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# Perceptions of Board Chair Leadership Effectiveness in Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Organizations

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## Abstract

This paper reports on the results of a multi-year, multi-phase international research investigation into what shapes perceptions of board chair leadership impact in nonprofit and voluntary organizations in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom. This research, tests hypotheses derived from five theoretical perspectives on chair leadership effectiveness that emerged from prior research by (Harrison and Murray, forthcoming). The purpose of this phase of the research is to determine: a) whether there is empirical support for the theoretical perspectives advanced; and b) which perspective offers the best explanation for why some board chairs are perceived as having more impact in the role than others. The results suggest chair leadership effectiveness is best understood as a multi-dimensional theoretical construct explained by more than one leadership theory. The paper concludes with a discussion of the findings and directions for further research.

*Keywords:* nonprofit board chair leadership; leadership effectiveness; leadership competency; team leadership; emotional intelligence; spiritual intelligence; relational leadership; and leadership impact

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## 1. Introduction

In a prior grounded theory research investigation, the first two authors of this paper started to fill a gap in the nonprofit leadership literature by answering questions about the role and impact of board chairs from the perspective of those who interact with them (e.g. CEOs, board members, and stakeholders). This research revealed the following findings:

- Many board chairs were perceived to have a moderate to high level of impact on their boards, CEOs and organizations;
- Not all board chairs were perceived as having impact in their leadership role;
- Chairs perceived to be effective shared similar behavioral characteristics whereas those seen as less effective were thought to be ineffective in different ways—either they were too active in the role or not active enough;
- Chairs with the most impact on their boards, CEOs, and organizations had what we called the “capacity to lead”,
- High impact chairs were the exception rather than the rule (i.e. few respondents had come in contact with them) (see Harrison and Murray, 2012 for a description of these leadership characteristics).

Four theoretical perspectives emerged from a review of the findings in the context of the literature on leadership. These perspectives illuminated understanding of why some board chairs were perceived as more effective and had more impact in the chair role than others. They also formed the basis for recommendations to improve board chair leadership practice.

While the prior research focused on perceptions of board chair leadership behavior and impact, this research seeks to determine which of the theoretical perspectives derived from it provides the best explanation of perceptions of board chair effectiveness. This research is based on data from a new more extensive questionnaire and a larger sample of key actors in nonprofit and voluntary sector organizations in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom. Also, whereas the previous research reported on the leadership

characteristics and impacts of all the board chairs respondents had ever known, respondents in this phase were asked to report on the chair they currently related to on a regular basis.

The paper begins with a review of the theoretical perspectives and hypotheses derived from our earlier findings and the review of the general leadership and governance literature. This section also includes an hypothesized theoretical model of board chair leadership effectiveness, which forms the fifth perspective on board chair leadership as a multi-dimensional construct explained by more than one theory of leadership. The research design and a description of the quantitative methods used follow. Then the findings are presented and discussed. The paper concludes with a discussion of needed further research.

## **2. Theoretical Perspectives on Perceptions of Board Chair Leadership Role Effectiveness**

As recommended by Parry (1998), the results of our earlier research were reviewed *ex post facto* through the lens of leadership and governance literature. Four theoretical perspectives emerged that provided an understanding of why some board chairs are perceived as more effective in the role than others. This section presents the five theoretical perspectives from which are derived the research study hypotheses.

*Theoretical Perspective 1: Board Chair Leadership Role Effectiveness is related to Board Chair Leadership Impact.* On the surface, this relationship seems obvious: if you think a leader is filling their role well, you will also think they have an impact. But, on further reflection, it is possible for this *not* to be the case as, for example, when one also believes that the role of chair, no matter how it is played, is not all that important in affecting the way nonprofit boards, CEOs and organizations perform. This is particularly relevant given that nonprofit leadership literature has, by and large, failed to acknowledge the leadership contributions of board chairs beyond managing board meetings or as a spokesperson for the board (Wertheimer, 2003). This is also true in the for profit sector where the chair is seen “as being relatively less powerful and more ceremonial and

symbolic than the CEO position” (Harrison, Torres, and Kukalis, 1988, p. 214). Kooiman (2007) suggests, “leaders can be activators of great importance in governance” (p. 66). However, as Otto (2003) noted, the role of nonprofit board chair is often one in which there is ambiguity and even conflicting expectations about the role between chairs, other board members, members of management and external stakeholders since it is often not defined in a clear and formal manner. The results of the initial phases of the chair research showed the way board chairs played their role had considerable impact on the board, CEO, organization, and external stakeholders. To test the perspective that perceived board chair effectiveness in the role is related to perceptions of the board chair’s impact on the nonprofit board, CEO, and organizational effectiveness we offer the following hypothesis:

*H1: The greater the satisfaction with the Chair’s performance in the role, the greater the impact the chair will be seen to have on the effectiveness of the board, CEO, and the organization as a whole.*

*Theoretical Perspective 2: Effective chairs are relational leaders.* The findings from the earlier study showed that effective chairs interact and build relationships with others who, in turn, place a positive value on those interactions and their leadership. The results further suggest that those chairs seen to be most effective were also seen as building high quality relationships with the key actors they connected with inside and outside of the organization. These findings are consistent with those of Leblanc and Gillies (2005) who studied the characteristics of effective for profit corporate boards. Effective boards had chairs that exerted the “right” amount and kind of influence in their role. They are also consistent with a body of literature known as *Leader-Member Exchange* theory (*LMX*). It suggests that effective leaders build high quality relationships with others regardless of their formal position in a social group or organization (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Uhl-Bien, 2006). In the context of governance, Kooiman (2007) suggests that the more leaders meet follower expectations in governing relationships, the “more credit” the follower attributes to the leader (p. 66). This research on leadership in a governance

context underscores the importance of the leader in governing *interactions* rather than governing *situations* (Kooiman, 2007).

