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# Distributed Leadership: Practices, Structures and Culture

*Professor Deborah Ancona*  
*Elaine Backman 2009*





# Leadership

Leadership is taking responsibility to engage with others in achieving shared purpose in the face of uncertainty. --Ganz





# Distributed Leadership

Leadership is widely dispersed throughout the organization and across organizational boundaries; may be exercised by individuals regardless of whether they are in formal positions of authority and where they are in the formal chain of command





# Related Research Streams

## Shared Leadership

**Genesis:** team research

**T. Foundations:** group process/leadership;  
network T./ collective learning

e.g., Brown & Gioia 2002; Carson, Tesluk & Marrone 2007; Manz & Sims 1993, Pearce & Conger 2003; Pearce & Sims 2002

## Distributed Leadership in Education

**Genesis:** school reform

**T. Foundations:** activity theory; distributed cognition

e.g., Bennett, Wise, Woods & Harvey 2003; Elmore 2000 & 2002, Gronn 2002; MacBeath 2005; Spillane and Diamond 2007

## Complexity Leadership

**Genesis:** applying complexity/chaos T. to human systems

**T. Foundations:** complexity/chaos T.; collective intelligence

e.g., Brown & Eisenhardt 1998; Hazy, Goldstein & Lichtenstein 2007; Uhl-Bien & Marion 2008; Uhl-Bien, Marion & McKelvey 2007)

## Post-Bureaucratic Leadership

**Genesis:** Macro trends in organizational structure, post-bureaucratic organizations

**T. Foundations:** Weberian/network T/Labor Studies

e.g., Heckscher 1994; Heckscher and Adler 2006; Kochan 2007; Macoby and Heckscher 2007; Pettigrew, et al 2003



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# Research: Field Exploration

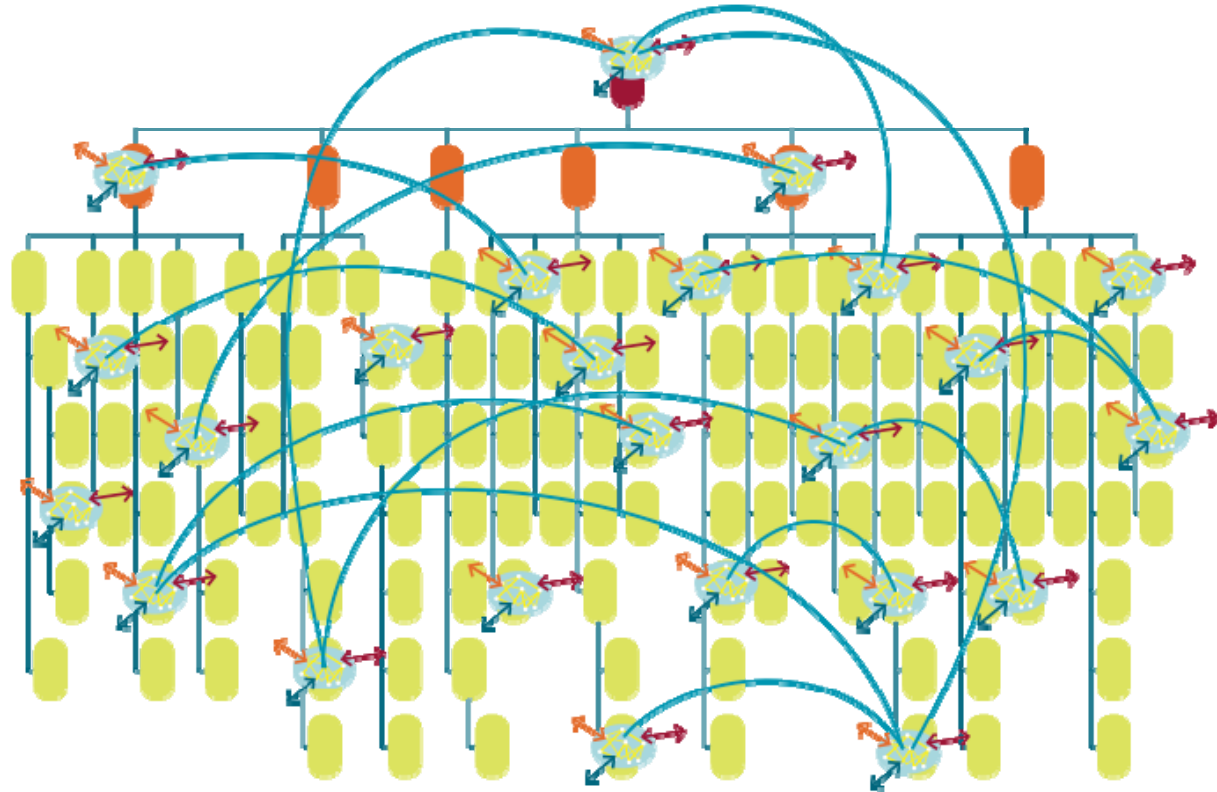
Studies across the four organizational buckets:

