

**VIEWS FROM THE OUTSIDE:
HOW THE NONPROFIT COMMUNITY
CHARACTERIZES HIGH PERFORMANCE
NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS**

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What high performance means for nonprofit organizations and how to define high performance is still a discussed issue. Building on Paul Light's work and the Standards of Excellence Codes of Conduct developed by the Maryland Association of Nonprofit Organizations, this research presents how the community, respectively the nonprofit organizations themselves, views high performance and define the characteristics of high performing organizations. The paper also analysis how the community's perception of high performance compares with the Standards of Excellence Codes of Conduct.

Keywords: nonprofit organizations, performance, management, standards of excellence

The nonprofit organization world has become increasingly complex. Competition among nonprofit organizations as well as the competition between them and for-profit organizations has increased. This has been accompanied by a decrease in available resources as well as an increased demand from donors and funders for the professional, efficient provision of goods and services by nonprofits.

The quest for high performance in nonprofit organizations has become the research question of the 21st century. Terms such as "capacity," "sustainability," and "standards" are familiar to the practitioner and the researcher alike. After unsatisfactorily pursuing the business definition of high performance, both professions are beginning to research and analyze the unique attributes of nonprofit organizations that are associated with high performance.

**The meanings of high performance and
performance measurements**

In his book "Pathways to Nonprofit Excellence," Paul C. Light (2002) suggests that nonprofits may have qualities of other organizations, but they must

*Transylvanian Review
of Administrative Sciences,
18 E/2006, pp. 96-107*

concentrate on their “nonprofit-like” characteristics to be sustainable. Instead of making efficiency, accountability and responsiveness the primary goals, nonprofits must also measure their work by public service, representation of stakeholders, collaboration and common good. These qualities are part of the definition of social impact that authors Letts, Ryan and Grossman (1999) say is suffering because of nonprofit organizations’ lack of organizational capacity.

Letts, et al. (1999) describe three types of organizational capacity. Nonprofits have generally mastered “program delivery capacity” and “program expansion capacity.” “Adaptive capacity,” which enables organizations to respond to their changing environments while continuing to deliver value to their clients, funders and staff, is underdeveloped in most nonprofits. Light’s (2002) interviews with NPO leaders reveal the growing tension the industry feels between performance and accountability. The pressure to produce “more with less” is driving nonprofits to reevaluate and revise their mission statements to include performance measures.

The pursuit of “mission” has not changed. Light (2002) finds that nonprofit leaders still view it as essential to the work and results of the organization. The components of a mission statement range from resources and financial management to impact, effectiveness and public trust. Effective management is the second most mentioned attribute of high-performing nonprofit organizations according to Light’s survey of nonprofit leaders. Although some leaders characterize management as being “entrepreneurial” and “innovative” and others see it as “principled” and “collaborative,” each style has a connection to the mission of the organization. Light divides other important characteristics into the broad categories of external relationships, internal structure, leadership and internal management systems.

“Quality processes” that involve the improvement of service delivery and responsiveness are one component of Letts’ et. al. (1999) assessment of organizational capacity. Nonprofits must also invest in customer-oriented product development that allows internal synergism and creativity. Benchmarking goals and outcomes fine tune the work and mission of the organization. Using human resource strategies to boost motivation and participation in the organizational mission also increases capacity. The authors encourage organizations to harness the power of national office resources, board member passion and expertise and venture capital investment strategies.

An analysis of various well established organizations shows that each of them defines high performance differently. For example, the American Red Cross operates on a business model that embodies nonprofit values (Ireland, 1999). The model focuses on internal processes that prioritize customer-oriented products. It recognizes its responsibility to the needs of individuals and communities and executes the mission through the “critical attributes” of employees. Teamwork, communication and performance measures and responses continuously develop the work of the organization. Executive experience and leadership is essential in high-performing nonprofits where CEO’s must be willing to share authority, use consensus-building strategies, create meaningful measures of performance, possess a high level of communication skills and work with limited resources (Taliento & Silverman, 2005).

Another established organization, the Christian Children’s Fund, uses a system for performance measurement that proceeds from its mission (Henderson, Chase & Woodson, 2002). Indicators and measurements reflect the organization’s program impact on its main stakeholders (children) through carefully monitored, broadly-defined outcomes. The outcomes are assessed by each CCF community and resources are adjusted accordingly, keeping the mission at the forefront of all planning. The natural progression from planning leads to a focused agenda, quality leadership recruitment, purposed fundraising, mission fulfillment and responsiveness to the community (Stubbs, 1998).

