Cognitive and Behavioral Leadership Coordination: Linking Shared Leadership to High Performance in Global Teams

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Abstract

The ability of a single leader to exert direct influence on globally distributed teams diminishes when members are scattered across boundaries. Shared leadership may be necessary to lead such teams more effectively. Earlier research has found contradicting effects of shared leadership on team performance, suggesting the possibility that there may be some interaction effects at play. In this study we use Grounded Theory to explore these effects, such as whether and how shared leadership interacts with global team boundaries and team coordination. We interviewed 58 team members and leaders from 6 teams and found that shared leadership’s influence on team performance is moderated by leadership coordination, such that shared leadership has a stronger effect when the distributed leadership activity is effectively coordinated, both cognitively and behaviorally. We also found that team leadership coordination needs to vary depending on the global boundaries spanned by the team.

1. Introduction

The influence of a single designated leader on a team, local or global, has dominated the attention in leadership research [42]. Given the shifting global workplace, the notion of a single heroic leader being responsible for either the triumph or downfall of work units has been questioned and even regarded as outdated or mythological [38]. With increasing complexity and distributed responsibilities of global team tasks, it is unlikely that a single leader may be capable of handling all the necessary leadership functions [42], as well as possessing all the needed competencies and roles to lead a team through the complexity of global task environments [2, 3, 5]. Moreover, as dispersion increases across global team boundaries, the ability of a single leader to exert direct influence on the whole team decreases because the windows of opportunity to communicate are more limited [1, 32]. Following this notion, researchers have begun to discuss whether, how and to what extent leadership can be shared across team members, and which factors drive shared leadership success [42, 20, 4]. While shared leadership has been viewed as an effective predictor of team performance in numerous studies on co-located teams, other studies have found opposite effects [see 7 for examples on both findings]. Prior research on shared leadership with distributed teams has consisted primarily of theoretical studies offering propositions [32, 33, 34, 41] with very little empirical research in this area. However, there are a few noticeable empirical studies exceptions related to team performance, but with conflicting findings. For example, a recent study [18] found that shared leadership leads to increased team performance in globally distributed teams, while another study [40] showed the opposite effect. Still, the extant literature argues theoretically for shared leadership being particularly effective for the functioning of globally distributed teams [33] working on tasks of high complexity and uncertainty [15]. Clearly, more empirical research is needed to further our understanding and resolve these conflicting perspectives on shared leadership. Our study aims to help fill this gap.

Coordination has been found to be an important mediator of the negative effects of global boundaries, such as spatial and temporal (i.e., time zone) distance, on global team performance [6, 8], particularly in tasks with dependent activities. While team leadership has been regarded as a key mechanism for overcoming coordination barriers that teams working across global boundaries face [25], we lack a nuanced understanding of the relationship between shared leadership and coordination in global teams. In addition, past research has found a positive link between shared leadership and team performance under uncoordinated settings in co-located teams [19], but an understanding of how shared leadership operates in global teams and influences coordination itself, is still lacking.
Given these gaps in the literature, we set out to study how shared leadership interacts with global team boundaries and with team coordination process. Thus, our research questions for this study are: 1) How does team coordination influence shared leadership effectiveness in global teams? and 2) How do global boundaries influence shared leadership effectiveness in global teams?

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Shared Leadership in global teams

As early as 1954, Gibb [13] stated that “leadership is probably best conceived as a group quality, as a set of functions which must be carried out by the group” (p. 884). Gibb was hence among the first to pave the way for the emergence of the concept of shared leadership. He later, [37, p.1] defined shared leadership 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.”

There are many other definitions of shared leadership [e.g., 4], but they all collectively suggest that leadership responsibilities are distributed over more than one person in the team, without neglecting the possibility of having a person in a designated leader position as well [41].

