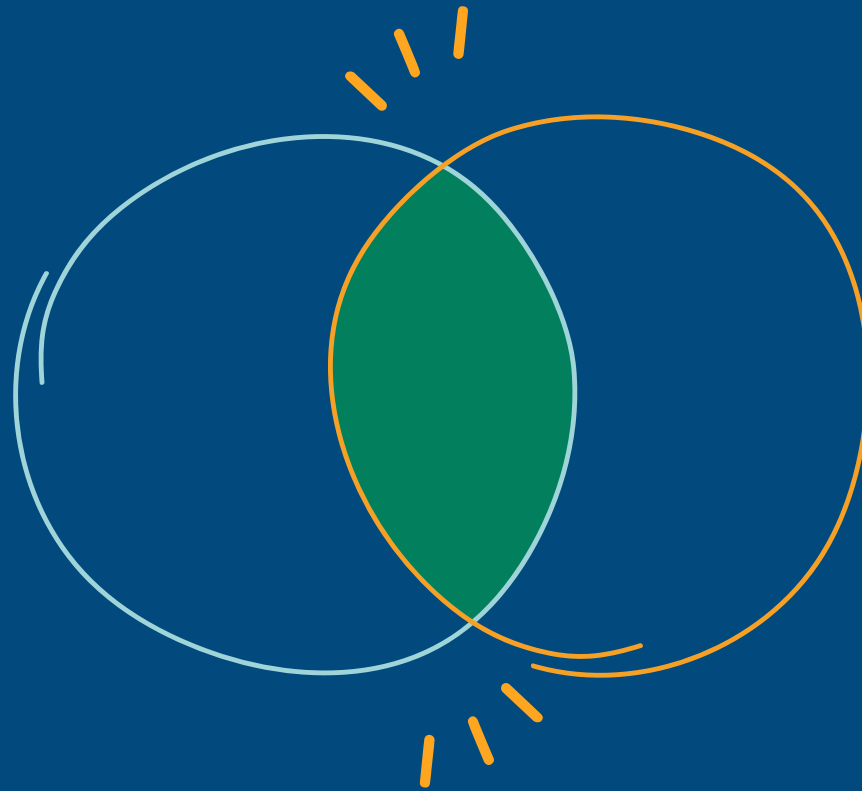


A User Guide to Co-Leadership



Claire Antrobus

A User Guide to Co-Leadership

Many in the UK cultural sector will already be familiar with co-leadership in the form of the Artistic Director / Executive Director co-CEO model which theatres have used for nearly 50 years. Co-leaders share overall responsibility for organisational strategy and performance, whilst each also leads separate areas. This model evolved as the management of cultural organisations became more complex in the late 1980s and ensures the overall strategy balances artistic and business considerations.

The recent past has seen an explosion in interest in co-leadership across other sectors internationally and new experiments in co-leadership in the UK cultural sector in response to an increasingly challenging operating context and an urgency to increase diversity. Recent adopters of co-leadership in the cultural sector are experimenting with less familiar models including co-CEO part-time job-shares; co-CEO models that avoid a binary separation of executive / artistic functions and co-Artistic Director models. Across the UK cultural sector organisations are recruiting co-leaders for the first time, for example the appointment of Zak Mensah and Sara Wajid

at Birmingham Museums Trust who are the first co-CEOs of a major museum group. The Royal Shakespeare Company announced the appointment of its first co-Artistic Directors in 2022, following a growing trend that includes Clean Break, Royal Exchange Manchester, Diverse City and Paines Plough among others. Sometimes co-leaders job-share, working part-time around caring/parenting responsibilities or external artistic projects, other times the co-CEOs are both full-time roles.

Internationally co-leadership is beginning to be viewed by commentators in healthcare, higher education, business, and non-profits 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. In the business sector co-leadership has been found to offer competitive advantage and improved profitability and performance by widening the leadership capabilities and perspectives available to organisations facing unparalleled challenges in this VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) operating environment.

This guide is written for professionals who may be considering co-leadership as an option for a future executive role, and the boards of cultural organisations. It is based on recent research supported by Clore Leadership Programme and Arts and Humanities Research Council which explored how co-leadership worked in 11 case study organisations via interviews with leaders and board members, and a wider survey of early-mid career professionals.



A lot of organisations are feeling like we can't carry on with business as usual, that we need some quite radical transformation in terms of our business models, the way we work with audiences... and that's not a job for one person.

Niels de Vos, Chair, Birmingham Museums Trust

Contents

1.	Why are Organisations Turning to Co-Leadership?	4
2.	What are the Benefits of Co-Leadership?	6
3.	How does Co-Leadership Work?	8
4.	Co-leadership case studies:	11
	Birmingham Museums Trust: Two Heads are Better than One	11
	Clean Break: Making Co-Leadership Work	15
	East London Dance: Opening Up Opportunities.....	19
	Fun Palaces: Valuing Difference.....	22
5.	How Can Co-Leadership Become More Widespread?	25

Resources

Advice to Boards:	27
Principles for Co-Leaders	32
Advice for Potential Co-Leaders.....	35
Further Reading.....	36

Acknowledgements

Why are Organisations Turning to Co-Leadership?

Cultural organisations today are operating in a rapidly changing, uncertain and highly complex environment. Leaders are experimenting with new business models that respond to financial uncertainty, and rising costs, whilst staying true to their charitable objectives. Many are exploring ways to increase reach and impact, including via use of digital technologies and more participatory and community-based practice. There is an increasing expectation to be ethical and transparent in how organisations operate; including tackling systemic under-representation of Black, Asian and Ethnically Diverse and disabled artists, audiences, staff and trustees.

Cultural organisations are not attracting the widest possible range of leadership talent at a time when accessing the best leaders is critical. The workforces of the largest publicly-funded arts organisations are reported to be 10% Black, Asian and Ethnically Diverse and 6% disabled, compared with 17% and 23% in the working-age population. Women, particularly those with children, also experience discrimination in the workplace, often leaving the sector or becoming freelance to enable part-time working.

The demands on those running cultural organisations have become unrealistic and even before the impact of COVID-19, which has significantly worsened the situation, we saw an increase in leaders stepping down from roles which come at too high a cost to their health and personal life.

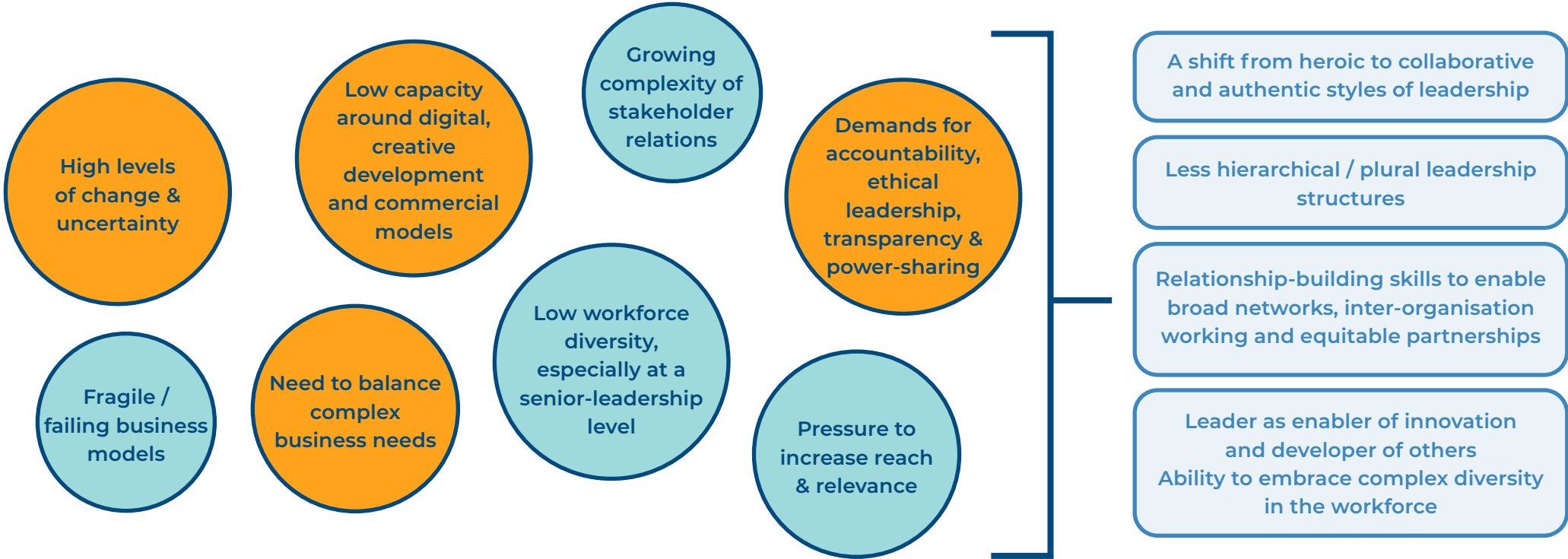
These intense working conditions impact leaders with caring responsibilities, health issues or disabilities most keenly. Currently very few leadership roles are recruited on a flexible basis, and the perception that boards prefer full-time leaders, and that leadership roles entail personal sacrifice, is widely-held and directly impacts the number of applications from minoritised candidates. As executive role descriptions become increasingly demanding in terms of the range of skills and levels of experience required, those impacted by structural discrimination are less likely to have acquired the expected credentials.



