

THE FULCRUM POINT

RETHINKING WHAT COUNTS AS LEADERSHIP

The Fulcrum Point is a candid opinion series covering relevant and vital issues in the nonprofit sector

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Rethinking What Counts as Leadership

By Chris Looney

For decades, the nonprofit sector has been shaped by a hierarchy that privileges certain functions as “strategic” and others as “support.” Executive leadership, fundraising, and communications often sit at the top of that pyramid, while research, operations, data, and stewardship are relegated to the middle or bottom.

It’s time to challenge that hierarchy.

If our sector truly believes in collaboration, evidence-based decision-making, and mission alignment, then we must recognize that leadership exists in every corner of our organizations. Some of the most powerful leadership functions are hiding in plain sight — and one of the clearest examples is advancement research.

The Leadership Behind the Curtain

At most institutions, advancement research is described as a “support” department. It supplies data, builds donor profiles, and conducts wealth screenings. But that’s an outdated and incomplete view. Research isn’t just collecting information — it’s interpreting patterns, forecasting trends, and identifying risk. It’s the function that helps an organization know what to do next.

In reality, research teams hold the compass of institutional intelligence. They see across silos, synthesize data from every department, and connect dots that others don’t yet see. When that perspective is invited into strategic planning, something remarkable happens: organizations start making smarter, faster, and more aligned decisions.

Research doesn’t just support leadership. It is leadership.

A Wider Lens: The Hidden Leadership Functions

Advancement research is not alone. Across the nonprofit landscape, several functions deserve greater recognition as leadership disciplines:



Finance professionals translate mission into sustainability. They ensure the organization's values are reflected in its resource allocation. When finance is invited into strategy early, the result isn't constraint. It's clarity.

Data and analytics teams provide the foresight that drives innovation. They can forecast donor behavior, optimize operations, and measure impact in real time - but only if they're treated as strategic partners, not back-end technicians.

Stewardship and donor relations professionals shape the post-gift experience, building trust and belonging that sustain relationships for decades. Their work defines retention, reputation, and renewal.

Operations and HR teams build the systems and cultures that enable growth. They are architects of organizational health - the quiet leaders of alignment and accountability.

In each of these roles, leadership is expressed not through hierarchy but through influence, insight, and integration. They lead by making the organization more intelligent, connected, and capable.

Why Respect Matters

This isn't just about recognition or morale. When leadership potential goes unacknowledged, organizations lose capacity.

When research teams aren't at the table, decisions are made without full intelligence. When finance is excluded from strategy, sustainability becomes reactive. When operations leaders are brought in only at the implementation stage, systems strain under the weight of ambition.

Respect, in this context, isn't about ego - it's about effectiveness. A leadership culture that honors every function's expertise produces better decisions, stronger teams, and more mission-aligned outcomes.



The Research Function as a Case Study

Advancement research offers a powerful example of what this new leadership model looks like in practice.

At the 2025 California Advancement Researchers Association conference, Fulcrum Nonprofit Leadership shared a framework for repositioning research as a core leadership discipline. The argument was simple: when research is integrated into governance, campaign planning, and board strategy, it transforms outcomes.

Research professionals can no longer afford to be seen as reactive data providers. They are strategic partners in shaping the future - forecasters, storytellers, and advocates for smarter philanthropy.

The key takeaway from that session still holds true: leadership begins where insight meets action.

Building a Culture That Recognizes Leadership Everywhere

How can nonprofit executives operationalize this idea?

1. Invite diverse functions into strategy early. If your planning sessions only include fundraising, marketing, and the CEO, you're missing key voices. Bring research, finance, HR, and stewardship to the table from the start.

2. Redefine metrics for influence. Don't measure value only by revenue raised. Measure by decisions informed, risks reduced, and opportunities identified.

3. Invest in visibility and professional growth. Leadership develops through exposure. Encourage researchers, analysts, and operations staff to present to boards, attend leadership training, and publish insights.

4. Champion cross-functional leadership. Reward collaboration as much as achievement. True leaders build bridges across departments.



The Fulcrum Point

At Fulcrum, we believe the health of the nonprofit sector depends on how broadly we define leadership. When we elevate research, finance, operations, and stewardship to their rightful place alongside advancement and executive leadership, we unlock a fuller version of organizational intelligence.

Every function has the potential to lead, not through title, but through contribution.

Because when leadership is shared, mission accelerates. And when insight leads, everything else follows.

For more information about Fulcrum Nonprofit Leadership, please visit our website at www.fulcrumleader.com or reach out to us directly via email at hello@fulcrumleader.com.