

# Leadership in Nonprofits: Social Innovations and Blurring Boundaries

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Published online: 16 January 2019

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**Abstract** With an increasing need for social innovations that rely on cross-sector partnerships, traditional ways of managing and leading human service nonprofits are undergoing rapid changes. Utilizing a qualitative, grounded theory approach, with data collected from a sample of nonprofit leaders of human service organizations in Pennsylvania, USA ( $n = 31$ ), the research findings identify clear characteristics of leadership that support undertaking social innovations. Respondents characterized leadership orientation and responsibilities in relation to the demands of blending across sectors and roles within organizations. Findings from this study provide key insights into areas of leadership development that may lead to effective partnerships and stakeholder engagement to better support social innovations.

**Keywords** Social innovation · Leadership · Human services · Nonprofit · Cross-sector · Social change

## Introduction

Social innovation is a concept and practice that has emerged within contemporary society. Researchers have conceptualized and operationalized the term to be

comprised of actions by organizations and individuals that respond to emerging and persistent social issues in new ways (Berzin and Camarena 2018; Berzin et al. 2015; Cnaan and Vinokur-Kaplan 2015; Nandan et al. 2015; Pol and Ville 2009; Shier and Handy 2015a). The intention of social innovations is to create new opportunities and pathways for vulnerable social groups that help reduce incidences of vulnerability, social exclusion, marginalization, precarious living, and/or inequality and inequity. Shier and Handy (2015a) and Berzin et al. (2015) have characterized social innovation within typologies that capture the different ways in which human service nonprofits achieve these broader social outcomes. These include: adaptations to existing processes, the development of new programs and organizations, and efforts that seek broader systemic change within public policy structures or the social or cultural landscape of society.

This increasing interest towards social innovation in recent times can be understood in relation to changing models of governance within contemporary society (i.e. third sector or new public governance). Due to the political-economic shifts that occurred in the later part of the twentieth century, social welfare provision has often been viewed as a partnership between nonprofit, for-profit, and government sectors, than the responsibility of a single sector (Balassiano and Chandler 2010; Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff 2002; Cnaan and Vinokur-Kaplan 2015; Jenson and Saint-Martin 2003; Phillips 2012).

These societal shifts in expectations of responsibility and governance are beginning to shape the orientations, perspectives, and practices of leaders in the nonprofit sector, and particularly in traditional human service organizations, where these partnerships are emerging. We use the term traditional human service organizations (HSOs for short) to refer to those community-based social service

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nonprofit organizations whose fundamental mandate is to support the direct service needs of vulnerable social groups. These include, for example, people experiencing housing loss, food insecurity, or those that need supports for daily living, such as disabled people or individuals with mental health issues, among others.

Traditionally, the model of HSOs, which are the key institutions of social service delivery, has been defined by a vendor identity. Denoting that organizations are mandated to provide a service to a vulnerable social group in a particular way, one that is defined by practice frameworks, government contracts, and public policy. However, due to changing models of governance and societal shifts in political-economic orientation, there has been change in this dominant vendor model to models of co-construction (i.e. development) and co-production (i.e. operationalization) of social services between nonprofit and government actors (Evans and Wellstead 2014; Graham et al. 2018; Jetté and Vaillancourt 2011; Vaillancourt and Tremblay 2002). And increasingly, the for-profit sector is included in this partnership model, through the creation and implementation of mechanisms in finance, such as social financing strategies, in collective purchasing decisions and supply chain relationships (Barraket et al. 2016), and through mechanisms of procurement and performance (Carmel and Harlock 2008), employment of marginalized social groups (Chan et al. 2017), performance-based contracting (Martin 2005), social accounting methods (Mook et al. 2007), and creating social enterprises (Quarter et al. 2015).

These evolving models of cross-sectoral partnerships in human service delivery and the social innovations undertaken, do not appear in a vacuum, but are a result in part by the leadership in HSOs. To explore a leadership approach, orientated towards social innovation within HSOs, we conducted qualitative interviews with Executive Directors of 31 HSOs that provided direct service to vulnerable social groups, following a grounded theory approach. We asked the following research question: What characteristics of leadership in HSOs support undertaking social innovations?

## Theoretical Orientation Towards Leadership and Social Innovation

A dominant focus of scholarship on leadership in nonprofit organizations has been to emphasize the qualities or capabilities of the primary executive leader—whether a president, Chief Executive Officer, or an executive director. For instance, some scholars have argued that the ability of the leader to inspire and promote hope among the key stakeholders is an important aspect of successful organizational leadership (Wallis and Dollery 2005). This

perspective points to the behaviours, beliefs, and traits of the executive leader in the organization and differentiates between leadership styles—such as transformational, transactional, or strategic leadership—and their role in helping to achieve outcomes (i.e. task completion) (see, for example, Kaplan 2001; Phipps and Burbach 2010; Rowold and Rohmann 2009; Trautmann et al. 2007).

