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When Shared Leadership Becomes Shared Burden and Invisible Coordination

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Abstract

Shared leadership is commonly framed as a means of distributing influence, expertise, and participation across team members. Yet distributing leadership influence does not necessarily reveal who absorbs the interpersonal responsibility, coordination effort, and emotional demands required to make that distribution workable. This Original Conceptual Framework Article addresses that hidden-work problem. It proposes the Shared-Burden Framework, an original synthesis that distinguishes distributed influence from three proposed burden pathways: responsibility diffusion, invisible coordination work, and emotional load. The framework further proposes burden asymmetry as a discrepancy between where leadership influence is distributed and where low-visibility organizing demands accumulate. Role clarity, peer engagement, expertise and network position, status expectations, hierarchy, trust, recovery capacity, and work design are treated as potential allocation filters rather than universal moderators. The article develops testable propositions and bounded team-design principles concerning decision rights, answerability, coordination visibility, rotation, escalation, support usability, and recovery. It does not claim that shared leadership is inherently harmful or that hidden work is always unequally distributed. Existing evidence is heterogeneous across constructs, levels, contexts, and designs, and several integrated relationships proposed here have not been directly tested. Validation therefore requires multilevel, longitudinal, network, and within-team designs that separately measure influence, responsibility, coordination activity, emotional demands, and allocation outcomes. The contribution is a burden-sensitive conceptual vocabulary for examining when shared leadership may create participation without equivalent visibility, authority, recognition, or protection from concentrated organizing work.

Keywords: Hidden work in shared leadership, Foundations of shared leadership, Responsibility diffusion, Invisible coordination work, Team-design implications, Shared

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Introduction

Shared leadership describes an emergent team-level pattern of influence, but the literature contains heterogeneous conceptualizations, measures, antecedents, consequences, and boundary conditions [1]. This matters because “shared” can refer to the distribution of influence without specifying the distribution of the work needed to sustain that influence. A team may therefore appear less leader-centric while still depending on a small set of members to connect people, clarify ambiguity, repair misunderstandings, absorb interpersonal tension, or ensure follow-through. The central problem is not whether shared leadership can be valuable, but whether prevailing descriptions make its enabling work sufficiently visible.

Direct evidence indicates why a burden-sensitive account is needed. Supporting shared leadership can impose individual costs when members interact frequently and assume interpersonal responsibility, especially when peers are less engaged [2]. That



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finding does not establish a general hidden-work mechanism, but it demonstrates that participation in a shared-leadership structure can have member-level costs that are not reducible to team performance. This article therefore treats interpersonal responsibility as an evidence-supported bridge while proposing broader pathways through which responsibility, coordination, and emotional demands may become concentrated.

A static comparison between shared and vertical leadership is also insufficient. Shared leadership develops across a team's life cycle, and its consequences depend partly on the pattern of that development [3]. Hidden work may accordingly emerge during role formation, uncertainty, handoffs, conflict, or periods in which new contributors exercise influence without corresponding changes in decision rights and support. Temporal development is therefore a boundary on the proposed framework rather than an incidental feature.

The content and distribution of leadership roles also differ across shared-leadership configurations, cautioning against treating sharing as a single degree variable [4]. Two teams with similar aggregate levels of shared leadership may differ materially in who performs task, relational, change-oriented, or boundary-spanning leadership. The proposed Shared-Burden Framework extends this configurational view by asking how low-visibility sustaining demands are allocated within a given configuration. Coordination provides the final motivation. In global virtual teams, highly shared leadership can be less effective when leadership activities are insufficiently coordinated, and implicit and behavioral coordination operate as distinguishable organizing processes [5]. Coordination is therefore central rather than incidental to the argument. As an Original Conceptual Framework Article, the objective is to develop a non-empirical framework for examining when distributed influence may coexist with unclear answerability, concentrated coordination work, emotional demand, or unequal low-visibility labor without presenting a validated causal model or universal prescription.

