

## 1 Introduction: The Crucible of Nonprofit Leadership

It is important for people to have time to reflect on the type of leader that they are, the type of leader they want to be, how their leadership styles impact how a program or an organization works and runs, and where there are gaps in their leadership . . . being transparent with yourself and others . . . and then finding people, talented people, who can bridge that gap.

New York Community Trust Leadership Fellows Alumnus

In the last few years, Deborah has worked at a number of nonprofits in New York. She has delivered critical services for people in the community; held administrative assistant positions for an after-school program dedicated to closing gaps in educational inequalities; worked at a healthcare organization providing medical supplies for the uninsured; supported attorneys offering free legal advice to immigrants; and, in her latest job, helped low-income families gain access to healthy food. Given these experiences and being great at what she does, six months into her new job the executive director offers Deborah a promotion to a position of leadership within the organization. While she's certainly excited by many of the job's perks, such as an increased salary, Deborah has long looked forward to moving into a position with greater responsibility, so accepts the offer quickly. However, after the first year of trying to manage people and develop new initiatives, she runs into a series of headache-inducing challenges.

These include a high turnover rate of direct reports; low staff performance; a continued lack of board buy-in for needed organizational changes; fudged financial reports and lower than expected fundraising projections; increasing concerns about racial and gender disparities between administrators and the people that the nonprofit serves; and, as a result, an increasingly cynical climate, escalating conflicts, and morale that's spiraling downward. Deborah finds herself in the midst of a "crucible" experience, where one's abilities are so tested and adversity runs so high that extraordinary insight and growth are demanded (Bennis & Thomas 2002). Having had little training in leadership to begin with, she wonders what she could have done differently, and, more important, what she could do in the future to become the type of leader she'd aspired to be.

As played out every day across the nonprofit sector, this situation begs a simple question with high stakes: What type of leadership should the next generation of nonprofit professionals hope to develop? Few other issues will affect the day-to-day life of organizations and societies as much as their leaders. When people are given the knowledge to lead well they feel empowered, gain clarity and focus, inspire others, build inclusive and trustful communities, and accomplish all that their mission, vision, and values set forth. On the other hand, when people lack leadership skills, the results can be disastrous. If there's any

area of professional development you wouldn't want to leave to chance, this would be it.

### 1.1 The Nonprofit Leadership Deficit

This Element provides the next generation of nonprofit professionals with a state-of-the-art, practical approach to leadership. It will be of interest to emerging nonprofit leaders looking for a broad and deep blueprint from which to operate, as well as long-standing nonprofit leaders looking to revise or bring their leadership ideas and actions more fully into the twenty-first century. It will also be of interest to scholars and other practitioners interested in nonprofit leadership, and especially those working in nonprofit leadership development that has often lacked through lines, remained static in the face of diverse and changing contexts, or failed to speak holistically to the needs of nonprofit professionals. *Leadership standpoints* provide a guiding, open-ended framework for both leadership development programs and leadership in action.

A host of research concludes that rising professionals need leadership development (Aguinis & Kraiger 2009; Chenok et al. 2017; Collins & Holton 2004; Conger 2010; Getha-Taylor et al. 2015; Lacerenza et al. 2017; Pernick 2001; Seidle, Fernandez, & Perry 2016) or the expansion of an individual's and collective's "capacity to be effective in leadership roles and processes" (McCauley, Van Velsor, & Ruderman 2010: 2, 20). In the nonprofit sector, however, leadership development has long been difficult to address, given its tight budgets and limited resources. Some studies show that nearly 70 percent of executives may leave the nonprofit sector in the near future.<sup>1</sup> Describing this nonprofit leadership development deficit, research finds that "Succession planning is the No. 1 organizational concern of US nonprofits, but they are failing to develop their most promising pool of talent: homegrown leaders," while "demand for effective nonprofit leaders today is as high as ever" (Landles-Cobb, Kramer, & Milway 2015: paras. 1, 5; Norley & D'Amato 2019). Furthermore, it's not simply a matter of filling previous roles but of increasing the leadership capacities of more people at all levels. As many organizational structures become flatter and more team-based, the demands for distributing leadership among staff have increased. Smaller nonprofits, where employees perform many roles, only heighten this need (Hernez-Broome & Hughes 2004; Leskiw & Singh 2007).