This emphasis on leadership styles has framed management discourses and general understandings of leadership within the nonprofit human services sector (Golensky 2011; Harley-McClaskey 2017; Weinbach 2003). Within these discussions, there are clearly identifiable leaders and followers. And, individual leaders become wholly credited with providing the direction for an organization with less emphasis on other aspects, such as interactions within the organization and between actors across different organizations, which may be instrumental to achieve outcomes. This leader-centred perspective on the relationship between leadership and outcomes is also evident in studies of innovative nonprofits. For example, in Cnaan and Vinokur-Kaplan's (2015) edited collection of socially innovative nonprofits there is significant attention and credit given to the leader's role in initiating a social innovation.

This rather patrimonial perspective on leadership has culminated into a belief that innovation within and by organizations is a result of an entrepreneurial leadership orientation or approach (Beekman et al. 2012; Ruvio et al. 2010; Weerawardena and Sullivan-Mort 2006). In earlier scholarship, Rose-Ackerman (1996) defines nonprofit entrepreneurs as individuals that have strong ideological beliefs about how to address an issue or provide services. It might be expected that individuals leading organizations have such strong beliefs, but are these characteristics of leadership in nonprofit organizations what make them innovative? Or rather, are the leaders who are more flexible and responsive to the changing sociopolitical-economic context more innovative?

This question—a critique of the limitations of the entrepreneurial leadership orientation—is developed in response to the now contested assumption that nonprofit organizations are “usually dependent on the quality of their executive leadership, and therefore, more subject to idiosyncratic rather than structural factors” (Kramer 1987, p. 244; cited in Wallis and Dollery 2005). Indeed, while leaders are not immune to structural factors outside the organization, such as political-economic policy shifts or changes in public perceptions and expectations, they are also influenced by factors internal to the organization, such as employees in the organization, decision-making structures, and the organization of work.

Jaskyte and Dressler (2005) investigated the relationship between organizational culture and innovation within HSOs. They measured multiple aspects of organizational

culture to determine which aspect effects the development of innovative programs and initiatives. They find the internal environment, or the cultural consensus, was negatively related to innovation within HSOs, and thus, they also critique existing theory about leadership and innovation, by highlighting the need to better understand the “context” and “human factor” necessary for innovation to flourish.

Alternatively, Goa et al. (2009) demonstrate that acceptance of organizational change among employees is related to successful manipulations of organizational interpersonal relationships. They suggest this is possible by education and open communication among employees, participation and involvement of stakeholders in decision-making and planning, and creating a learning culture by offering professional development to enhance employee skills. By changing the relationships and processes of interaction within the organization, employee perceptions about innovation and subsequent change within the organization alters.

In both instances, a leadership orientation towards innovation within HSOs is catalysed through engagement with organizational personnel (or other key stakeholder groups) and subsequently is not an act by a single person (or “leader”) within an organization as might be suggested from an entrepreneurial orientation. This finding is further aligned with Shier and Handy’s (2016a) research on characteristics of a social innovation-orientated organizational culture. Their findings suggest that interpersonal dynamics among key organizational personnel facilitated the development and undertaking of social innovations by HSOs. The executive leader was seen as facilitating the development of a culture of social innovation through various efforts of staff engagement, contrary to the assumptions of entrepreneurial or ideological leadership.

While not explicitly stated, these studies demonstrate an application of the theories of symbolic and micro-interactionism within the organizational context. The interactionist theorist’s “primary concerns are the relationships among individuals and how people create meanings and social relations”, according to Hallett et al. (2010). Based on this theoretical framework, the results from Goa et al. (2009), for example, can be interpreted as conditions of interaction among members of an organization that were essential to support innovation and change. A similar conclusion can be drawn from Shier and Handy’s (2016a) study on the internal conditions in an organization that support a socially innovative organizational culture, which are theoretically aligned with reciprocal leadership approaches (such as transformational or servant leadership), between leaders and followers to achieve outcomes.

A micro-interactionist perspective is important when considering leadership within organizations and

specifically in relation to social innovation. For example, Collins (2004) reminds us that: “Intense ritual experiences create new symbolic objects and generates energies that fuel major social changes. Interactional rituals are a mechanism of change, and as long as there is potential for ritual mobilization to exist, there is the possibility for sudden and abrupt periods of change” (Collins 2004, p. 43). Collins’ (2004) theory of interaction is grounded in a postmodern tradition of understanding change, a point that has direct applicability to understanding innovations and leadership within organizations.