Co-direction is a direct challenge to traditional, and often masculine, ideas of leadership – this idea that leadership comes from one person [...] Leadership, to us, is a community effort – it's bigger than the individual. It's the sharing of power, resources, responsibility and accountability.

Euella Jackson, Co-Director Rising Arts Agency

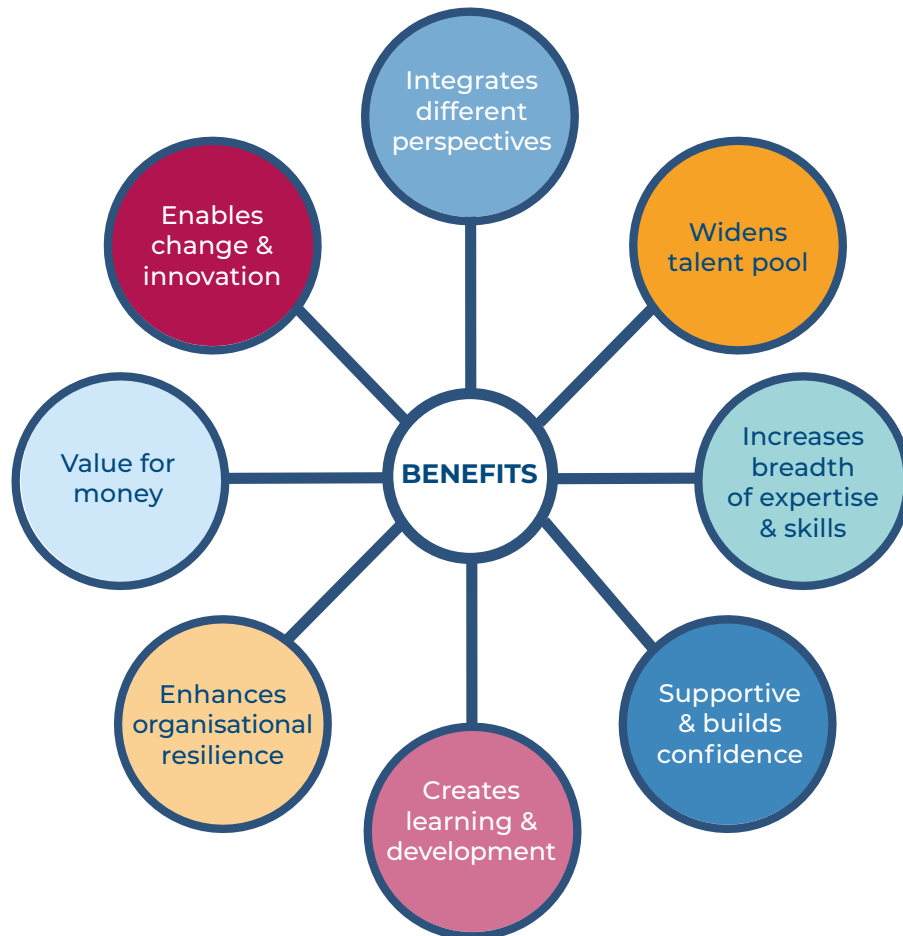
Leadership Context and Implications for Leaders



Employers are increasingly recognising that their approach to executive leadership roles needs to change if they are to attract and retain a more diverse workforce. In the UK cultural sector this is leading to the appointment of a more diverse range of candidates into co-leadership roles, often as their first CEO roles, in organisations such as East London Dance, Creative Black Country, Diverse City, Fun Palaces, and Rising Arts Agency.

The 'heroic' notion that one person can be expected to hold such a vast range of experience and responsibility is being replaced by increasingly shared or collective approaches, and these often enable flexible working which is essential in increasing workforce diversity. In a recent sector survey of those currently under-represented at leadership level, 88% said co-leadership would widen the talent pool and 94% said job-sharing would be invaluable to their ability to pursue senior executive roles.

What are the Benefits of Co-Leadership?

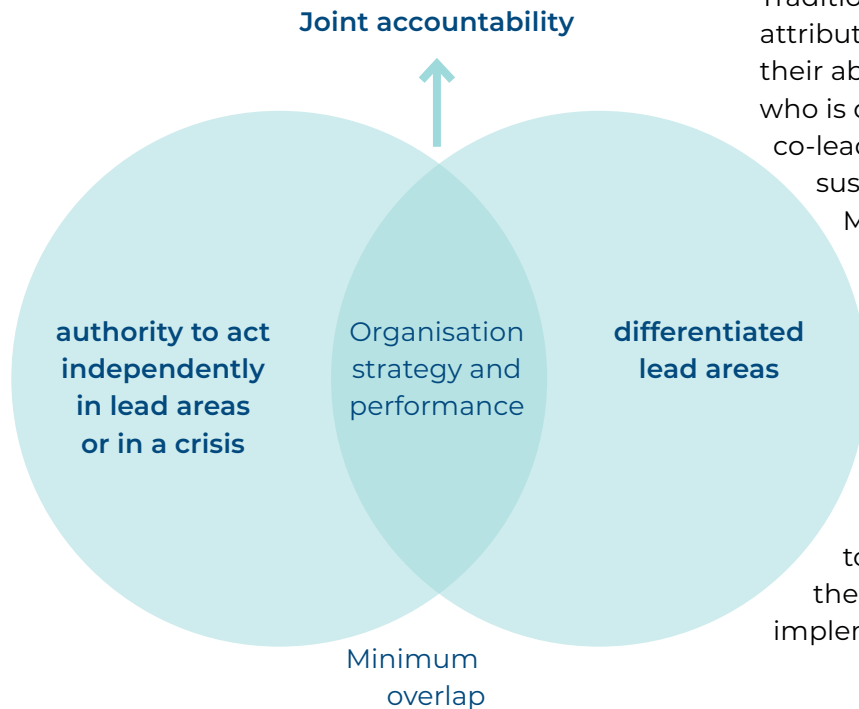


Co-leadership has been widely studied in non-profit sectors internationally, including health and education as well as culture, and is attracting increasing interest from the commercial sector too. Wider research consistently finds the following eight benefits can be achieved when co-leadership is well-managed and these were also reported as having been achieved in many the case studies in my research:

1. Co-leadership enables **change and innovation** through encouraging and symbolising a wider collaborative culture. Several of the case study organisations had opted for co-leadership during periods major transformation because having plural approaches, skillsets and perspectives can enable discovery of fresh solutions. Co-leadership often enables greater diversity and wider studies confirm this leads to better results and greater innovation, when diversity is complementary and well-managed. Simply put: two heads are better than one.
2. Co-leadership encourages **integration** of different expertise and perspectives – the AD/ED model in theatre originated when organisational leadership became more complex in the 1980s and means artists can still hold leadership roles by sharing responsibility. Internationally, co-leadership is favoured by sectors which need to balance different considerations in their organisational strategy, including healthcare and education. For case study organisation Clean Break, having co-Artistic Directors meant its social justice purpose and theatre perspectives both had a seat ‘at the top table’.

3. Co-leadership **widens the talent pool** by enabling flexible working, making roles more attractive to first-time CEOs and increasing the number of roles available at senior level. 70% of survey respondents wanted flexible working to be an option for senior roles. Co-leadership doubles the number of roles available and has led to an increase in diversity in leadership roles among case study organisations. Virtually all co-leaders in the case studies were first-time CEOs.
4. Co-leadership **increases the range of skills and expertise** available at a senior level. Today's cultural leaders are facing a unparalleled range of challenges including a need to develop new business models, increase reach and relevance, develop digital capacity, manage increased stakeholder complexity, enable wider power-sharing, lead relentless change and manage unprecedented uncertainty and complexity. Two people can offer a wider range of skills and perspectives than a single CEO.
5. Co-leadership enhances **organisational resilience** as co-leaders can cover for one another during periods of reduced capacity or absence and when one leader moves on the other provides stability. Co-leaders in the case studies had temporarily adapted their roles to cover one another during periods of illness, parental leave or other caring responsibilities.
6. Co-leadership can be inclusive as it provides **pastoral support** in demanding roles and **builds confidence** for co-leaders. Executive leaders are experiencing burnout from demanding roles, and many struggle to balance caring responsibilities with work. In contrast, several case study leaders reported a significant pastoral benefit to having a partner with whom to share responsibility. As Sara Wajid, one of the case study co-leaders, explains it's not just that two heads are better than one, four shoulders are broader than two. In addition, wider research suggests women and global majority leaders are more likely to experience Imposter Syndrome which may inhibit them applying for senior roles.
7. Co-leadership creates **developmental opportunities** for co-leaders to learn from one another. Case studies reported acting as one another's critical friends: encouraging high standards of one another. Wider studies in other sectors have found co-leaders experience high levels of on-the-job learning.
8. **Co-leadership is value for money and improves productivity.** The additional cost of co-leadership is often marginal (increasing the CEO cost by 10 – 20%), and can be offset against savings elsewhere in the staffing structure by having a broader range of skills at CEO-level. And whilst salary costs may increase, it is a good investment – recent research published in Harvard Business Review found companies with co-CEOs out-perform single CEO-led peers, producing shareholder returns of 9.5% compared with 6.9%. Another study found organisations with Co-CEOs were more financially robust as they had in-built accountability to one another.

How Does Co-Leadership Work?



Traditional and heroic notions of leadership attribute success to the individual leader and their abilities and actions; the strong leader who is decisive. As a result, the notion of co-leadership has often been viewed with suspicion; indeed the founder of McKinsey Consulting Marvin Bower is credited as having advised those considering co-CEO models that “power sharing never works”. And whilst co-leadership has worked well for the UK theatre sector for 50 years, on the rare occasions where individual partnerships have become difficult there is a tendency for some to see this as evidence as a problem with the model rather than due to how it was implemented.