A variety of behaviors and/or functions have been defined to constitute leadership [31]. In addition, extensive research has focused on what specific behaviors are performed by effective leaders [see e.g. 46]. Yukl and colleagues [46] classified these behavior types into three categories: task-oriented, relations-oriented, and change-oriented. While task-related and relations-related behaviors have been extensively studied in previous research, change-oriented behaviors have received scant attention [46]. Task-related functions, such as motivating and directing the team to meet their expected goals, have been found to predict distributed team success [21]. Similarly, relations-related behaviors, such as supporting relationship building in distributed teams, have been suggested to be an antecedent of team performance [21, 36]. Research has also suggested that behaviors to guide, structure, or facilitate the group might be performed by more than one individual, and these behaviors may originate from and rotate among various individuals over time [47].

Consistent with these arguments, we study shared leadership manifested through task-related, relations-related and change-related leadership behaviors in the team, performed by more than one team member.

2.2. Coordination in global teams

Coordination is the effective management of dependencies among activities in the task [26]. Coordination can be viewed as a process or an outcome [9]. Coordination processes can be behavioral—either mechanistic or organic or implicit—through team cognition [10]. Mechanistic coordination involves processes and tools for managing routine task activities, such as schedules, plans, and specifications [27]. Organic coordination involves team communication and it is most effective for least predictable and non-routine aspects of the task. While effective to resolve issues, organic coordination is less efficient in geographically dispersed environments because global boundaries create communication barriers. Furthermore, spontaneous organic coordination has been found to lead to more satisfying outcomes [22].

Organic coordination also helps coworkers develop shared familiarity and knowledge of one another over time, which are important for implicit coordination. Members of teams that have developed strong intragroup awareness coordinate their activities implicitly based on prior knowledge about their co-workers and unspoken assumptions about what other members are likely to do [39, 44]. Rico et al [39] underscore the importance of implicit coordination, which is consistent with Mehra et al’s findings [29] on “implicit” shared leadership coordination. They distinguished between “distributed-coordinated” and “distributed-fragmented” shared leadership. The former takes place when “individuals who had emerged as leaders perceived one another other as leaders” [29, p. 238]. They found distributed-coordinated leadership networks to be associated with higher team performance. This underscores the importance of the shared implicit view of team leadership. However, this does not yet tell us much about how leadership is related to other forms of coordination, such as actual task coordination, which our study addresses.

2.3. Global boundary complexity

Global teams need to bridge multiple boundaries, such as time zones, geographic distance, functional, organizational, and national [17], making coordination more challenging. As more global boundaries need to be crossed by team members and as the dispersion of these members across boundaries increases, the collaboration environment becomes more complex making coordination and shared leadership more difficult [23]. Although team leadership has been regarded as a key mechanism for
overcoming coordination barriers for global teams [25], we have a limited understanding about the relationship between shared leadership and coordination. How to lead and coordinate global teams across boundaries is hence an important question that remains largely unanswered in the extant literature [43]. Our study contributes to this, by investigating how shared leadership interacts with coordination process and with global boundaries in influencing shared leadership effectiveness.

3. Research methodology

This study uses a Grounded Theory approach to study the relationship between shared leadership and coordination in global teams, in ensuring high team performance. Grounded Theory is particularly useful for the study of social influence processes such as leadership [14, 35], as it enables us to theorize about the nature of leadership processes. In addition, it is a suitable method to apply for underexplored research topics. In line with these arguments, this study applied qualitative, interpretive research methods for answering our research questions.

3.1. Research context

This study is based on 58 interviews we conducted with six global teams in two organizations over a four-month period. Both participating organizations develop and sell software and provide technology-mediated support services to their customers worldwide. Organization 1 employs 170 workers worldwide. Organization 2 has 600 employees worldwide and it also provides installations and on-site support to its customers. The headquarters (HQs) of both organizations are located in Finland, and they have area offices throughout Europe, Asia and US. Table 1 provides more details about the teams we studied.

Team A provided technology support and on-site training to customers, whereas Team B delivered products and supported customers during the initial use of the product. The distant locations in Team A and B operate quite independently within their specific geographical areas providing services to local customers, but within the global teams, they interchange resources and provide support to each other. Team C and D were software development teams, which followed the Scrum work process methodology, which is an agile work process used to facilitate and expedite software development. Team E and F, in turn provided support to other teams and to the product’s sales staff. That is, they functioned as a bridge between product development teams, customer support teams and sales persons. Their team members were experts in their functional areas and provided material and guidelines to the customer support area offices, developed requirements specifications the product development division, and provided technical support to technical sales.

