Executive Summary

Co-leadership: an opportunity for the UK cultural sector to increase leadership diversity and impact

Dr Claire Antrobus, January 2023

When facing difficult challenges or complex problems it is often said two heads are better than one. Co-leadership is the embodiment of this approach, as a pair of leaders work together to share responsibility for guiding an organisation, and is already widely practiced in the theatre sector where Artistic and Executive Directors regularly act as co-CEOs. And yet, despite the challenges facing leaders of cultural organisations today never having been more demanding, many organisations still prefer to appoint a single leader. Whilst the belief that excessive working hours are unavoidable for leaders and that power sharing never works linger in some parts of the cultural sector, limiting the talent pool, there is growing interest in co-leadership across a range of sectors internationally.

Co-leadership has been found to offer competitive advantage by widening the leadership capabilities and perspectives available to organisations facing unparalleled challenges in this VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) operating environment. Studies have demonstrated that in complex organisations co-leadership improves organisational performance and supports the development of leaders and when co-leadership increases diversity, providing this diversity is complementary and well-managed, then it can lead to greater innovation, richer solutions and increased productivity.

In the UK cultural sector, the senior executives in leadership roles too often do not reflect the diversity of our wider society in terms of ethnicity, gender or disability. There is both a moral imperative and a strong business case to end this discrimination. Various studies have demonstrated that diversity of the workforce is associated with improved performance, particularly in terms of innovation. Consequently our cultural organisations are not accessing the full range of talent available for leadership at time when we need the best talent to chart a course through these very troubled waters. Co-leadership is beginning to be viewed by commentators internationally in healthcare, higher education, business, the third sector and cultural sector as a vehicle for enabling greater diversity in leadership. Others go further still, suggesting co-leadership enables a more inclusive organisational culture and offers an alternative to highly gendered leadership norms.

This report explores the potential role that increasing co-leadership opportunities could play in changing who applies for, and is appointed to, senior roles in the cultural sector. It seeks to establish whether co-leadership might address some of the barriers to progression into leadership roles that currently prevent Black, Asian and Ethnically Diverse people, women and disabled people being fully represented at the executive level. It draws on existing research into co-leadership and diversity, from a range of sectors internationally including healthcare, higher education, non-profits and business, as well as presenting new research gathered from a survey and over forty interviews with sector specialists, current leaders and trustees undertaken in autumn 2022. The report is structured as follows. Section one outlines the leadership challenges facing the cultural sector and the barriers to greater workforce diversity at an executive level, drawing on a literature review and new data gathered from a survey of early and mid-career professionals who are under-represented at a senior executive level in terms of disability, gender or ethnicity. Section two considers the benefits of co-leadership in relation to the challenges facing cultural organisations and the barriers to leadership diversity. Section three sets out the conditions required for co-leadership to work well, summarising the key risks and how they can be avoided. Section four explores how co-leadership might be more widely deployed, describing what limits co-leadership currently and identifying the common features in those organisations who have recently adopted co-leadership. Section five summarises the key findings, outlining implications for Boards, funders, and those involved in leadership development

and recruitment. A series of case studies supplements the report, providing 11 examples of current co-leadership models in a range of cultural organisations. The key findings are summarised below:

The cultural sector needs new leadership competencies and structures to respond to an increasingly complex and challenging operating context
There is a growing recognition that the heroic leadership model no longer serves organisations or individual leaders well, as evidenced by growing interest in alternative models, reports of burnout and difficulty attracting and retaining senior executives. Across a range of sectors internationally, commentators are indicating there needs to be a shift towards more collaborative leadership styles and structures in response to the VUCA operating context. As the cultural sector seeks new operating models, in this period of enormous change, co-leadership offers greater potential for innovation, resulting from the increased diversity it entails. Two heads are - literally - better than one. Practically, co-leadership is seen to offer organisations a wider range of leadership capabilities and capacity, as well as greater stability during periods of leadership transition.

The cultural sector lacks diversity at an executive level
Various studies have demonstrated that greater diversity of the workforce is associated with improved performance, particularly in terms of innovation. Consequently our cultural organisations are not accessing the full range of talent available for leadership at time when we need the best talent to chart a course through these very troubled waters.

