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# Continuous Improvement Strategies for Nonprofit Organizations

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# Walden University

College of Management and Technology

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Kieran Nawaz Mohammed

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2017

Abstract

Continuous Improvement Strategies for Nonprofit Organizations

by

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MBA, American Intercontinental University, 2010

BBA, American Intercontinental University, 2008

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

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## Abstract

Nonprofit organization leaders face increased performance and sustainability challenges due to reduced funding. Approximately 72% of nonprofit revenues required for the sustainability of nonprofit organizations come from program services, which are threatened by ineffective improvement strategies and reduced program funding. Using the conceptual framework of total quality management, the purpose of this multicase study was to explore strategies that nonprofit leaders use to implement successful continuous improvement programs to increase revenue. The population for this study was leaders of nonprofit organizations in Delaware. Participants were purposefully selected for their successful experience in implementing continuous improvement strategies in nonprofit organizations. Data were collected via semistructured face-to-face interviews from 4 nonprofit organization leaders and review of publicly accessible, online organizational documents related to the implementation of continuous improvement programs. Data were analyzed using methodological triangulation through inductive coding of phrases and words. Three themes emerged from this study: leadership strategies for holistic focus on process improvement, leadership focus on organizational strategy, and specific focus on functions of leadership. Nonprofit leaders should embrace continuous improvement applications traditionally applied in for-profit sectors. Nonprofit leaders could apply continuous improvement strategies to enhance performance and boost revenue. Implications for positive social change include developing sustainability and longevity in nonprofit organizations to help nonprofit leaders address larger problems, such as homelessness, disease, lack of cultural acceptance, and environmental sustainability.

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## Dedication

This is a reminder that nothing is impossible through God, Almighty. I dedicate this to my grandparents, mother, Zaulikha; my wife, Anham; my daughter, Eshal; and my sister, Sascha.

## Acknowledgments

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## Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Nonprofit organizations are significant contributors to the American economy and one of the significant sources of employment across the United States (National Council of Nonprofits, 2016). The changing environment makes daily operations for nonprofit entities increasingly difficult with challenges associated with competition from both the profit and nonprofit sectors and more rigorous regulations (Dobrai & Farkas, 2016). Management experts advise organizational leaders that their strategy has to be about constantly adapting to change in an ever-changing landscape (Arik, Clark, & Raffo, 2016). Nonprofits have to adjust to increased competition and a continuing demand for more accountability (Arik et al., 2016). Most nonprofit leaders report that raising money continues to be their greatest challenge, especially when factoring the increasing needs in communities (Chandler, 2015). Limited research exists on the continuous improvement strategies employed by nonprofit organizations. The purpose of this research study was to explore continuous improvement strategies that nonprofit organizations implement that may promote the reduction of costs and the generation of revenue.

### **Background of the Problem**

Increasing pressure on nonprofit organizations and reduced funding requires implementing performance strategies through improvement approaches to ensure continued sustainability (Al-Tabbaa, Gadd, & Ankrah, 2013). Governments are also increasingly requiring funders to ensure that the recipients of their financial support (i.e., nonprofit organizations) have the organizational capacity to deliver services effectively (Al-Tabbaa et al., 2013). A growing need exists for operations management models that

contribute to the continuous improvement of nonprofit organization processes (Drohomeretski, Gouvea da Costa, Pinheiro de Lima, & Garbuio, 2013).

Continuous improvement is an important managerial strategy for nonprofit organizations to develop competitive capacities to cope with turbulence and uncertainties of external environments (Oprime, Glauco, & Marcio, 2012). Business improvement practices correlate positively with competitive advantage (Jaca, Viles, Mateo, & Santos, 2012). A study on continuous improvement in nonprofit organizations is relevant because small nonprofit businesses must continuously improve to remain competitive; however, there is a substantial failure rate among nonprofit business organizations. Sustainability of continuous improvement is always an important and most difficult practice in organizations (Ali, Islam, & Lim, 2013).

### **Problem Statement**

Several factors threaten the survival of nonprofit organizations, including the lack of consistent government funding, decline in private donations, and growth in competition from the nonprofit and profit sectors (Al-Tabbaa et al., 2013). Almost 50% of nonprofits with government contracts or grants reported a decline in the funds received from those contracts or grants during the 2009-2014 period (Chandler, 2014). The general business problem is that some leaders of nonprofit organizations are experiencing a reduction in the funds they receive to operate. The specific business problem is that some leaders of nonprofit organizations lack strategies to implement successful continuous improvement programs to increase revenue.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies some leaders of nonprofit organizations use to implement successful continuous improvement programs to increase revenue. The target population consisted of leaders of nonprofit organizations possessing over 5 years of demonstrated successful experience in implementing continuous improvement programs to increase revenue located in Delaware. The implication for positive social change is that leaders of nonprofit organizations could use the findings from this study to increase their nonprofit organizations' longevity, service, employment, and benefits provided to communities.

### **Nature of the Study**

Researchers categorize research methodologies into three categories: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed (Venkatesh, Brown, & Bala, 2013). Researchers use the mixed-method to develop novel theoretical perspectives by combining the strengths of quantitative and qualitative methods (Venkatesh, Brown, & Sullivan, 2016). I did not select the mixed-method because that research methodology involves the collection of statistical and numerical data (Bailey, 2016), which was not the focus of my research. Researchers use quantitative methodology when generating numerical measures to compare, rank, and select data to support the decision-making processes (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015). Researchers use the quantitative method to examine relationships or differences among variables (Bailey, 2016). I did not select the quantitative method, which researchers use to generate numerical measures to compare, rank, and select data

to support decision-making processes. The purpose of this study was not to examine relationships or differences among variables.

Researchers use qualitative research methodology to explore some aspects of phenomena and use words rather than numbers as data for analyses (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015). Researchers use qualitative research to gain a more in-depth understanding of attitudes, behaviors, and motivation (Barnham, 2015). Because I was interested in gaining a more in-depth understanding of the strategies some leaders of nonprofit organizations use to implement successful continuous improvement programs, I selected qualitative research methodology for this study.

The five main qualitative research designs are grounded theory, ethnography, phenomenology, narrative research, and case study (Gibson, 2010). Grounded theory reflects, as the name suggests, theory grounded in the words and actions of those individuals under study (Goulding, 2005) and focuses on empirical analysis to support theory (Kemp, 2017). My research study had no focus on empirical analyses to support theory; consequently, the grounded theory research approach was not suitable for this study. The focus of an ethnographical study is a group that shares a common culture, but not necessarily by cultural heritage (Kruth, 2015). In this study, my focus was not on culture constructs or behaviors and experiences of its members; consequently, I did not select the ethnographic design. Researchers use a phenomenological design to understand the essence of an experience (Kruth, 2015). I did not select a phenomenological design because I did not seek to understand the essence of participants' experiencing a phenomenon. The focus of narrative research is storytelling, involving the identification

of significant events and placing them in time-constrained order (Kruth, 2015). Because my focus was not on exploring the meanings of participants' stories, I did not select the narrative research design.

A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are vague (Yin, 2014). Researchers using the case study research design collect data impartially from real-life scenarios and ask questions related to *how*, *why*, and *what* in nature (Yin, 2014). Based on Yin's (2014) description of the case study design, I concluded that the case study design was most suitable for exploring the strategies some leaders of nonprofit organizations use to implement successful continuous improvement programs.

### **Research Question**

What strategies do some leaders of nonprofit organizations use to implement successful continuous improvement programs to increase revenue?

### **Interview Questions**

I developed the following interview questions to address the overarching research question:

1. What strategies have proven successful in the implementation of continuous improvement programs to increase revenue in your organization?
2. How do you assess the success of the strategies you have used to implement successful continuous improvement programs to increase revenue in your organization?

3. How does the Board of Directors promote policies and values that align with continuous improvement initiatives to increase revenue?
4. How are continuous improvement strategies for increasing revenue effectively communicated throughout the organizational ranks and among stakeholders?
5. What are some specific examples of strategies you used to implement successful continuous improvement programs to increase revenue in your organization?
6. Which strategies that you used to implement continuous improvement programs to increase revenue in your organization were the least effective?
7. What role do leaders play in the implementation of successful continuous improvement programs to increase revenue in your organization?
8. What are some of the benefits of successful strategies you used to implement continuous improvement programs to increase revenue in your organization?
9. What do you think it is important for you to say that I have not asked you regarding strategies used to implement successful continuous improvement programs to increase revenue in your organization?

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this study is total quality management (TQM) because its focus is on continuous improvement for improving customer satisfaction and reducing costs of poor quality. TQM is an integrated management philosophy for continuously improving the performance of products, processes, and services to achieve and surpass customer expectations (Singh & Singh, 2013). Cwiklicki (2016) claimed that

the experts in TQM are Crosby (1979), Deming (1982), and Juran (1995) because they influenced the concept of TQM. These pioneers contributed to quality improvement efforts with a profound impact on managers and organizations around the world (Zairi, 2013). According to Cwiklicki (2016), the TQM concept did not appear until the second half of the 1980s, replacing total quality (TQ) and quality management (QM). The management concept of TQM emerged among American companies in the early 1980s and stressed customer focus, continuous improvement, structured problem-solving processes, and employee empowerment (Kennedy & Fiss, 2009), and reducing the cost of poor quality. Deming (1986) defined continuous improvement as removing defects and continuously improving product and service quality.

There is increasing pressure on nonprofit organizations to achieve best practices in performance through continuous improvements to ensure continued sustainability (Al-Tabbaa et al., 2013). Within nonprofits organizations, continuous quality improvements consist of all aspects of the organization and not just a focus on the provided goods or services (Al-Tabbaa et al., 2013). I used TQM as the conceptual framework for this study, focusing on strategies some leaders of nonprofit organizations use to implement successful continuous improvement programs. According to Ochieng, Muturi, and Njihia (2015), quality management models, such as TQM, and concepts deriving from TQM, such as ISO 9001, can simultaneously reduce waste, reduce cost, improve quality of product or service, and increase revenue in organizations.

## Operational Definitions

*Board of directors:* Board of directors is the governance of a nonprofit organization responsible for the business process, compliance with federal, state laws and organization by-laws, and alignment to organization mission (Olinske & Hellman, 2017).

*Business process management (BPM):* BPM is a strategy that promotes a process-centric organization, which focuses on customer satisfaction. The central function of the BPM is to manage and improve processes (Nadarajah & Kadir, 2014).

*Business process reengineering (BPR):* BPR is a radical improvement process that incorporates information technology (Khoshlafz & Hekmati, 2016).

*Enterprise resource planning (ERP):* ERP systems are comprehensive software packages that support organizational operations through the integration of information (Miller, 2017).

*Lean:* Lean means using value stream mapping, involvement of people, continuous improvement, and removal of waste (Assarlind, Gremyr, & Backman, 2013). Lean implementation focuses on value by understanding customer needs, analyzing the current process and establishing the value stream, creating a pull system, and then continuously improving (Womack & Jones & Jones, 2003).

*Lean Six Sigma:* Lean Six Sigma is a rapid improvement strategy that uses customer focus processes to reduce cost, develop speed, improve quality (George, 2003) and thereafter sustain the efforts through statistical process improvement (Dell'Aquila, 2017).

*Lean thinking:* Lean thinking is the continuous improvement mentality necessary to promote direct services to clients in the nonprofit sector by doing more, as an organization, to boost performance (Pittman, 2012).

*Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award (MBNQA):* In 1987, the U.S. Congress established the MBNQA through the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) to promote continuous improvement in organizations (Peng & Prybutok, 2014).

*Resource based view (RBV):* RBV is a strategic management theory that researchers have used to analyze firm resources, capacity, and routines, which are fundamental to firm operations and competitive advantage (Akaeze, 2016).

*Six Sigma:* Six Sigma is a process-improvement methodology that allows individuals to use statistical analysis to improve products and services. Six Sigma focuses on improving defects in a product or service. Define, measure, analyze, improve, and control are the phases of Six Sigma (Dell'Aquila, 2017).

*Total quality management (TQM):* TQM is an integrated management philosophy for continuously improving the performance of products, processes, and services to achieve and surpass customer expectations (Singh & Singh, 2013).

### **Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations**

Assumptions are specific beliefs related to the study that a researcher believes to be true or valid for the purpose of the study (Akaeze, 2016). Limitations are those aspects of a study that a researcher cannot control (Akaeze, 2016). Delimitations refer to the scope and boundaries of a study, as set by a researcher (Akaeze, 2016).

**Assumptions**

I selected nonprofit leaders in executive and board of director leadership roles. I assumed that interviewees were the best-selected individuals in their organization to participate in the study. I asked nine interview questions to four interviewees each from separate entities and assumed that interviewees provided answers that were true and accurate. I assumed that the use of the concept of continuous improvement strategies was universal across industries, cultures, and organizations. During the document analysis, I had to make assumptions and interpretations based on document content. I assumed that document content was accurate.

**Limitations**

A limitation of this study was that only five leaders of nonprofit organizations agreed to participate in this study. Conducting a study at only a few organizations prevents the application of findings across the nonprofit sector. Additionally, one leader chose not to participate in the study. The leader did not show up for the scheduled interview and did not return my calls or emails. The 60-minute time limit for interviews was another limitation of the study. Organizational policy for release of company information limited my access to online data only. The bias of the interviewees presented limitations on the study. The interpretations of continuous improvement varied from nonprofit leader participants, which posed a limitation to the study.

**Delimitations**

In this study, I conducted in-depth, face-to-face interviews with only four leaders of nonprofit organizations in Delaware. I interviewed only selected participants that met

the eligibility criteria. The leaders of these nonprofit organizations had to have had successful experience implementing continuous improvement programs. Other delimitations included the geographical area, the number of participants in the interview process, and the length of time for each interview.

### **Significance of the Study**

Nonprofit organizations play a critical role in society and in economic development internationally (Ritchie, Brantley, Pattie, Swanson, & Logsdon, 2015). U.S. government laws have shifted a heavier burden to nonprofits and, as a result, have endangered the work that nonprofit organizations do in communities (National Council of Nonprofits, 2013). In the following subsections, I focus on this study's potential contributions to business practice and implications for effecting beneficial social change.

### **Contribution to Business Practice**

In this study, I explored strategies some leaders of nonprofit organizations use to implement successful continuous improvement programs. These continuous improvement programs can contribute to improved business practice because many individuals, including those working for the federal and state governments, have encouraged nonprofit organizations to embrace innovation as a central organizing principle to accomplish their mission and to ensure a sustainable future. Leaders of nonprofit organizations are facing difficulties in achieving these goals (Dover & Lawrence, 2012). While demand for nonprofit services has increased significantly, the reduction of resources threatens the longevity and sustainability of nonprofit organizations (National Council of Nonprofits, 2013). Without equally increased resources to meet the

community needs, leaders of nonprofit organizations need to develop new approaches to implement successful continuous improvement programs (Chandler, 2015).

U.S. government policymakers at the state and federal level reduced funding to nonprofit organizations. As a result, nonprofit organizations' leaders struggle to continue working to advance local communities (National Council of Nonprofits, 2013). Leaders of nonprofit organizations may use continuous improvement to develop strategies to improve and sustain operations with reduced resources. Improving performance is essential for leaders of nonprofit organizations to fulfill their commitments to community members (Dobrai & Farkas, 2016).

### **Implications for Social Change**

Nonprofit organizations play an important role in society because leaders of nonprofit organizations provide people in many communities with valuable products and services at little or no cost (Xie & Bagozzi, 2014). Survival of nonprofit organizations is essential to provide social services for millions of Americans, ranging from food, funding, and shelter to stimulators of the economy, emergency responders, and incubators of innovation (National Council of Nonprofits, 2017). This study's findings could benefit leaders of nonprofit organizations because these leaders could use the strategies from this study to implement successful continuous improvement programs, enhancing performance and casting a wider social safety net to cover needy individuals and families. The implications for positive social change are that leaders of nonprofit organizations could use the findings from this study to increase their nonprofit organizations' longevity, service, employment, and benefits provided to communities.

### **A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature**

The literature review section has several subsections. It begins with an introduction, which includes information about the strategy for searching the literature, the frequencies, and percentages of peer-reviewed articles as well as publication dates. In the next section, I focus on the application of the literature to the research question and include a brief description of the purpose of the study. The subtopics I discuss in this literature review are TQM, continuous improvement, and the case for continuous improvement for nonprofit organizations. Throughout the literature review, I compared and contrasted different points of view and relationships between previous research and findings of this study.

I reviewed the literature on continuous improvement strategies and applications that may apply to nonprofit organizations published in various journals and seminal scholarly books. Google Scholar, linked to the Walden University Library's website, served as the primary source for accessing journal articles. The Walden University Library allows faculty and students access to various databases. Databases used to obtain literature for this study included Business Source Complete, ABI/INFORM Complete, Emerald Management, Sage Premier, Academic Search Complete, and ProQuest Central. I also accessed various open journals to obtain literature related to continuous improvement strategies for nonprofit organizations. AOSIS OpenJournals provides open access to peer-reviewed scholarly journals from various academic disciplines. Similarly, ScienceDirect provides both tolled and open access to a full-text scientific database containing journal articles and book chapters. In some instances, I accessed government

websites to obtain information about continuous improvement strategies for nonprofit organizations.

The strategy for searching through existing literature entailed the use of keywords and phrases in the various databases listed above. I applied filters to database searches to narrow the search results. These filters included specific keywords, a specified period, and specific databases. When using Google Scholar, I gave preference to articles published in or after 2013, ensuring that the literature would be topical and relevant. Secondly, I gave preference to articles that were available in the Walden University Library. The keywords and phrases I used in my search were *continuous improvement*, *process improvement*, *nonprofit organizations*, *performance improvement*, *business success*, *improvement strategies*, *nonprofits*, *nonprofit performance*, *nonprofit challenges*, and *business performance*. Crossref and Ulrich's Periodicals Directory are tools to verify that literature is peer-reviewed. The literature review includes 159 references. The publication date for 155 (97%) of these references is within the past 5 years. In addition, all 159 references are peer-reviewed articles and exclude website and non-scholarly articles.

### **Literature Review**

TQM concepts trace back to the 1800s when managers encouraged employee driven initiatives toward process improvement (Bhuiyan & Baghel, 2005). TQM derives from quality management (QM), which involves the fulfillment of requirements in regards to customer needs, the focus of specific products services and processes, the improved organizational performance, and the absence of errors (Hietschold, Reinhardt,

& Gurtner, 2014). TQM refers to a company-wide approach to results-oriented quality control and consists of a total contribution to quality by employees, customers, and suppliers (Hietschold et al., 2014; Kaur & Sharma, 2014). Quality itself becomes an integral part of the corporate philosophy, and management refers to the executive responsibility and relevance of managerial commitment. Hietschold et al. (2014) described TQM as an organizational strategy that focuses on long-term management orientation requiring companies to integrate quality into the firm's strategy to achieve consistent and lasting excellence. The quality of organizational plans determines a leader's vision and, without these, organizations cannot establish clear objectives and priorities regarding customer and market orientation (Hietschold et al., 2014).

In the first section, Application to Applied Business Problem, I provide a critical analysis and synthesis of the conceptual framework I selected for this study, TQM, using supporting and contrasting/rival theories from relevant literature on the topic of continuous improvement strategies for nonprofit organizations. Some of the supporting and contrasting/rival theories are MBNQA, RBV, BPR, BPM, and ERP.

The second section, Continuous Improvement, starts with a brief overview of the development of continuous improvement strategies for nonprofit organizations construct over time. I discuss common concerns relating to the construct as well as the various definitions, antecedents, and consequences of continuous improvement strategies for nonprofit organizations. The third and final section for discussion is the case for continuous improvement of nonprofit organizations. The theme starts with a general

discussion about nonprofit organizations and performance strategies related to continuous improvement for nonprofit organizations.

### **Application to the Applied Business Problem**

The objective of this qualitative, multiple case study was to explore the strategies that leaders of nonprofit organizations use to increase revenue. Developing an understanding of such strategies requires a qualitative approach, more specifically an exploratory multiple case study. In this study, I provided insight into continuous improvement strategies for nonprofit organizations from a group of leaders' perspectives.

The findings of the study can assist with the development of appropriate strategies for nonprofit organizations to generate. Once an understanding of the underlying meaning emerges, appropriate strategies will equip leaders with the skills to improve continuous improvement strategies for nonprofit organizations. The findings from the study can improve business practice by identifying appropriate strategies, leading to increased productivity and organizational competitiveness. The potential for social change includes applying continuous improvement strategies to develop sustainability and longevity of nonprofit organizations to help nonprofit leaders address larger problems, such as homelessness, disease, lack of cultural acceptance, and environmental sustainability.

### **Total Quality Management**

Many leaders adopt quality management principles to become more customer oriented through quality-obsessed strategy (Mahmood, Qadeer, & Ahmed, 2014). The most researched dimensions of TQM included strategic planning, leadership, information and analysis, customer focus, process management, and people management. Mahmood

et al. (2014) stated that TQM dimensions consisted of customer focus, continuous improvement, employee empowerment, and top management support. The guiding principles of TQM help leaders produce better quality products, reduce costs, increase customer and employee satisfaction, and improve organizational performance. Some authors of empirical studies argued that TQM implementation has a significant positive effect on organizational performance. Mahmood et al. considered TQM to be a philosophy, and its application gained a high degree of attention in improving organizational effectiveness. TQM principles represent the basis of a continuous improvement organization. Leaders use successful implementation of TQM principles through various process improvement strategies to gain a sustainable competitive advantage (Mahmood et al., 2014).

