



Communal as a Foundational Theme of Polycentric Leadership

Executive Summary

Polycentric leadership (PCL) is an emerging theoretical model designed to guide leadership practice in complex, globalized, and multipolar environments (Handley, 2020, 2023). Defined as collaborative and decentralized leadership that empowers multiple centers of influence, PCL responds to the limitations of hierarchical and unicentric leadership models in addressing adaptive challenges (Handley, 2020). The model is articulated through six interdependent themes: charisma, collaborative, communal, relational, freedom (entrepreneurial), and diverse (Handley, 2022). Within this framework, communal leadership refers to the intentional formation and sustaining of shared life, mutual responsibility, and collective identity among leaders and communities.

Communal leadership emphasizes belonging, participation, and shared ownership rather than individual authority or positional control. Drawing on theological, organizational, and social movement literature, this paper argues that the communal theme is foundational to polycentric leadership, enabling trust, resilience, and long-term sustainability in distributed leadership systems (Handley, 2023; Ostrom, 2010; Kanter, 1994). Recent applications in mission networks, global governance, and business transformations further underscore its centrality, demonstrating how communal practices foster adaptability in polarized and interdependent contexts (Handley, 2023; Wei-Skillern et al., 2016; Bauwens, 2025).

I. Introduction to Communal Leadership within a Polycentric Framework

The increasing complexity of global mission, nonprofit, and organizational ecosystems has intensified the need for leadership models that can sustain coordination, trust, and shared purpose without reliance on centralized authority (McChrystal et al., 2015). Polycentric leadership addresses this challenge by distributing authority across interconnected centers of influence while maintaining coherence through shared values and relationships (Aligica & Tarko, 2012). As global tensions—such as cultural polarization, technological disruption, and environmental crises—escalate, PCL offers a paradigm shift toward collaborative empowerment, particularly evident in mission movements where diverse actors must align without top-down mandates (Handley, 2023).

Within this system, the communal theme plays a critical role by shaping how leaders and followers understand themselves not merely as individual actors but as members of a shared body. Communal leadership resists both individualism and bureaucratic impersonality, emphasizing instead covenantal relationships, mutual accountability, and shared stewardship (Franklin, 2016; Hollenweger, 1996). This theme counters the isolation often found in hierarchical structures, promoting a relational ecosystem where influence flows organically through communal bonds.

Theologically, the communal dimension of PCL is grounded in a Trinitarian vision of shared life and mutual indwelling, as well as in biblical metaphors of the people of God as a body, household, and fellowship (Zscheile, 2007; Woodward, 2013). Organizationally, it draws from research on communities of practice, collaborative networks, and social movements, all of which demonstrate that shared identity and belonging are essential for sustained collective action (Wenger, 1998; Weber & King, 2013). Emerging case studies, such as those in Scandinavian governance and the Tata Group, illustrate how communal norms enable distributed power to thrive amid diversity and change (Handley, 2023; Bauwens, 2025).

II. Defining the Communal Theme in Polycentric Leadership

In polycentric leadership, communal refers to more than teamwork or cooperation. It describes a leadership environment in which authority, responsibility, and identity are held collectively rather than individually (Handley, 2022). Communal leadership emphasizes “withness” over “overness”, privileging shared discernment and participation over command-and-control dynamics. This approach aligns with the broader PCL model, where the six themes interlock to create a resilient framework for global challenges.

Three defining characteristics of the communal theme emerge from the literature (Handley, 2020):

1. Shared identity and belonging
2. Mutual responsibility and accountability
3. Collective discernment and ownership

Shared Identity and Belonging

Communal leadership fosters a sense of belonging that binds leaders together around a shared mission and narrative. This shared identity reduces fragmentation in decentralized systems by anchoring diverse actors to a common purpose (Logan et al., 2011). Research on social movements demonstrates that movements endure not primarily because of structures or strategies, but because participants experience deep relational bonds and shared meaning (Weber & King, 2013; Pierson, 2009). For instance, in polycentric mission networks, communal identity manifests through rituals of shared storytelling and celebration, reinforcing unity across divides (Handley, 2023).

In mission contexts, communal identity is particularly vital, as leaders often operate across cultural, organizational, and geographic boundaries. Polycentric systems depend on relational glue rather than positional authority to sustain coherence (Handley, 2022). Recent explorations in congregational engagement highlight how this identity empowers local leaders, transforming hierarchical remnants into vibrant, participatory communities (Simango et al., 2025).

Mutual Responsibility and Accountability

Communal leadership reframes accountability as mutual rather than hierarchical. Authority is exercised within relationships of trust, where leaders are accountable to one another rather than merely to superiors or boards (Kanter, 1994; Ostrom, 2010). This form of accountability strengthens ethical behavior and discourages isolation, which is a frequent precursor to leadership failure. In practice, it involves regular practices like peer reviews and communal covenants, ensuring that individual actions serve the collective.