3.2. Data collection and analysis

We interviewed all team members and leaders using semi-structured interview instruments, guided by a set of open-ended questions related to the informants’ experiences about their team’s work routines, communication, team dynamic, and leadership. In order to uncover the distribution of leadership within the team, we asked members, based on Yukl et als’ [46] hierarchical taxonomy of leader behavior, to talk about who took care of leadership functions and how. These behaviors were categorized into task, relations, and change behavior categories. In addition, the informants were asked to name the team members they perceived to be most influential in the team. Each interview lasted between 37 to 128 min, and was on average 64 min long. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Collecting data from different organizations and teams allowed us to compare similar and contrasting results [45]. This is especially useful when generating new theory. Following a Grounded Theory approach
[24], initial interviews influenced subsequent interviews. Hence, early results from one team influenced the focus of subsequent interviews in the other teams. During the data collection phase, we conducted a preliminary analysis of each interview. After conducting all interviews, we then re-analyzed all interviews. We started with open coding of the interview data to uncover the dominant themes, followed by focused coding to extract passages related to the specific themes found in the initial analysis [24]. Finally, we compared the emerging findings from each team over the different teams.

4. Results

The model that emerged from our analysis is shown in Figure 1.

![Figure 1. Emergent framework](image)

Our analysis revealed a more complex relationship than we expected between shared leadership and team performance. We found that shared leadership contributed to higher team performance in many cases, but could also work in the opposite direction, decreasing team performance. We also found that the effectiveness of shared leadership is influenced by global boundary complexity and leadership coordination. Our results show that leadership coordination is a key moderator of shared leadership effectiveness. Shared leadership increases the need for coordination within the team, beyond what is necessary for pure task coordination because the leadership itself also needs to be coordinated. We observed both types of leadership coordination, cognitive and behavioral. Finally, our analysis also shows that global boundary complexity influences the kinds of leadership coordination mechanisms that are most effective. We explain these relationships in more detail in the following sections. We begin with presenting potential benefits and challenges of shared leadership.

The names of participants (in quotes) have been disguised to ensure confidentiality.

4.1. Shared leadership and team performance

Interestingly, our results provide empirical evidence that shared leadership both, facilitate and hinder team performance through various mediating mechanisms. These mediating mechanisms, presented in Table 2, constitute both benefits and challenges of shared leadership. However, many of them were overcome by the team when leadership coordination was in place. This section describes the benefits and challenges associated with shared leadership. The next section describes how leadership coordination helps overcome these challenges.

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<tr>
<th>Benefits of shared leadership</th>
<th>Challenges of shared leadership</th>
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<td>Local awareness</td>
<td>Global unawareness</td>
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<td>Decision speed and quality</td>
<td>Wrong decisions made in more complex cases</td>
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Local awareness and global unawareness. First, shared leadership was perceived to enhance team performance when the team was able to benefit from local awareness and local member presence. For instance, the team leader of Team B commented that: “The benefits of sharing leadership globally comes for instance from the fact that local sub-leaders have a better awareness of the workers’ daily workload, their local culture and customers, in addition to being easier reachable than me being in another time zone ... and can interject with local conflicts better due to seeing the workers daily.”

This not only made coordination easier, but also faster. Consequently the team became more agile. Members were able to find support in their own time zone without having to wait for a response until the next workday. Being able to discuss issues locally before communicating over distance was perceived as beneficial by members in all participating teams. Furthermore, local (i.e., distant to HQs) members in Team B felt that shared leadership helped them communicate more effectively with the global team, which in itself was a difficult task, because the leader of the team and majority of team members were located at the HQs, as one participant described: “Because the global leader is in Helsinki the local [leader], they have not difficult to get their voice heard ... since we have different time zones, cultures, and languages, the sub leader position is quite important here, to forward our local voice.”
At the same time, the benefits of having more freedom and local leadership came at the expense of reduced global awareness of what was happening at other sites. Team members at other sites were able to complete task activities independently, and often forgetting to inform their cross-site colleagues. In addition, it was sometimes difficult to know if distant team members actually were working on the things being discussed. The leader of Team C outlined how: "One guy sometimes informs like, ‘hey now I have developed this kind of thing’ ... But I would rather hear about the issue before ... Sometimes things get out of hand and it has happened that a team member has worked for weeks on another issue than he informed about." This reduced transparency in the team in turn harmed performance when members were not able to prioritize the right tasks from a business perspective.