Foundations of shared leadership

A burden-sensitive framework must preserve what is established about shared leadership rather than redefine the construct around costs. Its development is contingent on team composition, climate, and time, including interactions between diversity and team conditions [6]. Shared leadership is therefore better treated as an emergent configuration than as a structural switch that organizations simply turn on. Neither its presence nor its extent demonstrates equal access to leadership, equal workload, or equal exposure to relational and coordination demands. Those allocation questions require separate constructs and measures.

Virtuality further separates opportunity to interact from authority to decide. A theoretical framework of virtual teams connects shared and emergent leadership with personality composition and technology-mediated interaction [7]. Digital connectivity may make contribution easier or more frequent, but it does not itself determine legitimate authority, accountability, or responsibility for unresolved work. Communication access is therefore an enabling condition rather than evidence of substantive power.

Measurement creates a related problem. Network density and decentralization can obscure which actors provide consequential leadership resources, motivating importance-weighted approaches that distinguish the amount of distribution from the importance of particular contributions [8]. This point is crucial for hidden-work analysis because apparently broad participation can coexist with dependence on a few high-value contributors. Contribution importance, however, is not itself a measure of workload, emotional strain, or burden.

Shared leadership also spans levels of analysis. Team-level shared leadership may connect with individual outcomes through experienced meaning, showing that a team configuration and a member's experience are analytically distinct [9]. This guards against assuming that a distributed team property produces a distributed individual experience. The framework therefore keeps shared leadership defined as distributed influence while treating burden allocation as a separate empirical question.

Responsibility diffusion

Responsibility diffusion is proposed here as a possible mismatch between distributed influence, decision authority, and answerability. Felt accountability differs from formal responsibility and depends on expectations of evaluation by salient audiences [10]. A person may therefore feel answerable without holding commensurate authority, while another may possess decision rights without experiencing equivalent interpersonal pressure to resolve problems. The proposed framework calls this an authority–answerability gap when these elements diverge. It does not claim that shared leadership automatically diffuses blame.

Less-hierarchical organizing clarifies why decentralization cannot be equated with the disappearance of organizing work. Self-managing and less-hierarchical forms still require mechanisms for authority, coordination, and accountability [11]. Autonomy must therefore be distinguished from responsibility transfer: removing a reporting relationship may redistribute decisions while leaving unresolved who must integrate competing views, close action loops, or answer for failures.

The level of analysis is equally important. Predictors and outcomes of shared leadership operate across individual and team levels [12]. Responsibility diffusion consequently cannot be inferred from a team-level shared-leadership score. It requires

evidence about who is expected to decide, who anticipates evaluation, who becomes the de facto escalation point, and whether these assignments change across episodes.

Hierarchy should not be treated as the opposite of desirable shared leadership. Meta-analytic evidence indicates that hierarchy's relationship with team effectiveness is contingent rather than uniformly beneficial or harmful [13]. The proposed framework therefore treats hierarchy as a boundary condition. The relevant question is whether authority and answerability are sufficiently aligned for the work at hand, not whether a team is simply flatter or more hierarchical.

Table 1 clarifies the conceptual architecture of shared burden by separating distributed influence from the less visible forms of responsibility, coordination, and relational work that may accompany it.

Table 1. Conceptual architecture of shared burden and invisible coordination.

