

**Leadership Development for Chambers of Commerce CEOs and Boards of Directors: A
Comparative Qualitative Case Study**

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Abstract

Nonprofit organizations, including Chambers of Commerce, rely on effective governance to ensure organizational sustainability, strategic direction, and community impact. However, more than half of U.S. Chamber boards receive little to no structured leadership onboarding or development. Insufficient training for nonprofit boards and chief executive officers may hinder leadership effectiveness and organizational performance. This comparative qualitative study examined why some Chambers of Commerce effectively onboard and develop their boards of directors while others do not. Guided by Knowles's theory of andragogy, the study explored the lived experiences and perceptions of Chamber chief executive officers and board members regarding leadership development and onboarding practices. Participants included nine Chamber Chief Executive Officers and seven board members from Chambers across the United States. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically to identify patterns in onboarding practices, leadership development experiences, and perceived organizational needs. Findings indicate that most Chambers provide onboarding; however, it is typically limited to a one-time organizational overview and is widely viewed as insufficient. Participants reported gaps in ongoing training, role clarity, and understanding of organizational functions. CEOs identified barriers such as limited time and financial resources, which may cause frustration but also highlight opportunities for support. Participants emphasized the need for customizable training tools, clearer role definitions, and continuous professional development to build a sense of shared purpose and resilience. This study contributes to nonprofit leadership literature by documenting persistent gaps in board onboarding and highlighting the need for scalable, affordable training grounded in adult learning principles to enhance governance and organizational effectiveness, fostering a sense of empowerment and progress among leaders.

Keywords: Chamber of Commerce, leadership development, board onboarding.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Nonprofit executives often face challenges in onboarding and developing board members, mainly due to a lack of experience in leadership training and development (Burton, 2022; Johnson, 2022; Morrison Greenhaw, 2018). Providing ongoing training and onboarding programs for the Board of Directors can improve their understanding of the organization and their roles and responsibilities as board members (BoardSource, 2024a). BoardSource is a global member network that offers resources to enhance board leadership and governance practices for nonprofits and executives (BoardSource, 2024a). Many nonprofit organizations (NPOs) encounter difficulties because of insufficient leadership training and onboarding processes, which can cause operational problems and negatively impact performance (Carman & Millesen, 2023; Harvell, 2024; Tyler, 2018).

The study of leadership has been a focus for scholars throughout history, ranging from Aristotle to contemporary researchers across various fields. Developing strong leadership skills necessitates a long-term commitment to practice. Sindell (2022) defined leadership development as the process of enhancing the leadership abilities of any member within an organization. This definition underscores the need for continued dedication to effectively support leadership growth. Johnson (2022) noted that developing leaders should be an organizational objective for NPOs (p. 2). Nonprofit executives face distinctive challenges compared to their for-profit counterparts, often requiring them to achieve goals with limited resources. A notable gap exists in nonprofit CEOs' and boards' leadership programs (Harvell, 2024; Tyler, 2018). Research has indicated that ongoing onboarding and training can strengthen the capacities of executives and board members, thereby creating opportunities for growth and enhancing overall organizational effectiveness (BoardSource, 2021; Dann, 2022; Sneath, 2021).

Chambers of Commerce are NPOs crucial in community building and economic growth through initiatives such as business attraction, retention, and tourism (Association of Chamber of Commerce Executives [ACCE], 2025b). There are over 7,500 Chambers in the United States, each varying in size and organizational structure. Chambers of Commerce are overseen by volunteer boards of directors composed of local community members and business leaders who collaborate to enhance the community and support local businesses. Board members often join with little or no prior board experience (Adkisson, 2021; Burton, 2022; National Council of Nonprofits, 2023). More than half (53%) of Chamber CEOs do not engage in leadership development for their boards (ACCE, 2025a; Burton, 2022). Johnson (2022) stated that leadership development is frequently viewed as a luxury rather than a necessity, as available funds for leadership development are often limited (p. 3).

An effective board encourages meaningful discussion and takes actions aligned with the organization's mission (Burton, 2022; Harvell, 2024). Boards require tailored tools and strategies to enhance their effectiveness and understanding of the organization and their responsibilities. Researchers have recommended ongoing training and orientation programs for boards and CEOs (BoardSource, 2024a; Harvell, 2024; Johnson, 2022).

Statement of the Problem

The problem is that over half of the Chamber of Commerce (Chamber) boards in the United States receive little to no leadership onboarding or board development. According to the ACCE benchmarking survey, 53% of the responding Chambers do not participate in leadership development (ACCE, 2025a). Recent research has indicated that 73% of chamber leaders lack board development training (Burton, 2022).

The negative implication of the problem of Chamber Boards and CEOs' little to no leadership onboarding or development is a lack of knowledge and understanding regarding skills and training necessary for the CEO and Board to effectively guide the Chamber (Carmen & Millesen, 2023; Tyler, 2018). This systemic lack of leadership training for CEOs and boards can result in poor decision-making, a misunderstanding of the nonprofit's purpose and mission, and personal egos taking precedence (Dann, 2022; Sneath, 2021; Thomas, 2024). Regular training and onboarding of board members can enhance the effectiveness of these organizations (BoardSource, 2021; Harvell, 2024; Sneath, 2021).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this comparative qualitative case study was to analyze why some chambers are onboarding and developing their Board of Directors and why some are not. This purpose was a logical response to the problem because Chambers face a leadership deficit that depends on their executives and boards to inspire, provide direction, and lead the organization into the future (Carman & Millesen, 2023; Tyler, 2018). The Chamber of Commerce fosters a healthy economy and enhances the quality of life by advocating for business interests, retention, tourism, and community building (ACCE, 2025b). The chamber industry is essential to this research because of its direct community impact. Evidence has suggested that failures in the Chamber boardroom stem from insufficient onboarding and leadership development opportunities, leading to a departure from the mission and the use of ineffective strategies (Carman & Millesen, 2023; Humphreys Johnson, 2017).

This research employed a qualitative case study approach to interview and examine the perspectives of Chamber executives and board members on the importance and outcomes of leadership development within their organizations. The goal was to engage eight to ten chambers

in the United States. The Chamber of Commerce Professional Facebook Group was the source for recruiting volunteer CEOs and board members to participate. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather the experiences from CEOs' and board members' understanding of the Chamber's mission, their roles and responsibilities, and how ongoing leadership development can help them fulfill their mission while serving their communities.

