In the Public Interest
Communication in Nonprofit Organizations

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In his comprehensive review of the history of organizational communication, Redding (1985) traced the field’s expansion in the United States to an unprecedented “triple alliance” that emerged among industry, academia, and the military. Throughout the second half of the 20th century, the U.S. government supported extensive communication research aimed at helping organizations (especially military organizations) do a better job of identifying and developing potential leaders. Although support for this type of work ebbed over time, the idea that communication scholarship should directly impact organizational effectiveness did not. For this reason, early studies of organizational communication often have been criticized for their apparent managerial bias. Moreover, despite the roots of this research in the military, the organizations studied almost always were for-profit corporations in the private sector. As a result, nearly all of the initial organizational communication theories and concepts were informed exclusively by the for-profit experience (see the review of applied organizational research by Seibold, Lemus, Ballard, & Myers, this volume).

Scholarship conducted in the 1960s began taking a broader view of organizations. The application of general systems theory (Bertalanffy, 1973), in texts such as Katz and Kahn’s (1966) The Sociology of Organizations, Weick’s (1969) The Social Psychology of Organizing, and Farace, Monge, and Russell’s (1977) Communicating and Organizing, provided a generic vocabulary for human organizing, one that reached well beyond the private sector. The emerging conviction that communication was constitutive of organizations—and the accompanying shift in focus from reified corporations (think: IBM) to more fluid and emergent forms (think: MoveOn.org)—set the stage for a broadening of the organizational communication research agenda to include nonprofit organizations, governments, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and communities.

A related trend also contributed to this broadening of organizational communication research interests. Beginning in the United States in the 1980s (but with roots in Europe), critical organizational scholarship became increasingly influential in the communication field (cf., Deetz, 1992; Deetz & Kersten, 1983). Critical approaches exposed and problematized the managerial bias characteristic of past research and revealed the political interests behind seemingly objective organizational decision making. Conceptualizing communication as constituting organizations created a significant point of entry for the critical analysis of power, voice, and participation in all types of collectivities (Deetz, 1994).

A review of organizational communication scholarship in the 1990s by Mumby and Stohl (1996) identified four central problematics that scholars have consistently addressed:
Eric M. Eisenberg and Beth Eschenfelder

(1) voice, (2) rationality, (3) organization, and (4) the organization–society relationship. This last problematic is especially salient for nonprofits, which are characterized by their explicit commitment to promoting social good and the large number and type of stakeholders who are invested in their success.

Many writers have addressed these unique characteristics by exploring how the origins and operations of nonprofit organizations align with the core dimensions of social capital, such as establishing networks, relationships, and trust, and creating shared visions and norms (e.g., Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1996; Chaskin, Brown, Venkatesh, & Vidal, 2001; King, 2004; Smith & Lipsky, 1993). Social capital is created when members of a community come together to form a nonprofit organization to focus on a social need not addressed by existing organizations (Chambre & Fatt, 2002). Thus, nonprofit organizations exist both to serve society and create change in it. Increased attention in organizational communication research now is being paid to this organizational–societal relationship (Mumby & Stohl, 1996). In this chapter, we focus mainly on research that explicitly addresses this relationship. What is not reviewed here is research that focuses solely on the service-delivery aspect of nonprofit work, such as social worker–client relationships (see Miller & Considine, this volume), or the vast amount of nonprofit management literature that addresses board development and fund-raising.

As a prelude to this review, we first provide background on the complex environment in which most nonprofit institutions exist. We begin by reviewing the history of the nonprofit sector, followed by a discussion of the major challenges facing nonprofits today. We then identify three specific communication challenges that are key to the successful management of nonprofit organizations: (1) partnering, (2) clarifying mission and identity, and (3) fostering employee involvement and identification.

Recent History of the Nonprofit Sector in the United States

Nonprofit is a legal term used by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) to refer to organizations that may use revenues only to further their charitable or educational mission rather than distribute profits to owners or shareholders. Nonprofit organizations are ubiquitous, with the majority of them concentrated in three areas: health, education, and social services. As Salamon (2002) explained:

The nonprofit sector is a vast and diverse assortment of organizations. It includes most of the nation’s premier hospitals and universities, almost all of its orchestras and opera companies, a significant share of its theaters, all of its religious congregations, the bulk of its environmental advocacy and civil rights organizations, and huge numbers of its family services, neighborhood development, antipoverty, and community health facilities. It also includes the numerous support organizations, such as foundations and community chests that help to generate financial assistance for these organizations, as well as the traditions of giving, volunteering, and services they help to foster. (pp. 6–7)

Given this impressive list, it is surprising how little research attention has been paid to examining the role of communication in these organizations.

From the mid-1930s to the late 1970s, this sector experienced unprecedented expansion, due to the U.S government’s increasing reliance on nonprofit organizations to “stimulate scientific advances and overcome poverty and ill health” (Salamon, 2002, p. 12). Especially between 1960 and the mid-1970s, “big infusions of cash were poured into
social services” (Bernstein, 1991, p. vii), with thousands of new nonprofit agencies created to receive and administer the spending of these funds.

Nonprofit organizations were further propelled into the U.S. public consciousness during President Ronald Reagan’s budget cutbacks aimed at dismantling inefficient and ineffective government social programs. As Boris (1998) explained, “Charities were promoted as the nongovernmental saviors of the poor and of children, the elderly, and the disabled” (¶ 2). The Republican-led U.S. Congress’s “Contract with America” in 1994 also attempted to scale back the size of the federal government and its involvement in citizens’ lives (Pynes, 1997), which resulted in the distribution of funds to states and local communities that were expected, in turn, to prioritize needed services and determine eligibility criteria for their areas. This “devolution” of federal government responsibilities to the state and local level created significant opportunities for nonprofit organizations to play larger roles in community planning and decision making. Nonprofit organizations were awarded government contracts because they were seen as “reputable, committed, like-minded community institutions” that could help governments to come closer to achieving their mandates (Ryan 1999, pp. 128–129).

The passage of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) to reform welfare added yet another wrinkle to local communities’ responses to the devolution process. The most dramatic provision of the PRWORA was a 5-year lifetime limit on public assistance and a 2-year deadline for most welfare recipients to secure employment. Because the implementation of this law was passed on to the states, welfare reform legislation and policies first led to the shifting of authority and responsibility from the federal to local governments and then to NGOs, including nonprofit and for-profit organizations. Requiring swift implementation and the mandate to integrate various services, the PRWORA gave an extraordinary boost to social service organizations of all types (M. J. Austin, 2003; Poole, 2003; Skloot, 2000).

Effective devolution of social services, however, is easier said than done. A smaller federal government is appealing in principle, but nonprofit organizations rarely are prepared to accept the added responsibility. Early on, political leaders promoted the idea that the charitable sector could be sustained almost exclusively through increased volunteerism and private donations. President George H. Bush spoke often about the “backbone of America” being a “thousand points of light,” a metaphor for willing “constellations” of caring volunteers. The notion of an independent charitable social safety net that could offset decreasing government support for social services persisted through the 1990s, but the porous and inadequate nature of this net ultimately became clear. An estimated two-fifths of public charities suffered a decline in inflation-adjusted dollars between 1989 and 1995, and a similar number operated on a very slim margin, with cash on hand less than or equal to 3 months of expenses (Boris, 1998). This dire economic situation has not improved over the past decade.