Conceptual domain	Working definition	What may become hidden	What it should not be confused with	Primary level of analysis	Diagnostic question	Conceptual boundary
Shared leadership	Distribution of leadership influence across multiple team members	Work required to sustain distributed influence	Equal workload or equal authority	Team	Who actually influences direction and action?	Distributed influence does not imply distributed burden
Responsibility diffusion	Proposed dispersion or ambiguity of answerability when influence is shared	Ownership of unresolved decisions and failures	Autonomy, empowerment, or simple delegation	Individual–team	Who must answer when ownership is unclear?	Diffusion is not assumed merely because hierarchy is reduced
Authority–answerability gap	Proposed mismatch between capacity to decide and expectation to account	Responsibility without corresponding decision rights	Formal job accountability alone	Individual–team	Can the responsible actor meaningfully alter the decision?	Requires direct measurement of both authority and answerability
Invisible coordination work	Proposed low-visibility work that connects interdependent contributions	Follow-up, bridging, repair, translation, synchronization	Communication volume or meeting attendance	Individual–team	Who repeatedly makes collective work cohere?	Coordination demand does not prove unequal burden
Emotional load	Proposed affective demand involved in sustaining participation and relationships	Reassurance, conflict smoothing, availability, emotional containment	Emotional labor as a single established construct	Individual	Who absorbs recurring relational tension?	Emotional demand must be distinguished from exhaustion
Burden concentration	Proposed clustering of sustaining work among comparatively few members	Repeated dependence on central or reliable contributors	Leadership centrality itself	Individual–team	Does hidden work repeatedly return to the same actors?	Concentration may reflect specialization rather than inequity
Burden asymmetry	Proposed discrepancy between distributed influence and distributed sustaining work	Unequal responsibility, coordination, or emotional demands	General workload inequality	Individual–team	Is leadership more distributed than the work sustaining it?	Central construct remains unvalidated
Allocation filters	Conditions proposed to influence who receives hidden work	Effects of expertise, status, role visibility, hierarchy, and peer engagement	Fixed demographic determinants	Individual–team–organization	What directs hidden work toward particular members?	Filters are conditional hypotheses rather than universal moderators

Table note: All constructs identified as proposed represent original conceptual elements of the Shared-Burden Framework. The table distinguishes analytical categories and does not imply prevalence, causal effects, validated thresholds, or universal organizational consequences.

Invisible coordination work

Invisible coordination work is proposed as low-visibility activity required to synchronize interdependent contributions, bridge interfaces, repair breakdowns, and close action loops. Structural theory on multiteam systems shows that interdependence across component teams generates coordination demands at interfaces [14]. Coordination also becomes consequential when leadership is highly shared in virtual teams [5]. These sources support the importance of coordination demands, but not the claim that such work is necessarily invisible or concentrated. The framework therefore separates structural coordination demand from the empirical question of who performs it, how visible it is, and what costs accompany it.

Technology does not remove this allocation problem. Evidence from information workers indicates that remote work can make collaboration networks more static and siloed even when digital communication remains available [15]. The relevant distinction is between access to communication channels and realized cross-boundary coordination. When networks become

more segmented, some members may need to bridge information, translate across groups, or restore connections; that inference remains proposed until directly measured.

Expertise dependence provides another possible concentration mechanism. Employees may seek problem-solving assistance from relationally difficult colleagues when those colleagues hold valuable expertise [16]. This does not establish that expert or central members are exploited or overworked. It does show why formal role descriptions alone may miss recurring problem-solving dependencies. Expertise and network position are therefore treated as potential allocation filters.

Helping can also change character as it accumulates. Longitudinal evidence indicates that escalating helping can increase job demands and generate personal and professional costs over time, with organizational tenure conditioning these processes [17]. Helping is not equivalent to coordination work, but the study provides an adjacent temporal mechanism: individually constructive acts can become burdensome when repeated demands accumulate. Demonstrating invisible coordination burden will require direct observation or repeated measures linking specific coordination activities to particular actors rather than inferring burden from collaboration alone.

Emotional load

Emotional load is proposed here as the affective and relational demand associated with maintaining distributed participation, not as a synonym for emotional labor. Emotional labor is an established emotion-regulation construct involving differentiated strategies and consequences [18]. Reassurance, conflict smoothing, availability, and relational maintenance within shared leadership need not involve the occupational display rules captured by emotional-labor measures. Emotional-regulation demand is therefore one possible component of emotional load rather than its complete definition.

Relational exchanges can replenish as well as deplete resources. Workplace help can buffer depletion associated with surface acting under specified conditions [19]. A team with frequent helping is therefore not necessarily a high-burden team; direction, timing, reciprocity, and usability of help may change its meaning. Leadership behaviors that benefit followers can also consume the enactor's resources and contribute to exhaustion under particular conditions [20]. Because transformational leadership differs from shared leadership, this finding supports only the broader possibility that leadership benefits and actor costs may coexist.

