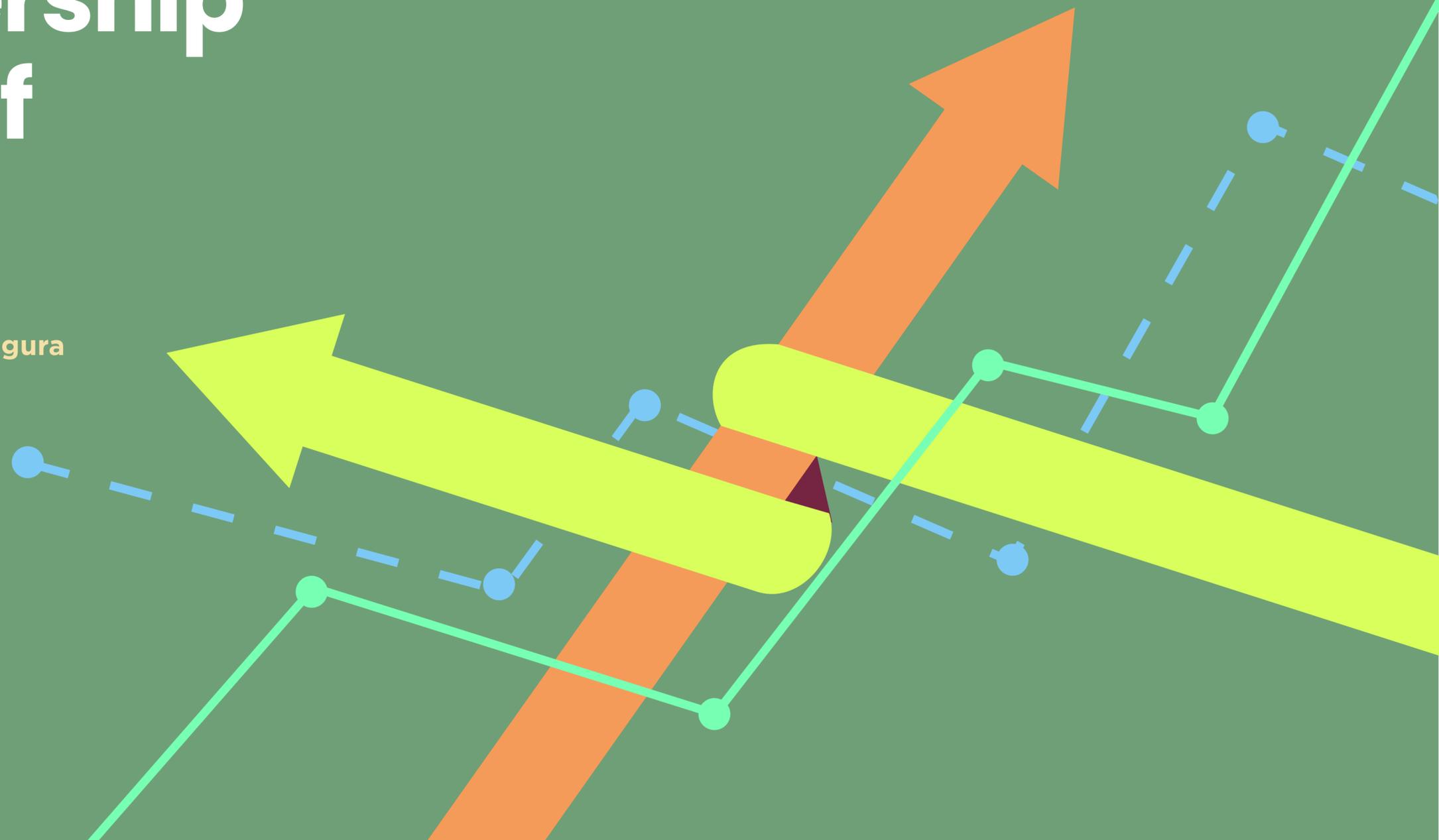


# Can Co-Leadership be the future of philanthropy?

Donika Dimovska, Simon Sommer, and Fabio Segura



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The current global pandemic has reinforced the reality that we live in a highly complex, ever-changing world, and that if we have any chance of tackling some of the big global challenges ahead of us, there is a need for leadership that is highly resilient and adaptable to meet the inevitable curve balls the future will throw at us.

