

## What Skills are Developed by Individuals Who Volunteer as Leaders in a Civic Organization?

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### Abstract

Volunteer leaders serve a critical role that enables many nonprofit organizations to achieve their organizational goals (Boezeman & Ellemers, 2014). In the process of engaging in activities that support a nonprofit organization's progress toward its goals, many volunteer leaders gain and refine important leadership skills. While some previous research has focused on volunteer leaders, Morrison and Greenshaw (2018) noted that there is limited literature pertaining to specific competencies and skills that are needed by volunteer leaders in nonprofits. Research has not yet fully explored a number of phenomena relating to volunteer leadership, including the types of skills developed by individuals serving as volunteer leaders. With this research gap in mind, our study investigates the types of skills gained by volunteer leaders in a civic organization. Results of the study reveal that the types of leadership skills developed by volunteer leaders tended to align closely with the four skill requirement categories in the strataplex described by Mumford et al. (2007); additionally, participants reported increased self-confidence. Implications for research and practice are discussed.

### KEYWORDS

*Leadership Skills, Nonprofit, Civic Organization, Volunteer Leaders, Skills Development, Self-confidence*

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### Introduction

Many nonprofit organizations rely heavily, if not exclusively, on volunteer leaders to help accomplish organizational goals (Boezeman & Ellemers, 2014). Volunteer leaders are non-paid individuals with formally defined roles in an organization (Morrison & Greenhaw, 2018). In the process of assisting a nonprofit organization reach its goals, volunteer leaders may develop and refine a number of professional skills and abilities.

Jäger et al. (2009) recognized that the practices utilized by individuals leading volunteers is an under-researched phenomenon and Morrison and Greenshaw (2018) recognized that there is limited literature pertaining to specific competencies and skills that are needed by volunteer leaders in nonprofits. Given that serving nonprofit organizations provides volunteer leaders the opportunity to learn and develop a variety of skills needed by leaders, there is an opportunity to advance the existing literature by identifying specific skills that volunteer leaders acquire and refine while serving in their leadership roles. Thus, the purpose of this study is to identify skills that volunteer leaders gain through their participation in leadership positions within a nonprofit community organization.

## Literature Review

### Critical Leadership Skills Needed in Organizations

A variety of skills, including interpersonal skills and problem-solving skills, are frequently recognized as critical for organizational leaders. A Harvard Business Review survey found that the most important skills for organizational leaders at every level include a) inspiring and motivating others b) displaying high integrity and honesty c) solving problems and analyzing issues d) driving for results e) communicating powerfully and prolifically f) collaborating and promoting teamwork and g) building relationships (Zenger & Folkman, 2014).

Likewise, a recent survey conducted by Training Magazine and Wilson Learning identified similar skills as important leadership skills in Worldwide Inc. (Leimback, 2023). In the survey, the top seven leadership skills identified by organizations included: a) coaching/ developing others b) communication skills c) team leadership d) strategy development and alignment e) emotional intelligence skills f) change leadership and g) interpersonal relationship skills.

### Volunteer Leader Skills Development within Nonprofit Organizations

In the process of volunteering in a leadership role within a nonprofit organization, volunteer leaders can gain and develop a variety of different skills and abilities. Palanski et al. (2022) identified a number of professional development benefits enjoyed by individuals that serve in leadership roles in volunteer contexts; benefits included utilizing and practicing existing skills, development of new skills, prompting self-awareness and development, providing the challenge of motivating others without formal workplace rewards and punishments, and providing greater freedom to experiment than is often allowed in the workplace.

Lester et al. (2017) recognized that there is very little research on how participation in a community organization can develop leadership skills. In their description of multi-domain leadership, the authors asserted that leadership development can be accelerated by an individual's pursuit of leadership opportunities in multiple domains including opportunities within the domain of community. Consistent with the view held by Lester et al. that leadership development is an outcome of participation within community organizations, Gordon and Gordon (2017) found that active membership in volunteer organizations including civic, fraternal, professional or religious, may provide individuals a way to gain new skills as well as enhance higher-level leadership skills in a non-threatening, collaborative environment.

The approach to leadership adopted by volunteer leaders may differ from paid leaders. In research comparing volunteer leaders to paid leaders in a national youth sports organization, Posner (2015) found that volunteer leaders engaged more frequently in certain leadership behaviors than paid leaders, including exhibiting behaviors they expected of followers, communicating a positive vision of the future, inspiring followers to direct their efforts in support of the organization's vision, encouraging innovation among followers, empowering followers, and demonstrating genuine concern for followers.