This theoretical (and empirical literature) suggests that a micro-interactionist approach may be useful in theorizing the relationship between social innovation and leadership within organizations. It suggests that uptake of social innovations can be better understood by focusing on the inter- and intra-personal dynamics within and across organizations. Indeed, then leadership is an investigation of the influence of leadership on the rituals of stagnation and disruption that manifest within and across organizational settings.

Thus, the micro-interaction orientation is one theoretical frame by which we may understand how innovation takes place within and across HSOs. However, due to the lack of scholarship and empirical evidence supporting the linking of this theoretical framework to social innovation and leadership, our study remains exploratory in nature. Micro-interaction is a guiding framework that suggests we cast the net wide to understanding leadership in relation to social innovations, and has influenced the focus of our questions to respondents. However, given the grounded theory approach, we were not beholden to any particular model to understand leadership. We remained flexible to our data and examined it also for evidence of a more leader-focused approach (such as entrepreneurial leadership orientations) to understanding HSO leadership in the context of social innovation.

## Methods

This study utilized a qualitative study design. After conducting a quantitative survey study of Executive Directors ( $n = 165$ ) of HSOs in Pennsylvania, USA, about their experiences with social innovations, a subset of those respondents ( $n = 50$ ), where successful social innovations had taken place, were recruited to participate in a follow-up qualitative interview to discuss their experiences with social innovation. Respondents were contacted by email and informed about this second stage of study, and 31 agreed. Ethics certification was received from the University of Pennsylvania’s Institutional Ethics Review Board.

Respondents represented HSOs that provided housing supports, addictions treatment, education, settlement services, hospice and palliative care, counselling, literacy, disability services, and food security, with services aimed at youth, women, families, and other vulnerable social groups. While the focus of their direct practice and programming is diverse among the study sample, many characteristics of participating organizations suggest certain elements of homogeneity. For instance, each organization had many employees (i.e. more than 10), they had a long history working within their local contexts (i.e. more than 25 years on average), and received the majority of their funding from government to offer their programs and services.

Qualitative data were collected from one-to-one interviews, following standard interviewing procedures (Fetterman 2008; Holstein and Gubrium 1995). Interviews were conducted over the telephone or in person, depending on the distance of the organization from the research team, and lasted 30–60 min in duration. The interview utilized a semi-structured interview guide. Respondents were asked open-ended questions relating to their organization's socially innovative efforts along with their perspectives on the factors within and outside their organizations that contributed to their success in undertaking social innovations. They were also asked about their own leadership style and qualities that they thought contributed to whether or not their organization undertook social innovations. Examples of questions are: In what ways do partnerships shape the socially innovative efforts of your organization? How does your leadership style play into your organization's ability to undertake social innovations? What structures or processes exist within your organization to support social innovation? Are there aspects of the way people interact within the organization that are supportive of social innovation? Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Aligned with the grounded theory approach of this qualitative study, data were analysed using procedures of analytic induction and constant comparison (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Goetz and Lecompte 1984) to identify emergent themes and patterns within the text of the transcripts (Charmaz 2000; Fetterman 2008). Specifically, two coders read the transcripts separately, identifying common themes and differences in responses across each of the interview transcripts. They met together to discuss the emergent codes from the analysis, with specific emphasis on highlighting similarities and differences related to the codes on leadership characteristics and dynamics that support organizations in undertaking social innovations.

The data were then translated into general categories to offer some conceptual depth to the various components of a leadership approach oriented towards social innovation. Categories were refined until all instances of contradiction

and difference were explained, which increased the dependability and consistency of the findings. Theoretical saturation was achieved with these 31 interviews following this process of analysis. No new themes were emerging after analysing 10 interviews.

## Findings

Two general thematic categories emerged from this analysis, contributing to our understanding of a leadership approach oriented towards social innovation within HSOs, from the perspective of individuals leading organizations that were identified as social innovators. These include:

- 1) Partnership orientation and partner engagement;
- 2) Internal stakeholder engagement.

For the first thematic category, data were further divided in two subthemes associated with a positive perspective towards:

- i) Partnerships and actively pursuing partnerships—a leadership orientation that includes a willingness to engage in partnerships, a willingness to rely on others' expertise, and a desire to provide more holistic services; and
- ii) Maintaining partnerships—actively looking to find partners, recognizing one's role and position in a partnership, and sharing power, control and information.