While Uhl-Bien (2006) suggests that the LMX literature is divided on the question of what is more important, the leader (individual) or the exchange (interactive process), it is the quality of the relationship that has been empirically linked to organizational performance. Leaders seen as having highly effective exchanges tend to have higher performing followers and organizations (Uhl-Bien, 2006).

*H2a: The higher the perceived quality of the relationship between the respondent and the chair, the more likely the respondent is to perceive the chair as having an impact on the performance of the board, CEO, and organization.*

In the general leadership literature, Hogg et al. (1998) note “the longer an individual remains in a leadership position, the more he or she will be socially liked and the more consensual the social attraction” (p. 1249). The underlying assumption of this research is that “familiarity breeds approval” at least on average. In the governance literature, Kooiman (2007) notes “longer-term” interactions are indicative of effective exchanges (see page 66).

*H2b: The greater the reported frequency of respondent-chair interactions, the greater the perceived impact of the chair on the performance of the board, CEO, and organization.*

*Theoretical Perspective 3: The effective Chair is perceived as a team leader.* The earlier research findings suggested that the effective chair is a facilitator who contributes to the effectiveness of others by building social cohesion and commitment among them. The finding that the chair is perceived as an effective group facilitator connected well with the general literature on team leadership. It suggests that leaders who are effective in developing an environment conducive to collaboration are more effective than those that do not (Lafasto and Larsen, 2001). In this regard, leaders have "special responsibilities

for team functioning in a manner that will help the group achieve effectiveness" (Northouse, 2007, p. 209). This type of leadership is consistent with the *human relations* school of thought that posits organizational effectiveness is affected by strong work groups (teams) (Tompkins, 2005).

*H3: The more chairs are perceived as team leaders, the more impact they will be perceived to have on the performance of the board, CEO, and organization.*

*Theoretical Perspective 4: Perceptions of chair leadership effectiveness are shaped by perceptions of the chair's leadership style and personality.* In the earlier research, effective chairs were more likely than ineffective chairs to be seen as possessing personal leadership characteristics that respondents described in terms of personal attributes, capabilities and observed behaviors (e.g. chairs were seen as extremely "committed" to the cause, used their influence for good in their efforts to achieve it, etc). These personal leadership characteristics aligned well with the normative literature on characteristics of desirable board members (Herman, 2005) and leadership volunteers (National Learning Initiative, 2003). They also aligned well with the characteristics of effective nonprofit (e.g. Hilland, 2006; Millesen, 2004; Otto, 2003) and for profit board chairs (Leblanc and Gillies, 2005) and nonprofit CEOs (Herman and Heimovics, 1991; 2005; Drucker, 1996) and a number of trait theories of leadership (see Judge et al, 2002). In addition, they align well with the characteristics of effective leaders in general as described by popular management scholars such as Peter Drucker, John Kotter, Ronald Heifetz, Daniel Goleman, and Jim Collins.

On reviewing this leadership literature, it became apparent that many of these personal leadership characteristics of effective board chairs could be described in terms of two personality constructs that have been linked to leader and organizational effectiveness: emotional and spiritual intelligence.

- *Emotional Intelligence (EI) and chair effectiveness.* Boyatzis (1999) defines EI as "one's ability to understand and use emotions about oneself and the ability to understand and apply emotional understanding when dealing with others" (p. 1). It is

a concept that Goleman (2011) says he popularized in his 1995 book, *Emotional Intelligence*, though it originated from the research of other scholars (e.g. Salovey and Mayer, 1990; Mayer, Caruso, and Salovey, 1999). Goleman (2011) suggests individuals with high EI have a “positive impact on others” (50).

*H4a: The more chairs are perceived as emotionally intelligent, the more impact they will be perceived to have on the performance of the board, CEO, and organization.*

- *Spiritual Intelligence (SI) and chair effectiveness.* Spiritual Intelligence is a related but separate construct from EI in that it consists of a set of pro-social or altruistic behaviors that have been linked to feelings of well being, motivation, and individual and organizational effectiveness (see Tischler Biberman, & McKeage (2002) for a review of the literature; Zohar (2005) for relationship to leadership; Zohar and Marshall (2000) for a definition and etiology of spiritual intelligence). SI also appears to offer a personal dimension on social intelligence that EI does not—that of personal commitment and devotion to a cause, which was a common theme throughout our previous research. Beazley (1997) defines SI as a trait consisting of definitive and correlated dimensions of spirituality. The definitive dimension is “belief in a transcendent being”, with the correlated dimensions relating to behaviors characterized as “helpfulness”, “humility”, and “honesty” (p. 4). People with higher levels of SI are found to be more likely to engage in religious activities as well as those that provide meaning in their lives (e.g. volunteer work). These traits have been associated with “authentic leaders” (see Gardner, Avolio, Luthan, 2005).

*H4b: The more chairs are perceived as spiritual intelligent, the more impact they will be perceived to have on the performance of the board, CEO, and organization.*

*Theoretical Perspective 5: Chair leadership effectiveness is explained by more than one theory of leadership.* The results of the earlier research suggest board chairs are seen to have an impact on the board, CEOs, stakeholders and organizations in a variety of



areas. Effective chairs were seen as demonstrating certain motivations (e.g. altruistic and highly committed to their organizations), possessing certain a certain style and personality characteristics (e.g. charismatic and communicative, empowering, trustworthy, and respectful) and engaging skillfully in certain behaviors (e.g. proactive, engaged, ease with people, ability to listen and find common ground).

In a governance context, Kooiman (2007) suggests perception of leader effectiveness is shaped by *leader actions* in managing the “complexity and dynamics” of governing interactions and governance relationships (p. 67). He suggests that leader effectiveness is explained by more than one theory of leadership. He suggests three that aligned well with our findings—motivational leadership, relational leadership, and political leadership. This leads to the conclusion that a more powerful explanation of chair impact can be derived from the interactions between multiple influences, rather than any one influence as set out in the theoretical perspectives on chair leadership described above.