Research Questions

The research questions will explore how CEOs of Chambers of Commerce onboard and develop their Boards of Directors. NPO leadership operates under a shared leadership model, which includes a volunteer Board of Directors and a CEO (Adkisson, 2021; Tyler, 2018). This model emphasizes collective effort and shared responsibility in leading the organization. Nonprofit leaders are often required to achieve more with limited resources (Thomas, 2024), making onboarding and board development essential responsibilities. The Chamber board typically comprises local citizens with little to no prior board experience (Adkisson, 2021; Burton, 2022; National Council of Nonprofits, 2023). Regular training and onboarding of board members can significantly enhance the Chamber's effectiveness (Board Source, 2021a; Sneath, 2021; Tyler, 2018). Three research questions guide the inquiry:

RQ1

Why do some chambers engage in leadership development and others do not?

RQ2

How can onboarding help Chamber of Commerce board members be effective in their role?

Introduction To Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this comparative qualitative case study was based on Malcolm Knowles' (1975) andragogy, also known as adult learning theory. This theory asserts that adult learners come with their knowledge, experiences, and levels of independence (Terrell, 2020). Andragogy is founded upon six key principles:

(a) Why: Adults need to understand why they are being asked to learn, essentially asking, "What is in it for me?" (Kaufman et al., 2008; Knowles, 1978; Terrell, 2020). According to Boardsource (2023), individuals have diverse motivations for joining boards, ranging from a desire to give back to seeking personal benefits. Arden (2023) described volunteer learning through andragogy theory as informal and focused on developing leadership, communication, interpersonal skills, advocacy, and community support. Onboarding new board members is crucial to ensuring they understand their roles and responsibilities (Harvell, 2024). As the National Council of Nonprofits (2023) and BoardSource (2024b) highlighted, initial onboarding should encompass more than just bylaws, financial statements, and the mission statement. It should also provide a brief overview of the organization's history, brochures, newsletters, a strategic plan, a calendar of events and programs, and a description of committees. This onboarding process should clarify new board members' expectations and outline their potential contributions to the board and Chamber programs.

(b) Adult learners utilize their life and work experiences, significantly enhancing their knowledge base (Kaufman et al., 2008; Knowles, 1978; Terrell, 2020). Individuals contribute their time and skills to community groups or organizations with a service mission through active participation (Arden, 2023; Sung et al., 2023). Onboarding should include discussions about how

board members wish to contribute to the organization and which committees they want to join (Harvell, 2024).

(c) Motivation among adult learners increases when they face immediate, real-life problems (Kaufman et al., 2008; Knowles, 1978; Terrell, 2020). Knowles' adult learning theory is particularly relevant to NPOs and volunteering, as these experiences bolster key leadership skills, including listening, advocacy, diplomacy, confidence, and organizational leadership (Arden, 2023; Harvell, 2024).

(d) Self-Concept: Adults learn best when responsible for their learning in self-directed environments (Kaufman et al., 2008; Knowles, 1978; Terrell, 2020). Regular onboarding fosters relationship-building, friendships, network expansion, practical listening skills, and leadership abilities while working towards a shared vision to advance the organization (Arden, 2023; Boardsource, 2023; Harvell, 2024).

(e) Problem Orientation: Adult learners require specific knowledge, skills, or abilities to tackle distinct problems instead of engaging with generic content (Kaufman et al., 2008; Knowles, 1978; Terrell, 2020). Onboarding engages board members by establishing identifiable, measurable goals and mechanisms to track their progress (Harvell, 2024).

(f) Intrinsic motivation: Adult learners are most engaged when their desire to learn is internally driven (Kaufman et al., 2008; Knowles, 1978; Terrell, 2020). Lifelong learners also respond to external motivators, such as promotions, job changes, or technological advancements (Arden, 2023).

Effective board development strategies should utilize each member's unique knowledge and expertise to address gaps within the industry (Harvell, 2024). When selecting new board members, Chambers should prioritize individuals who are well-connected within their

communities and possess specific skills that would be advantageous to the organization, such as those with backgrounds in law, accounting, and human resources (Adkisson, 2021; Harvell, 2024). Chambers are crucial in their communities (Adkisson, 2021; Tyler, 2018). Research has indicated that NPO boards should emphasize ongoing leadership training to strengthen both the CEO and the board, thereby enhancing overall effectiveness (BoardSource, 2024a; Sneath, 2021).

Nurturing volunteers into leaders is both an art and a science, grounded in adult learning theory (Kaufman et al., 2008). Kaufman (2008) emphasized that volunteer leadership development should concentrate on personal growth, organizational effectiveness, and community impact. Board members need to feel they are making meaningful contributions, whether by sharing their expertise or gaining insights about the organization (BoardSource, 2023). Researchers have found that volunteers apply the skills they acquire during onboarding to their workplaces and continue to engage with the organization long-term (Harvell, 2024; Karikari, 2024; Kaufman et al., 2008).

Introduction to Research Methodology and Design (Nature of the Study)

Leading an NPO, particularly a Chamber of Commerce, presents numerous challenges, making robust leadership essential for organizational success (Disanto, 2021). The significance of this study focused on the Chamber of Commerce CEOs and board members, demonstrating that leadership development for boards and CEOs cultivates high-quality leaders (Tyler, 2018). A BoardSource (2024a) survey of 214 NPOs highlighted significant demand for continuous board development to enhance performance.

The study also provided me with a tool to compare and contrast the practices of chamber organizations regarding the onboarding and development of their boards. The criteria are to

interview the experiences of leadership development from nine CEOs and seven board members from nine Chambers of varying sizes.

Data source triangulation was employed by interviewing multiple stakeholders to elicit diverse perspectives on leadership development. To complement the primary data, a comprehensive literature review was conducted to compile secondary data on nonprofit leadership, onboarding practices, and development opportunities.

Ethical considerations inherent in qualitative research necessitate obtaining informed consent from participants, along with assurances of confidentiality and autonomy (Yin, 2015, p. 280). Prior to data collection, approval was obtained from the National University Institutional Review Board to ensure adherence to established ethical standards and procedures. All participants received and signed an informed consent statement verifying their voluntary participation and consent to recorded interviews. Anonymity was maintained by refraining from documenting participants' names or any identifiable information.

Significance of the Study

This qualitative study examined gaps in the Chamber Board of Directors' onboarding processes and the availability of leadership development opportunities for the CEO. The research highlighted that comprehensive, consistent onboarding practices would enhance the board's ability to fulfill its mission and achieve strategic objectives, while leadership training would contribute to organizational effectiveness.

