Exploring the Factors That Shape Leadership Effectiveness in Nonprofit Organizations: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the multifaceted factors that shape leadership effectiveness in nonprofit organizations, focusing on the lived experiences of nonprofit leaders operating within the complex socio-political context of Tehran, Iran. A qualitative research design grounded in phenomenological inquiry was employed to capture the depth and nuance of leadership experiences. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 22 purposefully selected participants occupying leadership or strategic roles in nonprofit organizations in Tehran. The sampling continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed thematically using NVivo software. Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework, with codes and themes iteratively developed through open and axial coding procedures. Trustworthiness was ensured through member checking, peer debriefing, and audit trail documentation. Three main themes emerged from the analysis: (1) personal and interpersonal attributes, including self-awareness, emotional intelligence, ethical integrity, and communication competence; (2) organizational and structural context, encompassing role clarity, delegation, support systems, and flexibility; and (3) external environmental and stakeholder dynamics, such as community engagement, donor relations, regulatory pressures, and public perception. The findings highlight that leadership effectiveness is shaped not only by individual traits but also by organizational conditions and the broader socio-political landscape. Participants emphasized the need for adaptability, moral grounding, and strategic communication in navigating complex and constrained environments. Leadership effectiveness in nonprofit organizations is a multifactorial phenomenon driven by the interaction between personal competencies, organizational systems, and external influences. Culturally grounded and context-specific leadership frameworks are essential to understanding and enhancing leadership practices in resource-constrained and politically sensitive settings.

Keywords: Nonprofit leadership; leadership effectiveness; qualitative research; emotional intelligence; stakeholder engagement; Iran; organizational context; adaptive leadership.

Introduction

In an era marked by global crises, economic uncertainty, and complex social challenges, the role of nonprofit organizations (NPOs) has become increasingly critical in addressing gaps left by public and private sectors. As these organizations strive to deliver services, advocate for marginalized populations, and implement sustainable change, the effectiveness of their leadership becomes a cornerstone of organizational success (Riggio & Orr, 2004). Unlike corporate or governmental leadership models, leadership in nonprofit settings often entails navigating unique constraints, including limited resources, ambiguous governance structures, and a volunteer-dependent workforce.

These conditions necessitate a nuanced understanding of what constitutes effective leadership in this sector and how such leadership is shaped by both internal and external factors (Bryson et al., 2016).

Leadership effectiveness in nonprofit organizations is not solely defined by performance metrics or strategic outcomes. Instead, it encompasses the ability to motivate teams, align diverse stakeholders, make ethically sound decisions, and adapt to dynamic environments (Dym & Hutson, 2005). Given the mission-driven nature of NPOs, leadership involves a strong moral compass, visionary thinking, and a deep commitment to community engagement. However, despite its central importance, nonprofit leadership has been under-examined in scholarly literature compared to leadership in the for-profit and public sectors (Miller-Millesen, 2003). This research seeks to fill that gap by qualitatively exploring the factors that shape leadership effectiveness in nonprofit organizations, particularly within the socio-political and economic context of Tehran.

The complexity of nonprofit leadership is heightened by the hybrid nature of these organizations. Operating between the private and public domains, nonprofits are accountable not only to funders and regulators but also to service beneficiaries, volunteers, and the broader community (Oster, 1995). This multi-stakeholder landscape demands adaptive leadership styles that can reconcile competing demands and ethical tensions (Bass, 1999). Moreover, unlike corporate leaders who are often incentivized through financial rewards, nonprofit leaders are typically driven by intrinsic motivators such as social impact, value alignment, and a sense of purpose (Boehm, 2020). These intrinsic drivers influence how leadership is enacted and perceived, calling for a deeper understanding of the interplay between personal attributes and organizational context.

Several theoretical perspectives have been employed to understand nonprofit leadership. Transformational leadership theory, for example, has been widely applied due to its emphasis on inspiration, motivation, and individualized consideration (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Research suggests that transformational leadership correlates positively with employee engagement, organizational commitment, and innovation in nonprofit settings (Wright & Pandey, 2010). Similarly, servant leadership has gained attention for its alignment with nonprofit values such as altruism, community orientation, and ethical stewardship (Greenleaf, 1977; Eva et al., 2019). However, while these theories offer valuable insights, they often lack contextual specificity, especially in environments where external pressures such as political volatility, legal ambiguity, and financial instability prevail.

