

Examining the Influence of Corporate Culture on Employee Well-Being in Nonprofit Organizations

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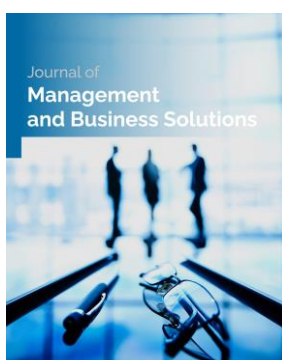
ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore how corporate culture influences employee well-being in nonprofit organizations operating in Tehran, focusing on the interplay of organizational climate, value alignment, and psychosocial support. A qualitative research design was employed using semi-structured, in-depth interviews to collect data from 21 employees working in various nonprofit organizations in Tehran. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure rich, relevant perspectives, and interviews continued until theoretical saturation was reached. Each interview lasted between 45 and 70 minutes and was transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke's framework, supported by NVivo 12 software for systematic coding and theme development. Three major themes emerged: (1) Organizational Climate, including leadership style, communication norms, job autonomy, recognition, and team dynamics; (2) Value Alignment and Purpose, involving mission congruence, ethical integrity, and the role of volunteer culture; and (3) Psychosocial Well-Being at Work, highlighting emotional exhaustion, psychological safety, and access to mental health resources. Employees who experienced inclusive leadership, transparent communication, and alignment with organizational values reported higher well-being, while those in bureaucratic or ethically inconsistent environments described emotional distress, burnout, and disengagement. Tensions between paid staff and volunteers also emerged as a unique cultural challenge in the nonprofit sector. The study highlights the pivotal role of organizational culture in shaping employee well-being within nonprofit settings. Supportive leadership, value congruence, recognition, and psychosocial resources are critical levers for improving mental health and engagement. These findings underscore the need for culturally responsive leadership practices and well-being strategies that align with the mission-driven ethos of nonprofit organizations.

Keywords: corporate culture; employee well-being; nonprofit organizations; organizational climate; value alignment; qualitative research; Tehran; psychological safety.

Introduction

In recent decades, the role of organizational culture has become increasingly central to understanding employee well-being, particularly within mission-driven sectors such as nonprofit organizations. Unlike for-profit firms, nonprofit organizations often operate under resource constraints, high emotional labor demands, and value-laden missions that deeply intertwine with employee identities (Baines et al., 2014). These unique conditions intensify the influence of corporate culture—defined as the shared values, beliefs, norms, and practices that shape organizational behavior—on employee experiences and psychological outcomes (Schein, 2010). While considerable research has explored culture and well-being independently, there is still limited empirical insight into



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how these constructs interact in nonprofit contexts, where purpose, passion, and precarious working conditions frequently collide.

Nonprofit employees often choose their careers based on alignment with the organization's mission rather than for financial incentives (Kim & Lee, 2007). As a result, the emotional connection between staff and the values embedded in their organizational culture can either serve as a source of fulfillment or, conversely, disillusionment and stress. Research has demonstrated that value congruence between employees and their organizations fosters greater job satisfaction, motivation, and psychological resilience (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; Vogel et al., 2016). However, in nonprofit organizations—where the boundary between professional obligations and personal ethical commitments is often blurred—misalignment in values or a toxic organizational culture may contribute to burnout, disengagement, and emotional exhaustion (Hagar & Brudney, 2011). Therefore, the exploration of corporate culture as a determinant of well-being in such settings is both timely and necessary.

Employee well-being is a multi-dimensional construct that encompasses emotional, psychological, and social dimensions of health and functioning in the workplace (Danna & Griffin, 1999). In the nonprofit sector, well-being is often compromised by structural challenges including low compensation, high workload, ambiguous roles, and scarce institutional support (Kim & Lee, 2007). The cultural environment—manifested through leadership style, communication norms, recognition systems, and support resources—either buffers or exacerbates these stressors (Bourke & Dillon, 2018). For instance, when employees perceive leadership as inclusive and supportive, they are more likely to report higher levels of engagement and lower stress, even in high-demand environments (Kuenzi et al., 2020). Conversely, when the culture is marked by hierarchy, lack of transparency, or exclusionary practices, psychological safety is undermined, and emotional strain intensifies.

