When Nonprofits Flounder: Practical Strategies for Cultivating Board Engagement and Courageous Followership

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Abstract

Grassroots nonprofits play a critical role in addressing community needs, often emerging from the passion and commitment of a founder who identified gaps in local services. As these organizations mature and the founder's involvement declines, a sustainable leadership model with engaged staff and board members becomes essential to continue their mission. Despite increased attention on nonprofit sustainability, the practical integration of followership theory into board engagement remains underexplored. Drawing from our dual perspectives as nonprofit scholars and practitioners, this synthesis demonstrates that nonprofit organizations can take practical steps to encourage courageous followership behaviors among leaders, board members, and staff. By fostering an environment that celebrates the courage to assume responsibility, serve, challenge, participate in transformation, and take moral action (Chaleff, 2009), nonprofits benefit from increased mission focus and long-term sustainability. Through both academic inquiry and applied professional experience, this study bridges theory and practice to produce fifteen practical recommendations in board member selection, board training, board structure, and director and board president behaviors. These actionable strategies provide evidence-based guidance for leaders and boards seeking to cultivate courageous followership practices that advance organizational purpose and community impact.

Keywords: courageous followership, nonprofit governance, board engagement, founder's syndrome, organizational sustainability

Grassroots nonprofits play a critical role in addressing community needs and often emerge from the passion and commitment of a founder who identified gaps in local services (Toepler, 2003). However, many nonprofits reach a critical juncture when their founders reduce involvement or depart entirely. Without engaged board members and staff ready to assume leadership responsibilities, these organizations face operational disruption, mission drift, or closure (Froelich et al., 2011).

Signs of organizational distress, or "floundering," appear when boards endorse founder's decisions instead of providing strategic oversight, staff wait for direction rather than taking initiative, stakeholder engagement declines, and strategic plans stall in implementation. These symptoms often stem from founder's syndrome, a condition in which a founder retains excessive control over strategy and decisions, inhibiting board development, staff growth, and organizational adaptability (James, 2019). Without planning and shared responsibility, even the most enthusiastic founding vision loses momentum. Sustainable leadership protects the mission and ensures continuity once the founder steps back.

Despite increased attention on nonprofit sustainability, practical applications of followership theory to board engagement remain underexplored. Followership theory offers a valuable framework by shifting focus from leadership alone to active follower participation in organizational success (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). To address this gap, two nonprofit founders synthesized Chaleff's (2009) courageous followership model, current nonprofit leadership research, and applied professional experience to confront the root causes of founder's syndrome. By examining research documenting improved followership behaviors, specific, actionable strategies emerged that boards and executive directors can implement to sustain their mission and meet community needs.

Nonprofit Founder Stories

The Legacy Arts and the One Love Global Wellness Foundation (2025) are presented as examples that demonstrate how nonprofit founders recognize and respond to unmet needs within their communities (Toepler, 2003). Analyzing the distinct impacts and challenges these organizations face underscores the vital role of engaged followers. Followership theory can contribute to addressing sustainability challenges, strengthening organizational capacity, and enhancing organizational success (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014).

Legacy Arts

Five entrepreneurs who own businesses in downtown Lima, Ohio, founded Legacy Arts to promote regional music, creative arts, and entrepreneurship. The nonprofit supports entrepreneurs and creative arts professionals and highlights the region's creative economy through an annual festival, scholarships, and music events. As founding members have stepped back, a lack of shared ownership and initiative among newer board members has limited momentum. Encouraging followers to assume responsibility and participate in transformation could reenergize engagement, ensuring the organization continues to fulfill its mission.

One Love Global Wellness Foundation

The One Love Global Wellness Foundation (2025) was established in response to the 2011 housing and economic crisis. The foundation has served over 20,000 individuals through food distribution and Blessing Bags. The organization's holistic approach connects participants with essential resources, including housing, employment, mental health support, substance abuse assistance, and healthcare referrals. The organization's leadership structure reflects its grassroots origins, with board members primarily composed of family members. As the founder reduces her involvement, the foundation's continued success will require board members and staff to embody courageous followership so that the One Love Global Wellness Foundation can continue to meet the community's needs.

Problem Statement

In 2025, the United States had approximately 1.9 million registered nonprofit organizations (Internal Revenue Service, 2025). These organizations represent a rapidly expanding sector of the economy that spans healthcare, education, the arts, and social services, forming a vital part of the nation's community-support infrastructure. Nonprofits play a vital role in confronting society's most urgent challenges, from delivering essential services to driving long-term systems change (Smith Arrillaga et al., 2025).