For this reason, we captured the perspectives above in the model presented in Figure 1 below. Here, perceptions of the effectiveness of the board chair are hypothesized as being related to the degree of satisfaction with the chair’s overall performance in the chair leadership role. Satisfaction with the chair’s role performance is hypothesized as being mediated by the perceived quality of the respondent-chair relationship and the frequency of respondent-chair interactions. In turn, the frequency of those interactions and the quality of that relationship is hypothesized as being affected by three sets of influences chairs we hypothesize chairs demonstrate in their leadership position: team leadership and emotional and spiritual intelligence. We expect that a significant percentage of the variance in what accounts for perception of chair leadership effectiveness in terms of the amount of impact chairs are seen to have will be accounted for by these influences. .

Figure 1 here

### 3. Research Design

To test the research hypotheses and the model in Figure 1, a new quantitative research study was designed utilizing a specially developed online questionnaire incorporating measures of the variables identified in the section above.

This survey was drafted and pre-tested in hard copy in 2008 as part of a small pilot study. It involved extensive interviews with members of a Seattle, WA area nonprofit organization that included the CEO, board chair, executive management team, and executive members of the board of directors. It was then refined and constructed electronically as a convenient and inexpensive way to gather data. Using a snowball sampling technique and third party networks, it was disseminated to a wide range of people (herein referred to as "key actors") who interact with chairs in nonprofit organizations in Canada and the USA (herein referred to as the North American sample).

The snowball sample method was deemed to be appropriate because it is generally recommended for research settings where a sampling frame for the population to be studied cannot be obtained (e.g. no lists exist from which to draw a random sample of the population) (Salganik and Heckathorn, 2004). While it cannot be said that the data from our snowball sample is representative of all key actors that interact with chairs, it is, as Wright and Stein (2005) point out, a useful method of "obtaining systematic information in situations in which convenience sampling is inappropriate and probability sampling is unrealistic" (p. 429). Furthermore, if the goal is to study real-world behavior "...then a snowball sample may yield better data" than data collected in other settings (p. 429). It is understood that data collected through this method cannot be claimed to be representative of respondent-chair relationships in all nonprofit and voluntary sector organizations. For this reason, it must be taken as exploratory and suggestive rather than representative and definitive.

Following analysis of the data gathered in the North American sample, the opportunity arose to test the research hypotheses in another culture. In collaboration with the third author of this paper, the questionnaire was modified to fit the British governance context and sent to key actors that interacted with chairs of nonprofit organizations in that country in 2009 using the same snowball sampling procedure. Due to the sponsoring agencies requirement for a shorter survey, the instrument was reduced, eliminating some items that had achieved significance in North America (for items and differences see measures section below).

The next section of the paper describes the two phases of the research, survey measures, and the statistical design for analyzing the data.

### *3.1 Methodology*

#### *2008 North American Survey*

The data from the online survey described above came from four samples:

1. Subscribers of the journal *The Nonprofit Quarterly* who responded to an email invitation to participate in the survey in an electronic newsletter sent by its editor in late October 2007 (referred to as NPQ).
2. Respondents who participated in the 2007 research and who indicated a willingness to participate further (referred to as 2007 follow-up).
3. Members of The Alliance for Nonprofit Excellence (ANE) in Memphis, TN who responded to an email invitation from the Alliance to participate in the survey in February 2008 (referred to as MA).
4. Representatives of tax exempt 501 c (3) nonprofit organizations in Washington State (accessed through the Secretary of Washington State Charitable Solicitation email listing) who responded to an email invitation to participate in the survey in March 2008 (referred to as WS).

The total number of respondents obtained from this sample was 542 key actors (KAs). The majority of KAs were CEOs (n=276, 51%) followed by board members (n= 138, 26%), and staff (n=125, 23%). Few external stakeholders responded to the survey. Response rates for surveys disseminated by third parties were not calculated because it could not be determined how many email invitations to participate were disseminated by third parties. As well, it could not be determined how many respondents received the electronic mail invitation to participate.

### *2009 United Kingdom Quantitative Phase*

To effectively involve UK respondents, the instrument was reduced and the language revised to fit the UK governance context. The key actor data (n=148) for the UK sample came from the following sources:

1. Members of *The Charity Trustee Network*, who responded to a link in an e-newsletter in February, 2009;
2. Members of *The National Council for Voluntary Organisations* (NCVO) who responded to an e-newsletter in February 2009 and direct email invitation in April 2009 to participate in the survey. A link to the survey was also available on the NCVO website.

1700 members of *The Charity Trustee Network*, of which 400 are chairs, received a link to the survey in an e-newsletter in February of 2009. *The National Council for Voluntary Organizations* (NCVO) promoted the survey via its regular newsletter to its membership of 5,000 Chief Executives<sup>1</sup>, staff, volunteers, and other stakeholders. The bulk of the responses from NCVO members came from a direct email appeal in early April 2009. A response rate was not calculated for the reasons described in the NA sample above.

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<sup>1</sup> In the U.K., managers of voluntary organizations are known as Chief Executives or CEs but they are referred to as CEOs in this paper for the sake of consistency.

In total, 148 respondents completed the survey with the majority coming from chief executives (n = 60, 41 %), trustees (n = 59, 40 %), and “other” types of respondents (n = 29, 19%).

### 3.2 Measures

Measures were derived from two sources:

1. Statements of the leadership behavior and impact of board chairs from those who interact with nonprofit board chairs collected in prior research (see Harrison and Murray, forthcoming).
2. Items from psychometric instruments measuring leader behavior from different theoretical perspectives (e.g. relational leadership, team leadership, emotional and spiritual intelligence)

#### *Chair Impact on Performance*

*Chair Impact on Board Performance.* Respondent’s perceptions of their Chair’s impact on board performance were measured by the following 13 items drawn from the statements of respondents in our prior research. The items were assessed on a 7 point scale where “1” is no impact at all and “7” is a great deal of impact:

1. The Chair’s actions have helped the board become clearer regarding its role.
2. The Chair’s actions have helped the board become more organized and efficient in how board work is conducted.
3. The Chair’s actions have helped the board become more engaged.
4. The Chair’s actions have helped individual board members become clearer about their role.
5. The Chair’s actions have helped individual board members become more productive in their role.
6. The Chair’s actions have helped the board contribute more meaningfully to setting the broad strategic direction for the organization.