For some organizations, as the literature review shows, the road to increased efficiency means a good mission statement, or a good market analysis, for others a good program evaluation. And yet, there is no clear understanding of what comprises an effective or high performance nonprofit

organization. Paul Light (2002) argues that there are at least four, not mutually exclusive, images of an effective nonprofit organization: high standards of excellence, careful measures of success, economical nonprofits, and transparency to the public.

The Maryland Association's Standards of Excellence

The lack of a clear definition of high performance does not stop nonprofit organizations from trying to construct a “clear pathway to higher nonprofit performance” (Light, 2002, 31). One of them is the Maryland Association of Nonprofit Organizations. Through its Standards of Excellence program, this association is trying to help nonprofit organizations to become high performers. An impact analysis of the Standards of Excellence program showed that “the Standards code provides a consensus model for how the most well-managed and responsibly governed nonprofit organizations should operate” (Maryland Association of Nonprofit Organizations, Standards of Excellence Impact Analysis, 2002). The standards are “designed to pull individual organizations towards a more hopeful future in which nonprofit like organizations focus on public good through mission centered work and programmatic effectiveness” (Light, 2002, 34).

Research questions

According to the Maryland Standards of Excellence, there are eight main areas of nonprofit operations, divided in fifty-five specific standards, addressing everything from board governance and human resources to financial management, fund-raising and information technology. According to Paul Light “these standards describe a nonprofit practically perfect in every way” (Light, 2002, 34). Therefore, any organization that goes through Maryland Standards of Excellence certification program acquires the tools to become a high performer organization.

The Pittsburgh nonprofit sector is one of the best developed sectors in Pennsylvania that plays a very important role in the region's economy. The Pennsylvania Association of Nonprofit Organizations (PANO) is in the process of adoption the Maryland Standards of Excellence. In Pittsburgh, however, such a program has not yet been implemented at the time when this research took place (2004). Therefore, no organization from Pittsburgh underwent the Standards of Excellence training and was familiar with the fifty-five specific standards that describe a “perfect nonprofit organization.”

Building the findings high performance means many things and that the codes of conduct developed through the Standards of Excellence program of the Maryland Association of Nonprofit Organizations illustrate what governance, management, and organizational practices best characterize outstanding performers in the nonprofit sector, this study asked two questions:

What does high performance mean for the Pittsburgh nonprofit organizations? How does this definition compare with the Maryland Standards of Excellence?

Research methodology

a. Sample design

Done in 2004, this study used surveys for the identification of high performing nonprofit organizations in the area and of their characteristics. Using a stratified random sampling design, a survey was sent to 408 organizations, respectively to 387 nonprofit organizations and 21 top foundations.

The purpose of the stratified random sampling design used to identify the 408 surveyed organizations guaranteed that this sample followed the distribution by sub-sector (NTEE classification) and size of the Pittsburgh nonprofit sector. The sample was drawn using the Forbes Fund database, after eliminating institutional organizations such as hospitals, colleges and universities and churches, professional, trade and union associations and all organizations that were not 501(c)(3). The Forbes Fund database contains information about 1,591 organizations (see Figure 1).

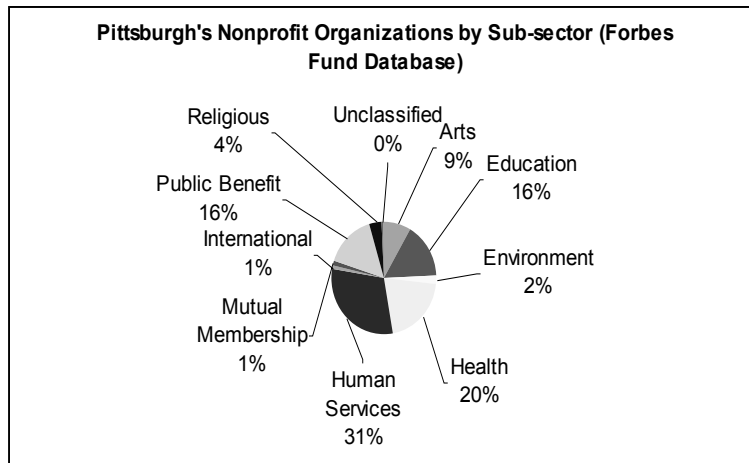


Figure 1. Pittsburgh' Nonprofit Sector by NTEE Classification

The final size of the sample was 408 organizations, representing 25 percent of the total number of the Forbes Fund database's organizations, includes organizations from each sub-sector and size category. Since the eight sub-sectors are not represented equally in the population, to allow for robust findings from each sub-sector, the sampling design assigned a minimum of 5 to 10 cases per sub-sector.

b. Survey development

The survey asked organizations to nominate up to three high performing nonprofit organizations and to indicate through a checklist of Standards of Excellence items what they thought made each of these organizations high performers. In identifying the characteristics of best performing nonprofits, the "Opinion Leader's Survey", developed by the Princeton Survey Research Associates and as presented in Paul Light's book, *Pathways to Nonprofit Excellence*, was adapted to use in the development of the survey instrument.