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<sup>1</sup> See the Robert Morris University Bayer Center for Nonprofit Management report *What Now: How Will the Impending Retirement of Nonprofit Leaders Change the Sector* (2018), [https://bcnm.rmu.edu/ProgramsServices/cmp-media/docs/BayerCenter/bayercenterwhatnowretirementfindingsjan27\\_2018final.pdf](https://bcnm.rmu.edu/ProgramsServices/cmp-media/docs/BayerCenter/bayercenterwhatnowretirementfindingsjan27_2018final.pdf).

Although gaps in nonprofit leadership development continue to remain a national concern, New York State alone provides a jarring example of how these fissures have widened as the sector continues to grow. A report on nonprofit organizations found “New York led the nation in both the number of people employed by nonprofits and total wages paid by these organizations” (at about 18 percent of private employment in 2017), and “From 2007 through 2017, these entities added more than 175,000 jobs in New York, a gain of 14 percent. During and after the Great Recession, they helped stabilize overall employment as jobs declined elsewhere in the private sector and among governmental employers” (DiNapoli 2019: 1). It’s thus more important than ever to develop leadership across the nonprofit sector.

Focusing on staff retention and advancement will remain critical to these efforts. Many people leave nonprofit positions due to the lack of opportunities for learning, mentoring, and growth. The need to “recognize the enormity of the problem and make it a top priority” stems from several factors involving limited supply and burgeoning demand: “the growing number of nonprofit organizations, the retirement of managers from the vast baby-boomer generation, the movement of existing nonprofit managers into different roles within or outside the sector, and the growth in the size of nonprofits” (Tierney 2006: paras. 9, 7; Le 2019: paras. 7–8). Overall, as Peggy Outen notes: “We see a sector that seldom calls the hiring process talent acquisition, a sector that too infrequently grows its own into leadership – a sector that is relentlessly outwardly focused, [and] now challenged to up its game internally to meet a demanding future” (Lindstrom 2018: para. 5). On a more positive note, these trends have attracted the attention of funders seeking to address nonprofit leadership development. Their efforts are paving the way for how to address deficits, while also raising questions about the type of leadership best suited to nonprofit professionals.

## 1.2 The Importance of a Nonprofit Leadership Theory

With the largest number of nonprofits of any city in the United States, New York City has provided a test case for foundations and other donors to fill the leadership development gap and build support for nonprofit professionals. The New York Community Trust Leadership Fellows (NYCTLF) program is one such effort. Begun in 2015 and funded entirely by the New York Community Trust (in collaboration with the Baruch College, City University of New York Marxe School of Public and International Affairs),<sup>2</sup> the program has trained fall and spring cohorts of nonprofit professionals in leadership

<sup>2</sup> There is a large literature on the need for universities to be involved in such work (e.g. Diner 2017; Maurrasse 2001; van der Wusten 1998).

development since its inception. The twelve-week certificate program includes seminars with practitioners and professors, a hands-on curriculum addressing the needs of nonprofit professionals in areas from communication to finance, a core change project that each fellow undertakes on behalf of their organization over the fellowship's course, individual pairings with mentors who have decades of field experience, and dinner conversations and networking events with leaders in the nonprofit and government sectors.<sup>3</sup> Figure 1 shows one of the fellowship's cohorts (Sperrazza 2019).

A participant once shared with me that the fellowship was the “Rosetta Stone” for her career and promotion into leadership positions. Yet, beyond the anecdotes, more systematic analysis has also been undertaken. In the first four years of the NYCTLF, an evaluation was conducted to identify the program's strengths and areas for improvement. The report examined all aspects of the fellowship in terms of its stated goals, namely to “increase the quality and diversity of leadership talent available to nonprofit organizations, with a priority focus on leaders of color” and to “improve the knowledge, skills, and confidence of mid-career professionals so that they become more effective managers and change leaders



**Figure 1** A New York Community Trust Leadership Fellows (NYCTLF) cohort

<sup>3</sup> See paragraph 4 of the “About Us” section of the New York Community Trust Leadership Fellowship website: <https://trustfellows.org/about-us/>. In terms of recruitment, nominations of emerging leaders are made by the executive director or another senior staff member of current trust grantees. Fellows are then selected and invited to join the upcoming cohort. Potential nominating organizations cut across the different, broad nonprofit areas of the trust's interests.



