Effective Structures of Collective Leadership:
A critical incidents’ study of the “Indignados” Protest Camps in Spain

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Abstract

This study will explore the “indignados” (outraged) protests in Spain, characterized by their endorsement of participatory democracy and their use of collective leadership in decision-making and camp organization. Collective leadership involves multiple people collaborating in leadership to attain their common goals (Méndez, Howell, & Bishop, 2011). Using a grounded theory methodology based on the analysis of semi-structured interviews of camp protestors, this study will analyze critical incidents of effective and ineffective collective leadership in camps’ committees and assemblies. Based on the analyses of protesters’ interviews, the paper will outline a theory of effective and ineffective dynamics of collective leadership, advancing the existing literature in its understanding of the different forms of collective leadership and their impact on group outcomes.
Objectives and Significance

“I demand a new conception for people’s participation on decision-making that is coherent with our times. This representative system, inherited from the bourgeois revolution, does not represent anyone. The distance between citizens and government keeps growing. One of the challenges in constructing a society 3.0 is addressing this demand for global participation; decentralizing power and letting the citizens make their own decisions.” (Álvarez, 2011, p.17)

Spain’s “outraged” or “indignados” movement begun in 2011 and has been characterized by their indignant reaction to the economic gains of the financiers responsible for the economic crisis, by questioning representative democracy’s ability to protect citizens from corruption and power abuses, and also by their support of participatory democracy (Gándara, 2011; Democracy 4.0, 2012). The Spanish camps of “indignados” emerged in a climate of young worldwide protests that included the “Arab spring” in Tunisia and Egypt, the “kitchenware revolution” in Iceland, the “desperate generation” in Portugal, the “outraged” protests in Greece, and the “occupy” movement in the U.S.A (Andersen, 2011; Euronews, 2011; Jornal de Notícias, 2011; Roddy, 2009). Despite the strong differences among these groups in specific demands and sociopolitical backgrounds, all have been formed primarily by educated young people that expressed their dissatisfaction with their national governments, which they perceived to be dysfunctional, corrupted, and unable to correct its own deficiencies. In Spain, the “indignados” built tent camps in the main cities of the country, organizing themselves first through social networks and then, in their camps, using assemblies and committees. Groups of campers would frequently seat together to make decisions that went from the establishment of their points of protest to the management of their camps, including task forces in charge of lightning and cleaning (Ebola, 2011).
The camps are now dismantled and the lack of leadership in the “indignados” movement has often been proposed as an important reason for its failure (Paniagua, 2011). However, it would not be accurate to say that this movement did not have leadership. On the contrary, the movement appears to have experienced abundance of leadership carried on collectively instead of having a single leader. This is what we call collective leadership, which involves multiple people collaborating in leadership to attain their common goals (Méndez, Howell, & Bishop, 2011), and which seems to resonate better with the new generations and fit the new tools for social organization (the social networks). Moreover, there is so much to be learned from this experience that we can hardly call the “indignados” protests a “failed movement”. Instead, we should explore in what other ways these young protesters are going to express their values of democracy, respect, and honesty in the future. It seems likely that we will see many of these committed protesters engage in entrepreneurship and social entrepreneurship in the years to come. Drawing lessons from this experience and learning about the factors that made their collective organization effective or ineffective will be important to help younger generations develop organizations that embody their values.

The objective of this study is, therefore, to explore critical incidents of effective and ineffective collective leadership in camps of “indignados” and inquire about the specific dynamics within each incident. This knowledge is likely to enhance the effective collective leadership of organizations with high levels of member participation and democratic decision-making.

Theoretical framework of this project

Traditional views of leadership often describe effective leaders as individuals characterized by specific personality traits, like cognitive ability, masculinity, and self-confidence (Lord, de Vader, & Alliger, 1986), or those who that effectively demonstrate behaviors that effectively address to the needs of their followers and the characteristics of the task and the situation (House, 1971). The assumption behind these theories is that the group is more effectively led by the person that possesses the best qualities for leadership, ignoring the possibility that the best leadership in the group may result from a combination of valuable efforts from multiple people within the group, or even further, from all group members. A number of authors have questioned this assumption in the past and proposed multiple constructs of collective leadership (i.e.: shared leadership, distributed leadership, collective leadership, peer leadership, co-leadership), which are frequently assumed to be equivalent to each other and descriptive of the same phenomenon (Avolio, Jung, Murry, & Sivasubramaniam, 1996; Bales, 1954; Barry, 1991; Benne & Sheets, 1948; Carson, Tesluk, & Marrone, 2007; Gibb, 1954; Gronn, 2002; Pearce & Sims, 2002). A careful exploration of these different constructs, however, evidences the complexity and variety of collective leadership phenomena and the importance of studying its
different dynamics in greater depth (Day, Gronn, & Salas, 2006; Méndez, Howell, & Bishop, 2011).

