Leadership Competencies in Non-Profit Organizations: Insights from Qualitative Research

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Abstract

The ever-changing environment required non-profits to adapt more effective leadership skills. This study provides an understanding of the characteristics of competent non-profit organization leaders. A qualitative phenomenology methodology was used, with 15 individual in-depth interviews with leaders from a non-profit organization in Saudi Arabia, leading the data collection process. Thematic analysis was applied to generate themes. The results revealed six main leadership competencies in the non-profit sector: 1) passion and altruism, 2) organizational advocacy, 3) instilling community support, 4) focus and strategy, 5) trust and delegation, and 6) continuous self-learning and agility. The findings suggest that leaders in different non-profit leadership organizations should possess six categories of competency to overcome internal and external challenges effectively. The study's findings contribute to the understanding and exploration of the nature of leadership competencies in non-profit organizations, and can be beneficial to similar contexts.

1. Introduction

Leadership plays a critical role in the success of any organization (Bryson, 2018). Non-profit organization, which are driven by a social mission rather than profit, are no exception (Bryson, 2018). Specifically, the role of leadership in non-profit organizations is critical not only in achieving the organization's mission but also in ensuring its long-term sustainability and success. Effective leaders in this sec-

tor must indeed possess a unique set of skills and competencies to navigate the complex challenges of working in a values-driven environment with limited resources (Devalkar et al., 2017; Mitchell, 2017). In this context, understanding the key competencies and characteristics of effective non-profit leaders is essential for the sector's growth and impact.

According to Phipps and Burbach (2010), core strategic leadership relates to a leader's ability to create and maintain three organizational capacities: the capacity to learn, change, and innovate managerial capacity. However, most of this research is conducted in corporate publications for profit-making institutions, and the empirical investigation of leadership competencies in non-profit organizations is relatively scarce (Winand & Hoeber, 2017). In this context, the authors of this study identified a need for a competency model for leadership in non-profit organizations. This study attempts to bridge this information gap by exploring advances in Saudi organizations and looking for specific leadership competencies that best fit non-profit organizational needs. A leadership competency framework for non-profit organizations based on all leadership positions could be used as a base for future management practices in similar contexts.

2. Literature Review

Organizations that aim to endure, thrive, and carry out significant and beneficial work must be responsive to the challenges posed by the world (Bryson, 2018). Technological, political, economic, and other events are indeed continuously changing our environment and creating new challenges for organizations (Bryson, 2018). For their survival, organizations need to have the abilities to adapt to these changes. This is especially true for non-profits, where serving communities and the ever-changing environment is its core principles. As such, effective strategic leadership is paramount (Bryson, 2018). However, effective leadership is a multidimensional concept that involves a range of skills and behaviors.

2.1. Effective Communication

First of all, a good leader must be intrinsically motivated (Santora et al., 2019), and have a clear and compelling vision for the future which they should be able to communicate to others. They inspire and motivate their team to work towards a common goal as well as gather the support from the community behind their initiatives. Creating value for the community and earning their trust are fundamental objectives for most non-profits, underscoring the significance of the latter. The core mission of these organizations is to serve the public good, making it crucial to prioritize the establishment of trust with the community they serve. According to Leardini et al. (2020), transparency, education, and stimulation of the community's active involvement in initiatives can help achieve this objective. By keeping the community informed and involved about specific activities and resource allocation, non-profits can indeed foster a sense of engagement and create a stronger relationship with their stakeholders (Alex-

ander & Fernandez, 2020).

In addition, creating value is also relevant for enhancing an organization's reputation and promoting donor support. The significant increase in the number of non-profit organizations worldwide, combined with a decline in government grants and donations following the recent recession, and the growing importance of corporate social responsibility have highlighted the crucial role of non-profits' reputation in attracting donations, volunteers, and partnerships (de Quevedo-Puente & Pérez-Cornejo, 2020). In this regard, de Quevedo-Puente and Pérez-Cornejo (2020) find that non-profits that provide valuable services or programs that address pressing community needs are more likely to attract resources and partnerships that enable them to sustain and expand their impact over time. Because non-profits rely heavily on sponsorships for their survival and ability to respond to unforeseen circumstances (Mitchell, 2017), effectively attracting donors is paramount.

