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Key Success Factors of NGO Leadership that Leads to Sustainable and Effective Development: A Case on BRAC, Bangladesh

Gouranga Chandra DEBNATH¹, Roni BHOWMIK²

Abstract

Research on leadership has been a fascinating area among Organizational Behavior and Human Resource Management researchers for the impact leaders make. The study adopted a qualitative case study method and conducted interviews with 26 managers from the top, middle, and lower management levels of BRAC. However, there was a cluster of behaviors and traits displayed across the levels, and we termed it as an inspirational style of leadership. We have also identified four dimensions of NGO success as perceived by the leaders: work orientation, culture and governance, operational aspect, and HR practices. The First findings, of this study, identify a unique leadership style i.e., inspirational leadership style. Second, it identifies the specific leadership attributes that exist in a successful NGO. Third, it provides glimpses into the organizational structure and governance of a successful NGO. Fourth, the NGO effectiveness parameters developed that can be used and validated as a measurement tool by quantitative researchers.

Keywords: leadership, development, non-government organizations, management.

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Introduction

The impact of a sustainable leadership style is very vital for sustainable development in the different private and public sectors and of course, especially in the NGO sector. Effective leadership styles can be significantly influential in increasing knowledge (Ramchandran *et al.*, 2013), and leadership styles can enhance the development of the decision-making process and organizational strategies (Stankosky, 2005). The role of leadership in organizational effectiveness has been well researched. The plethora of leadership studies have tried to identify numerous leadership styles and traits in different periods of time but still looking for sustainable development in the area of leadership practices and of course, the leadership style that is practiced by the BRAC is unique. Recent research on leadership is directed at identifying the leadership style that best suits a specific sector/industry. Weinfurter (2013) mentioned in his article “the keys to effective leadership” defined leadership is the capacity to translate vision into reality. On the other hand, Schwantes (2019) on his webpage mentioned that Bill Gates made a statement that “as we look ahead into the next century, leaders will be those who empower others”. As the culture and external environment where NGOs operate are different from for-profit businesses, the leadership in such organizations also requires different traits (Hailey, 2006).

Sustainability leadership by NGOs is well recognized around the world as the type of organization that has contributed the most toward sustainable development since the Rio Earth Summit (Scharmer, 2000). Leadership research in the NGO sector has started a couple of decades back (Hailey & James, 2002; Helleher *et al.*, 1996) and till date most of the researches has focused on top-level leadership. The most common leadership styles found in NGOs have been ‘charismatic autocrat’ and ‘paternalistic’ (Hailey, 1999). However, such styles have been reported to be not effective in certain cases as they hinder organizational effectiveness due to inappropriate use of power (Chambers, 1997). Researchers like Hailey (2006) have reviewed several kinds of literature on NGO leadership and reported that there exists a distinct kind of leadership style that is different from the styles found in for-profit organizations. Hailey (2006) found that the leaders display either of the following styles: paternalistic, activist, catalytic and managerial. Similarly, several traits of leaders have been identified (Hailey, 2006; Apostu, 2013). Apostu, (2013) had reviewed a number of literature and stated that there are four different styles of NGO leaders: Paternalist, Activist, Managerial, and Catalytic.

Sustainable Leadership Practices Driving Financial Performance (Smith & Sharicz, 2011) and BRAC is the best example in the NGO sector. BRAC got the first position all over the world in the NGO sector for consecutive 5 times until 2011 BRAC (BRAC, 2011) for the sustainable leadership style. Researchers opined that leadership style is context-dependent and there could be a cultural

impact on leadership (Hailey, 2006). An Asian study conducted on major NGOs of Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India reported that these NGO leaders display a distinct type of leadership trait. They are managerial, at the same time value-driven. They are ambitious and growth-oriented, at the same time know how to manage with limited resources. They were very responsive to the external volatile environment (Smillie *et al.*, 2001). African studies report certain leadership styles such as ‘engaging’ style (Mintzberg, 2006) and ‘humanist’ style (Jackson, 2004) befitting to that cultural context. Several other studies in different countries confirm the idea that leadership in NGOs is context-specific (James *et al.*, 2005; Fowler, 1997). However, while reviewing the impact of NGO leadership on performance, Hailey (2006) suggests that an effective leader should transform the organization while giving direction, inspiration to staff, mobilizing resources in the right direction, and promoting shared values. Very often leaders of NGOs are enthusiastic and dynamic people, but they need appropriate skills and expertise to manage organizations (Cooper & Boice, 2011). The weak sustainability of human resources can be seen as the result of limited financial opportunities and resources, as well as short-term project-oriented activities (Makhmutova & Akmetova, 2011).

On the other hand, very few studies have been conducted on the leadership styles and competencies of the leaders in the mid and lower level. Such studies have stated that leadership is a collective phenomenon and the leaders down the line should empower their staff to work effectively with communities (Fowler, 1997). Also, there is an opinion that the leadership in NGOs is contingent upon the past, present status, and future goal of the NGO, and the culture where it is operating (Fowler, 1997). NGOs are also very much vulnerable to external control and change (Hudock, 1995). Hence, the mid-level leaders should position themselves in the inspirational role as they have to communicate the vision and mission of the top leaders down the line while inspiring the staff to cope with change (Wheatley, 1994; Fowler, 1997).

Literature Review

The leadership concept is as ancient as the beginning of human civilization. The thoughts and studies about leadership have remained popular centuries after centuries. Ancient leadership literature mentions the leadership of Greek Heroes, Egyptian Rulers, Biblical Patriarchs, etc. Later studies have mostly focused on theories and definitions of leadership.

