

# POWER CONSTRUCTION AND INFORMAL AUTHORITY IN COLLECTIVELY LED ORGANIZATIONAL FRAMEWORKS

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**Abstract** - This literature-based inquiry investigates how power operates within organizations that implement collective leadership. Drawing on interdisciplinary sources from organizational theory, sociology, and leadership studies, the review identifies how influence persists even in the absence of formal hierarchies. Key variables such as discursive control, social capital, symbolic leadership, and boundary management are analyzed to understand how authority is reconstituted under egalitarian models. Rather than being eliminated, power is redistributed and often concealed within relational practices, agenda framing, and access to critical resources. The findings demonstrate that collective governance requires intentional safeguards against the emergence of informal domination, as shared leadership alone does not guarantee equitable participation. The review suggests that sustainable shared authority depends on structural clarity, reflective coordination, and ethical vigilance. These insights inform leadership practices across cooperatives, civic platforms, and mission-driven institutions.

**Keywords:** collective leadership, informal power, discourse, legitimacy, organizational trust, distributed governance, relational influence

## INTRODUCTION

Power within organizations has traditionally been conceptualized as a centralized phenomenon, resting in the authority of singular figures who govern through hierarchical command (Dosi et al., 2021). Yet, in recent decades, an alternative paradigm has emerged, suggesting that leadership can be distributed across multiple actors in a non-hierarchical structure. Collective leadership models, often adopted by mission-driven institutions, community movements, and egalitarian workspaces, rely on shared responsibility, horizontal deliberation, and rotating authority. These models reshape how power is exercised and negotiated, inviting questions about legitimacy, accountability, and control (De Andreis & Carioni, 2019). In such arrangements, decision-making is not merely a technical function but a relational process embedded in ongoing dialogue and mutual recognition. Authority is often derived from trust and perceived competence rather than formal designation. This fosters a more adaptive organizational culture, though it may also generate ambiguity when consensus cannot be reached (Abdullah et al., 2021). Furthermore, the fluidity of influence in collective frameworks necessitates continuous sense-making and reflexive engagement among members.

In such settings, power is less about positional authority and more about influence, voice, and negotiated consensus. Scholars such as Denis, Langley, and Sergi (1996) have examined how decision-making in shared leadership arrangements becomes an evolving process of alignment rather than unilateral command. Rather than being eliminated, power is dispersed across individuals and groups, creating complex patterns of influence that can both empower and destabilize (Pratto, 2016). The tension between formal equality and informal dominance frequently arises, leading to emergent dynamics that affect cohesion, direction, and sustainability (Van Dijke, 2020).

Within organizations rooted in shared governance, the distinction between leadership and power becomes increasingly blurred. Formal roles often rotate, yet some individuals accrue disproportionate influence through charisma, access to information, or social capital (Sinambela et al., 2023). This divergence between nominal equality and actual decision-making power has been documented across various collective models, including worker cooperatives, academic departments, and grassroots coalitions. As Ospina and Foldy (2009) argue, the cultural assumptions underpinning these structures do not eliminate power asymmetries, but recast them in subtler, relational forms.

The resulting dynamic demands careful attention to how influence is structured, challenged, and legitimized. While collective leadership aspires to flatten hierarchies, it can unintentionally reproduce exclusions if power is exercised without transparency or critical reflection (Simsa & Totter, 2020). The study of power in such environments therefore extends beyond formal authority to include processes of meaning-making, discourse framing, and informal alliance-building. Understanding these mechanisms is essential to analyzing the sustainability and integrity of collective governance systems.

Despite the widespread idealization of collective leadership in socially conscious institutions, recurring issues complicate its implementation. A central concern is the persistence of informal hierarchies that emerge despite formal decentralization. Denis et al. (1996) noted that these latent structures often concentrate influence in the hands of a few, undermining the democratic ethos intended by the organization. This asymmetry tends to provoke disillusionment among members who expect inclusive participation but experience implicit marginalization in decision-making arenas (Bell & Reed, 2022).

