to develop their own leadership skills (Zhu et al., 2018). It can be concluded that the official assignment of leadership to team members can bring benefits *and* risks, thereby resulting in the first research question:

**Research Question 1a:** What are the perceived advantages and disadvantages of formally appointing peer leaders in the team, for (1) team members and (2) formal leaders?

### *Counteracting jealousy by the formal leader*

Appointing peer leaders within a team presents an additional challenge, as it can lead to tensions between the formal leader and the peer leaders (Hanna et al., 2021). This tension arises due to a perceived violation of the formal leader’s psychological territory, which encompasses their attitudes and behaviors associated with perceived control over the work environment (Brown, 2014). When peer leaders encroach upon tasks traditionally under the purview of the formal leader, Zhu et al. (2018) argue that the formal leader may experience “psychological territory infringement” (PTI; Brown et al., 2005). This threat of authority can, in turn, undermine the formal leader’s self-efficacy and motivation to lead, thereby inhibiting their own leadership development (Zhu et al., 2018).

In addition, this infringement of psychological territory has been found to induce negative emotions in the formal leader, such as jealousy, and may lead to abusive leadership toward team members (Brown and Robinson, 2011). Jealousy, sometimes used interchangeably with envy, arises from social comparison and is a common emotion experienced in work settings characterized by intense competition for limited resources (Gonzalez-Navarro et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2021). Specifically, jealousy emerges when individuals both lack and desire the exceptional possessions or qualities of others. It is accompanied by feelings of fear of loss, anger over perceived betrayal, and inappropriate malice (Salovey and Rodin, 1984; Vecchio, 1995). Jealousy can manifest among co-workers in relation to intangible resources, such as a particular status or position. Similarly, when team members assume leadership responsibilities that encroach upon the formal leader’s territory, the formal leader may experience downward jealousy toward them.

Scholars have highlighted the potential risk of a leader experiencing jealousy towards followers, particularly when the followers demonstrate high performance or assume tasks traditionally carried out by the formal leader (Leheta et al., 2017). This negative emotion has been argued to give rise to competition, hostility, and counterproductive work behaviors (Gonzalez-Navarro et al., 2018). Formal leaders who perceive a loss of authority due to the emergence of peer leaders in their team are thus likely to engage in actions aimed at elevating themselves or undermining the peer leader(s). For example, a formal leader may initially encourage team members to assume leadership roles but



subsequently disregard their decisions or dominate the discussions (Holm and Fairhurst, 2018). Whether negative emotions like jealousy are indeed perceived to play a role in shared leadership will be studied as part of the first research question:

**Research Question 1b:** Will formal leaders experience jealousy when appointing peer leaders in their team, and if so, how can such feelings be counteracted?

Next, teams that opt for such a formal shared leadership approach in which peer leaders are officially appointed, may then face additional challenges depending on how those peer leaders are selected (e.g., anonymously vs open group discussion). To avoid the perception of favoritism, it is important that such decisions are communicated in a transparent manner (Chaput, 2012). Moreover, another point of discussion pertains to who is involved in this process. For instance, McClean et al. (2018) argue that formal leaders establish differential relationships or allocate resources differently among team members, which may have an influence on who is considered leaderlike and most likely to emerge as a peer leader. Consequently, once the formal appointment of peer leaders is deemed beneficial, the following question arises:

**Research Question 1c:** Who ideally makes the decision about which team members to appoint to which leadership role, and in what way?

### *One versus multiple leaders taking up leadership in the team*

Shared leadership should be seen as a continuum and can be conceptualized as a collective process in which the leadership influence is either widely (and evenly) distributed among the entire team or provided by only one or a select number of team members (D’Innocenzo et al., 2016). In their review, Zhu et al. (2018) have already proposed to “investigate whether it is more effective to let different team members take on different leadership functions or it is more effective to let team members co-perform all leadership functions” (page 30). Each form of leadership dispersion has its pros and cons.

On the one hand, having all team members take up leadership roles may lead to maximal sharedness of leadership, but may bring about negative consequences (e.g., overemergence of leaders; Lanaj and Hollenbeck, 2015). Raelin (2018) also argues that in order to keep harmony, team members will tend to agree with each other without critically evaluating each other’s perspective (i.e., groupthink) and no one is accountable anymore, possibly resulting in a laissez-faire style. Besides, team members can differ in their motivation to lead as well as their abilities and relationship qualities, which can affect the emergence of shared leadership (e.g., DeRue et al., 2011; Zhu et al., 2018). For instance, unmotivated team members will be less likely to collaborate to create a structure of shared leadership. Moreover, Zhu et al. (2018) note that coordination failures, information overload, or social loafing are likely to arise when all team members become leaders. Thus, (especially complex) responsibilities may best be managed by fewer peer leaders (D’Innocenzo et al., 2016).

At the opposite extreme, having only one peer leader in the team may not be ideal either. Here, the whole leadership rests on the shoulders of this one person. A person who lacks the personal resources (i.e., capability, time, and energy) needed to fulfill the different leadership roles, may experience role overload, stress, and burnout that “attenuate or eliminate the effects of sharing leadership” (Eatough et al., 2011; Houghton et al., 2015: page 324).

Then again, the optimal dispersion of leadership influence may lie somewhere between both extremes. Indeed, having multiple peer leaders is argued to be advantageous as a single individual is

unlikely to possess all the knowledge and expertise needed for the different roles (Nicolaidis et al., 2014). Also, being able to share the burden of leadership can avoid role overload and ensures the continuation of that leadership role behavior (i.e., backup behavior; Dust and Ziegert, 2016). For example, when a peer leader responsible for a certain role is absent or has difficulties with the role, another leader can (temporarily) take over the role, making the team more resilient to disruptive events. In their review of multi-leader teams, Dust and Ziegert (2016) also describe that the interaction of multiple leaders creates a synergy that fosters diversity of thought (due to the different experiences and backgrounds of the peer leaders). Drawing on the team diversity literature, capitalizing on the unique knowledge of each peer leader enables the team to have a more information-rich perspective on their work tasks (Dust and Ziegert, 2016), thereby enhancing team effectiveness (Wang et al., 2014).

However, appointing multiple peer leaders also bears the risk of noticeable power inequalities within the team (Nicolaidis et al., 2014). Teams in which multiple members display influence behaviors were found to compete for this influence, and this competition harmed team functioning (Groysberg et al., 2011; Greer, 2014). This is because power struggles among peer leaders can lead to task and relationship conflicts (Hanna et al., 2021), especially when peer leaders are reluctant to assume the role of followers and defer to other peer leaders. Relatedly, those team members who are not selected as peer leaders at all may experience feelings of exclusion and jealousy. Moreover, scholars note that it takes more time and effort to discuss and coordinate the different leadership roles (e.g., to avoid miscommunications; Brass and Krackhardt, 1999; see Dust and Ziegert, 2016). The opposing arguments for each form of leadership dispersion beg the question of whether the leadership can best be distributed throughout the team (i.e., multiple peer leaders), rather than centered on a single team member (i.e., one peer leader), as is formulated in:

**Research Question 2:** What are the perceived advantages and disadvantages of having multiple peer leaders in the team (compared to only one peer leader)?

### *One versus multiple leaders on a particular leadership role*

While shared leadership can manifest itself by team members taking up “leadership in general”, in some teams, there is a clear distinction between different responsibilities (i.e., what we refer to as leadership roles). The latter format is in line with the functional leadership theory (McGrath, 1962), which posits that leadership is not a unidimensional construct but rather encompasses a range of specific functional roles that leaders can or should fulfill based on the team’s needs (Contractor et al., 2012; Morgeson et al., 2009).

In the practice of shared leadership, these roles are often appointed to team members based on their individual skills, personalities, or interests (Chiu et al., 2016). However, it can be a challenge for a team to properly divide the different functional leadership roles across team members and to choose whether to appoint one or multiple peer leaders for each role. While some scholars argue that sharing one role with multiple individuals is beneficial, other scholars claim the opposite. More specifically, O’Toole et al. (2002) claim that assigning multiple leaders to a leadership role can actually lead to greater success, especially when a situation is so complex (e.g., during times of change) that a broader set of skills is required than one leader can possess. Moreover, sharing a role with other peer leaders can alleviate the stress levels of those responsible for fulfilling that role (Evaggelia and Vitta, 2012). On the other hand, there are arguments that “it might be good to share the burden of leading, but too many cooks might spoil the broth” (Gockel and Werth, 2010: page 179). In addition to the risks of free-riding and social loafing that may occur when multiple peer leaders are appointed to a role, uncertainties can arise regarding the distribution of authority and the



specific responsibilities assigned to each co-performing peer leader. Such role ambiguity can, in turn, pose a challenge to effective team functioning (Burke et al., 2003). Besides, the conflict management literature argues that the coexistence of multiple peer leaders who simultaneously exercise power (i.e., leadership) over each other results in negative dynamics (e.g., tensions and conflicts; Greer, 2014). In line with the dominance complementarity theory, this negative impact would be more prominent in teams with less diverse resources of leadership influence (Sinha et al., 2021). Scholars' mixed opinions on whether a leadership role should be shared leads us to our third research question:

**Research Question 3:** What are the perceived advantages and disadvantages of appointing multiple peer leaders for one leadership role (compared to one leader for one role)?

## Method

### *Research approach*

The present study had a qualitative, inductive research design with the aim to collect different perceptions on the benefits and challenges of shared leadership. These different perceptions can best be captured by qualitative approaches through which common patterns and themes are generated, especially for explorative research purposes (Gratton and Jones, 2010). Given our bottom-up approach in this study, we opted for in-depth interviews to fully capture the participants' perceptions and responses to our research questions.

For inductive study designs and data-driven analyses like ours, the principles of Grounded Theory generally apply (GT; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). More specifically, the aim of GT as a methodology is to produce knowledge i.e. grounded in data (i.e., participants' own perceptions) in the absence of any specific hypotheses by the researchers (Chun Tie et al., 2019; Hannah et al., 2008). Consistent with these principles of GT, data was collected across various types of organizations, followed by thematic analysis in which we coded the stated responses per research question. Coded responses that were similar in content were then classified and labeled as a clearly defined (dis)advantage. Based on this final classification, a set of distinct higher-order themes of the (dis)advantages were retrieved.