Findings

From the total of 408 surveys sent out, 387 to nonprofit organizations and to 21 top foundations, 32 surveys, mostly from small nonprofits, were returned due to incorrect address. Therefore, only 355 surveys were actually received by local nonprofits organizations.

After one mailing and one follow-up, 79 surveys were received, providing a return rate of 22.25 percent. The distribution of the returned surveys is as follows: 89 percent from nonprofit organizations, 10 percent from foundations and 1 percent other (apartment building). It is worth noting that the return rate from the foundations was high: 38 percent (8 responses out of the 21 surveys sent to foundations). This high return rate illustrates the foundations' interest in the nonprofit sector.

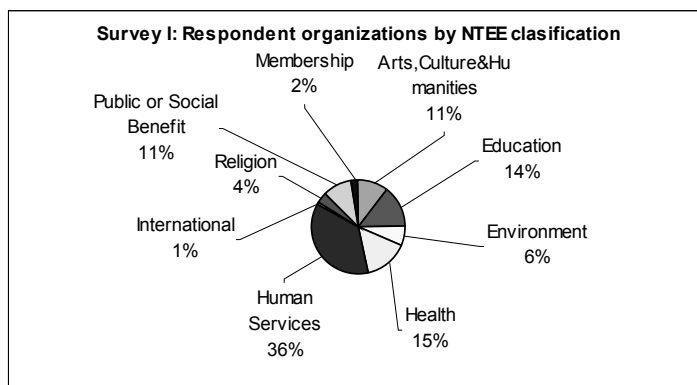


Figure 2. Survey I: Distribution of Respondent Organizations

As the figure illustrates, the distribution of those who responded to Survey I follows the distribution of the Pittsburgh nonprofit sector (see Figure 2). Given that human service organizations constitute the majority of the nonprofit sector, followed by health and education organizations, the distribution of the respondent organizations is the same. The majority of responses came from human service organizations, followed by health and education. This same distribution can also be observed in the list of nominated high performance organizations.

In order to understand the dynamic of the nonprofit sector and to test their knowledge of other nonprofit organizations, the surveyed organizations were asked about their work with other organizations. The findings indicate that majority of the organizations collaborate with 3 to 5 organizations, but their knowledge of other organizations is very high. Seventy percent of organizations know over 26 other organizations, respectively 40 percent know over 50 organizations and 30 percent know over 26 organizations. This finding shows that there are strong ties within the Pittsburgh nonprofit sector. Organizations know, observe and analyze each other.

To identify the nonprofit sub-sector of each of the nominated organizations, the database of Pittsburgh based nonprofit organizations, provided by the Forbes Fund, as well as the researchers' knowledge of the Pittsburgh nonprofit sector was employed. The following table (Table 1) illustrates the distribution by sub-sector of the 160 nominated high performance organizations.

Table 1. The Distribution of Nominated High Performance Organizations		
NONPROFIT SUBSECTOR	Number Nominated Organizations	Percent of Nominated Organizations
Arts	19	12%
Economic Development	1	1%
Education	18	11%
Environmental	5	3%
Faith-based	2	1%
Government Program	2	1%
Health	23	14%
Human Service	52	33%
International	2	1%
Membership	3	2%
Not a nonprofit	1	1%
Public Benefit	12	8%
Religion	3	2%
School District	1	1%
Unknown	16	10%
Total	160	

Through this survey, 160 high performance organizations were identified by area nonprofit organizations and foundations. Twenty eight of the identified organizations were nominated more than once (see Table 2 below).

Table 2. Nominations of High Performance Organizations	
Number of Nominations	Number of Organizations
Organization was nominated five times	3
Organization was nominated four times	5
Organization was nominated three times	4
Organization was nominated twice	16
Organization was nominated once	133

Views from the Outside:

How the Nonprofit Community Characterizes High Performance Organizations

According to the Maryland Standards of Excellence, there are eight main areas of nonprofit operations. The surveyed organizations were asked to check all the reasons they consider their nominated organization(s) to be high performer(s). Their perceptions are presented for each main category of nonprofit operations as developed by the Standards of Excellence.

