Non-Profit Leaders and Listening

Jyoti Bachani
Saint Mary's College of California, Moraga, CA, U.S.A.
&
Mary E. Vradelis
Sequoia Consulting, Berkeley, CA, U.S.A.

Abstract. *In this interview-based study of nonprofit leaders, we find that listening to their stakeholders from within and outside their organizations is an important activity. The leadership literature does not focus on listening as an important leadership skill and activity. We review the literature on listening and argue that more research is needed in the combined area of leadership studies and listening. Specifically, our data show that successful nonprofit leaders use their listening skills to gather input from various stakeholders and then use values, their own and their organization's, to construct their legislative power and influence and build an engaged community that supports their mission and values.*

Keywords : *Non-Profit Leaders and Listening*

This research project started as a dialog between an executive MBA student with over two decades of work experience in the non-profit sector and her professor, when the student expressed frustration that many of the theoretical lessons did not seem directly applicable to her practice in the non-profit world. The professor's explanation that non-profit organizations were similar to business organizations on many dimensions was dismissed. The student, with domain expertise in non-profit organizations, insisted that the business practices did not truly reflect the challenges faced by the non-profit organizations. We decided to resolve this by doing a study based on interviewing several non-profit leaders to see if others had the same experience.

Anecdotal evidence suggested that government agencies and non-profit organizations have to work with multiple constituents more routinely than for-profit organizations. Non-profits depend on raising funds from donors for basic survival. Their existence and success depends on being able to serve their constituents, keep the trust of their donors, win the commitment of their employees, and their ability to collaborate with all other organizations that serve the same constituency. So, investing time to discover and articulate some of these challenges was a good enough reason for a small study.

Jim Collins, the author of best-selling book "Good to Great: Why some companies make the leap.. and others don't," wrote a monograph to accompany the book. It is called "Good to Great and the Social Sectors," and it is aimed at the non-profit organizations. He introduced the distinction between for and not-for-profit leadership powers, in terms of executive and legislative powers. He wrote that for-profit leaders have executive powers to reward or punish based on being higher up in the pyramidal hierarchical structure of the business world, while non-profit leaders function in more flat networked organizations and thus depend on legislative power instead. Non-profit leaders do not have access to the same executive or reward power as that available to leaders in the corporate world. Frances Hesselbein, the CEO of the Girl Scouts of the USA, in the same monograph, describes her position as being 'in the center of an organization, as opposed to being at the top" since she has to work through influence rather than direct power (Collins, 2005).

These observations suggest that the leaders of non-profit organizations may require some different skills. We set out to investigate this by asking leaders of non-profit organizations to describe their experiences in their own words. The goal of the study was to better understand the challenges faced by the leaders of non-profit organizations, so that we could articulate and contrast these. Our goal was to provide empirical observations that would identify the ways in which non-profit organizations were faced with different challenges, or not. The major findings from this exploratory study are: (1) that the challenges of leading non-profit organizations are special in ways that are not very well articulated, understood or appreciated in literature or the trade press. We identify four such differences and explain how those impact management practices in these organizations; (2) that non-profit leaders devote a substantial part of their efforts to listen to their stakeholders, and listening is an important skill for a leader, in the non-profit organization.

THE NON-PROFIT SECTOR

The non-profit sector is estimated to represent 5% of the US GDP. According to a 2009 report, non-profits employ 9.4 million employees and 4.7 million full-time volunteers nationwide; non-profits constitute 11 percent of the American workforce—greater than the auto and financial industries combined (Bridgeland, McNaught, Reed & Dunkelman, 2009). Like other parts of the economy, the non-profits have been severely impacted by the recent economic crisis. The need for services has increased, while revenue has decreased (due to shrinking donations and endowments). Non-profits are often being asked to be more efficient and effective and adopt 'business' methods or metrics. Many have trained their managers and workers in the standard training programs that business managers attend. These arguments have led to non-profits reporting measures that make them accountable to their donors by declaring the percentage of every dollar that goes to the cause versus to overhead and other administrative expenses.

Some non-profit leaders believe that non-profits cannot be run like a business because they serve social goals that cannot be quantified in the same way that the bottom-line of a business can be. However, many managers with experience in both kinds of organizations argue that not being able to quantify a financial profit goal does not mean that a financial cost goal cannot be used as a measure. They advocate that efficiency of non-profit organizations be measured by their ability to deliver the same services for a lower cost or lower administrative overhead. This additional accountability is held up as a way to make non-profits more effective and efficient by adopting traditional business practices.

One study identifies three main sectors in the organizational world and their different abilities and motivations to adapt. These are: (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009, p. 53)

(1) Not-for-profit—"organizations are typically mis-driven…tend to value consensus decision making, with everyone having a voice in tough decision making. That also gives everyone a veto."

(2) Public sector—"organizations tend to be risk averse, security oriented, and insulated from the pressure to adapt from market-place competition."

(3) Private sector—"organizations are typically driven primarily by profit…operate in highly competitive environment…tend to protect historically but diminishingly profitable businesses."

According to the legal structure in California, the state law allows people to come together to either benefit members of an organization (a club, or mutual benefit society) or for some public purpose (such as a hospital, environmental organization or literary society), and offers tax-exempt status to 27 different types of organizations. The organizations formed under section 501 (c) (3) operate in a manner that donors receive tax credit for a donation, but other organizations that use their profits to support their main purpose may be religious, charitable, scientific, literary, and/or educational. The mutual benefit organizations' members do not receive tax credit, and include trade associations, chambers of commerce, credit unions, political education, etc. (Mancuso, 2009).