### *Data collection*

**Sampling procedure.** A purposive, stratified sampling approach was administered for the recruitment of participants (MacMillan and Schumacher, 2001). Roughly 100 participants were approached through our personal and professional networks with a written invitation to take part in an interview study on leadership. Criteria for participation were as follows: minimum age of 18 years, Dutch-speaking, working in Belgium, and being part of a work team that counts at least four team members led by a direct formal leader. In order to capture a wide range of perceptions and to represent diverse profiles within the workforce, we employed a stratified recruitment approach encompassing four distinct streams. More specifically, participants were stratified across their hierarchical position (i.e., formal leader vs team member; Bryman, 2004), their educational level (i.e., low vs high; where a high level denotes any degree surpassing a high school diploma), the type of organization in which they were employed (i.e., profit vs non-profit organization), and their gender (i.e., female vs male). Before each interview, participants provided their written consent for participation. Their participation was voluntary and not compensated. During all stages of this research, the anonymity of the

participants and confidentiality of the data were guaranteed. This study was approved by the Ethics Committee at the KU Leuven (G- 2019 02 1517).

**Participants.** In qualitative research aimed at exploring a heterogenous population, data saturation is typically achieved between 25 and 30 interviews (Creswell, 2007; Mason, 2010; Sandelowski, 1995). In total, 35 interviews were conducted. The remaining participants either did not react to the invitation or did not match our inclusion criteria (e.g., working in a self-directed team). Some participants also showed interest to participate but their busy work schedules did not allow them to make time for the interview. Participants worked in organizations of various sizes and for a large range of industries (e.g., commerce, healthcare, and justice), all based in Belgium. In Table 1, we summarize the demographical information of the 18 formal leaders and 17 team members that took part in our study. The average team size was 11.66 team members (SD = 10.22) and the average team tenure was 6.86 (SD = 5.64) years, ranging from 2 months until 30 years (M = 6.86; SD = 5.64). Moreover, participants mentioned that they interacted with their team for an average of 21.53 h per work week (SD = 14.79). Most of this interaction was face-to-face (80.71%), as opposed to digital interaction (19.29%).

**Interview Protocol.** The 35 interviews were conducted by the first author in the native language of all participants. While the first 27 interviews were carried out in person at the workplace of participants, the remaining eight interviews had to be performed via online meeting platforms due to COVID restrictions. For the interview structure itself, we applied a semi-structured approach, because it allows for more detailed explanations if needed, while still focusing on the predefined research questions (Howitt and Cramer, 2008; Robson, 2002).

Before the actual interviews were conducted, three pilot rounds were performed (not a part of our dataset). The purpose of these pilot interviews was to check whether the interview protocol or technique had to be revised for the sake of clarity or flow, thereby enhancing the validity of our questions (Sampson, 2016). In addition, these practice rounds helped us to prepare for the potential challenges that we may encounter in the actual interviews. All pilot interviews were carried out face-to-face and with participants that were representatives of our stratification scheme. In this way, we could ensure that our questions were comprehensible for all targeted participants. This is important because certain terms may not be correctly understood by, for instance, participants with a lower educational level. However, besides a few small adaptations in the phrasing of sentences and the order of questions, no further changes had to be made and all questions remained the same for all participants.

First, the Interview protocol (see Appendix A for the detailed questions) commenced with a general introduction about leadership, which in this study was described to participants as “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (Northouse, 2010: page 3). We then instructed participants to imagine an organizational context in which different leadership roles are assigned to specific members of their team (i.e., shared leadership), followed by questions about the formal appointment of peer leaders, the role of jealousy experienced by the formal leader, and the preferred selection method of these peer leaders (Research Question 1a, 1b, and 1c). Here, all participants were asked to name (dis)advantages for the formal leader on one hand and the team members on the other hand. We then probed about leadership distribution in general (Research Question 2) and when shared within one leadership role (Research Question 3). During the interview, we incorporated member checks (i.e., summarizing a participant’s statement and then asking this person to confirm its accuracy) to avoid interpretation bias by the researcher.

**Table 1.** Demographic information of participants.

	Formal leaders ( <i>n</i> = 18)	Team members ( <i>n</i> = 17)
Type of organization		
Profit	9	9
Non-profit	9	8
Industry		
Healthcare & personal care services	4	3
Financial services	2	2
Commerce & professional services	5	3
Justice, security & public administration	3	3
Agriculture, nature & fisheries	2	2
Transport (railways & road) & logistics	/	2
Technology, production & construction	1	/
ICT	1	2
Gender		
Male	9	8
Female	9	9
Age (in years)	<i>M</i> = 41.39 ( <i>SD</i> = 10.30)	<i>M</i> = 32.59 ( <i>SD</i> = 10.54)
Education level		
Low (professional education at most)	9	8
High (high school diploma at least)	9	9
Years working in current function	<i>M</i> = 6.90 ( <i>SD</i> = 6.21)	<i>M</i> = 2.85 ( <i>SD</i> = 3.16)
Years working in current organization	<i>M</i> = 10.14 ( <i>SD</i> = 8.15)	<i>M</i> = 4.74 ( <i>SD</i> = 5.47)
Number of hierarchical levels above own team	<i>M</i> = 1.93 ( <i>SD</i> = 1.49)	<i>M</i> = 4.00 ( <i>SD</i> = 2.03)
Years of leadership experience	<i>M</i> = 7.13 ( <i>SD</i> = 6.19)	n.a.
Years working with formal leader	n.a.	<i>M</i> = 2.07 ( <i>SD</i> = 2.54)

Note. n.a. = not applicable. Participants worked only in one team and independent from other teams. Most of the participating formal leaders and team members worked in different teams, except for three teams in which we interviewed both the formal leaders and one of his/her team members.

## Data analysis

Upon receiving participants' informed consent and permission, the interviews were audio recorded. Once all data was collected, these recordings were transcribed verbatim. Throughout transcription, the identity of participants and other personal information (e.g., organization affiliation) were excluded to guarantee anonymity. In addition, instead of using their names, each participant was given a number according to the stratification scheme (e.g., formal leader 7, team member 25). Using the qualitative analysis software NVivo, we analyzed the transcripts by organizing the data, creating codes, and marking text fragments that contained these codes (Hollensbe et al., 2008).

To establish a list of possible (dis)advantages of different shared leadership structures, the qualitative data was constantly coded and analyzed with "theoretical sensitivity" to identify, categorize, and label themes in our data (Starks and Trinidad, 2007; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). As for the coding procedure, we ran through all phases of the constant comparison method; starting with open coding (investigate, categorize, and form concepts of our data), followed by axial coding (identify patterns in the categories and create groups based on these patterns), and selective coding (recognize and describe overarching categories; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). To illustrate, participants' responses were given a code under which the same or similar responses by other participants

were placed (open coding). The final list of codes was then revised twice by the researchers by grouping together content-related codes (axial coding). Once the researchers agreed that the final cluster of codes differentiated enough from each other to be considered as a stand-alone code, each of these codes was given a definition and a label that conveyed the meaning of the underlying codes (selective coding). As an example, the six advantages “Less workload and fewer worries,” “More time for other things”, “(Small) problems are already taken care of by the peer leader [...]”, “More time for better quality of the remaining leadership roles of the formal leader”, “More time to pay attention to other team members [...]”, “More people that the formal leader can rely on” were lumped into the higher-order advantage “Less workload” for formal leaders (see Table 2).

Only the first author was responsible for the open coding procedure to keep intercoder differences at a minimum. The consistency and reliability of the coding were determined by running an intercoder-reliability (ICR) analysis in NVivo where one interview was coded by three coders. More specifically, we compared the first author’s open coding (i.e., which text fragments are marked and how they are categorized) with that of two other independent coders together. The interrater agreement as indicated by Cohen’s Kappa coefficient was .78. When comparing the coding of the independent coders apart, the agreements were 0.67 and 0.73, which can be interpreted as a substantial agreement in the coding procedure (Landis and Koch, 1977). During the axial and selective coding phases, the involved researchers thoroughly discussed disagreements until a consensus was reached (e.g., under which category a certain code should be placed, labels of higher-order themes). This form of investigator triangulation further improved the credibility and validity of our coded data (Carter et al., 2014). Lastly, we followed the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ; Tong et al., 2007) checklist in this study to warrant research transparency.

It should be noted that these interviews were also part of another study (see Edelman et al., under review). Here, more detailed information on the coding procedure is provided. However, the purpose of this study differed greatly from the purpose of the present study, and thus also involved other questions than the ones introduced above.

## Results and discussion

The coded responses (i.e., definitions of the broader categories of (dis)advantages and their underlying codes) for each research question are presented in Tables 2, 3, and 4. Since all input is valuable, we do not consider (dis)advantages that were mentioned more frequently as more relevant than less frequently mentioned (dis)advantages. However, when discussing our findings, we will not put too much emphasis on responses that were only mentioned by one or two participants. In regard to the closed questions that explore the preferred format of shared leadership, responses may differ depending on participants’ profiles. Hence, in order to contextualize our findings appropriately, we examined potential variations in responses based on the four selection criteria applied to our participants (i.e., hierarchical position, educational level, gender, and type of organization). Notable differences are outlined below.

### *Research Question 1a: Formally appointed leaders versus informal leaders*

Participants were asked to think of all the potential (dis)advantages of formally appointing peer leaders in a team, for both the team members as well as the formal leader. The coding procedure resulted in seven advantages and 14 disadvantages for formal leaders, nine advantages and eight disadvantages for team members, and three advantages and five disadvantages specifically for peer leaders (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** The perceived advantages and disadvantages of formally appointing peer leaders for team members and for the formal leader.

