

# “The loneliness” of the nonprofit leader: Comparison with for-profit and public organizations

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**Abstract:** Leaders in nonprofit organizations face challenges related to assignment and enforcement of tasks. Their influence on employees, who are mostly volunteers, remains largely limited. The purpose of the article is to answer the following research questions: Do leaders in Polish nonprofits feel alone in making decisions and carrying out tasks? Are there any differences between nonprofit, for-profit and public organizations in terms of who is responsible for decision-making? Are there any differences between nonprofit, for-profit, and public organizations in terms of who is responsible for carrying out tasks? A total of 315 non-randomly selected respondents participated in the study: 105 leaders and 210 employees not holding managerial positions (35 and 70, respectively, from each type of organization). The article shares the findings of the analysis of leaders’ statements. The Kruskal-Wallis test was used to identify possible cross-sectoral differences. The results prompt a conclusion that a significant part of leaders in Polish nonprofits experience “loneliness” and a sense of being left alone with problems related to the functioning of the organization. To a large extent, they have to make decisions and carry out tasks on their own, as they receive little to no support from employees. The comparative analysis showed that this problem is more prevalent in nonprofits than it is in for-profit or public organizations.

**Keywords:** leaders, nonprofits, decision-making, task realization, cross-sectoral differences

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## 1. Introduction

Managing nonprofit organizations (NPOs) is a case apart because of the structural and personal characteristics of these organizations. Polish experience shows that leaders<sup>1</sup> of nonprofit organizations face challenges related to assigning tasks and enforcing their realization, while having a limited ability to influence employees who are mostly volunteers. Every third Polish NPO (36%) relies on social work only, while

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<sup>1</sup> NPOs in Poland are small and non-formalized and therefore the term *leader* is applied to persons responsible for managing such entities.

every fourth (27%) offers irregular income (Charycka et al., 2020). Available reports on the activities of the Polish third sector point to the existence of what can be described as “loneliness” experienced by nonprofit leaders. In a 2015 study, more than half of participating nonprofit representatives (55%) admitted that most of the work and responsibilities is passed on to leaders (Adamiak et al., 2016). A similar pattern was observed for responsibility, which rested solely on management staff in almost half of the cases (48%). This, of course, entails emotional and health consequences for managerial staff. Research by Cypryńska-Nezlek (2020) found that problems commonly found in NPOs involve: fatigue, stress, pressure to work more, feeling of powerlessness related to external difficulties in accomplishing goals and missions. Are leaders in nonprofits “on their own” and do they bear the burden of decision-making and task realization by themselves? This is where it may be worth comparing nonprofits with for-profit and public organizations, as only that context can shed proper light on the extent to which this is a typical problem for NPOs while also expanding the knowledge of existing cross-sectoral differences.

The purpose of the article is to answer the following research questions:<sup>2</sup>

Q<sub>1</sub>: Do leaders in Polish nonprofits feel alone in making decisions and carrying out tasks?

Q<sub>2</sub>: Are there any differences between nonprofit, for-profit and public organizations in terms of who is responsible for decision-making?

Q<sub>3</sub>: Are there any differences between nonprofit, for-profit, and public organizations in terms of who is responsible for carrying out tasks?

The article is divided into sections, which are as follows: introduction, literature review, methods, results, and conclusions.

## 2. Leadership in nonprofit organizations

The literature points to differences in institutional requirements for leaders at organizations representing the three main sectors of the economy (cf. Mirabella and Wish, 2000; Tschirhart et al., 2008; Suarez, 2009). Differences in approaching leadership are emphasized in particular between for-profit and nonprofit entities (De Hoogh et al., 2005; Egri and Herman, 2000; Rierson and Miller, 2006; Rowold et al., 2014; Saxton, 2005; cf. Rowe, 2014).

Disparities in the work of profit, nonprofit and public managers result from the organizational context. What makes nonprofits stand out is that their human resources are drawn chiefly from volunteer work (Anheier, 2005; Salamon and Anheier, 1997). Participation is therefore voluntary, meaning also that activities take place without a clear division of responsibilities (Frumkin, 2002). Nonprofit leaders do not have strong authority over their employees and have limited opportunities to impose their plans and decisions (Neck et al., 1998; Rierson and Miller, 2006; Jager et al., 2009). Nonprofit organizations often lack a formal hierarchy and management is democratized, which in turn may turn them into a de facto coalition of individuals.