There are many different ways to define a non-profit organization. For the purpose of our study, we chose the broadest possible definition: we included any organization that served the community, even if it was a government organization, as long as it was not explicitly a for-profit business. This broad definition was consistent with the purpose of the study, which was to identify the ways in which leading these organizations would be different from leading a business.

There are many similarities between organizations, whether for- or non-profit. Organizations enable collective action. Whether it is a business run for profit, or a non-profit, or a community organization, a number of organizational issues and challenges of collective action are similar across different organizations. For example, organizations need to hire and train people, have specific roles for individuals, and an organizational culture and structure that enable the coordination of these individual actions into consistent collective outcomes. Organizations need some resources devoted to achieving their aims, say some physical space, financing for capital and operating expenses, equipment, human resources, and perhaps even some intangible resources like reputation, goodwill, etc. Capabilities to produce, market, and deliver their goods and services effectively are also crucial for all organizations, regardless of whether their final goal is to make a profit from these operations or not. However, since the study was motivated by the need to discover how running a non-profit posed challenges that were different from the ones that businesses faced, we agreed to focus on identifying and articulating what about the non-profit organizations made it so.

RESEARCH METHOD

Our goal in this exploratory study is to learn from the leaders of non-profit organizations about what they do, and identify what is unique about their practices. We are not confirming or disproving any theoretical model of leadership or testing any hypothesis. We simply set out to learn about the professional experiences of leaders in their own language.

One of the authors is a veteran with two decades of experience in various non-profit organizations, most recently as an executive director and a CEO of a consulting practice that helps many non-profit and community organizations with strategic planning and executive training. She is also alum of a yearlong program offered by the James P. Shannon Leadership Institute, an institute that is dedicated to the personal and professional renewal of leaders in community-serving organizations. According to the Shannon Institute website, their mission is "to nurture the creativity and vitality of proven leaders of philanthropic, civic, and community-serving organizations. The Institute provides a structured, challenging, and supportive opportunity for these experienced community leaders to clarify the purpose of their work and the core values they want that work to exemplify, to enhance their focus and effectiveness, and to increase their sense of fulfillment." As part of this program, the non-profit leaders are required to spend extensive periods of time in guided reflection to identify their core values and to find ways to connect their values to their work. The non-profit leaders work with facilitators, as individuals and in groups, to assess their skills, personality type, values, and several other structured self-reflective exercises.

Since this is an exploratory and descriptive study, we agreed that the alumni from the Shannon Institute program would be a suitable set of informants for this empirical research. We worked with the Shannon institute directors to identify a small subset of the alumni from the program, and contacted a dozen alumni with extensive experiences as non-profit and community leaders. Such convenience sampling is acceptable because this was a qualitative descriptive empirical investigation where the managers' experience and their ability to describe it with clarity was important. Since we were going to talk to leaders, we decided to ground the study in leadership literature. A review of what is established wisdom in leadership studies was conducted in order to identify the key leadership behaviors.

Leadership Behaviors

At a very high level of abstraction, the primary focus of leadership training and textbooks is on the role of the leader as the one to create a vision, communicate it, and inspire the followers, sometimes with charisma, to achieve collective action for meeting some goals. We used an edited volume of a popular leadership text that has several definitive articles (Northhouse, 2007), to compile a list of common leadership behaviors. The list was pared down to categories that were similar, and it is presented in table 1 below.

Table 1: Leadership Behaviors

Establish goals and timelines
Establish methods of evaluation. Establish high standard of excellence
Problem solving
Strong role model
Define roles. Clarify what is to be done, how it is to be done, who is responsible to do it. Giving directions.
Motivate subordinates. Challenge subordinates to perform at highest level possible. Demonstrate confidence in their capabilities. Consult with subordinates to obtain their ideas and opinions.

Data Collection

We interviewed a total of 8 leaders of different non-profit and community organizations all over the United States. Table 2 in the appendix provides basic introductory data about our interviewees, although their names, titles, their organization and its mission or purpose, have been disguised in some cases, to honor the participant's request for anonymity. We felt that by offering this option to be anonymous, we could get a more frank description of the challenges they faced. Both authors attended all but one interview. All interviews except one were conducted by phone. For one interview, one author was face to face with the interviewee and the other author was participating by phone. Each semi-structured interview lasted 70 to 100 minutes. The interview notes were transcribed and sent back to the interviewee to ensure that it adequately represented the conversation. The interview data were coded and analyzed in a grounded theory-based approach (Glasser and Strauss, 1967). We searched for common themes or patterns amongst all the interview data.

Initially, we used open-ended unstructured interviews for the first couple of leaders. We collected detailed descriptions of the leader's values, day-to-day activities, what mattered to them, what they were working on, what the results of their structured assessments from the Shanon program were, and what led them to that program. We also asked them questions about the values that had been identified by these non-profit leaders during their time in the reflective year long program at the Shannon Institute. We started the interviews with questions about their experiences with the Shannon Institute leadership program, specifically probing about some of the structured exercises related to their values and then asking them how those values were manifested in their work. We asked about the organization and its values and mission. Then we asked them to describe what they had been working on lately and go into the details of their day-to-day activities. The questions were meant to get a conversation started, while allowing us to conduct the interview in an open-ended free format that would allow us the flexibility to follow the conversation where it led us. To check for congruency between what the leader said and what the leader did, we asked for detailed and specific examples of their work.

