

Distributed leadership

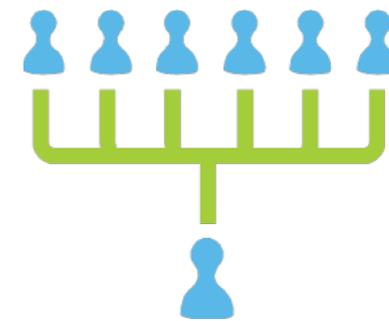
The complexity of

distributed forms of
leadership in practice

Dr Howard Youngs

‘Distributed leadership’ has increasingly become part of the educational leadership landscape in the 21st century and reflects the current emphasis on leadership as a collective in the general leadership field (Grint, 2011) ...

... even though leadership has always had a distributed, as well as, an individual concentrated aspect to it.



Unfortunately, distributed leadership has become a slippery and elastic concept, loosely used by many (Hartley, 2007; Torrance, 2009). It lacks a critical conceptualisation (Youngs, 2009).

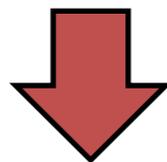
This morning my aim with you is to show how distributed leadership does not fit into a tidy 'box' as a unitary construct of leadership. Instead I argue that it needs to be re-theorised into distributed forms of leadership that exist in hybrid configurations of concentrated and dispersed/emergent leadership, where positional authority and symbolic power co-exist.

- 1. What is published?**
- 2. What distributed forms can emerge in practice?**
- 3. What re-thinking is needed?**



A distributed perspective of leadership is distinctly different from a normative approach

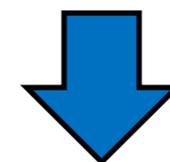
A focus on describing and understanding leadership practice



Descriptive research studies

Tendency to be apolitical and devoid of commentary on effectiveness

In education: an intention to distribute leadership so that staff relations and student outcomes improve



Normative research studies

Tendency to be apolitical, simplistic, and glosses over the complexity of practice

Typologies of leadership distribution

These can be grouped into two clusters

Organisational cluster

Authorised (Gunter, 2005)

Formal distribution (MacBeath, 2005; Spillane et al., 2004)

Representational (Harris, 2006)

Planful alignment (Gronn, 2000; Leithwood et al., 2007)

Classical, where existing structures are used (Thorpe et al., 2011)

Aggregated (Gronn, 2000)

Holistic cluster

Dispersed and democratic (Gunter, 2005)

Opportunistic and cultural (MacBeath, 2005)

Emergent (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Harris, 2006; Thorpe et al., 2011)

Spontaneous (Gronn, 2000; Leithwood et al., 2007; Spillane et al., 2004)

Autonomous (Harris, 2009)

Over time there has been a growing acknowledgement of complexity. The two clusters illustrate hybridity and support Gronn's (2011) argument that leadership distribution is orchestrated AND emergent.

Research studies of distributed leadership

Context: education, mainly schools
61 studies from 2003 - 2011

No one way of defining or describing 'distributed leadership' practice;

Leadership stretches over formal and informal aspects of an organisation and arises in-between or as a result of, the interactions that take place between individuals and/or groups.

Distributed forms can exist in conjunction with authority making distributed leadership in all its guises an inherently political concept.

Complexity and hybridity are evident.

Meta-themes
Trust
Organisational management processes (orchestration)
The importance of context

“Distributed leadership”

‘Distributed forms of leadership’