To effectively navigate changing mission and service contexts, individuals must have the ability to comprehend and interpret diverse activities, interests, and values within an organization (Lim et al., 2021). This is also commonly referred to as interpretive leadership skills, which is considered a vital executive competency for establishing a shared understanding of the non-profit's objectives and guiding others towards that understanding. Specifically, the three key components of interpretive leadership skills are contextual astuteness, coordination abilities, and self-reflection (Lim et al., 2021). Contextual astuteness relates to the capacity to comprehend the various interest groups and sources of power within a broader community and the interplay between them. Coordination capacity refers to the administrative ability to facilitate collaboration and cooperation among different employees within their respective fields of work. Finally, self-reflection involves positively questioning one's actions and motivations, and evaluating whether there may be a more effective or efficient way of approaching them in the future.

2.2. Support, Coaching, and Shared Leadership

A second important leadership trait relates to coaching and emotional support. Leaders should be able to listen to and understand the concerns and ideas of their team members and communicate with them in a way that is respectful and engaging (Santora et al., 2019). Numerous scholars have emphasized that a leader's authentic and transparent approach can positively impact employee well-being and engagement (Farid et al., 2022), organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB) (Basahal et al., 2022a), commitment, and motivation (Boysen et al., 2021). Employees should be acknowledged for their distinctive knowledge and competencies. Moreover, they should be motivated to utilize their abilities and knowledge to enhance organizational processes and achieving better outcomes (Routhieaux, 2015). Freeborough and Patterson (2016) find that this type of leadership, often referred to as transformational leadership, elevates followers to reach their full potential by fulfilling their higher-order needs, which conse-

quently results in higher levels of engagement. Also, by fostering creativity and promoting problem-solving, transformational leaders can attract a larger pool of employees (Freeborough & Patterson, 2016). Santora et al. (2019) add that this however requires a certain personality alignment between leaders and employees, to maximize a smooth collaboration.

Besides their ability to listen to others, encourage creativity, and incorporate feedback, effective leaders must also coach and mentor their team members with the aim of helping them reach their full potential. This includes providing guidance and support, and recognizing and rewarding their team members' achievements (Basahal et al., 2022b; Boysen et al., 2021). Such "shared leadership", according to Routhieaux (2015), can improve an organization's ability to navigate uncertainty and ensure its sustainability. This culture of shared leadership must be guided by senior executives who provide clear direction while remaining flexible in implementation.

2.3. Flexibility and Adaptability

Research shows that a good non-profit leader must be flexible and adaptable. In times of change and uncertainty, organizational adaptability is indeed critical to promoting progress and maintaining effectiveness and productivity (Bryson, 2018). This means that leaders must be able to adjust their approach to different situations and team members to achieve the desired outcomes (Lim et al., 2021).

However, preparedness to change does not only necessitate leaders' adaptability but also their ability to identify and develop adaptability in employees. This competence enables leaders to select employees who are most suitable for change-oriented work, and who can serve as motivators and exemplars for others during the transition period accompanying any new initiative (Calarco, 2020). Concrete, Calarco (2020) argues that adaptability translates into three types of flexibility: cognitive, dispositional and emotional flexibility. The first relates to the acknowledgement that change occurred, the ability to formulate new strategies, and the application of divergent thinking, which is a cognitive process that involves exploring various perspectives, breaking traditional patterns of thought, and considering unconventional alternatives. Dispositional flexibility relates to a leader's capacity to remain optimistic and realistic, and approach the change as an opportunity rather than a threat.

Finally, Calarco (2020) underscores emotional flexibility as a crucial aspect of adaptability that pertains to managing the emotions of others. Effective management necessitates that managers create a safe environment for employees to express their emotions, whether positive or negative, without fear of criticism. This can be facilitated through regular group discussions scheduled by managers, providing individuals with an opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings openly regarding the ongoing change and its potential impact on the organization.

Regardless of the above, Santora et al. (2019) warn that although change in an organization can bring positive benefits such as increased efficiency and innova-

tion, too much change can create confusion, uncertainty and resistance among employees, leading to decreased productivity and morale. Thus, a balanced approach to change management is necessary to ensure that changes are implemented successfully.