Higher-order theme	Description of category
<b>Advantages of formally appointing peer leaders for formal leaders</b>	
Less workload (38) <sup>a</sup>	The presence of peer leaders helps to address and handle problems, preventing them from reaching the formal leader directly or immediately. Consequently, the formal leader experiences a reduced workload and gains additional time to allocate towards other tasks or aspects, such as providing attention and support to team members who do not hold leadership roles
Independence (26)	The formal leader is not constantly required to be present and can assume a more withdrawn role as peer leaders take on tasks and the team becomes increasingly independent through the development of their leadership competencies. Consequently, the formal leader can have confidence that the work will be effectively executed by competent and capable peer leaders. Additionally, the smooth functioning of the team is not significantly disrupted in the event of an unexpected absence or departure of the formal leader
Clear point of contact for the formal leader (16)	The formal leader possesses a clear understanding of whom to approach for accomplishing tasks or resolving issues in a timely manner. This knowledge facilitates the coordination of goals and expectations with the peer leader(s) and enables swift communication and responsiveness in relaying information upwards. Additionally, the formal leader is better positioned to monitor the activities and performance of the peer leaders compared to situations where leadership responsibilities are distributed among all team members
More monitoring (9)	The formal leader can readily access (sensitive) information more easily by leveraging the proximity of the peer leader to the team. As a result, the formal leader can efficiently monitor the team's work progress and dynamics in a more timely manner
Learn from peer leaders (7)	The formal leader has the opportunity to learn from peer leaders who possess expertise in specific domains where the formal leader may have limitations
Team development (6)	By identifying the unique roles and strengths of each team member, the formal leader can serve as a coach, providing targeted feedback, teaching valuable skills, and supporting the overall growth of the team. Furthermore, the formal leader gains experience in effectively managing team members with diverse personalities
Accountability (2)	The formal leader is not solely responsible for reporting to higher authorities or shouldering all the blame. The shared leadership structure allows for shared accountability among team members, alleviating the burden placed solely on the formal leader

*(continued)*

**Table 2.** (continued)

Higher-order theme	Description of category
<b>Advantages of formally appointing peer leaders for team members</b>	
Clear point of contact for the team members (31)	Team members, particularly newcomers, are aware of the existence of a direct contact person for inquiries, issues, feedback, or information. They also have immediate clarity regarding whom to approach for specific matters when the formal leader is unavailable. This arrangement establishes a secondary point of contact within the team. Moreover, the presence of peer leaders contributes to reduced chaos and enhanced clarity regarding assigned responsibilities and the rationale behind them
Better team functioning (20)	The presence of peer leaders fosters increased cooperation among team members and the peer leader(s), thereby enhancing the overall strength of the team in terms of trust, safety, well-being, and functionality. Furthermore, the trust exhibited by the formal leader towards the peer leader(s) augments their motivation and commitment, contributing to a positive and harmonious collaborative environment within the team
Quality of leadership (17)	The team can benefit from the assurance that a specific role is being fulfilled by a competent and consistent peer leader who is naturally suited for that responsibility. As a result, team members are relieved of the need to allocate time and mental energy to address certain issues, as the peer leaders are now accountable for them. This arrangement allows team members to focus their efforts and thoughts on other pertinent matters, leading to increased efficiency and productivity within the team
Lower threshold to approach peer leaders (11)	Due to their closer proximity to the team, peer leaders may present a more accessible and approachable resource for team members, creating a lower threshold for seeking their assistance compared to approaching the formal leader. This is attributed to the perception that peer leaders possess a deeper understanding of team dynamics and challenges as they function as an internal point of contact within the team. Moreover, team members tend to exhibit greater receptiveness to the guidance and influence of peer leaders, further bolstering the support for leadership within the team, surpassing that of the formal leader
Decisiveness (5)	The presence of a peer leader helps mitigate prolonged and repetitive discussions within the team, as they assume the responsibility of making decisions on behalf of the collective. This reduces the need for extensive deliberations and facilitates a more streamlined decision-making process
Potential of team (4)	It offers an avenue for constructive discussions and facilitates the identification and recognition of individual talents within the team
More attention to leadership aspects (3)	The presence of peer leaders entails a distinct mission for each of them, which directs the team members' focus towards specific aspects that require heightened attention and emphasis

*(continued)*



**Table 2.** (continued)

Higher-order theme	Description of category
Aligned expectations (3)	The expectations of the team and of the formal leader can be more easily aligned
Responsibility-taking (2)	It encourages team members without formal leadership roles to assume greater responsibilities within the team
<b>Advantages of formally appointing peer leaders for peer leaders</b>	
Well-being of peer leader (16)	The formal leader acknowledges and appreciates the additional efforts made by the peer leader, fostering a sense of value and recognition. The presence of autonomy and opportunities for decision-making further contribute to the peer leader's feelings of being valued. This trust demonstrated by the formal leader enhances the motivation and commitment of the peer leader
Discovering boundaries (1)	The peer leader has the opportunity to explore and understand the boundaries of what is formally and legally permissible within their role
Peer leader development (1)	The peer leader can actively cultivate and enhance their own competencies through their leadership role
<b>Disadvantages of formally appointing peer leaders for formal leaders</b>	
Jealousy (34)	The formal leader may experience feelings of jealousy or rivalry when witnessing the peer leader successfully fulfill the leadership role, perhaps even surpassing their own performance. This experience can be emotionally challenging for the formal leader
Loss of status (21)	The formal leader must relinquish certain tasks and aspects of leadership, thereby potentially diminishing their hierarchical position. This transition may also evoke feelings of exclusion, as the formal leader no longer has the same opportunities to demonstrate their abilities and accomplishments
Loss of overview (21)	The formal leader may encounter challenges in maintaining a comprehensive understanding of team dynamics, particularly if there is insufficient dialogue and information exchange with the peer leader. This lack of oversight can impede the formal leader's ability to provide accurate and comprehensive reports to higher-level authorities. Furthermore, there is a risk of the formal leader categorizing team members into specific roles, leading to a limited and one-sided perspective of the team's dynamics, primarily based on input solely from the peer leaders
Poor quality of leadership (12)	There is a possibility that the peer leaders may not fulfill their tasks effectively or demonstrate sufficient competence, resulting in potential time loss or reduced performance. Additionally, the formal leader may disagree with the vision, working methods, or decisions made by the peer leader
Loss of control (10)	The formal leader must place trust in the peer leader's ability to effectively fulfill the leadership role and achieve the desired outcomes. This entails relying on the peer leader to provide comprehensive and accurate reports to the formal leader

*(continued)*

**Table 2.** (continued)

Higher-order theme	Description of category
Implementation challenges of shared leadership (9)	The formal leader has the responsibility to clearly communicate to the team the rationale behind the selection of a specific team member as a peer leader. It is essential for the formal leader to explain the advantages of appointing peer leaders and ensure that the team understands that these individuals do not receive additional privileges. Additionally, the formal leader plays a crucial role in mediating and resolving any disagreements that may arise among team members regarding the selection of the peer leader
Role ambiguity (8)	The implementation of a shared leadership approach can create conflicts with the established, hierarchical structure. This may result in ambiguity regarding the formal leader's role and responsibilities, as well as the differentiation between their tasks and those assigned to the peer leader
Disrupted team cohesion (4)	The introduction of shared leadership has the potential to create divisions within the team, making team management more challenging. Additionally, the formal leader may experience discomfort in providing fewer opportunities to other team members compared to the peer leaders
More monitoring (2)	The formal leader is faced with the task of monitoring a larger number of individuals in order to maintain an overview of their work, ensuring that each role is being effectively fulfilled
Need to invest in relationship with peer leader (2)	The formal leader is required to invest effort in establishing and maintaining a strong relationship with the peer leaders
Accountability (2)	The formal leader bears the responsibility for the actions of the peer leaders and, in the event of any negative outcomes, must safeguard and shield the peer leaders from adverse consequences
Changing job content (2)	The formal leader is left with the less enjoyable aspects of leadership, which can diminish their own job satisfaction
Situational constraints (1)	Granting autonomy to employees may not always be feasible for the formal leader, particularly in moments of crisis when prompt and high-quality actions are required
Inefficiency (1)	The decision-making process tends to be lengthier due to the increased need for consultation and discussion among team members
<b>Disadvantages of formally appointing peer leaders for team members</b>	
Status differences (28)	Differential treatment between peer leaders and non-peer leaders emerges, giving rise to status distinctions within the team that adversely impact team dynamics. This additional layer of hierarchy can contribute to conflicts within the team. The peer leader may perceive themselves as more valuable than other team members, leading to demands for increased compensation for the additional responsibilities they undertake
Jealousy (21)	Team members who are unable to fulfill their desired leadership role may experience feelings of exclusion, disadvantage, and jealousy. Consequently, they may exhibit less respect towards the peer leader(s)

*(continued)*

**Table 2.** (continued)

Higher-order theme	Description of category
Power abuse (11)	It is essential to align the expectations and aspirations of the peer leader with those of the rest of the team. There is a risk that peer leaders may abuse their position of power, fail to seek input from other team members, or exclusively carry out tasks according to their own preferences
Disagreement with peer leader choice (11)	The team members may hold differing perspectives and may not be in agreement with the decision to appoint a specific team member as a peer leader
Unexploited potential of team (7)	The talents and fresh ideas of other team members may be overlooked and disregarded, which is particularly unfortunate if the peer leader is not the most suitable individual for that role. Consequently, other team members are deprived of opportunities for growth and personal development, as they are no longer challenged or provided with the chance to flourish
Situational constraints (4)	The team becomes more vulnerable as it becomes less adaptable to exceptional situations, such as the loss of a peer leader or encountering setbacks. Additionally, the dynamics of working in smaller teams can become more complex and challenging to navigate
Peer leader dependency (4)	The other team members may experience feelings of powerlessness if they are not chosen as peer leaders. They become reliant on the peer leaders and the extent to which they effectively carry out their leadership roles
Free-riding (3)	When multiple peer leaders fulfill the same role, it is essential for these peer leaders to establish a strong relationship with each other to prevent free-riding and ensure effective collaboration. Additionally, team members who are not peer leaders may feel less accountable and become disengaged from the leadership aspects of the peer leaders
<b>Disadvantages of formally appointing peer leaders for peer leaders</b>	
High workload (7)	The additional responsibility, heightened expectations, and increased workload become unmanageable for the peer leader, posing challenges not only for the formal leader but also for the rest of the team
Building leadership status (6)	The peer leader assumes a distinct position "outside the team" and must cultivate trust and garner support from within the team in order to justify their decisions to other team members. The authority of the peer leader may face challenges if they do not assert themselves firmly, such as when a younger peer leader is not readily accepted by older team members
Role ambiguity (5)	There is a lack of clarity regarding the formal authority to make decisions as the tasks of the formal leader and the peer leader overlap. Additionally, errors can occur when the peer leader disregards the input of the formal leader and acts autonomously
Lack of motivation (4)	It is detrimental when the peer leader lacks genuine motivation to fulfill their leadership role, as their lack of enthusiasm can hinder their ability to effectively carry out their responsibilities
Loss of control (1)	It poses challenges for the peer leader to maintain control over all aspects and individuals, particularly in larger teams

<sup>a</sup>The numerical value accompanying each category label indicates its frequency, representing the number of times the respective (dis)advantage was mentioned throughout the interviews.