Put another way, the macroeconomic and political forces shaping the development of nonprofit organizations extend beyond any consideration of what best meets the needs of their clients, citizens, or communities. In this sense, nonprofit organizations face challenges that are practically identical to those encountered by private-sector, for-profit businesses, such as the need to cope with increased complexity, shrinking resources, increased competition, and nearly constant change.

One area where the for-profit, government, and nonprofit sectors are similar is that they all must deal with changing environments. There are, in fact, many ways in which nonprofits are both similar to and different from their for-profit and government counterparts. An overview of these differences is shown in Table 15.1.

As communication scholars, our main concern should be with how those associated
Table 15.1 Comparison of For-profit, Government, and Nonprofit Sectors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purposes and Interests</th>
<th>For-Profit Businesses</th>
<th>Government Entities</th>
<th>Nonprofit Organizations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Maximize profits</td>
<td>• Provide public goods generally not profitable enough to be supplied by the private sector in efficient levels (Gordon, 1992) or perceived by the community as being more trustworthy when provided by government (Boris &amp; Steuerle, 1999), such as indigent health-care or mental health services</td>
<td>• Maximize social missions (Saxon-Harrold &amp; Heffron, 2000)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Satisfy human needs by creating wealth (Steiner &amp; Steiner 2000)</td>
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<td>• Set own goals (Gordon, 1992)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Balance interests of stockholders and customers</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Satisfy the client, customer, or associate needs</td>
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<td>• Free to act in own interests, even when it clashes with the public interest (Bland &amp; Rubin, 1997)</td>
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<td>• Preferred providers for certain services to treat all citizens fairly (Boris &amp; Steuerle, 1999)</td>
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<th>Stereotypes</th>
<th>For-Profit Businesses</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Perceived to allocate resources most effectively and to provide least-cost solutions most responsively</td>
<td>• Seen as monolithic, intrusive, clumsy, and bloated; critics call for downsizing, contracting out, and business-like practices (Brinkerhoff &amp; Brinkerhoff, 2002)</td>
<td>• Considered softer and kindhearted, able to mobilize voluntary effort, linked to communities, and driven by enduring prosocial values (Brinkerhoff &amp; Brinkerhoff, 2002)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Seen as hard-edged and uncaring, favoring private over societal interests (Brinkerhoff &amp; Brinkerhoff, 2002)</td>
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<tr>
<th>Key Relationships</th>
<th>For-Profit Businesses</th>
<th>Government Entities</th>
<th>Nonprofit Organizations</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Key relationships include employees, customers, and owners, but success demands developing relationships with all sectors and publics</td>
<td>• Must work with outside interest groups (e.g., political, business, and/or citizens) and people whose careers and actions are outside government control (Gordon, 1992)</td>
<td>• Must establish relationships with a multitude of constituencies (Drucker, 1990): clients, employees, governments, business competitors, neighborhoods, and other nonprofits</td>
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<th>Fiscal Resources</th>
<th>For-Profit Businesses</th>
<th>Government Entities</th>
<th>Nonprofit Organizations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Rely on consumer purchasing of products and services</td>
<td>• Generate income through mandatory taxation</td>
<td>• Services are supported through government and private grants and donations</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Provide products and services to individuals based on their needs or wants, in exchange for a direct payment (Gordon, 1992)</td>
<td>• Through taxation and regulation, they assure that everyone is paying their share</td>
<td>• Although an operating budget must be maintained, profit is irrelevant because of the organization’s nature</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• May subsidize charitable work by providing services to populations more willing or able to pay (Saxon-Harrold &amp; Heffron, 2000)</td>
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with nonprofits employ communication to respond to these external pressures. Through a comprehensive review of the literature, we identify three communication challenges that face nonprofit leaders: (1) partnering, (2) clarifying mission and identity, and (3) fostering employee involvement and identification. **Partnering** is the ability of nonprofit leaders to cultivate multiple interorganizational linkages and, thereby, achieve synergy with other nonprofit organizations, for-profit businesses, and governments. **Clarifying mission and identity** refers to the ability of these leaders to stay true to their founding missions and, at the same time, adapt to external pressures, all while sustaining their organization’s unique sense of identity. **Fostering employee involvement and identification** refers to leaders’ ability to use communication to encourage employees’ participation
in decision making and to create a sense of loyalty and value commitment by them to the organization.

Partnering
Partnering effectively with stakeholders is the single-most significant communication challenge facing leaders of nonprofit organizations. Historically, the number and importance of stakeholder relations has been the key difference between nonprofit organizations and for-profit businesses (Drucker, 1990). Although the private sector lately has looked beyond its stockholders to other publics (e.g., Deetz, 1992), nonprofit leaders and board members always have known that they cannot fulfill their mission by “going it alone”; to succeed, they must “build alliances, networks, partnerships, and other types of collaborative relationships” (Waide, 1999, p. 244).

“Beyond the walls” is a phrase that the Peter F. Drucker Foundation (a charitable organization named after the late management consultant) adopted to describe the communication imperative facing all three sectors—nonprofit, government, and business—in moving toward strengthened partnership and community-building efforts (Hesselbein, 1999). As Somerville and Quinn (1999) concluded, to achieve their missions, these organizations must learn to “improvise collectively” (p. 233). These types of partnerships are a further example of the unique positioning of nonprofits described by Ott (2001): “The nonprofit sector has always been positioned rather delicately between the business sector’s profit motive and the government sector’s drive to meet social needs” (p. 355). Nonprofit organizations both depend on and, at times, compete with the other sectors (government and for-profit); as a result, the potential payoff is a significant impact on the quality of public life. Here, we explore the research literature on the variety of partnerships with and among nonprofit organizations, including those with for-profit businesses, governments, and other nonprofits. We also review the challenges those partnerships create and the role of communication in developing and managing those challenges.

Partnering with Business
In Tampa, Florida, the nonprofit Museum of Science and Industry (MOSI) recently partnered with State Farm Insurance to increase the impact of their efforts to educate the public about how to prepare for devastating hurricanes. Further south, an environmental organization protecting tropical rainforests partnered with a logging company to create a collaborative program that defined best practices for cultivating and harvesting tropical agricultural products. These exemplar types of partnerships have become more common among businesses and nonprofits, and are being studied more often in applied communication research.