Nonprofit leaders “have people who work with them, and not for them” (Rierson and Miller, 2006). Farmer and Fedor (1999) draw attention to the differences in psychological contracts in nonprofit and for-profit organizations. In the former, participation is symbolic,

<sup>2</sup> These questions are based on the literature review.

therefore the expected terminology is also symbolic. Volunteers bring onboard their convictions and beliefs, which are a manifestation of their ethical attitude towards the world (Rothschild and Milofsky, 2006; cf. Stukas et al., 2016). Motives of volunteers' involvement in nonprofit work can be both altruistic and instrumental (Briggs et al., 2010; Clary et al., 1998; Horton-Smith, 1981; Pearce, 1993; Shye, 2010; Sokolowski, 1996; Stukas et al., 2016).

Nonprofit leaders have limited opportunities to apply formal tools for enforcing orders and shaping the preferred behaviour of employees. This can be balanced out by greater involvement from volunteer staff. Pearce (1993; Liao-Troth, 2003) identified reliability as the central distinguishing feature between volunteers and paid workers. Volunteer workers exhibited lower levels of both job withdrawal and work withdrawal than paid employees, and higher levels of organizational commitment than paid employees. Volunteers were more likely to participate in organizational citizenship behaviours (Laczo and Hanisch, 1999). Overall, nonprofit employees are more willing to "donate" work and stay loyal to the organization than employees in other sectors (Almond and Kendall, 2000; cf. Borzaga and Tortia, 2006). Having said that, research by Goulet and Frank (2002; cf. Lyons et al., 2006) challenged that view by arguing that organizational commitment runs highest among employees working in enterprises, followed by nonprofits, and public organizations coming last.

### 3. Methods

The cross-sectoral study was conducted in 2019, in Poland's Lubusz Voivodeship. It concerned differences in the management of: nonprofit, for-profit, and public entities. One of the research areas was related to the "loneliness" of nonprofit leaders as well as to the problem of decision-making and task realization in three types of organizations. A total of 315 non-randomly selected<sup>3</sup> respondents participated in the study: 105 leaders and 210 employees not holding managerial positions (35 and 70, respectively, from each type of organization). This article shares the findings of the analysis of leaders' statements.

The questionnaire, in the part relating to the issues analyzed in this article, consisted of 2 semi-closed questions concerning persons responsible in their entities for the tasks realization and decision-making, which were addressed to managerial staff of all three types of organizations. Nonprofit leaders, through three closed questions, were additionally asked about their sense of loneliness in the entities they lead, about people who can replace them in their role as leaders, and about the percentage of employees engaged in the activities of the organization.

The research process consisted of the following stages: literature analysis, research gap identification, formulation of research questions and hypotheses, sample selection and development of adequate research tools, data collection and analysis, formulation of conclusions, indication of research limitations and future directions.

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<sup>3</sup> The sample was selected non-randomly. No list is available of leaders working in organizations in Lubusz Voivodeship, nor there is any such list of employees, members or volunteers working in Polish nonprofit organizations.

The following hypotheses were formulated:

H<sub>1</sub>: The majority<sup>4</sup> of the leaders in Polish nonprofits feel lonely in making decisions and carrying out tasks.

H<sub>2</sub>: There are differences between nonprofit, for-profit, and public organizations in terms of who is responsible for decision-making.

H<sub>3</sub>: There are differences between nonprofit, for-profit and public organizations in terms of who is responsible for task realization.

To test these hypotheses, surveys and statistical analyses were conducted. The questionnaires were sent out to different respondents (representatives of one of the three types of organizations: nonprofit, for-profit, and public) whose participation in the study was voluntary.

Among the leaders who participated in the study, there were more men (52.38%) than women. The average age of respondents in the study was 35.8. Most of them worked in small organizations (46.67%), the third part (31.42%)—in micro, and the fifth part (21.90%)—in medium-sized or large.

