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A Study of Rural Nonprofit Board Communication and Collaboration

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Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Angela-Janine Crawford

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2019

Abstract

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by

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Professional Administrative Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Public Administration

Walden University

August 2019

Abstract

This case study explored the perceptions, experiences, and significant internal communication and collaboration problem(s) faced by a rural nonprofit board of directors experiencing a growth transition. Specifically, this study addressed (a) how a rural nonprofit's board members perceived their communication and collaboration skills and practices, and (b) the training needed to improve board communication and collaboration policies and practices. Ten rural area study participants shared their experiences and made recommendations for board communication and collaboration training. Exploring the perceptions, understandings, and capacities of the rural nonprofit board members revealed how specific communication and collaboration policies and practices affected their organization's success. Using the conceptual framework of board governance, data were collected from participant interviews, which were then analyzed and coded using the eclectic coding method. Four themes related to the board's communication and collaboration practices emerged indicating a need for board restructuring and changes in members passion for and commitment to their mission, communication and collaboration skills, and training activities. This study provides information to the rural board members that may enable them to improve their communication and collaboration policies and practices and offers a plan of action to be taken. The findings of this study might bring about social change by adding to the understanding of approaches to improve rural nonprofit board governance effectiveness.

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Dedication

I dedicate this doctoral study to my parents, Sam and Peggy Curry, whose memory is etched in my DNA, who told me that I could do anything I put my mind to. I also acknowledge my beloved daughter, Anna Marple, my son Rashad Crawford, my two sisters, Rene' Curry and Sandra Curry, and my dear friend, Kathleen Young, for their steadfast encouragement and support. To my aunt, Alice Adele Taylor, who planted the seed in my mind of earning my doctoral degree decades before it bloomed into a conscious thought. And, to my PAS Committee Chair, Gary Kelsey, for his unending support and encouragement as we learned together. Thank you all.

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Section 1: Introduction to the Problem

Introduction

In this qualitative case study, I explored the perceptions, experiences, and the most significant problem(s) faced by a small, rural nonprofit board of directors related to board communication and collaboration. The organization studied is a rural nonprofit organization (NPO) formed in 2011 to address an urgent regional issue related to a lack of nutritional foods for vulnerable community residents in rural northeastern Washington state. As the NPO transitions from its formation stage of development, its board members currently face problems related to board communication and collaboration.

In this qualitative case study, I investigated the communication and collaboration challenges faced by the rural NPO's diverse board members. This exploration of the perceptions, understandings, and capacities of the rural NPO board revealed the unique issues of its rural culture and how specific policies and practices affect positively or hinder the organization's success (see Reitz, 2017).

My analysis of the rural NPO's study participants' interview responses shed light on the effectiveness the organization's communication and collaboration practices, which way produce potential positive social changes in the organization's ability to generate "creative energies and human and financial resources" (Snively & Tracy, 2000, p. 146). The analysis also indicated in which areas training would be effective in improving existing rural communication and collaboration practices.

Problem Statement

The main problem the rural NPO board confronts is a lack of cohesiveness caused by internal communication and collaboration challenges. In collaboration with concerned organizations outside the study region, the rural NPO works to serve and support the residents within its area by providing funding and support services to community volunteers. However, in this study I focused on the communication and collaboration issues among the organization's board members.

This analysis of the rural NPO's communication and collaboration practices sheds light on how effective the NPO's board of directors is in producing "creative energies and human and financial resources" (Snaveley & Tracy, 2000, p. 146) that can bring board members together as a cohesive body. The rural NPO's board, operating without an executive director or program manager, must ensure a solid foundation for success by adhering to effective communication and collaboration practices that allow the organization to accomplish its mission and maintain the trust of the communities it serves (Snaveley, & Tracy, 2002).

Organizational Relevance

The study findings add to the research on rural NPO board governing practices and effect the policies and practices as they relate to the rural NPO that lacks the resources available to more populated urban and metropolitan regions. The rural NPO must address the unique characteristics of the rural landscape and the diverse circumstances of its board before it can efficiently communicate and collaborate with stakeholders and the public. Members of the rural NPO board have a diversity of skills

and experiences with expertise in their respective fields. However, ineffective communication and collaboration efforts have led to confusion, inefficient decisions, and insufficient strategic planning for moving forward to accomplish the NPO's mission of addressing significant issues in rural communities. The small sample I used for this study does not lend itself to generalization but can act as a catalyst for further research.

Significance

Exploring the perceptions, understandings, and capacities of a rural nonprofit's board members revealed the unique issues associated with rural culture and the significance of specific board governance policies and best practices that affect positively or hinder the rural NPO's success (see Reitz, 2017). In this study, I identified the training needed to improve communication among board members in order to better facilitate their collaboration.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to explore and document the problem(s) and needs experienced by a rural NPO board of directors regarding internal communication and collaboration. My analysis of study data led me to create a plan for addressing those needs using adult learning-based training drawing on the participants' education, personal experiences, and skills. The rural NPO under study identified a county-wide issue and, to address the county's particular issue, partnered with local supporters and created a 501(c)(3) NPO in 2011. The NPO collaborates with 16 additional community partners to serve an at-risk population. However, to work effectively with community partners, the NPO must first improve its internal communication and collaboration practices.

Gaps in Organizational Knowledge

There are gaps in the scholarly literature related funding practices of NPO set in unique rural locations. However, Hardy Smith (2016) has noted that “Communication has a direct influence on your organization’s board member experience” (p. 2) and that the absence of good communication is the major cause of problems and frustration among board members and their performance. Laura Maurer (2016) conducted a study similar to mine using subjective evidence from face-to-face interviews. Maurer presented empirical evidence using email survey responses from 30 board members from 21 different nonprofit organizations from various fields focused on how “board members of small local nonprofit organizations perceive organizational effectiveness” (p. 20). However, there is no literature on the communication and collaboration practices of NPO board members facing the unique challenges embedded in rural areas.

Research Questions

RQ1: How do the board members of the rural organization perceive their communication and collaboration skills?

RQ2: Based on the perceptions of board members, what is the appropriate training content related to board member communication and collaboration?

RQ3: Based on the perceptions of board members, how can board training sessions be structured (i.e., scheduling, workshop sessions, retreat, hours of training) to address communication and collaboration development?

To address the gaps in existing literature regarding rural nonprofit board communication and collaboration, I have asked study participations these three questions.

Potential to Address Gap in Organizational Understanding

I developed this study to address the gap in a rural NPO's understanding for the need to improve board member communication and collaboration. The findings help clarify what a rural NPO must do while serving its community, and they can add to the research on nonprofit board communication and collaboration practices in rural communities, and affect the policies and practices imposed on the rural nonprofit that lacks the resources available to nonprofits in more populated urban and metropolitan regions.

Nature of the Administrative Study

In this case study, I explored rural nonprofit board communication and collaboration practices. The sources of data for the study were participant responses to qualitative semi-structured, open-ended interview questions designed to encourage the participants to describe their experiences and to reflect on the meaning of those experiences. The qualitative data were collected from transcribed interviews, using NVivo 12 software to identify themes in board member perceptions and understandings, indicating areas of effective and ineffective practices as they relate to the rural board members of the organization under study. I used a single case study approach to investigate the communication and collaborative characteristics of the organization's board using the responses of interview participants to collect qualitative data for analysis. The purpose of this study was to identify and improve the communication and collaboration practices of a rural NPO's board members to help them better accomplish their mission.

Significance

This study allows the rural board members to review their current communication and collaborations practices. The study also provides a plan for ensuring improvement in efficiency and effectiveness of communication and collaboration among themselves and with their stakeholders including community partners, affiliate organizations, business partners, beneficiaries of their services, donors and funding organizations, volunteers, and staff. Exploring the perceptions, understandings, and capacities of rural nonprofit board members revealed their communication about the unique issues of rural culture and how communication and collaboration practices effect positively the organization's success (Reitz, n.d.) and inform future studies. As researchers conduct more generalized studies of rural nonprofits, board policies and practices can be adjusted to address issues unique to rural regions.