3. Research Method

The study adopts a qualitative interpretive research design as the emphasis is on perceptions and lived experiences. More specifically, it follows a phenomenological research design. Phenomenology explores lived experiences and analyses the perspective of the individuals experiencing the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This type of design is the most effective choice as the focus of the study is on understanding the lived experiences of individuals who have leadership positions in non-profit organizations.

3.1. Data Collection

The selection criteria for participants in this study were twofold: their expertise and familiarity with the concept of leadership competency, and their leadership contributions at both national and international levels within non-profit organizations. The rationale for selecting these individuals is because their leadership positions require the application of a distinct set of competencies tailored to specific responsibilities and duties.

In this study, a semi-structured interview protocol was employed, consisting of a set of prepared questions and overall topics for the interviews. Ad hoc follow-up questions were also asked as needed during the interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2016). After each interview, the researcher recorded key ideas and themes. The decision to conclude data collection was made after fifteen interviews, as theoretical saturation had been achieved, and further interviews were deemed unlikely to yield new insights.

3.2. Participants

Data were gathered during the months of January and February 2023 through semi-structured interviews with fifteen participants. These included five females and ten males who have experience in leading non-profit organizations. Table 1 visualizes some import participant demographics.

3.3. Data Analysis

The study conducted interviews in Arabic, which were then transcribed and translated into English for analysis. A six-step thematic analysis approach was used to identify and categorize codes and sub-themes, as per the methodology defined by Creswell and Poth (2016). The first step of the research process involved the researchers reading and rereading the transcripts to become familiar with the data, followed by assigning codes to text fragments that represented a specific idea. The process continued until all possible codes and concepts were

Table 1. Participant demographics.

Participant Number	Gender	Position	Qualification
1	Female	Executive Director	MSc
2	Male	Executive Director	MSc
3	Female	Executive Director	MSc
4	Male	Chairman of the Board of Directors	Surgery Doctor
5	Male	Vice president	MSc
6	Male	Executive Director	MSc
7	Female	Executive Director	MSc
8	Male	Operational Executive Director	MSc
9	Male	Board of Directors	MSc
10	Female	Executive Director	Ph.D.
11	Male	Executive Director	MSc
12	Male	Executive Director	Ph.D.
13	Male	President	Ph.D.
14	Male	President	Ph.D.
15	Female	Executive Director	MSc

identified. Then, the researcher categorized and organized the connections between different codes into sub-themes. Finally, these sub-themes were combined and clustered into six higher-order themes: 1) passion and altruism, 2) organizational advocacy, 3) instilling community support, 4) focus and strategy, 5) trust and delegation, and 6) continuous self-learning and agility.

4. Findings

To describe or define a competent non-profit organizational leader, six themes were developed: 1) passion and altruism, 2) organizational advocacy, 3) instilling community support, 4) focus and strategy, 5) trust and delegation, and 6) continuous self-learning and agility. Each participant was assigned a participant number to ensure confidentiality. Direct participant quotes were used to support findings, and were translated from Arabic to English and slightly modified to ensure clarity for English-speaking readers (Santos et al., 2015).

4.1. Passion and Altruism

According to many participants, the distinguishing factor between a leader in the non-profit and for-profit sectors lies in their motivation. While it is believed that for-profit leaders are mostly driven by personal gain and career advancement, non-profit leaders are said to be guided by altruistic behavior and a genuine desire to assist others, which is less relevant to the for-profit sector.

I have a passion and love for helping others. You won't feel this "human part" as much in other sectors as you do in the non-profit. [6]

More so, leaders in non-profit organizations are expected to measure their success by the number of people they have been able to assist rather than the amount of money they have personally generated. Our results indeed suggest that the primary goal of non-profit leaders is to improve the lives of those they serve, and therefore, the impact they make on people's lives is the most significant measure of their success. With this in mind, it is believed that leaders who are genuinely motivated by altruistic behavior derive great satisfaction from the positive impact they have on people's lives and the community, making it their ultimate measure of success.

