



## THROUGH SELF-LEADERSHIP AND FOLLOWERSHIP TO SHARED LEADERSHIP: A PARADIGM FOR EFFECTIVE VIRTUAL TEAMWORKING

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### Abstract

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*Leadership and followership are key to firm performance, so it is important to understand them and find the optimal leader–follower interaction to be implemented in an organization. Understanding these concepts is important, because they help increase the company’s productivity and success in achieving its goals. This paper explores the connection among shared leadership, self-leadership, and followership, and argues that their practice is crucial for virtual teams’ success. The theoretical framework presented is supported by practical study cases of EY Slovenia, Haier, Soldev, and Hershey. The propositions, derived from the case studies, are related to two topics. The first proposition concerns how self-leadership is assumed by one who practices effective followership, and the second proposition concerns how shared leadership styles positively influence the building of trust and fostering of a sense of ownership of employees. With this theory, organizations can navigate the challenges of the modern workplace, and consequently improve their performance, productivity, and job satisfaction. Furthermore, we present a model that shows the influence of self-leadership on effective followership, and emphasizes the benefits of implementing shared leadership styles, especially in digital work, and we discuss the impact of self-leadership, self-awareness, and self-efficacy on the implementation of shared leadership within an organization that operates virtually.*

**Keywords:** *self-leadership, shared leadership, virtual teams, teamwork*

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### 1 Introduction

Leadership is about leveraging social influence to maximize the contributions of a team in order to achieve a common goal (Kruse, 2013). Alattari and Essa (2019, p. 408) stated that “Leadership has an important and effective role to play in achieving the goals. The leader is the captain of the ship who holds the reins of his hand; either he achieves his goals successfully or fails to do so and this eventually will

affect the entire crew.” Leadership and followership are accountable for the breakthroughs or breakdowns in organizations. This paper focuses on exploring the concepts of shared leadership and self-leadership, and the impact they have on followership. Leadership styles for small and medium-sized enterprises, that now are making an appearance in the era of virtual teamwork, are based on service from leaders to their employees, active engagement between leaders and employees, and the necessary

empowerment that employees need in order to complete tasks successfully (Cahyadi, Marwa, Hågen, Siraj, Santati, Poór, & Szabó, 2022). Self-leadership was introduced in the organizational management literature by Manz (1983), who described it as a “comprehensive self-influence perspective that concerns leading oneself toward performance of naturally motivating tasks as well as managing oneself to do work that must be done but is not naturally motivating” (Manz, 1983, pp. 288-297).

Three core components of self-leadership in virtual teamwork that we describe in this paper are self-awareness, empowerment, and self-efficacy. On the other hand, shared leadership takes place when two or more team members participate in leading the team with the aim of influencing and guiding other members to achieve optimal team performance. (Rentsch, Small, Davenport, & Bergman, 2012). Four core components of shared leadership in virtual teamwork that we describe in this paper are distributed decision-making, collaborative problem-solving, building trust, and fostering a sense of ownership. The phenomenon of digital transformation has transcended the realm of technical departments and now has become a priority for leaders across all industries, sectors, and regions. The current digital age represents only a starting point in the development of a world that is made possible by the rapid and extensive integration of technology in the workplace. The pace of the digital era is so swift that it is fundamentally altering the operational frameworks of both private and public organizations, demanding that they adopt new modes of thinking when designing their operating models (Mihai & Crețu, 2017). Therefore, the topic of leadership styles and followership is important because it can help organizations to create a more productive work environment, improve leadership effectiveness, and achieve their goals, especially in the era of virtual teamwork, in which employees are dispersed geographically (Malhotra, Majchrzak, & Rosen, 2007).

The combinations of leadership and followership in virtual teamwork are a relatively new area of research, especially after COVID-19, because the research has proliferated since that time, and as a result there are many gaps in the literature on this topic. Leaders often are portrayed as the element

that “makes or breaks” an organization. In contrast, a follower’s role is undervalued or neglected. Followers are treated as silent or passive participants, rather than assertive doers. That is why the leadership literature and research studies are leader-centric, whereas followership has received scant attention, and remains on the periphery rather than at the core of leadership research (Essa & Alattari, 2019). In conclusion, the existing literature lacks the actual connection between leadership styles and active followership in digital work. To date, most of these concepts have been described individually (e.g., for self-leadership, see Manz, Stewart, & Courtright, 2011), and are not related to virtual teamwork, whereas we investigated their optimal combination. In addition, the existing findings lack recommendations of good practice to implement these styles in a company, especially in virtual teams, in which not all employees are always at the same place.

This combination of leadership and followership styles is important theoretically because these leadership styles all take into account the complexities of modern organizations, and active followership emphasizes the importance of followers. The combination also reflects current trends in the era of virtual teamwork, because it promotes collaboration, empowerment, self-awareness, building trust, etc. Studies of leadership have focused primarily on the leader, neglecting the significant contribution of followers to the leader’s effectiveness and the organization’s performance. However, recently there has been a growing recognition of the crucial role played by followers in both the leader’s capacity to lead and the organization’s overall functioning. (Marturano & Gosling, 2008; Novak, 2012). The relationship between a leader and their followers is crucial for the success of both parties and to the achievement of the organization’s strategic objectives (Carpenter, 2009; Gallagher, 2009; Hollander, 2008). We complement the research on each leadership style individually and advance it by connecting self-leadership and shared leadership with active followership, which we find to be the optimal combination for digital work. We show the benefits of implementing shared leadership styles in an organization in the era of digital work. We focus on the connections among empowerment, self-aware-

ness, and self-efficacy, and the successfulness of implementing them in one's personal and professional life. Furthermore, we present a model that shows the connection between leadership styles and active followership.

