

mosaics



FEMINIST CO-LEADERSHIP
INSIGHTS & PRACTICES

INSIGHTS & PRACTICES
FEMINIST CO-LEADERSHIP

mirrors

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In admiration of all the co-leads charting new paths and showing up for each other and their communities every day

In gratitude to all the people who have supported us in our co-leadership. You challenged us, helped us grow, and believed in who we were together.

Ruby & Devi - co-leads once, co-conspirators forever.

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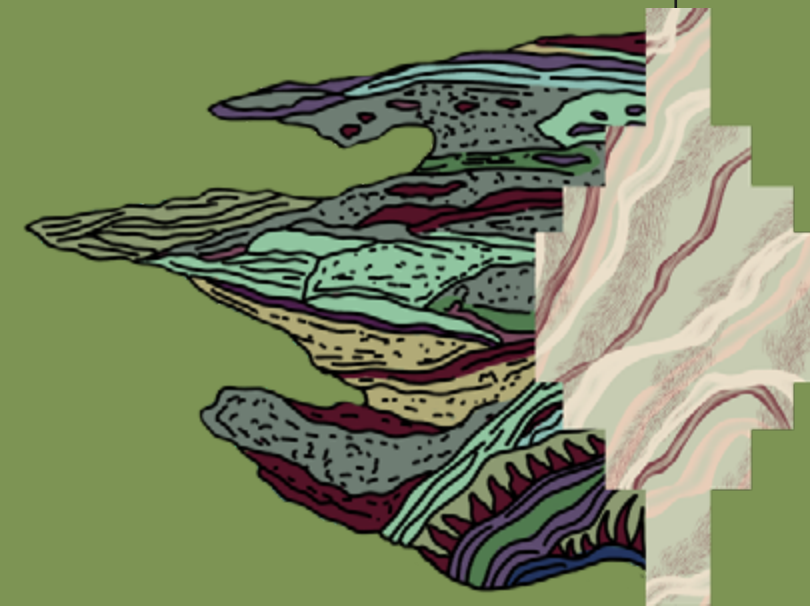
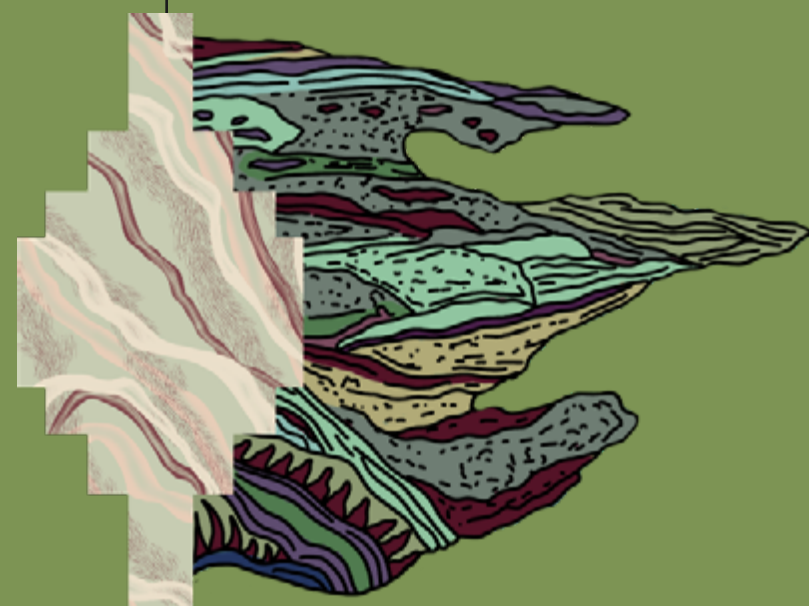
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Key takeaways

Key takeaways

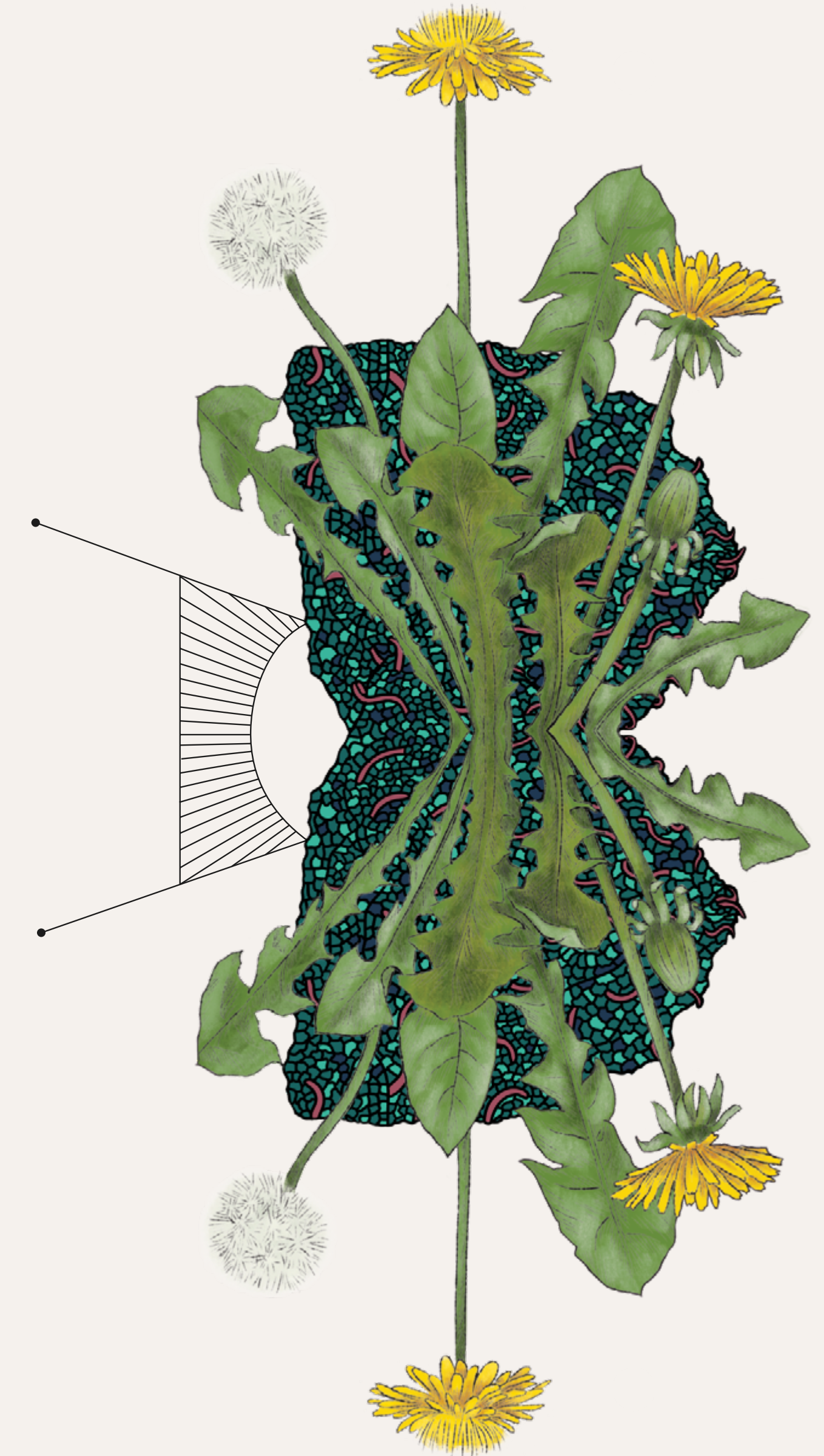
What we have learnt about co-leadership

This research was sparked by our first-hand experience co-leading a young feminist organisation between 2013-2019. We have since gone on to be part of and set up new collaborations and organisations with co-leadership structures. During this research process we are grateful to have interviewed more than 25 organisation leaders and practitioners who are themselves constantly learning and unlearning in their co-leadership practice.

In the current moment, as society moves through pandemic recovery, plunges deeper into climate crises and navigates complex and interconnected emergencies, we see co-leadership as an important piece in a mosaic of transformative change.

Alongside other core political practices and commitments embodied by individuals organisations and movements, such as building anti-ableist, anti-sexist, anti-racist organisations, integrating participatory decision-making models and working to align our politics with our practice, we think co-leadership can offer steps on a pathway towards collective liberation.

Below are key learnings and highlights from this research. We hope these findings are useful to co-leads and organisations navigating their leadership structures. Ultimately we know that the true value of this knowledge will be found in practice based learning within your organisations, which we hope can be supported through the use of the tools annexed to this report.



Overall learnings about co-leadership

-  Co-Leadership offers a structural model to enable shared responsibility and decision-making between two or more people.

Co-leadership is simply a structure and a mechanism to lead, but the intention behind the way the model is practised is critical for it to contribute to transformation.
-  Feminist co-leaders in particular are committed to transform themselves and use their power, resources and skills, in non-oppressive, inclusive practices and processes.

Feminist funders and organisations in particular often practice co-leadership as part of their commitment to centring and sharing power and decisions in their organisations.
-  Co-leadership can support an organisation to be dynamic, robust, sustainable and flexible.

More than one voice, decision-maker and leadership style at the executive level can be of deep value to both the organisation and individuals in co-leadership.

◆ Co-leadership is not a panacea to address unsustainable and/ or hierarchical leadership, and does not provide an inevitable pathway to healthy organisations with well distributed power.¹

For this structure to contribute to more aligned values and practice, it is important to articulate clarity in shared vision and how the model contributes to the broader political project about sharing power and leading in a more collective way.²

◆ Co-leadership can lead to further decentralisation and collectivisation of leadership beyond the executive function, within and across organisations.

It can spark new ways of exercising power, through cultures of horizontality and modelling of less individualistic values, including multiple co.leads at different levels. However, this requires a commitment and understanding from the whole organisation, including the board and staff – not just the executive co-leaders.

◆ If the intention of shared leadership is not actively named and practised across the organisation, co-leadership can even work to reinforce power dynamics, consolidate power or make leadership less accessible to their staff and senior leadership teams.

Self reflection, understanding of power, and clear mechanisms to communicate with and be accountable to the broader team are critical to address this.

¹. This idea and language of not seeing co-leadership as a panacea comes from our conversation with Susanna George.

². This idea and language of connecting co-leadership to the broader political project of transformation first comes from our conversation with Lydia Alpizar.

◆ Many organisations turn to co-leadership as a response to persistent hardship in their context, burn out, unsustainable workload and pace of the work.

During the pandemic and in the context of increased backlash and attack on rights, we are seeing this increase. For some, distributed leadership has been essential to sustain the individual leaders and the organisation and build resilience.

◆ Many co-leaders have made efforts to prioritise practices of ritual, collective care and joy in their work.

In doing so, they are able to cultivate deeper relationships and meaningful moments at work that create a more resilient support system for the leaders. This does not make them immune from burn out.

◆ Co-leadership may not work for everyone all the time - for some organisations it may only be impactful at certain moments in their life cycle.

During periods of rapid change, including during start up, co-leadership may help spur energy and pace. However, co-leadership during a time of 'consolidation' can be complex and even de-stabilising if the organisational culture is not ready or there is a clear political rationale or support mechanisms are not in place.

Practical learnings across different phases

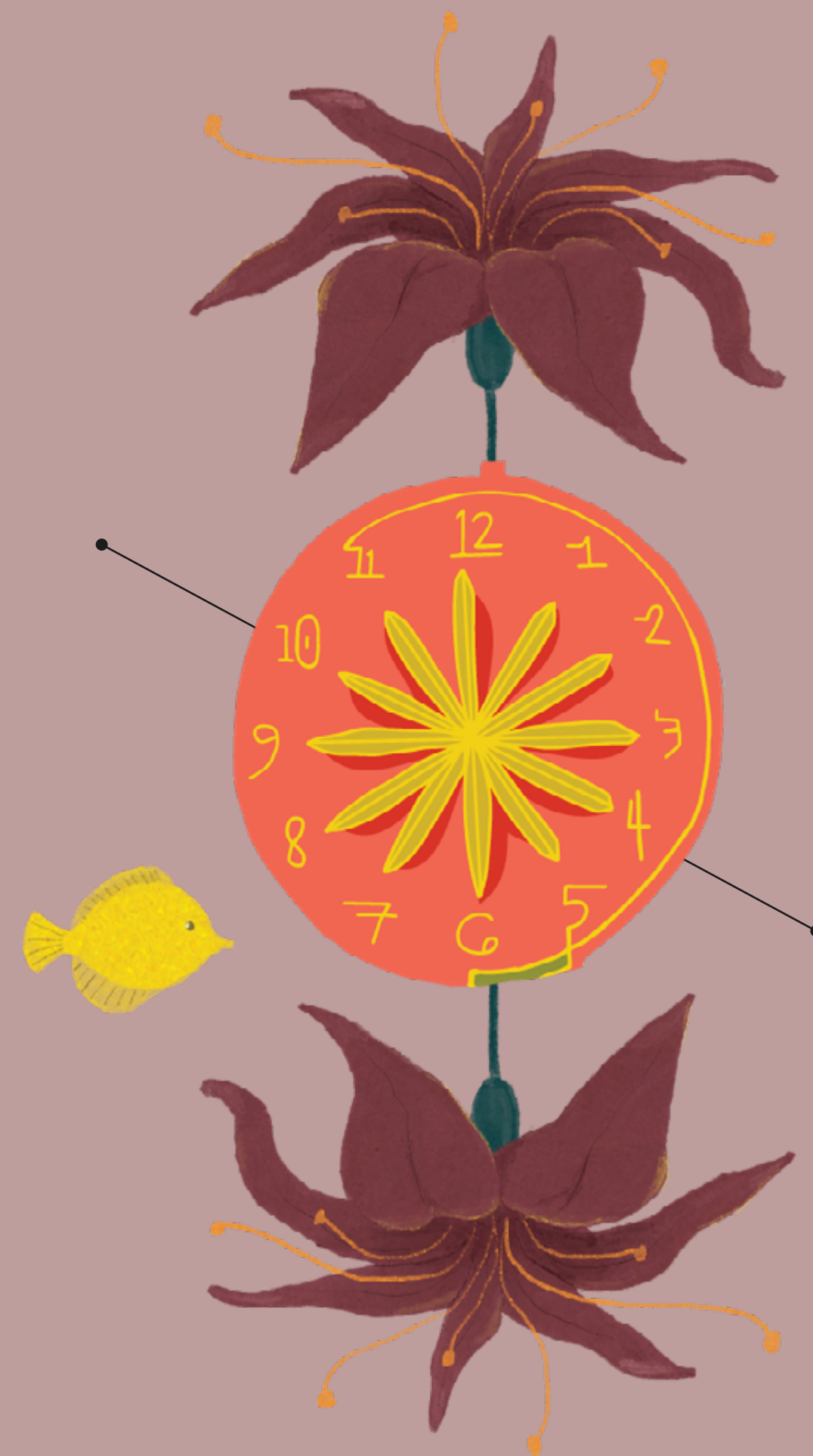
Emerging and setting up:



- ✦ Recruitment of co-leads – like any recruitment – can be challenging, and attention and intention must be placed in the matching of co-leads, ensuring sufficient space and time to find the right match. While not a science, **the most successful recruitment processes in our research seem to be with either one co-lead hired and playing an active role in the hiring of the next, or people applying together as co-leads, or co-founders.**
- ✦ Not everyone is right for a co-leadership role. Leaders who are willing to work closely and share power with other people, are **self-reflexive** are more likely to succeed.
- ✦ How co-leads **start their relationship is critical.** Taking time to understand each other's needs and **clearly define the distribution of work and communication methods** will help set the co-leads up. This should be clearly communicated across the organisation.

Practical learnings across different phases

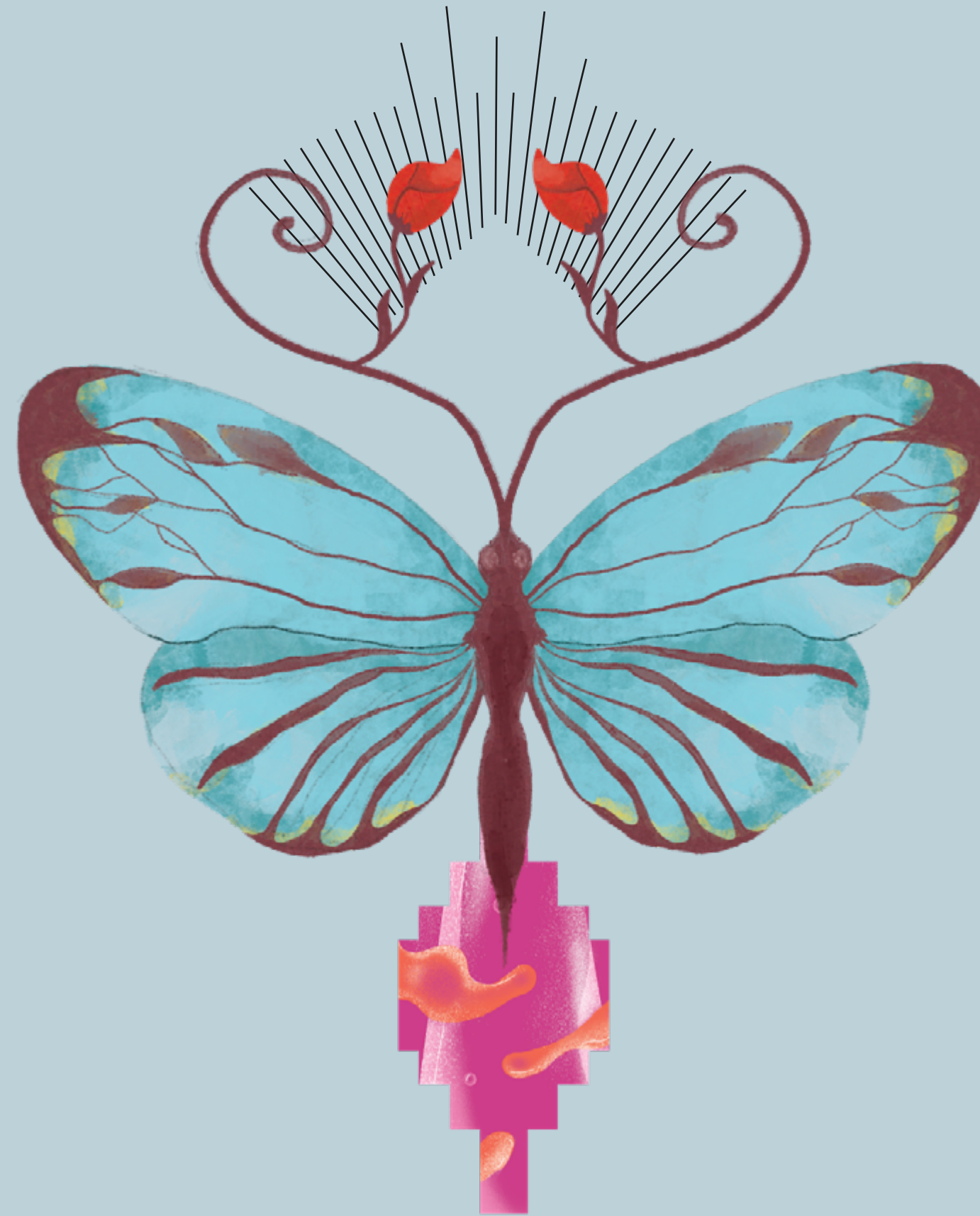
Nurturing and strengthening:



- ✦ To meaningfully show up in a co-leadership relationship, it is ideal if co-leads find ways to **cultivate a practice of building and strengthening their own self awareness and personal growth.**
- ✦ A co-leadership relationship, like any relationship, is one that **needs attention and intention, time and resources.** For many this has been in the form of individual and joint coaching, counselling and advisors.
- ✦ Being able to **trust and be honest with each other sits at the centre** of an effective relationship.
- ✦ **Boards have an important role to play in supporting co-leads.** They can evaluate performance in ways that support co-leads to grow, build accountability across the organisation and between each other. They can also provide guidance, backing co-leads' decisions.
- ✦ **Embracing complexity of unity in collective leadership.** Co-leads must navigate a relationship where sometimes it will make sense to lead together, and sometimes they should engage more individually.