Skloot (2000) studied collaboration between Lockheed-Martin and the Urban League in Baltimore that centered on child support enforcement and family unification. Through this partnership, the Urban League upgraded its staff’s technical skills and got improved access to the community and to local politicians. This case provides a model for collaboration between nonprofit organizations and for-profit businesses, as it shows that when these organizations enter into formal partnerships, nonprofits can focus on what they do best: offer skilled, one-on-one personal involvement, assistance, and steady care. They also can build capacities of the communities they serve and better represent local needs. As Skloot concluded, “If nonprofits can work out joint ventures with richer, bigger for-profits or other nonprofits, they could specialize. They could extend their reach and serve their clients better. Each could build off its core competencies” (p. 322).
Generally speaking, nonprofits enter into symbiotic, mutually advantageous relationships with for-profit firms for financial reasons. In the process of doing so, they often discover valuable new opportunities and sources of expertise. For example, for-profit businesses bring a wealth of experience to nonprofit organizations that helps to meet bidding, payroll, printing, and technology needs (Skloot, 2000; Werther & Berman, 2001). In return, nonprofit organizations can help businesses with cause-related marketing to promote their products and build consumer brand loyalty (Werther & Berman, 2001). J. E. Austin (1998) identified other benefits of such partnerships for businesses, such as nonprofit organizations serving as places where business executives practice new skills, build leadership capabilities, and contribute more directly to their community through involvement in nonprofit boards and committees.

Collaborating on commercial ventures also helps to soften long-standing skepticism about the motivations of corporations and opens the way “for nonprofit acceptance of the business community, not simply as a source of charitable support, but as a legitimate partner for a wide range of nonprofit endeavors” (Salamon, 2003, pp. 64–65). Moreover, cause-related marketing relationships can evolve into broader relationships that mobilize corporate personnel, finances, and know-how in support of nonprofit activities. This increased interest in commercial partnerships on the part of nonprofits “has meshed nicely with the growing readiness of businesses to forge strategic alliances with nonprofits in order to generate ‘reputational capital’” (Salamon, 2003, p. 65). This mutual interest, as Salamon (2003) explained, has led to a notable upsurge in these strategic partnerships.

Occasionally, nonprofits compete with for-profit businesses for consumer dollars. One reason such competition occurs is because government funders have changed to fee-based, consumer-side subsidies that more closely resemble for-profit practices. When clients can shop for services using government money, the onus is on nonprofit organizations to distinguish the services they provide as superior to the available alternatives. One instance of this dynamic, again, involves defense contractor Lockheed-Martin, which was attracted to the social welfare field after the implementation of welfare reform legislation designed to move large numbers of recipients from welfare dependence to employment (Salamon, 2003). As Salamon (2003) explained:

> What these firms offer is less knowledge of human services than information-processing technology and contract management skills gained from serving as master contractors on huge military system projects, precisely the skills needed to manage the subcontracting systems required to prepare welfare recipients for work. (p. 23)

Nonprofit providers, consequently, can find themselves working as subcontractors to for-profit entities, such as Lockheed-Martin, thereby increasing the number and salience of relationships between for-profit businesses and nonprofit organizations.

**Partnering with Governments**

Nonprofit organizational partnerships with government agencies yield many of the same benefits as partnerships with businesses, but the relationships are more varied and complex (Werther & Berman, 2001). Collaboration between government and nonprofit organizations is not new but has gained momentum as a result of changing attitudes and growing expectations about private-sector social responsibility (Snavely & Tracy, 2000). Nonprofit organizations often participate in government program planning and policy development, and serve as contractors to provide services desired by government

The relationship between government and the nonprofit sector increasingly has been characterized more by cooperation than conflict, as governments depend now more than ever on the nonprofit sector to assist in meeting human needs (Salamon, 1994). At the same time, scholars and practitioners have mixed views about the impact of government involvement in nonprofit governance and management. Researchers who study these relationships (e.g., Akingbola, 2004; Chambre & Fatt, 2002; Grønbørg & Salamon, 2002; Smith, 1994; Werther & Berman, 2001) cite persuasive challenges that include increasing demands by government agencies for accountability by nonprofits and funding uncertainties and constraints. Along with the demands that governments place on nonprofits comes a host of rules, policies, and decisions that may be frustrating, and, in some cases, even impair the ability of nonprofits to function effectively.

At times, the ongoing negotiation between elected government officials and nonprofit leaders can lead to much bigger problems, such as when agencies feel that government pressures them to dilute or even abandon their founding missions. Although the proliferation of government–nonprofit partnerships seems inevitable, observers are concerned about the potentially negative effects of this shift on the ability of nonprofits to stay independent and focused on fulfilling their core mission. The source of this concern is the observation that, as nonprofit organizations enter into relationships with governments, they increasingly organize themselves to mirror and imitate their government counterparts (Brinkerhoff & Brinkerhoff, 2002). These pressures pose threats to the continued pursuit of the mission of nonprofit organizations, leaving many, if not most, nonprofits to confront an “identity crisis” (Salamon, 2003, pp. 46) at some point in their history.

Challenges related to the blurring of sectors are revealed in research conducted by Alexander (1999, 2000) on nonprofit social service organizations serving children and youth in Cuyahoga County, Ohio. These studies assessed the impact of devolution and related contracting issues, and sought to identify effective nonprofit organizational coping strategies. In focus group discussions, nonprofit representatives indicated that difficulty in adapting to financial challenges posed by government agencies negatively affected their capacity to fulfill traditional public service responsibilities, such as advocacy, serving the most needy, research, and teaching. Moreover, they reported that their tactical choices increasingly were shaped by government reimbursement rates and the capacity to generate revenue. Findings from Alexander’s (1999) study supported the common perception that because of partnerships with governments, most nonprofit organizations are cutting programs, charging new and higher fees, and, in extreme cases, even rationing services.

The impact of government funding on the advocacy function performed by many nonprofit organizations is one primary way their ability to fulfill their service mission may be jeopardized. Historically, nonprofits have provided an independent voice and an important linkage between governments, communities, and citizens in need, not only through the provision of services but also through their political capacity as advocates for (sometimes unpopular) social causes (Alexander, 1999). Among other things, nonprofits organize communities, respond to community needs, and articulate these needs through advocacy (e.g., via public service announcements, press releases, and even community demonstrations). As nonprofits are pushed to become more business oriented, their political character often is imperiled.

One example of the loss of political agency by nonprofit organizations is captured in research by Lune (2002) on nonprofits operating syringe exchange programs (SEPs) in New York City, where the political environment increasingly ran contrary to their missions. Like most nonprofits today, nonprofits operating SEPs depend on ongoing
government support for their survival, but the controversial nature of their services can cause them to be isolated from much of the public health services and the drug treatment field. To become an “authorized” part of the health-care delivery system, the relationship between SEPs and governments seemingly had to shift; increased access to government support, thus, has come at the cost of abandoning direct political challenges to government policies in this arena.

Ensuring organizational survival has required nonprofits operating SEPs to move from “challenger” practices that contest government policy “toward conciliatory practices that implicitly or explicitly legitimate the interests of political elites, even at the cost of delegitimating their own constituency” (Lune, 2002, p. 471). Several informants in Lune’s (2002) study stated that although SEPs were once “a kind of social movement,” they now rarely advocate for social change. Instead, SEPs have turned toward a more subdued style of advocacy aimed at reducing the atmosphere of hostility and distrust as they try to forge lasting, undemanding relationships with other health and human service agencies. The principal survival-oriented strategy utilized by nonprofits operating SEPs has been to minimize their public visibility. A far cry from their earlier incarnation as issue advocates, today, they avoid political entanglements by trying not to be seen and by encouraging communities to forget that they even exist (Lune).

