

Why The Heroic Leadership Myth Builds Organizations That Break

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The Myth of Heroic Leadership interrogates the nonprofit sector's reliance on "heroic" executive leadership as a structural failure disguised as virtue. It challenges the deeply embedded belief that resilience lives in individual grit, arguing instead that overreliance on executive directors concentrates power, masks institutional weakness, and reproduces inequity—particularly for women and leaders of color. Through a systems and justice lens, the column examines how boards, funders, and organizational norms reinforce this model, and why sustainability depends on redistributing authority, accountability, and care across institutions rather than extracting more from a single leader.

In the nonprofit sector, we have learned to trust the wrong signs.

Visible strength and structural fragility are not always opposites. Sometimes, they are the same condition viewed from different distances.

When we see capable staff, impactful programs, renewed grants, and full calendars, we call an organization strong. But those signals can also hide a far more dangerous reality: an organization that may be on the verge of collapse from one funding freeze, leadership crisis, or critical staff departure.

There's one trap at the center of all of this: we mistake motion for health.

When programs are running, and payroll is being met, and the staff is "busy, but good," we take these as good signals and we exhale.

But those signals do not tell us whether an organization is healthy. They tell us only that the pressure is being absorbed somewhere. They do not tell us where it is landing or what it costs. They do not tell us whether the person absorbing it is sleeping, recovering, documenting, delegating, or silently becoming the infrastructure.

Most organizations have no way to measure that kind of hidden compensation.

There is no quarterly metric for "the database is clean because one person fixes it by hand every Friday," and no line in the work plan for "this only works because Maya answers Slack at 10:47 p.m." There's no board report that reads, "the strategy looks coherent because someone resolves every contradiction before it reaches you."

What looks like stability may actually be dependency. What looks like organizational maturity may be a single nervous system intercepting failure before anyone else has to feel it. And the better the gap is covered, the more invisible it becomes.

And that is a harder problem to fix than a crisis, because no one is looking for it.

That is one of the most pernicious costs of the heroic leadership model, which builds institutions whose strength is often a camouflage: a polished surface stretched over infrastructure that was never actually built.

In this model, the leader holds the work together so completely, and for so long, that everyone mistakes the leader's endurance for organizational health.

By appearance, we call that a strong organization, when in reality, it's a fragile organization with a strong person holding it together.

This is why organizational resilience is not just a leadership question or a management concern. It is about building sustainable infrastructure where staff, families, neighborhoods, and movements are not subject to absorbing the consequences of an organizational collapse that they did not create.

And that distinction is a justice issue.

The Impact of Heroic Leadership on Leaders, Staff, and Communities

This is where the need to repair organizational fragility converges with the demands of justice.

The **heroic leadership model** consumes the leaders most committed to the mission—and does it unequally, falling hardest on the women and BIPOC leaders. And the same model that burns out those leaders also builds the organizations most likely to fail the communities being served. It's a double harm along one fault line.

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When an organization strains, stalls, or breaks the damage does not stop at the office door. This is especially true for nonprofits delivering critical community resources.

The damage is absorbed by the people who were counting on the work to continue.

A parent loses the childcare slot that made work possible. A tenant loses the advocate who knew their case. A neighborhood loses a food pantry, a clinic partner, a legal aid referral, or the one staff member who knew which door to knock on next. A movement loses momentum at the exact moment momentum matters most.

The very people the sector exists to serve are asked, once again, to absorb the cost of systems that were never designed to be durable.

If we expect communities to trust these organizations, we owe them organizations built to endure beyond any one person's strength, stamina, or sacrifice.

The Test Comes Whether You're Ready or Not

Every organization eventually gets stress-tested, and almost never on a schedule it chooses.

The nonprofit sector is all too familiar with these scenarios: a funder changes priorities; a state budget stalls; individual giving drops; a partner walks away and takes half a program with them; a key contract is delayed for months. These are not rare events. They are the weather patterns of nonprofit life, and in a moment defined by political volatility and financial precarity, the weather is getting rougher.

For much of the sector, the test has already arrived.

In early 2025 alone, roughly one in three community-serving nonprofits had government funding cut, frozen, or delayed, according to the [Urban Institute](#). For the organizations that got hit, government dollars made up about 42 percent of their revenue—far above the sector norm.

