"It's human beings talking to one another": The role of relationship building in non-profit lobbying

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Abstract

This paper explores the importance of relationship building in the non-profit lobbying process. The study findings stress the importance of providing accurate information on policy issues (trust and openness); telling the story of clients (involvement); and researching and identifying the issues of the policy maker (investment). Implications for practise suggest relationship building in non-profit lobbying has an impact on achievement of organisational policy goals and objectives. Successful relationship building with policy makers requires strategy development and skills, which should be viewed as a set of activities that should be formally integrated into an organisation's objectives and strategic planning.[1]

Introduction

The non-profit sector has grown significantly over the past 15 years (Blackwood, Wing & Pollak, 2008) with more than 1.9 million non-profit organisations operating within the United States in 2006 (Independent Sector, 2009). While non-profit organisations fulfil a variety of functions within society, the majority (about 1.4 million) consist of public charities, private foundations, and religious organisations, which go beyond benefiting the institution's members and benefit the overall public (e.g., hospitals, religious institutions, and homeless shelters). In return for this public service, the Internal Revenue Service designates these organisations as 501(c)(3) status and provides them with special tax benefits (Independent Sector, 2009). While the non-profit sector's role as service provider has been widely recognised, scholars have more recently acknowledged non-profit organisations' role as an outlet for civic engagement for community members, particularly through lobbying (Berry & Arons, 2003; Frumkin, 2002). Although this has led to increased research on non-profit lobbying, the current scholarship primarily focuses on the legal constraints that non-profit organisations face when engaging in the policy-making process. There has been little emphasis or exploration on the effectiveness of organisational behavior in relation to policy advocacy.

Literature on lobbying and policy advocacy has documented the important role that relationship building plays in these activities (deKieffer, 2007; Kovacs, 2001; Rees, 2000; Skinner, 2007; Wise, 2007). In many cases, lobbying requires that organisations develop and maintain relationships with the public figures that they have targeted as agents of social change (Richan, 2006; Kovacs, 2001). Although the importance of relationship building has been well-emphasised through scholarship and non-profit handbooks, there is a dearth of research on relationship building as part of the lobbying process. This study supplements the existing literature on non-profit organisations and lobbying by investigating the relationship-building behaviours of non-profit leaders and how these relationships are related to lobbying. The knowledge derived from this study will be useful for non-profit leaders who are interested in developing effective political advocacy skills and to guide further research on non-profit political advocacy.

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Lobbying defined

Numerous terms have been used in the literature to describe the activities related to influencing public policy decisions, including advocacy (Child & Grønberg, 2007; Hoeffer, 2005), non-profit advocacy (Bass, Arons, Guinane, Carter & Rees, 2007), policy advocacy (Boris & Krehely, 2002; Mosley, 2008), and lobbying (Leech, 2006), with some scholars highlighting the ambiguity of these terms (Berry & Arons, 2003; Berry, 2005; deKieffer, 2007; Reid, 2000). Other scholars have asserted that lobbying is a subset of activities that fall within civic engagement and/or political advocacy (Boris & Krehely, 2002; Frumkin, 2002; Suárez & Huang, 2008).

The traditional definition of lobbying, which is a form of advocacy, includes those activities that are used to influence legislation (Borch & Huse, 1993). Further direct lobbying is the attempt to influence specific legislation through communication with legislators and/or other individuals who are directly related to the legislation formation process and taking a specific position (Rocha, 2007). Grassroots lobbying, attempts to influence the opinions of the general public, refers to specific legislation, reflects a view on the legislation, and also includes a "call to action" (Donaldson, 2007).

However, for the purpose of this study, we use Nownes' (2006) definition of lobbying as "an effort designed to affect what the government does" (p.5). Nownes believes that this broad definition is necessary because of the many elements that encompass this term. He writes that lobbying is a process rather than an activity, because numerous activities may be employed for a single lobbying effort. Also, the phrase "what the government does" allows for the inclusion of many activities that an interest group may want to influence, including a legislative vote, filling a vacant public office, or an executive order. The scope of this definition also allows the inclusion of the many elements that previous scholars have used to define the term 'lobbying'.