Consequently there have been a large number of studies exploring whether and how co-leadership works: and the findings are remarkably consistent, both in terms of what enables successful relationships and what can lead to problems.

There are four main considerations that underpin co-leadership which are explained in the following section.

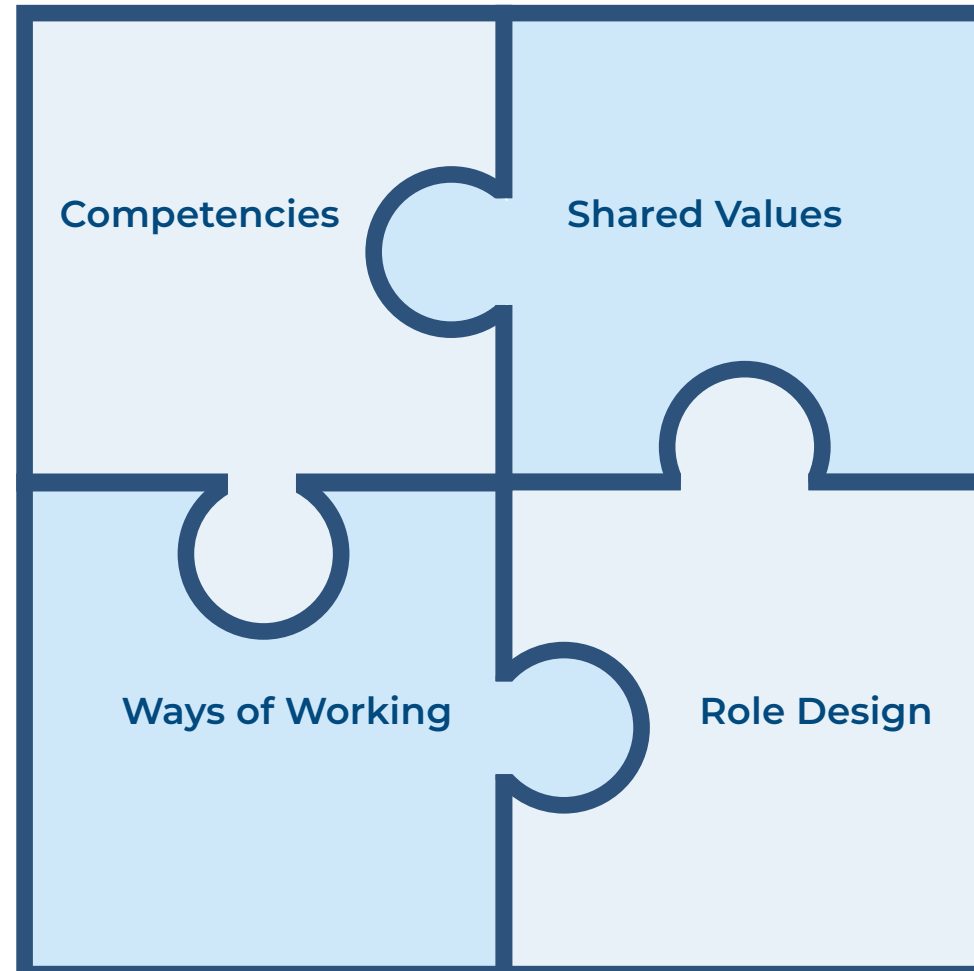
In addition, a practical guide for boards about how to plan, recruit and support co-leaders is included at the back of this guide, along with a set of principles for co-leaders based on my research.



...there have been a large number of studies exploring whether and how co-leadership works: and the findings are remarkably consistent, both in terms of what enables successful relationships and what can lead to problems

Core components of successful co-leadership

- Different and complementary skills and expertise
- **Emotional intelligence:** self-awareness, ability to build trust
- Embraces complexity and uncertainty, encourage challenges and handles conflict constructively
- Agreement on how to work together including disagreements
- Frequent, honest and open communication
- Shared physical space or equivalent
- Flexibility to support one another when required



- Values difference, diversity and collaboration
- Non-hierarchical within and beyond partnership
- Integrative approach to different views and challenges
- Keen to learn from one another
- **Differentiation:** individual responsibilities which play to strengths, avoiding unnecessary duplication
- Shared responsibility and joint accountability for organisational strategy and performance
- Opportunities to learn from one another
- Equality of workload, pay, contract terms

Shared values

Co-leadership functions by combining the different and complementary skills, perspectives and experiences of two or more people. To work well this difference needs to be rooted in shared values, and a shared vision for the organisation. These values typically include a commitment to working in a non-hierarchical way, with one another and more widely within and beyond their organisations, valuing diversity and an openness to learn from others.

Role design

Co-leaders share responsibility for cross-organisational strategy and overall performance. Both usually report directly to the board, and are jointly accountable. They also lead individually on their specialist areas and have authority to act as CEO, so as to avoid unnecessary duplication. Roles need to allow for time to work together, so if co-leadership involves job-sharing there is always overlap in working days, ideally at least one day a week.

Ways of working

All co-leaders work slightly differently as each partnership evolves to meet the needs of the organisation and the strengths of the individuals. However they work together, clarity about roles and responsibilities and authority to make decisions is important, not least for internal and external stakeholders. Doubling-up is to be avoided – most of the time only one co-leader should be needed, meaning that capacity is saved for those times when having two heads together really matters: usually when there is complexity. Communication between co-leaders is critical and needs to be honest, efficient and regular. Most combine a mixture of formal methods and informal ones, increasingly using technology to facilitate connection when they are not physically together or working at different times. Collaboration is not limited to the partnership: co-leaders also work collaboratively with colleagues and external partners.

Competencies

As well as a commitment to working together, both individuals need the skills and qualities to be able to do this well. Issues can arise if leaders lack the self-awareness or highly developed communication skills required to be able to know when to persist with a disagreement and resolve it through collaboration, and where they can 'agree to disagree'. Competition is to be avoided, co-leaders need to be masterful in disagreeing constructively with one another – not side-stepping or compromising on the important issues, but focussing on resolving those questions that need both perspectives to generate fresh thinking. They also need to be judicious in what they prioritise for collaboration, and maximise working solo. There is no need, or capacity, for two heads to agree, or have a say, on everything.

Communication between co-leaders is critical and needs to be honest, efficient and regular.

Co-Leadership Case Studies

Birmingham Museums Trust: Two Heads are Better than One



Sara Wajid and Zak Mensah, Co-CEOs, Birmingham Museums Trust

Birmingham Museums Trust (BMT) is a large and complex group of museums based in England's second city – home to a diverse and young population. In November 2020, BMT's Trustees appointed Zak Mensah and Sara Wajid as the first joint CEOs of a major UK museum. Both are first-time CEOs. Zak is the parent of young children and both Zak and Sara are people of colour working in a part of the cultural sector which has a particularly poor track record of diversity at a senior level. BMT's story of co-leadership tells of the benefits of co-leadership for the organisation, but also of two people ready for their first major organisational leadership roles but wanting to work part-time. It is also an example of a large organisation embracing senior job-sharing for the first time.

When the CEO role was advertised, despite being considered highly credible individual candidates and approached to apply on that basis, Zak and Sara decided to apply as a 'joint ticket'. Their personal circumstances and the scale and complexity of the role meant both preferred a job-share option. With two track records, and two different sets of skills to offer, the demands of the role felt more realistic as Zak explains:

The original job description was basically a wish list. They wanted someone who was amazing at 20 or 30 things, but that doesn't exist. There's not a single person who can be an expert at getting capital money and being transformational etc. And between two people, we definitely covered a lot more of the board's wish list.

Whilst Sara felt she would excel in, and relish, some parts of the role, she considered the scale and complexity necessitated two people:

It's a complex organization. It's a big task, and there are things about it that really, really appealed to me that I thought I could really do brilliantly. But there are other things about it that are massive and emotionally very taxing. And I thought it's going to take two to achieve that breadth, to do justice to the complexity of the challenges in that organization and the potential that I see in Birmingham.

As the father of two young children, Zak was concerned about the impact of the demands of the role on his family responsibilities:

Having young kids, I was really worried about making the next step into being a chief exec or any senior role, when the demands are high. So I felt a little bit stuck... and I had been watching this program on Netflix about the gender pay gap, and

... once you have kids, your career slows down or stalls. And so when the opportunity for this job came up, I thought I want to demonstrate that co-leadership is possible because it offers another way.

You've got to have a shared vision, and you both have to have values that you believe in.

this documentary was showing evidence that once you have kids, your career slows down or stalls. And so when the opportunity for this job came up, I thought I want to demonstrate that co-leadership is possible because it offers another way. So rather than having someone like me not apply for the job, surely there must be a way for this to work.

Whilst they did not know one another very well initially, having met via the Museum Detox network, they quickly realised that they could work together. Both had experience of job-sharing before; Zak's wife is in a job-share role and Sara had shared a role earlier in her career so felt comfortable about how to make the model work. Once they decided to apply jointly they undertook a thorough preparation, including paying for coaching

support to prepare their CVs and practise for the interview. Zak describes the matching that happened being around their shared vision and values, as well as valuing Sara as someone from whom he can learn:

You've got to have a shared vision, and you both have to have values that you believe in. And Sara's values are very much in alignment with mine – that was quite important... I also think it's really important to try and find someone that you can learn from. I learn from Sara every day. This is a really cheeky sneaky opportunity for me to do CPD by learning from someone else who's amazingly talented.