Any one of these shocks becomes a test for an organization to either pass or fail. What's hard is that the result is usually decided before the test begins.

A resilient organization bends when it is tested. It absorbs the hit, leans on reserves and distributed capacity, and keeps the mission moving. A brittle organization breaks because the shock lands on a structure with no slack, no redundancy, and no second point of support to take the weight when the first one buckles.

On an ordinary day, the brittle organization and the resilient one can look almost identical. The difference is often invisible from the outside because it lives in how the organization was built. Some organizations face the same downturn, the same delayed payment, the same funder shift, and survive while others break—and the ones that broke were often already built to do so. The hit simply found the fault line that had been there for years.

This is why the sector's favorite explanations for collapse—bad luck, bad timing, a crisis no one saw coming—so rarely hold up. The crisis may be real, but it is not always the cause.

And the fault line is not random. The organizations that shatter are often the ones that have been running on heroic leadership: individual absorption in place of built capacity. The heroic leadership model does not just overwork the leader. It quietly substitutes the leader for the structure. And an organization that has swapped a person for its systems has no systems to fall back on when that person can no longer absorb the blow.

What Brittleness Actually Looks Like When It's Tested

Brittleness is easy to name and hard to see.

In [the heroic leadership] model, the leader holds the work together so completely, and for so long, that everyone mistakes the leader's endurance for organizational health.

It stays abstract until you know its shape. So here is the shape: a set of structural conditions that tend to travel together. Each one marks a place where the organization has quietly become dependent on something it cannot afford to lose.

What links them is a single mechanism. Something that should have been built into the institution—distributed decisions, documented process, diversified funding, shared relationships—has been absorbed by a person instead.

Heroic leadership fills the space where structure should be; here's how:

1. **Revenue success masks financial fragility.** In a brittle organization, money may be coming in while the organization is still running at the edge. The budget balances only if every grant renews. Payroll clears only if a reimbursement arrives on time. The program survives only because one funder still trusts one person enough to keep writing the check.

On paper, the revenue looks institutional; In practice, it has been borrowed from individual loyalty.

The first article in the NPQ series, *The Myth of Heroic Leadership*, noted the Nonprofit Finance Fund's **2025 survey** findings that 36 percent of nonprofits ended 2024 in operating deficit—the highest rate in a decade. Further, more than half were holding three months or less of cash.

That is not resilience. That is a balance sheet standing on tiptoe.

2. **Decisions can't move without the leader.** In a brittle organization, the executive director is not merely the final decision-maker on matters that truly require executive judgment. Instead, the role has become the necessary passageway for an astonishing range of ordinary choices:

Which vendor should we hire? Can we change the program schedule? How should we frame the donor email? Can this partner commitment be adjusted? Who needs to be looped in before we move?

Often this absorption of wide-ranging responsibility that is not limited to executive function occurs because no one else was given the context, authority, or standing to decide. The result: when the leader is out, decisions simply pile up, and the organization stops at the place where authority bottlenecked.

3. **The relationships belong to people, not the institution.** Key relationships may appear to belong to the organization, but many of them are personal assets on loan. And the person holding them isn't always the ED — a development lead, a founder, a long-tenured program director, a board chair, or a trusted community liaison can each carry relationships the organization has never truly secured for itself.

The major funder trusts a person, not the organization. The signature donor takes one particular staff member's call. The coalition partner shows up because of someone's history in the work, not because the institution itself has earned that depth of trust.

This is where financial and relational brittleness turn out to be the same fault line. The revenue is fragile because the relationships are personal. When those people leave, the relationships often go with them. And the money is rarely far behind.

4. **The structure for shared work was never built.** Underneath all of this sits the deeper condition: the organization lacks the basic architecture that lets a team carry weight together. Critical structural elements like decision rights and accountability are undefined, and process lives in habit rather than documentation. Institutional knowledge is held in individual memory instead of shared systems.

None of this means the people failed. Usually, it means the opposite: capable people are working around the absence of structure with memory, improvisation, and trust. But improvisation is not infrastructure. Without scaffolding, the organization can't distribute weight. It can only route pressure toward whoever is willing, available, or expected to hold it.

