



Co-Leadership – The Future of Leading?

An Oxford HR Report

Oxford HR

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Oxford HR is a global leadership consultancy dedicated to searching for and supporting remarkable leaders and teams creating lasting positive social and environmental impact.



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Executive Summary

In response to a growing interest in the co-leadership model, we surveyed people across Oxford HR's global network to understand how co-leadership is perceived and experienced across the social and environmental impact sector. In addition, we interviewed individuals currently working in a co-leadership role to gain their perspective on how co-leadership works in practice.

Our findings confirmed that co-leadership is a viable and effective model to bring increased diversity to senior leadership teams, leading to more sustainable organisations, reduce feelings of loneliness through

power sharing, and foster succession planning, thus helping to future-proof organisations.

However, there is no one-size-fits-all model that works for all organisations and leaders. To avoid prolonged decision-making, personality incompatibility and confusion within the workplace, co-leadership roles need to be implemented carefully and judiciously. Thoughtful appointments, clarity around role sharing arrangements, and ongoing support for leaders are all vital to embedding effective co-leadership within an organisation.



Why Co-leadership?

As a consultancy with a global audience and an active and learned community, we are acutely aware of the challenges and trends within the hiring and talent retention space. In the past 12 months, our team has seen an influx of interest in the co-leadership model, with many organisations considering hiring co-leaders or wanting to learn more about how it works in practice.

The world of work has changed drastically in the last few years: the days of a 5-day working week in the office have passed on in favour of hybrid and remote working, supported by new technologies. In particular, the Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of supporting employee health and well-being, with many individuals re-evaluating their priorities across life and work.

These significant shifts in our understanding of work are contributing to the rising interest in alternative models. In particular, co-leadership ties in with many of these changes, as it offers individuals the option of progressing in their careers without having to sacrifice wellbeing and personal priorities. Alongside this, organisations are becoming more aware of the value and importance of diverse leadership.

Firstly, diverse leadership can help organisations function more effectively. These organisations draw on a wider range of perspectives which in turn can lead to stronger decision-making, more creative and innovative solutions, and better understanding of the needs of customers. This helps to explain why co-leadership is in the limelight: it offers the unique benefit of two very different people leading at the same time.

Secondly, conversations around socio-economic barriers to career progression, wage disparity and a traditional overreliance on male leadership are driving mission-driven organisations to reconsider how they make hiring decisions. In particular, there is a growing interest in feminist leadership principles as well as a move to decolonise power structures across NGOs, philanthropies and other mission-driven organisations.

These conversations have contributed significantly to explorations of co-leadership as a means to make leadership roles more accessible to underrepresented demographics.

With this in mind, we harnessed the collective wisdom of the Oxford HR community and gathered thoughts on our network's experience of co-leadership and their opinions on when and how it can be best used in mission-driven organisations. These insights helped to create a report with key takeaways, that is designed to be practical in advice and informative in opinion.

We hope that this report will be useful to those embarking on this model, already using it, or to those individuals that might be interested in becoming a co-leader. Thank you for taking the time to read it.

About Oxford HR

Oxford HR is a global leadership consultancy that has been operating since 1995, with offices in Amsterdam, Nairobi, Oxford, Singapore and Washington, working exclusively with impact-led organisations. Our mission is to identify and support leaders creating lasting positive impact and we care passionately about the need for urgent change in our world. We believe that, by identifying and nurturing senior leaders, social and environmental impact organisations can more effectively carry out their world-changing work.



Methodology

Phase 1: Co-leadership survey

In the spring of 2023, an internal team of Oxford HR consultants who had experience working with co-leadership came together to develop a questionnaire. Our goal was to identify the trends in understanding of and attitude towards co-leadership, and to answer some of the outstanding questions we encounter in our work as a leadership consultancy.

The questionnaire collected data in 4 areas:

- Demographic data for survey respondents
- Experiences of co-leadership in practice
- Recruitment of co-leaders
- Impact of co-leadership

In June 2023, we published the survey and invited responses from Oxford HR's email list and LinkedIn audience. This audience consists primarily of leaders working in mission-led organisations globally and people who may be interested in applying for a leadership role in our sector.

The survey received 149 responses by the end of July 2023. Of these, 47% work in an organisation that currently uses the co-leadership model.

Who took part:

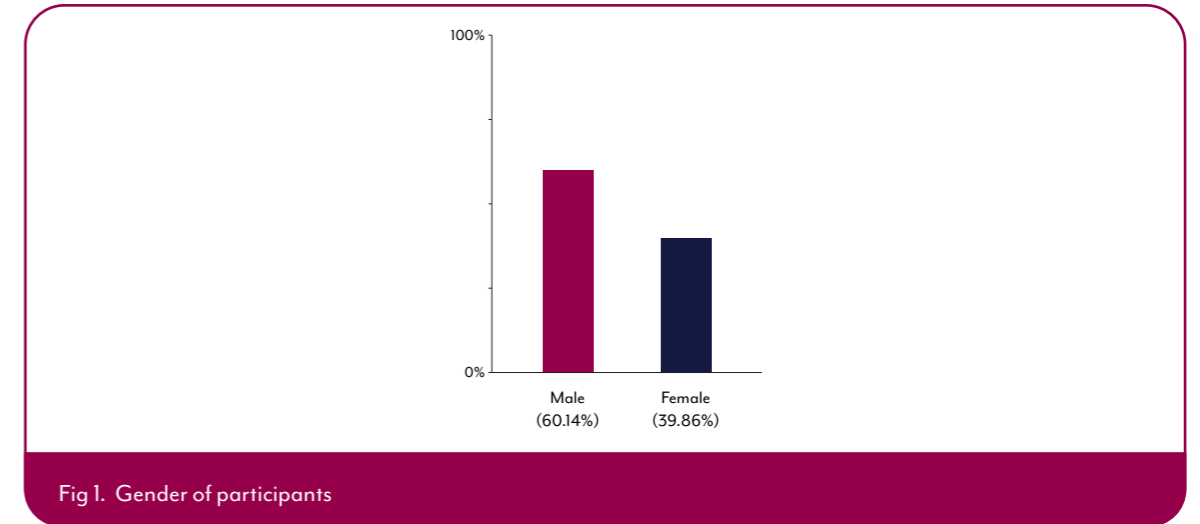


Fig 1. Gender of participants

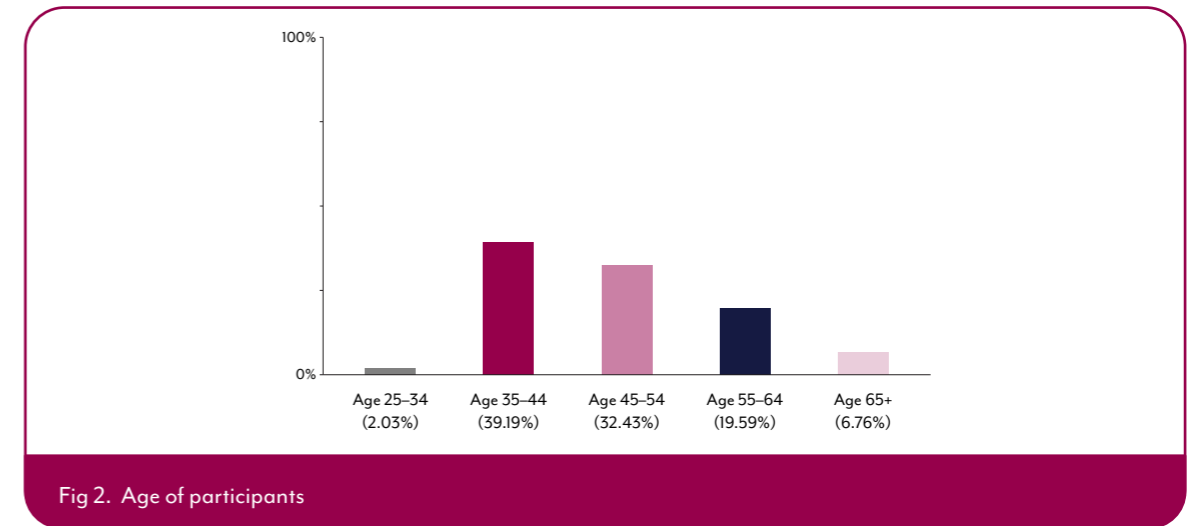
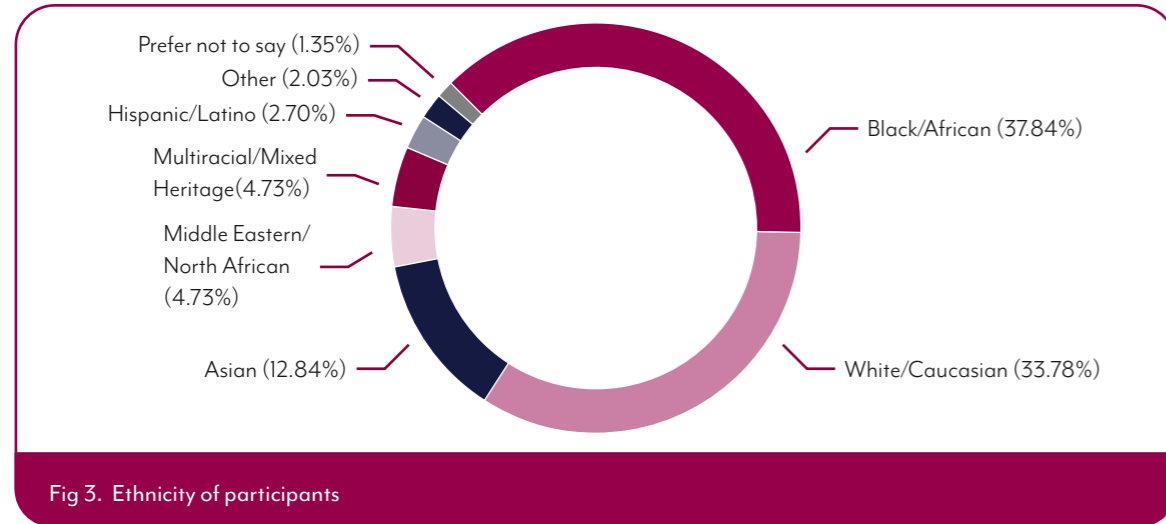
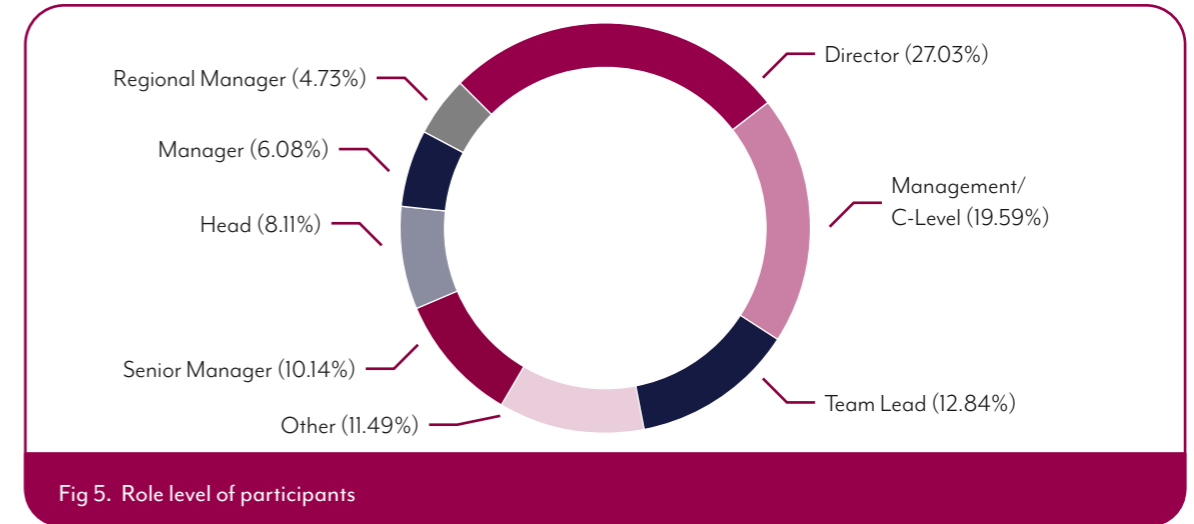


