

# Distributed leadership

By the end of this session you will be able to:

- Define distributed leadership and related terms
- Identify how this may work in practice

# Traditional approaches

- ▶ Traits theory – **WHO** the leader is
- ▶ Behaviours or functional theory–  
**WHAT** the leader does
- ▶ Styles theory– **HOW** the leader does it
- ▶ Situational and Contingency theory–  
**WHEN** the leader does it
- ▶ Transformational – **WHO, WHAT and HOW**

# Why distributed?

- ▶ Existing theories are a problem as they only allow for a two-fold division of labour: leaders and followers (Gronn, 2002)
- ▶ Real life is messier than this
- ▶ Leadership is a widely dispersed activity throughout teams and organisations and capability is needed at all levels (Bolt, 1999; Charan et al., 2001; Conger and Benjamin, 1999; Tichy, 1997)



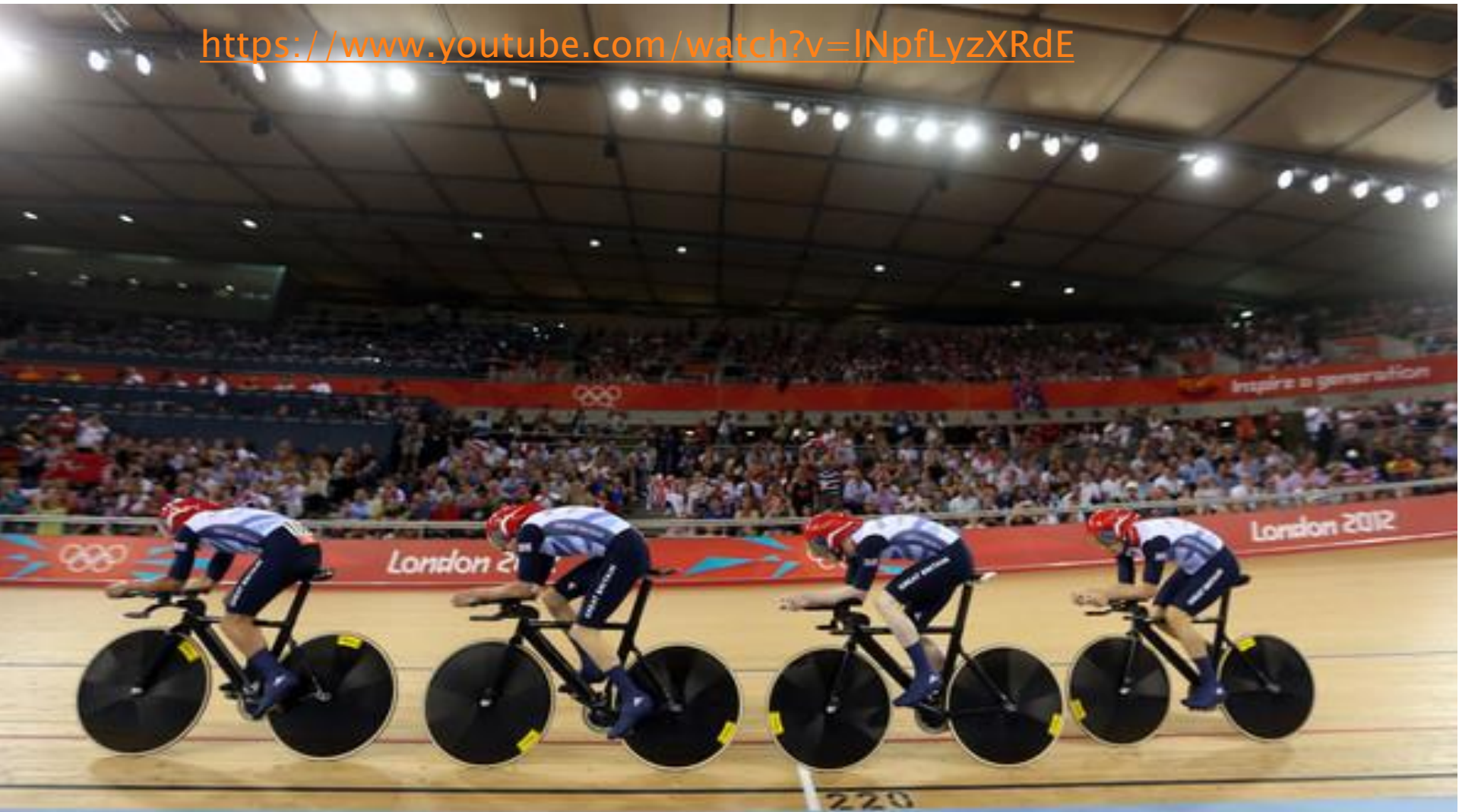
# Why distributed (2)