Practical learnings across different phases

Evolving and transitioning:



- ✦ **Transitions can be difficult for any leader and organisation but co-leadership brings with it its own strengths and challenges.** Co-leads should plan their transition openly with each other where possible, stagger leaving where it feels right for them, but not feel pressured to do so. Ensure there is ample support (coaches, healers, time, space, and resources) for co-leads to support their journey and that of the organisation, before, during and after a transition.
- ✦ This research project in itself has been a way for us to **document knowledge and harvest learnings and collective reflection.** Documenting practice-based learning throughout the relationship, including as part of any transition, is important as it enables the incoming co-leads to build from your learnings, as well as facilitates a growth mindset.

Introduction

2

What's in this report?

This report sits as one piece of a larger body of knowledge we seek to build, including practical and beautiful tools, stories, and case studies. We offer a piece of reflexive study, informed through the experiential learning and practice of co-leads and practitioners, including our own experiences. We seek to be in feminist praxis and reflection with the co-leads.

The report consists of three main components: the first, a section on learning and reflections on co-leadership; the second including reflections and practical tips through different phases of co-leadership; and the final section consisting of practical tools to accompany each phase of co-leadership.

Introduction

With the unpredictability that the last few years have brought – two years+ of a pandemic amidst ongoing political, economic and environmental crises – we are seeing drastic shifts in how organisations function in the day to day. Some are moving to hybrid or fully virtual work spaces, or extending additional leave or flexibility to their teams, and many are taking up models of co-leadership.

We believe this is a sign of our times, sometimes linked to necessity and pragmatism to support the sustainability and resilience of the work, while for others it is clearly aligned to their broader vision for sharing power and transformation. It is timely for a deep and broad look on what co-leadership is as a leadership structure, practice, and impact.



Who are we and why are we writing this report?

We are Devi Leiper O'Malley and Ruby Johnson, two feminist activists that came together as the first co-leaders of FRIDA | The Young Feminist Fund for seven years from 2013-2019. We followed in the foundational footsteps of the founding coordinator Amina Doherty. When we came together, we were mostly strangers with a few mutual connections.

Ruby is Australian, but lived and worked in Cambodia for several years, where Devi is from. Ruby met Devi's mother first, who encouraged us to meet. Over the course of two years we met a handful of times to share a fabulous Vietnamese lunch, some drinks, and one time to do some shopping at a pop-up vintage store. Ruby was hired first as a FRIDA co-lead, and then Devi joined a few months later.

When we became co-leads in 2013, co-leadership in the philanthropic and women's rights spaces was fairly uncommon. We had a lot to prove, not only as young executive directors but as co-leaders and feminist co-leaders.

From the onset, our leadership was part of a larger political project to transform conventional and mainstream practices and assumptions of leadership. After being founded with one young feminist coordinator, Amina, the founding FRIDA Advisory Council decided to adopt a co-leadership structure for several reasons: "innovation, a new approach that questioned existing structures and patterns of conventional leadership, acknowledgement of the range of skills and complex attributes required for a leadership role, especially for a quickly growing initiative emerging out of start-up."³

During our time at FRIDA, we played a critical role in strengthening the Fund, from being the only staff members to growing to a global team of 20 young feminists around the world in a virtual office, expanding the budget from 250,000 USD to over 4 million USD and building a grantee community of 150 young feminist groups.

There is no doubt that we could have done some things better and the time is full of learning, but we really gave it all we had. It was hard work. As we continue to work together and are close friends, people often assume we were best of friends the

whole way through. In reality, when we began working together, we were unaware of each other's personalities, habits, fears and ambitions. Over the years, there were several low moments, when we weren't sure we'd make it as co-leads or as friends, when we disappointed each other, made mistakes, or were too burnt out. But in these lows, you can find some of our biggest highs because they demonstrated our enduring commitment to our shared values such as trust, respect and boundaries, but also vulnerability, empathy and closeness.

Upholding these values together can yield concrete pathways to rethink, renegotiate and redistribute power, and enable transformations within movements, organisations, and culture. This has meant a commitment to unpacking varying privileges we hold and interrogating our own power and space for learning. Without a clear intention and authentic commitment from the individuals in the co-lead structure as well the *whole* organisation, co-leadership is not going to be much different from conventional leadership structure – except we suspect that it may be more prone to failure.

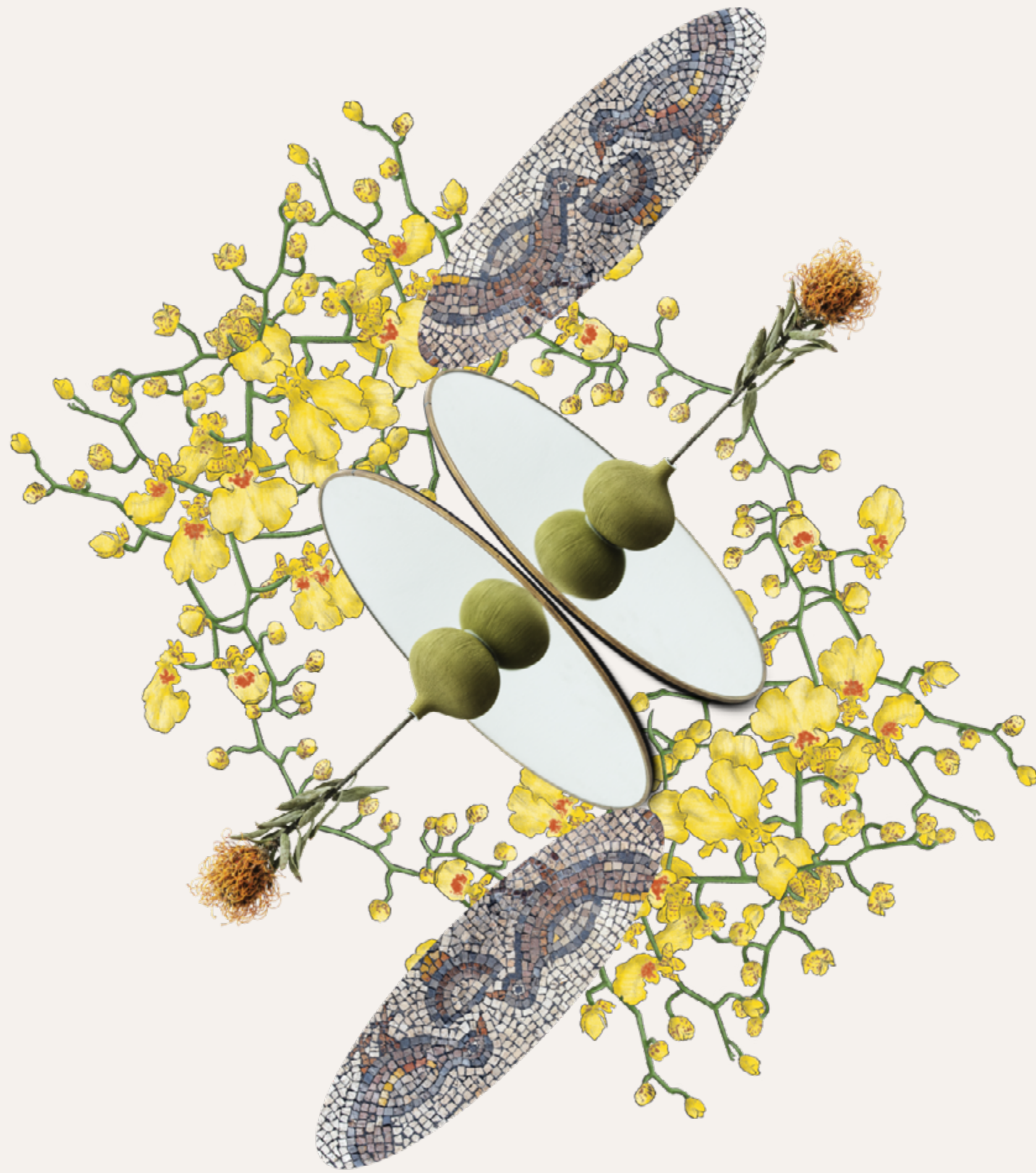
There are conflicting and competing outlooks on co-leadership – some believe it is the way to do feminist leadership, others think that it leads to conflict and rarely succeeds. A lot of this tension is clouded by the mystery of what co-leadership actually is and the lack of information available.

This goes to the heart of why we are writing this report. We want to share what we learned, read, and heard from others on what it takes to *practice* feminist co-leadership mainly for other co-leads, but also for the entire organisation around them, namely the board and staff.



³. This comes from the public newsletter announcing FRIDA's transition to co-leadership in 2013.

The *meaning* behind our title



The title of this piece is an apt representation of our co-leadership style. Many times when we have been faced with a choice (like what to call a report), we spend hours going back and forth on each other's opinions and weighing out the options. While not always the best answer, there are plenty of times when we were able to integrate both of our preferences and embrace the abundance of 'more is more' approach. The title of this report is like that.

Mosaics:

We have drawn on the idea of mosaics as we see our journey as made up of many distinct pieces that still come together to make a unique picture of a shared experience. A mosaic is a pattern of irregular pieces of colored stone, glass, ceramic, or mirrors, held in place by plaster/mortar. These pieces are called 'tesserae' in the craft of mosaic-making. The practice of co-leadership resembles the art of mosaic making because you are constantly coming together, responding to one another, and adjusting your position in order to create a work of beauty.

In addition, the mosaic metaphor works well for this body of work, which is a compilation of different reflections, learnings, practical tips, ideas, case studies, conversations, testimonies, a card deck, readings, and contributors.

Mirrors:

Many of the reports we have contributed to and co-authored over the years have been inspired by punk and rock and roll music, including 'Girls to the Front: a Snapshot of girl-led organising' (FRIDA and Mama Cash, 2018). Art, music and culture has shaped much of our lives, is connected to our feminist activism and who we are as people. This report's title is inspired by the Velvet Underground song, *I'll be your mirror*, which reflects some of the most precious parts of our co-leadership and what we believe is the treasure of feminist co-leadership. At the centre of our relationship is the care we have for each other and our practice, so that we embrace vulnerability, see and share each other's powers, and indeed, reflect our best selves for a movement that is building a better world.

THE VELVET UNDERGROUND

I'll be your mirror

Reflect what you are, in case you don't know

I'll be the wind, the rain and the sunset

The light on your door to show that you're home

When you think the night has seen your mind

That inside you're twisted and unkind

Let me stand to show that you are blind

I find it hard to

Please put down your hands

believe you don't know

'Cause I see you

The beauty you are

But if you don't, let me be your eyes

A hand to your darkness, so you won't be afraid

When you think the night has seen your mind

That inside you're twisted and unkind

Let me stand to show that you are blind

Please put down your hands

'Cause I see you

I'll
be
your
mirror

Methodology 3

and approach

Methodology *and approach*

Sparked from personal stories and experiences, this work is a mixed-media piece, with multiple methods and contributors coming together to present this body of knowledge. We are grateful for these collaborations and for the love and time that has been put into this report. The methodology consists of the following:

LITERATURE REVIEW

Christy Selica Alves authored a [Literature Review](#) that included academic journals, blog sites and organisation websites.⁴ Much of this literature review has been directly woven throughout this report. Searches for academic literature took place using academic search engines and digital commons such as university publication lists. While a substantive amount of writing on shared leadership is situated in education and health, for the purposes of this review, articles on business management and organisational development were prioritised. Unfortunately, though perhaps unsurprisingly, the literature available on shared leadership in managerial and organisational scholarship is overwhelmingly written by and centred on global North/Western stakeholders, with male leaders as the prime targets of their studies, and based on assumptions that effective leadership ultimately comes down to improving a business' bottom line.

IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS DOCUMENTING OUR EXPERIENCE

We were interviewed by Naomi Saelens in order to document our experiences of co-leadership during our seven years at FRIDA | The Young Feminist Fund, and to identify key themes and practices. These interviews totalled over 10 hours and enabled the distillation of knowledge and reflections of praxis.

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

Between September 2021 - March 2022, we conducted interviews with practitioners who worked with co-leads and co-leads coming primarily from feminist movements. These were a mix of funders and feminist organisations, with one exception from the private sector. Interviews focused on hearing how co-leadership structures were created, any practices the co-leads had developed, and their reflections on the advantages and disadvantages of the co-leadership structure. Change is constant - over the course of the project, some of these situations of the co-leads have evolved and may not exist in the same formation. . We have done our best to integrate learnings including when things did not work out.

4. In addition, Lauren A. Lanzo's recent dissertation published in January 2022 offers an even more substantive literature review of academic articles and experiments that discuss the pros and cons of shared leadership in multiple sectors and levels. See bibliography for full reference.

Interviews

Co-leads:

Ana Conner & Kiyomi Fujikawa,
THIRD WAVE FOUNDATION

Maggie Collier & Kirsty Fuller,
FLAMINGO GROUP

Alex Kent and Kate Muhwezi,
RESTLESS DEVELOPMENT

Lydia Alpizar,
**MESO AMERICA WOMEN HUMAN
RIGHTS DEFENDERS INITIATIVE**

Hakima Abbas & Cindy Clark,
**ASSOCIATION FOR WOMEN'S
RIGHTS IN DEVELOPMENT**

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Sahasranaman, **URGENT ACTION
FUND ASIA AND PACIFIC**

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Mohamed, **MUSAWAH**

Namita Aavriti Malhotra, Katerina
Fialova and Jan Moolman
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MAMA CASH

Anisha Susanah George,
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Anonymous contributors from
organisations transitioning to
co-leadership, considering it, or
deciding against it

Mukami Marete,
UHAI

Reflections

4

on co-leadership *in the mosaic*

Reflections in the mosaic

Our findings show that the conventional perspective that an individual leader can possess all the skills required to manage increasingly complex and adaptive organisations, is outdated.

For feminist organisations, co-leadership resonates with their values around sharing power, creating change from within, and also with our ethics around creating a thriving, healthy workplace for all staff members.

However, some believe that co-leadership is more trouble than it's worth. While sounding ideal in theory, in practice, it can be seen as too risky and prone to conflict. This section of the report looks at the overall positive and negative impacts of the co-leadership model, drawing on literature and interviews conducted for this report. Some think that while promising, it is not the panacea to the challenges we face in our organisations.

What is co-leadership?

In the simplest definition, co-leadership can be defined as two or more people equally sharing power, influence, and responsibility in an organisation, company, collective, or project, rather than a single leader. The concept of co-leadership was first documented in literature by leadership scholars David Heenan and Warren Bennis, who co-authored a book titled, *Co-Leaders: The Power of Great Partnerships* (1999). One of the aims of the book was to discredit the appraisal of the single heroic leader, as well as acknowledge the strong contributions a second leader brings to leadership practice.

It is important to acknowledge that shared leadership is not a new concept. Collective leadership has been a part of social movements for a long time and continues to be practised in different communities and cultures around the world. It is critical to understand that as we attempt to theorise around shared and co-leadership, "we are borrowing" from past knowledge and traditions (Abbas, in an interview by AWID, 2019). We see even the most reputable of our feminist thinkers and practitioners of shared leadership mistakenly refer to individual-led leadership as 'traditional,' and co-leadership as 'emergent.' We must remember the knowledge on which we build, even if – and especially if – that knowledge is not published in formal literature.

Leadership theory found in formal literature has by and large been shaped within a gendered worldview. A brief scan of leadership literature broadly reveals "countless narratives of exceptional, heroic men, whose work and family lives do not meet" (Batliwala, 2010). Over time, the understanding of what makes good leadership has shifted and expanded, and within this expansion, notions of co-leadership and shared leadership have surfaced.

So what is *feminist* co-leadership?

Women, in particular, have been organising through horizontal leadership structures and non-hierarchical collectives and networks for centuries, often rejecting the concept of 'leadership' entirely, as an embodiment of patriarchy and the monopolisation of power. Commissioned by CREA and written by Srilatha Batliwala, *Feminist Leadership for social transformation: Clearing the Conceptual Cloud*, was a seminal piece of work attempting to define and articulate what *feminist leadership* is and does, and "nail the jelly to the wall" so that we may be able to actually assess its worth and impact. In her review of different definitions of feminist leadership from movement figures at multiple levels and locations, Batliwala concludes that all the definitions of feminist leadership have several important features:

- ✱ They describe a set of attributes/behaviours, values, and practices
- ✱ They deal with power and politics
- ✱ They hint at feminists' own use and practice of power when they occupy leadership positions

We offer the following simple definition of feminist co-leadership based on Batliwala's work:

A DEFINITION OF FEMINIST CO-LEADERSHIP

Feminist co-leadership is a structure of two or more identified leaders that is based on a feminist perspective and vision for social justice. Individually and collectively, these leaders are transforming themselves and their organisations or collectives, to use their power, resources and skills, in non-oppressive, inclusive practices and processes to mobilise others around a shared agenda of social, cultural, economic, and political transformation. Feminist co-leaders take shared accountability for living up to these values, and working together to divide responsibilities and tasks to deliver on a group's shared goals.

Decisión— making

Decision-making is an essential element of leadership and behaviour within an organisation. It is an inherent site of power negotiation and practice based on the type of decision-making, from routine to strategic, policy and operational, and individual and group decisions.



The co-leadership structure offers many different opportunities for robust decision-making. However, there are mixed opinions on how this supports overall organisational effectiveness.

Firstly, co-leadership offers "cognitive heterogeneity" (Yankee, 2017), bringing a greater diversity of ideas to the table.