In addition to curbing advocacy efforts and influencing the types of services delivered by nonprofit organizations, governments also control service delivery by regulating the structure and qualifications of nonprofit personnel. New forms of government funding have significantly affected the staffing practices of nonprofit organizations, mainly by mandating the “professional” delivery of services an agency provides (Akingbola, 2004; Salamon, 1995). Such professionalism includes implementing minimum standards of care to ensure quality service delivery (e.g., acceptable client–provider ratios), which contribute to existing tendencies among nonprofit organizations toward professionalization and specialization (Smith & Lipsky, 1993).

Services funded through government contracts require nonprofits to hire full-time professional staff as a means of complying with stringent reporting and accountability requirements. According to Salamon (1995), “Poverty and distress have come to be seen as requiring more than amateur approaches and volunteer activity” (p. 138). Although volunteers remain an integral part of service delivery, agencies increasingly are replacing volunteers with professional staff, especially in front-line service delivery (Akingbola, 2004).

This movement toward professionalization of staff presents unique challenges for nonprofit organizations. In Lune’s (2002) research on SEPs, nonprofit organizations that once were managed by recovering addicts now often are run by professional managers with no prior experience working on drug issues. As Lune explained, “The conditions for aboveground work require a degree of professionalism and accountability in accordance with the interests of those outside of the affected communities rather than those within” (p. 470).

Related trends are visible in research conducted by Akingbola (2004) within the Canadian Red Cross—Toronto Region (CRC-TR). Interviewees agreed that government funding affects staffing, explaining that (contrary to the agency’s previous practices) external financial pressures led the CRC-TR to hire more staff on contract (on a temporary basis without benefits) for the delivery of services. The increased use of temporary staffing is a direct result of the uncertainty surrounding continued government funding. According to interviewees, the impact of government funding on staffing has multiple ramifications for the quality of services the agency provides, including stagnated or diminished quality of services, the inability to retain acquired program competencies, program instability, inevitable employee turnover, employee distraction, and low employee morale.
Funding restrictions and other government requirements not only significantly reduce the activities of nonprofit organizations but also simultaneously require other activities that may not be part of the mission of these organizations. For example, the financial requirements for operating in a contract environment discourage nonprofit organizations from serving populations with the greatest needs and providing services to their communities when outcomes are difficult to measure. The result can be a double whammy: both greater uncertainty and loss of the guiding vision. As Alexander (1999) claimed, “Government contracting may undermine a nonprofit’s financial stability, while at the same time encouraging nonprofit organizations to move away from their own distinctive mission and reflect more closely the priorities of government administrators” (p. 328).

Agency leaders have little choice but to adjust their vision to obtain continued funding, but in so doing, they risk losing the heart of the enterprise—their founding mission. Strategic management in the nonprofit arena involves maintaining “a distinctive sense of organizational mission” that binds diverse stakeholders together (M. J. Austin, 2003, p. 107). Internal and external tensions must be successfully managed to ensure that new government resources and contracts do not distort the historical values and priorities of a nonprofit organization. Partnerships will not attain their desired efficiency and effectiveness if the identities of all the partners are not maintained (Brinkerhoff & Brinkerhoff, 2002).

Partnering with Other Nonprofits

Given their overlapping missions, it is common for nonprofit organizations to partner with each other. A typical example is the close relationships between United Way and many public schools, hospitals, and universities. Partnerships among nonprofits provide excellent opportunities to bring more attention and leverage to pervasive social challenges. However, not every partnership of this type is successful. Histories of competition for resources, political maneuvering, and suspicion of one another’s past motives do not engender the type of open exchange required for robust collaborative relationships (Gray, 1989). One reason for increased competitive behavior among nonprofit organizations is they often must battle for their share of limited resources that include clients, board members, volunteers, employees, donations, contracts, grants, and political power (Brody, as cited in Tuckman, 1998; Garner, 1989). Nonprofits also may compete for plum alliances with for-profit and government entities (Tuckman, 1998; Weisbrod, 1997).

For most nonprofit organizations, cooperation and competition must coexist. Oster (1995) cited Greenpeace and The Nature Conservancy as examples of nonprofit organizations that act as partners in program and advocacy efforts, and simultaneously compete for donations. Oster described the competitive–cooperative position of nonprofit organizations as being similar to that of a tennis player “engaged in a somewhat quirky tournament,” stating, “at times, in this tournament, individuals face each other as single opponents. At other times, they are doubles partners, and, at still other times they switch partners and become doubles opponents” (p. 48). Furthermore, “just as in the tennis game, anticipating what the other players are likely to do is important whether they are your partners or your rivals” (Oster, p. 48). For an interesting parallel in the private sector, see Browning and Shetler’s (2000) description of collaboration among competitors in the U.S. semiconductor industry.

Ideally, nonprofit organizations partner “not because collective effort necessarily helps each individual operation, but because collective action serves a greater good” (Oster, 1995, p. 57). In reality, motivations for such partnerships often are more personal and pedestrian. These relationships sometimes are sought primarily for the gain of individual
nonprofits, which inevitably causes conflict in the collaboration process (Rein, 1983; Snavely & Tracy, 2000). Obstacles to collaboration uncovered in the research literature include behaviors such as turf protection, partners “hogging the glory” when collaboration succeeds, violating trust, adopting an “I” instead of a “we” attitude, and not living up to their communicative obligations (Snavely & Tracy, 2000, p. 161). Collaboration also can become a tool in power struggles over control, priorities, or resources within the social service system.

Snavely and Tracy (2000) studied collaborative practices among nonprofit organizations in rural southern Illinois and the Mississippi Delta. They interviewed mostly female leaders in the nonprofit sector who were either long-time agency employees or had played a long-term leadership role in community development and social services in their communities. Snavely and Tracy found that these leaders believed that collaboration is an effective way to deliver services and that it benefits nonprofit organizations in several ways. The directors clearly understood that their organization could never operate in isolation and that collaboration was the key to getting things done and the most effective means for extending services into the community, establishing credibility, obtaining needed community resources, and enhancing service delivery. These leaders established personal connections with one another, built bonds of trust, and committed organizational resources to working together (Snavely & Tracy).

Snavely and Tracy’s (2000) research also suggested that collaboration can be difficult to accomplish due to environmental factors characteristic of rural areas, where clients are scattered over a large geographic area and community financial resources are limited. Despite these challenges, nonprofit organizations in rural regions do engage in significant collaborations. Results from this study revealed that leaders of nonprofit organizations were more actively engaged in certain types of collaboration—such as case management and community-wide planning and issue assessment—but had limited involvement in others—namely, organizational integration and major interorganizational planning.

Researchers have identified several reasons for the prevalence of partnerships among nonprofits (see Alexander, 2000; Rein, 1983; Snavely & Tracy, 2000; Werther & Ber- man, 2001). One comprehensive study by Kohm and La Piana (2003) that surveyed 192 “strategic restructuring partnerships” between nonprofits, staff members, board members, and funders identified four motivations for collaboration: (1) maintaining funding support, (2) saving money, (3) capitalizing on a partner organization’s leadership, and (4) preserving or enhancing their organization’s reputation. Some alliances, therefore, grow out of concern for administrative efficiency and the avoidance of redundant effort, whereas others are formed to prevent costly competition for resources or clients and may be used to pursue collaborative funding applications, joint fund-raising, or the sharing of human and financial resources with other organizations. A related trend is toward more joint planning among partners to develop approaches to fill service gaps, better meet client needs, and provide a fuller range of services. Collaboration also may be entered into to increase the impact of advocacy efforts and bring about social and political reform.