Decision-making speed and quality. There was a general agreement among team members that shared leadership enabled the team to make faster decisions. Not only was this due to the team being able to overcome time-zone separation, but also due to the flat organizational structures (i.e. fewer management layers) of the companies. Members in offices other than the HQs that had experiences from their own culture's work practices commented: "I think the working condition is better here than in Korean companies ... that has from three to five approval systems. But in case of this organization, just one step ... so a decision gets done in a very short time" (Team A). This way, the leader of the team did not become a hindrance that had to be overcome every time a decision had to be made. This was valued, especially when members could make confident decisions based on their own expertise. On the other hand, for more complex matters, members making individual decisions, without consulting each other, resulted in a higher risk for faulty decisions.

Initiatives aligned or misaligned with team goals. The last contradicting finding in Table 2 highlights how team member initiatives both foster and hinder team performance. Intuitively, active participation and initiative taking helps the team. An Indian member from team D explained that: "we know our sprint goals very clearly ... So based on that we will take our own task." Another Romanian member from team C commented further that: "If you take a task, and you can’t do it, it’s okay, you can put it back, or ask for help. And this encourage you to take even harder issues, because you know somebody will help you in the end ... and next weeks, when you’re going to take tasks from that, you are going to solve them because you have learned about them." Hence, shared leadership not only reduces the amount of time spent directing people, but also encourages people to get involved in new tasks, which helps develop skills within the team.

Conversely, too much freedom was found to be problematic, as members tended to occasionally act on their own initiative in a misaligned direction with the team goals. In one case team members worked on the wrong tasks for several weeks (e.g. in Team C), and in other cases members were reluctant to follow established team processes (e.g. in Team D). In addition, team members tended to start to work on tasks coming in from other teams, rather than prioritizing their own team’s task. The leader of team E commented on this: “This is something they all do, they don't like to say no. If somebody asks them a question, saying can you do this for me, [they say] ‘well I'm a bit busy but I'll have a look tomorrow’. Rather than saying ‘no, that's not my responsibility, you need to go talk to this person ...’ so it's not necessarily a good thing from a resource point of view. Especially when other things, get affected by it as well.” This problem was present especially in team C, D, E and F, if not daily, on a regular basis. In Team D, the Scrum master reported how: “Distant members sometimes believe that another task is more important, than the one we just agreed upon to have highest priority... But if someone else calls them from Japan for instance, then they have difficulty deciding if the Japanese guy is more important than some Finnish guy.” These examples show how individual initiatives could be misaligned with the current team goals. This was commonly mentioned to be due to team members having difficulties judging themselves whether a task was important or not, given their lack of business perspective and customer relationship.

4.2. Leadership coordination

As described above, shared leadership sometimes contributed positively and other times negatively to team performance. We found that the effectiveness of shared leadership depended on the team’s ability to coordinate their leadership actions – i.e., a moderation effect. The concept of leadership coordination emerged from this observation, which came in two forms, cognitive and behavioral. Cognitive leadership coordination emerges when a person perceives another person as an available leadership resource, and consequently is willing to take directives from that source. Behavioral leadership coordination, in turn, is more closely associated with the explicit coordination of leadership actions towards more synchronized and aligned with team goals. We elaborate on behavioral and cognitive leadership coordination concepts next.
Behavioral leadership coordination. Team E is an example where the majority of team members participated in leadership functions, mostly on their own initiative. Members came up with new tasks, delegated tasks to each other, and created a stronger shared vision for the team. What made this team’s shared leadership unsuccessful was the uncoordinated nature of leadership activities. Team members did redundant work due to little coordination of task leadership functions. As the following team member put it: “Anders was supposed to manage my resources ... like prioritize for me, but now it’s just messy... I really don’t know who to take on tasks from.” Anders again explained that: “Suddenly I am like ‘hey what it this?’... and then he is working on something completely else and tells me that ‘Roger [the team leader] told me that I should do this now’, and I am like hey why did I not get informed. This is very confusing and not a sustainable solution.”