Another difficulty lies in the ambiguity of accountability structures. In the absence of clearly defined leadership roles, responsibility for outcomes may become diffused or contested. Hazy, Goldstein, and Lichtenstein (2007) emphasize that distributed systems require strong relational coordination to function effectively, yet many collectives lack mechanisms to ensure role clarity. The consequence is operational stagnation, inconsistent policy enforcement, or internal conflict over authority legitimacy (Drori & Hoing, 2013). This structural ambiguity often leads to a reluctance in decision ownership, as individuals hesitate to act without explicit mandates. Furthermore, the erosion of vertical authority can foster informal power accumulation by dominant personalities, distorting the collective ethos. Performance metrics become difficult to align, as accountability becomes a shared abstraction rather than an enforceable obligation. As a result, organizational momentum may falter when coordination relies solely on goodwill instead of institutional design.

Finally, the cultural assumption that shared leadership automatically ensures fairness and empowerment is increasingly questioned. Research by Ospina and Foldy (2009) suggests that power dynamics in collectives can be obscured by discourses of consensus, allowing dominant actors to influence outcomes without scrutiny. In such cases, members may feel pressured to conform to the majority or to influential voices, thus reproducing patterns of compliance rather than cultivating authentic deliberation.

Examining how power is distributed and enacted in collective leadership settings offers valuable insight into the underlying mechanisms of organizational coordination and legitimacy. This line of inquiry is crucial in understanding how egalitarian ideals are translated—or distorted—in practice. Through the analysis of power flows, informal authority, and relational negotiation, scholars and practitioners can gain a deeper appreciation for the tensions embedded in collective governance.

Furthermore, assessing these dynamics contributes to a refined theory of leadership that encompasses symbolic influence, discursive construction, and participatory boundaries. It also enables institutions aspiring to share power more equitably to recognize the structural and interpersonal forces that may inadvertently compromise their intentions.

This literature-based investigation seeks to explore how power functions in organizations that adhere to collective leadership models. The review integrates theoretical analyses with empirical studies to identify patterns of informal authority, decision-making asymmetry, and role negotiation. The aim is to develop a clearer understanding of the mechanics and implications of power in settings that prioritize shared governance. Findings from this inquiry are intended to enrich organizational theory while informing practice in leadership design, facilitation, and accountability within egalitarian institutions.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This study utilizes a literature review methodology to examine how power is constructed, distributed, and maintained within organizations adopting collective leadership frameworks. A literature-based approach is particularly suited to the subject matter due to the interpretive and conceptual complexity inherent in non-hierarchical governance. As articulated by Hart (1998), literature reviews in organizational studies serve not only to summarize findings but to synthesize theoretical insights, identify patterns across empirical research, and interrogate conceptual assumptions. This design allows for a layered exploration of power as both a relational and institutional construct.

Sources were selected based on relevance to three core analytical domains: collective leadership theory, power dynamics, and organizational decision-making in non-hierarchical systems. The selection process emphasized works published in peer-reviewed journals, authoritative academic books, and conceptual essays within the fields of sociology, organizational theory, and public administration. Inclusion criteria included explicit engagement with shared governance, informal authority, and leadership plurality. The analytical process followed an interpretive synthesis strategy as outlined by Noblit and Hare (1988), which allows for the integration of divergent perspectives while preserving the theoretical richness of individual contributions. This method enabled the identification of recurring themes, including informal hierarchy, discursive influence, relational legitimacy, and structural ambiguity.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In organizations governed by collective arrangements, authority becomes a fluid construct shaped by interpersonal negotiation rather than hierarchical decree. Traditional notions of leadership grounded in rank or position become insufficient to explain how decisions are formed, sustained, or challenged within such systems. As group dynamics unfold without a centralized command, leadership must be understood as a dispersed and context-dependent process that evolves through shared engagement (Nunes et al., 2020). This requires members to exercise situational awareness and adapt their influence according to shifting relational cues. Legitimacy, in this setting, is often earned through demonstrated competence, emotional intelligence, and sustained contribution. The continuity of leadership thus relies on relational credibility rather than formal mandates, necessitating a high degree of interpersonal trust and collective reflexivity.