After a comprehensive review of the leadership literature, the researcher concluded that “*there are almost as many definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept*” (Stogdill, 1974). Similarly,

it has been also difficult to summarise all theories and researches conducted on leadership in one study. Most of the current research about leadership are not related to the NGO leader's work environment such as social, cultural political, etc. (Hailey & James, 2004). The importance of upscale leadership in both private and public sector organizations is equal (Pardey, 2016). Democratic and persuasive leadership styles are followed in private sector organizations and the combination of agreeableness makes great leadership (Ohngren, 2011). The leadership without any certain mission, vision, and objectives will not be effective for the business organizations. In this case, the organizational performance like the quality of the product or service, profitability, and efficiency are decreased (Pardey, 2016). The roles and duties of leadership in a private sector organization are commanded by the legislation of the country as well as the organizational bureaucracy.

According to Prowle (2016), a manager of the public sector industry requires some specific skills to become successful on the view of subordinates as well as to meet the organizational expectations. The requirement of leadership skills can be divided into three parts such as: 1. Special technical skills, 2. Interpersonal skills, and 3. Managerial skills. Managers may not be confident without the expertise. A good ability of a successful leader is the desire for the development of those skills for better performance. It has been observed that leaders possess certain key attributes that help them make decisions and achieve organizational objectives (Nguyen *et al.*, 2015). Leaders have significant roles in creating and maintaining conducive organizational culture. Leaders should see that the way of life should regard decent variety among workers to bring out the best from it and influence one employee to complement another (Gilliam *et al.*, 2016). The leader needs to create aspiration among the subordinates and motivate them to accomplish those. It is also equally important to identify the personal, organizational, and social factors contributing to the condition of powerlessness in employees and take steps on those aspects to empower employees (Mohapatra & Mishra, 2018).

A common belief prevails that leadership is possible only at the top management level, which is not true at all. Even if it is true, leadership is delegated at different bottom levels as per situation requirements. The risk-taking nature of top management leaders is neutral and thus they try to motivate others to take risks by inspiring (Xie *et al.*, 2018). Some researchers claimed that the main task of a top management leader is to make service decisions and act to develop those (Pardey, 2016; Smith & Sharicz, 2011). Mid-level managers are led by top-level managers and in turn, they lead lower-level managers. In this process, the cultural difference should be ignored and local perspectives should be considered (Evan *et al.*, 2014). These mid-level leaders are considered the intellectual capital of the company (Sharma, 2017). Mid-level managers face unbound challenges in the process including managing unskilled workforce, implementing unsupportive

technology, and approaching contradictory strategic goals (Andrea, 2015). It is quite difficult to define low-level management. Some think of managing front-line executives, whereas some think of front-line executives as low-level management. These low-level leaders have a challenging task to form teams with field-level executives and select informal team leaders to communicate (David, 2007). The main challenge of a low-level leader is to keep the focus of the team members aligned with the company's overall values and vision to accomplish the assigned tasks (Kenneth *et al.*, 2006).

Although NGOs are doing great jobs in Bangladesh, their accountability has been questioned in many spheres (Malhotra, 2000). It is said that the activities of NGOs have become donor-driven. In order to comply with the donors, NGOs are getting deviated from the original service motive. A report by World Economic Forum 2013 states that the nature of the internal and external environment of the NGOs have changed tremendously in the recent past and the future of NGOs is completely different from its past. The traditional institutions are declining, NGOs are challenged to face the consequences of hyper-social media connectivity, reduced certainty of funding, reduced trust of the public on certain financial aspects of NGO activity, some major multinationals are standing as competitors for NGOs while acting as 'sustainability champions', the shifts in the geopolitical and economic condition of the world, etc. have affected the funding and management structure of the NGOs. From figure 1 we can evidently observe the chronicle of leadership development.

From the above-mentioned literature, it is observed that: (1) Leadership theories are evolving over the years and looking at the changes in the business context, there is always a need to study and define leadership in a changing environment; (2) Leadership studies have recently focused on different sectors. The nature of business in different sectors commands different traits and styles. Hence, a depth understanding of leadership attributes in different sectors is the need of the hour; (3) There exists a cross-cultural difference in leadership traits (Casimir & Waldman, 2007). It has also been observed that leadership in NGOs varies from culture to culture and also the paucity of literature and the complexity of the context in the NGO sector (Hailey & James, 2004) create the need for understanding the nature of leadership and identifying the leadership traits that contribute to NGO success in relations to the cultural context where NGOs operate; (4) There has been a lack of consensus on the effective leadership traits and styles for non-governmental organizations. Recently, there have been efforts from several quarters to identify effective NGO leadership traits. For example, Red Cross has brought a toolkit for an "effective leadership framework" for NGO leaders (Apostu, 2013).