Distributed through organisational structures in parallel

Stepping up

Boundary spanning group leadership

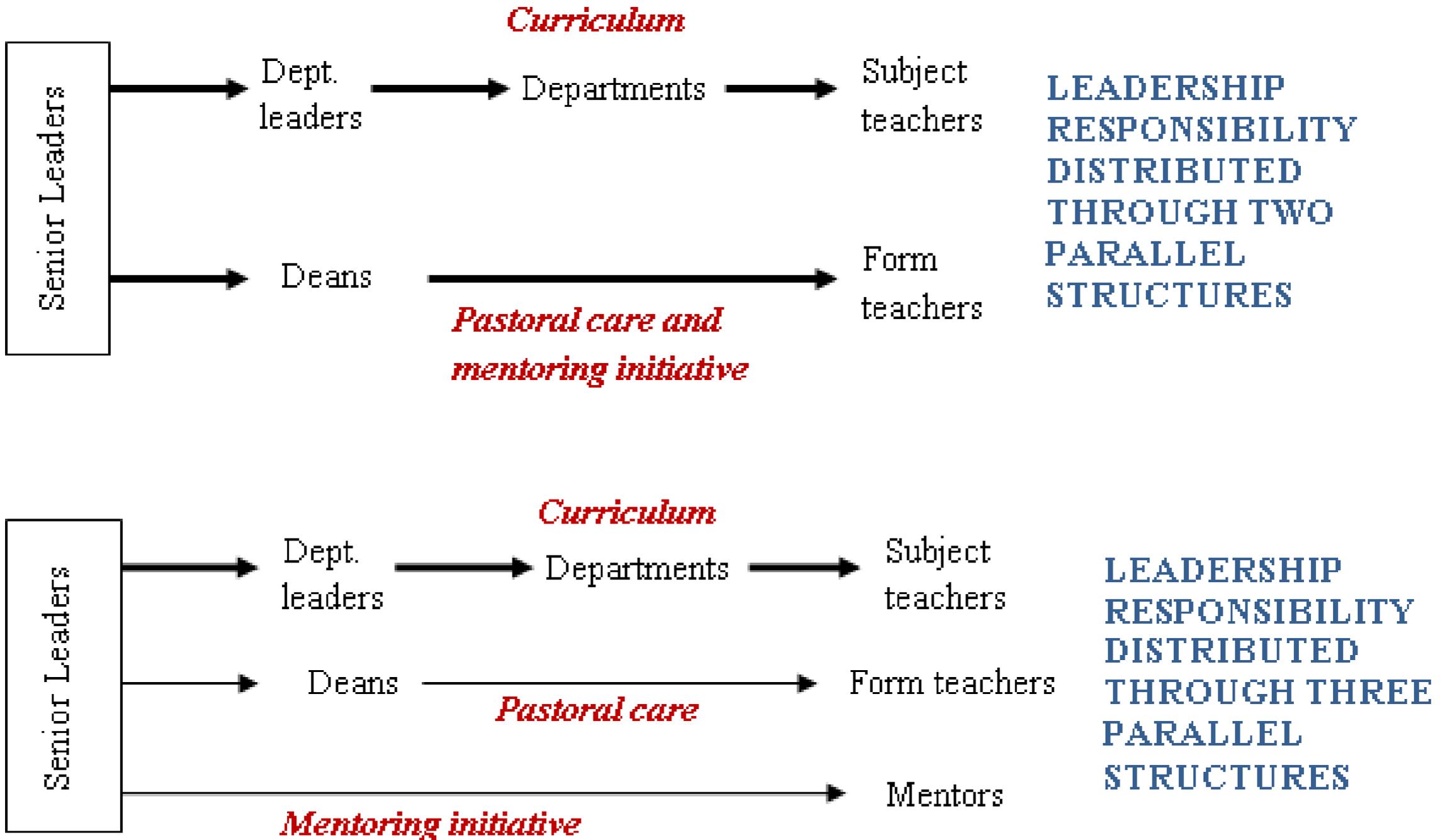
Stepping in and stepping back: The management of emergence

Two case studies

Nearly two years



Distributed through in parallel





Stepping up

A distributed form of leadership that looked different in each school

It was evident in two ways:

Cognitive: middle leaders were expected to ‘step up’ from silo to school-wide thinking.

Behavioural and attitudinal: Responsible risk-taking, others emerged, their voice was valued. Reporting back.

The flip side

“It is not ‘our’ responsibility”

Initiative overload

Finite capacity



Stepping in and stepping back: *The management of emergence*

‘Senior’ leaders stand back to create the space for individuals and groups to emerge, have voice and can engage in responsible risk-taking. Deference (Goffman, 1956) is a key here.

Structures and systems enable leadership emergence. Staff have a sense of collective direction. There is pro-active intervention from formal leaders.

