

# Interaction and Risk Management in Shared Leadership

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**Abstract:** The chapter presents a case from a government agency in Norway, where two assistant directors share a leadership position and must interact extensively. The main purpose is to highlight some benefits and challenges related to shared leadership when it comes to risk prevention and handling unforeseen events. The analysis is based on a relational perspective that emphasizes that successful interaction between people requires complementary skills, conceptualized as relational skills. The chapter concludes that the patterns of interaction and relational skills that develop during shared leadership can help prevent undesirable events. This is partly because shared leadership can provide increased capacity in identifying risks. Common experiences in handling risks and unforeseen events may contribute to learning that in turn provides the potential for further development of the interactional and relational skills in shared leadership. At the same time, shared leadership entails some risks that may impact on the prevention and handling of such events. For instance, interactional challenges that may arise in a shared leadership may prevent leaders from discovering potential hazards.

**Keywords:** *Samhandling*, interaction, shared leadership, identifying risks, organizational learning, unforeseen.

Citation: Wadel, C. C. (2018). Interaction and Risk Management in Shared Leadership. In G.-E. Torgersen (Ed.), *Interaction: 'Samhandling' Under Risk. A Step Ahead of the Unforeseen* (pp. 233–250). Oslo: Cappelen Damm Akademisk. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.23865/noasp.36.ch13>

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## Introduction

This chapter focuses on interaction between formal leaders who practice what is referred to in the literature on shared leadership as “joint leadership” (Wilhelmson, 2006; Döös et al., 2013; Döös, 2015). “Joint leadership” means that the leaders have the same leadership position and share responsibility and authority. In order for this type of shared leadership to function, extensive interaction between the leaders is required. The leaders must succeed in leading together; that is, succeed in co-leading. To do so, they have to form a common management practice and appear as unified. Shared leadership can have several advantages but may also entail various challenges, not least with regard to achieving the interaction required for effective co-leading, and may therefore represent a risk. At the same time, shared leadership, in various ways, may affect how the leaders handle risk.

This forms the basis for addressing possibilities and challenges related to collaboration associated with shared leadership, and for asking what impact shared leadership can have when it comes to preventing and handling risk and unforeseen events. These questions are discussed on the basis of empirical material from an ethnographic fieldwork carried out in a government agency in Norway over a period of 10 months in 2013 – 14. In this project, several leaders at different organizational levels were followed. This chapter concentrates on two assistant directors who shared a leadership position. The directors were followed throughout the fieldwork period. The analysis of the assistant directors’ interactions is based on observations from internal meetings between them and meetings between them and employees. Some meetings were followed up with informal conversations with the assistant directors. Furthermore, five formal interviews were conducted with one of the assistant directors and two with both directors together.

One case cannot give a complete picture of shared leadership, but it does provide a good basis for exploring the topics in this chapter. The case presented intends to give insight into the kind of interaction that leaders who share a leadership position have to engage in, the importance of this interaction for their leadership practice, and what appear to be important prerequisites for achieving successful co-leadership. The main

purpose of the chapter is to highlight and discuss some benefits and challenges related to shared leadership when it comes to risk prevention and handling unforeseen events. Risk is understood as something negative and potentially dangerous that one wishes to avoid. Unforeseen events are unexpected and unusual events that occur which require handling beyond the usual, everyday operations.

## Perspective and key concepts

The analysis in this chapter is based on a relational perspective, where relational concepts are applied to capture central aspects of situations in which individuals enter into interaction and relationships with each other (Wadel & Wadel, 2007). Social interaction is understood as “the process by which we act and react to those around us” (Giddens, 1997:85). Based on Mead (1934), we can say that the act of one person represents a gesture that depends on being received and responded to by interactive partners, in order to become a meaningful act and give grounds for talking about interaction. Thus, interaction can be said to refer to the partial acts of various persons who are interdependent. These partial acts may be performed simultaneously or sequentially. When looking at interaction, we are not only interested in capturing individual acts but also *co-activity*; in other words, acts that individuals perform together. In interaction, individual acts can be seen as partial acts that are part of something larger.

All interaction requires skills, including communication skills. For individuals to be able to interact successfully, complementary skills are required. Skills that two or more people possess together can be conceptualized as *relational skills* (Schou Andreassen & Wadel, 1987). Each person’s individual skills thus represent partial skills that are incorporated into the skills that the interacting people possess together. When it comes to shared leadership and risk management, the relational skills that the leaders have developed and possess together will be of crucial importance for how they react to, and handle, risks and unforeseen events.