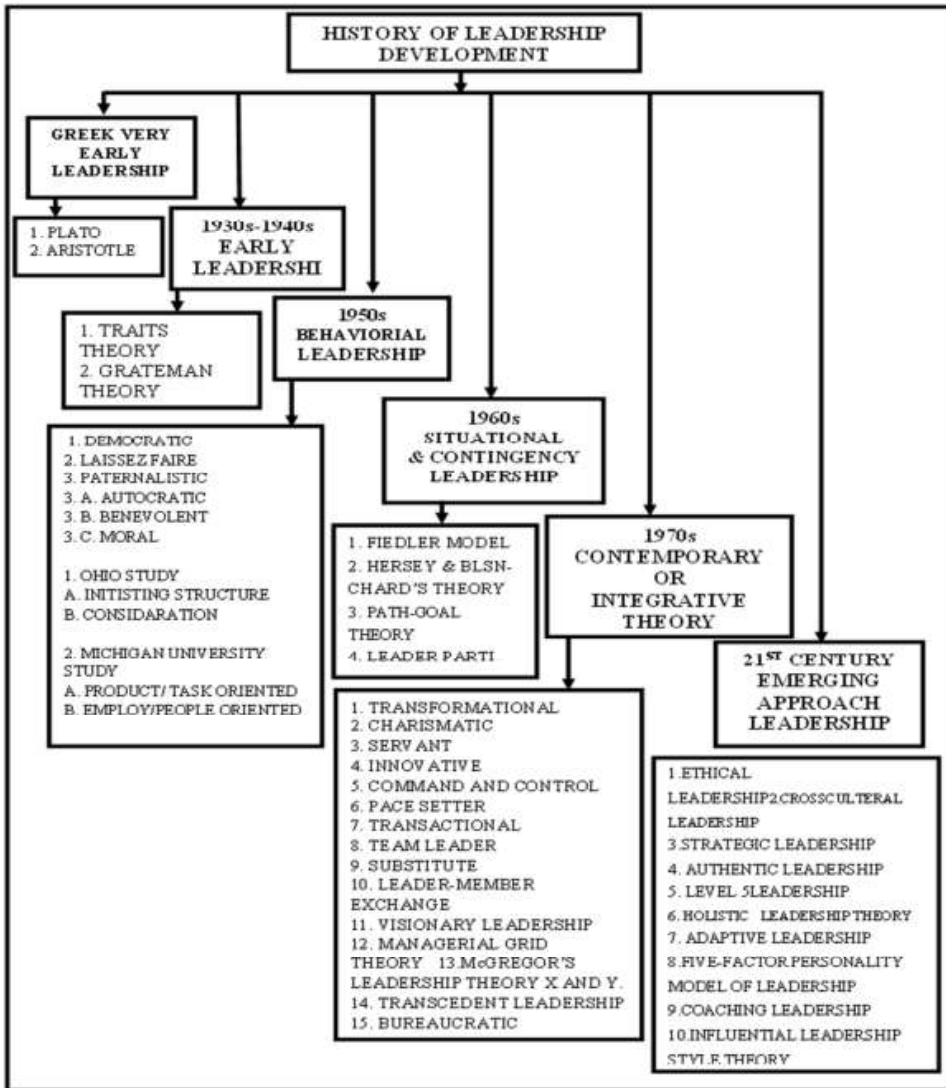


Figure 1. History of leadership development

Methodology

Coming to the leadership research context, Bryman (2004) asserts that it is the qualitative research that gave an impetus to leadership research while this field was fading away succumbing to the criticisms by various researchers (Cummings, 1981; Miner, 1975). Yin (2009) provides a comprehensive understanding of the nature and varieties of case studies. For him, the case study can be defined as “an experimental inquiry that explores a contemporary wonder in-depth and real-life context, particularly when the limits amongst marvel and contexts which are not unmistakably clear”. What the definition conveniently catches are contextual investigations which are expected – dissimilar to shallower as well as summing up techniques – for giving the levels of details and understandings, which is similar to the author Geertz’s (1973) idea of ‘thick portrayal’, which takes into consideration, intensive research of the intricate as well as distinct phenomena’s particularistic nature. Researchers assert that case study analysis “is characterized by enthusiasm for an individual context, not by the strategies for request utilized”, and that “the protest of study is a particular, remarkable, limited framework” (Stake & Munson, 2008).

This study aims at conducting a case study based on a qualitative approach. We have selected BRAC, the number one NGO of Bangladesh as the case here. It qualifies to be our case for the following reasons: it is the most successful NGO of Bangladesh which is surprising everybody with its exponential growth and dynamic leadership. While there is lots of fuss regarding the leadership effectiveness in NGOs, BRAC as a successful organization builds curiosity among researchers to explore the nature of leadership and how leadership leads to the success of this NGO.

Managerial Layers considered in this study

BRAC has three levels of management: top/first line/executive/ strategic apex; midline/technical level; lower level/ supervisor/ operating core management just like other organizations. Mainly the top-level management takes the decision and the operating level management executes the decision or implements the policy. As NGOs are doing fieldwork most of the time, the lower-level management has the most duties and responsibilities to satisfy the customers. The HR manual and official records were refereed to identify the positions in the top management, middle management, and lower management. The managers working in top, middle and lower management used to hold designations project manager, area manager, and filed manager respectively. As per Mintzberg’s (1990) model, only

line managers from three different levels were considered. We did not include the support staff in the study.

The research method is an inquiry process that moves from core philosophical supposition to exploration as well as information collection (Myers & Avison, 2002). The depth interview is appropriate to gather data from people close to the history of NGOs, noticing points, and their encounters, especially that moment when researchers investigate touchy themes. In our exploration, we utilized the top to bottom interviews or the depth interviews to explore the leadership style exhibited by employees from different levels of management and how their styles are related to the NGO's success. We took the interviews who are working for a long time in BRAC or its sister concerns. The method of the meeting was face-to-face in the place of the informant.