This section has highlighted the need for and variety of partnerships with and among nonprofit organizations, challenges those partnerships create, and the role of communication in developing and managing them. One of the more significant challenges resulting from these partnerships is the impact on a nonprofit organization’s mission, such as the challenge of balancing conflict between an organization’s service-oriented mission and the necessity to operate more like a business (Chambre & Fatt, 2002; Salamon, 2003). In the next section, we review research that looks more closely at the importance of nonprofit missions and further examine the role of communication in fostering stakeholder commitment.
Clarifying Mission and Identity

As discussed in the previous sections, funding pressures and government requirements can significantly impede the activities of nonprofit organizations and simultaneously require other activities that may not be central to these organizations’ historical mission. For example, the financial requirements for operating in a contract environment discourage nonprofit organizations from serving populations with the greatest needs or from providing services to these communities when outcomes often are difficult to measure. This result can cause for nonprofits both greater uncertainty and loss of the guiding mission. From a communication perspective, these pressures can result in an even greater problem: the steady pressure on agencies to dilute or abandon their founding missions.

Research on leadership within nonprofit organizations, consequently, focuses on the challenge of achieving an organization’s service-oriented mission in a way that is economically sustainable (Chambre & Fatt, 2002; Salamon, 2003). These two sets of criteria are not easily reconciled, inasmuch as they historically are associated with highly divergent expectations for both management and employee communication. Effective nonprofit leaders, therefore, must alleviate identity confusion and secure member buy-in to ensure successful goal attainment and loyalty among organizational stakeholders. Here, we review research that explores these challenges and the use of communication within and among nonprofit partners to mitigate them.

Mission and Identity Confusion

A contested or confused nonprofit agency identity leads to conflicts in determining or sustaining organizational strategy and structure, and too often results in management decisions that either are driven by environmental pressures or stumbled on without a clear rationale. As Young (2001a) claimed, “Nonprofit organizations must know who they are to make successful strategic and structural choices” (p. 155). Of course, there is no “one right” strategy for effectively addressing a social issue, as alternative organizational niches and identities always are available. However, selecting an identity is tantamount to an organization defining a “north star’ by which to navigate its course of action and shape strategy for the future” (Young, 2001a, p. 155). Flexibility of form allows nonprofit organizations to choose who they are, often from among several possible “organizational identities” that imply differences in strategy and structure, although good decisions about staffing, governance, and grant-making policies flow best from a sense of clarity with regard to institutional identity.

Young (2001b) provided an analysis of two instances of nonprofit umbrella associations—Girls Incorporated and CIVICUS—struggling with alternative identities that strongly influenced their choice of structure. Both nonprofits experienced changes over time that resulted in organizational stress, in the formative stage for CIVICUS and at a later critical juncture for Girls Incorporated. Through these challenging times, both organizations nurtured new, emerging identities and allowed old ones to slowly die off. As Young (2001b) explained, “They did not choose either to tolerate the pain of competing identities indefinitely—to forcefully replace one identity with another or to create some ‘meta-identity’ that integrates competing identities—or to create an entirely new identity” (p. 302). Allowing new identities to evolve naturally permitted these organizations to retain stakeholder support and provided time for them to comfortably adapt to what was best for the future. As Young (2001a) concluded, “The identity resolution for any given organization is critically important for achieving its social goals” (p. 155).
Member Buy-in

Securing buy-in from staff and other stakeholders associated with nonprofits can be difficult. Success in nonprofit organizations is measured largely in relation to the achievement of their mission or the effective provision of services, but consensus about the quality of nonprofit services is more difficult to obtain. As a result, responsiveness of nonprofit organizations to the needs of their stakeholders perhaps is the most important indicator of success (Lewis, Hamel, & Richardson, 2001). Herman and Renz (1999), clarifying the role of stakeholders in measuring the effectiveness of nonprofit organizations, argued that evaluations of effectiveness most often come down to stakeholder judgments, which are formed and changed in an ongoing process of sense making and negotiation. Perceptions of nonprofit organizational effectiveness are neither stable nor fixed; instead, effectiveness is socially constructed through stakeholder interaction. As Herman and Renz explained, in nonprofit organizations:

There are activities, but there is no effectiveness until someone calls it.... All stakeholders are permitted to determine effectiveness, although some stakeholders may be considered more credible than others, and there is no regular procedure for determining effectiveness. (p. 118)

The priorities of constituent groups, thus, affect goal setting and attainment in nonprofit organizations (DiMaggio, cited in Lewis et al., 2001). Effective leadership involves understanding the criteria of effectiveness that various stakeholders apply and managing those expectations.

Leadership and Stakeholder Communication

Due to the increased emphasis on stakeholders’ involvement and the critical role they play in nonprofit organizations, strong communication with stakeholders is essential to those organizations’ success. Here, we explore research on the role of leaders in nonprofit organizations in building and maintaining essential stakeholder relationships, which involves environmental scanning and stakeholder analysis, developing personal relationships with community partners, and establishing bonds of trust with stakeholders.

It is essential for leaders of nonprofit organizations to participate in and have access to key social networks both within their respective organizations and in the communities they serve. Moreover, leaders must maintain a high level of trust among their various constituents, including donors, board members, employees, clients, and the public, and they must communicate and gain support for a common mission and vision (King, 2004).

Stakeholders also can provide an impetus for change and serve an important role in implementing management or change strategies (Eadie, 1997); consequently, nonprofit–stakeholder alliances are an important resource when planning agency strategy. As Garner (1989) explained, “A wise leader will recognize such alliances at the outset of planning, consider how to use them for future advantage, and avoid damaging them” (p. 119).

Identifying stakeholders and building relationships with them is a primary role of nonprofit organizational leadership that has been studied by several researchers (e.g., Eadie, 1997; Garner, 1989; M. Shaw, 2003). Eadie (1997, p. 154) recommended that nonprofit leaders perform an environmental scan to “identify external conditions and trends that are pertinent to a nonprofit organization’s vision and mission,” followed by an analysis that identifies potential stakeholders with related interests.
M. Shaw’s (2003) research highlighted the importance of organizational leaders developing personal relationships with stakeholders. The successful partnerships studied were not built on negotiated agreements but on years of experience with partner agencies on the part of the individuals who worked together and had developed genuine affection for one another. In fact, partner agencies often implemented large-scale collaborative projects with no memorandum of understanding or contract, only a handshake and trust. M. Shaw’s research included a case study of relationships between land trusts (nonprofit organizations that protect a natural resource or preserve historically or archeologically important sites) and local governments to identify conditions that foster successful collaboration. He concluded that social factors, such as experience on the part of key personnel in working with the other entity and sincere affection for each other, were more key to successful collaboration than perceived economic benefits. This finding suggests that a nonprofit agency interested in creating a viable partnership to improve a project should give careful consideration to assigning staff members, making sure that those assigned either already have or are well positioned to forge meaningful relationships.

