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**A Review of Leadership Needed in Nonprofits: Transformational Leadership**

Hwangji S. Lu

University of Arizona Global Campus, Department of Health Sciences,  
180 S. Arizona Ave, Suite 301, Chandler, AZ 85225, U.S.A.

doi.org/10.51505/IJEBMR.2025.9202

URL: <https://doi.org/10.51505/IJEBMR.2025.9202>

Received: Jan 16, 2025

Accepted: Jan 27, 2025

Online Published: Feb 03, 2025

**Abstract**

Nonprofits have become more crucial in modern society for advancing social progress and solving social issues. Like for-profit organizations, nonprofits are experiencing profound upheaval and continue encountering even greater rates of change through their dynamic environments in the past decade. Change occurs everywhere with increasing speed and complexity. Due to the complex, turbulent environments, managing the resources for sustained performance has become increasingly difficult in most nonprofits. Leadership is critical to maintaining organizational viability. To survive and prosper, leaders of nonprofits must be vigilant to their external environments and attentive to changes. Numerous empirical research studies have shown that transformational leadership is the most effective in rapid environmental change. Nevertheless, nonprofit leaders and managers might not possess transformational leadership to lead their organizations in the rapidly changing environment. Leadership development has a tremendous impact on the long-term performance of the organizations. Nonprofits must invest money and efforts to prepare their leaders to take on challenges effectively and smoothly navigate the world's rapidly changing economic, social, technological, and political dynamics.

**Keywords:** low case, comma, paper template, abstract, keywords, introduction

**1. Introduction**

Nonprofits are charitable organizations and do not prioritize profits (Anderson, 2021). Instead, they are dedicated to promoting a social cause or advocating for a specific standpoint driven by their mission statements (Anderson, 2021; Bernal-Torres, 2021). The environments in which nonprofits operate today differ from what they used to be. Nonprofits face many challenges due to a shift in the industry dynamics and new realities in recent years (Carter, 2022). For example, as a result of the competition among multiple nonprofit organizations, donors have more choices to give, which results in difficulty retaining existing donors (Carter, 2022; Jordan et al., 2022). High inflation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic increases the cost of living, and people have less money left to give to charity. Moreover, less governmental funding is available due to shrinking national, state, and municipal budgets, which is also a significant challenge for nonprofits (Carter, 2022; Jordan et al., 2022). Compared to for-profit organizations, nonprofits have higher voluntary turnover rates (Anderson, 2021). The challenges put tremendous pressure

on nonprofit leaders. These emerging issues press leaders of nonprofits to broaden their repertoire of responses and possess different skills, knowledge, and competencies to lead their organizations through tumultuous times (Diaz, 2024; Jordan et al., 2022). There is an urgent need for nonprofit leaders to focus on building their organizational capacities, effectively manage changes, and sustain competitive advantage.

As the environment changes and becomes increasingly competitive, nonprofit leaders must maintain an organizational climate supporting changes to survive and prosper. The arrangement of this paper is as follows. First, this paper starts with an introduction stating the need for change in nonprofits. Second, this paper will review the essence of successful organizational change. Third, a literature review of effective leadership in organizational change and transformational leadership will be presented. Fourth, a survey of past research studies concerning the roles of transformational leadership in organizational change will be examined. The fifth and final section will discuss the best practices and solutions derived from the literature review and the author's professional experience.

## **2. The Essence of Successful Organizational Change**

### *2.1 Organizational Change*

The nonprofit world is changing in complex and dynamic ways, demanding that leaders fundamentally reconsider how they must adjust to the rapidly changing realities of what nonprofits are, what they do, and how they should conduct their activities (Bernal-Torres et al., 2021; Bojesson & Fundin, 2021). Organizational change is a complex endeavor. It is a process of taking an organization on a journey from its current state to a desired future state and dealing with all the problems that arise (Zukof, 2021). Change is not optional. Change is not a threat; instead, it is an opportunity for an organization to revitalize itself and continue to evolve and grow (Bernal-Torres et al., 2021; Tucker, 2024). Some changes gradually and subtly revise organizational structures, processes, and values; others are so drastic that they powerfully alter the organizational systems in many ways (Burke, 2023). Transformation occurs when organizations recognize that things cannot continue in the old way of operations and cannot achieve the business strategies required to succeed in fundamentally different environments (Tucker et al., 2024). Transformation is initiated to shape the organizational paradigm. Transformation, a fundamental shift from the old state to the transformed state, demands the organization shift its culture, mission, approaches, strategies, and people's behaviors, skills, and mindsets (Burke, 2023; Tucker et al., 2024; Zukof, 2021). Because of the nature of change, transformation requires determined and effective leadership. Leaders facing an organizational transformation must understand how to build the competencies to facilitate multiple radical change efforts (Curado & Santos, 2022; Busari et al., 2020). The ability to orchestrate the fundamental process of transformation in complex organizations has become the ubiquitous challenge of executive leadership in our time (Carter, 2022).