Mission and Program

According to the Standards of Excellence, a well-defined mission is an important characteristic of high performing organizations and an organization's programs should work towards achieving that mission.

According to the data, the Pittsburgh nonprofit sector concurs with this view. The identified high performers are characterized by a distinct mission, a willingness to work hard towards meeting their mission, with the provision of quality programs and services as a result. The following table (Table 3) illustrates this finding.

Table 3. Mission and Program Related Characteristics of High Performing Organizations	
Reasons Stated for the Nominated Organizations to be Considered Outstanding Performers	Percent Nominated Organizations
Organization's mission and effectiveness in meeting its mission	92%
Delivers quality services	87%
Quality of programs/services/products provided by the organization	86%
Has a clearly stated and publicly recognized mission statement	78%
Uses sound business practices to govern and run the organization	72%
Management (everyday operation) of the organization	71%
Involvement of the community in the programs and services offered by the organization	70%
Programs and services have remained stable over the past five years	62%
Length of time organization has been in existence	56%
Has experienced significant growth for their programs and services over the past five years	51%
Organization's ability to continually grow	50%

The data also illustrates the emphasis that the nonprofit community puts on the organization’s activities. According to the nonprofit community, high performers need to be involved in the community and to provide diversified and qualitative services that remain relatively stable. The literature suggests that management and the type of managerial decisions used are important characteristics of high performing organizations (Light, 2002, 80). This study’s findings concur with the literature.

It is worth noting that with only a 50 percent response rate on the issue of an organizational growth, that an organization’s ability to grow is not considered a main characteristic of high performing organizations. Light (2002, 81) found that high performing nonprofit organizations are pressured to grow. Yet, this research found that while organizational growth is important, the Pittsburgh nonprofit community considers that for high performance, organizational mission and the management of an organization are more important than is growth.

Governing Body

This study demonstrates once more the importance of leadership in high performance organizations. The nonprofit community sees leadership as being a key trait of a high performance organization (see Table 4.) The Executive Director is seen as playing a main and, possibly even greater, role than the Board of Directors in helping an organization to become a high performer. When it comes to risk taking, the findings of this study do not concur entirely with Light’s findings. Light found that opinion leaders consider it “very important that high performing organizations have a leader who encourages risk taking” (Light, 2002, 93-94). This study suggests that the Pittsburgh nonprofit community does not consider risk taking a main trait of high performing organizations, in spite of the fact that it sees the encouragement of new ideas as being very important.

Table 4. Governance Related Characteristics of High Performing Organizations	
Reasons Stated for the Nominated Organizations to be Considered Outstanding Performers	Percent Nominated Organizations
Leadership (ability to vision and motivate others towards the vision) of the organization	83%
The executive director is a participatory leader and manager most of the time	74%
Governance (Board of Directors) of the organization	56%
Executive Director encourages risk taking	50%
Executive Director rarely encourages new ideas and programs/services	8%

Conflict of Interest

According to the Maryland Standards of Excellence, a nonprofit organization’s board and staff should act in the best interest of the organization. The organization should have policies in place to prevent any actual, potential or perceived conflicts of interest. Given that this survey was sent to the nonprofit community, the researchers assumed that the nonprofit community might be unknowledgeable about conflict of interest policies in the nominated high performance organizations. Therefore, it asked questions that might indicate the potential for conflicting situations, respectively about the understanding of staff roles and work processes.

Table 5. Conflict of Interest Related Characteristics of High Performing Organizations	
Reasons Stated for the Nominated Organizations to be Considered Outstanding Performers	Percent Nominated Organizations
Staff are knowledgeable and contribute to the delivery of quality services	83%
Staff collaborate and work well with peers in the community	79%
The executive director has a clear understanding of his/her role	76%
Has work processes that allow for delivery of services and programs efficiently and effectively	68%
Gives its staff authority to make routine decisions on their own	56%
Staff has flexibility in regards to their work	54%

As seen in Table 5, it was found that the nonprofit community perceives that, in high performance organizations, staff members understand their roles and that there are processes in place that allow for the efficient and effective delivery of services and programs. However, the findings also indicate that the nonprofit community sees high performance organizations as limiting staff's decision making power, even when it comes to routine decisions.