## **2 Theoretical Background**

### **2.1 Self-Leadership, Self-Awareness, Empowerment, and Self-Efficacy**

Self-leadership has been introduced as a distinction among different levels of self-influence, and which provides a perspective that goes beyond the discipline and self-management process. Neck and Manz (2010, p. 4) defined self-leadership as "the process of influencing oneself." Manz (1986), who originally introduced the concept, described self-leadership as a person's ability to deliver excellent performance in tasks which motivate them as well as tasks that are challenging because their characteristics are not aligned completely with the person's purpose. Manz also stated that self-leadership is different from classic self-control or self-management because it acknowledges behavioral, cognitive, and intrinsic motivation.

The first supporting aspect we address is self-awareness, which contributes to the development of an individual because it allows a person to respond to their feelings and adjust their actions accordingly. Hultman (2006) defined self-awareness as a person's capacity to be aware of their limitations when it comes to challenges, while having a strong sense of their capability to maximize their personal skills, such as motivation, and the skills they have developed in their area of expertise. Robak, Ward, and Ostolaza (2005) stated that self-awareness is based on (self) observation, through which one can identify the quality of their abilities and recognize those of others. These attributes are a crucial component in successfully adopting the self-leadership approach in an organization. One who is able to regulate their emotions and responses when facing a challenge or a conflict within the team delivers high-quality performance. For example, a person who puts the anxiety and fear of failing aside when presented with a challenging task and manages to coax focus, determination, and best skills out of oneself

undoubtedly will complete the task with excellent results. Being self-aware also means completing one's tasks with integrity, inspiration, and respect for other team members, because self-aware people understand the emotional and behavioral impact on themselves and others.

The second supporting aspect is empowerment, which gives employees the independence to actually make decisions and commitments instead of only suggesting them (Forrester, 2000). It encourages people to become more involved in their environment and proactive in their work, which opens them up to new opportunities to develop skills and knowledge. As Carson and King (2005, p. 1,050) noted, "the root of empowerment is power and employees must be given the ability to exercise that power." Carson and King (2005) also noted that empowerment is the basis for self-leadership to produce positive outcomes in organizations. Because empowerment encourages a display of independence in one's work, lets one perform well in teamwork environments, and gives one a sense of ownership of their position within the organization, it is one of key factors that co-create one's ability to self-lead. It is the organization's responsibility to encourage empowerment among their employees, not only to attain excellent financial results, achieved through maximized productivity, but also to create a well-informed and functional environment that is based on the community rather than on individuals.

The third supporting aspect is self-efficacy, which refers to an individual's perception of his or her capacity to perform a specific task. Bandura (1986) is credited with recognizing the importance of self-efficacy in human agency. He clarified that "self-efficacy is an important variable in cognitive self-regulation (goal-setting, feedback, etc.)." Theoretically and empirically, self-efficacy has been shown to have wide-ranging implications for organizational behavior. Gist and Gist (2013) noted that self-efficacy has been proven to have a positive influence on cognitive self-regulation, especially on leadership and decision-making, and also contributes to predicting differential behaviors in different job situations, such as stress and strain, commitment, adaptability to change, entrepreneurial behavior, and socialization. Self-efficacy is critical to self-leadership because it enables

individuals to pursue new challenges and goals with persistence and determination. The external stimulation a company would have to provide in order to achieve the same results therefore is significantly reduced. Therefore, we propose

Proposition 1: Self-leadership is a prerequisite for effective followership, and is supported by empowerment, self-awareness, and self-efficacy.

## 2.2 Shared Leadership as a Theoretical Concept

“Shared approaches to leadership question individual level perspective, arguing that it focuses excessively on top leaders and says little about informal leadership or larger situational facts. In contrast, shared leadership offers a concept of leadership practice as a group-level phenomenon.” (Pearce & Conger, 2003, p. 22). Shared leadership theory argues against the traditional top-down approaches and hierarchical structures within an organization, and leans heavily toward a more decentralized approach, that is “distributed and interdependent” (Pearce & Conger, 2003). As a concept, it assumes that individuals within a team or organization possess unique skills, knowledge, and expertise that can be leveraged to achieve the collective goals of the organization. Shared leadership is conceptualized as a set of practices that can and should be enacted by people at all levels, rather than a set of personal characteristics and attributes enacted by people at the top. McIntosh (1989) described the individual achievement as being the tip of the iceberg, with collaborative networks creating conditions and supporting and facilitating it from beneath. Shared leadership concepts recognize that teamwork and group leadership practices truly are the enablers of one’s individual success.