Current cultural leadership norms and roles are exclusionary
A tendency for heroic and charismatic leadership in the cultural sector, coupled with a highly challenging external context, means that executive roles are widely agreed to have become unrealistic. 76% of survey respondents felt senior roles were unmanageable. The literature review suggests over-demanding roles disproportionately disadvantage those minoritized in the workplace who are less likely to be seen as capable of, or see themselves as qualified to apply for, them. The traditional view that 'power can never be shared' is still held by some, as it the assumption that ambitious leaders prefer to work full-time. 83% of survey respondents reported that employers preferred full-time leaders, in their experience. These cultural norms particularly disadvantage disabled people: interviewees and survey responses revealed people lack confidence that requests for reasonable adjustments will be supported and either decide not to waste their efforts applying or choose not to share their disability with their potential employer, lest this disadvantage their application.

Co-leadership can encompass the benefits of collaboration and the 'diversity dividend'
The benefits of co-leadership in the case study organisations have been replicated in wider studies of co-leadership in other sectors. These benefits are an excellent fit for the challenges facing the UK cultural sector, including that co-leadership enables a broader range of experience, perspectives and skills in leadership roles; facilitates more integrative and innovative solutions to the complex challenges the sector is facing; attracts (and retains) a more diverse and therefore richer talent pool; improves performance; and offers value for money.

Co-leadership is attractive to those minoritised in the cultural workforce
A small number of survey respondents and interviewees were not interested in co-leadership, preferring solo roles. Some voiced concern that by advocating for co-leadership as a mechanism to increase diversity it could be interpreted that minoritized leaders are incapable of solo roles. Notwithstanding these views, there was a very significant level of interest in co-leadership from survey respondents. 88% of survey respondents felt co-leadership would widen the talent pool. A significant number of leaders of case study organisations said they would not have applied for single leadership roles at this stage in their careers.

Co-leadership facilitates flexible working
Co-leadership can more readily be organised on a flexible basis, taking the form of senior job-sharing. This is significant, in terms of diversity, as wider studies have shown flexibility to be the key enabler of greater workforce diversity in terms of gender. Furthermore, the ability to work flexibly emerges as a key consideration in the survey. 52% of survey respondents said caring responsibilities would stop them considering more senior roles. 94% would value job-sharing specifically and 70% wanted flexibility more widely (part-time, flexible working hours or compressed hours) as an option when applying for senior roles.

Co-leadership is perceived as an alternative to heroic leadership model and enables a wider collaborative organisational culture
There is also a political angle to the increased interest in co-leadership. Solo and heroic models are associated with patriarchal and colonial leadership discourse, with co-leadership positioned in opposition by those wishing to challenge these ways of working. Organisations which seek to share power widely, by working in collaboration with communities or partner organisations, often adopt co-leadership structures. Similarly organisations wanting to encourage collaboration across different teams internally see co-leadership as reflecting structurally, and enabling, their wider organisational culture.

Co-leadership creates opportunities as it suits first-time CEOs and increases the number of leadership positions
All but one of the co-leaders in the case study organisations were in their first CEO role. Working alongside a peer offers greater support and learning opportunities, meaning co-leadership works particularly well for those new to a CEO position. As co-leading involves sharing responsibility it is perceived as being less intimidating, appealing to first-time CEOs who do not consider themselves ready for solo leadership roles. By doubling the number of executive positions, co-leadership increases the number of opportunities for individuals to gain experience and visibility. In the case study organisations, co-leadership has increased the diversity of leadership, resulting in more visible role models that better reflect the UK's population in terms of ethnicity, disability and gender.

Co-leadership does not necessarily increase leadership costs and can be good value
In most case studies introducing co-leadership had increased the executive salary costs, but by considerably less than might be expected. Costs are tight for all cultural organisations, and none could afford to double their executive salary costs. Either co-leaders were appointed part-time, or their appointment was enabled by savings elsewhere in the wider structure. When job-sharing formed part of a co-leadership arrangement there was always over-lap of between 0.5 to 1 day per week. Sometimes this entailed an increase from 1 to 1.1. or 1.2 FTE salaries, meaning the total salary cost increased by 10-20% compared with a single role, but other organisations achieved co-leadership at no additional cost by having two 0.5FTE roles alternating 2-3 day weeks, enabling 1 day of overlap per fortnight. Cost and value are not the same thing, and all case studies felt co-leadership offered exceptional value for money. A recent study, in the commercial sector, suggests co-leadership even increases profitability.