*Advantages for formal leaders.* A clear majority of participants expressed that appointing peer leaders reduces the workload of the formal leader and allows them to allocate more time to other tasks, such as coaching team members. Secondly, the increased autonomy of the team makes them more independent of the formal leader, ensuring continuity in leadership even if the formal leader is unexpectedly absent. Furthermore, having peer leaders provides a clear point of contact for the formal leader, facilitating the coordination of goals and expectations. The peer leader, being closer to the team, also provides the formal leader with more relevant information, enabling better monitoring of work and team dynamics. Additionally, formally appointing peer leaders contributes to the team's development, as the formal leader can provide targeted feedback to the peer leaders and learn from their expertise in specific leadership aspects. Lastly, sharing accountability with peer leaders is perceived as beneficial for the formal leader's well-being, as they are no longer solely responsible for all tasks and reporting to higher levels of the organization.

*Advantages for team members.* Participants mainly linked the appointment of peer leaders to the advantage of establishing a clear point of contact within the team, enabling team members to seek guidance, provide feedback, and address any concerns. In addition, the appointment of peer leaders was perceived to result in better team functioning by fostering greater cooperation and motivation among team members. Peer leaders, being more committed and dedicated to their leadership roles, contribute to a strengthened sense of trust within the team. Appointing peer leaders can also enhance the perceived quality of leadership in the team. Each peer leader possesses unique strengths and expertise in specific leadership aspects, ensuring that leadership responsibilities are effectively fulfilled. This alleviates the burden on other team members, allowing them to focus on their respective tasks without the need to invest time and energy in leadership-related matters. Another reported advantage was that there is a lower threshold to approach the peer leader because team members often find it easier to approach and connect with peer leaders as they feel understood by someone within their own team. In contrast, team members may exhibit greater receptiveness to the guidance and direction provided by peer leaders compared to the formal leader. Other advantages included improved decisiveness within the team as peer leaders are empowered to make decisions and facilitate efficient discussions. This enables the team to progress more swiftly and effectively. Additionally, the appointment of peer leaders promotes the optimal utilization of the team's potential. It creates an environment that encourages open discussions, enabling team members to discover and leverage each other's talents. Moreover, it aligns the expectations of the team and the formal leader more seamlessly and ensures that relevant leadership aspects receive the necessary attention.

*Advantages for peer leaders.* For the appointed peer leaders specifically, it was reported that their formal appointment can positively impact peer leaders' well-being as they feel valued and recognized by the formal leader, and enjoy increased autonomy in their roles, fostering a sense of motivation and ownership. Furthermore, their appointment as a leader also provides valuable opportunities for their personal and professional development to further enhance their own competencies and acquire new skills.

*Disadvantages for formal leaders.* According to the participants, appointing peer leaders in the team can have negative effects on the well-being of formal leaders. They may experience feelings of jealousy towards the peer leaders, especially when these peer leaders demonstrate more competence in fulfilling their leadership roles. Participants also indicated that the formal leader may perceive a loss of status (e.g., letting go of leadership control might weaken their authority and influence).

**Table 3.** The perceived advantages and disadvantages of one peer leader fulfilling all leadership (compared to several peer leaders).

Higher-order theme	Description of category
<b>Advantages of one peer leader fulfilling all leadership for the team</b>	
Clear point of contact (26)	There exists a single designated point of contact for all matters and various stakeholders, including team members, the formal leader, and external parties. Additionally, there is a comprehensive backup solution in place, wherein a suitable replacement can assume all leadership responsibilities in the event of an unexpected absence or departure of the formal leader
Alignment of roles (16)	A single individual can more effectively maintain an overview of the various leadership roles and ensure a harmonious balance among them
Quality of leadership (15)	Both the formal leader and the team members can have confidence that all pertinent leadership roles are effectively fulfilled by individuals who possess strong leadership qualities. This is in contrast to appointing individuals who may lack effective leadership skills to such roles
Efficiency (10)	Decisions and initiatives are expedited due to the presence of a single source of information, eliminating the potential for role confusion
Less workload for formal leader (1)	It is more manageable for the formal leader to effectively coach and supervise a single individual
<b>Disadvantages of one peer leader fulfilling all leadership for the team</b>	
Peer leader dependency (26)	The establishment of a hierarchy occurs with only one individual holding a position of power, making the other team members reliant on this individual (e.g., the peer leader). It becomes essential for the peer leader to remain present and engaged within the team to sustain the hierarchy
Unexploited potential of team (5)	Team members without leadership roles face limitations in their growth and lack opportunities to showcase their competencies, which diminishes their sense of value within the team. Consequently, there is a limited influx of input, as the peer leader possesses exclusive information, thereby excluding ideas and perspectives from other team members
Jealousy (12)	The remaining team members may experience a sense of disadvantage, giving rise to feelings of jealousy and potential gossip, as the leader is perceived as the favored individual of the formal leader
Disrupted team cohesion (5)	The team's collaborative efforts diminish, resulting in negative consequences for team communication and overall performance
Poor quality of leadership (5)	Conflicts may emerge within the team when team members express dissatisfaction with the performance of the peer leader
Lack of contact person (3)	Team members lack a designated point of contact when they experience a lack of connection or rapport with the peer leader
<b>Disadvantages of one peer leader fulfilling all leadership for peer leaders</b>	
High workload (38)	The effective performance of all leadership roles may be compromised, as it is unrealistic to expect a single leader to excel in all roles simultaneously or for all roles to align with their competencies and interests. Additionally, the workload on the peer leader can become overwhelming, particularly when required to constantly switch between different leadership roles that may not be compatible with each other

*(continued)*

**Table 3.** (continued)

Higher-order theme	Description of category
Free-riding (12)	Team members without a leadership role can experience a loss of their position within the team, leading to diminished participation, involvement, and job satisfaction. Consequently, these team members may refrain from taking up responsibilities as they perceive the peer leader as being responsible for handling all tasks
Well-being of peer leader (11)	The peer leader encounters stress as they shoulder the sole responsibility for multiple tasks, leading to a potential disconnection from other team members. In instances of problems or challenges, the peer leader may experience a sense of isolation, being the sole individual held accountable for the outcomes
<b>Disadvantages of one peer leader fulfilling all leadership for the formal leader</b>	
Lack of information transfer (3)	The formal leader is replaced by the peer leader, resulting in a potential loss of pertinent information for the former
Loss of control (1)	The formal leader must possess a high degree of confidence in the competencies of the peer leader

Interestingly, this fear of status loss appeared to be unfounded in previous research by [Edelmann et al. \(2020\)](#). Here, a positive relation was found between high-quality peer leadership and the perceived leadership quality of the formal leader, suggesting that the presence of competent peer leaders can actually enhance the leadership status of formal leaders. Other frequently mentioned disadvantages revolved around a perceived loss of overview of the team's activities. Participants expressed concerns about potential information gaps resulting from limited dialogue with peer leaders or a lack of input from the entire team.

There was also a perceived risk of poor leadership quality if the formal leader disagreed with the approaches taken by the peer leaders or if the peer leaders lacked the necessary competence. Additionally, the loss of control was identified as a significant concern. Formal leaders need to place trust in the peer leaders to effectively carry out their responsibilities and provide comprehensive updates to the formal leader. Participants also highlighted the additional work involved in implementing shared leadership. This includes the need to carefully frame and communicate the selection of specific peer leaders, as well as the responsibility to intervene and address any conflicts that may arise within the team. Participants also reported role ambiguity as a potential disadvantage (e.g., unclarity about the formal leader's tasks vs peer leader's tasks). It seems that confusion on who is officially in the position to make decisions is perceived to be an issue not only among the peer leaders but also between the peer leader(s) and the formal leader. Other disadvantages for the formal leader pertained to a potential decrease in team cohesion (e.g., the team is pulled apart and becomes more difficult to manage as a cohesive unit), more monitoring responsibilities (e.g., the formal leader now also needs to oversee the performance of the peer leaders), the changed job content, and increased accountability (e.g., being held responsible for the work of the peer leaders).

*Disadvantages for team members.* Participants mostly pointed to the perceived risk of creating status differences within the team (e.g., team members who are not selected as peer leaders may feel disadvantaged due to the introduction of a new hierarchical layer) as well as a feeling of jealousy (e.g., team members who are not chosen as peer leaders can feel excluded). It was argued that team members would then be less likely to show respect towards the appointed peer leaders, thereby



**Table 4.** The perceived advantages and disadvantages of multiple peer leaders fulfilling a role (compared to one peer leader).

