Strategic Leadership in Networks:
The Effect of External Factors on Advocacy Efforts

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Introduction

Contemporary research is replete with evidence that management of networks matters. New conceptualizations of network management have emerged (Agranoff and McGuire 2001; McGuire 2002; Milward and Provan 2006; Rethemeyer and Hatmaker 2008) and studies have confirmed the importance of networking for the effectiveness of public policy (Meier and O’Toole 2003; McGuire and Silvia 2009). In this age of collaboration, scholars are unlocking that which has heretofore been unexamined: how to improve the operation of a network. Although a growing body of literature frequently mentions the need for and the rise of this new type of public management, very little empirical research has been conducted in the public sector to “measure and identify the behaviors associated with an emergent network leadership perspective” (McGuire and Silvia 2009, 35, emphasis added). Indeed, this increasingly voluminous collaboration and network literature speaks only occasionally to leadership (Crosby and Bryson 2010). Furthermore, while networks are known to include private actors, little research has been conducted that focuses on the behaviors and actions of these private actors as they operate within the context of a dynamic, networked, public policy process.

This paper addresses these shortcomings in the literature by empirically examining a specific type of leadership behavior exhibited by managers of nonprofit organizations in their networks, that of advocacy. While myriad theories and empirical studies address the motivations, behaviors, and effectiveness of public sector legislative, executive (Doig and Hargrove 1987; O’Leary 1994; Schneider and Jacoby 1996), and judicial (Kobylka 1989; Rosenberg 1991)
leaders in seeking to influence policy outcomes, a realistic understanding of a networked policy process must account for the influence of other types of individual actors. Also, in spite of the widespread acknowledgement of the importance of interest groups and citizens in shaping policy outcomes (Baumgartner et al. 2009; Burstein 2003; Hayes 1981; Stimson et al. 1995; Wilson 1973), few scholars have focused on the corresponding roles played by individual leaders. Furthermore, empirical research within the interest group literature emphasizes full-time lobbyists and federal-level policy rather than local advocacy efforts of leaders of nonprofit organizations (Andrews and Edwards 2004). Therefore, a variety of scholarly traditions offer insight into this issue, but no existing theory adequately addresses the various dimensions and dynamics of local advocacy undertaken by nonprofit leaders within the context of their policy networks. Studies on leadership that stress the importance of a leader’s ability to influence external stakeholders promote this concept as a means to preserve an organization’s stability, survival, and legitimacy, rather than as a way to influence policy. In contrast, this study identifies and explains patterns of strategic behavior that connect the individual leadership actions of non-governmental agencies to policy outcomes. Thus, this research evaluates the influence of nonprofit leaders in a networked policy process.

Three terms must be clarified. First, a “policy network” perspective finds its source in many different theoretical lenses and has been defined as “(more or less) stable patterns of social relations between interdependent actors, which take shape around policy problems and/or policy programs” (Kickert et al. 1997, 6). More specifically, Rethemeyer and Hatmaker (2008) use the term policy network to “denote a set of public agencies, legislative offices, and private sector organizations (including interests groups, corporations, nonprofits, etc.) that have an interest in public decisions within a particular area of policy…because they are interdependent and thus
have a shared fate” (619). While moving perilously close to a network-level politics-administration dichotomy by distinguishing policy networks from collaborative/service provision, the conceptual distinction is relevant in this case as advocacy typically exists during policy formulation and planning.

Second, over the past decade, treatments of leadership within public and nonprofit management have progressed into a strong body of research on innovative and effective leaders (Herman 2005; Perry 2010; Van Wart 2011). However, there has long been scholarly debate regarding the difference between leadership and management (McGuire and Silvia 2009). Many recent scholars argue that the constructs of management and leadership overlap (Fernandez, 2008; Nahavandi, 2009; Northouse, 2007) to such an extent that the terms can be used interchangeably (Van Wart, 2005; Yukl, 2002). Many have also contended that any operationalized definition of leadership should be based on the purpose of the research and the research questions being asked (Bass 2008; Yukl, 2002). We adopt this approach because it allows us to define advocacy leadership behavior based on the context of the study.