Potential Contributions and Implications

The contributions of this study relate to the more efficient and effective functioning of a rural nonprofit board and may lead to the implementation of changes in how the rural board members communicate and collaborate with each other to encourage sustainable positive changes within their communities. The board members can use the study findings to improve not only rural board communication and collaboration for the organization under study but may also improve communication and collaboration with the organization's stakeholders and partners. As researchers conduct more generalized studies of rural nonprofit boards, wider contributions to the issues around rural board governance may result in adjustment to existing policies and practices, and

implementation of more lasting positive changes in rural areas of the United States. The positive changes in rural board governance may lead to improved and more effective board leadership and increased benefits to rural communities through human capacity and funding opportunities.

Summary

In Section 1, I documented and introduced a rural NPO experiencing problems in communication and collaboration among its board members, the nature and significance of the study, the potential contributions and implications, and limitations of the study. In Section 2, I will present existing scholarly literature that addresses rural NPO board communication and collaboration issues and add to that literature, and the broader context, around the unique problems rural NPO board members must address.

Section 2: Conceptual Approach and Background

Introduction

Many rural NPO boards members face organizational struggles with how to communicate and collaborate. Uncertainty and anxiety are common when an NPO board transitions from its formation stage into a more mature governing board and its members reflect on the need for improved communication and collaboration (Mathiasen, 1990).

To explore rural board member perspectives on communication and collaboration behaviors and issues they face within the organization, I interviewed 10 participants using the following semi-formal questions:

RQ1: How do the board members of small NPO perceive their communication and collaboration skills?

RQ2: Based on the perceptions of board members, what is the appropriate training content related to board member communication and collaboration?

RQ3: Based on the perceptions of board members, how can board training sessions be structured (i.e. scheduling, workshop sessions, retreat, hours of training) to address communication and collaboration development?

The purpose of this study was to explore and create a plan to improve the communication and collaboration practices and training of the study organization's rural board members to enable them to accomplish their mission. Later in this section, I will discuss the board's needs assessment, effective board communication, effective board collaboration, and my perspective as the student/researcher.

Concepts, Models, and Theories

The academic literature related to board of director communication and collaboration focuses on a board governance rationale that a board “accepts responsibility for helping to plan and execute the organization's work, for oversight of its finances, and, in general, for accountability for its organizational integrity” (Mathiasen, 1990, p. 6). This rationale is unconsciously geared toward nonprofit boards with adequate human capacity to carry out established board functions and practices, with little attention given to rural nonprofit board contexts in less populated regions.

The conceptual framework of board governance I used to inform this study was based on the model and best practices of nonprofit governance used for organizations in metropolitan areas of the United States. Basic board governance requires adherence to legal and ethical responsibilities, financial oversight, fundraising, strategic planning, succession planning, communication, and outreach while remaining focused on the organization’s mission. Board governance also requires the establishment of bylaws and policies by which nonprofits operate. Conflicts of interest, confidentiality, record retention and destruction, risk management, audits, executive compensation, media relations, and whistle-blower protections are also part of basic board governance (Herman, 2009).

However, the rural nonprofit under study is a young organization transitioning into adolescence, the age in which nonprofit boards typically experience uncertainty and trepidation in its governance practices. Mathiasen (1990) noted three stages of board development. The first stage or life-cycle of a board is organizing volunteers to lead or

control the organization. The second stage is transitioning into a governing board. The third stage is a board that is developing into an institution focused on funding raising. The life-cycle of a developing board further involves seven phases: infant, toddler, adolescent, prime, stable, aristocracy, and bureaucracy (Growing Up, 2006). During the growing up stages, the rural NPO under study is experiencing the transition into the adolescent stage in which “people begin to feel overwhelmed and the need for more organization” and there “may be internal conflicts between those who want continued unfettered growth and those who want to get organized” (Growing Up, 2006, p. 2).

Copley and Manktelow (2018) stated, “There has been insufficient attention in research design to systematically examining the influence of contextual factors on boards, or taking account of contextual differences in developing theory about boards (p. 19). From an organizational theory standpoint, Miller-Millesen (2003) examined “the theoretical assumptions that underpin a range of normative prescriptions about how a board ought to perform” (p. 521), and offered “a theory-based model of board behavior and a set of testable hypotheses for use in future empirical investigation of nonprofit board process and structure” (p. 522) focusing on understanding the behaviors of nonprofit boards. From an agency theory perspective, Fligstein and Freeland (1995) stressed the importance of separating ownership from control and used institutional theory for analyzing board behavior, and a resource dependence theory for regarding the ability of an organization to capture and maintain needed resources (as cited in Miller-Millesen, 2003). Each of the above theories focuses on a different set of activities and functions and requires a different skill set. While past theories and frameworks based on

governance possibilities or contingencies have their limitations and further research has been slow to develop (Cornforth 2012), Copley and Manktelo (2018) showed associations between internal and external contingencies associated “with different board behaviors and accountability practices” (Cornforth, 2012, pp. 19-20). Cornforth (2012) and Copley and Manktelow (2018) have agreed that the concept of nonprofit governance is too narrow, and does not attend to the “complex multi-level governance structures of many organizations” (Cornforth, 2012, p. 20), Van der Ploeg, Renting, Brunori, Knickel, Mannion, Marsden, et al. (2000). suggested that the development of rural agricultural practices in Europe be viewed as “as a multi-level process rooted in historical traditions” (p. 391).

The rural nonprofit segment struggles with the expectations of the nonprofit sector as a whole in urban and metropolitan areas because of rural traditions and practices (close-knit communities, topography, lack of technology in some areas, diminished human capacity, older population, etc.). Bradshaw (2009) offered a structural contingency approach to nonprofit governance that has some limitations; specifically, it cannot be scientifically or mathematically proven. Bradshaw (2009) also indicated that the advantage of using a structural contingency approach is in understanding that one-size does not fit all situations and the “models of governance must reflect organizational needs and environmental constraints” (p. 62). A contingency approach also helps to align “organizational effectiveness results from fitting characteristics of the organization, such as its structure, to contingencies that reflect the situation of the organization” (Bradshaw, 2009, p. 64).

Copley and Manktelow (2018) developed a contingency framework from previous literature “to re-analyze data from a national survey of the governance of nonprofit organizations in the USA” (p. 19) that will help nonprofit organizations, including rural NPOs, reflect on and align governance configurations with contingency management. However, they noted that contingency or change management is “missing from the literature” (p. 62).

Literature exists on the behavior and responsibilities of nonprofit organizations. However, no literature is available, related to communication and collaboration, on the small-town issues that can affect the functions of a rural nonprofit organization and how it addresses unresolved issues that can cause harm to it (Smalley, 2015).

As nonprofits go through their life-cycle changes, they experience changes in board functions and activities (Miller-Millesen, 2003). As the organization under study goes through its life-cycle change, it is important its board members develop strong communication and collaborative skills to successfully overcome issues unique to its rural communities. The theory supporting the structural contingency framework developed by Copley and Manktelow (2018) holds that an organization in alignment will succeed. The structural contingency framework may be appropriate for a rural nonprofit to consider during the organization’s life-cycle transition. In this study, I focused on improving communication (the dialogue of board members) and collaboration (how board members interact with each other), and aligning these processes to the rural nonprofit organization (in a non-metropolitan area with less than 5,000 inhabitants) (see Isserman, 2005).