Another shift from the traditional leadership approaches lies in embedment in social interaction. Lave & Wenger (1991, p. 23) stated that the “shared leadership is portrayed as a dynamic, multidirectional, collective activity that, like other human action and cognitive sense-making, is embedded in the context in which it occurs.” Again, it contradicts the generally accepted top-down approach, with its strict hierarchical nature of a leader–follower relationship. The followers are recognized for their role in influencing the leader, and not only the other way around. The implementation of the concept of

shared leadership implies certain characteristics of the followers, whose role is changed from a passive to an active one, for which reason they can be described as effective followers. They are characterized by a sense of personal responsibility for achieving the defined goals and sharing the organizational mission (Pearce & Conger, 2003). They take initiative for activities ensuring the improvement of their own potential while trying to recognize and meet the needs of the organization along with the leader. In addition, they are characterized by the ability to express their views clearly and freely and stand up to the leader, if by doing so they can prevent actions that could undermine the integrity or the goals of the organization (Pearce & Conger, 2003).

Shared leadership also includes a continuous process of identifying leadership potential among employees and encouraging them to develop these resources, and it is related to the particular quality and characteristics of the social processes in which leadership occurs. Isaac (1999) described the occurrence of collective learning as a safe container of this approach, as well as less likelihood of low fluctuation of information and knowledge within the organization. Scharmer and Käufer (2002, p. 24) noted that

collective learning occurs when individuals are able to move through different talking stages, the “talking nice” stage being the first and most shallow, rule repeating phase where people do not cross the line of expected, “reflective dialogue”, where people begin to speak their minds, engage in conversation actively and defend their perspectives openly, to the “generative dialogue” which occurs when the group loses its individual level focus and truly co-creates ideas. People are open to being influenced by others perspectives and ideologies.

The shift toward collective learning is particularly significant because it highlights the need to expand the individual level skills and characteristics that are related to learning (such as self-awareness) in order to include more group level–focused relational practices and skills such as authenticity, openness, vulnerability, and the ability to anticipate the responses and needs of others, yet not being afraid to fail (Fletcher, 1994, 1999).

We expand the context of shared leadership by incorporating characteristics of the servant leadership style, because it is considered to be one of the ideal styles in terms of human factors. In this leadership style, the leader identifies first as a servant and second as a leader (Parolini, 2009). In the context of virtual teamwork, in which isolation and exclusion due to there being little to no physical involvement among the team members, and they may even be separated geographically, being managed by someone who adopts the servant leadership style significantly reduces the possibilities of asynchronicities in communication and team relationships. Such leaders model behaviors that make their followers feel safe to fail, which results in a high level of trust between the leader and their subordinates (Zanouz et al., 2022). Especially in virtual teams, in which questions usually are put in writing and people tend to be careful what they ask because of the risk of failure or embarrassment, having one's subordinates feel safe enough to turn to them reduces information fragmentation, and consequently weak economic and financial results. Therefore, we propose

Proposition 2: The shared leadership style, which can be manifested through servant leadership, is positively related to building trust and fostering a sense of ownership of employees by distributing decision-making, and boosts collaborative problem-solving.

### 3 Case Studies

#### 3.1 Self-Leadership through Self-Awareness and Self-Efficacy at an Audit Firm in Slovenia

To discuss the importance of self-leadership, we introduce a weekly skills-development workshop, the Audit Hub Weekly Workshop, as an example of good practice suggested by an audit intern at EY Slovenia that was implemented for all assistants and interns in Audit Hub by the management. It is a specific local dissemination of knowledge, in addition to the extensive formal curriculum, which contains in-person and web-based learning. The workshop is held online so that remote workers are able to participate and overcome frequent Excel and audit-related challenges together. The intern who suggested the workshop showed their ability to recognize an area in which the entire team of assistants and interns lacked experi-

ence and knowledge, and the management listened to them and developed a solution that benefited everyone. This indicates a community in which people are rewarded for self-leading, and the management is open to being influenced by their subordinates (Internal Source, 2023).

#### 3.2 Shared Leadership at Haier and Solodev

The example at Haier, described by Hamel and Zanini (2018), involves seeking a compromise between a rigid hierarchical structure and agile shared leadership, because poorly performing leaders are vulnerable to a hostile takeover. If leadership increases people's authority without increasing their compensation, the additional responsibility may well be seen as a burden. Conversely, if leadership grants people stock without increasing their authority, they still will feel like minions. The Haier company operational model, Rendanheyi, is built on microenterprises (MEs) acting as smaller autonomous units within a larger company structure. According to Fischer (2013), microenterprises were assembled in the fourth organizational restructuring of Haier, which took place between 2005 and 2012. The implementation introduced three powers within a microenterprise: the power of decision-making, the power of hiring and firing, and the power of profit distribution. When a new market demand is created, so is a microenterprise that will specialize in the supply, e.g., the creation of the microenterprise that produces and sells three-door refrigerators.