If management and leadership are to be used interchangeably, we can receive guidance from the network management literature for the purposes of establishing just who the “network leader” is. Milward and Provan summarize different views of management by building a framework whereby there may be a designated, legitimate steerer of the network, but there are also managers in the network (Milward and Provan, 2006). This distinction is consistent with that put forth by 6 et al. (2006), who distinguish between governance of a network, which is designed to exercise control, regulation, inducement, incentive or persuasive influence over the whole network, and management within a network, which are activities carried out by individuals who are themselves actors in the network (5). First, managers of networks are
concerned with the whole network. These are “typically individuals who are charged with the task of coordinating overall network activities and, in general, ensuring that network-level goals are set, addressed, and attained” (Milward and Provan 2006, 18). The goals, objectives, and success are secondary to the network as a whole. Managers in networks primarily represent their organization within the network. “They are managers whose primary loyalty is to their organization, but who must work within a network context, addressing both organization- and network-level goals and objectives. These managers have split missions and, sometimes, split loyalties” (18). We are concerned with managers in the network.

Finally, advocacy can be considered an important leadership activity in networks. For example, recent studies of network leadership in the public sector assert that mobilizing both internal and external support is an important determinant of network performance (Silvia and McGuire 2010). Similarly, Rethemeyer and Hatmaker (2008, 42) refer to “mobilizing mass constituencies from within the manager’s ‘home’ network system and from those of adjacent systems” as an important add-on to previous conceptualizations of network management (Agranoff and McGuire 2001; McGuire 2002). In spite of the fact that few researchers have explored the advocacy role for nonprofit leaders, nonprofit experts agree that advocacy is an essential function of the nonprofit sector (Nonprofit Sector Strategy Group 2000). As early as the 1970s, David Horton Smith included the “systemic corrective role” of nonprofits—referring to the negative feedback they provide to government and business institutions, explicitly mentioning advocacy—as one of the ten major impacts the nonprofit sector has on society (2001, 84). Within today’s political environment, nonprofit organizations such as membership associations, unions, political organizations, and others form the primary structures for citizen involvement in the public policy process (Reid 2006). In addition, recent scholars have focused
their attention on the roles played by “traditional” nonprofit organizations in shaping public policy\(^1\) (Kreheley 2001; Child and Grønbjerg 2007; Schmid et al. 2008). Even given this recognition that nonprofits of all types, sizes, and missions can (and often do) advocate, the research on nonprofit advocacy concentrates almost exclusively on advocacy at the federal level (Foley and Edwards 2002). Even when widening the lens to consider advocacy more broadly, this bias towards research on national organizations and federal-level policy permeates the scholarly literature (Andrews and Edwards 2004). Advocacy through regional and local networks by nonprofit leaders certainly exists.

In light of the gaps apparent in the network literature, this paper seeks to accomplish three goals. First, in reviewing the existing conceptualizations of individual action in the policy process, we attempt to provide some scholarly context for empirical research. Second, by sharing the findings from in-depth interviews with nonprofit leaders who are highly engaged with the policy process in affordable housing, we hope to illustrate various dynamics surrounding the strategies and behaviors of nonprofit leaders who do advocate for policy change. Finally, we use these findings to offer some propositions on the effectiveness of particular network leadership strategies and behaviors in influencing the policy process.

**Research Questions**

The following over-arching research question motivates our inquiry: How do behaviors and actions of nonprofit leaders influence policy action within networks? Within this large question, the following subset of questions guides the research:

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\(^1\) Berry (2001) contrasts “traditional” nonprofit organizations with citizen advocacy groups as well as nonprofit organizations without the 501(c)(3) tax designation. We will follow Berry’s lead in referring to “traditional” nonprofits as those 501(c)(3) organizations most commonly considered the heart of the nonprofit sector, including social service providers, youth organizations, sports clubs, and community groups.
1. How do nonprofit leaders decide which actions and strategies they will use when advocating for a particular policy outcome?

2. Which behaviors and actions do nonprofit leaders consider most effective when advocating for a particular policy outcome? Which do they consider least effective?

3. Are there behaviors and actions of nonprofit leaders that are detrimental to an advocacy effort for a particular policy outcome?

4. When advocating for a particular policy outcome, how and to what extent do nonprofit leaders change their behaviors and actions in response to changes in the external environment, such as changes in political party control or the economic prosperity of the region?