Lobbying for social change

Starting in the 1960s, government-led initiatives, such as changes in tax laws, the Istook Amendments, and Circular A-122, have constrained non-profit lobbying by confusing non-profit leaders on what lobbying activities are permissible while still retaining their 501(c)(3) status (Bass, et al., 2007; Berry & Arons,2003; Boris & Krehely, 2002; Frumkin, 2002). However, research has demonstrated that political advocacy still remains an important function of non-profit organisations, which continue to lobby despite these initiatives (Brown, 2003; Bass et al., 2007). For instance, in Brown's (2003) study of national non-profit advocacy organisations, almost 81 percent reported that they lobby as a means of achieving organisational goals. In some cases, non-profit organisations' participation in the public policy process has been viewed as an extension of the direct services that these organisations provide to community members (Frumkin, 2002; Jackson-Elmoore, 2005; Hoeffer, 2005). Frumkin (2002) writes, "advocacy work looks like the wholesale part of the non-profit sector, while service work might be viewed as the retail end of the operation" (p. 53). In essence, lobbying for social change allows non-profit organisations to create system change that meets their constituents' needs and thus further enhances the direct services.

In addition to being a part of the non-profit sector's role of service provider, lobbying has also been identified as being related to the non-profit sector's role as an outlet for civic engagement for community members (Berry & Arons, 2003; Frumkin, 2002). Boris and Krehely (2002) state that "Through associations, people interact, build organisational skills, and create networks of trust and affiliation – the social capital – that enable them to work together to solve community problems, promote causes, and seek redress or change through the policy process" (p. 301). They further highlight how non-profit organisations have historically shaped US culture and policy arenas, particularly recognising the role of non-profits in the Civil

Rights Movement, the Women's Suffrage Movement, and the fight against child labour.

While many activities are related to and contribute to the lobbying process, one activity that has received attention in scholarship is relationship building. Studies have demonstrated that both legislators (Jackson-Elmoore, 2005) and non-profit organisations (Kovacs, 2001) recognise relationship building as having a vital role in effective policy advocacy.

Relationship management as an organisational process

A common framework used by scholars to examine the relationships between organisations and their external stakeholders has been relationship management theory. Drawing on the public relations literature, Ledingham (2003) defines relationship management as "Effectively managing organisational–public relationships around common interests and shared goals, over time, results in mutual understanding and benefit for interacting organisations and publics" (p. 190). Originally, relationship management was primarily viewed within the public relations and communications disciplines as being communications activities (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998); however, it is now more commonly conceptualised by scholars as a theoretical perspective in public relations (Bruning, Castle & Schrepfer, 2004).

Using relationship management theory as a framework, research has been able to examine and further understand the relationships between organisations and their publics. In their study of organisational-public relationships (OPRs), Ledingham and Bruning (1998) defined an OPR as "the state which exists between an organization and its key publics in which the actions of either entity impact the economic, social, political and/or cultural well-being of the other entity" (p. 62) and provided five dimensions of such relationships: trust, openness, involvement, investment and commitment. Hung (2005), who later stressed the importance of interdependence between organisations and their publics, described OPRs as an entity occurring when "organizations and their strategic publics are interdependent, and this interdependence results in consequences to each other that organizations need to manage constantly" (p. 396).

To further understand relationship management and OPRs, Ledingham (2003) performed an extensive literature review on relationship management, representing two decades of scholarship from many prominent public relations scholars who have focused on this topic (see Broom & Dozier, 1990; Broom, Casey & Ritchey, 2000; Bruning & Ledingham, 1998, 2000; Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Grunig & Huang, 2000; Littlejohn, 1995). From this synthesis, he made many conclusions about the relationships between organisations and their publics. For instance, he deduced that OPRs are transactional, dynamic, and goal-oriented in nature. He also asserts that OPRs "have antecedents and consequences and can be analysed in terms of relationship quality, maintenance strategies, relationship type, and actors in the relationship" (Ledingham, 2003, p. 188).