So despite not knowing one another very well, realising their values and vision were aligned, and having confidence in the co-leadership model, they felt confident to propose themselves as job-share candidates for a role that was advertised as a solo CEO role.

The Board perspective

When the joint application was presented to the Board it met a little bit of resistance as Zak explains:

The way it was communicated to us was that maybe you could put in separate applications because if one of you gets the job you can always appoint the other as your number two. And we didn't fancy that. So we batted that back and just said, 'No, we'll do it together'.

BMT's Chair, Niels de Vos, remembers being surprised when they received a job-share application as this did not fit with the 'very traditional lens' through which they initially viewed the role. He was impressed though, when the pair persisted as joint candidates crediting them for being 'quite brave' in sticking to their guns and opening the Board's eyes to a new way of thinking about the role.

In fact the Board quickly realised that their proposal made a lot of sense, particularly in the context of re-imagining the museums' purpose and model when having a wider range of skills and perspectives was deemed by the Board to be 'clearly very advantageous':

They forced us to look at it in a way that I hadn't assumed we would. But it didn't take me long to realize it makes quite a lot of sense. Because it's almost impossible to find all the qualities you want in one person anyway, for any job, never mind a CEO role... it's very rare to get someone with all the skills you want. So it didn't actually require a great leap of faith and it didn't take me long to be convinced. So then we obviously invited them to interview against other people, and as a pair. And guess what, unsurprisingly, between them they covered more of the bases of what we needed than any single individual could, so it almost guaranteed that they were going to get the job – once we accepted that we were happy for it to work as a job share.

Niels is an experienced CEO in the sports sector, and he realised that in his own professional life, the complexities of balancing civic, commercial, sports considerations and stakeholders meant that increasingly he was encountering forms of shared leadership at the executive level. He'd also previously worked with a joint leadership team in his role as Chair of the World Championships in the USA. The main challenge Niels perceives with BMT's co-leadership model is around having part-time senior roles – the solution to which in their case is having a Chair who 'leans in a bit more' and makes sure that the Co-CEOs operate, and are regarded as, equals.

Unlike co-leaders where there is a tradition of sharing senior roles, such as the Artistic/ Executive Director role in theatre, Sara and Zak have had the additional task of delineating their roles and forging their ways of working from scratch.

... it's almost impossible to find all the qualities you want in one person anyway, for any job, never mind a CEO role...

By each working three days a week, they cover a full-time working week between them with one day of overlap, which is widely understood to be essential in job-sharing to enable the added value that collaboration brings. As Zak says, “that’s where the magic happens when we’re both bouncing things off each other”. Having mapped out the main areas of responsibility, they then needed to decide who would lead on what, and which areas they needed to lead jointly, whilst minimising duplication. Zak’s expertise around organisational transformation, digital and innovative working practices has guided their experiments in how they communicate around decision-making to avoid inefficiencies and enable two people to share a role which is responsible for a lot of decisions.

For BMT, there are multiple benefits of their co-leadership model including greater organisational resilience during a period of socio-economic turbulence externally and a major capital project, and a wider breadth of expertise, perspectives, networks and style than could be found in a single individual. And as the population BMT exists to serve includes significant Black and Asian communities, a leadership team that visibly reflects local demographics is another asset.

Leading a large and complex museum group during a pandemic and a capital project is a major challenge, not least for anyone in their first CEO role. Not surprisingly, the support of the Board, and external support via peer networks, mentors and coaching has been invaluable. Both Zak and Sara speak highly of the relationship they enjoy with their Chair, who plays a supportive and collaborative role as the third team member. In Zak’s words:

I’ve often described it is as being like Le Mans, the 24-hour race in France. There are three drivers, and like those three drivers we swap and share, you’re all going to take turns. One of you might be faster in this bit of the track. One’s faster in this part, one of you might be terrible at night-time and one of you might be great at night-time. And we try between the three of us to make it work.

Two years in, co-leadership is working well for BMT and has enabled both Zak and Sara to develop experience they might not otherwise have been able to access. And having access to two diverse and complementary skillsets and approaches is enabling the museum to redevelop and rethink its model and operations more effectively.

Leading a large and complex museum group during a pandemic and a capital project is a major challenge...

Clean Break: Making Co-Leadership Work



The Clean Break leadership team 2018-22: Anna Herrmann, Joint Artistic Director, Erin Gavaghan, Executive Director, Róisín McBrinn, Joint Artistic Director

Clean Break is a women-only theatre company that uses theatre to raise awareness of the damage caused by the criminal justice system. Founded in 1979, it developed a new co-leadership structure in 2018 when its long-serving CEO moved on. The Board decided to appoint three senior roles to share the CEO function: an Executive Director and two Artistic Directors. The rationale for having two ADs was to reflect its 'dual mission' as an arts organisation with a strong social justice focus. As many theatres have long sought to integrate the organisational and artistic aspects of their work through having a joint CEO model comprised of Artistic Director (AD) and Executive Director (ED), Clean Break brought a third chair to the top table, aligning social mission, artistic programme and business model in a structure with 'equal weight'.

//

Being a women's organization, we wanted to create alternative models of leadership, and to think about collaboration which has featured really significantly in our evolution.

All three roles were appointed on a four-day-a-week basis, recognising caring responsibilities, wanting roles to be manageable and “wanting women to be able to succeed and move up in their careers whilst not negating their family lives and responsibilities”. The ED, Erin Gavaghan, was recruited externally, and two existing members of the senior leadership team, Róisín McBrinn and Anna Herrmann, moved into the new AD roles as co-leaders.

The decision to create a flatter leadership structure also reflected Clean Break’s values: “Being a women’s organization, we wanted to create alternative models of leadership, and to think about collaboration which has featured really significantly in our evolution.” The decision was also informed by the outgoing CEO’s experience of the challenges inherent in a solo leadership model in “very precarious and complicated times”.

I interviewed Anna Hermann in November 2022, six months after the departure of Róisín to become the AD of the Gate Theatre in Dublin, and as the organisation was reflecting on its future leadership structure. Ultimately Clean Break’s experience of co-leadership has been very positive and Anna could not imagine

having survived leading the organisation during the last few years of pandemic disruption without Erin and Róisín. However there were also unexpected challenges which led to some tensions with the Board and wider staff team, which took time and effort to resolve. Clean Break’s story shows what it takes to establish effective co-leadership and some of the challenges that can arise.

When the new leadership model was initiated in 2018, the three co-leaders were supported by an organisational coach to create a ‘compact’ setting out clearly their respective roles and responsibilities, but also how they wanted to work together – and importantly, how they wished to handle any disagreements or problems in their relationship. This was a useful process and entailed identifying which decisions needed to be made jointly by all three directors, and where individuals had autonomy.

The two ADs went through a similar process with the coach to explore their respective areas of autonomy and shared responsibility, as well as agreeing some protocols around ways of working including a commitment to avoid public disagreements and to discuss concerns only in private.

During the early days of the new model the three co-CEOs invested time in developing their relationships and working closely together. They met regularly to discuss issues and valued these discussions, but relationships with the senior team and Board suffered as the co-leaders were reaching decisions among themselves and collaborating and communicating less with others:

We had this threesome that met weekly, we threw ideas around, discussed lots of things, and then came to a decision. But we kind of forgot, in that process, that if it was one person leading that would have been a conversation with the senior management team or that might have been with the Chair. And those conversations would have already been involving those beyond that one layer of the organisation. And it took us a while to work out why we were having problematic relationships with our trustees, and with our senior management team.

Working together as three leaders, thrashing out their differences and investing time in working together had come at the expense of wider collaboration. As Anna reflected, they were making decisions but “we weren’t bringing anyone along with us”. Once this became apparent the co-CEOs sought external support to improve how they worked with the wider organisation. And after the Chair’s term finished, a decision was made to appoint co-Chairs which worked better in terms of balancing the triple-CEO/ Chair relationship, as well as enabling the organisation to diversify its leadership further and bring lived experience of criminal justice into the co-Chair role.

Part of the challenge of establishing the new co-leadership model stemmed from it taking more time than anticipated for Róisín and Anna to develop their shared leadership approach. They had begun by having differently-titled roles with responsibility for slightly different areas, but their role also involved significant

amounts of shared responsibilities. Both ADs had worked alongside one another for four years in other roles. They were keen to work together and committed to a collaborative model. However the difference in their working styles meant at times collaboration didn’t come easily and they did not always agree.

This caused uncertainty and confusion for the wider team who sensed disagreement even though the ADs avoided contradicting one another publicly. Staff felt unclear at times about who was leading or making decisions. Both parties invested time in making the relationship work and ultimately it became highly productive, “a really freeing and nourishing, dynamic duo”, with their combined efforts generating a higher quality and level of work than they could have done separately.

But developing this level of close collaboration took more time than either had anticipated, and had they both not been so committed to making the model work it might not have succeeded:

we were really committed to the vision. But we hadn’t articulated our different ideas of what that vision was until we were there in the role doing it.

the difference in their working styles meant at times collaboration didn’t come easily and they did not always agree. This caused uncertainty and confusion for the wider team

We both really believed in the vision. We really felt that was something we’d been articulating, a participatory artistic voice of the organisation. So we were really committed to the vision. But we hadn’t articulated our different ideas of what that vision was until we were there in the role doing it. And then we had to work it out for ourselves, but also make sure that everyone else was hearing a consistent and clear message. So it took time, but we got there. But in the early days, we would come into a space and we’d say things that we haven’t checked out with each other first... so that was difficult in the early days. And we got better at being clear. And also our language morphed, we got more singular, we understood more as the as the years developed, we were much clearer with a single voice.