Because volunteer leaders often lead other volunteers rather than paid employees, the particular skills developed by volunteer leaders may reflect the different type of leadership approach that is necessary when leading volunteers. Boezeman and Ellemers (2014) argue that because volunteer work is unpaid and not required, volunteer leadership requires an approach that focuses on non-instrumental and non-coercive concerns. Underscoring the importance of communication skills development, they found that it is imperative for leaders to communicate to volunteers how the organization improves people's lives in order to assist volunteers in their efforts to carry out their work for the organization.

### Background on Civic Organizations

Civic organizations represent a unique type of organization, with characteristics that separate them from for-profit organizations as well as some other types of nonprofit organizations. Civic organizations are characterized as voluntary associations that depend on members' contributions of money, time, effort and skill to work in support of a common purpose (Andrews et al., 2010). Civic organizations differ from for-profit and nonprofit bureaucratic organizations that are characterized by centralized decision-making and reliance on hired employees to complete the work. Instead, civic organizations are characterized as depending on members' voluntary efforts, decentralized decision-making across local units, and governance

through elected volunteer leaders. The accomplishments achieved by civic associations are the result of member and supporter voluntary participation (Andrews et al., 2010; Knoke & Prenskey, 1984; Smith, 2000).

Leadership practices required to generate commitment to voluntary organizations differ significantly from those used to generate compliance in work organizations (Andrews et al., 2010; Walton, 1985). With civic organizations characterized by voluntary participation, decentralized decision making, and voluntary elected leaders, it is necessary for leaders to work toward achieving the organization's goals without relying on coercive compliance (Andrews et al., 2010). The demand for effective leadership is felt at all levels of civic organizations, especially at the local level, with local chapters required to recruit, train, and support individuals who can serve in the many local leadership positions, requiring a major commitment to leadership development (Andrews et al., 2010). The significant reliance of civic organizations on work completed by volunteers points to the need to take a closer look at the particular skills developed by volunteer leaders in their efforts to lead volunteers.

### **Gap Addressed by our Research**

Jäger et al. (2009) recognized that the practices utilized by individuals leading volunteers is an under-researched phenomenon; the literature they found addressing the topic was primary popular management literature rather than research incorporating academic rigor. Since then, some research on volunteer leaders has been conducted in different areas of focus.

Bowers (2012) reported that in searching of EBSCO, ProQuest, Sage, and Emerald Insight databases, 386 results matched one or more of the following terms: "volunteer leadership," "volunteer leader," "voluntary leadership," "voluntary leader," "voluntarism" and "leadership," "volunteerism" and "leadership," and "leading volunteers." However, in the research articles that were included in the results, the primary focus of those articles was limited to three general categories: volunteer satisfaction and motivation, service learning, and the impact of employee volunteerism on corporate engagement. The high concentration of research articles focusing on a few general categories indicate that research has not yet fully explored a number of phenomena relating to volunteer leadership, including the types of skills developed by individuals serving as volunteer leaders.

More recently, Gordon and Gordon (2017) interviewed leaders in two civic organizations, finding that volunteer leaders benefited from formal and informal training, the opportunity to practice new skills and hone existing skills, and recognition that learned skills were transferable to other settings including paid employment. While their research acknowledged volunteer leaders were able to practice and refine skills, they did not identify the specific leadership skills developed. Additional research on identifying specific skills developed by volunteer leaders is needed. Morrison and Greenshaw (2018) recognized that there is limited literature pertaining to specific competencies and skills that are needed by volunteer leaders in nonprofit and volunteer organizations. With this gap in mind, our study seeks to advance the existing research by identifying specific knowledge, skills, and abilities gained by volunteer leaders in a civic organization.

By analyzing survey responses from a unique dataset gathered by the researchers, this study contributes to the understanding of the skills developed by volunteer leaders serving in a civic organization, Civitan International. In this research study, survey data from 65 leaders in the civic organization is used to identify skills that volunteer leaders acquired and refined in their role. Unitizing and categorizing the comments from participant responses allowed the researchers to identify the skills that the volunteer leaders developed and improved through their service.

### **Theoretical/Conceptual Framework**

Mumford, Campion and Morgeson (2007) proposed a model of four categories of leadership skill requirements consisting of cognitive skills, interpersonal skills, business skills, and strategic skills that were tested on a sample of professional employees working for the U.S. government. The model incorporates nine leadership skills taxonomies previously proposed; each of which included a variety of skills that fell within the four categories proposed by Mumford et al. Descriptions of the four categories are listed below.