- Traditional Hierarchies
- Flat (DL DNA Orgs)
- Nimble Networks
- Cross-Organizational





# Distributed Leadership in Hierarchies



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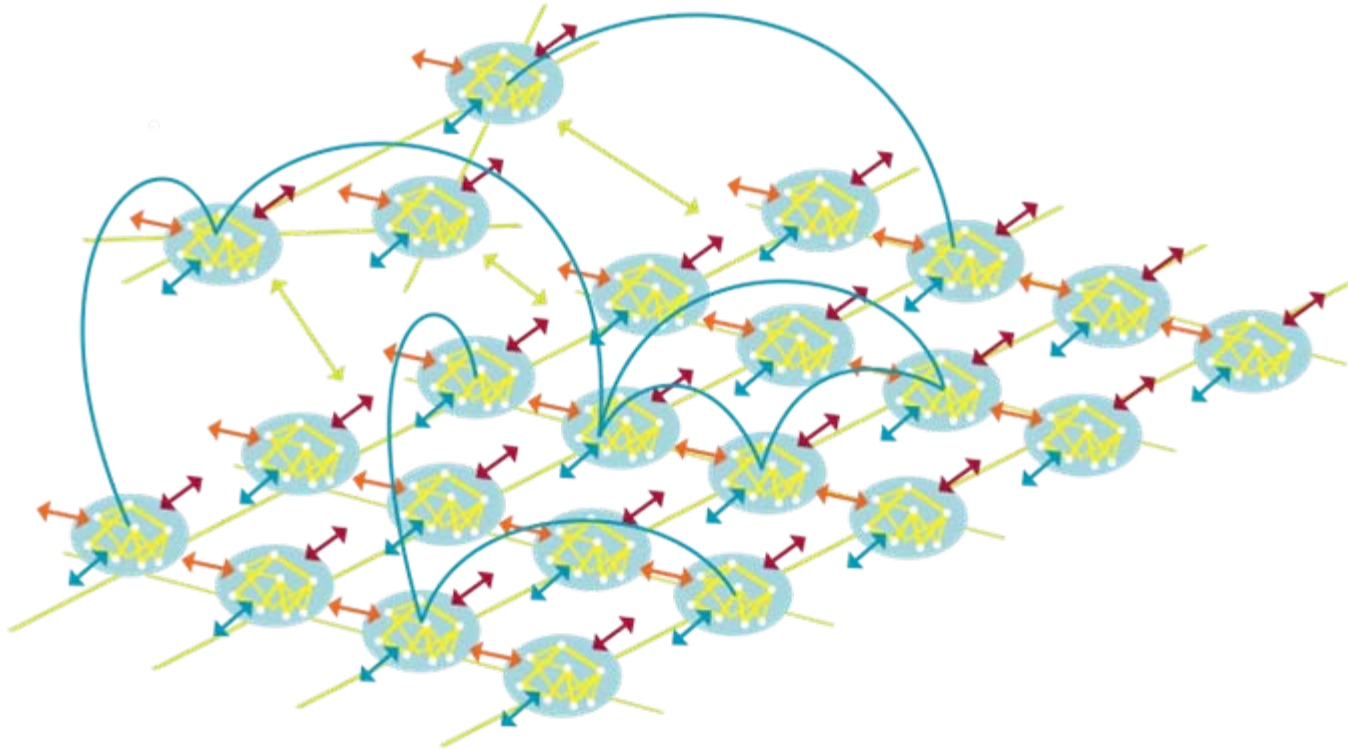


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# Distributed Leadership in Flat Organizations



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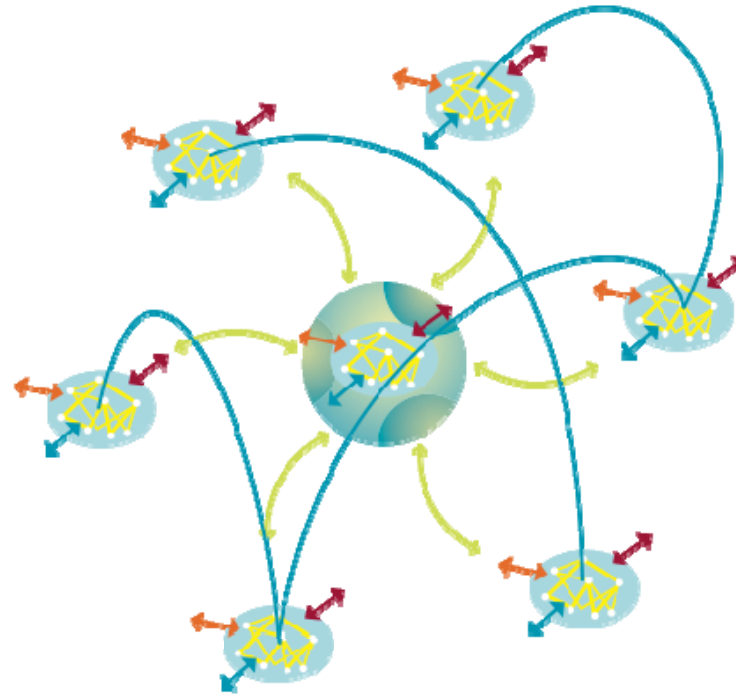