Another example, by an Indian team member from team C, shows how a lack of communication between Scrum master, Juuso, and an emergent subleader, Petri, causes confusion: “Juuso has arranged some meetings but, when he’s away these meetings have been shifted to another time. But then Juuso is not there to shift those time slots ... Sometimes even Petri gets confused since Juuso has decided something without communicated about it to him.”

These examples demonstrate how a lack of behavioral leadership coordination can result in duplicated leadership actions, which in the worst case could drag the team in different directions. Therefore, with shared leadership, it becomes vital to coordinate the corresponding leadership functions, not just the tasks themselves. It would have been more efficient if the two persons delegating tasks would have coordinated with each other before giving opposing directives to the team member, or if only one of them would have been responsible for that particular task-leadership function. Therefore, a coordination of the shared leadership functions is vital to overcome the dual coordination need.

Cognitive leadership coordination. Cognitive leadership coordination was mentioned to affect whether the leadership influence was effective (taken seriously, acted upon) or not. The following example from a member in Team B demonstrates this: “It is visible in the Asian culture, like when I am not anybody’s formal leader, it doesn’t bother them much what I am trying to say. The directive has to come from someone being their boss so that they would take it seriously.” Without a cognitively coordinated leadership structure, leadership efforts may go to waste if the followers are not following orders, or don’t know whose orders to follow.

Cognitive leadership coordination also influenced who members turned to when they needed guidance. In team D, a Finnish team member explained that: “It feels like they [Indian members] always ask Sami [Scrum master] about things that he is not able to solve, and then he always has to tell them to ask from another person ... Instead, they could have asked the right person straight away.” Similarly in Team B, Finnish members described how distant Asian team members tended to turn to them to get allowance to contact a leader: “Sometimes you get these questions like ‘I have been thinking about this a little, is it okay if I ask Tapio?’.” Considering that many of them had years of experience working together, this illustrated the role of cognitive leadership coordination, i.e. who was perceived as the eligible person to turn to when needing support.

Conversely, the Finnish members of all teams (A, B, C, D, E and E), did not perceive the role of the influencer to be important. A member of team A described how he had just found out about his immediate leader: “His title came quite as a surprise a few months ago when he had been named as our sub team leader ... I was just like, okay haha ... and this shows how important titles are in Finland... they don’t play a big role ... I don’t even anticipate that he will start to take more leadership responsibility.” It is evident that this member did not even recognize that his teammate had been assigned to a local sub leader position. The introduction of a local sub leader role had not changed the way leadership worked in the local sub team and, therefore, cognitive leadership coordination was not as important for him. In fact, no one in the Finnish team recognized that the introduction of a local sub leader in team A and B would have changed the team’s leadership. Another member in team A explained how: “Although Annika is my supervisor I can still go and ask, hey could you do this for me ... Although she is in a supervisor position, we are still pretty much in the same boat.”

Having a cognitively coordinated leadership structure therefore is especially important in highly hierarchical cultures, where there is a stronger power distance between leaders and followers. Thus, we posit that global boundary complexity influence the need of cognitive leadership coordination to the success of shared leadership in global teams. This is evidenced by the fact that culture influenced whoever members felt comfortable following directives from, and turning to when in need of support.

Behavioral leadership coordination. We found that there was a differing need for behavioral leadership coordination depending on the degree of distribution of leadership across boundaries. If only one person handles all leadership in the team, then
there is really no need for leadership coordination. Conversely, if leadership is distributed and shared across boundaries, then there is a stronger need for behavioral leadership coordination. Behavioral leadership coordination can be achieved both through mechanistic as well as organic coordination, often through a combination of both.