Selecting a co-leadership model alone does not guarantee success
It is important to explore what enables co-leadership to work well, and what problems can arise, because any model needs not only to be a good fit for the context but also well executed. A corollary finding is that when co-leadership fails, this does not necessarily prove it is the model itself that is flawed and indeed in this research failure occurred due to poor execution of the model. It is therefore important that boards considering deploying co-leadership understand not only the conditions required for its success, but equally the common pitfalls and how they can be avoided.

Co-leadership involves additional risk but this can be easily managed by a competent board
A well-functioning, and supportive, board is a pre-requisite for introducing co-leadership successfully. Given co-leadership also often involves first-time CEOs, and any change in leadership structure will involve an adjustment for internal and external stakeholders, Chairs working with co-leaders reported a need for greater involvement than typical with single CEOs. Effective co-leadership requires collaborative competencies and shared values and vision. If it emerges there is significant difference of values and vision, or a lack of the necessary skills on either part, then the Board need to be prepared to act.

Co-leaders need to have collaborative skills and complementary competencies, agreed ways of working and roles which are well-designed
Responsibilities are usually differentiated, although crucially there is shared responsibility for the core strategy and capacity to collaborate. Both co-leaders need excellent collaborative competencies including high levels of self-awareness, ability to build trust and navigate difference constructively. They must develop effective ways of working that facilitate communication and achieve role clarity to avoid confusion for wider stakeholders. Overall responsibility is shared and accountability joint rather than split. Many co-leaders contract informally before applying for a role jointly, including by discussing how they wish to handle disagreements and a minimum period commitment to working together. Because co-leaders need to be complementary, and able to work as equals, they are best appointed together and it can be problematic if one co-leader leaves before their partner.

Co-leadership thrives on differences, but is rooted in shared values
Co-leadership works best when individual leaders bring different perspectives, skills, styles or working and areas of expertise into their shared leadership role. Shared values and vision are the bedrock of any co-leadership relationship, and can enable new relationships to develop rapidly. Effective co-leaders are masters of collaboration, they can quickly resolve unproductive conflict around status or arising from routine tasks, enabling a focus on 'subject conflict': the generative exploration of difference that leads to innovation.

The assumption that power-sharing is doomed to failure looms large for some
Power imbalances can de-stabilise co-leadership relationships, and it is not unusual for external and stakeholders to seek to undermine co-leaders if they are more comfortable with a solo leader model. Wider structural imbalances within the leadership pairing can also lead to difficulties, for example if one receives more recognition. Also, if co-leaders, or the board, enter into co-leadership with reservations then this can undermine the trust which is necessary for these relationships to develop and precipitate failure through micro-management.

Boards need to be key partners in co-leadership
Boards share responsibility for leadership of cultural organisations, but too often relinquish this responsibility to the executive, preferring to adopt more of risk monitoring role. Also, line-management of CEOs doesn't happen systematically in the cultural sector. Whilst not unique to co-leadership, it means that leaders do not always receive the support or accountability required. This can be problematic for co-leadership pairings if one co-leader is underperforming and the board fail to take timely action. Also there can be a tendency for boards to expect the executive to shoulder too much leadership responsibility. Where co-leadership had been introduced in the case studies, it was often enabled and supported by a chair who had championed the model within the wider board. Chairs working with co-leaders need to be prepared to work more closely with co-leaders who are often also first-time CEOs or navigating the transition to a new leadership model for the organisation.

Co-leadership is not yet widely encouraged by employers
Co-leadership roles are still not openly advertised on a regular basis. 98% of survey respondents said they did not often see co-leadership roles advertised. Among the case study organisations, only 9% had advertised the opportunity as co-leadership: with a further 18% of employers encouraging a range of types of applications. Far more common is that co-leadership arrangements emerge during internal restructures (36%) or when candidates responded jointly to a role that was advertised as a solo leadership opportunity (37%).