While much of the literature on organizational culture has been developed in the context of corporate or public-sector organizations (Chatman & O'Reilly, 2016), nonprofit organizations represent a unique hybrid environment. They often combine professionalized management systems with value-driven missions, and operate with a mix of paid staff and volunteers. These hybrid dynamics influence how culture is constructed, negotiated, and experienced by employees (Knutsen & Brower, 2010). For example, volunteers may be idealized as embodying the "true" spirit of service, while paid staff may struggle with identity tensions and recognition disparities (Hustinx & Handy, 2009). Moreover, as nonprofit organizations become more bureaucratized under external funding pressures, there may be a shift away from communal cultures toward more hierarchical or performance-driven cultures, thereby affecting employee morale and well-being (Hasenfeld & Gidron, 2005).

Recent scholarship has called attention to the importance of psychological safety and inclusive cultures in supporting well-being across sectors. Edmondson and Lei (2014) emphasize that employees thrive in cultures where they can express themselves freely without fear of ridicule or punishment. Such environments are particularly important in nonprofit organizations, where emotional labor is often high and where employees must navigate the demands of compassion, advocacy, and service delivery simultaneously (Guy et al., 2008). When the organizational culture facilitates open communication, equitable treatment, and value alignment, it enhances employee resilience and reduces turnover. Alternatively, when these elements are absent, even the most mission-driven employees may experience emotional dissonance, cynicism, or intent to leave (Miller et al., 2011).

In addition to the general cultural dynamics, leadership style is a central cultural vector through which well-being is either cultivated or undermined. Transformational leadership, characterized by empathy, inspiration, and individualized consideration, has been positively linked with employee well-being in both private and nonprofit

settings (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Avolio et al., 2009). Nonprofit leaders who promote empowerment, shared purpose, and emotional support are more likely to foster thriving cultures where employees feel psychologically safe and valued (Benevene et al., 2019). In contrast, transactional or authoritarian leadership may create a culture of fear, rigidity, and emotional suppression, thus diminishing well-being and innovation.

Moreover, recognition practices within corporate culture have emerged as powerful determinants of emotional satisfaction. As Herzberg's (1966) two-factor theory suggests, recognition and appreciation are essential motivators that contribute to job satisfaction and mental well-being. In nonprofit organizations, where financial compensation is often limited, symbolic forms of recognition—such as verbal praise, awards, or public acknowledgment—can significantly impact morale. Conversely, the absence of recognition, or the perception of favoritism toward volunteers or external stakeholders, can produce resentment and emotional disengagement (Tschirhart et al., 2008).

Inclusion and equity are also critical elements of organizational culture affecting well-being. Despite the values of social justice often espoused by nonprofit organizations, internal practices may not always reflect these ideals. Tokenism, unconscious bias, and unequal distribution of opportunities can undermine employees' sense of belonging and fairness (Thomas-Breitfeld & Kunreuther, 2017). A culture that prioritizes authentic inclusion—through diversity efforts, participatory decision-making, and equitable treatment—enhances employee commitment and psychological health (Shore et al., 2011). Thus, exploring how nonprofit organizations construct and enact inclusive cultures is essential to understanding their impact on employee well-being.

Although the literature has provided important conceptual frameworks linking organizational culture and well-being, empirical research specific to nonprofit settings remains underdeveloped. Most studies have relied on quantitative methods, often using self-report surveys that fail to capture the nuanced lived experiences of employees (Saks, 2019). A qualitative approach is especially valuable for unpacking how employees interpret, negotiate, and emotionally respond to cultural practices in their workplaces. Through in-depth interviews, researchers can explore how elements such as leadership, communication, recognition, and value alignment shape daily experiences and long-term well-being in nonprofit organizations.

