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# **Understanding Nonprofit Work: A Communication Perspective, by Matthew Koschmann and Matthew Sanders**

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*Understanding Nonprofit Work: A Communication Perspective* is an essential read for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers who are interested in the *doing* or *practice* of the nonprofit beyond the more abstract economic sector or discrete organization(s) that take on the nonprofit label. Matthew Koschmann and Matthew Sanders (2020) draw on their extensive research and the growing body of scholarship on communication and nonprofit organizations to advocate for a distinct communication perspective on nonprofit work as a new lens to examine everyday nonprofit practices and problems and to provide a way of “thinking communicatively,” which can create positive, productive, and impactful outcomes in nonprofit work (p. ix).

Koschmann and Sanders (2020) begin by reviewing the dominant social understanding of communication as transmission, i.e., a process of functional or goal-oriented exchange of information between senders and receivers through channels, subject to noise and feedback loops (see Shannon & Weaver, 1998). A transmission perspective posits nonprofit organizations as a container and communication as flows of information within and from the container. However, the authors note significant critiques of the transmission model, including its inability to account for the complexities of and realities of dynamic meaning-making through human interaction. Communication is “not just about transmitting already-formed data between senders and receivers but rather is a complex process of continually producing and negotiating the meanings and interpretations that shape our lives” (Koschmann & Sanders, 2020, p. 8).

Drawing on what Craig (1999) and Deetz (1994) call a constitutive approach to communication, Koschmann and Sanders (2020) advocate instead for a social construction understanding of communication, i.e., we constitute, rather than simply express, our social realities in communicative interactions with others. Rather than asking what things “are,” a communication perspective asks how things are created through communication, how they are sustained or transformed through interaction, whose interests and identities are represented, and what kinds of actions might be supported or constrained through that interaction. In other words, what makes something a nonprofit are the specific communication processes, practices, and procedures that set them apart from other collections of people. By viewing nonprofits not as

things but as assemblages of interactions, Koschmann and Sanders (2020) argue that we can better understand how things come to be in organizations, enabling us to think more creatively about what we could do and who we could become in nonprofit practice.

In the subsequent five chapters, Koschmann and Sanders (2020) author alternating chapters, demonstrating what it can mean to “think communicatively” on several core nonprofit issues. In Chapter 2, Koschmann (2020) takes a communication perspective on the topics of nonprofit leadership, management, and governance (L-M-G) to expose a number of popular but unhelpful assumptions that portray leadership, management, and governance as mental, individual, positional, mechanistic, and situational. The communication perspective instead emphasizes social processes over personal cognition, hybrid agency over individualism, and a nexus of relationships, living systems, and socially constructed situations over abstract, mechanistic, or objective circumstances (see Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014). A communication perspective asks what we do with other people, not what we do to them. Because nonprofits are primarily relational, the communication perspective provides a practical template for practitioners to use questions to build relationships and foster more meaningful L-M-G in nonprofit organizations.

In Chapter 3, Sanders (2020) examines how a communication perspective can help understand and manage the tensions that nonprofits face as mission-driven organizations in a market economy. Conventional wisdom positions nonprofits as needing to be more business-like in order to be successful (Bush, 1992). Yet, as they raise, make, and spend money in pursuit of their missions, nonprofit organizations must do so in ways that meet the expectations not only of those they serve but also of donors, employees, volunteers, governments, and the public, thus balancing often competing expectations of frugality and excess, overhead and charity, immediate needs, and long-term growth. But while an economic understanding of the nonprofit might posit that nonprofits can either act like businesses (and prioritize market ideology) or not (prioritizing ideals of justice, fairness, equality, or the common good), a communication perspective reveals that this dichotomy is a social construction, and that nonprofits can sustain a more nuanced understanding of nonprofit work as mission and market in practice through ongoing interactions.

