

# Co-leadership Literature Review & Reading List

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### (1) [Co-CEOs: Are Two Better than One?](#)

Russ Banham  
Chief Executive

Both leaders know 'business' inside and out, divided up external and internal. Having clear areas of focus gives autonomy to make decisions without the need for consensus each time. Collaborate on 'big' decisions (definition of 'big'?). Good communication between both co-leaders vital is. Need to be aligned. Check egos. Complement each other's skill set.

### (2) [Three Nonprofits Share Their Approaches to Co-Leadership](#)

Meera Chary  
The Bridgespan Group

More and more nonprofits are diverging from the traditional "executive director" hierarchy and exploring co-leadership as an opportunity to share power and plan for their organizations' futures.

How to avoid pitfalls:

- Consider dynamic: prior collaboration can be effective
- Avoid rushing into it: strategic, intentional decision-making and hiring
- Don't set co-leadership in stone

### (3) [Is CEO a Two-Person Job?](#)

John Gerzema & Will Johnson (co-CEOs of Harris Polling)  
Harvard Business Review

**Why:**

- Being a CEO in today's fast-paced world requires too much for one person; constant learning, growth, and innovation while maintaining a strong, inclusive culture that nurtures a fatigued workforce
- Their cross-cultural poll found: empathy, selflessness, collaboration, expressiveness, flexibility, and patience were the most desirable traits for leaders, but the truth is that some measure of decisiveness and aggressiveness are also still needed.
- Very few can be left- and right-brained, single-minded and collaborative, and otherwise superhuman; a co-CEO model allows for the two to complement each other
- It also creates more succession opportunities for the C-suite

**How:**

1. *Pick the right partner:* very much a professional marriage; shared trust, respect, clear communication common vision and values a must; ability to manage conflicts

2. *Set clear expectations*: set clear performance standards and establish joint accountability; clear lanes and mutual accountability for 2 high-performing individuals is all you need
3. *Define roles and responsibilities*: ensure full organization understands who owns what, who makes which decisions (added benefit of this is it allows each to specialize, develop ongoingly and mentor in their areas); mitigate bottlenecks requiring both or too many people on any single decision, and allows the partner to come in with a fresh perspective to assist with sticky challenges
4. *Distribute authority but not responsibility*: While each partner has individual duties, both must fundamentally remain a leadership unit, one in which successes and setbacks alike are owned together; compensation, rewards and penalties jointly owned and accepted

#### (4) [Two CEOs, No Drama: Ground Rules for Co-Leadership](#)

Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries

INSEAD Blog

##### **Factors for success**

The two leaders:

- are prepared to critically challenge and support each other
- possess complementary leadership styles
- clearly defined roles separated by skill and style (i.e. visionary and integrator)

**Characteristics**: complementary leadership styles and/or skillsets

**Potential benefits**: can yield more creative and better-quality strategic solutions.

#### (5) [The Leadership Team: Complementary Strengths or Conflicting Agendas?](#)

Stephen A. Miles and Michael D. Watkins

Harvard Business Review

##### **Summary:**

- Need to consider the full executive team whether 2 to 3 people or an exec committee.
- Complementary Executive teams outperform solo leaders or teams that do not have complementary skills, experiences and strengths
- Need to plan for succession in any of the roles within the context of the team/ don't just replace by JD or technical skills but look for complementary people to fill gaps that will be created

##### **Why:**

"...fundamental limits on a single person's ability to focus attention, acquire new capabilities, process information, and play diverse social roles. Indeed, the limitations of people's information-processing capacity, which are well documented, make it impossible for one individual to manage a large and complex enterprise."

## Models:

1. one leader (usually the CEO) the job of managing the external environment, while her counterpart (often the COO) concentrates on internal management issues; or
2. divvy up tasks to designate executives to take primary responsibility for different business areas or functional groups

Should be complementary against one or more axis:

1. *expertise complementarity*: clear-cut division of responsibilities (i.e. a CEO with a Sales and Marketing background and a COO with an engineering, tech or product development background)
2. *cognitive complementarity*: involves differences in how individuals process information- i.e. Visionary and Integrator
3. *role complementarity*: leaders often play discrete and complementary social roles in organizations, i.e. one leader provides the “pull” through rewards and inspiration and another provides the “push” through disciplined goal setting and sanctions. Exs. Warrior/ Diplomat; Guardian/ Entrepreneur

Examples: Microsoft- Visionary/Integrator; Starbucks- visionary, administrator, and merchant

## Risks:

- lack of clarity on roles/responsibilities/reporting structures
- achieving and sustaining agreement about organizational priorities
- team members’ similarities in certain areas may interfere with the team’s overall complementarity. That too much overlap in the Venn diagram depicting members’ tasks, areas of expertise, mind-sets, or social roles. The problem may be more than redundancy—competition for how to do certain functions.