While interaction is a value-neutral concept, collaboration is a concept with positive connotations. Collaboration consists of interactions that are rewarding and lead to personal development, rather than interaction that

is suppressive or characterized by competition and conflict. Collaboration means that the participants work together to reach common objectives, such as when the members of a band collaborate to play music that sounds as good as possible (Schieffloe, 2011:311). Collaboration is a type of interaction characterized by generalized exchange, in which transactions do not depend on immediate returns. Collaborative relationships are characterized by trust (Schieffloe, 2011:353) and incorporation; in other words, a “give and take” relationship, and acts such as providing support and showing concern (Wadel & Wadel, 2007:92). Collaboration requires making the effort to establish and maintain relationships, and to build and maintain mutual trust, motivation and deference (Wadel & Wadel, 2007:75). A well-functioning, shared leadership will be characterized by collaborative interaction between the leaders.

## Shared leadership

A number of concepts have emerged that conceptualize leadership as something that is divided and shared, and as something individuals perform together or jointly. “Shared leadership” is one of these concepts. Shared leadership originates from the literature on teamwork (Fitzsimons et al., 2011), where the concept is used to describe how leadership functions are shared among the members of a team (Drecher et al., 2014). The concept has also been applied to situations in which two, or sometimes more, formal leaders share a leadership function, have joint responsibilities and lead together (Crevani, 2011). Döös et al. (2013) emphasize that shared leadership entails close and extensive collaboration among the leaders.

Shared leadership can be the result of a formal decision, as in the case described in this chapter. However, shared leadership can also emerge as a practice without being based on a formal decision. The literature contains a number of concepts used to describe different categories of shared leadership. For instance, “functionally-divided leadership” and “dual leadership” are concepts used for leaders at the same hierarchical level, who have equivalent responsibilities in the business but who carry out different tasks (Döös et al., 2006; Döös et al., 2013; Döös, 2015; Fjellvær, 2010). We also find that leaders at different organizational levels choose to

share leadership responsibility. “Joint leadership” has been used for situations in which two full-time leaders at the same hierarchical level occupy a leadership position together, have shared responsibilities and both formally and practically share tasks, responsibilities, power and authority (Wilhelmson, 2006; Döös et al., 2006). This is the form of shared leadership that is most extensive when it comes to leading together, and is therefore the focus of this chapter.

In the literature, shared leadership is described as both something new that is expanding (Döös & Wilhelmson, 2003; Döös et al., 2006; Döös et al., 2013) and as a phenomenon that has existed for a long time (Sally, 2002). In a survey conducted in Sweden, 41 % of the leaders responded that they practice one form or another of shared leadership. Joint leadership is practiced by 5 % of leaders in Sweden (Döös et al., 2006; Döös et al., 2013).

The occurrence and prevalence of shared leadership in our society today has been linked to a number of factors: the growth of new organizational forms; knowledge workers that must be led differently than traditional workers; the need for a way for leaders to handle an ever-more demanding, exhausting and unpredictable work situation; and the desire to make leadership less lonely (Wood, 2005; Crevani et al., 2007; Döös et al., 2013). In the Nordic countries, shared leadership may also be associated with a working life and leadership model that is characterized by a relatively-flat hierarchy, co-determination and a long tradition of autonomous and self-governed work groups (Döös et al., 2006).

The literature on shared leadership generally does not provide the sort of detailed descriptions and analyses of the interaction between leaders practicing shared leadership that would allow readers to see how the leaders perform shared leadership together in practice. Crevani et al. (2007:60) is an exception; they use concepts such as “consulting each other,” “exchanging information” and “exchanging ideas,” to describe shared leadership at a school. Several authors have emphasized that we need more knowledge about how leadership and managerial work is exercised in practice (Crevani et al., 2007; Tengblad, 2012). This includes more knowledge about how leaders who share leadership responsibility interact and lead together (Crevani, 2010; Döös et al., 2013). How do the leaders

interact with each other, what does their interaction consist of, what is the purpose of their interaction, and what impact does the interaction have on how they lead?

## Interaction in a shared leadership

To show the type of interaction that leaders in a shared leadership engage in, and to gain insight into how the leaders lead together and manage to co-lead, we shall present empirical material from a study of a public agency. The agency is one of 40 Norwegian government agencies which supervise the compliance of private and public enterprises with laws and regulations. We focus on two assistant directors in a joint leadership who share the responsibility for the agency's supervisory activities. Together, the two assistant directors are responsible for six teams, which are involved in supervising the industry that the agency is responsible for. Shared responsibility means that the two assistant directors must interact extensively.