7. The Chair's actions have helped the board fulfill its fiduciary responsibilities (e.g. oversight of finances, laws, rules and regulations etc.).
8. The Chair's actions have helped to attract and retain top quality board members.
9. The Chair's actions have helped the board better carry out oversight of the organization's performance.
10. The Chair has effectively handled disagreements among board members.
11. The Chair effectively manages meetings of the board.
12. The Chair is a major influence in creating high board morale.
13. The Chair is a major influence in creating a high performing team.

A principal components factor analysis was performed and it was found that the items were measuring a single component that accounted for 83 % (NA) and 76 % (UK) of the variance in the data. The eigenvalue for the component was 9.90 (NA) and 10.27 (UK) with factor loadings at or above .80 suggesting they were measuring similar perception providing evidence of convergent validity. For this reason, the items were combined into a latent variable index. The alpha reliability coefficient for the index was  $\alpha = .98$  (NA and UK samples). The data was normally distributed in both samples (NA:  $M = 4.36$ ,  $SD = 1.63$ ,  $N = 540$ ; UK:  $M = 4.16$ ,  $SD = 1.59$ ,  $N = 140$ ).

*Chair Impact on CEO Performance.* Respondent perception of the impact of the Chair on the CEO's performance was measured using a statement drawn from prior research and measured on the same 7-point Likert scale by a single item in the questionnaire:

1. The Chair's actions have helped the Chief Executive Officer (NA)/Chief Executive (UK) become more effective in doing his/her job. Again the data was normally distributed in both samples (NA:  $M = 4.52$ ,  $SD = 1.91$ ,  $N = 504$ ; UK:  $M = 4.51$ ,  $SD = 1.89$ ,  $N = 142$ )

*Chair Impact on Organization Performance.* Respondent perception of the impact of the Chair on the performance of the organization was measured using six

items drawn from the statements of respondents in prior research and measured (on the 7 point scale).

1. The Chair's actions have had a positive impact on the organization's financial position.
2. The Chair's actions have had a positive impact on the morale of staff, volunteers or members.
3. The Chair's actions have had a positive impact on the organization's efficiency.
4. The Chair's actions have had a positive impact on the planning and priorities of the organization.
5. The Chair's actions have positively influenced the amount of financial support for the organization provided by key external stakeholders (e.g. funders and donors).
6. The Chair's actions have had a positive impact on accountability (e.g. to regulators and clients).

One component was extracted with varimax rotation accounting for 77 % (NA) and 75 % (UK) of the variance in the data. In both samples, eigenvalues for the principal component were 4.6 and 4.5 respectively and factor loadings were at or above .80 suggesting the items were measuring similar perceptions. The alpha reliability coefficients for the organization impact index (NA:  $M = 4.05$ ,  $SD = 1.64$ ,  $N = 541$ ; UK:  $M = 4.02$ ,  $SD = 1.60$ ,  $N = 147$ ) were identical at  $\alpha = .94$  (NA) and  $\alpha = .93$  (UK).

*Overall Chair Impact.* The overall impact of the chair was computed using the three measures of chair impact: on the CEO, Board and the organization as a whole as the items were highly correlated. A principal components factor analysis was conducted with varimax rotation with one component extracted accounting for 88 % (NA) and 86 % (UK) of the variance in the data. In both samples, factor loadings were at or above .80 and the alpha reliability coefficients were  $\alpha = .93$  (NA) and  $\alpha = .93$  (UK). (NA:  $M = 4.26$ ,  $SD = 1.62$ ,  $N = 542$ ; UK:  $M = 4.23$ ,  $SD = 1.59$ ,  $N = 148$ ). The data for the component dependent variables—perceived impact of the chair on the performance of the CEO,

board and organization-- were normally distributed (i.e. with ratios for skewedness and kurtosis within acceptable levels as indicated by Berman, 2002).

*Satisfaction with Chair Performance in the Role.* This variable was measured on a 7 point Likert scale where “1” is not at all satisfied, “4” is somewhat satisfied and “7” is extremely satisfied with chair performance of the chair role (NA:  $M = 4.72$ ,  $SD = 1.95$ ,  $N = 542$ ;UK:  $M = 4.42$ ,  $SD = 1.90$ ,  $N = 141$ ).

*Perceived quality of the Respondent-Chair Relationship.* The quality of the respondent’s relationship with the chair was measured utilizing the well-known *Leader-Member Exchange Instrument (LMX)* developed by Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995). Key actors in the North American sample were asked six questions about the quality of their working relationship with their chair using a five point Likert scale where “1” is negative (e.g. not at all or strongly disagree or extremely ineffective) and “5” is positive (e.g. fully, strongly agree, or extremely effective). In response to the requirement for a shorter instrument in the U.K., only a general measure of chair relationship quality was included (item 6 below):

1. Do you know where you stand with the board chair (e.g. how he/she feels about your value and contributions to the organization)?
2. Do you usually know how satisfied the board chair is with the work that you do?
3. To what extent does the board chair understand the needs/problems associated with your position?
4. How well does the board chair recognize you for your contributions?
5. I have enough confidence in the board chair that I would defend and justify his or her decisions if he or she were not present to do so.
6. How would you characterize your working relationships with the board Chair? (UK only)

The above six items correlated beyond the  $p < .001$  level. A factor analysis (with varimax rotation) was conducted and one principal component was extracted that accounted for 75



% of the variance in the NA data. The eigenvalue for this component was 4.53. The factor loadings were above .86 which shows that they were measuring the same perception—that of the quality of the respondent’s relationship with the Chair. The alpha reliability coefficient for the index, which was computed as an overall measure of relationship quality in the NA sample ( $M = 3.85$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ,  $N = 539$ ) was  $\alpha = .94$ . In the UK, only one item measured quality of the respondent’s working relationship with the chair ( $M = 3.73$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ,  $N = 138$ ). Responses to this measure were normally distributed.