The Iranian nonprofit sector presents a particularly rich context for exploring these dynamics. Despite facing structural constraints and regulatory scrutiny, Iranian NPOs play a vital role in areas such as education, poverty alleviation, cultural preservation, and healthcare delivery (Sotoudeh & Malekzadeh, 2021). Leadership in these organizations requires navigating bureaucratic challenges, engaging with local communities, and fostering resilience in the face of resource scarcity. Moreover, the cultural context in Iran—characterized by collectivist values, hierarchical relationships, and religious influences—shapes leadership expectations and practices in unique ways (Hofstede et al., 2010). Therefore, leadership effectiveness in Tehran-based NPOs cannot be fully understood through Western-centric models alone.

Empirical studies have begun to uncover some of the critical traits and conditions that influence nonprofit leadership success. For instance, self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and ethical conduct have been identified as core competencies that contribute to leadership credibility and influence (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2013; Brown & Treviño, 2006). Research by Herman and Renz (2008) further emphasizes that nonprofit effectiveness is strongly correlated with leaders' ability to develop social capital, foster trust, and maintain strong community relationships. Other studies highlight the importance of organizational learning, adaptive decision-making, and

collaborative leadership in sustaining nonprofit missions under turbulent conditions (Light, 2004; Raelin, 2003). However, these findings often emerge from quantitative designs or case studies situated in Western contexts, limiting their generalizability to settings like Iran.

A growing body of qualitative research underscores the importance of context in shaping leadership practice. For example, Schedler and Proeller (2011) argue that leadership in mission-based organizations is fundamentally relational and shaped by interactions with various stakeholders. In culturally complex environments, the ability to engage in culturally intelligent leadership becomes paramount (Ang et al., 2007). This includes understanding local norms, navigating implicit power structures, and aligning leadership behavior with community expectations. In Tehran, nonprofit leaders must often reconcile institutional mandates with religious or political sensitivities, requiring a high degree of moral reasoning and strategic ambiguity (Farazmand, 2001). These contextual factors can significantly influence leadership strategies and their perceived legitimacy.

Additionally, organizational structures and internal systems play a key role in shaping leadership outcomes. Nonprofits often operate with fluid hierarchies, ambiguous reporting lines, and an overreliance on informal processes, which can simultaneously enable agility and cause dysfunction (Anheier, 2005). Leadership in such settings involves not only individual competencies but also the ability to design supportive structures, delegate effectively, and manage performance through non-traditional means (Cornforth & Brown, 2014). Furthermore, access to mentorship, capacity-building programs, and feedback systems can either support or constrain leadership development, particularly in resource-constrained environments (Taylor, Cornelius, & Colvin, 2014).

External factors—such as donor influence, government regulation, and public perception—also exert significant pressure on nonprofit leaders. Donor expectations can sometimes skew program priorities, while regulatory uncertainties may hinder strategic planning (Bies, Bartunek, Fort, & Zald, 2007). Leaders must therefore possess not only strategic acumen but also diplomatic skill and narrative competence to manage these relationships effectively. Public trust, often earned through consistent ethical behavior and transparent communication, was identified in previous research as a crucial enabler of nonprofit success (Sargeant & Lee, 2004). In environments where public skepticism or political instability is high, the ability of leaders to maintain legitimacy becomes even more vital.

This study addresses the above-mentioned gaps by conducting a qualitative investigation into the lived experiences of nonprofit leaders in Tehran. Through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 22 participants holding leadership or strategic roles in nonprofit organizations, the study seeks to identify the key personal, organizational, and environmental factors that shape leadership effectiveness. By applying thematic analysis and leveraging NVivo software for rigorous data management, the research aims to generate context-sensitive insights that extend beyond prescriptive leadership models.