“ ————— CINDY, AWID

So many of us have this really ingrained notion that the leader brings the answers to problems whether we like that or not. And then having co-leads helps to disrupt that because what do you do when they have two different answers? So getting to work with a co-lead, I realise there are different solutions and there is no 'one way forward'. In our experience, Hakima and I are often changing, rethinking, or shifting each other's decisions, and when it works, it's great. I realise I'm learning and that's how I want it to be.



The relationship that co-leaders have nurtures a safe sounding board, offering space for constructive disagreement or refinement of ideas that leads to great decisions. So if done well, having more than one leader can increase the overall intellectual capacity of the leadership.

Secondly, successful co-leaders that work well together provide each other with more confidence, energy and inspiration. Especially when considering strategic vision and risk-taking, co-leadership offers the opportunity for bold moves due to the additional dialogue, analysis and support two leaders bring to the process.

““

ROSA, PURPOSEFUL

I think having someone else by your side makes you braver. We have done some bold, risky things... Just having someone saying, ‘Yes, we can do this’ and being by your side...we have taken a lot of decisions I know I wouldn’t have on my own. I am also absolutely certain that we have made better decisions because we’ve made them together. The process of back and forth is really a process of nuancing, refining, stress testing and sharpening.

Thirdly, co-leadership can enhance effectiveness in decision-making. Many supporters of the co-leadership model raise this as one of its major benefits, especially against the backdrop of the complexity and extent of demands placed on leadership. Managing these demands by sharing them with a partner just makes more sense. In fact, a study undertaken in 2002 (Pearce and Sims) found shared leadership to be a useful predictor of effectiveness within an organisation.

Furthermore, a study of corporate organisations undertaken in 2009 (Wagner and Miller) found co-leaders who felt well-teamed to be "substantially more engaged at work," and that their businesses had "better safety, retention, creativity, productivity and profitability" One co-director, who authored a reflective blog on co-leadership (Schildkrout, 2014), stated that collaboration between two leaders results in "more creative, better-vetted, more strategic solutions."

However, some would question whether co-leadership can slow down decision-making, and therefore limit an organisation’s effectiveness.

““

HAKIMA, AWID

While decision-making might take a bit longer, if the final decision is actually effective, then the length of the process might have been worth it, even if perhaps it is not as timely as people would sometimes want it to be in the moment.

Many feminist leaders would question the **dominant narratives** of leadership that define efficiency only based on speed, and prioritize it at all costs. Zohra Moosa reminds us that there is "political work in reminding ourselves that the quality of our decisions matters, not just the speed at which they are generated." Zohra also added that "just because something is slower doesn't necessarily mean it's better. It is also true that sometimes we take too long to make decisions in our feminist organisations – and it's not because the quality of the decisions are improved as a result, nor that we are necessarily cultivating relationships, or any of it. We sometimes think more process is important because we elevate the role of process in our movements..." We think this point is important to continue to unpack in conversations on leadership all together.

Cultivating shared leadership between two people takes a significant amount of time, and may reduce the ‘speed’ of the organisation’s programmes in the short term (Arnone and Stumpf, 2010) – but may lead to the strongest investment into enhancing effectiveness. **Giving time for relationship cultivation is necessary, and it is part of our political work in feminist leadership** (Alpizar Durán and Williams, 2019).

There can also be miscommunication and confusion regarding decision-making processes. A staff member having an Informal conversation with one co-lead, can be mistaken as a decision, which the other co-lead is not aware of. Challenges also arise when the separation of roles or distribution of areas of work or the decision-making process is unclear. This can look like co-leads doing everything together without clarity on when decisions are jointly led or held by one co-lead. This can cause a strain on resources and at times neither co-lead holding the work fully, or overall lack of clarity who is leading specific pieces, leading to confusion, tension, and lack of responsibility and accountability of key elements of the executive function. This lack of clarity and unclear distribution of work often ultimately leads to conflict.

Co-leadership offers checks and balances through collaborative decision-making and bringing sometimes conflicting perspectives into alignment with one another. A number of scholars have also written about the benefits of conflict in leadership (for example, Mashburn and Vaught, 1980) for its capacity to open up processes of listening, deeper analysis and shared understanding. Disagreements turn into a helpful process.

“ ————— **CHERNOR, PURPOSEFUL**

You can disagree without being disagreeable. It always comes from a place that if she [my co-lead, Rosa] will disagree with the idea, she will not disagree with me. We can have a fierce, really heated debate. But if you are listening, you will see that it's a debate and we will go with a resolution, even if we need to say, 'I will go with this decision for now, but these are my reservations'.

While disagreement in co-lead relationships is inevitable, how different co-leads manage their disagreement processes varies. Some are happy to openly discuss them in front of their teams, whereas others prefer to debate alone first and present a unified front to their teams. For some, publicly disagreeing with respect and care, normalises a culture of discussion and debate in more collective spaces.

“ ————— **CINDY, AWID**

Because there are two of us, we need to take care not to get played off on each other. We have different opinions, it's part of the richness, but we have to know when it's important to have a unifying voice, and when to say, 'I feel this way, Hakima feels this way, and let's figure this out together.' It's part of the learning and the work.

For this to function well it is important that staff are confident in the co-leads' broader aligned vision and unity. In some contexts public disagreement or conflict and a lack of united front can encourage staff to play one co-leader against the other, whereby a staff member may attempt to seek a different outcome by approaching one co-leader over the other. However in these cases they may be linked to other dynamics at play within the organisation.

Well being (*or not*) of co-leaders

Experiential reflections from our research suggest that co-leads tend to prioritise individual, collective care and wellbeing as part of their shared leadership practice. However, we must be careful not to romanticise co-leadership as the way to solve all challenges related to overworking and burn out:



“

DEVI

I went through a significant burn-out crisis that seemed to come out of nowhere. I felt paralysed by fear and I came close to quitting. It was incredibly hard to talk to Ruby about this, because I knew everything would fall on her and it was hard to explain what I was going through when I didn't really understand it myself. However, she gave me a lot of space to take a break and seek help from others who helped me crawl out of the mental hole I had dug for myself.

Leading an organisation comes with great responsibility and personal cost. One of the key benefits of co-leadership cited in all of our interviews and in our own experience is the embedded support structure it can offer.

“

JESS T., EQUALITY FUND

"I'm used to leadership being a lonely experience. But I feel I can do this work - stay in it - because I have a partner and support system. Someone who is sharing in the lift of a heavy load."

Co-leaders are able to support one another in attending to responsibilities, but also celebrate together when making accomplishments.

Kirsty Fuller of the Flamingo Group believes co-leadership models help prevent costly impacts of a stressed singular leader that can go ‘unchecked’:

“ ————— KIRSTY, FLAMINGO GROUP

I think you do get mavericks or very stressed CEOs. They end up, as we all do under stress, starting to make poor decisions. And they can also project their stress onto those around. They project their frustration and failures onto those around them. Whereas I think co-CEOs can sort of call each other to account... [Without a co-leader] I think it's actually less enjoyable, less fun. And actually I think it's less healthy. I think there is something about doing things together and supporting each other in different times, but also being held accountable by each other.

A co-leadership model can enable "critical cycles of rest and replenishment" (Shildkrout, 2014) as one co-leader is able to hold the fort for the other when in need of a break. The support that co-leaders provide one another also decreases stress and burnout, due to an expanded leadership capacity.

It is particularly important for a leader to be able to speak to another peer, since it is harder to speak to others in the organisation that they are otherwise responsible for or have power over. One co-director described the relationship with his co-leader as "walk-in therapy," acknowledging his access to a sympathetic ear and sounding board, a resource that a single leader would not necessarily have access to in their organisation (Yankee, 2017). We found in particular that "a co-leadership model really offers built-in peer mentoring. We each have, and serve as, a safety net, someone to stop you from going over the edge, to hold you accountable, and keep you sane" (Leiper O'Malley and Johnson, 2017).

“ ————— KIYOMI, THIRD WAVE

One thing that I just want to lift up on the co-director model or a co-co model is... there's so much isolation in leadership and some of that comes with power and some of that comes with how power changes relationships. Where folks can't be as honest with you. You can't share everything because some things need to be confidential. On top of that, there is isolation that just comes with leadership. And I feel like our co-director model has been so essential to breaking that isolation, preventing burnout, and just having someone else to bounce ideas off of without people being like, "Does that idea that you just shared out of the top of your mind mean my entire job is going to change next year?"

Lastly, the majority of existing literature examining co-leadership comes from corporate organisations, and a frequently reported pitfall of co-leaders' in these studies is competition between one another. Competition tended to impact the effectiveness of co-leadership when there existed fear of unfair recognition given to the other co-leader (Arnone and Stumpf, 2010), or 'clashes of ego' (Yankee, 2017) in moments of disagreement. Co-leaders' inability to compromise would result in a loss of organisational focus (Arena et al., 2011), jeopardising the smooth-running of the organisation.

But before the challenge of competitiveness is written off as one only experienced in corporate settings, its reality calls for reflection around how habits and assumptions about the glory of individualism, 'winning' and the characteristics of personal success are internalised by leaders in feminist organisations too. Attempting to embed the transformative practice of shared leadership within a capitalist context that still praises the heroic leader requires much unlearning.

As one co-lead reflected, this is often at the root of conflict when co-leads divide roles as external/internal because we then recognise the 'externally focused' co-lead as doing 'better' or 'doing more'. However "competitiveness isn't a default between people, that's what capitalism teaches us." (Rosa)

Very common feelings of self-doubt and individual ambition can arise in co-leaders of feminist organisations – they are still human, with weaknesses and emotions. These feelings may be more pronounced or likely to arise when you are working with a 'counterpart' that you are being compared to, and lead to 'competitive moments' between two people. In our experience, you have to get very comfortable being mistaken for the other co-lead, discussing which of you should get to take on a travel or training opportunity (when you both want it and can't afford to send both), or observing the different relationships staff or outsiders may have with each of you. Eventually we got used to the nature of this, and ultimately we understood our own selves a lot better.

Successful co-leaders are able to manage feelings of competition in a constructive way, and learn to work together to overcome or tend to each other's needs by sharing emotions and vulnerabilities.

“

RUBY AND DEVI
(JOHNSON AND O'MALLEY, 2021)

As feminists, we used these experiences of vulnerability to recognise the flows of power within our relationship – when one of us was stronger at a certain skill than the other, and sharing how that made us feel intimidated, or when only one of us was invited to a conference and the other confessed their jealousy.

Impact of co-leadership on the staff and organisation

The presence of a co-leadership model at the executive level can have a ripple effect across the organisation. This impact can work to further decentralise power dynamics, support collective leadership to emerge at various levels, and deepen values and practice alignment.

However in some cases – in organisations, limited flow of information and poor communication – it can consolidate power at the top, and/or disenfranchise middle or senior leadership.

Co-leadership models can support healthy work environments that are aligned with collaborative cultures, and democratic principles of inclusiveness, participation and empowerment (Allison et al. 2018). Maggie of the Flamingo Group reflects on the impact on her company:

“ “ ——— MAGGIE, FLAMINGO GROUP

If you are asking a company to work in a collaborative way it sets a great example if the leadership is also collaborative. And maybe that's something that many businesses don't think through when you've got one person at the top lecturing people on collaborative working. It's more valuable to demonstrate that [collaboration] is happening at the most senior level in the business as well.

“ “ ——— MUKAMI, UHAI

I think of shared leadership beyond the Co-ED, and co-board chairs, for me it is important that co-leadership happens throughout the institution. It is important to reimagine what leadership looks like, not just leadership at the top. This means seeing the co-ED ships as a journey – towards dismantling hierarchies, a journey more than a destination. It is common to romanticise co-leadership – it's critical to see that beyond the top of an organisation, but also co-leadership trickles down and explores beyond that place of power at the top.

Co-leaders can have a positive effect on each other in their leadership style. Shildkrout (2014) explains how, in his experience as a co-leader, "[both of us] were more empathetic" towards staff members facing particular issues "than either one might be." Troiano further suggests (1999) that co-leadership shifts the management of staff to an "inquiry-based supervisory style," as opposed to top-down commanding. Along this line, Rosa Bransky of Purposeful says:

““

ROSA, PURPOSEFUL

We try to discuss our emotions and feelings quite often in our organisation as leaders, as it humanises us and it makes the people we work with feel safe to do that too. As we have got bigger, it has naturally got harder to know what's going on with everyone, all of the time. Who is struggling, who needs lifting up, who needs support. Having two of us with a watchful eye on our people is so invaluable. It means there is always someone observing, engaging with empathy, even while the other might be up against a deadline or struggling in their own ways.

Structures of organisations change as they think about how to expand the concept of shared leadership to the board and other parts of the organisation. A number of co-leads interviewed in this research shared that their co-leadership models had resulted in shared leadership in different parts of their organisation, including senior, middle and at board levels. It encourages behaviour shifts in leaders as well as in staff in how they engage with hierarchy and leadership. Vinita from UAF Asia and Pacific reflects how staff have evolved in their adoption of co-leadership:

““

VINITA, UAF ASIA & PACIFIC

After a year of my co-leadership with Virisila, there's been like some sort of switch that got turned on or some shift that happened. Now we're starting to see a lot more co-leadership of people working together in pairs or more towards specific projects. Now we have two people leading an area of work and we have encouraged them to also set out an intention of working together, and being clear how they compliment each other and how they understand their individual and collective accountability.

Based on this experience, Virisila and Vinita of UAF Asia and Pacific advised that there should be intentional space for staff to reflect and engage with co-leadership as a political concept and vision, and that this will not only help the co-leads but the entire organisation.

However, while a feminist co-leadership model is usually welcomed by team members, it can often be challenging to manage staff expectations when co-leadership is seen as 'the solution' to overcome critical challenges. Because co-leadership can be part of a progressive political project of 'doing things differently', we have found that some people may naively expect all decisions to be made in a vacuum. However, any leader(s) has to make tough choices when there are limited resources, legal responsibilities, and urgent deadlines. We still live in a capitalist system that constrains feminist leaders to always be able to make the most 'feminist' decisions. Operating in fiscal and legal environments that are not designed for feminist or social justice organisations is challenging. Co-leads that are seen to be examples of 'progressive politics' are especially held to a high expectation, and often given very little room to make mistakes.

Additionally, several co-leaders shared that there can still be resistance from team members to the co-leadership structure. While some might not want to admit it, some staff may not be suited to a co-leadership structure if they are also not ready to be patient and open to ways of decision-making that require regular consultation between two co-leads. For example, finance or operations staff might get frustrated at the time it takes for two co-leads to sign off on a hire or significant payment. It takes time to organise and categorise the different kinds of major and minor decisions that require one or two sign-offs from co-leads. Similarly, it may take time to organise the co-leads' division of responsibilities, and consequently the lines of supervision. For staff who equally interact with both co-leads or sit in shared areas of responsibility, there may be frustration about who their direct supervisor is, and it is important to make this clear.

Furthermore, while some staff may be theoretically in support of co-leadership at the executive, they may not have signed up authentically to put the principle in practice in their own roles and behaviour at the organisation. They are not necessarily held accountable to the principle of dismantling hierarchical behaviours and systems

like the co-leads are. As a transformational project that demands new ways of working and behaviours at work, staff also have accountability in ensuring the co-leaders as individuals and a structure are also cared for. Enshrining this accountability when different power levels are still at play is complex, and we are still actively looking for ways to understand and practice this.

Lastly, having more than one leader may not lead to the co-leads having more time for their teams, particularly if the organisation has been growing. As co-leads talk most regularly to each other, they may fall into a decision-making and/or consultation rhythm that can exclude others.

“ ” ————— JESS T., EQUALITY FUND

Somebody warned us about this in the beginning. Problem solving happens quickly and easily in the partnership, and you risk not bringing in your team in the same way to solve as a collective. I don't think we've figured this out, but we are working on it and aware of it.

In particular in some examples, especially when the model has gone from one to two co-leads, the creation of co-leadership can make the mid-level leadership team feel shut out of key decisions or isolated. The co-leadership can be seen to consolidate power 'at the top'. Creating space for conversations about people's relationships to power and how power manifests in the organisation through decision-making will be supportive if such dynamics should emerge. Whether it is the co-leadership level or senior management level, some organisations have shared that more leadership structures have led to 'islands' of people that can become disconnected.

“ ” ————— ZOHRA, MAMA CASH

Having a conversation about power and our relationships to it doesn't go far enough. I would argue that this is a known potential pitfall and a reflective praxis is therefore also needed. There are ways of building the accountability of co-leads to other parts of the organisation, and not just to each other, which can be explored.

Financial implications of co-leadership

An area that co-leadership studies are currently lacking in is a comparative cost-benefit analysis of the singular versus co-leadership model.

A common argument against co-leadership is that it is too expensive. Many of the co-leads we interviewed believed that the overall impact and gains of co-leadership outweighed the financial cost of the multiple salaries.

“ ——— KIRSTY, FLAMINGO GROUP

There's no way [the new company] would have joint CEOs. And part of that would be the cost of two CEO salaries to do what they see as one job, which they see as a very expensive model for the business. But actually you will be doing different things together. Also if [the co-leadership] is more successful and retains more people etc, then it pays for itself. But I think if you talk to most big corporations, most and all the whole finance world, all the private equity and venture capitalist houses, anybody providing funding to businesses... I think they're highly sceptical of the co-leadership because they do that sort of masculine finger pointing thing, 'like who's accountable?' And it's a 'who' singular. It's not 'who' plural.

“ ——— ROSA, PURPOSEFUL

In some ways the question of cost is a frustrating one, because it feels so reductive. But in other ways of course understandable, given how resource constrained the work is. I'm sure that if there was a cost analysis we would find that the cost was net neutral in the end. From a hard costs perspective there would be less consultants, less outsourced work in general less. From a soft cost perspective, fewer expensive mistakes, fewer stalled and restarted processes, a closer eye on the cost of things. Importantly for folks thinking about the model and worried about reactions from donors, we have never once been questioned about the cost from a funder, even when working with very traditional and hierarchical bi-lateral donors who interrogated almost every other dollar in a budget. I've always found that very interesting actually.

We infer that while funding two (or more) executive salaries may look more expensive in the budget, there could be other costs that are reduced or avoided because of the positive benefits of co-leadership. For example, due to the encouraging nature of collaborative and reflective decision-making, two or more co-leaders may make better choices that avoid ineffective or financially costly projects or seize opportunities more quickly to raise additional financial or reputational resources. A recent article in Harvard Business Review argued that co-CEO models may be worth it. The authors looked closely at the performance of 87 public companies with co-CEOs and found they tended to produce more value for shareholders than their peers did (Feigen, Jenkins, and Warendh, 2022).

Additionally, co-leadership builds in some safety measures against the classic leadership burnout – that can leave an organisation with an unwell leader that may not be able to fulfil their own potential, or unexpectedly depart for some time or permanently. In the current world’s dynamic and ever changing context of intersecting crises and change, having two or more EDs or CEOs enables organisations to have built in support systems and safety nets.