Based on the initial interviews, we created a semi-structured interview approach for the rest of the interviewees. The goal was to learn first-hand what leadership means to them, and how do they lead their organizations by reviewing the description of their activities. We asked about the results of Myers-Briggs Personality profiles of the leaders, which they had all done during the Shannon Institute program. Their values inventory and its consistency with the mission of their organization was also a part of our probing. We specially pushed for this by asking if they had any examples of a personal-institutional conflict of values and how it was resolved. We asked them to focus on specific projects, initiatives or activities that had been engaged in lately.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

We found that there were a variety of challenges that each leader and organization faced, and there were no common themes that jumped out of the interview data. Both authors immersed themselves in reading and re-reading the interview notes and spent over 30 hours discussing the key aspects and messages that the interviewee meant to convey to us. We tabulated the data into several tables with direct quotes from the interviewees, loosely structured around the concepts derived from leadership theory. Early versions of such analytic efforts made us aware that many of the leaders were describing activities that involved listening, although this was not a part of the leadership traits that we had identified in our literature review. The other thing in common with a number of these leaders was that they all found the Shannon Institute program to be beneficial, while at the same time, a number of them expressed their frustration with many other training programs that they had been subjected to. They went so far as to say that some the business training programs that they had gone through were a waste of time and resources. It was clear that they only attended these because their donors or board members made them attend. More than a few leaders expressed frustration that no one understood the challenges they faced, not even their own board of directors, who were often successful and smart business leaders.

First we highlight the features that distinguish non-profit organizations from business organizations, and pose some challenges that are different from what businesses face. Next, we report on the salient activity of listening that is critical to the leadership experience of a number of these leaders. We show the many different ways and forums through which these leaders set up and support their listening activities with the many constituents and stakeholders their organization is inter-connected with.

Challenges Faced by Non-Profit Organizations

We articulate the key differences between the challenges faced by a non-profit organization and a business, such that the usefulness of conventional business practices would be called into question. This list is based on analyzing the data collected during our interviews. We had explicitly asked two of the informants a question about what they see as the major differences between for-profit and non-profit organizations since they both had extensive experiences in the two sectors. Their answers provided a basis on which we searched for similar features across all our interviews. Identifying these differences is important as these are not articulated anywhere. When we reflected these results back to the participants, they were enthusiastic in their support and declared that it was useful to have these challenges spelled out so that they could communicate these more effectively to others too. These are unique to community organizations, but often go unnoticed since no one has articulated them before.

(1) Within the non-profits sector, the social and community service organizations serve an existing and often growing unmet need. They provide social services or community support activities that are essential to people's lives, for e.g. health-care for the uninsured, care for the elderly, temporary housing for the runaway youth, job-training and job-seeking support for the unemployed poor, etc. Even when they are providing non-essential services, their activities are in the domain where these enrich the lives of people they serve, for e.g. arts and recreational services, etc. In most cases, the demand for these services far outstrips the supply. There are waiting lists and selection criteria to limit and select who they can serve with their limited resources. They often have to turn people away for lack of resources to meet all the demand there is. In sharp contrast, the for-profit businesses usually have substantial advertising budgets and promotional programs to generate demand and awareness for their products and services, not all of which are critical or essential in the same way as the services provided by the community organizations. The challenges of meeting a high level of existing demand with limited resources are unique to the non-profit sector, and seldom a problem in the business world.

(2) The role of funding for a non-profit organization makes it substantially different from a business organization. One leader who had previously worked for over a decade with a large semi-conductor company and then switched to a non-profit serving the needs of children in schools, lamented that there were very limited funds to work with in the face of successful programs with good demand. He remarked that he had to say 'No' much more often in his current position than previously in the corporate world, even to ideas that he thought would be great for the organization. In our sample, all but one reported the challenges of funding their cause and organizations. Non-profit leaders have to scramble for money. This is recognized as an important part of their job. Some of the leaders lamented that they had to devote 50% of their time to fund-raising efforts even though they would have preferred to devote all their time to their cause. A majority of the leaders in our sample recognized that as custodians of money that was 'donated' to their cause, they had to be very judicious in its use and held themselves accountable. These ways of funding the organization are so radically different from the concerns of most businesses that have such a different approach and setup to raise funds for their businesses that it would merit a bigger investigation to draw out the contrasts than we can do justice to here.

(3) Non-profits tend to attract (and retain) volunteers and employees who are loyal to the cause of the organization. The employees are usually working for a lower compensation package than they would get for similar jobs in the for-profit world since they identify with the mission and supposedly derive satisfaction from the work. They also expect a work-life balance that is not common in the highly competitive corporate world. This also means that sometimes businesslike policies adopted by the non-profit leaders may end up de-motivating their employees rather than motivating them. Finally, since non-profits pay less, they may not get the best talent for jobs that are not directly serving their cause. Coupled with a lower training budget, this may lead to a less productive workplace sometimes.

(4) The non-profit leaders were unusually dedicated to their cause or organization's mission and showed a level of commitment to this above and beyond the loyalties seen elsewhere. They had longer tenures in the job; they were ready to take personal risks and showed a high degree of self-awareness in championing their cause. They made personal and professional changes to be aligned with the greater good they wanted to bring to the world. The flip side of this is that some of them showed signs of exhaustion, frustration and burn-out. The retreats and management training some experienced had failed to address matters at this

level of inner yearning, and sometimes become ‘yet another thing to do’. Sure, they learnt some tools and techniques to better manage their employees or finances, but they came away unable to really convey their true need. Many see themselves as ‘enablers’ who facilitate others to achieve their goals and yet they did not feel that they ever got the support they needed to achieve this properly. They displayed a lot of empathy for others, but did not feel that anyone, including their closest business or relationship partners truly understood what they needed to feel supported in their roles.