For the second thematic category—internal stakeholder engagement—four subthemes arose from the data about leadership efforts to support social innovation, which include:

- i) Creating organizational structures and processes for staff engagement and input;
- ii) Being available and supportive;
- iii) Open to ideas and shared decision-making; and
- iv) Keeping and hiring the right people.

Each category and their subthemes are described in detail below, using representative quotes from participants to elaborate on the categories and themes.

## Thematic Category 1: Partnership Orientation and Partner Engagement

Previous research has found that partnerships can be supportive of the social innovation initiatives of nonprofit organizations (Hodges and Hardiman 2006; Le Ber and Branzei 2010; Nichols 2006; Sandfort 1999; Seitanidi 2008; Seitanidi and Crane 2009; Shier and Handy 2015b, 2016b). As a result, then it is not surprising to find that a key component of a leadership orientation towards social innovation by HSO leaders includes a positive perspective towards partnerships. Respondents offer greater

specificity on this dynamic as it relates to their leadership orientation. Respondents identified that a key aspect of their leadership orientation for social innovation is to *actively pursue partnerships*. The active pursuit of partnerships suggested a general willingness of leaders to engage in partnerships.

For example, one respondent, with more than two decades of experience working in a HSO, described how the changing political-economic context, and evolving role of their organization in addressing emerging social issues, reshaped their orientation towards partnerships:

But this notion of using a different model and a different lens to look at this and not kind of have 25 years of historical baggage—I don't know that we got along 10 years ago. All I know is right now the way the cards are played, it makes a hell of a lot of sense for us to work together. Part of our role is just to be a facilitator in the discussion and come in without any preconceived notions.

In the same vein, other respondents described the positive orientation towards partnerships as a key component of leadership and the successes of the social innovations pursued:

Because we're open to it. I think that has a lot to do with it. And the staff gets that we can't do it all by ourselves. We don't have to be the big man on campus. We don't mind sharing with the (respondent names several partnering organizations)... We don't mind sharing the glory with all of them, because it's important that we do this all together. It took this neighborhood a long time to go down—fifty or sixty years. It's going to take a long time to come back, and you need to bring everybody to the table to make it happen.

As the respondents demonstrate, leadership efforts that support social innovation are characterized in part by having a positive orientation towards engagement in partnerships. Indeed, all respondents from this study indicated in some capacity the need and willingness to expand their service direction beyond the confines of their organization, and to work with other organizations, across sectors, to improve their overall impact.

Furthermore, respondents identified the need to be willing to *rely on the expertise of others* to achieve socially innovative outcomes. For example, one respondent described the intersecting vulnerabilities experienced by their service user group but recognized their inability as an organization to effectively respond with their own programming. Working in partnerships helps to achieve those broader social needs of their client group:

I don't know that there are any documents that we've signed that make us partners—but we don't do parent classes and nutrition classes, things like that. We don't do that on our own. Instead, we look for outside agencies who already do that and provide the services. And then, we work with them to make sure that our clients are getting those services, but we don't duplicate things somebody else is already doing.

Similarly, a respondent, the executive leader of a shelter service seeking to improve outcomes for people experiencing housing loss, describes their leadership experiences by highlighting the need to seek out expertise and supports from other organizations to address the root causes of housing loss:

Basically, three major causes of homelessness we see are unemployment, lack of education, and pregnancy. So we try to address all of those issues, and we knew we had to find partners in the community that can help us to address these issues, people that were specialized in—that was their area of expertise—to help our clients. And again, everything is all free to us, all free to our clients. We help each other out. People who need to go to homeless shelter, they send to us. So referrals go back and forth. It's something that again, without finding out how to help people get out of a situation, we provided no service just having a shelter. We sought partnerships where we thought there were needs... Whatever the need is, we would find a partner to help us address the problem.

Relatedly, many respondents also confirmed that a social innovation-orientated leadership approach included a *desire to provide holistic services*. Within this is a recognition that service user groups cannot be solely understood by a single presenting problem—such as experiencing housing loss or serious mental illness. The confounding social, political, and economic effects that contribute to adverse experiences of the clients require more than providing a single service. Another respondent also pointed out the need to partner to address an unmet need in their local community, related to the increasing rates of domestic violence:

We've been wanting to do some work around domestic violence. I've been thinking about how to address domestic violence in the communities we serve, but knowing that partnerships are stronger than us trying to do something on our own. And so I reached out to (respondent names six different non-profit and for-profit organizations) ... So we collaborated to create a program and to write a grant. So yeah, some of those partnerships have led to thinking outside the norm of what current interventions are

available, to say, “This isn’t working for the community so what can we do that might work”.

As a result, an orientation towards partnerships with other organizations was a solution chosen by leaders who wanted to resolve problems in holistic and innovative ways, leaving behind single-issue resolutions.