Recovery must be separated from allocation. Compassion-related processes can replenish resources and reduce burnout [21], but replenishment does not demonstrate that the underlying distribution of work is equitable. Recovery resources may condition potential consequences after demands arise; they are not substitutes for examining who repeatedly performs relational maintenance or why.

Measurement must also preserve episodes and levels. An individual may regulate emotion during a difficult interaction without experiencing persistent team-level emotional burden, while a team may repeatedly rely on particular members for reassurance or conflict containment without those members using identical regulation strategies. The framework therefore proposes measuring relational demands, regulation strategies, frequency of maintenance activity, and resource consequences separately. This separation also permits null findings: emotional load may be present without exhaustion, or exhaustion may be explained better by general workload. Such possibilities are theoretically informative because they distinguish allocation from consequence rather than treating every demanding interaction as evidence of harm.

Table 2 reframes the proposed shared-burden process as a set of distinguishable pathways through which distributed leadership may generate, concentrate, or relieve hidden organizing demands.

Table 2. Proposed pathways through which shared leadership may become shared burden.

Proposed pathway	Triggering condition	Hidden work generated	How burden may concentrate	Potential consequence	Plausible rival explanation	What empirical evidence would distinguish the pathway
Ambiguous ownership pathway	Multiple members can influence action but decision ownership remains unclear	Clarification, escalation, follow-through	Reliable members become default accountability points	Repeated responsibility without equivalent authority	Temporary role ambiguity	Repeated actor-level mapping of decisions, authority, and answerability
Coordination accumulation pathway	Interdependent contributions increase without equivalent integration routines	Scheduling, bridging, translation, repair	Central connectors repeatedly absorb integration work	Coordination overload or delayed closure	Legitimate specialist coordination role	Activity-level observation showing recurring concentration beyond formal role expectations

Expertise-dependence pathway	Particular members hold scarce knowledge or problem-solving capability	Advice, troubleshooting, verification	Difficult problems repeatedly flow toward experts	Persistent interruption and hidden support demand	Efficient specialization	Comparison of expertise dependence, task allocation, recognition, and workload
Relational-maintenance pathway	Participation creates disagreement, uncertainty, or interpersonal strain	Reassurance, mediation, conflict smoothing	Socially trusted members become informal stabilizers	Emotional demand or reduced recovery	General interpersonal climate	Repeated measures of who performs relational maintenance and under what conditions
Low-promotability allocation pathway	Necessary but low-visibility tasks remain weakly assigned	Note-taking, arranging, supporting, administrative closure	Status expectations shape who is asked or volunteers	Unequal recognition or career return	Preference or role specialization	Direct observation of requests, acceptance, recognition, and subsequent allocation
Helping-escalation pathway	Voluntary assistance becomes recurrent and expected	Problem solving, coverage, rescue work	Consistently responsive members attract additional requests	Increasing job demands	Temporary workload surge	Longitudinal evidence separating recurring helping from overall workload
Resource-buffering pathway	Demands are accompanied by credible reciprocal support	Help, relief, recovery opportunities	Burden may be redistributed rather than accumulated	Lower experienced strain despite high demand	Lower baseline workload	Within-person evidence connecting demands, usable support, and recovery
Recursive burden pathway	Prior reliability shapes future allocation	Additional coordination, responsibility, and support requests	Past helpfulness increases future dependence	Self-reinforcing burden concentration	Stable competence differences	Longitudinal network evidence showing burden allocation becoming progressively concentrated

Table note: These pathways are original conceptual propositions. They describe relationships that may occur under specified conditions and should not be interpreted as established causal sequences, predicted effect sizes, or demonstrated organizational outcomes.

Unequal burden by role and status

Burden allocation may be unequal even when participation is formally open. Experimental and field evidence shows that women can be more likely to volunteer for, be asked to perform, and accept low-promotability tasks, partly because others expect greater acceptance [22]. This finding provides a direct allocation mechanism for low-promotability work, but it does not establish that every hidden coordination task is gendered. Status expectations are therefore treated as a potential filter whose relevance must be tested for the specific task and context.