The Case study inquiries depend on numerous wellsprings of proof and information accumulation procedures. In the examination venture wellsprings of proof include website reporting of BRAC, magazine and daily paper articles, messages, records on successful completion of projects, NGO ranking parameters published by ranking agencies, etc. However, the major source of data for this case was from the in-depth interview with informants. For conducting the interview following procedure was adopted.

We have used qualitative content analysis to analyze the text data. According to Downe (1992) the goal of content analysis is "to provide knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon under study". The objective of the study was to understand the leadership traits, style, and process of BRAC and how do they conceive the success of NGOs. Hence, qualitative content analysis was the best option to analyze our survey data. The qualitative content analysis goes beyond the counting of text and categorizes the text into different categories with similar meanings (Weber, 1990). While developing categories, the researcher can refer to explicit and inferred communications.

Data analysis started with reading the entire transcripts again and again like a novel to get a sense of the whole (Tesch, 2013). Then data were read one by one and important parts were highlighted to derive codes (Morgan, 1993). The codes and categories were based on the various definitions given about leadership styles, traits, and organizational effectiveness and the words that implied the act, behavior, or trait of a leader. In some cases, the codes were based on the success parameters and factors uttered by informants. To obtain objectivity, the codes were developed by an expert other than the researcher. Researchers discuss the benefit of employing independent judges for coding and categorization (Kolbe & Burnett, 1991).

Although qualitative research is often criticized for the absence of objectivity in measurement and lack of scope for applying statistical techniques to measure the reliability and validity, it has been acknowledged by several researchers as

a valuable and valid research method (Cassell & Redman, 2002; Morgan & Smircich, 1980). Qualitative research provides a depth understanding of the phenomenon and adopts methodological pluralism (Cepeda & Martin, 2005; Silverman, 1998). The depth of the story generated through the research reflects the credibility and reliability of the research (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Among the several techniques suggested by researchers for quality check of qualitative research, the framework provided by Erlandson *et al.* (1993) is widely accepted. On the basis of this framework, the quality parameters of the study are reported below:

Truth value: The truth value or internal validity of the research was maintained through the following steps: i) the researcher had maintained prolonged engagement with the informants through initial rapport building, obtaining permission from the authorities, meeting them informally in canteen and workplace, and having a telephonic conversation; ii) preparing interview transcripts, recoding of interview for not losing any data, rounds of verification in data collection, preparation of transcripts and development of codes immediately after the interview; iii) methodological triangulation by collecting data from different projects located in various parts of Bangladesh and from different levels of management; iv) theoretical triangulation through perusal of previous research while generating codes; multiple levels of analysis and constant comparisons.

Applicability: Applicability of the research is also known as external validity or transferability. According to Erlandson *et al.* (1993), the applicability of qualitative research is ensured through a detailed description of findings. In this research, the findings have been described in detail by mapping out the codes generated.

Consistency: Consistency of the research can be ensured through dependability audit. Hence, all the audio recordings of the interview, transcripts, and codes have been preserved for further audit. The entire mapping of the backend analysis of the transcripts has also been preserved.

Analysis and Implementation

The main objectives of the study were to explore the leadership styles of leaders working in BRAC. Leaders from all three levels were interviewed. Participants had provided numerous statements to describe leadership. The statements were summarized by pooling as much information possible from all the statements by forming codes based on previous leadership literature. Later, all the information extracted was summarized in a meaningful definition of leadership for each level of management. The most common words respondents used to describe leadership in top management were 'visionary', 'power', 'control', 'risk taking'. The definition that we could derive from all these expressions was: "*Leader is a visionary and*

leads through power and control, achieves success by taking the risk". Similarly, the derived definition of leadership for middle management was: "*Leader is a visionary and team player. He/she achieves success by formulating strategy, encouraging and inspiring the subordinates at the same time exercises power when required*" and the definition for lower-level management was: "*Leader is a visionary and creative individual who leads from the front. He/she motivates, supervises, involves and helps subordinates to achieve success*".

It is observed that top-level focus is more on accumulating and exercising power and taking risks. On the other hand, at the middle level, leaders have been focusing on inspiring subordinates, formulating strategy, and exercising power occasionally. At lower-level leaders are focusing on the creativity, motivation, and involvement of subordinates. It has been studied that leadership roles differ across different levels of management (Pavett & Lau, 1983). While top-level managers perform the roles of figurehead, spokesperson, disseminator, negotiator, resource allocator, etc. more frequently, the role of lower-level managers has been more of directing the team and acting as technical experts. Apostu (2013), in an extensive review of NGO leadership, mentions that although the environmental context demands NGO leaders to be participative and collaborative, still many NGOs have been found to be maintaining organizational hierarchies. Hence, the existence of clear hierarchies in BRAC is not very unique to the NGO context.

The leadership traits and competencies perceived by managers from different levels also varied substantially (*Table 1*). While the exclusive traits of top management were 'dreamer', 'risk taker', 'exemplar', in the middle management the traits and competencies were 'coaching and mentoring ability', 'communication' and 'team building'. On the other hand, the traits and competencies of lower-level management were 'resource mobilizer', 'flexibility in changing style', 'impartial', and 'helpful'. Since the lower-level managers work directly with the community members and sometimes are contractual workers to implement the projects, their competencies are more people-centric. Top-level management's major role is to expand the branches, negotiate, obtain funds, think of new business, etc., and hence, their competencies are more individual and business-centric. On the other hand, mid-level managers are more towards maintaining the talent in the organization and hence have organizational talent-centric competencies.