Human Resources

When it comes to staff members, both the nonprofit community, as well as the Executive Directors of high performance organizations, view staff retention and stability as very important for the efficient and effective functioning of a nonprofit organization, even more important than diversity (see Table 6).

Table 6. Human Resource Related Characteristics of High Performing Organizations	
Reasons Stated for the Nominated Organizations to be Considered Outstanding Performers	Percent Nominated Organizations
There is consistency in staff	71%
Staff has flexibility in regard to their work	54%
Organization's ability to retain staff	51%
Staff are demographically diverse staff-young and old, male and female, black, Latino and white staff	50%
Staff must check in with management before making a decision	9%
Staff are always changing	6%

Financial and Legal

The numbers in Table 7 demonstrate that the resources available to a nonprofit and its budget size are not the main characteristics of high performing organizations. These findings could also suggest that an abundance of financial resources do not enable a nonprofit organization to become a high performer.

Table 7. Financial Characteristics of High Performing Organizations	
Reasons Stated for the Nominated Organizations to be Considered Outstanding Performers	Percent Nominated Organizations
Resources available to the organization	52%
Financial stability of the organization	50%
Has a “rainy day” or reserve fund to meet emergencies	28%
Budget size of the organization	27%

In Light’s (2002, 49) research, only 30 percent of the opinion leaders said that the high performing nonprofit organizations that they knew have a rainy-day or reserve fund. It is interesting that in spite of the many differences between Light’s research and this one, the findings are not just similar, but very close in numbers. This research finds that only 28 percent of the nonprofit community sees high performing organizations as being prepared for a possible financial emergency.

Openness

It is the opinion of the nonprofit community that collaboration, not competition, with other nonprofits is a strong determinant of high performance. In fact, collaboration with other organizations is ranked extremely high among all the characteristics of high performers. Communication and the ability to work with others also rank high among these characteristics (see Table 8).

Table 8. Openness Related Characteristics of High Performing Organizations	
Reasons Stated for the Nominated Organizations to be Considered Outstanding Performers	Percent Nominated Organizations
Collaborates with other organizations	85%
The executive director networks well with other Executive Directors, funders, community leaders and the public	79%
The executive director communicates with others easily	74%
Ability of the organization to work with other non-profits on joint projects	69%
Community or public’s perception of the organization	64%
Competes with other organizations	29%

Fundraising

Seventy-five percent of the organizations agree that the Executive Directors of high performing nonprofits know how to mobilize resources. It is evident that the fundraising capacity of the organization is one of the main characteristics of a high performer; specifically, the Executive Director plays a major role in fundraising for the organization. It also appears important for a high performing organization to be able to raise money from private foundations, rather than from governmental sources. (See Table 9.)

Table 9. Fundraising Related Characteristics of High Performing Organizations

Reasons Stated for the Nominated Organizations to be Considered Outstanding Performers	Percent Nominated Organizations
The executive director knows how to mobilize resources	75%
Has been successful in raising private foundation funds	66%
The executive director Is a good fundraiser and builder of resources	61%
Has a diversified funding base	56%
Organization’s ability to fundraise	51%
Has been successful in seeking government funding	44%
Relies on only a few funding sources	21%
Does not engage in seeking government funding	10%
Rarely engages in fundraising to produce unrestricted revenue	7%

Public Affairs and Public Policy

Informing the public and being active in the community are important traits of high performing nonprofit organizations. According to Light (2002), going to workshops, seminars and talking with colleagues is part of the job description for high performing organizations because these activities encourage the exchange of ideas and promote learning. With the findings shown below (Table 10), the Pittsburgh nonprofit community hints towards the willingness of its high performers to learn and participate in community.

Table 10. Public Affairs Related Characteristics of High Performing Organizations

Reasons Stated for the Nominated Organizations to be Considered Outstanding Performers	Percent Nominated Organizations
Uses various means to inform the public about its mission and services	71%
Staff <u>regularly</u> attends sector or community conferences, seminars and meetings	69%

Summary of findings and conclusions

Survey responses of Pittsburgh’s nonprofit leaders not only identify high performing nonprofit organizations in the area and their characteristics, they also strengthen the existing Maryland Standards of Excellence. The results also closely follow the existing literature.

Defining and carrying out the mission of the organization continues to be the most significant indicator of high performance. It is important to over three quarters of the leaders to have a clearly stated and publicly-recognized mission statement. The “quality process” of product development that flows from the mission captures the second and third highest ranked characteristics of quality and quality delivery of programs and services. Henderson, Chase and Woodson (2002) note the impact of the mission on programs and stakeholders that lead an organization to more effectively produce agenda, leadership, fundraising and responsiveness—attributes that are highly-ranked in this study.