Office housework sharpens this boundary. Women have been found to perform more office housework, particularly social-maintenance work, with gender differences in career returns; importantly, office housework did not significantly predict burnout in that study [23]. Preserving this null result prevents the framework from converting unequal allocation automatically into emotional exhaustion. Invisible work may have unequal recognition or promotion consequences without producing identical well-being outcomes.

Recognition is another distinct layer. Meta-analytic evidence indicates that gender differences in leadership emergence vary across context and criteria [24]. Opportunity to contribute, recognition as a leader, and consequential influence therefore cannot be collapsed. A member may perform substantial low-visibility maintenance without being recognized as leading, while another may gain leadership recognition through more visible contributions.

Formal support likewise differs from usable support. Negative beliefs about accepting coworker help can affect attitudes, performance, and reputation [25]. Teams cannot assume that merely offering assistance neutralizes concentrated burden. Role, status, expertise, and reputation should consequently be examined as allocation filters rather than treated as fixed demographic determinants.

Expertise may cut across status in ways that complicate simple inequality narratives. Repeated requests to highly knowledgeable members can represent efficient specialization, while the same pattern can become burdensome if interruption, recognition, discretion, and compensating resources are misaligned. The framework therefore requires comparison of task necessity, formal role expectations, recognition, and available discretion before labeling concentration inequitable. Likewise, evidence of gendered low-promotability work should motivate tests of request and allocation processes rather than demographic presumptions about willingness, competence, or preference. Burden inequality is not inferred from identity alone; it must be demonstrated through patterned allocation and its organizational treatment.

Proposed shared-burden framework

The Shared-Burden Framework proposes burden asymmetry as a discrepancy between the distribution of leadership influence and the distribution of interpersonal responsibility, invisible coordination work, and emotional-regulation demands. It integrates established but separate findings rather than claiming a demonstrated causal chain. Shared-leadership trajectories can change with team interventions and collective personality [26], indicating that leadership distribution itself is dynamic. The proposed framework adds a distinct question: whether changes in influence distribution are accompanied by changes in who must answer, coordinate, repair, support, and recover.

Figure 1 presents the original conceptual synthesis for shared-burden framework, showing how the article's principal constructs, mechanisms, uncertainties, and decision boundaries are connected.