**Figure 2** NYCTLF leadership training. Photo courtesy of the NYCTLF.

within their organizations” (Reinelt & Fried 2018a: 3).<sup>4</sup> Over approximately two years, the evaluators carried out surveys, focus groups, and more with past and current cohorts, program faculty, and other stakeholders to capture the program’s perceived impacts and make recommendations for future planning.

In addition to continuing assessments of the participants’ experiences across the program by NYCTLF staff, the fellows, instructors, and program stakeholders identified a significant need for the fellowship, with broad applicability to the nonprofit sector: to develop a theory or framework for leadership for the program as a whole and as a contribution to the field of leadership and nonprofit professional development writ large. A report implied that there may be an underlying theory about leadership already implicit in the program, or at least a model or framework that could be created and articulated more intentionally (Reinelt & Fried 2018b: 1, 2). Having such a theory would follow the grounding in existing literature for value- and diversity-based leadership as a starting point for nonprofits, provide a through line for the many different topics that make up leadership development (e.g. organizational development, communication, finance, management, etc.) and provide a memorable imprint to guide participants’ practice (see Figure 2).

From another perspective, the literature on training and development makes clear that having a model to guide program objectives is critical to carrying out this type of work effectively. All professional development programs should be

<sup>4</sup> The trust’s impact assessment report can be found here: [www.nycommunitytrust.org/newsroom/a-report-on-the-new-york-community-trust-leadership-fellows/](http://www.nycommunitytrust.org/newsroom/a-report-on-the-new-york-community-trust-leadership-fellows/).

“working from a solid theoretical framework and thoughtfully allowing empirical knowledge to guide . . . decisions,” which makes them “credible, effective, and valuable to the organizations which seek their help” (Waldeck & Seibold 2016: xi). Conger (2010: 289–290) advises that leadership development programs should be built “*around a single well-delineated leadership model*” (emphasis added)<sup>5</sup> based on studies demonstrating participants’ learning is improved through a clear focus on behaviors and competencies and different content, learning methods, and assessments taking place over multiple sessions, with organizational and other reinforcements in place.

In essence, there is “no theory-free consulting; we are all driven by explicit and/or implicit human and organizational theories” (Pettegrew 2016: 308), and using guiding theories impacts leadership, management, and self-assessments (Sasnett & Ross 2007). Those in the professional development space hence need to be more strategic about the theories that guide their work (Gale 2018; Jackson & Aakhus 2014; Waisanen 2019). Under these terms, nonprofit professionals need a leadership theory that’s descriptive and normative – providing both a guide for mapping their experiences and a lens to assess their daily practices.<sup>6</sup> With these purposes in mind, let’s turn to the modeling function that such a theory can serve.

### 1.3 Modeling Nonprofit Leadership

Having observed firsthand the impact that leadership programs leave on their participants and alumni, I’ve long thought about the topic, particularly from the perspective of communication practice. As a teacher of both leadership and communication in a variety of programs and schools, and having been with the NYCTLF as a faculty member and mentor since its start, the question of what type of nonprofit leadership should be modeled became more pronounced in my own experiences over time. In discussions with many practitioners and scholars in this space, too, it became clear that we need to know more and can do better when it comes to articulating a vision for nonprofit leadership.

With more than five years of program data, the NYCTLF has been well positioned to express a distinct theory of leadership for nonprofit professional development. There are many theories of leadership (e.g. transformational, situational, adaptive, servant leadership, etc.; Northouse 2018) that are certainly useful and can be incorporated into such a model. Yet, given the results of

<sup>5</sup> Emphasis added.

<sup>6</sup> For any big term like “leadership” that tries to capture more than we are ever able to fully capture in words, we are trying to get at what scholars call a pragmatic theory of the middle range (Watts 2011) – a snapshot of contextualized practices that contribute to the overall picture. This project was engineered with this approach in mind.

assessments in the last several years, what became clear is that a leadership theory that speaks to the depth and breadth of participants' aspirations, the many different teachings and practices that have emerged from subject matter experts within the program, the evolving online knowledge hub constructed by both program staff and the fellows themselves, and especially the finding that the program needs social justice-oriented themes to carry across the program, all beg the question of what theory of leadership could best encapsulate this wealth of experience and education. This theory looks both inward to the many learnings that have taken place across the program and outward to the literatures on leadership, related fields, and other professional development programs from which further insights can be derived.