The transition to a dual AD model was not easy for Clean Break, but there were many benefits, not least during the pandemic, when having three senior leaders gave an agility and level of peer-support that enabled them to avoid the high levels of stress that others experienced:

An absolute benefit was experiencing the pandemic, with three women holding the reins. I can't imagine what that would have felt like otherwise, just in terms of how we shared the pressure and what that meant. The kind of the speed at which we needed to make decisions in those days, and the ability to do it, because there were three of us. The weight of responsibility felt manageable, compared with the burnout which I saw, and continue to see, replicated in other organisations from single CEOs, who were completely exhausted. There were so many times, we were like, 'I couldn't imagine doing this without the three of us'.

After Róisín's departure, Clean Break decided to reflect on how best to configure its leadership team in future, conscious that what had worked for the organisation to date was not necessarily the best model going forwards. Also, the organisation is also keen to improve representation of Black, Asian and Ethnically Diverse people at leadership level, and their current interim arrangement includes the existing AD/ED co-leaders with a new interim Deputy who has been promoted internally.

The Board will consider its options and recruit early in 2023, but Clean Break's learning is already clear. Co-leadership, including co-artistic leadership, can work well and offers important benefits. The time has passed for the solo CEO, cultural organisations are facing too many challenges for one person and the demands of those roles exclude many who could contribute to more flexible models. But co-artistic leadership is not necessarily

an easy model to introduce, and even when people have previously worked together it takes time and external support to establish successfully. Like many other organisations, rather than assuming that they will replace leadership roles like-for-like, Clean Break are considering carefully what is the best model for their context, and what option would best complement their existing team, when the need to recruit arises.



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East London Dance: Opening Up Opportunities



Kate Scanlon and Tia Hassan, Co-CEOs and Co-Creative Directors of ELD

When East London Dance's (ELD) long-serving Artistic Director and Chief Executive was ready to move on, the Board realised that it needed to carefully consider how they recruited her successor. The CEO role had greatly expanded in scope and complexity over her tenure and the Board realised it would be hard to find the same breadth of experience and skills in another person. Outgoing Chair Moira Sinclair explained that the Board were also aware ELD's leadership needed to better reflect the diversity of East London's communities, and this had become even more pertinent after the murder of George Floyd and the subsequent Black Lives Matter protests. They realised that might involve re-thinking how they approached the role: "It really did become clear that it was that was likely to require us to change our model and that we couldn't expect all the change to come from the candidates who are applying to us." In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Board were also mindful that expectations around work were changing and therefore "we realised if we really wanted to diversify the pool of people we were getting, and reach the best candidates, we might want to think about a more flexible approach".

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The Board had already been working with Amanda Parker, then of Inc Arts, on an action plan to diversify the senior leadership team. Amanda now consulted with potential candidates to understand the barriers and incentives to applying for the role. This revealed that the role was perceived by some to be over-ambitious in scope for one person and that greater flexibility would likely yield a wider range of applications. Therefore the recruitment materials welcomed applications for flexible working and two very strong pairs of job-share CEO applicants were shortlisted, including Tia Hassan and Kate Scanlon who were successfully appointed and started the roles in October 2021. Both Kate and Tia wanted to work part-time as they have young families and other creative outlets. They are joint CEOs, each working three days a week. They share responsibility for strategy, whilst each leads distinct areas of the organisation's programmes and activities, and line-manages different staff teams.

Moira explains how the Board had some reservations as to how the proposals for joint leadership would work. The Board were used to working with a full-time solo leader and recognised a co-leadership job-share “might require something different of the Board as well”. Some of the Board's concerns were about co-leadership – for example, how responsibilities would be shared – but other questions were about the implications of having part-time post-holders in the senior role:

Through the process what we were interrogating was how firmly did it feel as though the people who were applying really understood the nature of that kind of co-working relationship? We went to a two-stage interview process because I think we really wanted to interrogate a bit more what that actually looked and felt like in the context of the company. I think some of the anxieties were that it was unmanageable, that things would fall between the stools, that it wouldn't be clear to the team who was doing what.

Moira reflects that there was a greater focus on practical questions than is typical for a leadership selection process. The successful candidates produced a briefing note that outlined how they would work together and manage certain scenarios, e.g. how they would cover holiday periods. As a smaller organisation, the costs of using external Executive Search companies were prohibitive, so the Board led the recruitment process. No-one on the selection committee had direct experience of co-leadership, although the Chair's lived experience meant she was aware how important the option of flexible working can be for working parents, and she had previously managed other job-shares, albeit not at the leadership level. Whilst co-leadership was a new model for ELD, Kate and Tia had a long track record of working together and both had long-standing involvement with the organisation, both of which gave the Board confidence.

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Most importantly, the combination of their skills and networks (arguably broader than would be found in one person) and their shared vision for ELD convinced the Board that this was the leadership pairing that was right for the organisation:

They'd worked together for a long time before, so they were coming in with this real sense of 'we know each other, we work well together' – they were convincing in that. And we responded to their shared vision for East London Dance – that's essentially your job, as chair, to recruit the CEO for the organisation, and you want someone who's going to understand and take the vision forward. They both had relationships with East London Dance previously. So they had a sense of the history and values that sit alongside those things. And they were able to articulate that as one, rather than as two different things. So I think they had done a really good job in thinking through those elements of what the job feels like.

Having found the leadership ELD wants for its next phase, the Board recognised they needed to offer more support than might be typical for their co-leaders to flourish, not least as these are also their first CEO roles. Whilst the co-leaders are responsible for developing their own working practices and relationships, the Chair has provided a higher level of advice and support and extended her term of office to enable the new leadership to establish themselves before a new Chair is recruited. ELD's experience shows that taking a more flexible approach to recruitment can yield a more diverse and talented field, and that having a Board that is in good shape, and a Chair who is able and willing to support first-time or co-leaders is critical to making this kind of model possible.

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Fun Palaces: Valuing Difference



Kirsty Lothian and Makala Cheung, Co-Directors of Fun Palaces
(photo credit: Neelam Chhara)

Fun Palaces has a mission to create a world in which everyone has a say in what counts as culture, where it happens, who makes it, and who experiences it. A small central team based in the Albany Theatre in South East London work with a network of Ambassadors across the UK to enable local communities to co-create their own events, culminating in an annual weekend festival. Rooted in co-creation and founded by two co-Directors, Stella Duffy and Sarah-Jane Rawlings, it is perhaps not surprising that when it was time for a change of leadership, a co-leadership model was their preferred choice. What is striking is their deliberate focus of recruiting for difference in their co-leadership model. The two new co-Directors are long-time staff member Kirsty Lothian and Makala Cheung. Makala was appointed following external recruitment to complement Kirsty in terms of skills, experience and perspective.

The recruitment process was carefully considered as Fun Palaces were keen to attract a leader who would be complementary but different to Kirsty who describes herself as “a White, middle-class woman who is Oxford-educated”. Makala is British-Chinese and describes her background as working class. Conscious of the importance of finding two people who would work together well, despite bringing very different experiences, skills and styles of working to the table, the recruitment process involved several stages and Kirsty was involved throughout. It was also a very inclusive recruitment process, for example with candidates invited to submit recorded applications if they preferred rather than written statements.

But it still took a nudge from a third party associated with Fun Palaces to encourage Makala to apply – although the recruitment pack helped, as Makala remembers:

There was a really welcoming line about people from different backgrounds and I remember going ‘oh, they want someone just like me’, I remember actually thinking that when I read it.

Makala, and the other candidates, were encouraged to have a number of informal conversations with staff and to see the ‘interviewing’ process as two-way. This reassured Makala, who was able to gather the information she needed to feel clear about what she was potentially committing to.

Reflecting on the difference between recruiting a co-leader to a solo leadership role, Kirsty describes an extra stage to the process where the potential candidates could meet informally and explore how they would work together. As the recruitment happened during the COVID-19 lockdown, this took the form of a long phone conversation, although ideally they would have met face-to-face.

In this conversation they discussed some of Makala’s concerns about the role, which included the amount of travel involved, and Kirsty was able to adapt to support this, by accompanying Makala on one of her first trips.

Both Kirsty and Makala work part-time, sharing the Director role. Kirsty has a young family; Makala’s family is older, but working part-time for Fun Palaces means she can continue her artistic practice, and she also works for a community organisation in Bristol, where she is based. Their working hours fluctuate during the year, with Kirsty working 3 – 4 days a week during term-time and less in school holidays. Makala works approximately 2 days a week and is able to cover periods when Kirsty works less. Their working patterns are flexible, but they aim to overlap as much as possible – so they are collaborating on projects rather than seeking to cover a Monday-Friday model.

Given the ethos of the organisation, and a wider staff structure with high levels of part-time working and flexibility, appointing co-leaders felt like a natural step, according to Kirsty:

It’s always seemed like the normal way to go about things. We are a part-time organisation. With quite loose job descriptions generally, people adjust around each other and the work gets done. It’s a patchwork of teams, of people balancing five different kinds of career and with people balancing caring responsibilities in all ages, or having health reasons that mean there’s a certain number of hours that they can do. And it’s meant that there’s room for everyone. And for an organisation that is about recognising everyone’s brilliance, it feels really good to be able to enable people’s brilliance in that way.

