

# Co-leadership: Alternatives to a Single ED Model

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# 1.0 What is Co-leadership?

Co-leadership is an alternative to traditional models of leading non-profit organizations where there is one person in an Executive Director role. <sup>1</sup> “Co-leadership is not a new model. To the contrary, nonprofit organizations have used co-CEO and co-Executive Director models to divide senior leadership responsibilities and to share accountability since the 1980s. For example, a common way leaders have shared power is by having one co-leader focus on internal operational tasks, while the other co-leader focuses on external-facing responsibilities, like engaging with funders and constituents.”<sup>2</sup>

**This resource is a short, introductory primer on co-leadership.** It does not offer an opinion on co-leadership. Instead, it includes a breakdown of benefits and challenges one might anticipate, along with some considerations for applying this model. It is meant for both current senior leaders and Board members. Lastly, links to additional reading and resources are provided if you want to dive more deeply into this topic.

## 1.1 Co-leadership versus Shared Leadership

Co-leadership and shared leadership may seem like the same thing, but they represent different operational models. Below is a brief description of each of them to help you understand the key differences. **The focus of this resource is on co-leadership.**

*Shared leadership* is a model that adopts ‘self-led’ practices across teams and/or shares decision-making power across multiple levels of an organization. “The shared leadership model conceptualizes leadership as a set of shared practices that can and should be enacted by people at all levels. Leadership is understood as a dynamic and multi-directional group process rather than a role exercised by a select few at the top.”<sup>3</sup> This means that different teams can be responsible for different aspects of leading the organization, without necessarily seeking approval from a more senior leader.

*Co-leadership* describes a model where the role of Executive Director (ED), traditionally a one-person job, is shared by two or more individuals, each responsible for different sets of leadership tasks. For example, with three co-EDs, one might be responsible for administration and operations, one for programming and one for strategy and/or external stakeholder engagement including donor relations. A co-leadership model varies in that it can be adapted or tailored to best suit the needs of individual organizations. Many of the documented examples of non-profits using a co-leadership model are focused on smaller organizations.

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.fplglaw.com/insights/shared-leadership-a-primer-for-nonprofits/>

<sup>2</sup>[Three Nonprofits Share Their Approaches to Co-Leadership | Bridgespan](#)

<sup>3</sup>Carsten Tams, Bye-Bye, Heroic Leadership. Here Comes Shared Leadership, Forbes (2018).

## 2.0 Why Talk about Co-leadership?

Fundamental changes in working environments have led some organizations to reimagine their organizational structures, including exploring alternative leadership models. Socio-economic trends and generational shifts in work preferences show young people moving away from ED positions, and preferring collaborative, flatter structures where leadership is more evenly shared.<sup>4</sup> Attracting new talent to nonprofits can be challenging, and co-leadership has become a way to explore investing in existing staff and building sustained capacities in leadership within organizations. Additionally, the increasingly complex funding and policy environment is challenging to navigate, and some leaders are interested in sharing this journey. Finally, a competitive salary and/or compensation package that might incentivize an ED to be in what is typically a complex, difficult role may be somewhat out of reach of some AIDS Service Organizations (ASOs) and other non-profits.

*“As today’s workplaces have become increasingly knowledge intensive, often depending on collaboration among multiple specialized contributors, theories of leadership are shifting away from their single-minded focus on personal attributes required of heroic leaders at the top”.<sup>1</sup>*

*“[Co-leadership is a model that ultimately challenges some of the...beliefs we hold about leadership—as exemplified by the typical ‘visionary leader’ and ‘rockstar performer’ that we are used to hearing about. All this contributes to the inherent complexity around co-leadership which requires us to redraw many of the traditional ‘lines of power and control’ and be willing to openly welcome a new culture where shared decision-making and accountability are the norm.”<sup>1</sup>*

In 2016, CompassPoint Nonprofit Services brought together five leaders from organizations with co-leadership models to share their “why” when it came to co-leadership. As one of the leaders stated, “sharing leadership is an expression of our individual and organizational identities” and “organizations are experimenting with shared leadership because traditional, hierarchical leadership is not resonant for the individual leaders themselves.”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> <https://buildingmovement.org/blog/sharing-the-hard-decisions-how-co-leaders-can-do-more-together/>

<sup>5</sup> Bell, Cubias, Johnson. “Five Insights from Directors Sharing Power”, Non-Profit Quarterly (2017).