This study is a qualitative analysis of the role of relationship building within the organisational context of non-profits and lobbying activities. This exploration specifically examines the basis for attitudes and beliefs about, as well as methods for, relationship building in the non-profit lobbying process.

Methods

The goal of this research is to qualitatively explore the role, function, attitudes, behaviours, and beliefs about non-profit boards of directors and lobbying activities including relationship building. This study utilises a mixed methodology in that participants completed a brief survey and participated in a focus group or individual interview. The focus group methodology provides a systematic way of exploring the research question, promoting a "thick" analysis of the information (Umana-Taylor & Bamaca, 2004). Five focus group interviews were conducted with non-profit organisations in central North Carolina. A variety of organisations having diverse foci were examined in an effort to gain an understanding of the practices and perspectives within the non-profit context. This research was undertaken to further explore the preliminary survey data obtained in summer 2006 (Taliaferro, 2008).

Sample

Sampling for the study was a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. Administrators in Central, North Carolina were targeted through a database of organisations developed and maintained by the North Carolina State University Institute for Non-profits. Participants were also asked to recommend other non-profit leaders for inclusion in the study. Ultimately, study participants included administrators from non-profit organisations predominantly in the Triangle (Raleigh, Durham, Chapel Hill), Greensboro, Charlotte, and Wilmington areas of North Carolina. The study garnered responses from 53 participants of which 86 percent were white, 10 percent were African American and 4 percent Hispanic/Latino. The majority of the participants (60 percent) were female. The participants ranged in age from 22 to 66 years, the average being 53 years. The participants held a wide range of professional roles including executive director (e.g., CEO and president), communications director, and board member. All of the participants would be considered middle to upper-management in their respective organisations, having some level of governance and administrative responsibility. The organisations represented were relatively large organisations, with the median budget of $1,000,000. However, budgets ranged from $55,000 to $5,000,000. Most of the organisations (83 percent) had three or fewer staff members with some level of responsibility for public policy.

Procedures

The study's methods, surveys, and interview protocols were approved by the North Carolina State University Institutional Review Board. Five focus groups (Umana-Taylor & Bamaca, 2004) were held during October and November of 2006. Telephone interviews that ranged from 30 to 90 minutes were conducted during December 2006 and January 2007. The interviews and focus groups were conducted using semi-structured interview schedules and a topic guide respectively (Rubin & Babbie, 2007). The focus groups and interviews were audio-taped and transcribed for analyses. Both interviews and focus groups asked participants several questions, including what comes to mind when non-profit lobbying is suggested, define lobbying, discuss how it is different from advocacy, who sets the lobbying agenda in the agency and what strategies are used.

Data analysis

The transcripts were hand-coded by the researcher and a research assistant. The data were then organised into meaning units and categories (Coleman & Unrau, 2005). Inductive coding was used to determine the initial themes and a three-layer process was used to code the data: identifying, organising, and interrelating themes. First, the significant themes that appeared across most or all study participants' interviews were identified as patterned regularities in the data (Wolcott, 1994). Next, themes were organised according to their frequencies of occurrence, devoting more time to the themes that are common across study participants. Then, as suggested by Rubin & Babbie (2007), various themes were interconnected, by contextualising the themes in a broader analytical framework by making connections to the research literature. Through this analysis process, several themes emerged from the data. The following section details findings drawn from the focus group discussions and field interviews.