In doing so, the study contributes to the limited but growing body of literature on nonprofit leadership in non-Western, resource-constrained, and politically complex environments. It emphasizes the need for culturally grounded, practically relevant understandings of leadership effectiveness—insights that can inform leadership development, policy design, and organizational capacity-building initiatives across the global nonprofit sector.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative research design to gain an in-depth understanding of the factors that shape leadership effectiveness in nonprofit organizations. A phenomenological approach was adopted to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of organizational leaders and senior staff members operating within the nonprofit sector. The participants were purposefully selected based on their leadership roles or extensive involvement in managerial or strategic capacities within nonprofit organizations in Tehran, Iran. The inclusion criteria ensured that participants had at least three years of experience in nonprofit leadership or strategic planning, thus possessing rich, relevant insights for the study.

A total of 22 participants were interviewed, with the sampling process continuing until theoretical saturation was reached—that is, the point at which no new themes or insights were emerging from subsequent interviews. The sample included executive directors, program managers, fundraising coordinators, and volunteer leaders, ensuring diversity in role and perspective within the nonprofit landscape.

Data Collection

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, which provided a balance between guided inquiry and open-ended exploration. An interview protocol was developed, covering key areas such as leadership challenges, decision-making, motivation, stakeholder engagement, and organizational dynamics. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was conducted in person at participants' workplaces or online through secure video conferencing platforms, depending on participant preference and availability.

All interviews were audio-recorded with the informed consent of participants and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis. Ethical approval was obtained from the appropriate institutional review board, and all participants were assured of confidentiality and their right to withdraw from the study at any point.

Data analysis

The data analysis followed a thematic analysis approach, guided by Braun and Clarke's six-step framework: familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. The qualitative data were managed and analyzed using NVivo software, which facilitated the organization of codes and emerging patterns.

Open coding was initially applied to the transcripts to identify meaningful units of information, followed by axial coding to group similar codes into subthemes and broader themes. The analysis was conducted iteratively, allowing for refinement of categories and validation through constant comparison across interviews. To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, techniques such as member checking, peer debriefing, and audit trail documentation were employed.

Findings and Results

Theme 1: Personal and Interpersonal Attributes

Self-Awareness

Effective nonprofit leaders consistently emphasized the importance of self-awareness in navigating their roles. They described understanding their emotional triggers, reflecting on their personal strengths and weaknesses, and

maintaining role clarity. One participant shared, "I constantly ask myself whether I'm leading for the mission or just managing the chaos. That awareness keeps me grounded." Concepts such as emotional insight, adaptive mindset, and inner motivation were recurrent across narratives.

Communication Competence

Communication was identified as a cornerstone of leadership effectiveness. Participants described the need for active listening, empathic dialogue, and cultural sensitivity in diverse nonprofit settings. A manager explained, "You're not just delivering a message; you're interpreting a mission to different stakeholders—volunteers, donors, communities." Many leaders noted that persuasive speaking and attentive listening enhanced trust and team cohesion.

Ethical Integrity

Leaders repeatedly emphasized acting with transparency, fairness, and alignment between values and actions. Ethical lapses, even minor ones, were seen as damaging to organizational credibility. One executive stated, "If I don't model integrity, how can I expect my team to commit to our social mission?" Consistency and accountability were cited as vital for trust-building both within the organization and with external partners.

Emotional Intelligence

The ability to manage one's emotions and understand others' emotional states emerged as a fundamental trait. Respondents highlighted skills such as self-regulation, empathy, and emotional resilience. "There are days I feel overwhelmed," admitted one director, "but I've learned to pause, breathe, and redirect before reacting to stress or criticism." Leaders who demonstrated high emotional intelligence were perceived as more approachable and effective during crises.

Decision-Making Confidence

Many participants noted that nonprofit contexts often demand rapid, high-stakes decisions with limited resources. Being decisive, prioritizing tasks, and trusting one's strategic instincts were seen as crucial. A project coordinator remarked, "You can't wait for perfect information; you learn to balance intuition with data." Confidence in decision-making helped foster clarity and direction among teams.

Conflict Management

Managing disagreements constructively was identified as a critical competency. Participants mentioned the importance of mediation, assertiveness, and neutral facilitation. As one respondent put it, "Conflicts aren't inherently bad; it's how we handle them that either builds the team or breaks it apart." Leaders often saw their role as balancing advocacy with objectivity during internal tensions.