- ▶ `It is not leadership from any one person that is required, it is an aspect of leadership each of us summons from within. In this respect, the same qualities we have sought in one person can be found distributed among many people who learn, in community, to exercise their leadership at the appropriate moments` (Nirenberg, 1993 p198)
- ▶ The more members who contribute to the real work of leadership the better (Hackman, 2005)



# Where is the leader (ship)?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=INpfLyzXRdE>



# Old wine in new bottles?

- ▶ Dispersed or distributed leadership is not new (Edwards et al, 2004)
  - Mentioned by Gibb (1954) in the Handbook of Social Psychology (Gronn, 2002)
- ▶ A renaissance started in the noughties (Ray et al, 2004)
- ▶ `Distributed argues for a less formalized model of leadership where responsibility is dissociated from the organization hierarchy` (Bolden et al, 2008 p11)
- ▶ This seems to fit *Western* 21<sup>st</sup> century firms fascination with flatter structures and team working?

# Terms include:

- ▶ **SuperLeadership** (Manz & Sims, 1991; Sims & Lorenzi, 1992)
- ▶ **Rotating and Multi-directional**





# Terms include:

- ▶ Co-leadership and Shared leadership
- ▶ Distributed and Dispersed
  - Concentrates on `frames of leadership` as an unfolding emergent process
  - Gives a richer appreciation of context, culture, history and geography
  - Leadership as an event? (Wood and Ladkin, 2008)





# Activity: 2 phases

## ► Phase 1:

- In pairs: read the case study example and identify:
  - What type of distributed leader (ship) is discussed – what label would you give it?
  - How and why distributed leadership works or not?
- What are the benefits or potential advantages of distributed leadership?
- What are the downsides or potential disadvantages?
- 25 minutes



# Activity

- ▶ Phase 2:
- ▶ Join with two other pairs looking at different case studies and share your findings
- ▶ What is important about the context for distributed leadership to work?
- ▶ 10 minutes



# Does it work?

- ▶ The type of distributed leadership may dictate success e.g. (Mehra, Smith, Dixon & Robertson, 2006)
  - Distributed–coordinated = increased performance
  - Distributed– fragmented = decreased performance
- ▶ Context matters – it works better in some types of organisation/setting
- ▶ What are the influencing factors related to context?

# Influencing factors on success

- ▶ Power
  - Where does it sit
- ▶ Organizational hierarchy and structure
  - Size
  - Coordination and communication
- ▶ Distance
- ▶ Complexity of the task
  - High performance tasks
- ▶ Reward processes
- ▶ Culture
  - Willingness to develop the skills of all



# Activity Sheet

- ▶ Using John Nirenberg's (1993) definition (see handout), on your own, in pairs, or small groups discuss the questions and be prepared to feed back to the rest of the group.
- ▶ 15 minutes

# Potential benefits?

- ▶ Increased creativity and innovation
- ▶ Better use of skills and strengths
- ▶ Higher performance
- ▶ Increase motivation and job satisfaction
- ▶ Lowers labour turnover
- ▶ Creates learning communities
- ▶ Keeps skills in the organisation
- ▶ Practical benefits
  - E.g. 24/7 coverage
  - No over-reliance on one `super` being

# Potential issues

- ▶ Ability, motivation and opportunity may be limited
- ▶ Existing managers may feel threatened
- ▶ Lack of accountability
- ▶ Customer perceptions
  - Where does the buck stop?

# Preparation for next week

- ▶ Consolidate your learning so far
- ▶ Continue working on your glossary
- ▶ Consider whether distributed leadership may be a main leadership theory for assessment 1
- ▶ Next week (week 8) Followership Approaches