It is a model that also works well for both co-Directors, enabling Kirsty to develop her career part-time whilst balancing parenting responsibilities and enabling Makala to feel able to take on her first national organisational leadership role: “I never would have taken this role if I was the only director. It was knowing that someone else was there...for me it felt okay.” Looking around at her peers in other organisations, balancing parenting younger children with working, Kirsty reflects that co-leadership means her own career has progressed whereas “peers have got really stuck hitting at this point in



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their life". For both Makala and Kirsty in their first CEO roles, having the mutual support of a co-leader is invaluable, particularly given the complex and ambitious scale of their work and the challenging external environment. Kirsty describes the support thus:

You can be a source of help to each other, which is what feels so kind of rich about it as a model. Like, you've got a buddy. When you don't know what to do about something, it's okay. It's not just your problem when you have a really frustrating situation to deal with. There is somebody who's absolutely invested in it as much as you are. Of course, you can have friendship groups and mentors, coaches, and all the rest of it, which are all brilliant and important, but it's baked into the model of it as well, which is so powerful to me.

Reflecting on how their partnership works, Makala points to their different but complementary ways of working, noting these are things you would not normally consider as part of a job description – whether that is about Makala taking a long-term perspective more often, or Kirsty bringing a more reflective approach alongside Makala's urgency and delivery-focus.

They also describe the importance of making time for one another, to understand one another's perspectives and ideas. Having deliberately sought out difference, both parties recognise that they need to prioritise conversations which explore one another's ideas. Being committed to working in this way is essential – Kirsty describes it as being "open to hearing completely opposite points of view and wanting to hear them and wanting to absorb them and wanting to think about them and see how that makes you rethink".

But whilst difference is central to their model of working there is equally an underlying shared vision and values which guide a collaborative way of working that is generative, as Kirsty explains:

We both have the same underlying ethics. We want to change the world in the same way. We have the same sense of what justice looks like and what the great work looks like, and whilst our guts do not automatically go in the same direction actually we are able between us to have a much fuller way of getting to that change. And that seems to be one of the absolute huge strengths of co-leadership.

At a time when the challenges facing cultural organisations are too complex for any one person to hold all the answers, Fun Palaces have embraced a leadership model that offers them a way to co-create new ways of doing things.



... it's about being open to hearing completely opposite points of view and wanting to hear them and wanting to absorb them and wanting to think about them and see how that makes you rethink.

How Can Co-Leadership Become More Widespread?

There is a growing interest in co-leadership, although the number of executive roles advertised on this basis is still very small. Of the 11 published case studies in the research only one had been advertised as a co-leadership opportunity, although a further two explicitly encouraged flexible applications. The vast majority were either advertised as solo roles or co-leadership resulted from internal reorganisation. The lack of advertised opportunities can deter potential candidates who assume boards who do not actively encourage flexible and co-leadership applications are unlikely to consider their application favourably.

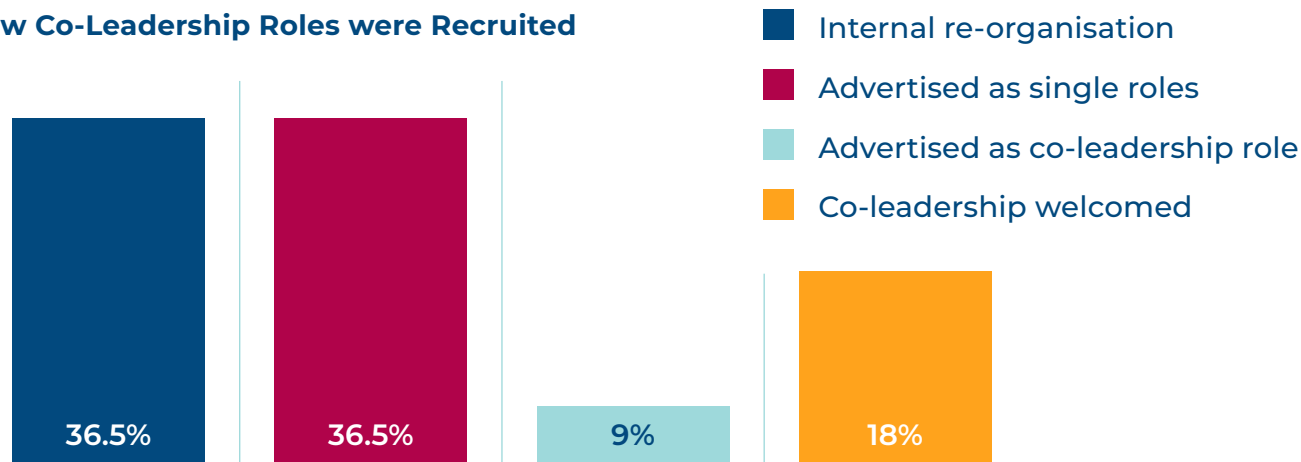
Boards have concerns about the perceived additional risk and cost that co-leadership might entail. However co-leadership can be achieved at little or no additional cost via job-sharing, and overall investment in co-leadership represents good value for money. There are some potential additional risks, just as co-leadership offers potential additional benefits, but these are easily managed by an experienced board.

Co-leadership presents an opportunity to create a more impactful and inclusive model of leadership, but it is not suitable for every organisation or leader. It is not a quick fix

for a lack of leadership diversity and should not be used to appoint those not yet ready: co-leadership is demanding and candidates need to be suitably experienced and well-supported by their boards. There are many other issues contributing to a lack of leadership diversity which also need to be addressed, in addition to shifting the culture and structure of leadership via collective models, such as co-leadership.

Boards of cultural organisations have a critical role to play in enabling and supporting co-leadership. Funders and those involved in leadership development have responsibilities too: to encourage awareness and understanding of co-leadership and to support potential leaders develop the competencies required. Like anything worth doing, co-leadership needs to be done well to work – the resources section of this guide provides some practical advice and information for those interested in pursuing co-leadership further.

How Co-Leadership Roles were Recruited



Enablers of change

Leadership from the chair

Board confidence in co-leadership
or in the individual co-leaders

Commitment to collaborative
leadership and to increasing diversity

Recognition that the models needs
to change, and that the co-leadership
model supports change

Factors currently limiting use of co-leadership

Lack of information about how co-leadership
works, including recruitment and selection

A lack opportunities advertised as being open
to co-leadership

A lack of inclusive leadership recruitment
expertise available in-house

A preference for full-time leaders

Fear of conflict between leaders and unclear
accountability

Concerns about the additional cost involved

Advice for Boards

1. Planning stage: is co-leadership the best option for you?

What to expect

Co-leadership suits organisations operating in complex environments where a breadth of experience and expertise is required. It also suits first-time CEOs and can be a more inclusive model, which is particularly attractive to women, global majority and disabled candidates.

Co-leaders are best appointed together – it can be hard to achieve the equality required if a new co-leader is appointed alongside an existing leader.

Not all boards will be in a position to support co-leadership effectively. The chair will need experience and capacity to mentor new leaders and to support transition if this is a new model for the organisation, as is often the case. Board members, or funders, may have concerns about co-leadership, including how it works practically, the potential for conflict, and the cost. Concerns may also arise from previous poor experiences, or second-hand accounts, of failed co-leadership and a preference for full-time CEOs.

Key considerations

The chair needs to be committed, capable and have capacity – this is not an option for an inexperienced chair, and it useful for them to have CEO experience and/or experience of co-leadership. The chair will also need the capacity to provide support, and ideally be committed to serve at least 12 – 18 months beyond the arrival of co-leaders.

The board needs to be committed to changing its leadership model – the full board needs to understand and support co-leadership, as any reservations can derail co-leaders if this leads to excessive scrutiny. The board is encouraged to carefully consider the risks of co-leadership, and discuss their plans with the wider staff, including how any risks would be managed and potential implications for any existing roles. But remember: whilst the short-term risks might seem high, in the long-term the rewards are far higher. Also, the risks can easily be managed, by a capable board.

Consider flexible working – co-leadership can be a more inclusive model and works well on a part-time or job-share basis. It will greatly increase the quality and range of applications if you advertise clearly that flexible working is an option.

Review the vision and values – as in any leadership recruitment situation, it's important the board are clear about the organisation's vision to guide its selection process.

Support you may find useful at this stage

- Seek external specialist advice early in the process: a HR adviser or executive search consultant can help you think through the options and maximise the range of potential applicants.

2. Recruitment: making space for co-leadership as an option

What to expect

Review the role of the departing CEO and don't expect to replace like-for-like. The organisation's needs are likely to have changed over time; long-serving staff have often adapted to role to suit their strengths and you also need to take account of availability of candidates and shifting expectations around hybrid working and flexibility. Many cultural leaders are systematically over-working too, so the current role is unlikely to be achievable within contracted hours.

To be effective co-leadership needs a clear shared mission/ vision and values, which should align with the organisation's. Roles need to be clearly defined, with any reporting arrangements and individual responsibilities outlined. Co-leaders usually have a mixture of shared and individual responsibilities. Individual co-leaders need the authority to act in their areas of responsibility, and ability to act unilaterally in critical moments.

Applicants for co-leadership roles may not have worked together before as co-leaders, as it is not yet a common model. Evidence suggests that this is not a barrier to success; as long as co-leaders share values and vision, and possess the necessary leadership skills, highly successful co-leadership relationships can be formed between strangers. Applicants are also likely to include first-time CEOs and if you attract global majority, women and disabled candidates they may have gained their experience and skills in freelance roles or less traditional career paths, including beyond the cultural sector, due to systemic discrimination. Candidates may be hesitant to propose flexible working arrangements due to previous poor experiences so it is advised to proactively encourage this through the recruitment materials, if you wish to attract the widest talent pool.