**Literature Review**

*The Nonprofit-Government Relationship*

Dennis Young used economic theory to characterize three different manifestations of the relationship between government and the nonprofit sector: supplementary, complementary, and adversarial (2000). From a supplementary perspective, nonprofit organizations intervene in public service provision where government services fall short. The complementary view conjures images of the “hollow state” (Milward and Provan 2000), where public service dollars fund nonprofit service delivery primarily through contracts. Finally, the adversarial characterization considers the role for nonprofit organizations as advocates in the public policy process. While

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2 Depending on their particular tax designation, nonprofit organizations may or may not be able to engage in lobbying. Advocacy refers to the entire spectrum of policy-related activities, such as general public education about an issue area. In contrast, lobbying refers to attempts to influence specific legislation or referenda. Nonprofit organizations with the 501(c)(3) tax designation are prohibited from contributing to political campaigns, but they may lobby, as long as they remain under certain financial limits. For more information on nonprofit advocacy and lobbying, see the Center for Lobbying in the Public Interest’s website (www.cpli.org).
many scholars have studied nonprofit-government relations using the supplementary and complementary perspectives, relatively few have considered the adversarial role.

To the extent that scholars have studied nonprofit advocacy among traditional nonprofits, most research has focused on either measuring the quantity of nonprofit activity or finding its determinants. Multiple studies have shown that fewer than 3% of nonprofit organizations participate in lobbying (Boris and Krehely 2002, Suárez and Hwang 2008). In terms of determinants, scholars have found both a negative relationship between nonprofits receiving funding from local authorities and engaging in political activity (Schmid et al. 2008) and a positive one (Chaves et al. 2004).

The weakness of Young’s government-nonprofit paradigm and the other treatments of nonprofit advocacy are their failure to provide insight into the role that individuals play in carrying out the adversarial position. Within the leadership literature, some scholars have stressed the importance of a leader’s ability to influence external stakeholders (Harrison and St. John 1996, Bryson et al. 2001), but this concept is often promoted in order to preserve an organization’s financial stability and legitimacy. Nanus and Dobbs (1999) dedicate a chapter to the benefits of “Leader as Politician,” offering suggestions on how and why to build a political base, but they rely on a handful of anecdotes to provide support for the advised behaviors. Hence, turning to the role of individuals in research on policy change may provide further insight into this issue.

**Leaders of Policy Change**

Stemming from the political science literature on theories of policy change, two narratives emerge for the possible role of nonprofit advocates in the policy process:
representatives of organized interest groups and policy entrepreneurs. While nonprofit advocacy is under-researched, political scientists have a long-standing tradition considering the role of organized interest groups in influencing the policy process (Evans 1996, Yackee 2005, Baumgartner et. al 2009). Within this literature, lobbyists are often treated as perfect representatives of the organization’s preferences (Baumgartner et al. 2009). Wilson (1973) distinguishes between the individual and his or her organization, insisting, “the behavior of persons who lead or speak for an organization can best be understood in terms of their efforts to maintain and enhance the organization and their position in it” (9). In this way, he provides room for deviation of the attitudes and behaviors of an interest group leader from the ideology and preferences of the group at large. With this in mind, a research approach treating lobbyists and other organizational leaders as distinct from their organizations may help illuminate the role of the nonprofit leader in interest groups politics.

Although this avenue seems promising, transposing the idea of nonprofit leader onto the role of lobbyist omits critical dimensions of the former. Unlike the nonprofit leaders considered in this study, lobbyists are rarely the administrative heads of their organizations. In fact, the nonprofit organizations most committed to advocacy are likely to hire their own lobbyists as a means of pursuing their policy goals. Theory explaining or predicting the advocacy behaviors and strategies of nonprofit leaders must consider their advocacy activities alongside their other organizational and networking responsibilities. Accordingly, being an influential nonprofit leader in the policy process likely requires somewhat different skills than those of an effective lobbyist.

The concept of policy entrepreneurship is the second narrative that may be useful in understanding the influence of nonprofit leaders in the policy process. According to Mintrom and Norman, “Policy entrepreneurs can be identified by their efforts to promote significant policy
change” (2009, 651), although their conceptualization of the policy entrepreneur is only one among many. In his “Exchange Theory of Interest Groups,” Salisbury argues for understanding interest groups “as exchange relationships between entrepreneurs/organizers, who invest capital in a set of benefits, which they offer to prospective members at a price—membership” (1969, 2). Thus, the policy entrepreneur is often assumed to be the leader of a group with a well-defined membership (Moe 1980). Kingdon upends this claim, asserting instead that policy entrepreneurs are not limited to a particular place within the policy community, but are accurately defined by “their willingness to invest their resources—time, energy, reputation, and sometimes money—in the hope of a future return” (2003, 122). While these concepts emphasize different behaviors, motivations, or attributes of policy entrepreneurs, they all support the broad concept of policy entrepreneur as leader in the policy process.