### *2.2 Managing Resistance to Change*

The major problems most organizations have with their change efforts come from inadequate attention to culture and people's behaviors and mindsets (Burke, 2023; Tucker et al., 2024).

Organizational culture drives sustained behaviors and impacts organization's performance (Bernal-Torres et al., 2021). Innovative culture fosters an environment of growth and progress because creativity, novel ideas, and the drive for change are nurtured and encouraged (Burke, 2023). Judge and Dougals (2009) contended that innovative culture displays an organization's ability to establish norms of innovation or change and support innovative activities. Innovative culture positively supports change when creativities, experiment with new ideas are allowed, and people are encouraged to take risks and occasionally fail (Tucker et al., 2024). As a result, innovative culture will increase adaptability, agility, efficiency, and sustainability (Lei et al., 2019). A culture resistant to change in an organization will weaken the potency of the change effort (Khaw et al., 2022). Therefore, change strategy must first address culture change and employee resistance (Khaw et al., 2022; Li & Xie, 2020).

Managing the organization's human side is a significant hurdle in organizational change (Tucker et al., 2024). Employee reactions to organizational change can directly influence the outcomes of organizational change and any change initiatives within an organization (Khaw et al., 2022). Employee reactions toward a change are developed through the interactions between an individual's attitudes, beliefs, and feelings toward a change. Reactions could be positive or negative, depending on how managers introduce a change and how others respond (Diaz, 2024). From the employee's perspective, organizational changes are considered as uncertain and impactful (Busari et al., 2020). A negative reaction occurs when organizational change results in more workload, anxiety, anger, fear, fatigue, stress, and uncertainty, especially when change is hasty and involves the whole organization or significant parts of it (Busari et al., 2020). Consequently, resistance to change is engendered.

### *2.3 Organizational Change Capacity*

Bojesson and Fundin (2021) defined organizational change capacity as a blend of managerial and organizational capabilities that enables an organization to adapt more quickly and effectively than other organizations to changing situations. Change capability refers to the organization's ability to create and implement successful change solutions and produce new ones to deal with threats and ride on opportunities effectively (Lei et al., 2019). In the face of new challenges, different times demand different skills and abilities (Bojesson & Fundin, 2021; Cao & Le, 2024). The capabilities of organizations that bolstered past performance are not necessarily working or will not work well in the future (Tucker et al., 2024). The success of implementing organizational change initiatives depends on the extent of the beliefs and attitudes of employees toward change as well as the behaviors of change leaders themselves (Kleine et al., 2024; Lei et al., 2019). Because the risks and uncertainties are inherent in generating new ideas and implementing changes, Men et al. (2020) believed trust in leadership is one of the significant employees' change-related attitudes, behaviors, and mindsets. Lei et al. (2019) argued that organizational change capacity is associated with employees' trust in their colleagues and leaders. When employees have a high level of trust in their leadership and organizations, they deem that leadership is supportive; they are more open to suggested changes and have much greater commitments to follow the changes originated by their leaders and implement the change

initiative successfully (Busari et al., 2020; Islam et al., 2022; Isler et al., 2021; Khaw et al., 2022).

#### *2.4 Job Satisfaction*

Job satisfaction is a mix of psychological, physiological, and environmental conditions that make individuals satisfied or dissatisfied with their work (Anderson, 2021; Nguon, 2022). Those conditions could be work conditions, opportunities for advancement, fair evaluation of work, social relations and supervision, and wages (Anderson, 2021). Intrinsic factors such as acknowledgment, independence, support, and personal growth can influence individual job satisfaction; in contrast, examples of extrinsic factors are monetary rewards and fringe benefits such as tuition reimbursement, health insurance, and promotion (Nguon, 2022). People who work in non-profits are less concerned about extrinsic factors because they are usually intrinsically motivated by a calling to serve, identify with the organization's mission, and remain committed to quality services as long as they perceive the organization is living up to its stated mission (Li, & Xie, 2022). Curado and Santos (2022) asserted that job satisfaction is crucial because it relates to employee retention, as dissatisfied workers are more likely to leave the organization. On the other hand, satisfied employees are more productive and committed to performing tasks that meet their expectations and values. Bortnowska and Seiler (2024) noted that nonprofits often deal with complex social issues requiring highly motivated and committed staff with resilience to deal with stress. Nevertheless, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly intensified consumer demands for nonprofit services while restricting nonprofit organizations' capacity to fundraise and meet the needs of the vulnerable population. It is unsurprising to see high burnout and turnover rates in nonprofits (Deng et al., 2021).

