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Abstract

The mental health of leaders in the non-profit sector has emerged as a critical, yet often overlooked, area of inquiry in organizational and leadership studies. While corporate and political leadership has been extensively examined, the psychological wellbeing of non-profit leaders remains underexplored despite its central role in sustaining social impact. The COVID-19 pandemic underscored this gap by amplifying structural vulnerabilities within the sector and intensifying the burdens placed on leaders. Unlike executives in corporate or governmental contexts, non-profit leaders must navigate multiple, often conflicting, accountabilities to donors, staff, boards, and communities, while operating under conditions of financial scarcity and mission-driven urgency. This article draws upon occupational psychology, resilience theory, and organizational behavior to argue that leader wellbeing is not merely a private concern but a strategic determinant of organizational resilience. By analyzing frameworks such as the Job Demands–Resources model, theories of resilience, and organizational culture research, the article highlights the systemic dimensions of leadership wellbeing. Ultimately, protecting the mental health of non-profit leaders is both a moral imperative and a strategic necessity, shaping the sustainability, adaptability, and legitimacy of organizations that serve vulnerable populations.

Keywords

non-profit leadership; mental health; organizational resilience; burnout; occupational psychology; wellbeing; governance

1. Introduction

Leadership wellbeing has long been treated as a peripheral issue in organizational studies, with attention traditionally focused on corporate executives or political elites. In contrast, the mental health of non-profit leaders has been largely neglected despite its significance for sustaining organizational resilience and impact. Global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic have drawn attention to this gap, as leaders were compelled to safeguard organizational survival while managing unprecedented pressures on staff and beneficiaries. This article examines the mental health of non-profit leaders as a central dimension of

organizational resilience, highlighting why it demands dedicated scholarly and practical focus.

2. Context and Background

The demands on non-profit leaders differ from those in corporate or governmental sectors. Corporate executives are primarily accountable to shareholders, whereas non-profit leaders must balance the expectations of diverse and often conflicting stakeholders—boards, donors, employees, volunteers, and communities. The complexity of these accountabilities, coupled with chronic resource scarcity, increases the risk of strain, burnout, and moral injury (Litz et al., 2009).

Research in occupational psychology demonstrates that stress and emotional exhaustion undermine cognitive flexibility, innovation, and ethical decision-making (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Maslach & Leiter, 2016). For non-profits, these impacts are magnified by mission intensity and exposure to community suffering. Structural vulnerabilities, such as dependence on donor funding and unstable policy environments, further exacerbate leaders' psychological burden (Ebrahim, 2019).

3. Conceptual Frameworks for Understanding Wellbeing

3.1 The Job Demands–Resources Model

The Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model provides a useful framework for analyzing how workload, resource constraints, and emotional demands interact to affect wellbeing (Demerouti et al., 2001). In non-profits, high demands (e.g., ethical tensions, mission urgency) are rarely matched by adequate resources, creating conditions for chronic strain.

3.2 Resilience Theory

Resilience theory highlights the capacity of individuals and organizations to adapt and recover in the face of adversity (Connor & Davidson, 2003). For leaders, resilience entails not only personal coping strategies but also the cultivation of organizational cultures that support flexibility, psychological safety, and collective learning.

3.3 Organizational Culture and Leadership

Studies of organizational culture emphasize the role of leadership in fostering trust, openness, and adaptive capacity (Edmondson, 1999). A culture that supports mental health and learning reduces stigma around vulnerability, enabling leaders and staff to sustain performance under pressure.

4. Illustrative Challenges in Non-Profit Leadership

Non-profit leaders face unique pressures that shape their wellbeing:

- **Moral injury**: Leaders often confront unmet community needs due to structural limitations, leading to ethical distress (Litz et al., 2009).
- **Complex accountability**: Balancing the expectations of donors, boards, and beneficiaries creates tensions absent in corporate settings (CIVICUS, 2021).
- **Resource scarcity**: Chronic financial constraints amplify stress, limiting investment in staff wellbeing or organizational infrastructure (Smith & Brough, 2022).
- **Crisis response**: During COVID-19, leaders were required to simultaneously protect staff safety, secure funding, and sustain services (United Nations, 2022).

These examples illustrate why wellbeing strategies developed for corporate executives cannot simply be transferred into non-profit contexts without adaptation.

5. Discussion

The wellbeing of non-profit leaders must be reframed as a structural and strategic issue rather than a matter of personal coping. Individual resilience interventions—such as mindfulness or stress management—are insufficient if systemic vulnerabilities remain unaddressed. A multi-level approach is necessary:

- **Individual level**: Supporting leaders through coaching, peer networks, and mental health resources.
- **Organizational level**: Embedding psychological safety, work-life balance, and transparent communication into organizational culture.
- **Sectoral level**: Rethinking funding models and accountability frameworks to reduce structural pressures that drive burnout and moral injury.

Bridging theory and practice requires recognizing that leadership wellbeing is inseparable from organizational sustainability, donor trust, and community outcomes.

6. Conclusion

The mental health of non-profit leaders is both a moral responsibility and a strategic necessity. Leaders' psychological wellbeing directly influences decision-making, organizational culture, and the capacity of non-profits to adapt under crisis. Frameworks such as the JD-R model, resilience theory, and organizational culture research provide critical tools for analyzing and addressing these challenges. Future research and practice must move beyond individual coping to systemic approaches that integrate leader wellbeing into governance, funding, and sectoral accountability. Strengthening the mental health of

leaders ultimately strengthens the resilience, legitimacy, and long-term impact of civil society itself.

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