Recent studies have offered valuable insights into strengthening onboarding processes and leadership development within NPOs (Carman & Millesen, 2023; Harvell, 2024). CEOs and board members of Chambers of Commerce play crucial roles in promoting leadership

development and organizational success. However, when onboarding and training are neglected, boards may face governance challenges.

A survey conducted by BoardSource (2024a) involving 214 NPOs revealed opportunities for continuous board development. Prioritizing onboarding and leadership training can help boards clarify their roles and responsibilities, strengthen fundraising capacity, and improve representation within their organizations (Carman & Millesen, 2023; Tyler, 2018). These findings highlight the importance of intentional and ongoing leadership development to enhance governance effectiveness and sustainability.

This study contributes to the broader literature on nonprofit governance by identifying practical strategies for strengthening leadership at both the board and CEO levels. The findings have the potential to inform policy, guide best practices, and support the long-term viability and effectiveness of Chambers of Commerce, offering a hopeful outlook for the future.

Definitions of Key Terms

Association of Chamber of Commerce Executives (ACCE)

The Association of Chamber of Commerce Executives (ACCE) was established in 1914 and serves over 9,000 leaders from 1,300 Chambers of Commerce (ACCE, 202a). The ACCE provides its members with resources and tools. Only 17% of the US Chambers are members and can access their resources.

Board of Directors

A board of directors (BOD) serves as the governing body responsible for overseeing the nonprofit organization and making the highest-level decisions that represent the interests of its stakeholders (Boardsource, 2024a). The board of directors provides directions to govern the nonprofit (Thomas, 2024).

Chamber of Commerce (Chamber)

The first Chamber of Commerce was established in 1599 in Marseille, France, to promote regional economic interests. The first Chamber in the United States was founded in 1768 in New York. A Chamber of Commerce is a nonprofit organization composed of businesses working collaboratively to advance their collective interests while contributing to the development of their community, region, state, or nation. As nonprofit entities classified under the 501(c)(6) tax code, Chambers do not qualify for federal funding through tax dollars or government grants (ACCE, 2025a).

There are more than 7,500 Chambers across the United States, ranging from small organizations with minimal or no staff to large entities employing twenty or more individuals (U.S. Chamber of Commerce, 2024). While each Chamber operates with a unique mission, their objectives generally align with five core goals: (a) fostering economic growth through business attraction and retention, (b) promoting tourism, (c) ensuring long-term prosperity by advocating for a pro-business environment, (d) representing the interests of the employer community, and (e) facilitating efficient business transactions through well-structured networks (ACCE, 2025a; Adkisson, 2021).

Chief Executive Officer (CEO)

The nonprofit Chief Executive Officer (CEO), also referred to as the Executive Director (ED), is responsible for executing the organization's daily operations, ensuring that its mission remains active and progresses effectively. This role includes overseeing staff and volunteers to facilitate organizational initiatives (Thomas, 2023). In the context of a Chamber of Commerce, the CEO serves as the primary convener of business leaders, a prominent spokesperson for local business interests, and a steadfast advocate for the community's economic growth (Adkisson,

2021). Additionally, the CEO is responsible for establishing the organization's vision and mission, fostering relationships with the board and broader community, managing staff, and overseeing financial and operational activities (Tolbert, 2024).

Onboarding

Orientation is a critical resource for new board members, facilitating their transition and helping them effectively navigate the complexities of their roles. This process actively engages members in board activities while providing essential education on the organization's mission, programs, and governance structure. The primary objective is to ensure that new board members acquire the knowledge necessary to make meaningful contributions. Additionally, ongoing education for current board members is facilitated through interactions with subject matter experts and guest speakers who offer diverse perspectives on key issues. The Chief Executive Officer (CEO) plays a pivotal role in the success of this orientation by continuously educating the board on their responsibilities, emerging challenges, and the broader impact of the nonprofit organization (BoardSource, 2023; National Council of Nonprofits, 2023).

Nonprofit Organizations (NPOs)

According to the U.S. Internal Revenue Service (IRS): A nonprofit organization is organized and operated exclusively for religious, charitable, scientific, testing for public safety, literary, educational, or other specified purposes and that meets specific other requirements are tax-exempt under Internal Revenue Code Section 501(c)(3). Other nonprofits that meet specified requirements for exception include business leagues (Internal Revenue Service (IRS), 2023).

Summary

This study investigated the challenges nonprofit executives face in onboarding and developing board members, particularly within Chambers of Commerce. Research indicates that

many NPOs lack structured leadership training, resulting in operational inefficiencies and diminished organizational effectiveness (Burton, 2022; Johnson, 2022; Morrison Greenhaw, 2018). However, a commitment to effective leadership development can significantly enhance the strategic capabilities of both executives and boards, thereby promoting organizational growth and sustainability (Tyler, 2018; Harvell, 2024). Scholars emphasize that ongoing onboarding and training programs are essential for fostering this positive trajectory, enhancing the strategic effectiveness of executives and boards alike (BoardSource, 2021; Dann, 2022; Sneath, 2021).

Chambers of Commerce play a crucial role in community and economic development, supporting initiatives to attract, retain, and promote business and tourism (ACCE, 2025b). Despite their significance, research suggests that more than half of Chamber CEOs do not prioritize leadership development programs for their boards, often viewing such initiatives as optional rather than vital (ACCE, 2025a; Burton, 2022; Johnson, 2022). Many board members within Chambers assume their roles with little to no prior governance experience, highlighting the pressing need for structured training and onboarding programs (Adkisson, 2021; National Council of Nonprofits, 2023a). Scholars have advocated for continuous leadership development, underscoring its importance in strengthening board effectiveness and ensuring alignment with organizational missions (BoardSource, 2024a; Harvell, 2024; Johnson, 2022).

I used a case study approach to explore the factors influencing Chambers' engagement with board onboarding and leadership development. Understanding these variations can help identify the best practices for implementing practical governance training and enhancing nonprofit board performance and organizational outcomes. Chapter 2 further elaborates on this discussion by reviewing the relevant literature and contextualizing the study's problem and purpose

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The problem this study addresses is that more than half of Chamber of Commerce (Chamber) boards in the U.S. receive little to no leadership onboarding or board development. The purpose of this comparative qualitative case study is to analyze why some chambers are onboarding and developing their Boards of Directors, while others are not, and to explore effective onboarding and development strategies for Chamber boards.

