

Leadership Styles within the Context of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)

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doi: <https://doi.org/10.37745/ijngoe.16/vol8n16575>

Published December 31, 2024

Citation: Naoum R.F. (2024) Leadership Styles within the Context of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), *International Journal of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Essays*, Vol.8, No 1, pp. 65-75

Abstract: *Leadership in Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) is critical for navigating resource constraints, diverse stakeholder needs, and mission-driven goals. This study examines transactional, transformational, and laissez-faire leadership styles within NGOs, identifying their strengths and limitations. Transactional leadership provides structure and efficiency in crisis situations but may stifle innovation. Transformational leadership inspires long-term commitment and change but risks over-reliance on charismatic leaders. Laissez-faire leadership empowers skilled teams but can lead to inefficiency without clear direction. The findings emphasise the need for adaptive leadership tailored to specific organisational contexts, bridging gaps in the limited research on NGO leadership practices.*

Keywords: NGO leadership, leadership styles, transactional leadership, transformational leadership, laissez-faire leadership, adaptive leadership

INTRODUCTION

Leadership is key in shaping organisational direction and effectiveness in various contexts, including business, politics, and social organisations. It goes beyond management; it aligns the vision and inspires the team to achieve shared goals. Effective leadership is not confined to titles; it is an action-oriented role that motivates, coaches, guides, and supports individuals to reach their full potential and contribute to overall success.

In a business context, innovation is more crucial than ever in an unstable and competitive environment. Organisations strive to succeed, stay competitive in the market, and explore different avenues for gaining a competitive edge. One such avenue is to foster and encourage staff innovation, a role that leadership can play (Kozioł-Nadolna, 2020). While leadership in a political context is multifaceted, it is not just about shaping countries and communities or influencing policies; it is also about fulfilling functional duties, political responsibilities, social responsibilities, patriotic duties, oaths of office, and allegiances to service (Aide Okun & Ose Iyawe, 2022). Political leadership involves a complex interaction of various factors that influence, motivate, control, and manipulate the decisions and actions made by leaders. These factors

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development-UK determine the direction, pace, and impact of political leadership, which are subject to change over time (Frohlich & Oppenheimer, 2015).

However, our focus in this paper is beyond profit margins and political power plays, which is the Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) context. In stark contrast to government or for-profit sectors, NGOs have a noble mission of social change, focusing more on communities that have not been brought to attention under government or private sector activities. This mission, driven by a deep sense of social responsibility, sets NGOs apart (Arora, 2012) and inspires us in this paper to delve deeper into their leadership styles. Often operating with limited resources, these organisations courageously tackle pressing issues—poverty, healthcare, education, environmental conservation—with unwavering dedication (Mawele, 2023). In this context, leadership transcends mere management; it becomes a catalyst for transformation, a beacon of hope in the face of daunting challenges.

In the NGO context, there is a lack of existing literature linking leadership theories and leadership styles or characteristics (Hailey & James, 2004), partly explaining the gap in the literature for two main reasons. The first is that the NGO leadership may be highly personalised based on the NGO context and the leaders' personalities. Therefore, an unwillingness exists to accept the management and leadership styles commonly found in NGO leadership. The second reason is that the idea of leadership contradicts the culture of collaboration and inclusivity that many NGOs strive to promote. According to (Allison, 2002) the NGO sector is more of a mission-driven or value-driven culture that appreciates a participatory approach. It is less hierarchical than the for-profit sector and prioritises equality and participatory democracy. This leads to an overlook of research that supports and highlights the role of specific individuals in the overall organisational dynamic.

Therefore, in order to participate in bridging the gap that exists in the literature, this research paper analyses and compares different leadership styles within the specific context of NGOs. In the course of this analysis, the paper delves into the key stakeholders of the NGOs and their working conditions, with the aim of drawing informed conclusions about the most suitable leadership styles for such organisations.

NGO Leadership Development Context

As stated by Olivo, 2007,p.79 “Official United States and European documents between 1900 and 1945 were used to investigate the first appearance of the term Non-governmental organisation”. NGOs have existed in various forms for centuries, but they gained fame in international relations, international development and public policy and increased their numbers dramatically during the 1980s and 1990s (Lewis, 2010). Many forms and structures of NGOs exist; they vary between small to large, formal and informal, and bureaucratic or flexible; they can be externally funded, while others depend on local resources (Lewis, 2023). NGOs are unique since their mission is to support local communities without any profit, where the NGO workers have low job demands, low control, and high social support (Attqi, et al., 2017). The success of NGOs relies heavily on leadership actions and impact; the effectiveness of leaders is also influenced by the external factors and circumstances surrounding their organisation according to (Fowler, 1997; Hailey & James, 2002; Hailey & James, 2004 Kelleher & McLaren, 1996).