Although the nonprofit leaders considered here may be policy entrepreneurs, the entrepreneurial concept clearly emphasizes a leader of “dynamic” policy change. Thus, policy entrepreneurs can be identified only subsequent to their substantial influence on public policy. While the nonprofit leaders attempting to influence policy would like stake this claim, it is unrealistic to label all of these advocates as policy entrepreneurs. Conversely, the title of policy entrepreneur belongs only to the most outstanding among nonprofit advocates. Once again, existing theory falls short in providing an appropriate framework for understanding the nonprofit leader as policy advocate.

Context

The purpose of this study is to understand, from the perspective of leaders of networked nonprofit organizations, how leadership behaviors and actions influence the outcomes of policy
initiatives related to their organizations’ missions. While this research is intended to inform nonprofit leadership within networks in general, we have pursued the research questions within the context of those organizations focused on providing or increasing affordable housing, which exists within a highly networked context. Nonprofit organizations operating within the affordable housing arena provide a particularly rich setting for this study: While Community Action Agencies and Community Development Corporations have evolved significantly from their Vietnam Era roots (Perry 1971, Keating et al. 1991), many of the latter organizations are now active members of their region’s affordable housing community (Silverman 2008). With this long history of political action, nonprofit agencies involved in affordable housing have sustained a high level of involvement in the policy arena and thus can offer insights for organizations in less-engaged issue areas.

In addition, affordable housing development is an extremely complex process, nearly always involving the collaboration of numerous stakeholders including planning commissions, private contractors, neighborhood groups, utility companies, social service providers, private donors, and local, state, and federal funding agencies. Because the networked environment is necessary for service provision, nonprofit leaders in the affordable housing community are ideal informants for understanding advocacy leadership by private actors within a network.

The policy initiatives considered here are policy goals expressly stated by the organization or the organization’s nonprofit community. As described in the research design, the nonprofit agencies participating in this research either have advocacy as an explicit objective or are members of such an advocacy organization. Therefore, the policy initiatives are those previously identified by the advocacy organizations (and supported by their member organizations) in legislative agendas, strategic plans, or other formal documents. Most
commonly, these policy initiatives relate to the formulation, passage, or blocking of specific state or local legislation. Policy initiatives relevant to this study are those which address subsidized housing structures (development, availability, preservation) or affordable housing residents (tenant rights, eligibility requirements, concurrent services) in general. Policy initiatives expressly concerning particular nonprofit organizations have not been considered.

“Affordable housing” is an ambiguous term because of its various definitions, depending on the source. According to the glossary from U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), housing is generally considered “affordable” if it costs the resident(s) no more than 30 percent of his or her income, including utilities (Glossary of HUD Terms). Most nonprofit agencies with missions concerning affordable or low-income housing adhere to this guideline, as it is often necessary for receiving any level of government funds. Practically speaking, nonprofit organizations focused on affordable housing often serve special populations—such as the elderly, disabled individuals, veterans, domestic abuse victims, or the chronically homeless—who are unable to find affordable housing through the common market. Within this study, “affordable housing” and “low-income housing” are used interchangeably, since nearly all affordable housing providers serve low-income residents and the terms are indistinguishable in practice.

Methodology

Grounded Theory Approach

We employ a qualitative research design based in grounded theory. Such research is intended to generate rather than validate any prior theory. Thus, in contrast to the traditional deductive approach to forming theory, a grounded theory approach uses data to derive the theory. First
explained in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Glaser and Strauss 1967), grounded theory is an inductive approach where the researcher “discovers concepts and hypotheses through constant comparative analysis” (Glesne 2006, 27). Rather than forcing the data to fit into preconceived theoretical frameworks, grounded theorists form their ideas about relationships among concepts from the data itself. This tends to make the grounded theory approach more appropriate for research involving qualitative rather than quantitative data.