The Consequences are Not Hypothetical

In 2015, the Federation Employment and Guidance Service, an 80-year-old New York human-services agency, **collapsed into bankruptcy** almost overnight. From the outside, FECS looked like one of the sector's sturdier institutions: a \$250 million budget, roughly 350 sites, and about 120,000 people served each year. Underneath, it was running on thin cash, underfunded government contracts, and finance leadership instability, with three chief financial officers cycling through in two years.

When the gap finally surfaced, there was no reserve and no slack to absorb it. Nearly 1,900 people lost their jobs, and 120,000 New Yorkers had to be handed off to other providers.

That is the danger of brittleness. It does not always look weak while everything is holding. It can look like strength: a decisive leader, a well-funded organization, a loyal donor base, a smooth-running staff.

There is one question that turns all of this from a diagnosis into something a board can test on itself: *if this leader stepped away tomorrow, does the roof still stand?*

The correction starts with measuring the right thing. Not whether the leader is holding everything together, but whether the organization could hold together without any single person.

In a healthy institution, the leader is the architect. They design the beams, specify the load paths, and build systems that bear weight whether or not she is in the room. In a brittle institution, the leader is not the architect—they are the structure.

The building stands because the leader is standing inside it, holding up the roof with their own arms.

What looks like shelter is a person under strain.

So, this question of “whether the roof still stands” in the absence of the leader is not about the leader at all—it is about getting to the bottom of the brittleness trap. It asks whether the organization has a strong enough existence independent of the leader's strength. And in a startling number of organizations that look healthy, the honest answer is no.

It doesn't have to be that way.

The alternative is real: an organization can be built so the roof stands on its own beams, and when it is, a leader's departure is a transition rather than a collapse.

For example, when Kemi Ilesanmi, who led The Laundromat Project in NYC for more than a decade, handed the CEO role to Ayesha Williams in 2022, the transition was planned far in advance and the organization simply kept running. The two planned together and made joint appearances before donors and partners to make the point that the institution, not the founder, was what held.

No One Chose This. But It Can Be Fixed.

None of this is a natural fact about nonprofits, and none of it is the product of bad intentions. It's something the sector built without ever deciding to: the accumulated result of thousands of small, reasonable choices made by people running as hard as they could at work that matters.

Fund the program the community needs now instead of the reserve. Renew the grant for one year because next year's budget is uncertain. Trust the capable leader who always seems to have it under control. Keep the report focused on outputs because the program numbers are what the funder asked for.

Each choice can make sense on its own.

What almost no one did—because the work was always urgent and there was never time—was step back and add up what all those sensible decisions were producing together.

No board set out to hollow out its own organization. No funder designed a grant to burn out a leader. No executive director chose to become the backup system for every missing system. But that is what happened in too many places.

Boards take part mostly by being reassured by the wrong things.

A leader who never brings a crisis to solve, who makes the work look effortless, is easy to trust. And that trust, entirely well-meant, can quietly reward the compensation that is hollowing the organization out.

The fix isn't to trust leaders less. The fix requires us to get more curious when everything looks seamless: What is making this look easy? What is not reaching the board? Who is catching the work before it breaks? What would happen if that person stopped catching it?

The answer is a different kind of attention.

You cannot build institutions for justice on a design that hands its deepest risks to the people with the least capacity to carry them.

In that light, resilience is not organizational housekeeping. It is a promise-keeping practice. It is what allows an organization to keep faith with the people its mission claims to serve.

It can't be built without the people with the most leverage over what an organization rewards and what it can afford: its boards and its funders.

The correction starts with measuring the right thing. Not whether the leader is holding everything together, but whether the organization could hold together without any single person. Not the smoothness of the surface, but the soundness of what is underneath.

That is harder to see than a program count. Harder to fund than a direct service line. Harder to put in a board dashboard than the number of meals served, clients housed, students tutored, or cases closed.

That is probably part of why the sector does not measure it well.

But it is the only version of strength that survives a bad year.

Which is the question this series turns to next: how.

How organizations distribute the authority, relationships, knowledge, and capacity that brittleness concentrates. How boards can govern for resilience instead of being reassured by performance. How funders can support institutional strength instead of unintentionally rewarding heroic compensation.

Naming the fragility is the first move.

Building the alternative is the next.