The performance parameters of leaders of different levels were found to be the same in certain aspects such as maintaining accuracy, timeliness, and quality. Leaders in mid-level management were found to be sometimes juggling between time urgency and quality of service. Their focus was on the twin objectives of controlling cost and effectively managing the resources. On the other hand, lower-level managers are more concerned about the utilization of human resources, cutting operating costs, and aligning employees with organizational objectives. *Hence, it is implied that leadership behavior differs to some extent in different levels of management.*

Table 1. Leadership in three levels of management as perceived by participants

Level	Leadership style	Leadership definition and traits	Performance parameters of the leaders
Top Management	Personal characteristics: Hard working, punctual, passionate about the work, simple and emotionally attached to subordinates.	Definition: Leader is a visionary and leads through power and control, achieves success by taking risk. Traits: Emotional intelligence, Risk taking, Dreamer, hardworking, learning attitude, communicator, exemplar, problem solving, interpersonal relationship, visionary thinking, inspiring attitude.	Meet the project objectives and look at overall development Project performance and accuracy Efficiency and punctuality Quality and quantity of service, effectiveness of resource allocation and accuracy of work
Middle Management	Management style: Provide freedom and autonomy, pay individualized attention, are helpful and friendly towards subordinates, demand commitment and hard work from the subordinates and if required provide step by step guidance,	Definition: Leader is a visionary and team player. He/she achieves success by formulating strategy, encouraging and inspiring the subordinates at the same time exercises power when required. Traits: Visionary, risk taker, intelligent, positive attitude, creative, initiative, patient, good listener, individualized attention, problem solving, inspiring attitude, emotional intelligence, motivator, communication, confident, mentor and coach, hardworking, interpersonal relationship, team builder, emotional attachment to organisation, punctual.	Quality of service May be late but should achieve quality Careful about the cost Meet project objective on time Are careful about the accuracy of work Are concerned about superior's appraisal Quantity with short period of time Look at sustainability
Lower Management	decision making style is consultative.	Definition: Leader is a visionary and creative individual who leads from the front. He/she motivates, supervises, involves and helps subordinates to achieve success. Competencies: Resource mobilizer, visionary, guide and mentor, flexible in changing style, good communicator, dreamer, risk taker, openness, impartial, positive thinker, team builder, helpful, hard working.	Quality and accuracy Project objective and overall development Superior appraisal Proper utilization of human resource Reduce operating cost Work on time with maximum quality Align employee goal with the objectives of BRAC

Personal characteristics: hardworking, punctual, passionate about the work, simple, and emotionally attached to subordinates.

Management style: provide freedom and autonomy, pay individualized attention, are helpful and friendly towards subordinates, demand commitment and hard work from the subordinates and if required, provide step by step guidance, decision-making style is consultative.

All the above personal characteristics and management styles of managers reflect the *Inspirational style/ democratic style*. We consider this as the dominant leadership style prevailing in the organization.

Table 2. NGO success vs. BRAC success parameters as perceived by the participants

Level	Summary of opinions on NGO effectiveness	Summary of opinions on effectiveness of BRAC
Top Management	<p>How well it is working hand in hand with govt.?</p> <p>How well it has impacted the life of poor people that can be measurable?</p> <p>How well it has impacted people, society and country?</p> <p>How well they manage the fund?</p> <p>How long it has existed?</p> <p>How many branches it has?</p> <p>How many people are involved?</p>	<p>BRAC has done thousands of works and served many under privileged.</p> <p>Is a sustainable organization and grown very fast?</p> <p>Is operating in many countries of the world?</p> <p>Focuses on long term development by creating social impact.</p> <p>Is working in very significant societal issues such as education, health, sanitation, micro credit etc.?</p> <p>Is doing even more than Govt?</p> <p>It is value driven and follows 4 core values: integrity, innovation, inclusiveness and effectiveness in implementing diversified projects?</p> <p>It practices equality and freedom.</p> <p>It is the no.1 NGO in Bangladesh.</p>

<p>Middle Management</p>	<p>How much it has impacted the life of people while working hand in hand with Govt.? How much they impact the daily life and social life of poor people? Popularity and presence in different countries? How long it has been working? Is it sustainable? How do they work? Who is their customer, client and stake-holder? How they handle their stakeholders? The worldwide presence of the NGOs? How fast it is growing?</p>	<p>It provides opportunity to all employees to perform. It motivates employees to do their job by placing right people at right place. It provides equality and freedom to employees It manages fund perfectly. Is has sustainable development. It follows four values: integrity, innovation, inclusiveness and effectiveness. Working for poor while maintaining all ethical code of conduct. It learns from mistakes and takes timely and efficient decision. It has transparent governance system. In some areas BRAC does more than Govt. It always targets at meeting the needs of people.</p>
<p>Lower Management</p>	<p>How well it works for common people? How long it has been working? How perfectly they are handling the projects? Whether properly utilizing the fund? For whom they are working? Poor/under privileged? How well they are managed inside? Are they working hand in hand with govt.? How many branches it has?</p>	<p>It has changed the socio-economic condition of people. It has made the change where Govt. failed. It follows ethical code of conduct in the organization. It manages fund effectively. It aims at sustainable development by creating social impact. It improves human potential through training and development. It has built a sustainable organization.</p>

“NGO effectiveness/success depends on how well an NGO works as a supporting side of government...NGO basically works with the poor people and how they impact the poor people living... How influence poor people in their daily lives? Is there any change? -how much is it? And how can it be measured?”