Another implication of M. Shaw’s (2003) study is that because leaders of nonprofit organizations must cultivate good working relationships with representatives of government agencies, hiring staff with prior government experience can be a wise strategy. Potential government partners likely have goals and values quite similar to those of a nonprofit partner. Establishing trust and developing a deep understanding of how various agencies operate cannot be negotiated in the course of one or two meetings before embarking on a joint venture; hence, when a history of trust and understanding are present, the collaborative effort can focus mainly on achieving project goals and not as much on developing the details of the partnership.

In addition to personal relationships, the importance of establishing open communication and dialogue in nonprofit partnerships has been studied. For instance, Medved et al. (2001) explored how communication may be used to reveal, frame, and ameliorate tensions in one community health change effort: the Comprehensive Community Health Models Initiative. Among those participating in the study, Medved et al. found that the counties that included the greatest diversity of participants in their change process produced the greatest benefit, due to fuller involvement of institutions that serve disadvantaged populations.

Leading a heterogeneous group always is a challenge, but when the potential of such a group is realized, great and innovative things can happen. Medved et al. (2001) concluded that assembling people who typically do not work together creates the potential to share important new information with mutual benefit. Leaders and group facilitators who keep the need for recruitment, inclusion, and parity in dialogue foremost in mind can heighten the odds of creative problem solving and system change.

This section described theory and research on the challenges of leading nonprofit organizations. The core tension to be managed is between a nonprofit’s social mission, on the one hand, and economic and political pressures, on the other hand. In the third and final section, we examine the role of communication in promoting employee involvement and identification with nonprofit organizations, which presents special challenges due to the unique nature of the nonprofit workforce.

**Fostering Employee Involvement and Identification**

In nonprofit organizations, gaining employees’ involvement and identification is both important and challenging. Although members of any organization need to identify with
its goals and link themselves to some essential elements of the organization, this need is prominent in nonprofit organizations. In this section, we examine research addressing the unique characteristics of the nonprofit workforce that influence issues of organizational involvement and identification, explore how changes in the nonprofit sector challenge employee and stakeholder commitment, and suggest communication strategies for strengthening nonprofit members’ involvement and identification.

For the most part, those who work for nonprofit organizations are motivated by strongly held values and have chosen to work in this sector for this reason. They typically have strong professional loyalties and well-articulated opinions about the right way to serve consumers (Arsenault, 1998). This behavior is more significant in the nonprofit than in the for-profit sector, because nonprofit workers likely “self-select occupations that require particular types of emotional labor” (Shuler & Davenport Sypher, 2000, p. 75). As Pines noted, human service workers tend to be unique in that their career choices are motivated by concerns such as “working with people, helping to meet people’s needs, and making the world a better place to live” (cited in Shuler & Davenport Sypher, 2000, p. 73). Very often, such workers regularly go above and beyond the call of duty, even if it means increasing their emotional labor.

Human service organizations, such as community mental health centers (CMHCs), depend heavily on interpersonal relationships to function smoothly and deliver high-quality services to consumers. Contextual factors within organizations are critical in facilitating or constraining ways in which services are delivered by clinicians and case managers to consumers with serious mental illness. Morris and Bloom (2002) examined the relationship between contextual factors (such as an organization’s structure, culture, and climate) and job satisfaction and organizational commitment among administrators and staff in CMHCs undergoing system changes in the financing of mental health care. Their research revealed that aggregate measures of organizational culture and climate were associated with employees’ levels of job satisfaction over and above those individuals’ perceptions of culture and climate, suggesting the importance of the work environment within CMHCs in promoting job satisfaction among administrators and staff on the front lines of mental health service delivery. Without an organizational environment that sustains and supports staff efforts to meet the often complex and demanding individual needs of diverse consumers, staff burnout and turnover are inevitable, and quality of care and service may be compromised (see Miller & Considine, this volume).

A shared belief in a nonprofit agency’s mission is one reason employees remain committed to their job and organization. Brown and Yoshioka (2003) found that employees’ positive attitudes toward the mission of a youth and recreation service organization were closely related to their satisfaction and intent to remain with the organization. They identified three broad reasons why individuals stay with a nonprofit organization: (1) belief in the mission and desire to help people, (2) satisfaction with the organization and coworkers, and (3) satisfaction with their job and opportunities for personal and professional growth. Given that nonprofit organizations rely on their mission to attract resources and guide decision making, mission statements are an important type of management communication for motivating employees and keeping them aligned with a nonprofit organization’s vision, principles, and practices.

Brown and Yoshioka (2003) further clarified three basic principles that influence nonprofit employees’ attitudes toward their organization’s mission: awareness, agreement, and alignment. Ideally, employees must know the mission, agree with what it says, and see consistency between it and their daily work activities. Intrinsic motivations, such as attachment to mission, however, may run thin, as full-time employees earn salaries that are not competitive with other organizations. Dissatisfaction with pay tends to override
employees' attachment to the mission as an explanation of why they may leave nonprofit organizations.

**Challenges to Employee Involvement**

Although commitment to the mission is important, it is not enough to keep employees motivated and identifying with their nonprofit organization. Several challenges facing nonprofit organizations today directly influence employment practices and employee satisfaction. For example, as explained previously, employees of many nonprofits are at the mercy of government funders (Andrus, 2000), and despite government requirements for professional staff, funding may limit salaries. Restrictions on professional practice in nonprofit organizations receiving government funds, combined with low wages, job insecurity, and intractable social problems, have made nonprofit agencies less attractive work environments for human service professionals. Focusing on the mission, therefore, may attract employees but is less effective in retaining them.

Goulet and Frank (2002) interviewed employees from government, nonprofit, and for-profit organizations to examine workers' commitment in each of these sectors. Their research supported the notion that the nonprofit sector is unique, given the organizational commitment differences between nonprofit employees and those in the other two sectors. Intrinsic motivators are important to both nonprofit and government workers, but extrinsic motivators, such as pay and benefits, remain critical. Because compensation packages in for-profit firms are far more attractive, workers in nonprofit and government organizations may be lured away from their intrinsic commitment to a “cause” (Goulet & Frank, p. 207). In a robust economy, with low levels of unemployment and frequent job shifts, employees of nonprofit and government organizations experience decreased commitment when compensation packages and other extrinsic rewards simply are not competitive with those in the private sector.

In addition to focusing on factors contributing to employees' organizational commitment, Brown and Yoshioka's (2003) research identified three primary reasons why employees leave a company: other career plans, insufficient pay and opportunities, and frustration with management. Frustration with management was expressed as the organization “is not run well” or that it “doesn’t reflect the mission,” both of which result in perceived inconsistencies between management’s rhetoric and actions (Brown & Yoshioka, p. 13).

Another challenge to maintaining nonprofit employees' commitment is organizations' shrinking level of commitment to their workforce, as evidenced in their inability to provide health care, pensions, and related benefits (Skloot, 2000). Research has shown that such benefits have a negative impact on employees' satisfaction and commitment.