- 1) Cognitive skill requirements include communication skills such as speaking, active listening, writing, and reading comprehension as well as active learning and critical thinking skills.
- 2) Interpersonal skill requirements include social perceptiveness, coordination (with others), negotiation, and persuasion.
- 3) Business skill requirements include operations analysis, and management of personnel resources, financial resources and material resources.
- 4) Strategic skill requirements include visioning, systems perception, systems evaluations, identification of key causes, problem identification, and solution appraisal.

Mumford et al. (2007) also visualized a strataplex of "strata" (levels of leadership) and "plex" (segments of the four categories) illustrating that strategic skill requirements are relatively more important for senior level managerial jobs than junior level managerial jobs.

### **Use of Open-ended, Qualitative Items to Evaluate Skills Developed by Volunteer Leaders**

As little prior research focused on identifying specific skills gained by volunteer leaders in a civic organization, the researchers focused their efforts on identifying those skills. The researchers adopted an exploratory approach to gather data. Consistent with an exploratory approach, the researchers utilized a survey design including an open-ended qualitative item to gather information on skills developed by survey participants. Open-ended, qualitative items provide survey respondents full freedom of expression and enable the researcher to identify issues salient to the survey respondent and the strength of the respondent's feelings (Foddy, 1993; Iarossi, 2006). As a result, responses to open-ended items can provide insights that cannot be captured by using closed-ended items. Including an open-ended, qualitative survey item provided the opportunity for the volunteer leader survey participants to identify skills and other related issues that might be different than skills utilized by leaders in other organizational contexts. Thus, the data gathered helps us answer the following research question: What types of leadership skills are developed by volunteer leaders in a civic organization?

## **Methods**

### **Survey Instrument**

The survey included an open-ended, qualitative survey item as well as demographic items. The open-ended survey item read, "In a few sentences, please describe how Civitan has helped you develop and demonstrate your leadership skills." Demographic items related to gender and years of service.

### **Research Venue**

The venue chosen for study was Civitan International. Civitan International is a nonprofit, civic organization founded in Birmingham, Alabama in 1917 with a mission "to build good citizenship by providing a volunteer organization of clubs dedicated to serving individual and community needs, with an emphasis on helping people with developmental disabilities" (Civitan International, 2025a). Common ways in which local clubs serve community needs include volunteering for soup kitchens, building homes, participating in local Special Olympics events, and fundraise for the Civitan International Research Center (Civitan International, 2025c). Civitan International is a volunteer-based civic organization with only a few paid staff at the organization's headquarters; the rest of the organization is led by volunteers (Civitan International, 2025b). One of the authors had been an active member of the organization for many years and has served in several leadership positions.

## Participants

Almost all survey participants were Civitan members serving in District Level and Club Level positions at the time of the survey. Survey participants were in the United States, where a large majority of organization's members and leaders reside. The organizational structure is geographically based; the structure at the time of the survey is included in Table 1. Below the International level, each of the eight large geographic regions containing multiple districts (e.g., Region 1 comprises districts in Alabama and Mississippi, Region 2 Georgia, South Carolina, and Florida Districts). In turn, each district contains multiple areas (e.g. North Carolina East contains nine areas); each area contains individual, community-based clubs (2 to 15 clubs). Many of the survey participants previously held leadership positions at multiple organizational levels. In contrast to many employment-based leadership paths in which an individual tends to follow a leadership path that often moves only upward in an organization, in Civitan it is not unusual for an individual to return to lower levels of leadership after serving in a higher-level position. For example, Past International Presidents have subsequently served as District Governors.

Table 1 Civitan Leadership Organizational Structure

Level	Units	Leadership positions
International*	1	President, President Elect, Immediate Past President, Treasurer, Secretary, and Regional Directors.
Regions	8	Each Region (a bundle of Districts) is represented by one elected Regional Director who serves on the International Board.
Districts	22	Each District (a bundle of Areas) is represented by a Governor, Governor Elect, Past Governor, Treasurer, Secretary, and committee chairs.
Areas	126**	Each Area (a bundle of Local Clubs) is represented by one Area Director appointed by the District Governor.
Local Clubs	876***	President, President Elect, Immediate Past President, Treasurer, Secretary, and committee chairs.
Members	24,812***	Anyone 18+ can become a member.

\*Two Canadian districts, four European districts, two Asian districts, and a small number of International Clubs at Large are excluded from this table because they were not recruited.

\*\*Number is approximate.

