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Factors Contributing to Continuous Growth in Founder-Led Non-Profit Startups

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ABSTRACT

Over the years, there has been a well-documented decline in the success rate of founder-led non-profit start-ups. However, it is still unclear how to help founder-led non-profit start-ups continue to grow. Most founder-led non-profit start-up organizations cease to exist because they merge with other organizations, have inadequate resources, or have poor management.

The objective of this study was to provide a clear road map for practices that founder-led non-profit start-ups can adopt to ensure that their organizations operate successfully. In light of the literature, the result of this study also indicated that it is crucial to involve employees in the decision-making process, recruit and retain members and volunteers, create a strong brand identity, build good relationships between the board and the managers, and develop and manage the employees' accountability. Continuous efforts on these factors will influence the organization's sustainable growth and generate personal considerations.

1. Introduction

Research on the failure of founder-led non-profit start-ups shows that leaders should adopt effective leadership practices. First, leaders need to promote the sharing of the organization's vision. The long-term goals of an organization should be spearheaded by a clearly defined vision (Nguyen et al., 2019). Accordingly, it is the responsibility of management to share the organization's vision with the employees and the public. Founder-led non-profit start-up leaders are, ideally, charismatic in their traditional association with the public or, at the least, effective communicators. To better achieve effective leadership and management, employee encouragement should be considered. Employees will be better motivated when the organization's management meets their demands. Motivated workers will be inspired to advance the institution's goals, thus increasing productivity within the organization (Lipton, 2003). This can gradually become an influential and comfortable organizational culture if leaders consciously cultivate it. As a result, imagining that everyone contributes fully and feels hopeful while working for a start-up might help to attract more potential sponsors, donors, investors, and cooperators, who would be a strong and veritable force to contribute significantly to the growth and development of start-ups. Research reports showed that when leaders had trouble expressing their passion and vision, they struggled to gain perspective supporters'

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attention. The resulting fundraising hardship ultimately limited the start-up's growth (Young et al., 2018).

2. Internal Challenges and Appropriate Strategies

2.1. Involving Employees in the Decision-Making Process

Previous research showed that more than 70% of founder-led non-profit start-ups ceased operations before their tenth anniversary. The few that succeeded were often those that transferred management from the founders to other corporate leaders. Most organizations' decisions were made by the founders alone, and the failure to consult others affected the decisions' soundness. Studies of decision-making often show that decisions are rarely made by a single person, regardless of the views of the organization's members. Organization leaders must be less individualistic. Organizational decisions must consider organization members' acceptance of the organization's direction (Bavelas, 1964). When the founder makes decisions about the organization's operation without consulting others, it affects worker morale and increases turnover.

2.2. Develop and Manage Accountabilities

Geer's research and studies indicate four measures that positively impact organizational accountability to operating standards: fiscal responsibility, good governance, adherence to mission, and program effectiveness (Brody, 2001). Second is the leadership style, specifically transformational leadership, which would positively affect non-profit accountability. Further, non-profits that hire and develop influential leaders responsible for directing employee and volunteer efforts are more likely to maintain long-term effectiveness and withstand economic downturns (Riggio et al., 2004). Influential leaders influence and motivate people to contribute more than expected (Bolino & Turnley, 2003). According to transformational leadership theory, leaders developing their followers' full potential and increasing their job satisfaction increases an organization's potential to achieve its goals through higher follower performance (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1995). Many researchers, such as Bass and Steidlmeier (1999) and Dvir, Eden, Avolio, and Shamir (2002), hypothesize that transformational leaders increase followers' desire for high-level performance, create a solid moral and ethical environment, and generate more outstanding follower commitment to organizational values.

"Leadership in non-profit organizations is typically viewed as the combination of staff and board leadership to achieve the mission. Drucker (1990) declared that this governance structure of non-profit organizations malfunctions as often as it functions. He suggested that staff leaders must work in tandem with their boards to be effective. Still, it is the executive officers who are the stronger players." Thus, on the other hand, the board of directors that trusts each other and adheres to the common purpose and mission can work tightly with other senior managers and executive officers. Together, they can build a sound management mechanism that considers how to cultivate good internal relations better and prepare responses to various problems and crises that may arise during the organization's continuous development.

