

ACCOUNTABILITY LAB'S CO-LEADERSHIP TOOLKIT: LESSONS ON SHARED LEADERSHIP FROM A TRANSLOCAL NETWORK

A practical resource for organizations exploring co-leadership models



PURPOSE

This toolkit shares Accountability Lab's (AL) experience of designing, implementing, and sustaining a Co-CEO leadership structure. It is offered as a model, not *the* model – but rather a practical set of reflections, guardrails, and considerations for organizations considering shared leadership.

WHY THIS TOOLKIT EXISTS

Across the nonprofit and civil society sector, leadership is becoming more complex. Organizations are navigating funding uncertainty, political polarization, global teams, and rapidly changing programmatic environments. Leaders are often expected to oversee strategy, partnerships, fundraising, operations, governance, and communications simultaneously – often across multiple countries and contexts.

At AL, this reflection led to a transition from a traditional single-CEO structure to a Co-CEO model. The goal was not simply to divide work among three people. It was to build a leadership structure better suited to the complexity of the organization, the translocal nature of the network, and the specialist expertise required to steward it well.

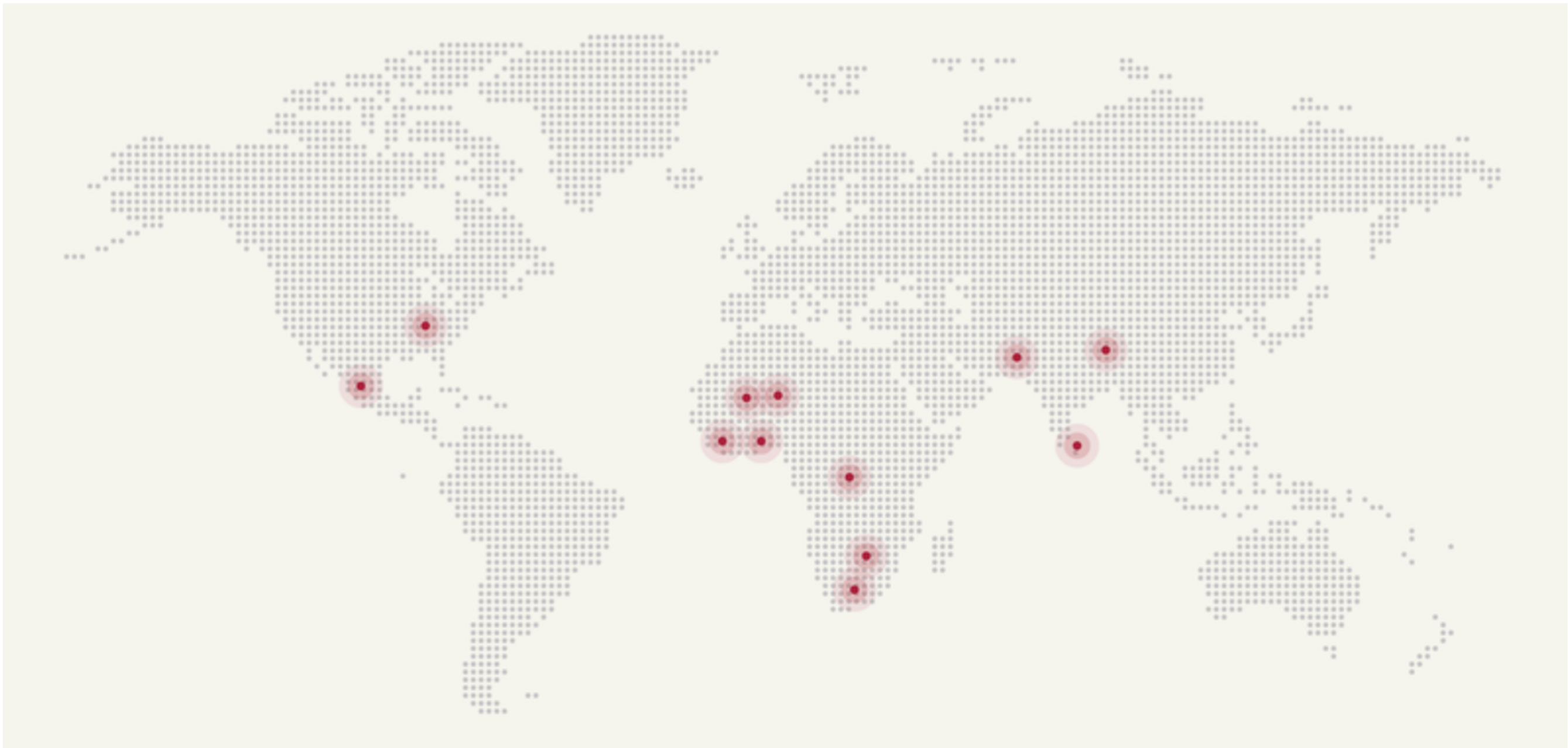
This toolkit has three aims:

- To explain how AL's Co-CEO model works in practice.
- To share practical lessons for organizations exploring shared leadership.
- To acknowledge both the strengths and the limits of co-leadership.



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UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT: A TRANSLOCAL NETWORK



AL operates as a translocal network of independent Labs working across multiple countries and contexts. Each Lab is locally rooted, with its own leadership, teams, and programming, while remaining connected through a shared mission and collaborative governance structure.

This model allows solutions to emerge from local contexts while benefiting from global learning and partnership. At the same time, it creates a leadership environment that is inherently distributed, requiring coordination, trust, and shared decision-making across geographies and cultures.

“The Co-CEO model for us is a tripartite structure through which three of us act as CEOs together. While we each continue to have domains of primary responsibility and expertise, we also make collective decisions on the direction of the organization as a whole. We work in close collaboration with other senior management and the directors of the other Labs around the world, of course, to steer the network collectively. It is a set-up that works really well for us!”

- Blair Glencorse

THE CO-CEO STRUCTURE AT A GLANCE

The Co-CEO model combines specialist leadership with shared stewardship. Each leader has defined workstreams aligned with their expertise and preferences, while major strategic questions are discussed collectively.

The AL, Co-CEO structure is made up for three Co-CEO’s each with their own work stream, duties and responsibilities (as identified by us and the board during the model set-up in 2023). These lines of responsibility align with our personal preferences as well as personalities therefore I would not say that they are/will remain somewhat static. While we do have these individual lines of responsibility, we make joint decisions on critical strategic issues.

- Jean Scrimgeour

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Leader	Primary focus	Shared leadership responsibilities
Blair Glencorse	Partnerships, fundraising, and external engagement across the network	Collective strategy, governance, organizational direction
Cheri-Leigh Erasmus	Programming, learning, strategic initiatives, and emerging technology innovation	
Jean Scrimgeour	Risk, systems, finance and operational oversight	

Note: defined responsibilities are important, but the structure remains intentionally flexible as the organization evolves

WHY CO-LEADERSHIP?

For all three leaders, the model responds to a basic reality: nonprofit leadership has become too complex to assume that one person can sustainably hold everything alone.

“It is impossible for one leader to have all the skills required to steer an organization, raise funds, bolster the organization’s public profile, and think and grow it strategically. Co-leadership requires a certain type of openness, not just in the leaders committing to it, but in the whole organization.”

- Cheri-Leigh Erasmus

“I think the more traditional model of one CEO or Director that is in charge of the entire organization is often unsustainable. We have found that, perhaps counter-intuitively, it is during times of crisis that the co-leadership model makes decision-making quicker and more effective.”

- Blair Glencorse

“The non-profit leader needs to be good at finances, fundraising, communications, advocacy, programming, and so much more. Leadership also needs to bring in a number of experiences and perspectives, and co-leadership allows for all of that.”

- Jean Scrimgeour

At the same time, co-leadership is not simply a structural shift. It requires a broader organizational readiness.

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS AND WHAT WE'VE LEARNED

“The whole organization needs to think about leadership and hierarchy in a different way. To put it simply, you cannot simply fit an old, dated culture into a new mold. The people, thinking and processes at the organization have to blend with the notion of a co-leadership structure.”

- Cheri-Leigh Erasmus

“It is not for the faint of heart, co-leadership requires radical kindness, trust, accessibility, patience, and so much more.”

- Jean Scrimgeour

Because co-leadership remains relatively uncommon in the nonprofit sector, organizations often encounter assumptions about how it works. AL's experience challenges several of these common misconceptions.

Misconception 1: Co-leadership slows decision-making

In practice, the opposite can be true. Having multiple leaders working closely together can strengthen decision-making by allowing ideas to be tested and refined through discussion. Rather than causing delays, shared leadership can improve decision quality and reduce uncertainty around major choices.