This literature review systematically outlines the theoretical framework for the study. The review begins with a historical overview and structural analysis of the Chamber of Commerce industry. I explored leadership development within nonprofit organizations, emphasizing the roles and growth of CEOs and the importance of volunteer leadership. These topics are placed within the context of adult learning theory and the concept of lifelong learning. Additionally, I examined board governance and onboarding practices, and how they influence the relationship between the board and the CEO. Furthermore, the literature discusses how leadership impacts organizational outcomes, considers financial constraints and their effect on leadership development, and concludes with a summary of key findings and notes on existing gaps in knowledge.

The effectiveness and sustainability of nonprofit organizations (NPOs) are inherently connected to the leadership skills demonstrated within their structures, especially in board onboarding and leadership development practices. Research by Johnson (2022) and Tyler (2018) revealed that the success of NPOs operating in complex and often challenging environments heavily depends on how well they prepare their boards and chief executive officers (CEOs) for their roles, as noted by DiSanto (2021).

A Chamber of Commerce serves as a vital nonprofit organization that relies on a dedicated volunteer board of directors to advocate for local businesses and foster economic growth within the community (ACCE, 2025c). However, a concerning trend has emerged: over half of the Chambers of Commerce boards across the United States reportedly undergo minimal to no onboarding or leadership development efforts (Burton, 2022).

Given this backdrop, the primary aim of this comparative qualitative case study investigated the reasons behind the disparity in onboarding and development practices among various Chambers of Commerce. I sought to identify and explore practical strategies of onboarding and leadership development that can enhance board functionality and overall organizational impact, ultimately contributing to the long-term sustainability of these vital community institutions.

Leadership development is increasingly recognized as a cornerstone of organizational effectiveness, particularly within the nonprofit sector. Numerous studies highlight that while nonprofit organizations (NPOs) play a pivotal role in addressing various community needs, they frequently encounter significant leadership challenges that hinder their potential impact. Research conducted in recent years has unveiled a notable knowledge gap regarding effective onboarding processes for board members and the strategic leadership practices necessary for chief executive officers (CEOs). The gap is further compounded by the common uncertainty board members experience concerning their roles and responsibilities. Such uncertainty often arises from NPO CEOs' challenges in delivering comprehensive onboarding and continuous development opportunities for their board members. Organizations need to address these challenges by establishing robust leadership development frameworks that enhance individual capacities and foster a collective understanding of governance and accountability among board

members. By prioritizing leadership training and clear communication, NPOs can strengthen their governance structures and improve their service delivery and community impact.

Given the pressing need for effective leadership in the nonprofit sector, this study will deepen our understanding of how effective leadership can be cultivated in NPOs by examining successful onboarding and development practices within specific chambers of commerce. The study will provide insights into fostering leadership and organizational resilience. The literature review is organized into various sections to thoroughly analyze existing research and information relevant to the study. Table 1 categorizes the sources by type and publication date. A total of 90 sources were utilized to complete this literature review.

Table 1 - Literature Search Summary

Publication date	Chamber and academic websites	Articles in peer-reviewed journals	Books	Non-peer reviewed studies	Total	% of Sources
2020–2025	18	34	3	14	69	75%
2014–2019		7	3	2	12	13%
2008–2013		5		1	6	7%
<2007		4		1	5	5%
Total	18	50	6	18	92	100%

A rigorous, systematic approach supported the data collection process for the qualitative comparative study. I engaged with various credible sources, including the National University Library, EBSCOhost, ProQuest, Sage, BoardSource.org, and the websites of the Association of Chamber of Commerce Executives and the United States Chamber of Commerce. These carefully curated sources are recognized for their reliability, providing access to peer-reviewed and non-peer-reviewed scholarly articles published within the past five years and ensuring the robustness and validity of the research findings. All sources consulted during the study are

meticulously documented in the references section. By employing key terms such as "leadership," "board of directors," "chamber of commerce," "nonprofit organization," "onboarding," and "leadership development," I sought pertinent academic literature, leaving no avenue unexplored in the pursuit of credible information.

Theoretical Framework

Malcolm Knowles's theory of andragogy (1975) serves as the foundational framework for understanding adult learning. Knowles identified six core principles of adult learning: (a) the need for self-concept, (b) the value of prior experiences, (c) readiness to learn, (d) orientation to learning, (e) internal motivation, and (f) the desire to apply knowledge immediately. These principles emphasize that adults are self-directed learners who bring professional and personal experiences to their educational journeys (Terrell, 2020). Central to this framework is the belief that adult learners leverage their learning experiences and apply them to real-world problems (Karikari, 2024).

Self-Concept

The first principle of andragogy is self-concept. According to Boardsource (2023), individuals engage with nonprofit boards for various motivations, including the desire to bring about positive change in their communities and to pursue personal development. Nonprofits often operate with limited financial resources, necessitating careful allocation of funds to fulfill their mission and address staffing and volunteer development needs, particularly in board recruitment and onboarding (Jordan et al., 2022; Thomas, 2024).

Volunteers in these organizations usually seek to enhance their leadership skills (Allen et al., 2022; Arden, 2023), including communication, interpersonal relations, advocacy, and practical support mechanisms (Arden, 2023). NPO volunteers use their developed skills in their

workplaces (Karikari, 2024). Day and Dannhäuser's (2024) research showed that adult learners respond more favorably to leadership development integrated into their daily activities than traditional training programs.

Prior Experiences

The second principle of andragogy underscores the critical significance of leveraging prior experiences to expand learners' knowledge bases (Terrell, 2020). Lifelong learning forms the bedrock of adult education, embodying an ongoing journey of acquiring new knowledge and skills throughout one's lifetime. The lifelong journey includes formal, informal, and non-formal learning experiences (Sung et al., 2023). Non-formal learning, particularly skills cultivated through structured activities, fosters development (Sung et al., 2023).

In the chambers of commerce, non-formal learning can manifest through engaging opportunities such as volunteer work, active participation in committees, organizing significant events, and community service projects. Moreover, contributing to grant-writing initiatives and serving on the board of directors are pivotal ways individuals can apply their skills to benefit their communities (Adkisson, 2025). Volunteer board members play a vital role by dedicating their time and expertise to enhance organizational effectiveness and harness information creatively and innovatively to drive success (Arden, 2023; Sung et al., 2023).