Key considerations

Keep the job description realistic – review the job description and person specification carefully. Check how many hours your outgoing CEO has been working regularly in case the role is over-ambitious. Focus on the most important parts of the role, rather than creating a wish-list of everything you might need, as this will discriminate against minoritised candidates and narrow your talent pool.

Take a flexible approach to find the best candidate – keep your options open and be willing to consider a range of models depending on the candidates who apply and whether they might work best as a solo CEO or co-leaders. One experienced chair advised: “always go with the best candidate, or candidates. Be imaginative and prepared to take risks and to make it work.” Don't expect candidates to have all the experience required to do the role, before they've had the opportunity to do the role.

Explore how co-leaders propose to share responsibility – don't expect co-leaders to have resolved every aspect their approach at interview stage, but they should know how they expect to work together and their respective lead areas. Boards considering co-leadership can often focus on practical considerations, but the advice from experienced chairs and recruiters was to avoid this: “focus on the vision and don't get bogged down in the practicalities”. If you want to discuss arrangements, allow longer for joint interviews so you have enough time to also fully explore their leadership potential and vision.

Allow capacity for overlap in job-shares – a minimum of one-day per week is typical for a senior job-share role, and whilst it is possible to operate job-sharing with no increase in hours this is not optimal.

Be transparent – in the recruitment pack clarify the full range of options you are willing to consider and the maximum budget. For example, candidates might want to know whether the salary budget could cover a 1.2 FTE role, allowing for job-sharing on a 3-day week.

Allow choice for both parties – co-leaders ideally apply together and select one another. If there is already one co-leader in place, there needs to be an opportunity for candidates to decide whether they wish to work together.

Assess for co-leadership competencies and compatibility – co-leaders need highly developed collaborative leadership skills to work effectively including excellent emotional intelligence; self-awareness, the ability to build trust and empathy. They need to embrace difference constructively and be masterful collaborators. They should ideally possess a wide range of different experiences, expertise and skills between them, but share values and vision.

Make sure the selection panel is diverse and qualified to assess the candidates – ensure you have experience of job-sharing or co-leadership in the mix, as well as panel members with experience of leadership and qualified to assess the competencies involved.

Build in support from the outset – any CEO benefits from well-structured support including mentoring, training and coaching as well as regular informal supervision and periodic performance management and development review with their line-manager. Executive recruitment specialists recommend the conversation begins at offer stage, so new leaders feel supported from the outset, and boards are advised to budget for external support.

Support you may find useful at this stage:

- Inc Arts offers online resources that can support planning for and delivering inclusive recruitment.
- External executive search and recruitment specialists can advise on designing the role and the selection process, as well as assist in attracting candidates.
- Many organisations invite external panel members to augment the experience, and diversity, of the board for leadership recruitment processes.
- Relevant training, e.g. unconscious bias, should be offered any board members involved in recruitment and selection.

be willing to consider a range of models depending on the candidates who apply and whether they might work best as a solo CEO or co-leaders. One experienced chair advised: “always go with the best candidate, or candidates. Be imaginative and prepared to take risks and to make it work.

3. After appointment: supporting co-leaders to thrive

What to expect

Leadership transitions can be unsettling for staff and when a new model is involved, internal and external stakeholders alike may initially be unclear or feel concerned as to how things will work.

Some stakeholders may be sceptical and seek to undermine the model. Residual concerns from previous poor experiences of co-leadership, or doubts about power-sharing and part-time CEOs, can derail the building of trust between boards and co-leaders and lead to scrutiny with insufficient support.

All organisational leaders need support, although there can be a tendency to assume CEOs don't need line-managing. Leaders who are 'The Only Ones' (a term used by Gaylene Gould to describe the experience of being a sole Black, Asian or Ethnically Diverse leader in an organisation) or first-time CEOs may need additional support. During the transition the chair will need capacity to advise co-leaders and champion them with internal and external stakeholders who may be unsettled or need reassurance.

Occasionally co-leadership relationship may encounter difficulties, if either party under-performs or lacks the competencies required, or if differences emerge in terms of values or vision.

Key considerations

Agree roles and ways of working – co-leadership is often a new departure for the organisation, so taking time to clarify how the arrangements will work including defining individual and joint responsibilities, communication protocols, how to handle disagreements, and how co-leaders will work with the chair and other staff is important. This agreement may need to be refined later, but clarity at the outset is useful for all. The chair also needs to set clear expectations: leaders need clear performance targets and opportunities to discuss progress. As co-leaders are jointly accountable they usually share objectives and meet the chair together to set and review targets. The chair is advised to meet both co-leaders together regularly, on a weekly or fortnightly basis.

Champion the model – the chair may need to champion the model with any sceptical staff and external stakeholders. A new leadership model may impact other senior staff and the chair has a responsibility to discuss any changes with those impacted before co-leaders arrive in post.

Avoid doubling-up – whilst there will be situations which involve both co-leaders, typically Board meetings, strategy development, working with the senior leadership team, the temptation to expect both to be involved in everything needs to be avoided. The chair also needs to avoid the impulse to check with the other co-leader, to get a second opinion. External and internal stakeholders may need reassurance initially that both individual co-leaders have authority to act as CEO.

Be supportive and avoid over-scrutiny – boards need to be careful not to micro-manage, as this behaviour undermines trust and can cause more problems than it solves. Having appointed co-leaders, the board should be asking itself: what do we need to do to support them, rather than how can this go wrong?

Be prepared to intervene – whilst co-leaders should be expected to hold one another to account and resolve their differences, this does not absolve the Board of their responsibility for performance management. If either co-leader is under-performing or conflict begins to develop between them it's essential the board intervenes quickly.

Be fair and treat co-leaders equitably – boards should avoid treating co-leaders inequitably and this extends to pay, conditions and contractual arrangements, as well as informal behaviours. Wider research suggests EDs receive far more scrutiny than ADs from their boards, whether from a deferential approach to artistic leadership or because boards feel more confident monitoring fundraising performance than artistic quality. It's important co-leaders, who are jointly responsible for the organisation's success, receive similar levels of recognition and challenge.

Support you may find useful at this stage

- An experienced chair, with capacity, is often best-placed to mentor the co-leaders, although external mentors and leadership coaching can also be helpful.
- Consider offering pre-emptive joint coaching to facilitate an initial 'co-leadership contract' to include how to handle disagreements, with regular review sessions (e.g. quarterly) to support building the working relationship.

- If tensions arise between co-leaders external mediation should be considered, and if this cannot be resolved then the Chair is responsible for deciding a course of action.

Advice to Boards: Summary

PLANNING STAGE

- Does the chair have the capacity and capability?
- Is the full board committed?
- Have you considered flexible working?
- Is the vision and values clear and up to date?

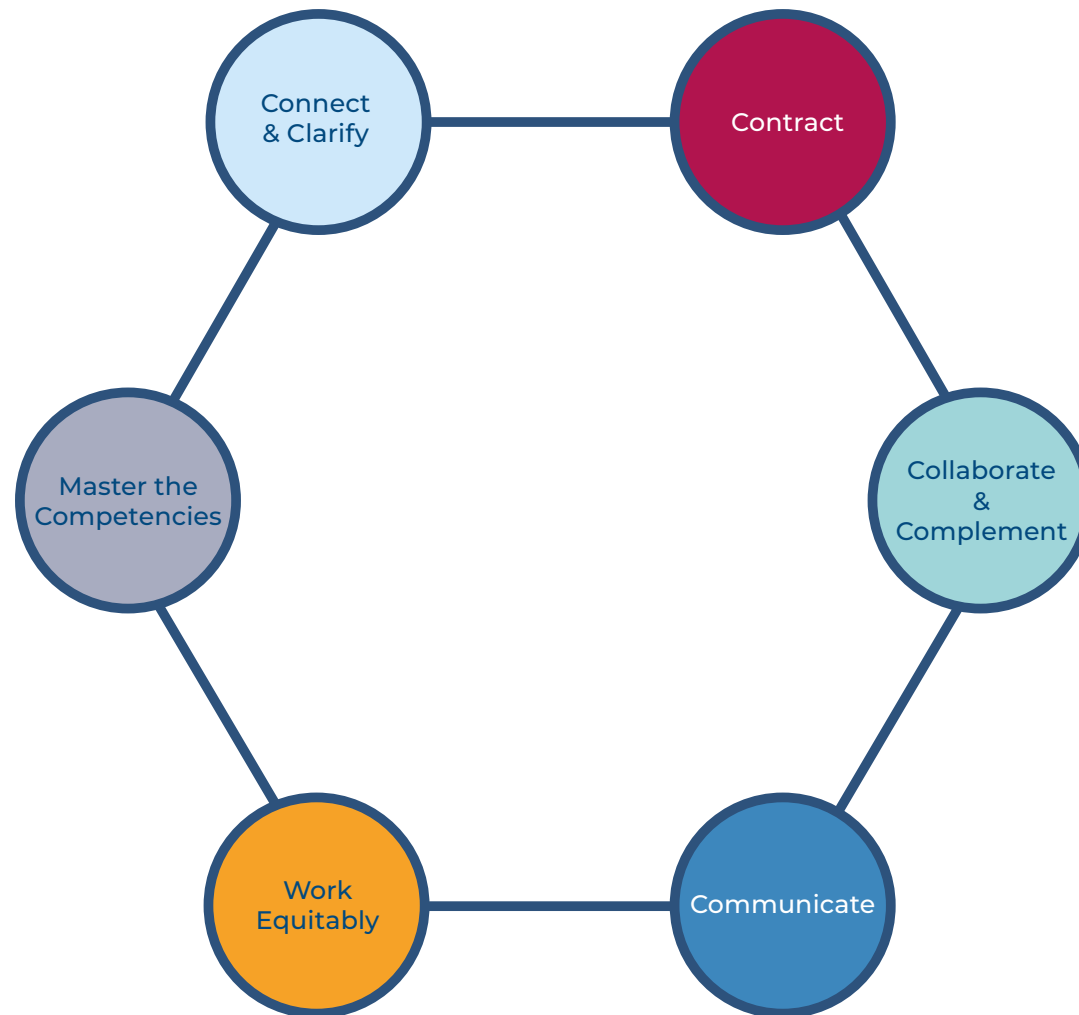
RECRUITMENT

- Ensure the job description is realistic
- Be explicit, transparent and flexible to enable a range of leadership options
- Ensure co-leadership is well-designed
- Check candidates have the competencies and commitment to co-leadership
- Build in support from the outset