Findings

It is important to note that the overwhelming majority of non-profit administrators do not consider what they are doing lobbying. Non-profits have a particularly negative perspective about lobbying, having much more comfort with advocacy and education. However, based on their discussion, many non-profit leaders in the study did lobby. One Eastern North Carolina administrator discussed this fear and uneasiness with the process of lobbying as a result of not having existing relationships:

> "you just don't know how to do it and you don't realize that it doesn't take a lot of time and energy … once you get it started and once you know what you're doing and … you get some relationships built. It's nicer to be able to do those kinds of -- I think that's part of [the aversion to lobbying]."

Regardless of their level of lobbying activities, the participants readily acknowledge that an integral part of lobbying is relationship building. Although they discussed influencing legislation when asked to define lobbying, they also explicitly discussed the need for personal relationships. So much so, that one non-profit marketing director defined lobbying as "developing goodwill through communications or activities, including the building of relationships with a designated individual or that person's immediate family with the intention of influencing current or future legislation or executive action or both". Another non-profit executive director from Eastern North Carolina suggested that: "It's human beings talking to one another". Participants shared that initially the lobbying process often seemed mystical but was really a series of interactions and conversations. Another director from the Greensboro focus group agreed, offering that "it's just regular human relations, as far as I'm concerned".

Once a relationship is developed, it's easy

While lobbying caused many of the participants great angst, those who had engaged in lobbying activities described it as easy. One executive director of a child-serving organisation suggested that the lobbying process is easier once relationships are developed. Until there is a level of interaction, comfort, and familiarity, the idea of lobbying is fairly intimidating to novices to the process. She suggested that when individuals are not familiar with lobbying:

> "you don't realize that it doesn't take a lot of time and energy after … once you get it started and once you know what you're doing and you become [comfortable] and you get some relationships built. It's nicer to be able to do those kinds of [things]. I think that's part of it".

The ability to develop relationships demystifies the process. Another director of a family services organisation suggested:

> "Now if you don't have those relationships it might be … it has to be called lobbying and advocacy. If you naturally have those relationships, it's just conversation. And so it probably is advocacy, but I don't go about it thinking, 'Oh, man, I got to get these people today. I got to make sure they know this, know that.' It's a telephone call."

Interaction with policy makers humanises them and makes the act of lobbying much less anxiety-ridden and negative.

Participants especially extolled the value of relationship building within the non-profit lobbying context. Because these organisations do not have extensive lobbying budgets, they must rely on other types of capital to bring the same types of results as for-profit companies. An administrator in the Charlotte area discussed it in the following terms:

> "It seems like you get places only if you spend a lot of time building the relationships so they know you when you come back and they know to trust your information. So then there's something that does kind of pull at their heart or something, and you've got the information and they trust it because you have the relationship, because that would be the only thing that we can use. We don't have money, just the effort."

Don't forget the gatekeepers

The target of the lobbying effort was given special attention in the participants' responses. They noted that relationships are not only built with the policy maker but her/his staff as well. After discussing that the lobbying process is largely about interpersonal interactions, one Triangle area family support executive director commented that "And often times it's just it's the staff of the representative that you need to forge the relationships". These gatekeepers were essential to access and ultimately influence. Another commented that "because [you develop a relationship with the gatekeeper] then you get in the door, if you have an agenda, you're given an appointment sooner than if you just try to maintain a relationship with the representative". This was deemed particularly relevant at the federal level of government lobbying. One housing executive from the Charlotte area discussed the process for getting support from a federal representative through a series of visits, phone calls, and meetings with the legislator's staff. She said: "But it really was through meeting with her staff face-to-face and phone calls from a lot of people... but most of it went on working with the staff."

Know their issues

Non-profit leaders were strategic about the relationships they initiated. Participants talked about the importance of connecting with legislators on issues that have personal importance for the legislator. This connection between the legislator and the issue serves as a point of entry and a means of developing common ground upon which to initiate a relationship. One Greensboro focus group member advised that "If there's an area that they're adamant about then you know that's the one to go after. You don't give up on the others but that's the one that you stick with pretty much". She discussed this as a way of getting "their ears" on an issue.