Empirical studies of polycentric governance demonstrate that systems with strong communal norms are more resilient and adaptive because participants internalize responsibility for the collective good (Ostrom, 2010; Carlisle & Gruby, 2019). For example, the Swiss Confederation's model of cantonal autonomy balanced by federal collaboration exemplifies how mutual accountability fosters stability in multicultural settings (Handley, 2023).

Collective Discernment and Ownership

Communal leadership privileges shared discernment over unilateral decision-making. Rather than locating wisdom in a single leader, polycentric communities distribute discernment across the network, recognizing that insight emerges from dialogue, prayer, and shared reflection (Handley, 2020; Franklin, 2021). This process often includes tools like consensus-building forums or digital platforms for inclusive input, amplifying diverse voices.

This approach aligns with theological traditions that emphasize the role of the community in discerning God's guidance and organizational scholarship that highlights collective intelligence as essential for navigating uncertainty (Johansson, 2004; McChrystal et al., 2015). In business contexts, such as Haier's radical reinvention through employee-led micro-enterprises, collective ownership has driven innovation and adaptability (Handley, 2023).

III. Theological Foundations of Communal Leadership

The communal theme of polycentric leadership is deeply rooted in Christian theology. Trinitarian theology provides a vision of unity without uniformity, mutuality without hierarchy, and shared life without competition (Zscheile, 2007). The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit exist in relational communion, modeling a leadership paradigm grounded in love, mutual glorification, and shared purpose. This perichoretic dance invites human communities to mirror divine interdependence, where no single entity dominates.

Biblical images such as the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12), the household of God (Ephesians 2), and the early Christian community (Acts 2) reinforce the centrality of communal life in Christian leadership. These images emphasize interdependence, shared gifts, and collective responsibility rather than individual prominence (Woodward, 2013; Hanciles, 2008). Jesus' teaching in Luke 22:24-30 further critiques hierarchical ambition, advocating servant leadership within a communal framework (Handley, 2023).

Historically, movements marked by strong communal practices—such as early monastic communities and Pentecostal networks—have demonstrated remarkable adaptability and resilience, often flourishing without centralized authority structures (Hollenweger, 1996). Contemporary applications, like polycentric approaches in global mission theology, extend this legacy by promoting "from everyone to everywhere" ministry, where communal bonds enable intercultural flourishing (Handley, 2023; Simango et al., 2025).

IV. Communal Leadership as a Catalyst for Polycentric Action

In polycentric systems, communal leadership functions as a catalyst that enables coordination, trust, and sustained engagement across decentralized networks (Handley, 2020, 2023; Wei-Skillern et al., 2016). By embedding relational practices, it transforms potential chaos into synergistic action.

Strengthening Trust in Distributed Systems

Trust is the currency of polycentric leadership. Communal practices—shared rhythms, relational investment, and transparent communication—build the trust necessary for leaders to act autonomously while remaining aligned with the collective mission (Kanter, 1994). In Scandinavian governance models, high levels of societal trust underpin polycentric decision-making, allowing local empowerment without fragmentation (Handley, 2023).

Enhancing Resilience and Adaptability

Communal leadership enhances resilience by ensuring that leadership capacity is widely shared rather than concentrated. When authority and knowledge are distributed within a community, systems are better able to absorb disruption and adapt to change (McChrystal et al., 2015; Ostrom, 2010). The Tata Group's century-long emphasis on communal purpose and social responsibility illustrates how this resilience sustains global operations amid economic shifts (Handley, 2023).

Sustaining Long-Term Movements

Movements that prioritize communal life are more likely to endure beyond the tenure of founding leaders. By embedding leadership within a community rather than a personality, polycentric systems reduce dependency on charismatic individuals and foster generational continuity (Pierson, 2009; Logan et al., 2011). Recent mission leadership studies affirm this, showing how communal themes enable transitions to indigenous and diverse leaders (Handley, 2023; Bauwens, 2025).

V. Conclusion: Communal Leadership and Polycentric Sustainability

The communal theme is indispensable to polycentric leadership. While decentralization enables flexibility and innovation, communal life provides the relational and moral framework that sustains coherence and trust (Handley, 2022).

Without a strong communal foundation, polycentric systems risk fragmentation, competition, and mission drift. Communal leadership reframes leadership as a shared vocation rather than an individual achievement. Grounded in theological vision and supported by organizational research, it enables leaders to navigate complexity through shared identity, mutual accountability, and collective discernment (Aligica & Tarko, 2012; Milliman et al., 2005). As global mission and organizational contexts continue to grow in

complexity—marked by rapid technological change and cultural shifts—the communal dimension of polycentric leadership offers a compelling model for forming resilient, ethical, and missionally aligned leadership ecosystems. Future research should explore its application in emerging digital networks and cross-sector partnerships to further validate its transformative potential.

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