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The background of the top section is an abstract, textured image with a color palette of blues, greens, and yellows. It features several overlapping circles and lines, some solid and some dashed, creating a network-like or orbital pattern. In the center, there are three circular inset images showing people in a meeting: one person in a yellow sweater, one in a white shirt using a tablet, and one in a brown jacket.

Shared Leadership: A Philosophy, Not a Leadership Structure

By Jake Appelman, Steena Chandler and Ryan Hill

Interview spotlight with the leaders of DPR, Fortis and Syska Hennessy.

Last year we introduced shared leadership as an innovative succession trend, defined as “a group of two or more leaders with a common purpose to lead and oversee the business, and a shared influence to do so.” In response to the article “[Leading as Partners](#),” questions, including “how do you differentiate shared leadership teams from all other executive teams?” and “what does this look like in reality?” among others, emerged from several industry leaders.

Through ongoing research and nearly a dozen interviews in 2019 with industry executives practicing shared leadership at the highest levels, a strong theme emerged: **Shared leadership is not a leadership structure but a leadership philosophy**. In other words, you cannot glance at an organizational chart and identify companies that practice shared leadership.

Charlie Holm of Fortis Construction believes, “If you have the right leaders, it could work in any business. But you need the right leaders. It’s about the people, not the structure.” Our research aligns with Holm’s assertions and shows that adopting a shared leadership philosophy is a comprehensive way to think about your role and the way you behave as a leader.¹

As we highlighted in [our first article](#), shared leadership is an emerging trend, practiced successfully by a growing number of industry organizations. Through our interviews, we learned that leaders who actively practice the philosophy of shared leadership have a few guiding principles. They spoke about deep trust, active debate, frequent communication, awareness of complementary skill sets and removal of their egos. This article outlines these guiding principles, as defined by the industry leaders we interviewed.

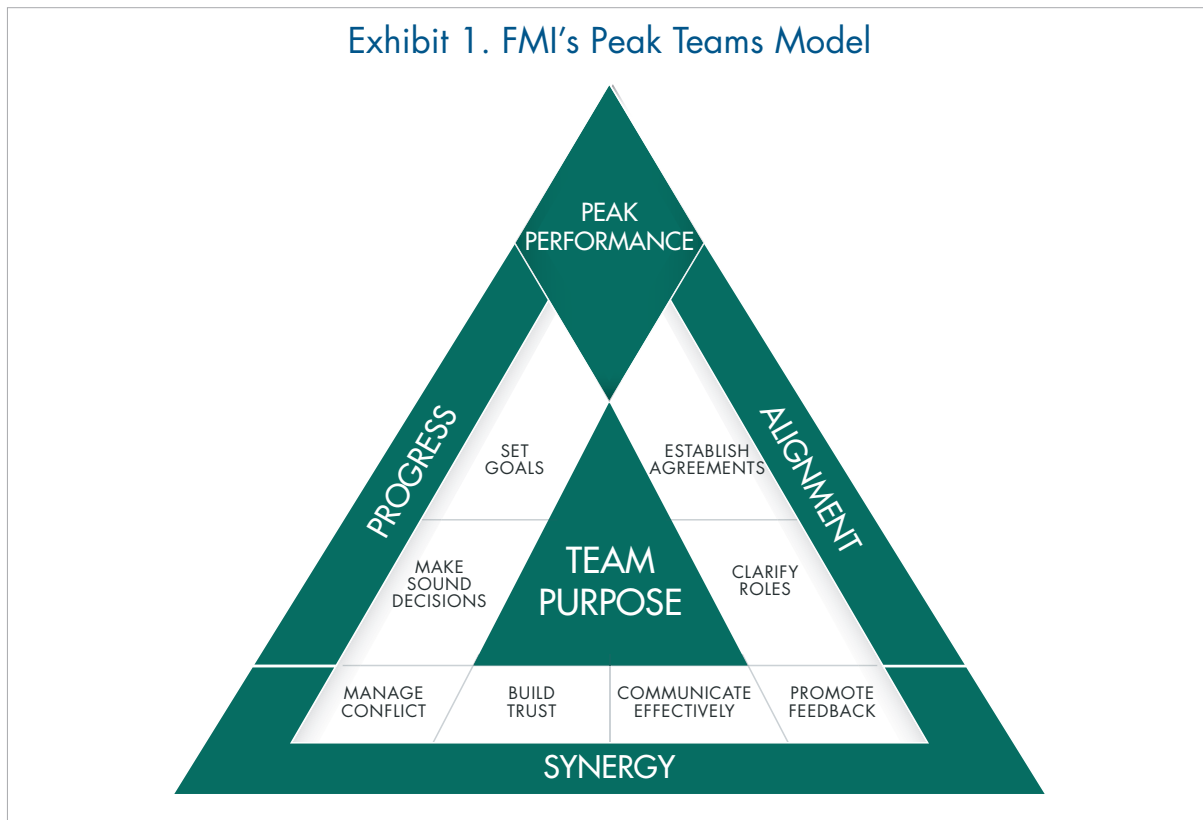
¹ Carol A. Walker. “New Managers Need a Philosophy About How They’ll Lead.” Harvard Business Review. September 15, 2015.