A second subtheme in this category, and representing a defining feature of a leadership orientation, was *maintaining partnerships*. This category included several factors. The first was *working with the right personnel and organizations*. Respondents acknowledged the need to identify partners most likely to support their social innovations, with the intention of engaging them in the innovation. For example, one respondent described the shared leadership that happens when engaged in social innovations through partnerships, and the need to maintain those partnerships with the right personnel:

There are maybe five or six of us who make these things happen, and we’re accustomed to working as a team...We’re willing to provide the buses, and we’re willing to fund; we’re willing to do the pieces, all it takes to get it done. There’s a great deal that goes into any one of these projects, whether it’s that musical project or whether it’s any other collaboration. All the detail that somebody has to pick up on, and when there’s not somebody there to do it, we have to think about how to reallocate responsibilities, and keep it going.

While this respondent described the need to maintain awareness of the partnership actors as a component of maintenance, their response is also related to the second subtheme of *recognizing one’s role and position in a partnership*, which similarly appears in other responses. Recognizing their role in the partnership, and emphasizing shared leadership roles, is an important aspect of the leadership orientation given by respondents. Unlike previously mentioned perspectives on entrepreneurial leadership, the shared leadership approach in solving persistent social issues is important in forging social innovations. The responsibility does not rest on a single individual, rather it is a group of people involved in the partnership who collectively are recognized as “the leader”. One respondent captures this by stating:

And so there was a lot of “you” and “we” and really it had to be an “us.” For me, one of the biggest challenges is moving “we” and “them” to an “us”... and somebody finally said, “You know what? We are just one big group now.” And I think they’re getting there, but it’s those underlying kind of emotional attachments that people have that make things very difficult.

A final theme related to leader orientations about maintaining partnerships is *perspectives about sharing power, control and information*. Within a social innovation-orientated leadership approach, shared power, control and information are critical resources, as many respondents explained. Indeed, respondents highlighted that they cannot function ‘within silos’ to address emergent and persistent social needs. As a result, this challenged their own leadership perspectives to develop an orientation towards sharing these resources. For example, one respondent described:

Yeah, that’s been a major challenge for this collaborative, because one organization is the (Respondent names largest organization in a service sector). They have 60 employees, are a large partner agency, probably get double our annual revenue. And we’re not tiny—we’re a medium-sized organization—so it was thinking about who is going to run meetings... And we had to be upfront and honest about it. (Respondent names facilitator) is the adult education director for this organization, and we’ve had tough times, we’ve had times when we haven’t been happy with each other, but we work through it by talking to each other and not pretending that the problem is not there. The other thing we’ve both learned is that when you feel confident in your leadership, you are comfortable giving it away. You don’t have to be the one running the meeting, you don’t have to be the one people are always listening to.

Other respondents similarly describe sharing information across organizations, seeking each other out for advice, and sharing financial resources to meet intended goals, as critical elements of leadership that is oriented to social innovations.

## Thematic Category 2: Internal Stakeholder Engagement

While the previous analytical category focused on external engagement of the leaders to support social innovation, respondents also described engagement with stakeholders internal to the organization. This internal engagement is reported as a key characteristic of their leadership approach to support the social innovations in their organizations. Respondents described, in several different ways, engaging multiple organizational actors in their leadership roles within the organization when planning and executing social innovations.

### i) Creating internal organizational structures and processes for staff engagement and input

The first, and most commonly reported by our respondents, included specific targeted approaches to engagement by shaping *internal organizational structures and processes*. Respondents identified specific structures and processes, which related to team dynamics and organizational hierarchies, the creation of committees and formal groups, and providing opportunities for professional development and training for employees as being instrumental in supporting their organization's social innovations.

Shaping team dynamics and addressing organizational hierarchies so that it supports all staff members to come up with new ideas is described by one respondent:

I try to encourage people to think freely and collaborate, to come up with whatever ideas they might have and to make sure that we clearly communicate those to other people. There are forums to have conversation, we create opportunities for meeting.

This respondent later described some challenges experienced with this leadership approach related to budgeting. As organizations in this study relied on state-level funding to support their regular programming efforts, social innovations, typically involving the development and implementation of new projects, are not funded. Thus, respondents had to develop new procedures and processes to provide their staff members with opportunities to have release time from their position or rely on student interns to support the organization's daily operations.

Specific processes of engagement include creating times for dialogue and bringing together members across the organization. One respondent describes this:

We have different kinds of departments: so we have a fundraising department and we have a program department. I sit with them, and we do brainstorming. We have weekly updates where we talk about what's going on. I'll toss ideas out onto the table. Sometimes we'll pull somebody in from another department just to get a kind of cross reference: "Can we do this? Should we do this? Does this make sense?" We talk a lot as a big group, and that's when the best ideas get generated.