This study fills a gap in the existing literature on collective leadership in two different ways. First, it will go beyond the exploration of antecedents and consequences of collective leadership that has been the main focus of prior empirical research in this area with very few exceptions (Barker, 1993; Barry, 1991), to explore in real settings the dynamics that develop in groups that engage in collective leadership. Of particular interest is the study of the effects of the formalization of the leadership process – by establishing and communicating specific leadership roles, creating rules for role assignment or rotation, developing formal decision-making processes, etc. – and how this formalization is related to higher performance in collective leadership. In fact, formalization of roles and rules for decision-making have been identified by Seifter and Economy (2001) as key in the excellence of performance by the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, a conductorless orchestra. Second, the study will explore collective leadership in a very non-traditional setting, that contrasts heavily with the more traditional settings of previous empirical research, which included including manufacturing task-forces, top-management teams, consulting teams, new ventures, and non-profit organizations (Avolio, Jung, Murry, and Suvasubramaniam, 1996; Barker, 1993; Barry, 1991; Carson, Tesluk, & Marrone, 2007; Pearce & Sims, 2002; Pearce, Yoo, and Alavi, 2004). I expect that this less traditional setting may have worked like a wonderful, big-scale laboratory of collective leadership that may have generated a higher degree of organizational improvisation and innovation. These conditions may have produced creative approaches to lead collectively that have not yet been captured by studies performed on more traditional organizations.

Methods and Data Analysis Plan

This study will be conducted using a grounded theory study that will explore critical incidents of effective and ineffective collective leadership dynamics – using the original methodology proposed by Glaser & Strauss (1967) and expanding with the additions of Strauss & Corbin (1990). Data will be gathered in semi-structured interviews with protesters that participated in a minimum of 5 organization or decision-making activities of “indignados” camps in the main cities of Galicia, a Northwest region of Spain. Because of “emergent” quality of the theories developed using this methodology, the sample size and composition will depend on the results obtained throughout the data gathering and analysis process, based on the emergence of new ideas in the interviews that indicate the need to collect additional data (that is, using a “theoretical sampling” method). Interviews will explore critical incidents of effective and ineffective collective organization in the outraged camps. Questions like the following are likely to be used:
- Think of a time that you participated in a group within the camp that you thought worked very well together or had very good results. Describe the activity of this group. What helped the group work so well/attain those good results?

- Think of a time that you participated in a group within the camp that you thought didn’t work very well together or did not attain very good results. Describe the activity of this group. What do you think hurt the group’s activity?

Each critical incident (of both good and bad organization) will be read to identify themes within the narrative. The emerging themes of the first interviews will be considered in the coding of themes emerged in subsequent interviews until theoretical saturation is attained (until no new themes emerge from the interviews).

**Activities Planned**

1. Initial contacts with “indignados” protesters in cities of Galicia (northwest of Spain) - *April and May 2012*
2. Preparation of materials and participation in e-workshop training on NVivo 9.0 (qualitative analysis software) – *May 2012*
3. Execution of interviews, transcription, and analysis of data in Spain – *June to August 2012*
4. Result discussion will be written following the data analysis – *September to October 2012*
5. Review of the relevant literature for the article will be performed after data collection to follow the process guidelines established by Strauss & Corbin (1998) – *November to December 2012.*
6. Paper submission to the Academy of Management annual meeting - *January 2013*
7. Using the feedback from the conference in March, submission of the paper for publication to Administrative Science Quarterly - *May 2013.*

**Outcomes expected**

The methodology used in this study, grounded theory, requires the researchers conducting and analyzing the interviews to let the outcomes emerge from the data without affecting these results with their personal biases. Hence, the theories generated in the study should be shaped by the participants’ views and not those of the researcher or by the prior literature (the literature review is typically performed after the data collection and analysis to avoid biasing the results). Whereas the feasibility of a perfectly objective analysis of the data can be questionable (and has been subject to long debates in the relevant literature), it is the responsibility of the researcher to avoid developing concrete expectations that could compromise the results. I feel that I come into this project without an agenda but with certain curiosity based on my prior research experiences.
Qualifications of the Grant Director
Collective leadership is my field of study and the focus of my dissertation. It has generated several papers on the study of different forms of collective leadership and on the effects of collective leadership on team outcomes and gender egalitarianism. My prior research, on this and other topics, has been published in peer reviewed academic journals, books, and presented in peer reviewed conferences in the areas of management and leadership. In 2011, one of my papers on collective leadership was awarded by the International Academy of Management and Business. In regards to the methodology I will use in this paper, grounded theory was a significant portion of my training as a Ph.D. student and one of the main areas of study for my comprehensive exam. To improve my familiarity with the software NVivo 9.0, that will be used to analyze the interviews and identify themes, I will participate in a eeworkshop that is scheduled to go from May 14 to May 18 this year.

Previous Grants Received
I have not been the recipient of grants intended to fund research in the past. I did receive in 2010 an IU South Bend Distance Learning grant awarded by the University Center for Excellence in Teaching for the development of an online course. Two sections of this course were offered on fall 2010, and also on spring and fall of 2011, and spring 2012.

Efforts underway to obtain additional funding
I have not applied for additional funding for this project.

Budget
The grant requested will provide the time necessary to conduct this research study. This time will be dedicated to conducting, transcribing and analyzing the interviews, which will require at least two months of work. The budget is detailed below:

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