The two assistant directors interact in several different arenas. They interact in connection with a number of regular management meetings, and in meetings with the teams and co-workers they are responsible for. They also regularly meet with each other in connection with their shared area of responsibility, which they refer to as "coordination meetings". These meetings act as a kind of "backstage arena" (Goffman, 1959:112), where the directors prepare their leadership, mark out a course, and ensure a coordinated and professional outward appearance. They also hold pre-meetings ahead of external meetings. Face-to-face interaction also takes place when they contact each other in their offices or run into each other in the hallway, at the coffee machine or in the cafeteria. They also communicate frequently by email.

### What does the interaction consist of?

At an overarching level, much of the interaction between the two assistant directors relates to keeping an overview of the industry they supervise and the supervisory activities that the agency plans and implements. More specifically, their interaction relates to the planning of activities

and meetings, discussions about the need for enhanced knowledge development, the management and distribution of resources, etc. Much of the interaction focuses on the allocation of tasks between them, such as who is to be listed as responsible for specific projects and who should participate in the various types of external meetings. Sometimes they choose to appear in meetings together, to mark the seriousness of the meeting or to be able to support each other in difficult matters.

If we look more closely at what the interaction between the two assistant directors consists of, we find that it is focused on *informing* and *briefing* each other about various issues and keeping each other up to date. This interaction is due to the fact that the directors have had to divide work and responsibilities between them. The interaction is highlighted as absolutely necessary for them to fulfil their shared responsibilities. Furthermore, they say that one of the most important things that they do in relation to leading together is to *discuss* an issue, look at what and who it affects, and exchange viewpoints. These discussions often include what they refer to as *reflecting together*.

The interaction between the assistant directors is also associated with *acquiring ideas* or *input*, or concrete *suggestions* in relation to something they are working on, or a problem that they must handle. Some of the interaction between them consists of *thinking aloud together* or *brainstorming*. The brainstorming often takes place in the initial phase of the work on a case or issue, at a moment when they are very open to all kinds of ideas. Some of the interaction between them relates to *seeking and giving advice* about cases they are working on. The assistant directors also talk about using each other as *sparring partners*, for example, when preparing a difficult case for presentation to the executive management. In some instances, the interaction is about *getting feedback* on whether something one has been working on looks good or can be done a certain way, or it is about *seeking and securing support* from the other person. When a case has reached the point where one has a suggestion of how to respond and act, they tend to seek both feedback on, and support for, the suggestion.

Another aspect of their interaction is illustrated by the statement that: “*We use each other to air things.*” This is often about needing someone to

talk through an experience with or express frustration to. Much of the interaction between the assistant directors is about brief *checks* and *clarifications*. For instance, they may check whether they acted in accordance with previous practice. The interaction is also about *coming to an agreement* and *making decisions*. One expression that the assistant directors use when talking about their discussions and forming the basis for decision-making is *talking things through*. “Talking things through” means talking together until one has reached a shared understanding or agreement about the issue. The assistant directors emphasize the importance of talking things through to reach agreement and present a united front when one of them is to meet with co-workers or external parties.

The interaction that the leaders need to achieve in order to lead together, have a common leadership practice and appear as unified even though they are two individuals, can be termed “co-leading”. To ensure that things have been talked through appears to be central to co-leading. Co-leading is most clearly expressed in their interaction when the assistant directors succeed in talking things through, thereby ensuring that they have a joint practice and succeed in appearing as unified. This does not mean that other forms of interaction do not play an important role in co-leading. For example, the exchange of information is an important prerequisite for successful co-leading. If the leaders have not exchanged information and interpreted information together – and thus have no clear sense of what the other person is thinking – co-workers will get the impression that there is no joint leadership. This would make it easier for the co-workers to play one leader off against the other.

## What significance does the interaction have?

The interaction between the assistant directors is important in order for them to establish a *shared understanding* and a *common standpoint*. The assistant directors must establish a shared understanding of how they will lead the area they are responsible for and what is important to prioritize. They emphasize that their interaction is important to ensure that they are coordinated. In other words, the interaction “ensures that they convey the same message” and it is “important in order to be able to stand together”.