The operational and tactical leadership within each unit is voted on by employees each year, whereas the visionary leadership is directed by upper management. Anyone employed by Haier can apply to work in any microenterprise and to become its leader. Therefore microenterprises are expected to be self-managing, and their freedoms are formally enshrined in three rights. Firstly, an organization decides on opportunities that need to be pursued, sets its priorities, and facilitates internal and external partnerships with a strategy. Based on that, they evaluate their human resources and increase the set, and align individual roles and working relationships. Lastly is the distribution of pay rates and bonuses. (Hamel & Zanini, 2018). Haier has managed to build a competitive internal labor market, in which mutual

selection of heads and employees takes place dynamically (Li, 2017). Its employees not only serve as subordinates, but serve customers on behalf of the company, and are able to decide for themselves the areas in which they are experts. The possibility of applying to any microenterprise within the company enables employees to be linked directly to a business opportunity of their personal choice. By creating value for the customer, they also create value for themselves, through compensation (Li, 2017).

Additionally, Haier expanded the meaning of each employee by implementing a principle that encourages everyone to apply for a leadership role. That makes an employee an effective follower in their team, actively preparing to step into the shoes of a leader at any time. Li (2017, p. 164), refers to an important concept which is crucial for this type of enterprise management: “orders with high value attract competent employees, competent employees complete orders with high value.”

Hamel and Zanini (2018) noted that the aforementioned steps come with great responsibility. Targets are customized for every member of a microenterprise and are specified by periods: quarterly, monthly, and weekly. Compensation is coupled tightly with business performance. The base salaries are low, and opportunities for additional compensation are tied to three performance thresholds. According to Li (2017), compensation is directly related to customer reviews, and has little to do with assessments by superiors as in the traditional salary system.

With so much at stake, it is hardly surprising that microenterprises team members have little tolerance for incompetent leaders. If a microenterprise fails to hit its baseline targets 3 months in a row, a leadership change is triggered automatically. If the microenterprise is meeting its baseline targets but failing to reach its value-adjusted mechanism (VAM) targets, a two-thirds vote of the microenterprise’s members can oust the existing leader. As stated previously, poorly performing leaders are vulnerable to a hostile takeover. Anyone at Haier who believes that he or she could better manage a struggling ME can make a pitch to its team. Performance data for all MEs is transparent across the company, so it is easy to spot takeover opportunities. If an interloper’s plan is convincing, a leadership change ensues. This may

seem extreme, but it is simply an analogue for the market approach to corporate control. If a company consistently underperforms, its board will simply eject the CEO—or the business may be bought by a competitor who believes it can manage the assets more effectively (Hamel & Zanini, 2018).

Haier adamantly follows the concept from the I Ching which refers to dragons flying without a leader. In the organizational context, this means working together to do everything in the team’s power. Assisting each other in need and co-developing prominent solutions creates an environment in which there is no need for a leader (Li, 2017).

In support of the preceding statement, we incorporated another no-CEO case study. Solodev decided to hire a CEO, but the company culture did not respond well to this. Instead, the responsibilities and decisions of the CEO were transferred to an Executive Committee of experts from different departments. The decision-making processes were distributed among them according to their roles in navigating the direction of the company. In the case of paralysis in decision-making, the founders intervene to reduce the confusion by assessing a more centralized opinion. Solodev works on the principle that the goal of an executive is supposed to be building a company that can run without them. This is why it is crucial for leaders to empower their teams to make these decisions, instead of relying solely on the leader (Valamis, 2023).

### **3.3 Embracing the Role of a Servant Leader: Hershey Case Study**

This section presents the benefits of adopting a servant leadership style through a practical case.

McCollum (2022) explained his personal transformation from a budget owner to an influencer in his position at Hershey by being mentored by leaders with a servant leadership style. He explained that the driving force behind the servant leadership must extend beyond the knowledge in one’s area of expertise and must include components such as behaviors and attitude, and strategies and actions, because the servant leadership approach strongly advocates for achieving authority through communication and service to one another, rather than solely through lucrative titles and accreditations. It is the organization’s

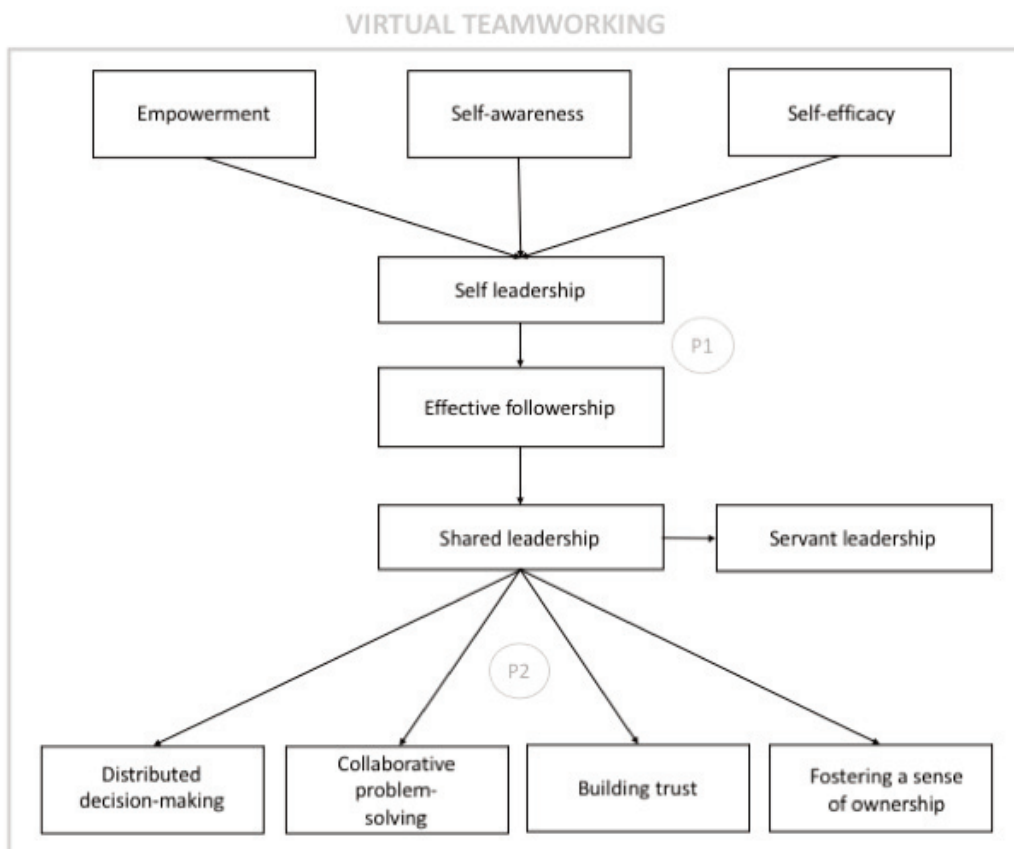
responsibility to adopt the “greater good” concept, which means that the environment must encourage this type of leadership style.