#### *2.5 Organizational Citizen Behavior*

When individuals have lower burnout or emotional exhaustion levels and feel supported by their managers, they tend to show reciprocal support toward the organization. Organizational citizenship behavior exhibits when employees make extra effort to complete tasks and are helpful and supportive of the organizational goals (Curado & Santos, 2022). Examples of organizational citizenship behavior include maintaining punctuality, helping co-workers with job-related issues, volunteering to perform extra duties without complaint, and observing organizational rules and regulations. Organizational citizenship behavior is essential to nonprofit efficiency, especially during an organizational change (Anderson, 2021; Curado & Santos, 2022).

### **3. Effective Leadership in Organizational Change**

#### *3.1 Effective Leadership*

In today's ever-changing environment, leaders play a key role in the success or failure of a nonprofit organization (Jordan et al., 2022). Leadership is a critical agent for change and innovation in organizations because they are mainly responsible for bringing the necessary changes by creating a vision, identifying the need for change, and implementing it (Cao & Le, 2024; Ghasabeh, 2021). The leaders help create, shape, and develop organizational cultures

(Bass, 1999); at the same time, the cultures help influence all members (Burke, 2023; Ghasabeh, 2021). An organization's success and effectiveness highly depend on leaders possessing an appropriate balance of skills, competencies, and capabilities (Bojesson & Fundin, 2021). Effective leadership is at the core of successful organizational transformation (Burke, 2023; Curado & Santos, 2022) and contributes 71% of the success of organizational change (Khaw et al., 2022). Many change initiatives fail because leaders have not realized the motivation for improving change capability (Lei & Le, 2019).

Communication is essential for any change initiatives (Burke, 2023). Communication is a critical step in shaping the organizational culture (Khaw et al., 2022) and a vital vehicle for gaining people's buy-in during times of change (Tucker et al., 2024). Change requires the support and consensus of employees toward change efforts (Cao & Le, 2024). Change is impossible unless people are willing to start changing themselves (Khaw et al., 2022). People's participation and commitment are particularly critical to the success of a major change initiative (Burke, 2023; Tucker et al., 2024). In the nonprofit world, organizational effectiveness depends on how well the organization engages a broad spectrum of internal and external stakeholders. Hence, the change leader must actively convey and promote values, beliefs, assumptions, and expectations about the organization and what is sought to achieve and make sense (Burke, 2023; Tucker et al., 2024). Organizational change is a challenging task and will take time. The change leader must encourage two-way communications to engage people in the change process and motivate people to do more than they originally intended and thought (Jordan et al., 2022; Smoyer et al., 2021). The change can only be realized if everyone in the organization is involved in this endeavor (Tucker et al., 2024). It should start with the change leader who can act as a role model for others (Smoyer et al., 2021). Leadership is the process by which actions and steps are taken over time to gradually bring the other organizational components into alignment, thereby meeting the stakeholders' goals (Bass, 1990; Diaz, 2024). Engaging internal and external stakeholders is not an easy undertaking. Building relationships with diverse stakeholders to help achieve the mission is a substantial challenge to leaders in nonprofit organizations (Isler et al., 2021; Jordan et al., 2022; Son et al., 2020).

### *3.2 Transformational Leadership*

One of the prominent theories in leadership is transformational leadership, considered one of the most influential (Isler et al., 2021). In 1973, sociologist James V. Downton first coined the term "transformational leadership" (Walston & Johnson, 2022). James MacGregor Burns further developed transformational leadership by describing it as a leadership style that can inspire followers to become better versions of themselves and develop their potential (Burns, 2012). Built on Burns's work, Bass (1985) devised a theoretical framework for studying two aspects of leadership –transformational leadership and transactional leadership – and further differentiated between these two types of leadership. However, Bass viewed transformational and transactional leadership as complementary; that is, transformational leadership builds from the transactional base. Bass believed that most leaders exhibit transformational and transactional leadership in various degrees.