2.3. Recruitment and Retention of Members and Volunteers

One of the significant challenges that founder-led non-profit start-ups confront is recruiting and retaining members. These organizations must ensure that their member numbers are sustained yearly according to their needs and resources. Large organizations, as well as small ones, must deal with attrition. The significant causes of attrition are elaborated on below.

One of the major causes is the poor management of members. Bad management can negatively impact an organization's operations and its employees' behavior. If staff is insufficiently motivated by management, then the managers might be at fault. Poor leadership negatively impacts an organization in many ways, typically in decreased profits, business failure, reduced employee productivity, and low morale (Yau, 2019). Unfair recruitment activities are a contributing factor.

Secondly, unconscious biases are one of the reasons organizations struggle to attract and keep diverse candidates. Unfair recruitment can result from stereotyping and is illegal. Stereotyping and other unfair practices prevent the founders of non-profit start-ups from finding and keeping well-qualified personnel. Due to scarce resources, leaders report that finding candidates with the necessary skills and experience to fill positions is almost impossible. The number of non-profit organizations in operation adds to the competition for the most qualified candidates (Mariani et al., 2019). Non-profits must classify their workers as permanent or contract-based employees per current state and federal labor laws. Scheduling adequate personnel to work at the organization's events can be challenging (Osborne, 2017).

Scheduling volunteers for these tasks is challenging because recruiting people with the organization's skills and commitment is demanding. The volunteers also must undergo the same screening and onboarding process as paid workers, even though they do not receive or expect compensation (Wasserman, 2012). If the recruiting process is ineffective, it is difficult for the recruiters to coordinate it. This occurs especially when the relationship between the recruiter and the hiring manager is strained (Jantz, 2017).

Considering this phenomenon, founder-led non-profit start-ups should plan awards programs to celebrate and appreciate exceptional workers and volunteers. The awards may not be expensive, but they can play an essential role in boosting morale and lifting spirits (Richter et al., 2018). Leaders should plan special activities for employees to promote bonding, such as a recognition lunch with colleagues. Granting a midyear break for staff and workers is a reboot activity that helps reset their mindsets. Some leaders try to curb volunteer and staff problems by building an organizational culture. Once properly established, organizational culture can be maintained even when experiencing external challenges. The culture can be built by making the workers feel valued and appreciated. It creates an environment where people encourage and care for one another, contributing to a good team spirit (Terrana, 2017).

Further, the means of engagement should be identified. Leaders must be sure that there is continuing engagement with potential members. Both recruitment and retention must be focused on to avoid long-term issues. For the first time, organizations are placing more emphasis on long-term member engagement than short-term member acquisition (Nguyen et al., 2019). Besides, Freeborough et al., (2016) suggest that human resource managers and executives at nonprofit organizations may want to specifically train employees to apply greater idealized influence, intellectual motivation, personal considerations, and inspiring motivation. The second step involves providing benefits for members. If member benefits are evident, a large number of members will be satisfied. Members have high expectations that an online experience will be engaging and interactive. When it is, the membership base can be expanded with new audiences. Founders of non-profits should consider expanding their member base as they engage with existing donors and members (Jantz, 2017). Diversification of the recruitment strategies aids in getting a transparent, effective outcome. Using social media platforms to post job opportunities is generally advisable.