Higher-order theme	Description of category
<b>Advantages of multiple peer leaders fulfilling one role for the team</b>	
More diverse input (24)	The inclusion of multiple ideas, knowledge, perspectives, and a broader range of needs fosters a more comprehensive and efficient outcome, as opposed to relying solely on the perspective of a single peer leader. This diversity is advantageous, as different approaches or skills may be necessary or desired by the entire team, rather than being limited to the perspective of one individual
Independency & leadership continuity (21)	The team operates independently from the formal leader, eliminating dependency on a single individual. If one of the peer leaders is unavailable, the other peer leader(s) can serve as a backup, ensuring continuity in leadership responsibilities. Consequently, the leadership structure becomes less hierarchical and formal, promoting increased team independence
Choice in point of contact (14)	The presence of multiple peer leaders provides additional options for team members to select from, considering factors such as personality, personal connection, and the unique talents of each peer leader
Efficiency (5)	The fulfillment of leadership roles can be expedited, and the process of establishing clear goals becomes more streamlined, particularly within larger teams
Better team functioning (4)	There is an increased level of dialogue and consultation within the team
Team cohesion (2)	It enhances team cohesion and fosters a sense of ownership among team members regarding the decisions made
Responsibility-taking (1)	It encourages other team members to assume greater responsibility within the team as well
<b>Advantages of multiple peer leaders fulfilling one role for the peer leaders</b>	
Well-being of peer leader (18)	It provides the peer leader with a sense of reassurance, knowing that they are not alone, and allows for mutual support and encouragement among peer leaders during challenging times. Furthermore, it enables more team members to showcase their strengths and derive motivation from performing their work
Less workload (9)	The workload of the peer leaders is reduced as responsibilities are distributed among them, allowing for task allocation based on individual interests, personalities, and competencies
Building leadership status (5)	The peer leaders can collectively communicate with the rest of the team, and their decisions and actions may receive greater support from team members
Shared accountability (4)	The peer leader is not solely held accountable when multiple individuals share the same leadership role and it is not effectively fulfilled
Developing team-work skills (2)	The peer leaders develop the ability to make compromises in the event of disagreements

*(continued)*

**Table 4.** (continued)

Higher-order theme	Description of category
<b>Disadvantages of multiple peer leaders fulfilling one role for the team</b>	
Need for role clarity (23)	Effective communication is crucial to clarify the responsibilities, knowledge, and actions of each peer leader, mitigating any potential role confusion. However, challenges such as information loss may occur, where certain information fails to reach one of the peer leaders, particularly in cases of their absence. In extreme situations, this could result in a scenario where none of the peer leaders take necessary actions
Conflicts among peer leaders (18)	Conflicts may emerge among the various peer leaders due to divergent approaches, expectations, perspectives, and opinions they hold
Inefficiency (11)	When multiple peer leaders collaborate on the same task, it can lead to inefficiency due to the increased need for dialogue and coordination among them, which consumes valuable time. Additionally, monitoring the larger picture and team objectives becomes more challenging, particularly in smaller teams
Clique formation (6)	Cliques may form, leading to potential exclusion of individuals, as different approaches by peer leaders can create divisions within the team. This could result in the formation of groups between peer leaders or between peer leaders and other team members
No clear point of contact (5)	It can create ambiguity, particularly for new team members, regarding whom they should approach for specific matters
Alignment of roles (3)	Certain tasks or communication may be more effectively handled by a single peer leader rather than multiple peer leaders, as the latter can potentially result in the transmission of different or conflicting information to external parties
<b>Disadvantages of multiple peer leaders fulfilling one role for the peer leaders</b>	
Conflicts among peer leaders (20)	Competitive behavior or jealousy may arise among the peer leaders, and they may struggle to reach a consensus due to stubbornness or adherence to their own individual visions. These conflicts can be exacerbated by differences in character, work pace, efficiency, or capacity. Consequently, poor teamwork and tension may permeate the entire team
<b>Disadvantages of multiple peer leaders fulfilling one role for both peer leaders &amp; the team</b>	
Free-riding (8)	During busy periods or challenging discussions, some peer leaders may fail to fulfill their responsibilities and instead shift the workload onto other peer leaders. Therefore, it is crucial to ensure an equitable and fair distribution of workload, preventing one peer leader from shouldering a disproportionate amount of the responsibilities while the other(s) may become less proactive or less engaged
Power abuse (4)	The personal ambitions of peer leaders may sometimes take precedence over fostering a healthy team dynamic. Additionally, a peer leader's strong personal drive may inadvertently hinder the contributions of other peer leaders or team members, potentially suppressing their involvement and inhibiting overall collaboration

further undermining the positive impact that peer leaders could otherwise have on the team dynamics and performance. Appointing peer leaders was also associated with potential power abuse by the peer leaders (e.g., they may exploit the status differences to act in their own self-interest without seeking input from the rest of the team). Hence, differentiating between peer leaders and the other team members can lead to unequal treatment and corruption within the team. This finding aligns with research on Leader-Member Exchange, which indicates that differential treatment by leaders is seen as disadvantageous and unfair by employees (e.g., Liden et al., 1997). Moreover, team members may disagree with the peer leader choice and become dependent on the peer leader (e.g., the other team members feel powerless and depend on the peer leaders and their leadership quality). Other disadvantages were related to the untapped potential of the team (e.g., talents/ideas of the rest of the team may go unused, the other team members have fewer opportunities for growth), situational constraints (e.g., the team becomes more vulnerable and less adaptable in certain situations) and the risk of free-riding (the other team members feel less responsible for their work because the peer leaders now “do everything anyway”).

*Disadvantages for peer leaders.* Appointing peer leaders in the team was also perceived to result in a higher (or even overwhelming) workload for peer leaders and additional challenges for peer leaders related to their leadership status in the team (e.g., risk of not being accepted as a peer leader by the rest of the team or their leadership position being undermined by other team members). Role ambiguity between the formal leader and the peer leader was identified as another potential disadvantage (e.g., overlapping tasks, uncertainty about decision-making authority and leadership boundaries) or when the appointed peer leader is not motivated to fulfill the leadership as he/she did not want to be a leader in the first place. This finding demonstrates that during the selection of peer leaders, it is important to not only consider the competencies of team members but also their motivation to become a peer leader.

### *Research Question 1b: Counteracting jealousy by the formal leader*

One additional question was posed about the role that jealousy by formal leaders might play when appointing peer leaders in the team, and how to counteract these feelings. Negative emotions towards the peer leaders due to “psychological territory infringement” (Zhu et al., 2018), such as jealousy or rivalry, were indeed the most frequently mentioned disadvantage for the formal leader (i.e., more than half of the participants stated that it is likely for the formal leader to experience those feelings). Notably, further analysis revealed that most participants who did not anticipate feelings of jealousy among formal leaders were men with lower educational backgrounds employed in profit organizations.

Participants offered several strategies to avoid or reduce the jealousy perceived by the formal leader. First, participants emphasized the importance of including the formal leader in the decision-making process ensuring their agreement with the assigned roles to team members. It was noted that imposing a shared leadership structure without the formal leader’s support can be detrimental. Hence, the more this process is determined by open and transparent dialogues, the easier it may be accepted.

Second, participants suggested that the formal leader should shift their perspective to view shared leadership as a collective effort to fulfill all aspects of leadership in the most effective way. Recognizing that another team member may be better suited for a specific leadership role can help alleviate feelings of personal inadequacy or threat to their authority. Besides, participants reported

that the formal leader should focus on the benefits of appointing peer leaders, such as gaining time for new challenges or investing in their own development.

Third, participants recommended that the formal leader should demonstrate assertiveness and clearly define the leadership boundaries. Formal leaders can assign a specific role to themselves, define it, and clearly communicate it to the team (e.g., in which situations they should involve the formal leader). By realizing that it is the formal leader's task to intervene if things go wrong, formal leaders can maintain a sense of belonging within the team while not entirely relinquishing their leadership responsibilities.

Fourth, related to the previous point, open communication was argued to be important in counteracting jealousy. Participants recommended formal leaders engage in open and honest conversations with peer leaders, expressing their own feelings and concerns (e.g., "It seems to me like I am only assigned the least important tasks"). By reflecting and exploring the underlying causes of these emotions, formal leaders may discover that they stem from insecurities about their leadership capability. These insecurities often arise from a lack of knowledge about team dynamics and the specific activities carried out in the team. To address these insecurities, participants recommended that formal leaders increase their presence on the work floor. By being more involved in day-to-day activities, formal leaders can gain valuable insights and contribute their own expertise. Concrete suggestions included engaging in discussions with peer leaders to learn from their working methods or ensuring regular debriefing sessions with peer leaders to stay updated on team progress and developments.

### *Research Question 1c: The selection method of peer leaders*

Participants were asked who ideally makes the decision about which team member is appointed as a peer leader for a specific leadership role. A clear majority of participants (i.e., 37.14%, mostly higher educated women employed in profit-oriented organizations) preferred the option of an anonymous rating method, in which both team members and the formal leader are involved in appointing peer leaders. Next, 25.71% of the participants opted for an open group discussion among team members. Interestingly, only a few participants opted for the method in which only the formal leader (i.e., 5.71%, all lower-educated formal leaders employed in a profit-oriented organization) or only the team members (anonymous rating) decide whom to appoint (i.e., 5.71%). The remaining 25.71% suggested alternative approaches.

First, six participants (i.e., 42.82% of those who suggested an alternative) referred to an open group discussion with both the formal leader and the team members, in which they could deliberate on the most suitable individuals for each leadership role. The potential members should then have the opportunity to reflect on whether they genuinely desire to take on this role (instead of making immediate decisions). By including the formal leader in this discussion, he/she can actively engage in the conversation, express personal opinions, and monitor team dynamics throughout the process (e.g., dominant team members may overpower quieter individuals). Participants stressed the importance of clarity in decision-making, as it would provide a transparent understanding of why specific choices were made, which would not be the case in anonymous ratings.

Second, it was recommended for the formal leader to individually inquire with team members about their career interests and their motivation to assume a leadership role. Once motivated individuals are identified, an open discussion can be facilitated among them to collaboratively allocate the leadership roles. The formal leader can either approve the proposed division or initiate a discussion with the entire team, excluding the selection candidate, to seek consensus. If the entire team agrees, the formal leader can communicate the final decision to the chosen peer leader.

Third, participants suggested the option of self-assessment on different leadership roles. For example, a person may initially feel inadequate to fulfill a particular role, but if other team members perceive that person as the most suitable candidate, it can serve as a source of motivation. Feeling this support from the team can encourage the team member to embrace this role. Besides, the formal leader can utilize this self-perception score to engage in a discussion with the team member, exploring their concerns and finding ways to provide optimal support in the future. Relatedly, formal leaders can conduct separate meetings with team members to gather their perspectives on individual strengths and weaknesses, consolidate this feedback, and then make an informed decision in selecting the peer leader. In this way, everyone has an opportunity to contribute to the selection process.

Finally, two key considerations were consistently put forth by participants regarding the appointment procedure. First, in open group discussions, individuals might not feel comfortable openly expressing their reluctance to take on a leadership role, potentially leading to a sense of obligation. To address this, participants emphasized the importance of assessing beforehand whether the team is prepared for candid discussions, ensuring an environment conducive to honest expression. Second, participants emphasized the significance of garnering unanimous support for the concept of shared leadership within the team (including the formal leader, peer leaders, and other team members), so that everyone fully embraces the idea and realizes the benefits of appointing peer leaders.