According to Allen et al. (2021), adult learners must articulate their purpose to foster personal and professional growth. Consequently, strategically selecting board members with specialized knowledge and skills becomes essential to meeting specific organizational needs effectively (Adkisson, 2021; Harvell, 2024). Ideal board members often possess robust community connections and valuable expertise across fields such as legal, accounting, and human resources (Adkisson, 2021; Harvell, 2024). By integrating individuals with diverse

backgrounds and skills, boards can enhance their capacity to address challenges and seize opportunities, ultimately driving their organizations toward success.

Readiness to Learn

The third principle of andragogy emphasizes adult learners' motivation to confront immediate, real-world challenges (Terrell, 2020). Volunteers in NPOs acquire essential skills and knowledge while expanding their social networks (Sung et al., 2023). Leadership competencies developed through volunteer experience include active listening, advocacy, diplomacy, self-assurance, and organizational leadership (Arden, 2023; Harvell, 2024).

Orientation to Learning

The fourth principle of andragogy is that adults learn through self-directed trial and error (Arden, 2023; Terrell, 2020). Ongoing onboarding processes support relationship development, foster camaraderie, enhance networking opportunities, and cultivate essential skills, such as effective listening and leadership, while collaborating towards shared organizational goals (Arden, 2023; Boardsource, 2023; Harvell, 2024). Recent studies on leadership development confirm that adult learners benefit greatly from acquiring new cognitive frameworks, as examining problems from various perspectives can significantly enhance their leadership capabilities (Day & Dannhäuser, 2024). Furthermore, the self-concept of volunteers includes the social connections and relationships formed with fellow volunteers during collaborative efforts to create innovative solutions (Day & Dannhäuser, 2024).

Internal Motivation

The fifth principle emphasizes the desire to solve problems and apply knowledge and skills to specific challenges (Terrell, 2020). Effective onboarding strategies actively engage

board members by establishing clear, measurable objectives and implementing systems to track progress (Harvell, 2024).

Apply New Knowledge Immediately

Knowles' sixth principle states that adult learners thrive when they can apply newly acquired knowledge or skills immediately (Terrell, 2020). Lifelong learners can be motivated by external factors, such as promotions, career changes, or technological advancements (Arden, 2023). Engaging in lifelong learning enables individuals to develop valuable skills and qualifications relevant to their volunteer roles (Sung et al., 2023). Additionally, NPO volunteers, including board members, can effectively implement the knowledge and skills gained from their learning experiences into their professional activities (Karikari, 2024).

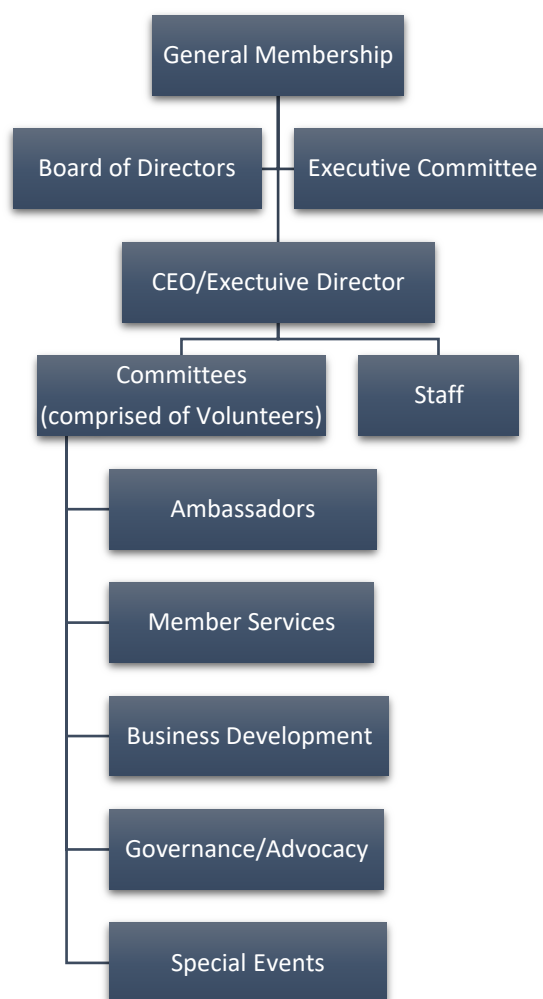
History And Structural Overview of Chambers of Commerce

Chambers of Commerce are vital in advocating for the business community and fostering local economic development (ACCE, 2025b). These organizations comprise local, regional, and national business owners who unite to advance their shared interests (Association of Chamber of Commerce Executives [ACCE], 2025b). They represent private enterprises and act as catalysts for civic and economic advancement. The concept of the Chamber of Commerce originated in 1599 when the first Chamber was established in Marseille, France. In the United States, the inaugural Chamber was founded in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1773. The institution was nationalized in 1912 under President William Howard Taft with the creation of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce (U.S. Chamber of Commerce, 2024). The national body serves as a unifying force, coordinating efforts nationwide and amplifying the collective voice of local Chambers (ACCE, 2025b, p. 2).

Chambers of Commerce are classified as 501(c)(6) nonprofit organizations, which highlights their commitment to their mission and allows them to collect membership fees and donations to support their operations and advocacy efforts on behalf of their members (ACCE, 2025c). The nonprofit 501(c)6 status enables them to charge dues to their members and participate in advocacy activities supporting their business communities (Internal Revenue Service, 2024). Volunteer boards of local business leaders oversee chambers. The nonprofits' strengths lie in their boards, which are composed of dedicated individuals who volunteer their time and expertise to positively impact their communities and improve their leadership skills (BoardSource, 2024b; National Council of Nonprofits, 2025a). Depending on the organization's size and capacity, its leadership structure may include volunteer committees and paid professional staff.

Chambers operate as self-funded entities, emphasizing their autonomy and dedication to promoting business-friendly policies while facilitating local economic development. According to the American Chamber of Commerce Executives (ACCE, 2025a), over 7,500 Chambers across the United States exhibit significant variance in size, staffing, and strategic orientation. All Chambers depend on volunteer leadership, while larger organizations employ professional teams to implement programs, engage stakeholders, and formulate policy (ACCE, 2025a). Figure 1 provides a general organizational chart for Chambers, portraying their structural framework. Small Chambers lacking paid staff tend to operate with a volunteer board of directors, while others may feature a range of committees. Regardless of their size or structure, all Chambers are fundamentally anchored by a governance model that ensures the Board of Directors remains accountable to the general membership, overseeing the Chief Executive Officer (CEO).