Grounded theory is far from being non-systematic. Avoiding a pre-structured design in research often results in only thick description of raw data as opposed to analysis. Indeed, some grounded theory applications allow for a frame of reference or a theoretical lens through which to analyze the data. For example, Miles and Huberman (1994) recommend designs that pay prior attention to a conceptual framework, as well as research questions, sampling, and instrumentation that have a “focusing and bounding” role (34). Basically, for this research, it is a way to look at advocacy empirically from the perspective of those immersed in the arena. The approach taken in this study thus puts the qualitative researcher somewhere between designs based on deductive quantitative testing of explicit theoretical propositions and descriptive and causal inference, and thick analysis of nominal data (Agranoff 2007).

**Research Design**

This study is appropriate for qualitative research because the subject it explores is both subtle and complex. Policy-making is a multifaceted process highly influenced by factors such as political party control, the state of the economy, and the individual agendas of elected officials. The only hope for understanding the influence (or ineffectiveness) of networked nonprofit leadership within this dynamic environment is to learn from those who have experienced it
firsthand. Accordingly, structured interviews comprised the primary form of data for this study. Information gathered from organizational websites and 990 tax forms (as accessed through www.guidestar.org) constitute a limited amount of supplemental data.

The interviewees were selected from the community of nonprofit leaders of affordable housing organizations in West Coast states (Washington, Oregon, and California). Specifically, interviews were conducted with staff members from state- and local-level affordable housing advocacy organizations associated with the PCAHN network. PCAHN (the Pacific Coast Affordable Housing Network) is an informal network of nonprofit organizations that serve as trade associations and/or advocacy organizers for their local affordable housing communities. Each PCAHN organization is a federation (Selsky defines this as an association “in which the affiliates are organizations rather than individuals” (1998, 286)) comprised of nonprofit affordable housing providers and other affordable housing support organizations in their local communities. In terms of their public policy involvement, some PCAHN members focus on city- and county-level policy while others focus on state-level policy. Some examples of PCAHN members are the Southern California Association of Nonprofit Housing, the Oregon Opportunity Network, and the Housing Development Consortium of Seattle-King County.

The interviewees are individuals who have served in formal leadership positions (current or past) and have experienced a high level of engagement with policy issues. In addition, interviewees have been selected from among those who are willing to reflect on their advocacy failures in addition to their successes, as honest self-reflection was crucial for obtaining meaningful data. The interviews were conducted by telephone, ranging from thirty to fifty-five minutes with the average time of forty minutes.
Description of Participants

The data for this study have come from interviews with twenty-one professionals from nonprofit organizations involved with the field of affordable housing. The interviewees used in this part of the work in progress all live and work in the West Coast of the United States, with eight based in California, five in Oregon, and eight in Washington State. Thirteen of the interviewees are or were recently leaders of affordable housing coalition organizations, in which advocacy is a core function. Another six interviewees serve as leaders of nonprofit organizations that develop and/or provide affordable housing services to low-income residents; these organizations are all members of one or more coalition groups. Of the remaining two interviewees, one is a leader in an affiliated coalition (not focused strictly on housing), and the other is from a funding organization that supports affordable housing advocacy efforts. Of the twenty-one leaders interviewed, five primarily focus their efforts (both advocacy and services) statewide, five have a regional focus, eight focus within their specific county, and two generally limit themselves to work within their city. On average, the interviewees had served in their positions for six years. Ten of the participants were male.

The organizations represented constitute a particular sub-sample of nonprofits that are highly engaged in advocacy. Although twelve of the organizations had advocacy as a core function (two interviewees were the past and current director of a single organization), all of these organizations have the 501(c)(3) tax designation. Of the remaining seven organizations whose leaders participated in the study, four are 501(c)(3) organizations, two are housing authorities, and one is a private foundation. Of the eleven 501(c)(3) organizations reporting lobbying activity on their most recent publicly-available 990 tax form, all but two took the 501H
election. In terms of advocacy activity, this suggests a higher level of sophistication among this
group of organizations as compared to average nonprofits (Berry 2006).

Method of Analysis

In accordance with grounded theory, data collection occurred simultaneously with
analysis and, in fact, guided the data collection process (Corbin and Strauss 1990). While a
discussion guide provided a continuous structure throughout data collection, the interviews
varied in terms of range of discussion and emphasis on particular topics. Overall, early
interviews tended to focus on specific advocacy actions used as well as decision-making
strategies. Later interviews concentrated more on the influence of external factors. However, a
significant portion of all interviews centered on effective strategies and leadership behaviors.