Visionary Thinking

Leaders who articulated and pursued a strategic vision were seen as inspiring and influential. Several described the challenge of aligning short-term realities with long-term goals. "You have to believe in a future that others can't yet see," explained one founder. This subtheme included ideas such as innovation, boundary-pushing, and future-oriented leadership.

Theme 2: Organizational and Structural Context

Role Clarity and Delegation

Many leaders emphasized the importance of clearly defined roles and effective delegation. Vague responsibilities often led to inefficiencies and burnout. A program manager reflected, "In nonprofits, we all wear many hats. But

unless everyone knows which hat to wear when, things get chaotic." Concepts such as task ownership and avoiding micromanagement were central.

Support Systems

Participants highlighted how mentorship, leadership development, and peer feedback served as essential support structures. The absence of these systems often left leaders feeling isolated. "We need more leadership pipelines—not just throwing people into roles and hoping they swim," said one respondent. Psychological safety and board support were also crucial to leadership sustainability.

Performance Evaluation

While formal appraisals were rare, leaders valued informal feedback and participatory evaluation models. One executive mentioned, "We don't just evaluate outputs; we talk about growth—what worked, what didn't, what can be better." Transparent KPIs and development plans were associated with improved accountability and morale.

Resource Constraints

Scarce resources—especially funding and human capital—were a recurring theme. Leaders described how financial limitations impacted decision-making and team motivation. "Some days, it feels like running a marathon with one leg," said one participant. Budget limits, donor dependency, and burnout risks were among the open codes in this subtheme.

Structural Flexibility

Adaptive structures were cited as necessary for responding to crises and innovation. Participants valued fluid hierarchies and decentralized authority. A coordinator shared, "If you're rigid in a nonprofit, you'll snap under pressure. Flexibility is our strength." Leaders discussed how organizational agility enabled rapid pivots during external or internal disruptions.

Theme 3: External Environment and Stakeholder Dynamics

Community Engagement

Participants stressed the importance of direct engagement with the communities they serve. Leaders who actively listened and built trust were more effective in aligning programs with actual needs. "If the community doesn't see themselves in our work, then we've failed, no matter how well we fundraise," noted one interviewee. Grassroots involvement and social accountability were common ideas.

Donor Relations

The need to balance transparency with strategic messaging in donor communication was widely acknowledged. One fundraising director explained, "Donors want numbers, but they also want a story—a connection to impact." Long-term partnerships and mission alignment were critical for sustainability.

Regulatory and Legal Influences

Several participants reported frustration with unclear or restrictive government policies. Navigating legal ambiguity and shifting regulations required both caution and creativity. "The paperwork alone can be enough to discourage innovation," remarked one director. Legal barriers often shaped leadership strategies significantly.

Socio-Political Pressure

Leaders described the difficulty of maintaining neutrality or advocacy in politically sensitive contexts. Ideological divisions, especially in a highly dynamic environment like Tehran, impacted program design and stakeholder trust. "You have to walk a tightrope—speak truth to power without being shut down," stated a program leader.

Public Perception and Branding

Maintaining a strong public image was considered essential to attract both support and legitimacy. Leaders mentioned storytelling, reputation management, and effective media engagement. One interviewee noted, "A single viral post—positive or negative—can shift everything." This subtheme reflected how narrative control influenced leadership effectiveness.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study explored the multifaceted factors that shape leadership effectiveness in nonprofit organizations, drawing on the lived experiences of 22 leaders operating in Tehran's nonprofit sector. The findings suggest that leadership effectiveness in these organizations is a result of the dynamic interaction between **personal and interpersonal competencies**, **organizational and structural factors**, and **external environmental pressures**. Each of these dimensions plays a critical role in influencing how leadership is enacted, perceived, and sustained.

One of the most salient findings relates to the significance of **personal and interpersonal attributes**, particularly self-awareness, emotional intelligence, communication competence, and ethical integrity. These qualities form the internal core of leadership effectiveness and align with existing scholarship that emphasizes the humanistic and relational nature of nonprofit leadership. Goleman et al. (2013) have emphasized emotional intelligence as a cornerstone of leadership, especially in emotionally charged and value-driven environments like nonprofits. Similarly, Brown and Treviño (2006) argue that ethical integrity not only shapes internal culture but also external legitimacy, which is consistent with the participants' emphasis on values-driven conduct and moral decision-making. Communication competence, which was widely discussed by participants, has been consistently linked in the literature to trust-building, clarity of vision, and stakeholder engagement (Riggio & Reichard, 2008).