Figure 1 - Local Chamber Organizational Chart



Note. Recreated from Association of Chamber of Commerce Executives (ACCE, 2025c)

Local Chambers are not merely passive entities but proactive leaders and initiators of change (ACCE, 2025b). ACCE (2025c) notes that local chambers do not always include paying members of their state and national chambers of commerce; the connection is voluntary and does not extend to the national chamber, which oversees or governs the state or local chambers.

According to the ACCE survey of 2,075 adults in the United States, 81% agree that their local chamber is a trusted resource and partner for businesses. However, 70% of respondents wish

they knew more about their local chamber's community work (ACCE, 2025b). Chambers differ in size and have distinct roles and responsibilities tailored to their specific contexts. These roles can range from small Chambers governed by volunteer boards of directors that may lack paid staff to larger Chambers that employ numerous staff members engaged in various roles to fulfill their mission. The business models and organizational missions of Chambers vary significantly to meet the unique needs of their communities (ACCE, 2025). A frequently cited adage within the Chamber industry asserts, "If you have seen one Chamber, you have seen one Chamber," underscoring the notion that each Chamber, much like each community, has unique characteristics (ACCE, 2025c; Adkisson, 2021).

Leadership Development in Nonprofits

Leadership development is a cornerstone for organizational effectiveness, resilience, and long-term sustainability in the nonprofit sector. Nonprofits play critical roles in addressing social challenges, requiring leaders who are both visionary and pragmatic. Effective leaders must navigate complex operational landscapes to foster growth and innovation (Johnson, 2022; Thomas, 2024). Despite this understanding of leadership's role, many NPOs struggle to enhance their leadership capacity due to limited resources, complex governance structures, and shifting community expectations (Burton, 2022; Johnson, 2022). Many studies agree that addressing these challenges requires investment in comprehensive leadership development initiatives that build skills while fostering adaptability and responsiveness (Carman & Millesen, 2023; Johnson, 2022; Tyler, 2018). By prioritizing leadership development, NPOs can strengthen their capacity to meet rapidly changing demands, ensuring greater impact and sustainability (Johnson, 2022; Seeman et al., 2023). Adaptive and strategic leadership is essential for nonprofit executives. Johnson (2022) identifies adaptability and strategic foresight as key attributes of successful

nonprofit leadership, which aligns with Thomas's (2024) observations regarding the sector's increasing complexity. Jordan et al. (2022) noted that CEOs perceive their leadership style as directly contributing to organizational effectiveness. The findings of the studies highlight the importance of equipping nonprofit leaders to anticipate challenges, adjust strategies, and inspire collective action in uncertain environments (Carman & Millesen, 2023; Thomas, 2024; Tyler, 2018).

Personal accountability and intentional investment in leadership growth emerge as crucial themes. Halliwell et al. (2023) emphasized that sustainable leadership stems from individual commitment to continuous learning. Day and Dannhäuser (2024) reinforce that leadership development is dynamic and requires consistent organizational support. The studies highlighted the dual responsibility of both leaders and organizations in fostering effective leadership (Day & Dannhauser, 2024; Halliwell et al., 2023; Mason & Kim, 2020).

Transformational leadership is often emphasized for its focus on soft skills, like influencing others and nurturing organizational cultures that encourage continuous learning (Horvath et al., 2024; Johnson, 2022). Tyler (2018) and others (Morrison & Greenhaw, 2018; Sneath, 2021; Adkisson, 2021) argued that effective leadership is linked to improved operational performance and social impact. Structured onboarding and professional development programs are crucial for creating internal leadership pipelines. Day and Dannhäuser (2024) emphasize that these initiatives enhance leadership skills and foster organizational cohesion and strategic alignment.

CEOs And Leadership Development

The role of Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) in nonprofit organizations has significantly evolved, broadening in scope and complexity. Traditionally focused on operational management,

today's nonprofit CEOs are expected to engage in strategic foresight and long-term planning, taking on responsibilities that were once primarily handled by boards of directors (Jordan et al., 2022; Mason & Kim, 2020; Seeman et al., 2023). Numerous scholarly studies show that nonprofit CEOs exemplify values-driven leadership, operating in environments characterized by increased accountability and complex demands (Gilmer, 2012; Jordan et al., 2022). These conditions require a wide-ranging skill set, including adaptive leadership and strategic thinking (Adkisson, 2021; Hunter, 2021; Jordan et al., 2022). Tolbert (2024) explains how a lack of leadership skills hampers the CEO's ability to lead effectively, and current leadership training options are limited and do not sufficiently address the challenges and opportunities NPO leaders face. Unfortunately, research indicates that many NPOs do not see leadership development as a valuable investment in their strategic planning (Bozer, 2015; Tyler, 2018).

Nonprofit executives are increasingly responsible for strategic tasks that were traditionally handled by board directors. These tasks include long-term planning, policy leadership, fundraising, and board recruitment (Jordan et al., 2022; Mason & Kim, 2020). Sneath (2020) and Dann (2022) also highlighted that CEOs need to develop diverse skills and maintain a broad knowledge base to stay effective in rapidly changing environments. Research has shown that cultivating leadership skills and developing leaders can take years or even decades and require ongoing effort (Day & Dannhauser, 2024; Gilmer, 2012). This broadening of CEO responsibilities marks a fundamental shift in nonprofit governance, positioning the CEO as a key driver of organizational stability and transformation.

Ceo Competencies

Despite the expanding scope of the CEO role, research indicates persistent deficits in critical competencies, particularly in board governance, public advocacy, and strategic leadership

(Burton, 2022; Johnson, 2022; Mason & Kim, 2020). Many nonprofit executives report stepping into leadership positions without adequate preparation or access to formal training and onboarding that could enhance their effectiveness (Burton, 2022; Hunter, 2021). These gaps are particularly alarming given evidence that CEO capacity is closely linked to organizational performance and mission attainment (Jordan et al., 2022). Hunter (2021) and earlier studies (Bozer et al., 2015) demonstrate that leadership can be developed and taught, although it is complex.

Findings from the Association of Chamber of Commerce Executives (ACCE) further highlighted the shortfall in leadership development. They reveal that 53% of Chambers do not engage in leadership development (ACCE, 2025a). A recurring barrier to CEO development is a lack of time. Studies by Burton (2022), Thomas (2024), and Adkisson (2021) reported that nonprofit executives struggle to participate in reflective learning and professional development due to ongoing operational pressures. Time constraints for CEOs limit opportunities for experiential learning, mentorship, and strategic thinking—components essential for cultivating effective leadership and aligning executive performance with board expectations (Aulgar, 2016; Day & Dannhauser, 2024; Gilmer, 2012). The ACCE Horizon Initiative Report declared that leadership is the most significant factor in ensuring the prosperous future of Chambers (DiSanto, 2021).