Participants were careful to not use the personal issue of the policy maker as a means of exploitation, but instead as a strategy for determining where to focus attention. The idea was to spend resources on the policy makers who were most likely to become allies or champions for the specific cause. Understanding this aspect of the policy-makers' motivations was a way to determine where to expend valuable resources. For instance a Charlotte executive director of a human service organisation told the group:

> "I think if it is a legislator who has a personal connection to the issue, I think [legislator name] came out recently about mental health – there's a mental health issue – and how her family and her involvement in mental health was related to that. So I think if families of legislators have experienced something similar, then I think it can be effective in that sense, but there has to be that personal connection somehow."

Be truthful and knowledgeable

Like all interpersonal relationships, honesty and courtesy was deemed essential in the relationships developed with policy makers in the lobbying process. The participants suggested that these aspects of relationship building, if ignored, can have dire consequences. A Triangle area housing executive cautioned:

> "The other thing you have to do is to thank the people, and so that's always important to do. Don't just say, 'Give me.' But when they help, you say thank you and give them good, solid information. Don't try to work them. Don't try to play the game because once you tell them some stuff that's not true, you're dead in the water."

This honest, courteous interaction fosters the beginnings of the trust and networks required for political and social capital. More than one participant reported receiving calls from policy makers seeking information to support a bill or testimony on an issue. This level of trust and reciprocity was often deemed the cornerstone of the relationship. The status of trusted resources was valuable and often provided the foundation for subsequent interaction.

Other participants agreed with the importance of being available to provide accurate, trustworthy information. The following exchange between two administrators in the Charlotte area exemplified the premium on reliable information:

> Administrator A: "especially because we don't go with money – it seems like you get places only if you spend a lot of time building the relationships so they know you when you come back and they know to trust your information. So then there's something that does kind of pull at their heart or something, and

> you've got the information and they trust it because you have the relationship, because that would be the only thing that we can use. We don't have money, just the effort."

> Administrator B: "But sometimes, too, I think I've seen it as the more and more you develop relationships, the more and more you're involved, then they start to actually use you as a source, and they call you and ask your opinion on certain things, or at least have their staff ask you about something, and I think that's important because that really says at least you have more of an intimate contact with them."

Tell the story

Participants unanimously supported using 'stories' to "bring the message and mission to life" as part of the lobbying process. Telling a story is not simply getting your message across for the lobbying effort; it also engages policy makers and provides a path for involvement (e.g., emotional attachment, volunteerism, etc.). Since relationships are based on trust and shared experiences, this provides the entry to more extensive interactions. One director from a youth services organisation in Raleigh discussed how she is able to link the experiences of the legislator to the stories of her clients:

> "the most powerful stuff is when they are back in their districts and they're seeing what local folks are doing. Then when I can have a conversation with them they have a context and they're telling me stories and I can relate it to that, and that to me is where the real relationship building happens."

She went on to further discuss the impact, relaying success stories about her programme's clients "They love to hear about the kid who went to college, or the kid who got his grades turned around who got expelled a year before. That's not fluff, that's real stuff; that's why we're doing what we're doing."

Storytelling provides the context for interactions, requests and proposed policies. The participants often provided stories about the 'typical' service recipient as a means of showing impact, consequences, and implications of action or inaction.

Telling a story provided the basis for the openness, trust, and mutual understanding that is required for relationship building. These stories served as the proxy for interaction with the individuals of the organisation. Many of the participants suggested that telling a few key stories was more effective in making a connection than other methods of interaction or lobbying. One executive director said, "I'd rather have those 10 folks than the thousand emails or phone calls which, by and large, piss off the legislators because it takes their time, and they would far rather have that real focused quiet [discussion]."