One explanation for why nonprofit organizations pay lower wages than other organizations is nonprofits supposedly are nicer places to work. Indeed, some authors have proposed that nonprofit organizations *should* make an effort to promote a work environment that reflects the beliefs of the organization (e.g., being a caring organization, family friendly, culturally diverse, and fostering supportive communication; cf., Arsenault, 1998; Fineman, 2000 Lewis et al., 2001). Emanuele and Higgins (2000), however, showed that, in many instances, nonprofit organizations are not more likely than other organizations to offer pleasant working conditions. Nonprofits also often are significantly less likely than other organizations to offer health-related insurance benefits, life insurance and pension benefits, and leave time. One benefit that is provided more readily by nonprofit organizations, however, is on-site daycare (Emanuele & Higgins, 2000).

As benefits decrease, policies and restrictions tighten, and wages remain low, employ-
ees’ loyalty to nonprofit organizations fades (Smith & Lipsky, 1993) and executives are more easily recruited away by for-profit businesses. Those who leave are eager to break free from stifling work rules and inadequate rewards for performance; consequently, “the brain drain from the nonprofit sector threatens its leadership” (Skloot, 2000, p. 320).

In addition to decreasing benefits, nonprofit employees are affected by emotional labor, burnout, and stressors imposed by government regulations, as discussed previously. Several studies have explored factors of burnout and emotional labor in human service delivery work, and communication strategies that can mitigate their negative effects on employees and the organization as a whole (see Miller & Considine, this volume). Miller, Stiff, and Ellis’s (1988) research with a large psychiatric hospital on relationships among empathy, communication, and burnout in human service professionals, for instance, found that caregivers’ ability to respond through communication had a strong impact on the likelihood of burnout. Leiter (1988) proposed a predictive model of burnout in human service workers, relating burnout to social involvement with coworkers and job satisfaction, and found that burnout was greatest for workers who communicated extensively about work but had few informal supportive relationships with coworkers.

Miller, Zook, and Ellis (1989) conducted related research with employees of a retirement center in the Midwestern United States, utilizing various inventories to measure workplace burnout, work stressors and workload, role stress, and social support from supervisors, coworkers, friends, and family. They also explored the type of communication that was most effective for dealing with burnout among the various employee groups. Their findings confirmed the existence of distinct job characteristics and subcultures among administrative, nursing, housekeeping, maintenance, and food service employees, and showed that helpful communication strategies varied for the different employee groups. For example, administrative employees most valued participation in decision making, whereas nursing, housekeeping and food service employees valued social support from coworkers and supervisors.

Employee Involvement Strategies

Many authors suggest that enhancing the social support aspects of coworker communication is one key to leading human service organizations. As Leiter (1988) claimed, “The challenge for health service administration is to create work settings that utilize those aspects of work-oriented communication which enhance feelings of accomplishment, while minimizing the demands and drudgery that aggravate exhaustion” (p. 115).

Harris, Mainelli, and O’Callaghan (2002) conducted research with leaders of nonprofit organizations in the United Kingdom to determine the extent to which such organizations provide employees with “evidence of worth” (p. 399). Organizational leaders consistently stated that staff and volunteers/members were the key audiences for their communication, and that staff commitment was a prerequisite for measuring evidence of worth. Care and attention to the nonprofit workforce also is important because employees’ feelings, emotions, values, and interactions contribute to an organization’s culture and identity (Domagalski, 1999; Fineman, 2000; Rafaeli & Worline, 2001; Shuler & Davenport Sypher, 2000).

McAdoo and Pynes (1995) also discussed the measurement of employee job satisfaction, as well as effective communication strategies that foster employee involvement and identification in one nonprofit organization. As McAdoo and Pynes argued:

Nowhere is the task more difficult in determining employee satisfaction than in the human service field where people’s roles are often blurred, where the parameters
between jobs are not clearly defined, and where executives often have trouble setting clear and consistent policy across all levels of agency structure. (p. 369)

McAdoo and Pynes’s (1995) research was conducted with Places for People, Inc. (PFP), a nonprofit organization providing residential, vocational, recreational, and psychosocial services for adults with severe and persistent mental illness who reside in St. Louis, Missouri. As part of PFP’s public relations planning process, a questionnaire was administered to staff members to measure their attitudes toward and satisfaction with their jobs, benefits, and physical environment. Employees expressed dissatisfaction in several areas, including not feeling involved in the agency and not having a sense of ownership in its success. Employees felt that they did not have a “voice” in agency decisions that affected them personally and that information was not communicated effectively throughout the organization. They said that they did not have authority to do their job and were not recognized as responsible or accountable for work performed. Employees also reported that policies were not administered equitably across program lines, management was disinterested in the success of line staff, and that there was a distinct absence of mutual trust and respect among coworkers and between management and line staff.

McAdoo and Pynes (1995) further showed that effective team coordination is essential to securing employees’ involvement and identification in nonprofit organizations. In response to the workplace quality-of-life issues uncovered as part of their research with PFP, the company implemented a series of organizational development and team-building exercises, and restructured how it staffed its core services. Program components were combined such that all services were provided by three newly established, integrated teams of professionals. The agency extended its hours of operations and team members were responsible for planning their flexible work schedules and setting goals and objectives, and they were involved in developing policy. PFP also increased staff collaboration at all staff and management levels, including direct and meaningful staff interaction with the board of directors. PFP’s experience confirms the findings by Lawler and Mohrman (as cited in McAdoo & Pynes) that given the right mix of information, knowledge, power, and rewards, employees will be both more satisfied and productive.

A Feminist Perspective

Some scholars have used feminist theory to explore the struggles that nonprofit organizations face in dealing with the challenge (from governments and elsewhere) to become “more professional.” Mumby’s (1996) exploration of organizations as gendered sites of communication, control, and resistance reviewed studies of “women’s alternative organizations,” several of which were nonprofits. Mumby (p. 277) examined “the process through which women workers attempt to develop autonomous spheres of culture and identity within existing organization settings,” and focused on the development of alternative organizational forms devoted specifically to women’s issues (see also Buzzanell, Meisenbach, Remke, Sterk & Turner, this volume). Mumby concluded that the successful construction of alternative organizational forms in this context always is accomplished with one eye on the ideal and the other on pragmatic realities; as we discussed elsewhere, successful nonprofit organizing inevitably requires compromises and the accommodation of diverse and, at times, conflicting interests.

Ashcraft’s (2000) study of a feminist nonprofit organization (SAFE) devoted to the support of survivors of domestic violence illustrates well the struggle within nonprofits to develop more “professional” relationships within their workforce. Staff members and volunteers described SAFE as an holistic community that weaves together the profes-
sional and personal lives of its members in various ways, considers personal and family
needs as organizational obligations, and exhibits a “unique union of emotion and work”
(Ashcraft, p. 361). Ashcraft, however, described SAFE’s dilemma of remaining open to
emotional expression but also setting clear limits, explaining that “despite SAFE’s care-
ful efforts to blend private and public lives, mounting tension between formal hierarchy,
 quasi-egalitarianism, copious emotional expression, and fear of power abuse erupted into
the intense and painful drama of ethical relationship boundaries” (p. 378). The drama
associated with this dilemma resulted in the development of a policy that banned all
sexual relationships and urged only professional relations among coworkers; that policy
discouraged socializing, mandated that “iffy” relationships “required immediate debrief-
ing with a supervisor,” and advised employees to pursue even friendships “with extreme
caution” (Ashcraft, 2000, p. 371).