All but three of the interviews were recorded and archived\(^3\), although limited note-taking
also occurred during the interviews. Following the strategy suggested by qualitative
methodologists (Silverman 2005, Glesne 2006), common themes, preliminary analyses, and
research experiences were periodically written down in a researcher journal. In determining the
common themes and concepts, additional notes were taken from the interview recordings and
then arranged the concepts in clusters. The description of these clusters is identified in the
findings, and the analysis generated the subsequent propositions.

Findings

Advocacy Activities, Policy Goals, and Decision-making Processes

Most of the advocacy activities used by the interviewees were consistent with those
typically considered by those attempting to influence policy. The specific actions most

\(^3\) Technology failures prevented three recordings, but extensive notes were taken during those interviews.
frequently mentioned include testifying at council meetings and public hearings, writing letters to legislators, submitting opinion pieces to local news sources, and sponsoring events with the purpose of educating government officials, their staff, and the general public. In addition, all of the leaders interviewed do substantial work in their networks through coalitions. Because of the research design, all but two of the twenty-one leaders interviewed are formal members or leaders of at least one coalition specifically focused on affordable housing issues. However, many of the leaders also cited their participation in broader networks, within which they worked on a vast range of issues including regional planning, transit-oriented development, and benefits for low-income individuals. This is evidence of what Rethemeyer and Hatmaker (2008) referred to as a network system.

The leaders referred to a relatively narrow range of policy goals, although the specific initiatives varied greatly by region as well as government level (city, county, and state). The most common policy goals referenced related to budget allocations for affordable housing development/preservation and resident support services, the creation of new funding streams, and inclusionary zoning ordinances.

Organizations employed a variety of processes for determining what policy initiatives the organization or coalition would pursue. The majority of organizations had a formal process for determining policy goals, such as an advisory board or policy committee. For other organizations, the executive director made most decisions about when to get involved in a policy area. One leader explained that her board developed specific guidelines that she uses to determine if she can engage in a policy issue without seeking board approval first. Other leaders use their experience and their knowledge of their stakeholders’ priorities to guide their actions.
**Synthesis of Inside and Outside Strategies**

Nearly all of the leaders discussed the importance of having both an “inside” and “outside” strategy. Inside strategies largely referred to direct connections with legislators and governmental staff, generally through private meetings and personal relationships. For the interview participants, outside strategies imply more of a grassroots mobilization as well as a more aggressive stance on whatever issue is at hand.

While all leaders asserted that some outside strategy is necessary, few believed they alone could influence policy. One agency head explained reluctantly that while a solid showing at a public hearing is important (“If you don’t do it, you’ve got a problem”), this is not where important decisions are made. Even still, illustrating that there are individuals backing an organization can be invaluable for long-term credibility. Another leader reflected, “I think a lot of our power at the local level comes from our ability on the big issues, once in a while, to turn a lot of people out to city council meetings.” Thus, participation in public hearings is a crucial but insufficient part of influencing policy.

The leaders identified relationship-building with politicians and government staff as among the most effective strategies for influencing policy. Starting a new relationship with an elected official is challenging but often necessary because of regular turnover on local councils and state legislatures. Leaders suggest that the easiest strategy is to reach out to legislators using their particular constituents, although this strategy alone may prevent relationship-building with key decision-makers. Alternately, pursuing relationships with agency and legislative staff is seen as a good way to get to know legislators as well as foster long-term allies, since staff often retain their positions for longer time frames.
Influence of Economic Crisis

The recent economic downturn played a profound role in determining both the policy goals and strategies of interview participants. Leaders have tended to temper their “asks” and redefine their victories. For several years, one advocacy organization had pushed for a continual increase in dedicated housing funds; this year, they took a defensive route, aiming to prevent the funds from total elimination.

Alternately, several leaders highlighted the policy opportunities created by the economic crisis. One organization led a successful effort to pass a local inclusionary zoning ordinance. The leader attributed this success to the slow housing market, commenting that the traditional opposition of private developers had been weakened by the economy. Another leader considered the economic crisis a good opportunity to forge unconventional alliances, as his group recently started formal collaboration with a local school district.