Relevance to Public Organizations

Extensive literature and training resources are available on how to become a successful NPO board. The majority of related literature is focused on nonprofit boards in urban and metropolitan regions with adequate human capacity and resources to carry out board functions. Little attention is given to less populated region NPO boards or “grassroots organizations that employ few or no staff” (Copley & Manktelow, 2018, pp. 18-19) and problems vary with the organization’s board structure, procedures, rules and the responsibilities of their boards. Isserman (2005) defines the term rural, for purposes of research into public policy issues, as areas outside of the Core Based Statistical Areas (CBSA) used by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) to define metro/nonmetro areas of the country. Neuhoff and Dunckleman (2011) describe rural nonprofits as small but tough as they address issues unique to rural characteristics such as isolated location, population size, financial condition, and leadership capacity. Rural NPO boards struggle to achieve standard best practices that include reviewing mission statements annually, monitoring budgets, recruiting for skills that align with the needs of the organization, and collaborating with young professionals and leaders from diverse backgrounds for problem solving (Accomplishing the mission, 2017).

However, Gayle Northrop (2018) suggested that building a strong board goes beyond best practice “structures and activities that boards should consistently implement” (p. 56). As nonprofit boards transition through the various stages of development, Northrop (2018) indicated that examining both the board’s stage of development and best practices to determine which best practices would help it move forward regardless of the

length of time since it was founded. The key to forward movement is “an intentional strategic planning process and then using the new strategic plan” (p. 57). In addition to the new intentional strategic plan, Northrop (2018) prescribed creating a board development committee to help maintain good governance responsibilities by helping the board create and clarify the roles and responsibilities of board members, attend to board composition, facilitate member orientation and education and exits, and encourage the board development and support board member engagement. The board development committee is also to help board members assess their effectiveness and member succession (Northrop, 2018).

Existing Scholarship and Broader Context

Literature is missing on communication and collaboration among board members of rural NPOs that must deal with the unique characteristics and customs of rural regions. Hardy Smith (2016) pointed out the importance of good communication by organization leaders to their board of directors and that that communication can improve the board’s performance and success. While Smith (2016) focused only on organization leaders, the successful characteristics of good communication can be adopted by the board members themselves. For example, it is as important to listen to what someone is not saying as it is to ask questions to gain understanding with which to make informed decisions (Smith, 2016). Most boards receive information from the organization’s leadership, specifically the executive directors. Once board members receive that information, there must be a convergence of minds because “none of us is as smart as all of us” (O’Toole, Galbraith, & Lawler III, 2002, p. 4). O’Toole et al. (2004) provided an example of a corporation with

four co-equal leaders that has not employed a CEO since 1995 because they became a team, setting aside individual egos, and adopting “a shared set of guiding principles” (p. 5). O’Toole et al. (2002) admitted that the team concept of leadership has not always worked. However, O’Toole et al. (2002) also stated that when a corporation or organization faces challenges that require the skills not possessed by only one person, the communication and collaboration of a team can provide the needed skills needed to meet the tough challenges.

Current State of Practice

Snaveley and Tracy (2000) describe the state of practice or challenges the organization under study is experiencing. “Environmental factors present in rural areas suggest that collaboration may be difficult to accomplish. Clients are scattered over a large geographic area, they are hard to contact because of transportation problems, community financial resources are limited, staff salaries are low, and some rural populations resist service offerings” (p. 145). James Smalley (2015), in his dissertation on the Factors that Influence Nonprofit Board Member Behavior in Rural Minnesota, confirms the lack of available literature on the small-town issues that can affect the functions of a rural NPO and that unresolved small-town issues, or the lack of genuine dialogue, can cause harm to the organization. Also, life-cycle changes experienced by NPOs cause changes in how boards function and their activities (Miller-Millesen, 2003). As the rural NPO’s founders have retired from the board, and the organization goes through a life-cycle transition, it is crucial that its board members assess their current characteristics, experiences, and needs, and are trained to develop the effective

communication and collaboration skills needed to address and overcome issues unique to its rural communities.

Recommendations for Improvement

The first step in recommending improvements in communication and collaboration of rural nonprofit board members is to assess their characteristics, needs, and the skills needed to address and overcome issues unique to its rural communities (Millesen & Carman, 2019). According to Millesen and Carman (2019), periodic self-assessment, while not a common practice of nonprofit boards, can help “determine how to strengthen their performance” (p. 74).

Nonprofit Board Needs Assessment

In assessing the needs of board members, the cultivation of openness and the shared responsibility and authority must be examined as well as the need for clear communication (Millesen & Carman, 2019). O'Toole et al. (2002) speak of a board working as a team. Millesen and Carman (2019) struggled with the lack of literature addressing practices focused on board self-assessment which led them to make certain assumptions, one of which is a board's intention to improve performance according to best practices and to strengthen the organization's work. In reviewing the findings of their research, Millesen and Carman (2019) made note that board members “wanted to be more skilled at communicating what they know in their hearts to be true” (p. 89) and to learn more about their fellow board members as people, not just their roles on the board. This assumption relates to the understanding of Taylor, Chait, and Holland (1996) of creating “a more comfortable environment for trustees to speak freely” (p. 9).

An instrument used to assess good board governance includes communication styles regarding board culture and board responsibilities (Gill, Flynn, & Reissing, 2005). Duffy, Gordon, Whelan, Cole-Kelly and Frankel (2004) discuss the “methods and tools used by educators, evaluators, and researchers in the field of physician–patient” (p. 495) they used to assess competence in communication and interpersonal skills in the context of physician-patient relationships. Duffy et al. (2004) indicate that “interpersonal skills are inherently relational and process oriented” (p. 495) and “effect communication has on another person” (p. 495). According to O'Toole et al. (2002), “The success of any co-leader approach very much depends on the relationship between the two individuals and how it is received by the others in the organization” (p. 30).

In assessing the collaboration efforts of rural nonprofit organizations, Snavelly and Tracy (2000) paint a picture of the challenges of collaboration efforts between organizations that can also apply to board members of rural organizations.

Environmental factors present in rural areas suggest that collaboration may be difficult to accomplish. Clients are scattered over a large geographic area, they are hard to contact because of transportation problems, community financial resources are limited, staff salaries are low, and some rural populations resist service offerings (p. 145).

Snavelly and Tracy (2000) also indicate that only one-third of rural nonprofits have strategies for assessing their collaboration activities. Gill et al. (2005) used a self-assessment checklist to determine the effectiveness of board programs. The results of this self-assessment indicate 17% of nonprofits assess or monitor programs and not

individual activities. However, Pamela Bacon (2008) discusses how we informally assesses collaboration efforts daily often without knowing we do. For example, we may overhear a conversation that triggers action on our part (worst-case scenario). Or, someone may ask you a question and you are led to explain a topic to others (best-case scenario). As a library media specialist, Bacon (2018) also uses data to assess the success of collaborations.

While considering board training options, an adult learning theory was examined. Merriam (2001) stated that “we have no single answer, no one theory or model of adult learning that explains all that we know about adult learners, the various contexts where learning takes place, and the process of learning itself” (p. 3). Stoica (2019), agrees with Merriam and explained that although there has been an explosion of adult learning programs over the past 20 years, “Presently, there is a lack of definitive research on adult learning and on effective adult educational models” (para, 1). However, Andragogy, a concept developed in Europe, is the “art and science of helping adults learn” (Merriam, 2001, p. 5; Loeng, 2018, p. 4). Furthermore, Malcolm Knowles made the concept of andragogy known in the United States (Loeng, 2018) which uses life experiences and skills to teach adults.

Effective Nonprofit Board Communication

While some existing literature provides information on the issues facing the rural NPO, none offers insight on how the rural NPO board succeeds or fails to communicate and collaborate to resolve the unique and complex challenges they face. In 1996, Taylor et al. stated that “Effective governance by the board of an NPO is a rare and unnatural

act” (p. 4) and that “Nonprofit boards are often little more than a collection of high-powered people engaged in low-level activities” (p.4). “Sometimes board members lack sufficient understanding of the work of the institution and avoid dealing with issues requiring specialized knowledge” (p. 4).

