To Challenge or Respect Constraints? The effects of leadership style

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Does leadership style matter in the governance of civil society organizations? Despite all the practitioner storytelling and scholarly case studies, little effort has gone into questioning why leadership might matter in understanding the impact of NGOs on the challenges that civil society faces. To remedy the situation, let us push beyond merely acknowledging who is in charge, to learning how leadership style might be linked to particular types of organizations and settings.

Because NGOs want to have a sustainable impact, we tend to assume that their leaders use a “take charge” style of leadership. But do they? Don’t the increasingly complex transnational landscapes such leaders face necessitate a range of responses—sometimes calling them to challenge the constraints they face and sometimes cautioning them about the tradeoffs of not working within the constraints? In our in-depth interviews with 152 leaders of international NGOs, we found that leaders often talked about how the constraints they perceived affected what their organizations could do. (For a description of the study, see http://www.maxwell.syr.edu/moynihan/tngo). These leaders felt limited by the expectations of clients, boards, donors, governments, members (if any) and the networks to which they belonged, as well as compelled to work on the goals around which their organizations were conceived. Using a new technique for assessing leadership style (Leadership Trait Analysis), we also discovered that they chose different ways of dealing with these expectations.

The majority of the leaders we interviewed were not inclined to challenge the constraints they faced. Indeed, 57 percent indicated that they prefer to maintain collaborative arrangements and engage in compromise and consensus, rather than challenge constraints or seek change directly. These leaders indicated that they respect the constraints they perceive, take their cues from context, engage in incremental change, and remain open to the demands and needs of important or disenfranchised constituents.

The rest of the leaders in our interview (some 43 percent) see themselves as challenging constraints. Thirteen percent tackle change “head-on,” framing constraints as something to overcome. These leaders do “take charge.” Another 11 percent favor a “behind the scenes” approach to change, using their influence more indirectly and informally to challenge constraints. They tend to let others take credit so as to maintain their maneuverability in working toward the organization’s goals. And 19 percent use the situation to guide how they challenge constraints, recognizing the strategic difference between tackling a change “head on” versus “behind the scenes” and the situations where each worked better.

But these data do not tell the whole story. For example, leaders of small transnational NGOs were more likely to respect constraints than leaders of medium or large transnational NGOs. When leaders of medium-sized NGOs challenged constraints, they did so in a direct, take charge manner while leaders of large NGOs were more likely
to use a “behind the scenes” approach. In other words, different organizational sizes were associated with different leadership styles.

Moreover, leaders of organizations deemed fiscally efficient by outside monitoring groups such as Charity Navigator were more likely to challenge constraints than leaders of NGOs rated low in fiscal efficiency. The leaders challenging constraints did so in a strategic manner, letting the situation suggest whether a head-on approach or working behind the scenes would be more effective. Here leadership style was associated with different degrees of perceived effectiveness.

The biggest difference between the leaders’ approaches to constraints was a leadership style distinction between humanitarian relief groups and sustainable development ones. Some 64 percent of leaders of sustainable development NGOs respected constraints while only 25 percent of leaders of humanitarian relief organizations did. And when leaders of humanitarian organizations challenged constraints, they were more likely to tackle them head on: taking charge and pushing for change. In effect, while leaders of sustainable development NGOs were predisposed to seek compromise and consensus, working to see what important constituents would support and gauging the needs, interests and aspirations of these relevant others, leaders of humanitarian relief organizations were much less willing to work within the system.

NGO leaders evidenced different leadership styles by sector as well. Among the leaders we interviewed, it appeared that being first on the scene after natural and man-made disasters tended to demand individuals willing to challenge the status quo in an immediate, fundamental way. This was the case for humanitarian relief groups, but also for a few environmental groups. In contrast, for leaders of organizations intent on engaging in sustainable development activities, it seemed that collaboration and a propensity to value established arrangements—a willingness to work within the current system, was the order of the day.

As a former international leader once observed, leadership is like being on a moving sidewalk with fire at either end and people throwing issues and problems into the mix while you, as leader, are trying to make headway on an agenda. Leadership involves aligning these various forces while staying upright and moving the organization forward. As this view suggests, context is important in leadership; people tend to choose leadership positions that match their styles and in which they feel comfortable. As our interview data suggest, this applies to the world of international NGOs, were leaders do indeed seek out positions that match their style.

If we are genuinely interested in sustainable impact, then the focus should be about more than just finding leaders who take charge or about the latest hot topic in change management. Knowing what leadership ingredients an NGO is working with—leaders, context and constituents—should matter because using such knowledge is a powerful model for creating a slew of winning recipes. We easily recall leaders we have known who seemed comfortable with the challenges they faced and seemed to be perfect for the job at that point in time given the operating environment. The key here is that focus on the intersection of situation, individual and leadership style. To increase the frequency of finding that perfect fit, we need to develop and employ NGO change and organizational governance approaches that bring “content” of change and “leadership styles” closer together. At the Transnational NGO Leadership Institute we and the leaders with whom we work have seen firsthand the potential for this new way of gleaning
impact and fostering alignment between style and setting. Rigor, assessment and creativity can indeed facilitate better matches. In this way, NGOs that pay attention to leadership style in their hiring and operations may need to worry less about ascertaining sustainable impact, as sustainable impact will have multiple routes to find them because of the NGO care in selecting the leadership style it uses.