*Reported frequency of respondent-chair interaction.* Reported frequency of respondent chair interactions including in-person, telephone, and electronic interactions (e.g. in emails and web-based) where 1= Interacts with the chair quarterly or less, 2= monthly, 3= bi-weekly, 4 =weekly, 5 = daily. While the mean was higher in the North American sample, the mode for reported respondent-chair interaction in both samples was weekly interaction (NA:  $M = 3.24$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ,  $N = 538$ ; UK:  $M = 3.01$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ,  $N = 148$ ). The data was within the acceptable range for skewness and kurtosis (i.e. a normal distribution).

#### *Perception of the Chair’s Leadership Competency*

As noted in Figure 1, this component comprises three competencies—as a team leader and as a person with emotional and spiritual intelligence.

*Perceptions of the Chair as a Team Leader.* These were captured through statements of board chair leadership behavior. Some items were derived directly from statements of those who interact with chairs from our earlier research (see Harrison and Murray, forthcoming) while others were from LaFasto and Larsen’s (2001) *Collaborative Team Leader* instrument. We chose to include items from this instrument because they captured the facilitative nature of the chair leadership role we concluded was important in our earlier research. We adopted their four point measurement scale to measure chair leadership behavior where ‘1’ is the perception that the behavior is “false”, ‘2’ is “more

false than true”, ‘3’ is “more true than false” and ‘4’ is the perception that the behavior is a “true” reflection of the chair’s leadership. Of the 23 items included in our 2008 survey, the following eight were considered more than “somewhat true” of the leadership behavior of board chairs. We included these items in the UK survey. The items were as follows:

1. The board chair does not distract the board from goals.<sup>2</sup>
2. The board chair creates a safe climate where issues can be discussed.
3. The board chair looks for and acknowledges the contributions others make to the board and organization.
4. The board chair confronts and resolves inadequate performance in a respectful way.
5. The board chair is open to new ideas and information.
6. The board chair is fair and impartial.
7. The board chair provides the right amount of autonomy and independence for the board and CEO.
8. The board chair makes me feel like a valuable member of the team.

We used principal components factor analysis (with varimax rotation) to show the items were measuring the same behavior. The results of the analysis showed the items loaded onto one factor with eigenvalues of 5.23 (NA) and 5.63 (UK) accounting for 65.42 % (NA) and 70.43 % (UK) of the variance in team leadership data. Factor loadings were above .71 in both samples. The alpha coefficient for the index was  $\alpha = .92$  for the NA sample and  $\alpha = .94$  for the UK sample indicating good reliability in measuring perception of the chair as a team leader (NA:  $M = 3.39$ ,  $SD = .68$ ,  $N = 542$ ; UK:  $M = 3.35$ ,  $SD = .69$ ,  $N = 148$ ).

Mean statistics for team leadership show that the distribution of responses was skewed such that most respondents perceived their chair as displaying team leadership characteristics (NA:  $M = 3.40$ ,  $SD = .68$ ,  $N = 504$ ; UK:  $M = 3.35$ ,  $SD = .69$ ,  $N = 148$ ). For

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<sup>2</sup> Items one to four were adapted from Lafasto and Larsen, 2001

this reason, it was transformed at the median into a dichotomous variable: “true” (greater than 3.50 on the 4.0 scale) and “less than true” (3.50 or less).

### *Perceptions of Personality Characteristics of the Chair*

*Emotional Intelligence.* EI was measured using statements (with permission) from Hay Inc’s. *Emotional and Social Competence Inventory* (Version 3 in Wolfe 2006). 70 items were framed as statements describing the chair’s competency on four dimensions: *self awareness* (“critical awareness of own feelings and their strengths and weaknesses”), *social awareness* (“critical awareness of others, including feelings, perspectives, backgrounds, teams and organizations (e.g. values, structures, processes and culture))”, *self-management* (“making an effort to improve and being seen as responsive to change, composed and optimistic”), *relationship management* (“communicating a vision, coaching and influencing others, managing conflict, encouraging participation”). The items in the scale are measured on a five point Likert scale where “1” is never, “2” is rarely, “3” is sometimes, “4” is often and “5” is consistently. “Do not know” responses were recorded as missing data as per Wolfe’s (2006) instructions.

An overall EI construct was computed as an average of the four dimensions:

1. The Chair is self aware (1 dimension, 5 items)
2. The Chair is socially aware (2 dimensions, 12 items)
3. The Chair self-manages (4 dimensions, 23 items)
4. The Chair manages relationships (5 dimensions, 30 items)

Factor analysis (with varimax rotation) showed that only one component was extracted accounting for 84 % of the variance in the NA data and 89 % in the UK data. The eigenvalue for this component was above one at 3.39 (NA) and 3.58 (UK). The factor loadings were above .73 in the NA and .86 in the UK sample. Results show the dimensions were measuring the same perception—that of the chair’s emotional intelligence. For this reason an overall measure of EI was computed (NA:  $M = 4.04$ ,  $SD =$

.74,  $N = 520$ ; UK:  $M = 4.03$ ,  $SD = .79$ ,  $N = 147$ ). The alpha reliability coefficient for the index was  $\alpha = .94$  in the NA and  $\alpha = .96$  in the UK sample.

Mean statistics for EI show that most respondents perceived that their chair displayed a number of the characteristics of this leadership competency. In other words, the distribution of EI was skewed to the high end. For this reason, it, too, was transformed into a dichotomous variable using the median of 4.21 in the NA sample and 3.60 in the UK. As a dichotomous measure, half of respondents had a score that indicated they perceived their chair “often” or “consistently” displayed a high level of EI while the other half had scores that suggested EI was less than consistent.