As stated by (Hailey, 2006, p.8), “There are also worries about the lack of leadership talent in the non-profit sector as a whole. This ‘leadership deficit’ will become urgent as the sector expands over the next twenty years. In the US alone, over half a million new senior managers will have to be developed for leadership

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development-UK positions in 2007–2016.” In the nineties, the International Forum on Capacity Building - a coalition of NGOs focused on enhancing the organisational and managerial capacity of the sector – raised their concerns about the quality and availability of suitable leadership (Hailey, 2006). Moreover, CIVICUS, an international alliance of civil society organisations, noted that the rapid turnover of senior staff and the challenge of replacing them were contributing factors and recommended that NGOs take steps to attract and retain influential leaders (CIVICUS, 2002).

As a result, it is now more recognised that there is a crucial need to gain a further understanding of the characteristics, styles and influences of NGO leaders. There is a growing acknowledgement of the importance of learning from different approaches to leadership development. Meanwhile, there is a lack of research on NGO leadership, which limits the ability to understand the unique role of leaders and the necessary skills and competencies in the context of NGOs (Hailey & James, 2004).

NGOs Work Conditions

To understand the essential characteristics of a leader in the context of NGOs, it is crucial to identify the key stakeholders or actors involved in NGOs and the complexities of the work environment and conditions.

NGOs Stakeholders

Like for-profit organisations, nonprofit organisations clearly distinguish between the managers responsible for making operational decisions and the owners, as Fama & Jensen (1983) outlined. However, besides the decision-making from the owners or managers of NGOs, key actors are also involved in the activities of the NGO, such as clients, beneficiaries, volunteers, or donors (Puyvelde, et al., 2012), which are also called stakeholders by other authors. According to Eric Rhenman (1964), “stakeholders in an organisation are the individuals and groups who depend on the firm to achieve their personal goals and on whom the firm depends for its existence.” According to (Lewis, 2004, p. 202) the term stakeholder refers to “any person or group that can claim an organisation’s attention, resources or output or who may be affected by the organisation”. Moreover, different individuals or groups have varying levels of power (Krüger, 1974), legitimacy (Suchman, 1995), and urgency (Mitchell et al., 1997) make them the key stakeholders.

In the context of NGOs, according to (Dicke, et al., 2016) “Nonprofit stakeholders include individuals, groups, communities, governments, and others that affect, or are affected by, one or more nonprofit organisations or the sector as a whole.” Meanwhile, nonprofit stakeholders are usually mainly concerned with a nonprofit organisation's mission, and they have the power to influence its success (Dicke, et al., 2016). Stakeholders are essential since they can ease the NGO's mission or make it even more difficult. At the national level, when the stakeholders have the buy-in and commit to taking action and have the goodwill, knowledge, experiences and resources, it is possible to accelerate the mission while minimising or not creating additional risk (Matsuoka & Rocha, 2021). NGO leaders should be able to convey and communicate the organisation’s mission and work toward achieving it while limiting the risk of disagreement from the key stakeholders and getting their buy-in.

Nature of work

Both types of NGOs, which work for short-term missions like a humanitarian response, and those who work for long-term objectives like development organisations, have heterogeneous tasks. For instance, according to (Cusumano & Pattison, 2018), the job demands of this nature include economic development, project management, and humanitarian aid in conflict regions, where NGOs may put their workers' lives at risk in

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such conditions. In other words, NGO employees have to deal with high levels of stress and tension, maintain internal regulations and achieve the organisation's aims and objective (Haz, et al., 2019). Furthermore, despite the working conditions established by the NGO there, some employees in this sector are intrinsically motivated to support society in any possible way. As a result, they establish a high degree of well-being due to internal or personal reasons (Wearing & McGehee, 2013). In order to achieve this objective, workers in this sector need many kinds of skills (Zbucheá et al., 2019). The job requires direct contact with key stakeholders such as beneficiaries and demands high collaboration and teamwork (Moser & Skripchenko, 2018). Conversely, managers and leaders should be careful because this kind of work could also lead to worker burnout due to limited resources, lack of support (Smith, 2013), and long working hours within risky work environments and conflict zones (Cusumano & Pattison, 2018).