Trust Your Partners

Relationship trust and longevity were common themes in our interviews. Trust on the shared leadership teams of Fortis, DPR and Syska Hennessy was built over many years of working together in different capacities, with an understanding that disagreements come with the territory. At Fortis, Jim Kilpatrick mentioned that trust among the leadership team was built through facing adversity and “going to battle together.” In battle or during business challenges, the abilities of leadership are tested, and trusting in your partners’ competences is a foundational pillar for building trust.²

The leaders we interviewed at DPR, Fortis and Syska Hennessy also believe in the intentions of their partners. When asked to give others advice on adopting the shared leadership philosophy, Mike Humphrey of DPR says, “Be patient. It takes time and can’t be forced. It doesn’t exist without a lot of trust, and trust comes with vulnerability, so it takes time. I trust in the intentions of my team.”

Leaders at these three companies understand the connection between trust and results. According to our research, “Teams with strong trust have higher performance, greater satisfaction among team members, and less stress than their peers.”³ Our work with executive teams within the industry corroborates this theory. After surveying nearly 400 industry professionals on the different components of our Peak Teams model (**Exhibit 1**), we found that team trust was the top predictor of team performance. In fact, **of the nine behaviors surveyed, team trust accounts for 40% of overall team effectiveness.**



Source: FMI Industry Research

² Emily Livorsi. “Trust Matters.” FMI Quarterly. December 1, 2014.

³ Ibid.

Engage in Healthy Debate, Then Align

For shared leadership to be effective, leaders say you must challenge one another and debate the big decisions. Our interviewees admitted that engaging in debate is not always a productive, efficient affair; but it's well worth the effort. Fallow highlighted these challenges:

The honest truth is that shared leadership is not easy and requires hard work. At the end of the day, I think knowing that there's going to be conflict, and knowing that there's going to be some angst and feeling like "Are we really on the same page? Are we constantly stepping on each other's toes?" That's all part of shared leadership. You need to be able (and willing) to deal with some chaos in order to reap the benefits.

Cyrus Izzo and Gary Brennen of Syska Hennessy repeatedly talked about how their focus on meetings and discussions helped ensure organizational alignment. According to Izzo, "Lively dialogue around how we can help each other in a collaborative spirit" is key to their organization's success. Without debate and collaborative discussions, Brennen adds, "You don't necessarily generate the best idea or the best outcome."

Our interviewees concur and see open discussion as a vehicle to ensure good decision-making. George Pfeffer with DPR elaborates on the topic of debate and why it is critical by saying, "We are able to get multiple inputs and align around an answer. The answer that is molded from multiple inputs is much better than the first singular idea—even if it was the smartest individual's input who may know the most about the topic." Without debate, leaders can fail to recognize blind spots or consider better alternatives.

Communication Is Key

Effective communication is important for any relationship, regardless of business philosophy. What stood out in discussions with our interviewees was the *frequency and consistency* of communication. Leaders who share oversight of a business are not only scheduling one-hour weekly check-ins, but also are consistently communicating with one another on a daily, sometimes hourly, basis. As Tim Sissel reflected on Fortis' founders: "They do a good job of coming across as a group of three, are well aligned...I think that's because they are dogmatic about communication." Similarly, DPR's Ray Trebino says what makes his team most effective: "It starts with overcommunication."

Leaders say their best communications take place through quick five-minute phone calls, text messages and one-line email questions. Whether or not a decision is needed on a specific topic, leaders engaging in shared leadership believe that keeping their partners informed creates the foundation for a united front.



The same leaders also focus on how to effectively communicate their decisions to the rest of the organization as a single, unified voice. To emphasize the importance of a singular message, Tim Sissel of Fortis says, “We’re realizing and recognizing the gravity and the importance of having a consistent message among us because people see that as a strength of leadership.”

We agree. Establishing a clear vision and clear organizational objectives that are disseminated throughout the organization provides employees direction, focus and a sense of meaning.⁴ Setting a clear direction for an organization requires frequent touch points and consistent communication among the members of the leadership team.

Leverage Individual Strengths

This guiding principle comprises components like self-awareness, awareness of team member attributes, and a willingness to be open and celebrate diverse skill sets. Greg Wimmer of Fortis Construction mentions the differences with one co-leader through this fun analogy:

If a company challenge was a cake, Charlie cares about the flavor of the cake, and, maybe, how big it is. I care about the color and the dispersion of the sprinkles. This is to say that I gear toward, and am good at, the details. Charlie naturally thinks bigger. We try to leverage those strengths, and I believe our differences make us a stronger leadership team.

Fortis’ founders, Jim Kilpatrick, Rene Gonzalez and David Aaroe, adopt a similar mindset. Aaroe offers some sage advice to those considering a shared leadership model and encourages leaders to “Focus on the complementing skill sets and forget about the titles. If you get the right people, with the right complementing skill sets in place, it’s amazing what you can achieve.”