**Mechanistic leadership coordination.** Team C and D were both following the Scrum work process and hence held daily scrums (or bi-daily in team C) and other Scrum meetings. They used an issue tracking management tool (ITMT), which facilitated transparency within the team. A member of team C talked about this: "All our work tasks are described here [ITMT], you see who is working on what and what the progress of the work is, and if a task require someone to do testing. For work allocation it's an excellent tool ... and we have decided that all work is open to anyone. Even though people have special areas of expertise it is good in the long run if people does a little bit of everything." This shows how mechanistic coordination (i.e. process and technology) helps the team carry out task leadership functions, such as delegation and work sequencing.

On the other hand, a lack of mechanistic leadership coordination was visible in Team D, which had a few detractors in the team refusing to follow the Scrum process. The frustrated Scrum master described this: "It doesn’t matter whoever decides, they doesn’t follow the process, but does what they wants ... A lot of problems arise from that, for example, how can we know when something is getting ready?, like we don’t necessary what they have been up to, ... and then suddenly the work pops up and we need to be ready to take care of the testing.” The same Scrum master went on to describe: "I always have to call them separately, to see what’s going on.” This, in turn, shows how a lack of a mechanistic leadership coordination, result in a stronger need for organic leadership coordination.

**Organic leadership coordination** took place primarily through meetings, where team members discussed their work and aligned their intended leadership actions. During these meetings, team members could make decisions together, increasing the likelihood for the decisions to be successful. Several members from each team pointed out that, for complex matters, decision quality was improved if the team took into account opinions from more persons, and decisions were influenced based on expertise rather than on a person’s position in the company. As a member of Team C explained: “Generally a team has more experience because it’s a team, so it’s good to let the team decide. Because in the end, if one person’s idea is not good, then we have counter arguments ... So the entire team decides important things also, not only one person.” Another member of Team C mentioned how in his old company, decisions tended to come down from the top, which made him question the quality of those decisions, and loose motivation and commitment to the task. Therefore, participative decision-making kept the team moving forward in the right direction. Furthermore, making decisions together in the team helped members overcome the negative outcomes resulting from individuals taking initiative in the wrong direction and help members to foster global awareness of the team’s leadership.

**Mechanistic and organic leadership coordination combined.** Oftentimes there is a need for a combination of mechanistic and organic leadership coordination. For example, an Indian member of team D mentioned: “If I’m working on a task, everybody can see what I’m working on and how it is progressing ... Also, if we get some doubts and if we are modifying something, we need to inform everyone so that they will be aware of it. So for that, this meeting [daily scrum] is really helpful.” Similarly, a Finnish team member described how: “Our processes force people to bring forth problems, like I have myself a tendency to get stuck on a difficult task for several days ... but in Scrum everyone every day has to bring forth what they are working on and tell about their problems.” Hence, mechanistic leadership coordination helped facilitate organic leadership coordination.

In team E and F, neither of these forms of coordination functioned effectively. Both teams, had a minimum amount of meetings, and most communication happened on an ad hoc basis over one-on-one discussions. Considering that neither of these teams had any project management tools in place [i.e. a form of mechanistic coordination], this resulted in a lack of transparency within the team and uncoordinated shared leadership. This is exemplified in team E in which leadership functions were redundant, sometimes causing confusion, not only to those participating in leadership, but also to the followers. Another example from team F shows what a lack of behavioral leadership coordination could result in: "Sometimes you hear that someone went to visit some company and then you are like, humm, I was in that company the previous week, maybe we could have done it together, so it would be interesting from that point of view [to have meetings] so you could hear what people are planning, and in which projects they are being involved. Then it would be easier to sometimes coordinate some things.” It is unlikely, that a single leader would have assigned both members to visit the same customer in such a
short time span. Too much freedom in carrying out leadership task can hence work in the opposite direction, hampering team performance.