The flip side

Leadership becomes a congested space

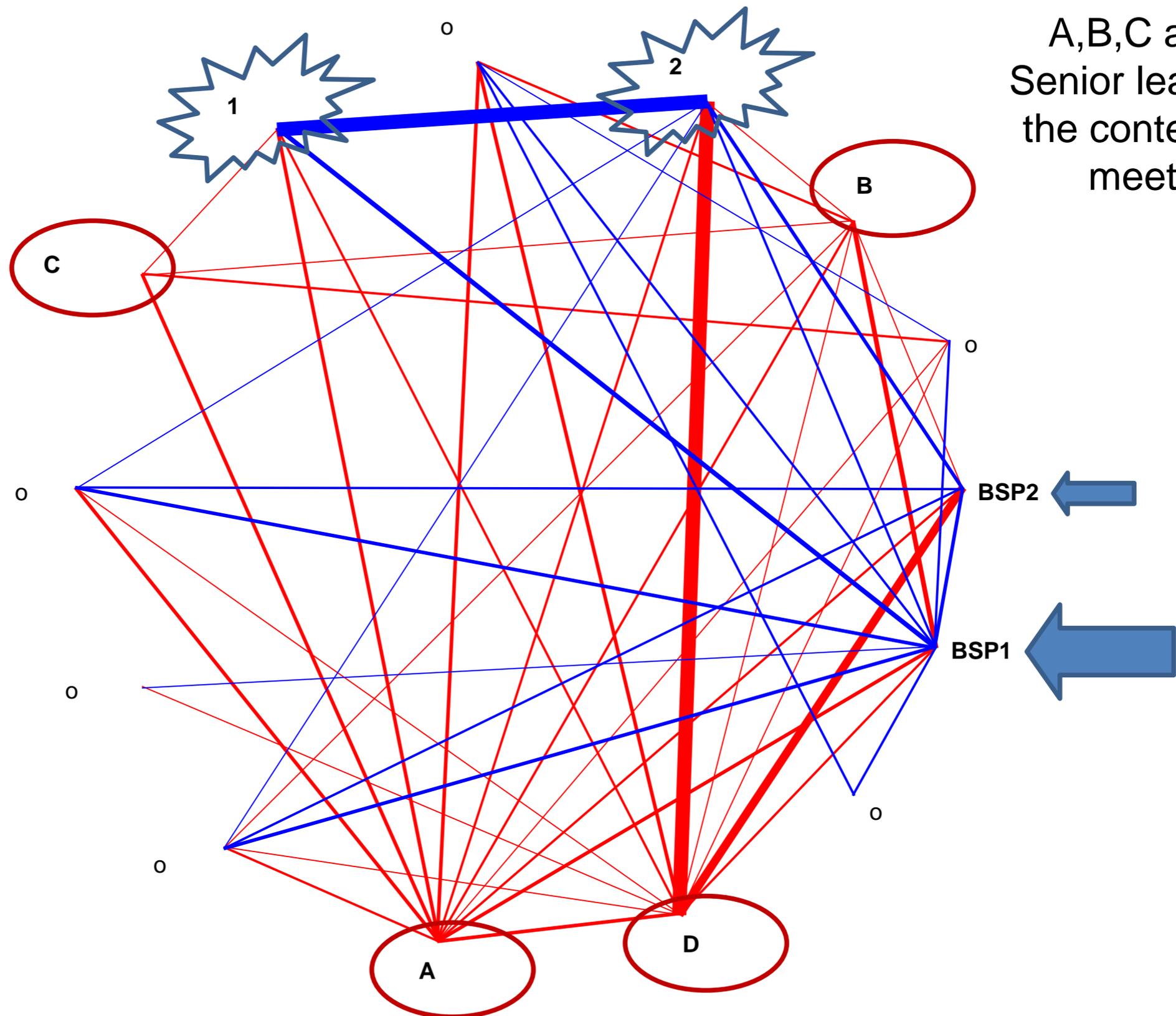
Too much structure and middle management undermines initiative

Lack of organisational and group cultural awareness – people need to know the ‘rules of the game’

Boundary spanning as it occurred (one example)

Sociogram of interactions

A,B,C and D
Senior leaders in
the context of a
meeting



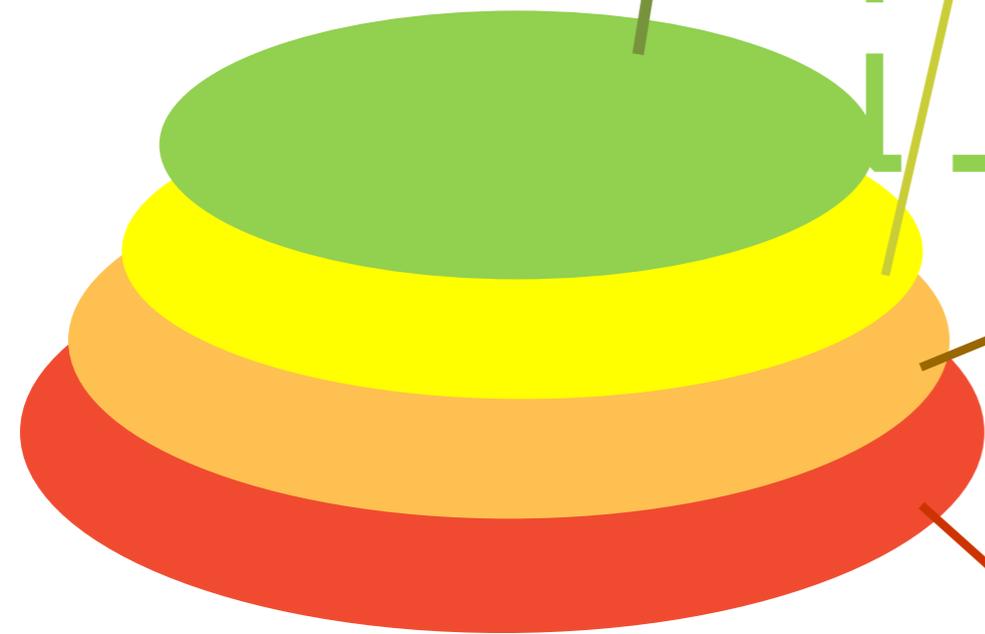
BSP = boundary spanner

But what lies beneath?

Why are distributed forms so different and change over time?

It is here where a sociological and critical framework can help.

Applying an analytical framework to distributed forms



1st LEVEL:
Organisational forms of leadership

2nd LEVEL:
Emergent forms of leadership

3rd LEVEL:
Current profession, social, cultural and political contexts

4th LEVEL:
Past profession, social, cultural and political contexts

Hybrid configurations of leadership practice

A critical and sociological perspective is required to move beyond 1st and 2nd level analysis. 1st level analysis only, tends to over-emphasise 'official forms' that support a normative view of distributed leadership.

Possible questions:

Given the emphasis in this paper on merging authority with symbolic power what are the implications:

firstly for leadership development?

and secondly for research of leadership in organisations (and groups)?

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