Larger nonprofits typically have greater resources, paid staff, and broader service capacities. In contrast, grassroots nonprofits operate through community-centered initiatives, rely heavily on volunteers, and adapt quickly to local conditions (Toepler, 2003). While this adaptability fosters strong community connections, grassroots organizations frequently face obstacles related to long-term sustainability and founder transitions (Froelich et al., 2011). As nonprofits mature and founders reduce their ongoing investment, developing a sustainable leadership model with engaged staff and board members becomes critical to sustaining the organization's mission and impact.

Methodology

This study employed a systematic literature review approach to identify research-based strategies for fostering courageous followership in nonprofit organizations. The process unfolded in two distinct phases: an initial search and a framework-guided analysis. During the first phase, the researchers conducted targeted searches across academic databases to locate peer-reviewed studies examining followership in nonprofit contexts. The search strategy incorporated multiple keyword combinations to capture research involving nonprofit founders, leadership, and followership, with all sources published in English through January 2025, primarily within the past five years. During the

second phase, the researchers employed Chaleff's (2009) courageous followership model as the analytical framework. They systematically examined the selected literature to identify behaviors that represent each dimension of courageous followership, as well as organizational factors, structures, or practices that foster those behaviors, thereby informing practical recommendations for nonprofit boards and leaders.

Founder's Syndrome

Grassroots nonprofits may lack a foundation that supports longevity due to founder's syndrome. Founder's syndrome refers to a set of challenges that arise when a nonprofit's operations and identity center heavily on its founder, who struggles to adapt to necessary organizational changes, often because of emotional attachment, a desire for control, and a reluctance to share power (James, 2019). Founder's syndrome typically results in handpicking loyal board members, making most decisions alone, and resisting innovation or new strategies (Boustani & Boustani, 2017). Furthermore, organizations experiencing founder's syndrome face difficulties adapting to new community needs, reluctance among other leaders or board members to speak up, and challenges in building sustainable leadership models (Geib & Boenigk, 2022).

Founder's syndrome differs from standard leadership transitions because the founder's personal energy, networks, vision, and emotional investment are deeply embedded in the organization's structure, culture, and identity (Boustani & Boustani, 2017). Succession became more difficult because the organization's success had historically relied heavily on the founder's unique contributions (James, 2019). Ultimately, overcoming founder's syndrome requires a deliberate shift from personality-driven control to shared governance and accountability. Counteracting these issues requires strengthening the organization's leadership system.

Nonprofit Leadership

A systems-oriented approach to leadership provides a sustainable framework for grassroots nonprofits. By emphasizing shared influence, collaborative governance, accountability, and mutual responsibility among all organizational members, leaders could strengthen both leadership and followership development. This approach supports smoother leadership transitions, sustained mission alignment, and improved adaptability in changing environments (Geib & Boenigk, 2022; Linville & Rennaker, 2022; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014).

Organizational Leadership

Organizational leadership is the process of influence that includes leaders, followers, and the organizational context, extending far beyond the actions of any single leader (Kellerman, 2008). Leadership and followership roles interchange in response to

organizational needs, allowing individuals to lead and follow as circumstances evolve (Eva et al., 2021). Engaged followers contribute constructively to organizational direction through feedback, active participation, and co-construction of goals and strategies, making them essential to innovation and success (Linville & Rennaker, 2022; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Leaders of nonprofits are followers too, since they must follow the strategic leadership of the board of directors, and they benefit from embracing their dual roles (Donaldson, 2025).

Followership

Followership examines how followers impact the leadership process through their actions, influence, and shared purpose with leaders (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Followers influence leader emergence, shape organizational direction, and move fluidly between leading and following roles while aligning around shared purpose (Chaleff, 2009; Eva et al., 2021; Jiang et al., 2021). Engaged followers intentionally co-construct leadership processes to advance common purposes and strengthen organizational outcomes (Linville & Rennaker, 2022). Effective followers actively partner with leaders, support organizational goals, and have the courage to either challenge or support leaders as circumstances require (Chaleff, 2009; Riggio, 2020).

Nonprofit Governance

A board serves as the highest governing authority in nonprofit organizations, with primary responsibilities including setting strategic direction, ensuring financial stability, upholding the organization's mission and values, and selecting and replacing the leader (Donaldson, 2025). Nonprofits operate under high public expectations and firm mission commitments, making governance essential for sound resource stewardship, transparent accountability, and the effective advancement of community causes (Blevins et al., 2020; Bowen, 2012). Strong leadership and accountability sustain public trust, guide strategy, and influence both organizational outcomes and long-term success (Bowen, 2012). Boards function most effectively when engaging in fiduciary, strategic, and generative modes of governance that anchor values, decision making, and mission continuity (Chait et al., 2005).