McCollum (2022) stated that because the stakeholders’ interest is to genuinely serve their subordinates, it is easy for them to align their own goals with those of their stakeholder and become personally invested in the company’s success. Alignment is crucial for achieving the planned financial and interpersonal results. Encouraging genuine interest of the employees in the collective investments of the company consequently makes them an extension of the stakeholders’ teams. They will be considered at early stages of every process, such as (re)negotiations of contracts, solving of disruptions, and communicating efficiently with agencies. Such actions create conditions in which stakeholders do not need to be present at all times, because mutual trust is at its peak. Because everyone is empowered to do their best, there is very little need for an actual CEO. McCollum (2022) stated that another benefit of this establishment is allowing employees to be less fearful to come forward regarding

compensation and how success is measured. That is achieved through the servant leader positioning themselves a facilitator and enabler. They pave the way for their subordinates and overcome obstacles with them. Modeling this type of behavior boosts trust among the team members, and it is an excellent approach to empowerment. Servant leader is able to embrace failure as an inevitable effect of a less strict hierarchical approach. By encouraging employees to take on challenges that will fulfill their professional and personal purposes, they serve their own and the company’s greater good. Obviously, the financial targets must be met, but the idea of servant leadership is to accomplish them through active role-modeling (Steelcase, 2018).

#### 4 Integrative Conceptual Model

Based on the theoretical research, we propose an integrative conceptual model (Figure 1) that shows the optimal combination of leadership–followership styles in digital work for the optimal team and company performance.



The model displays the first proposition (P1) by connecting empowerment, self-awareness, and self-efficacy in the context of adopting or improving self-leadership among employees. These concepts promote having the ability to self-observe and regulate one's behavior and emotions accordingly, as well as modeling confidence and trust in one's skills in one's area of expertise, and expressing one's perspectives powerfully and on one's own initiative (Lee et al., 2018, Manz, 2015). Self-leadership is an essential skill for anyone working in virtual teamwork, because it involves being proactive, taking initiative, and seeking feedback to improve one's performance continuously. By empowering individuals, fostering self-awareness, and building self-efficacy, organizations can create a culture of self-leadership that encourages individuals to take ownership of their work, stay motivated, and achieve their goals (Taştan, 2013).

This helps individuals to stay productive, motivated, and adaptable, and enables them to succeed in an increasingly competitive and rapidly evolving virtual team working. For example, according to Li (2017), Haier's employees not only serve subordinates, but exist to serve customers on behalf of the company, while deciding themselves upon the areas in which they hold expertise, because they work in an environment that encourages the three concepts of self-leadership, self-awareness, and empowerment. In the role of a follower, such an approach makes a person effective. Effective followership is an essential component of virtual teamwork and virtual collaboration (Carsten et al. 2021), because active followers work collaboratively with the leader and other team members to achieve shared goals, and they take initiative in contributing their ideas, feedback, and suggestions to the group. In the case of reduced physical involvement, as in a highly virtual team, such an approach is necessary for high productivity and excellent financial teamwork. Haier encourages effective followership by implementing the principle that everyone can apply for a leadership role. They establish new microenterprises every time there is an increase in demand for certain goods and services, and anyone at Haier can apply to lead these microenterprises (Li, 2017).

The shared leadership approach, supported by active followership, can help promote collaboration, communication, and trust in a virtual teamwork environment. By working together and leveraging each

other's strengths, teams can be more effective and achieve better outcomes. Exemplary active followership is an essential component of effective teamwork and collaboration. It enables individuals to contribute their best work and promotes a positive and productive team culture that is essential for achieving shared goals. Therefore, to make shared leadership in virtual teamwork as effective as possible, it is essential to foster an environment in which active followership is encouraged and valued. For shared leadership, which is a collaborative approach in which leadership is distributed among team members, rather than being the sole responsibility of one person (Lave & Wenger, 1991), effective followership is a crucial component, because it means mutual collaboration among team members, especially in highly virtual teams, which in turn improves the organizational climate and builds relationships and trust among colleagues. Shared leadership allows the expertise to be distributed across the team, because each employee has different knowledge and skills that can be integrated into successful decision-making.