\*\*\*Membership data at the time of survey collection was reported by the Civitan International Membership Director (L. Stephens, personal communication, November 01, 2014).

## Data Collection

Consistent with the protocol approved by the institutional review board (IRB), researchers initially mailed surveys to each district's Secretary along with a request for the Secretary to proceed with the following protocol: District Secretaries were to distribute the researchers' invitations to the other district board members at the board's next meeting and provide time for interested board members to complete the survey. The district Secretaries would then collect and return the completed surveys to the researchers.

## Data Analysis

Content analysis of written comments is a commonly used procedure that utilizes textual data to make inferences regarding a person's thoughts, intentions and attitudes (Morris, 1994). In the text analysis process, words, phrases, or paragraphs are highlighted and coded. Consistent with this process, the primary documents (participant written responses) were coded with a phrase or sentence as the unit of analysis (Krippendorff, 2004). Each phrase or sentence that referred to a specific idea was separated as a unit. As part of the process of identifying and separating the units, all possible ideas were recognized and captured in separate comments. Overall, 118 unitized comments relating to the question posed to survey participants were identified.

After the written comments were unitized, each comment was discussed by two of the researchers and compared to the four skill requirement categories of the strataplex model described by Mumford et al. The researchers reached a consensus on the particular skill requirement category that most closely aligned with each comment and categorized each comment accordingly. Subsequently a third researcher was asked to independently code the comments.

To be confident in categorization of each unitized comment, the degree of agreement between the third researcher and the first two researchers was calculated. Overall agreement was strong (95.8%). In instances where there were differences in the categorization of unitized comments, all three researchers reviewed the categorization to determine the rationale for the difference. The researchers determined differences were due to typical reasons – some words had multiple meanings, and some phrases were interpreted differently due to the context of other words. After discussing differences in each case, the coding was updated until 100% agreement was achieved.

## Results

### Findings

A total of 118 unitized comments were generated from 65 respondents in 15 Civitan International districts. Years of Civitan service reported by respondents averaged 19.4 years with a median of 17.0. Sixty percent of respondents were female, 40 percent were male.

Qualitative analysis results are included in Table 2 and includes a frequency analysis of unitized comments that represented each of the four categories of skill requirements: cognitive skills (28.0%,  $n = 33$ ), interpersonal skills (26.3%,  $n = 31$ ), business skills (36.4%,  $n = 43$ ), and strategic skills (3.4%,  $n = 4$ ). Most unitized comments matched one of the four categories of skill requirements, however several participants included written comments relating to improved self-confidence. Self-confidence is not a skill, but the authors concluded it was appropriate to report statements on the topic (5.9%,  $n = 7$ ) as the statements signaled that self-confidence was a salient matter to the participants.

Table 2 Unitized Comments Categorization and Summary

Category	Unitized Comment Examples	<i>n</i>	% of total
Cognitive skill requirements	<p><i>"Being rather shy, it has helped me tremendously to talk in front of my peers."</i></p> <p><i>"The experience as Club President and President-Elect especially helped me develop and hone my abilities to communicate, both one-on-one and to a group."</i></p> <p><i>"Provide the ability to learn from members and others".</i></p>	33	28.0%
Interpersonal skill requirements	<p><i>"These people work for free! You have to make them "want" to do it!"</i></p> <p><i>"Serving on the board showed how bringing people together can get things done."</i></p> <p><i>"You learn to work with all kinds of people."</i></p>	31	26.3%
Business skill requirements	<p><i>"The experience ... helped me develop and hone my abilities to organize people."</i></p> <p><i>"(I) have become a mentor for other leaders."</i></p> <p><i>"Civitan has helped me learn to delegate responsibility to others."</i></p>	43	36.4%
Strategic skill requirements	<p><i>"By serving in these roles it... showed me just how Civitan works behind the scenes."</i></p> <p><i>"Honestly the most valuable application has been to lead the West Ashley Club into a new phase of action, service, and modernization."</i></p>	4	3.4%
Increased Self Confidence	<p><i>"Having been in a leadership position, has made a more confident and assertive person."</i></p> <p><i>"It has helped me... develop more self-confidence."</i></p>	7	5.9%

### Discussion and Practical Implications

This research provides insights into the types of skills developed by individuals leading volunteers, addressing the calls of Jäger et al. (2009), Bowers (2012) and Morrison and Greenshaw (2018) for more research into the phenomenon. This study also helps fill in the research gap identified by Lester et al. (2017) by recognizing how participation in a community organization can develop the leadership skills of their volunteers.