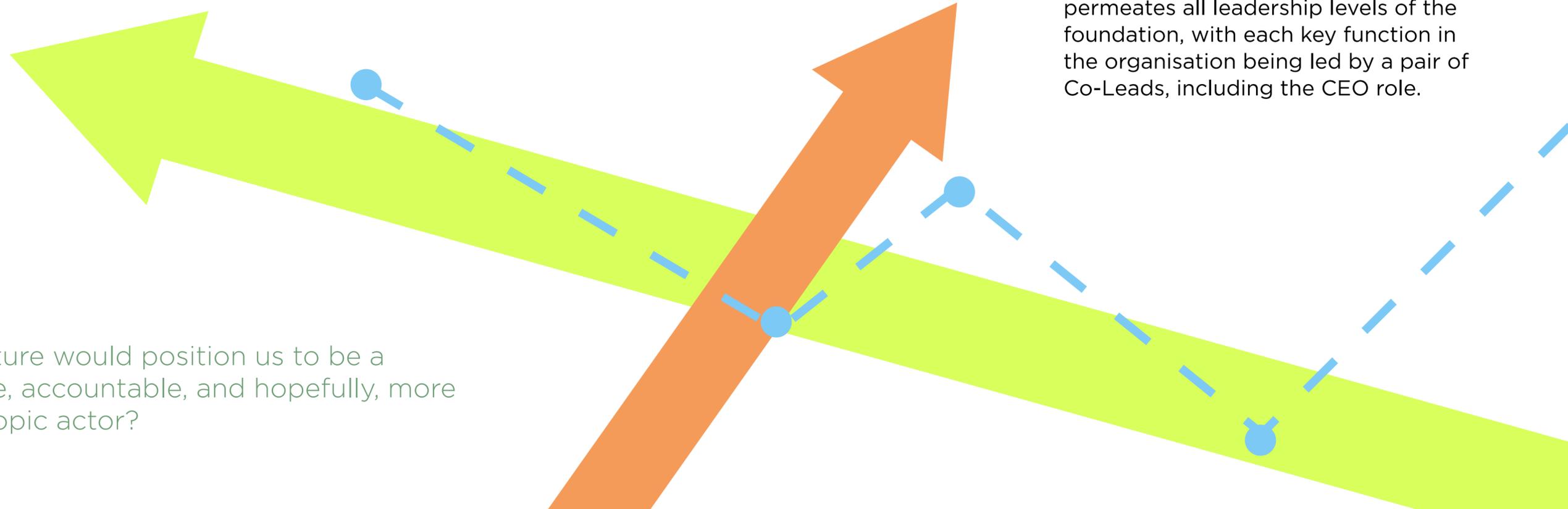
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This could not be truer in the context of global philanthropy whose role and purpose are coming under even greater scrutiny in a world reeling from the consequences of Covid – debates about the concentration of ‘power’ at the top of foundations and perceived lack of transparency in decision-making for how capital is deployed are all fair and much needed. Any powerful, value-driven social institution such as philanthropy should be subject to close examination and critical scrutiny and it is great to see that some [promising efforts](#) are underway.

Our way to step up is to examine the core fundamentals of how we operate – not only vis-à-vis our partners and grantees which we also do – but taking an honest and critical look at the very leadership and decision-making structures within the Jacobs Foundation. As we embarked on this journey back in 2019, we were guided by the key question: What type of structure would position us to be a more agile, inclusive, accountable, and hopefully, more impactful philanthropic actor? With the support of our Board, this careful examination led us to create a Co-Leadership structure which we launched in 2020 and now permeates all leadership levels of the foundation, with each key function in the organisation being led by a pair of Co-Leads, including the CEO role.



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# The case for Co-Leadership

a model virtually unheard of in philanthropy.

In evaluating the decision to move to a Co-Leadership model, we were astounded to find out that, while the model is well-established in the business world – with [useful examples of successes and failures](#) – it is virtually unheard of in non-profit organisations and charitable foundations. But we should not have been too surprised – in fact, many foundations stick to very traditional, hierarchical, and sometimes even autocratic decision-making models, with virtually all final decision-making power concentrated in one person (notably, almost extinct words such as ‘Secretary General’ have survived in the foundation world). The dangerous combination of sole decision-making power and widespread absence of internal and external control mechanisms makes foundation leaders particularly susceptible to hubris and overconfidence.

A smart co-leadership and shared decision-making structure can counterbalance this susceptibility. As the term is often used interchangeably with shared, dispersed, or distributed leadership, we should first clarify what we mean: Co-Leadership is an equal sharing of the CEO or director-level management role between two people who share ownership of the goals of their team or function and engage in joint decision-making across all major aspects of their work. As an evidence-based organisation, we looked at what the literature tells us about the benefits of our interpretation of Co-Leadership and the potential pitfalls and challenges to watch out for:



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## The benefits.