Fig 2. Age of participants

Ethnicity:

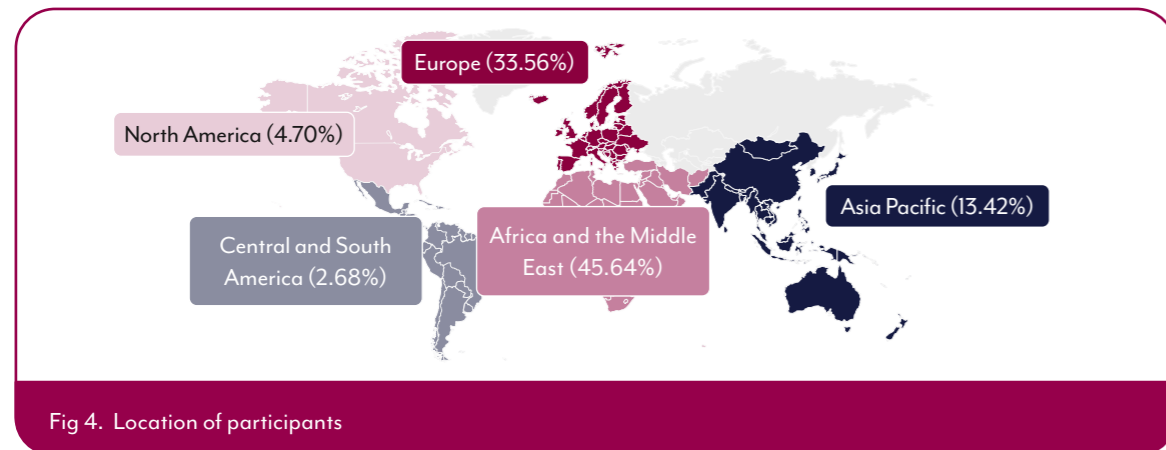


Role:

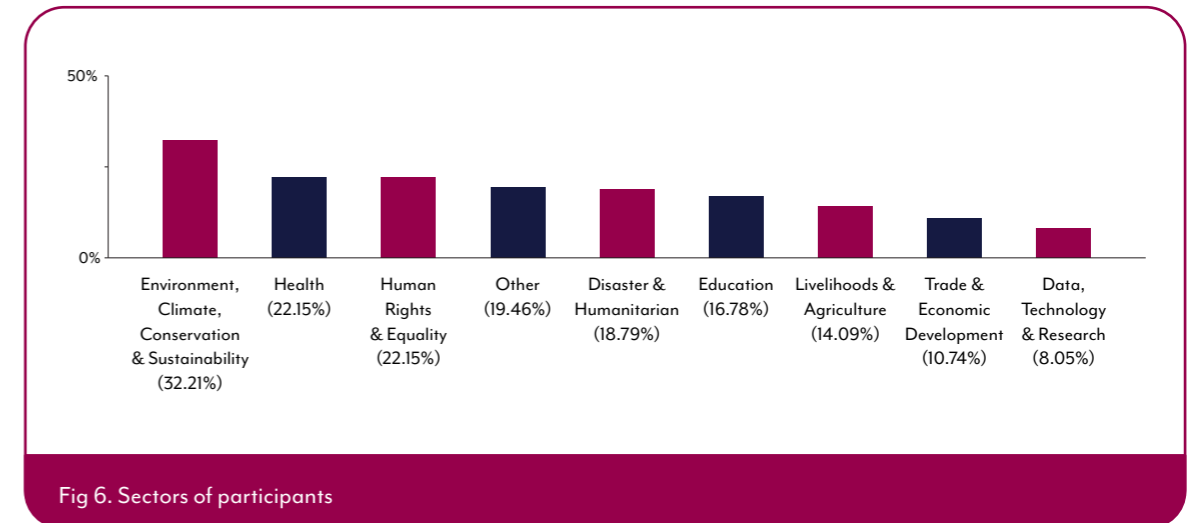


Our respondents represented a broad range of localities, seniorities and mission-focus.

Location:



Sectors:



Methodology

Of our respondent's direct experience of co-leadership as a model, these were the following responses:

- 20.69% said they were *extremely familiar with co-leadership*
- 27.59% said they were *very familiar with co-leadership*
- 34.48% said they were *somewhat familiar with co-leadership*
- 12.64% said they were *not so familiar with co-leadership*
- 4.60% said they were *not at all familiar with co-leadership*

With over 47% of those currently being in an organisation using this model.

Phase 2: Interviews with co-leaders

Building on preliminary findings from the survey, in August 2023 we conducted interviews with co-leaders operating in our sector. These leaders represent a range of organisations (those focused on gender equality, humanitarian, environmental-led organisations) and demographics (male and female co-leaders, partnerships with age gaps and differences in tenure, those working from different countries to their counterparts).

The interview took the form of informal conversations, sometimes with both leaders in a co-leadership role and sometimes with just one individual. Interview questions were informed by gaps in the quantitative data or interesting comments from the survey.





Towards a Definition of Co-Leadership

A typical definition of co-leadership might look like:

Co-leadership refers to a leadership structure in which two or more individuals jointly and collaboratively hold leadership positions, sharing responsibilities, decision-making authority, and accountability for the direction and success of a team, department, organisation, or project. In a co-leadership arrangement, the leaders work together to leverage their respective strengths, skills, and expertise to achieve common goals and address challenges.