The opinions of participants on BRAC success parameters were more detailed and emotionally loaded than their description of NGO success. To quote one participant:

“According to authors, the success of BRAC is defined-how much sustainable is the organization built by the BRAC. Last almost 50 years they are doing very well and day by day it is growing up and up. They are not operating only in Bangladesh; they are operating in another 13 countries as well. Actually, they are improving the living condition of poor people and bringing improvements in human potential. Their success depends on long-term development by creating social impact. They brought a huge change here”.

The content analysis of the data helped us to derive four measurable dimensions of success of BRAC: work orientation, organizational culture and governance, operational aspect, and HR practices.

Key success factors of BRAC

Another interesting aspect of the research was to explore the factors influencing BRAC success as opined by the participants. Participants of all the three-level have described the factors differently. However, certain overlapping statements were there. To quote one participant:

“BRAC had been able to work successfully in local and beyond the local border because of BRAC’s motivation to grow beyond problems, innovation, experience and success in Bangladesh as well as its infrastructural support”.

Content analysis of opinions on this question resulted in several factors. Later on, all the factors were grouped under three capabilities: Leader capability related, Human resource capability related, and organizational capability related factors. Among all the factors, *founder Sir Abed’s and organization’s brand name* was the highest mentioned term. Next to that were the terms: *infrastructural capabilities and motivated and capable employees were the terms frequently uttered by participants*. All the participants unanimously agreed that BRAC is a successful NGO and it has obtained No.1 NGO position as per NGO advisor ranking.

The authors were also interested in know-how leadership influences the success of BRAC. When the participants were asked how and why leadership influences the opinions were diverse. One of the participants said:

“According to authors BRAC’s leadership empowered the employees across the hierarchy and that had helped the employees to work with responsibility and freedom and achieve designated tasks and contribute to the success of the organization”.

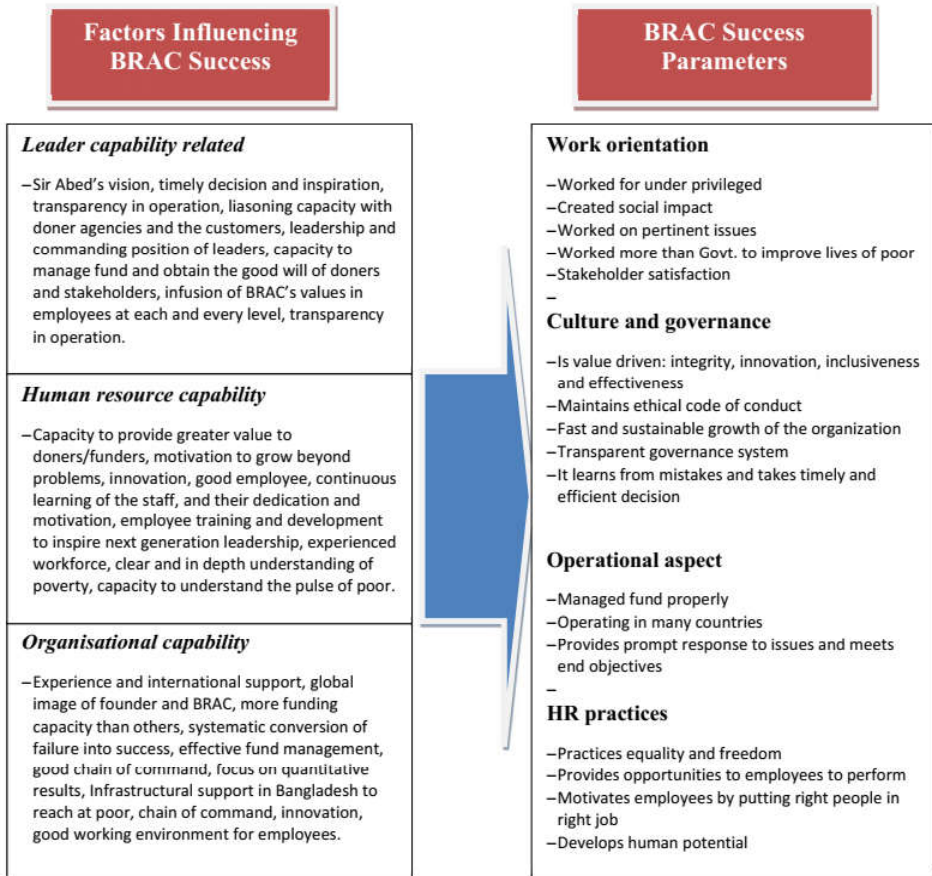


Figure 2. Key success factors of BRAC

“As a leader we need to make some decision and need to take the necessary steps to achieve the success in the project. We have to give the emphasis on the project objectives and the project goal. For these we need to focus on the learning from the past mistake and also need to focus on utilizing the resource efficiently”.

Some leaders particularly mentioned their achievements and how their contribution had contributed to the success of BRAC.

“Of course, authors actions influence the success of the organization. We created a HR partner module by finding the problems of the employees and provided solution... created work-friendly environment and ultimately it was implemented which, increased employees’ satisfaction and productivity. The end result was possible because of authors action.”