Courageous Followership Framework

Chaleff (2009) developed a model of courageous followership that defines the intentional, initiative-driven partnership between leaders and followers, in which followers share responsibility for organizational success. Courageous followers remain accountable for their actions while willingly granting leaders authority, yet they never surrender their autonomy or values. Chaleff's framework identified five dimensions of courageous followership: the courage to assume responsibility, the courage to serve, the

courage to challenge, the courage to participate in transformation, and the courage to take moral action. The following sections examine research-based strategies that foster these behaviors within nonprofit boards. Figure 1 summarizes the research-based strategies.

Figure 1: Summary of Research Synthesis Linked to Courageous Followership Behaviors

Courageous Followership Behavior	Research	Practical Recommendation Theme
Courage to assume responsibility	Nonprofits benefit from having board members with strong individual, relational, and collective identity (Megheirkouni et al., 2025)	**Board Member Selection**
	Members with a reputation as an effective leader also tend to be viewed as an effective follower; followership supports more functional team interactions (Baird & Benson, 2022)	**Board Member Selection**
Courage to serve	Leaders' emotion-related behaviors congruent with display norms generate engagement and loyalty (Silard, 2018, p. 304)	**Director & Board Chair Behaviors**
	Affective commitment increases among board members with a longer tenure on the board (Stephens et al., 2004, p. 497)	**Board Structure**
	Affective commitment increases among board members who have accepted board leadership or officer positions (Stephens et al., 2004, p. 497)	**Board Structure**
	A positive relationship between increased gender diversity and increased effective board governance practices (Buse et al., 2016)	**Board Member Selection**

Courageous Followership Behavior	Research	Practical Recommendation Theme
	Policies and inclusion practices that support diversity improve performance when diversity exists (Buse et al., 2016)	**Board Structure**
	Board-led nomination committees support board functioning (Minichilli et al., 2009)	**Board Member Selection**
Courage to challenge	Critical debate among board members positively impacts board task performance (Minichilli et al., 2009).	**Board Training**
	Board commitment activities, such as preparing for meetings and asking critical questions, increase member commitment (Minichilli et al., 2009, p. 68).	**Board Training**
	Regular executive sessions in board meetings encourage open & transparent communication (Bowen, 2012).	**Board Structure**
Courage to participate in transformation	Board members & directors need clarity around and training in all three modalities encompassed in leadership, including governance (Donaldson, 2025)	**Board Training**
	A lack of internal infrastructure or transition planning increases vulnerability to disruption; shared leadership significantly relates to nonprofit leadership continuity (Geib & Boenigk, 2022; James, 2019).	**Board Structure**

Courageous Followership Behavior	Research	Practical Recommendation Theme
Courage to take moral action	A founder who retains tight control diminishes the board's ability to lead independently (James, 2019)	Director & Board Chair Behaviors
	Both the nonprofit executive director and board president must set an example to followers to behave as stewards (Brinckerhoff, 2004)	Director & Board Chair Behaviors
	Workshops & scenario-based exercises that engage in role-playing improve ethical decision-making (Gentile, 2010)	Board Training

Practical Recommendation Themes:

☐ Board Member Selection   ☐ Board Training

☐ Board Structure   ☐ Director & Pres. Behaviors

Strategies That Foster the Courage to Assume Responsibility

Courageous followers assume responsibility for themselves and their organizations through personal accountability, self-assessment, feedback seeking, and professional growth (Chaleff, 2009). Nonprofits strengthen when board members demonstrate a robust follower identity at the individual, relational, and collective levels (Megheirkouni et al., 2025). Individual identity reflects confidence in one's value; relational identity emphasizes commitment and high-quality relationships; and collective identity prioritizes group membership. When followers embody all three aspects of identity, trust between leaders and board members increases, producing more effective governance and stronger organizational outcomes.

Individuals recognized as effective leaders also demonstrate effective followership (Baird & Benson, 2022). The presence of effective followership enhances team effectiveness by promoting collaboration, reducing conflict, and supporting shared leadership. In nonprofit and organizational settings, these qualities create more

productive, cohesive, and resilient teams. When board members take ownership of their roles and lead with courage, they build the trust and collaboration needed to keep the mission strong and the organization moving forward.