As for changing strategy, leaders talked about their rapport with legislators, and the need to tone down policy goals in order to maintain credibility. Instead of focusing on policy battles, nonprofit leaders emphasized the need to help guide elected officials during difficult times:

You can’t advocate in a vacuum…What you can’t do is ignore the realities and just keep pitching the same thing, because then you will not be providing any help to those legislators...You need to adjust your approach so you can find ways to help legislators do the right things.

According to several leaders, one sign of an effective advocate is that legislators will seek out him or her to provide expert advice. In a time of intense budget cuts, these relationships can help guide elected officials in deciding which programs to cut and which to protect.
Least Effective Strategies

Overall, the nonprofit leaders interviewed considered their coalitions and approaches to be largely effective. However, past experiences as well as observations of other advocates enabled them to highlight some particularly ineffective strategies. One leader previously worked in a nonprofit where advocates employed an “old-school” strategy of setting up conflict and identifying the enemy (usually an elected official). While this may generate grassroots excitement, this kind of approach will likely jeopardize any chances of shaping future legislation.

Several leaders faulted other organizations for taking positions on more policies than they could credibly influence. These leaders felt that selecting a small number of policy priorities allowed for much greater influence than spreading limited resources across many initiatives.

Leaders identified other common mistakes relate to issue messaging and coalition coordination. Individuals with particularly strong relationships sometimes go directly to legislators outside of coalition efforts, which can confuse legislators and undermine coalition efforts. However, a few leaders warned that a coordinated message can also be ineffective if it does not resonate with elected officials. In this case, leaders emphasized that communication among coalition members is critical in order to quickly identifying a stronger message.

The Perception of Nonprofit Advocates

One area of relative disagreement revolved around how nonprofit leaders believe they are perceived by elected officials as compared to other types of advocates (i.e., private sector or individual citizens). One group of leaders definitely thought they enjoyed greater integrity because of their mission-based motivation. One leader asserted, “We have ‘right’ on our side,”
while another explained that some politicians view members of his coalition “not as lobbyists, but really as advocates… representing a constituency of people.”

Other leaders believed that some politicians consider nonprofit advocates less competent than those representing for-profit organizations. One leader speculated that certain elected officials think that the business lobbyists represent “people who are really doing something” in contrast to the low-income constituents represented by nonprofit advocates. Finally, a few nonprofit leaders suspected that a substantial portion of elected officials do not differentiate between mission-based and private interest advocates.

**Promising Leadership Attributes**

The interview participants provided remarkable consensus around the two related leadership attributes they emphasized most frequently: Effective skills in relationship-building and facilitating coalitions. Other associated qualities, such as good communication skills and comfort with shared leadership, further supported these attributes. Under the umbrella of facilitating coalitions, several leaders discussed the challenging but crucial skill of supporting other people’s leadership by getting the right messenger to deliver the most effective message. In contrast to common perceptions of charismatic leadership, some leaders also referred to a “behind the scenes” tendency as important for maintaining a healthy coalition. Finally, given the technical complexity of this arena in terms of both policy and practice, some leaders thought an expert-level understanding of affordable housing development is crucial to effective leadership.

**Theoretical Development**
So what is learned from these nonprofit leaders? At least four general propositions about network leadership effectiveness in advocacy emerged from the research.

Proposition 1: *Nonprofit leaders involved with advocacy should have a good understanding of when to act quickly and independently versus when to ask others and go through a collaborative decision-making process.* Policy advocacy can either be a singular or a collaborative activity. For the former, the relevant contacts must be known, actions need to be swiftly taken, yet the leader must act on behalf of the larger coalition or network. On the other hand, it is not always easy or advantageous to participate in collaborative decision making. Huxham (2003) argues that in some cases, collaborative arrangements attain a “collaborative advantage which is concerned with the potential for synergy from working collaboratively” (401). In many cases, however, “collaborative inertia” occurs. Participants in a collaborative endeavor often cannot agree on common aims, the amount of power within the collaboration is unequal, trust is difficult to build, and participants often do not know with whom they are linked (McGuire 2006). The stark conclusion is that “unless the potential for real collaborative advantage is clear, it is generally best, if there is a choice, to avoid collaboration” (Huxham 2003, 421).