*Spiritual Intelligence.* Perceptions of the extent to which the chair was perceived as possessing “spiritual intelligence” were measured using three correlated dimensions of spirituality in Beazley’s (1997) Spirituality Assessment Scale (SAS). Respondent perceptions of Chair leadership behavior were assessed on a 7 point Likert scale where “1” is “strongly disagree” and “7” is “strongly agree” on the following dimensions:

- Chair helpfulness (8 items)
- Chair honesty (5 items)
- Chair humility (4 items)

Factor analysis was conducted to determine whether the items could be: a) reduced into the three dimensions as Beazley described and b) reliably combined, like EI, into a single construct. One component was extracted with varimax rotation accounting for 82 % of the variance in both the NA and UK data. In both samples, eigenvalues for the principal component were 2.47 and factor loadings were at or above .88 suggesting that the items were measuring the same trait. The alpha reliability coefficients for the computed SI index (NA:  $M = 5.45$ ,  $SD = 1.31$ ,  $N = 534$ ; UK:  $M = 5.62$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ,  $N = 131$ ) were identical at  $\alpha = .89$  (NA and UK).

Similar to team leadership and EI, the distribution of responses for SI show that most respondents perceived that the Chair demonstrated SI in the role. For this reason, it was necessary to dichotomize the data at the median of 5.80 in both the NA and UK samples.

A limitation of this research comes from common methods bias, a problem Meade et al. (2007) define as “the degree to which correlations are altered (inflated) due to methods effects” (p. 1). These methodologists say the problem is common in organizational and survey research that involves assessment of multiple constructs and self-reported data. They also suggest it can be managed using multiple samples and statistical analytic techniques such as factor and regression analyses which we employed in this research.

### *3.3 Characteristics of NA and UK Samples*

The majority of survey respondents reporting on their chair were from older and larger nonprofit organizations-- greater than 25 years (NA: 46 %; UK: 39 %) and with annual budgets between \$/£ 1 and 10 million (NA: 36 % and UK: 29 %) annual budget. They also come from organizations with primarily public service (as opposed to member service) missions (NA: 70 %; UK: 66 %).

With respect to board characteristics, survey respondents represented a diversity of board types (e.g. “working” boards, “governance” only boards and those that mixed both of these models) with ‘governance only’ being the most frequently reported (NA 52%; UK, 46%) (See Gill, 2005 for these types). Many board sizes were also represented—from five or fewer to 21—though most were between 11 and 15 members (NA 35%; UK, 40%).

Overall, survey respondents were experienced as board members with 84 % of NA and 85 % of UK respondents reporting that they had been in their position for 2-3 years or more. There were more respondents who were board member in the UK sample than in the NA sample (NA 26 %; UK 40 %) and close to equal numbers of staff and other stakeholders (NA 23 %; UK 20%).

With respect to demographics, the majority of survey respondents in the NA and UK were over the age of 45 years (NA: 86 %, n = 424; UK: 81%, n= 98). More females (71 %, n =37) than males (29% n =153) in NA sample compared to more even balance in the UK sample (female: 56.5%, n =74; male, 43.5 %, n =57).

#### **4 Research Findings**

This section is organized in two parts. It begins with the results of correlation, crosstabs, and regression analyses to test the hypotheses advanced in section 3 above. The second section presents the results of path analysis, a type of multiple regression analytic technique that was used to test for direct and indirect relationships (also known as paths) between the independent and dependent variables in the hypothesized model.

##### *4.1 Tests of Hypotheses 1 to 4*

*H1: The greater the satisfaction with the Chair's performance in the role, the greater the impact the chair will be seen to have on the effectiveness of the board, CEO, and the organization as a whole.*

Support was found for this hypothesis across both samples.. As satisfaction with chair leadership increased so too did perception of chair impact on the performance of the board (NA:  $r = .864$ ,  $p < .000$ ; UK:  $r = .841$ ,  $p = .000$ ), the CEO (NA:  $r = .753$ ,  $p < .000$ ; UK:  $r = .754$ .,  $p = .000$ ), and the organization (NA:  $r = .797$ ,  $p < .01$ ; UK:  $r = .785$ ,  $p = .000$ ).

*H2a: The higher the perceived quality of the relationship between the respondent and the chair, the more likely the respondent is to perceive the chair as having an impact on the performance of the board, CEO, and organization.*

Support was found for this hypothesis across samples. As perception of chair relationship quality increased so too did their perception of chair impact on the performance of the board (NA:  $r = .723$ ,  $p < .01$ ; UK:  $r = .841$ ,  $p = .000$ ), the CEO (NA:  $r$

=.667,  $p < .01$ ; UK:  $r = .657$ ,  $p = .000$ ), and the organization (NA:  $r = .797$ ,  $p < .01$ ; UK:  $r = .695$ ,  $p = .000$ ).

*H2b: The greater the reported frequency of respondent-chair interactions, the greater the perceived impact of the chair on the performance of the board, CEO, and organization.*

This hypothesis was only partially supported. In both samples a weaker though statistically significant relationship was found between frequency of respondent-chair interaction and perception of chair impact on the board (NA:  $r = .246$ ,  $p < .000$ ; UK:  $r = .209$ ,  $p = .013$ ) and organization (NA:  $r = .258$ ,  $p < .000$ ; UK:  $r = .187$ ,  $p = .023$ ). Frequency of interaction with the chair was significantly related to perception of chair impact on the CEO in North America only (NA:  $r = .207$ ,  $p < .000$ ).

*H3: The more chairs are perceived as team leaders, the more impact they will be perceived to have on the performance of the board, CEO, and organization.*

Support was found for this hypothesis across both samples. The more team leadership was seen as a “true” characteristic of the chair’s leadership, the greater the perceived impact of the chair on the board (NA:  $r = .601$ ,  $p < .000$ ; UK:  $r = .595$ ,  $p = .000$ ), the CEO (NA:  $r = .509$ ,  $p < .000$ ; UK:  $r = .506$ ,  $p = .000$ ), and the organization (NA:  $r = .525$ ,  $p < .000$ ; UK:  $r = .561$ ,  $p = .000$ ).