## Four pillars to make it work:

1. A common vision
2. Common incentives: rowing in same direction with same core focus as in 1 year goals
3. Communication: near constant communication and well-established protocols
4. Trust: provides the freedom to have conflict before forming a plan and to make mistakes and bounce back/fail forward and come together for the good of the organization

## Succession:

- More of a challenge the more complementary the roles
- Example: a COO (integrator) promoted to CEO (visionary) can leave a gap; can they hire and trust a new integrator? Do they have the skills to develop vision and big ideas and keep the entrepreneurial spirit?

- The skills that make a good integrator are rare and hard to pivot/convert; few executives can play all the roles well
- Need to play to strengths and weaknesses in succession planning as well

**Options:**

- When a COO type has the skills to move into a CEO position, the CEO should groom them and give them increased responsibility over a course of years, and they should likewise develop their successor
- role swap, so the CEO takes on more integrator traits with succession and hires a visionary as a chief strategy officer or president or something. This requires that the new CEO be willing to share the spotlight and that stakeholders accept this.
- The team could all leave and a new one hired
- Hire someone for complementariness to fill whichever role(s) are open

## (6) Are Co-CEOs a Great Idea or a Total Disaster?

Gwen Moran

Fast Company

In a fast-paced environment, needing 2 approvals may slow things down / things are less nimble (each co-leader needs to have clear responsibilities). The WHY is important. Define lanes/who has final say on what; define decisions when you need both co-leaders approval/input. Critical for co-leaders to present a united front for the team.

## (7) How to Co-Lead a Team

Rebecca Newton

Harvard Business Review

**Why:**

Co-leadership leads to more team interaction and innovation

**How:**

Commitment and attention must be paid to trust.

1. Share ownership of the goal(s) but divide roles and responsibilities (re-evaluate differentiation regularly)
2. Be mindful of the joint impact on others (clearly communicate delineations of duty and get feedback on how you are as a team, not just individually)
3. Praise one another for successes and jointly take the hit for failures; address and solve them together
4. Be open to re-negotiating roles based on environment, ambitions or needs

5. Recognize that you and your co-leader will have the biggest impact on each other's work satisfaction/product. Regularly check in and honestly communicate about everything, including what's great, what's challenging, and what feels limiting or restrictive.

## (8) [Here's When It Actually Makes Sense to Have Co-CEOs](#)

Joe Procopio

Medium

Used Salesforce as an example: co-leaders worked for 18 months. Split decisions/mixed messages. Depends on where the organization is in its life cycle, during a startup phase, having 2 leaders seems to make sense. Need for a CEO2 (not a co-CEO, or a CEO JR or a CEO successor). CEO body double who thinks for themselves. External and Internal challenges: CEO1 external (managing up and out), CEO2 internal (managing down and in). Check egos, high level of trust. Rapid growth needs 2 leaders.

## (9) [Rocket Fuel: The One Essential Combination That Will Get You More of What You Want from Your Business \(book\)](#)

Gino Wickman and Mark C. Winters

### Why:

- Dynamic leadership pair of a visionary and an integrator is the best way to maximize your potential and achieve everything you want to achieve in a growth phase organization \$5M-\$250M, 10-250 employees
- Many examples: Walt and Roy Disney, Henry Ford and James Couzens, Ray Kroc and Fred Turner, Wickman and Winters, etc.

Visionaries bring:

- Idea Generation
- The Big Picture
- Ability to see the future
- A hunter mentality (for ideals, investors, opportunities, solutions...)

Integrators bring:

- Running the day to day (goals and accountability)
- The steady force (and obsession with organizational clarity)
- A voice of reason
- Internal communication and integration

### What:

Visionaries:

- Solve big complex problems

- Generate 20 new ideas per week
- Are great leaders (inspiration/passion/emotional charge)
- Are optimistic
- Focus externally (“on” the business)
- Create the vision

Integrators:

- Identify and articulate problems
- Make the best ideas a reality
- Are great managers
- Are realistic
- Focus internally (“in” the business”)
- Execute the vision

It’s a two-piece puzzle

- Each V/I pair fits perfectly based on how complementary they are: chemistry, trust, and the tension that their differences create
- The people and the relationship change over time, and eventually may not fit together or one piece may need to be replaced if one person moves on
- Sometimes the organization or environment outgrow and integrator or the relationship goes through natural cycles and the pieces don’t fit anymore- Ford and Couzens parted ways after 12 years; Gates and Allen parted after 7

Visionary Spectrum

Determination of how visionary the visionary needs to be by:

- Type of industry (ex. Technology/innovation vs. Property management)
- Growth / impact aspirations
- Degree of complexity

Calibrate the type of integrator you need based on the type of visionary you have. If you have a strong visionary, generally, you need a strong integrator to counter-balance

BUT it's not a one size fits all approach- some pairs have traits that complement each other’s weaknesses

Important to know what makes each other tick and will get the best results, not be rigid (ex. Honda and Fujisawa- Fujisawa knew that Honda needed some leash to pursue shiny objects, and so focused that energy on his motorcycle racing, because his racing and tinkering acted as R&D for the company)