My success is not measured in money, it's measured in terms of how many people I am affected. I don't expect to get a bonus at the end of every year for the amount of work I've done. I'm doing this because I really want to make a difference. I think if you have that mentality you never get tired of what you're doing. [8].

In addition, apart from driving personal motivation, passion also seems to play a vital factor in inspiring others. When a leader truly believes in the cause and is passionate about helping others, their enthusiasm is indeed said to radiate to their team and create a sense of purpose and commitment among employees. This can have a cascading effect, leading to a more empathetic and driven team that is more likely to align with the organization's values and mission.

A good leader should be a true believer and supporter of the organizational purpose. When a leader shows confidence and support in the organization, he is more likely to convey that feeling to others, so the team will likewise gather behind the organization and its vision. [3]

Conversely, if a leader lacks this passion and empathetic attitude, they are unlikely to excel in their role. Without a genuine desire to help others, the work may indeed become tedious and unfulfilling, leading to a lack of motivation and a diminished ability to make a positive impact.

If I am a leader in the sector, no matter how much I can reach the position, if I do not have the ability to sympathize with the beneficiary and the ability to communicate this sympathy and feel it, I am in the wrong place. [9]

4.2. Organizational Advocacy

Our study findings suggest that a non-profit leader must possess the ability to keep critical stakeholders, including the Board of Directors and significant donors, engaged and supportive of the organization. This involves adopting a stakeholder-centric approach that requires leaders to empathize with others' agendas and viewpoints while making informed decisions that keep them satisfied. Effective communication skills are crucial for maintaining stakeholder interest, making it imperative for non-profit leaders to master this skill.

The leader must be an excellent communicator with all stockholders. Whether

they are the board of directors, beneficiaries, employees, or donors—whether governmental or private, a leader must have the ability to positively influence stakeholders to ensure their support and commitment. [5]

In addition to keeping current stakeholders engaged, non-profit leaders must also focus on attracting new investors to support the organization's mission. This requires an active role in advocating for the organization and participating in events to promote the organizational cause and demonstrate its positive impact. Ultimately, the ability to attract new investors and supporters is vital for the long-term sustainability and success of the non-profit organization.

Partnerships are very important. As leaders, we travel and visit the ministries and officials, and try to connect the association with the officials. We participate in events, in celebrations, we are present in front of the donors, and so on, to promote the organizational image. [15]

You need to have the ability to persuade and influence, because in the non-profit sector, you are selling a service, which is the social issue. You are either helping people to see it to get their support, or you are doing fundraising, and all of these things require the ability to influence people and persuade them, whether they are donors, volunteers, or legislators. [9]

Apart from verbal communication, non-profit leaders must also possess exceptional writing skills to create reports, proposals, and programs that attract investors and partners. Effective writing skills are essential for creating compelling narratives that resonate with potential investors and partners, highlighting the organization's strengths, values, and mission. Leaders must possess the ability to articulate their ideas clearly and concisely, and tailor their messages to specific audiences, including potential investors, board members, and other stakeholders. Well-crafted reports and programs can help non-profit leaders establish credibility and inspire confidence among investors, increasing the organization's chances of securing support and funding for its mission.

We depend on individuals and donors to support our programs. There must be specialization, for example, in writing letters and preparing reports, and preparing programs in ways that attract donors. [15]

In times of uncertainty, the role of a non-profit leader as an organizational advocate becomes even more crucial. While non-profits rely heavily on sponsorships and partnerships, leaders must ensure that their organization can survive without particular partners and donors. This necessitates a continuous search for new partners to mitigate the effects of losing existing ones. The organization must learn to be self-sufficient and diversify its resources effectively, reducing its dependence on any single partner or donor. By proactively seeking new partnerships and diversifying its resource pool, non-profit leaders can ensure their organization's long-term sustainability and success.

The work needs permanence, continuity, and a firm and solid base. It should not depend on seasonal donations and on uncertainty, but rather have a solid entity to refer to and rely upon. [4]

4.3. Instilling Community Support

Our study results highlight the critical role of community support in the success of non-profit organizations. Non-profit leaders should indeed align their organization's values and goals with community expectations by engaging with members, understanding their needs, and developing initiatives that resonate with them. Doing so can build a strong reputation and secure long-term community support.