Nonprofit employees more often represented associations (74.3%) than foundations (25.7%). Every third (30.48%) worked for an entity with fewer than 10 permanent employees (paid, non-paid, members). Almost half (47.62%) were involved with organizations employing 11–50 people, while the rest (11.90%) worked for larger organizations. They represented entities operating in various areas but mostly: social and humanitarian aid (37.14%), education and research (35.24%), culture and recreation (24.76 %) or development and housing (22.86%). More than half of the surveyed NPO employees (62.82%) were members of the organization, the fifth part (19.23%) were volunteers, and the remaining part (17.95%) were paid employees.

Public team members most often worked in medium-sized (50–249 employees; 35.14%) or large entities (over 250 employees; 35.24%), while other members mostly worked in small or micro entities (up to 50 employees; 27.62% in total). Those were mostly: offices (42.86%), army and police and prison (18.09%), educational institutions (15.24%), hospitals (13.33%).

Every fifth (19.05%) for-profit respondent worked in a company with fewer than 10 employees, while every fourth (25.71%)—in a small, every third (30.48%)—in a medium-sized, and every fourth (24.76%)—in a large enterprise. The predominant industries were wholesale and retail trade (23.81%) and manufacturing (22.86%).

Statistical analyses were carried out using Microsoft Excel and Statistica software. A non-parametric test was performed (the Kruskal-Wallis test), which was preceded by examining the normality of the distribution of individual research groups—using to this end the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test with the Lilliefors correction (the results obtained justified using the non-parametric test).

## 4. Results

The research showed that more than every third (37.14%) of the surveyed NPO leaders felt lonely, in the sense of being left alone with problems related to the functioning of the organization, while every second (51.43%) expressed the opposite opinion. The obtained results were the basis for rejecting the H<sub>1</sub> hypothesis, although they also showed that the scale of the discussed problem is significant, which can be considered a worrying indicator for the functioning of Polish nonprofit entities.

<sup>4</sup> According to the *Wielki słownik języka polskiego* (Greater dictionary of Polish language, Żmigrodzki, [https://wsjp.pl/index.php?id\\_hasla=35345](https://wsjp.pl/index.php?id_hasla=35345)), the majority is “the number of objects that account for more than half the total”.

An interesting question is whether the "loneliness" experienced by some of the NPO leaders was a matter of choice or perhaps stemmed from employees' passive attitude to work (cf. Stankiewicz et al., 2018). To this end, leaders were asked to indicate what percentage of their employees were involved in the functioning of the organization. Responses showed that in every tenth (11.43%) entity only 10% of employees were actually involved in the activities of the organization. No more than half of the employees were involved in the functioning of most NPOs (65.71%), while only in every third (34.29%) the percentage of engaged employees was higher (Figure 1).

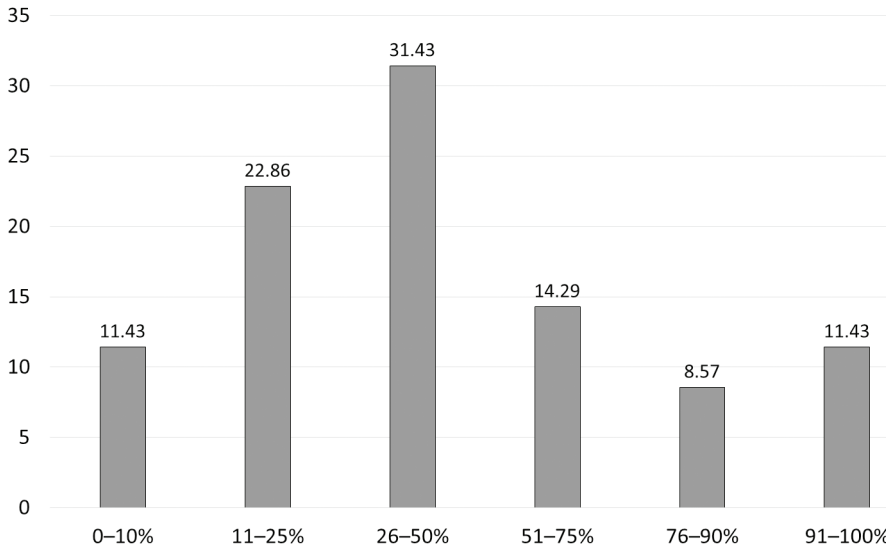


Figure 1. Percentage share of nonprofit employees engaged in the functioning of their organization

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

Some light on the problem of "loneliness" among nonprofit leaders has already been shed by research intending to find out which people could effectively replace NPO leaders in the case the latter quit. According to more than half of the surveyed managers (60%), there are employees who could become their successors, while over a fifth of respondents (22.86%) expressed the opposite opinion. 17.14% of the leaders found it difficult to answer that question. In other words, one in five NPOs would be at risk if their leader chose to step down.