TQM techniques include the use of scientific methods for some process improvement activities including work organization, observation and value analysis for work processes, identification of points of highest advantage for quality improvement, and evaluation of alternate solutions to diagnose problems continuously (Garcia-Bernal & Ramirez-Aleson, 2015). Firms that adopt TQM could identify and eliminate causes of operational problems, increase output uniformity or standardization of quality, improve product quality, and reduce the complexity of the processes. According to Garcia-Bernal and Ramirez-Aleson (2015), a core principle of TQM is the customer orientation of all the activities to produce and deliver products and services that better satisfy customers' present and future needs and expectations and thereby improve their satisfaction. Garcia-Bernal and Ramirez-Aleson stated that TQM practices proved effective in establishing

ongoing direct relationships with customers, coordinating of information sharing and more potent personalized communication channels, and engaging employees in customer satisfaction activities to reduce response time to changes in demands and needs. TQM application to customer satisfaction implies a firm's sustainability to its competitive advantage, adding value for its clients through a more refined alignment between client and service/product (Garcia-Bernal & Ramirez-Aleson, 2015).

The main reason that TQM fails is the lack of knowledge about TQM implementation (Carmona-Marquez, Leal-Millan, Vazquez-Sanchez, Leal-Redriguez, & Eldridge, 2016). Carmona-Marquez et al. (2016) noted that the current turbulent and uncertain economic environment requires TQM approaches to involve methods to foster and enable a more interactive management framework. Carmona et al. suggested that the successful application of TQM depends on instrumental drivers, which mediate strategic enablers-business success and tactical drivers-business success links. Carmona-Márquez et al. suggested that leaders use these drivers to influence performance because these drivers should have priority among instrumental, tactical, and strategic enablers. Carmona-Márquez et al. indicated that managers should focus their attention and energy on implementing and improving instrumental practices such as benchmarking, process improvement, and zero defects mentality.

According to Liu (2016), TQM can assist organization leaders in enhancing any organization's competitiveness, efficiency, and flexibility in planning, organizing, and understanding all activities within an organization and by integrating all members into the management circle. By implementing TQM, business leaders are capable of dramatically

enhancing employees' perceptions of the work environment and satisfaction and improving organization performance and output. Liu stated that TQM models include two perspectives: *soft management* and *hard management*. Liu explained that the core purpose of soft management manifests in the control of the customer-supplier relationship. The core purpose of soft management is to communicate organizational culture, with the customer, within the organization, and to emphasize the organization's goal and commitment. In contrast, managers should exert hard management strategies in three fields, which are systems, teams, and tools.

Ashraf (2016) found that TQM and knowledge management (KM) philosophies are both equally significant for performance excellence in organizations. Ashraf stated that previous researchers considered TQM applications important for organizations to gain a competitive advantage. Ashraf noted that KM is the procedure of acquiring, saving, disseminating, and successfully using organizational knowledge, whereas TQM is a philosophy that encourages organization leaders to gain a competitive advantage. Ashraf stated that organizational culture is a frequent enabler between TQM and KM. Ashraf claimed that TQM applications positively influence innovation. Other researchers (Khan, Ijaz, Saif, Quresh, & Afaq, 2015) concluded that TQM practices played a significant role in organizational success. Khan et al. (2015) stated that organization performance directly relates to effective TQM practices and identified customer focus and management commitment as some of the important TQM attributes.

Dubey and Gunasekaran (2015) stated that TQM is a term used to describe a comprehensive view of quality assurance. Dubey and Gunasekaran explained TQM as a

management philosophy that involves all levels and functions of the organization for continuously improving the quality of goods and services. Dubey and Gunasekaran claimed that TQM is *management innovation* or *management revolution*. Dubey and Gunasekaran identified four soft dimensions considered important for successful TQM implementation, including human resources, quality culture, motivational leadership, and relationship management. Employee motivation, commitment and loyalty, organizational culture, top management commitment or leadership, human resources, and customer relationship are instrumental, soft dimensions of TQM (Dubey & Gunasekaran, 2015).

Organizational leaders use TQM applications for making a profit and for survival (Yapa, 2012). Yapa stated that although many organizations claim to implement TQM strategies, these organizations' leaders may not fully understand TQM as a concept. Yapa explained TQM as an ever-evolving practice. Within the TQM framework, the many available components might make selection confusing. TQM as a strategy consists of a myriad of implementation strategies (Yapa, 2012). Yapa included a list of the more renowned continuous improvement strategies that evolved from TQM, such as Deming's (1950) 14 points and cycle (Plan-Do-Check-Act); Juran's (1951) quality trilogy of planning, controlling, and improving; and Crosby's (1979) absolutes of quality management, consisting of conformance to requirements, prevention, zero defects and cost of quality. Continuous improvement strategies that stemmed from these early applications include Lean, Six Sigma, and the hybrid Lean Six Sigma (Bhuiyan & Baghel, 2005) and the theory of constraints (Chou, Lu, & Tang, 2012; Goldratt & Cox, 1984). Yapa concluded that top management commitment is a pre-requisite for the

successful implementation of TQM and that a lack of a thorough understanding of TQM philosophies and techniques exists among managers. A need exists for TQM short training courses offered by universities and training institutes or a need for inclusion of TQM-related courses in business degree programs (Yapa, 2012).

The continuous improvement strategies that evolve from TQM provide a myriad of perspectives and approaches but focus on the general concept of organizational culture change (Womack & Jones, 2003). The various models deriving from TQM evolved into universal applications such as Lean and Six Sigma, which combine strategies and philosophies into systematic applications (George, 2003). The connection between continuous improvement strategies and nonprofit mission-focused objectives may provide opportunities for nonprofit organizations to be more resourceful and successful (Al-Tabbaa et al., 2013). Nonprofit organizations address needs and services to vulnerable populations (Melao, Guia, & Amorim, 2016). The competition for scarce resources; pressure from funders, governing bodies, and stakeholders for higher quality services; and demand for cost effective, better quality services forces nonprofit organization leaders to seek strategies that embed continuous improvement activities into their nonprofit organizations' processes (Melao, Guia, & Amorim, 2016). Leaders implement continuous improvement models to deliver improved organization functionality and services (George, 2003).

TQM promotes innovation throughout the entire organization (Augusto, Lisboa, & Yasin, 2014). Augusto et al. explained that the TQM innovation effort should include organizational processes, systems, procedures, product development, and customer

service. Augusto et al. stated that in pursuit of competitive advantage in a highly competitive global market, organizations are attempting to adopt innovation as part of an organizational TQM philosophy. Leaders using innovation through continuous improvement provide organizations with the ability to remain competitive (Drucker, 1985). Wiengarten, Fynes, Cheng, and Chavez (2013) affirmed that the economic downturn, which began in December of 2007, has increased organization investment in programs such as TQM to achieve improved operational performance. TQM is a quality management philosophy that takes a holistic and innovative company-wide approach to quality management (Wiengarten et al., 2013). Wiengarten et al. stated that TQM allows individuals to strive for continuous improvement in all the functions of an organization to improve quality related and organizational performance.

Wiengarten et al. (2013) summarized TQM commonalities into three points, soft practices, hard practices, and core concepts. Managers of TQM use social or soft practices such as human resources, teamwork, and employee involvement and technical or hard practices such as predefined workflows and workflow management. Managers addressing the soft and hard practices need to holistically create the need for a systematic approach and apply optimal management of TQM core concepts to improve organizational performance. Wiengarten et al. stated that previous research suggested that, from an operations viewpoint, quality improvements through TQM concepts lead to waste reduction, cost reduction, and improved organizational performance. The features of TQM and innovation are similar (Wiengarten et al., 2013). Some elements of TQM, such as continuous improvement, the learning organization, customer-driven focus,

teamwork, involvement, and empowerment align with innovation principles (Drucker, 1985).

Individuals recognize TQM primarily for emphasizing customer needs and contributing to organizational efficiency and effectiveness through process orientation and continuous improvement (Steiber & Alange, 2013). Steiber and Alange noted that other researchers claim that some TQM practices are conducive to innovation and that some of the best practices of innovation management arise from TQM elements. Business leaders could perceive continuous improvement as an organization-wide process of focused and sustained incremental innovation (Steiber & Alange, 2013). The broad principles of TQM involve customer focus, visible leadership, holistic approach, process focus, continuous learning, and standardization for creativity.

Steiber and Alange (2013) noted that TQM involves capturing the potential from all employees and that customer focus in TQM covers both internal and external stakeholders and entails the understanding of customers' demands and needs. Steiber and Alange stated that *visible leadership* in TQM sets the vision, establishes few but challenging goals to all levels of the organization, coaches employees, and creates a team environment that empowers employees. The TQM concept of *continuous learning* includes components, such as continuous improvement and culture and processes and methods for organizational learning. Steiber and Alange stated that if business leaders view TQM as a school striving primarily for control and efficiency by limiting variation, achieving standardization, and engaging in orienting the organization to the proper process, might result in less value for companies in the future. The broader application of

TQM involves quality and continuous improvement. The core concepts of TQM that focused on measurement and statistical methods serve to limit variation, standardize the process, and limit the organization's ability to innovate (Steiber & Alange. 2013).

Successful TQM implementation could create sustainable quality and productivity that improve in the long term by developing a learning culture. Staff promotes and stimulates organizational learning when top managers begin to implement TQM (Yazdani, Attafar, Shahin, & Kheradmandnia, 2016). Although organizational learning is important for successful TQM implementation, Yazdani et al. (2016) noted that few researchers have investigated the correlation between TQM and organizational learning. Yazdani et al. explained that hard and soft TQM concepts create segmentation in TQM practices. While soft TQM practices include human resource management (HRM) practices that focused on people- and culture-oriented organizational change and development, essential TQM practices are technique- and method-oriented practices. Within the TQM management system, Yazdani et al. noted that hard and soft TQM practices complement each other.

TQM is an integrated management philosophy and a set of practices that emphasizes continuous improvement and meets customers' requirements (Green, 2012). Green (2012) noted that TQM represents the culture of an organization committed to total customer satisfaction through continuous improvement. Green stated that although there may be variations in the definition of TQM, the focus of TQM remains continuous improvement and culture. Green claimed that the TQM philosophy includes four organizational components: quality, people, organizations as systems, and senior

management. Green warned that TQM introduced as a quick-fix manner might lead to failure. Green claimed that while involvement and consistency address the internal dynamics, adaptability, and mission focus on the external environment. Green stated that adaptability and inclusion outweigh mission and consistency, which suggests that change and flexibility are more important to TQM implementation than stability and direction.

Business leaders use TQM to increase productivity and quality through employee satisfaction, which in turn leads to customers' satisfaction (Masry, Hamido, & Hilaly 2015). Masry et al. (2015) referred to TQM as a tool to improve the effectiveness, efficiency, and competitiveness of any business enterprise. When applying TQM, Masry et al. stated that quality dimensions include five areas: performance, reliability, conformance, durability, and serviceability. TQM is a transformational initiative that is necessary to increase organizational effectiveness (Haffar, Al-Karaghoul, & Ghoneim, 2013). Leaders of successful organizations should adopt and employ changes continuously (Haffar et al., 2013). According to Haffar et al., researchers have recognized the influence of organizational culture on the success of TQM implementation. Employees believing that they can gain recognition or other beneficial gain are more willing to participate in TQM initiatives (Haffar et al., 2013).

Aydin, Ucuncu, and Tiruaki (2015) stated that TQM is an element that boosts general business performance while gaining a competitive advantage using world standards. The implementation of TQM involves a holistic understanding, which requires quality application processes and policies in all areas of work related to product and employees' relationships with internal and external customers (Aydin et al., 2015). Aydin

et al. explained that when leaders apply TQM using a holistic understanding, TQM embodies the art of perfection that involves an effective method to reach ideal performance or the total of the principles and philosophy for improving organizations. According to Aydin et al., TQM implementation could help companies build adequate quality and management systems to stay competitive. Leaders that implement TQM are looking for quality represented in work processes and procedures and internal and external customer relations. Aydin et al. claimed that employee desire is a requirement for TQM implementation. Aydin et al. noted that employees' contributions to decision-making processes create a feeling of inclusion because employees experience more involvement as part of the organization and aid in improving employee satisfaction.

Change initiatives are essential for organizations seeking to improve viability and a competitive position (Liao, Solatani, & Yeow, 2014). The global demand for improved quality of goods and services requires quality-driven change for organizational success (Liao, Solatani, & Yeow, 2014). Liao et al. stated that legitimacy aspects of TQM supplant the efficiency aspects of the improvement model over time, as quality changes become the expected level of performance and display the legitimacy of the organization. Liao et al. noted that successful TQM initiatives rely on underlying requirements, such as logical alignment of improvement initiatives, with organizational quality issues and effective managerial leadership.

Economic performance benefits from quality-driven tools, such as TQM, but most of these initiatives fail in goal achievement (Karyotakis & Moustakis, 2014). In some TQM initiatives, individuals supplanted short-term success with long-term sustainability

failure (Karyotakis & Moustakis, 2014). The biggest hurdle to a successful TQM endeavor is the culture change that is required, along with quality improvement initiatives (Karyotakis & Moustakis, 2014). TQM serves as a more holistic application and differs from other improvement initiatives that focus solely on efficiency (Karyotakis & Moustakis, 2014).

Individual acceptance of TQM as an organizational performance improvement philosophy is essential for survival. TQM encompasses quality-driven efforts targeting cost reduction, productivity, organizational management improvement, customer service, and competitiveness (Ooi, 2015). Ooi noted that TQM is adapted mainly in the manufacturing sector; however, little difference exists between the service and manufacturing sectors regarding human resources, customer focus, and leadership. Ooi also noted that the service sector uses the soft components of TQM. Ooi's study on Malaysian firms suggests that TQM practices apply to both service and manufacturing industries. Singh and Sushil (2013) noted that TQM seeks to enhance customer satisfaction to consider it the focus through organizational efforts to promote quality improvement activities.

TQM initiatives encourage competitiveness through increased productivity, cost reduction, and a holistic application of higher effectiveness and efficiency (Singh & Sushil, 2013). Singh and Sushil (2013) noted that TQM is an organizational culture application rather than just a management application. Kabak, Sen, Gocer, Kucuksoylemez, and Tuncer (2014) stated that TQM involves workforce motivation and a strategy aligned with work climate. Kabak et al. noted that there is a direct relationship

between TQM and employee job satisfaction endeavors. Kabak et al. stated that teamwork and a holistic organizational effort are components of a successful TQM implementation. Kabak et al. noted that research suggests that teamwork is the most dominant factor regarding job satisfaction. TQM activities, such as employee training and education, employee relations, and teamwork, aligned strongly with job satisfaction (Kabak et al., 2014).

### **Other Contrasting/Rival Theories**

Some organization leaders struggle with continuous improvement strategies (Womack & Jones, 2003). Continuous improvement initiatives may be lengthy processes causing lack of motivation and enthusiasm to reach the total organization effort required for success (Crosby, 1979). Business leaders could also misunderstand continuous improvement initiatives or may not be ready for continuous improvement strategy implementation (Crosby, 1979). The development of other popular but contrasting strategies or theories categorized as business excellence models (BEMs) include the MBNQA, BPM, BPR, ERP, and RBV theory (Dahlgaard, Chen, Jang, Banegas, & Dahlgaard-Park, 2013). BEMs have two purposes, which are guiding an organization to business excellence and conducting performance assessments (Dahlgaard et al., 2013). According to Dahlgaard et al. (2013), some companies experience both financial and nonfinancial benefits while some researchers indicated that implementation of BEMs does not guarantee success.

BPR is an improvement process that incorporates information technology (Khoshlafz & Hekmati, 2016). Martonova (2013) noted that while strategies involving

TQM focus on incremental changes, BPR strategies are more radical in design and implementation. Both BPR and TQM models consider leadership to be a key component for success. Managers implement BPR strategies to achieve prompt process performance while TQM implementation transforms organizational culture. BPR strategies seek to redesign systems and processes usually in a one-off event and stem from management vision that may not be employee friendly. The most glaring difference between TQM and BPR is the continuous improvement component (Martonova, 2013).

Firms use the RBV theory to assess resources, capacity, and processes for establishing a competitive advantage and optimal operations (Akaeze, 2016). According to Silva, Gomes, Lages, and Pereira (2014) managers implement RBV to understand how to achieve competitive advantage through firm resources and organizational capabilities. RBV theorists suggest that firms' competitive advantage come from its resources and how firms' leaders manage these resources (Lazzari, Sarate, Goncalves, &Vieira, 2014). According to Lazzari et al. (2014), resources are the assets, capabilities, organizational processes, company attributes, knowledge, and information that a company may use to implement improvement strategies. Business leaders attain the competitive edge resulting from RBV by developing rare, valuable, hard to imitate, and difficult to understand strategies (Lazzari et al., 2014).

ERP is a technological information management system that merges critical information such as supply chain, finance and accounting, human resources, and customer relations (Al-Dhaafri, Al-Swidi, & Yusoff, 2016). Gollner and Baumane-Vitolina (2016) noted that ERP systems incorporate internal and external information

systems into a single solution. According to Suman and Pogarcic (2016), ERP software integrates and automates business processes while enabling the sharing of data across the business enterprise. Al-Dhaafri et al. (2016) stated that by applying ERP, firms improve their organizational performance. Al-Dhaafri et al. noted that the factors affecting the success of ERP and TQM are similar. Leaders implementing ERP could assist their organizations by providing timely and integrated information to maximize organizational performance. Suman and Pogarcic noted that ERP implementation is usually an imitation of other companies' successful practices and the greatest advantage is harnessing the capability to make quality and timely decisions.

In 1987, the U.S. Congress established the MBNQA through the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) to promote continuous improvement in organizations (Peng & Prybutok, 2014). In 2005, the U.S. Congress expanded the MBNQA to cover government and nonprofit organizations (Peng & Prybutok, 2014). The MBNQA focuses on seven specific areas of performance, including leadership, strategic planning, customer focus, data and knowledge management, workforce, operations, and results. The MBNQA model allows individuals to use leadership, strategy, and customer focus to promote the customer-based results through the workforce and operations. Peng and Prybutok (2014) argued that the 2013-2014 edition of the Baldrige model weighs information systems more profoundly than the previous models.

MBNQA proves effective to improve process innovation (Lee & Ooi, 2015). While some researchers deem TQM as a prerequisite for innovation, other researchers suggest that TQM may not facilitate innovation. According to Lee and Ooi organizations

could improve performance including innovative enhancements by adopting MBNQA. Leaders of the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) use quality management constructs and remain the most popular BEM in Europe (Bou-Llusar, Beltrán-Martín, & Escrig-Tena, 2016). Similar to the MBQNA model, the EFQM model also has an award program called the European Excellence Award, conferred to those organizations that demonstrate a high level of organizational performance through excellence in leadership, process management, and strategy execution (Bou-Llusar et al., 2016).

Leading European organizations formed the EFQM in 1988, as a nonprofit organization in Europe to promote the concept that business excellence is the answer to sustainable success (Luis Miguel, 2015). Leaders use the EFQM model to empower employees to embrace a challenge, commit to organization goals and stress the soft skills of quality management (Bou-Llusar et al., 2016). Luis Miguel (2015) noted that the EFQM emphasizes innovation, flexibility, and benchmarking through stakeholder involvement. Nonprofit organizations experience rising costs and limited access to capital, leading to increased fundraising initiatives (Owens & Yarbrough, 2015). Nonprofit organization leaders seek ways to analyze and improve performance in their fundraising initiatives. Fundraising is increasingly competitive and nonprofit organizations continuously seek ways to improve fundraising performance (Owens & Yarbrough, 2015).

Methods, such as MBQNA, involve training and development of staff as an organizational approach to performance and process improvement that may help mitigate

cost and boost performance (Lahidji & Tucker, 2016). TQM and variants of TQM strategies may align well with leaders of nonprofit organizations seeking strategies to train staff to improve performance to align with organizational goals and objectives and to reduce cost (Carvalho, Melo, & Ferreira, 2016).

Haddad et al. (2016) suggested the BPM model as an appropriate continuous improvement approach for nonprofit organizations. The succinct value of this model for nonprofit organizations is the ability to transform management from an amateur to a professional level, which Haddad et al. defined as a focus on structural and labor change. Nadarajah and Kadir (2014) noted that the BPM is a strategy that promotes a process-centric organization, which focuses on customer satisfaction. The central function of the BPM is to manage and improve processes (Nadarajah & Kadir, 2014). According to Nadarajah and Kadir, organizations that implement the BPM, experience improved communications, transparent process steps and strategy, and informed decision-making. Leaders of nonprofit organizations continuously struggle with balancing cost and efficiency with the need to provide social support without restrictions to resources (Haddad, Ayala, Urona Maldonado, Forcellini, & Lezana, 2016). The definition of BPM varies depending on different views and perspectives (Haddad et al., 2016). The core criteria of BPM models involve performance and improvement. Haddad et al. (2016) conducted research that supported BPM as a process improvement and strategic application for nonprofit organizations seeking to identify, analyze, improve, and sustain high performance processes that reduce cost and generate revenue.

Human resource performance improvement is a concept that may assist nonprofit organizations in boosting performance, improving efficiency, and reducing cost (Robineau, Ohana, & Swaton, 2015). Robineau et al. (2015) noted that the concept has been a common practice in the corporate world but very sparse in nonprofit organizations. Robineau et al. (2015) stated that the actual challenge for implementing High-Performance Work Practices (HPWP) stems from training and development, employee retention, and compensation.