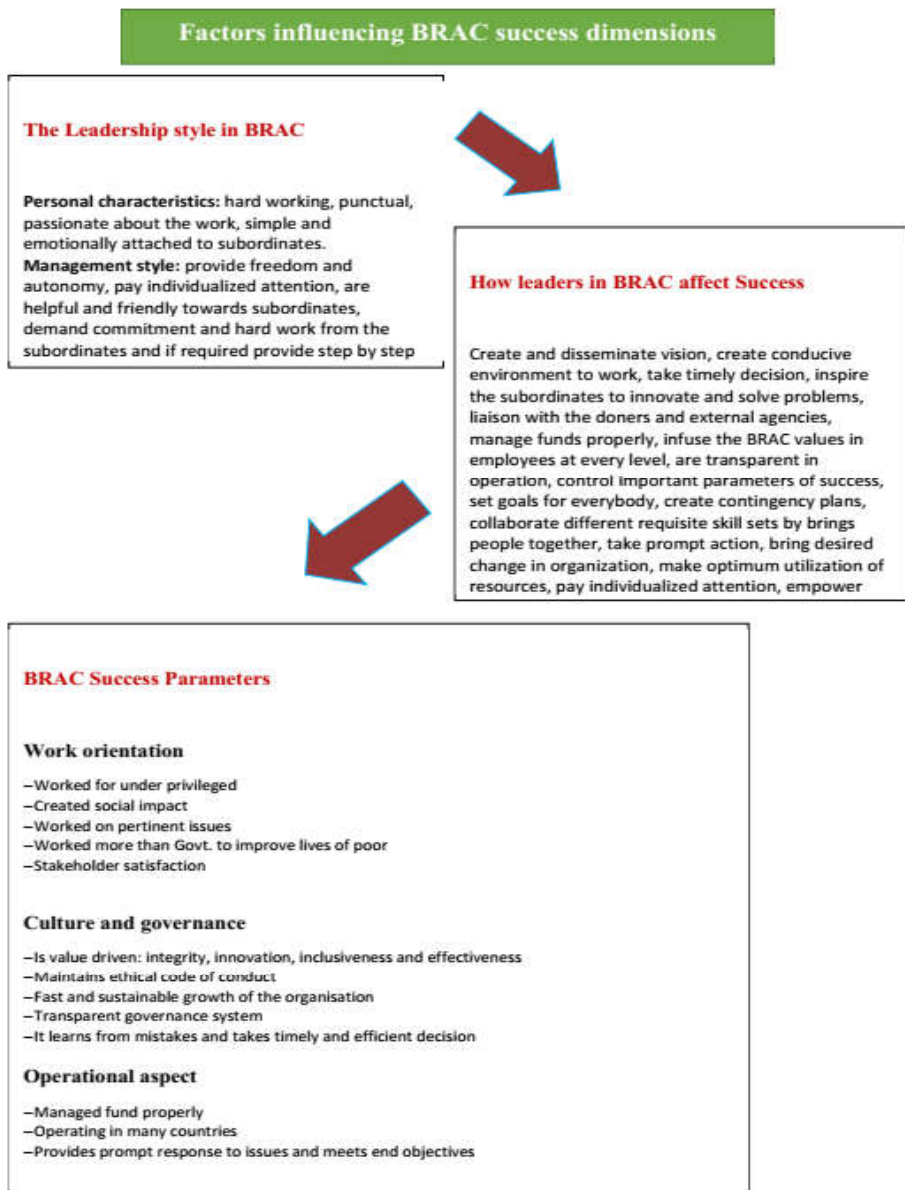


Figure 3. Success dimension of BRAC

Based on the outcomes of the in-depth interview, the key success factors of BRCA are presented in figure 2, and success dimensions are pointed out in figure 3. The outcomes of the study would be beneficial for a large group of people. At the very first stage, all the NGOs operating in Bangladesh, as well as other parts of the world, would get a model or sustainable leadership framework to follow in order to structure their enterprise. Even unsuccessful NGOs may find solutions to overcome existing problems. The study would have contributed towards understanding the NGO effectiveness parameters. The perceptions of managers on leadership and NGO effectiveness would help management assess the perceptual gap if any. The present study provides a holistic quick overview of the leadership research, NGO sector, BRAC, and leadership which would be of interest for the readers who want to gain a quick understanding of these matters. The understanding of factors influencing NGO effectiveness can provide the way forward and identify the gap in their leadership practice. Further, being the first empirical study on NGO leadership in BARC, this study will be the torchbearer for the other researchers of Bangladesh.

Discussion

Researchers have suggested quantitative measures of effectiveness by calculating the dependency ratio and survival ration of NGOs [61, 62] (Sharma, 2012; Lewis, 2010). However, the conceptualization and operationalization of the construct organizational effectiveness have been the most debated topic (Miles, 1980). To provide a conclusive remark, Campbell (1977) mentions "... effectiveness is not one thing. Perhaps a better way to think of organizational effectiveness is an underlying construct that has no necessary and sufficient operational definition but that constitutes a model or theory of what organizational effectiveness is". Taking the clue from such contradictory literature on organizational effectiveness, this study provides a comprehensive framework on NGO effectiveness.

Our study points out four dimensions on which NGO effectiveness can be measured: work orientation, culture and governance, operational aspect, and HR practices. Given the economic and socio-political context of Bangladesh, where the NGO focuses its activities and how it carries out its work is a matter of its success and brand building. As perceived by the participants, the NGO should work towards the underprivileged and focus on pertinent issues; should create social impact, and what is most important is stakeholder satisfaction and linkage with Govt. It is noteworthy here that the most significant issues found in the Bangladeshi development sector were the troubled government-NGO-donor agency relationship and the focus of NGOs being changed to profit-making (Gauri & Fruttero, 2003; Debnath & Bhowmik, 2012). They seemed to be more accountable to donors (Newaz, 2003) which sometimes put the development in jeopardy. In such a

context, working hand in hand with the government with a service mindset could be the best way of working for the NGOs.