The act of guiding in a non-hierarchical structure is embedded in interactional practices such as framing narratives, facilitating dialogue, and nurturing consensus. Those who are able to clarify ambiguity, manage competing interests, and synthesize group intent often acquire influence, even when formal roles are absent. In this setting, leadership is less about designation and more about perception, responsiveness, and contextual sensitivity (Kummelstedt, 2022; Mardikaningsih, 2024). Influence becomes fluid, shifting according to issue salience and the perceived legitimacy of individual voices. Decision-making authority tends to emerge through iterative trust-building rather than explicit appointments. The ability to broker understanding across divergent viewpoints often defines one's position within the collective. In such ecosystems, leadership manifests through social navigation, rhetorical coherence, and the capacity to stabilize uncertainty without imposing dominance (Rojak, 2024).

The legitimacy of action within these collectives is continuously reconstructed through interpretive practices. Members are called upon to align divergent expectations, assess the relevance of competing priorities, and define meaning collaboratively. This sense-making process constitutes the foundation of organizational coherence, and those adept at navigating it often assume functional leadership, even without official acknowledgment (Beck et al., 2021). Leadership, therefore, becomes an emergent outcome of discursive competence rather than structural entitlement. The ability to interpret shared experiences and narrate them in ways that resonate across identities is central to influence. According to Fairhurst and Grant (2010), organizing processes are dialogic in nature, requiring a constant negotiation of understanding and direction. Collective environments thus reward cognitive flexibility, emotional resonance, and dialogical framing. Over time, these competencies shape the internal architecture of legitimacy and sustain the operational rhythm of the group.

Rather than removing the existence of power, collective governance relocates it. Authority is embedded in relational proximity, linguistic competence, and strategic presence in key moments of deliberation (Putra, 2021). Those who influence group reflection or shape shared understanding become central to the direction of the collective, regardless of whether their status is explicitly recognized (Wolfe, 2018).

Power dynamics in this environment remain unpredictable, often shifting with the emergence of new challenges, reconfigured alliances, or altered group composition (Mastio & Dovey, 2019). As Denis et al. (1996) observed, leadership emerges as an outcome of distributed coordination, not the imposition of singular authority. Hence, understanding such dynamics requires attention to interaction patterns and the social construction of authority.

Ultimately, collective organizations must confront the paradox of structure and fluidity (K. Smith et al., 2017). The lack of fixed hierarchy demands that legitimacy be constantly re-earned through relational effort, narrative framing, and dialogic skill. Those who lead are those who facilitate meaning—not as commanders, but as architects of coherence amid plural voices.

Informal authority becomes a dominant mechanism for navigating complex organizational terrains. Individuals often gain influence based on rhetorical fluency, reputational capital, or previous contributions. As Hazy et al. (2007) noted, these emergent leaders may not possess formal titles, yet their interpretations guide collective action. Such informal power can stabilize group decisions, but may also introduce hierarchy if left unexamined. The dynamic tension between distributed intent and centralized effect remains a persistent concern (Crenshaw, 2017).

Narratives play a foundational role in sustaining power under shared leadership. Storytelling, symbolic framing, and language use often construct implicit hierarchies within otherwise egalitarian structures. Ospina and Foldy (2009) revealed how leaders in collective spaces use discursive tools to shape perceptions of legitimacy, resolve ambiguity, and manage internal coherence. Through repetition and endorsement, certain voices become amplified, leading to interpretive dominance that may not align with organizational ideals of equality (Darmawan, 2024).