While NGO workers need a certain level of independence when carrying out their work (Zbucheá et al., 2019), a correct level of supervision and management is crucial to help workers understand the importance of their contribution to the mission of the organisation (Lam & Kuipers, 2019). As stated by several authors (Brown et al., 2012; Lindenberg & Bryant, 2001), the workflow and management in most NGOs are considered centralised rather than decentralised. At the same time, other authors argue the importance of having a clear structure, where the lack of clear structure and the informal social structure of NGOs could lead to adverse side effects on the performance of the NGO (Lam & Kuipers, 2019). Another aspect regarding NGOs is the limited time of the contract, which could exist based on the nature of the intervention or project. The high turnover rate and temporality of the contract considered the worker's undesirable situation, as highlighted by (Chacón & Dávila, 2001).

Therefore, the leaders of NGO organisations should understand the dynamic nature of the NGO, its circumstances, and its environment to successfully lead their organisations and achieve their short-term and long-term missions.

Major Leadership Styles: Historical Context and Definitions

International NGOs extensively advocate for increasing the speed of their humanitarian and development responses to overcome and resolve diverse humanitarian and developmental issues, such as climate change, education, health, child labour, refugees and migrants' movement, security, and scarcity of resources (Daud, 2020). Therefore, more focus is on enhancing and building the capacity of the NGO teams, staff, and key stakeholders, as well as on the leaders and their leadership styles (Arora, 2012). Meanwhile, NGO leaders often face extraordinary challenges—both at a personal and organisational level (Apostu, 2013). These challenges have similarities and differences from those faced by governments or the for-profit sector (Arora, 2012).

As stated by (Hailey, 2006, p.1), “NGO leaders are often isolated and unsupported. There is talk of a leadership deficit because of the shortage of talented leaders and the growth of the non-profit sector generally.” Therefore, various leadership styles can be employed in the context of an NGO; as such, this research has identified the three most popular from the literature on leadership, which are : (i) Transactional Leadership, (ii) Transformational Leadership, and (iii) Laissez-Faire Leadership.

(i) Transactional Leadership

Max Weber described the transactional leadership style in 1947 in his socio-economic considerations of the organisation, and then Bernard Bass in 1981. Moreover, McGregor Burns's study of leadership was the

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development-UK cornerstone for further developing leadership as a new area (Nikezić, et al., 2012). This leadership style is based on a mutual exchange between the leader and the followers (Gomes, 2014), and it goes like this: “I will give you this if you do that” (Mawele, 2023). As stated by Yukl, 2013, p. 321 “Transactional leadership motivates followers by appealing to their self-interest and exchanging benefits”. Therefore, leaders can acquire followers' cooperation by offering something in return for their efforts. In contrast, followers accept the leader's requests and authority because they have something to get. Transactional leadership aims to sustain the status quo by ensuring followers meet agreed-upon goals and objectives. Under transactional leadership, the relationship between the leader and the follower is mutual, with the leader delivering praise or criticism based on the follower's performance (Mawele, 2023).

(ii) Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership was first mentioned in 1973 in J. V. Downton's sociological study. (Nikezić, et al., 2012). James McGregor Burns (1978), who wrote a best-selling book on political leadership, influenced much of the thinking about transformational leadership (Yukl, 2013). Moreover, Burns contrasted the fundamental distinction of the transformational leadership style as directly related to the charismatic leadership approach since Max Weber's time (Yukl, 2013). In 1976, Robert House started approaching the traditional literature on charisma and charismatic leadership and concluded that the selected literature from social psychology could be explained in a relevant way (Nikezić, et al., 2012). According to (Burns, 1979; Burns, 2004) transformational leadership aims to create, motivate and inspire a more significant commitment to change existing patterns, values, beliefs and goals. According to Burns, transformational leaders try to meet the requirements of their followers by identifying their needs, wants, or demands, communicating their motivations, and keeping their engagement. As a result mutual simulation will be generated, ideally transforming the follower into a leader and the leader into a moral agent (Nikezić, et al., 2012). There are four components of transformational leadership were identified by Bass, 1997: charisma, inspiration, individual support, and intellectual stimulation. Moreover, the key characteristics of transformational leaders are identified by (Nikezić, 2009; Nikezić, et al., 2012) which are creativity, team orientation, respect, coaching, responsibility and confession