Misconception 2: Shared leadership weakens accountability

Co-leadership does not mean that responsibility is diffused or unclear. At AL, each Co-CEO maintains defined workstreams and individual performance indicators that contribute to the organization's collective goals. Clear roles and accountability systems ensure that responsibility remains visible and measurable.

Misconception 3: More leaders means less work

Another common assumption is that sharing leadership somehow reduces the workload. In reality, the model often allows leadership teams to engage more deeply with complex issues. Multiple leaders can focus on different areas simultaneously, allowing organizations to move faster while maintaining careful oversight of critical decisions.

Misconception 4: Co-leadership is a “soft landing”

There is sometimes an assumption that shared leadership exists to accommodate leaders who cannot lead independently. In practice, co-leadership represents a deliberate structural choice. It requires the same level of leadership capacity, strategic thinking, and decision-making responsibility as traditional executive roles – and often demands even stronger collaboration and communication skills.

Misconception 5: Co-leadership is expensive

A leadership structure that is predicated on more than one CEO or Executive Director can sound expensive. All organizations have different salary scales and levels- but senior decision-makers are costly whatever their title. We have found that co-leadership has not increased overhead costs- if anything, because of the efficiencies it creates, it has streamlined budgets and improved value-for-money.

HOW DECISION-MAKING WORKS IN PRACTICE

At AL, the co-leadership model relies on a combination of clear swim lanes, shared guardrails, and constant communication.

Each Co-CEO maintains primary responsibility for specific areas of work aligned with their expertise. Within those domains, many day-to-day decisions can be made independently. At the same time, strategic issues affecting the organization as a whole are discussed and decided upon collectively.

Frequent communication (both formal and informal) ensures that decisions remain aligned and that leaders stay informed about developments across the organization.

Importantly, consensus does not require uniform agreement. Differences in perspective are often seen as constructive, helping refine decisions while maintaining shared commitment to the organization’s goals.

Decision-Making Structure		
Type of Decision	Typical Lead	How It Is Handled
Day-to-day operational decisions	Relevant Co-CEO within their swim lane	Usually made independently, with regular updates to the other Co-CEOs to maintain transparency.
Major spending, staffing, or structural decisions	Shared leadership	Discussed collectively and approved together before implementation.
Strategic shifts during crises or emerging opportunities	Shared leadership, with one leader often coordinating	Leadership team maps out priorities together and adjusts responsibilities based on expertise and capacity.
Governance, internal accountability and performance	Shared leadership, and board members	Review of progress, pay levels, and management approach against KPIs

Several communication habits help make this structure work effectively:

- Regular formal check-ins between the Co-CEOs
 - Frequent informal conversations throughout the week
 - Rapid information sharing through messaging platforms
 - Transparency around decisions made within individual portfolios
 - Working with a leadership coach both independently and collectively strengthens internal accountability
- These practices help ensure that leadership remains coordinated while allowing individual leaders to move quickly within their areas of responsibility.
- Over time, this rhythm of communication creates a shared understanding of priorities and reduces the likelihood that major decisions come as a surprise to other members of the leadership team.

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Why this approach works

- The combination of defined roles and continuous communication allows AL's leadership team to balance autonomy and collaboration.
- Leaders can move quickly within their domains while still maintaining collective responsibility for the organization's overall direction.
- Regular dialogue ensures that differences in perspective strengthen decisions rather than slow them down.

REVISITING “SWIM LANES” AND ADAPTING OVER TIME

One of the strengths of AL's co-leadership model is that leadership responsibilities are not fixed permanently. While each Co-CEO maintains primary areas of responsibility, the distribution of work can evolve as organizational priorities, external conditions, or personal circumstances change. The leadership team uses both formal and informal mechanisms to periodically revisit how responsibilities are structured.

Formal reflection and planning

Several times each year, the Co-CEOs hold strategic review sessions that include:

- updates on organizational strategy
- reflection on leadership responsibilities
- discussion of emerging priorities or risks
- health and wellness assessments
- personal and professional check-ins

These conversations create space to assess whether leadership roles remain aligned with the organization's needs and whether responsibilities should shift.

Organic adjustments between reviews

Between formal reviews, adjustments often occur organically in response to changing circumstances. When new challenges or opportunities emerge, the leadership team typically:

1. Identifies the work that needs to be addressed.
2. Assesses current workloads across the leadership team.
3. Assigns leadership responsibility based on expertise, capacity, and context.
4. Revisits and rebalances responsibilities as the situation stabilizes.