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# Distributed Leadership in Nimble Networks



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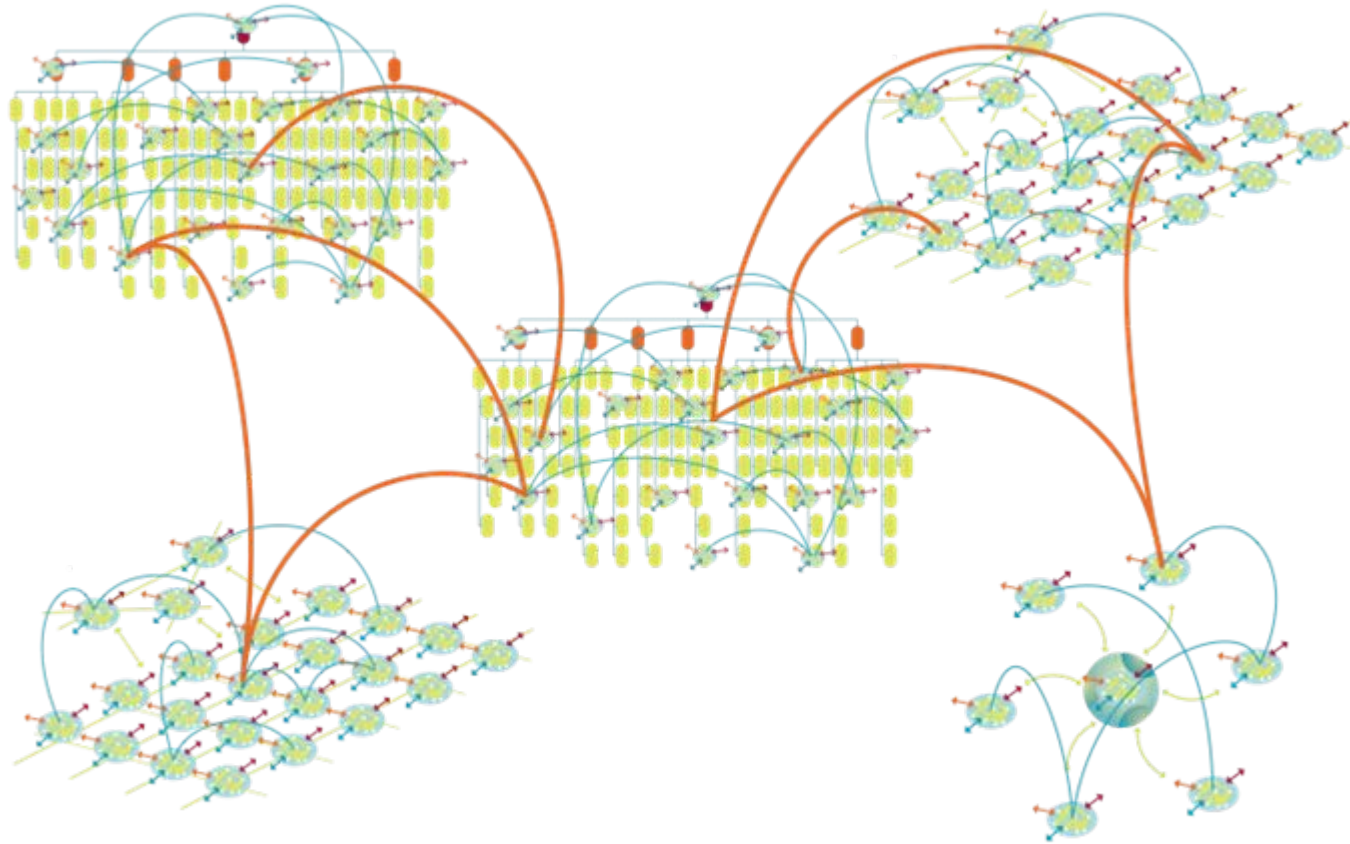


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# Distributed Leadership Across Organizations



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# Three Research Questions

1. What are the key elements of a well-functioning distributed leadership system?
2. Can we measure the overall level or type of distributed leadership within an organization?
3. How do different levels and patterns of distributed leadership affect organizational outcomes?



# 6 Elements of D.L.

- Collaboration
- Local Entrepreneurship
- Global Purpose
- Multi-directional Decision Making
- Alignment
- Control





## Distributed Leadership Audit

LEADERSHIP ACTIVITY	within-unit	cross-unit	cross-level	cross-organizational
COORDINATING WORK				
option:				
• generation ↓				
• vetting ↓				
• selection ↓				
ASSIGNING RESOURCES				
option:				
• generation ↓				
• vetting ↓				
• selection ↓				
SETTING STRAT. GOALS				
option:				
• generation ↓				
• vetting ↓				
• selection ↓				

Total DL