At the core, a key advantage of the Co-Leadership model over the individual leader paradigm, is that it brings together complementary styles and skillsets that can provide holistic vision and strategy to an organisation. If done well, it can create stability and continuity at the leadership level as collaboration becomes the focus and the act of sharing the work and mental load with a partner alleviates some of the pressure, especially in crisis situations, such as the Covid-19 pandemic. It can also offer built-in regular peer feedback from one’s Co-Lead and create checks and balances in the form of collaborative decision-making and shared accountability.

## The challenges.

As evidenced by the numerous [examples of failed attempts](#) at Co-Leadership, it is a model that ultimately challenges some of the deeply ingrained ways of thinking and limiting beliefs we hold about leadership – as exemplified by the typical ‘visionary leader’ and ‘rockstar performer’ that we are used to hearing about. All this contributes to the inherent complexity around Co-Leadership which requires us to redraw many of the traditional ‘lines of power and control’ and be willing to openly welcome a new culture where shared decision-making and accountability are the norm.

# It is complex and takes work, but we are better for it.

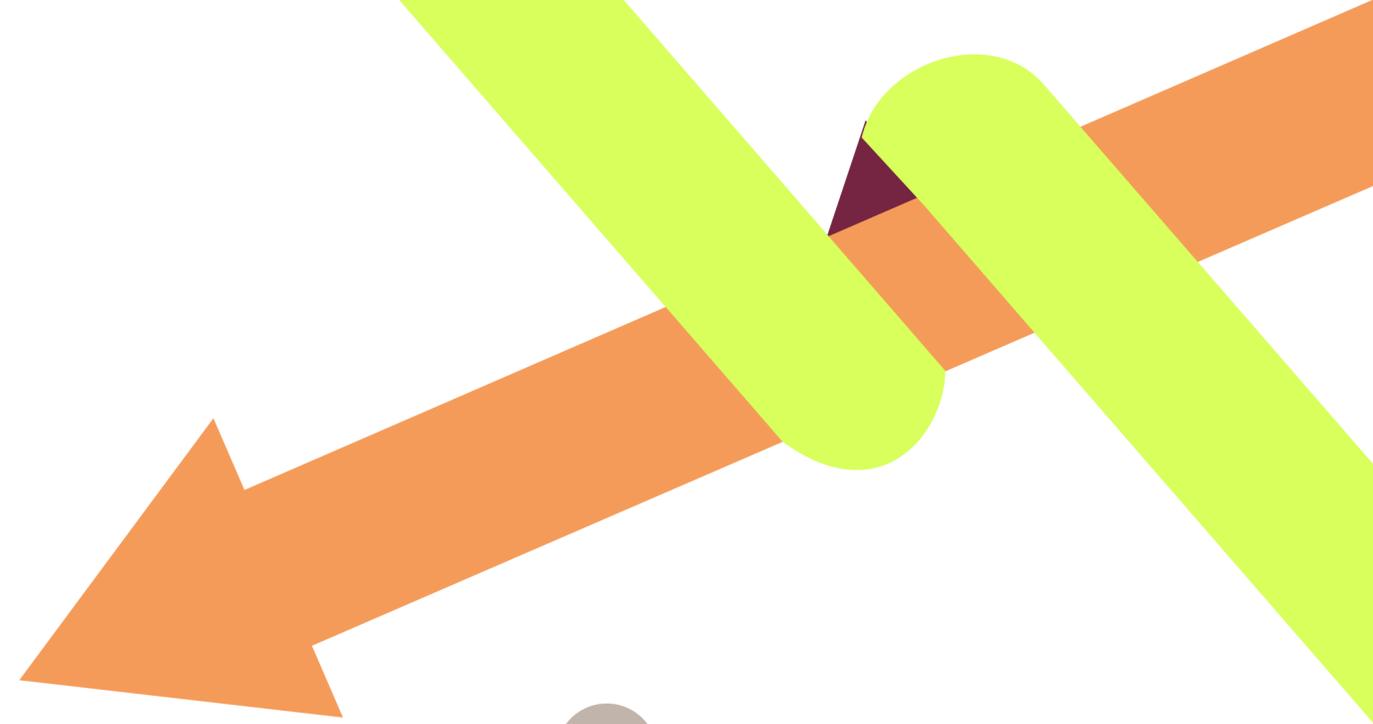
One of the main motivations leading us to embark on the Co-Leadership journey was the desire to 'unify' the various siloes across our work and the best way to do so was to take the less obvious path - instead of appointing one CEO at the helm (following the transition of the previous CEO), we would bring the heads of the two largest and most visible programs within the foundation to lead as Co-CEOs. This would signal to both staff and external stakeholders that the foundation saw the development of its future strategy and desired impact in the world as the confluence of all its core competences and assets under one unified vision for change.