Trust operates as a crucial regulatory mechanism in collective power negotiations. In the absence of formal enforcement systems, interpersonal trust substitutes for structural accountability (Ehren & Baxter, 2020). Brower et al. (2000) argued that such trust is built through consistency, transparency, and shared commitment. However, once eroded, it becomes difficult to restore, as interpersonal grievances can become institutional fractures. Trust thus functions simultaneously as currency and constraint in egalitarian leadership models. Scholars such as Kramer and Tyler (1996) have highlighted that trust enhances willingness to cooperate under ambiguity, reinforcing voluntary compliance even when authority is informal. Its presence reduces the cognitive load associated with risk calculation, thereby fostering relational continuity. Conversely, low-trust environments exhibit heightened defensiveness, fragmentation, and symbolic compliance. In these settings, coordination becomes reactive rather than strategic, and collective goals are often displaced by protective behaviors. As such, the maintenance of trust must be understood as an ongoing process embedded in relational ethics and procedural fairness.

Conflict resolution becomes an essential site for the observation of power. Although consensus is a stated objective in most collectives, it often masks underlying competition for influence. De Dreu and Gelfand (2008) contended that in settings emphasizing equality, conflict avoidance may paradoxically suppress dissent, thereby enabling covert hierarchies. Managing disagreement openly and constructively is necessary to prevent stagnation and reinforce procedural justice within the collective. Follett (1924) argued that integration—rather than domination or compromise—provides a superior model for durable resolution. However, achieving integration requires the capacity to reframe conflict as shared problem-solving rather than as personal threat. Without deliberate dialogical frameworks, emotional undercurrents may

override rational deliberation, destabilizing group cohesion. In addition, power asymmetries often re-emerge during moments of dispute, as some members may dominate communicative space under the guise of efficiency or pragmatism (Morrill, 1995). Thus, conflict spaces become diagnostic of both leadership legitimacy and the structural openness of the collective itself (Rojak, 2021).

Role fluidity, while theoretically inclusive, can generate ambiguity in decision-making authority. In distributed frameworks, members often assume rotating responsibilities. Yet without clear role delineation, accountability diffuses, and expectations become unstable. Hazy et al. (2007) observed that system coherence depends on members' capacity to align actions without recourse to command. The absence of positional clarity can result in operational inertia, especially during crises or high-stakes decisions. Gronn (2002) emphasized that role ambiguity becomes particularly problematic when temporal urgency demands rapid coordination, and no actor is authorized to act decisively. Moreover, unclear expectations can erode motivation, as individuals may perceive leadership as burdensome rather than shared. In empirical studies by Raelin (2003), collectives that lacked explicit task boundaries exhibited greater susceptibility to duplicated efforts and strategic misalignment. Furthermore, when informal authority arises without transparent mechanisms, relational dynamics often shift toward informal dominance rather than egalitarian dialogue. In such environments, trust alone becomes insufficient to maintain consistency, and operational clarity must be explicitly co-constructed and periodically reaffirmed.

Power is often consolidated through access to resources. Even in collectives, those who control funding, information, or external relations tend to shape agendas (Kaldor & De Waal, 2020). This resource-based asymmetry challenges the principle of shared control. Pfeffer and Salancik (2003) demonstrated that control over critical dependencies creates structural power regardless of intent. Organizations must thus reconcile resource stewardship with participatory ethics. Access to financial flows, for instance, often enables agenda-setting authority that bypasses deliberative channels. Kanter (1979) noted that individuals with structural access to budgetary discretion or external partnerships frequently accumulate soft power that is difficult to regulate. This influence is further reinforced when transparency mechanisms are underdeveloped, allowing decision-makers to leverage informational asymmetries in non-obvious ways. Over time, such patterns may solidify informal hierarchies that contradict the foundational ethos of collective governance. To maintain legitimacy, collectives must ensure that access to strategic resources is rotated, contested, or at least accountable through codified institutional procedures.

Social capital remains a determinant of leadership durability in collaborative environments. Individuals with high relational embeddedness tend to influence norms and practices more consistently. Bourdieu (1986) argued that social capital converts into symbolic authority when others validate one's credibility. In collective organizations, this can subtly institutionalize informal elites, especially when relational networks are not periodically rebalanced or made visible.