This approach allows the leadership team to remain flexible while ensuring that responsibilities remain clearly defined.

Responding to changing circumstances

Over time, the leadership team has adapted responsibilities in response to a range of situations, including:

- parental leave
- illness or personal circumstances
- leadership sabbaticals
- the COVID-19 pandemic
- major shifts in the global aid landscape
- Socio-political crises in countries where AL operates

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During these moments, one leader may temporarily take on greater responsibility for a specific issue or area of work. Once the immediate pressure passes, responsibilities are recalibrated and leadership “swim lanes” are adjusted accordingly.

Why flexibility matters

This ability to redistribute leadership responsibilities allows the organization to remain resilient during periods of uncertainty. Rather than relying on a single leader to absorb additional pressures, the model allows the leadership team to adapt collectively while maintaining continuity across the organization.

SPECIALIST LEADERSHIP: STRENGTHS, OVERLAP, AND UNIQUE VALUE

The effectiveness of AL’s co-leadership model rests not only on trust and shared responsibility, but also on a clear understanding of the distinct strengths each leader brings to the role.

While each Co-CEO maintains defined areas of responsibility, the model works best when leaders are intentional about identifying where they add the most value to the organization.

Over time, the leadership team has developed a clearer understanding of three important distinctions:

- What each leader **can do**
- What each leader **does well**
- What each leader **is uniquely positioned to lead**

These distinctions help ensure that leadership responsibilities are aligned not only with formal roles but also with individual strengths and instincts.

Recognizing both overlap and specialization

Like many experienced leaders, all three Co-CEOs are capable of operating across multiple domains of the organization. However, effective co-leadership requires distinguishing between general capability and areas of particular expertise. By clarifying where each leader’s perspective, experience, or instincts are strongest, the team can allocate responsibility more effectively while maintaining shared oversight of the organization’s direction.

Trust as the foundation of specialization

This approach relies heavily on trust. Each leader must feel confident deferring to others when their colleagues are better positioned to lead a particular issue or decision.

Rather than creating competition, this model allows leaders to support one another’s work with humility while maintaining collective responsibility for the organization’s outcomes.

The advantages of specialist leadership

When roles align with expertise, the leadership team can operate more effectively across multiple priorities at the same time.

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This creates several benefits:

- Leaders can focus deeply on their portfolios
- Complex issues can be addressed simultaneously
- Decision-making can draw on complementary perspectives
- Leadership energy is directed where it has the greatest impact

At the same time, shared visibility across workstreams ensures that the organization's strategy remains cohesive. In practice, this balance between specialization and collaboration allows the leadership team to combine focus, agility, and collective accountability.

CAPACITY, BACKFILLING, AND LEADERSHIP SUPPORT

Shared leadership does not reduce workload. Instead, it changes how leadership responsibilities are distributed and raises important practical questions about capacity, backfilling, and operational support. When AL transitioned to a Co-CEO model, the leadership team had to consider how responsibilities previously held by a single executive would be redistributed across the organization.

Redistributing previous leadership responsibilities

In practice, this process has been gradual and evolving. Some responsibilities that were previously centralized under a single CEO have been absorbed by existing teams. For example:

- Colleagues across the programs and learning teams have taken on portions of previous program leadership responsibilities
- Fundraising and partnership work are supported by team members working closely with the relevant Co-CEO
- Finance and operational leadership continue to rely on a strong finance and operations team, while strategic oversight remains at the executive level

This approach allows leadership to remain focused on strategic direction while ensuring that operational responsibilities are shared across the organization.

Balancing efficiency and ambition

The leadership team's reflections suggest that co-leadership can increase efficiency by improving decision-making and alignment across leadership functions. At the same time, the model can also create new opportunities for growth. With multiple leaders able to focus on different priorities simultaneously, organizations may find themselves expanding programming, partnerships, and strategic initiatives.

This dynamic creates an important balancing act. While co-leadership can improve agility and responsiveness, organizations must also remain attentive to the operational capacity required to sustain increased activity.

A model that evolves over time

As the leadership structure matures, the distribution of responsibilities continues to evolve. Leaders may hand off certain operational functions to teams while taking on new strategic roles that emerge as the organization grows. This gradual recalibration is a normal part of the process. Co-leadership is not a fixed structure but an evolving system that must adapt alongside the organization itself.

