

# Non-Profit Leadership Success: A Study of a Small, Non-Profit Organization's Leadership and Culture through the Lens of Its Volunteers



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## INTRODUCTION

*To be noble is to give to those who have less. It is an issue of service and leadership- Native American proverb (Leader 360, p.1).*

While observing local non-profit volunteer coordinators at a recruitment fair, one of the elder leaders stated to a young upstart non-profit leader: “Your volunteers are loyal to you. What you have to do is figure out how to get them loyal to the organization.” Is this what a group of local community members thought when they began feeding homeless people in their community in 1984 from the back of their garage? This organization of people grew, became a non-profit, moved from garage to church to a community building with a small staff and large pool of volunteers providing hope for the needy in their county. The transformation did not happen by chance. There was a small group of people that observed a need in their community and wanted to do something about it. Thirty years later, the organization is thriving. While not the largest non-profit in the county by a long shot, they are able to provide food for the hungry more than any other organization. This success is one of the goals of their vision and part of their mission.

It is widely believed that an organizations vision and mission statement guide its performance. A vision statement focuses on what the organization will do in the future, not what it is doing today. “It is a statement which the employees of the organization need to embrace” (Kaushik, 2011, p. 1). Embracing the vision should motivate the employee to work energetically to ensure success through their performance. “Vision statements give direction for employee behavior and helps provide inspiration” (Hawthorne, 2015, p. 1). Inspiration leads to worker motivation and overall success for the organization. The vision, combined with the mission statement, provides a focused sense of purpose for the employee.

A mission statement describes, in brief, the fundamental purpose for the existence of the company. “It focuses on the purpose of the organization, its activities, its capabilities, customer focus, and the business makeup. It is a combination of why and how your company does something and what it does” (Kaushik, 2011, p. 1). Mission statements are used by most successful organizations.

In fact, in a study by Bain & Co. conducted in 1996, of the top 25 management methods and techniques deployed by senior managers all over the world, mission statements consistently show to be the top-rated management tool during each of the prior ten years (Bain et al., 1996; Bart et al., 2001, p. 19).

Leaders should emphasize the current mission statement to employees, which clarifies the purpose and primary, measurable objectives of the organization. A mission statement is meant for employees and leaders of the organization (Hawthorne, 2015).

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For example, Bartkus et al. (2000) state the organizational mission statement should be a communicational tool that allows current and prospective stakeholders to determine whether they would like to be involved with the company. Therefore, the use of the mission statement as an external communication tool seems to be beneficial to companies. (van Nimwegen et al., 2008, p. 63).

If, as stated earlier, vision and mission provide a focused sense of purpose for the employee in an organization; culture represents the shared expectations and self-image of the organization. The mature values that create tradition or the “way we do things here.” (Clark, 2015, p. 1)

Defining culture is hard to do as it is an abstract term. While there is universal agreement that (1) it exists, and (2) that it plays a crucial role in shaping behavior in organizations, there is little consensus on what organizational culture actually is, never mind how it influences behavior and whether it is something leaders can change (Watkins, 2013, p. 1).

For the purpose of this study, culture is defined as: “the learned beliefs, values, rules, norms, symbols, and traditions that are common to a group of people. It is these shared qualities of a group that make them unique” (Northouse, 2006, p. 302).

In the framework of strategic leadership, setting a vision for an organization and mission statement for its operations, these tools used by the leadership also affect the culture. In fact, Rosenberg (2009) states the entire purpose of leadership is to create a culture. In a large and well established organization it can be difficult for an outsider to implement a new culture. While there are many studies for this line of thought, there are just as many that believe culture drives leadership. One task for the leadership, then, is to set the conditions through the organizations mission to foster a culture that values the employee and his or her performance. “Leaders can help create positive morale and motivation within their team, and within each individual employee simply by creating a corporate culture of trust and affection” (Whipple, 2015, p. 1).

It is generally accepted that one practice of successful leadership is a leader’s ability to provide purpose and direction for employees and the organization through a vision and mission statement. Most of the earlier empirical works concentrate on senior executives and managers.

*...If the works are not investigating how leaders formulate their mission and vision statements, then it is about how comprehensive their mission statements are and how they impact on performance. The perspective of the employee and, therefore, the larger work force remains relatively neglected. (Darby, 2012, p. 95)*

In this chapter’s study, the organization is a small, community non-profit comprising of mostly volunteers. One way to assess the current understanding of vision and mission is through the lens of the employee (volunteer). The objective of this chapter is to look at how this organization’s leadership uses known leadership practices for their current success. This chapter will utilize on-hand data in the form of observations, interviews and a current volunteer satisfaction survey to assess its leadership and the organizational culture.

## **THE ROLE OF LEADERS**

Theories abound on the role of leaders. Leader360.com has a list of 12 effective leadership roles. The road to great leadership that is common to successful leaders include five leadership points. (Kouzes &

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