Furthermore, there is a geographic and cultural gap in the existing literature. Much of the research has been conducted in Western countries, often neglecting the contextual realities of nonprofit work in regions such as the Middle East, where political, social, and economic dynamics may influence organizational culture in unique ways. In Iran, for instance, nonprofit organizations operate within a complex ecosystem of religious, governmental, and civil actors, which may shape distinct cultural expectations and employee experiences (Dehghan & Sadeghi, 2020). By focusing on nonprofit employees in Tehran, this study contributes to the diversification of organizational research and enhances the global understanding of culture and well-being.

This study aims to fill the identified gap by qualitatively exploring how corporate culture influences employee well-being in nonprofit organizations operating in Tehran. Using a thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with 21 employees from various nonprofit institutions, the research investigates the subjective meanings and emotional implications of cultural dynamics. Key areas of interest include leadership style, communication practices, value alignment, recognition, and psychosocial support. By capturing the lived experiences of nonprofit workers, this study provides a richer understanding of how organizational culture contributes to or detracts from employee well-being. The findings aim to inform both theory and practice, offering insights for nonprofit leaders, human resource managers, and policy-makers seeking to build healthier, more inclusive, and more resilient organizational cultures.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative research design aimed at exploring the perceived influence of corporate culture on employee well-being in nonprofit organizations. The research was grounded in an interpretive paradigm, enabling the investigation of subjective experiences and organizational contexts through the voices of the participants. The target population included employees working in various nonprofit organizations based in Tehran, Iran. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of individuals with relevant organizational experience and insight into the cultural and psychological dimensions of their workplace.

A total of 21 participants (13 women and 8 men), aged between 25 and 58, took part in the study. Their roles ranged from frontline staff to middle managers, ensuring diversity in perspectives. Recruitment continued until theoretical saturation was achieved—that is, when no new themes or insights were emerging from additional interviews.

Data Collection

Data were collected using semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted in person at a time and place convenient for the participants. Each interview lasted between 45 and 70 minutes. The interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions designed to explore participants' experiences and perceptions related to organizational culture, values, interpersonal dynamics, leadership styles, and their impact on psychological and emotional well-being. Probing questions were used to deepen the discussion when necessary. All interviews were audio-recorded with the informed consent of the participants and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data analysis

The transcribed interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach. NVivo qualitative data analysis software (version 12) was used to assist in organizing and coding the data systematically. The analysis process involved initial open coding to identify meaningful units of text, followed by axial coding to group related codes into subthemes and overarching themes. To ensure trustworthiness, the study employed member checking, peer debriefing, and audit trails. The research team engaged in continuous reflexive discussions to minimize bias and enhance analytical rigor.

Findings and Results

Theme 1: Organizational Climate

Leadership Style

Participants highlighted leadership as a central force shaping their emotional well-being. Supportive and participatory leaders were often associated with greater motivation and reduced stress. In contrast, authoritarian or micromanaging behaviors led to dissatisfaction. One participant shared, "When my supervisor trusts me to make decisions, I feel valued—but when I'm constantly questioned, it's demoralizing."

Communication Norms

Transparent and open communication was considered critical to well-being. Several employees noted frustration with hierarchical barriers and information hoarding. As one interviewee put it, “Sometimes we hear important news last, even though it affects our work directly. It creates confusion and anxiety.”

Work Environment

Psychological safety and the physical-emotional environment were frequently discussed. Factors such as noise levels, shared office spaces, and emotional atmosphere influenced mood and focus. One employee noted, “Our office feels warm and inclusive—it’s like a second home—but the open layout can be distracting.”

Team Dynamics

Peer relationships and team interactions were vital for emotional support. Collaborative teams promoted resilience, while competitive or conflict-ridden environments harmed morale. A participant remarked, “It’s the little things—someone offering help or checking in. That’s what keeps me going.”

Recognition Practices

The absence or presence of recognition significantly affected morale. Verbal appreciation and public praise were highly valued. In contrast, feeling invisible to management diminished engagement. One participant explained, “Just a ‘thank you’ in front of the team can make a huge difference. Silence makes you wonder if your work matters.”