Another respondent describes the need to challenge existing organizational hierarchies. They recognize the need to create more fluid organizational structures, shake up existing structures and hierarchies and involve actors throughout the entire organization in social innovation, as this quote illustrates:

We have a management team, and innovation is part of the ongoing discussion. But I will be changing the organizational structure to break things up a bit, because it's relatively Balkanized a bit. Breaking it up into more client-specific areas and making it a more client-focused structure, instead of this weird 'I build my empire and you build yours', which is what happened—I think that's a way to shake it up a bit. Shake people up.

In each case, respondents described ways in which they facilitated engagement among their staff group to support socially innovative efforts. The leader–follower dynamic is not as clearly delineated in many of these cases. However, some respondents did describe having to take a more direct approach, forcing individuals to work together, and reshaping the hierarchies and silos within the organization. For instance, one respondent describes:

I came in, and I started to make the organization horizontal and team based. The breaking of habits that this is my job and this is my team. People would say I am the director of this department or that one, and that they shouldn't have anything to do with resource development, for example. They would say, you go get me money. I said to them that those other administrative units don't know what you want money for. I hate to tell you, you're going to have to tell him. Breaking it down and putting people within teams.

These processes of leadership, of breaking up existing hierarchies and creating spaces for collaborative engagement, was exemplified by other respondents who described the creation of groups and committees within and across organizations who are tasked to think innovatively and solve persistent social problems. A typical example is this one:

It's a group of 30 people, and all senior leadership is represented, all supervisors, and we also have front-line employees because they're the ones who do the real work and they know what makes sense and doesn't make sense.

Other respondents discussed the involvement of all levels of employees to be engaged in socially innovative efforts, and not just the leaders of the organization, and in principle, sharing leadership around innovation within and across organizations. This example well illustrates the point:

We believe that every member of our staff should be out in the community talking to people—attending meetings, going to conferences. It's not just me that's the face of (Respondent names organization). It's

everybody that works here. Yes, I could strike up a conversation with a CEO and come to an effective collaboration, but more often it is people in the organization talking to people in other organizations, and they get people involved. It finds its way through the entire organization, and then you have something that people want to collaborate on. The problem with a top-down collaboration where I say what we're doing is that the people actually doing the work aren't interested. So it's not really a collaboration. In what we do, you can't have it that way. We encourage everybody to get themselves involved in their communities and field, find ways to put us and ourselves out there.

The points raised in the quote above were very common among interview participants. No leaders interviewed in this project saw themselves as the sole actors engaged in efforts towards social innovation. Instead, an often repeated theme in the responses was that of shared leadership.

Leaders saw their roles as creating opportunities and expectations for people to be engaged with thinking and working creatively for social innovations. For example, some respondents described when orientations are led for new staff hires, that leaders share these expectations and provide examples of how staff in the organization are engaged in socially innovative efforts—which typically go beyond the pre-defined work roles found in most HSOs. Other respondents went much further and provided specific training and professional development opportunities to support leadership development across units and positions within an organization that were geared to innovation, including educational programs and conference attendance. The response below illustrates a theme captured in many of the responses:

We send people to all kinds of educational programs with assistance. That's important to innovation—workers who didn't have a regular four-year degree now have that degree and are getting their master's. They think differently, they read differently, and they start to innovate instead of punching in and punching out. The educational component is really important to getting this going. There's not one thing you do that creates a motivated and innovative organization. It's much more complicated. It's a Gestalt. The whole is infinitely more complicated than the parts, but you have to know, at least in a formulaic way if it's a multivariable analysis, you have to know which ones you put in the analysis. And over time you figure out the priorities and the weights that each thing adds to it.

## ii) Being available and supportive and iii) Being open to ideas and practicing shared decision-making

The second and third themes within this category of internal stakeholder engagement referred to the ways in which respondents perceived interactions with their staff. Leaders reported being *available and supportive* as well as *being open to ideas and practicing shared decision making*. Both themes define a leadership orientation that is inclusive of others within the organization. For being available and supportive, respondents utilized open-door policies and created opportunities to spend time together—such as at lunch breaks or activities outside of work. For example, one respondent described relationships forming as they worked on social innovations:

We spent time together on that process. In spending time together, which included significant hours in that planning, we also ate some meals together. We just spent time together, and it wasn't just business. After a while, you're having a meal with somebody. You don't just talk business, you actually find out a bit more about that person. And they, about you. So this isn't a thing that happened in one year. I'd say we had a sense of where we wanted to go, and we worked at this over a period of probably two to three years before we saw any real fruit. But then, it's an ongoing thing where we have the tools to continuously improve.

