Chapter 1
The Nature of Distributed Leadership and its Development in Online Environments

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ABSTRACT
Distributed leadership is a practice that spreads leadership over a number of people who work cooperatively and interdependently to achieve the purpose of their group. Unlike heroic models of leadership, which rely on the capabilities of one person, distributed leadership encourages all members to contribute their knowledge and expertise. Online environments such as communities of practice, action learning groups and virtual teams are ideally suited to fostering the development of distributed leadership because they allow all group members ready access to information and also allow for the sharing of information between group members. This chapter will consider how distributed leadership can be encouraged in online environments by both positional and emergent leaders and by the use of appropriate technologies.

INTRODUCTION
Distributed leadership is a concept that encourages all members, rather than only the positional or formal leader, to be involved in leadership of a group. Much has been written about distributed leadership in the education sector and in some business organisations; however there has been less discussion about how leadership can be distributed in online environments, despite their increasing occurrence. Information and communication technologies facilitate the access to and sharing of information between people working and learning in online environments. This has in turn has flattened traditional hierarchies in these environments and created a culture in which all group members are able to contribute to leadership hence strengthening the functioning of the group.

This chapter aims to describe the notion of distributed leadership and how it differs from traditional models of leadership. The nature and distribution

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of leadership in three online environments: online communities of practice; virtual teams; and online action learning groups and distribution of leadership in these will then be discussed. This will be followed by an analysis of factors that affect the distribution of leadership in online environments. Future trends and issues in this area will also be signalled.

**BACKGROUND**

**Traditional Leadership Models**

Traditional models of leadership have focused on the role of individuals in positions of power and the ways in which these leaders influence their followers. Such models of leadership are often referred to as ‘great man’ theories or heroic leadership models. Two of the more common models of leadership are those of transformational and transactional leadership. Transformational leaders are seen to influence, motivate and inspire others (Proctor-Thomson & Parry, 2001). They are role models for the people they work with and have visions that they are able to clearly articulate. Transactional leaders work on the premise that they are able to reward followers and that their followers desire those rewards (Day & Harris, 2002). This leadership involves the manipulation of people and situations and is not seen to encourage leadership in others. These two models both posit leadership as an individual phenomenon with leaders in the front and followers behind, though transformational leaders seek and take responsibility for different leadership functions and assume complementary roles (Barry, 1991). This view is premised on the notion that “leadership is a collection of roles and behaviours that can be split apart, shared, rotated, and used sequentially or concomitantly” (Barry, 1991, p. 34). According to Gronn (2002), the term distributed leadership has two broad meanings. The first meaning refers to leadership being shared or dispersed across multiple leaders with no particular individuals providing more leadership than others. Gronn describes this view of distributed leadership as minimalist, as it does not involve an increase in leadership potential. The second meaning offers a more holistic perspective and suggests that
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