These stories were deemed even more effective when they came directly from clients. While providing these stories in letters was a good strategy, many of the participants explicitly discussed the benefits of face-to-face interactions between the client and the policy maker. The organisation's staff generally saw themselves as coordinators of these interactions, as described by one executive from a housing and homelessness organisation:

> "Again I'd say through what we do is provide a context, a structure for people to come together and understand these issues, for example, homelessness. So we've been experiencing people going out into the streets for a night and developing relationships with some of the clients at the [organisation name]. Through that relationship folks who then are moved to advocate more readily, more aggressively on behalf of people that they've gotten to know through relationship."

There will be an investment of time

All of the participants agreed that the process of building trusting, honest relationships takes time and effort. When asked explicitly about the amount of time it takes to build a relationship, comments such as "a long time" were common responses. The participants unanimously agreed that it takes approximately three years to develop an enduring relationship with a policy maker. Another executive director added, "I say that it's quicker for you if you have some of the same philosophies or ideology; and I think that those who don't, you almost have to figure out a different way to get at them." Although having a relationship does not guarantee a favourable outcome, it makes the process easier and more pleasant. Participants in the Charlotte focus group discussed the time and lack of guaranteed outcome in the following terms,

> Administrator A: You've got an intricate process already working. If they don't get re-elected, you're starting all over again.
>
> Administrator B: Well, yes. But with any luck, if there's someone that you were really working on that hard and they get outed, then maybe it will be someone who's more sympathetic to our way of thinking [who gets the position].
>
> Administrator C: Well, the other thing is you have to keep getting re-elected, so…

One well-connected executive of a state-wide coalition discussed that it took several years to develop the relationships that she currently enjoys. When asked how she did it and how long it took, she responded "Very slowly. It really was just going to as many things and there was a period of time and still is, that I work a lot of hours. Because I'm out, I have to be out and have to be visible so I joined a million committees." She went on to discuss the committee leadership, networks, and partnerships that were essential in developing relationships. Specifically, she hired a consultant who provided introductions to decision-makers.

> "And I've [working with him] for three years, and, and although it was a choice between hiring [the consultant or] an assistant so I wasn't typing my own letters and coming in and working 80 hours a week. What he's been able to do for me in the organisation is far more valuable in the long run; he can pick up the phone and call a senior vice president at [a large private university] and say we really, we need you."

The relationship has to be with the organisation

Similarly, several organisations used paid lobbyists to make initial introductions and then went on to develop these relationships themselves. There was concern that the relationship would be made with the lobbyist and not the organisation. Therefore, the follow-up was essential to the process and outcome of the lobbying effort. One director from the Triangle area said:

> "Our lobbyist will periodically introduce me to different people, but a lot of them don't know who I am once our lobbyist walks out the door; I forget what that person's name is again. So I just try…There's certain people that I know are really keen on our position, so I always send an email or send a personal letter with our newsletter, and just try to keep our name in front, as well as my name in front, because it's going to make a hill of beans if our development person sends this person a letter; they don't know my development person, they know me."

This was a common strategy and one way administrators engaged their boards of directors, advisory boards, and other friends of the organisation. Many of the administrators used board members to make introductions to policy makers and other people of influence. One administrator said:

> "I feel like I've got four, five, six, seven, eight good relationships but it's through board members. It's through our state-wide organisation that provides the contacts that allowed me to build the relationships without making cold calls, somebody who just didn't know me at all. So, I think leverage just makes a tremendous difference."

Another administrator suggested that this method of interaction made the lobbying process more of a "conversation than a call to action."

Discussion and implications: Relationships and lobbying

There are many reasons that relationship building with policy makers is vital to effective lobbying. One of the stronger arguments for building relationships with government officials is the competition that individual organisations and interest groups face when trying to attract and maintain the official's attention (Teater, 2009). For instance, consistent with the findings above, Hoeffer (2005) found that by developing positive relationships with government officials, interest groups increased their level of access to representatives. Teater (2009) explains that through relationship building, interest groups may make their issue more personal to public officials while also increasing the organisation's credibility. Relationship-building activities that are effective for organisations include personal contact (i.e. face-to-face meetings) with public officials and an organisations' presence in the policy arena (Jackson-Elmoore, 2005; Rees, 2000). The study participants emphasised the benefits of making issues more personal by connecting the issues of the clients, the organisations' mission, and the interests of the policy maker.