Shared leadership is a collaborative approach in which leadership is distributed among team members, rather than being the sole responsibility of one person (Lave & Wenger, 1991), which is crucial in the digital era. It encourages mutual collaboration among team members, who often are geographically dispersed, which in turn improves the organizational climate and builds relationships and trust among colleagues. Shared leadership allows the expertise to be distributed across the team, because each employee has different knowledge and skills that can be integrated into successful decision-making. Moreover, the model acknowledges servant leadership as an optimal reciprocal relationship with the active followership style; by encouraging employees to take on challenges that will fulfill their professional and personal purposes, they serve their and the company's greater good. The idea is to accomplish this through active role-modeling (McCollum, 2022). Although the servant leader identifies as a servant first, it is important to acknowledge that their increased responsibility sets them apart from their followers. In our framework, the model is consistent with the second proposition (P2), because in order to distribute the decision-



making and constant collaborative problem-solving, it is essential to build trust and foster a sense of ownership among the team members. Shared leadership directly contributes to the aspects of remote work. Collaborative problem-solving encourages collaboration of smaller groups in the particular department and promotes the sharing of ideas and information, helping to ensure that team members can work together to identify, address, and overcome challenges (Collier, 2016).

It can be particularly challenging to build and maintain trust in a virtual teamwork environment, because there are fewer opportunities to form a relationship. However, trust is an essential component in any team environment, because it increases the team's and the organizations' performance (Ferrin, Bligh, & Kohles, 2008).

Distributed decision-making in virtual teamwork is helping to distribute decision-making authority more evenly and ensuring that decisions are made with input from multiple perspectives (Malone, 2014). Fostering a sense of ownership encourages team members to take ownership of their work and to contribute their ideas and expertise to the team's goals, helping to ensure that everyone feels invested equally in the team's success (Pierce et al., 2001). When team members are working remotely, it can be challenging not only to maintain a sense of ownership and accountability for their work, but also to see their work present in the "bigger picture."

## **5 Discussion**

### **5.1 Theoretical Contributions**

This paper shows the benefits of implementing shared leadership styles in an organization, but foremost in an era of virtual teamwork. Furthermore, it discusses the importance of possessing a sense of self-leadership, self-awareness, and self-efficacy in order to co-create an empowered and innovative environment. Shared leadership distributes the powers of decision-making and responsibilities among more people within an organization than does the traditional approach, so it is important that as many people as possible possess these attributes.

The research in this paper is focused on the connections among empowerment, self-awareness, and self-efficacy, and how successful a person is in implementing a self-leadership approach in their life, which directly influences their ability to become an effective or active follower within their organization. By that, we mean a person's capacity to be aware of their limitations when it comes to challenges, while having a strong sense of their capability to maximize their personal skills, such as motivation, as well as the skills they developed in their area of expertise (Hultman, 2006; Bandura, 1986). It is important for one's personal life and professional life. Consciously creating room for improvement is crucial for developing new skills and knowledge, as well as symbiotic coexistence within an organization. It also is significant to have a solid belief system about one's own capabilities in order to take on new challenges.

Although the case study coherently presents the importance and impact of adopting the fact that a person is in the role of a follower, those attributes make them an effective follower who contributes to the organization by fulfilling their own goals and desires, while also preparing for the role of leader because the environment empowers them to express their perspective to their peers. As per McCollum (2022), who transformed from an active follower of his servant leader to a servant leader himself, the most important thing is to include one's heart in every aspect of one's work. Despite a coherent display of the importance and impact of adopting a self-leadership approach and how it transforms a person into an effective follower, and subsequently into a leader, the case study excluded the context of remote or hybrid working, in which it is especially important to be aware of the impact that these attributes have on the quality of work life as well as the functioning of an organization, because people are not present in their offices every day. This research proves that it is very important to be proactive and engage in activities that result in stronger relationships in the work community. It complements the existing theoretical implications by giving fresh insight into the impact of these three individual concepts—self-awareness, self-efficacy, and empowerment—on self-leadership in the context of modernizing workplaces by working remotely or in hybrid mode.

Existing theoretical findings stress the importance of being open to adopting different approaches and constructive behavior when facing challenges, while also being confident in overcoming them with one's abilities and skills. By incorporating another variable, virtual teamwork, we attach even greater importance to self-leadership, lack of physical involvement within a team could mean isolation and dissociation from its common purpose. Collaborative problem-solving then would decline, as would productivity and financial results.

With the implementation of shared leadership styles, for example, the servant leadership style, it is much easier for the people involved to obtain a sense of control over their work and narrative. Because the servant leader is devoted to their team and to serving its purpose, they set an example for their subordinates. This means empowering them to find their true purpose within an organization and helping them to fulfill it. When people are listened to and supported to achieve their personal goals within the work goals, productivity rapidly increases, which is directly beneficial to the organization itself. According to Valamis (2023), "the goal as an executive is to build a company that can run without them. This is why it is crucial to empower your teams to make these decisions instead of relying solely on you."