However, at Oxford HR, we are swiftly realising that there is no set definition of what a co-leadership model should look like, and we have seen many different approaches to it. The success of these varies on the organisation and individuals in question. Some of our respondent's experiences illustrated that the most common definition of co-leadership was two full-time roles co-leading (54.93%). Followed by two individuals in more of a job share setting (30.99%). More than two full time roles co-leading was much lower (15.49%), with more than two individuals in a job share setting seen much less frequently (12.68%). Co-leading, regardless of whether the roles are full-time or not, is therefore more associated with a definition of just two leaders at this time.

We spoke with Mike Noyes of Action Aid UK, who is currently in a full-time, hybrid working, interim co-leadership role with the organisation, who stated that “rather than being a role that was shared between two people working part-time, this was an existing post, that both of us picked up the shared responsibility for. Due to circumstances at the time, it was a decision taken to deliberately take a level out of the hierarchy”. We went on to discuss that the development of this style of leadership was almost a Change Management tool, utilised to minimize disruption and provide stability with an element of cost saving – Mike is of the opinion that it has definitely “paid off for the department, in terms of having more clarity on decision making and reducing time, as there are less tiers in a process”.

Our research found that for most respondents' experiences, the size of the organisation does matter when it comes to considering using a co-leadership model, with 43.06% of answers. 37.50%

of respondents said that organisation size did not matter, with 19.44% answering ‘not sure.’ Additional comments revealed that larger organisations can increase the complexity of co-leadership, although certain respondents suggested that in these types of organisation where there is no centralised system approach, co-leadership can be beneficial to manage global operations more effectively by a ‘divide and conquer’ approach.

“We’re a small charity. Essentially, we reassessed whether we needed a traditional CEO and Deputy, surmised that we didn’t and went for our two senior managers to step up as full-time co-CEOs. We split some areas of work by our interests and strengths but share general responsibility as CEOs”

Around the question of logistics in relation to the size of the organisation, a few of our respondents added additional information around the topic of internal and external facing partners. For example, one leader took an external role with stakeholders whilst another managed internal operations, which suited their setup very well. Programmes and Operations were often identified as two distinct areas where skills to lead are different and works well with a co-leadership model. All co-leaders of our respondents reported to their board as a pair.

“We are both responsible for leading the organisation, but have a split in areas of accountability, i.e. I take finance, my co-MD takes HR. However, although we take a lead on different parts of managing the organisation, we are both involved in the decision making, so neither of us make major executive decisions independently of each other. This means that decision-making can be slowed down rather than sped up”.

Feminist Leadership Principles

Co-leadership has been closely linked to feminist leadership principles. Rooted in equality and the challenging of traditional power dynamics, these principles can be found in the co-leading model, such as the advocacy of inclusion, collaborative decision-making, empowerment, vulnerability, continuous learning and transparency, and crucially, these elements can determine whether this model of leadership will work in a specific organisation.

Feminist leadership principles do not have one, single accepted framework, creator or originator. Feminist leadership principles and ideas have come from various theorists and researchers and often stem from gender equality, social justice and intersectional approaches. Researchers such as Carol Gilligan and Joan Acker and authors and activists such as bell hooks, Audre Lorde and Kimberle Crenshaw have all contributed to the ideas of feminist leadership.

Feminist Leadership approaches often engage with the intersectional approach towards leadership, where all various facets of one’s identities (one’s history, gender, race, socioeconomical background etc.) are being taking into consideration. International NGO’s such as ActionAid International have implemented

this framework into their organisational structures in an attempt to create a “transformative vision of a just world free from poverty, oppression and patriarchy.”

Feminist Leadership Principles include intersectionality, social justice, collaboration and inclusion, empowerment, ethical leadership, critical thinking, work-life balance, mentoring and support as well as advocacy and activism.

Another Oxford HR client, Mama Cash, has also embraced Feminist leadership principles in the form of co-leadership; this can enable organisations to address the power disparity and inequalities present in their structures. The sector has a history of neo-colonial practices that entail various inequalities. To create more equity, those in power, namely those in the Global North, need to reshape their practices. The framework of Feminist Leadership has been proven successful in providing the right tools to initiate change internally, not only on an individual level, but on an organisational level as well.

Mike Noyes noted that ‘ActionAid UK is very strong on its feminist principles...and this model is a demonstration of that’...he reflected that ‘it’s an interesting conversation as to whether an 80/90% female department would have accepted a male director, had I been brought in on my own’.



Recruiting Co-leaders

Recruiting co-leaders requires a thoughtful approach that takes into consideration not only individual qualifications but also potential to work harmoniously in a collaborative leadership structure. Therefore, one of the most vital elements to getting a co-leadership model right, lies within the recruitment process. This can be said to start even before posting the vacancy, with the exploration of desired leadership skills (ideally as part of an established succession plan) and a tailored job description for each co-leading role. Moving beyond the recruitment process, space needs to be created to accommodate onboarding and potentially coaching to ensure a smooth transition for the organisation and effective ways of working for the co-leaders.

Our survey had several questions on whether leaders were recruited together, if there were psychometric assessments involved for personality comparisons and whether on-going support was given after hires were made e.g., coaching.

An interesting topic of discussion is that of whether both co-leaders should come from the same recruitment process; 62% of respondents thought it was important to recruit at the same time. Our experiences at Oxford HR are that we have recruited for both co-leaders at the same time and have also appointed a singular co-leader to join another already in post. In the future, we may expect to see more of the latter due to the unlikelihood of both leaders leaving at

the same time. There are benefits to both approaches: on the one hand, appointing both at the same time means there is less risk of a hierarchy between them as they are both new to the organisation; hiring separately means potentially less turbulence for the organisation as one co-leader can offer training and support to the other in their first few months.

“Institutional memory is important, hence simultaneous recruitment is not essential. What’s more important is a genuine commitment to co-leadership and flexibility from all co-leads. However, simultaneous recruitment does make it easier to jointly divide responsibilities without historical roles blurring clarity for staff and/or cherry-picking of roles by incumbent.”