While developing relationships in general is an important tactic in non-profit lobbying, research has also shown that non-profit organisations are strategic in the relationships they cultivate and maintain. Kovacs' (2001) study demonstrated that advocacy groups consider the time constraints of public officials when deciding on targets. The participants recognised the time and energy investment necessary to cultivate sustained relationships. Further, they discussed the level of risk that is involved. The participants fully understood that a cordial or even friendly relationship did not always translate into favourable outcomes and that the relationship was subject to the vagaries of the voting public.

Additionally, the research findings are congruent with Smucker (1991) who highlights the importance of developing relationships with legislative staff, who are more accessible and may lead to further relationship building. Non-profit organisations may also be strategic on how they contact public officials based on the official's preference on how they receive information (i.e. mail, email, telephone) (Teater, 2009). The relationships developed with gatekeepers (e.g., staffers, assistants) were deemed as valuable as, if not more valuable than, interactions with the policy maker. Often these relationships translated into thicker, more sustained, interactions than visits with the policy maker.

Ledingham and Bruning (1998) provide five dimensions of relationships between organisations and their publics: trust, openness, involvement, investment and commitment. The comments of the study participants echo these dimensions. The participants explicitly stress the importance of providing accurate information on policy issues (trust and openness); telling the story of clients (involvement); and researching and identifying the issues of the policy maker (investment). Understanding the utility of these dimensions within the lobbying context will provide a template from which organisations can plan and coordinate their lobbying efforts.

Although the sample of this study was too small to conduct a statistical analysis, trends in these data provide insight on relationship-building behaviours as they pertain to lobbying within the non-profit sector. However, there remains a general lack of understanding on relationship management and non-profit organisations, requiring further research. It is suggested that to contribute to the existing literature on organisational-public relationship (OPRs) within the non-profit sector, researchers should explore how existing studies on OPR in the for-profit sector could be applicable to non-profit organisations. One example would be to replicate Bruning, Castle & Schrepfer's (2004) study on public attitudes of OPRs. This quantitative study examined attitudes, such as individuals' personal commitment to a specific organisation, their confidence that the organisation would improve the community, and the attractiveness of the organisation compared with others. Another example would be to perform a large quantitative study examining Ledingham and Bruning's (1998) five dimensions of OPR dimensions as it pertains to non-profit organisations. While findings from such studies would be useful to all non-profit organisations interested in focusing on OPR management, it may provide particular insight for non-profit organisations engaging in grassroots organising. Also, the quantitative nature of these studies would address the limitations in generalisability of the current study's findings given its focus group design.

One of the most important implications that findings from this research has for non-profit professionals relates to the role that relationship building has on achieving the policy goals and objectives of the organisation. As indicated from the non-profit professionals participating in this study, successful relationship building with policy makers requires strategy development and skills. Hence, relationship building should be viewed within the non-profit sector as a set of activities that should be formally integrated into an organisation's objectives and strategic planning. In addition, these activities should be viewed as professional skills that can be further developed through training and further education.

The implications of these findings also highlight the importance of relationship building in the training and education of non-profit professionals. First, educators should not underestimate the importance of relationship building in non-profit studies curricula. Although civic engagement is an important role of the non-profit sector (Berry & Arons, 2003; Boris & Krehely, 2002; Frumkin, 2002), there remains confusion among non-profit professionals about lobbying altogether (Bass et al., 2007). By developing the needed skills to be effective lobbyists, non-profit educators can better prepare non-profit leaders for an environment of increased service need and constrained public budgets. These implications also pertain to the board members who serve as leaders for non-profit organisations. By emphasising explicit relationship building and interpersonal skill development within leadership development and training programmes, non-profit board members can be better prepared to advocate for the non-profits and publics in which they serve.

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