Our research complements Valamis (2022) by presenting how to lead a team to work in unison and achieve great results. For virtual teamwork, these concepts take on new, greater importance, because the modern ways of working mean significant changes in ways that work teams function. Some virtual employees are very fond of not having to commute to the office every day and interact in person with co-workers and management. If not applied properly, leadership styles can cause asynchronous dynamics within teams that work virtually. Some employees may find that they are doing their job routinely, with no passion for it, because they have little to no contact with other members, no career conversations with their superiors, and therefore no development in their area of expertise. That can cause lower productivity and weak economic and financial results. By introducing shared leadership styles that include collaborative problem-solving and distribution of

responsibilities within a team, employees start fostering a sense of ownership, which contributes to building trust among team members. Although they may not see each other in person every day, their work is organized to maintain contact with one another. If everyone is very well informed about others' tasks and responsibilities, the response to a challenge or a problem is much stronger. Therefore, there is less need for an executive in the shared leadership approaches.

## 5.2 Practical Implications

### 5.2.1 *Recommendations for Managers and Staff about Self-Leadership and Supporting Attributes*

Self-leadership has great significance because it enables individuals to achieve their professional objectives and be effective leaders to their followers. The most important self-leadership skills that managers and employees should develop are self-awareness, motivation, decision making, dedication, self-regulation, and accountability (Indeed Editorial Team, 2022).

Having a high level of self-awareness in management is critical for achieving success. Insufficient self-awareness can result in poor decision-making, difficult relationships with co-workers, and feelings of incompetence. Recognizing one's strengths and weaknesses can lead to the development of improvement strategies in a more effective way (Sharma, 2022). Self-awareness in managers can be built by measuring strengths and weaknesses, setting boundaries, knowing one's emotional triggers, considering how one's actions affect others, and, most importantly, asking for feedback from employees (Peek, 2023). However, it is crucial that not only managers are self-aware—followers also must be self-aware. The development of self-awareness in employees is a crucial step in improving how they handle their behavior and relationships with others (Heumann, 2018). Self-awareness in employees can be built with self-reflection, asking for feedback from managers, assessments, and skills development (Arruda, 2023). Self-awareness is important because self-leaders need to understand their strengths and weaknesses. Motivation is crucial be-

cause if managers and employees are highly motivated, they can cope better with challenges. Building self-regulation skills is important because it helps employees and managers cope with challenges instead of reacting to them. A successful self-leader is accountable for his actions and takes the blame if he or she is responsible for a mistake.

Empowerment is significant because it leads to employees feeling empowered, resulting in increased engagement, higher work effort, and greater loyalty toward their employer. The authority granted to them often results in quicker, superior, and more-efficient outcomes (De Smet, Hewes, & Weis, 2020). To empower employees, it is essential for leaders to establish transparent expectations, provide the necessary resources, offer constructive feedback, welcome input and ideas, effectively communicate the organization's vision, and recognize and appreciate the hard work of employees. Establishing transparent expectations is important because it enables employees to make decisions while ensuring that the decisions align with the organization's objectives. Leaders should be specific when they offer constructive feedback, because it provides an opportunity to help employees understand the impact of their actions on a person or project, whether positive or negative. Leaders should encourage the participation of followers in decision-making and goal-setting, because it exposes the organization to innovative ideas and a new perspective. In addition, effectively communicating the organization's vision to employees helps them understand how each team member's efforts contribute to achieving that vision. When employees feel appreciated for their hard work, they are inspired to be more innovative, proactive, and resourceful in problem-solving (Bosworth, 2022).

Individuals with high self-efficacy tend to put forth the necessary effort to attain a desired goal, which increases the chance of achieving it. Having high self-efficacy in leadership can impact one's own performance as a leader and the performance of the group one leads. (Spoelma, 2018). Employees and managers can build self-efficacy by celebrating success, observing others, seeking positive affirmations, and paying attention to others' thoughts and emotions. It is important to cel-

brate success, because accomplishing something creates a strong sense of confidence in one's abilities. Witnessing others making an effort and succeeding also can boost one's confidence in one's own potential to succeed. Positive social feedback can enhance one's sense of efficacy, whereas negative comments can significantly weaken it (Cherry, 2023).

### ***5.2.2 Application of Shared Leadership Concept to the Organizational Structure in the Context of Virtual Teams***

According to Valamis (2022), there are steps that must be followed in order to implement the shared leadership concept successfully in the organizational structure. Firstly, a safe working environment is crucial to shared leadership. This means that employees feel safe to propose their own ideas and perspectives that help to transform and grow the businesses, meaning they "feel safe to fail." In order to create such an environment, employees should interact with one another on a personal level, e.g., learning their kids' or pets' names. Still, expectations must be set, especially for virtual teamwork, because direct team management is more difficult due to less physical presence. Pearce and Sims (2002) noted that when the team has a common grasp of a vision, they facilitate goals that are associated with improved performance. Because highly virtual positions incorporate more individuality than do full-time office or hybrid positions, it is important for a team to have a ritual. Bell and Kozwloski (2002) propose creating routines and habits in the early stages of a team lifecycle, because they contribute to the establishment of healthy expectations and reduce any individualistic behavior that potentially could be harmful. Hambley (2007) noted that it is especially applicable in the context of shared leadership, because the responsibilities and tasks are distributed within a group, and therefore all the team members must maintain a standard in the performance of their work.