The leader's sense of "loneliness" in the organization may also spring from the fact that he/she does not receive support from employees, e.g. in the decision-making process (not only for everyday but also strategic decisions) and/ or during the implementation of tasks.

In the course of the research, the decision-making patterns in NPOs were analyzed and compared with those collected in for-profit and public organizations. The Kruskal-Wallis test was performed to determine whether the responses given by leaders differentiate the type of organization.<sup>5</sup> There were no grounds to reject the null hypothesis about the uni-

<sup>5</sup> The null hypothesis (about uniform distribution) is rejected when H value is larger than the Chi<sup>2</sup> distribution (Ostertagová et al., 2014).

form distribution of the assessment of decision-making in nonprofit, for-profit and public organizations ( $H=0.19229$ ,  $\text{Chi}^2=3.565170$ ;  $H<\text{Chi}^2$ ). However, cases where leaders would make decisions on their own due to lack of support from employees were observed in nearly every fifth NPO (17.14%), while this correlation was either non-existent (0%) in public or sporadic (2.86%) in for-profit organizations. It was also found that leaders are more likely to consult employees for decision-making regarding the functioning of the organization in for-profit and public entities (54.29% each) than they are in nonprofit entities (31.43%). Joint decision-making involving all staff was most prevalent in NPOs (28.57%, compared to 17.14% in public and 14.29% in for-profit) (Table 1).

Table 1. People who are responsible for decision-making in nonprofit, for-profit and public organizations

People who are responsible for decision-making in organization N=105 (35/35/35)	Total	Nonprofit	For-profit	Public
	[%]			
1. Leader makes decisions on his/ her own, he/ she is not interested in hearing the opinions of other employees.	5.71	8.57	5.71	2.86
2. Leader makes decisions on his/ her own because there is no such support coming from employees.	6.67	17.14	2.86	0.00
3. Leader makes decisions on his/ her own taking into account the opinions of a few trusted employees.	20.00	11.43	22.86	25.71
4. Leader makes decisions on his/ her own listening to the opinions of all staff.	46.67	31.43	54.29	54.29
5. All staff make decisions together.	20.00	28.57	14.29	17.14
6. Management board makes decisions through majority voting.	0.95	2.86	0.00	0.00

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

The questionnaire also addressed the issue of task realization in nonprofit, for-profit and public organizations. The Kruskal-Wallis test was performed to determine whether the responses given by leaders differentiate the type of organization. Grounds were found for rejecting the null hypothesis about the uniform distribution of the assessment of task realization in nonprofit, for-profit and public organizations ( $H=8.217809$ ,  $\text{Chi}^2=1.06006$ ;  $H>\text{Chi}^2$ ).

Table 2. People who are responsible for carrying out tasks in nonprofit, for-profit and public organizations

People who are responsible for carrying out tasks in organization N=105 (35/35/35)	Total	Nonprofit	For-profit	Public
	[%]			
1. Leader carries out tasks on his/ her own, not wanting help from others.	0.95	0	2.86	0
2. Leader carries out tasks on his/ her own because there is no such support coming from employees.	4.76	11.43	0	2.86
3. Tasks are carried out by a small percentage of employees.	26.67	37.14	22.86	20.00
4. Tasks are carried out together by all staff.	60.95	45.71	68.57	68.57
5. Others.	6.67	5.71	5.72	8.58

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

Carrying out tasks together by all staff was more prevalent in for-profit and public organizations (68.57%, each) than in NPOs (45.71%) (Table 2). In NPOs, however, it was more common for a small percentage of employees to show commitment (37.14% compared to 22.86% in for-profit and 20.00% in public). Let us note that in every tenth nonprofit entity (11.43%) the leader carried out tasks on his/ her own, as no other employees wanted to support him/ her in this area.