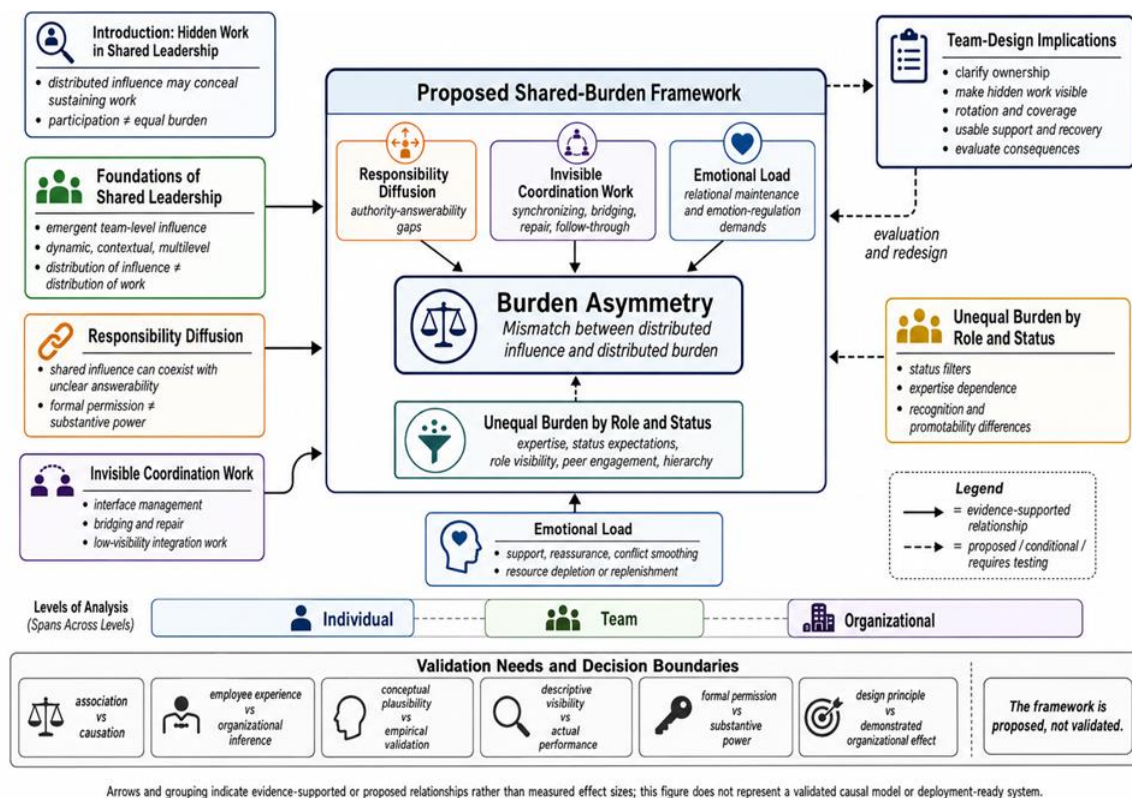


Figure 1. Shared-Burden Framework

Alt-text description

A conceptual organizational-science diagram of shared-burden framework showing the principal constructs in When Shared Leadership Becomes Shared Burden and Invisible Coordination, their relationships, levels of analysis, uncertainties, validation needs, and decision boundaries.

Table 3 converts the Shared-Burden Framework into falsifiable conceptual propositions and corresponding design responsibilities without treating those responsibilities as validated interventions.

Table 3. Testable propositions and bounded team-design responsibilities derived from the Shared-Burden Framework.

Proposed proposition	What should be observed	Pattern consistent with the proposition	Pattern that would challenge it	Corresponding team-design responsibility	Governance or misuse risk	Readiness boundary
P1. Distributed influence can coexist with concentrated sustaining work	Influence and hidden-work distributions measured separately	Influence broadens while responsibility or coordination remains concentrated	Influence and sustaining work remain similarly distributed	Examine influence and burden as separate team properties	Assuming visible participation proves equity	Requires construct validation
P2. Authority–answerability gaps increase hidden responsibility burden	Decision rights and accountability expectations tracked by actor	Members answer for outcomes they cannot materially alter	Authority and answerability remain consistently aligned	Clarify decision rights, escalation, and ownership	Using “empowerment” to disguise responsibility transfer	Requires longitudinal testing

P3. Repeated coordination dependence can produce burden concentration	Coordination activities mapped across time	Bridging and repair repeatedly return to the same members	Coordination rotates naturally or follows legitimate formal roles	Make recurring coordination work identifiable and discussable	Turning visibility systems into surveillance	Observation must precede intervention
P4. Expertise and status can filter hidden-work allocation	Requests, assignments, and informal dependencies tracked	Certain roles or actors receive disproportionate low-visibility demands	Allocation follows task need without persistent actor concentration	Review who receives recurring support and coordination requests	Essentializing demographic or status groups	Context-specific evidence required
P5. Emotional load is distinct from workload quantity	Relational demands and total workload measured separately	Similar workloads produce different relational-maintenance demands	Emotional demand adds no explanatory distinction	Recognize relational maintenance as analytically separate work	Medicalizing ordinary teamwork	Requires discriminant validity
P6. Recovery can moderate consequences without correcting allocation	Burden and recovery resources tracked together	Concentrated burden has weaker consequences where recovery is credible	Recovery does not alter the relationship	Provide recovery and usable support alongside allocation review	Treating resilience as a substitute for redesign	Recovery is not evidence of fairness
P7. Hidden-work visibility can improve governance only when interpretation is contestable	Visibility practices and member responses examined	Members can identify, question, and correct burden records	Visibility creates gaming, stigma, or punitive monitoring	Build transparent and contestable review mechanisms	Converting coordination traces into performance rankings	No automatic deployment recommendation
P8. The framework should be rejected or revised when burden asymmetry is not empirically distinguishable	Separate measures of influence and sustaining work tested	Stable discrepancy appears across relevant episodes and contexts	Constructs collapse empirically or predicted allocation patterns fail	Treat framework evaluation as iterative rather than confirmatory	Searching only for confirming evidence	Framework remains provisional

Table note: All propositions and team-design responsibilities are original proposed contributions. “Consistent with” does not mean “caused by,” and none of the design responsibilities should be interpreted as a validated intervention, performance guarantee, regulatory requirement, or implementation-ready prescription.

