

Session Title: Leadership Trends in the Non-profit Sector: A North American Sample of United Way Executive Directors

Conference Themes: Governance & Management, Communication, Networking & Social Marketing

Abstract:

The conducted research evaluates the leadership characteristics of 178 executive directors in non-profit organizations throughout seven cities in North America; six in the United States and one Canadian. This research provides schools of social work quantitative data regarding the educational and employment backgrounds of non-profit executive directors and the leadership behaviors and activities they employ in their work in organizations. Implication for social work academia include the leadership curriculum and succession planning investments in social work, as it relates to non-profit leaders newly entering the field from other disciplines, will be provided as well as additional areas of concern.

The conceptual themes that were evaluated were focused on executive director backgrounds, organizational responses to executive directors and their self-reported leadership behaviors. These three themes were the basis for tool construction, data collection and statistical analysis. Analysis into a potential recruitment trend, in which leaders are recruited from disciplines outside of social work for non-profit organizational leadership, was included. Insight into the possible role abdication within the sector was desired, examining the prevalence of organizations recruiting leadership without social work backgrounds, experience and ethics. Identifying whether or not non-profit organizations will respond differently to those with or without social work educations, reflective in salary, relocation practices and organizational budget size, was included. And lastly, the self reported utilization of specific leadership skill sets was evaluated based on educational backgrounds. The leadership skill sets measured involved

behaviors indicative and reflective of internal and external boundary spanning, strategy and strategic planning, innovation, and succession planning.

The Executive Director Leadership Behaviors (EDLB) was constructed to gather the following information: Executive Director Background (demographics, educational background/field of expertise, educational exposure, work experience); Organizational Information (organization demographics and executive director engagement); Executive Director Leadership Behaviors (behavioral/activity importance, leadership components, narrative opportunity). The research was designed as an exploratory, explanatory, non-experimental field study. The EDLB included forty-four items, measuring more than 120 variables. Tool and item construction included Likert scale, direct response, fixed choice, ranking, narrative, and listing response options, with funnel sequencing to address memory and response fatigue.

The research was executed utilizing an electronic process replicating the Dillman Total Response Method, the EDLB being sent via electronic mail to the sampled participants with end date and two week interval reminders. Completed surveys were accepted via electronic mail, facsimile and postal mail. A disproportionate random sample was drawn from a compiled listing of United Way of America agency executive directors in seven North American cities, with 654 invited to participate. A 30% total return rate was accomplished and 178 surveys were completed and returned.

Participant demographics revealed a gender distribution of 60.1% females and 39.9% males. The mean participant age was 52.59 years, ranging from 29 to 85 years, with a SD of 9.45 and 58.5% over 50 years old. Racial composition was 84.7% Caucasian and 15% having a different racial make-up. Living situations were described as 10.2% single, 74.6% married/partnered, and 11.3% divorced.

The educational accomplishments of participants reported that 94.9% had a Bachelor's degree (9% social work, 44.9% Bachelor of Arts), 61.6% had a Master's degree (15.3% social work,

16.9% Masters of Arts, 16.9% other), and 15% had a Doctorate degree (8.1% PhD, 3.5% JD, 1.2% MD, 2.3% Other). Social work degrees were reported by 21.1% (37 participants), versus Non-Social work degrees 78.9% (138 participants).

The reported employment experiences revealed that 76.3% had non-profit management experience compared to 30% (INSERT), 20.8% had government management experience compared to 21%, and 24.1% have for-profit management experience compared to 43%. The reported executive director experience in non-profit sector revealed that 58.2% reported their current role was their first executive director position, 33.9% had occupied two or three executive director positions, and 29.5% had served in an interim placement at least one time.

The data revealed considerable longevity in the non-profit sector with 42.1% having worked in non-profit sector for more than 26 years, 70.8% having worked in non-profit sector for more than 16 years, and 4.5% having worked in the non-profit sector for less than five years. Fifty-seven percent (57.1%) had worked with or were involved with their organizations before becoming the executive director, 42.9% were not involved with their current organization prior to their current position, and only 6.3% of executive directors identifying themselves as the founder of the organization.

This research resulted in significant differences in relocation practices, as well as identifying a period of time in which non-profit organizations began employing executive directors with non-social work educational backgrounds and having for-profit experience. Using resource dependency theory as an explanatory model for the shifts in executive leadership occurring in the sector, the data identified a significant period of time in which non-profit organizations began employing executive directors with non-social work educational backgrounds and having for-profit experience. Also resulting in significant differences between those with and without social work backgrounds were relocation practices, organization budget size, boundary spanning

activities, and salary differentials between genders. Numerous trends were also found in the data, specifically regarding strategic planning activities.

Significant Findings Included:

1. A pivotal time period can be identified in which executive directors are being positioned into organizations with for-profit employment experience and non-social work educational backgrounds

- Significant findings relating to the time period 1994-2007
- A clear and meaningful time period exists, beginning in 1994 and up to 2007, in which executive directors with for-profit management experience and non-social work educational backgrounds were being placed in non-profit leadership positions at a greater rate than those without the same management and educational experience.

2. Executive directors with non-social work education backgrounds will have relocated more often for their current position and received a relocation package

- Significant contradictory findings in which social work educated executive directors were found to relocate significantly more for their positions.

Further Analysis: Relocation Value

- Data also indicates a contradictory trend with those having non-social work educational backgrounds receiving a relocation package from their current employer.
- Social Work educated mean relocation value: **\$2375**; Non-Social Work educated mean relocation value: **\$ 5275**

3. Greater the organizational budget, the less likely a social worker educated person is the executive director

- Significant findings in which social work educated executive directors are more likely to run organizations with budgets exceeding one million dollars.
- 83.8% of social work educated executive directors, were leading organizations with budgets exceeding one million dollars; 67.4% of non-social work educated were leading organizations with budgets exceeding one million dollars.

Implication for the non-profit sector include the leadership activities and behaviors, and succession planning investments identified as critical for the future of the sector by participants and developed from current leadership literature. Additionally, the different organizational components and leadership behaviors identified by all participants will be reviewed as areas of collective concern and critical for the certain challenges on the academic and professional horizon.

Speaker Biography: A victim advocate since 1997, Dr. Gamble has spent her career growing programs and organizational capacity in the non-profit and for-profit sectors. In her most recent position, she oversaw the nation's only protective order notification service for domestic violence victims at Appriss, Inc, and is currently a national trainer on domestic violence and technology. Dr. Gamble earned her BA from the University of Kentucky, her MSSW and PhD in Social Work from the University of Louisville, Kent School of Social Work. Her research interests include non-profit leadership, international social work, organizational development, succession planning, protection order notification effectiveness, and systemic barriers to victims. She is the Board Chair for Witness Justice, a national non-profit serving victims of crime and trauma, and sits on the National Sheriff's Association Domestic Violence Committee. Dr. Gamble lives in Louisville KY and is a long distance runner and travel enthusiast.