# Valuing Voices blog: Moving towards a Distributed Leadership model

As we aspire to a more equitable and responsible research culture, we need to consider how leadership has the power to influence that culture, and what skills and behaviours it requires. The leadership we will need to fulfil this vision is likely to look very different to what we might consider to be more "traditional" leadership styles. In our view, *leadership needs to be less hierarchical and more flexible.*

Distributed leadership aims to break down or disrupt unhelpful hierarchies by questioning who holds power and why. It recognises how individuals can bring their skills and experiences into the leadership space - whether or not they hold a formal leadership role - and promotes trust, innovation and creativity. This leadership style also brings a broader perspective to a team or organisation by allowing people from diverse backgrounds to bring their experiences to leadership roles and allowing everyone in the team to contribute.

In research, hierarchies include the PI leadership model which prioritises contributions from more senior or experienced staff and can also lead to imbalances in power and recognition within global north/south partnerships. To help us understand and model what a more equitable and responsible team structure might look like, we have been using the Thrive project's (University of Liverpool) Team Convening principles:
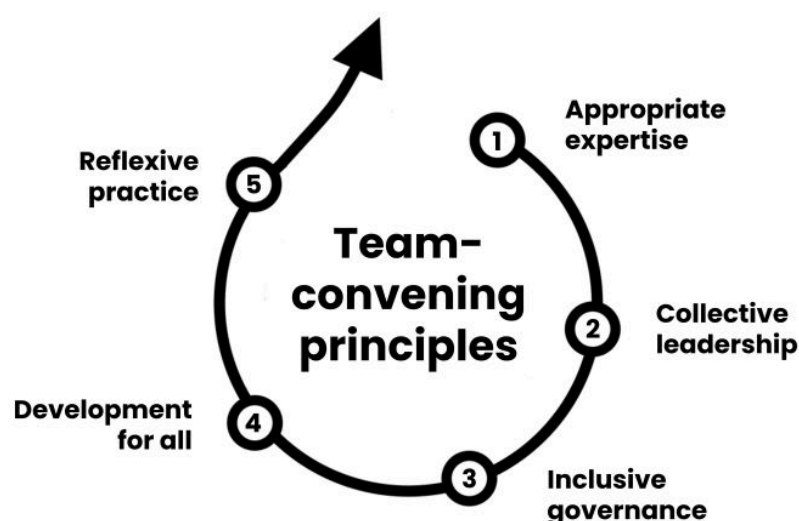
An experience from the Living Lab

In the Valuing Voices Team, we initially tried a **non-hierarchical leadership approach**, which favours collective decision making. We found, however, that this approach led to some significant challenges. The team was getting bogged down in information, and the need for everyone to have a say created large pauses to project progress. These stoppages then led to decision paralysis as no one was given the authority to have the final say. Furthermore, the model did not allow the team to address the underlying hierarchies that still existed, such as differences in salary and role expectations. In practice, asking colleagues in lower grades to contribute equally to key project decisions led to disenchantment rather than empowerment. It overlooked the reality that not all team members were equally compensated so should not be expected to contribute equally to project outputs.

After reflection, the team collectively decided to move to **a distributed leadership model**. In practice, this means individuals taking ownership of their own pieces of work, making decisions independently without the need to check in or defer to others, and making sure everyone's voice is heard on key decisions. Nonetheless, a member of the project's leadership team still holds the overarching responsibility for tasks getting completed. For our team, it means being trusted to lead on our own work packages with monthly reviews, taking key decisions ourselves to keep work moving forward, whilst recognising that the responsibility of important tasks do not sit with members of the team in lower grades but with members of our leadership team who are compensated for this responsibility through their higher salaries and more advanced role expectations.

This resource was written by Alison Goodwin and Roisin Blackburn, with editing and design support from Lucy Cheseldine.