You need to have a vision and mission statement, and set goals and values that the community supports. Especially the vision needs to be carefully considered until everyone is satisfied with it, because serving the community requires their assistance and support. [3]

To gain community support for their initiatives, non-profit leaders are further recommended to organize workshops and other events that educate community members. This is because participants believe that when the community understands the organization's purpose and the impact it can have, they are more likely to offer their support.

There seems to be a relatively low level of awareness and interest among the public regarding the work of non-profit organisations. Public acceptance is very important to make non-profits successful so we invest in educating the community through things like workshops, and this is increasing acceptance and support… We believe that instilling value leads to behavioural change automatically. [3]

More so, our findings indicate that non-profit leaders should go beyond seeking community support and actively engage community members as volunteers. This approach not only benefits the organization but also empowers community members and makes them feel valued, heard, and included, which helps with maintaining their engagement and satisfaction.

This type of work requires many hands to grow and become successful, and it is important to recognize the value of volunteers and keep a database to follow them, communicate initiatives to them, and reach out to them for help and input. It is worth noting that volunteers are willing to participate, so utilizing their willingness is crucial. [3]

Furthermore, we find that to maintain community support, non-profit leaders must establish themselves as trusted communicators, particularly in terms of financial management. Our research findings indicate that transparency regarding the use of funds from donors and grants is critical to building credibility and demonstrating accountability. Such transparency, however, goes beyond just financial statements as our results indicate that leaders must also be transparent about their actions that involve the organization's beneficiaries. More so, participants feel that leaders must provide a platform that allows community members and beneficiaries to voice their opinions and concerns. This engagement not only demonstrates a commitment to transparency but also fosters trust and a sense of ownership among the community members, subsequently strengthening their support for the organization's cause.

There should always be a forum to exchange ideas and listen to those whom you're trying to help and there should always be accountability. I should always be fully transparent to the beneficiary about why I am doing something. There should never be any doubt, misunderstanding, or miscommunication regarding my relationship with the person I'm trying to help. [8]

4.4. Focus and Strategy

Our research indicates that many participants understand the importance of having a clear and focused strategy, which should be based on a deep understanding of the needs and challenges facing the community. Non-profit leaders indeed need to identify what initiatives are most needed in society and develop programs accordingly.

The ability to understand reality and understand needs in society, and trying to fill this need by carrying out projects or initiatives with specific sponsorships that help the association and its beneficiaries. [5]

While identifying necessary initiatives is a critical initial step, it is merely the starting point as leaders must subsequently prioritize and evaluate the initiatives against each other, to establish a focus. In order to accomplish this, strategic decision-making is necessary, which entails carefully assessing various options. This approach enables leaders to efficiently allocate resources, thus maximizing community impact. Subsequently, leaders must effectively communicate the projects to the community to garner support, as elaborated in the previous section.

Visionary leadership is important to foresee and plan impact, because the most important motive for people to contribute is their ability to understand and believe in the project's potential impact. [9]

Once the focus is set, non-profit organizations need to identify the specific areas that require their attention. This involves translating societal needs into practical objectives that serve the intended purpose efficiently and effectively, as explained by this participant:

If your focus is on breaking the poverty cycle for children, you need to know how to rehabilitate them efficiently. It starts with supporting the mother with basic needs such as food, water, and clothing, and teaching the child skills that are relevant in the 21st century, such as languages, technology, and programming. Soft and physical skills are also important, as well as practical abilities, e.g. knowing how to write a CV and present themselves during a job interview. [1]

To serve the purpose, the non-profit leader needs to establish a financial strategy and make informed decisions on how to allocate the budget. This, according to our findings, requires to have a good understanding of financial issues and understand how to find and select beneficiaries strategically.

The leader must investigate how to spend the funds of a non-profit institution, and ensure the endowment is spent according to the strategy and that the beneficiaries are eligible. [14]

Regardless of the above, it is important that leaders regularly evaluate and revise project goals and objectives to ensure that they remain relevant and effective in addressing the community's needs. To do this, non-profit leaders should use quantitative measures or gather qualitative feedback from beneficiaries to assess the effectiveness of their initiatives. By doing so, they can identify areas for improvement and adjust their strategies accordingly.

