**The North Star Approach to Shared Leadership**

*Shared leadership is not something ‘done’ by an individual ‘to’ others, or a set of individual actions through which people contribute to a group or organisation.....*

*(it) is a group activity which works through and within relationships,*

*rather than individual action.*

*Bennet et al: 2003*

**Culture**

To us culture is just about the way we do things. We are unafraid of challenges and resolute that we will make a difference. Culture is not only about what we do, it is also about how we do it and why. This is at our heart and is what sets us apart from others. The challenges that we as a society face demand courage, flexibility, innovation, resilience, robust relationships and dogged determination to make a difference and to keep trying and this requires new and different ways of working. No one person or small group of people has all the answers and therefore we wanted to involve and include more people. The distributed leadership model we agreed to develop, has required more people to be leaderful, to be more accountable and to have more influence.

We invest in the development of leaders across the organisation and many people are involved in leading the organisation, this is supported by clear decision making processes at every level. We all engage in development and training to enable our skills to be applied flexibly in a way that maximises the impact on us and the business. We have leading edge people strategies that help us to be both clear about our approach and have consistent management styles. We pay attention to and invest in our wellbeing.

We have adult to adult relationships that strengthen our commitment to fairness, honesty, transparency and personal responsibility. We are all encouraged to be involved within the business, to provide challenge and feedback and are all influential. We are confident in trying new things and we all contribute towards improvements. We manage uncertainty and change through regular, open dialogue, focused external scanning and good planning which enables us to manage risk effectively, think quickly, be creative and remain agile and leading edge.

The way that we work means that we are a partner of choice because we are innovative, flexible, honest, accountable and we deliver results.

The Leading and Growing Strategy: North Star To 2018 clearly stated the direction of travel for North Star and the chosen approach to leadership, to be achieved through an increasingly influential, leaderful and accountable workforce. In practice this approach supports and encourages decisions being taken or shaped by those people most affected by the outcome of the decision. In turn, this shift requires people to become more concerned, more involved and more responsible for how they affect and respond to decision making and influencing opportunities. Our strategy to 2023 builds upon this approach.

This approach is by no means an easy option. Contributing voluntarily and tangibly to influencing and achieving the direction of North Star requires people to look as much to themselves and to each other as to the CEO and Senior Team. A shared model of leadership is based upon the interactions of many rather than only the actions of an individual leader. Such an approach requires courage, confidence and perseverance: for the leader to trust in ‘letting go’ and in distributing power and responsibility throughout the organization and for those in receipt of greater opportunities for influence, that they are open to taking responsibility in a different kind of way whilst differently relating to and with others at all levels within the organisation.

**Why Shared Leadership?**

It has become something of a cliché to talk about the increasing speed of change but it is a well-researched fact; globalisation, technological innovation and economic shifts are only three of the factors involved in creating greater volatility and complexity in developing and developed economies. All sectors of business and social purpose businesses have to respond to the changes created by this interconnected dynamic and some, like North Star, are thinking more proactively in terms of the kind of internal world that needs to be created in order to ensure flexibility and agility in turbulent times. Additionally and very creatively, North Star is also exploring how internal ways of operating: adult to adult, creative and empowering relationship can be translated into external world interactions with customers and other stakeholders.

The challenge for North Star has been and continues to be the development of shared leadership within the context of a more traditional hierarchy. Hierarchy, which is only a hundred years old, is highly effective in ordering complexity, rendering it manageable through organisation. It is a critical element in the smooth operating of sizeable entities. Where it is less effective is when the external world moves quickly. Too much reliance on hierarchy can render an organisation overly static or immobile as the internal attempts to match or, worse case scenario, slow down the external world to meet the internal.

The journey that North Star has embarked upon, as well as courage, confidence and perseverance, also calls for resilience. Creating robust internal relationships, working outside of the usual boundaries and territories whilst continuing to operate within a traditional hierarchy is challenging. From the outside, North Star is as it appears to be – a traditionally structured housing association. However, venture inside and what is discovered is a vibrant, demanding and relationally orientated environment, operating out of a developing set of shared values rather than organisational structure. Being able to manage both within and without hierarchy certainly demands 21st century skills rather than those of a hundred years ago and those skills, alongside a developing mind set are being enhanced and acquired throughout the organisation as all staff attend bespoke programmes of development.

Encouraging new patterns of leadership can positively benefit the organisation in areas such as innovation and creativity, bringing new ideas into action and embedding the authorities to make a difference. In addition, a loosening reliance upon traditional approaches to authority can lead to an increased connection to the values of the organisation as these, collectively created and owned principles, come alive and are utilised in decision making and action. Increasingly shared leadership can lead to business success and recognition and, whilst the seeking of awards has never been a North Star pursuit, receiving the Investors in People Platinum Standard has been welcomed, particularly given only 0.5% of companies across the UK have managed to achieve this award.

Regardless of the type of organisation, increasingly people want to move away from a transactional model of operating towards one that is more relational, which allows people to bring more of their ‘whole’ selves to the their work life. Engaging in meaningful work, influencing self and others and having greater freedom to work out what is required with others is a 21st century approach to work and North Star, through the dissemination of shared leadership is encouraging, empowering and enabling everyone to have the opportunity to grow and develop with the organisation. By moving beyond a culture focussed on those in leadership positions, shared leadership is an interconnected web of activity, operating out of a shared set of values with people working across and beyond the traditional hierarchical boundaries. This does not mean there is no leadership, quite the opposite but it is leadership through relationship rather than by rule.

**The Characteristics of Shared Leadership**

Shared leadership is concerned with:

* The process of leadership – how making things happen occurs within the organisation.
* Developing participatory activity – how making things happen with others is enhanced and encouraged.
* Individual development - how the approach enables people to engage, learn and develop.
* Shared leadership is an organisational condition rather than a set of personal qualities and is anchored in self-management, self-initiative and self-monitoring activities, rather than in position or role and actively supported and encouraged by the minimum of policies and procedures and the maximum of dialogue, inquiry and partnership.

So far, we have learned that shared leadership:

* Is not about delegation but about taking responsibility.
* Requires organisational mechanisms and processes to be aligned to approach and values.
* Means that whilst everyone has the opportunity to lead, it does not mean that everybody leads all the time (situational leadership).
* Requires time, space and the opportunity for people who have learned to comply and be silent, to learn to bring more of themselves to work.
* Requires groups to have the resources and freedom to meet, learn, plan and reflect.
* Requires a healthy relationship between responsibility and authority to act.
* Is fostered rather than mandatory.
* Is inclusive and participatory.
* Requires people to be equipped with the tools and attitudes for effective human relations.
* Requires a wiliness to work with alternative approaches to power and authority.
* Requires affective competence.
* Is context specific.
* Can mean different things to different people, therefore communication is critical.
* Creates anxiety for centralised leaders who prefer control to trusting others.
* Enables letting go more readily if there is a clear sense of the parameters for action and a shared understanding of the direction of travel.

The challenge, as the organisation moves forward , is to continue to ensure that actions reflect strategy and that, under both internal and external pressure the commitment to a precious and pioneering approach is strengthened and sustained.