### **Continuous Improvement**

Continuous improvement is a principle within TQM and a basic tenet within quality since the 1980's (Lahidji & Tucker, 2016). Continuous improvement is a TQM concept, which focuses on a culture of sustained improvement through process waste elimination (Bhuiyan & Baghel, 2005). Continuous improvement and process improvement are interchangeable terms (Bhuiyan & Baghel, 2005). Some experts concluded that continuous improvement success is dependent on an organization's success to drive culture change through the development of innovative ways to view quality (Deming, 1982; Juran, 1995; Womack & Jones, 2003). Leaders apply continuous improvement strategies as an evolutionary process that leads to a better way to compete and add value to existing processes that cover the entire workforce of the organization (Paraschivescu, 2015). Masaaki Imai, considered the father of continuous improvement (Erez, 2016), introduced the concept of Kaizen in a 1986 publication titled *Kaizen: The key to Japan's competitive success* (Paraschivescu, 2015). *Kaizen* is a compound word in Japanese that includes two concepts: Kai, which means change, and Zen, which translates

to improve or make good (Sanchez & Blanco, 2014). Continuous improvement implementation requires a cultural adjustment and input from the entire organization (Fryer & Ogden, 2014).

Continuous improvement is a gradual never-ending change that occurs through incremental improvement (Fryer & Ogden, 2014). Innovation is a key component in competitive strategy in nonprofit organizations, which aligns with the concept of continuous improvement (Weerawardena & Mort, 2012). During the 1950's Deming adopted the concept of continuous improvement as his first quality principle (Choi, 1995). While continuous improvement emerged as a fundamental concept regarding production and quality, managers have not been fully capable of conceptualizing it into the genre of organizational change (Choi, 1995). Organizational change must involve some destruction of existing practices. Theorists believe that the business environment changes continuously, which requires continuous scanning from the organization (Choi, 1995). Managers look for opportunities for change and, once they decide to change, managers determine the possible and limited range of strategic change. Managers make changes incrementally and locally to give organizations stability (Choi, 1995).

Sustaining continuous improvement strategies and the level of short-term performance attained by these applications is challenging (Chakravorty & Hales, 2017; Drucker, 1985; Womack & Jones, 2003). Organizational leaders applying continuous improvement strategies as an organizational culture change rather than a rapid, short-term solution are, more likely to succeed in these initiatives (Womack & Jones, 2003). Continuous improvement for sustainability of nonprofit programs is necessary for

nonprofit survival and for mitigating threats, such as economic recessions and natural disasters (Chakravorty & Hales, 2017). Failed attempts of sustainability provide opportunity for competitors (Drucker, 1985). Sustainability is an organizational-wide responsibility, and no continuous improvement strategy will automate sustainability; instead, it requires a constant effort (Chakravorty & Hales, 2017). The entire organization shares responsibility for continuous improvement sustainability as part of TQM strategies (George, 2003; Womack & Jones & Jones, 2003)

Continuous improvement aligns more with a manufacturing and for-profit application (Haddad et al., 2016). The nonprofit organization's mission-based approach to operation creates an environment that is service based rather than one driven by performance optimization (Drucker, 1985). According to Burksiene (2014), the best models of continuous improvement for the public sector are; International Organization for Standardization (ISO) standards, the European Foundation for Quality Management Excellence Model (EFQM), and the Common Assessment Framework (CAF), which include specific features such as complete organization inclusion, individual responsibility, effective management, leadership, and strategic thinking. The resurgence of Lean and Six Sigma in organizations demonstrates a need for continuous quality improvement (Al-Tabbaa et al., 2013). This reemergence creates a need to understand the theoretical basis and practical application of overarching frameworks that will provide a realistic path forward for organizations struggling to achieve sustainable performance (Al-Tabbaa et al., 2013). Leaders achieve continuous improvement success when using a

process model and organizational efforts established by the organizational culture that continuously focuses on improvement (Womack & Jones & Jones, 2003).

### **Continuous Improvement for Nonprofit Organizations**

Dobrai and Farkas (2016) used Salamon and Anheir's (1992) definition of nonprofit organizations as institutionalized organizations implementing regularity in their activities, operating privately and independent from the government, even if they are receiving support from the government. Nonprofit organizations are entities that do not distribute profits to their owners or leaders; instead, nonprofit organizations reinvest their surplus earnings into the objectives of the organizations. According to Dobrai and Farkas, individuals from other entities from outside the organization do not control nonprofit organizations and provide voluntary membership or participation in the activities. Maurer (2016) defined nonprofit organizations as voluntary organizations that have nonprofit or charitable legal status, an IRS designation of 501c (3), and boards of directors that govern them. From an operational perspective, leaders of nonprofits focus on accomplishing a mission because nonprofits are mission-based organizations, which makes performance optimization a challenge (Drucker, 1985). Nonprofit organizations attain a moral status by being mission focused to do good for society (Hoole & Patterson, 2008). Funders of nonprofit organizations seek evaluation methods to determine nonprofit performance and focus on areas such as continuous growth and improvement (Hoole & Patterson, 2008).

Nonprofit organizations focus on revenue as strongly as for-profit organizations but strategize based on performance of mission (Drucker, 1989). Leaders of nonprofit organizations continuously face the challenge of insufficient funding while focusing on

mission (McHargue, 2003). Nonprofit organizations need to measure performance (Soysa, Jayamaha, & Grigg, 2016) to establish criteria upon which to improve. Difficulties in measuring and sustaining performance because of stakeholder expectations, the nature of services provided, and the inability to use financial outcomes as a measure of success impact improvement strategies for nonprofit organizations (Soysa, Jayamaha, & Grigg, 2016). Performance measurement is a criterion of TQM and continuous improvement (Lahidji & Tucker, 2016). Performance measurement leads to improved organizational performance, but the relationship between performance measurement and organizational performance improvement is stronger in for-profit organizations (Soysa, Jayamaha, & Grigg, 2016). Researchers in Australia found that the Balance Score Card (BSC), when customized to measure mission and strategy, serve as a continuous improvement strategy by allowing nonprofit organizations to effectively gauge performance that aligns with governance and stakeholder expectations (Soysa, Jayamaha, & Grigg, 2016). Managers implement continuous improvement initiatives with mixed results because the purpose of these applications is not realized (Womack & Jones, 2003). Leaders design continuous improvement strategies to promote organizational culture change, which is the sustainability model (Womack & Jones, 2003). One of the impediments of nonprofit organizations is the inability to achieve sustainable performance through continuous improvement efforts (Al-Tabbaa et al., 2013). Focusing on organizational culture as the objective of continuous improvement initiatives may influence the success of these strategies (Womack & Jones, 2003).

The changing environment makes daily operations for nonprofit entities increasingly difficult. Meeting these challenges involves making continuous improvements in structure, leadership, and organizational process. Nonprofit organizations' performance is more critical than ever before (Dobrai & Farkas, 2016). Effectively responding to increased competition from competitively aggressive for-profit firms is a significant issue for many nonprofit organizations (Froelich, 2012). Al Tabbaa et al. (2013) suggested that nonprofit organizations might benefit from continuous improvement strategies to respond to reduced funding sources and increased growing responsibility. As governments transition, many of the social service provisions are delegated over to nonprofit organizations, creating the necessity for more efficient processes to match supply when the demand increases. Considering cost reduction and high performance, TQM involves training and development of staff as an organizational approach to performance improvement (Lahidji & Tucker, 2016). TQM strategies may align with nonprofit organizations seeking strategies to train staff to improve performance to align with organizational goals and objectives (Carvalho, Melo, & Ferreira, 2016).

Funders expect nonprofit organizations to improve performance by doing more with fewer resources (Tevel, Katz, & Brock, 2015). Business leaders use the TQM model to minimize cost (Kajdan, 2007). Cost minimized in one area, such as using cheaper material, may result in increased costs in other areas, such as scrap. The TQM model has evolved into concepts such as Lean Six Sigma where leaders use sigma levels to determine defects reducing overall costs by improving reliability (George, 2003).

Organization leaders use globally popular continuous improvement strategies, such as Lean Six Sigma and Six Sigma, to reduce organizational costs (Kadjan, 2007). Nonprofit organizations may be able to benefit from the total cost reduction to provide more effective and efficient services with less operational costs.

Nonprofit organization leadership affects the success of organizational performance (Phipps & Burbach, 2010). Leaders are responsible for modeling strategies, such as continuous improvement. Researchers noted areas that nonprofit leaders must adapt from for-profit leaders include smaller scope of authority, innovative metrics to monitor performance, and building an effective organization with limited funds and resources (Phipps & Burbach, 2010). Nonprofit leaders must also develop organizational capacity for change; however, researchers (Phipps & Burbach, 2010) noted that the process of building capacity for change varies between for-profit and nonprofit organizations. Mission-focused nonprofit organizations must implement innovation practices unique to their mission, as the capacity to innovate impacts the sustainability of a nonprofit organization (Phipps & Burbach, 2010). Leadership styles, such as transformational leadership, align with continuous improvement and impact organizations' communication (Jameson, 2017). Transformational leaders use direct methods to deliver information-rich communication (Jameson, 2017). The use of preferred communication methods by various generations, such as face-to-face or social media, requires leaders to apply continuous improvement efforts to communication methods.

Researchers (Garnett, Marlowe, & Pandey, 2008) found correlation among trust, morale, leaders' credibility, and the relationships between organizational culture and communication. Communication is a soft dimension of continuous improvement strategies and integral to the success of continuous improvement initiatives in nonprofit organizations (Yazdani et al., 2016). Poor communication management and practice negatively affect donor relations and performance within the organization (Deming, 1982; Jameson, 2017). Communication in nonprofits is important because nonprofit leaders' sustained and continuous outreach is the currency of value that keeps funders and volunteers motivated (Taliento & Silverman, 2005).

Although some researchers suggest the emergence of performance as a measure of accountability for nonprofit organizations, there is a lack of evidence of performance outcomes influencing donors (Charles & Kim, 2016). Zhan and Tang (2016) drew a contrast regarding continuous improvement. Zhan and Tang's research focused on politically motivated funding, which undermines the need for continuous improvement or performance-based rewards. Zhang and Tang uncovered a unique avenue for continuous improvement in vendor and contractor relationships and the continuous development of bipartisan advantages. Pittman's (2012) review of Miller, Bogatova and Caenihan's (2011) work resulted in the contention that lean thinking underscores the continuous improvement mentality necessary to promote direct services to clients in the nonprofit sector by doing more as an organization to boost performance. The shrinking state and federal governmental support, coupled with declining private resources, is a significant challenge for leaders of nonprofit organizations, as leaders rethink and restructure their

operations (Mataira, Morelli, Matsuoka, & Uehara-McDonald, 2014). Leaders of nonprofit organizations have several challenges resulting from the changing environment, such as the emergence of knowledge-intensive business services, competition from other nonprofit organizations and for-profit sectors alike, and stringent regulations (Dobrai & Farkas, 2016). The environment for nonprofit services rapidly changed, creating more space for civil organizations and commercial providers in markets that were once exclusive to nonprofit organizations (Weerawardena & Mort, 2012).

While the larger and more financially stable nonprofit human service organizations stand a decent chance of surviving, the smaller nonprofit organizations that typically provide small-scale, locally based programs are in peril because of cuts in funding (Mataira, et al., 2014). The need to explore alternative sources of revenue has led to growing interest in social entrepreneurship, social marketing, and social technology as opportunities to generate cost-savings and as practical ways to improve the efficacy of their social programs (Mataira et al., 2014). The continuous improvement need stems into nonprofit organization governance, defined as the management and leadership of nonprofit organizations, which comprise of disengaged boards, varied opinions on the direction of the nonprofit organization, lack of enthusiasm, lack of funding, and lack of understanding (Marx & Davis, 2012).

The tools and strategies of TQM process improvement are universal (Bossert, 2016). Successful implementation and outcomes in nonprofit organizations depend on understanding the principles of process improvement in alignment with the mission (Bossert, 2016). The use of Six Sigma methods, such as design for Six Sigma (DFSS),

demonstrated positive outcomes in behavioral health care nonprofit organizations (Lucas, Primus, Kovach, & Fredendall, 2015). Leaders use DFSS to build quality into processes through a structured, solution-based approach that involves positive outcomes for stakeholders and customers.

Oakbrook Terrace, IL, a nonprofit organization, uses Lean Six Sigma to improve processes that result in better outcomes (Gaskill, 2016). The board of directors monitors employee satisfaction and the program's effectiveness. The board of directors influenced the improvement process by systematically developing and monitoring the change management process. The board of directors was also responsible for the overarching culture change that affects the success of process improvement initiatives in organizations (Gaskill, 2016).

Nonprofit organizations serving as health care providers compete in a more concentrated market with less availability of funding as the Federal Government of the United States continues to reduce medical funding (Gupta, Brigman, & Sahi, 2015). The Mental Health Services Institute (MHS), a nonprofit organization, uses the theory of constraints (TOC), a derivative of TQM, to improve business performance and satisfy stakeholders and customers. One of the tenets of TOC is that constraints affecting performance impacts financial performance. The TOC application allows organizations to focus on quality, customer satisfaction, and flexibility to meet changes in the market with the overarching theme of continuous improvement (Gupta, Brigman, & Sahi, 2015).

### **Transition and Summary**

In Section 1, the foundation of the study, I introduced the general doctrine of the study. Section 1 included the background; purpose statement; problem statement; overarching research question; background of the problem; nature of the study; definition of terms; assumptions, limitations, and delimitations; significance of the study; interview questions; conceptual framework; summary; and an overview of the study focused on strategies leaders of nonprofit organizations use to implement continuous improvement programs. Section 2 includes the purpose statement, role of the researcher, participants, research method and design, populations and sampling, data collection, data analysis, reliability and validity of data, transition, and summary. Section 3 includes the study overview, presentation of findings, application to professional practice, implications for social change, recommendations for action, recommendations for study, reflections, summary, and study conclusion.

## Section 2: The Project

In this section, I include the purpose statement, role of the researcher, participants, research method and design, populations and sampling, data collection, data analysis, reliability and validity of data, transition, and summary.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies some leaders of nonprofit organizations use to implement successful continuous improvement programs to increase revenue. The target population consisted of leaders of nonprofit organizations possessing over 5 years of demonstrated successful experience in implementing continuous improvement programs to increase revenue located in Delaware. The implication for positive social change is that leaders of nonprofit organizations could use the findings from this study to increase their nonprofit organizations' longevity, service, employment, and benefits provided to communities.

### **Role of the Researcher**

The role of the researcher involves exploring, describing, explaining, and ethically documenting and storing the data collected (Yates & Leggett, 2016). As the researcher, I performed all of those duties, thus serving as the key data collection instrument. My role also entailed completing the following tasks, noted by Yin (2014) as required of a researcher: identifying qualified candidates; scheduling face-to-face interviews; developing and preparing the interview questions; conducting the interviews in an ethical and compliant manner; transcribing interviews; documenting; validating data using multiple sources (e.g., interviews, document analysis); developing codes and

themes; ensuring data saturation; and presenting the findings in an unbiased manner. Cronin (2014) noted that case study researchers perform systematic inquiry, which focuses on in-depth and specific situations. My interview questions focused on the overarching research question, which relates to strategies that leaders of nonprofit organizations use to implement successful continuous improvement programs.

Case study data collection weighs heavily on the skill of the researcher (Gog, 2015; Tumele, 2015; Yin, 2014). My familiarity with continuous improvement strategies emerges from my professional job functions as a continuous improvement methodologist for over 15 years and my specialization in the field through Lean Six Sigma certification, earned in 2009. Case study researchers should have a firm grasp of the underlying issues that may affect the judgment of the researcher in data analysis (Gog, 2015; Yin, 2014). I worked for the State of Delaware for the past 6 years and gained familiarity with the nonprofit sector through my role as the Delaware Department of Health and Social Services Procurement Administrator. I am also actively involved in nonprofit endeavors in the Delaware area as a process improvement consultant. My familiarity and experience working with nonprofit leadership provided a level of comfort and acquaintance with participants and issues since there is an existing working relationship.

According to Yin (2014), interviews represent one of the most important sources of information in case study research. Yin stated that when collecting data from human participants, specific ethical considerations exist. The Belmont Report includes guidelines for ethical research, including ethical parameters regarding minority and vulnerable populations as well as protections against participant misuse and vulnerability

(Akaeze, 2016; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1979). I used the Institutional Review board (IRB) Research Ethics Planning Worksheet to ensure compliance with the Belmont Report guidelines and protection of study participants.

Ethical values and good practice are the responsibility of the researcher (Stefaniak & Mazurkiewicz, 2017). Researchers employ ethical practices such as guidelines, codes, and regulations enforced by professional associations and review boards (Resnik, 2015). Researchers conduct their research in an ethical manner, which Resnik (2015) defined as norms of conduct that distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable behavior. The guidelines provided by the Belmont Report protocol (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 1979) involves three parts: the boundaries between practice and research, the basic ethical principles, and applications. Respect for persons, beneficence, and justice are the three basic ethical principles of research involving humans (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 1979). Researchers satisfy the *respect for persons* principle by honoring participants' independence; researchers understand that some participants may have diminished autonomy and should act ethically in response (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 1979). Under the *beneficence* principle, researchers adhere to the idea of bringing no harm to participants while capitalizing on maximum benefits (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 1979). Researchers honor the *justice* principle by treating participants fairly in terms of potential advantages and hardships brought about by the research (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 1979). My role as a researcher was to implement the Belmont Report protocol guidelines as these guidelines applied to my research study to ensure that I adhered to the

ethical standards contained in the Belmont Report. The IRB ensures ethical research practices and procedures (Ervin, Taylor, & Ehrhardt, 2016).

Before I began collecting data, I obtained permission from the IRB. As an ethical consideration, researchers should provide informed consent to participants to acknowledge participants' consent and understanding (Lie & Witteveen, 2017; Roberts et al., 2016; Yin, 2014). I presented potential participants with the informed consent form prior to conducting the interview. I conducted interviews after each participant indicated approval to participate in this study by signing the informed consent form. I notified participants via the informed consent form that they could end the interview or recuse themselves from participation in my research at any time and that this research was unaffiliated with my role as a State of Delaware employee and was independent and separate from any other nonacademic affiliation. I also kept participants' information confidential and secure.

Kirshner, Pozzoboni, and Jones (2011) noted that bias restricts objectivity in research due to the influence of personal beliefs on data collection. Researchers play a crucial role in ensuring data reliability and validity and need to remain unbiased while conducting case study research (Gog, 2015). Yin (2014) suggested remaining unbiased by avoiding a preconceived position. Yin noted that remaining open to contrary evidence also serves to mitigate bias and that listening attentively and being able to receive large amounts of data from the lens of the interviewee is an effective way to remain unbiased. My research strategy involved the use of a tape recorder, with permission from the study participants, to ensure unbiased and accurate documentation of the data collected. I

ensured data accuracy by giving study participants the opportunity to proofread my interpretation of their interview responses.

Researchers use an interview protocol for case study research that includes important information, such as interview procedures, a script of the introduction and the conclusion, prompts for obtaining consent from participants, and interview questions (Hagan & Houchens, 2016; Yin, 2014). Researchers use the interview protocol as a procedural guide (Akaeze, 2016). I used an interview protocol (see Appendix A) to assist and guide me through the interview procedures, including a script of the introduction and the conclusion, prompts for obtaining consent from participants, and interview questions and prompts. I assured protocol compliance by consistently sharing the same information with all participants.

### **Participants**

Yin (2014) noted that, in case study research, a selection of qualified candidates or *participants* provides the research data. Researchers should use a fair selection process to select suitable participants by defining the participant selection criteria (Elman, Gerring, & Mahoney, 2016; Kothari, Peter, Donskov, & Luciani, 2017; Yin 2014). Researchers may encounter challenges that include finding appropriate cases and participants for their study (Elman et al., 2016; Fletcher, McPhee, & Dickson, 2015; Gottfert, 2015). Researchers must clearly establish eligibility criteria. Eligibility criteria for participation in studies are the specific parameters (e.g., age and employment status) established for participants to qualify for a study (Akaeze, 2016; Fletcher et al., 2015; Hodkinson & Garland, 2016). Participants are eligible if they have experience and

knowledge related to the topic under investigation (Akaeze, 2016; Fletcher et al., 2015; Yin, 2014).

I established participant eligibility criteria based on participants' experience with the use of strategies to implement successful continuous improvement programs. Eligible participants demonstrated at least 5 years of successful experience using strategies nonprofit organizations use to implement successful continuous improvement programs. Researchers perform purposeful sampling to acquire information rich content and allow for in-depth study (Akaeze, 2016; Elliott, Combs, & Boyce, 2011; Yin, 2014). I purposively selected participants for this study from leaders of nonprofit organizations in Delaware. These participants were appropriate for this study because they aligned with the study based on their experience and expertise in leading nonprofit organizations in continuous improvement programs. Holland (2017) noted that purposive sampling involves the selection of the most qualified participants to ensure the researcher captures the most relevant information for the study.

Researchers face challenges when acquiring access to participants and organizations for research (Elman et al., 2016; Fletcher, McPhee & Dickson, 2015; Gottfert, 2015). To overcome this challenge, some authors suggest researchers collaborate with key organizational personnel, implementing a variation of participant selection tools and paths and understanding the target population (Fletcher et al., 2015; Hodkinson & Garland 2016; Kothari et al., 2017). Cleary, Horsfall, and Hayter (2014) noted that accessing participants should fulfill a specific purpose related to the research question and have a clear rationale. As part of my strategy, I worked with key members

and leaders of nonprofit agencies in the Delaware area. I accessed these participants by visiting their administration locations, networking events and Delaware Alliance for Nonprofit Advancement (DANA), a networking hub for nonprofit organizations in which I am a member.