The interaction ensures that they do not develop divergent practices, such as which means and sanctions to use in the agency's supervisory activity. The interaction also helps to ensure a just and equal treatment of the co-workers, and is important for them to be perceived as one leadership. Furthermore, the interaction between them is important to ensure that they have thought about all aspects of an issue and have considered it from every angle. It becomes apparent that they are creative together and that new ideas emerge when they talk with each other. The assistant directors also emphasize that the interaction helps establish trust between them and gives them a sense of confidence in their leadership role.

## Prerequisites for collaborative interaction and co-leading

It is possible to identify various aspects that can help explain how the two assistant directors succeed in their interaction and co-leading. These aspects are not necessarily absolute requirements for success in shared leadership, but are factors that help make interaction and joint leadership easier, and appear to be important in creating a well-functioning joint leadership in practice.

The assistant directors talk about their interaction using the term "collaboration," emphasizing that they enjoy a close and well-functioning collaboration. They explain this by stating that they find it very rewarding to work together and that they both benefit from collaborating closely. Furthermore, they emphasize that they have good personal chemistry and that this helps them to collaborate well. Another important prerequisite that they underscore is that they do not have the same skills but have similar knowledge about the area they lead. They complement each other in that they have different experiences from previous work and have different strengths and weaknesses in terms of knowledge about the industry that they supervise. The assistant directors point out that it is important to experience collaboration as being personally beneficial, and that it would otherwise be difficult to maintain. They also believe that if they had been very focused on possessing and exercising power, their collaboration would have been arduous, and this would have destroyed their

partnership. The literature on shared leadership has highlighted similar premises as necessary for shared leadership to function (Döös et al., 2013).

In summary, the interaction between the assistant directors can be said to be characterized by generalized exchange and incorporation, based on mutual trust and respect. It is also clear that the assistant directors have complementary knowledge and skills related to the field they lead, and that they have developed relational skills. These relational skills are evident in their close and effortless collaboration, helping each other to improve, and succeeding in leading together and appearing as a unit.

## Shared leadership and risk

Risk is inherent in all inter-personal interaction. Collaborative interaction is often built on trust. Placing trust in others always entails a risk that the trusted persons do not behave as expected (Misztal, 1996). There is often a possibility that something unforeseen may occur when interacting with other people that will have an impact on the interaction and the trust between the parties involved, and in turn, lead to other interactional terms or place new demands on the interaction.

Shared leadership may entail a risk that the leaders do not succeed in achieving the interaction that is necessary for being able to co-lead, and there is always a risk that the interaction between the leaders will fail in one way or another. These risks are related to various interactional challenges associated with shared leadership.

The assistant directors in the government agency emphasize several challenges in their joint leadership. They stress that it is often difficult to find the time to meet and have enough time for required interaction. They note that at times it is cumbersome to have to discuss many issues with a co-leader. There is also a risk that confusion may arise in relation to their informal division of responsibilities and that, as a consequence, some cases can fall between the cracks. Furthermore, they believe that confusion can easily arise over who actually decides what, and that remaining unified in cases where they have disagreed can be quite challenging. They also see a significant risk of conflict and power struggles related to shared leadership in situations where the leaders are not pulling in the

same direction, and create confusion by sending different messages. In these situations, there is a great risk that co-workers may try to play the leaders off against each other. If the leaders develop a close friendship, they may find it challenging to address difficulties with each other.

Many similar challenges are described in the literature on shared leadership (Döös et al., 2013). Wilhelmson (2006) mentions the risk that leaders in a shared leadership may be too strong together and create an imbalance in the organization. A strong bond of trust that develops between the leaders may also become dysfunctional, leading to blindness and a lack of vigilance (Tharaldsen, 2011). In the literature, the most significant reason for skepticism towards shared leadership relates to whether the leaders can make quick and clear decisions together when necessary (Crevani et al., 2007; Crevani, 2011; Döös et al., 2013).

Many of the challenges that can arise in a shared leadership may increase in situations that are unpredictable, and include unanticipated events in which communication and interaction are often more challenging, leading to increased levels of stress. Not least, this relates to the challenges of making necessary decisions quickly. When an unforeseen event occurs, the opportunities for exchanging information and talking things through may change, and then the character of the interaction can also change. Therefore, the possibility that the leaders convey different messages and appear as if they are not in accordance with each other will increase, making it more difficult for the leaders to achieve the respectful interaction between them that is necessary for maintaining each other's trust.