Similar to the struggles within SAFE, the study by Rodriguez of a battered women’s
shelter “demonstrated conflict between the establishment of an egalitarian and participa-
ty organizational structure and the various bureaucratic, ideological, and economic
also reviewed Maguire and Mohtar’s study of the counterdiscourses of a women’s center,
explaining that:

> Although the center experienced the usual tensions between the need for hierarchical
structure and the development of egalitarian relationships, the members also defined
themselves in terms of three discursive moves that functioned to situate them in an
oppositional relationship to the mainstream culture: a) identifying state-run agencies
as incompetent; b) re-educating members of these dominant publics regarding domes-
tic violence; and c) reinforcing their outsider status by identifying false assumptions
and stereotypes about them perpetuated by the dominant publics. (p. 282)

**Storytelling and Identification**

One way in which organizational members sustain a supportive work environment and
foster identification with the organization is through storytelling. Bradshaw (2002), in
his study of board–staff relations and governance of nonprofit organizations, suggested
that nonprofits can be understood as socially constructed entities through storytelling.
As Bradshaw explained:

> Stories serve to create both a vision of the future and a coherent sense of the past
for organizational members.... Organizations rely on stories as cultural artifacts to
give people a sense of direction, shared memories, and a definition of community. (p.
474)

Bradshaw suggested that the leadership function involves the creation of an organiza-
tion’s story and that the management function is the implementation and enactment of
that story such that it shapes organizational reality.

Research conducted by Wilensky and Hansen (2001) on the stories of executives of
nonprofit organizations supports the notion that it is important for nonprofit leaders to
motivate employees, foster a supportive environment, and establish a connection to the
organizational mission. Executives considered the organization’s people (both staff and
volunteers) to be its essential strength, and most executives believed that their power
came from their ability to motivate and align employees with the organization’s mission.
One way they accomplished these goals was by creating and sharing stories within the
organization that fostered employees’ understanding of the mission and their association with the organization.

This review has focused on communication strategies used by leaders, volunteers, and employees of nonprofit organizations to identify and respond to significant threats and challenges facing them today. We identified three communication challenges most relevant to this process: partnering, clarifying mission and identity, and fostering employee involvement and identification. Such research still is emerging, and our understanding of the communication issues facing nonprofit organizations is improving as this sector continues to grow and transform. As the nonprofit landscape continues to change, more focused study is necessary. Toward this end, in the next and last section, we identify specific issues that warrant further research.

Future Applied Communication Research on Nonprofit Organizations

As nonprofit organizations continue to face government funding cutbacks and increased competition, new management strategies are emerging that warrant further study, including the use of mergers, consolidations, and administrative and management service organizations. According to McLaughlin (1998), the bulk of innovation in nonprofit organizations today is taking place not in services but in management. Organizations that want to survive and prosper must respond to environmental change; that response might be continuing to provide the same services but in a manner that is better and more competitive than previous ways of operating, or it may involve planning for important shifts in organizational focus and structure to better ensure long-term stability. In addition to diversifying funding sources and implementing strong management practices to streamline nonprofit agencies, the thrust of “innovation will be toward greater collaboration between nonprofit organizations and others carrying out similar missions” (McLaughlin, 1998, p. xxii).

Although still a relatively new trend in management practice and scholarly research, mergers between and among nonprofit organizations are becoming more common. Consistent with the study of for-profit business mergers, however, most attention has focused on the mechanical aspects of how to make a merger happen. As explained below, areas that have received less attention in the literature are the organizational culture of nonprofit organizations, emotional characteristics of the nonprofit workforce, and the impact that these new partnerships have on organizational effectiveness.

The first area for continued and expanded research is organizational culture (see Seibold et al., this volume), which is especially important because culture within the nonprofit sector surpasses structure as the primary means of organizing, motivating, and assessing workers’ (both paid and volunteer) attitudes and behaviors. Organizational culture also is important because it commonly is cited as the reason why mergers fail—in particular, because of clashing organizational cultures and the lack of attention paid to this issue when planning and executing a merger (Bramson, 2000; DeVoge & Spreier, 1999; Feldman & Spratt, 1999; Marks & Mirvis, 1998). Although there has been ample research on organizational culture over the past 2 decades, the vast majority has focused on organizations in the private sector.

A second direction for further research is the emotional characteristics of the nonprofit human service workforce. As previously shown, care and attention to the nonprofit workforce is important because employees constitute an organization’s culture and identity (Fineman, cited in Domagalski, 1999; Rafaeli & Worline, 2001; Shuler & Devonport Sypher, 2000). Unique to nonprofit human service work, the major transformation caused by mergers presents some significant challenges related to employees’ emotions
and the need to support, engage, and assist them in moving through such a transition. Expressing care for employees’ emotions during a major change not only keeps employees content but (also) contributes to the success of the merger effort.

Third, research should look into the pragmatics of nonprofits engaging in a wider variety of strategic partnerships as a means of responding to environmental change. As nonprofit organizations explore new coping strategies and partnerships, such as reorganization, consolidation, and mergers, there is an increased need for applied communication research and practice. These trends create the need to expand researchers’ and practitioners’ knowledge of organizational change (see Seibold et al., this volume) in nonprofit settings, thus setting the stage for important applied communication research agendas within these organizations.

In addition to topics for further research, there are possibilities for new and expanded types of research. One strategy recommended by Lindenberg (2001) is to inject an underrepresented viewpoint into the research on nonprofit organizations—specifically, the voices of managers. Managers’ “often-unheard” voices can provide unique feedback to academics about how useful their frameworks turn out to be when applied within the complex world of nonprofit organizational practice. Scholars can gain new insights by taking managers’ experiences into account and refining their frameworks to make them even more useful.

The voices of managers and others within nonprofit organizations perhaps can best be heard through methods such as narrative inquiry (see Ellingson, this volume), which has proven useful in researching organizational issues, such as emotion in the workplace (e.g., Miller, Considine, & Garner, 2007), which is especially relevant in the nonprofit sector. Sandelands and Boudens (2000) recommended stories as a research method that captures people’s feelings and emotion in the workplace, claiming that “narratives can be used to discover universal human truths about feelings and forms of life” (p. 56; see also Fineman, 2000).

**Conclusion**

We began this chapter with the observation that most research on organizational communication has focused on for-profit businesses. This tendency has become problematic because of the significant growth in size and importance of the nonprofit sector. Through a review of existing research, we showed how communication is essential to meeting three challenges associated with the effectiveness of nonprofit organizations: partnering, clarifying mission and identity, and fostering employee involvement and identification. We concluded with a call for further study of the emotional aspects of communication during nonprofit organizational change, utilizing research methodologies that capture the voices and stories of nonprofit employees and leaders. Applied communication research that takes into account the unique qualities of nonprofit organizing will produce important findings that have the potential to improve quality of life for everyone.

**References**


Communication in Nonprofit Organizations