To summarize, the non-profit organizations address huge unmet demand for their services for basic social and community needs, with volunteers, employees, and leaders that are deeply and personally committed to the causes they organize for, often making personal sacrifices in salary and life-style choices associated with supporting the cause, with the constant burden of generating ongoing financial resources needed for their work. There was a sense amongst a number of them that there was inadequate understanding or empathy for their roles in the face of these challenges. One of them was dealing with a conflict with the business-person on the team who appeared to him to only care about the monetary aspects without understanding the need to keep the programs going that were critical to the mission of the organization. Another one said that he had found the management and business training that had been offered to him over the years to have become ‘one more thing on the to do list’ rather than something that was helpful to him. These programs had failed to help him solve the kinds of problems that he struggled with because his community service world was different from business organizations in ways that were not obvious or easy to convey.

Table 2: Summary of the Key Differences.

	For-Profits	**Non-Profits**
PURPOSE:	To provide service/goods that communities will pay for.	To serve unmet needs founders are passionate about
Bottom Line	Financial	For cause: raison-de-etre
Mission	For-profit motive	Financial is secondary – only needed to serve mission
PEOPLE	Leaders listen – to influence employees/followers	Leaders listen to incorporate employees'/donors'/follower s' interests and goals.
Leadership	Has power of position and rewards	Depends on consensus building to incorporate employees' donors', and followers' interests and goals.
Employee Motivation	Money and career growth	Cause is primary
PROCESS	Money flows from many to few	Money flows from few to many
Decision power	Executive	Legislative
Communications	Hierarchical	Goes in all directions
Resources	Have money to invest in professional development and operations	Often operate with scarcity mentality
Success metrics:	Mostly financial	Often elusive impacts on community
Fundraising	Based on financial success or potential	Tailored to donors' interests
Scalability	Goal for businesses	Often hindered by local stakeholder interests

Non-Profit Leaders' Behaviors: Listening Matters

Apart from the features listed in the previous section, there were no clear patterns in the data across all interviews. When we reviewed the data with regard to the leadership activities identified in Table 1, we found that depending on the organization and its leader, some of these activities were more salient for some than for others. The Myers-Briggs Personality profiles of the leaders also revealed that the leaders have all different personality types. There was a variety of values that the leaders and the organizations espoused, with no common thread uniting these (other than features listed in the earlier section that distinguish these organizations from the for-profit organizations). Some leaders knew their values clearly and aspired to live them on a daily basis while others recalled doing the values-identification-exercise during the Shannon program. In most cases, the organizational mission seemed to be well aligned with the personal values of the leaders, and if it was not, the leader was either reconsidering their position or working towards realigning the direction of their organization to be more consistent with their personal values. Some instances of conflict between the two were brought up along with examples of how the personal-institutional conflict of values was or had been resolved or addressed. Explicit examples of their activities and projects helped us identify which of their activities was not theoretically represented in the abstract theoretical descriptions of Table 1. The data showed that leaders spent a lot of their time in various situations that required them to be actively listening. So much so that we consider it an important leadership activity that needs to be listed explicitly in addition to the others in Table 1. The last activity listed in Table 1, ‘consult with subordinates..’ implies a listening role for the leader but often becomes an exercise in ‘selling’ the leader’s ideas or a low level ‘involvement’ by the followers.

Listening is an important leadership activity. In describing their day to day activities, the non-profit leaders we interviewed, explicitly mentioned how a majority of the activities they engaged in were essentially ‘to listen’. They needed to find out what their employees, donors, collaborators, customers, policy makers, boards, and various other stakeholders needed or wanted. This focus on listening was so pervasive in their descriptions that we would have expected this to be part of the many theories. We were surprised that the leadership literature does not include listening more explicitly. It is implied indirectly in several leadership activities like communication, consulting, gathering input, etc but it is not considered explicitly anywhere. This implicit theoretical treatment of an important empirical activity is a big gap in theorizing about leadership. The implied skills of communication do not focus on listening either. The communication models direct the leader to focus on other areas like coding the message and selecting the appropriate channel for communicating the message but not on the critical skill of listening. Hence, even the implicit inclusion of listening in theories is incomplete and completely divorced from the experiential descriptions of what leaders are really doing.

All leaders described spending a lot of their time gathering input and simply listening to people within and outside their organizations. Based on these empirical findings, we propose that listening is a significant activity essential to the role of a leader. After all, the leader articulates the aspirations of a collective of followers, much greater in strength of sheer numbers, and to be able to do that with any authenticity, the leader needs to be a good listener and an empathetic one too. The data show that listening really well is what allows a leader to capture the zeitgeist and the collective aspirations of the followers. The leaders do not have any special skills like mind-reading or clairvoyance, or wizardry of any kind, but yet are able to capture the imagination of their followers and articulate their collective aspirations because they have the ability to listen and pay attention to the content and emotion of what they hear.

Examples of Non-profit Leaders Listening

Here are some examples of the way the leaders were engaging in listening. The names of the leaders and organizations have been disguised.