Brennen of Syska Hennessy concurs and can’t say enough about the strengths of his co-leader Cyrus Izzo: “Cyrus is pretty amazing. He has an incredible memory where he remembers everything—conversations, people, whatever’s happening—and he’s very laser-focused. I’m probably a little more conceptual.”

The leaders we interviewed spoke highly about their co-leaders and the different strengths and perspectives they brought, with true joy at having a co-leader like that with them. Each leader actively celebrated his or her individual team members’ differences with great admiration and sincerity.

Live to Serve and Leave the Ego Behind

Time and time again, we heard that to be successful as a shared leadership team meant operating with your ego left at the door and leaders always putting the needs of the organization above their own. At Syska Hennessy, Cyrus Izzo points out that for shared leadership teams to be truly successful, it is critical that they:

First, be a good listener. Check your egos at the door and focus on the most important aspects of your business, which are your team members and clients, and everything else will fall into place. If you focus too much on what your business card says or your email signature, you are probably setting yourself up for failure.

⁴ Robert E. Quinn and Anjan V. Thakor. “Creating a Purpose-Driven Organization.” Harvard Business Review. July-August 2018 Issue.

At Fortis, Jim Kilpatrick fundamentally believes that you have to “Put yourself last” and elaborates by saying, “Our job is to take care of everyone else. We view ourselves as servants. For shared leadership to be successful, leaders have to be willing to do the dishes.”

Sissel of Fortis agrees and places emphasis on the importance of humility and vulnerability:

It takes the individuals that have the right mindset toward wanting to be part of a team versus wanting to be king of the mountain. And there are a lot of egos out there. That won't work in shared leadership. So it's back to that authenticity, humility, being vulnerable. And those are wired in who you are and how you operate, not what you know.

For these organizations, emphasis on vulnerability, humility and team naturally result in the de-emphasis of titles and hierarchy.

Rob Fallow of Fortis describes the benefits of this mentality by saying: “We believe that shared leadership creates empowerment for our people, which has an exponential effect. When everyone feels more empowered, that creates something special in a culture and an environment that really propels the organization forward.”

Adopting a Shared Leadership Philosophy

Companies and leaders who believe in the guiding principles of shared leadership might ask, “Is this really for us?” Brennen of Syska Hennessy fundamentally believes that “It could work for just about any company. But there's a big if, right? The leaders must share the same values and vision. And if they don't, then it can't work. It doesn't matter which company it is.”

While the emerging trend of shared leadership is actively practiced by a growing number of organizations in the engineering and construction industry, this nascent philosophy (and its guiding principles) begets a unique way of operating. The leaders of DPR, Fortis and Syska Hennessy believe this unique approach is fundamental to their companies' overall success. They believe it empowers their employees, allows the most effective solutions to rise to the surface, and creates a culture of collaboration—all of which ultimately drive business success.

If you are considering adopting a shared leadership philosophy, DPR's Trebino recommends asking yourself why first. Figure out the why of the shared leadership and understand why the model feels right for your company and your situation. “If you get alignment on the why,” Trebino says, “only then you can go to the next questions of the who and the how.” As leaders explore this philosophy of shared leadership, start off by asking yourself why you are exploring it. If you can answer that, then you just may be on your way to adopting that philosophy.

DPR interviewees:

Mike Humphrey – management committee member

George Pfeffer – management committee member

Ray Trebino – business unit leader

Fortis interviewees*:

David Aaroe – senior executive and co-founder

Jim Kilpatrick – senior executive and co-founder

Rob Fallow – senior executive

Charlie Holm – senior executive

Tim Sissel – senior executive

Greg Wimmer – senior executive

Syska Hennessy interviewees:

Cyrus Izzo – co-president

Gary Brennen – co-president

*Note: Rene Gonzalez, co-founder and senior executive at Fortis, was unable to be interviewed but reviewed the article and agrees with the contributions of his partners.



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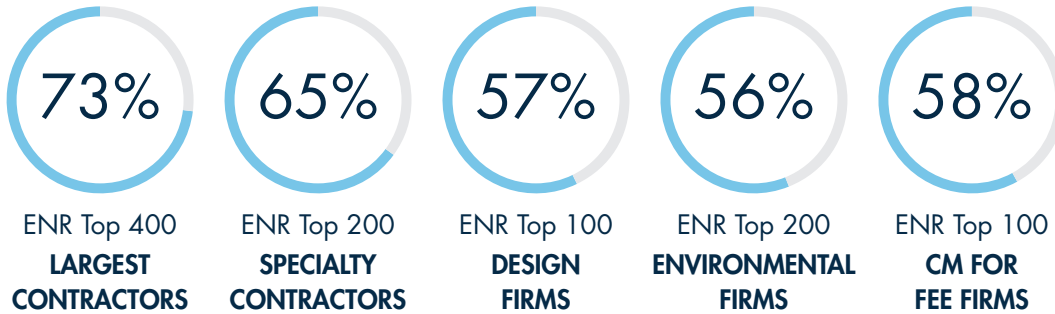
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- Ownership Transfer & Management Succession
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