One of the important technical competencies is the ability to design developmental interventions and projects, and this is the task of you today as an organization or association. Your main goal is to improve the service for the beneficiary. How can you make sure that the beneficiary is actually using this service to improve his/her life? [9]

4.5. Trust and Delegation

Our research findings suggest that for a non-profit organization to succeed, a leader cannot solely make all decisions. Participants express that it is important for leaders to delegate tasks and trust other individuals within the organization to make informed decisions because the organization should not be entirely dependent on the leader's presence. The organization should indeed be able to function effectively and efficiently without the continuous supervision of the leader. This level of self-sufficiency and employee autonomy adds value to the organization and allows for continued growth and development. Therefore, non-profit leaders must focus on building a team that is capable of carrying out the organization's mission, even in the leader's absence.

Projects cannot be completed by one person. Rather, the leader must accept the participation of all those who are capable and experienced in this field, delegate responsibilities, empower, and give decision-making power. [4]

In addition, a successful leader is also perceived as someone who gives room to others to voice their opinion, and is open to personal criticism and feedback. No leader is perfect, and there will always be room for improvement. Participants believe that by accepting others' opinions and feedback, and actively incorporate their ideas and input into decision-making processes, a leader can build a stronger, more effective organization that is better equipped to serve its mission and make a positive impact on the community.

We do encourage people to speak; they know that everything is fine and that they can say anything. This is very important and a very powerful tool for everyone to grow. The day that you stop accepting criticism the day you stop listening is the day you stop leadership. [8]

Importantly, our results indicate that inclusivity plays a critical role in shaping the image of a non-profit organization. This is because employees are, like their supervisors and leaders, ambassadors to the organization, and contribute to its reputation. It is therefore essential to include and motivate them. A positive work environment that promotes inclusivity and encourages a sense of belonging is therefore crucial.

Leadership in the community program is that you deliver the message together with the team. They are all ambassadors who carry the message with you. The team must be at the same pace—we deliver the message together. [3]

In addition, we find that clear objectives and goals are important, as these provide employees with direction, purpose, and motivation.

The leader needs to make sure that there's a strategy and vision in place, and he must make sure that goals and objectives are regularly evaluated and revised so that there is always a clear goal for employees to work towards. [5]

Further, it is deemed important for leaders to remember that they are ultimately responsible for the organization's success and should take ownership of any mistakes made. Blaming employees for mistakes or failures can create a negative work environment and damage employee morale, and as such is not recommended.

Leaders need to give room for everyone and take everyone's opinions into account, and when a mistake happens, take the responsibility for it. [13]

With the above findings in mind, it is important that leaders put the right people in the right positions. Indeed, as participants explained, every employee has different skills and strengths, and a good leader should understand each employee's capabilities to fully utilize them within the organization.

By delegating tasks to the right people, leaders can ensure that tasks are completed efficiently and effectively, which ultimately not only benefits the organization but also helps to develop the skills of individual employees.

Leaders should know what capabilities and skills team members bring to the table. Bad leadership is when someone has certain professional competencies, but is placed in the wrong department or position. [5]

However, finding talent proves often difficult as the non-profit sector typically does not offer competitive salaries compared to other sectors. This can make it difficult to recruit and retain skilled employees, particularly younger graduates who may prioritize higher-paying job opportunities.

One challenge is to find the right talent. The non-profit sector always suffers from a shortage of competent people due to competition. There are many for-profit organizations that will pay more and this makes it harder to attract talent. [5]

One solution to the difficulty in finding talent for non-profit organizations due to lower pay is to recruit fewer people and pay them higher salaries. By offering higher salaries, participants believe that non-profit organizations might be better able to attract talented and committed individuals who might otherwise be drawn to higher-paying jobs in other sectors.

There are many associations that have a large number of employees and low salaries, and I find that it is better to have fewer employees with higher salaries to stimulate their productivity and ensure efficiency and quality output. [2]

Finally, results suggest that leaders working in the non-profit sector should ensure to communicate to potential talent that there is a career growth path available in the sector. Unfortunately, it seems that many people may not realize

that the non-profit sector offers opportunities for career advancement and professional development, and by highlighting these opportunities top talent may be more successfully attracted and retained.