Some board members feel disloyal to their administration or chief operating officer (CEO) if they have opposing opinions on issues that mattered, “a reactive, uninformed board” (Taylor et al., 1996, p. 5) and can miss opportunities or know when something is not right within their organization. Rural NPO boards may still fall under the influence of high-powered people but they fall behind in their development and success due to limited knowledge of their industry or organization because of their isolation and lack of resources. Taylor et al. (1996) also indicated that governing boards are “among the least innovative, least flexible elements of many nonprofits” (p. 11) when it comes to changes in their practices. However, nonprofit boards must change to accomplish the “work that matters” (p.4) which requires changing the rules that govern the way the board functions. If the CEO of an NPO, for example, does not share information with board members, those board members may not agree on or accept problems that may arise or take responsibility for solving them which requires them to gain knowledge from multiple sources and for board members with expertise in their field to mentor others (Taylor et al., 1996). In general, most boards focus on policy and leave the implementation of those policies to management staff. However, Taylor et al. (1996) state that “important matters cannot be divided neatly into policy and

administration” (p. 7) and the board must also be involved in the implementation process, especially in a crisis.

Reitz (2017) encourages genuine dialogue in organizations, focusing on the relationship between leaders and followers, what Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) call the ‘between space’ dialogue, but does not mention leader-to-leader dialogue or the dialogue between nonprofit organization leaders or between board members. Taylor et al. (1996) remind us that “Small groups create a more comfortable environment for trustees to speak freely” (p. 9). “Instead, everyone must get involved. That will set off a chain reaction: the more trustees are involved in meaningful work, the more they will know; the more they know, the more they can contribute to the team; and the more they contribute to the team, the more likely the stars will form a constellation” (p 10). A nonprofit board without a CEO can discuss sensitive issues in executive sessions or when the board is functioning as We instead of leader-followers present open lines of communication among trustees (p. 11).

Hardy Smith (2016), in a blog published by BoardSource, discusses developing better board relations between executive management and the organization’s board by learning to be a better communicator. Becoming a better communicator is sound advice even when organizations have no executive management. For example, Taylor et al. (1996) discuss CEO and board members working together where the lines of policy makers and implementing policies are blurred as boards and CEOs work as a team. A small nonprofit that has no CEO, like the one under this study, can create the same team culture by using six actions Hardy Smith (2016) describes to improve communication:

1. Be upfront in your recruitment process about expectations. For example, don't assume board prospects understand and accept that raising funds is a board responsibility.
2. Consider that people process information in different ways. Some may like spread sheets and charts while others may prefer people stories and pictures. When sending out documents, offer a choice of electronic and hard copy versions. Cookie cutter communication is easier, and attempting to meet individual communication preferences is certainly demanding, but the results are worth the effort.
3. Schedule the release of information to allow enough time for digesting important material. Advance distribution shows consideration for board members' busy schedules.
4. Appreciate the value of in-person communication. Often email, printed materials, reports presented to a group, and even telephone calls don't have the same impact as a one-on-one conversation.
5. Be aware of physical and psychological influences when interacting with others. Your body language, tone of voice, and choice of words all matter. So, do theirs. When they answer, pay attention to their body language, tone of voice, and choice of words, all of which communicate what they are thinking. Understand that individual personality and generational differences directly relate to how your message is interpreted.

6. Remember the most important element of good communication is focused listening. Board members need to feel that their opinions are wanted and respected. Demonstrate that you're a good listener by being present in a conversation and actively acknowledging that the information you receive is understood and appreciated (pp. 4-5).

Larry Lauer (2005) also offers ways to improve board communication and, while his article on *How to Talk to Your Board* was written for nonprofit executives, his advice can apply to boards without an executive director. In the context of not having an executive director, board members themselves can cultivate a relationship with the board chair. Board members can also discuss their shared vision for the organization with board members, revisit the organization's mission, collaborate on and develop board policies, ensure board members receive accurate financial information, hold special events to get to know each other better, show appreciation to one another, and provide job descriptions with clear expectations for board member evaluations. And, "Executive sessions without the CEO present open lines of communication among trustees" (Taylor et al., 1996, p 10).

Gunderson (2011) discusses how required donations by foundations could support charitable organizations, but without a way to effectively communicate about and capture those donations, rural communities miss their opportunities to acquire funding to build for the future. In an article titled *Rural Philanthropy Building Dialogue from Within*, Swierzewski (2007) presents views on funding rural nonprofits and strategies those who fund NPOs can implement to offer support to the rural nonprofit sector. For example,

according to Swierzewski, donors are aware of the struggles rural nonprofits face that have to do with their “isolation from economic, political, and social importance of the American city” (p. 6). Because of the isolation of rural NPOs, some funders perceive the positive aspects of rural communities as safe and serene. “On average, in rural America, there is one nonprofit for every 50 square miles” (p. 11) and “serve much larger swaths of land than urban ones” and the “population is highly dispersed, and low-cost public transportation is rare” (p. 11). A board’s working structures and its focus on the rules to make the board work more efficiently, such as meeting frequency and board routines, can improve a boards effect on the communication and sharing of information in a group (Gabrielsson & Winlund, 2000). Which in turn helps the board members communicate more effectively in capturing needed funding.

Also, Taylor et al. (1996) state “To function as a team, board members need equal and timely access to information. Agendas, minutes, and background information from task force and committee meetings should be distributed to all trustees, and the board should use technology conference calls and E-mail – to increase timely communication” (p 10).

Wright and Millesen (2008) conducted a study to investigate the prevalence, conditions, and consequences of role ambiguity in nonprofit boards of directors and found that board members are often confused about their roles because of a lack of communication which affects board member performance. Confusion about board member roles “is likely to be a result of poorly communicated expectations among executive leadership and board members” (p. 324) and, with training and performance

feedback, which fosters open communication about shared expectations, role confusion and misunderstanding can be reduced or eliminated.

Also, Vladislav and Gabriela (2015) discuss distinctions between supply and demand determinants in the Czech Republic related to nonprofit sustainability, an important topic for the rural NPO under study. Moreover, Urquia-Grande, Perez-Estebanez, and Rautiainen (2017) discuss the effectiveness and accountability of small NPOs in the Democratic Republic of Congo, while Gose (2011) presents a brief overview of changes in foundation priorities that affect NPOs. Without effective communication on these crucial issues, nonprofit boards are destined to miss opportunities to succeed in their missions.

Effective Nonprofit Board Collaboration

Another word for collaboration is partnership. Taylor et al. (1996) suggest nonprofit boards adopt a new way of functioning they call ‘The New Work’ (p. 4). “Given the collaborative character of the new work, prospective trustees should understand that governance is a collective enterprise” (p. 10).

Historically, the practice of most large, well-established nonprofits has been to recruit stars as board members. The assumption was that a collection of exceptional individuals would equal an exceptional board. The new work of the board cannot be done by a powerful inner circle. Instead, everyone must get involved. That will set off a chain reaction: the more trustees are involved in meaningful work, the more they will know; the more they know, the more they

can contribute to the team; and the more they contribute to the team, the more likely the stars will form a constellation (p 10).

The more involved board members are in what Taylor et al. (1996) call “meaningful work” (p. 10) the more they can eventually contribute to the team. Maurer (2016) agrees that a “board’s accomplishment requires team work” (p. 24) and that board members have “a desire to be part of that team” (p. 24).

Block and Rosenberg (2002) discuss what they call “founder’s syndrome” (p. 353). In surveying focus groups in Denver, Colorado that included urban and rural NPOs to reflect the types and characteristics of nonprofits, Block and Rosenberg sought to understand the influence and privilege founders have over their board versus the influence of non-founders. Although the rural NPO founders are no longer active board members, a different investigation was required to learn if their influential power and privilege set a precedent for unhealthy collaboration practices for the growing organization’s non-founder board members (p. 354).

