



Collaborative

A POLYCENTRIC LEADERSHIP TRAIT

Joseph W. Handley, Jr., Ph.D. (A3)



Collaborative as a Foundational Theme of Polycentric Leadership

Executive Summary

Polycentric leadership (PCL) is an emerging theoretical model developed to address the leadership challenges of complex, globalized, and multipolar environments (Handley, 2020). Defined as a decentralized approach that empowers multiple centers of influence while sustaining coherence through shared purpose and values, PCL responds to the limitations of hierarchical and unicentric leadership models. The model is articulated through six interdependent themes: charisma, collaborative, communal, relational, freedom (entrepreneurial), and diverse (Handley, 2020).

Within this framework, *collaborative* leadership refers to the intentional coordination of people, resources, and authority across organizational and cultural boundaries in pursuit of

shared goals. Collaboration in PCL is not merely cooperative behavior but a structural and cultural commitment to shared problem-solving, joint ownership, and distributed decision-making. This paper argues that collaboration is a core enabling mechanism of polycentric leadership, translating shared vision and communal identity into coordinated action across complex systems (Handley, 2020; Kanter, 1994; McChrystal et al., 2015).

I. Introduction to Polycentric Leadership

Contemporary organizations increasingly operate in environments characterized by interdependence, uncertainty, and rapid change. In such contexts, no single leader or institution possesses sufficient information, authority, or capacity to address complex challenges independently (McChrystal et al., 2015). Polycentric leadership responds to this reality by distributing leadership across networks of actors who collaborate toward shared objectives (Handley, 2020; Ostrom, 2010).

Collaboration is a defining operational principle within polycentric systems. While decentralization enables flexibility, collaboration ensures alignment, coherence, and collective effectiveness. Without collaboration, polycentric systems risk fragmentation; without decentralization, collaboration becomes constrained by hierarchy. PCL holds these dynamics in productive tension, enabling both autonomy and coordinated action (Aligica & Tarko, 2012; Franklin, 2016).

Theologically, collaborative leadership reflects a vision of shared vocation and mutual participation in God’s mission, where leadership is exercised through partnership rather than domination (Zscheile, 2007; Woodward, 2013).

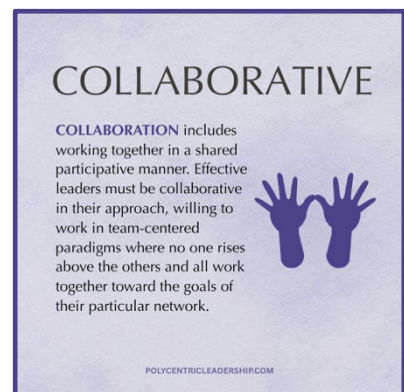
Organizationally, it draws from research on cross-sector collaboration, alliance-building, and networked leadership, all of which emphasize the necessity of collaboration for addressing adaptive challenges (Kanter, 1994; Wei-Skillern et al., 2016).

II. Defining the Collaborative Theme in the Polycentric Context

In polycentric leadership, *collaborative* refers to the intentional structuring of leadership processes that enable diverse actors to work together across boundaries of role, organization, culture, and geography (Handley, 2020). Collaboration is not an informal preference but a disciplined practice requiring clarity of purpose, shared norms, and relational trust.

Three defining characteristics of collaborative leadership emerge within PCL (Handley, 2020):

1. Shared problem-solving and decision-making



2. Cross-boundary partnership and integration
3. Joint ownership of outcomes

Shared Problem-Solving and Decision-Making

Collaborative leadership prioritizes collective intelligence over individual expertise. In polycentric systems, decisions emerge through dialogue, negotiation, and shared discernment rather than unilateral authority (McChrystal et al., 2015). This approach increases the quality of decision-making by integrating multiple perspectives and reduces blind spots inherent in centralized leadership models (Johansson, 2004).

Research in organizational theory demonstrates that collaborative decision-making enhances innovation and adaptability, particularly in environments characterized by ambiguity and rapid change (Kanter, 1994; Fayad et al., 2024).

Cross-Boundary Partnership and Integration

Polycentric collaboration extends beyond internal teamwork to include partnerships across organizational, denominational, and sectoral boundaries. Such collaboration is essential in mission and nonprofit contexts, where impact often depends on coordinated efforts among diverse stakeholders (Handley, 2020; Oxbrow, 2010).

Effective collaboration requires leaders who can bridge differences, align incentives, and cultivate trust across cultural and institutional divides. These boundary-spanning capacities are central to polycentric leadership effectiveness (Wei-Skillern et al., 2016; Aligica & Tarko, 2012).

Joint Ownership of Outcomes

In collaborative leadership, success and failure are shared. Joint ownership reinforces accountability and commitment by ensuring that participants are invested in collective outcomes rather than individual agendas (Kanter, 1994). This shared ownership reduces competition within networks and strengthens alignment around mission and values (Handley, 2020).

III. Theological and Organizational Foundations of Collaborative Leadership

The collaborative theme of PCL is grounded in theological and organizational traditions that emphasize shared participation and mutual responsibility. Trinitarian theology offers a model of collaborative action rooted in unity, diversity, and shared purpose, where distinct persons act in coordinated harmony (Zscheile, 2007).