Researchers must gain the trust and acceptance of study participants (Olsen, Lehto, & Chan, 2016; Newton, 2017; Yin, 2014). Researchers and participants represent the interactive source of information and need to establish rapport for communication that promotes in-depth, rich data (Clearly et al, 2014; Newton, 2017; Yin, 2014). Frequent researcher and participant engagement establish trust and rapport (Olsen, Lehto, & Chan, 2016). In my prior role as the Delaware Department of Health and Social Services procurement administrator, I frequently worked with many nonprofit organization leaders, developing trust and rapport over years of business engagement. I worked closely and frequently with the participants of this research to promote trust and rapport that results in rich, in-depth data.

Researchers select participants that are congruent with the conceptual framework of the study to ensure rich, in-depth data on the research topic (Cleary, Horsfall, & Hayter, 2014; Gog, 2015; Gottfert, 2015). Some authors noted that to extract rich, in-depth data, researchers should establish participant eligibility criteria, which align with well qualified, experienced, and knowledgeable participants (Gog, 2015; Gottfert, 2015; Tumele, 2015). I selected participants that align with the overarching research question by establishing eligibility criteria that included experience and knowledge of strategies

used to implement successful continuous improvement programs in nonprofit organizations.

### **Research Method and Design**

In this section, I continue the discussion found in the Nature of Study in Section 1 and expand on the topics of research method and research design. I explain the reasons behind my decision to select a qualitative research methodology. Finally, I explain the logic behind my selection of a multiple case study design.

#### **Research Method**

I conducted my research study using a qualitative method. Researchers use qualitative research methodology to focus on in-depth understanding, behavior, and motivation using words instead of numerical data (Akaeze, 2016; Barnham, 2015; Gog, 2015). Researchers ask questions through qualitative methods previously unconsidered that may add deeper insight into the phenomenon under study (Bansal & Corley, 2011). Researchers use the qualitative research methodology when the overarching research question relates to *how*, *why*, and *what* rather than *how much* or *how many* (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015). Some researchers use the qualitative research method using interviews to make valuable contributions that are scientific (Kozleski, 2017). Conducting qualitative research focuses on discovering concepts and phenomena that emerge from data resulting from the study (Barnham, 2015; Gog, 2015; Tumele, 2015).

Researchers conducting qualitative research studies seek data that align with the context of the phenomenon under investigation (Barnham, 2015). Researchers use qualitative research methodology to conduct empirical studies that produce knowledge

pertaining to perspectives, settings, and techniques (Kozleski, 2017). According to Bansal and Corley (2011), qualitative researchers reach a level of intimacy with the research that quantitative researchers are unable to reach. My research study focused on exploring strategies some leaders of nonprofit organizations use to implement successful continuous improvement programs and aligned well with the characteristics of qualitative research. My goal was to gather information from participants' experiences to reflect the natural, ongoing context of continuous improvement strategies in nonprofit organizations. I focused on the decision making of nonprofit organization leaders having successfully implemented continuous improvement programs in their organizations. I sought an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon.

Researchers conducting quantitative research studies seek a deductive approach using quantification of data in a numerical representation (Barnham, 2015; Gog, 2015; Tumele, 2015). Researchers conducting quantitative studies state the research questions in the form of hypotheses and use quantifiable data to compare variables. I did not select the quantitative research method for my research study because I was not interested in results determined by quantifiable data nor through a deductive process. Employing a quantitative research method may uncover results that vary from the researched phenomenon. McCusker and Gunaydin (2015) noted that researchers conducting quantitative research studies focus on statistical analysis that removes the researcher from real-life scenarios. Researchers conduct quantitative research with a focus on statistical data analysis to answer quantifiable questions. The quantitative research method was not

appropriate for my research, as I sought to answer leadership decision-making questions, as opposed to performing statistical analysis.

Researchers conducting mixed-methods research studies use a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods; however, there has been discourse on whether the combination of two research methods is appropriate due to the radically different paradigms (Venkatesh, Brown, & Bala, 2013). Researchers conduct mixed-methods research studies when attempting a combination of qualitative and quantitative research (Eunjeong, 2016; Yurt & Tunkler, 2016; Turner, Cardinal, & Burton, 2017). Yurt and Tunkler (2016) conducted a mixed-methods research study, using a case study design in the qualitative aspect of the research to consider a wide range of data with the intent to understand the research problem by delving deeper into the data by investigating a single person or an organization. I was not interested in the quantifiable data analysis of mixed-methods research methodology because I did not use the quantitative research component of the mixed-methods research methodology. I did not choose quantitative research because I was not interested in quantifiable data for my research.

### **Research Design**

Tumele (2015) noted that research design is the logical sequence that bridges the empirical data to the overarching research question of a research study. Researchers argue that a research design is the framework for data collection and analysis and include experimental design, cross sectional or social survey design, longitudinal design, comparative design, and case study design (Gog, 2015). Researchers use case studies to illuminate decisions, the reason behind the decisions, and the outcomes related to those

decisions (Gog, 2015; Gottfert 2015; Yin, 2014). Researchers noted that case studies are appropriate for in-depth investigations of contemporary cases, especially when the context and lived experience lack clarity (Glowacki-Dudka, & Griswold, 2016; Tumele, 2015; Yin, 2014).

Researchers use case study design to explore participants' experiences and provide an authentic view of participants' experiences with the phenomenon under investigation (Gog, 2015; Tumele, 2015; Turner, Cardinal, & Burton, 2017; Yin, 2014). Researchers claimed that multiple case studies are more beneficial than single case studies as the evidence from multiple cases studies are more convincing in providing a deep, holistic understanding of the phenomenon (Kopf, Hsu, Shows, & Albinsson, 2016; Kothari et al., 2017; Yin, 2014). According to Yin (2014), researchers conducting case studies focus on the *why* and *how* of decision-making. Researchers use multiple case studies to facilitate detailed and intensive analysis of specific cases (Maslen, 2015).

The case study research design was most suitable for this study because I conducted an in-depth investigation of a contemporary case. I used the case study research design to explore study participants' experiences and provide an authentic view of participants' experiences with the phenomenon under investigation, which was to explore strategies that leaders of nonprofit organizations use to implement successful continuous improvement programs. I used multiple case studies because they are more beneficial than single case studies, as the evidence from multiple cases studies is more convincing in providing a deep, holistic understanding of the phenomenon. Researchers consider case studies as a design because case studies involve specific interest in cases

rather than methods of research inquiry (Akaeze, 2016). I was specifically interested in strategies leaders of nonprofit organizations use to implement successful continuous improvement programs, which focused on the *why* and *how* of decision-making.

Researchers (Akaeze, 2016; Hunt, 2014; Kopf et al., 2016) stated that qualitative research designs consist of case study, phenomenology, ethnography, and narrative.

Researchers use a phenomenology when seeking to study lived experiences pertaining to senses, feelings, artifacts, and memories of a specific phenomenon (Hunt, 2014; Nazir, 2016). I was not interested in feelings, senses, artifacts, and memories of a specific phenomenon; therefore, a phenomenology was not an appropriate design for this study.

Researchers use an ethnography design to explore cultural systems. Ethnography involves the researcher embedding into the culture (Hunt, 2014). I was not interested in cultural systems in this study and, consequently, an ethnographic research design was not appropriate for this study. Hunt (2014) also argued that researchers use narrative studies to tell a story about a lived experience from the lens of the subject or participant. A narrative research design was not appropriate for this study because I did not tell a story about lived experiences using the lens of the participants.

Researchers attain data saturation in case study research when no new information or themes arise from continued data collection (Boddy, 2016; Hennink, Kaiser, & Marconi, 2017; Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, & Fontenot 2013). Precise data saturation guidelines for qualitative research remain lacking (Elman, Gerring, & Mahoney, 2016; Gummesson, 2014; Yin, 2014). Therefore, researchers collect data until no new themes emerge from new data (Elman et al., 2016; Gummesson, 2014; Yin, 2014). Without a

specific data saturation formula for qualitative research, researchers often collect data past the saturation point to ensure redundancy (Elman et al., 2016; Gummesson, 2014; Yin, 2014). I recruited participants and collected data until no new themes emerged. I reached data saturation with four participants. Researchers use empirical inquiry to conduct case studies (Yin, 2014). I focused on strategies that nonprofit business leaders use to implement successful continuous improvement programs using empirical inquiry through a case study design.

### **Population and Sampling**

Researchers typically use purposive sampling in qualitative studies to attain in-depth, rich data (Benoot, Hannes, & Bilsen, 2016; Hennink, Kaiser, & Marconi, 2017; Poulis, Poulis, & Plakoyiannaki, 2012). Poulis, Poulis, and Plakoyiannaki (2012) noted that researchers use purposeful sampling to find cases that align with the research purpose and questions. I used purposive sampling to attain participants possessing experience in using strategies for the implementation of successful continuous improvement programs in nonprofit organizations. I purposefully selected participants from the nonprofit sector that had implemented successful continuous improvement programs and had been in operation for at least 5 years to ensure the most qualified candidates and best opportunities for alignment with this study. I have access to a network of professionals familiar with the nonprofit community in Delaware. I established relationships with nonprofit professionals over the past seven years as a State of Delaware government employee. These professionals advised me on how to acquire participants from the nonprofit sector that match my research study requirements. I also

have a working relationship with many nonprofit organizations' leaders and conducted outreach for participants once I attained IRB consent by visiting locations and sending emails using a script (Appendix A). I am also a member of Delaware Alliance for Nonprofit Advancement (DANA), a nationally recognized nonprofit hub that allows me to solicit for candidates based on specific criteria.

No rules exist for sample size in qualitative research (Boddy, 2016; Hennink et al. 2017; Marshall et al., 2013). Yin (2014) suggested a sample size of a minimum of two participants for a multiple case study. I selected four participants as the sample size for my research. Researchers recently conducting similar studies (Akaeze, 2016; Holland, 2017) selected three participants through purposive sampling for their research studies and successfully attained data saturation. Hennink et al. (2017) noted that data saturation is a common guiding principle for testing sufficiency in purposive sampling. Researchers (Marshall et al., 2013) recommended various sampling sizes depending on the research criteria in order to achieve data saturation. Data saturation occurs when the data begin to replicate or become redundant (Marshall et al., 2013). In summary, had I not reached data saturation with four participants, I would have continued to recruit participants and conduct interviews until data would replicate or become redundant.

Participant selection is important in case study research (Elman et al., 2016; Gog, 2015; Gottfert, 2015). Participant selection criteria for my research study involved nonprofit business leaders possessing successful experience in deploying continuous improvement strategies for at least 5 years with the challenges of a decrease in funding and an increase in the demand of services. I selected participants from active nonprofit

firms. Some nonprofit organizations face government reduction of funding and growing service-provision populations (Chandler, 2014). I selected participants for this study from nonprofit organizations, subject to government funding reduction and increasing service requirements, possessing the experience and expertise in the implementation of successful continuous improvement programs to contribute in-depth substance to this research.

Researchers (Akaeze, 2016; Holland, 2017) noted that criteria for participants included willingness to participate in the study and knowledge in the study subject through demonstrated experience for at least 5 years. I worked with organizations such as DANA and State Government and performed online searches through various nonprofit organization websites to establish a list of qualified participants in the nonprofit service sector that demonstrated at least 5 years in continuous improvement strategy implementation in nonprofit organizations and willing to participate in this study. I used the email script (see Appendix A) to initiate communication with organization leaders and then provided the informed consent form to those who meet eligibility criteria. The informed consent form (see Appendix A) contains a participant eligibility section that requires acknowledgment by participants to determine eligibility.

Researchers select participants based on a typical sample to lead to deeper understanding of the subject matter (Elman et al., 2016; Starman, 2013; Yin, 2014). I focused on service-provision nonprofit organizations that experienced reduced government funding and increased service needs, which represented a typical sample of the nonprofit organizations in Delaware. Yin (2014) noted that the simplest multiple case

studies consist of a selection of two or more cases that are considered replications. I selected four participants from Delaware nonprofit service-provision organizations currently in existence, with process improvement programs.

Interviews serve as directed conversations that provide one of the most significant pieces of data in case studies (Yin, 2014). I used semistructured interviews to extract data from participants and conducted interviews at the location of the nonprofit organizations to promote the real world setting. Interview settings should promote open dialog, comfort, and familiarity while facilitating confidentiality (Cridland, Jones, Caputi, & Magee, 2015). I ensured the interview setting promoted open dialog, which is crucial to case study research by selecting a location that is comfortable and familiar to the participant. Providing convenience to participants improves rapport and comfort (Francone, 2017). Participants in comfortable interview settings might disclose more in-depth information (Miller, 2017). I selected an interview setting suggested by the participant that was comfortable and familiar to promote rapport and enhance communication. Similar case study researchers held interviews for approximately 60 minutes (Akaeze, 2016; Jones & Thessin, 2017). My interview sessions were approximately 60 minutes long, as specified in the interview protocol (see Appendix B). I reminded study participants that the interview could last approximately 60 minutes.

### **Ethical Research**

Researchers use codes of ethics to influence ethical decision-making behavior and promote participant and researcher trust (Yallop & Mowatt, 2016). Yin (2014) noted that researchers should apply ethical conduct to protect participants. Ethical conduct involves

gaining informed consent that involves informing participants about the purpose of the study and asking their permission to serve as participants (Yin, 2014). The purpose of the informed consent form is to gain consent and to inform participants of the research process, criteria and expectations for voluntary participation such as procedures, risks and benefits, payment and sample questions (Yin, 2014). I used the informed consent process for ethically promoting involvement of participants in my research study. Friese et al. (2017) noted that IRB input and approval is important for research involving human participants. The Walden University's IRB approval number for this study is 10-05-17-0193693. I personally presented the IRB-approved informed consent form to potential participants in accordance with participant compliance guidelines (see Appendix A).

Participants were free to withdraw from this study at any time. Participants have the right to refuse or withdraw from participation at any given time without repercussion (Akaeze, 2016). Participants wishing to end participation in this study had the option to email me as notice for recusal. Participants volunteered their time freely for this research study. According to Lynn (2001), there is a lack of understanding for how incentives work which may affect the quality of data. Hansen (2007) suggested that incentives have no significant effect when the interview times remained constant. My interviews with participants lasted 60 minutes. I did not present participants with any incentives for participating in my research study. Researchers conducting similar case study interviews did not use incentives to attract volunteers (Akaeze, 2016; Dimici, 2015; Holland, 2017). Saunders and Ung (2017) noted that participants for case study interviews should voluntarily participate and not feel compelled or obligated. I did not offer an incentive

because it could have promoted compulsion or obligation for participation. I gave participants a summary of the final research study findings.

Yin (2014) noted that protecting human participants' privacy and confidentiality including names, addresses, and etcetera is the researcher's responsibility. I protected names of participants and organizations by redacting confidential information from all research content. Cronin-Gilmore (2012) noted that researchers should secure participant data for a period after conducting research. Holland (2017) conducted case study interviews and kept participant data secure for a period of 5 years then destroyed the data. I will also keep original data for a minimum of 5 years in a safe location in my home and will destroy the data after the 5-year period.

### **Data Collection Instruments**

I used an email script (see Appendix A) to initiate communication with participants. I have access to organizations with large databases of potential participants. I also work in affiliation with the nonprofit community and have rapport with many nonprofit leaders. After the initial contact, I followed up with the informed consent form.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) introduced the concept of the researcher as the primary research instrument. Researchers conducting qualitative case studies function as the primary data collection instrument to collect data using interviews and document analysis (Akaeze, 2016; Fletcher, 2016; Kozleski, 2017). Researchers using the qualitative case study research design collect and analyze data by interacting with study participants and using several data collection instruments (Fletcher, 2016; Kozlezki, 2017; Yin, 2014). I collected and analyzed data by engaging with study participants and using several data

collection instruments. As the researcher, I served as the main data collection instrument for this case study and collected data using semistructured interviews and document analysis.

Researchers collect rich, in-depth data through face-to-face, semistructured interviews, using open-ended questions, to obtain an improved understanding of participants' perspectives of the phenomenon under investigation (Dimici, 2015; Gottfert, 2015; Holland, 2017). Researchers conduct semistructured interviews, which allow for follow-up interview questions leading to the creation of explanatory context (Ling, Payne, Connaire, & McCarron, 2016). Collecting rich data through semistructured interviews might lead to the discovery of new themes in the data (Yin, 2014). I collected rich, in-depth data by conducting face-to-face, semistructured interviews to discover new themes in the data and to gain an enhanced understanding of participants' perspectives regarding strategies leaders of nonprofit organizations use to implement successful continuous improvement programs. I asked follow-up interview questions to create explanatory context.

Researchers use document analysis as a data collection technique (Akaeze, 2016; Holland, 2017; Yin, 2014). Using document analysis in conjunction with conducting semistructured interviews allows researchers to explore the phenomenon under investigation (Archambault, Kennedy, & Friedhoff, 2016) and increase rigor of the study through triangulation (Kallio, Pietila, Johnson, & Kangasniemi, 2016; Yin, 2014). Researchers analyze various organizational data including documents such as financial statements, internal memos, emails, newsletters, and data found on websites such as

annual reports (Akaeze, 2016; Cleary, Horsfall, & Hayter, 2014; Kozleski, 2017; Mariani, Annunziata, Aprile, & Nacchia, 2017; Wilson, 2016) to find specific information pertaining to the case study.

I used document analysis as another data collection technique in this study. I accessed documents, such as press releases, newsletters, financial data, and other relevant information from organizations' websites that provided data related to continuous improvement strategies used in these nonprofit organizations. I used semistructured interviews and document analysis concurrently to explore strategies leaders of nonprofit organizations used to implement successful continuous improvement programs. As the primary research instrument, I collected data by conducting, recording and transcribing face-to-face, semistructured interviews with participants using an interview protocol (see Appendix B). At the end of the interview, participants had an opportunity to give any additional thoughts on continuous improvement programs that the interview might not have generated.

Recording and transcribing interview data ensures the reliability of the participants' responses (Akaeze, 2016; Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016; Holland, 2017). Researchers use member checking to validate data collected during qualitative research interviews and to mitigate researcher bias (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016; Caretta, 2015; Chua & Adams, 2014). Member checking involves participants reviewing researchers' interpretations of participants' responses to correct, confirm, add, and or clarify specific aspects of the data collected (Yin, 2014). Researchers use member checking (Marshall et al., 2013), which takes place when the

researchers conduct interviews, interpret what the participants shared, and share this interpretation with the participants for validation. I recorded and transcribed interview data to ensure the reliability of the participants' responses. I used member checking to allow participants to correct, confirm, add, and or clarify specific aspects of the data collected. I interpreted what the participants shared and shared this interpretation with the participants to validate data collected and to mitigate bias.

### **Data Collection Technique**

Researchers use interviews in qualitative studies as a technique to grasp participants' experiences (Akaeze, 2016; Holland, 2017; Yin, 2014). Researchers applying the interview technique may use structured, unstructured or semistructured versions to collect data (Courneya, Wright, Frinton, Mak, Schulzer, & Pachev, 2005; Negis-Isik & Gursel, 2013; Yin, 2014). Conducting structured interviews involves discipline to rigid structure of wording and sequence of questions (McTate & Leffler, 2017). I did not select structured interviews because it requires rigorous, standardized and ordered questions. Conducting unstructured interviews allows researchers to ask different questions to different participants in any manner befitting the researcher (Dana, Dawes, & Peterson, 2013). I did not select unstructured interviews because this method puts the power of the interview in the hands of the interviewer to guide in any direction he prefers and this may facilitate bias.

I used an email script (see Appendix A) to initiate contact with participants. I met with the four participants at locations of their preference. Three participants chose to meet at their office locations and, the other, at a coffee house. Interviews averaged 45

minutes in length. Initially I had 5 interviews scheduled but a participant withdrew prior to the interview. Researchers use interview questions when gathering rich, in-depth information through interpersonal communication (Courneya et al., 2005; Dimici, 2015; Gottfert, 2015). Recording and transcribing interviews are common when conducting interviews for qualitative research (Akaeze, 2016; Hampton, Rabagliati, Sorace, & Fletcher-Watson, 2017; Holland, 2017). Researchers conducting semistructured, in-depth interviews use the overarching research question to guide the data collection process and may use supporting and follow up questions to draw rich data regarding a phenomenon (Akaeze, 2016; Courneya et al., 2005; Holland, 2017). Researchers use semistructured interviews for facilitating flexibility related to adapting research questions to obtain rich and in-depth data (Elliott et al., 2011; Gottfert, 2015; Yin, 2014).

Advantages of semistructured interviews include open-ended questions that allow participants to respond in their own words and from their worldview and provide descriptive, in-depth data (Adzobu, 2014; Elliott et al., 2011; Gottfert, 2015; Kallio et al., 2016). Researchers use semistructured interviews to facilitate a loose and flexible format that allows the interview process to move smoothly from question to question even though the interviewer may change the order of questions to promote open dialog and ask clarifying questions (Adzobu, 2014; Elliott et al., 2011; Gottfert, 2015; Kallio et al., 2016). Another advantage of the semistructured interview technique is that researchers can develop a relationship with participants and address concerns and questions participants may have about the research study (Cridland et al., 2015; Kallio et al., 2016; Newton, 2016). Participants in this study responded to the interview questions in their

own words, without restrictions. Using a semistructured process helped facilitate a comfortable and smooth process that promoted in-depth dialog.