Costs: budget lines to consider

- Two or more salaries and benefits packages for co-leads.
- Professional development budgets for each co-lead.
- Travel for two or more co-leads for strategy and board meetings / internal workshops, budget for co-strategising.
- Coaching, technical consultants and wrap around support for co-leads.

Benefits: why co-leadership is worth it financially and cost reduction opportunities

- Better financial decision-making.
- Lessened need for additional leadership cover when one is off sick, on sabbatical or on leave.
- If things are going well, reduced HR and recruitment costs because of lower turnover.

Summary of overall benefits and challenges of co-leading

BENEFITS:

- + Better decision-making, effectiveness and overall impact of the organisation
- + More opportunities for strategic risk-taking and innovation
- + Increased mental wellbeing of leaders
- + More sustainable leaders and organisations
- + Intentional work cultures
- + May manage leadership burnout more easily

CHALLENGES:

- Decision-making may take longer, be miscommunicated or confused
- Potential for conflict due to competition and insecurity
- Alienation of other staff
- Managing staff expectations more broadly on feminist leadership in organisational contexts, and in particular for co-leaders.
- Perceived cost of two leadership salaries

Summary of things that often go wrong in co-leadership



Lack of clarity in the roles between co-leads. This can lead to work not being completed, no one being accountable for key areas of work, or tensions when co-leads are working on the same thing and neglecting other areas of their work.



Splitting the work too rigidly, working in silos, and not embracing the accountabilities that need to be shared and intertwined - especially finances, human resources, and strategic growth and development. There can be a tendency to split areas according to each co-leads strengths, and while this can work in terms of delegating a key person *responsible*, both co-leads need to be equally *accountable*.



Dividing the areas of work in terms of "internal" and "external" roles - co-leads need to be involved in both areas. This can work for some people, but for many this can result in limited visibility of the shared nature of the work and some dynamics over time. If this is an intentional decision, making it very explicit in hiring or distribution of work is key.



Not hiring or evaluating each co-lead with the expectation that they have the same core accountabilities to leading and managing the organisation.



Variance in pay / compensation, and/or a lack of transparency about this. This can lead to a feeling like the work is not equally valued or appreciated.

Summary
of things
that often
go wrong in
co-leadership



The co-leads are not matched well, one of them was not involved in the hiring process of the other, they did not pick each other and do not have chemistry or mesh well.



One or more of the co-leads is not self reflective, or actually wants to genuinely be in a co-leadership role.



Shadow or direct positional power from a supervisor (whether a board member, more senior role, etc) can create a strange dynamic between the co-leads and sometimes mean one of the co-leads has more power or access than the other.



Adequate time is not dedicated to developing relationships, ways of working, spending time together, and developing practices of sharing feedback.



Lack of trust, commitment to the structure itself, and communication between co-leads. This impacts how the co-leads show up in the organisation and in the external world.

A practical

5

guide

to growing feminist co-leadership

A practical *guide* to growing feminist co-leadership



ANISHA SUSANAH GEORGE

Anything can work if the intention and attention are aligned. So it is important to have intentionality and then to pay attention.

Here we offer a series of practices, tools and suggestions that we hope will be useful to organisations and co-leaders. These centre on the conditions needed for co-leadership to thrive. In addition, all these tools can be collectively viewed [here](#), along with accompanying guidelines. We have unpacked these learnings into three phases:

- I. **EMERGING:** the beginning of the journey setting up a co-leadership model
- II. **NURTURING:** strengthening and sustaining of co-leadership
- III. **EVOLVING:** the transition and transformation of co-leads stepping down from an organisation's co-leadership position

These are by no means clear cut and neatly definable phases, they flow into each other in both nourishing and messy ways. Co-leadership in many ways is cyclical; it begins and starts again and is not necessarily linear. However, our own experiences do follow this arc and we felt they offer something useful to people in different moments of their own personal or organisational journeys. An important cross-cutting recommendation throughout this timeline, is to document it along the way. Feminist co- and shared leadership models and practices are active around the world in different contexts. Building co-leadership praxis and its associated body of knowledge relies on our shared contributions and starts with documenting the feminist methodologies and processes used along the way.



Doing co-leadership? Document it!

A cross-cutting recommendation is to be intentional about documenting your journey, process, and practice. The body of knowledge on co-leadership is growing but far from adequate! We encourage everyone to contribute to our collective knowledge so that we can keep improving, growing, and learning.

I. *Emerging*: Setting up a co-leadership model

A. Deciding if co-leadership is right for your organisation

There are many factors that may inspire and propel organisations to explore moving to a co-leadership model. Some of the reasons that emerged in our research include; existing leaders approaching burn out and unrealistic expectations for one leader; wanting to decentralise leadership and offer new collective models; seeking further values and practices and appetite for learning and experimentation, to name a few. In a unique case of co-leadership at Association for Progressive Communication, they have shifted naturally from one, to two, to three, back to two, in acknowledgement of who is actually doing the work, and how much time is actually needed for it.

Conversely, it is important to acknowledge when an organisation may not be ready to transition to a co-leadership structure. One representative of an

organisation wishing to remain anonymous shared that the Board of Directors took the decision with senior leadership to not pursue a co-leadership structure, even though it was seriously considered. This was because this fairly large organisation was in a moment of significant leadership transition, as well as entering a phase of ‘consolidation,’ where internal structures, systems, and culture needed to be refined. The current leadership structure had been working well with an Executive Director and Deputy Director, and there was not a strong enough desire to change this at this time, though they were open to it in the future.

Besides the rationale, the timing and conditions for starting a co-leadership structure are also important. Previous executive director of AWID, Lydia Alpízar, gave the board, directors team and staff a little over two years’ notice, which enabled them to start a reflection process on how to approach the transition to co-leadership especially (Alpízar Durán and Williams, 2019).



Tool

✦ IS CO-LEADERSHIP RIGHT
FOR YOUR ORGANISATION >

B. Recruiting co-leaders

Co-leadership recruitment is more complex, given the multiple variables in not only identifying the right individuals but also the right partnership. This section shares a few experiences of how co-leaders were paired and recruited, and offers some insights for how others might design their recruitment. Recruiting executive leadership is a dedicated field of its own, and here we try to focus on the specific elements unique to co-leadership recruitment.

In our investigation of other co-leadership experiences, there were different pathways of how they came together. The number of feminist co-leaders that knew one another before being appointed far outweighs those who did not. This is the case for AWID, FRIDA, Third Wave Fund, We Are Restless and EDGE Funders Alliance at least. Two co-leaders who do not know each other and apply separately for leadership positions is currently more rare. This also has to do with the way co-leaders are recruited – whether the organisation needs to fill both positions or only one position (since one position is already held by someone in the organisation, or the recruitment is staggered).

One co-leader in a 2010 study suggested that it was, at the very least, incredibly important that co-executive director candidates discuss their philosophy and differences in perspectives in advance, before accepting the position (Arnone and Stumpf, 2010). Recruitment processes should plan especially for this, either providing time for candidates to discuss shared visions or asking them to present on this especially. In the case of Ana and Kiyomi at Third Wave Fund, they applied to the opening together, having already met at a previous organisation. By their own initiative, but also guided by the application requirements, Ana and Kiyomi spent significant time discussing their vision for co-leadership together before they began interviewing. Ana and Kiyomi share their experience in preparing to apply for Third Wave:

“ ——— ANA, THIRD WAVE

The whole process from the beginning was really intentional. We thought about what our leadership structure could look like. We did a ton of work to build trust together.

“ ——— KIYOMI, THIRD WAVE

I think it was really helpful for us to apply together too, both because we had the relationship before, had the trust built before, which I feel is the thing that folks end up having to catch up on and that's the hardest thing to do. Honestly, it's the work you have to do to be able to slingshot forward, like the pulling back. And we were able to do that before we even started both because we had known each other in community.

Turning to our experience, Ruby had been hired first at FRIDA, then the recruitment began to find a counterpart to complement her skills and role. The interview process consisted of interview panels and a written assignment – but nothing especially dedicated to discern our ‘pairing’. Ruby was involved in the hiring of Devi and has a direct vote in selection.

Meanwhile, a study of various corporate organisations with co-leadership structures (Yankee, 2017; Heenan and Bennis, 1999) suggest that two co-leaders forced to work together – be it as a result of convenience or the preference of other stakeholders – rarely stay together.

On a final note regarding recruitment, the case of internal candidates can be both entirely sensible but also tricky. On the one hand, having an internal candidate take one of the co-leadership roles ensures there is some institutional knowledge already in place.

On the other hand, inviting internal candidates to apply for the position can be sensitive if the internal candidates are unsuccessful. Reflecting on our experience with Barbara Williams and learning from other co-leadership recruitments, we believe it is important to treat internal and external candidates separately in two rounds of recruitment.

Tips

1 HIRING TWO NEW CO-LEADS AT THE SAME TIME IS DIFFICULT, UNLESS THEY APPLY TOGETHER AS PARTNERS.

We did not see many successful examples of two unknown candidates being paired together. We recommend avoiding the pressure of this challenge, and instead hiring one leader at a time. However, there is potential in hiring new co-leads simultaneously if they apply together, like in the example of Third Wave Fund and AWID. When co-leads choose to apply together, they have presumably done the work of assessing if they have good chemistry and complement each other well.

2 IF INVITING INTERNAL CANDIDATES TO APPLY, HOLD SEPARATE ROUNDS OF INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL RECRUITMENT.

In order to be sensitive to internal candidates and minimise awkwardness between internal and external candidates throughout the process, we suggest interviewing internal candidates in a first round. If after this review there are no candidates, then meaningful feedback should be given and an honest practical plan can be made for that candidate's ongoing growth within the organisation. It should be clear to them why they were not selected and they should commit to the process going forward. After this, the recruitment can proceed with external candidates.

3 MAKE SURE THE HIRING MANAGER AND/OR COMMITTEE CONSULTS WITH THE EXISTING CO-LEADER IF THERE IS ONE.

This consultation should focus on what the existing co-lead is looking for in a partner – the skill sets, knowledge expertise, personality traits, and identity experience. This conversation helps everyone, including the current leader, get more clarity about both the ‘tangible’ and ‘intangible’ assets the organisation needs in the new co-lead.

4 HOLD DEDICATED INTERVIEWS WITH THE EXISTING LEAD AND THE CANDIDATES.

Giving time for potential partners to get to know each other and get a sense of any chemistry is important. The interview can focus on key leadership values, qualities, and behaviour questions – assuming that other skills-based questions are asked at a different stage. As an option, it is also helpful to create the opportunity for the potential partners to speak on their own.

5 ENSURE THE EXISTING CO-LEADER HOLDS SIGNIFICANT WEIGHT IN DECISION-MAKING.

Given that the leaders will have to work together, it should be straightforward that the existing leader is committed to the co-leadership model and has substantial say in who they get paired with. The existing leader should know themselves best and what kind of person best complements them and simultaneously know the organisation and what the role requires of people

6 ENSURE THERE IS ADEQUATE TIME FOR REFERENCE CHECKS.

These can be assessed in direct questions with the candidates, but also through thorough reference checks. It is our opinion that reference checks cannot be a last minute ‘check’, but rather are a significant part of assessing the co-leads compatibility to each other and the co-owned role. Allocate adequate time for reference checks.

7 FOCUS ON EMOTIONAL MATURITY AND SELF AWARENESS SKILLS AS MUCH AS THE EXPERTISE IN OTHER TECHNICAL AREAS FOR BOTH CO-LEADS.

All great leaders should possess high-level emotional skills to be able to influence, inspire, and manage people, but for feminist co-leadership to be successful this is even more so. Both co-leads need a strong sense of self-awareness, self-reflexivity, to be responsible for one's inner emotional landscape and an understanding of power and positionality in all its forms. They also need to be cognisant of their weaknesses or areas of growth. Furthermore, we believe that feminist leaders in today's organisations need to have a strong sense of care for physical and mental well-being for themselves, their co-lead, and their organisation and staff. Intertwined with this, is the leader's ability to cope with and manage stress and conflict.

C. Getting started and setting up for success

Building ‘good chemistry’ between co-leaders is directly linked to the amount of time they spend with one another ‘figuring out’ how to work together. It is important to get this practice going as soon as possible.

For co-leaders working in virtual organisations, being able to spend time together in-person where possible is indispensable (Johnson and Leiper O’Malley, 2017). It takes time to get to know your co-leader, their "entry points to their work" and how they "see the world" (AWID, 2019). Spending time physically together is not only important for meetings and work-related activities, which is helpful, but also spending time recreationally together, simply having fun, greatly contributes to achieving alignment between co-leaders (Leiper O’Malley and Johnson, 2017; and Schildkrout, 2014).

Looking back at our experience, we realise that our co-leadership memories are especially tied to locations: "When we helped baby turtles get to the sea in Mexico, when we found that blue flower in Antigua, sitting by the river in Kampot, dropping

flowers on the beaches of Rabat..." We were intentional about creating moments together, and it became somewhat of a practice. This was important especially since we worked in a virtual office and were separated for the majority of our tenure. The lasting effect has been a ‘memory map’ of moments shared together that enabled us to get to know each other differently and chart our decisions and progress as co-leaders.

Even if co-leaders cannot meet, they can spend time together virtually. This was the case of the co-leads of Urgent Action Fund Asia Pacific, and they managed to create a shared vision document for their co-leadership and inspired us to recommend this as an important practice for all co-leads. This has since become a key document in their appraisal and self-evaluation process to measure their progress and success against.

Boards and staff setting up for new co-leads to enter the organisations are also critical. Ana from Third Wave shares about their experience, especially of board support:

“ ————— ANA, THIRD WAVE

.. the outgoing ED and the rest of Third Wave staff and Advisors did an amazing job of making sure that the community and our donors were down for the co-co model. They created a campaign called the sustainable leadership fund which was a series of pledges to support us. This created a group of folks that were on our side to support us when different things would come up in the beginning stages of our leadership journey. That was really critical to us being able to jump in and start with trust and commitments from the Third Wave community. The financial pledges were especially helpful because it’s hard to start any executive or co-co role by having to hit the ground fundraising.

Guidance for boards in supporting co-leads



- ✦ **WHEN HIRING AND SUPPORTING NEW CO-EDS, THE ROLE OF THE BOARD CANNOT BE UNDERSTATED.**

This is particularly important in the set up phase. Apart from having a clear legal responsibility of overseeing the performance of the executive, the board has a principled responsibility in supporting the co-leadership structure over time.

- ✦ **WHERE POSSIBLE, AIM TO HAVE SPACE TO CO-DESIGN PROCESSES.**

It is important for boards not to assume when there are two EDs the same practices and processes automatically need to be replicated from one individual leader. Traditional processes for individual leaders will need to be adapted.

- ✦ **HAVE OPEN CONVERSATIONS ON HOW TO NAVIGATE TRANSPARENCY AND CONFIDENTIALITY.**

Given the close nature of how co-EDs work together, and the shared authority and responsibility, intention on how and which things are done *together* and which are done *separately* will be important. Open conversations on how to navigate transparency and confidentiality will support conditions to build trust between co-EDs.

- ✦ **HUMAN RESOURCES ISSUES SHOULD BE HELD WITH CARE.**

When it comes to human resources issues that need to be kept private between the board and the individual due to confidentiality, processes should be held with care and awareness of how not to undermine the closeness and transparency between co-leads. Explaining enough information so the other co-lead is informed, but not given details to undermine confidentiality is ideal.



CO-LEADS SHOULD BE EVALUATED BOTH AS A TEAM AND INDIVIDUALLY.

In performance review / evaluation processes co-leads should be evaluated both as a team and individually. Ideally they should have a chance to evaluate each other, but this is shared only with them as a way to build trust.



ONE PITFALL TO BE WARY OF IS COMPENSATING CO-LEADS DIFFERENTLY

Or choosing to do so but not communicating it openly. While there may be a rationale that one co-lead is compensated at a higher level due to higher level experience, these compensation decisions are highly sensitive when two people are holding the same level of accountability and responsibility for the organisation. This decision needs to be taken with well-thought out reason, and if compensation levels are different, the board needs to pay attention to this as a potential conflict risk over time. Where possible, finding a way to openly and transparently, with consent, share this with both co-leads is ideal.



ENCOURAGE CO-LEADERS AND ORGANISATION STAFF TO REFLECT ON THE CO-LEADERSHIP PROJECT TOGETHER.

While it may be obvious that the executive co-leaders would benefit from shared coaching and time to reflect on what they want and understand co-leadership to be, this investment of time and resources is less so with staff.

Tips

1 MAKE SURE TO SPEND PHYSICAL TIME TOGETHER WHEN FIRST STARTING OUT.

Getting to know each other in physical space, both during work and after hours, is helpful for relationship building and strengthening the emotional intelligence needed to navigate each other through the challenging parts of the position. If not possible to meet in person, it is still possible to do a virtual retreat so long as time is dedicated and protected, and the same commitment is still made to the recommendations that follow.

2 BEGIN BUILDING AN ANNUAL BUDGET FOR LEADERSHIP RETREATS TO ENSURE THAT MEETINGS CAN TAKE PLACE FOR THESE IMPORTANT CONNECTING MOMENTS.

3 SPEND TIME TALKING ABOUT SHARED VALUES, VISIONS, AND COMMITMENTS.

If possible, begin creating shared documents to capture these so they can be referred to in the future. Articulating your commitments to each other and your practice of co-leadership are helpful to guide each other in your relationship and hold each other to account.

4 START CREATING YOUR OWN SACRED PRACTICES AND RITUALS TO HELP ESTABLISH A UNIQUE CHARACTER TO YOUR CO-LEADERSHIP.

This could be getting a particular kind of meal together, going to natural sites of beauty, holding time to have ‘virtual drinks’ together, sending each other particular kinds of memes, and so on. It is up to you to create what is ‘sacred’, or in other words special or dedicated to your co-leadership. We find that these help build memory and connect you to the human experience of co-leadership.



Tools

✦ CREATION OF A CO-LEADERSHIP MANIFESTO >

✦ BUILDING RITUALS >

D. Dividing and sharing responsibilities

Co-leadership certainly requires sharing ownership of the overall goals and mission of the organisation, and dividing responsibilities, decision-making and accountability. The division of responsibilities should be defined by the initial Terms of Reference (ToR) and/or job descriptions that help delineate the separation of roles and where there needs to be co-responsibility. However, this may take several years to ‘get right’ and is likely to change over time. It can be extremely helpful for co-leads to be given some flexibility and time (Allison et al. 2018; and Yankee, 2017). This way, co-leads can have the space needed to understand one another’s strengths and expertise (Newton, 2015), but also to be honest with oneself about one’s own weaknesses (Leiper O’Malley and Johnson, 2017; and Schildkrout, 2014).