As researchers conduct more generalized studies of rural NPOs, and publish their literature, a broader contribution to the field of public administration related to rural NPOs may involve policy and practice adjustments that specifically address issues unique to rural regions. The potential implications affect the more efficient functioning of rural NPOs that lead to the implementation of more positive outcomes to major adverse problems in rural areas.

Rural Nonprofit Board Training

The concept of andragogy uses life experiences and skills to teach adults (Gitterman, 2004; Loeng, 2018; Merriam, 2001). With adult learners, it is necessary to connect the abstract concepts of learning with life experiences (Gitterman, 2004). According to Gitterman (2004), “connections are more likely to be actualized when students are engaged in an active, collaborative learning processes” (p. 96). Adult learning draws on the experiences and skills of the members and links those experiences to a learning concept or process (Gitterman, 2004; Merriam & Bierema, 2013, Chapter 1).

Historically, education in rural America was conducted in one-room, staff by the local community, with a flexible curriculum (Gitterman, 2004). The one-room learning environment (conference room), in contrast to a formal school setting, may be suitable for training communication and collaboration practices with the rural organization’s board members using a collaborative or interactive process (Gitterman, 2004). More important than the training setting is the creations of “a supportive and trusting psychological and social climate” (p. 103). Learning collaboration requires board members to participate with the instructor in the development the training content (Gitterman, 2004). One of the instructor’s tasks is “to help students find the connections between their field experiences, readings, and class discussions” (p. 104) while encouraging board members to learn from each other.

Organization Background and Context

It is vital that as a rural nonprofit goes through its developmental transitions board members ensure they have a solid foundation of communication and collaboration on which to move forward with its mission, and to keep on track of doing what is right by the communities it serves (Locke, Spirduso, & Silverman, 2014).

Organizational Context

In partnership with, and supported by local funders and donors, the 501(c)(3) works with local rural community partners to address an issue the organization was created to address that threatens vulnerable rural residents consisting of seniors and children. The organization currently has no executive director. The organization has been functioning since 2011 and is transitioning from the founder's stage into the governing or adolescent stage of development and requires restructuring to meet its needs as an organization and the needs of the communities it serves.

Definition of Organizational Terms

The term 'rural' may not be a term that readers fully understand. Isserman (2005) defines the term rural, for purposes of research into public policy issues, as areas outside of the Core Based Statistical Areas (CBSA) used by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) to define metro/nonmetro areas of a country. The USDA, in defining 'rural,' applies several definitions which describe the density of a population or the geographic location (USDA, n.d.). For this study, rural is defined as having a population ranging from 2,500 to 39,000 located in a country setting outside an urban metro area. Metro is a shortened version of the word metropolitan and is defined as

“noting, or characteristic of a metropolis or its inhabitants, especially in culture, sophistication, or in accepting and combining a wide variety of people, ideas, etc. of or relating to a large city, its surrounding suburbs, and other neighboring communities”(Dictionary.com. n.d.).

Communication defined by Comstock (2018) “is an exchange of information or the expression of ideas or feelings. Written and spoken words are fundamental to communication, but tone, gestures, and body language also are part of the message. Listening is a vital element, since without it no real exchange can take place” (para. 1). Comstock (2018) also states that “the process is far from perfect, as individual experiences, interpretations, and context affect each communication event” (para. 1).

Collaboration is “a relationship formed by individuals working together on a project or task. It combines a personal and professional connection with shared goals and emotional engagement” (Junyk, 2018, p. 1) and “takes creativity and the experience of groups of talented people with their combined knowledge and skills to achieve innovative solutions to problems” (p. 1). Limited resources require rural community-based organizations to be more creative and innovative in solving problems. Collaboration, along with assessment and strategizing, is needed when time and energy are insufficient for a task, and although it is difficult to accomplish, can be an informal, ongoing process of sharing knowledge (Cumberland, Kerrick, Choi, & Gosser, 2017).

Context Applicable to the Problem

James Smalley (2015), in his dissertation on the Factors that Influence Nonprofit Board Member Behavior in Rural Minnesota, confirms the lack of available literature on

the small-town issues that can affect the functions of a rural nonprofit organization and that unresolved small-town issues, or the lack of genuine dialogue, can cause harm to the organization. Also, life-cycle changes experienced by nonprofit organizations cause changes in how boards function and their activities (Miller-Millesen, 2003). As the rural nonprofit goes through its life-cycle change, it is important that its board members assess their characteristics, needs, and experiences, and are trained to develop the effective communication and collaboration skills needed to address and overcome issues unique to its rural communities.

Role of the DPA Student/Researcher

This single case study focused on one rural NPO board's communication and collaboration practices. From my perspective as a consultant to nonprofit organizations and the student/researcher conducting this study, I have no relationship with the rural nonprofit organization under study. However, as a senior adult and resident of one of the rural communities served by the organization, I am familiar with the organization's priority issue and the portion of the population affected. Moreover, motivation to see the organization succeed in its mission, and to determine if the organization's activities have the desired effect, pushed me to examine current and past literature on rural board governance. My search turned up little to no in-depth research directly addressing the specific struggles between rural nonprofit board members as they communicate and collaborate on issues unique to their rural area.

Summary

In Section 2, I documented the literature on the conceptual framework of board governance, life-cycle changes board experience, how good governance goes beyond the consistent activities, and recommendations for improving rural board communication and collaboration. While much of the literature is not specific to rural nonprofit boards, the material can be adopted and implemented by rural nonprofit board members in ways that can help improve their communication and collaboration practices that would help a rural governing board succeed at their mission. In Section 3, I present the case study research method and procedures used to collect and analyze study data.

Section 3: Data Collection and Analysis

Introduction

The problem facing the rural board I studied is its internal struggle with uncertainty and anxiety as it transitions from away from its infancy to become an effective and efficient governing board to stabilize an organization facing the unique challenges of its rural environment. The rural NPO board of directors faces internal communication and collaboration challenges associated with its members changing roles. The purpose of this study was to explore, identify, and offer recommendations for improving the communication and collaboration practices and appropriate training of rural nonprofit board members to help them fulfill their mission.

In partnership with community affiliate organizations, and supported by local funders and donors, the 501(c)(3) organization works with local community partners to address an identified issue that threatens vulnerable rural residents. It is vital that as the rural organization goes through its transition from its infancy into a more mature governing board, its members ensure they have a solid foundation of communication and collaboration on which to move forward with its mission and to keep on track of doing what is right by the communities it serves (see Herman & Renz, 2004; Price, 2017).

Practice-Focused Questions

The problem the rural board members face relates to their internal struggle with uncertainty and anxiety because of ineffective communication and collaboration as the board transitions from its infancy life-cycle stage to become a mature and stable governing board faced with the unique challenges of its rural environment. There are

gaps in scholarly literature dedicated to addressing nonprofit organization practices set in unique rural locations. No literature exists on communication and collaboration between small, rural nonprofit board members as they address the unique challenges embedded in rural areas.

Interview Questions

1. How well do you feel the organization board members communicate with each other?
2. How well do you feel the organization board members collaborate with each other?
3. If additional training were offered to improve or enhance communication skills, what would you want to see included in the training content?
4. If additional training were offered to improve or enhance collaboration skills, what would you want to see included in the training content?
5. If additional training were offered, what would you want to see included in the training content?
6. If additional training were offered, what type of training setting would you prefer?
7. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about the organization's communication and collaboration practices?

Alignment between Research Method and Research Questions

I collected interview data to address the study's research questions. I developed the questions to explore rural board member perspectives and needs regarding

communication and collaboration. Also, interview questions addressed their preferences for how additional training would be conducted.

Source of Evidence

Types and Sources of Data

I designed this study to record and transcribe, from interviews, qualitative data to understand individual board member perspectives related to nonprofit governance best practices. The issues I investigated included policies and practices for the organization board functions. Other issues for investigation included education of board members, the age of board members, involvement with nonprofit training, the board's ability to carry out required nonprofit government policies, its members' use of best practices, and the cohesiveness of board members. Furthermore, the level of commitment each board member has to the organization's vision and mission was observed to determine the success or failure the mission. The assumptions in qualitative research are that the sample size is small and is not random, and that inductive reasoning be used to analyze the study results.