When asked during interview, Mike Noyes had the opinion that if one of the co-leading model leaves, then you have to let whoever is staying recruit who they are going to be working with. “You couldn’t just give me someone when you have to work in such a close partnership as this”.

63% of respondents thought it was important to use psychometric assessments during the recruitment process for co-leaders. At Oxford HR, we often recommend this approach for the hiring of any senior role. The use of psychometrics can reveal underlying motivations, values, strengths, development areas and traits of candidates (both good and bad), which can shed further light on whether the candidate will be successful in the role. Typically, we see the following benefits of using psychometric assessments during the recruitment process:

1. Understanding of personality
2. Information about leadership style
3. Knowledge of emotional intelligence
4. Approaches to conflict resolution
5. Awareness of communication skills

“Integrating psychometrics into the selection of co-leaders is crucial because it helps us understand the unique strengths, communication styles, and problem-solving approaches that each candidate brings, enabling us to build a co-leadership team that not only collaborates seamlessly but also complements each other’s abilities, resulting in a more enriched and successful leadership dynamic.”

Jenna Pilley, Director of Leadership & Change

In terms of executive coaching support once leaders are in place, a large majority of our respondents (75.31%) thought both leaders should have joint coaching support, 58.02% thought there should be individual executive coaching support, leaving just over 7% who thought executive coaching wasn’t important at all in this scenario. We believe that for any senior leadership position, executive coaching can be an invaluable tool. In addition to providing the individual with professional and personal development, it can also benefit the overall health and success of their organisation.

“They are individuals and different. So, coach the individual to succeed in co-operation with the colleague.”

There is also the question of gender within a co-leadership arrangement, which we asked our survey participants about. We asked, ‘To what extent do you agree a man and a woman can co-lead effectively on a scale of 1-100’, with the average rating being 82%. This suggests that effective leadership is not determined by gender but rather by a combination of skills, qualities, and the ability to work collaboratively. Gender diversity in leadership teams can offer a broader range of perspectives and skills, which can enhance decision-making and problem-solving.

Similarly, there are questions on how disparity in age can affect the relationship between two co-leaders. Although there was no explicit mention of age gaps in our initial questionnaire, it was a topic that a few of our interviewees noted as something that had not worked particularly well in the past, however, all of our participants further explained that personality and shared values were the most important aspect regardless of demographic differences.

Learning from the Corporate World

There may be lessons we can take from the corporate sector regarding co-leadership; although the analysis is still in its infancy. A study by the Harvard Business Review found that from the pool of organisations they studied, nearly 60% of those led by co-CEOs outperformed. They also found that the tenure of co-CEOs was the same as that of a singular CEO; about 5 years on average.

“Today the job of running a company has become so complex and multifaceted, and the scope of responsibilities so great, that the co-CEO model deserves a fresh and close look.”

Harvard Business Review

Our respondents noted a few elements where social and environmental impact organisations may learn from their peers in the corporate sector. These included clear reporting lines, roles and responsibilities, in addition to performance measures and investment in leadership development.

The co-CEOs at Hodges-Mace were interviewed and they discussed the benefits of the co-leading model. The organisation chose to pursue this route because the scope of the Executive Director role had grown; having two CEOs would allow each to have a smaller focus. They found clearly defined remits useful in terms of not having to discuss every small decision. They also noted the importance of having a coherent message:

“We do companywide meetings where we both talk about the business and we also provide updates via e-mail. One of us will write those and the other will proof it. That helps us make sure that we hit the key messages and that our collective voice is captured in every communication.”

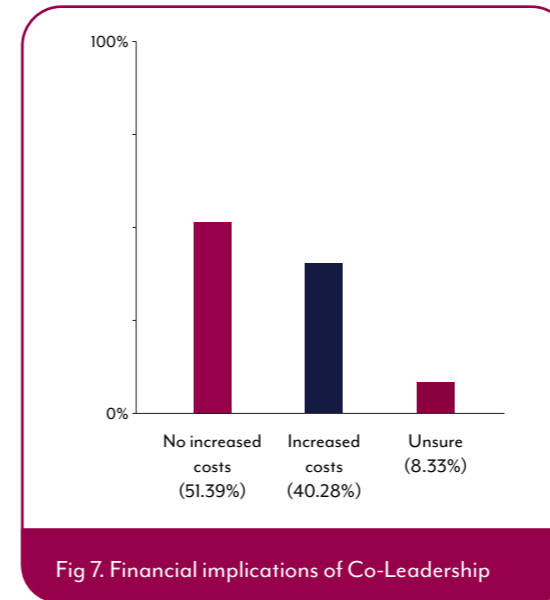
Chief Executive



Financial Implications

With inflation rising and competition for funding increasing, finance and economic conditions are often front of mind for social and environmental impact organisations. With the increase in living standards there is also a need for higher wages, which could mean organisations are unwilling to pay the two or more salaries needed for a co-leading model. This, added to the potential costs of outsourcing the recruitment process and any coaching or onboarding that might be required, could further deter people from considering it.

The implementation of a co-leadership structure typically involves the allocation of additional resources to accommodate the needs and preferences of multiple leaders. This could include increased compensation packages, benefits, and allowances for each co-leader. At Oxford HR, we often find one of the main reasons for organisations to reject a co-leadership model, is the idea that financially it will be too or more expensive and that cost doesn't outweigh the benefits. From our data, 51.39% of respondents noted that it did not cost their organisations more to use this approach. 40.28% felt that there was an increased cost to their organisation, whilst 8.33% were unsure.



One participant noted:

“there is a high investment but high returns as well. I understand that this leadership model for core and global operations has provided more trust in the organisation’s efficiency to deliver in a timelier way, and to also better position the organisation globally.”

In the same vein, we also received feedback that co-leadership roles actually save the organisation financially by ensuring more seamless and strategic continuity.

On the other hand, multiple respondents noted that the two co-leaders earned a full-time salary and ‘at the end of the day, both leaders need to be paid.’ This may cause problems for smaller organisations without the budget for two senior hires, or organisations that are not in a sustainable economic position. Once again, this reinforces the view that organisations need to think carefully about using the co-leadership model and ensure they have the adequate mechanisms in place.