Co-leadership is viewed with caution by some employers
Boards have concerns about conflict and potential lack of accountability with co-leadership. Fears around the risks of co-leadership can be the result of examples where co-leadership ended badly, where there is a tendency to assume it is the model itself that is at fault rather than how the model was implemented. Confidentiality around performance issues of individuals, and poor employment practice, means the full facts of examples of failure are rarely in the public domain. The wider literature is consistent in identifying what needs to be in place of co-leadership to thrive, and how to manage the additional risks. With good recruitment practice, management and governance in place there is no reason co-leadership cannot work well. In the four examples considered where co-leadership relationships had failed, the key factors which had caused issues were all known risks which, arguably, could have been better-managed by the boards and individual leaders involved.

Organisations often lack recruitment expertise and this impacts executive recruitment
Executive recruitment is often led by the board and many organisations lack the expertise to undertake an inclusive and effective recruitment process. Whilst larger organisations may invest in external executive search and recruitment consultancy, many perceive the cost to be prohibitive and manage the process in-house.

Co-leadership is not yet well-understood by Boards or the wider workforce
Co-leadership is not widely understood by Boards or the cultural sector workforce. Many potential applicants appear to be confused as to whether employers would only consider co-leadership as a job-share, which is not surprising given the lack of transparency in terms of how some co-leadership appointments have been made. Potential applicants have concerns about the affordability of working part-time and some are not sure how to find a job-share partner or co-leader. Boards appear to scrutinise co-leadership applications more closely, wanting to explore the details of logistics during the selection process.

Co-leadership presents a useful opportunity to increase the diversity of leadership in the cultural sector, but far wider action is required
Increased deployment of co-leadership will increase diversity in the cultural sector. It is however not the only intervention needed to achieve greater diversity. The literature review highlighted other major barriers to leadership progression including the endemic culture of over-working, poor employment and recruitment practice (including particularly the lack of flexible working options) and a mis-placed belief that the cultural sector is a meritocracy. 95% of survey respondents felt that not everyone had equal chance to succeed in the cultural sector, regardless of background. A more inclusive leadership model is a very helpful step towards increasing diversity, but it needs to be well-managed and supported by the board, and other actions will be required to achieve more representative leadership.

The report recommends boards consider co-leadership as an option when recruiting executive roles, advising recruitment also needs to be more encouraging of alternative leadership models and flexible working, and transparent. Boards are encouraged to consider seeking external specialist support in designing, recruiting and onboarding new leaders, and are reminded to ensure leadership

roles are realistic. Caution is advised if a board is not willing or able to support co-leaders by sharing responsibility for leadership and provide regular supervision and development support. It is also advised that co-leadership is not an easy option for less experienced candidates, or quick fix to improve the diversity of leadership and those responsible for selection need to ensure candidates have the core skills and commitment to shared values required. Boards also reminded they are ultimately responsible for ensuring resources and strategy are better aligned and urged to take steps to address the endemic culture of overworking that is damaging to diversity in the workforce, as well as employee wellbeing more widely.

Recommendations for successful co-leadership include that difference and complementarity of skills, background and areas of expertise are essential, but values and vision need to be closely aligned. All co-leaders need highly developed inter-personal skills in terms of communication, building trust, and the ability to constructively resolve disagreement. They also need to operate with high levels of emotional intelligence and navigate power imbalances with sensitivity. Co-leaders should ideally select one another, and start and finish their roles together. The roles need to be designed to facilitate shared responsibility and collaboration, whilst also reflecting areas of individual authority and expertise. Boards have a responsibility to ensure co-leaders are treated equally and the chair has a pivotal role to play in championing co-leaders, particularly when the model is new and stakeholders are in a period of adjustment.

Funders, leadership development and recruitment specialists and leadership development programmes can play an important role in raising awareness of co-leadership as an option, and addressing the lack of information about how it works among boards. There are implications for the leadership competencies co-leaders need. Whilst most programmes already address the core skills underpinning collaboration, co-leaders need to develop mastery of embracing complexity and difference constructively. Given the centrality of the board's role in co-leadership resources that empower executive leaders to ask for the support they need from their boards would also be helpful, as would activities or resources that improve understanding and transparency of executive recruitment processes. Finally, all those interested in increasing diversity in leadership, and a thriving cultural sector in the longer term, need to tackle the leadership discourse that normalises endemic and discriminatory over-working practices in the wider sector.