Before going further, it's worth mentioning that you cannot *not* have a theory or theories of leadership operating in an organization – you can see it in everything that people say and do.<sup>7</sup> If, for example, Derek, the executive director of a local nonprofit, never seeks input from staff when it comes time to devising a strategic plan, never allows board members to speak at the annual gala, and frequently can be heard making comments such as “we don't need to hear more voices, we need results,” he's clearly channeling an authoritarian theory of leadership. So one goal of this work is to get more strategic and less ad hoc or intuitional about the theories of leadership already at work in nonprofit planning and action.

In this sense, another goal of this project is to simply make nonprofit leadership less nebulous. To construct a definition for leadership, this study seeks to not merely identify and fill a gap but to build on the values that have become foundational to the NYCTLF fellowship, similar programs, and current trends in leadership research emphasizing the need for distributed and connective models that put the exercise of leadership within all people's reach (Gronn 2002; Pearce & Conger 2002).

Since the organizational change literature is clear that “what works well in one organization, culture, or country, may well produce failure in another organization, culture, or country” (Jacobs, Van Witteloostuijn, & Christe-Zeyse 2013: 775), a theory that remains sensitive to contexts and diverse people and cultures is integral to this visioning. At the same time, it's worth recognizing from the outset that definitions can be tyrannical. I certainly don't want to force a closed and conclusive definition of leadership in this project that fails to account for future learnings. In constructing a theory, there's a paradox in both needing to draw from and develop useful ideas for leadership while being

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<sup>7</sup> I draw inspiration here from Pearce (2009) and the adage that “you cannot not communicate” (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson 1967: 49).



attentive to what the theory possibly excludes. In this spirit, and following the guidance offered by many of the dimensions and themes to come, I offer a flexible and open-ended definition for nonprofit leadership that welcomes future insights and amendments, contractions, or expansions.

Ultimately, this project puts forth a theory of *leadership standpoints* for the next generation of nonprofit professionals. Based on five years of data from a complete review of NYCTFL materials, including all surveys, focus groups, and similar data from its program evaluation, and drawing from leadership literatures and comparisons with similar leadership training programs, this Element creates a framework for leadership standpoints. As part of this effort, we conducted interviews with a random sample of NYCTFL alumni (and searched for patterns in these data through follow-up computer-aided textual analyses) and sought extensive feedback from program stakeholders, academics, and nonprofit practitioners every step of the way. These interviews stood at the tip of an iceberg, carrying all the previous work forward by helping to sharpen, distill, and extend many themes that were already percolating based on the prior evaluation work,<sup>8</sup> the broad review of program and external materials, and many conversations and seminars we engaged in to discuss this project's findings. Before getting into many of these details, let's first define leadership standpoints.

## 2 What Are Leadership Standpoints?

Before moving on to the connections between leadership standpoints and related leadership studies, as well as the specific features of the theory for nonprofit leadership development and practice, I'd like to provide a cursory definition and overview of the concept's dimensions and themes. In essence, a theory of leadership standpoints both describes and prescribes a form of nonprofit leadership keenly attentive to one's and others' positionalities at every turn. By positionality, I mean the many different standpoints from which one and others operate. Sánchez (2010: 2258) describes positionality as:

[the] notion that personal values, views, and location in time and space influence how one understands the world. In this context, gender, race, class, and other aspects of identities are indicators of social and spatial positions and are not fixed, given qualities. Positions act on the knowledge a person has about things, both material and abstract. Consequently, knowledge is the product of a specific position that reflects particular places and spaces.

<sup>8</sup> An executive summary of the NYCTFL program evaluation can be found at: [www.nycommunitytrust.org/newsroom/a-report-on-the-new-york-community-trust-leadership-fellows/](http://www.nycommunitytrust.org/newsroom/a-report-on-the-new-york-community-trust-leadership-fellows/).



This involves being aware of the positions from which each person thinks and acts, while also attending to the cognitive, affective, behavioral, structural, and environmental forces at play within and between people, organizations, and communities. For example, Fulton, Oyakawa, and Wood (2019: 260) find that “leaders of color can help predominantly white organizations work for racial equality by providing a ‘critical standpoint’ – an outsider-within perspective that allows them to see and critique racialized dimensions of organizational life” that can be difficult for others to see.