Bass (1985) identified four qualities of transformational leadership: idealized influence or charisma, inspirational motivation, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation. In the dimension of idealized influence, transformational leaders act as role models, set an example for change, and encourage followers to think about problems differently (Bass, 1985). On the other hand, followers are more likely to emulate their leaders and the emotions attached to their leaders (Busari et al., 2020; Pasamar et al., 2019). Such leaders can confidently and devotedly create the organization's vision for the future and a culture of change (Burn, 2012). They are extraordinarily gifted people who generate pride, loyalty, confidence, and alignment around a shared vision (Jasni et al., 2023). Such leaders are ethical, have many commitments, communicate the vision, and motivate the followers to transcend their self-interest to achieve the organization's goals (Burns, 2012). When the followers face conflicts, disagreements, and stress, transformational leaders with idealized influence will offer remedies (Walton & Johnson, 2022).

Inspirational motivation is a trait of leaders inspiring people to overcome obstacles (Jasni et al., 2023). Transformational leaders set high and reasonable goals for their followers and encourage them to perform above expectations (Isler et al., 2021). They raise followers' awareness regarding the importance and value of organizational goals and emphasize the connections between their personal and organizational goals (Jasni et al., 2023; Son et al., 2022). Such leaders would also continuously exhibit enthusiasm and encouragement to inspire their followers to achieve the organization's goals (Isler et al., 2021). Transformational leadership displays high determination and persistence that demonstrates courage and conviction in the vision and mission and thus inspires, empowers, and motivates followers (Bass, 1985). Such leadership utilizes inspirational motivation to influence followers intrinsically and extrinsically to execute beyond expectations and help them reach their full potential (Curado & Santos, 2022).

Transformational leadership is individually considerate, providing followers with support and coaching (Bass, 1985). Leaders with individual consideration show compassion, be receptive to other people's perspectives, and be willing to investigate their followers' perspectives (Bass, 1985). This would lead to an increase in the followers' confidence (Jasni et al., 2023). Such leaders are sensitive to each follower's needs, make efforts to accommodate various individuals and make them feel heard and valued (Jasni et al., 2023).

The final characteristic of transformational leadership is intellectual stimulation. This characteristic enables transformational leaders to stimulate their followers intellectually and pay attention to the personal needs of each of their followers (Bass et al., 2003; Jung & Avolio, 1999). According to Burns (2012), transformational leaders inspire their followers to learn and develop new skills by allowing them to develop ideas independently. Such leaders advance followers' confidence, build their abilities, and motivate followers to perform their jobs above expectations (Bass et al., 2003). Jasni et al. (2023) contended that by encouraging followers to use their approaches to solve problems, leaders can stimulate their followers' intellect, generate innovation, and increase their creativity. Transformational leaders with intellectual stimulation will inspire followers to use creativity and ingenuity to find novel solutions to challenges.

Transformational leadership has emerged as one of the most effective leadership styles, contributing to positive and critical outcomes for most organizations in the context of rapid environmental change (Cao & Le, 2024; Pasamar et al., 2019; Son et al., 2020). Despite no significant differences in the transformational leadership qualities of leaders in for-profits and nonprofits, nonprofit entities, compared with for-profits, seem to be highly receptive contexts for transformational leadership (Riggio et al., 2004). Transformational leadership is more likely to emerge in times of turbulence and in organizations that need growth and change (Busari et al., 2020; Cao & Le, 2024; Ghasabeh, 2021; Islam et al., 2022). Transformational leadership is more suitable for a dynamic external environment, where employees are empowered with greater responsibility and encouraged to innovate and take initiatives or risks (Li & Xie, 2020). Riggio et al. (2004) affirmed that the essence of transformational leadership fits in the context of the nonprofit organizations seamlessly.

#### **4. Empirical Research in Transformational Leadership**

Over the past few decades, substantial research studies have been done in organizational change management to explore how transformational leadership plays a role in organizational change. Many empirical studies indicated that transformational leaders play a central role in both the process of change initialization and implementation (Busari et al, 2020; Cao & Le, 2024; Islam et al., 2021; Lei et al., 2019; Peng et al., 2021). Busari et al. (2020) investigated the association between transformational leadership style and employees' reactions toward organizational change. The findings showed that transformational leadership is positively related to employee engagement and trust in management during organizational change. Employee's trust in management positively mediates the relationship between organizational change capacity and transformational leadership. Transformational leaders inspire their employees to follow the change strategy and encourage them to go beyond the change goals by positively impacting employee trust in their leadership (Islam et al., 2022). Busari et al. (2020) advised that employee engagement plays a critical role in implementing a successful change, and transformational leadership behavior shapes positive change reactions.