(1) Let us first look at a large organization that had a long history of being very hierarchical. The leader, Mike, enjoyed extensive executive powers and could command loyalty and obedience from those who reported to him based purely on the traditional training and socialization into their roles from historical precedent. The stereotypical image of the organization was one of a strict hierarchy where the chain of command was maintained with deference. Mike spent about 10% of the time on his job in situations where he was interacting with his constituents and the population his organization served. He listened to them and learnt that his organization was perceived as a bureaucracy and his employees that dealt with the people were not well liked, despite being in a role that was supposed to be a helpful one. He wanted to change that, and be seen and admired by the community for their helpful role. As part of learning more about his organization, beyond the formal reports and meetings, he

set up a monthly open forum where anyone from the 90 employees (and 65 volunteers) could come and bring up any issues they wanted to bring to his attention. These forums were a way for him to listen to his employees and provide them with direct access to the leader bypassing the more traditional channels of the bureaucratic organization.

(2) In another organization, there were 12 employees who were responsible for the largest advocacy group in the state on a certain issue, with an annual operating budget of one million dollars. The process to hire a new executive director for this organization took a total of nine months. A board member for this small organization, who worked in the corporate world, felt that a similar position within the business world would have been filled in a fraction of the time. The search included a consultative process that was followed to ensure that the right person was found for the role. The consultations were all about listening to formulate the right job description and find the right person. The board listened to the employees who would be led by this person. They listened to their donors who would donate their money based on the trust in the vision and leadership of the executive director. They listened to the community they served by including various opinion leaders for their cause. By listening to all the stakeholders, within and outside the organization, donors and recipients, they learnt about the key challenges in terms of the issues and the donations, and about what the leader was expected to achieve. This helped formulate what was expected from the person taking the position, and thus was an important part of the hiring process and the final decision. To give a specific example, by listening, they learnt that a major donor group had become alienated from the organization and had stopped donating as much as before. So, one of the selection criteria for the executive director was to explicitly be able to rebuild connections with this specific donor group and reintegrate them in order to be able to serve their shared cause.

(3) For another organization, the purpose was to provide certain programs for grade school students; a COO was hired, who brought over a decade's experience from the corporate world. He saw how popular and important the school programs were and proceeded to create a growth strategy for the organization. The strategy was articulated and presented to the employees in a meeting. It was described as to serve a million school students in 20 cities by 2020. From the COO's business world experience, such a specific target-oriented strategy had served to motivate employees and align their actions to help achieve the corporate objectives. In this non-profit organization, it had the opposite impact. The staff hated it and was de-motivated by it. They told the COO that he was attempting to bring the corporate world's 'growth just for the sake of growth' mentality to their mission, without appreciating how they were different. They spoke up in the meeting to declare their concerns about how this growth would impact the quality of the programs. This growth would also mean that they, the employees, who actually delivered the programs in the schools, would have to travel to schools far away from their home districts, or maybe even transferred to new locations. They were not interested in doing that. The COO listened intently to their concerns and agreed to reconsider the strategy. It had to be withdrawn as presented, and reformulated to be more consistent with the organization's key resource, its people. The revised strategy focused less on target numbers and more on the difference they would be making.

(4) Another example of the importance of the leader's listening was from a community development organization. The leader traveled overseas to poor countries to truly understand how development work was undertaken in other parts of the world. The biggest lesson he came back with was that the very concept of 'development' was questionable since communities that thrived were not dependent on help from outside for their 'development'. The communities that survived and thrived were ones where the community members owned the responsibility for their own development and thus the work for this community development organization had to be radically shifted and re-focused to be about community engagement not development. Community engagement produces development that is

enduring and lasts. This fundamental shift would not have been possible unless the leader had cared deeply and listened well to truly understand the community's needs in an empathetic manner.

In all these examples, the role of the leaders in making a significant shift in their organization depended heavily on their ability to listen and their openness to change. The vision, the role the leaders assume, the assumption the leaders make and how the leaders communicate their vision to the employees, all depend on their ability to listen well. They listen to the employees, the donors, the community they serve, and they understand how these different needs and demands can be balanced to achieve the organization's mission.

See the table in appendix 1 for a more detailed tabulated list of some critical incidents and examples of how the behaviors of these leaders showed a willingness to listen and the ways in which they set up mechanisms and forums to be able to listen. Each of these leaders recognized that listening and paying attention to all stakeholders was critically important for achieving the goals of their organization. While listening is implicit in a number of these activities, it is not explicitly mentioned anywhere.

Listening

Since listening emerged as a key practice, we decided to conduct a literature review of leadership and listening. A broad library and internet based search for articles with the key words leadership and listening, communication, management communication was conducted. Communication appeared explicitly as an important leadership activity, but when we looked deeper, none of the communication models in the literature mentioned listening.

The only studies that explicitly mentioned listening in the context of leadership were these: One study found that perceptions of leadership were positively correlated with listening effectiveness (Bechler & Johnson 1995, Johnson & Bechler, 1998). Orrick (2002) offered some prescriptions for leaders on how to be more effective listeners by looking the speaker in the eye, paraphrasing to ensure understanding the speaker's message, keeping an open mind and not getting emotional or defensive, and being respectful by not betraying the confidence of the speaker.

A few other authors have recognized the importance of listening for managers and supervisors (Ambrose, 1984; Imberman, 1969; Weinrauch & Swanda, 1975). Supervisory listening impacts subordinate support, trust, intrinsic motivation and performance (Stine, Thompson, et al. 1995) and affects community building efforts (Purdy, 1991). Listening can affect success at work (Sypher, Bostrom, et al. 1989). One study acknowledged that it is the 'toughest management skill" (Brownell, 1987). We decided to pursue this further and focus on the research related to listening. Early searches yielded medical listening research on the physiological and neurological processes of listening. However, after some diligent guided search with the help of conversations with colleagues specializing in management communication area, we found the literature on listening.