## Shared leadership and risk prevention

While shared leadership may entail different risks, it may also help to reduce some leadership-related risks. Shared leadership may prevent the leaders' work from becoming too demanding. The leaders can relieve each other and step in for each other. The organization becomes less dependent on the individual leader and thus, less vulnerable. It can maintain activities even if one leader is absent or indisposed. According to the experiences of the assistant directors in the Norwegian government agency, the fact that they are two people working closely together helps

them to make decisions that are more well-founded, in part because they have different and complementary knowledge and experiences, and thus can see multiple aspects of an issue. It also helps to ensure a better focus on issues that are important to keep track of in the sector for which they are responsible, thus reducing the risk of overlooking or failing to address something that might lead to an undesirable situation.

Well-functioning interactions between leaders in a shared leadership can often contribute to prevent risks and undesirable events. The leaders can make each other aware of what they should be alert to. Together, they can identify signs, analyze situations, take precautions and think through how best to handle potential events. The assistant directors in the government agency emphasize that the fact that they are careful to keep each other informed, take time to discuss issues together and exchange viewpoints means that they generally have looked at and thought through all aspects of an issue. That they check issues with each other, look to each other for advice and place emphasis on having talked things through together, has preventative effects. That the assistant directors develop a shared understanding, establish trust and develop confidence as leaders through their interaction helps to prevent potential risks, such as the risk that co-workers will try to play them off against each other or that enterprises will react extremely negatively to a decision made by the agency.

However, it is also the case that the patterns of interaction that develop between leaders in a shared leadership may have a negative impact on the ability to predict an event or potential crisis, and to handle a crisis, because the leaders think too similarly and thus do not see dangers or challenge each other's understanding of the situation.

## Shared leadership and handling risks and unforeseen events

Leadership generally entails much uncertainty. Studies show that the leaders' everyday life consists of a constant stream of inquiries and new challenges (Mintzberg, 2009; Tengblad, 2006; 2012). Shared leadership can be a way to handle aspects of the unpredictability that leadership entails. A well-functioning, shared leadership may have many advantages

when handling undesirable or unpredicted events, and leaders can seek advice and support from each other.

In situations where a serious event occurs, there is often a great need for efficient and good communication and interaction. Yet it is precisely in these situations that the conditions for interaction are the worst. When leaders who do not know each other from previous interactions have to handle a challenging situation together, confusion and uncertainty may easily arise that make handling the situation more difficult. Knowing each other well, having experience in communicating and interacting with each other, and having a clear division of responsibility may be crucial in a critical situation or when something unforeseen occurs. The relational skills the leaders in a shared leadership have developed through their interaction may be of great significance when they must handle crises or unpredicted situations.

We can assume that the assistant directors in the above case have created a basis for handling undesirable and unpredictable events – including situations where they do not have the opportunity to talk things through with each other in the actual situation – because they know what their partner is thinking and know that they have the support of their partner. This means that interaction in “normal” situations helps to form the basis for the interaction necessary when something unforeseen, unusual or difficult arises. Through their previous interaction, the leaders know each other, have established ways of communicating and interacting and have developed relational skills that they can draw on to handle unforeseen events. Thus, for example, the leaders will be able to respond quickly to each other’s actions and statements, and they will be able to spontaneously provide each other with the emotional support that is important when handling difficult and challenging situations.

## **The impact of unforeseen events on shared leadership**

The interaction and co-leading that characterizes a well-functioning shared leadership may also be challenged when something unforeseen occurs and quick decisions and actions must be taken. In addition, the

conditions for interaction will tend to change in these situations. It may be more difficult to find opportunities to talk together, and provide confirmation and support for each other. In these situations, it may be that established patterns of interaction, shared understandings, agreements and practices are insufficient or do not provide adequate guidelines for handling the situation. The situation may require that one moves beyond the established patterns of interaction. Decisions must often be made without first having an opportunity to talk things through. The challenges related to interaction in a shared leadership will, in other words, increase in situations that are unpredictable or involve unforeseen events.