## 2.1 Potential Benefits and Challenges of Co-Leadership

Co-leadership offers some potential opportunities, as well as challenges, that ASOs should be aware of if they are considering this model.

Potential Benefits of Co-leadership	
Combining Strengths for Creative Solutions and Extended Reach	Two or more leaders can not only combine but also complement each other's skills and experiences for creative responses to complex problems. Bringing together unique perspectives can deepen organizational strategy and its ability to be adaptive as the operating environment shifts and changes. The wider range of skills in co-leadership also affords the ASO a chance to sit at a wider range of planning, policy and advocacy tables.
Encouraging a Culture of Collaboration	Shared power and decision-making when modeled in senior leadership can support an organizational culture of collaboration and shared ownership among staff and Board who have the benefit of seeing varying viewpoints leveraged for learning and growth. <sup>6</sup>
Supporting Anti-Racist and Decolonizing Practice	<p>Traditional leadership models are built on colonial hierarchies that uphold individuals as "heroic" leaders, and draw "a neat line between leaders and followers."<sup>7</sup> Co-leadership and practices can support decolonized and collaborative approaches to work. "The collaborative aspect of co-leadership breaks down the more traditional colonial, patriarchal type of decision making,"<sup>8</sup></p> <p>Co-leadership can clear a path to leadership positions for some Black, Indigenous, and racialized people who have found that path blocked by barriers in the labour market and in organizations. It can enhance the opportunity for diverse voices in leadership, which will strengthen the work of the ASO overall.</p>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.bridgespan.org/insights/library/leadership-development/approaches-to-nonprofit-co-leadership>

<sup>7</sup> Carsten Tams, *Bye-Bye, Heroic Leadership. Here Comes Shared Leadership*, *Forbes* (2018).

<sup>8</sup> [Three Nonprofits Share Their Approaches to Co-Leadership | Bridgespan](#)

Potential Benefits of Co-leadership	
	<p><i>**However, see an important caution in the section on “Potential Challenges” on ways in which co-leadership can hinder the progress of racialized leaders, or can potentially do so.</i></p>
<p>Supporting Greater Involvement of People with AIDS/Meaningful Engagement of People with AIDS (GIPA/MEPA)</p>	<p>Co-leadership offers opportunity to take up leadership roles for some PHAs who may have experienced barriers in accessing the labour market and in career mobility in organizations. As a fundamental value in the HIV sector, GIPA/MEPA can possibly be better realized with co-leader models.</p> <p><i>**However, see the cautions in the “Potential Challenges” section on ways in which co-leadership can hinder the progress of PHAs, or can potentially do so.</i></p>
<p>Relieving Isolation and Supporting Retention</p>	<p>Traditional positions of sole leadership can be a lonely experience. Having someone else with similar levels of responsibility and accountability that also has an in-depth understanding of the ASO helps ease this isolation and supports generative dialogue that can enhance the overall quality and breadth of leadership. As a by-product of sharing in the responsibilities and relieving the isolation, co-leadership is shown to reduce the stress individual EDs feel in their roles.<sup>9</sup> This may positively impact ED retention as well.</p>
<p>Creating stability, continuity and sustainability</p>	<p>Co-leadership creates more consistent leadership if someone gets sick, takes a leave, departs the organization, etc. It also eases some of the burden of the role, reducing the potential for burnout and making top leadership positions more manageable.</p> <p>Note that a planned or unexpected ED leave is <b>not</b> recommended as a time to try co-leadership or to create interim leadership unless co-leadership has been very well-planned (e.g., possible co-leaders identified, clear Board support, resources in place to support co-leaders, organizational health and culture can support the model, etc.).</p>

<sup>9</sup> <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/doing-more-with-more-putting-shared-leadership-into-practice/>