The earliest reference that we found on the topic of listening was the 1925 work, "Science of listening" authored by W. Tucker. Yet, the 'father of listening' in academic arena was Late Dr. Ralph G. Nichols, of the University of Minnesota. In 1972, he wrote, "Listening is good business." Some of his other writings relevant for managers are "Listening is a 10-part skill." (1987a) and "Manipulation versus persuasion" (1987b). In 1979, his successor, Lyman K. "Manny" Steil, started the International Listening Association to promote the practice, teaching and research of listening. This professional organization hosts annual meetings and publishes the International Journal of Listening.

Listening is a skill and it can be taught(Adams, 1947, Anthony & Anthony, 1972; Barry, 1973; Duker, 1970; Haynes, 1979; Wolvin & Coakley, 1984). There are measurement and assessment tools to assess the skill levels (Allen, 1977; Watson & Barker, 1988). The most recent review of the listening literature that we could find was by Witkin (1990); so listening as an area of research does not seem to be as active as it is important. This gap in research is particularly puzzling since business practitioners and academics claim to recognize listening as one of the most important skills for effective professionals (Smeltzer, 1993). Listening ability and effectiveness affect the perceptions of individual performance in general and communicative competence in particular, in the workplace (Haas & Arnold, 1995). Yet, according to one count, only 1.5% of articles in business journals dealt with listening effectiveness (Smeltzer, 1993).

There are different ways to practice the art of listening based on general properties of listening (Barrett-Lennard, 1988; Bigelow, 1976; Duker, 1964; Duker & Petrie, 1964,), for e.g. active listening, empathetic listening, etc. Active listening is where the listener takes an active role in the communications process by applying four techniques: restatement--restating or paraphrasing a message, summary--summarizing the main issues of a series of important points, responding to non-verbal cues--acknowledging and verbalizing the presence and effect of non-verbal messages, and responding to feelings--acknowledging and verbalizing the presence and affect of the feelings expressed (Knippen & Green, 1994). Listening in certain contexts can create healing, growth, relationship enrichment, tension reduction, problem solving, and knowledge advancement (Barrett-Lennard, 1988). Managers and leaders can use listening for all these.

Based on this research, we can declare that leadership literature has a gap since it does not include listening as an important leadership skill. Perhaps this is a skill more extensively used by non-profit sector leaders, but it seems to be worthy of inclusion in general leadership theories. In practice, leaders can be measured on their listening competence, trained in the behaviors of active listening, and there are several popular books, talks and corporate training programs on the subject. What is missing is academic research that will focus on how leaders and managers can use active listening skills to get organizationally beneficial outcomes, like effective relationship building, problem solving, knowledge creation, community building, and motivating subordinates. Our empirical data offer an illustration of how these non-profit managers used listening to engage with their stakeholders and communities to do just this. For this group of managers, listening is an important leadership activity, but their effectiveness really depends on their ability to use listening to truly engage the stakeholders in the collective endeavors of the organization.

Listening and Engaging

While the evidence in the previous section focuses on how the leaders were listening, their effectiveness really depended on how they engaged their organizations, their employees, donors and their constituents once they have listened and learnt. How does the balancing act with multiple different interests play out? The data we collected showed that effective listening was combined with the ability to engage the different constituents in a manner that brought a balance to the different interests using the leader’s personal values and/or the organization’s declared mission as the uniting thread. We want to emphasize that the leaders are not just listening to build consensus. They are also not just listening to provide what is being asked for by the various stakeholders they listen to. The leaders in our study, were listening, paying attention to really understand empathetically what the real concern was, and finding a way to address that concern, without compromising on the main goal and vision and values that are critical to bringing these different stakeholders into the conversation to begin with. So, in this section, we will provide further examples of how the leaders listened and used their own values or their organizations’ missions to construct a dialog and shared understanding that allowed them to be effective leaders.

For Mike, the leader from the hierarchical organization who started monthly forums for people to communicate directly with him, the values came into play in two ways. They had recently moved into new office premises. As part of that office design, Mike posted the organizations' mission statement in the lobby by the elevator where everyone entering the office could see these and be reminded of their mission on a daily basis. Mike also created his personal values statement and had these framed and posted in his office so that anyone coming to his office could easily see these. More importantly, he said, it reminds him to make every decision to be consistent with his values so that he is able to 'live his values' through his day-to-day actions. He saw these actions as being critical to his ability to lead effectively. He said that if he were to push decision making down through the traditionally hierarchical organization, he had to allow people to see that he meant it. In pushing decision making down the organization, Mike told his employees that if what they were doing was not illegal, unethical or against policy and was consistent with the organization's mission, they did not need to wait to get permission to do it. This gave individuals responsibility for their actions and increased the response time to make the organization less bureaucratic for their customers. Mike's objective was to be as transparent in his own decision making as possible, so that his stated values, as posted in his office, were seen in his actions by his employees. This allowed him to model the behavior he expected from these employees as they learnt new ways of the organization he was working to transform. This engagement is the critical second step after the listening stage since it shows that listening does not automatically mean yielding to the requests and demands that were heard. It means acknowledging these and yet finding a way to lead the individuals to see how their positions were best handled in the context of agreed upon collective values and mission of the organization.