The study also underscores the importance of **visionary thinking and decision-making confidence**—two subthemes that were deeply interwoven in how leaders responded to uncertainty, resource limitations, and strategic complexity. These attributes resonate with transformational leadership theory, which emphasizes the leader's ability to inspire and mobilize others toward a shared mission (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Leaders in this study frequently noted their reliance on intuition and decisiveness, which complements findings by Hooijberg and Choi (2001), who identified adaptive decision-making as a predictor of leadership effectiveness in ambiguous environments. The ability to mediate conflicts, mentioned by many respondents, reflects the broader literature on conflict competence and its role in maintaining organizational cohesion (Abigail & Cahn, 2011).

Within the **organizational and structural context**, the themes of role clarity, delegation, structural flexibility, and performance evaluation were emphasized as practical determinants of leadership effectiveness. These findings echo Cornforth and Brown's (2014) work on nonprofit governance, which highlights the operational tensions nonprofit leaders often face in unstructured or ambiguous settings. The presence of support systems—mentorship, board backing, and professional development—was seen as vital in mitigating leadership fatigue and isolation, particularly in lean environments. This aligns with research by Taylor, Cornelius, and Colvin (2014), who emphasized that nonprofit leadership thrives in organizations that invest in capacity building and leadership development pathways.

A particularly compelling contribution of this study is its attention to the **external environmental factors** that affect leadership behavior. Leaders in Tehran navigate a landscape marked by socio-political volatility, regulatory ambiguity, and fluctuating public trust—challenges that demand political acumen and narrative management. These findings corroborate prior research by Farazmand (2001), who argued that leadership in developing contexts is

inherently political and requires the ability to adapt to shifting institutional frameworks. Regulatory barriers and donor pressure were frequently cited as constraining leadership autonomy and influencing organizational priorities. Bies et al. (2007) similarly highlighted the tensions nonprofit leaders experience when external funders' agendas shape internal strategy.

Another noteworthy theme is **community engagement and stakeholder responsiveness**, which participants viewed as essential to leadership legitimacy. This finding supports Herman and Renz's (2008) claim that nonprofit effectiveness is strongly linked to leaders' capacity to build social capital and maintain inclusive relationships. The participants' attention to grassroots involvement, listening to community needs, and managing public perception demonstrates that leadership in this context extends beyond the organization's boundaries. It involves fostering trust in environments where skepticism toward civil institutions may exist. Such results parallel Sargeant and Lee's (2004) findings on the role of trust in nonprofit sustainability.

Notably, the participants did not refer to formal strategic planning or hierarchical authority as primary drivers of leadership success. Instead, they emphasized adaptability, improvisation, and responsiveness—suggesting that **structural agility** may be more valuable than rigid planning in nonprofit contexts. This is in line with Light's (2004) assertion that high-performing nonprofits exhibit fluid decision-making structures that accommodate rapid environmental changes. Leaders' focus on flexibility also reflects emerging literature on adaptive leadership, which encourages distributed leadership models and learning-based approaches to management (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009).

Despite operating in a constrained political and economic context, many nonprofit leaders expressed optimism, resilience, and a strong sense of purpose. This mirrors the intrinsic motivation and value alignment identified by Boehm (2020) as core traits of effective nonprofit leaders. Yet, the reliance on intrinsic rewards also suggests potential burnout risks if organizational structures do not sufficiently support emotional well-being and professional growth. Some respondents explicitly noted the emotional toll of their roles, reinforcing previous findings on the psychological demands of nonprofit leadership (LeRoux & Feeney, 2013).

This study, therefore, contributes a more **context-sensitive, integrative framework** for understanding nonprofit leadership effectiveness—one that encompasses not only individual traits and organizational conditions but also the broader ecosystem of stakeholders, politics, and cultural expectations. The Iranian context, with its unique religious, social, and political dynamics, provides an important counterpoint to Western-centric leadership models. These findings advocate for a more pluralistic understanding of leadership that is responsive to local norms and institutional realities.

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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.

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Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adheried 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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