It does appear that the co-leadership model has a financial implication. Paying two salaries will always be more expensive than one, especially when factoring external recruitment support, coaching and onboarding into the equation. However, despite initial higher costs, co-leadership can pay for itself in terms of the benefits of strengthened leadership, inherent succession planning and organisational effectiveness.



Challenges

‘It didn’t work well. Mainly for attitudinal and ego reasons’

There will always be instances where co-leadership doesn’t work. Some organisations will not be set up for the co-leadership model, either logistically, in the nature of their work, or in their ways of working and culture within the senior leadership team. With our research, we have found that if the practice of co-leadership does not have buy-in throughout the whole organisation, including the Board, then the model could destabilise the whole organisation at a fundamental level.

Mike Noyes agreed with this statement, giving the opinion that “it might not work for every organisation, but also at certain points in time”.

Additionally, if the hiring process is not conducted correctly there may be a mismatch in personalities, working styles and approaches that may result in animosity and upset, both for the leaders and their teams. If clear boundaries and ownership of different areas aren’t set up from the outset, or if communication isn’t clear and transparent, then this can lead to strains on resources, dissatisfaction and ultimately, conflict.

The top areas there are likely to be challenges as identified by our survey respondents, was as follows:

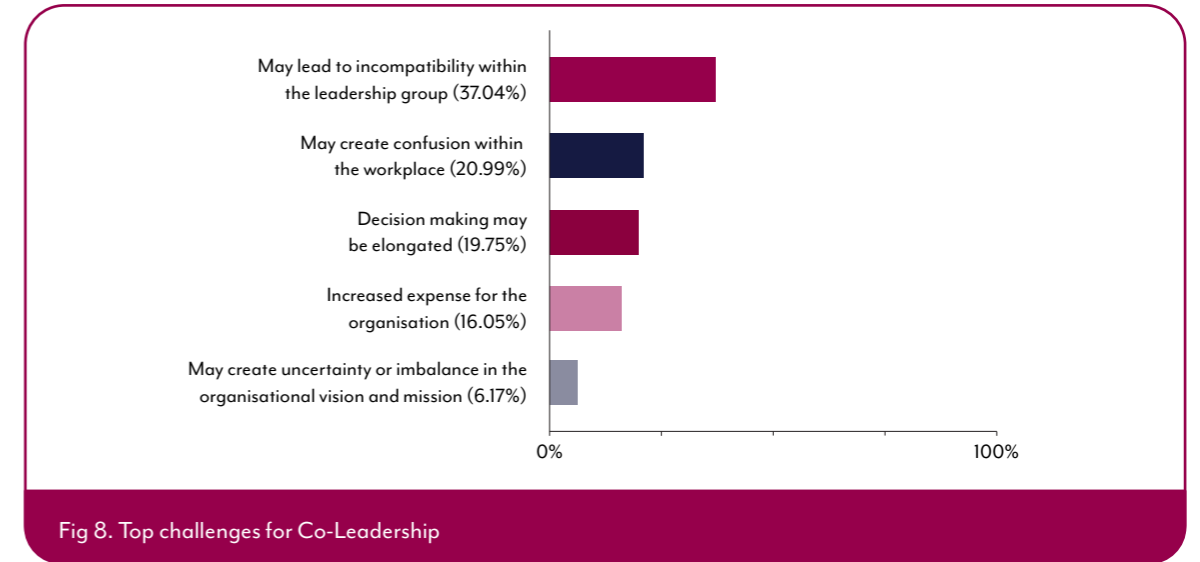


Fig 8. Top challenges for Co-Leadership

With regards to the challenges above, one of the key insights from our interviews was that of being mission aligned when co-leading; if both leaders share the same values and vision, it can help reduce confusion and uncertainty within the organisation. In order for the model to work, for co-leaders to have a foundation on which to build their working relationship and to fix disagreement, they need shared values and commitment to the mission of their organisation. This is the cornerstone of a successful co-leading arrangement.

“In our case it confused the team and encouraged divisiveness.”

Challenges

Furthermore, it can also act as a mechanism for conflict resolution. Throughout our interviews, we learned from co-leaders that when disagreement or difference of opinion occurred, knowing that on the base level, both individuals were committed to the same vision, helped iron out the differences and prevented serious conflict.

“A shared set of values and principles is the starting point for all of the strategy, planning and communication.”

Happy Mwende Kinyili - Co-Executive Director at Mama Cash

The key recurring theme seems to be that of mission focus and alignment. Another aspect of co-leading which may be seen as a challenge, is that of increased time spent on decision-making, with there being two or more viewpoints to consider. Whilst true that key decisions may take longer to reach a conclusion, it is also important to consider that the conclusions reached may be more balanced and stronger because of the length of discussion time. It might also allow

for multiple viewpoints to be navigated and thus prevent future disagreement, and ensure that there is adequate buy-in.

There is definitely a shared values and personality element. We don't live in each others pockets, but we have a hinterland that brings us together as well, which is part of the trust and relationship – we can talk to each other about things that are not work.

Mike Noyes, ActionAid UK

Organisational buy-in is also key when implementing a co-leadership model, to ensure that the entire organisation is aware of the remit of each of the co-leaders. Essentially, introducing a co-leadership model is a form of organisational change, so preparing the rest of the organisation for this change is important to the success of the appointment. Organisational buy-in and consultation can help to prevent 'setting co-leaders' up for failure.

Clearly defined roles will also reduce workplace confusion and allow a certain amount of autonomy within each remit. However, it is also important to leave a little room for the model to evolve and take shape in a way that is bespoke for each organisation, as was mentioned in our interviews. Being too strict on who is responsible for what can lead to rigidity and stagnation. A salient point that emerged throughout our conversations was that of letting go of thoughts of 'how things should happen' in order to see how the model might evolve in an organisation organically.