Similarly, Islam et al. (2021) examined the impact of transformational leadership on employee engagement during organizational change. Their findings confirmed that transformational leadership positively correlated with employee engagement, and trust in leadership mediates the relationship between transformational leadership and employee engagement. Cao and Le's (2024) study also substantiated the importance of transformational leadership behavior in fostering employees' trust in their leadership and building organizational change capacity. Improving organizational capability is critically important because change initiatives rest on the employees' competencies, skills, knowledge, and trust developed to meet the demands of changes and innovations (Cao & Le, 2024).

In their research, Lei et al. (2019) found that within the Chinese context, transformational leadership and employee trust in leadership positively correlate with innovative culture and organizational change capacity. Organizations can only develop change capacity and implement change initiatives successfully if leaders can communicate about the organization's goals, shape

employees' attitudes and beliefs toward changes positively, and inspire followers to overcome the status quo and accomplish goals beyond expectation by building employees' trust in them (Lei et al., 2019). In a meta-analysis of 30 empirical studies, Peng et al. (2021) summarized that transformational leadership is strongly associated with employees' openness to change, commitment to change, and support for change.

Transformational leaders respect employees as valuable resources, care for developing emotional and ethical links with employees, and inspire employees to put the organization's needs over their interests (Lei et al., 2021). Numerous studies have empirically tested the link between transformational leadership, job satisfaction, and organizational citizenship behavior (Anderson, 2021; Curado and Santos, 2022; Nguon, 2022). For instance, in conducting an intensive meta-analysis regarding the influence of transformational leadership on job satisfaction, innovative behavior, and work performance to achieve the organization's goals, Nguon (2022) concluded that transformational leaders transform employees' attitude toward work, enabling them to cope with the pressure in the workplace and improve employees' work performance and job satisfaction through innovative behavior to increase productivity. Nguon (2022) also avowed that satisfied employees exhibit increased creativity and productivity.

Based on an analysis of the literature, Anderson (2021) concluded that transformational leadership positively correlates with organizational change capability, job satisfaction, and efficiency. Transformational Leaders concentrate on changing attitudes, fostering relationships that produce effective change, and facilitating knowledge sharing and innovation by applying intellectual stimulation (Anderson, 2021). Changing attitudes and fostering proper relationships promote harmonious work environments in non-profits, which in turn helps maintain optimal levels of job satisfaction. Apart from stimulating and motivating employees to perform exceptionally toward achieving organizational goals, creating innovative and knowledge-sharing work environments could enhance non-profit work to be more meaningful (Ghasabeh, 2021). To investigate the relationship between transformational leadership, job satisfaction, and the adaptive performance of staff, Curado and Santos (2022) found that transformational leadership inspires followers' willingness to dedicate themselves to their work, contributes to superior job performance, and fosters a higher level of job satisfaction.

## **5. Conclusion**

Management guru Peter Drucker (as cited in Orr, 2004) portrayed the greatest challenge of nonprofits is "to provide the leadership, the competence, and the management that will determine the quality and the performance of the twenty-first-century society" (p. 276). As evidenced, transformational leadership is the most pertinent leadership style for effectively managing the change process. Cao and Le (2024) averred that applying transformational leadership into practice is very necessary to manage and implement organizational change successfully. Nonetheless, not all managers and leaders of nonprofits exhibit transformational leadership behaviors. Given that leadership is born and bred, Kleine et al. (2024) advocated that organizations must establish a comprehensive ongoing development plan to cultivate their leaders toward transformational leadership skills to drive a successful organization-wide change.



For nonprofit entities seeking ways to make a difference in the ever-changing environment, building leadership capacity is the way to meet the daunting challenges they confront now and in the future. However, there is likely an inadequate amount of funding budgeted and spent for leadership development training in the unpredictable economy. Leadership development is indeed costly. Given that leadership development is a costly and time-consuming endeavor, organizations need to invest wisely and plan prudently to maximize the benefits of training. Additionally, leaders also need to ensure that middle managers who have direct contact with frontline staff apply transformational leadership on the daily basis, which is crucial for the future of nonprofits and the well-being of society.

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