3. External Challenges and Appropriate Strategies

3.1. Challenge of Funding

Good financial ratios are considered a prerequisite for achieving social goals (Duckles et al., 2005). The ongoing US economic recession has led to increasing financial challenges and pressure on non-profits to maintain a productive workforce and accomplish their vision effectively. A sample of 363 US non-profits found that 83% of respondents reported significant financial stress, and 40% reported severe financial stress in 2008–2009 (Salamon el at., 2009). In addition to this, revenue generation grew at a low average of about 16% of the whole; funds received from donors came to around 11.5%, and those from fundraising stood at 7.5% (Jantz, 2017). The non-profit sector is encountering serious difficulty generating revenue, and this is forcing most organizations to make budget cuts. As a result, organizations' staff are expected to do the same work with fewer resources. Organizations typically have fewer employees than they would like because of budgetary constraints. Senior-level employees involved in an organization's day-to-day activities also make decisions for the entire organization (Mariani et al., 2019) will overburden single individuals.

Another problem is the process of tracking grants. Many organizations rely on grants to supplement their small budgets (Ndalamba et al., 2018). Grants are typically awarded for specific activities, and the non-profit's accountants must allocate funds accordingly and decide which grants are receivable and when the grant monies can be collected. Most non-profit leaders report having difficulty finding donors and conducting practical fundraising activities. They frequently experience the pressure of raising sufficient funds to accomplish their objectives (Young et al., 2018). Further, according to a description provided by Fleisher (2017), a founder-led non-profit start-up may find that relationships with other non-profit organizations can, for example, improve opportunities for acquiring grants. Networking should be seen as an opportunity for growth and development instead of a threat or competition (Fleisher, 2017).

To effectively address the problem of financial constraints, a sound understanding of finance is essential and should be considered in an organization's drafted vision. Organizations should be fully aware of their current operating budgets to allocate funds orderly. They must also have realistic expectations concerning the extent to which donors can be relied upon to underwrite their needs. It is necessary to access specific financial data and create an all-hands-on-deck strategic plan for growth. The leaders of founder-led non-profit start-ups have to bring everyone on board, including facilities workers and fundraising personnel, to ensure that the strategic plan of fundraising is implemented appropriately (Yi et al., 2019).

3.2. Inappropriate Allocation of Available Resources

More than 30 years after the birth of research into organizational failure and success, the meaning of corporate failure and success in the context of non-profit organizations remains unclear, which suggests that this aspect of profit-making organizations can be extended and referred to by suggesting some directions for further research into this field (Helmig et al., 2014). According to Helmig's perspective, a non-profit organization's success and sustainability depend on its acquisition of the resources to operate (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Accordingly, organizations are never self-sufficient but somewhat interdependent with other organizations in their environment. Firms must trade with other organizations with input to obtain the resources needed to produce output. Only when successful transactions occur can the organization remain in the market (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). The company's valuable and unique resources are recognized as drivers of sound business performance. Incomplete imitability, substitution, and incomplete liquidity make resources more valuable and give enterprises a competitive advantage in the market (Barney, 1986). Resource dependence theory states that organizations must acquire and maintain essential resources for survival. If they do not obtain sufficient resources, they will have to cease operations and exit the market (Davis & Cobb, 2010; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). These foundational research theories can be used as a reference, as it applies to non-profit organizations. Many non-profit organizations depend on support from well-wishers, which can fluctuate. Therefore, they must ensure a keen allocation of resources to make sponsors feel more confident contributing money and resources. Due to the high competition among non-profits for donor resources, persuading and convincing potential donors to choose a particular organization requires innovative efforts. A non-profit organization start-up needs to ensure its resources are appropriately aligned with its priorities.

3.3. Creating a Solid Brand Identity

Brand identity and market position are essential in establishing a sense of competition within an organization. According to research by Terrana (2017), the lack of a brand identity is a factor in the failure of many founder-led non-profit start-ups. Another study concluded that most workers in organizations with an intense, clearly defined brand identity work more enthusiastically than those in organizations with less or no brand identity (Lipton, 2003). The brand's market position enables workers to follow the organization's long-term goals (Wasserman, 2012). Following the blueprint for achieving the organization's vision enables members to actively cooperate with the management, thus contributing to overall goal achievement.