(iii) Laissez-Faire Leadership

The term “laissez-faire” is a French phrase that translates to “let do” or “let things take their course”. In 1939, Kurt Lewin conducted pioneering research on laissez-faire leadership, which is, by definition, the passive. (Mawele, 2023), inactive or ineffective forms of leadership (Gomes, 2014), or destructive forms of leadership (Robert & Vandenberghe, 2021). Other authors defined it as avoidance and abdication of one's responsibilities. (Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008). This style of leaders is described as leaders who avoid making decisions, abdicate their responsibilities, delay actions, and refrain from using the authority associated with their roles (Bass & Bass, 2008; Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008; Robert & Vandenberghe, 2021). Laissez-faire leaders usually do not provide sufficient resources, such as information, for their followers. Moreover, they provide challenging task assignments and autonomy-supportive conditions (Robert & Vandenberghe, 2021). Followers under this leadership style have the most independence (Mawele, 2023). Meanwhile most authors describe this type of leadership as passive or even negative, other scholars, such as (Goodnight, 2004), perceive the laissez-faire leadership style as an empowerment or delegative leadership style and describe it as a potential future leadership style, viewing it as the next phase.

3. Critical Evaluation of Leadership Styles & and Their Practical Applications in NGO Contexts

This section aims to evaluate the three leadership styles in NGOs. The leadership styles are evaluated in terms of strength, weakness, and applicability in different types of NGOs and brings up controversies from the literature, as described in Table No.1

The comparative analysis in table (1) shows that each leadership style has pros and cons. For instance, transactional leaders have a clear structure, responsibilities, and protocols for delivering aid (Mawele, 2023), but it could limit personal growth and innovation, where workers seek information from the top down. This kind of leadership may be suitable and effective when using guidelines and instructions to ensure efficient and organised aid delivery in emergencies. In other words, it could be suitable for humanitarian responses without time to motivate the workers. Instead, it is a time to save lives, support women, children, and the elderly in crises, and provide food and health services; therefore, transactional leadership may be a good solution in this case. However, it may not fully address disaster-affected communities' complex needs and challenges, requiring additional leadership approaches for long-term recovery and development. Examples of this kind of organisation include UN Agencies ILO, IOM and more (Malinowski, 1962).

Table No.1: Comparative Analysis for (Transactional, Transformational and Laissez-faire) Leadership styles

Leadership Style	Strengths	Weaknesses	Applicability in Different NGOs Contexts	Controversies
Transactional Leadership (Gomes, 2014; Mawele, 2023; Nikezić, et al., 2012; Yukl, 2013)	Clear structure and expectations	It relies heavily on rewards and punishments, which may not always be practical.	Suitable in situations requiring immediate action or emergency response where strict adherence to protocols is vital	1. It can lead to a lack of innovation and intrinsic motivation. 2. Criticised for not fostering employee growth and long-term commitment. 3. It can be seen as overly controlling and bureaucratic.
	It can be effective for short-term goals and projects	May foster a transactional relationship lacking an emotional connection		
	Works well in crises where quick decisions are needed	It may not inspire creativity or innovation		
Transformational Leadership (Bass, 1997; Burns, 1979; Burns, 2004; Nikezić, et al., 2012; Yukl, 2013)	Inspires and motivates followers to go beyond their self-interests	Requires a high level of charisma and communication skills	Effective in mission-driven organisations where passion and commitment are key to achieving goals	1. It can lead to an over-reliance on the leader, potentially hindering team autonomy 2. Criticised for its emphasis on personality and charisma rather than tangible results
	Fosters a culture of innovation and creativity	May struggle in situations requiring immediate decision-making or crisis management		

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	Builds strong relationships and trust with followers	It can create dependency on the leader for direction and motivation		3. Some view it as manipulative, with leaders using charisma to manipulate follower
Laissez-faire Leadership (Bass & Bass , 2008; Goodnight, 2004; Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008; Mawele, 2023; Robert & Vandenberghe, 2021)	Allows for maximum freedom and autonomy for followers	This can lead to a lack of direction and accountability	Effective in organisations where volunteers or professionals are highly self-motivated and skilled, requiring minimal supervision.	1. It has the potential to create chaos and confusion within teams. 2. It can lead to inefficiency and lack of progress due to unclear direction. 3. Often seen as a sign of leadership incompetence or disengagement.
	Encourages creativity and innovation	This may result in a lack of coordination and goal alignment.		
	Empowers followers to take ownership of their work	It can foster a sense of neglect or abandonment among followers		