ACCOUNTABILITY, KPIS, AND MEASURING WHAT MATTERS

Shared leadership does not eliminate accountability. In many ways, it requires more intentional systems to ensure that responsibilities remain clear and progress can be tracked across the organization. At AL, the leadership team uses a combination of individual and collective metrics to monitor performance and alignment.

Connecting individual work to shared goals

Each Co-CEO maintains specific responsibilities aligned with their portfolio. Individual performance indicators are designed to reflect these areas of leadership while also contributing to broader organizational objectives. This approach ensures that leadership accountability remains visible while reinforcing the idea that major outcomes result from collective effort.

Monitoring the health of the leadership model

In addition to traditional performance indicators, the leadership team also uses internal reflection tools to assess how well the co-leadership structure itself is functioning.

These periodic check-ins focus on questions such as:

- Are responsibilities still clearly defined?
- Are decisions being made efficiently?
- Are leaders able to support one another effectively?
- Does the model continue to serve the organization's needs?

These “temperature checks” help the leadership team evaluate whether the model remains effective over time.

Navigating complexity in a translocal network

Measuring leadership success can be particularly complex within a translocal network like Accountability Lab. While the Co-CEOs are responsible for the overall direction and health of the network, individual country Labs operate as independent entities with their own leadership and outcomes. As a result, leadership metrics focus on areas where the global leadership team can directly influence progress – such as partnerships, network coordination, resource mobilization, and shared strategic priorities.

A flexible approach to measurement

For organizations exploring co-leadership, the key lesson is not to adopt a single set of metrics, but to establish clear, transparent mechanisms for tracking contributions, alignment, and organizational health over time. Shared leadership works best when responsibility remains visible and measurable – both individually and collectively.

THE BOARD'S ROLE IN THE TRANSITION

At AL, the Board was not simply asked to approve the Co-CEO model. Instead, it played an active role in shaping the structure and ensuring a thoughtfully designed transition.

From the earliest stages, board members engaged in detailed discussions with the leadership team about how shared leadership would function in practice. These conversations included questions about decision-making authority, accountability mechanisms, governance oversight, and the model's long-term sustainability.

Designing the structure together

Rather than adopting a pre-existing template, the leadership team and board worked collaboratively to develop the structure.

This process involved:

- documenting leadership responsibilities and decision-making processes
- clarifying how authority would be distributed across the leadership team
- defining mechanisms for accountability and performance review
- identifying how the model would be communicated to staff, partners, and stakeholders

Because co-leadership models- especially of 3 co-leaders- are still relatively uncommon in the nonprofit sector, many of the questions raised during these conversations had limited precedent in existing literature or governance guidance.

As a result, the organization had to develop several of its own frameworks and guiding documents to support the transition.

The role of ongoing external support

To support this process, the leadership team decided to work with a transition coach. This external facilitation helps structure conversations, clarify roles, and document how the model functions in practice.

The organization also invited a leader who had previously worked within a co-leadership structure to speak with the board. This provided board members with a practical perspective on both the opportunities and challenges of shared leadership.

Communicating the model internally

Another important part of the transition involved ensuring that the leadership model was clearly explained across the organization.

The leadership team developed a communication plan to help staff understand:

- How responsibilities were divided across the Co-CEOs
- How decisions would be made
- How the new structure would affect day-to-day collaboration

This helped ensure that the shift was not only understood at the governance level but also embedded in the organization's culture and operations.

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Lessons for boards

For boards considering similar leadership structures, the key lesson is that co-leadership requires more than formal approval.

Successful transitions typically involve:

- close collaboration between leadership and the board
- clear documentation of roles and decision processes
- openness to experimentation and learning
- strong governance engagement throughout the transition

In practice, the process of designing the structure together can strengthen trust between leadership and the board while ensuring that governance mechanisms evolve alongside the leadership model.

HIRING FOR CO-LEADERSHIP

One of the clearest lessons from AL's experience is that co-leadership depends on more than individual expertise. The relationship between leaders is just as important as their technical skills.

In traditional executive recruitment, boards typically focus on identifying a single candidate with the strongest leadership profile. In a co-leadership structure, however, the dynamics between leaders become central to the model's success.