In sum, participants argued for an honest and transparent approach when selecting peer leaders in the team. The majority of our sample favored an anonymous rating method, as it is believed to encourage team members to provide more honest, reliable ratings than in a group discussion. However, if the team fosters a climate of psychological safety, where members feel comfortable expressing concerns without fear of negative consequences, open group discussions can serve as a viable alternative. Such discussions may offer more in-depth insights into the rationale behind selecting an individual as a peer leader for a specific role.

### *Research Question 2: One versus multiple leaders taking up leadership in the team*

Overall, a clear majority of participants preferred to distribute leadership within the team (i.e., 74.29%) rather than centering it onto one peer leader (i.e., 5.71%). Interestingly, the latter option was preferred by lower-educated formal leaders employed in a profit-oriented organization. The remaining 20% of the participants did not choose either option.

Instead, they suggested alternative ways of distributing the leadership that will be discussed in detail below. For the team, our coding procedure yielded five advantages and six disadvantages of having one peer leader who takes on all the leadership (instead of having several peer leaders within the team; see [Table 3](#)). For peer leaders and the formal leader specifically, three and two additional disadvantages emerged from the data, respectively.

**Advantages.** Participants perceived it beneficial to have only one peer leader because that would result in a clear and singular point of contact for all parties involved (i.e., team members, the formal leader, and external stakeholders) and for all matters (i.e., questions pertaining to all leadership aspects). Additionally, a single peer leader would serve as a comprehensive replacement in the absence of the formal leader, ensuring continuity and minimizing disruptions within the team. Another argument for centering the leadership was the ease of aligning different leadership roles. This would enable the peer leader to maintain a balanced approach, ensuring that all facets of leadership receive adequate attention and preventing the neglect of any specific aspect. Other

perceived advantages were the quality of leadership (e.g., the formal leader and the rest of the team can be confident that all leadership is fulfilled (well) by the same person) and increased efficiency within the team, given that a single source of information leads to quicker and more decisive actions. Finally, centering all leadership on one peer leader was perceived to have positive implications for the well-being of the formal leader. Instead of overseeing multiple individuals or the entire team, the formal leader could focus on coaching and supervising a single peer leader.

*Disadvantages.* Having one peer leader responsible for all leadership aspects was predominantly associated with peer leader dependency (e.g., a hierarchical structure emerges in the team, leading to team members relying heavily on this single individual with authority) and untapped potential of the team (e.g., restricted input and perspectives from other team members who have fewer opportunities to showcase their competencies and contribute to the team). Such a structure was also linked to feelings of jealousy among other team members (e.g., feeling less favored by the formal leader), reduced team cohesion (e.g., less collaboration in the team), and poor leadership quality (e.g., team members are dissatisfied with the leadership provided by the sole peer leader). Moreover, participants highlighted the absence of a designated contact person for team members who may feel uncomfortable or hesitant to approach the sole peer leader.

For the peer leader in question, fulfilling all leadership was generally viewed as disadvantageous because an excessive workload would be placed on this person. It was deemed unlikely that one person could effectively handle the demands of every leadership aspect simultaneously or could possess the necessary competencies or expertise to excel in all areas of leadership. Participants also raised concerns about the potential for free-riding within the team (i.e., when the rest of the team feels less involved and, as a consequence, does not take up responsibilities anymore). Concentrating all leadership on one peer leader was also perceived to harm the well-being of the peer leader (e.g., by experiencing heightened stress due to overwhelming responsibility of fulfilling all leadership aspects, or by feeling detached from the team). Finally, participants also mentioned potential disadvantages for the formal leader, such as limited information transfer and perceived loss of control (e.g., feeling replaced or overshadowed by the peer leader, risk of missing relevant information).

*Alternative suggestions.* First, the most commonly suggested approach was a combination of both options, where team members are involved in and aware of each leadership role to some extent, while also designating one person to maintain a focus on leadership, assume final responsibility, and coordinate the process. Participants believed that this hybrid approach would depend on the presence of individuals within the team who possess the necessary talents for these leadership roles. Second, it was argued that not all leadership roles need to be exclusively fulfilled within the team itself. Participants proposed the possibility of seeking leadership expertise from individuals outside of the team, thus bringing in external perspectives and skills.

A third suggestion put forth was that the distribution of leadership within the team should consider the specific content of the leadership role. Participants suggested that social leadership aspects, such as team cohesion and well-being, could be effectively fulfilled by most team members, particularly those who are external to the core group. On the other hand, task-related aspects, such as task distribution, may be best handled by a single designated peer leader. Additionally, participants mentioned that distributing leadership roles throughout the team is most efficient when a role encompasses multiple significant tasks. Conversely, if the roles are too similar in content, it may be more effective for these roles to remain consolidated and fulfilled by a single individual.



Taken together, our findings indicate that the idea of dividing the leadership across different peer leaders was perceived as the most effective option by participants while centering all leadership on a single peer leader received less support. This aligns with previous research conducted in both organizational teams (DeRue et al., 2015) and sports teams, where team performance was found to be higher when leadership was distributed among multiple team members (instead of concentrated in a single team member; Fransen et al., 2014). Besides, our findings point to the risk of disagreement within the team when the required tasks do not align with the skills of a particular peer leader. Consequently, the different leadership aspects may not be performed equally well, as it is unlikely that one person possesses the talent and expertise to effectively handle every aspect of leadership (Yukl, 2010). Previous research by Edelmann et al. (2020) supports the notion that in most teams (i.e., 83%), leadership is fulfilled by multiple team members rather than being centralized in a single individual.

### *Research Question 3: One versus multiple leaders on a particular leadership role*

Participants were introduced to two options for appointing peer leaders: only one peer leader for each of the leadership roles (e.g., John takes on role X, Pete takes on role Y, etc.), or multiple peer leaders per role, so that the leadership responsibility is shared (e.g., John and Pete both taking on role X). For the team, we coded seven advantages and six disadvantages of having multiple peer leaders for one leadership role. For peer leaders specifically, five additional advantages and three disadvantages were identified (see Table 4). The opinions were divided and less univocal than in Research Question 2; 57.14% of the participants were in favor of having multiple peer leaders fulfill one particular role, while 11.43% (all formal leaders of a team) preferred to have only one peer leader per role, and 31.43% either could not decide between the two distribution approaches or suggested alternative options that are described below.

**Advantages.** For team members, the most reported advantages of having multiple peer leaders per leadership role were primarily related to the diversity of input (e.g., diverse perspectives, ideas, approaches, and skills that cater to the varied needs of the team), followed by independence and leadership continuity. The team is less reliant on the formal leader and when one peer leader is unavailable (e.g., due to holidays), another peer leader can seamlessly assume the responsibilities, which not only reassures team members but also alleviates the pressure on any individual peer leader. Another perceived benefit of having multiple peer leaders in each role was that the team members have multiple peer leaders to choose from as a preferred point of contact. If a team member encounters difficulties with one peer leader (e.g., due to personal conflicts or a lack of rapport), they can still approach another peer leader who fulfills the same role. Next, the presence of multiple peer leaders within each role was seen as advantageous for the efficiency of the team's work (e.g., the leadership role is fulfilled more rapidly and agreements on clear goals can be reached more easily), as well as the team cohesion (e.g., increased dialogue within the team promoting cooperation and a sense of shared ownership over their teamwork).

For the peer leaders, sharing one leadership role was reported to be advantageous for the well-being of the peer leaders (e.g., they can support and encourage one another as needed). Additionally, the distribution of responsibilities within the role among the peer leaders based on their respective interests and competencies results in a reduced workload for each individual. Moreover, participants stated that co-performing a role facilitates the establishment of a stronger leadership status (e.g., the peer leaders can collectively address the team and garner greater support and credibility among team

members). Another advantage pertained to the shared accountability of peer leaders (e.g., there is not only one peer leader who is held responsible if the leadership role is not fulfilled well).

*Disadvantages.* Participants also identified some disadvantages associated with the appointment of multiple peer leaders to a single role, primarily centered around the need for role clarity (e.g., insufficient coordination among peer leaders can lead to a loss of information, resulting in inadequate performance of the leadership role). In addition, concerns were raised about potential conflicts among the different peer leaders (e.g., due to divergent views/opinions on how the shared role should be fulfilled) and inefficiency (e.g., increased dialogue among peer leaders can be time-consuming). Moreover, the presence of multiple peer leaders in a shared role was seen as potentially fostering clique formation (e.g., subgroups can form between the peer leaders themselves or between peer leaders and the remaining team members), and team members may face challenges in identifying a clear point of contact (e.g., it may be unclear for team members which peer leader to approach for specific matters). Furthermore, one notable concern raised was the increased difficulty in aligning roles effectively (e.g., heightened risk of contradictory information being communicated to external parties).

Participants also pointed out potential risks such as free-riding among peer leaders (e.g., the workload is unfairly distributed) and power abuse (e.g., peer leaders prioritize personal ambitions over the collective interests of the team). For peer leaders specifically, having multiple leaders per role was perceived to lead to conflicts among peer leaders (e.g., feelings of jealousy or competitive behavior), thereby impeding decision-making processes.

Participants generally expressed favorable views towards the practice of co-performing a specific leadership role, aligning with existing scholarly suggestions that combining talents can enhance team performance while alleviating the pressure and workload on an individual peer leader (Evaggelia and Vitta, 2012). Conversely, this diversity of talents also entails the risk of conflicting views among peer leaders regarding the fulfillment of their shared role, potentially leading to conflicts or competitive behaviors. Furthermore, as previously posited by Zhu et al. (2018), some peer leaders may exhibit reduced effort, relying on the assumption that others will shoulder the workload. Then again, Chreim (2014) argues that too many peer leaders assuming the same leadership role can lead to an “overcrowded leadership space” (page 538), resulting in overlapping contributions or wasted time and effort. Consequently, to mitigate miscommunications and inefficiencies, it is vital to have a clear understanding of each individual’s responsibilities and to effectively coordinate activities when co-performing the same role (Pearce and Conger, 2003; Chreim, 2014).