The majority of co-leads we interviewed tend to hold different portfolios across the organisation, from programs, to communications, to advocacy, to resource mobilisation, but most commonly share accountability of the core functions of the executive – financial, human resources and governance. While

there are some cases with one co-lead holding these core pieces very well on their own, we have also seen a few examples where eventually this generated tension between the co-leads, becoming frustrated with the unequal level of accountability, or when one feels like they have less power and authority. Some co-leads split the role with one person being more public and the other facing inwards – dealing with more internally focused roles, somewhat like a CEO and COO distinction. Our research shows that this is a higher risk to sustain as these roles are critical to the oversight of the organisation that all co-leads need to hold.

Ultimately, what makes sense for the co-lead model will depend on the individuals, the organisation and the moment both are in, something that will shift over time. Organisations like APC, and even in our own experience, found that while we try to divide core internal work like finance, human resources, and overall management, inevitably, these areas of work can end up being shared more fluidly between all co-leaders in acknowledgement that we all need to weigh in, and this helps lead to stronger decisions.

Furthermore, co-leadership does not happen in a bubble and needs to be responsive to changing contexts. These include different circumstances that may arise, internally and externally, and changing areas of co-leaders’ desired growth. Over time, it is inevitable that the skills and interests of co-leaders grow. A co-leadership structure should support the career goals of the co-leaders, enabling them to expand chosen capacities, and embrace new challenges (ibid.).



While there are various ways for dividing the role, we have found the split does not matter so much as ensuring clarity and communication about each co-leader's roles. Below are a few examples of co-leaders developing specific language and practices to help them establish patterns for decision-making.

In a study undertaken in 2002, scholars concluded interestingly that while the division of responsibilities between co-leaders is important for effective leadership, it is not as critical as communicating those roles effectively to the organisation at large (O'Toole et al., 2002).

Ultimately each organisational context and set of leaders will adopt a split that works for them, and this is likely to shift and adapt over time as the organisation changes.

“ “ ————— HAKIMA, AWID

We try to be really clear when we are coming with a decision versus a conversation we want input on. What is it we are seeking by bringing an issue to each other? And we'll just say it clearly.

“ “ ————— JESS H., THE EQUALITY FUND

Sometimes the other person doesn't realise that they actually know the answer to a problem... But through discussion, the other one will say, 'You are really clear, let's go that way.' Sometimes we are witness to each other's clarity before we can get there for ourselves. So then the work and practice is being able to recognise that clarity in your partner.

“ “ ————— DEVI, (JOHNSON AND O'MALLEY 2017)

We would regularly make decisions together, but if the conversation got too long, we would say to one another, 'This is what I think, but it's your call.'

“ “ ————— JESS H., THE EQUALITY FUND

We have a commitment to our team that if you've heard from one of us you've heard from both of us. When one of us responds without consultation with our Co and there's a disagreement, then we take it up together. That's been a pretty good principle that has served us. It also requires more thought and attention before we respond, because in many ways we are making a decision on behalf of the partnership.

“

JESS T., EQUALITY FUND

We are constantly unpacking structure, ways of working, decision-making. It is a constantly evolving process as we design, build and scale our organisation. But we are clear in our intent to decentralise decision-making and build common ground. We have built multiple fora to ensure this... yet it still remains a work in progress.

“

MAGGIE, FLAMINGO GROUP

Our [roles] did develop quite naturally as co-founders. But I can imagine that within a new co-leadership model, for example, there'd have to be a lot of discussion about roles and decision-making areas, so that it didn't become tense later on. I think that there would be a core job description, but then there'd be part of it which was very clear about who did what and who had decisions on what areas. I think that's important.

“

KIRSTY, FLAMINGO GROUP

I think that there are some things where you need to be very clear that both people are involved. So for example, you wouldn't want to separate financial leadership and decisions, you wouldn't want a situation where one leader is excluded from the business planning because they are not as confident on finances. I mean, there may be somebody that's a bit stronger on it, but that's more going to be about numbers on the page. It's not going to be about big decisions around the business. So if you're genuinely co-leads you need to know the stuff that's absolutely co-led.

“

ZHARIN, MUSAWAH

It is critical to clearly define our individual and shared accountabilities, let it simmer and then review it. Then make sure that the organisation also fully understands the delineation of roles. As we support each other, we also need to have the courage to hold each other to account. The reconnection time to keep each other abreast on what is going on which our individual and shared spaces need to be sacrosanct and generous, not rushed and pushed down the priority list. There should also be recognition that accountabilities may shift based on who is most effective to take them on. When the Afghan crisis escalated in Aug 2021, Huda was best positioned to lead the crisis response as I knew nothing! But I supported her by taking on some of her duties to give her space to better manage the crisis. So constant calibrating of the division of roles is also imperative. But don't over do it!

A closer look: at a co-leadership model that didn't work

A snapshot of what happened

At the time of the current ED transitioning, the organisation launched an open call for applications for the role of Executive Director. At this time the role was advertised as an individual role, rather than a co-lead. During this time the board and staff recruitment committee decided to instead propose a co-leadership model.

The successful applicants were one internal and one external. The two successful applicants did not have any contact during the application process and the first time they met was on the first day of their appointment. At first the relationship was somewhat turbulent, with some disagreements and varied ways of working. They were two different people, but really tried to make it work. They invested in leadership coaching and support.

They didn't have a clear delineation of their roles, and went to many if not all meetings together. There was a lack of clarity in who managed which people and who supervised which staff, and this ended in duplicating a lot of efforts. This did not lead to a reduction of work, and in many ways was not sustainable. There was some hesitancy to split the work / create portfolios and there was a lack of trust between the two co-EDs. The organisation over relied on the dream of having a co-leadership model working, without having the structure and support to ensure that it worked. The co-EDs were evaluated together and not also individually.

Over time, staff became unhappy and began directly lobbying for one of the co-ED's to be removed from the organisation. The lack of sharing of work and communication led to a rupture in the relationship between the two co-EDs.

THIS CLOSER LOOK IS BASED ON AN INTERVIEW WITH FORMER OR CURRENT LEADERS THAT HAVE BEEN ANONYMISED AT THEIR REQUEST.

Eventually something quite serious went wrong with the organisation, and rather than both EDs addressing and working through it together, it was hidden and the situation became somewhat precarious for the organisation.

One of the co-EDs resigned and left the organisation. Fundamentally some of the underlying issues were a lack of shared or aligned vision or set of values to steer the organisation. With this quite difficult situation, the board is considering reverting back to an ED model.

All of this happened during the pandemic, which meant that contexts and realities for everyone involved were also much more difficult and strained.

Learnings and things they could have done differently

DURING RECRUITMENT

It is important for candidates to have a chance to confirm alignment and if they are a fit before they are asked to accept the job. They should have some time to get to know each other. This spaciousness is important to start the relationship off right. This is particularly important if the two EDs don't know each other. While not an exact science, our research suggests that stronger co-lead pairings are formed when the current co-ED/s has an active role in the recruitment process, and/or when people have some existing knowledge of each other, or if two new co-EDs apply together by choice. Two completely new candidates that do not know each other can be much more complex and bring a higher chance of failure.

FINDING THE RIGHT CANDIDATE

This is especially important if the job is first advertised as an individual role, but regardless, it is important to assess key competencies for sharing power and decision-making. As outlined previously in this report, this includes things such as self-reflexiveness and self-awareness about your impact on others and a desire to distribute work and build trust. Co-leadership is not for everyone, and that is ok. These are important elements to build into the recruitment process.

DURING ORIENTATION

Leaders should be asked to take time to confirm their shared vision, role division and ways of working. Once they have this they should present these to the staff and board. This should include who supervises who, and should be shared across the organisation.

CLEARLY DEFINED ROLES

It is so important to define roles and have them clearly documented in a ToR or something similar. This can of course change over time, but is essential.

CONDITIONS TO THRIVE

Co-lead structures need support and commitment from the board level and the organisation, and this will look different for each organisation. This means investment of resources, time and ongoing structures and support. It should not just be left to the co-Eds to work this out, but be a collaborative journey the organisation embarks upon to better share decisions and power.

✦ EVALUATIONS

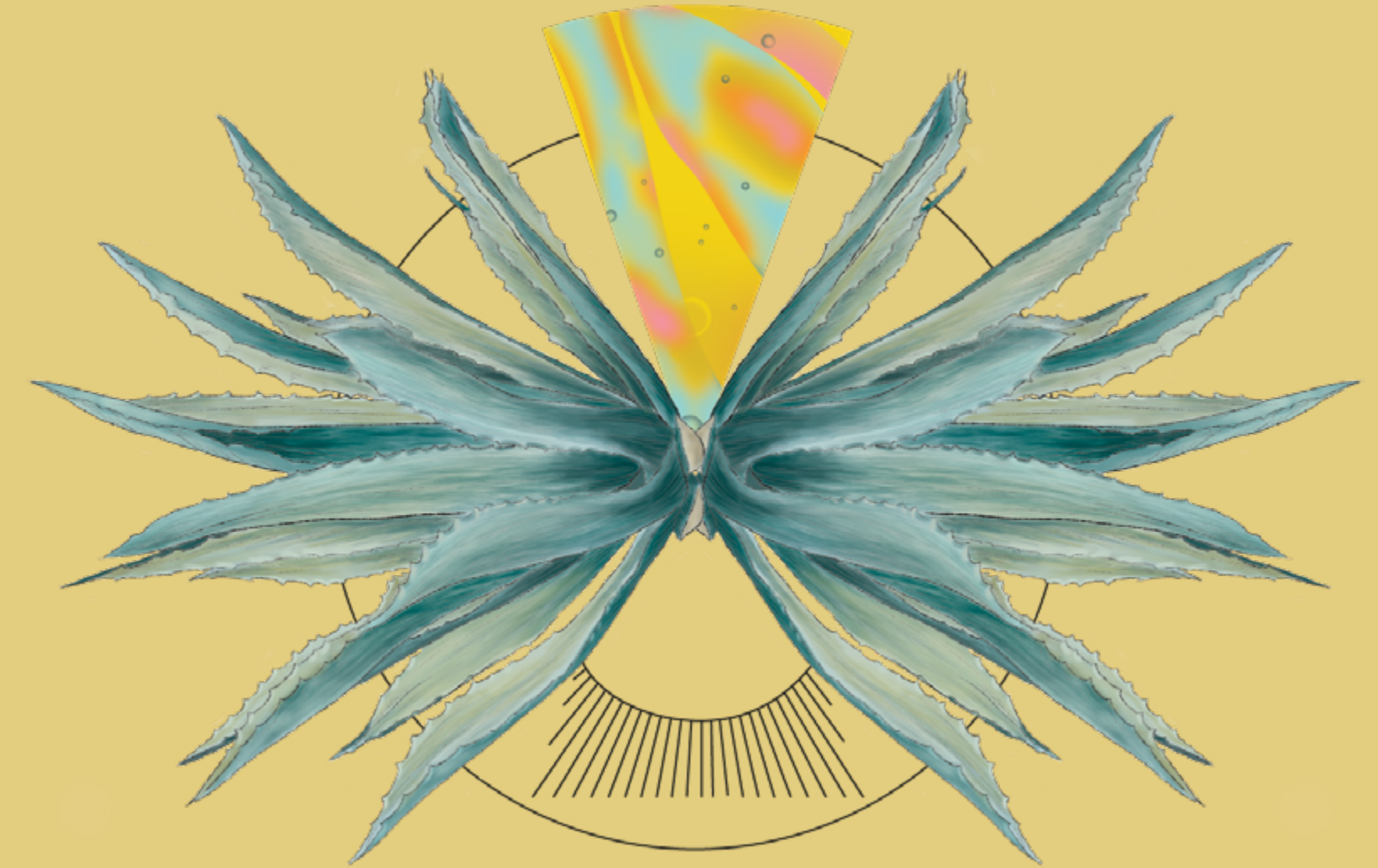
It is important to evaluate the co-EDs as a unit – together – but also as individuals, giving them a chance to grow and be held accountable as individual leaders as well as co-leads. If there is a conflict, a challenge or problem in process with one co-ED – in particular if there are complaints from staff – in some cases it is unlikely and difficult for the other co-ED to elevate this issue to the board. Especially so if the co-leads are trying to repair, salvage, or maintain trust between each other, before sharing an issue with the board (as an employer). This can present a risk for the organisation, given a delay of identifying problems before they get worse. It is essential to have a clear process for staff to submit a complaint about the leadership that does not compromise the relationships between co-EDs; and a process to allow one co-lead to share concerns privately with the board. There should be an agreed process or method to address any challenges faced with one or both of the co-EDs for staff.

✦ ENGAGING THE TEAM

In this case the team elevated concerns to the board level about one of the EDs. It will be important to open conversations and find ways to engage the team at each stage of the co-leadership model – from setting up the model, to strengthening it throughout, through to the end or transition of the current Co-EDs.

✦ ENDING THE RELATIONSHIP

Sometimes a match just doesn't work. This is ok and it is important to acknowledge like in any relationship that sometimes things are not a fit. The board should put in place mechanisms to navigate these situations as part of the probation period.



✦ ONE FAILED CO-LEADERSHIP MODEL DOES NOT MEAN ALL WILL FAIL

While in this example the match didn't work, and some matches across our sector have also not worked, this does not mean the model itself is a failure. Individual leaders often do not work, and we simply learn from this and move on to find an ED or CEO that is a better fit. With co-leadership, while in some cases it is difficult to find the right match, it should not dissuade organisations from continuing with this model.

A closer look: at how Ruby and Devi distributed the role of co-ED at FRIDA

Over our time together, we created endless charts and tables to clearly map out where each one's responsibilities and accountabilities lie, whether in a short-term project or a long-standing role. We developed this practice early on, and named this in one of our first articles together: "Having this clarity supports our own efficiency as a team, and enables us to trust each other on a regular basis" (Leiper O'Malley and Johnson, 2017).

While Ruby was responsible for FRIDA's Programs and Devi was responsible for Resource Mobilisation and Communications, we were both jointly accountable for success in each other's 'jurisdictions'. Some examples of this are:

- ✦ We consulted each other regularly and kept each other well informed, as well as appreciated that neither of us could do our work successfully without the other. For example, Ruby played an essential role in cultivating new donors, so that Devi and the Resource Mobilisation team could manage the subsequent proposal and reporting process.
- ✦ Each was responsible for hiring or approving hires in their respective 'teams', however all contracts were jointly signed and we consulted each other on our final decisions. This practice was especially important since we ultimately shared the same legal responsibilities of caring for FRIDA's advisors, employees, or consultants.
- ✦ Ruby consulted Devi on particular decisions related to relationships with grantee partners since they were both co-responsible and accountable to maintaining FRIDA's reputation and standing in the larger community.
- ✦ We made a point about being very clear on areas where we were jointly accountable such as human resources, financial management, governance, organisational development, risk management, and learning, monitoring and evaluation. We assigned one of us as the overall 'lead manager' role to these areas, but often still split responsibilities within them to share the load.

While we were very clear about our separate ‘responsibilities’, over time we developed a strong understanding of our ‘shared duty of care’. While this happened naturally when we were a small organisation of just three staff, we ultimately recognised the importance of this as we grew to a 20+ staff member organisation. We began to claim our consultation with each other as a practice of sustainability, meaning that if one of us needed to take leave for some reason, the other could step in fairly seamlessly because we had already been consulted (or at least informed).

We tended to assign responsibilities based on where each of us felt most comfortable – though not necessarily because we had expertise or training in these areas. So in these areas in particular, we were able to support each other’s growth zones, meaning that we respected that each of us was taking on leadership responsibility and were committed to learning and growing skills in these areas. We are thankful for having coaches, like Barbara Williams, to help us sort through these divisions of work (see Section D for more on working with external coaches).

“

LEIPER O’MALLEY AND JOHNSON 2021

As embodiment coach and conflict facilitator Prentis Hemphill says, ‘Boundaries are the distance at which I can love you and me simultaneously,’ and in our co-leadership practice, we set boundaries in many ways. This included the practical decisions of dividing our work and delineating our ‘jurisdictions’, as well as the emotional language to communicate when limits were being pushed. Modelling boundaries and saying no is a muscle we are still strengthening, but have been integral to our friendship and leadership.

Tips

1 MAKE SURE A CLEAR TERMS OF REFERENCE (TOR) IS IN PLACE FOR EACH CO-LEAD.

This can involve creating one overall ToR and then dividing the work, or creating tailored ToRs for each co-lead. Clarity on the organisation's executive function role is essential to enable you to distribute the role between two or more co-leads. The ToR's should make clear where there is shared responsibility and accountability and which co-lead is responsible for which area of work. These should be shared with everyone in the organisation.

Tools

✦ PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT >

✦ DEVELOPING AN ACCOUNTABILITY FRAMEWORK >

2 WORK WITH FLEXIBILITY TO DEFINE THE ROLE DIVISIONS.

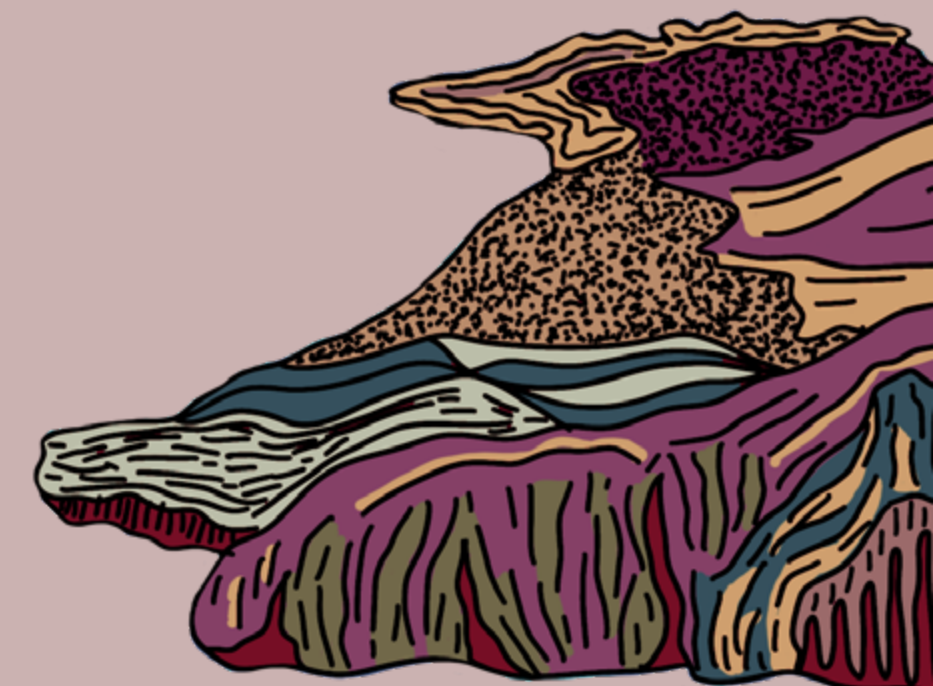
While the co-leads should be hired to complement each other and have some general ideas for each co-leads focus, it is important to be open to changes in a ToR. As the co-leads get to know each other and the role, they will determine how best to divide the work based on skills, capacities, priorities and other factors.