Meanwhile, transformational leadership focuses more on the people than the task itself, where the transformational leader inspires and mobilises workers and even the community to achieve a shared vision. This type of leadership could be more useful in NGOs that work for long-term objectives, such as in the case of the development sector, economic reform, youth and women empowerment, and specific sector reforms. As stated by (Hailey, 2006, p.5), “transformational leaders seek to achieve sustainable success, where organisations became flatter, more decentralised, and less bureaucratic”. Some NGOs are working to de-centralise their management (James, 1998) like Oxfam (Navajas-Romero, et al., 2020). The reason behind that is to give more space for creativity and innovation so the local staff can be creative in their work areas. However, it may face resistance from authorities, some stakeholders, or entrenched interests opposed to human rights advocacy, requiring strategic navigation of stakeholders' dynamics and potential risks that may arise. As stated (Hailey, 2006, p.5), “Leaders needed a new skill-set based around networking, negotiation, delegation, and team building, " similarly for NGO leadership.

Finally, Laissez-faire Leadership relies on the workers' capacity to give them space and freedom, in other words, it empowers them, as stated by Goodnight (2004). However, other authors such as Bass & Bass (2008), Robert & Vandenberghe (2021), and Hinkin & Schriesheim (2008) argue that this kind of leadership could lead to chaos if the leaders do not provide support and communicate well with the organisational needs. In order to get the full benefits of this type of leadership, leaders should provide their workers with the needed power and information and let them exercise autonomy in decision-making and project implementation. This kind of leadership may be helpful in case the workers are very skilled in their jobs, such as senior field researchers. Moreover, it could be suitable when leaders of NGOs work directly with Community-Based Organisations (CSOs) leaders and seek to empower and enhance their capacity to provide local context-driven solutions (Cummings, 1995). However, clear communication and coordination may be required to ensure alignment with organisational goals and priorities, particularly in multi-stakeholder initiatives.

CONCLUSION

This paper was an opportunity to shed light on the NGO sector work environment and leadership styles. However, the NGO sector has its characteristics and dynamics, and this kind of sector, both for humanitarian response or development efforts, is mission-driven rather than profit- or power-driven. Of course, it shares its differences and similarities regarding challenges with profit organisations (Arora, 2012) or governmental agencies (Frohlich & Oppenheimer, 2015); however, it is considered to be unique in its goals and objectives (Attiq, et al., 2017). NGOs operate in diverse environments, facing challenges from delivering essential services to mobilising social movements. Effective leadership requires adaptability and choosing the right style for the situation (Navajas-Romero, et al., 2020). Moreover, NGO leaders should also be aware of NGOs workers' nature; as stated by (Navajas-Romero et al., 2020, p.15), "They are usually someone with a characteristic profile that is different from the usual worker in an industrial or service company". NGO workers are strongly linked to the mission of the organisation, and they generally feel that their activities are satisfying and interesting (Bidee, et al., 2013). However, leaders must also be aware that NGO workers, to complete their jobs and stay motivated toward their mission, should acquire a level of empowerment and identify in the workplace, self-determination, social justice, inclusion and equality (Smith, et al., 2019).

In conclusion, no single leadership style should dominate the NGO sector; transactional, transformational, and laissez-faire leadership all have a place in NGOs. The effectiveness of each style depends on factors like the specific task, team nature and experience, nature of stakeholders, and organisational goals, whether short- or long-term. As stated by (Hailey, 2006, p.12), "Leaders need to balance inward-looking (management) and outward-looking (influencing) skills, exceptional communication and networking skills, resilience, and emotional attachment." The effectiveness of the leadership theory depends on the nature of the NGO's mission, the context in which it operates, and the characteristics of its stakeholders. Transactional leadership may be suitable for managing emergency response efforts, while transformational leadership can advocate for systemic change and social justice. Laissez-faire leadership may be appropriate when local expertise and autonomy are valued for grassroots initiatives that seek to empower CSOs, leaders, and workers. Therefore, the most effective leadership style is the one that best addresses the current challenge and drives positive change.

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