Boundary management becomes vital as organizations interact with external environments. Collective leadership is inwardly focused, but externally facing tasks often require spokespersons or negotiators (Seshadri & Elangovan, 2019). These boundary actors accumulate representational power, potentially misaligning internal egalitarianism with external hierarchy. Mintzberg (1983) suggested that external interfacing roles must be institutionally circumscribed to prevent power consolidation.

Decision-making processes illuminate latent hierarchies. Although votes, deliberations, and rotations are common, influence often lies in agenda-setting and framing (Al Hakim & Hariani, 2021). Gaventa (2006) proposed that power is exercised not just in decisions made, but in what is considered discussable. Therefore, analyzing meeting structures, timing, and procedural rules can reveal unequal participation opportunities that subtly privilege some while marginalizing others (Blue et al., 2019). Clegg et al. (2006) emphasized that institutional routines such as who speaks first or who drafts preliminary documents contribute significantly to the shaping of outcomes. Even when rules appear neutral, the accumulation of micro-advantages—such as familiarity with jargon or informal alliances—may lead to systemic exclusion. Hardy and Phillips (1998) argued that discursive control often precedes material control in determining influence, especially in flatter organizations. As such, the architecture of deliberation must be scrutinized not just for transparency, but for equity in how voice, time, and access are distributed across members.

Generational differences can influence how power is interpreted. Younger members may emphasize fluidity and decentralization, while older participants may rely on precedent and established routines. These variances create interpretive gaps that affect leadership continuity. In such contexts, shared leadership must accommodate temporal negotiation between innovation and tradition, ensuring coherence without silencing either pole (Bhayana et al., 2021).

Emotion and affect contribute to authority legitimacy. Charismatic individuals often garner support not through rational argument but through affective resonance. As Conger and Kanungo (1987) and Barberá-Tomás et al. (2019) argued, emotional engagement can be a source of symbolic power. In collectives, this may skew decision-making toward individuals who inspire loyalty rather than those with technical expertise, raising questions about normative evaluation criteria.

Institutional memory influences the trajectory of power. Those who possess historical knowledge often guide decisions, resolve ambiguities, or arbitrate disputes (Eddine et al., 2023). While such continuity can be stabilizing, it may also create dependency on legacy figures. If not counterbalanced by transparency and inclusivity, this may lead to authority entrenchment in a rotating system intended to prevent concentration (Arifin et al., 2021).

Technological mediation increasingly shapes collective leadership. Digital tools for communication, voting, and documentation can democratize access but also centralize control over platforms. Coleman and Blumler (2009) emphasized that digital infrastructures are not neutral and may reflect the design preferences of their administrators. Attention to platform governance is necessary to ensure alignment with participatory values.

In conclusion, power within collective leadership structures operates through complex and often paradoxical channels. While the aspiration is shared influence, the mechanisms of discourse, resource access, and social capital continually reshape actual authority distribution. The literature reveals that transparency, reflexivity, and relational competence are essential to sustaining equitable leadership over time.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study has explored how power is formed, negotiated, and sustained in organizations adopting collective leadership models. Despite the absence of fixed hierarchies, power continues to manifest through discourse control, resource access, and relational positioning. The literature indicates that leadership in these environments is not power-neutral; it reconfigures authority through subtle channels rather than eliminating it altogether. Distributive assumptions of equality can mask the accumulation of informal influence, requiring continuous reflexivity to preserve organizational legitimacy and trust.

The findings highlight that shared leadership structures must be accompanied by deliberate practices that illuminate hidden authority flows. Organizations cannot rely solely on structural decentralization to ensure fairness or inclusivity. Power must be monitored as a relational phenomenon, shaped by trust dynamics, narrative framing, symbolic capital, and procedural transparency. Attention to these dimensions is critical to aligning practice with normative commitments in egalitarian systems.

It is recommended that institutions practicing collective governance institute mechanisms for critical dialogue, rotating facilitation, and open evaluation of power patterns. These include structured feedback processes, inclusive role negotiation, and transparent agenda-setting. Future research should investigate how evolving technologies, shifting demographics, and hybrid work arrangements influence the endurance of informal hierarchies within decentralized leadership frameworks.

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