Strategies That Foster the Courage to Serve

Courageous followers willingly engage in the challenging work of serving both leaders and the organization (Chaleff, 2009). Followers with the courage to serve dedicate themselves to the leader's and organization's mission through active, competent, and loyal participation. They evaluate ideas, present solution options, and provide mission-focused feedback (Chaleff, 2009).

Board culture significantly influences members' willingness to serve. A sense of belonging and affective commitment grows among board members with longer tenure and leadership experience, strengthening organizational attachment and stability (Stephens et al., 2004). Nonprofit leaders whose emotion-related behaviors align with display norms foster greater follower engagement and loyalty (Silard, 2018). Research has also demonstrated that gender diversity on boards correlates with more effective governance practices (Buse et al., 2016). Board-led nomination processes that select and retain individuals best suited to the organization's needs contribute to overall board effectiveness (Minichilli et al., 2009).

Strategies That Foster the Courage to Challenge

Courageous followers speak up when behaviors or policies conflict with their sense of what is right (Chaleff, 2009). They challenge questionable actions, seek clarity and accountability, and address unethical conduct directly to safeguard institutional integrity. Courageous followers speak truth to power by respectfully challenging leaders or organizational norms that conflict with ethical standards or mission priorities, offering honest feedback, and questioning decisions when necessary.

Minichilli et al. (2009) emphasized that constructive boardroom debate encourages members to challenge assumptions, explore alternative solutions, and leverage the group's diverse expertise. Boards that foster open discussion and critical debate among members demonstrate stronger task performance. Boardroom cultures that promote preparation, inquiry, observation, and substantive dialogue advance decision quality and service effectiveness. In addition, regular executive sessions create opportunities for candid discussion among board members, allowing sensitive issues to be addressed without external pressure. These sessions strengthen trust and transparency, enabling boards to identify and resolve complex challenges while reinforcing effective governance practices (Bowen, 2012).

Strategies That Foster the Courage to Participate in Transformation

Courageous followers advocate for organizational transformation and actively participate in change processes (Chaleff, 2009). When behaviors threaten the common purpose, they champion the need for change and pursue both personal and organizational growth. Through their commitment, courageous followers help transform attitudes and systems to better align with the mission. Board members and directors who view themselves as both followers and leaders demonstrate greater efficacy and integrity in navigating organizational complexity because they recognize that effective governance depends equally on adaptive followership and visionary leadership (Donaldson, 2025). Understanding governance as a dynamic partnership, they facilitate progress, challenge norms, and contribute innovatively to organizational development. To remain effective, these individuals require clarity and targeted training in leadership, governance, and management so that their skills align with the diverse demands of nonprofit oversight and strategic planning. In succession management, shared leadership among the director, board, and human resources staff promotes leadership continuity (Geib & Boenigk, 2022). Conversely, organizations that lack formal structures or transition planning face higher risks of disruption during leadership transitions (James, 2019).

Strategies That Foster the Courage to Take Moral Action

Courageous followers act in accordance with their core values, even under pressure to do otherwise (Chaleff, 2009). They refuse directives that violate moral standards or threaten the mission, and they may choose to leave the organization to maintain personal integrity if their values are continually compromised (Chaleff, 2009, 2015). Boards that rely solely on a founder's network risk undermining accountability and restricting strategic innovation among members, limiting the organization's ability to respond to future challenges (James, 2019).

Founder behaviors critically shape the board's ability to demonstrate moral courage. Both the nonprofit executive director and the board president set a clear example by acting as responsible stewards who prioritize community well-being above personal interests or internal politics (Brinckerhoff, 2004). Organizations strengthen stewardship values by facilitating workshops and scenario-based exercises that engage members in role-playing ethical dilemmas, alternating between leadership and followership roles. Through these experiences, board members and executives build ethical decision-making capacity, promote shared accountability, and lead adaptively in complex situations (Gentile, 2010).

Practical Recommendations

Recommendations were developed through a systematic review of scholarly research on nonprofit leadership and followership, application of the core concepts of Chaleff's (2009) courageous followership model, and inclusion of the authors' practical experience as nonprofit founders. By integrating theoretical frameworks with real-world insights, four central themes emerged that inform meaningful board engagement and organizational sustainability: board member selection, board training, board structure, and director and board chair behaviors. Each recommendation is grounded in both empirical research and practitioner experience, collectively offering a clear pathway for nonprofit organizations to address challenges in sustainable leadership models and ensure long-term mission impact.