It is difficult to convince people in the non-profit sector of job growth and rehabilitation opportunities. They may not know that the non-profit sector may have a career future. This challenge is partly due to the mental image related to the sector. [9]

4.6. Continuous Self-Learning and Agility

The findings emphasize the importance of leaders recognizing their limitations and being open to growth and improvement. Self-reflection is, as explained, indeed an essential tool for leaders to assess their performance, identify areas for improvement, and make changes accordingly. It allows leaders to learn from their mistakes and successes and apply new techniques based on experience, benefiting the organization.

Using my past experiences, looking at everything again and re-evaluating how we're doing things—there's always a better way and you always need to build and improve on strategies and procedures to become more efficient and successful. [8]

As part of continuous self-evaluation, it is crucial for leaders to stay informed about the latest developments in their field. This approach enables prompt adjustments and helps prevent obsolescence, while also providing a competitive edge. Additionally, it ensures that leaders remain knowledgeable and have a clear understanding of the next steps to take.

I am constantly keeping myself informed of all developments in the sector. [6]

In alignment with the above, participant further elaborated that leaders must indeed possess agility to adapt to rapidly evolving societal norms and values by staying attuned to their communities' needs and wants. By remaining flexible and responsive, they can tailor strategies and stay relevant, avoiding negative consequences such as disconnection from the audience.

Leaders must have the ability to lead the transformation, whether it is a strategic transformation or a transformation due to unforeseen challenges—internal or external. [5]

Indeed, organizations can face significant challenges when regulations and laws change, as they must adapt their operations to comply with new requirements. This can be a complex and time-consuming process, requiring significant investment. In this respect, various participants feel that governmental requirements for non-profit organizations have become more stringent, making agility and strategic capabilities more important than ever.

One of the biggest challenges in this sector is the financial sustainability. Today, government demands that every association has a financial adequacy that secures its expenses without relying on donations. My grant program must present strategic work plans, e.g. how do you deserve the grant, what are its targets, and make detailed reports. Leaders in the non-profit sector have to work

with the thinking and logic of the private sector. [7]

A problem-solving and open mindset is, as such, important, and a leader needs to be flexible and willing to change the course if needed.

Sometimes we do not know how to react to a change, even if we have set out a clear vision and goals. There may be internal disputes, and we may encounter obstacles. What we do is, we gather, listen to each other, and try again. A leader should understand and apply a problem-solving approach. It is not easy to establish such a culture because people have different opinions and have emotions, but this culture of flexibility is important to deal with unforeseen issues. [3]

5. Discussion

This study explored specific leadership competencies that best fit non-profit organizational needs. The study adopted a qualitative interpretive research design, with semi-structured interviews with fifteen participants who have a CEO experience in the leadership of non-profit organizations. To describe or define a competent non-profit organizational leader, six themes were developed: 1) passion and altruism, 2) organizational advocacy, 3) instilling community support, 4) focus and strategy, 5) trust and delegation, and 6) continuous self-learning and agility.

In a first theme we explored how altruistic behavior and a genuine desire to assist others are paramount for a leader in a non-profit organization to remain motivated and efficient. Building on previous findings from Santora et al. (2019), we find that leaders in this sector indeed measure success by the number of people they assist, and the impact they make on people's lives. In this respect, our findings suggest that leaders in non-profit sectors significantly differ from those working in for-profit sectors, who are usually driven by personal gain and growth.

A second characteristic defining effective leadership in the non-profit sector, according to our study findings, relates to fruitful advocacy. Keeping in mind that non-profits rely heavily on the (financial) support from partners and donors, our results emphasize the need for non-profit leaders to adopt a stakeholder-centric approach, possess effective communication and writing skills, and participate in social events, to maintain the support and engagement from existing critical stakeholders, as well as attract new investors. Possessing the skill to effectively communicate ideas in a clear and concise manner, and to tailor messages to suit specific audiences, such as board members, potential investors, and other stakeholders, is crucial in establishing credibility, inspiring confidence, and fostering independence. The latter becomes particularly important in times of uncertainty. These findings are aligned with research conducted by de Quevedo-Puente and Pérez-Cornejo (2020), but add new and valuable details and practical examples which leaders may want to adopt.