“It's a 'co' - it's one unit instead of two individuals. There needs to be a willingness to be innovative and to lose control to see how things might happen.”

Florence Riako Anam – Co-Executive Director at GNP+ Global Network of People Living with HIV

The challenges mentioned by participants in our interviews and within our questionnaire are important to consider when evaluating the merits of co-leadership. Confusion amongst the team, mission-related uncertainty and extrapolated decision-making are certainly issues to be avoided in any organisation. However, by following a thorough and robust recruitment process, paying attention to each individual, their skills, strengths and values, can remedy many of the challenges presented above.



Skills needed to be a co-leader

- **Trust:** co-leaders should be able to trust each other, and this can be said to be the foundational element of all co-leading relationships. When trust exists, leaders are more likely to share their thoughts, concerns, and feedback openly, leading to better decision-making and problem-solving.
- **Honesty:** co-leaders who are honest with each other demonstrate integrity and reliability, which in turn fosters a sense of trust and mutual respect. Honesty allows for clear communication and enables the co-leaders to have a strong relationship, strengthening the overall organisation.
- **Accountability:** accountability is crucial in co-leadership for maintaining transparency and achieving shared goals. It ensures that both leaders are on the same page and are clear of each other's roles and expectations and allows for a culture of continuous improvement.
- **Collaboration:** Co-leaders often bring diverse skill sets, experiences, and perspectives to the table. Collaboration allows them to leverage each other's strengths to make more informed decisions and accomplish tasks more effectively. Collaboration considers the broad implications of choices and avoids siloed thinking.

“Success is based on trust and shared values between the two co directors and an agreement to back decisions you have not made.”

“We took a lot of effort at the start of our partnership to produce what I call The Grid, which is about 2 pages long and highlights who has responsibility for each topic. At the end of the day, if we have a disagreement, Hannah will win on policy and I will win on institutional funding. This was developed through an understanding of what each other's existing roles were, what our backgrounds were and where our expertise lies and then ensuring that it was balanced fairly. This also allows people in the department to know who to come to – it's very clear and transparent. Investing time in this really helped and we also review it from time to time to ensure its relevancy and that it is still balanced correctly”
Mike Noyes, ActionAid UK



Benefits

Co-leadership is not a panacea to address unsustainable and/ or hierarchical leadership and does not provide an inevitable pathway to healthy organisations with well distributed power.

Devi Leiper O'Malley and Ruby Johnson, Insights and Practices for Feminist Co-leadership

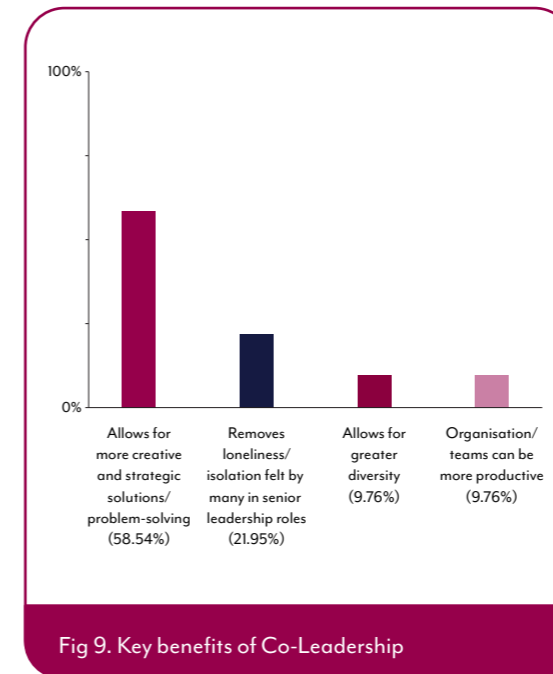
With interest in co-leadership surging, there must be a reason why. Many organisations begin looking into this model because of the perceived benefits, which can include:

- **Diverse Perspectives:** Co-leaders can bring with them different backgrounds, experiences approaches and viewpoints to the organisation. This diversity can lead to more comprehensive and creative solutions to complex challenges.
- **Shared Responsibility:** Co-leaders can distribute leadership responsibilities, reducing the workload and stress on individual leaders. This can lead to better work-life balance and prevent burnout, resulting in sustained high performance.

Benefits

- **Balanced Decision-Making:** With multiple leaders, decisions are more likely to use collaborative methods including discussions and debates, leading to higher instances of well-rounded and carefully considered choices. This can help avoid hasty decisions made in isolation.
- **Mitigation of Risk:** Different viewpoints may uncover potential pitfalls and provide a more comprehensive risk assessment.
- **Enhanced Innovation:** The combination of diverse perspectives can foster innovative thinking and problem-solving. Co-leaders can challenge each other's assumptions, leading to more robust and creative solutions.
- **Specialised Expertise:** Co-leaders might possess distinct skills and expertise, allowing each leader to focus on their strengths while complementing each other's weaknesses.
- **Succession Planning:** Co-leadership can serve as a built-in succession plan. In case one co-leader departs, the remaining leader can step into the role, ensuring a smoother transition and continuity in leadership.
- **Conflict Resolution:** Co-leadership requires effective collaboration and conflict resolution skills. Leaders can learn to manage disagreements constructively, fostering a healthier team environment.
- **Personal Growth and Development:** Co-leaders can learn from each other's leadership styles and approaches, leading to personal growth and development. They can share insights, mentor each other, and learn new strategies.
- **Morale and Engagement:** A balanced co-leadership approach can enhance team morale and engagement, as employees often appreciate the collaborative leadership style and the sense of inclusion it brings.
- **Flexibility and Adaptability:** Co-leaders can adapt to changes more effectively as they leverage each other's strengths to address evolving challenges and shifting priorities.

