

learning from co-leadership

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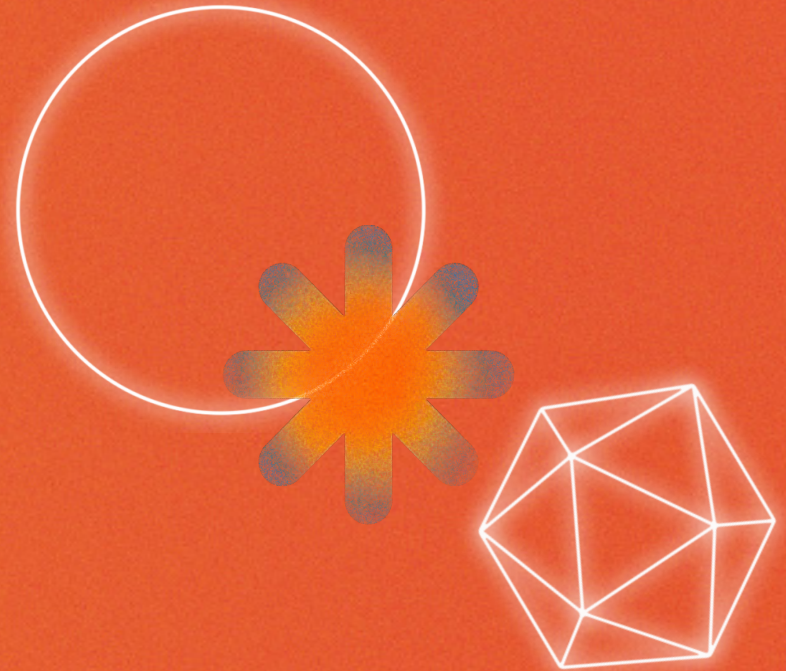
THE ENGINE ROOM

what does our model look like?

Where we arrived in 2023, was as a group of four who shared responsibility for the health and success of the organisation, formally as two co-Executive Directors and two co-Deputy Directors. This structure emerged after over a year of changing shapes and adjusting to emerging needs.

We made decisions together and worked in pairs, trios and as individuals on clearly delineated responsibility areas.

Next, we'll share some lessons we learned. Take a look at the [accompanying videos on our blog!](#)



We found it most effective to organise ourselves around targets, rather than static role descriptions.

Writing job descriptions proved to be a difficult and enervating task that quickly fell by the wayside as it became clear that if we each led the organisational target areas for which we were best suited, we would all be happier, contribute what was most needed from us by the organisation, and be best set up for success. This year we experimented with discrete team-wide annual targets, each of which aligned with specific areas of work and senior leader responsibilities.

Another benefit of dividing work this way is that by clearly defining responsibilities for outcomes, we were each able to balance both indepen-

dent forward movement on our specific areas and growth/learning in the areas our co-leaders were responsible for.

This also shaped how we proactively managed handoffs. Since there was (of course) intersecting work and collaboration, it became obvious where we needed to double down on clear hand-offs and communications, versus when we could move things forward more independently.

It's possible to move quickly while collaborating, as long as you stay flexible and rooted in trust.

Decision-making in shared leadership doesn't have to take longer than in a solo leadership model, as is often feared. While we had weekly meetings with the four of us, we emphasised the importance of meeting as groups of three and every dyad possible (7, if you wanted to know) to grapple with ideas or dilemmas.

This helped us avoid feeling like we had to make decisions only when everyone was present, and it kept information flowing. Since we all agreed that this would allow us to move quickly and play to strengths and interests, we weren't overcome by FOMO (fear of missing out).

It might feel messier and less linear at first, but the diversity of perspectives, experiences and skill-sets usually results in more thoughtful decisions and deliberate processes, without sacrificing nimbleness.

It can also work more consistently than solo leadership models, wherein the ED must either always be available or key decisions have to wait until they get back to the office. This

allowed us to centre wellbeing and rest more consistently.

The quick movement amongst ourselves built energy on a regular basis. It kept the energy positive — when one or two people on our team were struggling, or low on energy, we were able to collectively help energise each other. This wasn't simply about making life good, it also increased our agility and accomplishment.

Finally, making decisions across four people meant we had to get deliberate about our expectations, like making it clear when all four of us need to weigh in on something, or when one or two people have the knowledge and responsibility to take something forward.



*There are actually four “I”s in our team.
(Does that make us great leaders and bad
spellers?)*

By which we mean, part of what kept things moving along was that we acknowledged, respected and celebrated what we each excelled at as individuals, rather than assuming we all had to do things the same way. This allowed us to focus our time together specifically on the things it was important for us to all be present for. It helped us distinguish individual responsibilities, too.