5. Discussion

In line with earlier studies [e.g., 18] we found several benefits of shared leadership in global teams. Shared leadership led to more agility towards changes, increased decision quality and speed, and also encouraged members to take own initiative. At the same time, shared leadership was not always successful and could sometimes result in a lack of global transparency, wrong decisions being made, and duplicated or misaligned leadership activities, pulling the team in different directions. Hence, one should not expect positive outcomes exclusively from shared leadership. Future research should therefore theorize about under what conditions shared leadership enhances global team performance, and under what conditions it is detrimental.

We took a first step in this direction by exploring the relationship between shared leadership and coordination in global teams. While team leadership has been regarded as a key mechanism for overcoming coordination barriers associated with global team boundaries [25], our study shows, that the relationship is more complex when leadership is shared. Although shared leadership influences the team’s task coordination itself, it also increases the need to coordinate leadership functions in the team, creating a dual coordination situation.

Following these contradictions, our work contributes to theory by introducing the concept of shared leadership coordination, divided into a cognitive and behavioral part. Our findings show, how leadership coordination is an important moderator of the effect of shared leadership on team performance. In line with prior research [28, 29] we found that when the leadership structure was cognitively aligned, shared leadership contributed positively to global team performance. However, our results show that this is not enough. Leadership actions also need to be behaviorally coordinated to moderate team performance. This finding sheds new light on earlier studies [19] stating that shared leadership increases team performance under uncoordinated settings. While this may be true, our study shows that shared leadership alters the coordination process itself, creating an additional coordination need in the team that is not solely dependent on task dependencies.

We found that, depending on the global team boundary complexity, shared leadership will require different forms of leadership coordination. With a higher global complexity in the team, it becomes imperative to facilitate cognitive leadership coordination in the team, as the eligibility of the leader influence may be rooted in cultural values (e.g., power distance [16]). This is consistent with team cognition research, which has provided ample evidence that cognitive coordination mechanisms like team mental models (i.e., similarities in mental schemas among team members) [30] and expertise coordination (i.e., knowing where expertise resides in the team) [12] help members develop more accurate expectations about their teammate’s task activities. This has implications for global leaders and team members, who need to influence each other over distance in time, space, and culture. First, perceiving each other as an eligible source of leadership is vital for the influence attempt to be effective. Second, synchronizing leadership actions between leaders is important to minimize duplicated work, and to ensure that the team works towards aligned team goals.

A combination of mechanistic, and organic coordination mechanisms helps the team to coordinate their leadership effectively. Mechanistic coordination through processes and technology increase transparency in the team and decrease the need to spend time on management tasks, such as delegation and scheduling. These are good news since there has been a proliferation of self-managing teams [11], which emphasize the need for leadership originating from within a team as opposed to that originating from a single individual elevated by hierarchy. However, given the global teams’ unpredictable work nature, organic coordination, between the members participating in leadership is also necessary to synchronize leadership actions.

This study is not without limitations. First, as with any qualitative study, our findings might not be applicable to other organizational contexts. In addition, this study does not account for the longevity of the team, and team members’ familiarity with each other, which might have substantial impact on team processes. Moreover, although we were able to offer rich insights on how shared leadership interacts with coordination in global teams, we have not been able to provide information about the proportions of cognitive and behavioral leadership coordination to ensure shared leadership effectiveness, which requires further research.

Many studies have measured shared leadership by asking team members to check the names of the people they perceived to be a leader [e.g., 28, 29]. Since this addresses the cognitive alignment of leadership, it does not tell anything about how shared leadership is coordinated behaviorally. To date, there has been little distinction between the cognitive and
behavioral aspects of shared leadership, although it is theoretically important to distinguish between them. Future studies need to focus on both of these factors. In addition, future studies need to dig deeper into the structural underpinnings of shared leadership, to tease out how the shared leadership distribution over global boundaries influence team performance.

In sum, our study underscores the value of devoting further attention to study the relationship between shared leadership and intervening team processes in contributing to organizational outcomes. We expect that this study will help advance this line of research by providing a nuanced understanding of the complex nature of shared leadership in teams operating over various global boundaries.

6. References