Researchers (Akaeze, 2016; Childs 2017; Holland, 2017) noted that the disadvantages of semistructured interviews include the lengthy and costly process, unstructured methodology, complexity of data, excessive details provided by participants, and the bias that may affect interpretation of data. I was able to schedule and conduct interviews in a timely manner and used an informed consent form, an email script (see Appendix A), and interview protocol (see Appendix B) to establish a structured data collection process. The disadvantages associated with conducting semistructured interviews may negatively affect data quality (Akaeze, 2016; Kallio et al., 2016; Madill & Sullivan, 2017). Interview topics and recording of interviews may make participants uncomfortable (Cridland et al., 2015). This discomfort may lead to nervousness during the interview process or the unwillingness of participants to release rich, in-depth information (Nieman, 2013). Novice researchers lacking experience in interviewing may struggle with the interview process (Cridland et al., 2015; Newton, 2017; Yin, 2014). Interviewing may promote bias as participants attempt to provide answers that are more pleasing to the researcher rather than the facts (Masip, Blandon-Gitlin, Martinez, Herrero, & Ibabe, 2016; Yin, 2014). I encountered participants' seeking my approval twice during my interviews. Participants sought my approval on whether they were providing me with the correct answers. I explained to study participants that there were no correct or wrong answers to interview questions and to feel welcomed to provide their answers because I was there to learn from them. The researcher's views and nonverbal cues may also

influence the answers provided by the participants (Kallio et al., 2016). I focused on controlling my facial expressions and nonverbal cues. I mitigated the negative effects of conducting semistructured interviews by providing participants with an informed consent form and interview protocol that detailed the semistructured interview process. I answered any questions that participants had about the interviews and the research study.

Using semistructured interviews involved collecting data from well-qualified participants having demonstrated extensive experience as leaders of nonprofit organizations in the successful implementation of continuous improvement programs to increase revenue. I determined suitable participants by requiring acknowledgement on the informed consent form to a statement that attests to qualifications. I also asked for professional references from colleagues familiar with nonprofit organizations and this study. I developed the interview protocol (see Appendix B) for participants by aligning the interview questions with the overarching research question. Researchers conducting case study research use digital recorders, such as cell phones and digital recording devices (Akaeze, 2016; Childs, 2017; Yin, 2014). I recorded and transcribed all interviews and allowed participants to member check the data at the end of the interview to promote validity and accuracy in the data collection process. I used a Samsung Galaxy 8 cell phone as a digital voice recorder and kept a separate digital voice recorder as a backup. I did not need to use the backup device.

I conducted document analysis as another source of data collection. Qualitative researchers may employ a variety of data collection techniques including document analysis (Akaeze, 2016; Annink, 2017; Yin, 2014). Documents may be private or public

and include financial statements, organizational memos, and newspaper and website publications (Atchan, 2017; Hesjedal, Hetland, Iverson, & Manger, 2015; Kornhaber, Barkauskas, & Griffith, 2016). I gained access to private documentation by requesting permission from authorized officers within the organization. Advantages of using document analysis along with interviewing include allowing the researcher to conduct triangulation to increase rigor and obtain greater insights to the research phenomenon that may lead to a richer understanding of the research phenomenon that may involve the discovery of new themes (Atchan et al., 2016; Yin, 2014).

I anticipated that collecting data using document analysis comes with some disadvantages. Organizations create documents for various purposes, which may lead researchers to make assumptions and cause variation in interpretation, which challenge the trustworthiness of the data (Grammes & Acikalin, 2016; White, Oelke, & Friesen, 2012). Another obstacle when attempting document analysis is the access to data deemed sensitive by organizations (Kristin & Kalpana, 2017). I intended to access organizational documents once I received IRB permission to proceed with data collection. I encountered one of the disadvantages of document analysis, which is denied access to internal company documentation. Instead, I reviewed press releases, newsletters, financial data, and other relevant information from the participating organizations' websites. I also interpreted the document content without background knowledge or commentary from the document producer.

A pilot study is a preliminary study that serves to prepare the researcher before conducting a larger study (Doody & Doody, 2015; Morris & Rosenbloom, 2017; Yin,

2014). After IRB approval, a pilot study was not required because I conducted a multiple case study exercise as part of my coursework at Walden University. Conducting this case study exercise provided me with experience for conducting multiple case study research using semistructured interviews, developing an interview protocol, and following the interview protocol to gain informed consent and integrating tools, such as a Samsung Note 4 as a digital recording device. I used the opportunity to concentrate on mitigating researcher bias by paying attention to my behavior, cues, and transcribed interview data in comparison with the recorded interview and member checked my interview data. The research I conducted consisted of process improvement strategies small business use to generate revenue. I met with participants at a location familiar to them after providing informed consent. I followed an interview protocol and asked five pre-written questions and follow up questions for clarification as needed. Participation was voluntary. I reviewed and analyzed the data using Excel and developed themes. I presented my research as an assignment for review by a Walden University professor.

Member checking involves participants' real-time review of transcribed interview data to increase the credibility of data (Birt et al., 2016; Holland, 2017; Madill & Sullivan, 2017). Researchers allow participants to member check interview data to ensure validity and accuracy (Akaeze, 2016; Birt et al., 2016; Holland, 2017). Member checking involves participants reviewing the researchers' interpretation of participants answers to correct, confirm, add, and or clarify specific aspects of the data collected (Yin, 2014). Researchers use member checking (Marshall et al., 2013), which takes place when the

researchers conduct interviews, interpret what the participants shared, and share this interpretation with the participants for validation.

I interpreted what participants shared during the interviews and shared this interpretation back with the participants to validate data and to mitigate bias. I allowed participants to member check the interview data at the end of the data collection process to ensure validity and accuracy. Some disadvantages to member checking exist. Social and interpersonal relationships, different worldviews, and values and beliefs may influence member checking (Madill & Sullivan, 2017). Birt et al. (2016) noted that member checking might allow participants to reconstruct their answers especially if answers reflect negativity. I did not encounter any of these disadvantages in my member checking process.

### **Data Organization Techniques**

Conducting qualitative case study research involves the collection and organization of empirical data (dos Santos Bortolucci Espejo, Portulhak, & Pacheco, 2017; Kimball, 2016; Senom & Othman, 2014; Yin, 2014). It is useful to compile data in an organized manner and qualitative researchers use various methods for this process (Akaeze, 2016; Banks, 2013; Holland, 2017). My case study research involved the collection and organization of empirical data using field notes, a digital recording device, and transcribed interview data collected from face-to-face semistructured interviews consisting of nine questions (see Appendix B). Researchers protect participants' confidentiality and privacy (Yin, 2014) by using methods such as coding. I used coding, such as P1, P2, P3 to ensure participants' confidentiality and privacy and redact interview

transcripts by removing personal information and other information deemed confidential by the participants.

I kept electronic data on a password protected flash drive and kept electronic and hard copy data in a safe at my home. McCurdy and Ross (2017) noted the importance of keeping qualitative research data secured and destroying them after a certain period. I will destroy the flash drive and hardcopy data by shredding after 5 years. Importing raw data from the flash drive into a qualitative data analysis software (QDAS) program assisted in data organization. Researchers use QDAS to better understand qualitative data through organizing, coding, retrieving, and analyzing (Paulus, Woods, Atkins, & Macklin, 2017; Salmona & Kaczynski, 2016; Woods, Paulus, Atkins, & Macklin, 2016). I used QDAS, specifically NVivo for Mac, to assist in retrieving, coding, and analyzing my research data. Researchers use NVivo software to organize data by importing, storing, and analyzing data related to qualitative studies (Akaeze, 2016; Paulus et al., 2017; Woods et al., 2016). Qualitative researchers (Akaeze, 2016, Paulus et al., 2017) use various versions of NVivo software when preparing to organize and sort rich, in-depth multimedia data. NVivo is relatively inexpensive and accessible as a download. I used NVivo for Mac software to sort and organize my multimedia data in a central location. It is important that tools selected for data analysis do not perform the thinking for the researcher but rather assist with data organization (Paulus et al., 2017). As the researcher, I maintained the role of analyst, which is to search for the meaning within the data.

I used a reflective journal to capture field notes, such as my thoughts and observations of participants' initial demeanor, to promote transparency and broad

descriptions while allowing me to reflect on the research process. Qualitative researchers (Akaeze, 2016; Akkoyunlu, Telli, E.Çetin, & Dağhan, 2016) used a reflective journal as a record book, which allow the researchers to demonstrate research process transparency, record broad descriptions, and document insights otherwise not captured during the research process. Using a reflective journal allows researchers to reflect on action steps and insights (O'Leary, Wattison, Edwards, & Bryan, 2015) and to do bracketing (Tufford & Newman, 2012). I kept an electronic reflective journal to demonstrate research transparency by documenting reactions to the interview process, setting, and my personal reflections during the data analysis; decisions about coding; and theme identification.

Many countries have enacted research data laws that serve to establish best practices for collecting and sorting data during and after research (Rumbold & Pierscionek, 2017). These laws are guidelines for data collection best practices in research institutions. The IRB requirements align with many of these research data laws and apply to my research study. Among the criteria of these legislations are (a) the purpose of collecting data, (b) obtaining informed consent, (c) collecting only information needed for the study, (d) using the data only for the purposes of the research study, (e) retaining the information only as long as required, and (f) keeping the information secure (McCurdy & Ross, 2017; Rumbold & Pierscionek, 2017).

I stored all raw data on a password protected flash drive and kept hardcopies in a locked safe during non-use periods. Researchers (Akaeze, 2016; Childs, 2017; Holland, 2017) conducting similar studies used similar strategies to ensure secure storage throughout the research process. Yin (2014) noted that researchers must consider ethical

responsibility for their work, which includes protecting research data. I coded participants as P1, P2, P3, and P4 and organizations as O1, O2, O3, and O4 to maintain confidentiality and protect privacy of participants. Following the completion of the study and according to the requirements of Walden University, raw data will remain locked in a safe for 5 years. Researchers maintain data in a secure location for a fixed period after conducting case study research and then the data are destroyed (Akaeze, 2016; Banks, 2013; Holland, 2017). I will maintain the data, both electronic and hardcopy, in a secured location at my home for a period of 5 years. I will destroy the data by shredding them after 5 years.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis for this case study revolved around TQM applications regarding continuous improvement strategies in nonprofit organizations. I achieved data saturation with four participants. Data saturation is attained when the data begins to repeat or become redundant (Akaeze, 2016; Holland, 2017; Yin, 2014). Case study research involves the use of multiple sources of data (Tumele, 2015; Yin, 2014). Researchers conduct data analysis to identify patterns and relationships among the data to add transparency and to address a central research question (Atchan, 2016; Salmona & Kaczynski, 2016; Yin, 2014).

Attaining triangulation involves using multiple sources of data, such as data collected from interviews and document analyses (Drouin, Stewart, & Van Gorder, 2015; Joslin & Muller, 2016; Yin, 2014). Researchers conducting case study research utilize triangulation as a method that decreases bias and increases validity through multiple

perspectives (Drouin et al., 2015; Hober, Weitlaner, & Pergler, 2016; Joslin & Muller, 2016; Yin, 2014). Four types of triangulation are data, investigator, theory, and methodological (Joslin & Muller, 2016; Tibben, 2016; Yin, 2014). Data triangulation involves capturing data from multiple sources, investigator triangulation involves data collection using multiple investigators, theory triangulation involves multiple perspectives of the same data under analysis, and methodological triangulation involves multiple methods to collect data (Gibson, 2017; Joslin & Muller, 2016; Yin, 2014). Researchers applied methodological triangulation by using at least two methods to collect data to explore the phenomenon (Akaeze, 2016; Holland, 2017). Methods used to give various perspectives and insights included interviews, notes, and journaling. I applied methodological triangulation by collecting data from multiple sources using face-to-face interviews and document analysis. Conducting methodological triangulation produces validation of the effectiveness of a technique and includes semistructured interviews, and other collection activities to demonstrate the richness and depth of the data (Bekhet & Zauszniewski, 2012; Drouin et al., 2015; Fusch & Ness, 2015; Iqbal & Hassan, 2015).

Researchers conducting qualitative studies may perform data analysis continuously and in conjunction with data collection (Gottfert, 2015; Kozleski, 2017; Mayer, 2015). Qualitative data analysis involves exploration of recurring themes, patterns or concepts (Firmin, Bonfils, Luther, Minor, & Salyers, 2016; Nassaji, 2015). Qualitative data analysis may be thematic, stylistic, or rhetorical (Farsi, 2017). Researchers using thematic analysis use an inductive, iterative approach that requires multiple reviews of the same data (Firmin et al., 2016). Two of the most commonly used data analysis

programs are ATLAS.ti and NVivo (Paulus et al., 2017). I researched both software packages to determine the advantages of each for this study. Researchers using NVivo and ATLAS.ti had similar results when using the software (Paulus et al., 2017). I visited both websites, reviewed the products, and decided to use NVivo for Mac simply because it seemed simpler to install and use on an Apple iMAC. Researchers use QDAS, such as various versions of NVivo software, for data classification, ordering, and analysis by importing, storing, and analyzing data related to qualitative studies (Akaeze, 2016; Paulus et al., 2017; Woods et al., 2016). QDAS allows researchers to identify themes and the relationships among the themes (Paulus et al., 2017).

Researchers use themes to address overarching research questions, organize data by identifying keywords and patterns, and to validate their interpretation of data (Bessa & Tomlinson, 2017; Lin, Li, & Wang, 2017; Pohlmann, & Kaartemo, n.d.). I identified themes that I used to help me answer the overarching research question by using a coding process to highlight keywords and develop patterns. Researchers use NVivo to facilitate a coding process to identify and continuously refine the codes until no new themes emerge (Akaeze, 2016; Edward-Jones, 2014; Oliveira, Bitencourt, Zanardo dos Santos, & Teixeira, 2016). To answer the overarching research question, I continuously refined the codes identified by the NVivo software until there were no new themes.

I followed the interview protocol (see Appendix B) and uploaded interview transcripts by typing into a Microsoft Word document and uploading to the NVivo for Mac software. I directly uploaded voice recordings from my phone to my iMac computer and into NVivo for Mac software. I employed the meaningful unit analysis strategy.

Chenail (2012a) noted that meaningful unit analysis might be more efficient and effective than traditional line-by-line or word-by-word analysis because the researcher identifies meaningful units as opposed to word-by-word or line-by-line analysis. Researchers use labels to identify meaningful units of a transcript then apply these labels to all transcripts to create broad themes (Bradley, Getrich, & Hannigan, 2015). Chenail (2012a) suggested that using the *Insert Comment* function in Microsoft Word allows a researcher to produce an audit trail that promotes trustworthiness and transparency, especially to those external to the research process. After I typed the interview transcripts into Microsoft Word, I used the *Insert Comment* function to make notes and develop an audit trail. I made comments regarding key words and phrases that occurred across all participant interviews. I used a reflective journal to capture nuances, insights and broad themes. Keeping a reflective journal during interviews is another option for researchers to capture possible themes, background information, and context for later review (Akaeze, 2016).

In addition, as the second source for data triangulation, I reviewed publicly accessible organizational documents and used the content analysis method to review the data. I reviewed press releases, newsletters, financial documents, and annual reports from online sources. The documents helped to support continuous improvement concepts and strategies used by the nonprofit leaders (see presentation of findings, section 3). Researchers use content analysis to analyze documents by classifying identified codes and identifying emerging themes (Yin, 2014). Researchers (Crowe, Inder, & Porter, 2015; Visagie, Loxton, Stallard, & Silverman, 2017) noted that qualitative data analysis involves various methods including thematic and content analysis. I used content analysis

for document scrutiny for this study. Content analysis involves identifying and classifying codes and emerging themes (Crowe et al., 2015). Visage et al. (2017) employed Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines for content analysis. These guidelines comprised of a) data familiarity, b) initial coding, c) searching for themes, d) reviewing themes and e) defining and naming themes. I used these guidelines to perform the content analysis. I located documents, converted these documents to electronic format, and imported the documents into NVivo for conducting content analysis.

I requested access to company documents from an authorized officer of the organization and visited the organizations' websites to collect data about organizational goals, recent activities, performance, annual reports, and other data pertinent to the overarching research question. I used coding to categorize data by findings. Researchers performing methodological triangulation use coding and data analysis instruments to analyze the various streams of data to find similarities and patterns (Akaeze, 2016; Holland, 2017; Iqbal & Hassan, 2015).

I took notes during the interviews to recollect context and background to garner a better understanding of participants' responses to interview questions through the coding and thematic analysis. Thorley, Baxter, and Lorek (2016) noted that note taking assisted in recollection. Researchers write memos as a method to reflect and recollect thoughts and observations captured throughout the data collection phase (Bringer, Johnston, & Brackenridge, 2006; Parrott & Cherry, 2015). Memos help facilitate the transition from descriptive mode to analytical thinking (Bringer et al., 2006). Researchers identify themes by grouping similar labels together (Bradley, Curry, & Devers, 2007). I used

memos to record reflective notes as I learned from the data. Mind mapping and concept mapping are thinking and note-taking strategies (Çoban & Tokatlı, 2017) that allow researchers to represent concepts and ideas around central themes more efficiently and effectively (Burgess-Allen & Owen-Smith, 2010; Jirasek, Plevova, Jiraskova, & Dvorakova, 2016). Mapping is effective for code-based analysis that connects codes, concepts, and themes (Burgess-Allen & Owen Smith, 2010; Jirasek, Plevova, Jiraskova, & Dvorakova, 2016). I used mind mapping and concept mapping to group the information collected through memos and other analysis notes into concepts and themes to transition from descriptive codes to broad analytical descriptions.

I employed concept and mind mapping to help me identify themes, demonstrate the connections between themes and related literature, and illustrate the way themes support the conceptual framework of the study. Themes contained in related literature included innovation, quality, organizational contribution, availability of resources, continuous improvement, management and leadership, organizational culture, performance and competitive advantage (Augusto et al., 2014; Aydin et al., 2015; Green, 2012; Hietschold et al. 2014; Karyotakis & Moustakis 2014; Kaur & Sharma, 2014; Liao et al., 2014; Masry et al., 2015; Ooi, 2015; Steiber & Alnge, 2013).

### **Reliability and Validity**

Validity and reliability are broad terms used to ensure trustworthiness in qualitative research by capturing facts and accuracy within the research and from the data while mitigating bias (Akaeze, 2016; Street & Ward, 2012). Several scholars (Cope, 2014; Yin, 2014) noted that researchers measure the quality of research designs using

trustworthiness. Most commonly, qualitative researchers ensure trustworthiness by addressing the following four criteria established by Lincoln and Guba (1985): dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability (Cope, 2014; Hadi & Closs, 2016; Shenton, 2004).

### **Reliability**

Reliability is the ability to draw similar results if the research was to be reproduced in the same manner (Shenton, 2004; Yin 2014). Researchers use reliable instruments and multiple sources of evidence to attain a high level of quality in conducting and reporting research, including reliable results (Dag & Arslantas, 2015; Tertoolen, Geldens, van Oers, & Popeijus, 2015). In this case study, I used two sources of evidence, including interviews and document analysis because several researchers (Akaeze, 2016; Holland, 2017; Ng et al., 2013) used these multiple sources of data collection when conducting qualitative research. Researchers conducting case studies maintain that no source supersedes the others; instead, sources of data collection complement each other and researchers must use as many data collection sources as possible (Shadiev, Wu, & Huang, 2017; Yin, 2014).

Dependability refers to the constancy of findings and conclusions through repetition of the research process captured through an audit trail (Akaeze, 2016; Cope, 2014; Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013). To enhance dependability, I used experts to examine this study's research process, as recommended by several scholars (Chan Huan Zhi, Hj Malek, & Bahari, 2017; Haakma, Janssen, & Minnaert, 2017; Landis, Scott, & Kahn, 2015). To ensure dependability, I used the same set of interview

questions and the interview protocol (see Appendix B) for each interview (Akaeze, 2016; Holland, 2017; Townsend, Pisapia, & Razzaq, 2015). Finally, I used *member checking* to confirm data dependability, as suggested by several scholars (Birt et al., 2016; Marshall et al., 2013; Yin, 2014). I conducted member checking by returning written interview data to participants for their confirmation that data were documented accurately and according to their interpretation, as suggested by several experts (Akaeze, 2016; Birt et al., 2016; Cam & Unal Oruc, 2014). I handed my notebook over to each participant at the conclusion of the interview. I granted participants at least fifteen minutes after the interviews to review their responses. All participants reviewed and approved their interview transcripts without changes. Researchers use member checking to ensure data dependability by ascertaining that researchers' biases have not tainted the data collected (Akaeze, 2016; Cam & Unal Oruc, 2014; Yin, 2014). Member checking was important to my research study because I sought to capture the interviewees' experiences without bias regarding strategies they used to implement successful continuous improvement programs to increase revenue in their organizations.

Researchers record interviews to capture data verbatim, allowing for review and reflection to ensure that transcribed data and themes are reliable (Akaeze, 2016; Birt, et al., 2016; Holland, 2017). I mitigated my bias by asking interviewees to explain their answers providing in-depth detail. If participants' answers to interview questions lacked depth, I asked participants to elaborate on their answers. I did not alter the interview process. I followed the interview protocol (see Appendix B) and did not ask participants to answer new questions to ensure I remained consistent and increased reliability, as

recommended by several researchers (Akaeze, 2016; Holland, 2017; Townsend et al., 2015).