An organization's success is based on the image it portrays to the public. Accordingly, the founders of non-profit start-ups should place brand image identification at the core of their operations. The identity given to every organization is directly proportional to its perception by the public. For this reason, it is essential for management to project a good image of their organization to the public. Moreover, brand identity is vital to the start-up non-profit's success because it contributes toward loyalty, which attracts passionate audiences to notice a start-up's value.

According to a study by Jantz (2017), to solve the lack of identity, non-profit start-ups should incorporate granular analysis into their operational strategies (Terrana, 2017), meaning there should be a clear linkage between an organization's operation and its aggregate data. Having a precise analysis of identified needs and an understanding of such issues imposes an adequate basis for determining the operational strategies that should be followed. A well-established and unique identity might help attract more sponsors, clients, and a sympathetic audience to non-profit start-ups. Hence, other methods could gain more support from outside resources and the target community to promote stability and growth.

4. Summarize the Role of Vision in Founder-Led Non-Profit Start-Ups

4.1. The Importance of Vision in Creating a Robust Strategic Plan

Actual data from the US Center for Philanthropy Statistics show that about 30% of non-profits fail after ten years, and according to Forbes, more than half of chartered non-profits are doomed to fail or become stagnant within a few years for reasons ranging from leadership issues to poor strategic planning (Tracy S. Ebarb, 2019).

According to Ray (2020), a significant challenge for non-profit start-ups is the lack of a strategic operating plan to achieve the organization's vision. Moreover, based on Heikkilä et al. (2018), implementing a vision starts with developing a strategic plan. In addition, Thomas et al. (2019) explain that a non-profit organization's managers should establish a clear roadmap for the current and future operation levels and goals. The organization's vision should be clear to all its stakeholders to ensure that they will play significant roles in the start-up's success (Ray, 2020; Kim et al., 2018).

One major weakness of founder-led start-ups is the expectation that the owners will set the operational procedures. As a result, some lesser parties in the organization are left out of the decision-making process. To ensure success, the management team needs to elaborate on the organization's vision clearly, and the roadmap management should use to achieve that vision (Ray, 2020). Further, an organization's or business's vision and mission statement play a significant role in successful operation and growth. The organization's vision should guide the leader's decisions. Stick to vision ensures that all decisions are consistent with the start-up organization's goals. This vision should be communicated to all workers and staff in the organization to ensure that every action runs smoothly. Using records and data for decision-making enables an organization to identify essential features that have helped the organization achieve short- and long-term goals. Such an evaluation enables an organization to identify potential success traits and avoid those associated with past failures (Jantz, 2017; Terrana, 2017). Scholars emphasized the importance of strategic planning to achieve the organization's vision. Management's responsibility is to ensure that all workers are engaged in working toward the organization's vision. Workers involved in decision-making were more enthusiastic and committed to achieving the organizational vision and goals. Several scholars emphasized the need for operating founder-led non-profit start-ups based on vision actualization. This approach requires leaders to create a vision that succinctly illustrates the organization's values, then be guided by those values as they work toward short- and long-term goals.

4.2. Transferring the Organization's Vision from Paper to Reality

According to Mark Lipton's book Guiding Growth: How Vision Keeps Companies on Course, organizations need to make their vision work for their development and growth. Therefore, non-profit start-ups not only set forth their vision on their manifestos but also have a strategic roadmap for actualizing their visions. Effectively actualizing the institution's vision, translating it from words on paper to a working reality, is crucial because it enhances unanimity of purpose. The employees gain a sense of belonging to the organization, which motivates their daily activities. Transferring the institution's vision from paper to reality provides the employees with a psychological commitment to the institution's goals (Turner, 2017). It enables members to understand the organization's objectives, believe in them, and act to support them. Actualization of the vision provides a focal point for individual identification with the organization as unique and separate from others in the same field. Vision could become a spirit: a belief and a tight bond connecting the members and leadership. This transparent strength will help founder-led non-profit start-ups transform tangible support into visible benefits.

