The Dyadic Relationship between an Executive Director and Board Chair during Turbulent Times

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Abstract:

For almost a decade, the external environment of nonprofit organizations has been experiencing change following the 9/11 aftermath and continuing with the current economic downturn. The change has resulted in budget cuts, decreases in government funding, corporate and individual giving, and increased demand for services. The state of the economy has created multiple challenges for human service nonprofit organizations struggling to survive under turbulent conditions. The traditional governance model of a nonprofit with a clear delineation of roles and responsibilities for the board of directors and the executive director is shifting as nonprofits are seeking alternative resources for funding for operating in the changing environment. A successful partnership between the board chair and the executive director balances power, influence, and responsibility through complementary skills, a positive emotional connection, and a good working relationship. The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore the phenomenon of the dyadic relationship between the board and an executive director of a human service nonprofit organization experiencing a changing environment.

The problem addressed what factors may contribute or inhibit the development of the relationship of two organizational leaders. The qualitative strategy design of measurement and analysis was a naturalistic inquiry of the perceptions of the dyadic relationship between an executive director and a board chair. Data collection was obtained through interviews using semi-structured open-ended questions. The focus of this study was on the discovery of the dyadic relationship and the factors contributing to a positive or negative relationship. The phenomenon of the dyadic relationship uses Leader-Member Exchange theoretical framework for analysis of findings. The discovery-oriented study was guided by the following research questions:

1) What are the executive director and a board chair’s individual perception of their dyadic relationship while experiencing change in their external environment?

2) What are the contributing factors that lead to the development of a positive relationship?
3) What are the contributing factors that lead to the development of a negative relationship?

As a result of the findings of this study, a proposed model of relationship development under situational conditions is presented to understand the factors present in each stage of the relationship. The model also suggests that the absence of positive factors can impact movement through the stages of development, therefore, lessening the ability to create a high quality relationship. The relationship development model is based on the emerging themes, the Harmonizers (positive relationship, no negative factors), the Missing Link (positive relationship, areas of concern), the Miscommunicators (working relationship, higher balance of negative factors), and the Adapters (Negative relationship, slight to no positive factors).

Furthermore, the findings of this study support the relationship-based approach of Leader-Member Exchange theory of leadership making. The high level of trust and respect present in the dyadic relationships is consistent with the three phase development stage of stranger, acquaintance, and maturity. Therefore, the importance of the study was to understand the perception of an executive director and a board chair of their relationship development and provide an understanding of the process and the influence on board behavior and organizational effectiveness during times of change.