### **Validity**

Research validity involves attaining credibility, transferability, and confirmability (Girgin, 2013; Kozleski, 2017; Yin, 2014). Researchers using the case study design ensure credibility by using multiple sources of data, iterative and in-depth analysis to identify themes and patterns across cases to ensure validity (Akaeze, 2016; Bigham & Nix, 2011; Kozleski, 2017). When an individual researcher conducts data analysis during case study research, attaining credibility depends on the researcher's ability to ensure completeness and representation of data (Akaeze, 2016; Holland, 2017; Yin, 2014). One way to establish credibility is by carefully reading interview data (Cronin, 2014; Holland, 2017; Yin, 2014). I thoroughly reviewed interpreted data to ascertain that I effectively captured participants' perspectives. I also ensured that I captured similarities and differences among participants of this study. I conducted member checking after interpreting participants' interview answers and before analyzing data to ensure validity of the interview data, as recommended by several scholars (Akaeze, 2016; Birt et al., 2016; Holland, 2017).

Transferability refers to the applicability of findings to other similar studies, contexts, or situations while adhering to the meanings of the current study (Akaeze, 2016; Bahcekapili, Bahcekapili, Fis Erumit, Goktas, & Sozbilir, 2013; Houghton et al., 2013). I used semistructured interviews and achieved internal and external validity using member checking and documentation of the research process using thick descriptions to promote

transferability (Akaeze, 2016; Cam & Unal Oruc, 2014; Holland, 2017; Houghton et al., 2013). Attaining transferability involves thick descriptions with rich and vigorous reports (Houghton et al., 2013). To provide high-quality results, I purposively selected participants detailing participant demographics; conducted in-depth and extensive data analysis; and presented results in an innate, transparent, and detailed format to promote this study's transferability.

Confirmability occurs after establishing dependability, credibility, and transferability (Cao, 2007; Houghton et al., 2013; Lee, Mishna, & Brennenstuhl, 2010). Confirmability refers to the researcher's capability to show that the research data are the actual researcher's interpretation of participants' answers to interview questions without bias (Akaeze, 2016; Holland, 2017; Houghton et al., 2013). I gave my undivided attention to every participant and documented participant's responses to mitigate biases. I documented my own thoughts, biases, and insights. I interpreted participants' interview answers carefully, focusing on capturing perceptions exactly as explained by the participant, establishing a link between data and results, and increasing confirmability of the results by using existing literature.

Using methodological triangulation increases a research study's validity by using multiple sources of data, such as data collected from interviews and document analyses to confirm study findings (Drouin, Stewart, & Van Gorder, 2015; Joslin & Muller, 2016; Yin, 2014). I increased validity in this research study by using methodological triangulation. To conduct triangulation, I used member checking of interpreted interview data, and reviewed company documents. Case study research design's foundation is the

collection of data from multiple sources. Using methodological triangulation of data sources is the main strategy to support validity of this case study, as suggested by several scholars (Drouin, Stewart, & Van Gorder, 2015; Joslin & Muller, 2016; Yin, 2014).

I achieved data saturation in this research study by continuously analyzing data. Data saturation occurs when additional data collection and analyses results in repetitive, redundant information (Akaeze, 2016; Hennink et al., 2017; Marshall et al., 2013). Researchers are unable to generate definite findings unless they achieve data saturation (Akaeze, 2016; Gillian & Craig, 2016; Holland, 2017); consequently, I continued to collect and analyze data until data became repetitive and redundant.

### **Transition and Summary**

In Section 2, I discussed several important elements of this study, including a restatement of the purpose statement, role of the researcher, participants, research method and design, population and sampling, ethical research, data collection instruments, data collection technique, data analysis, reliability and validity, and transition and summary. Section 3 includes the study overview, presentation of findings, application to professional practice, implications for social change, recommendations for action, recommendations for further study, reflections, summary, and study conclusion.

### Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

In Section 1, the foundation of the study, I introduced the general doctrine of the study. In Section 2, I discussed several important elements of this study. In Section 3, I provide the study overview, presentation of findings, application to professional practice, implications for social change, recommendations for action, recommendations for further study, reflections, summary, and study conclusion.

#### **Introduction and Study Overview**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies leaders of nonprofit organizations use to implement successful continuous improvement programs to increase revenue. I analyzed data collected from conducting semistructured interview and review of organizational documents. Three major themes emerged from data analysis: leadership strategies for holistic focus on process improvement, leadership focus on organizational strategy, and specific focus on functions of leadership. Participants also noted areas of concern and deficiency in their process and the continued struggle of dealing with internal and external change while trying to improve simultaneously. A finding from this study that contradicted the findings of some previous research studies was the lack of differentiation between for-profit operations and nonprofit operations. Nonprofit leaders focus on revenue growth and business success as acutely as for-profit leaders do; however, the revenue stream of nonprofits significantly deviates from that of for-profit enterprises. Nonprofit revenue comes primarily from stakeholders, such as donors, grants, and government funding to support a specific purpose. For-profit revenues are primarily a direct result from goods and services. In

regards to the processes nonprofit leaders use, the similarities, desired outcomes, constraints, and setbacks were generally similar to those of for-profit organizations, as noted in the literature review.

### **Presentation of the Findings**

The overarching research question for this research study was the following: What strategies do leaders of nonprofit organizations use to implement successful continuous improvement programs to increase revenue? My strategy for addressing this question involved conducting semistructured interviews with four nonprofit leaders in Delaware to obtain in-depth information regarding strategies nonprofit leaders use to implement successful continuous improvement programs to increase revenue. Each participant met the qualifications for participation by having at least 5 years of experience implementing continuous improvement strategies in nonprofit organizations. I coded participants as P1, P2, P3, and P4 and organizations as O1, O2, O3, and O4 to maintain confidentiality and protect privacy. I reviewed publicly accessible documents for each organization, consisting of press releases, newsletters, financial data, and other relevant information from the organizations' websites. I triangulated data obtained from the semistructured interviews and my review of organizational documents. Before proceeding with interviews, study participants signed informed consent forms. Participant interviews lasted between 40 and 60 minutes.

I used NVivo for Mac to help sort and analyze data into themes. I cross-referenced with the literature review to determine consistency and relevance with peer-reviewed, scholarly articles. The conceptual framework for this study was TQM. I

transcribed interview data to Microsoft Word documents and uploaded transcriptions, interview audio recordings, and research observations drawn from documents and interviews into NVivo for Mac. I also kept notes as part of a research journal. I used NVivo for Mac to help store the data in a single location for easier analysis, highlight themes, and perform in-depth data analyses. Three major themes emerged from my analysis of the data: (a) leadership strategies for holistic focus on process improvement, (b) leadership focus on organizational strategy, and (c) specific focus on functions of leadership. Each major theme that emerged from data analyses contains subthemes that added context to the main theme. Table 1 shows the major themes that emerged from the data analysis process. The ranking order of the themes is not relevant.

Table 1

*Major themes identified from data collection*

Major themes	Participant responses	% of participant responses
Leadership strategies for holistic focus on process improvement	20	18
Leadership focus on organizational strategy	23	25
Specific focus on functions of leadership	17	16

Below is a discussion of the three themes and their relationship to the literature and conceptual framework used in this study.

### **Theme 1: Leadership Strategies for Holistic Process Improvement**

All four study participants used the terms *process improvement* and *continuous improvement* interchangeably during the interviews. The four participants in the study noted the importance of process improvement strategies; described detailed strategies that shared similar subthemes, constraints, and successful initiatives; and explained the concept of process improvement as a function connected to organizational goals but not as specific strategies, such as TQM, Lean, Six Sigma, or other modeled process improvement strategies. I noted core values and principles related to continuous improvement strategies throughout the interviews with the four participants in which I found similarities among process improvement initiatives. All four participants viewed process improvement as activities needed through an all-inclusive strategy for continuous improvement.

Similar themes regarding process improvement emerged from analysis of the data from the four interviews. Nonprofit leaders rely heavily on financial data reporting to summarize processes in numbers to inform leaders on processes. All four participants made efforts to use process improvement strategies when targeting funding sources. Each participant continuously sought new and effective approaches for attaining revenue. P2 noted that “writing for grants and capital campaigning” is a primary focus of the process improvement strategy for O2. P4 noted that “competitive contracts” were a revenue stream that suited O4 because “they shifted strategy from compliance to quality.”

P1 noted that trial and error is a part of processes in O1 and that nothing can determine success practically unless implemented. P1 stated, “so many times people have

great ideas but they don't have the destination in mind." P1 further noted that implementation is a challenge especially when converting board strategy into practical steps for execution. P2 explained that process improvement means people improvement and that focus on process improvement should consider that "not all is taught but is caught." P2 noted that process improvement centers on mentorship and development through the ranks of the workforce. P2 noted that process improvement is a cycle and not a linear approach.

P3 also considered process improvement a cyclical process and explained that customers do not always see the need to continue to develop their own abilities to overcome their hardship. O3 leaders are "always evaluating best practices" and engaging in the development of "programs, trying to make sure homeowners are as successful as possible by offering continued training and troubleshooting services." P4 stated, "process improvement begins with leadership but the data for improvement needs to be drawn from the frontlines." P3 further disclosed the need for clearer communication, including better communication channels, to promote more effective and efficient process-improvement initiatives. P4 explained that "process improvement is a daily focus within O4 and the organization is quality-improvement driven so, an alignment with mission and meeting goals requires a continuous effort to improve processes." All four participants noted that funding and changing markets made process improvement a necessity more than a desire. P2, P3, and P4 noted that a significant measure of continuous improvement success was their ability to secure funding through competitive contracting, grants, and funding campaigns. All four participants sought to improve continuously, secure and

maintain funding, satisfy growing demand, and remain competitive. The following three subthemes under the leadership strategies for holistic process improvement theme emerged from conducting data analysis: (a) leaders conducted financial analyses, (b) leaders used strategies for customer-focused processes, and (c) leaders used strategies to promote employee engagement. Table 2 shows the subthemes under the leadership strategies for holistic process improvement theme.

Table 2

*Subthemes under the leadership strategies for holistic process improvement theme*

Subthemes	Participant response	% of participant response
Leaders conducted financial analyses	19	6
Leaders used strategies for customer-focused processes	11	15
Leaders used strategies to promote employee engagement	11	4

**Leaders conducted financial analyses.** For all participants, financial data had a significant role in the process improvement strategy. Participants used financial data as part of the ongoing organizational strategy and improvement processes. Participants referred to the review and decision-making process using financial data as financial analysis, which is part of the process improvement strategy. P1 noted that all initiatives “should be strategically analyzed for cost and return on investment before committing and not just because it sounded like a great idea.” P2 referred to O2’s leadership approach as “bean counting,” noting that budget, general ledgers, and other financial documents are essential for gauging and managing programs. P2 further detailed the challenge of

having salary as the largest expense and having to adhere to compliance regulations that demand specific ratios of staff to clients. P2 stated that O2 relied on a “huge volunteer pool ...because I don’t have the money to hire all the help I need.” In addition, P2 stated that O2 “lost a lot of funding from the State.”

P2 noted that without the continuous review of revenue reports, managing fluctuating expenses would be nearly impossible to achieve. P3 noted that the board of directors served as the final approving voice for all program-specific expenses. Financial analysis at O3 was primarily the responsibility of the board of directors. Financial documentation and analysis was a continuous part of their processes, which involved client home ownership. P4 explained that quarterly reporting and reviews occur because they are part of O4’s quality improvement activities. P4 explained the financial analysis process as very comprehensive due to the diverse offerings and contractual frameworks. P4 stated, “we have over 25 different programs that we manage, each with a unique contract structure and compliance requirements.”

All four participants viewed financial analysis as vital for gauging performance and communicating effectively throughout the management ranks. As part of process improvement, leaders use financial analysis to see expenditures in shorter increments of time, allowing for process adjustments necessary to balance continuously changing needs. Leaders use financial analysis to create a sense of security among leaders because it allowed them to monitor programs more closely and make continuous improvements as needed.

**Leaders used strategies for customer-focused processes.** Participants agreed that customer focus is critical to financial success and revenue management. P1 noted the need to create value within the organization to perform well in a competitive market. P1 noted that leaders need to “value employees, their opinions count, they should want to go to work, not have to go to work.” P1 placed strong emphasis on employees as internal customers and the need to motivate continuously to promote individual growth that results in overall organizational development. P1 also noted from a revenue standpoint the importance of understanding customer needs and design programs of value to the customer not just “assume this is what the customers want.” This strategy aligned closely with the strategic planning concept noted by P1, “as the revenue generators, how can we be profitable?” P1 suggested a hands-on approach for engaging customers, such as approaching customers standing in line and asking, “do you like standing in line for an hour? Can I show you a way to save time?” P1 further noted the importance of having customers be part of the solution.

P2 emphasized the critical population that O2 served. P2 noted the importance of having services aligned with customers’ desires to ensure positive outcomes because the focus is not just a customer satisfaction initiative but also a societal impact. P2 explained that O2 leaders used an industry grading system whereby high performing entities qualified for larger funding amounts. P2 noted that a strong focus on customers has a positive effect on stakeholder funding growth. P2 noted, “collaboration with parents, parents are the reason I am in business, getting them involved is one of the hardest parts of the business.”

P3 stated that O3 dealt with a difficult customer base, forcing O3's leadership team to apply a continuous effort to break barriers to connect services with customers' needs, as the fulfillment of the mission of the organization depends on client success. P3 noted that sustained client success is "as crucial to O3 as it is for sustainability of the organization itself." P3 noted the innovative measures taken to attract clients to programs,

When we provided a program on taxes, there was no interest and customers did not make a commitment, but when we use the word *empowerment*, they [customers] were like what was that? You're going to help me do what? The empowerment part is what makes the most impact.

P4 noted, "customer focus was a significant part of the quality agenda" of O4 and "continued adjustment to the changing needs of customers promoted a sustainability model" for O4. P4 deemed important to "maintain a reputation for doing good work" to get continued funding support determined by client satisfaction grades. P4 noted the use of *how are we doing* cards as a customer-focused strategy for continuous improvement in O4, and as part of customer satisfaction data collection. Participants agreed that the nonprofit market was about the client. *Clients are the reason we exist* was a common theme among the four study participants.

**Leaders used strategies to promote employee engagement.** All participants in the study weighed employee engagement significantly as part of continuous improvement strategy. P1, P2 and P4 noted that employees are the face of the organization. P1 demonstrated a genuine concern for value added engagement. P1 noted, "measuring attitude and motivation is difficult to accomplish from a top down perspective," and

described leadership efforts to create innovative activities within O1, such as the use of competitions and team challenges to help employees make themselves relevant to the value-added concept. P1 noted the need for employees to “speak up and become relevant,” as opposed to just being a mechanical component in the process.

P2 disclosed a scholarship program designed to help high performing employees pay tuition and promote employee engagement. P2 noted, “employee incentives promoted buy-in and mutual support for programs.” P2 also explained that “past program clients returned to volunteer [status] as a way of giving back.” P3 noted, “employee engagement, within the organization and between employees and the clients, is what ensures the sustainability of the client,” which was, in part, the mission of O3. P4 approached employee engagement using data sharing and having the staff share in the organization success. P4 further noted that continuous improvement strategies are only successful when there is a total organizational effort.

I drew a clear distinction between employee engagement and employee satisfaction from the data analysis. After conducting data analyses, I found participants view employee engagement as a necessary part of process improvement because employees are at the point of customer contact. Employees know the hurdles, successful paths, and redundant initiatives. Employee satisfaction emerged as a responsibility of leadership. I noted a contrast between employee satisfaction and employee engagement. All participants regarded employee engagement as a function of process improvement and regarded employee satisfaction as a function of leadership.

**Correlation to current literature.** The findings from this study regarding process improvement aligned with the scholarly literature (Hirzel, Leyer, & Moorman, 2017; Xiaodong et al., 2017), specifically customer-oriented focus, leadership involvement, and adaptability for sustainability. Cost, organizational culture, and customer-focused strategy are core elements of continuous improvement initiatives (Hirzel et al., 2017). All four participants used strategies to target issues concerning cost, culture, and continuous improvement.

All four participants noted the ongoing need for improved service provision that involved the coordination of the workforce and processes with a focus on customer satisfaction. In the nonprofit sector, the majority of customers represent the most economically challenged members of society, making the customer-focused provisions of nonprofit organizations a vital commodity (Xiaodong et al., 2017). Employee engagement is key to successful process improvement (Hirzel et al., 2017). Nonprofit organizations serve societal needs (Xiaodong et al., 2017). Organizational leaders are usually able to improve a process but experience far less success in sustaining the continuous growth model (Chakravorty & Hales, 2017). Continuous improvement models have their foundation on strategies developed around customer satisfaction (Al-Nahyan & Abdel All, 2017). Stakeholders are demanding higher quality services, better performance, and lower costs, increasing the need for financial analysis as part of the continuous improvement initiatives (Melao et al., 2016).

To achieve continuous improvement leaders must support strategies for gradual culture change (Liu, 2016), which involves engaging employees and collaborating to

achieve goals (Osbourne & Hammoud, 2017). Disengaged employees are very costly to an organization (Osbourne & Hammoud, 2017). Ashraf (2016) noted that an organizational culture is an enabler of continuous improvement. Management must work with employees to ensure that employees assume co-ownership of the process improvement implementation (Al-Nahyan & Abdel All, 2017). Employees must feel a sense of belonging and ownership over the culture change for continuous improvement to become effective (Liu, 2016).

**Correlation to conceptual framework.** Leaders use TQM to enhance organizational efficiency and performance (Al-Nahyan & Abdel, 2017). All participants acknowledged the importance of continuous improvement to remain competitive and to achieve sustainability. TQM applications involve the coordination of work teams, leaders, processes, and procedures to develop a continuous improvement culture to satisfy clients (Al- Nahyan & Abdel, 2017). All nonprofit leaders participating in this study noted the need for holistic involvement of the workforce and customer-focused process alignment that meets organizational goals. Not all elements of TQM are necessary for an organization to experience overall success and improved business performance (Prashanth, 2017). All four study participants provided continuous improvement strategies that shared some similarities in strategy but varied in technique and method. TQM strategies have significant positive effects on organization performance (Mahmood et al., 2014). All four participants in this study regarded process improvement as a strategy for growth and sustainability. Process improvement or continuous improvement is a common desire among nonprofit leaders.

Leaders of nonprofit organizations struggle with sustainable, continuous improvement models deriving from TQM (Bhuiyan & Baghel, 2005; Hirzel, Leyer, & Moorman, 2017; Mahmood et al., 2014). Nonprofit leaders adopt TQM principles, such as customer-oriented strategies, as part of process improvement initiatives (Mahmood et al., 2014). Leaders using process improvement initiatives eliminate operational problems, increase output, promote standardization of quality, and reduce complexity (Garcia-Bernal & Ramirez-Aleson, 2015).

A core focus of TQM's continuous improvement initiatives is to reduce productivity waste, which affects revenue (Yapa, 2012). All study participants noted the need to extend services to new and growing markets while facing challenges associated with funding reduction from traditional funders, such as government. Funders are also requiring more reporting to demonstrate effective use of funds, reduce administrative costs, and increase the direct allocation of funds to programs, as part of new funding arrangements.

The findings of this research study are different to those found in the literature. For instance, Soysa, Jayamaha, and Grigg (2016) stated that nonprofit organization leaders have trouble in using financial outcomes as a measure for success. Nonprofit leaders use revenue data significantly to demonstrate financial success and are extremely wary about finances and financial data accuracy. Drucker (1989) noted that nonprofit organizations focus as much on revenue as for profit organizations. All four participants noted the importance of financial analysis and its function in maintaining a sustainable organization. TQM techniques involve scientific methods and value analysis for work

processes, identifying areas for quality improvement and evaluating alternative solutions (Garcia-Bernal & Ramirez-Aleson, 2015).

Several scholars (Mehmood et al., 2014; Ooi, 2015) noted that customer focus remains an essential component for process improvement. All participants agreed that client focus was the reason their organizations exist. All participants noted that organizational leaders worked with the workforce to develop and implement strategies and processes to provide high-quality services to clients. According to Garcia-Bernal and Aleson-Ramirez (2015), TQM is the customer orientation of all processes with the intent of providing services that improve customer satisfaction.

Several researchers (Ashraf, 2016; Liu, 2016; Mahmood, 2014) provided evidence that supports the claim that employee engagement is a core component of TQM's process-improvement implementation and sustainability. Process improvement and continuous improvement are interchangeable terms that represent a systematic approach reliant on organizational culture change for success (Bhuiyan & Baghel, 2005). Liu (2016) noted that leaders could enhance organizational performance and effectiveness by integrating all employees into the management circle, sharing responsibility and accountability. Yapa (2012) claimed that strategies, such as the Deming's cycle of Plan-Do Check-Act and Juran's quality trilogy, weigh heavily on employee engagement and participation. An organization's culture change based on TQM cannot occur by management's actions alone, employee engagement is vital to culture change initiatives (Dubey & Gunasekaran, 2015).

