From Change Agents to Method Actors: The Effect of Transnational NGO Leadership Style on Constraint Responsiveness

Christiane Pagé, Margaret G. Hermann
Moynihan Institute of Global Affairs, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY, United States

The aim of this paper is to expand our understanding of transnational NGO leadership and governance by proposing for it a leadership-at-a-distance assessment method derived from political psychology. This approach explicitly incorporates leaders, leaders’ perceptions, and their leadership styles with leadership behavior in a backdrop of contextual constraints specific to third sector governance. To date, cases and small n studies have offered a limited way of considering civil society leaders. Not only has this run the risk of prescribing “one-best-way” of leadership and change agency, we still know little about the exercise of leadership and even less about its variability and resulting consequences. There remains a gap in leadership agency theory for civil society actors. The goal of our research is to offer a different lens on challenges and opportunity in third sector governance: we undertake linking leaders’ perceptions to political action through assessments of leaders’ responsiveness to constraints.

To address this concern, this article asks: How does transnational NGO leaders’ responsiveness to normative and institutional constraints influence organizational and third sector governance? We present a framework that links the effect of leader’s sensitivity to context on their leadership style to suggest how the latter can shape strategies and decision-making in transnational NGO governance. The question signals a move past “who” the NGO leaders are, and represents a baseline effort to assess how leadership matters in the decisions such NGOs make regarding the use of tactics, repertoires and methods to face constraints.

Political psychology scholarship has a long tradition that looks at the ingredients of leadership. Leaders and constituents work together in a particular context. Research tells us that constituents select different types of leaders in times of plenty as opposed to periods of recession, to lead revolutionary movements versus institutionalize change, and when developing a vision is critical in contrast to when maintaining stability is the name of the game. In effect, this approach to leadership has led to the development of something called the contingency theory of leadership (e.g., Fiedler, Chemers, and Mahar 1976; Fiedler and Garcia 1987; Winter 1987; Bass 1990; Hermann 2003). This theory emphasizes the importance of the “match” between what the leader is like and what the setting calls for.

Our analysis develops the aggregated personality profile of 152 transnational NGO leaders headquartered in the United States. The paper examines two politically relevant personality traits that help assess methods for dealing with constraints: leaders’ beliefs that they can actively control events, and their need for power.

1. The research was supported by National Science Foundation Grant No. SES-0527679--Transnational NGOs as Agents of Change: Toward Understanding Their Governance, Leadership, and Effectiveness and the Transnational NGO Initiative at the Moynihan Institute of Global Affairs, Syracuse University. The final datasets are derived from a stratified random sample of 152 transnational NGOs drawn from a population of 334 US-based international not-for-profits rated by Charity Navigator (www.charitynavigator.org) in 2004/2005. In-depth face-to-face interviews were conducted 2006/2008.

The findings embed transnational NGO governance research into the theoretical context of decision making that encompasses active, reactive, direct and indirect “methods” for dealing with governance constraints. In ascertaining these orientations toward constraints, we have used an assessment-at-a-distance method developed by the second author and available now in a software package called Profiler Plus (see www.socialscienceautomation.com). The technique is described in detail in Hermann (2005, 2008).

Of the 152 characterizations, we find that 87 or more than half of leaders in our sample are predisposed to work within the system and respect the constraints they encounter in governance (57%). In contrast, 65 are of leaders are motivated to challenge constraints related to governance, in one mode or another or both (43%). Of the latter grouping, we characterize 16 as “working-behind-the-scenes”, 20 as “head-on” challengers of constraints, while we see 29 “bifurcate” and challenge constraints both directly and indirectly as best fits the situation.
We develop a contingency or match theory of leadership for civil society so that we can better understand what is possible and when change is likely by keeping in mind that leadership involves not only leaders but also who they are working to lead and the nature of the constraint baring contexts in which the leadership is taking place. We find statistically significant differences in behavioral methods by sector intersect (environment, conflict resolution, human right, sustainable development, humanitarian relief), by size, by organizational efficiency (% spending to support programs), and by type of collaboration (within NGOs and across other institutional actors). We explore the lack of statistically significant relationship between other key structural variables like function (advocacy vs. service) and normative orientation (faith or secular world views). We also develop implications for the relationship between method for dealing with constraints and influence over NGOs’ systems of accountability.

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