5. Conclusion

Research on the continued growth of founder-led non-profit start-ups is innovative. There are few studies and observations in this area. Based on the non-profit organization from a macro-perspective, by reading past literature, the subdivision of founder-led non-profits can be summarized to analyze what common factors affect its sustainable development. Many scholars and researchers have proposed the non-profit organization as the theory of leadership and which leadership model to use is more suitable for developing the non-profit organization. Therefore, founder-led non-profit start-ups should watch this factor's impact on sustainable development. The leadership implementation's efficiency affects the whole organization's performance. It was found that when making decisions in many founder-led non-profits, the founder and board play this role, leading to the lack of members' participation in decision-making and discussion. According to the literature, other outstanding employees' participation in the decision-making process will increase employees' enthusiasm and make them more aware of the organization's mission and vision so that they can be more transparent, focused, and responsible in their daily and long-term commitments.

Second, founder-led non-profit start-ups may encounter external challenges in their initial development phase, such as how to find a recognized foothold in other non-profit bases, which are now mature and stable relative to their development. Another is establishing uniqueness so the target audience can quickly and accurately find the organization and establish trust. These can be reached by brand. Through past research, establishing a brand characteristic of recognition provides a window for the public and service objects into the organizations' activities, service content, and intended present and future coverage, including development planning. Additionally, shaping the brand to build trust and familiarity in the crowd so that the project implementation process can attract more supporters, followers, donors, volunteers, and potential members will enhance the possibility of many like-minded friends joining the organization, resulting in a more significant social influence.

For internal development, in addition to involving more competent team members and employees in the decision-making process, a significant internal relationship will influence the organization to move forward more steadily. That is the relationship between the shareholder members and the rest of the management. Shareholders and management have different roles and tasks but are not independent and separate. On the contrary, they cooperate and closely support and coordinate to complete the project tasks, which can effectively help implement the vision and goals. For instance, one of the board members can attract more donations because they have a broader social circle. When maintaining relationships with donors and sponsors in the future, the chief of the fundraising department needs to keep these social relationships well and get continuous donations. At the same time, cooperation and trust between them will make targets more stable kinetic energy and not because the relationship between each other is not harmonious leads to other internal crises, so it will not only affect the implementation of the mission, vision, and services and the promotion, it will also make the whole organization inefficiency. Then it will cause more external predicaments, such as losing donors, funding, and public trust.

The essence of non-profit organizations is to provide specific services to needy people to compensate for gaps in social resources and some public services the government provides. Therefore, for founder-led non-profit organization start-ups, maintaining good organizational performance is critical to the organization's sustainable growth. According to the literature, the factors affecting the performance of an organization lie in whether the members working for it can maintain enthusiasm and satisfaction for a long time and be responsible for implementing the organization's goals. Non-profit research achievements in this field are relatively few, but field experts have paid great attention to it. Geer's four elements of fiscal responsibility—good governance, commitment to the mission, program effectiveness, and transformational leadership—mentioned in many other literary works have improved organization members' effectiveness in fulfilling their long-term commitment positively and satisfactorily.

Non-profit organizations raise funds to achieve their short- and long-term visions for significant projects. Additionally, founder-led non-profit start-ups are in the initial stage, and thus, funds must be more reasonable and scientific to apply financial resources efficiently and precisely. Further, splitting the vision into various portions and phases would better aid in achieving the founder-led non-profit start-ups' goals. The issue of inadequate resources, including financial ones, will be eased so the leader can effectively share the organization's vision and goals with the public. When this is accomplished, investors, sponsors, and donors are motivated and expected to contribute to the organization's success, thus ensuring its continuity.

Managers should constantly engage with potential members and train them with enthusiasm and passion. Recruitment and retention must be implemented to avoid long-term issues. For instance, organizations could emphasize long-term member engagement more than short-term member acquisition. Another critical strategy to achieve this objective is to create member benefits. Leaders must see that their management principles are consistent with the vision and mission statements.

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