Analysis of participant responses indicated the types of leadership skills developed by Civitan volunteer leaders tended to align closely with the four skill requirement categories in the strataplex described by Mumford et al. (2007); additionally, the open response format enabled participants to report increased self-confidence as a salient issue.

The category of cognitive skill requirements included a total of 33 unitized comments (28.0%), with many comments focusing on communications in general and oral communication skills in particular, as well as skills associated with active listening and critical thinking. A total of 31 unitized comments (26.3%) were categorized as interpersonal skills, with many of the unitized comments reporting the survey participant learned how to work well with others, improved the survey participant's abilities to negotiate and persuade, as well as the increased ability to effectively work with others who differ in background, personality, and workstyle.

The numerous comments categorized as cognitive skills requirements and interpersonal skills is consistent with the findings by Boezeman and Ellemers (2014) that stressed the importance of communication skills in volunteer leader positions. In reporting gaining skills such as speaking, active listening, negotiation and persuasion, participants reported that they gained communication skills captured in the strataplex categories of cognitive skill requirements and interpersonal skill requirements noted by Mumford et al. (2007). The numerous comments recognizing participant development of communication skills is logical considering that strong communication skills are needed to achieve the organization's goals without relying on coercive compliance (Andrews et al., 2010).

The category of business skills included a total of 43 unitized comments (36.4%), the highest percentage, with many of the responses noting skills gained in the management of personnel resources, including delegating, organizing, developing and motivating others. Responses also noted skill development in event planning and operations analysis. While previous research on volunteer leaders acknowledged the development of cognitive skills and interpersonal skills, the result of this study also recognizes the prevalence of business skills development.

A total of four unitized comments (3.4%) were categorized as strategic skills, with unitized comments including references to viewing the organization with a systems perspective, identification of key causes, as well as expressing a vision for one's organizational unit. Strategic skills are more often required at the highest levels of leadership in an organization (Mumford et al., 2007). The relatively low percentage of participant comments referencing strategic skills could potentially indicate that strategic skills were simply not needed in the leadership positions held by survey participants. Alternatively, the low percentage could point to an important gap between the strategic skills needed and actual skills developed by organizational leaders.

The category of increased self-confidence included a total of seven unitized comments (5.9% of all comments); participants reporting an increase in self-confidence is consistent with Gordan and Gordan's (2017) conclusion that volunteering for a leadership role in a service organization may confer a benefit of increased personal and professional confidence.

There are practical implications of this research for individuals who wish to develop their leadership skills as part of their professional development. Based on the responses provided by participants, serving as a leader in a volunteer organization provides opportunities to gain and develop cognitive, interpersonal, and business skills. Having an alternative means of developing leadership skills outside the opportunities provided by one's employer may be especially helpful to individuals whose employer is unable or unwilling to provide leadership skills training. This extraorganizational volunteerism (Peloza & Hassay, 2006) performed outside one's role as an employee would enable an individual to enhance these skill sets without being dependent on their employer to provide those opportunities.

In a similar fashion, for an employer that may want to offer an employee the opportunity to develop leadership skills but lacks the resources to do so, encouraging an employee to pursue a leadership position in civic organization could be a cost-effective means of outsourcing of training to develop cognitive, interpersonal, and business skills. Not only do volunteer leaders develop a variety of different skills and abilities (Palanski et al., 2022), these leaders can transfer skills gained by leading volunteer to their workplaces (Gordon & Gordon, 2017).

### Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Because this study was designed to capture skills gained over the entire time the survey participant had been a member of the organization, the skills reported by participants could have been acquired at any leadership level the individual held during their time with the organization. This research does not imply that the percentage of skills included within each category represents the level of skill required for the participant's current leadership position. The survey was administered to leaders surveyed in district-level leadership positions, which represents mid-level organizational leadership. While some of the survey participants had previously served at higher levels of leadership in the organization, relatively few participant comments were categorized as strategic skills requirements, with most comments representative of skills requirements associated with lower and middle levels of leadership according to the strataplex described by Mumford et al. (2007). The study's participants were volunteer leaders from a single civic organization; future research focusing on volunteer leaders at other civic organizations could provide additional insights.

In considering skills requirements needed at different levels of organizational leadership in civic organizations, future research could also explore differences in skills gained by volunteers who serve civic organizations at different leadership levels, including the highest-level leadership positions, the lowest-level leadership positions, as well as non-leadership positions. Such research could identify differences in the types of skills developed at different leadership levels in the organization. Additionally, future research could further explore relationships between skills gained by volunteer leaders and levels of self-confidence.

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