Job Autonomy

Autonomy over tasks and scheduling was linked to a sense of control and reduced stress. Participants valued flexibility and trust from supervisors. One interviewee said, “When I’m allowed to manage my own time, I feel empowered. But when every move is monitored, it’s suffocating.”

Organizational Structure

Structural issues such as bureaucratic inefficiencies and lack of role clarity often created frustration. Some employees described feeling “stuck” in decision-making processes. As one respondent stated, “It takes weeks to get approval for anything. By then, the moment has passed.”

Theme 2: Value Alignment and Purpose

Organizational Mission

A clearly articulated mission helped participants find personal meaning in their roles. Alignment between individual values and organizational purpose acted as a protective factor against burnout. One participant noted, “Knowing that my work contributes to something bigger helps me push through hard days.”

Ethical Values

Ethical consistency and fairness were essential for maintaining trust. When leadership failed to act with integrity, participants reported emotional dissonance. One respondent shared, “Preaching transparency but hiding financial decisions really hurt our morale.”

Social Impact Orientation

Employees derived psychological strength from their organization’s contribution to society. Pride in the organization’s impact fostered a sense of purpose and self-worth. One interviewee emphasized, “We’re not just doing a job—we’re making a difference. That keeps me motivated.”

Inclusiveness and Equity

Perceptions of fairness, diversity, and inclusion strongly affected well-being. Positive environments embraced gender and cultural equity, whereas tokenism and inequality created distress. A participant said, “They say we value diversity, but in practice, leadership still looks the same—it feels performative.”

Employee–Organization Value Fit

Alignment or misalignment of values shaped long-term engagement. Employees who felt their beliefs mirrored the organization's reported greater fulfillment. In contrast, value clashes led to withdrawal. One individual expressed, "I used to believe in the mission, but now it feels like the organization has changed—I feel disconnected."

Volunteer Culture Influence

The blending of professional staff and volunteers created tensions. While many respected volunteer contributions, some noted role conflicts and uneven expectations. A staff member explained, "It's hard when volunteers are treated better than employees. We do the heavy lifting, but they get the praise."

Theme 3: Psychosocial Well-Being at Work

Emotional Exhaustion

Burnout was a frequent concern, especially under high workloads or ambiguous expectations. Emotional labor—such as maintaining empathy with clients—also drained participants. One participant commented, "It's hard to keep smiling when you're mentally and emotionally tired every day."

Job Satisfaction

Satisfaction stemmed from meaningful tasks, skill development, and a sense of achievement. Participants appreciated clear goals and personal growth. As one employee put it, "When I finish a project that really helps someone, I feel proud. It's not just busy work."

Work–Life Balance

Many employees emphasized the need for flexibility, especially given the emotional demands of nonprofit work. Blurred boundaries led to stress and burnout. One staff member said, "Emails at 10 p.m., weekend meetings—it's hard to shut off. It takes a toll on my mental health."

Psychological Safety

The ability to speak freely without fear of reprisal contributed significantly to emotional comfort. Environments that tolerated mistakes were seen as nurturing. A participant shared, "I feel safe sharing my ideas here. Even if they're not perfect, I'm not afraid of being judged."

Support Resources

Access to supportive mechanisms such as mental health counseling, peer mentoring, and supervisor support was described as vital. Employees valued organizations that acknowledged emotional needs. One interviewee said, "Knowing there's someone to talk to—whether a colleague or counselor—helps me cope with the hard days."

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study shed light on the multidimensional ways in which corporate culture influences employee well-being within nonprofit organizations. Participants described organizational culture not as an abstract concept but as a lived, emotional reality shaped by daily interactions, institutional practices, and symbolic meanings. The emergent themes—organizational climate, value alignment and purpose, and psychosocial well-being—reflect a dynamic interplay between structural factors and personal experiences. These results strongly align with and extend prior literature on organizational culture, leadership, and well-being, particularly within resource-constrained, mission-driven settings.