Effective management is also a highly ranked characteristic in terms of the leader’s vision for the organization and the leader’s ability to direct staff in the delivery of quality programs and services. Over seventy percent of respondents feel that high performance leadership involves good management

and sound business practices, understanding and participation, networking and communication and the ability to mobilize resources. These attributes encompass efficiency and effectiveness as well as Paul Light's (2002) suggested values of public service, representation of stakeholders, collaboration and common good. Leaders that are involved with the daily internal and external operations of their organizations are the new breed of high performers. The board of directors does not have an overwhelming impact upon the high performance organizations in Pittsburgh, which may indicate that board members' passions and expertise are not fully leveraged as Letts, et. al (1999) suggests.

Collaboration is also a key attribute of high performers. Respondents observe eighty-five percent of the high performance organizations working with other organizations. The Executive Director is the most important collaboration tool for the organization, followed by co-sponsored projects. The Pittsburgh leaders also value community involvement in an organization through programs, services and staff contact. Most high performers encourage staff to attend conferences, meetings and seminars in the field and in the community. Collaboration is one of the unique attributes of nonprofit organizations highlighted by Paul Light (2002). It assumes a role in Letts et. al. (1999) "adaptive capacity" by creating a mechanism for responding to the constantly changing and evolving environment of nonprofits. The result of collaboration and "adaptive capacity" is the ability described by Letts et. al (1999) to maintain a strong delivery of value to clients, funders and staff. As an organization learns, experiences and adapts to the environment, it better understands the needs of its stakeholders and the most advantageous methods of program/service delivery.

Attention to human resources, a quality process discussed by Letts et. al. (1999) is not as highly ranked as other attributes, yet is a pervasive element in the high performance dialogue. Consistency of staff and work processes are noticeable in approximately seventy percent of the high performing organizations. Only half of the organizations are recognized for having the ability to retain staff, indicating that staff stability comes from a personal desire to work for the organization. Work flexibility is not highly valued, but this observation is probably an outgrowth of prioritizing the staff's commitment to mission. Shared authority, listed by Taliento and Silverman (2005) as a desired attribute of executive leadership, is confirmed by the low number of organizations that require management approval for decisions and the fifty-six percent of organizations that give staff the authority to make routine decisions on their own. Regardless of the actual makeup of the staff, only half of the organizations are recognized for contribution of staff diversity to high performance. These total observations seem to indicate that emphasis on internal collaboration produces a high performance organization.

The actual financial state of the organization is not as important to high performance as the process in securing financial resources. Organizations heavily rely on the skills of the executive director to identify and secure funds. The ability to raise capital from a diverse group of funders, especially private foundations, is evident in more than half of the high performing organizations. Interestingly, high performers do not expend much effort in pursuing government funding. Taliento and Silverman's (2005) research concurs with the need for executive directors' ability to lead with limited funds. Letts et. al. (1999) expands upon the diverse funding observation by suggesting a venture capital approach to donor participation in the organization.

The identified high performing organizations within the Pittsburgh community have longevity, indicating that high performance is an evolution. Significant budgets ensure that the organization has sufficient resources, both human and financial, to sustain as well as grow. Dissemination of the mission statement through communication and programs supports the presence and longevity of the organization.

High performing organizations are 'learning' organizations. Standards are seen as tools for growth and a move towards excellence, not an end in themselves. It is the practices (communications, culture,

values, processes, etc.) that an organization uses to meet standards that are more important than the fact that they meet a particular standard.

All of the observations in this study are based upon peer observation and value judgments. As subsequent research confirms the reoccurring presence of attributes related to high performance, it is suggested that future studies focus on the quantitative value of these attributes. Nonprofit organizations need to communicate value per dollar to their funders, value of a service to their clients and value of the organization and services to be able to retain competent staff. This research assists in the understanding of what is valued in the community and how widespread it is in the organizations perceived as high performing. The contribution of nonprofit organizations to the quality of life will be validated as future researchers quantify these reoccurring elements in synergy with the business world.

Acknowledgments: The authors are extremely grateful to the Copeland Fund Elmer J. Tropman's Nonprofit Sector Research Fund for funding this research, to Mr. Gregg Behr, President of Tropman Funds, for his support and guidance, as well as to Ms. Laura Thomas for her research assistance help.

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