Hierarchy location is one proposed allocation filter because hierarchy can have different effects depending on where it is located within multiteam systems [27]. Recovery capacity is another boundary: daily empowering-leadership effects vary with sleep quality, illustrating how similar leadership demands may have different consequences depending on available recovery [28]. Team trust is multilevel and dynamic and can support vulnerability and coordination [29]; however, trust does not establish fair burden distribution, and any claim that it masks overreliance remains proposed.

The framework yields a validation agenda rather than a confirmatory checklist. Studies should establish discriminant validity among distributed influence, felt accountability, coordination activity, emotional-regulation demand, and burden asymmetry. Longitudinal network designs could test whether influence becomes more distributed while coordination or answerability becomes more concentrated; experience-sampling designs could examine burden states across episodes; multilevel models could separate member experiences from team configurations. Rival explanations are essential. Concentration may reflect expertise, temporary project phase, voluntary specialization, task complexity, or efficient role differentiation rather than hidden inequity. The framework would be weakened if influence and burden consistently move together, if proposed filters do not predict allocation, or if burden concentration has no distinguishable consequences after relevant work demands are controlled.

Team-design implications

The framework implies a design agenda rather than an intervention recipe. Remote-work evidence shows that effectiveness depends on work characteristics and individual differences, including autonomy, interdependence, support, monitoring, workload, and self-discipline [30]. For burden-sensitive design, the implication is to examine combinations rather than maximize autonomy or participation in isolation. Decision rights, coordination obligations, workload, and support should be evaluated together because a nominally empowered member may still face dependence, monitoring, or unrecognized integration demands.

Technology also requires conceptual discipline. It can operate as context, sociomaterial influence, creation medium, or teammate in theories of team leadership [31]. A platform that increases visibility or communication access therefore cannot

be assumed to equalize influence, responsibility, or recognition. Digital trace data may help identify coordination patterns, but visibility measures should not be treated as performance scores or used to infer legitimate authority.

More broadly, digital work design shapes autonomy, demands, task allocation, monitoring, and responsibility; technological capability alone does not determine good work [32]. Proposed team-design responsibilities are therefore procedural: clarify who may decide and who must answer; identify recurring coordination tasks; rotate or recognize low-visibility work where appropriate; provide escalation and coverage; and test whether support is socially usable. These are hypotheses for evaluation, not validated safeguards.

Visibility practices also create governance risks. A coordination ledger, rotation schedule, or escalation map may be useful only if members understand its purpose, can contest misclassification, and are not penalized for recording support or repair work. Prospective studies should compare influence networks with activity, accountability, resource, and recognition measures over time while testing rival explanations such as expertise specialization, task complexity, workload cycles, or voluntary preference. A design should be revised or rejected if the predicted burden asymmetry is absent or if proposed safeguards create new inequities.

Conclusion

Shared leadership distributes influence, but it does not logically follow that responsibility, coordination, emotional demand, recognition, or recovery opportunities are distributed in parallel. This article's proposed Shared-Burden Framework makes that distinction explicit. It organizes responsibility diffusion, invisible coordination work, emotional load, and role- or status-filtered allocation around the proposed construct of burden asymmetry while retaining temporal, multilevel, relational, structural, and sociotechnical boundaries.

The framework is intentionally non-empirical. Its integrated pathways, burden states, propositions, and design responsibilities require independent construct validation and direct testing. Evidence of shared influence cannot substitute for evidence of burden allocation; visible participation cannot substitute for consequential authority; and recovery resources cannot establish that underlying work allocation is fair. Future research should separately observe who influences, decides, answers, coordinates, supports, receives recognition, and bears repeated demand across time. The contribution is not a verdict against shared leadership, but a more demanding conceptual test of what "shared" means when the work that sustains collective leadership is included in the analysis.

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