*The act of being available and supportive* within the organization was defined by respondents as creating opportunities to listen and get to know individuals that work in the organization. They highlighted the need to create safe spaces for people to be able to disagree and challenge people in higher positions within the organization and to take risks. One respondent described their leadership approach as follows:

There are two key factors. I think one of them is creating the right culture and the other one—from a leadership perspective—is having humility as a leader, allowing the people who work here to succeed and fail. You often learn more from your failures than you do through your successes. Our team, our staff, have the ability and autonomy to think and contribute the diverse talents they bring to the table... I give them the ability to fail, and then help them to learn from those experiences.

The third theme in this general thematic category was *being open to ideas and practicing shared decision-making*. Respondents routinely articulated that they did not have all the answers. They suggested that they had an overarching commitment to collaboration within the

organization, involving multiple stakeholders in the decision-making process. For example, one respondent stated:

Sure. I have relationships with each of the staff of course. Anything at all that comes up, I just talk to the staff about to see what their ideas are on it and then we decide. Probably 85% of the time, we decide together what the changes may be, if we were going to make any. I don't just make a bunch of changes and tell them do it or anything like that. It's definitely collaborative.

This shared decision-making process was exemplified by many respondents by creating opportunities that involve interaction between stakeholders at all levels. These relational aspects of leadership are identified as important precursors to the success of the organization undertaking social innovations:

And I think it also comes back to I'm not the only guy in the place who's allowed to think. We're 24/7 operations, so people have got to be free to come up with innovative ideas on how to solve some of the problems with drug addicts, homeless people, pipes that burst, medical emergencies, on and on. And I just can't be the only one who's allowed to problem-solve things.

#### iv) Keeping and hiring the right people

The final subtheme related to internal stakeholder engagement, and identified by respondents as a defining feature of their leadership orientated to social innovation, was a perspective on *keeping and hiring the right people*. In this case, the 'right people' were referred to as those individuals who would be able to take on leadership roles within initiatives of social innovation that the organization was pursuing or develop their own initiatives and engage in partnerships with external stakeholders to mobilize social innovations.

Besides hiring the right people, firing the wrong people was also expressed. Respondents recognized that they were often limited by the personnel in their organization, and for them to be successful in their undertaking of social innovations, they had to have the 'right' employees. One respondent described:

One of the things that I concluded is that I don't think an agency should be driven by the executive director. An overriding philosophy is that everybody at the agency ought to have a seat at the table. But that also says then you better improve the quality of the folks that you have so that when they're at the table, it's an intelligent discussion. I'm a big fan of talent. Talent

begets success, which attracts more talent, and you start to build.

Almost all the respondents agreed there was a need to put effort into hiring practices or providing opportunity for staff to get engaged in their socially innovative efforts, to think innovatively and creatively about the pressing problems that their client groups were experiencing. They did not want to immediately fire employees who were unwilling or resisted new ways of doing things, but for many respondents the ineptitude of their staff to engage effectively in new socially innovative processes or programming became an issue dealt with through performance management processes and strategies. For example, one respondent described:

I've long believed in hiring for attitude. You can teach them the skill. If you hire the skill and the attitude is lousy, it is a bad day. I've hired some brilliant people on paper who afterwards you just go "really?" I would much rather hire the talent, but it has to be committed to the cause. I've probably turned over 20% of the work force here. There are some people who just didn't get that mission, and I'm a big fan of coach-counsel-cut. We'll coach it, if you don't get it, we'll counsel you. And then if you don't get it, we're going to say goodbye.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This study followed a grounded theory approach. It was informed by a broader theoretical perspective on social theory, inclusive of structural (i.e. evolving political-economic contexts and models of governance) and micro-interactionist theories pertaining to leadership. Respondents identified a leadership orientation or approach to practice that was characterized and defined by political-economic shifts. The changing political-economic landscape has resulted in adapted models of governance and service delivery, wherein HSOs find themselves engaging in efforts to respond to persistent or emerging social needs within their local communities through social innovation. These changes, both in societal context and in the expectation of HSOs to meet the needs of society, has reshaped leadership orientations within HSOs—as exemplified by respondents in this study—to include a shared or more blurred leadership approach.