3 BE REALLY CLEAR ON THE LEADERSHIP AREAS THAT ARE ALWAYS CO-ACCOUNTABLE.

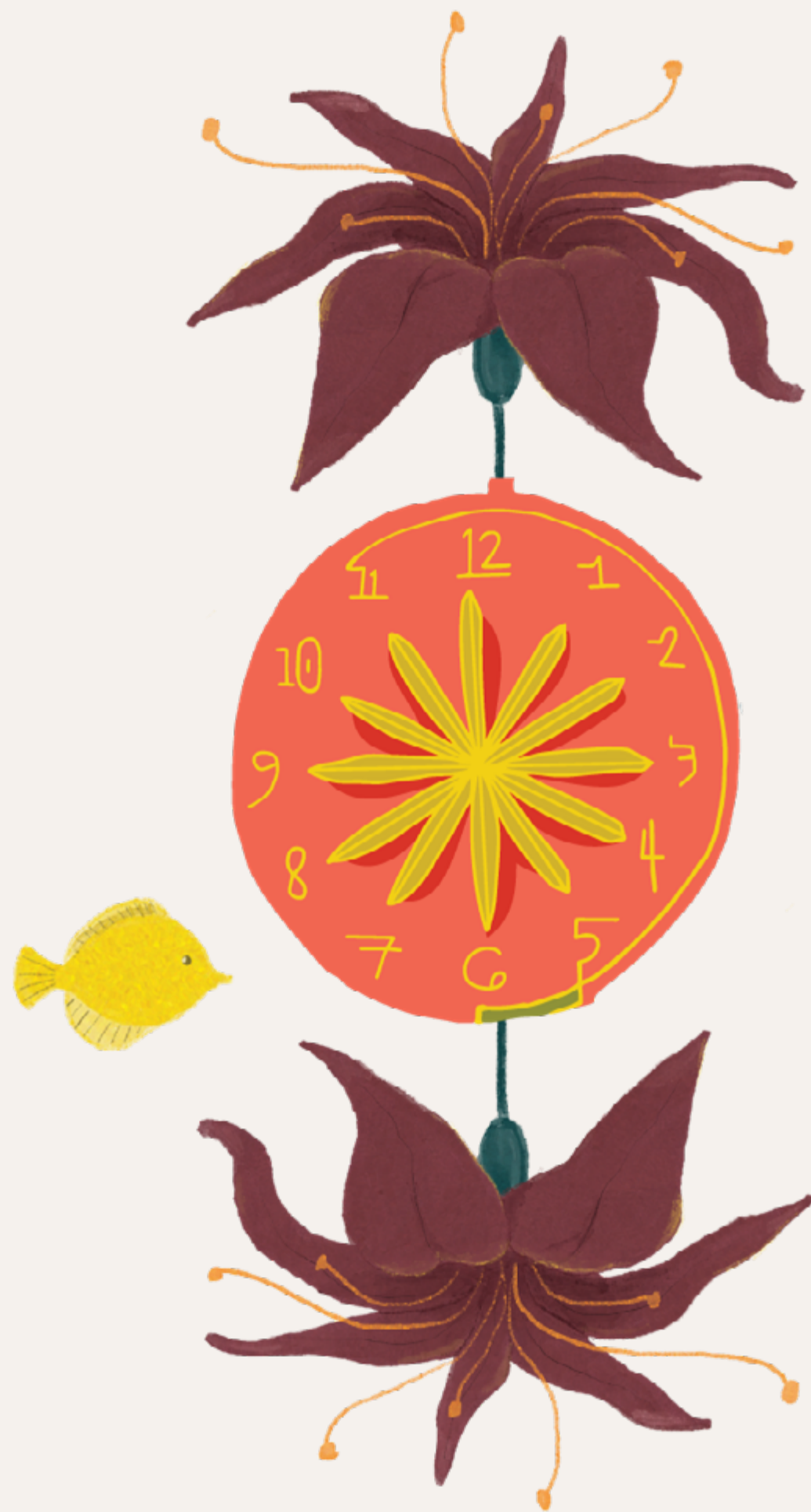
There are parts of running an organisation that we think should always be jointly held at a high-level, though responsibilities within these areas may be divided. These include areas like Financial Health and Resilience, Human Resources, Governance, and Organisational Development. Assigning these essential foundational areas completely to just one co-leader can be precarious and unfair when both are ultimately responsible for caring for the organisation as a whole.

4 SPEND TIME UNDERSTANDING WHAT DECISION-MAKING IS, AND THE MANY METHODS OF MAKING A DECISION.

There are a variety of ways to make a decision - whether it be an authoritative decision, a decision that requires consensus from all stakeholders, or a decision made by vote. Some methods are more appropriate than others in different contexts and situations. Given that co-leadership regularly flows more smoothly when there is clarity on who is making what decision, having the language and understanding of these methods can support the co-leads to get really clear about who makes certain decisions and how they lead the organisation together. This also supports them to achieve clarity and communicate the involvement of other stakeholders in the organisation such as staff, board, advisors or others. Using a RACI - Responsible, Accountable, Consulted and Informed chart or similar model is helpful here.



II. *Nurturing*: Ingredients of a thriving co-leadership model



In this section, we focus on the key considerations and practices that have been supportive to us and other co-leads we have interviewed some years into their relationships.

“ ——— ANONYMOUS

I don't think everybody can do this. Or I don't think everybody can do it right away. Maybe people can learn to do it, if they're interested. I think it takes quite a lot of interpersonal self reflective ability to know what you want, what you need, what you're able to do, what you have to learn how to do to do the work.

“ ——— VIRISILA, UAF ASIA & PACIFIC

There is a challenge when you have a co-leadership after someone has been working solo for some time. For me, it took a while for me to understand, particularly because I went from co-leadership and then for six months I was leading on my own during an interim period. Then I went back into co-leadership. It took a while for me to click in my head that I actually have to be consulting Vinita and talking to her about things and that I'm not making the decision all by myself anymore. It took a while to do that. And it's good that with Vinita, she's very direct about that. Like she says, "You should share that with me," and always prompting me because sometimes it didn't occur to me. So then I had to tell myself, "You've got to readjust your gears."

A. Building relational awareness

Strengthening and sustaining co-leadership is undoubtedly not a one-person-job. It takes commitment from both/all co-leads to navigate the human experience of leadership – the ups and downs, successes and failures, good days and bad. Many co-leaders agree that these positions lead to significant personal growth and broaden perspectives on the practice of leadership. Taking on leadership roles can also be "extremely transformative for individuals, enabling deep-seated changes in the self that have resulted in... self-awareness, empowerment and liberation" (Batliwala, 2010). Our experience as co-leads has taught us that one's journey together must be rooted in our individual praxis of learning, self-reflection and growth. A desire to learn, unlearn, to reflect, to listen and to be in relationship with oneself and with another person has underpinned much of the success of our own relationship as co-leads. Talking to co-leads, many share experiences of the value of co-leadership in their own growth and capacity.

In a 2010 study, self-awareness and open-mindedness were considered the most important attributes in evaluating a potential co-leader (Arnone and Stumpf, 2010). Effective co-leaders recognise that – of all people – they personally have one of the greatest impacts on their co-leader's experience of work. Honest conversations, while they may be uncomfortable sometimes, allow for vulnerability and hold spaces for strengthening the relationship (Newton, 2015). Cultivating this awareness for oneself, the other person/people, and the relationship(s) itself is a fundamental ingredient of successful co-leadership. Judith Jordan, psychologist and co-director herself, describes relational self-awareness as "personal awareness, awareness of the other, awareness of the impact of oneself on the other, the effect of others on oneself, and the quality of energy and flow in the relationship itself."

In the following sections, we unpack key elements related to 'relational awareness'

- ✱ Trust, confidence, and empathy
- ✱ Knowing your strengths and differences
- ✱ Managing stress and conflict

Trust, confidence and empathy

Having one another as a trusted point of support, enables each co-leader to operate at their best (Newton, 2015; Greenpeace, 2016; and Leiper O'Malley and Johnson, 2017). As we have outlined in other sections, building trust between the co-leads takes commitment, intention, and time.

“ ————— CINDY, AWID

I trust her (Hakima) integrity. So even if I disagree with the decision, I trust the place she's coming from and am open to the possibility that maybe she's right and I'm wrong. The basics of trust, respect, being able to laugh together have been really important for us to work well as Co-Directors.

“ ——— KATE, RESTLESS DEVELOPMENT

You don't have to share your inner secrets with the other person, but when stuff is happening in your life, good and bad, it does impact on your work. I may need space because my child is at home and sick and therefore I'm trying to do two things. If Alex just knows that, she helps to accommodate that and vice versa. Alex and I are very lucky in that sense that we both are fairly open with sharing our lives. That depth of friendship, if you like, was already there and it's allowed us to share our head space, not just our physical wellbeing.

In order to build trust, there needs to be a willingness to be jointly accountable for the good and the bad. This means praising your co-leader for successes, and taking some responsibility for failures. People, both within and outside of the organisation, do not always know how to navigate interacting with co-leaders. As a result, it can be commonplace for people to "incorrectly assign" success or failure to one co-leader or the other.

Regardless of one's direct involvement in the situation, allocating praise for successes to your co-leader and being the first to pick up responsibility for any failures strengthens trust and unity between co-leaders (Newton, 2015). Chernor at Purposeful shares how he intertwined the confidence he needed as a leader and as a co-leader with the trust he had in Rosa:

“ ——— CHERNOR, PURPOSEFUL

Not because I self doubt, I am a reasonably confident person, but it feels much better if Rosa was there. You are making some big decisions, big gambles, massive... there is no script for all of these things. You just need that person that you know is your partner, they are there [for you]... Because she's there with you, you know she's gonna be there with you and while she commits to it and that is also learned because you have been in the trenches with her already and have done things already with her. So you know once she commits, you know it is gonna come to life...

Ultimately, the more a co-lead is able to 'show up' for their co-leader, the more trust and confidence can be built. In the beginning as we were figuring out our relationship and leadership positions, there were times we were overwhelmed on behalf of the other person and tried to step away from the situation. This led the co-lead, who was left 'behind' to deal with the situation, feel abandoned and insecure about their own leadership capacity. We were able to confront each other about this and learn better how to be there for each other over the years, helping each other navigate through overwhelming or messy situations. Our experience has shown us that an intentional practice of vulnerability, closeness and empathy have sown important seeds to lead together.



“ ——— RUBY & DEVI (JOHNSON AND O’MALLEY, 2021)

Indeed, a uniquely defining moment for us as women leaders who wanted to have children, was when one of us experienced a miscarriage around the same time another fell pregnant. During this time, we had to respect the different levels of energy each of us brought to work and gently navigate our interactions while holding confusing feelings of sadness, joy, shame, and guilt – it demanded our greatest level of *empathy* with each other as women, colleagues, and friends.

Knowing your strengths and valuing your differences

“ ——— HAKIMA, AWID

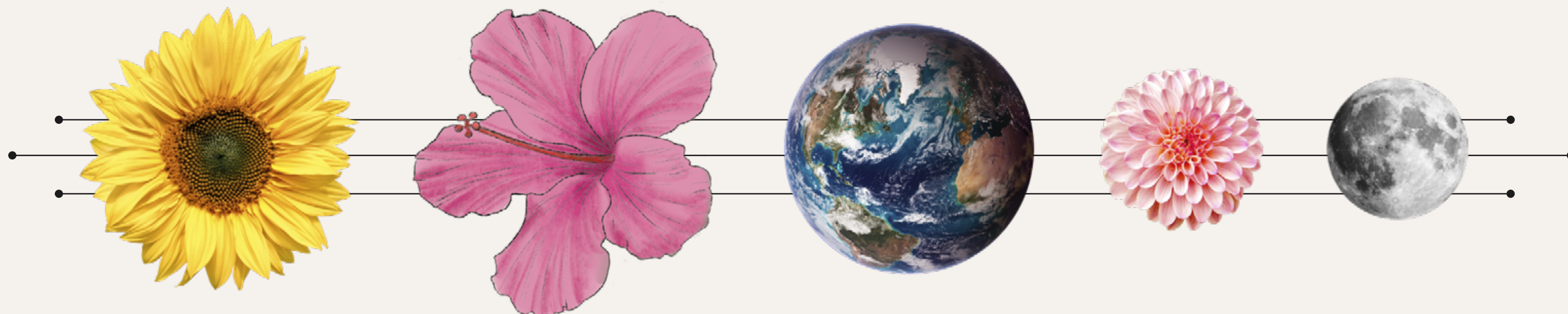
Make your differences your superpower, your strength

Having complementary skill sets and personalities can create an incredibly vibrant, effective and impactful co-leadership. However, this is dependent on recognising one’s own weaknesses to enhance effective collaboration. A co-leader that is unable to recognise their weaknesses becomes unhelpful.

When it comes to decision-making, while unity is powerful, many co-leads found they wanted to embrace the reality that they are two different individuals and they were not always going to agree. That also was a powerful force within organisations, to model a space for debate, and encourage open and caring discussions. Below are two examples of how ‘difference’ can be managed and shared with the organisation:

“ ——— HAKIMA, AWID

Cindy and I have a difference here and there, and sometimes it's okay, relax. And sometimes, I mean, we need to go away and we'll hash it out. Or sometimes let's hash it out together with whoever the third person, other people are. I think we've gotten to a place where people have started to see the value of even hearing the differences because they too think can kind of then engage on either side of thinking, but it's taken a while to get there.



“

ROSA, PURPOSEFUL

We try and display our humanity as much as possible in the org. We are public about our relationship and disagree out loud. We try to model that it is okay to disagree and we try to have the debate in front of other people and I think it has been such a gift to be able to do that with another human being in a safe way and for younger colleagues to see that. One of our practices is co-leadership out loud and to not do the ‘wrangle, behind closed doors.’

Managing stress and conflict

When working closely with someone in a shared leadership position, the way co-leaders handle stress has a huge impact on their relationship with their co-leader. When we feel threatened, stressed or anxious, deeply buried emotions and past experiences operating at a sub-conscious level may start to drive our actions and cause us to say or do things that contradict our feminist values.

Having processes in place for addressing conflict is often overlooked amidst the excitement of working together, but conflict is also a "common side effect of drawing out each person's unique perspective" (Schildkrout, 2014), especially in organisations where risk-taking and experimentation is encouraged. Creating scheduled time to check in with one another and inviting an external facilitator to support conflict resolution (Schildkrout, 2014), were practices mentioned that strengthened resolution between co-leaders.

In moments of conflict, shift your perspective: conflict resolution often starts with the self. In a study by Arnone and Stumpf (2010), co-leaders who scored as having the greatest success in their work based on certain criteria indicated they were able to establish a positive working relationship with their co-leader, which many attributed to a simple shift in their own perspective. One co-leader explained, "At some point, I realised that I would have to keep my ego in check and serve the firm. I did not want to be a casualty of my competitive nature" (Arnone and Stumpf, 2010).



We have made intentional efforts to take up communication practices that are consistent, and tailored to our needs. One thing we also did was assign the rainbow emoji as a code or signal to say "I need space / I'm getting tense / I am not feeling good to talk about this right now". This served us to understand and support each other immediately, tabling the conversation for when the person felt in a better space. However, we trusted each other to be self-accountable to eventually coming back to the conversation and not avoiding it completely. We made active efforts to move through conflict through courageous and honest conversations, no matter how hard they were. Here is a detailed example from Restless Development, and the relationship they have built to deal with each other's 'quirks' rather than let tension rise.



“ ————— **KATE, RESTLESS DEVELOPMENT**

Every now and again, I get a message from Alex saying, "Have you got five minutes?" And then immediately she'll add, "Nevermind. It's the end of the day. It can wait till Monday" To which, I think "Yeah. Right. As if, I'm going to let her leave it until Monday because she is quite clearly stewing on something. So if I give her what will actually be probably be more like 35 minutes, that releases whatever Alex is stewing on. Between us we'll work out whatever she is stewing on, so there's a plan and we'll know it's going to be fine. This allows both of us then to switch off for the weekend and get on with real life, instead of work life or whatever. And so those little things, we've learned how each other works and how we can support each other.

For me, a big moment was like, "Oh, yeah. Alex's five minutes is actually Alex's little help button." And it cost me absolutely nothing. And yet by helping Alex in that situation, we're helping each other in the grander scheme. And Alex will probably be able to identify with you what my little 'help button' is, and I probably don't even know I'm doing it.

Tips

Key elements of nurturing 'relational awareness' in co-leadership

1 SELF-AWARENESS AND GROWTH MINDSET

To meaningfully show up in a co-leadership relationship, it is ideal if co-leads find ways to nurture a practice of building and strengthening their own self awareness and personal growth. The way each person will do that will differ, however some of the ways we have found useful include journaling, therapy, coaching or working with trained practitioners to work through past and current trauma, taking scheduled time off etc.

2 RELATIONAL AWARENESS AND EMOTIONAL MATURITY

These are important to relate to the rest of the leadership staff team. To enable this muscle to become stronger, it is helpful to create space within the organisation to open discussion.

3 DEDICATING TIME TO NURTURE A RELATIONSHIP

A co-leadership relationship, like any relationship, is one that needs love, attention and intention. This means dedicating time to understand each other's needs, ways of working and forging agreed practices and cadence to how you will work together.

4 HEALTHY, TRANSPARENT AND CARING COMMUNICATION

Regular and consistent communication that is both open, honest and clear will be critical to sustain relationships. Where possible, co-leads have had success when they develop ongoing and regular communication tools and mechanisms they use with each other, consistent check-ins, scheduling feedback and perhaps even creating language or codewords that they reserve for hard conversations to enable them to move more fluidly.

5 CONFLICT WILL INEVITABLY BE A PART OF YOUR RELATIONSHIP - HOW YOU RECOGNISE AND RESPOND TO THAT IS KEY.

Finding ways to openly address and work through such conflict will be critical to the depth and growth of your relationship as co-leads.

Tips

Key elements of nurturing 'relational awareness' in co-leadership

6 EMBRACING COMPLEXITY OF UNITY AND COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP

The power of having two co-leads should be navigated strategically with intention and care. There will be moments when it is powerful to show unity and a shared voice; practically this could look like joint co-signed communications, and being together at key events. And, it will be important to find ways to hold space for your individual voices and contributions.