Crosstab statistics were used to further test the team leadership hypothesis. An index split at the median was created (see measures section above). Figure 2 below shows the significant positive relationship found between perception of the chair as a team leader and perception of chair overall impact (NA:  $\chi^2(1, N=542) = 169.08$ ,  $p = .000$ ; UK:  $\chi^2(1, N=148) = 39.75$ ,  $p = .000$ ). The bars in figure 2 indicate the degree of perceived team leadership for chairs seen as high and low impact. As can be seen, the more chairs are perceived as team leaders, the more they are also perceived as having a high impact.

Figure 2 here.

*H4a: The more chairs are seen as demonstrating a high level of emotional intelligence, the more impact they will be perceived to have on the performance of the board, CEO, and organization.*

This hypothesis was also supported across both samples. The more the chair was perceived as emotionally intelligent, the greater the perceived impact of the chair on the board (NA:  $r = .590$ ,  $p < .000$ ; UK:  $r = .666$ ,  $p = .000$ ), the CEO (NA:  $r = .499$ ,  $p < .000$ ; UK:  $r = .554$ ,  $p = .000$ ), and the organization (NA:  $r = .504$ ,  $p < .000$ ; UK:  $r = .609$ ,  $p = .000$ ).

The results of the crosstab analysis shown in Figure 3 below illustrates the significant positive relationship found between the perception of the chair as emotionally intelligent and the perceived extent of the Chair's impact at the 95 percent confidence interval (UK:  $\chi^2 (1, N=148) = 58.25$ ,  $p = .000$ ; NA:  $\chi^2 (1, N=520) = 123.21$ ,  $p = .000$ ).

Figure 3 here.

*H4b: The more chairs are perceived as demonstrating spiritual intelligence, the more impact they will be perceived to have on the performance of the board, CEO, and organization.*

Support was found for this hypothesis across both samples though it was much stronger in North America than in the UK (NA:  $r = .533$ ,  $p < .000$ ; UK:  $r = .298$ ,  $p = .001$ ), the CEO (NA:  $r = .446$ ,  $p < .000$ ; UK:  $r = .219$ ,  $p = .013$ ) and organization (NA:  $r = .505$ ,  $p < .000$ ; UK:  $r = .284$ ,  $p = .001$ ).

Crosstab analysis provided further support the SI chair impact hypothesis as shown in Figure 4 below (UK:  $\chi^2 (1, N=131) = 9.51$ ,  $p = .002$ ; NA:  $\chi^2 (1, N=534) = 113.99$ ,  $p = .000$ ).



Figure 4 here.

#### 4.2 Test of the model to 'explain' chair impact

The multivariate regression technique known as path analysis was used to test relationships between constructs in the hypothesized model shown in Figure 2. Two types of results are reported:

1. The size and significance of paths between variables in the model. This statistic, which shows the significance of the direct paths between independent (exogenous) and dependent (endogenous) variables, is called the partial regression (*pr*) coefficient. The statistic between two independent (exogenous variables) or correlated paths is the correlation coefficient (*r*)

2. The percentage of variance in the dependent (endogenous) variables accounted for by the independent (exogenous) variables is indicated by the statistic "R square". This statistic is depicted as a number in the upper right hand quadrant of each dependent variable in the path model (see figures 5 and 6 below for results). As a multiple regression, variables are controlled thus indicating how much the endogenous variable of interest changed as a result of preceding exogenous variable influences. Factors not included in of the model are depicted as error (*err*) variables. They represent changes in endogenous variables not accounted for by the variables in the model (see figures 5 and 6 for paths between *err* and endogenous variables). If the R square is high, than much of what changes the endogenous variables is captured inside the model.

The results of the path analysis are described and depicted below in figure 5 for the North American sample, and figure 6 for the UK sample.

Figure 5 here.

Figure 6 here.

With respect to the size and significance of paths in the hypothesized model, several interesting results were found.

- In both models significant correlations ( $p < .001$ ) were found between the independent variables of Team Leadership (TL), Emotional Intelligence (EI) and Spiritual Intelligence (SI). These findings are in keeping with those of Tischler, Biberman, & McKeage (2002) who suggested that these leadership traits are related.
- With respect to the significance of paths between the independent and dependent variables in the North American model, nine of the twelve paths in the NA sample were significant beyond the  $p < .05$  level. Team Leadership, EI and SI were all significantly and positively related to perception of relationship quality (TL,  $pr = .40$ ,  $p < .05$ ; EI,  $pr = .16$ ,  $p < .05$ ; SI,  $pr = .21$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Only perception of the chair as a team leader was related to the respondents' reports of the frequency of their interaction with the chair ( $pr = .22$ ,  $p < .05$ ). As we expected, frequency of respondent-chair interaction was related to perception of chair relationship quality ( $pr = .19$ ,  $p < .05$ ) Significant relationships were found between relationship quality and satisfaction with chair leadership in the role ( $pr = .82$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and between satisfaction with chair performance and perception of chair impact on the board ( $pr = .85$ ,  $p < .05$ ), CEO ( $pr = .75$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and organization ( $pr = .79$ ,  $p < .05$ ).
- In the UK sample, eight of twelve paths were significant beyond the  $p < .05$  level. Perception of the chair's spiritual intelligence was not a significant path to perception of relationship quality as it was in the North American sample. In the UK, EI was a much stronger and more significant influence on perception of respondent-Chair relationship quality ( $pr = .41$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and respondent frequency of chair interaction ( $pr = .14$ ,  $p < .05$ ) than in North America. Similar to the findings for the NA sample above, frequency of respondent-chair interaction was related to perception of chair relationship quality ( $pr = .12$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Another similarity was found between relationship quality and satisfaction with chair leadership in the role ( $pr = .82$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and between satisfaction with chair performance and perception of chair impact on the board ( $pr = .89$ ,  $p < .05$ ), CEO ( $pr = .77$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and organization ( $pr = .81$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