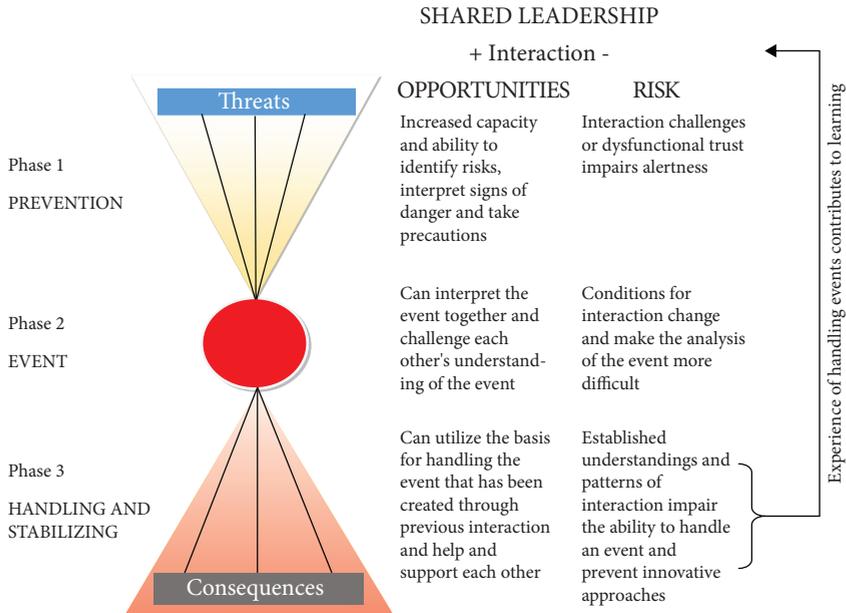
In a challenging and pressed situation, with little time for interaction and talking things through and a need for quick decisions, it will be more difficult for the leaders to appear unified, and there is a greater risk that they will send conflicting messages. A pattern of interaction characterized by collaboration, mutual exchanges and incorporation may be challenged, easily developing into conflict and interaction characterized by the exercise of power.

Handling an undesirable or unforeseen event may also contribute to further developing and strengthening the relationship and interaction between leaders in a shared leadership, in part because leaders in these situations must interact to handle new problems and may learn from this (Torgersen, 2015:17). The relational skills of joint leaders may be challenged when something unforeseen arises. Furthermore, these situations may require relational skills beyond those the leaders have developed and which apply under normal circumstances, such as making quick decisions together in a pressured and complex situation. The leaders may also develop their relational skills in handling the situation and through the shared learning that may occur in the situation. Thus, they may form a better basis for handling future challenges related to possible risks, and unforeseen and undesirable events.

## **Conclusion - a model**

In summary, shared leadership and the patterns of interaction and relational skills that are developed during such a leadership, provide some

opportunities in terms of preventing and handling undesirable events that were not foreseen. At the same time, shared leadership entails some risks that may impact on the prevention and handling of such events. Experiences in handling events may contribute to learning, that in turn provides the potential for further development of the interaction and relational skills in a shared leadership. We can illustrate this as in figure 13.1.



**Figure 13.1** Interaction in shared leadership through the Bow-tie phases.

The figure is based on the Bow-tie model and shows the key opportunities and risks of shared leadership in terms of preventing, interpreting and handling an undesirable event. By providing increased capacity in identifying risks, shared leadership can help prevent undesirable events. On the other hand, interactional challenges that may arise in a shared leadership can prevent the leaders from discovering potential hazards. When an event occurs, shared leadership can provide opportunities when it comes to interpreting what is happening, but can also make it more difficult to achieve a common understanding of the situation. When it comes to handling events, earlier interaction between the leaders may give the basis for effective handling, but established interaction and thought patterns can

also impair the leaders' ability to handle the event and prevent them from seeing alternative approaches. Experiences from the handling of an event may contribute to learning that impacts on the leaders' future interaction, related to the prevention and handling of undesirable events.

This chapter has focused on shared leadership and has intended to provide insight into the interaction that a well-functioning shared leadership requires and implies, pointing to the importance of this interaction for a good and unified leadership practice. This has formed the basis for discussing the role that shared leadership can have when it comes to anticipating and preventing risks, and dealing with unforeseen and unwanted events that may occur in an organization. We have pointed to challenges and risks related to shared leadership that could affect how leaders manage to prevent or reduce risk, hinder unwanted events and handle such incidents when they occur, and we have underlined benefits and strengths related to shared leadership in relation to preventing and handling serious and unwanted events. A main point that we wish to emphasize in this chapter is that the relational interactional skills that leaders in a shared leadership manage to build up through their co-leading under normal circumstances, can form a foundation that makes it possible for them to achieve coordinated and collaborative interaction also in an unusual and demanding situation, even though the leaders are unable to communicate directly with each other in this situation.

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