**How**

Disciplines:

- Accountability Chart (p71-95)

1. look forward; focus on what you need, not what you have; start as if building from scratch
  2. Detach yourself from existing business; be open-minded
  3. Elevate yourself about the business; make decisions for the greater long-term good
  4. One person in each role
  5. Typical break—3 function areas (sales/mkg- translates to development and comms; Operations- translates to programs; and Finance and Administration)
  6. Not one size fits all again but need clarity and clear accountability
  7. Integrator reports to Visionary- “increases the effectiveness and solves many organizational problems)
  8. Most common Visionary roles- new ideas/R&D; creative problem solving; major external relationships; culture; selling big ideas/big asks
  9. Most common Integrator roles- LMA, Executing the business plan/P&L results; integrating the other major functions; resolving cross-functional issues; communication across the organization
- The 5 Rules (p97-109)- standing together is critical- any small gaps show up as canyons to the rest of your team
    1. Stay on the same page- monthly same page meetings off site 2-4 hours, do not leave until 100% on same page; see sample agenda p99
    2. No end runs- when an employee tries to split, go around one of you or another manager, or engage in unproductive complaining train everyone to listen carefully and then ask the question, “are you going to talk them or am I, because one of us needs to tell to them.”
    3. The integrator is the tie breaker - when it belongs to an owner per the accountability chart, they can make the final decision, when it’s an issue that pertains to the organization, the Leadership Team, and day to day cross-departmental bottlenecks, the integrator gets to decide (\*side note: on a healthy team everyone agrees with the solution 8 out of 10 times, when they don’t the integrator decides, and once the decision is made, everyone must commit to it.) The Visionary should only trump the Integrator if the Integrator is uncomfortable making a particular issue or consistently making bad decisions. This should be rare and only happen within the context of the Same Page meeting, never in front of the team; big strategic decisions are covered in the same page meeting before Leadership Team
    4. The visionary is an employee when working “in” the business - if a visionary takes on a project or role in the business, they report to the integrator on that work
    5. Maintain mutual respect- genuinely treat each other as partners, maintain a high level of trust, openness, and honesty; treat it like a marriage, deal with tension and conflict directly, care for one another; Never, NEVER, make a negative comment about your partner, if you have something to say, do it directly and productively
  - Ensuring Integrator Fit-
    1. How well do they fit with your Core Values (must be 100%)



2. How well do they align with your passion and purpose
3. How well do they match with the roles and responsibilities, get it, want it, and have capacity to do it

### **Onboarding**

- Focus on the first 90 days (read the First 90 Day)
  - Accelerate Learning: actively expose the integrator to the most important store of knowledge, coach them, ask them questions to focus their thinking and teach them how to find their own answers
  - Secure Early wins: help them find impactful projects that can help them be successful in their first 90 days, then help her to figure out how to make them happen
  - Achieve Alignment: actively work through the accountability chart and 5 rules together
  - Build the Team Dynamics: spend time helping your integrator establish a foundation
- Patience for 1 year

### **(10) [Leadership Teams: Why Two Are Better Than One](#)**

David K. Williams & Mary Michelle Scott  
Harvard Business Review

This company introduced co-leaders at every level of the organization; co- managers; etc.

#### **Advantages:**

- Flattened the hierarchy
- Personal growth (leadership development)
- Improved the bottom line (more than covered the cost)
- Improved creativity- they pair complementary sets- right/left brain; creative and linear
- Lower turnover- shared responsibility means lower burn out; their turnover is next to zero
- In-house succession planning- developing leaders allows for easier promotions; and then hire for the lower level vacancy

#### **Disadvantages**

- Initial implementation- hiring and onboarding all the complementary pairs is a large outlay of time; training the pairs in co-leadership
- Out front investments in payroll before seeing the returns to bottom line and overall benefits

- Risk that some of the pairs may not like each other- they had one pair that went through a rough period and had lots of questions about who arbitrates and what to do if one was holding the other back, so forth before they adapted and settled in
- Hiring for the other half of a pair offers a bit more to consider during the process

### How

- 5 Non-Negotiables must be present for a paired leadership program to work: Respect, belief, trust, loyalty, and commitment. We test all decisions against these characteristics.

### Additional Reading

- [The Surprising Benefits of Co-Leadership](#)
- [A Guide to Co-Leadership, Why It's Hard, Why It's Good, and How to Make It Work](#)
- [Co-Directors in Action: A Joint Interview with All\\* Above All and Reproaction](#)
- [Adaptive network models of collective dynamics](#)
- [Three Nonprofits Share Their Approach to Co-Leadership](#)
- [Co-CEOs Are Out of Style. Why Is Netflix Resurrecting the Management Model?](#)
- [Making a Co-CEO Leadership Structure Work](#)
- [5 Reasons Why Your Organization Should Be Thinking About Co-Leadership](#)
- Reinventing Organizations: An Illustrated Invitation to Join the Conversation on Next-Stage Organizations (*book*)