Studies show that non-profit organization (NPO) leaders need a broad range of skills, including communication, relationship-building, financial management, strategic planning, human resources, and fundraising (Adkisson, 2021; Thomas, 2024; Tyler, 2018). The chief executive officer (CEO) must demonstrate strong leadership in a complex operational environment by clearly communicating a vision, motivating staff, and making informed

decisions to ensure organizational success (Tyler, 2018). Research by Allen et al. (2022) highlights the importance of soft skills in leadership, while Adkisson (2021) stresses that Chamber CEOs must be adaptable and flexible to respond to changing conditions, all while remaining committed to supporting the interests of the business community.

CEO Continuous Learning

In response to these challenges, scholars advocate for integrating leadership development into the core of daily organizational life. Day and Dannhäuser (2024) proposed an embedded development model where learning is a continuous, workplace-based process. Jordan et al. (2022) support the continuous learning approach, arguing that a wide range of leadership skills—including communication, conflict resolution, strategic planning, and volunteer management—can be most effectively developed through experiential and peer-based learning. Addressing these challenges, scholars recommend leadership development strategies that emphasize both formal and informal learning (Day & Dannhäuser, 2024). Formal training initiatives, such as workshops or certification programs, should complement informal methods like peer learning, mentoring, and experiential learning (Conely, 2022; Halliwell, 2023). Studies have shown that training approaches are most successful when integrated into the organization's culture and supported by the board, fostering a shared commitment to development (Johnson, 2022; Jordan et al., 2022).

In qualitative studies, executives reported that success often hinges on applying lessons learned from professional experiences to complex real-world challenges (Allen et al., 2021; KariKari, 2024). In today's turbulent, fast-changing environment, adaptability and learning are vital leadership traits, enabling CEOs to navigate uncertainty with confidence and creativity (ACCE, 2025b). Knowles' (1975) theory of andragogy provides a valuable framework for

interpreting these findings. Key principles of adult learning, such as self-directedness, the importance of experience, readiness to learn, an orientation to problem-solving, and intrinsic motivation, closely align with the needs of nonprofit CEOs. The emphasis on experiential and autonomous learning resonates with the realities executives face as they synthesize knowledge in complex, real-time contexts. For example, integrating leadership development into daily workflows, as advocated by Day and Dannhäuser (2024), reflects Knowles' principle that adult learning is most effective when it is immediately relevant and problem-centered.

Literature outlines four interconnected themes: (1) the growing responsibilities of nonprofit CEOs, (2) persistent skill gaps and a lack of investment in leadership development, (3) time as a barrier to professional growth, and (4) the importance of nurturing a culture of organizational learning. These findings suggest a need for more intentional, integrated, and adult-learning-focused leadership development practices. There is limited empirical research on board onboarding processes and their connection to CEO leadership development (Day & Dannhäuser, 2024). Few studies have examined the extent to which boards are prepared to support CEO learning or how onboarding can serve as a strategic lever for organizational alignment.

Volunteer Leadership and Lifelong Learning

Volunteers are vital to the operational capacity and sustainability of nonprofit organizations, including Chambers of Commerce (DiSanto, 2021). Numerous studies have emphasized their essential role in mission delivery, organizational governance, and community engagement (Sneath, 2021; Tyler, 2018). A strong correlation exists between lifelong learners' willingness to participate in civic life through volunteering and their ability to collaborate effectively. Conely (2022) supported lifelong learning through a study by DiSanto (2021) on

Chambers, which described how volunteers' roles include serving on the board of directors and various committees. Volunteers support programmatic functions and serve as a crucial pipeline for future leadership within nonprofit organizations. Encouraging volunteer leadership should be regarded as a strategic imperative.

Volunteer Motivation

Volunteering with nonprofits offers opportunities for both civic engagement and personal growth. Tyler (2018) and Arden (2023) emphasized that volunteerism encourages lifelong learning, boosts civic responsibility, and strengthens community ties. These insights align with Knowles' (1975) theory of andragogy, which states that adults are internally motivated and prepared to learn when education is self-directed, experience-based, and relevant to real-life issues. Tolbert's study noted that for any organization to succeed, leaders, volunteers, and staff must be motivated and focused on achieving results. Often managing multiple personal and professional responsibilities, volunteers are most engaged when leadership development opportunities are integrated into their service experience and align with organizational goals. Arden (2023) also linked volunteerism to self-efficacy and skill development, suggesting nonprofits can enhance their impact by viewing volunteer involvement as a resource for task completion and a pathway for leadership development at both the individual and collective levels. This type of development strengthens the organization's leadership pipeline and aids in succession planning.

The literature emphasizes the urgent need for nonprofit organizations to prioritize formal leadership training and onboarding, especially for board members, many of whom are volunteers with limited prior governance experience (Adkisson, 2021; Burton, 2022; National Council of Nonprofits, 2023). Carman and Millesen (2023) and Tyler (2018) argued that a lack of qualified

leadership and minimal board engagement significantly limit organizational effectiveness. These deficits are particularly evident in Chambers of Commerce, where board composition often includes local business community members, many of whom are unfamiliar with nonprofit governance's strategic and fiduciary responsibilities.

Sneath (2021) and BoardSource (2024a) advocate for systematically onboarding volunteer leaders to enhance board functionality. Formal onboarding and ongoing governance education equip new board members with essential knowledge about the mission, structure, legal responsibilities, and advocacy roles, fostering confidence and purpose. Tyler (2018) added that onboarding helps cultivate a shared leadership ethos, allowing stakeholders to see themselves as integral contributors to a collective mission, ultimately improving organizational cohesion and member engagement.

Volunteer Development

Like other nonprofit organizations, Chambers of Commerce depend on volunteers for leadership roles (DiSanto, 2021). Studies indicate that volunteer leadership development offers tangible benefits, including increased engagement, improved organizational performance, and greater community impact (Adkisson, 2021; BoardSource, 2024a; US Chamber of Commerce, 2024b). For instance, Harvell (2024) and Karikari (2024) presented evidence that volunteers who engage in structured onboarding and leadership development initiatives frequently apply their newly gained skills in their professional and civic roles, enhancing the broader societal value of such programs.