Secondly, encouraging transparency is a fundamental concept that needs to be implemented in order for shared leadership to function within an organization. Therefore, it is crucial to hire people

who respect transparency. Valamis (2022) highlighted that having employees who value transparency is essential for meeting company standards. The organization itself also must be transparent with its performance and rewards related to performance, because these are crucial for employees to understand precisely their role in the process and how they can maximize their contribution to shared goals. It is very important to provide avenues for communication, such as Slack or Microsoft Teams.

Thirdly, a clear structure must be created. Morgeson (2002) suggested three main parts to the structuring of the leadership: methodology of accomplishing a task, clarification of roles within a team, and time frame. Valamis (2022) noted that in practice, this could be a back-end hub, in which employees co-create and use a decision and/or responsibility map.

Hamel and Zanini (2018) noted that it is essential to reward employees according to their accomplishments. This ensures fairness, which leads to better performance and employee engagement. To reward employees, one option is to implement a social recognition system, in which employees enter their observations of their own work and that of other members of the team. Rewards then are distributed according to the votes. Keeping the reward system transparent and clear is vital (Valamis, 2022). More importantly, every employee must receive feedback. Morgeson (2009) suggested that a certain degree of informal internal leadership must be applied by communicating feedback and task-related results to employees, ensuring greater individual commitment to the team as well as identification with its purpose. In practice, there should be balance in methods of providing feedback. Milestones always must be communicated in a detailed and comprehensive way, whereas smaller-scale tasks can be communicated informally and contemporaneously.

### 5.3 Limitations and Future Research Directions

Although this paper presents many new findings regarding how shared leadership influences teams in the era of hybrid work and the connection

to personal attributes leaders must possess in order to function well within such teams, certain limitations must be considered regarding these findings. Firstly, the research in this paper was not based on empirical work of our own, but on theoretical work and real-life cases of implementation of such practices. Furthermore, the cases were provided by multinational companies, which have an above average amount of resources at their disposal to allocate for many different purposes. Therefore, we could not conclude through this research that applying shared leadership styles would have been as successful in small and medium-sized enterprises.

Secondly, the cases provided are not an empirical study. The information was gathered through (self) observing by the authors of the studies in the workplaces of their choosing, and they listed the positive effects they experienced or noticed in an environment in which shared leadership styles were applied, by mentors or through the functioning of teams (McCollum 2022; Hamel & Zanini, 2018). Therefore, an empirical analysis must be conducted in the future in order to better understand the underlying factors of success in work teams that function under shared leadership styles. Among the personality traits of the followers and their management, financial compensation must be included as a variable in order to measure the impact of self-leadership that is rooted solely in the ability to self-observe and be influenced by others who have adopted similar characteristics. That could be of huge importance to companies that cannot afford to compensate their employees in the manner that others can.

Lastly, any further research, whether empirical or not, must include teams that function in hybrid mode or even completely virtually, because the effects of shared leadership styles are discussed mostly in environments in which people still work in the office full-time. In the case of mismanagement under shared leadership, the less-strict hierarchical structure may cause confusion within the team regarding their direction and goals. In the era of virtual team working, teams are even more prone to this, because they have little to no physical involvement with one another.

## EXTENDED SUMMARY/IZVLEČEK

Vodenje in sledilstvo sta ključnega pomena za uspešnost podjetja, zato ju je pomembno razumeti in poiskati optimalno interakcijo med vodjo in sledilcem, ki jo je treba izvajati v organizaciji. Razumevanje teh konceptov je ključno, saj pomagajo povečati produktivnost podjetja in uspeh pri doseganju njegovih ciljev. Ta članek raziskuje povezavo med deljenim vodenjem, vodenjem samega sebe in sledenjem ter trdi, da je njihova praksa ključnega pomena za uspeh virtualnih skupin. Predstavljeni teoretični okvir je podprt s praktičnimi študijskimi primeri; EY Slovenija, Haier & Soldev in The Hershey Study. Predlogi za nadaljnje raziskovanje, ki izhajajo iz študij primerov, se nanašajo na dve temi. Prvi predlog govori o tem, kako samo-vodenje prevzame tisti, ki prakticira učinkovito spremljanje, drugi pa o tem, kako deljeni stil vodenja pozitivno vpliva na izgradnjo zaupanja in spodbujanje občutka lastništva zaposlenih. S to teorijo lahko organizacije krmarijo z izzivi sodobnega delovnega mesta in posledično izboljšajo svojo uspešnost, produktivnost in zadovoljstvo pri delu. V nadaljevanju predstavljamo model, ki prikazuje vpliv samo-vodenja na učinkovito spremljanje, poudarjamo pa tudi prednosti implementacije deljenega vodenja, zlasti v kontekstu digitalnega dela, ter razpravljamo o vplivu samo-vodenja, samozavedanja in samoučinkovitosti, pri implementaciji in izvajanju deljenega vodenja znotraj organizacije, ki deluje virtualno.

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