The exploratory study conducted here identified the dominant style of leadership prevailing in BRAC across the three levels of management was the *inspirational style*. These leaders were found to be punctual, hardworking, and passionate about their work and prefer to become an ideal role model for their subordinates. They adopt a consultative decision-making style and give their subordinates lots of autonomy and freedom. Their main aim is to empower their subordinates and see that the goal is achieved on time and quality of work is maintained. Hence, it can be stated that these leaders possess some of the qualities of the *paternalistic* and *managerial* style of leadership mentioned by Hailey (2006).

One of the least looked after but the most pertinent issue in leadership is that leadership has been studied by many scholars independent of its context. Whereas, social identity theory proposes that leadership behavior is based on the definition of themselves with respect to their social group and social identity (Haslam & Platow, 2001). Hence, the economic, political, and socio-cultural context of Bangladesh might have influenced the display of these traits among the leaders. They have to now deal with curtailed funding from the donors, stiff competition, and political pressure to some extent and at the same time take the responsibility of uplifting a huge mass of poor (Islam & Morgan, 2012). As it is narrated by Islam & Morgan (2012), there seems to be a comparison of NGOs and government in community development. NGO activities are perceived as “magic bullets” that give quick and lasting solutions to the local problem (Gauri & Fruttero, 2003) as NGOs tend to get very closely connected to communities. Hence, the leaders need to be connected to the ground, very quick in response, and workaholics to win the hearts of the local community and the donor agencies. Evidently, our study identified such attributes in leaders. While the top leaders of BRAC possessed qualities such as ‘learning attitude’ and ‘risk taking’, middle managers possessed attributes such as ‘creativity’, ‘punctuality’, ‘confidence’, ‘effective communication’ and lower-level managers showed the traits of ‘hard working’ and ‘effective resource mobilization, along with other qualities of leaders. In all three levels, the main performance criteria perceived by them were quick response and quality delivery.

One of the common behaviors of leaders found in this study was that they used to be attentive to the needs of the subordinates as well as were very particular about the completion of tasks. Such style was akin to the *Nurturant-Task* style of leadership of Sinha (1980). Bangladesh is one of the Asian countries and very close to India, some of the attributes seen in leadership models identified in the Indian context were also noticed in BRAC leaders. Few of such models include the Workshop model of Chatterjee (1998) which says that such leaders consider work as worship; contribution model of Singh (2000) says that one person is known by his/her work; and OCTAPACE model of Pareek (1981) which emphasizes on

creating an open culture and giving autonomy to subordinates. In this study, it was found that the leaders used to be workaholics and gave utmost importance to work. They were also found to be giving lots of autonomy and freedom to subordinates.

In general, they sometimes get tremendous political pressure and at the extreme, get imprisoned if they oppose the present government (Qazi Faruque Ahmed leader of the Bangladeshi NGO, Proshika). According to Arora (2019) a development professional, NGO leaders must possess the following traits to be successful. They need to be effective communicators, should have eyes on the goals, empower and inspire, take initiative and believe in transformation. Our findings are similar to these self-reflections of an experienced NGO leader.

Conclusion

The study of leadership has been fascinating in all time periods as the earth has witnessed many born leaders and leaders who have emerged through the struggle of life. Leaders were considered mostly as people with certain qualities who can develop the economy of a country or bring profit to the organizations. The need for leadership in the social, developmental, or NGO sector has been realized off late.

Studies reveal that such organizations require all together with a sustainable leadership style. Based on this premise, this study aimed at exploring the leadership qualities of leaders of the most successful NGO of Bangladesh, BRAC. It was found out that the dominant leadership style prevailing in the organization was inspirational. The leaders were hard-working, passionate, and emotionally attached to their work. They followed a consultative decision-making style, found to be empowering subordinates by giving lots of autonomy and freedom. They were found to be too much concerned about quality and quantity in the completion of projects. They were value-driven and had empathy for subordinates and common people. We coined the term *inspirational leadership* for these leaders as their personal values and approaches are inspiring for the subordinates.

The study also identified the factors such as human resource practices, leadership style, etc. directly or indirectly, influencing the growth and success of NGOs. BRAC being the most successful NGO as per the rating agencies, identification of the success parameters of BRAC was another objective of the study. It was found out that BRAC's success parameters were based on four dimensions such as work orientation, culture and governance, operational aspects, and HR practices. BRAC has been found to be successfully impacting the lives of the poor, has a humanitarian value-driven culture, manages funds appropriately, is very efficient in completing projects successfully on time, and has a very conducive human resource practice.

The findings of the study are certainly a guidebook to understand the nature of NGO leadership in a country like Bangladesh and help for the sustainable

development in the microeconomic sector. The findings can also be helpful for the BRAC employees to know about their leadership styles and need to practices for long-term development. Other NGOs or NGO leadership development programmes can get insights from this study to develop NGO leadership skills in the employees. This study calls for more quantitative studies based on the findings to validate the leadership and NGO effectiveness dimensions.

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Author contributions

G.C.D. contributed to the conceptualization of the study; R.B. contributed to the data curation; G.C.D. contributed to the methodology of the study; G.C.D. and R.B. contributed to the formal analysis. G.C.D. and R.B. contributed to the original draft writing; G.C.D. and R.B. helped to review and edit. Both authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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