These positive factors were reflected upon in our quantitative data, with the respondents ranking the below as the most important key benefits to co-leadership:



When asked specifically whether a co-leadership model allows for more diversity within an organisation, 78% agreed and for Oxford HR this is one of the key benefits. Having two leaders at this level is likely to bring with it diversity of thought, mind and decision making. Using co-leadership as a way to embed diversity within organisations is potentially a good way to introduce and embed diverse thinking within the organisation. This is particularly important for mission-led organisations with a global remit, having one or more leaders allows for a geographical spread (for example, having one based in the Global North and one in the Global South), which can help ensure the organisation's leadership is reflective of the populations it serves. If this is done within co-leadership it is important that the organisation is ready for and can support diverse leaders and all that that might bring, including cultural approaches to leadership, management and organisational methods.

78% of respondents agreed a co-leadership model allows for more diversity.

Benefits

Another key benefit is that of the potential for the co-leadership model is that it may reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation felt in many senior leadership positions. These emotions can have significant negative impacts on organisations, employee engagement and team morale, and the stifling of innovation and creativity. Many of the remedies to feelings of workplace loneliness can be found in the benefits of co-leading, such as open communication, work-life balance and leadership development. By using co-leadership, senior leaders are more likely to have a soundboard, someone to challenge their ideas and opinions, and are less likely to overwork due to the split of responsibilities.

Research from Deloitte found that 57% of respondents say their organisations are “weak” when it comes to helping leaders manage difficult schedules.

Additionally, having two co-leaders can act as a built-in succession plan, as in many cases, when one leader steps down, one will remain and keep the organisation stable at a time that can sometimes be turbulent. This may explain why 74% of our survey respondents agreed that co-leadership allowed for a more sustainable organisation.

“If one half of the duo leaves, the other can ensure a stable transition.”

Harvard Business Review

Organisations employing a co-leadership model may find themselves more productive and efficient compared to others with a singular executive director. In addition to the points above on reducing the loneliness of leading an organisation, having two points of view can lead to more nuanced arguments, leading towards a more balanced decision. Having two opinions on an important matter can show that different points of view have been considered and lend strength to a particular idea.

The division of responsibility can also mean that each co-leader has more time to spend on the issues they are tasked with, for example, having one co-lead focusing on operations and internal systems, and one responsible for external stakeholders and communications. This might allow for specific processes to be more efficient as they have had adequate resource allocated to them.

Co-leadership and Advocacy

One area that we identified through our qualitative research was the unique benefit of using co-leadership in organisations with a heavy focus on advocacy. The demands of leadership are ever-increasing; financial stress of managing budgets combined with a decrease in funding opportunities and developments in remote working and technology can mean that burnout is ever-more prevalent in senior leadership positions.

Nearly 60% of leaders reported they feel used up at the end of the workday, which is a strong indicator of burnout.

Forbes

Within organisations with a heavy focus on advocacy, the demands can be even more pressing. In addition to the myriad of challenges faced as a leader of an impact-led organisation, the advocacy leader must themselves be an advocate for their cause. This expectation of being the external face of the organisation and mission can quickly eat into other areas of responsibility, or vice versa, meaning that many leaders often have far too much on their plate.

By utilising a co-leadership model, organisations can dedicate an entire employee to their external relations, by having one co-lead directly responsible for advocacy and campaigns. This allows the functioning of an organisation to not be sacrificed, whilst also allowing the organisation to stay up to date on current trends within their area of interest and not lose its voice.



Conclusion

“Co-leadership is a model that promotes shared leadership and collaboration among individuals in leadership positions. It recognises that effective leadership can come from multiple sources and encourages the pooling of diverse skills, perspectives, and expertise to drive organisational success.”

This report has highlighted some of the most common pitfalls within the co-leading model, in addition to the myriad of benefits that might help social and environmental impact organisations perform better. It is evident through this research that a co-leadership arrangement is not something that can be spontaneously decided upon and implemented; it requires considered thinking, a truly collaborative approach, organisational buy-in and dedicated time and resource in the recruitment process to ensure success. For smaller organisations, or those in times of turbulence or volatility, this may not be a wise choice.

The research has also shown that the co-leadership model is still evolving; its uniqueness stems from its fluidity and, indeed, no two of the co-leadership models we have interacted with have been the same. This is due to the relationship between two or more co-leaders; with different lived experiences, professional skills, demographics and opinions, no two cases will ever be identical – and this can be said to be the model’s key strength.

So: is co-leadership the future of leading? For many individuals and organisations, it very well could be. For organisations that are stable, both in terms of finance and governance, that are wishing to embrace feminist leadership principles and incorporate greater diversity of thought into their senior decision-making, co-leaders can certainly help to bring positive impact to both their organisations, and the sector as a whole.

“The idea of the solitary leader is linked to traditional leadership concepts. For co-leadership to work and be promoted in an organisation, we need to be ready to rethink our understanding of what a leader is and how leadership is most effective.”

Key Takeaways

For co-leadership to work here are some of the parameters needed:

1. Clearly outlined goals and expectations
2. Clear roles and responsibilities (boundaries within this)
3. Open and Transparent Communication
4. Shared vision and trust (mutual respect)
5. Conflict Resolution Mechanisms
6. Leadership Development & Support (regular performance evaluation within that)
7. Board support with an evaluation model that promotes growth and provides guidance

“By providing these forms of support, organisations can create an environment that fosters effective co-leadership, collaboration, and shared decision-making, ultimately leading to better organisational outcomes”

End note

Throughout this research process, it has come to our awareness that there is appetite for further exploration and peer learning for co-leaders. Now with a pool of interested co-leaders, from a broad range of backgrounds and a variety of experience, we

are considering the creation of a co-leading forum, where we can further harness the collective wisdom of our global networks. Please ensure you are signed up to our mailing list [here](#) and following us on our social channels to learn more about this initiative.

Our survey respondents noted what they felt they needed for successful co-leadership:



Fig 10. Requirements for successful Co-Leadership

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Saranel Benjamin – Co-Executive Director at Mama Cash

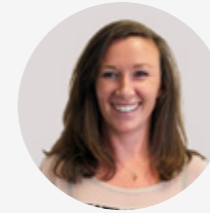
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