*Alternative suggestions.* Approximately one-third of the participants advocated for a more nuanced approach instead of choosing between the two approaches. According to them, the optimal approach to role distribution may vary depending on factors such as team size (e.g., larger teams with smaller subteams, particularly during challenging times, may benefit from having multiple leaders for a specific role). In addition, participants emphasized the importance of the relationship between team members (e.g., peer leaders who share the same role should have a harmonious rapport with one another). To foster a sense of responsibility throughout the team, participants proposed the idea of rotating roles among team members at different intervals (e.g., changing roles every trimester). Moreover, participants emphasized that the nature of the role itself should influence the approach to role distribution. To illustrate, task-related roles (e.g., task distribution) were suggested to be alternated among team members, while this might not be possible for social-related roles where competence may be more innate or personality-dependent.

## General discussion

To date, the research on the effectiveness of shared leadership has been fragmented. This is partly due to the fact that shared leadership has mainly been studied as one general concept, and not sufficient attention has been paid to the various ways in which shared leadership can be implemented (e.g., informal vs formal appointment, one peer leader vs multiple peer leaders across the team and within one role; [Manheim, 2017](#)). Moreover, plenty of empirical studies on shared leadership focus on its benefits, while the potential challenges are mostly limited to theoretical arguments and comments. In the present study, we argue that shared leadership might not always yield the expected benefits and that its impact may depend on the manner in which it is implemented (along with other potential moderating factors such as team, task, or individual characteristics). Therefore, we took a step toward addressing the contradictory views on shared leadership effectiveness and empirically investigated the potential (dis)advantages of different implementations.

The insights obtained through this explorative research advance our understanding of different shared leadership approaches and reveal how they can drive but also undermine teamwork (e.g., increasing the team functioning and independency of the team, but also instigating more status differences and role ambiguity). Another important observation is that the participants in our sample mentioned numerous benefits and challenges with respect to a variety of outcomes that go beyond mere performance. This finding is in line with the previous suggestion that the effects of shared leadership on other outcomes, such as well-being, should not be overlooked (e.g., [Manheim, 2017](#)).

### *Practical implications*

Organizations striving to flatten their leadership structure and embracing shared leadership as a promising concept often assume it to be a universal solution for enhancing team effectiveness. However, our findings indicate that organizations should be more cautious and considerate when implementing shared leadership, as unforeseen challenges may arise that could undermine its effectiveness or lead to less favorable outcomes for the team and/or the formal leader (e.g., conflicts). Drawing from the insights shared by our participants, we derive four conclusions that are important to consider when adopting different shared leadership approaches in practice.

First, we recommend that the formal leader of a team should be treated as part of the team and be included in all stages of the implementation. Most participants preferred to involve the formal leader in the process of selecting peer leaders, which is in line with earlier research in which teams believed that the formal leader still plays a critical role under shared leadership conditions ([Miller et al., 2007](#)). Changing from a traditional hierarchical structure in the team to delegating leadership to team members not only creates contradictory demands for formal leaders (e.g., to flatten the hierarchy and at the same time be in charge of coordinating this process) but can also cause resistance in the formal leader. Indeed, scholars agree that “the introduction of shared leadership requires extensive preparatory work to overcome traditional professional demarcations” ([Steinert et al., 2006](#): page 51). Hence, an initial briefing about what constitutes shared leadership and how it may work in his/her team can motivate the formal leader to empower the team members to take up leadership themselves. This step is crucial because shared leadership is most effective when the formal leader fully supports and understands the concept, recognizing that it does not render them obsolete. Offering practical guidance beforehand on how to manage and mitigate negative emotions towards peer leaders can help minimize any adverse effects they may have.

Second, when selecting peer leaders, participants suggested that an anonymous rating method with the entire team may be the most ideal option. On the other hand, open group discussions can work for

some teams, too. If possible, we recommend formal leaders assess the dynamics in the team and make a reflective decision on what may work best for his/her team. Participants emphasized that the choice of peer leaders should be accepted by the team. This aligns with the idea that simply claiming authority is not enough, but that this authority also needs to be granted (Barnard, 1938). Indeed, regardless of the nature of the appointment procedure, participants preferred to involve the formal leader and all team members in this process. This inclusive approach serves to minimize the risk of disagreement or disapproval from the formal leader or team members regarding the selection of individuals to fulfill leadership roles and how they perform in those roles, thereby reducing the chance of conflicts (Roth, 2022) or leader overemergence (Lanaj and Hollenbeck, 2015). Moreover, in line with procedural justice research on promotion decisions (e.g., Lemons and Jones, 2001), transparent communication about why someone has been selected as peer leader is important to avoid frustrations, conflicts, or even leader corruption in the team (Pearce et al., 2007; Ulhøi and Müller, 2014).

A possible method to overcome subjective biases that may lead to (inappropriate) leader overemergence is to consistently employ 360-degree feedback programs and then compare team members' own ratings with their ratings of others (Lanaj and Hollenbeck, 2015). Additionally, by means of "after-event reviews" and reflection exercises the team can set common ground rules (e.g., priorities) to organize the process and discuss potential dilemma's that they are facing (Derue et al., 2012; Raelin, 2018). Finally, adopting rotating leadership programs (Erez et al., 2002), where every team member has the opportunity to take up leadership, can help to identify the most qualified peer leaders over time.

Yet, the most optimal technique to identify the best-qualified team member for a specific role that addresses several of the perceived challenges of formally appointing peer leaders may be the Shared Leadership Mapping (SLM; Fransén et al., 2015; Fransén et al., 2020). SLM adopts social network analysis by relying on team members' perceptions of each other's leadership qualities in order to create a visual map of the team's leadership structure. Together with the perception of the formal leader, this visualized network can support an informed decision for whom to appoint as a peer leader, thereby ensuring that the peer leaders have a large support base in their team. Furthermore, SLM addresses Hanna et al.'s (2021) caution for the potential risks when team members take up leadership against their will (e.g., due to role overload). More specifically, SLM also takes into account team members' personal motivation to take up leadership, which is an important predictor for (peer) leadership effectiveness (Badura et al., 2020). As such, team members who are not motivated to take up leadership (or a specific leadership role) will not be appointed as peer leaders. However, knowing that there is a support base in the team and that their leadership is accepted by their team members will likely boost the motivation of the appointed peer leaders to take the lead.

Third, when delegating leadership authority and specific roles to peer leaders, strategies should be in place to avoid the potential risks they may encounter throughout time (e.g., wasted time/efforts due to a lack of role clarity, power abuse) and that can lead to conflicts or poorer team functioning. Given that the team composition can change with time, it is important to regularly analyze whether the initially appointed peer leaders for each role are still perceived as the best peer leaders. In line with the dominance complementarity theory, formal leaders can avoid disharmony in the team by ensuring a team composition in which the power (i.e., leadership) of one peer leader can be clearly differentiated from the leadership of the other peer leaders (Sinha et al., 2021). To prevent negative dynamics, practitioners may be advised to look at the team compositional state to maximize the diversity of power bases, so that the leadership shared among several peer leaders can be fully exploited. Providing specific definitions for each role, as well as for the different responsibilities within one role, can clarify the boundaries of a peer leader's responsibilities. Finally, providing leadership skills training may alleviate role stress in peer leaders who face role ambiguity or role

overload when fulfilling multiple roles (Chen and Zhang, 2022). Difficulties related to role ambiguity can also be circumvented by focusing on clearly differentiated and specified roles rather than on general leadership, which in turn impedes miscommunication.

Another strategy to mitigate negative dynamics or potential stalemates in teams where multiple team members claim leadership is to strengthen the team's collective identification. By fostering a shared sense of belonging, common goals, and unified team identity, individuals are more likely to prioritize collaborative decision-making and cooperative behaviors rather than engaging in competitive power struggles. A high level of collective team identification can serve as a motivational mechanism for team members, including peer leaders, to prioritize the team's interests over their individual motives. When team members strongly identify with the team as a collective entity, they are more inclined to set aside personal interests and work towards common goals. This fosters a harmonious and cohesive team environment, reducing the likelihood of conflicts arising from conflicting leadership claims. By embracing a shared sense of "us," team members are more likely to collaborate effectively and contribute to the overall success of the team. (i.e., to take the lead, Siangchokyoo and Klinger, 2022).

Instead of engaging in competitive behaviors, team members can contribute to the team's interests by willingly sharing their leadership with other peer leaders. Organizing social events or teambuilding activities (especially in the early phases of teamwork) can nourish a team's collective identity (Hannum, 2011). In addition, formal leaders can learn how to engage in identity leadership (Haslam et al., 2011). Here, the formal leader can be taught how to create, strengthen, and maintain a shared social identity in the team, which can prevent individualistic behaviors that harm shared leadership effectiveness. In doing so, it may also encourage the formal leader to think in terms of the collective goals, which can reduce hostile feelings towards the peer leaders (e.g., due to power struggles).

In addition, it is important to recognize the extra efforts of peer leaders but just as well keep in mind the well-being and development opportunities of those who do not fulfill a leadership role. It is worth noting that, from a hierarchical functionalist perspective, the inherent instability in shared leadership structures may give rise to power struggles among team members who are not in leadership positions (e.g., a hostile attitude towards peer leaders, Greer et al., 2018). By proactively addressing and discussing potential challenges, such as conflicts between peer leaders and other team members, teams can prevent future obstacles in the implementation of shared leadership. Providing training to formal leaders can enable them to identify early indications of detrimental dynamics within the team and intervene accordingly when necessary.

Fourth, the reality is that today's organizational teams evolve dynamically throughout time (e.g., team members come and go quickly), are highly interdependent, and are more multicultural compared to older forms of teamwork (Kirkman and Harris, 2017). This dynamism and complexity not only require proper planning but also commitment and continuous monitoring of the process. As Scott and Caress (2005) point out, shared leadership is "an ongoing and fluid process, requiring continual assessment and re-evaluation in order to be flexible and responsive to an ever-changing environment" (page 4). To be able to successfully adapt to team changes our results suggest that teams can best distribute a leadership role among multiple peer leaders, hereby avoiding dependence on one peer leader who might leave the team at some point. This finding is in line with previous research in sports teams that showed that the optimal leadership sharedness involved multiple leaders (but was also restricted to a selected number of peer leaders; Leo et al., 2019; Mertens et al., 2020). However, in line with previous theorizing, our data suggest that having multiple peer leaders can also have disadvantages (e.g., free-riding). When leadership is shared, peer leaders can feel less psychologically empowered in their role, which can reduce their motivation to take initiative and enhance team performance (Chen and Zhang, 2022). Nordbäck and Espinosa (2019) describe

several leadership coordination mechanisms that can help peer leaders to synchronize their influence behaviors and that motivate them to act as a collective (rather than a mix of individuals).