Tools

- ✦ [CONFLICT RESOLUTION SCENARIO PLANNING >](#)
- ✦ [POWER AND VULNERABILITY GARDEN >](#)
- ✦ [SUPPORTING EACH OTHER THROUGH THE HIGHS AND LOWS >](#)
- ✦ [CREATING SPACE FOR FEEDBACK >](#)
- ✦ [DIAGNOSING WHAT IS GOING WRONG >](#)
- ✦ [NAVIGATING CONFLICT TOGETHER >](#)

B. Individual and collective care, and cultivating joy

In our work as feminist activists and grantmakers, we have dedicated much time and energy to seeding intentional practices to cultivate spaces of joy, and of individual and of collective care. This is something that exists at the individual, collective and structural level, and within organisations and society at large. Healthy co-leadership relationships and organisations are deeply reliant on this political work. By having a joint leadership structure, co-leads often feel less alone and have built in support and rest, but co-leads are not immune to burn out. Dedicated attention to care, wellbeing and joy we feel is an important part of sustaining co-leadership models and organisations.

HOLDING THE WEIGHT WITH SOMEONE ELSE

Many organisations shift toward a co-leadership model because the workload and stress level is overwhelming for one person to manage and not a more distributed ‘weight’ shared with other senior leaders. Therefore, maintaining a balance between

the self, the institution, and also the demands around people, is important in practising co-leadership. Practices of feminist co-leadership enhance the success of that leadership when considerations regarding power, politics and purpose, and principles and values are integrated into the way co-leaders work with one another.

FINDING TIME FOR JOY AND CONNECTION

Many of the co-leads we spoke to shared how they dedicated time and energy to come together to have fun, find joy and build relationships. This supported many to sustain their work in the months ahead, in particular for people working virtually. In our own experiences, the connective tissue to enable us to move quickly and steer the organisation comes from the time when we were able to come together in person and connect.

These experiences also underscore the value of in-person space to connect, something that, of course, has been really critical during the pandemic.

“ ————— CHERNOR, PURPOSEFUL

We have always been in some crisis or another. But in the midst of that crisis, we will look for a beach. We will go to the beach and go swimming... and dance all night. We find those moments in the midst of [crisis], pockets of joy. We will end up having a meeting in the middle of the sea, in the ocean, we can discuss little things, gossip... Another thing is that we have a lot of humour and don't take each other too seriously. She constantly pokes fun at me - in a way that can be annoying! (said affectionately). I think it is back to the theme that it humanises us - and creates a sense of us being people first, and not just colleagues.

“ ——— JESS H., THE EQUALITY FUND

..we laugh, sometimes in a big group call one of us will say something and it's just the two of us laughing. People can see that we laugh together and I think it's positive, I think people like that.

“ ——— ANA, THIRD WAVE

I think for us it's really important that we also have both space to vision together and also relationship building. We do annual retreats. Making sure that its built in so that we have like, "Let's just go to a river and hang out and also then talk about our long term vision for Third Wave. And that has been really essential for the co-leadership."

“ ——— HUDA, MUSAWAH

I guess being cognisant of what Zharin likes, what her idiosyncrasies are, what her little... She likes Terry's Chocolate Orange. I sent her a little something in the post for her birthday. Just be really mindful and pay attention, in the ways of working, what she likes, how she likes information. That kind of attention to detail is really important for me because it means that I see her, and hopefully, that makes her feel like, "Oh, she's [Huda] not just this person in another continent that I talk to for work," or, "Huda is someone I support a lot and send constant reminders to on WhatsApp, like: "We have a meeting now. Here's the link".

“ ——— JESS H., THE EQUALITY FUND

There is another learning as of last week and when we spoke last we couldn't have known how important it is but having spent almost 18 months leading from a distance, the nature of being side by side in a room has proven to be quite profound. The clarity that comes from being together, we had a list of six things that felt like we'd need a week to get through and we got through it in 85 minutes... because there is something just different about being in front of a whiteboard and just being able to move forward. Just the pure, uninterrupted connection... we were able to move through a bunch of things.

✱ SETTING BOUNDARIES

Creating boundaries is an act of self- and collective care (Leiper O'Malley and Johnson, 2017) and is essential for the resilience of co-leaders' wellbeing. This involves being clear about personal limits, and also being comfortable with saying 'no' or asking for help (ibid.). Boundaries also help navigate the kind of relationship or friendship the co-leaders want to cultivate, since co-leaders cannot be 'everything' to each other - especially when they annoy, disappoint, or upset each other at times. Co-leaders need to remember to cultivate other support systems they can confide in, whether it is a coach or another friend who is willing to understand and appreciate the unique experience of leadership.

Boundary-setting also includes respecting the precious time co-leaders have to work intensely together without other distractions. In virtual working contexts, this entails blocking periods in one's calendar where calls cannot be taken, or taking a number of days on either side of a conference in which both will be present to work together in-person (Leiper O'Malley and Johnson, 2017).

Tips

1 LEVERAGE THE FACT THAT YOU ARE MORE THAN ONE PERSON

Practically - having more than one Executive Director or CEO of an organisation enables more flexibility to take time for yourself, to take leave, to not always have to be switched on, and to redistribute burden and load. To make the most of this, co-leads should coordinate and support each other to take time when they need it. Simply, this may look like coordinating leave or it could mean having a sabbatical, taking time for long service leave etc. However, this should be reciprocal and if one co-lead is out for significant time, it should ideally be something they hold with care and recognition.

Tools

✱ SETTING BOUNDARIES / WAYS OF WORKING >

✱ DEVELOPING A SELF & COLLECTIVE CARE PLAN >

2 CONTINUE TO PRIORITISE IN-PERSON SPACE IN THE MIDDLE OF YOUR RELATIONSHIP

In-person time to connect is critical and needs to be resourced and prioritised because of the type of connection and efficiency that comes from in-person space. Many co-leads have intentionally chosen to connect in beautiful places, around water, or nature or giving themselves permission to be surrounded by healing and connection.

3 DEVELOP YOUR OWN DEDICATED AGREEMENTS AND PRACTICES AROUND INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE CARE.

This will support greater uptake of these things across the organisation. Ensure this includes some space for JOY!

C. Evaluations and reviews

While much attention is rightly placed on the co-leads to make this model work, there is a significant role for both the board and staff to contribute to success. The board needs to play the supervisory role of the co-leads, both as individuals and partners. This requires the board to regularly evaluate certain characteristics and work objectives of the co-leaders as well as take a specific approach to evaluate co-leadership through their appraisals.

Most co-leads we interviewed were also the first configurations and their boards were still developing their appraisal processes. We share this experience, and we had to develop much of these practices together with our governance coach, Barbara Williams. The Equality Fund co-leads shared that they specifically do a joint self-assessment reflecting on what they have contributed to the organisation together.

The Equality Fund performance appraisal exercise has 14 competency areas of assessment for the partnership. Initially the board suggested using the Korn Ferry 38 competency model to develop

the assessment tool but the co-leads realised this model was not suitable for co-leadership. Through this exercise the team discovered that assessing, appreciating and evaluating a co-leadership framework did not exist and that they had to develop a customised tool.

“ — JESS H., THE EQUALITY FUND

We knew inherently that scoring us individually was not healthy. We went back to our governance committee to request to be assessed as a unit. We have one job description – we function as a team. You can have conversations with us individually. It illuminated that not only was the Korn Ferry tool not designed for co-leadership but that there was no tool that was designed for it.

Staff can also play a meaningful ‘guiding’ role to the co-leads. Firstly, they can be formally involved in evaluating the co-leaders if they are included in the appraisal process. Secondly, they can offer understanding, patience and support to the co-leads, managing up and encouraging co-leadership practice for the benefit of the entire organisation.



Tips

1 ENSURE THERE IS A STRONG APPRAISAL PROCESS IN PLACE, WHICH EVALUATES THE CO-LEADS AS INDIVIDUALS AND AS A TEAM.

Use or encourage the co-leads to develop their own documentation on their shared vision statement or commitments to the model.

2 BE WARY OF USING INDIVIDUAL SCORING METHODS AND HOW THIS IMPACTS THE CO-LEADS.

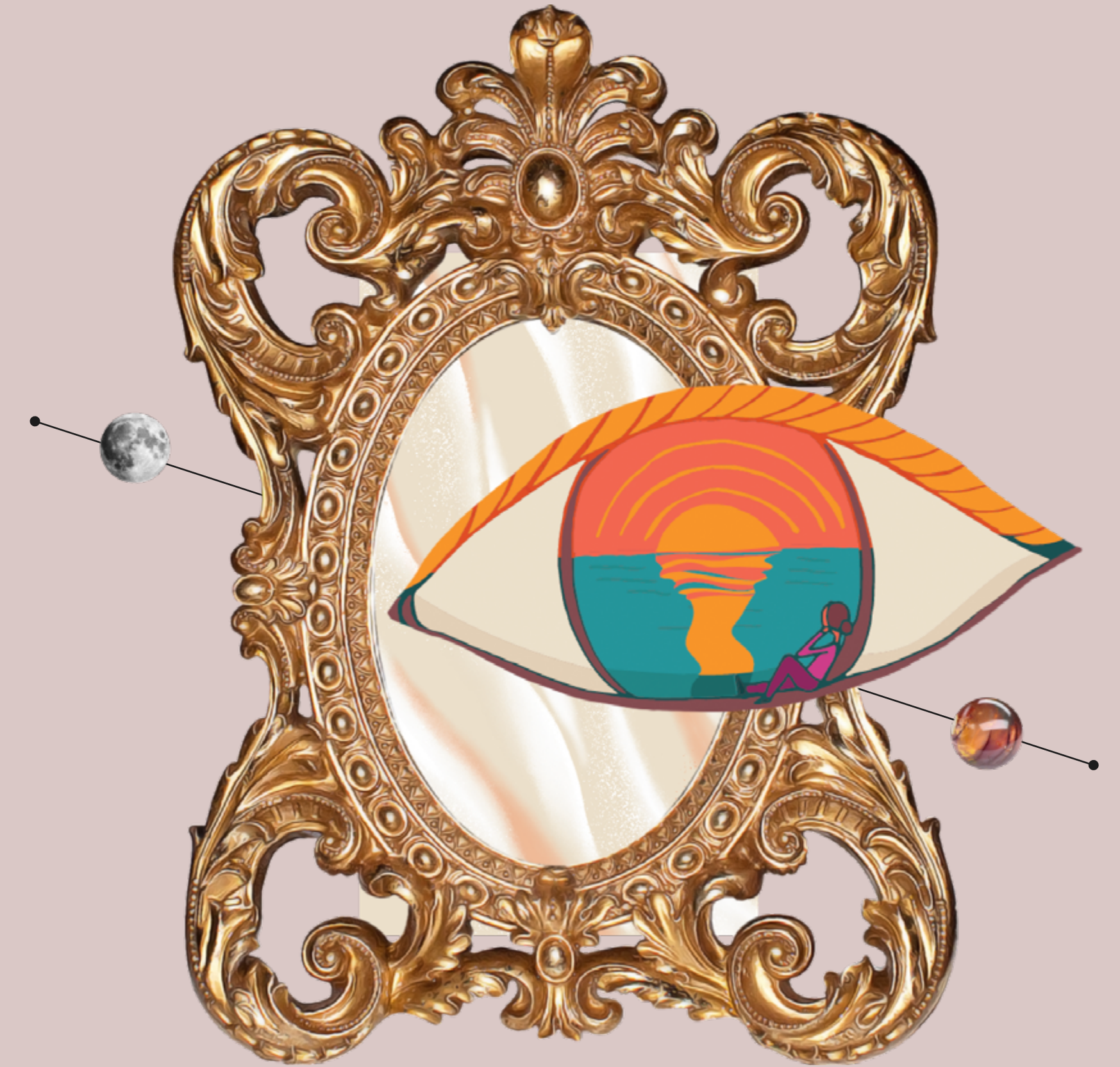
If not managed well, it is hard for individuals to not compare themselves to the other when seeing the raw data scores. There are other ways to provide thoughtful feedback.

3 INVOLVE DIRECT-REPORTS AND OTHER STAFF TO INPUT TO THE REVIEW.

This also helps build the staff's stake in the co-leadership model.

4 CONTRIBUTE TO AND ENGAGE IN LEARNING ABOUT THE CO-LEADERSHIP MODEL.

This relates to our cross-cutting recommendation for documentation as it supports others in co-leadership.



Tool

✦ PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT >

D. Dedicated resources: time, money and more

A key factor in sustaining healthy and nourished co-leadership relationships comes down to a consistent effort to prioritise and resource the relationship and the partnership. There are many ways this has manifested across the different models and examples we have investigated, from prioritising coaches, healers, physical and virtual time together, to making time for joy and laughter. While it is no easy task when leaders are embedded in the day to day of putting out fires and running their organisations, our analysis confirms the value of making time, space and resourcing a critical part of sustaining a co-leadership model.

WORKING WITH COACHES AND CONSULTANTS

Working with consultants and coaches in developing strategies for organisational processes, as well as to understand themselves and one another better, are incredibly helpful for successful co-leadership.

Susanna George reflects on how important it is for co-leads to spend time getting to know themselves more deeply in order to contribute to the relationship: One of the things that has been interesting to me is even when co-leaders are able to work out their relationships with each other, work needs to be done on your mental models, and the perceptual systems that you hold, your beliefs and assumptions etc etc. That often happens with the support of an external facilitator or a coach.

Coaching enables each co-leader to "develop greater self-awareness through identifying style differences, behavioural tendencies under pressure, and assumptions that may detract from building mutual trust" (Arnone and Stumpf, 2010). In our experience, having coaches by our side gave us strength to take risks, and also made things a bit less scary and way more fun. Being able to reach out to executive directors from sister organisations to ask for advice has also been invaluable. This is echoed by many co-leads we spoke to, with many of them sharing experiences of joint coaching sessions to enable them to work through challenges and fortify relationships:

“ ————— KIYOMI, THIRD WAVE

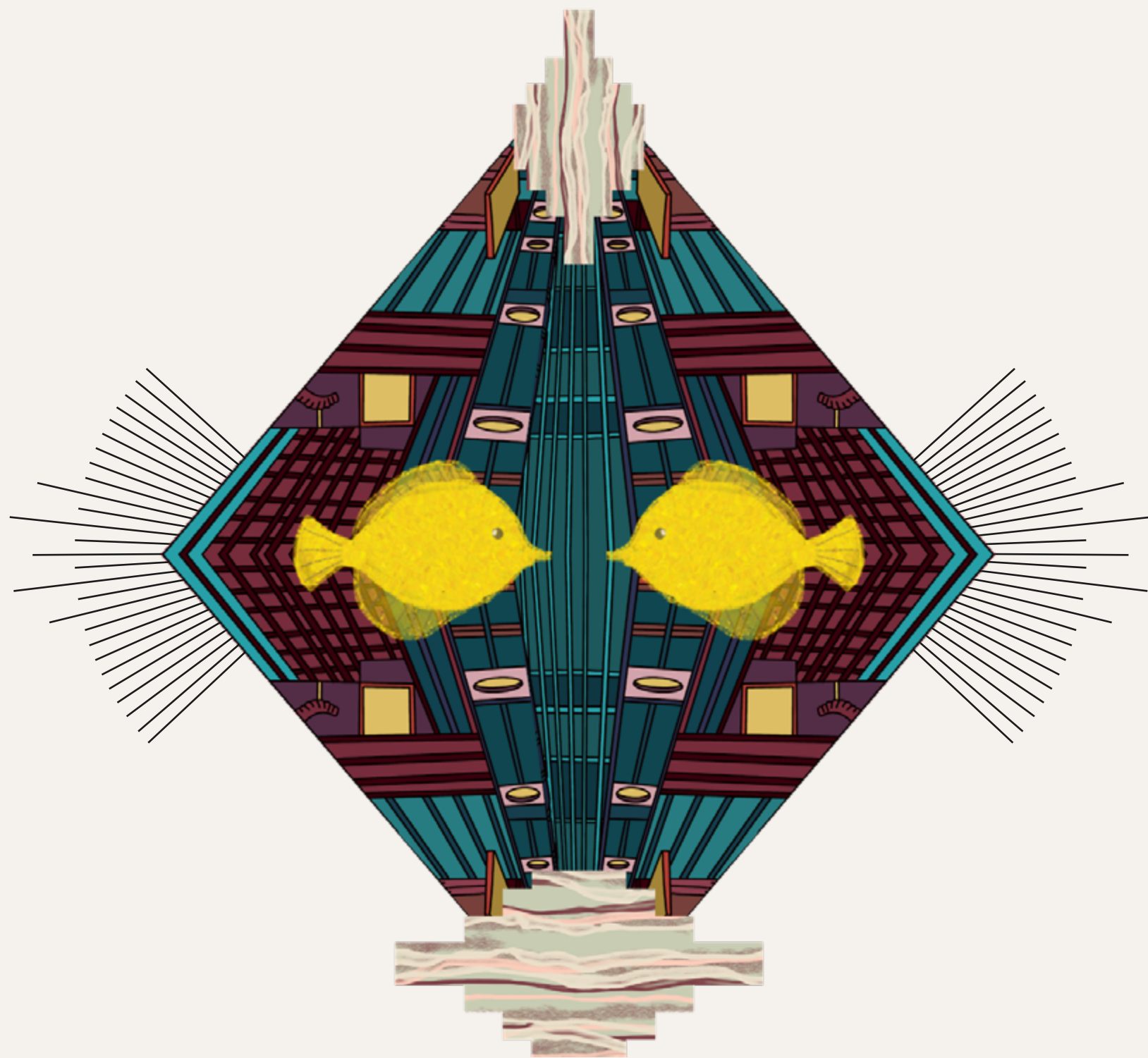
The other thing that's been really helpful is that we work with a coach and do coaching sessions together. Those sessions both give us space to unpack things. We meet and we'll check in and be like, "Here's what's going on." The coaching gives us a layer underneath to unpack some of the more sticky parts of what it means to be in leadership.

“ ————— ANONYMOUS

Even when people know each other well, and they step into a co-leading role, there needs to be a lot of support around that, I think. I don't know if I like this word coaching any longer, but accompaniment and enabling and recognising that the contexts are difficult, transitions are difficult, people have to learn how to do it.

✦ USING ONLINE TOOLS FOR WORKING TOGETHER VIRTUALLY

For virtual organisations, using online project management and communication tools is essential, and they are especially helpful for co-leads to keep each other updated, decisions documented, and communication consistent. Examples of such tools include Asana, Slack, Smartsheet and Google Chat.



“ _____ RUBY

During our time at FRIDA, we often had 12 hours between our timezones, with me in Mexico, Devi in Cambodia and later Korea, me in Sydney, and Devi in Morocco. Grappling with time zones and long distances has been a reality that shaped our work together long before the pandemic. Over time we developed different ways to update each other, most things I imagine many co-leads use nowadays, a running document where we wrote notes to each other, voice notes, shared calendars, being quite structured with our meetings and to do lists. We spoke to each other almost every day.

Hakima from AWID also emphasises the need to simply have conversations. "You need to connect on things. Where in an office you might say, hey... what happened there?" (AWID, 2019), in virtual organisations, time needs to be scheduled to have those check-ins.