In the other example, the organization that offered the school programs, the newly formulated strategy was a 10-fold increase of students served to one million students by 2020. When it was presented and the employees reacted to it negatively, complaining that it was 'just growth for growth's sake' without consideration for their values and needs, it was changed. The new strategy was to pilot the program in three new cities, with a targeted slower growth-rate of 20,000 students. It was scaled back from the original goals that were perceived as too ambitious. The newly formulated mission was still about growth, but it tied the growth to the organization's mission and acknowledged the employees' needs. It did not require employees to relocate or travel long distances to deliver the programs, and thus be able to maintain their need for a work-life balance. The new strategy maintained the numbers focus and fostered the accountability and results orientation that were the critical aspects of the original new strategy when it was introduced. Thus, listening to employees' concerns and addressing them was balanced with keeping true to the chosen direction for the newly emerging organization that was being intended by the new strategy.

DISCUSSION

Implications for Management

We found evidence to convince us that listening is fundamental and crucial for leadership studies. What we are most concerned with is how far can we generalize this claim? This study may be based on a small sample, but for qualitative research, this is not unusual. The data we have collected is describing the world in the words of the practitioners without theoretical filters creating any biases. Weick (1999) made a call for 'feeling theories' that theorize from the perspective of the people and the situations they face, so that we can see and appreciate the world they live in, not from our own or some neutral external perspective, but from the same one as theirs. We feel that by inductively arriving at our findings from the evidence we collected systematically, we have provided such a key discriminating feature of non-profit leaders. They are the ones who want to and know how to listen.

Limitations of the Study

Our sample constituted leaders of non-profit and public sector organizations only, as we wanted to understand leadership in this context. Further work is needed to see how these skills may be useful in other contexts. Although we did find some research that supports that listening is a good skill in many managerial situations, but its direct connection to leadership remains to be established more comprehensively. This is consistent with the findings we came up when focusing on features that distinguish the non-profit sector from the traditional business organizations. We feel that the next logical extension of our results will be to the networked flat organizations. These results may be less relevant or applicable to the more traditional hierarchical organizations where leaders can rely exclusively on their executive and reward powers and may not need good listening skills.

Our sample may be small but it is very diverse, varying in scope from small to large organizations, from charters in community development, political advocacy, support for the arts, social services, children's services and so on. Without use of executive or formal authority and relying primarily on legislative authority, these leaders managed to take their organizational missions forward by listening to the concerns of their employees, donors and constituents, and re-framing their message in an empathic manner, while being guided by their values, to create an engaged community that supported their mission. When we review the initial comparison of for-profit and non-profit organizations, we see that these differences do not preclude the general ability of these results. Leaders in corporations deal with similar challenges of having to satisfy multiple stakeholders and may benefit from better listening skills.

Directions for Future Research

This study points to the potential for further work: to include listening literature more actively with leadership literature and develop specific propositions on how leaders and managers can use listening to be more effective in their roles. We would like to use a larger sample to better describe and document how leaders listen and engage their constituents to create effective organizations. We would also like to conduct a comparative study with the business organizations. Theoretically, listening also needs to be explicitly made a part of communication models.

REFERENCES

Adams, H. M. (1947). Learning to be discriminating listeners. *English Journal* 36(January), 13-14.

Allen, T. H. (1977). How good a listener are you? *Management Review* 66(February), 37-9.

Ambrose, D. (1984). Are you listening?: Some guidelines for managers. *Executive Report*(April), 16-19.

Anthony, P. &Anthony, W. P. (1972). Now hear this: Some techniques of listening. *Supervisory Management* 17(March), 19-24.

Barrett-Lennard, G. T. (1988). Listening. *Person-Centered Review* 3(4), 410-425.

Barry, M. (1973). How to listen. *Times Educational Supplement* 3024(May), 77.

Bechler, C. &Johnson, S. D. (1995). Leadership and listening: A study of member perceptions. *Small Group Research* 26(1), 77-85.

Bigelow, S. (1976). Art of active listening. *Industrial Distribution* 66(May), 129.

Bridgeland, J., & McNaught, M. (Civic Enterprises), &Reed, B., & Dunkelman,M (Democratic Leadership Council), (March 2009). "Quiet Crisis" Michigan: W.K. Kellogg Foundation.

Brownell, J. (1987). Listening: The toughest management skill. *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly.*

Collins, J. (2005). Good to Great and the Social Sectors. Denver, CO: Jim Collins.

Duker, S. (1964). What do we know about listening. *Journal of Communication* 14, 245-248.

Duker, S. (1970). Teaching listening: Recently developed programs and materials. *Training and Development Journal,* (May), 11-14.

Duker, S., & Petrie, C. J. (1964). What we know about listening: Continuation of a controversy. *Journal of Communication,* 14 (December), 245-252.

Glasser, B.G., & Strauss A.L. (1967) The development of grounded theory. Chicago, IL: Alden.

Haas, J. W. & Arnold, C. L. (1995). An examination of the role of listening in judgments of communication competence in co-workers. *Journal of Business Communication, 32* (2), 123-139.

Haynes, M. E. (1979). Becoming an effective listener. *Supervisory Management, 24* (August), 21-28.

Heifetz, R., Grashow, A., & Linsky, M. (2009). *The practice of adaptive leadership tools and tactics for changing your organization and the world*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business Press.

Imberman, A. A. (1969). Listening is part of your job. *Supervisory Management,* 14 (November), 34-36.

Knippen, J.T., & Green, T. B. (1994). How the manager can use active listening. *Public Personnel Management*, 23.