In Chapter 4, Koschmann (2020) recognizes the centrality of collaboration as a key organizing strategy of the nonprofit and the not insignificant challenges that emerge from trying to build meaningful and effective collaborations across disparate partners. A communication perspective recognizes that collaboration and communication are inseparable. Collaborations emerge and exist in the ongoing interactions and decisions of various stakeholders, and collaborations only persist so long as the communication/interaction continue. As a result, Koschmann (2020) proposes the term “collaborcation” (drawing on Laurie Lewis, 2006) to center the role of communication in nonprofit collaboration. Collaboration typically presents many difficult challenges for nonprofits, especially in terms of exercising authority, developing a shared identity, taking meaningful action, and achieving meaningful effectiveness. Applying a communication perspective, however, explains that effective collaboration is the ability to exert influence in such a way that leads to the existence of a social entity that has the capacity to act and make a difference. Thinking “collabrocatively” foregrounds how people interact in and through collaborative work and how the outcomes of those interactions shape, enable, and constrain future interactions and outcomes.

In Chapter 5, Sanders (2020) focuses on the construction of meaningful work (see Cheney, Zorn, Planalp, & Lair, 2008). Many nonprofits face challenges in recruiting and retaining employees and volunteers. Without the typical market-rate compensation tools employed by the for-profit sector, nonprofits typically encourage participation through mission and purpose. Sanders (2020) argues that, in contrast with economic, managerial, and psychological perspectives that fail to

fully explain the meanings of nonprofit work, a communication perspective demonstrates that meaning isn't in the work itself but rather it exists in discourses, i.e., ways people talk about work that imbues work with meaning. In particular, a communication perspective foregrounds practices that foster memorable messages, associate organizational and personal identities, and connect work practices to organization mission to build a discourse of meaningful work while also recognizing the ethical implications of how the meaningfulness of work may be used to enable problematic practices or environments in some nonprofit contexts.

Finally, Koschmann (2020) applies the communication perspective to international nonprofit work in Chapter 6. While international nonprofit work experiences many of the same challenges and opportunities as nonprofit work in domestic contexts, international nonprofit work faces additional tensions surrounding language and terminology, knowledge and knowing, and religion and financial arrangements. Koschmann (2020) highlights how each tension has a substantial impact on how people communicate in international nonprofit contexts but also simultaneously are shaped and changed by those same communication processes. Close attention to these relational realities can lead to more successful communication outcomes. As Koschmann (2020) practically concludes, "How you understand communication in these situations could make all the difference, i.e., what it is you think you're doing when you communicate and what you think communication is accomplishing will have direct impacts on the successes of your projects and the quality of your relationships" (p. 157–8).

Koschmann and Sanders' (2020) book is essential reading for anyone interested in nonprofit organizing far beyond the communication discipline, including practitioners, students and scholars in management, business, development, political science, public policy, and nonprofit affairs. Koschmann and Sanders (2020) challenge readers to consider how communicative thinking enhances our understanding not only of what it means to do nonprofit work but ultimately of what it means to be a nonprofit. The transmission model of communication is inadequate in a complicated world in which relationships and meanings are constantly negotiated in interaction. Thinking communicatively may not lend itself to straightforward prescriptions for how to communicate in nonprofits, but Koschmann and Sanders (2020) demonstrate that those simplistic injunctions often fail to produce meaningful results in the face of the real world's complexities anyway. Instead, a communication perspective invites us to "consider what we are making together in our communication with other people" (Koschmann & Sanders, 2020, p. 161). This also provides a new way of understanding the nonprofit—not simply as not-business or not-government but as a unique organizational form dedicated to creating and shaping a better world through interactions with other people. Such an understanding provides nonprofit scholars, policymakers, and practitioners both agency and responsibility for how nonprofits envision and communicatively create the common good.

## Disclosure Statement

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest that relate to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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Sarah Steimel is a Professor in the Department of Communication at Weber State University. Her research focuses on tension management, identity, and communication in organizations, especially between nonprofit organizational staff, volunteers, and the diverse clients they serve.