As it stands, nonprofit ED roles are often designed in ways that are practically the job of three to five different people (fundraiser, senior programmes lead, ops lead, finance lead, etc.).

We found that the shared leadership model allowed each of us — with different desires, expertise and abilities — to be able to contribute meaningfully, without having to comply with unrealistic expectations and the incredible stress of traditional leadership. Sharing leadership also allows leaders to be able to grow their skills in more organic and sustainable ways.

Our varied perspectives meant that we were able to see many more angles of each situation than if it were just one of us. Though this was sometimes challenging — the quest to maintain our voices as individuals while also maintaining a united position on decisions for the organisation — it was more often than not a huge asset.

Having our team of four “I”s allowed us to get rapid feedback to ideas in a safer space, testing concepts out in the open and refining or growing them. This created a rapid learning experience for each of us to build substantive knowledge on different issues and explore new approaches to problem-solving.



Laura (she/her)



Paola



Gillian Williams



Julia Keseru

Check out the [accompanying blog post](#) to hear stories about our co-leadership journey.

The promises of more resilience and wellbeing can be true.

By trusting one another, we were able to actually leave our work at work when we went out of the office — and also trust that important projects and decisions would continue moving.

For Julia and Gillian, who'd been solo EDs before, this was something truly impactful. In solo leadership models, the pressure to be always connected while "on vacation" lest decisions go un-made or projects un-progressed is constant. It creates unnecessary stress, and it contributes to either toxic models of leadership or significant burnout. For Paola and Laura, the relevance of trusting collaboration for wellbeing became clear during the pandemic, and learn-

ings from that period showed that the approach to rest was not only expressed through time-off, but also in daily actions. These involved integrating breaks into our work, exploring responsive, accessible ways of working (for example, through audio, if our eyes were tired of screens), and making time to simply check in on each other. This approach also required openness to accept that, sometimes, slowing down is needed for collaborating in a meaningful way.

From an organisational perspective, being able to keep wheels turning meant that critical processes didn't have to be on hold when a co-leader was on either brief or extended leave. It made work itself feel less brittle and likely to crack.

If we feel something, we have to say something.

A leadership team of four from four different sets of lived experiences can mean a lot of learning from our differences. Some of this surfaced in the leadership work we did on DEI alongside our organisational DEI initiative. We practised navigating disagreement or tension, regardless of scale or importance, by speaking up and listening closely when someone else spoke up.

The practice of disagreeing with others in professional settings is one that we each have varying levels of comfort with (based on things like the work and personal cultures we're situated within, our own identities, the languages we

speak, and more). It requires that we're each able to enter conversations with humility and trust. It meant being willing to change our own views, rethink expectations and practise nudging each other in new directions — or to sit comfortably with the unresolvable differences and disagreements.

As individuals, navigating disagreement while remaining united in our ultimate decisions sometimes meant growing comfortable with discomfort. Taking full responsibility for executive level decisions is hard when you are in the minority, and it relies upon a foundation of trust in your fellow co-leaders.

There will be radical differences in the experience.

Along the way, we learned more about the ways our experience as a leadership group was different from, or impacted, the experiences of team members. For example, we learned that it was important to communicate what we knew when we knew it, even when we didn't fully understand something ourselves, which often meant prioritising transparency over our own comfort.

In moments where we weren't clear with the rest of the team — either because we were waiting to fully bake something or because we were so enmeshed in the work amongst ourselves — the team felt lost. (Reasonably!) When there's a close leadership team experience,

it's critical to spend time and care in developing communications, holding space for team member questions, learning from missteps and checking assumptions about who knows what.



a few of our favourite shared
leadership resources

- [Learning from co-leadership](#), our blog post to accompany this booklet!
- [Walking new paths: Practising co-leadership for the futures we want](#). RightsCon 2023 Session.
- The tools and practical, deep research by Ruby Johnson and Devi Leiper O'Malley on [feminist co-leadership](#).
- [The Achieving Transformative Feminist Leadership toolkit](#) from CREA.
- [Doing More with More](#), detailed (and practical!) research on shared leadership journeys.
- [Structuring Leadership: Alternative models for distributing power and decision-making in nonprofit organizations](#) from the Building Movement Project.
- First-hand accounts of shared leadership processes, like those from [Mama Cash](#), [Change Elemental](#), [Urgent Action Fund Asia and the Pacific](#), [Fund for Global Human Rights](#), [FRIDA](#) and many more.

*experimenting with co-
leadership? have questions?*

*we want to hear from you!
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