## **Theme 2: Leadership Focus on Organizational Strategy**

All participants considered organizational strategy a responsibility of executive leadership and the board of directors, particularly when engaging in planning strategic activities for the following year. All participants noted that nonprofit organizations plan strategic activities annually. According to all participants, nonprofit organizations' leaders have the responsibility of determining the direction and strategic path of the organization. P1 noted that when engaging in strategic planning, "you look at your SWOT [strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats] analysis. A lot of times, your threats are so unknown. Your destination, your vision, your mission; put your *why* in there." P2 explained the leadership approach to organizational strategy as, "how do we generate revenue through buy in? We build rapport, establish connections, and use motivational strategies. Engage any and everybody who can help with the mission of giving back to the children. How can we change using people commitment?"

P3 explained the organizational strategy for O3 as delivering a transparent model based on trust and designed to align with the voice of the customer. P3 noted that customer-focused organizational strategy is evident through programs and noted, "*Voices for Women* [a community enhancement program], as the majority of program clients are women; was designed by leadership to bring community leaders and homeowners together to discuss community needs." P4 noted that the organization strategy for O4 was simply to maintain a high level of performance by "maintaining accreditation with a large emphasis on continuous quality improvement."

All four study participants indicated a desire for an inclusive organizational culture or a learning organization and the term *buy in* emerged frequently across all interviews as a core tenet to ensure organizational strategy success. All participants used the term *buy in* to note that a strategy without support from stakeholders at the operational level would fail. Theme 2, *leadership focus on organizational strategy*, has three subthemes, which are (a) leaders used effective communication, (b) leaders used financial planning strategies, and (c) leaders used operational improvement as a sustainability strategy (see Table 3).

Table 3

*Subthemes under the leadership focus on organizational strategy theme*

Subthemes	Participant response	% of participant response
Leaders used effective communication	24	14
Leadership used financial planning strategies	19	6
Leaders used operational improvement as a sustainability strategy	27	9

**Leaders used effective communication.** All four study participants use communication as part of their organizations' process improvement strategy. All leaders interviewed use reports to communicate progress and program reports to the board of directors. Leaders depend on communication in the form of financial, performance, and other reports to make effective decisions.

Communication, as P1 noted, “is so important but can become convoluted” and derail the productivity initiative. P1 further stated that “communication is probably the most talked about issue in O1 . . . consistency is key.” P2 noted, “everything that happens here is reported up.” P3 noted that it is important to “be provided regular updates on what is happening.” All participants in this study considered communication a means of empowerment. P1, P2 and P4 encouraged communication from bottom up rather than top down, acknowledging that top-down communication was already part of the strategic process. All participants explained that communication that can shed light on performance issues is the one that comes from the staff. All participants noted that the *voices at the front lines, in the trenches, or representing the face of the company* were extremely important and effective in directing the organization toward satisfying customers’ needs.

P1 noted that “great ideas with no destination” is a non-value approach and that isolated performance is inferior to engagement and collaboration. P1 noted the importance of “marketing ideas and strategies,” not only in a commercial sense but also within the organization to communicate effectively and to promote *buy in*. P2 and P4 used visual communicators, such as posters and signs, as well as comprehensive reports to communicate effectively within the organization. P3 emphasized community engagement and face-to-face exchange of ideas and updates. All participants underscored the need for organizational *buy in* regarding strategies and operational initiatives.

All participants used the *buy in* concept to support and influence the communication methods used to engage the workforce. The four organization leaders

used communication strategies in a variety of ways, but with similar intent, to gain stakeholder support, inform and update, and deliver policy and procedures. The organizations' leaders used communication as a tool of influence with donors and other stakeholders. All participants used robust collection of data methods to hand-pick specific pieces for communicating progress, failure, hardship, and motivation. P1 used the O1's marketing team as a force for communicating with internal and external stakeholders. P2 used communication to engage funders in organizational needs and to grow revenue.

**Leaders used financial planning strategies.** All four study participants noted that leaders use financial planning strategies to develop lead measures comprising of forecasts, projections, and needs analyses in order to meet strategic operational and program goals. P1 referred to financial planning strategies as “creating a destination and determining how we get there.” P1 referred to the financial planning as a “cost analysis for profitability.” All participants' financial planning strategies follow a general path of investing resources for increased resource and financial returns. Participant strategies involve securing capital from stakeholders and then using growth activity to maximize revenue in a cyclical process that starts and ends with outreach to stakeholders. This study's participants had a different approach to financial planning.

P2 and P4 noted that funders are vigilant to how responsibly and effectively organizations use funding. P2 and P4 explained that in a competitively growing market, reacting after fund distribution is not sufficient anymore. Nonprofit leaders have to demonstrate effective planning to show the path of the funding usage prior to distribution. While P2 referenced program and market expansion strategies that require robust

financial planning details, P4 explained that, “we have twenty-five different programs each with their own contractual process, data systems, evidence-based model, and measures making their costs unique.” P4 noted that financial planning was critical to ensuring program sustainability.

Using financial data to plan a strategy was a common theme among all study participants. Each organization used reports to inform their boards of directors and executives to gauge progress and understand problems. I noted the use of financial data to demonstrate both lead and lag outcomes. P2 explained that financial planning strategy is “knowing what we wanted to do and then seeing what we did.” All participants noted the organizations’ reservations regarding available funds and the technicalities of use associated with nonprofit donor funds. P2 explained that some donor funds have specific uses and that a sum of money may look available for use on a report but would have a specific use “for example to fund a specific program,” and not for general use. The path to releasing these funds is not simply reassignment. P3 further explained that there was a legal process and a timeline involved to re-categorize funding appropriations.

**Leaders used operational improvement as a sustainability strategy.** All participants in this study viewed operational improvement as a necessity for sustainability. All participants reported that the main motive behind investing in operational improvement is to mitigate competition and create opportunity. All participants used the term *buy in* to describe personal support for improvement strategies throughout the organizational ranks. All participants acknowledged the need to remain competitive as far as funders are concerned. P1 conducts SWOT analyses to strategize for

improvement initiatives. P1 noted the need to be continually improving because, “it is unpredictable when the next Uber may show up to disrupt your market or Amazon may decide to step into this industry as their next path for growth.” P1 noted that operational improvement translated into people improvement requiring cheerleader leadership empowering employees, “give them the resources, empower them, [and] then listen to them.” P1 noted that operational improvement is a collaboration between leadership and employees.

P2, regularly performing benchmark analyses, stated that P2 “runs the organization like a for-profit business to remain competitive.” P2 explained the need for continuous improvement because of the growing demand for services and the reduction of funds at the state and federal level. “It is not as easy to simply write a grant. We must engage funders more and let them see that they are making a difference not just to individuals but also to communities.” P2 further noted that operational improvement involves, “keeping your finger on the pulse of what is happening in your industry, in your community and collaboration with other nonprofits.” P2 further stated that there is a continuous need to “promote performance and meet needs.” In addition, “partnerships through collaboration are not common themes among nonprofits.”

P3 noted that, in O3, the operational improvement effort starts with the board of directors’ involvement at all levels of the organization to “stay in the know.” P3 noted that operational improvement derives from “listening to clients’ needs and making adjustments.” All four participants explained the importance of operational performance alignment with the needs of the client. P3 noted that even though “there may not be any

direct competitors to some of our programs,” the funding pool is not dedicated to a specific program but to the clients and that another service directed at the same population may threaten potential funding. Therefore, O3 must maintain a high level of performance and product through operational improvement.

P4 noted that leaders of O4 “shifted from a compliance organization to a quality-driven organization,” to enhance performance innovation and to increase revenue. This shift has created an operational environment of performance and quality measures that drive sustainability. P4 noted “finance, facilities, services, measures for success,” are all required for board of directors’ reviews. The board of directors is very involved in the success of the operation, embracing the idea that leaders “focus on ways to improve data collection, analyze processes, share success stories, and remove employee burdens,” as part of the operational improvement process.

**Correlation to current literature.** Communication is necessary to promote organizational growth internally and externally (Freund, 2017). All participants in this study noted effective communication as a requirement for internal and external results. TQM effectiveness depends on management commitment, effective communication, and employee involvement (Prashanth, 2017). Al-Nahyan and Abdel All (2017) noted that, for TQM strategies to be successful, managers and employees of all ranks must communicate effectively. P1, P2 and P4 noted various strategies to enhance managerial and employee communication, as part of the organizational strategy. Leaders must communicate with all employees in the organization as internal customers. Leaders using such communication model could reduce uncertainty and fear and provide good

feedback, which is vital to promoting change (Al-Nahyan & Abdel All, 2017). P1 and P2 regarded their staff as internal customers noting that organizational success depends on staff success.

As part of the organizational strategy, leaders use financial analysis and reporting to develop budgets and other projections designed to illustrate a financial path from present to future state (Calopa, 2017). All participants noted that leaders were responsible for financial planning as part of the organizational strategy to promote sustainability. Process improvement strategies, such as Lean and Six Sigma identified in the literature review (Gaskill, 2016), require extensive data analysis, including financial data to plan strategically, as part of the improvement process. All participants agreed that financial planning was a fundamental feature of organizational planning, which aligns with current literature, as Melao et al. (2016) claimed that financial planning has a significant role in nonprofit organizational and operational strategy, considering scarce resources, pressure from funders, and demand for cost effective services.

Leaders view organizational strategy as imperative for maintaining a competitive advantage, which involves areas such as communication, decision-making, and organizational growth (Kim & Krishna, 2017). All participants noted that organizational strategy was a responsibility of leadership but noted that performance, engagement, and communication were holistic expectations. Organizational strategies involve maximizing resources and understanding that markets are continuously changing, forcing strategies to evolve (Osbourne & Hammoud, 2017). All participants noted the need for sustainability through continuous improvement strategies. Yazdani et al. (2016) noted that

organizational strategies involving TQM require soft and hard applications, such as organizational culture change and technique- and method-based practices. All participants viewed organizational strategy through customer-focused processes and an inclusive culture, as a criterion for sustainability.

**Correlation to conceptual framework.** Successful business communication is essential to the success of organizations (Thill & Bovee, 2007). Participants noted that *buy in* is essential for program success. All study participants used the term *buy in* to describe trust and willingness. Steiber and Alange (2013) noted that the leadership application of TQM involves setting a clear vision, coaching employees, and establishing trust. All participants noted that they use communication in all components of an organization. TQM applications focus on people- and culture-oriented organizational change (Kabak et al., 2014), which relies heavily on trust by removing invisible barriers, such as fear, through effective communication.

I noted that all study participants mold communication into various forms that best fit their organizational culture to extract the most value out of communication activities. Leaders use communication as a tool to promote both employee and customer satisfaction (Aydin et al., 2015). Nonprofit leaders participating in this study regarded communication as an essential, versatile tool for internal and external engagement and for promoting performance. There was a lack of evidence from participants to support specific measurements for communication effectiveness. Leaders developing communication processes from TQM strategies promote employee willingness to engage in organizational improvement initiatives (Masry et al., 2015).

All participants noted a continually evolving strategy to maintain customer satisfaction by meeting demand, reducing cost, and improving performance. TQM is an organizational strategy that has continuous improvement as the main objective through a strategy of planning, leading, information analysis, customer focus, and people and process management (Mahmood et al., 2014). Leaders use TQM strategies by relying on the workforce, innovation, and transformational leadership to attain sustainability (Mahmood et al., 2014). All participants in this study sought continuous improvement efforts in their organizations and programs to remain competitive to attract funders while mitigating reduced funding and increased service demand. Leaders use TQM as a strategy to enhance competitiveness, efficiency, flexibility in planning, and organization of activities, by integrating all members into the management process (Liu, 2016).

Gupta et al. (2015) noted that TQM strategies, such as those involving theory of constraints, could affect a firm's financial performance by reducing barriers to operational performance. All participants noted that financial planning was essential for converting ideas into programs. Aydin et al. (2015) noted that TQM increases general business performance by embracing a holistic understanding, which involves all areas of the operation including costs. As part of strategic planning, cost estimates and calculations are essential to weigh improvement objectives (Mahmood et al., 2014). P1, P2, and P4 expressed concerns over variation and variable costs such as salaries, noting that a continued focus on financial data for planning and continuous analysis was time consuming yet necessary. TQM as a process improvement model features cost reduction

as part of the strategy by removing process waste and improving performance (Melao et al., 2016).

Operational improvement is the core of the continuous improvement strategy involving lower costs, higher performance, and higher quality output (Singh & Singh, 2017). All nonprofit leader participants noted client satisfaction as a key criterion for both service provision and funders. Leaders implement continuous improvement strategies to deliver improved organizational functionality and services (Melao, Guia, & Amorim, 2016). Operational improvement using TQM strategies promote quality through client satisfaction (Al-Nahyan & Abdel All, 2017). TQM is a holistic continuous improvement strategy that requires organizational improvement through incremental changes targeting the organizational culture (Dubey & Gunasekaran, 2015).

Participants cited operational improvement as key to attaining sustainability and competitiveness. The feedback from participant engagement aligned with Paraschivesu's (2015) study findings in that leaders apply continuous improvement strategies as an evolutionary process that leads to a better way to compete and adds value to existing processes that cover the entire workforce of the organization. Participants regarded operational improvement as employee engagement, better performance, and effective leadership. Leaders that adopt TQM eliminate operational problems and improve processes through effective leadership, communication, and employee engagement (Garcia-Bernal & Ramirez-Aleson, 2015).

### **Theme 3: Specific Focus on Functions of Leadership**

All four study participants noted that nonprofit leaders serve in two functions, which are boards of directors and executive leaders. All four participants noted that their organizations' success was contingent on director boards and executives providing direction and strategy using effective leadership. All participants noted that executive leaders are responsible for directing operations using effective processes. The board of directors is responsible for strategic planning, involving decision-making aligned with organization mission and goals. All study participants noted that the board of directors comprises volunteers serving as organizational leaders focused on organizational development and strategic planning.

The four participants of this study noted that leadership decision-making is a core function that determines the annual strategic course the organization takes. P1 and P2 rely on leaders for creative and innovative problem solving. P1 noted the importance of having a diverse leadership board to promote innovative thinking. P1 explained that leaders are accountable for their various functions and performance through a scorecard system. P1, P2, and P3 noted that leaders implement continuous improvement strategies by finding innovative ways to be more resourceful with time and spending one-on-one time with executives and ensuring alignment with leadership goals throughout the organization.

While P1 stated that leaders are responsible for taking the organization from "good to great," P2 stated that leaders needed to "put on creative hats to keep the [financial] bottom line in the black, not the red." P2 noted that leaders are passionate

about their contributions and that they assume the responsibility for helping other employees achieve goals throughout the year. P2 noted that the president of O2 is directly involved in many of the programs. P3 noted that O3 has a very active board that focuses on organizational alignment with goals and mission. P3 noted that leaders work transparently to promote trust and to establish direct client relationships.

P1, P2, and P3 noted that leaders approach strategic planning and organizational performance from assets and liabilities lens. P4 noted that leaders function as operations managers, paying attention to reports and data to gauge progress and perform progress analyses to support decision-making. P4 noted that the board relies on data from the Performance and Quality Improvement Program, which is a specific quality assurance group supporting an organizational-wide operative focused on continuous improvement and quality. From the data, three subthemes (see Table 4) stemmed from the *specific focus on functions of leadership* theme: (a) leaders took responsibility for employee motivation, (b) leaders took responsibility for revenue growth, and (c) leaders took responsibility for strategic planning.

Table 4

*Subthemes under the specific focus on functions of leadership theme*

Subthemes	Participant response	% of participant response
Leaders took responsibility for employee motivation	20	6
Leaders took responsibility for revenue growth	33	11
Leaders took responsibility for strategic planning	23	25

**Leaders took responsibility for employee motivation.** All participants noted that leadership communication is necessary throughout the organization to promote employee satisfaction and motivation. All four study participants agreed that leaders play a vital role in engaging and establishing a positive work environment for the nonprofit workforce. When asked about the role of leadership in support of nonprofits' continuous improvement initiatives, each participant identified varying specific functions. P1 described the board of directors as being a performance-based part of O1 because O1 had measurable targets to achieve, just like the workforce. P1 stated that leaders do not just "talk the talk, but walk the walk." As an extension of successful strategic planning, leaders must also "buy in . . . to a culture of strengthening people . . . give them resources, empower them, then listen to them. They are the experts . . . check ego at the door." P2 noted that the board of directors is not a governing authority, but an advisory board that plays a role in helping the organization improve and succeed. P2 noted, "leaders have to be molded, a lot of it is not taught but is caught." P3 noted that the board of directors is the governing authority and provides the final approval on financial investments. P4 noted that the board of directors serves as the decision makers ensuring alignment between mission and objectives.

Although each leadership strategy varied, the message regarding leader and employee engagement was the same. Both P1 and P2 agreed that leaders must ensure employees are the best version of themselves. All participants viewed the motivation of employees as a core responsibility of boards of directors and other organizational leaders. Leaders in O1 use employee incentives such as games and competitions to promote a fun

and motivating culture. P2 and P3 used process design to remove employee burden by designing processes that allowed employees flexibility in schedules, work volume and opportunities for learning. P2 also noted that employee incentives are in place, such as scholarships for which high performing employees would compete.

P2 explained that not all employees are volunteers. P2 noted that leadership struggles with motivating volunteers working side by side with paid employees. P4 noted that leaders focus on promoting a continuous improvement, quality driven environment to boost employee satisfaction to achieve the level of performance required to maintain high quality to compete effectively. P4 noted that some leadership strategies might not be producing the desired results because employees have control over the distribution of communication material necessary to gauge the overall performance of the process. P4 explained that employees do not realize that while they may think they are protecting themselves, the real purpose is to improve and promote employee satisfaction but they are denying themselves that opportunity.

**Leaders took responsibility for revenue growth.** All participants noted that the responsibility for revenue growth is a leadership commitment. Both P1 and P2 noted the need for innovation at the leadership level to align customer needs and stakeholder ownership with programs to increase revenue. P1 noted that leaders focus on revenue growth by developing alignment between organization mission and processes. P1 explained that leaders at O1 break their decision-making process into two general categories, assets and liabilities.

P2 noted that leaders focus on revenue growth by pursuing grants and campaigning to stakeholders while trying to mitigate decreased funding, citing State of Delaware's funding-match reduction from 80/20 to 50/50. P2 explained that leadership innovation extends into funding campaigns. P2 stated, "you cannot just go to a woman's group and expect them to open up their purses to us because you have not created any buy in." P3 noted, "cost-reduction strategies include standardization of processes and procedures." P3 also noted the need for leaders to create programs and create *buy in* simultaneously. P3 noted that O3 leaders work with lobbyist to promote effective legislation at the state and federal levels to create revenue streams that support their agenda. P3 summed up the initiative of the board of directors and leaders as "alignment [of strategies with that] of purpose," which made the path to revenue generation more transparent.

P4 stated, "the board of directors sets the compass," directing the organization on its annual path and helps transform the organization from a compliance organization to a quality-driven organization. P4 explained that O4 leaders assist in the development of the organization to a more competitive entity with greater potential and opportunities for revenue growth. P4 noted that revenue growth involves knowing which investments to make and leaders of O4 use "selection criteria for clients."

**Leaders took responsibility for strategic planning.** All participants regarded the strategic planning process as decision-making activities and attributed the responsibility to leaders. According to all participants, nonprofit leaders continuously seek ways to promote sustainability and longevity. P1 and P2 stated that leadership's key objectives

should include sustainability and consistency. “Strategic planning should not just be great ideas with no destination,” according to P1, “but also a map of how to get there.” P1 also noted that “strategic planning should be agile, allowing the company to react to changes that may not have been foreseeable.”

P2 noted that leaders need to “put on creative hats” to find new and innovative ways to grow revenue, as traditional sources such as funding from the State of Delaware is no longer a sustainable option. P3 noted that leadership passion and individual commitment are as necessary to longevity as the strategic organizational plans. P3 further noted that many of the leaders in O3 are tenured longer than 10 years. In contrast, P1 noted that younger leaders within the organization might have more personal motives than organizational goals in mind. P4 noted that leaders focus on the operational plan and use comprehensive and systematic procedures to ensure compliance, considering all available options. All participants agreed that the development of strategic plans takes time to develop. P4 stated, “leadership longevity is key . . . turnover within the nonprofit sector at the leadership level is high, our model is one where people feel the results and they want to encourage future years.” P1 and P3 noted that succession planning was key to strategic planning success and that strategic plans take time and an all-inclusive buy-in to be successful.

According to all participants, strategic planning is the responsibility of leadership and involves developing trust with internal and external stakeholders, ensuring stable leadership through effective succession planning and creating organizational empowerment. All four participants in this study noted that strategic planning and

revenue directly connect because the decision-making process involves consideration of both programs and revenue, requiring an in-depth understanding of program costs and the path to achieve sustainability after program launch.

**Correlation to current literature.** A core tenet of continuous improvement is culture change (Ashraf, 2016). Nonprofit leaders participating in this study agreed that organization sustainability relies on culture change. Leaders promulgate culture change (Schein, 2017). All participants agreed that culture change stems from the responsibilities of leadership. Nonprofit organization leadership stems from the board of directors sharing responsibility for the alignment of mission and purpose with organizational functionality and sustainability (Olinske & Hellman, 2017). Leaders involved in continuous improvement initiatives dedicate themselves to leading and motivating employees, establishing a clear vision and organizational goals throughout the organizational ranks (Al-Nahyan & Abdel All, 2017). Employee motivation emerged as a subtheme from *the specific focus on leadership functions* theme. All participants agreed that effectively communicating a clear vision that aligns with the organization's mission supports employee motivation and is the responsibility of leadership.