Leadership standpoints forward an aspirational purpose by advising that nonprofit leaders continually try to step into new standpoints to best enact their institution’s mission, vision, and values. Grounded in current calls to forward “collective leadership development” that moves beyond individual performance and engages and extends “multiple entities in the leadership process” (Eva et al. 2019: 1), leadership standpoints are not simply about stepping into others’ shoes but about identifying and continually trying to understand the variety of standpoints one and others inhabit to push beyond those boundaries and perform new standpoints. In this sense, leadership standpoints incorporate but are also larger than just “perspectives” or “views,” terms that tend to have heady, cognitive connotations. Standpoints get at where we and others stand, with a focus on the material and ecological, not merely intellectual bases from which people engage with their worlds.

Since standpoints aren’t fixed, what leadership standpoints add to the field is a moral, prescriptive lens that speaks to the foundational and emergent positions of nonprofit life, from long-standing, best practices in management to newer, participatory forms of organizational budgeting. It’s grounded in practical ethics, since “inclusion and affective commitment” are “key factors for how leaders can increase nonprofit performance” (Brimhall 2019: 31). Leadership standpoints are about casting as wide a lens as possible on the contexts that we each inhabit, while constantly being ready to shift or deepen one’s positions. Consistent with contemporary scholarship, leadership standpoints are not absolute nor intended to offer a one-size-fits-all approach but rather reflect a type of leadership that requires constant input and customizations to fully reflect today’s organizational needs.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> This follows literature arguing that “Leadership development is context-sensitive. There is no one best way to lead or to develop leaders. In different settings, there may be different expectations of leaders and different practices that make them effective.” It is also “an ongoing process . . . grounded in personal [and collective] development, which is never complete” (McCauley, Van Velsor, & Ruderman 2010: 3, 26). Leadership standpoints are dynamic rather than static and workable rather than perfectionistic. They also work with one of the largest studies of leadership ever conducted, which found that there are *both* clusters of expectations for leadership across the world and significant variations in different cultures. For example, almost universally people

In essence, *those applying leadership standpoints practice inclusion, build spaces for performance, and think and act with range.* To do so, such leaders continuously interact with diverse stakeholders, constantly verify others' views and interests, and remain keenly attentive to power distributions, material constraints, and hidden or unacknowledged voices that need surfaced, while expanding their personal and social outlooks to elevate performance and meet pressing demands best addressed through broadly informed decisions.

At its heart, each of these moves requires the expansion of one's own and others' positionalities. Inclusion requires the ongoing recognition and incorporation of others' positions into all aspects of leadership. Building spaces for performance constantly places all staff between the positions of what is and what could be. Thinking and acting with range asks the next generation of nonprofit leaders to continuously learn different positions through multiple methods and means. In Section 2.2, I detail two brief examples for what this line of leadership looks like in action and why it's well-suited to nonprofit leadership, in particular. Before doing so, to gain a deeper understanding of its dimensions and themes, let's take a look at the pluralistic background from which leadership standpoints stem.

## 2.1 Pluralistic Dimensions

From the data collected in this project, I use an intentional plurality in constructing leadership standpoints to underscore the emphasis on multiplicity observed throughout this project – the need for multiple voices, multiform interpretations, and multicultural understandings and applications in all leadership work. At the same time, I have drawn the term “standpoints” loosely from two theoretical lenses with their own histories and that align with the research findings.

The first, “standpoint theory,” builds from three premises: that “knowledge is socially situated,” that “marginalized groups are socially situated in ways that make it more possible for them to be aware of things and ask questions than it is for the non-marginalized,” and that “research . . . should begin with the lives of the marginalized” (Bowell n.d.: para. 1).<sup>10</sup> Standpoint theory turns foremost to the voices of those typically excluded from decision-making to build inclusivity and gain a more accurate diagnosis of what's actually happening in any situation than would be available had this broad net not been cast. For this project's purposes, the theory would have practitioners maintain a laser-like focus on the

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expect leaders to broadcast charisma, integrity, and interpersonal communication skills, while avoiding being nonsocial, malevolent, and self-focused. Yet these expectations play out in different ways across settings (Northouse 2015, adapted from Dorfman, Hanges, & Brodbeck 2004).

<sup>10</sup> Harding (2004) coined the term “standpoint theory.”