Relationship of Evidence to Purpose

The purpose of this study is to identify and improve the communication and collaboration practices of a rural board members for accomplishing their mission. The evidence collected from the qualitative data through interviews revealed themes or patterns in board member perceptions of current communication and collaboration skills and practices.

Data Analysis

With university approval (IRB 12-26-18-0720815), I asked interview questions of 10 board members. I used their responses to identify themes and patterns to determine appropriate training content and process based on board member needs. The first step in the analysis consisted of carefully reviewing the transcripts of all participants and taking note of first impressions, then re-reading and manually coding individual transcripts to determine relevant information and patterns based on the study research questions. The next step was to upload transcribed interviews and researcher notes into NVivo 12 software, which I used to code and identify themes (Yakut Cayir & Saritas, 2017). The coded qualitative data were then analyzed to determine how the relevant data were connected. From the coded data, I used a summary of the results, without interpretation or subjective bias, to describe the themes and their connections to one another. By subjective bias, I mean “I looked for the warm and the cool spots, the emergence of positive and negative feelings, the experiences I wanted more of or wanted to avoid, and when I felt moved to act in roles beyond those necessary to fulfill my research needs” (Peshkin, 1988, p. 18). Analysis of the results concludes with intervention recommendations and summary remarks (see Section 5).

Published Outcomes and Research

Search engines used to find literature and outcomes related to rural board member communication and collaboration include academic databases, search engines, and browsers. The key search terms included rural, rural board governance, communication, collaboration, nonprofit board, board members, governance best practices, board

governance, and board assessments. The scope of the literature review spans the years the year 1990 to 2018 and included peer-reviewed articles, Internet sites, books (few), newspaper articles, and journals.

Evidence Generated for the Administrative Study

Participants

Ten board members agreed to be interviewed for the study. I selected participants using the following criteria: (a) each participant was to be invested in the success of the rural NPO, (b) all participants to have served on another rural nonprofit board for at least six months, and (c) all participants were to live and work in the rural area under study. Current board members include women and men ranging in estimated ages from the mid-30s to retirement age. No inducements were offered for participation.

Procedures

Before beginning this study, I obtained a written a letter of cooperation from the NPO's president to conduct my research, issued a written invitation to each potential participant, and obtained a signed consent form from each voluntary participating board member. This qualitative study of the communication and collaboration practices of the rural nonprofit board members included recorded 1-hour interviews. I also used journal entries to record supplementary information such as my impressions, participant reactions, and significant events. While scheduling interviews, each participant voiced their preference for a quiet setting free of distractions for an informal conversation, and where their confidential involvement in the study would be maintained.

Types and Sources of Data

Qualitative data were collected from individual board members regarding their perspectives related to communication and collaboration. The issues investigated included policies and practices for communication and collaboration. Other issues under investigation included education of board members, involvement with nonprofit training, the board's ability to carry out required nonprofit government policies, and the cohesiveness of board members. Furthermore, I observed the level of commitment each board member has to the organization's vision and mission, which determines the success or failure the mission. The assumptions in qualitative research are that the sample size is small and is not random, and that inductive reasoning be used to analyze the study results.

Measures

The significant method used to collect data was individual, personal interviews with ten board members. The credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of this qualitative case study were based on the stories told by the participants. However, the reader should bear in mind that the stories are subjective and the research design is the standard measurement of the data's trustworthiness.

Research Design

My use of a qualitative research method and single case study design was appropriate for gathering data on the phenomenon of communication and collaboration in a rural NPO (see Baxter & Jack, 2008). Framed by my 18 years of experiential knowledge as a member of small, rural NPOs, a resident of the community served, and a

nonprofit scholar-practitioner, this study addressed the perspectives, understandings, and experiences of participants.

I designed this study to record and transcribe interview conversations and analyze participant responses to interview questions to understand individual board member perspectives, and how they related to effective and efficient communication and collaboration best practices. The assumptions in this qualitative research study were that the sample size was small, was not random, did not lend itself to generalization, and that inductive reasoning be used to evaluate study outcome results.

Protections

The identities of individual participants in this study were not be shared. Details that might identify participants, such as the location of the study, also were not be shared. The researcher did not use participants' personal information for any purpose outside of this research project. Data are kept secure by assigning a number code to each participant and the key to the code in hard copy stored in a separate locked file cabinet, with all written data stored on a password protected hard drive, and all recorded data saved to an external hard drive accessible only to the researcher. No proper names of any participants, the NPO, or external stakeholders, who may be identified during the data collection process was utilized during the data analysis or writing process. Instead, all information was categorized and generalized to ensure anonymity for the protection of all parties. Data are kept for at least five (5) years, as required by study protocol. Also, the Interview Induction Statement (see Appendix) provided the following statement to further ensure participant privacy: I will not be identifying you, your nonprofit, or any

external parties you may reference by name during the study analysis or in my study results. This protection process was conducted to ensure no participant can be identify, nor the nonprofit, or any external parties in the written transcript, my data analysis, or the study results. Finally, participants have the right to stop the interview process at any time, for any reason.

Analysis and Synthesis

The research questions were answered by collecting qualitative data from board members and analyzing their perceptions of their skills and practices for themes or patterns that determined an appropriate plan for intervention. Reviewing the data from transcribed interviews revealed trending themes in board member perspectives. The first step in the analysis consisted of carefully reviewing the transcripts of all participants and taking note of first impressions, then re-reading and manually coding individual transcripts to determine relevant information and patterns based on the study research questions. The next step was to upload transcribed interviews and researcher notes into NVivo 12 software which was used to code and identify themes (Yakut Cayir & Saritas, 2017). The coded qualitative data was then analyzed to determine how the relevant data were connected. From the coded data, a summary of the results, without interpretation or subjective bias, was used to describe the themes and their connections to one another. By subjective bias, I mean “I looked for the warm and the cool spots, the emergence of positive and negative feelings, the experiences I wanted more of or wanted to avoid” (Peshkin, 1988, p. 18). Analysis of the results concludes with intervention recommendations and summary remarks (see Section 5).

Summary

The result of the study will be presented in a two-page summary report to the organization's board members, documenting the study outcomes and recommendations for action. The study recommendations may lead to the creation and implementation of one or more adult learning-based training sessions on board of director communication and collaboration.

In Section 3, I presented the case study research method used to conduct this study on a rural nonprofit board's communication and collaboration. In Section 4, I present a summary of the perspectives of rural board members who experience difficulty with communication and collaboration issues that cause confusion and frustration as the organization transitions from its infant or formation life-cycle stage to its adolescent or governing stage of development.

Section 4: Evaluation and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of rural nonprofit board members regarding their experiences and skills related to communication and collaboration while addressing issues unique to their rural area. The rural NPO board members under study were experiencing confusion and frustration as it transitions from its infancy life-cycle stage into its institutional governance or adolescent stage. Such confusion and frustration is often caused by issues related to communication and collaboration practices among board members. While literature is abundance on nonprofit boards, there is a lack of literature on rural nonprofits, their boards, and their practices. To gain knowledge on how rural nonprofit board members communicated and collaborated, I asked them six interview questions during scheduled, informal interviews. The first interview question related to their perceptions of their communication skills and practices. The second interview question was similar except it related to the perceptions of their collaboration skills and practices. The third and fourth interview questions focused on training needed to improve communication and collaboration skills and training session details. Interview question five related to training settings and logistics. With interview question six, I encouraged each participant share as much information as they felt comfortable providing that would assist in improving and enhancing their communication and collaboration practices.