Liu (2016) stated that improvement models include two dimensions, hard and soft management. Liu noted that the soft dimension involved enhancement of the employees' perception of the work environment. All participants agreed that soft skills, such as communication and employee motivation, are important for establishing successful organizational strategies. Al-Nahyan and Abdel All (2017) noted that organizational leaders should consider all employees as internal customers participating in continuous

improvement initiatives to attain organizational improvement. TQM organizational improvement strategies require employee empowerment and motivation (Al-Nahyan & Abdel All, 2017). All participants noted that employee engagement and motivation depend on the decision-making processes of leaders. P1 and P2 noted that leaders must first understand the need to look inward to ensure employees receive support for their growth to become the best versions of themselves.

Within nonprofit organizations, the executive director and other leaders serve to grow revenue internally by managing operational costs and focusing on performance and compliance (Olinske & Hellman, 2017). P1, P2, and P4 noted that leadership decisions to establish continuous improvement strategies that focus on internal development boost revenue. Olinske and Hellman (2017) noted that boards of directors are influential community members assisting in revenue growth. All nonprofit leaders in this study stated that leaders bear the responsibility for revenue growth. As part of this responsibility, leaders need to be innovative to find new paths to revenue. Continuous improvement strategies positively influence innovation (Ashraf, 2016).

Leaders of nonprofit organizations continuously struggle with balancing cost and efficiency with the need to provide social support without restrictions to resources (Haddad et al., 2016). P1 and P2 noted that great ideas alone are not sufficient and that leaders need to develop a clear a path and strategy to get the organization to the desired performance level. Suarez and Esparza (2017) noted that nonprofit leaders should consider private sector tools, such as continuous improvement strategies, to produce efficient and effective outcomes and to view the customers as the primary focus.

**Correlation to conceptual framework.** Continuous improvement derives from TQM strategies and involves initiatives that help organizations attain sustainability and a competitive advantage (Al-Tabbaa et al., 2013). Leaders use TQM's process improvement to increase the effectiveness and flexibility of the planning process (Liu, 2016). All participants noted that leaders focus on sustainability through process improvement initiatives. All participants considered that organizational leaders are responsible for achieving employee motivation and directing the organization towards a culture of sustainability and higher performance. P1 and P2 noted the need for leaders to respond to change effectively and design strategies that prepare the organization for continuous change. Common subthemes involved employee motivation, trust, and hands-on activities to ensure alignment of message with vision throughout the organization. Leaders provide the vision and are responsible for employee motivation (Liu, 2016; Martanova, 2013).

All participants noted that organizational leaders' responsibility involves effectively communicating the organization's mission and strategy to the workforce and the stakeholders. The communication style of leaders is extremely important, as it determines trust and empowerment (Al-Nahyan & Abdel All, 2017). Leaders should view TQM as an ever-evolving concept with no fixed finish line (Yapa, 2012). The four nonprofit leaders participating in this study noted that competition is increasing and ongoing and that there is a need for continuous innovation to remain competitive and find new funding sources. All participants noted that employees play a significant role in the

organizations' competitiveness and that clear communication of mission and strategy from leadership is the first step in the process.

Leaders and motivated employees facilitate TQM initiatives, such as organizational improvement through continuous improvement. Leaders are responsible for creating and maintaining the motivation for employees (Al-Nahyan & Abdel All, 2017). All participants cited employee motivation as an integral part of organizational success. Leaders create the strategy for a systematic approach to promote organizational performance, which involves participation by motivated employees. Improved organizational performance leads to improved revenue, efficiency, effectiveness, and client satisfaction (Wiengarten et al., 2013). Leaders using TQM strategies have the responsibility of capturing the potential from all employees (Steiber & Alange, 2013). All participants in this study stated that employees and leaders must be able to channel positive energy through communication and motivation to meet organizational goals.

Leaders use motivational leadership as a soft dimension of TQM to promote organizational success (Dubey & Gunasekaran, 2015). Effective continuous improvement strategies include highly motivated employees (Wiengarten et al., 2013). All participants in this study expressed the importance of engaged and motivated employees for their organizations' success. All participants noted that organizational leaders have the responsibility to communicate effectively and develop innovative methods to motivate employees. Nonprofit organizations depend on motivated volunteers to support the nonprofit's initiatives (Taliento & Silverman, 2005). P1 and P2 described incentives designed to promote employee satisfaction and motivate employees to maintain or

improve performance. Employees believing that there is a beneficial gain in participating in TQM initiatives are more willing to participate (Haffar et al., 2013). Singh and Sushil (2013) noted that TQM is an organizational culture application leaders use to promote both internal and external customer satisfaction. Kabak et al. (2014) noted that there is a direct relationship between TQM and employee satisfaction due to workforce motivation activities and communication.

Leaders use TQM strategies to overcome turbulent and uncertain economic environments (Carmona-Marquez et al., 2016). The four nonprofit leaders participating in this study acknowledged the vitality of increasing revenue for sustainability. Yapa (2012) noted that leaders use TQM applications to boost revenue and to survive. Mataira et al. (2014) noted that smaller nonprofit firms are at risk because of funding cuts and while larger organizations are more financially stable, the need for alternate sources of revenue is essential to both, smaller and larger organizations. One of the core tenets of continuous improvement initiatives is to reduce costly non-value added steps or process waste (Womack & Jones, 2003). All participants noted the need for innovation at the leadership level to grow revenue by looking at the operation and developing creative funding campaigns. Ashraf (2016) noted that leaders use TQM philosophy to gain a competitive advantage. While Dubey and Gunasekaran (2015) noted that TQM is management innovation, Augusta et al. (2014) claimed that leaders use TQM to promote innovation throughout the entire organization.

One of the most researched dimensions of TQM is strategic planning (Mahmood et al., 2014). All nonprofit leaders participating in this study regarded strategic planning

as a role that organizational leaders assume to establish the direction of the organization. Leaders use TQM strategies to produce better quality services, reduce costs, and improve organizational performance (Mahmood et al., 2014). Leaders use TQM for establishing ongoing direct customer relationships, sharing information, coordinating efforts, and improving sustainability (Garcia-Bernal & Ramirez-Aleson, 2015). All nonprofit leaders participating in this study voiced a desire to develop and sustain methods to gain a competitive advantage with a customer-focused process.

### **Applications to Professional Practice**

The specific business problem is some leaders of nonprofit organizations lack strategies to implement successful continuous improvement programs to increase revenue. Nonprofit leaders experience unique challenges regarding revenue generation (Xiaodong et al., 2017). Issues such as reduced funding and limited resources affect the nonprofit sector, creating significant capacity challenges (Xiaodong et al., 2017). I focused on the overarching research question: What strategies do leaders of nonprofit organizations use to generate revenue? The conceptual framework was TQM. Leaders use TQM as an integrated management philosophy for continuously improving performance of processes and services to achieve and surpass customer expectations while reducing operational waste (Singh & Singh, 2013). Leaders using TQM employ implementation strategies such as Lean, Six Sigma, TOC, and MBNQA to reduce operational costs, improve performance, and focus on customer needs (Bou-Llusar et al., 2016; Yapa, 2012).

Nonprofit organization leaders focus on transforming their organizational structure to performance-based operations, as the competition for limited funds increases (Xiaodong et al., 2017). Nonprofit leaders may use the content and results of this study to increase their knowledge, develop, and implement strategies that target core areas of concern in nonprofit organizations, such as leadership strategies for holistic focus on process improvement, leadership focus on organizational strategy, and specific focus on functions of leadership. Leaders of nonprofit organizations may use these themes as a guide to help address concerns and to identify core strategy areas for improvement in nonprofit organizations. I also provided examples of specific applications deriving from TQM such as Lean, Six Sigma, and MBNQA. Nonprofit leaders can use these and other TQM applications to implement and solve performance issues, reduce operational costs and develop a higher performing organization to increase revenue.

I produced data leading to the understanding of the underlying applications of continuous improvement, such as soft skills for success through employee motivation. Leaders using these strategies and implementation tools might develop and transfer these skills to employees, assisting with sustaining continuous improvement strategies for nonprofit organizations. Leaders may use the findings from this study to improve business practices by identifying appropriate continuous improvement strategies that lead to increased productivity and organizational competitiveness. Leaders implement continuous improvement strategies to help their organizations evolve and develop competitive capacities to cope with turbulence and uncertainties within their market (Oprime et al., 2012).

Leaders in nonprofit businesses may use information from this study to make improvements and to remain competitive and establish sustainability. Sustainability of continuous improvement is always an important and most difficult practice in organizations (Ali et al., 2013). I used scholarly literature and practical feedback from case-study research to demonstrate connectivity between proven continuous improvement strategies and nonprofit applications of continuous improvement strategies. Leaders may use specific techniques such as PDCA, TOC, and root-cause analysis from strategies such as Lean, Six Sigma, and Malcolm Baldrige to overcome process and organizational constraints. Leaders using TQM as a strategy do not need full deployment for success (Al-Nahyan & Abdel All, 2017). In this research study, I highlighted the critical success areas identified by nonprofit leaders to form the cornerstone for a continuous improvement strategy.

### **Implications for Social Change**

The use of continuous improvement strategies by nonprofit leaders to increase revenue has implications for social change. Nonprofit organizations are social entities that provide services to vulnerable populations and the economically challenged (Xiaodong et al., 2017). By applying continuous improvement strategies, nonprofit organization leaders could grow their organizations and create a competitive advantage through sustainable and effective process-improvement models. Using continuous improvement strategies promotes organizational growth and development (Aydin et al., 2015) that may increase revenue, allowing the organization to service a wider vulnerable client base and increase employment opportunities. Leaders using continuous

improvement applications, such as TQM, Lean, and Six Sigma, emphasize a learning organization and a problem-solving capability at every level, which promotes innovation (Phipps & Burbach, 2010) and employee development (Al-Nahyan & Abdel All, 2017). Using continuous improvement strategies leads to personal growth and organizational development (Haffar et al., 2013).

By implementing continuous improvement strategies to increase revenue, nonprofit leaders could develop innovative and competitive strategies to thrive in new markets. Leaders could use continuous improvement strategies to create new programs to target a wider range of clients, demonstrate more efficient and effective processes, make better use of funds to ensure organizational sustainability and produce more innovative approaches to problem solving. Leaders could bring new ideas and strategies to solve some of society's most crucial problems, such as poverty, hunger, and disease. Stakeholders are more likely to support initiatives that demonstrate innovative and effective applications and sustainable organizations (Xiaodong et al., 2017). All four study participants noted that sustainable funding and nonprofit relationships support nonprofit community development programs, creating more economically stable and safe communities and enhancing the standard of living for not just those served by the nonprofits but everyone in the community.

### **Recommendations for Action**

The three major themes that emerged from this research study are leadership strategies for holistic focus on process improvement, leadership focus on organizational strategy, and specific focus on functions of leadership. These themes signify the

foundation for effective continuous improvement implementation strategies in nonprofit organizations. The first recommendation is that leaders should explore continuous improvement strategies and gain a deeper understanding of the concepts of continuous improvement. Leaders of nonprofit organizations seeking to improve revenue could use continuous improvement concepts from the TQM framework to improve processes (Singh & Singh, 2013) and to attain desired goals. Leaders could also use strategies from the TQM framework to develop leadership skills to improve employee satisfaction through effective communication and a customer-focused approach (Kabak et al., 2014). Some leaders may choose to implement continuous improvement strategies in whole or in part, depending on their organizations' needs (Al-Nayhan & Abdel All, 2017).

The second recommendation is that leaders should use continuous improvement strategies to remove performance obstacles, not just manage them. Using strategies involving root-cause analysis, an integral component of continuous improvement, allow leaders to identify the source of the problem to eliminate it (Womack & Jones, 2003). Nonprofit leaders could work with funders and other stakeholders to develop societal solutions to end hardships, instead of continually mitigating effects caused by them. Funders already look for specific qualities in service providers, such as doing more with less funds (Tevel et al., 2015) and adding quality-driven concepts, such as process improvement, that will ensure better outcomes from their investments and create win-win outcomes between stakeholders and nonprofit organizations.

Stakeholders and leaders of nonprofit organizations should pay attention to continuous improvement strategies to promote sustainability, growth, and, most

importantly, deliver improved services to the clients they serve. Childs (2017) noted that inappropriate methods for process improvement are disruptive and different organizations require different strategies for success. While different nonprofit organization leaders develop strategies based on their specific missions and available resources, nonprofit organization leaders may benefit from continuous improvement applications stemming from the TQM framework to improve performance, stay focused on critical to success criteria, and boost revenue (Mahmood et al., 2014).

The core audience for the results of this study is nonprofit leaders. Leaders may utilize the continuous improvement strategies to develop organizations in a myriad of ways that affect organizational performance (Phipps & Burbach, 2010) including employee development (Al-Nahyan & Abdel All, 2017) and performance development and revenue growth (Mahmood et al., 2014; Melao et al., 2016). Nonprofit leaders need implementation strategies to promote capacity for change, innovation throughout the ranks of their organizations, and a culture of continuous learning and development in order to attain sustainability (Phipps & Burbach, 2010).

I will publish this study, once approved, on ProQuest and in a peer-reviewed journal. I will continue my role as a process improvement consultant sharing this knowledge with nonprofit leaders seeking to improve performance and increase revenue using effective improvement initiatives within their firms. I will also provide each participant in this study a hardcopy of a summary of this study in gratitude for their participation in the study.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

This study comprised of only three nonprofit leaders in the service sector in Delaware. I recommend further expansive study across various nonprofit sectors to assess the application of findings across the nonprofit sector. Conducting a study to attain a deeper understanding of nonprofit organization leadership may add to the depth of understanding required to help nonprofit leaders overcome the continuous challenges, including dealing with change, building capacity, and growing revenue.

Time was a limitation of this study. Researchers conducting future studies may explore the research question using longitudinal methods to identify nonprofit continuous improvement strategies for increasing revenue patterns along longer timelines. I recommend a study specifically on failures of continuous improvement strategies within nonprofit organizations. Given the importance of communication as acknowledged by all participants in this study, I recommend a research study to develop a mechanism for measuring communication effectiveness within nonprofit organizations. Researchers may also consider a study focused on continuous improvement of volunteer and employee engagement to support the organizational continuous improvement initiatives.

In this research study, I uncovered that leaders of nonprofit organizations use various approaches to continuous improvement. The various nonprofit worldviews of continuous improvement could also be a topic for further study. In this study, I discovered that nonprofit leaders use various strategies; however, all participants noted common themes, such as leadership strategies for holistic focus on process improvement, leadership focus on organizational strategy, and specific focus on functions of leadership.

Researchers may also consider specific studies providing deeper exploration on each of these themes.

### **Reflections**

My experience with the DBA doctoral study process was a compilation of struggle, success, commitment, self-realization, and discovery. I began the DBA program with a strong background in process improvement strategies and implementation gained from over 17 years of experience. I invested time focusing on ways to mitigate my own bias as the research study progressed. I used my knowledge on the subject matter to my advantage to peruse scholarly articles for pertinent content. When it came to interviewing, I was concerned about leading the discussion and employed a strategy of promoting dialog instead of initiating dialog after asking the questions.

I was able to attain participants for this study within 10 days. Conducting interviews in short intervals was beneficial to my analysis process as I was able to recall details and observations as I read the notes and transcripts. This process was important because being able to recall the details allowed me to understand context and gain a deeper understanding of the concepts described. The IRB process lasted a month. Once I obtained IRB approval, I took participant recruitment as a challenge. I wanted to ensure I had the data collection completed before the 2017 U.S. Christmas and Thanksgiving holiday seasons would arrive because of scheduling and availability issues. I was able to secure appointments for five interviews in a week and conducted four out of the five interviews, as one potential participant retracted. I found it more difficult to conduct a dialog with some participants because I wanted to add my stories to the conversation,

which could have created bias. Therefore, I applied a sterner, more disciplined approach to remain focused. I also found that participants felt like they had to answer the questions *correctly* and would ask me if their answers were appropriate or were what I was anticipating. I mitigated my bias by explaining that whatever answers they provided were the correct answers and that I wanted to capture their experiences with continuous improvement strategies as leaders of nonprofit organizations.

I was excited to analyze the data using NVivo for Mac. However, the learning curve for NVivo for Mac slowed me down and was sometimes distracting, forcing me to focus on learning how to use the software and look at support videos in the midst of data analysis. I tried to prepare for this phase while I awaited IRB approval but I soon realized that hands-on analysis is a lot different from just watching *how-to* videos. I began highlighting key words, phrases, and highlighting the subthemes from the research. I regarded data analysis as the core responsibility of completing section three. My anticipation to analyze the data was building throughout the data collection process so I was excited to uncover the results of the data analysis. My analysis of data produced three major themes, which are (a) leadership strategies for holistic focus on process improvement, (b) leadership focus on organizational strategy, and (c) specific focus on functions of leadership. When it was time to write up the data, I used the Walden DBA rubric as a guide. I had to revisit the audio data a few times especially when using verbatim phrases. From this research study, I uncovered that nonprofit leaders view their challenges as business challenges, very similar to for-profit leaders' views. Nonprofit leaders use continuous improvement strategies in various forms to boost revenue.

I discovered that the complexities of nonprofit operations, funding, and leadership diminish with continuous improvement strategies but the intent needs to be a culture change, not a quick fix solution. Leaders of nonprofit organizations struggle with sustainability strategies, specifically the soft skills, such as communication and employee motivation. The participants in this research study focused on the development of soft skills and attributed the responsibility for such development to leadership.

### **Study Conclusions**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies leaders of nonprofit organizations use to implement successful continuous improvement programs to increase revenue. By conducting this research study, I will add to the body of literature on continuous improvement strategy implementation. Approximately 72% of nonprofit revenues required for the sustainability of nonprofit organizations comes from program services, threatened by ineffective improvement strategies and reduced program funding (National Center for Charitable Statistics, 2013). Nonprofit leaders face significant challenges, such as funding reductions, funder expectations, and growing demand for services (Xiaodong et al., 2017). To respond to these challenges, nonprofit leaders should embrace continuous improvement applications traditionally applied in for-profit sectors. Nonprofit leaders could apply continuous improvement strategies to enhance performance and boost revenue (Al-Tabbaa et al., 2013).

Four nonprofit leaders participated in semistructured interviews to help answer the overarching research question for this study: What strategies do leaders of nonprofit organizations use to generate revenue? The conceptual framework for this study was

TQM and the three main themes that emerged from this study were: (a) leadership strategies for holistic focus on process improvement, (b) leadership focus on organizational strategy, and (c) specific focus on functions of leadership. The themes aligned with findings in the literature review. Nonprofit leaders may use these themes to develop continuous improvement strategies to improve performance and to boost revenue. Nonprofit leaders utilize continuous improvement strategies to develop organizational performance and revenue growth (Mahmood et al., 2014; Melao et al., 2016).

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## Appendix A: Email Script

Dear (Participant, Name)

I am Kieran Mohammed, an independent researcher pursuing my Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) degree at Walden University, Minneapolis. The purpose of my qualitative multiple case study is to explore strategies some leaders of nonprofit organizations use to implement successful continuous improvement programs to increase revenue.

I am seeking well-qualified candidates who have demonstrated success in continuous improvement implementation in nonprofit organizations for five or more years. Based on a preliminary review, you are a well-qualified candidate for this study. The interview will be limited to 60 minutes and scheduled at your convenience. Your participation and information will be kept confidential in accordance with Walden University's confidentiality guidelines. Your participation, though voluntary, will provide data that will address strategies that may affect nonprofit performance and may help increase revenue. If you decide to participate, I will provide an informed consent form that explains your rights during the process and the purpose of the doctoral study. I will conduct interviews through face-to-face interaction in a location that is convenient to you.

I will share results and findings with participants, scholars, and other stakeholders. Participation in the interviews will be voluntary, and the right to decline to take part or stop at any time during the interview will be respected.

Please advise if you have any questions or require any additional information. If you are

willing to participate, please email me to let me know your intention.

My contact email is:

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Kieran Mohammed

## Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Research Study Title : Continuous Improvement in nonprofit Organizations.

Research Question: What strategies do some leaders of nonprofit organizations use to implement successful continuous improvement programs?

### Interview Procedures

I will present a brief overview and introduction that reiterates the IRB requirements

- 1) The interview will be conducted face to face for 60 minutes.
- 2) The interview will be digitally recorded
- 3) The interviewee or interviewer may choose to end the interview at any time
- 4) The interviewee will be given the opportunity to read the interview transcript at the end of the interview.
- 5) There will be no compensation for participation in this interview

### Interview Questions

I developed the following interview questions to address the overarching research question:

- 1) What strategies have proven successful in the implementation of continuous improvement programs in your organization?
- 2) How do you assess the success of the strategies you have used to implement successful continuous improvement programs in your organization?
- 3) How does the Board of Directors promote policies and values that align with continuous improvement initiatives?
- 4) How are continuous improvement strategies effectively communicated throughout the organizational ranks and among stakeholders?
- 5) What are some specific examples of strategies you used to implement successful continuous improvement programs in your organization?

- 6) Which strategies that you used to implement continuous improvement programs in your organization were the least effective?
- 7) What role does leadership play in the implementation of successful continuous improvement programs in your organization?
- 8) What are some of the benefits of successful strategies you used to implement continuous improvement programs in your organization?
- 9) What do you think it is important for you to say that I have not asked you regarding strategies used to implement successful continuous improvement programs in your organization?

I have read the interview protocol. I have received and signed the informed consent form. My signature on this form grants my permission for my participation in this recorded interview and my full understanding of this interview protocol.

Researcher's Name

\_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Name

\_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C: NIH-Protecting Human Research Participants