Potential Challenges of Co-leadership	
<p>Additional Investment of Time Required</p>	<p>Good co-leadership takes time. Discussions and debates that drive decisions between leaders, and then between co-leaders and staff/Board can slow down planning and implementation of work. Co-leadership may add time to organizational processes.<sup>10</sup></p> <p>It also takes time for an organization to make the shift to a co-leadership model—everything from recruiting and onboarding the right candidates to revising needed policies, processes, and operations standards/documentation (e.g., job descriptions), especially as teams acclimatize to the change in leadership structure. The long view is required to successfully transition to a co-leader model.</p>
<p>Lack of Compatibility and Balance of Workload/Responsibility</p>	<p>The quality of the relationship among co-leaders is an important ingredient for success. As one co-CEO stated, “We had already done a lot of the messy work of learning what it meant to work really closely with one another, how to resolve differences of opinion and perspectives ....”<sup>11</sup> . It may be possible that co-leadership works with certain people in place, but when one of them leaves, and new personalities come on to the team, it may be more difficult to apply as a model.</p> <p>An imbalance in levels of commitment or work ethic among co-leaders can cause resentment. It can also leave staff and Board confused about who to go to for what.</p> <p>People in a co-leader model will typically need support to negotiate their respective job responsibilities or foster healthy, productive relationships, just as we all do. The Board and/or externally hired coaches usually need to invest time and/or money to help ensure success.</p>

<sup>10</sup> <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/directors-sharing-power-leadership/>

<sup>11</sup> [Three Nonprofits Share Their Approaches to Co-Leadership | Bridgespan](#)



Potential Challenges of Co-leadership	
Friction between co-leaders can be Divisive	Unresolved conflict among co-leaders can be divisive for people at the organization, and difficult for the Board to manage. Given that small nonprofits, including many ASOs, do not always have the benefit of a designated Human Resource Lead to mediate as needed, conflict among co-leaders can have a strong ripple effect throughout the organization, negatively impacting culture and morale. And, if one of the co-leaders feels the Board is supporting or siding with the other(s) in the conflict, this can increase tensions.
Defining Clear Decision-Making and Lines of Accountability	While certain decisions, responsibilities or job functions are easier to assign to one co-leader or another, others don't align so neatly, and require collaboration, especially related to risk management. If these aren't identified, or if a process isn't worked out in such cases, it can lead to issues such as incomplete or poor decision-making or confusion for staff about what actions to take in any given situation.
Reinforcing or replicating discriminatory or unequitable practices for PHAs or for Black, Indigenous and racialized people.	<p>Just as there are opportunities to break down barriers to positions of leadership in ASOs faced by PHAs and/or by Black, Indigenous and racialized people, it is important to remember that the default for Black, Indigenous and racialized people and/or PHAs should NOT be co-leadership.</p> <p>As one racialized co-leader put it, "From a racial equity perspective, we shouldn't <i>expect</i> leaders of colour to share leadership. Let's not tell them they need to have a co-leader. Because we've had many white leaders for decades and we never expected them to have a co-CEO."<sup>12</sup></p>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.bridgespan.org/insights/library/leadership-development/approaches-to-nonprofit-co-leadership>

## 3.0 Cultivating an Organizational Environment for Co-leadership

While co-leadership can offer rewarding outcomes, its potential challenges need to also be considered. So, what do organizations need to have in place for co-leadership to thrive, and what kind of potential co-leaders do you need to recruit? Below are the key conditions seen in well-functioning co-led organizations, and some questions for your organization to reflect on if you are thinking about co-leadership.