Data Collection and Coding

Recorded interviews ranged in length from 15 to 60 minutes. I used two coding methods for data analysis. The first method used was eclectic coding, a hybrid of grammatical and exploratory coding methods using a hard copy for first and second coding cycles to identify patterns within the collected qualitative data that aligned with the study's research questions. For the second coding method, I used NVivo 12 software to categorize, recode, and rename passages of transcribed interview text and identify themes within the data.

Findings and Implications

In the following subsections I identify themes associated with each research question.

Research Question 1

RQ 1 was: How do the board members of the rural organization perceive their communication and collaboration skills? I used data from participant responses to Interview Questions 1 and 2 to address RQ1.

In the first interview question I asked, "How well do you feel the organization board members communicate with each other?" Seven participants responded that board members communicate "well" during board meetings, five participants indicated that communication can be improved and needs focus, four participants indicated that communication needs more structure and improved processes, and four participants expressed the need for a program manager or executive director. Four participants expressed a desire for more frequent communication, three participants stated

communication was difficult and indicated a disconnect, three participants indicated a need for a strategic plan, three participants stated that communication and collaboration work together (better communication, better collaboration), two participants indicated that, while they respect, support, and have honest communication, the communication is “not good.” One participant stated that communication is on-going/continual depending on board member’s responsibilities, one participant stated that communication is “top down,” one participant wanted a central information source, one participant expressed a desire for feedback on projects, and one participant stated “I don’t know.”

In the second interview question I asked, “How well do you feel the organization board members collaborate with each other?” Four participants indicated collaboration was good with annual event, two participants stated the need for a program manager, 2 two participants stated collaboration was difficult, two participants stated collaboration was tied with communication, one participant indicated a breakdown in collaboration, one participant stated orchestration is needed. One participant stated everybody needs to be involved, one participant stated there is no camaraderie, and one participant stated collaboration is not effective. One participant indicated a need for team building skills, one participant discussed time constraints, one participant stated geography makes collaboration difficult, one participant indicated collaboration only happens once a month at board meetings, and one participant stated “I don’t know.”

Research Questions 2

RQ 2: Based on the perceptions of board members, what is the appropriate training content related to board member communication and collaboration? I used data from participant responses to Interview Questions 3 and 4 to address RQ 2.

In the third interview question, I asked: “If additional training were offered to improve or enhance communication skills, what would you want to see included in the training content?” In the fourth interview question, I asked: “If additional training were offered to improve or enhance collaboration skills, what would you want to see included in the training content?”

No two participants indicated the same training content. Participant responses included statements that training would be helpful, there should always be training, a need for recruiting board members, training on what makes a good board, a need for formal orientation, and that training should be specific for those struggling. Other participants indicated a need for building a volunteer base, training in fund raising, a need to define board structure, written board procedures/documentation, training in positive thinking, training on team building/group functioning, and “I don’t know.”

Research Questions 3

RQ 3: Based on the perceptions of board members, how can board training sessions be structured (i.e. scheduling, workshop sessions, retreat, hours of training) to address communication and collaboration development? I used data from participant responses to Interview Questions 5 and 6 to address RQ 3. In the fifth interview question, I asked: “If additional training were offered, what length of time would be

appropriate for the session(s)?" Four participants suggested a four-hour training workshop, and three participants desired training time (undetermined length) before or after board meetings. Individual participants indicated two four-hour sessions, four two-hour sessions, a day-long session, and including training during monthly board meetings.

In the sixth interview question, I asked: "If additional training were offered, what type of setting would you prefer?" Four participants stated that workshops would be appropriate, and three participants suggested a retreat as an optional setting for training. Participants also indicated the frequency of training sessions. Four participants did not know, three suggested once per month, while individual participants suggested every two or three months, annually, and that training should be conducted throughout the year.

Summary Question 4

SQ 4: To obtain additional data not covered in previous interview questions, I asked a summary interview question: "Is there anything else you would like to tell me about the organization's communication and collaboration practices?" As I asked this question, I noticed that participants began to relax more and they openly discussed issues not addressed in their responses to previous interview questions. They discussed how well-intentioned board members were but voiced concern that they needed to work together as a team or stop altogether because of their frustration with the board's current disfunction. Participants stated that there are a lot of opportunities for the board to serve and they could set the standard for other rural boards if they would commit to doing what is necessary, stating that "It's about elbow grease," and that their biggest struggle is with sustainability and people energy.

Participants also shared that they collaborate well during monthly meetings and their annual fundraising event but do not connect with each other in between monthly meetings and would like to get to know other board members more personally.

Participants stated that “It is doable” but not orchestrated because they do not have an executive director to provide the board the information and service it needs.

I identified four major themes while analyzing and coding data from the rural NPO board member interviews. The first theme indicated that the governing board members have a passionate dedication to their mission. The board members believe in what they are doing to serve their communities and work to accomplish their mission.

The second theme indicated a lack of commitment by board members to complete the processes needed to establish a solid organizational foundation such as strategic planning, recruiting, and financial planning. While the board attempts to adhere to prescribed best practices of board governance, in the absence of administrative staff or a sufficient number of volunteers, the “high-powered” board members are reluctant to collaborate to complete the necessary “low-level activities” (Taylor et al., 1996, p. 4). The lack of administrative support has added to the frustration and confusion commonly found in NPOs transitioning to maturity (Miller-Millesen, 2003). The unresolved issues have also contributed to the frustration and confusion the board struggles with and delays its development. There is a consensus among board members that the organization needs an executive director or program manager to partner with the board to complete essential board processes and improve communication among board members because their efforts are “not being orchestrated” (P8).

The third theme I found in the data indicated a disconnect in communication. While seven board members agreed that board members communicate “well” during board meetings, three individuals stated communication is difficult, indicating a disconnect. For example, Internet and phone services are available to most of the board members but not to all of them. Email communication is limited in some rural areas as service providers do not find it cost effective to install the needed infrastructure, leaving rural residents to travel to the nearest town or a neighbor’s home to access to the Internet. Also, board members who use only cell phones instead of land phone lines find the mountainous terrain blocks their phone reception. Combined, the lack of email and phone service make it difficult to communicate with specific individuals outside of the monthly scheduled meetings. Also, four board members reported that collaboration was good with the organization’s annual event. However, as with limits to communication, collaboration on the annual event becomes more difficult for the board members.

Also, the amount of time required to travel to and from monthly board meetings through the mountainous terrain of the region, particularly during snowy winter months, presents a problem for some members. While traveling is an aspect of attending all board meeting, there is no public transportation available in the rural communities the board serves, and driving time can exceed 3 hours, depending on the weather, to be present at a 2-hour meeting. And, while the board exhibits passion for its mission and is motivated to continue serving its rural residents, the decision to drive to board meetings, when travel may be hazardous, is left to individual members, further limiting time dedicated to face-to-face communication and collaboration efforts.

The more knowledgeable and experienced board members interviewed in the study are aware of the importance of continual communication and agree that it can be accomplished. However, time is not allocated to address essential unresolved issues during monthly board meetings.

The fourth theme I found in this study concerns the need for training. Nine of 10 board members recognized the need for training and shared their specific concerns. The consensus of participants regarding how training should be accomplished was that training sessions should be in form of workshops and the training time should either be allotted during the monthly 2-hour board meetings or added at the end of the meeting.

Recommendations

The following recommendations for intervention to relieve some of the confusion and frustration experienced by the rural nonprofit board address the four coded themes.

Theme 1: A passion for the organization's mission. The organization's board members have a passionate dedication to the organization's mission and continue to work diligently to serve the residents in the communities they serve. However, passion can diminish when they continually performing process-driven tasks which can cause board "members to doubt their effectiveness and wonder if they have any real influence" (Taylor et al., 1996, p. 4). To avoid the loss of passion, board members can focus on issues that are crucial to the organization's success, establish timetables for results, establish measures for success, and become more involved with their constituencies (Taylor et al., 1996).