First, the theme of **organizational climate**—especially leadership style, communication norms, recognition practices, and job autonomy—strongly predicted employee well-being. Participants emphasized that leadership

behaviors directly shaped their emotional and psychological states. Those who experienced supportive, participatory leadership reported higher morale, in line with research by Avolio et al. (2009), which highlighted transformational leadership as a facilitator of psychological health. Conversely, authoritarian or micromanaging leadership styles were associated with increased emotional strain, supporting the findings of Skakon et al. (2010), who noted that poor leadership correlates with stress and burnout in employees.

Similarly, clear and open communication within teams was seen as a vital protective factor against uncertainty and role confusion. This aligns with Edmondson and Lei's (2014) work on psychological safety, which showed that employees are more engaged and less anxious when they feel safe expressing themselves and receiving feedback. The presence of open communication, feedback loops, and opportunities for voice significantly enhanced participants' perceptions of psychological safety. The absence of these elements led to disengagement and feelings of exclusion, reinforcing findings by Kuenzi et al. (2020), who emphasized that communication norms are a key conduit for transmitting organizational culture.

The role of **recognition and job autonomy** emerged as particularly significant in environments where financial compensation is not the primary motivator. In nonprofit settings, verbal praise, symbolic appreciation, and flexibility in work execution were crucial for maintaining job satisfaction and emotional well-being. These findings are consistent with Herzberg's (1966) two-factor theory, which posits that recognition and autonomy are core motivators of satisfaction. They also support Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory, which underscores autonomy and competence as foundational to psychological well-being.

The second major theme, **value alignment and purpose**, revealed that congruence between personal values and organizational mission plays a critical role in buffering against emotional exhaustion. Participants who felt connected to their organization's purpose described a deep sense of fulfillment, even in the face of resource shortages or operational challenges. This corroborates Kristof-Brown et al.'s (2005) meta-analysis, which established that person-organization fit predicts higher job satisfaction and commitment. Moreover, the importance of shared values in nonprofit settings echoes the work of Kim and Lee (2007), who found that mission alignment significantly enhances employee retention and motivation in nonprofit organizations.

Conversely, misalignment between stated organizational values and actual practices triggered emotional dissonance, distrust, and disengagement among participants. For example, when participants perceived a lack of transparency or fairness, especially in decision-making or resource distribution, their sense of organizational identification deteriorated. These findings support the critical perspective advanced by Hasenfeld and Gidron (2005), who argued that increasing bureaucratization in nonprofits can undermine the humanistic values they claim to uphold. Likewise, the challenges participants described regarding equity and tokenism resonate with the critiques raised by Thomas-Breitfeld and Kunreuther (2017), who noted that nonprofits often fall short of practicing internal diversity and inclusion despite promoting these ideals externally.

A unique subtheme that emerged was the **volunteer culture influence**, which created both symbolic tension and role ambiguity. While participants respected the passion and contributions of volunteers, they also noted disparities in how staff and volunteers were treated. These tensions mirror the findings of Hustinx and Handy (2009), who discussed the identity and status challenges that arise in hybrid organizational models blending volunteerism with professional staffing. The perception that volunteers received more praise or symbolic capital despite lower workloads fostered resentment among some employees, adding a layer of emotional complexity to the nonprofit work environment.

The third theme, **psychosocial well-being at work**, encompassed emotional exhaustion, job satisfaction, psychological safety, and access to support resources. Participants frequently discussed the emotional toll of nonprofit work, including compassion fatigue and role overload. These stressors are well documented in previous research (Maslach & Leiter, 2016), particularly in caregiving and advocacy roles. However, participants also pointed to buffering mechanisms such as mental health support, peer mentorship, and leader empathy, which mitigated these negative effects. This is consistent with Guy et al. (2008), who argued that emotional labor in the public and nonprofit sectors requires both institutional and interpersonal supports to sustain well-being.

Moreover, the discussion around **work-life balance** underscored the emotional challenges of blurred boundaries in nonprofit work, particularly when the cause is emotionally demanding. Participants noted difficulty "switching off" from work and a lack of policies that support psychological detachment, which aligns with research by Sonnentag and Fritz (2007) on recovery from work-related stress. Employees in such roles need structured flexibility and institutional norms that honor personal time, especially when mission-driven passion can lead to self-exploitation (Baines et al., 2014).

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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