The importance of values alignment

While technical competencies remain important, successful co-leadership depends heavily on shared values and a strong commitment to the organization's mission and culture. Leaders must be willing to collaborate closely, share responsibility, and support collective decision-making. This requires a level of openness and trust that goes beyond traditional executive leadership roles. For this reason, values alignment often matters more than assembling a perfect set of complementary technical skills. Skills can be learned and strengthened over time, but trust, respect, and shared purpose are much harder to build if they are not present from the outset.

Organic leadership development

AL's experience suggests that co-leadership may work best when leaders grow into the structure organically through the organization. When leaders have already worked together for an extended period of time, they are more likely to understand each other's strengths, communication styles, and decision-making approaches. This shared experience can make it easier to navigate the complexities of joint leadership. While external recruitment into co-leadership roles is possible, organizations may find it more challenging to build the necessary level of trust and alignment quickly.

Rethinking succession planning

Co-leadership also has implications for how organizations approach leadership transitions. In many traditional structures, boards lead the recruitment process for a new executive director or CEO. In a co-leadership model, however, the remaining leader or leaders may need to play a more active role in selecting future co-leaders. This is because the appointment of a new co-leader can fundamentally reshape the chemistry and effectiveness of the leadership team. For that reason, succession planning in a co-leadership model often requires careful attention to leadership compatibility, working styles, and shared vision – not just individual qualifications.

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A leadership partnership, not just a role

Ultimately, hiring for co-leadership is not simply about filling a position. It is about building a leadership partnership capable of sharing responsibility, navigating complexity, and supporting one another over time. Organizations considering co-leadership should therefore approach recruitment with a clear understanding that leadership chemistry, trust, and shared values are essential foundations of the model.

COMPENSATION AND EQUITY

Executive compensation is one of the most practical (and often sensitive) questions organizations raise when considering a co-leadership model. A common concern is whether shared leadership will make an organization “top-heavy” with senior salaries. In practice, organizations adopting co-leadership must think carefully about how executive compensation aligns with both organizational sustainability and internal equity.

Balancing leadership structure and financial reality

In many nonprofit organizations, leadership salaries are already constrained by funding structures and sector norms. Introducing multiple executive leaders does not necessarily mean replicating the compensation level of a traditional single-CEO role multiple times. Instead, organizations often need to think creatively about how to keep leadership compensation fair while reflecting the financial realities of the sector. At AL, the Co-CEO model evolved alongside a commitment to maintaining reasonable overall leadership costs while gradually moving toward greater pay equity across the leadership team

Equity within the leadership team

Ensuring fairness within the leadership structure is also important. Over time, the organization worked to align compensation across the Co-CEO roles so that leaders with comparable responsibilities receive comparable remuneration. This process did not happen instantly and required adjustments over several years. Leadership decisions regarding salary progression were made with attention to both internal fairness and the organization’s financial constraints.

Transparency and expectations

For organizations exploring co-leadership, one key lesson is the importance of addressing compensation questions openly from the beginning.

Leadership teams and boards should discuss:

- How executive salaries will be structured within a shared leadership model
- How compensation compares to a traditional single-leader structure
- How internal equity will be maintained over time
- How financial sustainability will guide compensation decisions

No single formula

There is no universal formula for structuring executive compensation under a co-leadership model. Each organization must balance leadership needs, internal equity, and available resources. What matters most is that compensation decisions are approached transparently and thoughtfully, ensuring that the leadership structure remains both sustainable and fair over time.

CULTURE, EGO, AND THE HUMAN SIDE OF SHARED LEADERSHIP

Co-leadership is sustained not only by systems, structures, and governance processes, but by culture.

In practice, the success of a shared leadership model often depends on how leaders navigate ego, recognition, and shared responsibility.

At AL, the Co-CEO model has required a strong culture of mutual respect, trust, and support. Rather than competing for visibility or influence, the leadership team focuses on ensuring that decisions are led by the person best positioned to address the issue at hand.

This approach encourages leaders to defer to one another's expertise and to recognize that success is collective rather than individual.

A guiding philosophy within the leadership team is that leadership power is most effective when shared.

"The best thing you can do with power is give it away."

- Blair Glencorse

This principle shapes how responsibility and recognition are distributed across the organization. Leaders actively support one another's work and often designate the colleague best positioned to represent the organization in particular forums or decisions.

The result is a leadership culture that prioritizes collaboration over competition. Rather than creating rivalry, the model encourages leaders to focus on strengthening the organization and its broader network.

Shared leadership has also changed how responsibility is experienced at a personal level. Traditional executive leadership can often be isolating, with a single individual expected to make difficult decisions alone.