Biblical narratives reinforce this collaborative vision, depicting leadership as a shared endeavor involving apostles, elders, and communities working together in discernment and mission (Acts 15; Ephesians 4). These texts underscore the importance of collaboration for maintaining unity amid diversity (Woodward, 2013). From an organizational perspective, collaborative leadership draws on research in alliance formation, network governance, and team-based leadership. Studies consistently demonstrate that collaboration enhances organizational performance when supported by clear goals, relational trust, and shared norms (Kanter, 1994; Ostrom, 2010).

IV. Collaboration as a Catalyst for Polycentric Effectiveness

In polycentric systems, collaboration functions as the mechanism through which distributed leadership becomes operationally effective (Handley, 2020).

Enabling Coordination without Centralization

Collaboration allows polycentric systems to achieve coordination without reverting to hierarchical control. Through shared frameworks, communication practices, and relational alignment, leaders are able to act autonomously while remaining strategically aligned (McChrystal et al., 2015; Wei-Skillern et al., 2016).

Enhancing Innovation and Learning

Collaborative leadership fosters innovation by creating spaces for experimentation, feedback, and learning across the network. Polycentric systems benefit from diverse inputs and rapid knowledge exchange, enabling adaptive responses to emerging challenges (Johansson, 2004; Fayad et al., 2024).

Sustaining Trust and Commitment

Collaboration reinforces trust by making leadership processes transparent and participatory. When leaders experience meaningful participation in decision-making, commitment to the collective mission deepens, strengthening long-term engagement (Kanter, 1994; Logan et al., 2011).

V. Conclusion: Collaboration and Polycentric Leadership Practice

The collaborative theme is indispensable to polycentric leadership. While decentralization distributes authority, collaboration integrates that authority into coherent and effective action (Handley, 2020). Without collaboration, polycentric systems fragment; without decentralization, collaboration becomes constrained by hierarchy.

Collaborative leadership reframes leadership as a shared practice rather than an individual function. Grounded in theological vision and supported by organizational research, collaboration enables polycentric systems to navigate complexity through shared problem-

solving, cross-boundary partnership, and joint ownership of outcomes (Aligica & Tarko, 2012; McChrystal et al., 2015).

As organizations and mission movements increasingly operate in complex global ecosystems, the collaborative dimension of polycentric leadership offers a robust framework for sustaining alignment, innovation, and collective impact.

References

- Addison, S. (2015). *Pioneering movement: Leadership that multiplies disciples and churches*. IVP Books.
- Aligica, P. D., & Tarko, V. (2012). Polycentricity: From Polanyi to Ostrom, and beyond. *Governance*, 25(2), 237–262.
- Fayad, A., Majekodunmi, J., Mendola, M., & Kenny, R. (2024, March–April). Nurturing innovation. *Harvard Business Review*.
- Franklin, K. J. (2016). *A paradigm for global mission leadership: The journey of the Wycliffe Global Alliance* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Pretoria).
- Handley, J. W. (2020). *Polycentric mission leadership* (Doctoral dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary, School of Intercultural Studies).
- Johansson, F. (2004). *The Medici effect*. Harvard Business School Press.
- Kanter, R. M. (1994). Collaborative advantage: The art of alliances. *Harvard Business Review*, 72(4), 96–108.
- Logan, D., King, J., & Fischer-Wright, H. (2011). *Tribal leadership*. HarperBusiness.
- McChrystal, S., Collins, T., Silverman, D., & Fussell, C. (2015). *Team of teams*. Penguin.
- Ostrom, E. (2010). Beyond markets and states: Polycentric governance of complex economic systems. *American Economic Review*, 100(3), 641–672.
- Oxbrow, M. (2010). *Better together: Partnership and collaboration in mission*. Edinburgh 2010 Study Theme.
- Wei-Skillern, J., Ehrlichman, D., & Sawyer, D. (2016). *The most impactful leaders you've never heard of*. Stanford Social Innovation Review.
- Woodward, J. R. (2013). *Creating a missional culture*. InterVarsity Press.
- Yeh, A. (2016). *Polycentric missiology: 21st-century mission from everyone to everywhere*. IVP Academic.
- Zscheile, D. (2007). The Trinity, leadership and power. *Journal of Religious Leadership*, 6(2), 43–69.

About the Author



REV. JOSEPH W. HANDLEY, JR., PH.D.

Joe Handley is currently CEO of A3 and serves ex-officio on the Board of Directors. Rev. Handley is a seasoned mission leader with over 30 years of global experience. Born and raised in Southern California, he received a B.A. in psychology and an M.A. in theology from Azusa Pacific University. In 2020, he completed a Ph.D. in intercultural studies from Fuller Theological Seminary. Joe served nine years at Azusa Pacific University as the founding director of their Office of World Missions and director of one of the first multi-national high school mission congresses in Mexico City in 1996. In 1998 the Lord called him to Rolling Hills Covenant Church where he served as the Global Outreach Pastor and shortly thereafter as Associate Pastor for Outreach Ministries. In July of 2008, Joe answered God’s call becoming the fourth president of A3, a developer of Christ-like leaders seeking to accelerate Christ-centered movements around the world. You can find his articles at polycentricleadership.com and a3leaders.org/.



6 Centerpointe Drive, Suite 3700 || La Palma, California 90623 USA
Online: <https://polycentricleadership.com>

Joseph W. Handley, Jr., Ph.D., President
Email: jhandley@a3.email

Copyright © 2026 Polycentric Leadership || Readers are free to distribute this white paper within their own organizations, provided the footers, footnotes, Polycentric Leadership copyright, logo & contact information are not removed from the document.