Proposition 2: *Nonprofit leaders who invest in relationship-building with both government (staff and elected officials) and members of their own coalitions will be most successful.* Managing the external network environment is important for the leader, as Silvia and McGuire (2010) demonstrate in their analysis of leadership behaviors in local emergency management. Encouraging support from and keeping the network in good standing with the higher authority, as well as encouraging support from and keeping the network in good standing with stakeholders
inside and outside the network. Such behavior helps establish the legitimacy of the network (Milward & Provan, 2006) and acts as a “mobilizer” to develop commitment and support for a specific policy position from both the network/coalition members and external stakeholders.

Proposition 3: *Nonprofit leaders who develop and adjust strategies and policy goals based on the broader political and economic context will be more influential than those with less adaptive approaches.* Policy advocates must work within the current environment, taking into account the influence of partisanship, election results, opposition tactics, the power of the status quo, and issue salience (Baumgartner et al. 2009). The salience and complexity of an issue are particularly important considerations, but their levels are alterable and will likely change over time (Gormley 1986). Thus, these and related external factors are dynamic, requiring an effective nonprofit advocate to continually gauge and adjust strategy and policy goals based on environmental changes. Even within a well-established network, “boundary-spanning” pursuits are effective strategies for adapting to changing conditions (Alexander 2000), as identified by leaders in this study who forged untraditional partnerships in response to the economic crisis.

Proposition 4: *The most successful nonprofit leader advocates will rely on network leadership practices such as excelling in communication, promoting strategies that attempt to get the best messenger to deliver the right message, building relationships with relevant stakeholders, and having credibility as both experts and community organizers.* A leader/advocate must be able and ready to sell an idea/project, or a set of ideas/projects, to elected officials and representatives of other organizations (McGuire 2011). Collaboration does not come automatically and the more the potential collaborators perceive demands on agency autonomy, power, and resources, the
more resistance is likely to follow. The decision to pursue advocacy thus requires persuasion that participation or partnering will be of mutual benefit and/or for a larger cause. The leader should have some substantive knowledge of the issues/problems dealt with in the network (Klijn and Edelenbos 2008). Network managers thus must be able to engage in what could be called transdisciplinary practice (Agranoff and McGuire 1999). A manager must know something about the work of different professions and occupations, and be ready to respond with this knowledge. Acquiring and utilizing knowledge from multiple disciplinary practices simultaneously can thus be critical to the success of advocacy.

**Discussion**

Much of the research on nonprofit advocacy considers organizational rather than individual actors. In contrast, the results from this study make a first step towards linking the strategies and behaviors of nonprofit leaders to their influence on the policy process. The propositions offered here may form the beginning of a theory explaining the role of traditional nonprofit leaders in the policy process as they operate in vast policy networks. Because this research used a limited qualitative approach, the findings presented here should not be generalized outside of the context of this particular study. However, the presented propositions help lay the groundwork for a more systematic approach to these research questions. Therefore, this research contributes to the leadership literature by examining the way that nonprofit leaders fulfill the “adversarial” role in the nonprofit-government relationship. This research also contributes to theory by using leadership concepts as a means of bridging across the research streams of nonprofit advocacy and the role of individuals in a dynamic policy process.
In addition to contributing to leadership theory, this study has numerous implications for leadership practice. Findings from the study have illustrated particular leadership practices that seem most effective for influencing the policy-making process, so nonprofit leaders from all issue areas will benefit from this research. By discussing explicit actions and behaviors of those involved with advocacy, the study could serve as a catalyst for nonprofit network leaders looking to become involved in the policy-making process but unsure of how to do so. Furthermore, elected officials and other stakeholders can gain a better understanding of effective ways to engage the nonprofit community in creating policy. Finally, if nonprofit leaders adopt the strategies identified here as most effective, public policy has the potential to change in a way that is more consistent with the preferences of nonprofit leaders.

Advocacy and mobilizing mass constituencies for the purposes of influencing public policy making should be considered an important component of network leadership. Whether to pursue a collaborative strategy, when and how to invest in relationships within policy coalitions and networks, how to adapt to fiscal and socioeconomic contexts, and determining how and why particular leadership skills are most effective are all important pieces of the leadership skill set. Future research should consider a larger dataset to address the aforementioned propositions as a means to further develop the “tool belt” of the nonprofit network leader.
References