## 5. Conclusions

The results prompt a conclusion that a significant part of nonprofit leaders in Poland experience "loneliness" and a sense of being left alone with problems related to the functioning of the organization. They largely have to make decisions and carry out tasks on their own, as they receive little to no support from employees. The comparative analysis showed that this problem is more prevalent in NPOs than it is in for-profit or public organizations.

While this may be explained by the limited possibilities of using formal tools of influencing nonprofit employees, a question should also be asked about the psychological variable which is the assertiveness of nonprofit leaders but also their management skills expressed e.g. in the ability to divide responsibilities and manage human resources. Let us also note that NPO leaders are not normally subject to complex substantive verification of their fitness for leadership. As a rule, those who are socially accepted and willing to act get the job, which means they are often left alone to bear organizational burden. This is further complicated by the fact that some nonprofit leaders lack any management background whatsoever, which can make them not as well-equipped to deal with employees, including through the use of HRM methods and techniques adapted to the needs of nonprofit organizations. While these solutions are encouraged by some of the authors dealing with the problems of the third sector (e.g. Baluch, 2012; Bogacz-Wojtanowska, 2009; Burke and Cooper, 2012; Hudson, 1999; Pynes, 2013)<sup>6</sup>, available studies show that management of human resources, including non-wage motivation, is largely underestimated among Polish NPO leaders (Charycka et al., 2020). This, in turn, may have a negative impact on employee commitment and favour employees' reluctance to engage in decision-making and task realization.

To what extent is the problem discussed in this article caused by structural, and to what extent—by personal and competence-related conditions? Further research is needed to answer this question. Any such studies should be in-depth and use techniques based on direct contact, interviews, observation, case study, etc. which would help better understand the analyzed problem. Finally, let us point out some limitations of this research. The sample was selected non-randomly, which means the findings cannot be generalized, and the study involved only Polish organizations, meaning it was embedded in a specific cultural context that should be accounted for when formulating conclusions.

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<sup>6</sup> It is often highlighted in the literature that motivating third-sector employees should be based on: mission of the organization, wise leadership, mutual trust, reaching to the source of problems, two-way sensitivity, personal discipline, and teamwork (Drucker, 1990; cf. Scheepers et al., 2005; Stankiewicz, Seiler and Bortnowska, 2017).

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## „Osamotnienie” lidera organizacji nonprofit: porównanie z organizacjami nastawionymi na zysk i z organizacjami publicznymi

**Abstrakt:** Liderzy organizacji non profit stają w obliczu problemów związanych z delegowaniem zadań i egzekwowaniem ich wykonania. Mają oni ograniczone możliwości wpływania na pracowników, którzy przeważnie są wolontariuszami. Celem artykułu jest udzielenie odpowiedzi na następujące pytania badawcze: Czy liderzy polskich nonprofitów czują się osamotnieni w podejmowaniu decyzji i realizacji zadań? Czy istnieją różnice między organizacjami non profit, for-profit i publicznymi w zakresie tego, kto podejmuje w nich decyzje? Czy istnieją różnice między organizacjami non profit, for-profit i publicznymi w zakresie tego, kto realizuje w nich zadania? W badaniach ankietowych wzięło udział łącznie 315 celowo dobranych respondentów: 105 liderów oraz 210 pracowników nie-

pełniących funkcji kierowniczych (odpowiednio: po 35 oraz po 70 z każdego typu organizacji). W artykule zaprezentowano wyniki analizy wypowiedzi liderów. Zastosowano test Kruskala-Wallisa celem identyfikacji ewentualnych różnic międzysektorowych. Wyniki przeprowadzonych badań upoważniają do wniosku, że w polskich organizacjach non profit istotna część liderów czuje się osamotniona i pozostawiona sama z problemami dotyczącymi funkcjonowania organizacji. Muszą oni w znacznym stopniu samodzielnie podejmować decyzje i wykonywać zadania, ponieważ nikt z personelu ich w tym nie wspiera lub czynią to nieliczni. Analiza porównawcza wykazała, że w przypadku organizacji non profit problem ten jest powszechniejszy niż w organizacjach for-profit i publicznych.

**Słowa kluczowe:** liderzy, organizacje non profit, podejmowanie decyzji, realizacja zadań, różnice międzysektorowe