In contrast, co-leadership allows leaders to navigate complexity together, providing space for reflection, debate, and mutual support.

"Co-leadership has also given me the courage to let go when needed, because I feel held and supported."

- Cheri-Leigh Erasmus

This sense of shared responsibility allows leaders to focus more deeply on their areas of expertise while trusting their colleagues to lead in others.

Over time, the model has helped create a leadership environment in which no single individual is expected to carry the full weight of executive decision-making. Instead, leadership becomes a collective process grounded in trust, collaboration, and shared purpose.

CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESS — AND WHEN NOT TO TRY IT

The leaders at AL are clear that co-leadership is not a universal solution. While the model can offer significant benefits, it also depends on specific organizational conditions. Attempting to implement shared leadership without those foundations can create confusion or instability rather than strengthening leadership. The key lesson from AL's experience is not that co-leadership is fragile, but that it must be intentional, well-designed, and supported across the organization.

Several factors appear particularly important for making a co-leadership structure work effectively.

- ***Alignment on roles, responsibilities, and authority***

Leaders must have a clear and shared understanding of who leads which areas of work and how decisions will be made. Ambiguity in these areas can quickly create tension or slow progress.

- ***Strong trust between leaders***

Co-leadership depends heavily on trust. Leaders must be confident that their colleagues are acting in the organization's best interests and must be willing to defer when another leader is better positioned to guide a decision.

- ***Active board support***

Boards play an essential role in shaping and sustaining the model. Successful co-leadership structures typically involve close collaboration between leadership and the board to define governance mechanisms, clarify accountability, and ensure transparency around decision-making.

- ***Organizational buy-in***

Shared leadership requires cultural alignment across the organization. Staff, partners, and funders must understand how the structure works and feel confident about how decisions are made.

- ***Time and intentional design***

Co-leadership rarely works as a quick structural change. Designing and implementing the model requires careful planning, documentation, and ongoing reflection.

Co-leadership can be particularly challenging when certain conditions are absent.

For example, organizations may struggle with the model when:

- Leadership trust has not yet been established
- Boards are uncomfortable with shared authority
- Internal culture is highly hierarchical
- Leadership transitions are rushed or reactive

Conversely, a situation update focusing on the following questions can ensure collective ongoing commitment to the process:

- All Co-Directors remain committed to the co-leadership model;
- All Co-Directors feel the co-leadership structure is delivering better results for the Lab than otherwise;
- All Co-Directors feel that they are able to support one another and to deliver their respective responsibilities in terms of leadership and management.

In some cases, founder-led organizations may also face challenges if founders are not ready to genuinely share decision-making authority. When founders are open to co-leadership, this often enables them to remain in the organization for a longer period, ensuring continued impact and trust.

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A model that requires ongoing work

Shared leadership is not a one-time structural decision. Like any leadership model, it must be revisited, refined, and supported over time.

When the necessary conditions are present, co-leadership can create a more resilient and collaborative leadership environment. Without those conditions, however, organizations may find that the model creates more complexity than it resolves.

For organizations considering co-leadership, the most important step is to assess whether the cultural, governance, and leadership foundations required for shared leadership are truly in place.

A FIVE-PART FRAMEWORK FOR ORGANIZATIONS EXPLORING CO-LEADERSHIP

Drawing on the reflections and experiences of AL’s leadership team, the following framework offers a practical way for organizations to think through whether co-leadership may work in their context.

While these structural elements are essential, the leadership team also emphasizes that co-leadership depends on relational dynamics such as empathy, care, and mutual support.

Rather than focusing only on structure, the framework below highlights both the organizational and relational conditions required for shared leadership to function effectively.

Area	Questions to Ask
1. Values and Trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Do the leaders share core values?• Is there enough trust to support disagreement, deference, and joint accountability?
2. Decision-Making and Roles	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Which decisions can be made individually and which must be collective?• How will leadership roles evolve as the organization grows or faces new challenges?
3. Processes and Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What documentation, communication rhythms, staffing, ongoing leadership support, and backfilling plans are needed to sustain shared leadership and impact?
4. Measurement and Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How will leadership effectiveness be evaluated?• What KPIs, reflection processes, or review sessions will help assess whether the model is working?
5. Sustainability Over Time	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How will the organization handle leadership transitions, shifting workloads, or external shocks that may affect the structure?