Mancuso, A. (2009). *How to form a non-profit corporation in California*. California: Nolo Press.

Nichols, R. G. (1972). Listening is good business. *Management of Personnel Quarterly,* 1, 2-10.

Nichols, R. G. (1987a). Listening is a 10-part skill. *Nation's Business,* (September), 40.

Nichols, R. G. (1987b). Manipulation versus persuasion. *Journal of the International Listening Association,* 1, 3-14.

Northhouse, P. (2007). *Leadership: Theory and practice*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc.

Orick, L. M. (2002). *Listening practices of leaders*. Unpublished dissertation, University of New Mexico.

Purdy, M. (1991). Listening and community: The role of listening in community formation. *Journal of the International Listening Association,* 5, 51-67.

Smeltzer, L. R. (1993). Emerging questions and research paradigms in business communication research. *The Journal of Business Communication, 30* (2), 181-198.

Stine, M., Thompson, T., et al. (1995). The impact of organizational structure and the supervisory listening indicators on subordinate support, trust, intrinsic motivation and performance. *International Journal of Listening, 9*.

Sypher, B. D., Bostrom, R. N., et al. (1989). Listening, communication abilities, and success at work. *Journal of Business Communication,* 26(4), 293-303.

Tucker, W. (1925). Science of listening. *19th Century 97*, (April), 548.

Watson, K. W., & Barker, L. L. (1988). Listening assessment: The Watson-Barker Listening Test." *The Journal of the International Listening Association,* 2, 20-31.

Weick, K. E. (1999). That's moving: Theories that matter. *Journal of Management Inquiry*.

Weinrauch, J. D., & Swanda, J. R. J. (1975). Examining the significance of listening: An exploratory study of contemporary management. *The Journal of Business Communication,* 13 (Fall), 25-32.

Witkin, B. R. (1990). Listening theory and research: The state of the art. *Journal of the International Listening Association,* 4, 7-32.

Wolvin, A. D., & Coakley, C. G. (1984). Developing listening skills. *Effective Listening Quarterly,* 4(June), 1-4.

Appendix 1: Interview Table

Karen, **Board Member of a Statewide Advocacy Org. (For Profit Manager)**	In addition to her work in the for-profit sector, Karen was a board member of a statewide advocacy organization, which had gone through a search for a new Executive Director. This process included creating extensive forums for listening to staff, volunteers, donors and other constituents. For this 15-person organization, the process took over 9 months. In the end, they chose a Executive Director who would reach some of the previously dis-engaged members/supporters of the organization.
Michael Goldstein, Plymouth Police Chief	After 15 years in the police department, Mr. Goldstein was promoted to Police Chief. Although it is a hierarchical system, he conducted regular forums to hear the staff's concerns. He also made an effort to listen to the community's concerns and improve the public perception of the police department. The department posted their code of ethics for the public and Goldstein posted his values in his office. He used these as a guide in difficult situations and allowed staff to use their discretion in their work.
Jane	Jane had a critical role in deciding how to distribute city funds to local arts groups. The staff, with help from an advisory committee, must develop criteria for funding and review applications for funds against those criteria. She is often confronted with situations where she knows an organization would be perceived as essential to the community, however some basic infrastructure issues are not being addressed. Staff, and other city officials, are acutely aware that there could be a backlash from the community in reaction to decisions to fund, or de-fund, an organization. In the end, these community reactions can encourage the City Funds to give these community-supported a second chance to correct infrastructure issues before totally de-funding an organization.
Susan	Susan had recently been hired to a new position at a state's largest nonprofit social services organization (multi- million budget with over 2000 employees), the organization has some more flexibility to expand and contract based on available funding. She has also worked with a for-profit company that serves nonprofits. She watched the for-profit owner learn that nonprofit employees are not only motivated by money (salary/bonuses) and career advancement. Non-profit workers are motivated by making a difference (not just making the numbers).
Jack Lee, **Youth Frontiers**	After nine years with Intel, Mr Lee decided to make a career change and support the founder of Youth Frontiers, by bringing his financial and business skills to the organization. The difference between non profits and for-profits became most vivid for him when he attempted to set an ambitious goal for the organization. The goal of one million students by 2020, was developed with the senior management team. However, the staff spoke out strongly against it because it seemed to focus more on numbers than mission – and didn't take into account their roles and interest in the organization. Mr. Lee observed that nonprofit staff members are motivated by more than financial and career growth incentives that are common in the for-profit sector.

Crystal	Crystal provided clinical supervision to the staff that runs a day treatment program. She had clear values that were well-reflected in the values of her workplace. Communicating values and integrating into the day-to-day work of the organization was very important. She found it helped staff deal with difficult situations and also felt it was important in dealing with clients and parents who had problems with the program.
Jeffrey	Jeffrey worked for a program for 15 years, providing support to youth coming out of corrections. He grew interested in ways to move beyond issues of race to by looking at the culture of communities and the ways to engage them, which led him to a new position as E.D of a community development organization. As part of his research and professional growth, he traveled to Africa and saw how communities work together. It is not outside services that develop the community, but a shared sense of responsibility for everyone's success.
Paul Shaffer, Log Cabin Literary Center	As Executive Director of Log Cabin Literary Center, Mr. Shaffer encountered a disagreement with a staff member about a particular program that was losing money. For him, it called into question the mission and values of the organization. This question was taken to the Board of Directors. He realized that if the Board made a program decision based on the dollars/business of the organization over the program's impact, he would choose to leave the organization – despite his extensive commitment to the organization.