	Conditions	Questions to Consider...
1.	Commitment to anti-racism/anti-oppression, including anti-Black racism and anti-Indigenous racism	<p>Does our organization have a stated, formalized commitment to anti-racism/anti-oppression? How are we committing to anti-Black racism and anti-Indigenous racism? Do we have processes, policies and systems that support that commitment?</p> <p>Have we explored how to use anti-racism/anti-oppression principles and practices in the process of exploring co-leadership so that we can reduce unintentional discrimination or oppression? Have we checked in on unconscious bias?</p> <p>Are our current and potential co-leaders, and other people in our organization, comfortable talking about our feelings and power dynamics in the workplace, especially conversations that can come up about racism or other oppressions in the workplace that can be uncomfortable or difficult? How can we foster that?</p>
2.	High trust and investment in relationship-building	<p>Does our organization have an ongoing commitment to building culture of transparency and trust?</p> <p>How does our organization—and the potential co-leaders—value and model mutual respect, power sharing, humility, and learning?</p>

	Conditions	Questions to Consider...
		<p>How does our organization prioritize building strong, trusting relationships between all staff? Between leaders and the Board?</p>
3.	<p>Leaders that value direct, timely feedback &amp; conflict resolution</p>	<p>How could we support current or potential co-leaders to give feedback directly and with ease, and to have good mechanisms in place to address conflicts effectively?</p> <p>How can we invest in our current or potential co-leaders by offering coaching or mentoring, and providing proper supervision?</p>
4.	<p>Stable, well-functioning organization with fundamental management practices in place, and a solid plan to prepare the organization for the transition to co-leadership</p>	<p>Does our organization have clear mission, vision and values that are aligned with our work and our practices?</p> <p>Is our Board clear and united about why we might move to this kind of model?</p> <p>Does our organization have comprehensive human resource and financial practices and policies?</p> <p>Does our organization have stable finances?</p> <p>Are we stable enough in terms of both services and operations to take the time needed to make a change to co-leadership?</p>
5.	<p>Clear set of responsibilities and clear accountability mechanisms</p>	<p>Does our organization have clearly defined roles, responsibilities, and lines of accountability right now that we can build from?</p> <p>Have we worked out an equitable division of responsibilities for co-leaders, considering parity around emotional labour and handling conflict, risk and other organizational challenges?</p> <p>Have we thought about the decisions or processes that don't clearly align to one of the proposed co-leader divisions?</p>

	Conditions	Questions to Consider...
6.	Transparent, proactive communication, between leaders and staff and between the leadership and the Board	<p>Does our organization communicate clearly and regularly with internal and external stakeholders? Do we have regularly updated communication plans?</p> <p>Does our organization have a healthy Board right now? Could it support a change like this? What would the Board need to embark on a change like this?</p> <p>Have we worked out a process to ensure all co-leaders report to and communicate to the Board, to ensure transparency and to offer the Board the full breadth of strategic and organizational viewpoints?</p> <p>Does my organization hold regular staff meetings, and is it possible to ensure that in a co-leadership model, all co-leaders are meeting with staff?</p> <p>Does my organization have an effective way of addressing conflict right now, or would we have to develop that?</p>
7.	Iterative planning and implementation/explicitly supporting experimentation	<p>Does my organization have a learning culture that supports experimentation and making mistakes?</p> <p>Have we planned for a phased implementation with built-in reviews, reflection and course corrections, so that we can tailor our model to our unique situation?</p>

## 4.0 Where to go for More Information?

There is much to learn about co-leadership, and to do a deeper study is highly recommended. Below is a mix of resources from articles to books that can help.

1. [Three Nonprofits Share Their Approaches to Co-Leadership](#), Meera Chary, The Bridgespan Group, 2022



2. [Doing More with More: Putting Shared Leadership into Practice](#), Michael Allison, Susan Misra and Elissa Perry, Nonprofit Quarterly, 2018
3. [Shared Leadership: A Primer for Nonprofits](#), Linda J. Rosenthal, JD, The For-Purpose Law Group, 2021
4. [Sharing the Hard Decisions: How Co-Leaders can do More Together](#), Frances Kunreuther, Building Movement Project, 2015
5. [Bridging competing demands through co-leadership? Potential and limitations](#), Émilie Gibeau, Ann Langley, Nicolas van Schendel, The Tavistock Institute, 2019
6. [Publications - Ananda Valenzuela](#)
7. [Our Decision to Transition to a Co-Directorship - Asian Pacific Environmental Network \(apen4ej.org\)](#)