However, while this sounded promising, a major first hurdle to overcome was to convince the Foundation's Board that this new model of leadership was going to work in practice. Are we going to be able to manage things efficiently and seamlessly, without falling into unclear, diluted responsibilities and letting things slip between the cracks, not only as Co-CEOs, but as Co-Leaders across the Foundation's work? Are we going to be able to build the type of culture that would make this leadership model effective and sustainable? These are critical questions that any organisation re-thinking its leadership structure needs to think about long and hard. Ultimately, after several months of discussions and planning, we felt confident that we had evaluated the pros and cons and thought through the complexities and were ready to take the plunge into Co-Leadership.

Then there was the question of how to put this into practice and how to manage the transition internally. It is fair to say that the initial internal staff response to what was a major change from the established leadership culture, which was one of fairly traditional, hierarchical leadership, was an equal mix of uncertainty about what this meant in practice, resistance to change, and excitement about the innovation and opportunity this new shift could bring. Managing through this process had its challenges that required perseverance and commitment from everyone, but what ultimately made it easier is that we believed that this new structure would result in a better organisation for everyone - interestingly, some of those who struggled most initially eventually became the most ardent supporters of the new structure.



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So, what have we learned after nearly two years of being a Co-Leadership organisation? There are three main takeaways that we think are important for any organisation that is considering a potential transition to Co-Leadership:

1

## It takes time, commitment, and effort.

As with any important personal or professional partnership, it takes constant, intentional work. What this means for us is that we take learning about how to be Co-Leaders seriously and invest considerable time and effort to continuously improve how we work together. For example, we have introduced Co-Leadership training for all Co-Lead pairs and encouraged everyone to work on their relationship by keeping an open communication channel about what works and what can be improved. This is easier said than done, and we are constantly pushing ourselves to step outside our comfort zone and challenge our limiting beliefs and assumptions.

2

## Timing matters.

The Co-Leadership model was introduced at a time when the Foundation was going through a new a leadership transition and was poised for change. In this sense, the introduction of the new structure was developed in conjunction with the launch of a new organisational strategy; hence, it could be integrated 'wholesale' into the new strategy as opposed to retrofitted into existing organisational structures. It does not mean that it was a totally smooth process, but the fact that we were already on a change journey made it the 'right' time to look at the way we were organised. Importantly, most Co-Leads were new hires who could be recruited into the new structure adopting the Co-Leadership mentality from the start.



Our experience has shown that the common refrain that Co-Leadership is slow and unable to make swift decisions might be a misconception.

3

## Culture is fundamental.

It would be impossible to operate as a Co-Leadership organisation without a culture of transparency and trust. We have codified this in our core values for how we work together and relate to each other, including the specific behaviours and practices that we want to encourage across our work to continuously nurture and maintain a culture of trust and openness. We discuss these openly and frequently to raise and practice our collective self-awareness across the organisation.

The Covid pandemic was the ultimate test of whether our investment would pay off. Our experience has shown that the common refrain that Co-Leadership is slow and unable to make swift decisions might be a misconception. In the heated situation of the pandemic in 2020, we have experienced the opposite. Being able to 'outsource' key work components to each other for a limited period to focus on other urgent tasks has helped the Jacobs Foundation to be one of the first movers in offering Covid relief to its partners and in providing encompassing protection for its employees ahead of almost all other peers.

# Does this mean the end of the ‘great hero’ model of leadership dominating philanthropy?



we firmly believe that the ‘great hero’ model of leadership may simply not be fit for purpose for the problems the world faces. Co-Leadership might just be a one promising way to step up to these challenges.

We are not suggesting that there is one ‘right’ way to organise the leadership structure of a foundation or non-profit – there is already a lot of literature on management structures and models, and we do not claim to be experts. But we do believe that – as we look ahead to the challenges and opportunities for philanthropy and think about how to position ourselves to support the future of young people and our planet – it is on us to be the ‘best selves that we can be’. This could mean taking a deep and honest look at our leadership structures, and the organisational cultures that underpin them, to ask the question: *How are we perpetuating outdated leadership models and how can we re-think our structures to meet the challenges of the future?*

At Jacobs, we are on a learning journey with our Co-Leadership experiment and there still a lot that we need to get right, but two years in, we firmly believe that the ‘great hero’ model of leadership may simply not be fit for purpose for the problems the world faces. Co-Leadership might just be a one promising way to step up to these challenges.

As we move forward with our Co-Leadership experience, we look forward to hearing and learning from actors across philanthropy and beyond – from organisations with similar as well as opposing and alternative views, perspectives, and experiences to our own – so that we can challenge and advance our collective thinking on how to be ‘the best selves that We can be’ and ultimately move the philanthropy field forward. ●



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