Similarity was also found between the NA and UK path models with respect to the amount of variance in the dependent (endogenous) variables for chair impact that was accounted for by the independent (exogenous) variables. Exogenous variables accounted for:

- 59 % (NA) and 56 % (UK) of the variance in the perception of the chair's impact on the *CEO's* performance;
- 65 % (NA) and 62 % (UK) of the variance in the perception of the chair's impact on the *organization's* performance; and
- 78 % (NA) and 72 % (UK) of the variance in the perceived impact of the chair on the *board's* performance.
- 67% (NA) and 69% (UK) of the variance in satisfaction with chair performance in the role.
- 50% (NA) and 43% (UK) of the variance in perceived quality of the respondent's relationship with the chair.
- 5% (NA) and 2% (UK) of the variance in the reported frequency of respondent-chair Interactions.

## **DISCUSSION**

It is a truism in the social sciences to say that different people looking at the same situation "see" different things then interpret the reasons for them and react to them differently. In the case of chairs of nonprofit organization boards of directors, our previous research reported that many of those who have the opportunity to observe nonprofit board chairs in action see them as being quite important in influencing the performance of boards, CEOs and even the entire organization.

While prior research advanced a number of theoretical perspectives to explain perceptions of chair impact, this research sought to determine which factors provided the best explanation. The results show support for the theoretical model shown in figure 1 above though, since the data were gathered at one point in time only, it is understood that

it cannot test the causal links between the variables that are implicit in the model. They do, however, lend support for the conclusion that chair leadership is a multi-dimensional theoretical construct as Kooiman (2007) suggests.

An interesting result of the analyses of the data was the finding that that perceptions of the chair team leadership, EI and SI were not distributed normally but skewed such that most respondents saw their chairs as possessing them. When these variables were normalized (creating "high" and "less high" categories) those chairs that were perceived to have high EI were significantly more likely to be seen as having a high impact in the role. This suggests that there is perhaps a tendency to view chairs in a generally positive light simply because of the luster of the role irrespective of who is in it. However, our findings suggest that only respondents who believed their chairs possessed these competencies in almost every respect (i.e. consistently, often, or agreed they had observed them to be true behaviors) saw them as having high impact on the nonprofit and voluntary sector organizations they served.

Finally it was not known to what extent differences would exist between respondents in the North America and the U.K. No hypotheses were developed but the results were analyzed comparing the two samples. As it turned out, very few differences were found between respondents from the different cultures. Those that *were* found occurred primarily in the lack of significance of the Spiritual Intelligence variable in the U. K. sample. This could have been due to slight differences in the way it was measured or a tendency for more nonprofit sector actors in the U.K. to be less comfortable with overt expressions of idealism such as "humility" and "selflessness". Clearly further research into the underlying values and motives of nonprofit sector leaders in different cultures would be valuable.

As mentioned, a study conducted at one point in time, it is not possible to make definitive statements of causality such as those implied in the theoretical framework advanced in Figure 1 above. Nevertheless the application of path analyses does permit a statistical test of variables included in a causal model, which does indicate the significance of direct and indirect relationships (linkages) between the independent variables as well as the

proportion of variance in the dependent variables accounted for by them. The independent variables both directly and in combination significantly affected the views of the chairs' performance in the role which, in turn, affected the chairs' perceived impact. More dramatically, these variables accounted for variations in respondent perception of the quality of their relationship with the chair and satisfaction with their chair's performance in the role. These findings suggest chair leadership is more than a ceremonial role. They lend further support for Kooiman's (2007) assertion that leaders involved in governance can have great impact. Moreover, that the impact leaders involved in governance are perceived to have can be explained by more than one theory.

## CONCLUSION

In summary, how does this research contribute to a better understanding of the comparatively understudied role of the board chair in nonprofit organizations?

- At least in the eyes of most key actors, the leadership role of the board chair is important in spite of the absence of formal authority attached to it.
- It is not just the leadership role that is important – when the individuals who fill that role are seen as performing it well they are likely be seen as having a positive impact on the performance of the board, the CEO and the organization as a whole.
- When key actors believe that the quality of their relationship with the chair is high, they are more likely to also perceive that the chair has performed the role well and is having an impact.
- Chairs who are seen as demonstrating certain leadership style and traits (team leadership; Emotional intelligence; and Spiritual Intelligence) are more likely to be seen as effective in building high quality relationships with the key actors who interact with them. In particular this study highlights the results of our prior research that showed the effective chair as a team leader who “works with” others rather than “under” or “over” them (see Harrison and Murray, forthcoming). It

further reveals the importance of personal commitment and interpersonal behavior that are captured by the concepts of Spiritual and Emotional Intelligence.

- Finally it appears that a lesser though significant condition for developing for developing positive perceptions of chair behavior and impact is simple frequency of interaction. Chairs who spend time with the key actors in their environment were more likely to be viewed positively underscoring the social and relational nature of the chair leadership role.

While this research has provided some interesting insights into perceptions of chair leadership effectiveness and its determinants it is clear that further research is needed. Among the areas in which such further research could take place are the following:

- Given that all the data reported so far is derived from the perceptions of those who interact with chairs, what factors (i.e. cultural, respondent, organizational and board structural-contingency), in turn, are associated with the tendency to perceive chairs one way or another?
- The impact of changing contextual conditions that surround nonprofit organizations such as changing funding patterns, major personnel changes and any other events that suddenly disturb the status quo would add considerably to our understanding of how these relationships are formed and change as circumstances change.
- Finally, the design of this study and nature of the sample severely limits its generalizability. Longitudinal research and a representative sample is much to be desired. This methodology would permit such things as an in-depth examination over time of chair leadership from multiple perspectives (board, management, and external stakeholders).

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