As a result, the findings have theoretical implications. For example, the data when analysed reveal that leadership is not concretely defined by a single individual, especially in the context of social innovation. Our respondents tell us again and again, and in multiple ways, that successful

leadership includes pursuing and maintaining partnerships and working to create structures and processes within organizations to mobilize staff at all levels. As a result, in some respects these findings do not support traditional entrepreneurial or ideologically focused leadership approaches where action and decision-making occur in a hierarchical fashion, and where there is a clear delineation between who is a leader and who is a follower. Nevertheless, the leader's role, as described by respondents, remains relatively hierarchical. But instead of emphasizing the leader as the initiator of an idea or outcome, respondents have emphasized their own role in creating opportunities for social innovation. They act in ways that support shared leadership and facilitate action within and across organizations. This model of leadership fits well into a micro-interactionist theoretical orientation, and similarly aligned to reciprocal leadership models that highlight the processes of engagement between leaders and followers to achieve outcomes. Here we see leadership as creating conditions of interaction among members of an organization (and/or across organizations) for positive outcomes. In applying Collins' (2004) notion of "ritual mobilization" (p.43), the findings from this study support an understanding of leadership for social innovation in contemporary HSOs as the "ritual mobilization" of individuals within and across organizations that support "sudden and abrupt periods of change" (p.43). These findings fall into line with previous research conducted by Shier and Handy (2016a) in Alberta, Canada, where they found that an organizational environment, in which the leader acted in ways that facilitated engagement among organizational personnel, was supportive of the socially innovative efforts undertaken by the HSO.

This research also has implications for the advancement of scientific inquiry into the processes and conditions related to social innovation. While leaders interviewed in this study do have a unique perspective on their role and function within and across organizations to support social innovation, the leadership is strongly articulated as being shared. It is difficult to assess, and it seems not to matter to the leaders themselves either, as to who took the lead in any particular socially innovative effort. However, based on these research results, to pursue the questions of how social innovations emerge and thrive in these organizational contexts, further research is needed about the relationship dynamics and processes within organizations among employees and with their partner organizations. For example, early investigations into the relationship dynamics done by Le Ber and Branzei (2010) and Shier and Handy (2016b) highlight a dynamic of leadership within partnerships for social innovation that are characterized by processes of risk and value framing within organizations and between partnership actors. These would be useful

areas of further investigation in relation to the leadership orientation of those engaged in social innovations. Further research also needs to empirically verify the type and nature of interactions suggested from the qualitative data presented in this study. This could be achieved through some exploratory quantitative research. The findings here have the potential to contribute to some initial scale or measurement development of a social innovation-orientated leadership approach, which could be tested for validity and reliability. Further research could then also investigate the experiences across organizations that are more or less socially innovative.

The findings also have practical implications. For instance, the findings provide insight into a leadership orientation from the perspective of executive leaders in HSOs that might be replicated in other organizations or reflected upon by leaders as they consider how to support the development and implementation of socially innovative efforts within their organizations and/or through partnerships. The thematic analysis identifies key ways in which executive leaders are engaging within and beyond their organization to develop and implement social innovations. The findings also tangibly identify the processes, procedures, and structures that can support the "ritual mobilization" (Collins 2004, p.43) of people to support the socially innovative efforts of an organization. These include, for example, attention to external stakeholders through partnerships, and developing positive processes, structures, and approaches to engagement within organizations. The findings provide an initial conceptual framework (see Fig. 1), albeit exploratory, of the facilitative role of executive leaders in shaping the orientation of HSOs towards social innovation.

Of importance to note is that this study is reporting on the experiences of HSOs that are well-established, and most receive stable and substantial government contract funding. The findings may not be transferable to organizational settings, for example, in start-ups, or in the service sectors of culture, environment, or education. Although, as start-ups grow and mature, even nonprofits in these areas will likely undertake social innovations that flourish with similar micro-interactions. A priori, we cannot expect such similarities, and this would require further investigation, to fully understand the approach to leadership in different settings.

Furthermore, while the findings from this study highlight a social innovation-orientated leadership approach in organizations that identify being socially innovative, they potentially suggest that there is a duality in terms of organizational and leadership characteristics (such as level of engagement and collaboration and the way decisions are made) between organizations that undertake social innovation and those that do not. Further research is needed in



**Fig. 1** Role of leaders in HSOs undertaking social innovation

this area to assess the presence of these leadership tactics in HSOs that do not undertake social innovations or do so to a lesser extent.

Additionally, this study was exploratory, and while it provides important insights about the changing dynamics of leadership and management within HSOs, in particular the blurring model of leadership, further research is necessary with other samples of HSOs or other nonprofits to support the transferability of the study findings. Nevertheless, the results from this study act as a conceptual starting point for further qualitative and quantitative investigations, and provide theoretical and practical insights about the nature of leadership within HSOs for the purposes of creating social innovation.

#### Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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