Tips

1 RESOURCE, RESOURCE, RESOURCE

Allocate budget and time to sustain the co-leadership model. Prioritise your work as you go, do not cancel on each other and prioritise external meetings where you can. Ensure co-leads have dedicated time to build and harvest mutual understanding and a connection.

2 LOCATE YOUR PEOPLE AND ASK FOR HELP

Invest in coaches, healers, or people to accompany and guide you. Ideally do this both individually and together when it makes sense. When you find good people, also pass them along to other leaders.

III. *Evolving*: Transition and transformation



“ ——— KIRSTY, FLAMINGO GROUP

I would say having since been a CEO of a business on my own [after doing co-leadership]... the co-leadership was such an important part of making that time at that business a rewarding experience and giving me a rewarding career.

Below are some practices and experiences shared from feminist organisations AWID, FRIDA, Third Wave Fund, and Mama Cash, who have, in different ways, experienced transition processes into new co-leadership.

Feminist leadership transition is worthy of another paper in itself but a growing conversation.⁶ We are currently in a learning and reflection process with a number of feminist leaders who have transitioned in the last few years. We will be producing a series of offerings with them to diver deeper and share our collective knowledge on feminist leadership transitions. Therefore in this section we aimed to be as focused as possible in sharing what felt relevant to co-leads embracing and embarking on co-leadership, with the hope that the broader piece of work on leadership transitions will complement this.

A. Start with the end in mind and be as intentional as possible with timing

Succession planning is critical for organisational planning and sustainability. Zohra points out that:

“ ——— ZOHRA, MAMA CASH

Having a co-leadership structure can be more sustainable because it reduces risk if the ED has to step out. With two EDs, you can build in some redundancy and also have a pipeline for succession - you can stagger recruitment and transitions. We have done this at Mama Cash and you can also see this experience at AWID.

5. See Alpizar Duran and Williams (2019), Rao and Sandler (2022), and Bellagio Conversations (2022).

In a co-leadership model, this planning is more **complex**. After discussing their ideas with each other, the next important discussions for co-leads to have are with staff, board and donors. The boards of all kinds of organisations express gratitude to directors who give them a lot of lead time. We gave the FRIDA board and staff roughly two years notice, however it was also an inevitable and expected process given that we committed FRIDA to a policy that ensured it was always youth led (under 35 years old).

In addition to providing sufficient notice, it is also useful to keep in mind the transition alongside the strategic planning cycle. At AWID, Lydia Alpízar coincided her departure with the end of a strategic plan, which enabled the new co-directors to facilitate a process themselves of setting a new vision and trajectory for the organisation. We also coincided our departure with the creation of FRIDA's strategic plan. Though the participatory process began before co-leaders were in place, it was designed specifically so the co-leads had the chance to be there in the final stages, contribute to it and make it their own.

Finally, while planning and timing are important, **ultimately timing an exit is a personal decision. Some things are beyond the control of an organisation.**

“

RUBY AND DEVI

Both of us were feeling ready to hand over the roles to new energies and explore new professional and personal adventures. Some people have asked us why we did not stagger our departure. While we agree that it can make a lot of practical sense for an organisation, it did not fit with our personal preference. After having given a lot of ourselves to care for an organisation and community that was defined by participatory practices, we both had made up our minds about our personal choices.

B. Staff are included in the process and given space to engage

Part of the responsibility of co-leaders when transitioning out is to actively work with other staff in grappling with and deciding on how internal systems can be made to work better (Allison et al. 2018), so staff that stay behind are left with systems in place that work better for them. Both FRIDA and AWID set up a leadership transition team or committee, made up of staff, board members and consultants, to support the process of selecting "two new kindred and compatible souls" to become their organisations' next co-executive directors (Pierre-Antoine, 2019; and Alpízar Durán and Williams, 2019).

AWID also ensured that staff were involved in all stages of the recruitment process. At one point, AWID set up a Town Hall for staff to give their input and ask questions about the role and functions of the new co-directors (Alpízar Durán and Williams, 2019; and AWID, 2019). As a result, "staff felt engaged, consulted and informed, and there were no big surprises for them. This ensured the process flowed internally and there was trust in the ED and the board" (Alpízar Durán and Williams, 2019).

C. Additional resources for knowledge building and reflection

We were very grateful when one of FRIDA's funders offered and encouraged us to ask for additional funds to support our transition, especially for documenting and reflecting on our time. We now offer the same advice to others going through transition.

While it may be referred to more commonly as a 'sabbatical', we have found this to be an inadequate description for what might be better named as a *leadership transition grant*. This grant would provide space and time for the departing co-lead(s) to harvest knowledge from throughout their time at the organisation. This is helpful not only for the leader but also the organisation, field, and larger movement.

Through our interviews it appears that there are very few examples of this practice and new ground that can be broken. From the examples we did come across, time frames vary from three months to one year, and there was a tendency to commit to some form of documentation, research or output document as part of a transition grant. There were few, if any, examples of an organisation offering some financial compensation or a grant as a way to support the transitioning leaders rather than to take a period of reflection or rest time that is not linked to a deliverable.

It can be awkward or complex to receive this grant from the organisation as it can prolong the transition and the feeling that the leaders still are working within the organisation. This was the case for us, as we self-fundraised for a sabbatical/end of term grant of about three months that was intended for our own documentation time. Ultimately we were unable to take this time as we were called into continue supporting the organisation. Our lesson learned is to ensure transition periods are longer, and do not overlap with the documentation, reflection or sabbatical time.

Once we realised the mistake in combining 'handover' time with 'evolution' time, we decided to propose a new transition policy for any retiring staff member that had worked at FRIDA for more than five years. This policy stipulated that the departing staff member be supported for up to three months after their final day in the office to support them to have more time to reflect and rest, while processing their transition. All while no longer being 'on call' for the daily work.

Finally, it is important to see that this 'evolution' time belongs to more than just the organisation, but to the larger movement. It is important we build collective knowledge, and therefore it may require multiple actors to resource it. We hope that organisations and funders may consider different mechanisms to provide these resources for transitioning leaders, especially since the 'evolving' requires ample time to do well, and may need to enable leaders to rest, get some distance, and find new communities before being able to properly reflect. We speak more about the importance of community in a later section.

D. Use an 'ethic of care' for everyone going through transition

Changes and shifts in power can incite fear in different ways for all involved (Batliwala and Friedman, 2014). Relationships and interactions need to be navigated from a practice of care, whether it be with the outgoing and incoming directors, the donors, staff, board, or the wider community and movements in which the organisation sits.

For the transition process at AWID, "space for caring and to be really affirming with each other" was created between the outgoing director and incoming co-directors through regular check-ins (Alpízar Durán and Williams, 2018). At the same time, partners and donors were also assured that the transition was a healthy process. They reassured donors that "the transition did not emerge from a crisis, there was not a coup - it was one more step in the growth of AWID" (ibid.).

For the outgoing director of Third Wave Fund, Rye Young, the transition was an opportunity to affirm and celebrate the amazing staff behind the fund's work when informing donors about the change in leadership (Mic Check! Podcast, 2019). They talked about transitions "as being healthy and as an important skill for movements to have" (Reprojobs, 2020). They also integrated their perspective of transitions as normal and healthy into their management style, by encouraging staff themselves to think about their careers beyond the organisation, and dream their next steps (ibid.).

While the practices articulated above are by no means comprehensive and are based on existing studies and reflections, they are tried and tested examples of what practices can look like when effectively informed by the politics, principles and feminist understandings of power that nurture the wellbeing and meaningfulness of an organisation.



E. Find community

Even with co-leads, transition can be an isolating experience, especially when so much of your community and identity is interwoven with an organisation. Often leadership transition can bring with it unexpected emotion, loss, and shifts in many aspects of people's lives.

In our own experience, it's been essential to find and connect with varied communities. One of those key communities for us has been a circle of people who have recently transitioned. This group currently includes Swatee Deepak, Lisa VeneKlasen, Theo Sawa, Emilienne de Leon, Pamela Schiffman, and Hope Chigudu. Together, we are working on a short publication on learnings from feminist leadership transitions that will come out in early 2023.

Tips

1 **WHETHER YOU TRANSITION TOGETHER OR AT DIFFERENT STAGES, FIND A WAY TO SUPPORT EACH OTHER AS CO-LEADS AND ACTIVELY SEEK OUT COMMUNITY.**

Leadership transitions can be incredibly isolating experiences, and having the opportunity to navigate some of the emotional complexity with a trusted comrade is an incredible way to support reflection, processing and support.

2 **WHEN TRANSITIONING, CONSIDER WHAT YOU NEED TO SUPPORT YOU IN THAT TRANSITION**

This could include a transition grant, a set amount of salary to enable you to land softly, ongoing benefits etc.

3 **CREATE AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT.**

As you support with handover and transition, intentionally work to ensure there are resources for the new leadership and organisation. Leverage the trust donors have in your leadership to secure funds and multi-year commitments and identify external support like coaches and consultants to provide extra perspective and guidance to key individuals involved in the transition.

4 **MAKING WAY FOR THE NEW LEADERSHIP**

It is important to name the fact that sometimes there are expectations that the new co-leads will be the same as the last. It is important as outgoing co-leads in particular to normalise a narrative evolution for all as a necessary step in an organisation's life. Encourage comfort with the unknown and the vulnerability that comes with change. This could be a call in to funders, staff, board and community to trust the new leadership and the messiness that is a reality of leadership transitions.

Tools

✦ **EXIT STRATEGY >**

✦ **LOOKING BACK >**

Tips

5 DEFINE WHAT YOU NEED, COLLECTIVELY AND INDIVIDUALLY AND WORK WITH YOUR STAFF AND BOARD TO MAKE THIS WORK.

If it feels right for you to leave at the same time, have the courage to design this, if you prefer to stagger, work with your board to ensure there is still support in place, for example with an interim.

6 MAKE TIME FOR REFLECTION AND DOCUMENTATION, AND DON'T BE AFRAID TO ASK FOR ADDITIONAL RESOURCES TO SUPPORT THIS.

Organisations and funders could collectively create a separate mechanism to support transitioning leaders. Recognise this is extremely difficult to do whilst active in the co-lead role, and that even after you have transitioned you may need rest before you can document.

7 AFTER YOU HAVE TRANSITIONED, FORM MUTUAL AGREEMENTS WITH THE INCOMING CO-LEADS ON WHAT THE RELATIONSHIP WILL LOOK LIKE AFTER YOU LEAVE.

This is a process of opening conversation with incoming co-leads on what both the outgoing and incoming co-leads need to thrive. Needs may include: some ongoing contact or guidance that should be compensated, ways to communicate and share information, and co-creating an understanding of what a healthy engagement might look like, how to honour the outgoing's work, while making space for the new leaders.

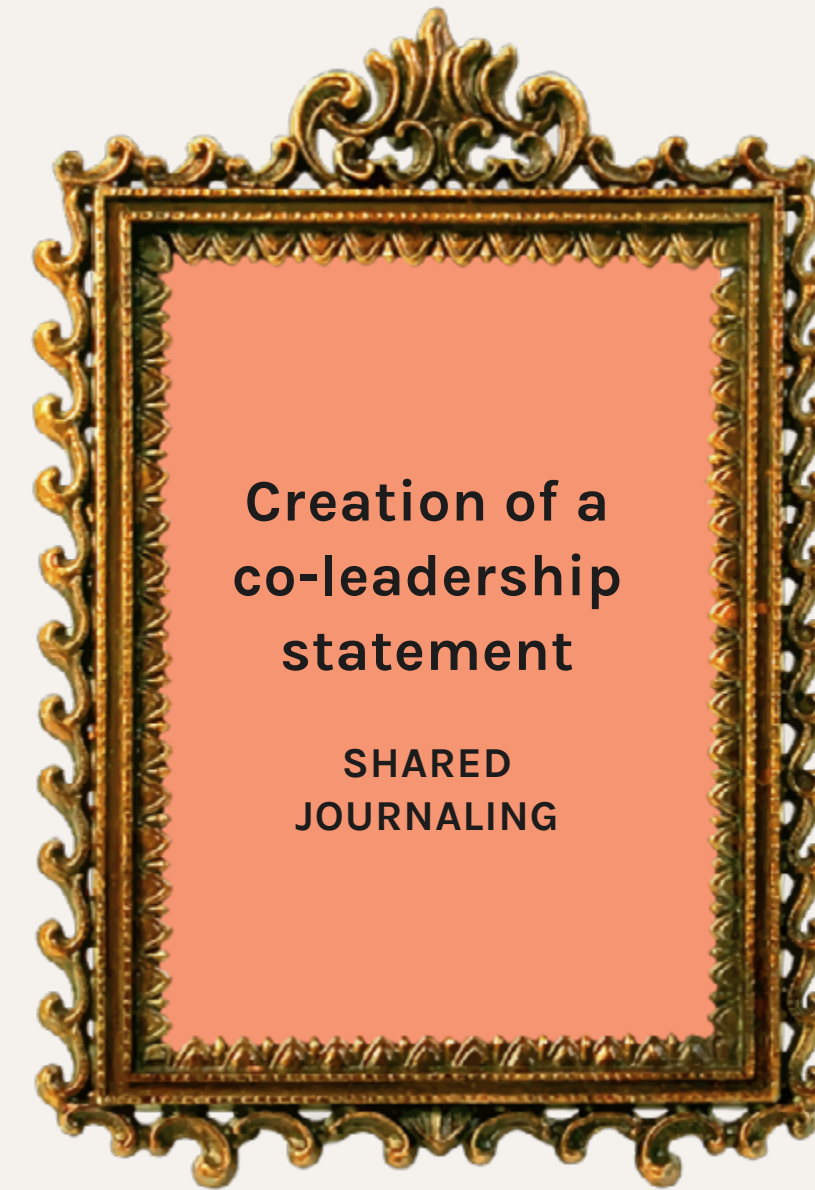


Tool Gallery 6

A set of tools for co-leaders and is based on and accompanies the research. Each tool complements the ‘Emerging’, ‘Nurturing’ and ‘Evolving’ sections of the research. It is inspired and informed by many other sources and we hope for it to be a live list that grows and evolves as others add to it.

Emerging Tools

CLICK TO VIEW



Nurturing Tools

CLICK TO VIEW

Supporting through the highs and the lows
SHARED JOURNALING + ORACLE CARDS

Power and vulnerability garden
SELF JOURNALING + ORACLE CARDS

Developing a self & collective care plan
SHARED JOURNALING + CARDS

Navigating conflict together
GUIDED EXERCISE

Conflict resolution scenario planning
GUIDED EXERCISE + ORACLE CARDS

Creating space for feedback
GUIDED EXERCISE

Diagnosing challenges or what is going wrong
GUIDED EXERCISE

Evolving Tools

Exit strategy checklist
DISCUSSION

Looking back
SHARED JOURNALING + DISCUSSION

Concluding 7

thoughts & other

offerings

Concluding thoughts and other offerings

What we learned (and didn't learn)

Co-leadership is an increasingly popular model across multiple sectors. Having more than one leader is complex – and that complexity can lead to a stronger, happier, and more strategic organisation. That same complexity can also bring a distinct vulnerability to conflict and rupture.

This action research compiles the many reflections, insights, and experiences of co-leaders around the world, predominantly in the feminist and women's rights space. It is part of a larger conversation that can support more people and organisations to understand and practise co-leadership with intention.

In doing this research, many of our beliefs were tested but ultimately reinforced. The contributors articulated some of our thoughts better than we could, and offered their experiences to us so that we could link patterns into helpful recommendations for us all. Our tacit understanding of what makes co-leadership wonderful has expanded and matured into more formal knowledge that we hope is shared widely.

Repeated throughout, **our most valued learning from this study is that for co-leadership to have the greatest impact, it must be set up and practised with intention.** For it to be truly feminist co-leadership, it must be guided by a North star of political transformation. That is, it must be sensitive and attentive to flows of power, spreading and weaving manifestations of power in ways that disrupt the linear and vertical concentrations of power that are at the foundation of patriarchal, capitalist systems of inequality.

Collectivising power and decision-making to two or more leaders does not minimise the need for broader conversations and practices that work to share power across organisations and movements. Nor does it erase the current tendency of many – including feminist organisations – to have a never-ending to-do list and hurtle rapidly towards burn out. Nor does it erase the backdrop of structural oppressions and systemic failures that make up our world or make less complex the contradictory nature of trying to build alternatives ways of being. We recognise that co-leadership may make sense for some organisations, while for others it will not. There are different models to share leadership and power, and co-leadership offers one tangible way.

This report does not intend to paint a rose-coloured view or suggest that co-leadership is the answer to all challenges in relation to power, care and organisational or individual leaders' wellbeing. What co-leadership does is plant a seed, model a different way of being, demonstrate the power of different perspectives and voices, of collectively held processes, and support the organisation to embrace multiplicities and complexity.

In the cases where certain forms of co-leadership does not work out, there are a myriad of factors to explain this - whether it is an individual co-lead personally deciding the position is not right for them, the relationship doesn't work between the co-leads, or the organisation deciding a co-leader or structure is not right for the collective needs, and more. Because co-leadership is complex, we would urge everyone to remember that just because co-leadership does not work out in that moment for you or your organisation, does not mean it will *never* work.

Transformative leadership - and especially co-leadership - is no easy, quick feat. It requires collective action, not just from co-leaders but the other members of the organisation like the governance body and staff. This intention is not something achieved all at once, but slowly, over time. Many of us have been shaped by attitudes that make it hard for us to let go of power, cause us to feel ashamed of vulnerability, and drive us to compete at the expense of care for ourselves and each other. There is much unlearning to do.

There are some things that we feel are still not as clear, because we need more time and other perspectives to fully understand them. These include:

- ✦ A more in depth cost-benefit analysis of resourcing co-leads over an individual
- ✦ More comparative analysis on individual and co-leadership structures
- ✦ Unpack what might it take to explore this model in large scale formal leadership institutions, including heads of state, or private philanthropy or UN agencies.

We hope to attend to these gaps in time, and hopefully with others.

What else this study offers

We have woven the insights and lessons we gained from this study into practical tools or guideposts to support your co-leadership journey. These have been named throughout the report and compiled in a [Tool Gallery](#).

In addition, we have designed a set of cards and activities inspired by tarot, working with tarot readers and artists around the world. The mosaics and mirrors offer us again a metaphor for how these cards should be used. They should support co-leaders to spark conversations about how co-leaders will 'fit' together as distinct but connected pieces. They should illuminate reflections that may require vulnerability and courage in one's self and in each other. Finally, they should remind you of the beauty of authenticity and transformation.

What we hope comes next

Looking forward, we are eager to see how these cards and other tools are used and whether they are helpful to others. We are excited to continue conversations in community with co-leads through coaching circles or collective reflection spaces. We hope that co-leaders will engage with our findings, share new practices or ideas, and help us refine what we have.

Our current offerings of the report, guides, and cards can be found together in one home, on a website that we hope will evolve and grow.

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