Fred Shaffer (2014) states that nonprofit board “Officers can build on their training foundation through regular communication and mentoring” (p. 40). Unpaid volunteers prioritize their time between professional jobs, serving their communities, and families to serve on nonprofit boards and have little time to learn about how a board operates and their board responsibilities. As new board members, participating in a “well-designed board orientation program can jump-start the learning process” (p. 40) and can receive a manual of board operations describing policies, procedures, expectations, and for training purposes.

Theme 2: Commitment to the mission and dedicate time to do what is necessary to establish a firm foundation on which to operate for the organization to succeed in accomplishing its mission and become a working board. Four of the study’s more experienced participants agree that hiring an executive director or program manager is necessary for improving effective communication and collaboration between board of directors. However, the organization’s funding is limited to hiring an executive director in a part-time position which may not be sufficient to carry out the responsibilities of the position. Santora, Sarros, and Esposito (2010), in a study of small to medium NPOs, found that these organizations do not

- have adequate finances to support leadership development activities
- have a human resource department to coordinate leadership development initiatives
- have a formal strategic plan that includes leadership development initiatives
- often provide upward mobility for employees

- groom insiders for future leadership roles
- provide leadership development through a competency-based approach (p. 18)

The above characteristics also apply to rural NPOs. And, in the absence of an executive director, the rural organization's board should consider becoming a working board to establish a solid foundation on which to build success. "The term "working board" is an informal term that has emerged to describe a governance setting where board members perform not only their fiduciary and strategic duties, but also partner with staff to fulfill management and technical functions" (BoardSource, 2013, p. 2).

According to BoardSource (2013), "the working board is not a less sophisticated approach to governance structure. Rather, a working board requires a more thoughtfully constructed structure that relies upon diligent consistency in its implementation" (p. 2) which can "cultivate a culture of learning, strategic planning, active engagement, and staff partnerships" (p. 2) and better prepare them for growth or crisis. A restructuring of the board can harness "the collective efforts of accomplished individuals" (Taylor et al., 1996), and utilize their experiences and skills more effectively and establish training situations for less experienced members.

Theme 3: Disconnect in communication and collaboration. The small size of the rural nonprofit board lends itself to "shorter and more focused discussions" and "faster and better decision-making" (Price, 2017, p. 2). However, small board members tend to volunteer for more board and event activities in the absence of enough volunteers to do the work, and often feel "overworked and overburdened and believe these activities take too much time away from family and paid work" (p. 2). Moreover, nonprofit board

members are “often left feeling discouraged and underused” (Taylor et al., 1996, p. 4). Wright and Millesen (2008) indicate that “irregular and limited interaction” (p. 323) can cause ineffective communication. Participants in this study have shared that the majority of their communication takes place just before monthly meetings. The disconnect in communication can be resolved with more frequent member communication between monthly board meetings on relevant issues related to board functions, activities, and training.

Theme 4: Use of the experiences and skills of board members in adult learning-based sessions for Board training. Before training begins, an assessment of current board member’s skills should be conducted. Wang and Ashcraft (2012) stated that the assessment should cover board member “working experiences, tight schedules, and learning styles” (p. 122) to design the appropriate training “curricula and the format” (p. 122) based on board member competencies associated with their roles. Nonprofit professionals are expected to have or learn “a broader range of skills and abilities because they are required to handle more responsibilities and challenging tasks on a daily basis” (p.124) paying specific attention to input from stakeholders. With the above characteristics in mind, it is important to structure communication and collaboration around not only the legal requirements but also the member’s needs, the board’s needs, and the needs of the organization and board member scheduling preferences (Renz, 2007).

The potential positive social change may be in the organization’s ability to increase member energy, creativity, and funding to more effectively serve their affiliates.

Strength and Limitations of the Project

The strength of this study is its contribution to literature on the rural nonprofit board. However, the limitations of this study consist of it being a single case study with a small sampling of participants not sufficient for generalization throughout the nonprofit sector. While there was a small number of participants involved in this study, the material contained in it may be useful to other rural NPO boards. The qualitative nature of the study is subjective and not supported by quantitative data. This study may be used as the basis for future research into rural board practices and policies.

In Section 4, I presented the study findings and uncovered four themes from the responses of the study participants. Also, a recommended strategy for addressing communication and collaboration issues using adult learning-based training was described. In Section 5, I present how the results of the study will be disseminated to the rural nonprofit organization under study.

Section 5: Dissemination Plan

I will present the result of the study in a two-page summary report to the organization's board members, documenting the study outcomes and recommendations for action. The study recommendations may lead to the creation and implementation of one or more adult learning-based training sessions on board of director communication and collaboration. I will meet with the board members after they have reviewed the summary to answer any questions they may have about the study.

The audience for this study would include rural nonprofit board members and their organization leadership, scholar practitioners, funding institutions, nonprofit advocates, and potential rural nonprofit organization volunteers. The appropriate situations for the product of this study to be shared could be in training sessions, workshops, conferences, in academic settings, and as research reference material.

Summary

As an inexperienced organization, the rural nonprofit I examined in this study is going through a growth transition that, according to James Smalley (2015), causes changes in how the board functions and a change in its activities. Also, Taylor et al. (1996) shared that it is unnatural for a nonprofit to operate effectively as a governing body. However, many of the study participants are frustrated by the lack of guidelines, such as job descriptions, and are ready for change in the way they function. The recommendations in Chapter 4, if implemented, may help the rural organization's board members maintain their passion for the organization's mission, harness and utilize the experiences and skills of more accomplished board members, and communicate and

collaborate more effectively and efficiently. Participants have shared their desire for training on board functions and responsibilities. Building a firm foundation using the andragogy learning concepts to support the organization and its board members may give them confidence in their roles and help propel them forward toward fulfilling their organization's mission.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol

Interview Introductory Statement

Good (morning/afternoon/evening). Thank you for agreeing to take part in this interview for my research study of rural nonprofit board communication and collaboration practices. There is a total of seven (7) questions and I anticipate the entire interview will take approximately 60 minutes or less. Throughout the interview, if you become confused or do not understand a question as phrased, please feel free to stop and seek clarification from me.

Additionally, I will be recording the interview using a digital voice recorder to ensure I can remain engaged with you throughout the interview and later to transcribe your responses completely and accurately into text. You will receive a copy of the interview transcript from me no later than two (2) weeks after we conclude the interview process, to allow you the opportunity to review, edit and/or clarify your responses from today's interview. It is requested that you return any comments, edits, or concerns you may have within two (2) weeks to ensure the ongoing success of the research study.

I also want to remind you that I will not be identifying you, your nonprofit, or any external parties you may reference by name during the study analysis or in my study results. This is being done to ensure no one can identify you, your nonprofit, or any external parties you may name upon reviewing the written transcript, my data analysis, or the study results.

Finally, as a reminder, you have the right to stop the interview process at any time, for any reason.

Do you have any questions?

Are you ready to begin the interview?

PAS Interview Questions

Research Question 1:

How do the board members of the rural [REDACTED] perceive their communication and collaboration skills?

Interview Questions:

1. How well do you feel the [REDACTED] board members communicate with each other?
2. How well do you feel the [REDACTED] board members collaborate with each other?

Research Question 2:

Based on the perceptions of board members, what is the appropriate training content related to board member communication and collaboration?

Interview Questions:

3. If additional training were offered to improve or enhance communication skills, what would you want to see included in the training content?
4. If additional training were offered to improve or enhance collaboration skills, what would you want to see included in the training content?

Research Question 3:

Based on the perceptions of board members, how can board training sessions be structured (i.e. scheduling, workshop sessions, retreat, hours of training) to address communication and collaboration development?

Interview Questions:

5. If additional training were offered, what length of time would be appropriate for the session(s)?
6. If additional training were offered, what type of setting would you prefer?

Summary Question 4:

7. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about the [REDACTED] communication and collaboration practices?