Third, our results highlight the importance of investing in the community and ensuring their support for the organization. Non-profits can gain such support

by aligning their organization's values and goals with community expectation and developing resonating initiatives. Further, confirming earlier research from Leardini et al. (2020) and Alexander and Fernandez (2020) our findings suggest that leaders should invest in educating the community and even involving them as volunteers in initiatives. This approach not only benefits the organization but also empowers community members and makes them feel valued, heard, and included, which helps with maintaining their engagement and satisfaction.

Yet another important leadership skill, relates to being able to find focus and establish strategy. Indeed, once community needs are identified, leaders have the responsibility to assess various options and choose a focus based on available resources and maximum attainable impact. Next, they then need to translate the needs into practical and attainable objectives that serve the intended purpose efficiently and effectively, and develop a (financial) strategy. More so, we find that it is important that leaders regularly evaluate and revise goals, objectives, and strategies, based on quantitative measures and qualitative feedback, to ensure that they remain relevant and effective in addressing the community's needs.

A fifth key characteristic is the ability to delegate, empower, and trust others to make informed decisions. For non-profit organizations to operate effectively and efficiently without continuous supervision, leaders must focus on building a capable team. Encouraging open discussions and idea sharing is particularly important in the non-profit sector, which is inherently characterized as a social and empathetic sector. Maintaining a positive image and reputation is paramount, and this is achieved, in part, by ensuring employee satisfaction through their active involvement. Our study supports previous literature that highlights the importance of actively involving employees in organizational processes (Boysen et al., 2021; Freeborough & Patterson, 2016; Routhieaux, 2015). However, our results highlight that leaders still have a crucial role in guiding employees and taking responsibility for mistakes when they occur. Blaming employees for mistakes or failures can create a negative work environment and damage employee morale, which is detrimental to the non-profit's success.

With the above findings in mind which highlight the value of delegating responsibilities to others, our findings build on those from Calarco (2020) and highlight that an effective leader in the non-profit should understand the capabilities of each employee to fully utilize their skills and strengths within the organization. However, we find that non-profit organizations may struggle in particular to recruit and retain skilled employees due to lower salaries compared to other sectors. While our results highlight that offering higher salaries to a smaller workforce, and emphasizing the career paths in the non-profit sector may alleviate this problem partially, it is unclear if such measures have worked in the past. As these findings are new, more research might be required in this area.

Finally, in line with Lim et al. (2021) concept of interpretive leadership, our results suggest that leaders need to regularly practice introspection and evaluate whether there is a better way to handle situations in the future. Such openness and flexibility are especially needed in the context of the ever-changing envi-

ronment and stricter rules in the non-profit sector which have forced leaders to come up with creative solutions, together with their teams. These findings are in line with previous literature (Calarco, 2020).

6. Research Implications

The findings have various implications for researchers and practitioners. Firstly, the study results emphasize the significance of leadership skills in non-profit organizations. Secondly, the research highlights the importance of six groups of competencies mentioned above in similar contexts.

7. Limitations and Future Research Directions

Although this study provides valuable insights into the characteristics that define effective leadership in the Saudi non-profit sector, there are certain limitations that need to be acknowledged. The small sample size of only 15 Saudi non-profit leaders from various industries limits the generalizability of the results. Qualitative studies, while valuable in capturing contextual nuances, indeed lack statistical reliability. Therefore, future research should consider a larger and more diverse sample size and adopt a mixed-method approach that combines qualitative and quantitative methods for a more robust understanding of the data and statistical validation of the findings. Furthermore, future research could incorporate perspectives from other stakeholders, such as board members, employees, beneficiaries, and other community members to gain a more comprehensive understanding of what makes leadership in the non-profit sector successful and efficient. We also highlight that these findings pertain to the Saudi context and do not translate to other countries. Future researchers are encouraged to replicate the study to explore whether effective leadership in the non-profit sector is defined differently in other cultural contexts.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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