Taken together, the present study not only highlights the benefits of certain shared leadership implementations but more importantly so, sheds light on their potential challenges. Thereby, our research findings provide the necessary insights that can assist teams in implementing an effective shared leadership structure. Based on the perceived challenges, an intervention program may be developed that avoids these challenges as much as possible. Moreover, it may be worthwhile for practitioners to raise awareness of the relevance of leadership claiming and granting among team members (e.g., using role plays to teach the team how to engage in these processes, [Siangchokyoo and Klinger, 2022](#)).

Our findings have indirect implications for practitioners, suggesting that a cautious approach and critical evaluation are necessary before implementing a specific format of shared leadership in practice. Understanding and addressing the potential barriers associated with shared leadership can help mitigate the negative consequences of this leadership model. Additionally, practitioners should remain open to the possibility that hierarchical leadership structures, characterized by a clear formal leader who makes final decisions and assumes responsibility for them ([Pearce et al., 2007](#)), may be more effective in specific contexts. For instance, in teams with members who have conflicting goals or diverse personalities, a hierarchical leadership approach may yield better results. By considering these factors, practitioners can make informed decisions about the most suitable leadership approach for their specific circumstances.

### *Strengths and limitations of the present study*

The strengths of this study include both substantive and methodological choices. First, on a methodological level, we maximized validity by pilot-testing the interview questions prior to data collection ([Sampson, 2016](#)). Throughout the analytic stages, we ensured trustworthy data by audio recording, peer-reviewing the coding process, and implementing post-interview reflections. Credibility was further achieved through extensive discussions and reflections on the categorization process (i.e., lumping content-related codes) by the involved researchers (i.e., researcher triangulation; [Carter et al., 2014](#)). Second, our chosen study sample is relatively large ( $N = 35$ ), compared to previous studies with a similar aim (i.e., [Herbst et al., 2019](#): with  $N = 7$ ). While their study focused on church communities as a specific work context, the present study aimed for greater external validity. More specifically, by including a sample stratified across organization type (profit, non-profit), education level (high, low), and a wide range of sectors, this study offers a more detailed and representative picture of how shared leadership is perceived in the broader work population.

Despite all efforts to maximize the validity and reliability of our qualitative research design, this study is subject to some limitations. In addressing those, opportunities for future research emerge. First, our study results are purely descriptive. Although theoretical saturation was reached and recurring themes should get particular recognition, we believe that more emphasis should be placed on their perceived importance instead of the frequency of mention. We encourage future researchers to complement our insights with additional research. Ideally, an intervention study with several points of data collection can be set up in which the various approaches are implemented and their impact on outcomes compared to each other. Next, longitudinal research may provide insights into the dynamic nature of shared leadership. For instance, in some phases of team development, a different approach may be more efficient than in others.

A second limitation of our study pertains to the speculative nature of our approach, as the conclusions are derived solely from participants' perceptions. Besides, although all participants appeared to be unfamiliar with the different formalized shared leadership implementations, we cannot entirely exclude the possibility that some may have had prior experiences with such implementations. Therefore, we



cannot differentiate between opinions based on actual experiences and those influenced by employees' beliefs regarding the potential consequences of shared leadership. Future research should delve into whether employees' experience with shared leadership plays a role in employees' perceptions of the different (dis)advantages. Given that this study did not assess individuals' actual experiences of shared leadership in real-world settings, but rather draws on their expectations, our findings are only preliminary and need to be confirmed in future research. Consequently, the practical implications of this research may not fully capture the complexities of everyday organizational life and should be interpreted with caution.

Nevertheless, we believe that these findings provide first insights into participants' preferences on how shared leadership should be implemented and on the potential perceived risks of the different implementations. In the next step, intervention studies can be conducted to test the effects of the different structures of shared leadership in practice. Although it will not be easy to create an environment that controls for the many confounding variables (e.g., team composition, formal leader, etc.), these studies might provide additional evidence on the effectiveness of different shared leadership implementations and on whether the challenges identified in this study indeed arise (or can be countered based on our suggestions). Moreover, the emergence of leaders within a team is intricately influenced by interpersonal dynamics at the group level, which offers an explanation for the varying shared leadership structures observed in teams (DeRue et al., 2015).

Thus, to understand why specific shared leadership structures arise in certain teams while others do not, it would be valuable to direct greater attention toward the underlying social-psychological processes. This entails examining team members' perceptions of one another, rather than solely concentrating on immutable individual traits. Longitudinal research can shed more light on these processes. Furthermore, incorporating a temporal dimension into the study of shared leadership can provide more clarity about the complex interaction between shared leadership and hierarchical leadership over time (Holm and Fairhurst, 2018). This approach allows for an examination of the sustainability of shared leadership practices in teams with lower levels of team stability (e.g., due to turnover; De Brún and McAuliffe, 2022). By considering the temporal aspect, we can gain valuable insights into how shared leadership evolves and adapts within dynamic team environments.

It is important to note that the context into which a leadership implementation is introduced is an important dimension of complexity (Hawe et al., 2009). Indeed, additional analysis of the responses revealed that participants with a given profile preferred a specific format of shared leadership. This preference could be attributed to internal factors (e.g., personality, personal interests), as well as external factors (e.g., organizational culture). For instance, different cultures may exhibit preferences for distinct leadership styles, which could impact their perception and acceptance of peer leadership (Hanna et al., 2021). In companies with a traditional hierarchical structure, the concept of shared leadership may encounter greater resistance from formal leaders and team members compared to more progressive and egalitarian organizations. Furthermore, the specific implementation of shared leadership may vary depending on a country's culture. For instance, it is conceivable that shared leadership is more widely embraced in individualistic cultures as opposed to collectivistic cultures that prioritize conformity. However, it is important to consider that in individualistic cultures, peer leaders may also become more competitive in their roles, potentially leading to power struggles and knowledge hiding, which contrasts with the cooperative nature of collectivistic cultures (Hanna et al., 2021; Chen and Zhang, 2022).

Finally, further research is warranted to examine team-level variables that could serve as boundary conditions in mitigating negative outcomes associated with shared leadership structures. It would be valuable to investigate whether the optimal distribution of leadership (roles) varies based on team type (e.g., management teams vs factory worker teams), team size, or team interdependency. In sum, contextual factors may play a significant role in determining the acceptance and outcomes of shared

leadership practices. Exploring these factors can provide valuable insights into understanding the nuances of shared leadership effectiveness and inform the development of context-specific approaches.

## Conclusion

The advantages and disadvantages of different shared leadership approaches identified in this research are in line with previous theorizing of scholars, thus providing valuable considerations when implementing a particular shared leadership approach in practice. The findings indicate that employees generally perceive shared leadership to be most beneficial when leadership responsibilities are distributed across the team, rather than concentrated in a single peer leader. Similarly, a single leadership role is perceived to be best fulfilled by multiple peer leaders as opposed to a sole peer leader. The research also emphasizes the importance of including the formal leader in the shared leadership process to address concerns related to control and leader status. Failure to involve the formal leader may lead to fear and negative emotions that could hinder the effective implementation of shared leadership. Accordingly, it is recommended that formal leaders participate in the selection process of peer leaders, which can be done through anonymous or open group discussions. Overall, this study offers an overview of the benefits and challenges associated with different shared leadership formats, contributing to the existing body of shared leadership literature. At the same time, the findings provide theoretical guidance that can assist teams in making informed decisions regarding the suitability of specific shared leadership structures, as well as in anticipating and addressing potential issues that may arise.

## Appendix

### Appendix A

*Interview protocol with the research questions of the present study*

**Research Question 1a:** Suppose we were to assign specific leadership roles within your team to specific team members and thereby implement a shared leadership structure:

- What are the potential benefits of formally appointing peer leaders?
  - o For the team members
  - o For the formal leader
- What are the possible disadvantages of formally appointing peer leaders?
  - o For the team members
  - o For the formal leader

**Research Question 1b:** To what extent do you think is it possible that the formal leader experiences rivalry and jealousy when implementing a shared leadership structure in your team?

- Can such feelings possibly be counteracted? How?

**Research Question 1c:** Who ideally makes the decision on which team member is appointed as a peer leader to which role? And how?

- a. The formal leader (e.g., by identifying which team member may exhibit the role ‘best’)

- b. The team - in an anonymous way (e.g., through an online assessment in which each team member rates the leadership quality of the other team members, and the person with the highest rating score is then appointed as peer leader)
- c. The team - in an open discussion in the group
- d. Based on a combination of the team members' and the formal leader's opinions (e.g., both rate the leadership quality of each team member for each role in an anonymous online assessment. The person with the highest rating score of both the team members and the formal leader is then appointed as the peer leader)
- e. Or can you think of another 'best practice' in which peer leaders can be ideally appointed within the team?

**Research Question 2:** Now imagine a set of distinct leadership roles to be distributed within the team. Here, several options are possible for the distribution of these roles; one option is that one team member takes up all the roles (i.e., one peer leader), and another option is that these roles are distributed among several people in the team (i.e., multiple peer leaders).

- Which do you think would be the best option?
- What are the possible advantages of centering all leadership on one peer leader within the team (compared to distributing the leadership among multiple peer leaders)?
- What are the possible disadvantages of this?

**Research Question 3:** There is also the possibility of appointing only one person for each of the leadership roles; e.g. John as a task leader, Pete as a social leader, etc., or appointing multiple peer leaders per role, so that the leadership responsibilities of this role are shared.

- Which do you think is the best option?
- What are the possible advantages of appointing multiple peer leaders for one role (compared to one peer leader for one role)?
- What are the possible disadvantages of this?

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The author(s) declared the following potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The authors hereby declare that this study was carried out in the absence of any financial or commercial relationships that could be seen as a potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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