AFTER APPOINTMENT

- Agree ways of working
- Avoid doubling up and advocate for the model internally and externally
- Be fair and treat co-leaders equitably
- Be supportive and avoid over-scrutiny
- Be prepared to intervene

Principles for Co-Leaders



Contract – particularly around conflict

Agree how you want to work together. Do this at the outset, and review this regularly, adjusting your responsibilities and ways of working as the roles evolve. Stay flexible so you can support one another, and respond to organisational need. It's a good idea to discuss how long you both commit to the role and your potential exit strategy at the outset.

Agree how you will disagree. Many co-leaders don't disagree publicly, preferring to maintain a united front to avoid confusion or risk undermining one another. Others suggest it can be helpful to voice different opinions at times, if you want to encourage others to share their different perspectives and challenge one another constructively.

It could be helpful to differentiate between how you handle subject and status conflict. Subject conflict is about different ideas and is generally helpful – unlike status conflict which is about winning by being 'right' or having more power. Perfect the art of agreeing to disagree. Know when a difference of perspectives is important to you or helpful and so deserves attention, and when to let things drop.

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Collaborate

Define where you both want to be involved and make decisions jointly – and where you can lead autonomously. Collaboration is at the heart of co-leadership and it's natural to want to work together as much as possible to learn from and support one another. Realistically though, you'll need to prioritise carefully where two people add value, and that's usually in complex situations.

Complement

Work with a partner who brings different experience, expertise and perspectives to your own, and agree where you want to work together and separately. Work separately where you can, to preserve time together for

collaboration, planning together and review. Having multiple perspectives on more routine tasks is often counter-productive and inefficient, causing confusion and even friction. Play to your individual strengths, but be mindful to share workload fairly.

Communicate

Be practical, honest and efficient in how you communicate. You'll need to keep one another informed so find smart ways to convey factual information to one another and preserve your time together for more discursive conversations. Honesty and high levels of trust are essential for working at pace and at your best.

Work separately where you can, to preserve time together for collaboration, planning together and review.

A new co-leadership arrangement may be confusing to external and internal stakeholders who are used to having a full-time solo leader. Make sure everyone understands which co-leader is responsible for each area, and where both have authority to act.

Work Equitably

Keep it equal: watch out for others treating you or your partner less favourably, or situations where one of you has privilege. This includes making sure co-leaders receive equitable recognition and development opportunities. Keep an eye on your work-loads which should be equitable. Responsibilities may need to be re-allocated between co-leaders, or other colleagues, temporarily or permanently to ensure both co-leaders are able to equally contribute to your shared role.

Agree your boundaries: these will be personal to you as individuals but other co-leaders suggest they are often available to one another (but not other colleagues) outside of working hours, on the agreement that the other will respond if they can.

Competency

Master collaborating: develop brilliant listening skills, and the ability to embrace difference, navigate complexity and power imbalances, build trust and confidence. Make sure you know yourself well – ask for regular feedback, make it easy for others to speak honestly with you by showing you value their feedback and act on it where possible. Work with coach individually. Connect with other co-leaders to compare ways of working and share learning.

Connect and clarify

Work closely with the chair and wider staff. The chair should be available to speak/ meet with you both jointly every 1-2 weeks. Agree clear and joint performance targets with your board, and meet at least twice a year to discuss progress. External support from a coach can be useful in devising and reviewing your working arrangements.

A new co-leadership arrangement may be confusing to external and internal stakeholders who are used to having a full-time solo leader. Make sure everyone understands which co-leader is responsible for each area, and where both have authority to act. Be clear with others who does what, and who can decide what. Watch out for others expecting you to double-up when not needed, either by both being involved or by asking second opinions.

Senior colleagues, and the board, can feel excluded when co-leaders work well together and discuss and agree matters between themselves which previously might have involved a wider circle. Be mindful about who else needs to be informed or consulted, or who might add value to conversations.

Watch out for others expecting you to double-up when not needed, either by both being involved or by asking second opinions.

Advice for Potential Co-Leaders

Getting ready to apply

1. **Develop your networks** – identify several people you might want to a co-lead with so you're ready when an opportunity arises. Discuss which roles or types of roles you're interested in and what you'd like to achieve through them. Look for people at a similar career stage, with similar ambitions and values, but with complementary skills, so the package overall is more attractive to employers.
2. **Test out potential partners** – if possible, find opportunities to work together. Employers prefer a track record, plus you can reassure yourselves you can work well together.
3. **Develop yourself** – co-leading can be demanding. Make sure you have the skills and competencies required for co-leadership including good emotional intelligence (self-awareness, ability to build trust, empathy) and the ability to handle conflict and navigate difference constructively. Leadership courses and coaches can help you identify your strengths, learn new techniques and skills and develop your leadership experience.
4. **Do your homework** – the full report includes 11 case studies of co-leadership arrangements and lots more information about the model, the challenges and the benefits. There's also a section at the end of this guide with a selection of useful resources.
5. **'Contract' with your partner** – before applying, many of the co-leaders interviewed had discussed how they would approach sharing the role. Some also discussed a minimum period they would commit to the role, conscious that if one co-leader moves on this often impacts the other.
6. **Ask, if co-leadership isn't advertised** – there's a Northern saying: 'shy bairns get nowt'. Less than 10% of the case studies where co-leadership was in place had been advertised as such. Hopefully more co-leader roles will be advertised in future, but in the meantime get in touch and ask if you can apply on this basis.
7. **Make the business case** – if co-leadership costs more, be clear what the benefits are.
8. **Expect questions about the model** – the board may have reservations about how co-leadership might work. Prepare responses to how you'd approach the role including how you might share responsibilities and handle disagreements and practical considerations such as working patterns (if job-sharing), how you might manage absences and your potential exit strategy. You might want to have drafted a working agreement you could refer to, or even share with the board during selection.
9. **Present yourselves as a joint candidate** – as co-leaders you are a package rather than two individuals. Tips include presenting your CVs consistently and demonstrating how well you complement one another.
10. **Invest in coaching** – 1 – 2 sessions with a leadership coach can help you prepare for interview.

Applying for co-leadership roles

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Further Reading

The full research report, and a growing library of case studies, can be accessed at coleadership.info

1. Claire Antrobus, **Co-leadership: an opportunity for the UK Cultural sector to increase leadership diversity and impact, 2023**

The full report and Executive Summary are available online from this UK-based study of 15 organisations which have recently adopted co-leadership in the cultural sector, including 11 case studies describing how the model evolved and works and a section exploring anonymous examples of what can go wrong, and why. The report also draws on a literature review and survey to summarise the main barriers to leadership diversity in the UK.

2. Meera Chary, **Three non-profits share their approach to co-leadership, The Bridge Span Group, 23 March 2022.**

Available from: www.bridgespan.org/insights/library/leadership-development/approaches-to-nonprofit-co-leadership

A short article about three US non-profits that have recently introduced co-leadership models.

3. Ciara Eastell, 'The Future of Cultural Leadership', In: Witzel, M., ed. **Post-Pandemic Leadership, London: Routledge, 2022, pp.156 – 168.**

An article summarising the challenges facing cultural leaders today and the implications for cultural leadership.

4. Marc Feigen, Michael Jenkins, and Anton Warendh, 'Is It Time to Consider Co-CEOs?', **July-August 2022, Harvard Business Review Magazine.**

Available from: hbr.org/2022/07/is-it-time-to-consider-co-ceos

A useful summary of the case for co-leadership including findings from a recent study of businesses that demonstrates improve profitability under co-CEOs.

5. Wendellyn Reid and Hilde Fjellvær, **Co-Leadership in the Arts and Culture: Sharing Values and Vision, Routledge, 2023.**

A highly-recommended comprehensive study of co-leadership in the arts and cultural sector internationally.

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About the author

Claire Antrobus is a leadership coach based in York with over 30 years' experience in the non-profit and cultural sectors in a range of artistic and executive roles including at Arts Council England, Tate Liverpool, Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art and British Council France. Claire helps people to create change and improve their impact by developing leadership skills and transforming their organisational cultures and works with organisations that care about developing communities, tackling inequalities and creating social change. She was 2009/10 NESTA Innovation Clore Fellow.