Board Member Selection

The research synthesis identified strategies for board member selection. Selecting nonprofit board members is a critical process that shapes organizational effectiveness, diversity, and long-term success. An intentional, evidence-based recruitment strategy ensures the board includes individuals whose skills, identities, and values align with the organization's mission and leadership needs.

- Nonprofit boards should recruit members with strong follower identities and proven followership effectiveness (Baird & Benson, 2022; Megheirkouni et al., 2025).
- Boards benefit from members known as both effective leaders and effective followers (Baird & Benson, 2022) and from increased gender diversity (Buse et al., 2016).
- Nomination committees should objectively select and retain members based on organizational needs and qualifications rather than personal relationships or founder influence, ensuring diverse expertise and effective governance (James, 2019; Minichilli et al., 2009).

Board Training

Comprehensive training programs equip board members with the knowledge, skills, and confidence needed to fulfill their governance, legal, and ethical responsibilities effectively. Such programs strengthen decision-making, risk management, and strategic planning capabilities, enabling boards to operate with greater accountability and long-term impact.

- Boards benefit from training in followership, leadership, and governance practices (Donaldson, 2025).

- They should cultivate a board culture that emphasizes preparation and encourages critical questioning (Minichilli et al., 2009).
- Boards should encourage constructive debate among members (Minichilli et al., 2009).
- Facilitating workshops and discussions around scenario-based ethical case studies further enhances members' moral reasoning and ethical decision making (Gentile, 2010).

Board Structure

Board structure defines how authority, accountability, and collaboration are organized within a nonprofit's governance framework. A well-designed structure strengthens organizational capacity by ensuring role clarity, promoting effective communication, and aligning leadership functions with the nonprofit's mission and strategic priorities (Bowen, 2012; Donaldson, 2025).

- Boards should invest in board member retention strategies to increase board member tenure (Stephens et al., 2004).
- By providing leadership opportunities for board members, such as office and committee leadership positions, boards encourage courageous followership (Stephens et al., 2004).
- Boards should establish internal infrastructure or use transition planning to define the process of replacing the board director (James, 2019).
- Regular board executive sessions also prompt critical and transparent communication within the board (Bowen, 2012).
- Boards should implement policies that promote diversity across ethnicity, gender, and background to strengthen governance effectiveness (Buse et al., 2016). Without such policies, boards risk underutilizing the potential of diverse perspectives.

Director and Board President Behaviors

The director and board president should exemplify stewardship, accountability, and community-first leadership, serving as role models who prioritize organizational integrity and collective success (Brinckerhoff, 2004).

- They foster courageous followership by demonstrating emotional intelligence and authenticity that align with organizational display norms (Silard, 2018).
- The director and board president set the standard for stewardship through transparent decision-making and ethical leadership (Brinckerhoff, 2004).

- Founders must release excessive control and empower the board to fulfill oversight and strategic planning responsibilities, ensuring balanced governance and sustainable leadership continuity (James, 2019).

Conclusion

When nonprofits falter due to founder transitions, board disengagement, or organizational drift, the underlying issue often stems from an overreliance on the founder or leader rather than on engaged followership (Froelich et al., 2011; James, 2019). Communities depend on nonprofits to address essential needs that neither government nor markets adequately meet (Smith Arrillaga et al., 2025). Implementing courageous followership principles equips nonprofit leaders, board members, and staff to sustain mission integrity, enhance accountability, and promote collaboration across all levels of stewardship. Ultimately, effective nonprofit governance demands a proactive commitment to shared leadership and mutual accountability.

The 15 strategies developed through scholarly research and practitioner experience provide a practical framework for cultivating the courage to assume responsibility, serve, challenge, transform, and act morally, ensuring that nonprofits continue to thrive beyond their founders and advance their missions for generations. It is equally important that courageous followership extends beyond boards and staff to include volunteers, beneficiaries, and other key stakeholders, thereby strengthening organizational capacity and engaging the broader community in shared stewardship. All types of nonprofits benefit from embracing these recommendations, not just those facing founder's syndrome. Ultimately, courageous followership establishes a foundation for enduring impact. A nonprofit's future rests on the courage of those who step up to lead and follow with integrity, ensuring the mission endures.

Limitations and Future Research

The authors selected relevant research papers after the initial search, but their subjective selection may have filtered out potentially relevant studies. The databases used might have also excluded relevant research due to the chosen journal subscriptions. Future research should examine how courageous followership interacts with emerging challenges, including technological developments, funding sources, and regulatory environments. Empirical studies investigating outcomes when courageous followership is intentionally cultivated will further refine understanding.

About the Authors

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