Chambers' intentional leadership cultivation strategies demonstrate increased board effectiveness and mission alignment (BoardSource, 2021; Sneath, 2021). These findings

underscored the significance of considering board and volunteer leadership development not as secondary activities but as fundamental strategic functions within organizational design.

Knowles' (1975) principles of adult learning, specifically the emphasis on experiential learning, problem-solving orientation, and intrinsic motivation, provide a compelling framework for shaping volunteer leadership development. Adult learners benefit the most when training is relevant to real-world challenges and when they are granted autonomy in their learning journey. Embedding development opportunities into volunteer roles, as advocated by Sneath (2021) and BoardSource (2024a), promoted retention, deeper engagement, and a stronger leadership culture.

Board Governance and Onboarding Practices

Boards of Directors (BODs) play a crucial and multifaceted role in the governance of nonprofit organizations (NPOs). They serve as the foundational backbone that ensures effective oversight, upholds fiduciary responsibilities, and provides strategic direction (BoardSource, 2024a; Harvell, 2024). As custodians of mission integrity, BODs are key advocates for organizational sustainability, encompassing financial viability, social impact, and community engagement. They are entrusted with numerous essential responsibilities that extend beyond traditional governance functions, including strategic planning, advocacy, and stakeholder relationship-building (Aulgar, 2016).

Many nonprofit organizations (NPOs) tend to operate based on historical precedents and existing practices rather than a clearly articulated governance framework (Aulgar, 2016). This reliance on traditional approaches can hinder an organization's ability to adapt effectively and achieve long-term success in a dynamic, evolving nonprofit environment. To address these issues, boards must establish and clearly define roles and responsibilities for their members, thereby enhancing accountability and overall effectiveness. Furthermore, studies indicate that

challenges in board governance often stem from a lack of experience among board directors, which can lead to persistent governance problems within NPOs (Harvell, 2024; Mason & Kim, 2020). Addressing these issues through targeted training and clear governance policies can foster more adaptable and resilient nonprofit organizations.

Board Challenges

Comprehensive onboarding processes and ongoing engagement initiatives are essential for equipping board members with the knowledge and tools needed to fulfill their responsibilities effectively (Carman & Millesen, 2023). Prioritizing these elements can significantly enhance governance practices, ensuring that boards remain relevant and contribute to the sustained success of their organizations. Many boards face challenges due to a lack of formal onboarding programs and role-specific training (Dann, 2022; Kenny, 2024; Thomas, 2024). Studies show that numerous NPOs do not prioritize board member development, resulting in a sector where individuals frequently lack relevant knowledge (Aulgar, 2016; Sneath, 2021). When board members are not adequately prepared, they risk disengagement, which can compromise effectiveness. Conversely, some members may overstep boundaries, encroaching on staff roles and causing organizational dysfunction (Harvell, 2024; Thomas, 2024). Therefore, strong training and support systems are crucial for equipping board members with essential knowledge while fostering collaboration and accountability.

Effective onboarding is essential for integrating new board members into the organization's mission, culture, and strategic vision (Temkin, 2024). Despite its significance, research indicated gaps in both practice and scholarship regarding the scope and effectiveness of nonprofit board onboarding (Mathews, 2019; Mason & Kim, 2020). Many board members are

confused about their roles, particularly in fundraising, policy advocacy, and long-term strategic planning (Carman & Millesen, 2023; Kenny, 2025; Tyler, 2018).

Onboarding Programs

Various authors emphasized that onboarding programs must go beyond standard orientation sessions and include comprehensive instruction on organizational history, governance structures, mission alignment, legal responsibilities, and the specific functions of committees (BoardSource, 2024b; Carman & Millesen, 2023; Day & Dannhauser, 2024). While many board members show commitment, a considerable number also lack prior experience in governance (Harvell, 2024; Mason & Kim, 2020). The lack of structured and ongoing onboarding can result in role ambiguity, micromanagement, and disengagement, ultimately obstructing organizational growth and mission advancement (Mason & Kim, 2020; Mathews, 2019). Kenny (2025) suggested linking onboarding with continuous leadership development to address these challenges, enabling board members to contribute strategically and meaningfully. A comprehensive approach improves board performance and cultivates a stronger commitment to the organization's goals, ensuring members collaborate toward long-term success and impact (Andrews, 2023; DiSanto, 2021; Kenny, 2025).

Traditional onboarding processes often fail to adequately prepare board members for their roles (Adkisson, 2021; Burton, 2022; Johnson, 2022). Burton (2022) and Johnson (2022) outlined how the standard approach to onboarding is typically superficial. These processes usually rely on a basic review of essential documents such as organizational bylaws, financial statements, and previous meeting minutes. This standard approach to onboarding has increasingly been recognized as insufficient for equipping board members to effectively navigate the complex realities of modern governance (Burton, 2022; Johnson, 2022).

Johnson (2022) argued that an enriched and integrated onboarding experience aligns with the organization's evolving strategic priorities. BoardSource (2024b) also highlights the importance of incorporating historical and strategic planning documents into onboarding but falls short of providing actionable recommendations for continuous governance development. To empower board members, nonprofits must create robust onboarding frameworks that encourage ongoing learning and adaptation. It can be concluded from the literature that a comprehensive onboarding program, including mentorship opportunities, regular training, interactive workshops, and chances for board members to engage with experienced practitioners and thought leaders will enhance leadership effectiveness and their response to sector challenges.

The studies indicated that onboarding should emphasize collaboration and community engagement, encouraging members to participate in local initiatives and events. Incorporating real-world scenarios and case studies can foster critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Andrews, 2023; Arden, 2023; Mason & Kim, 2009). Overall, this multifaceted approach ensures that board members stay informed, innovative, and well-prepared to make strategic decisions aligned with the organization's mission (Arden, 2023). These initiatives ultimately lead to more effective governance, enhanced organizational sustainability, and meaningful community impact.

Chambers of Commerce face unique challenges because their boards often consist of local business leaders who may lack experience in nonprofit governance (Adkisson, 2021; Burton, 2022; National Council of Nonprofits, 2023). Targeted governance training is essential for leveraging board members' expertise while addressing knowledge gaps in nonprofit operations, mission alignment, and fiduciary duties (Kenny, 2025; Arden, 2023). Such programs empower board members to navigate complex governance issues and promote effective leadership, enabling Chambers to better serve their communities. Strategic recruitment that

prioritizes community connections alongside professional skills—such as legal, financial, and human resources expertise—can significantly enhance board effectiveness (Adkisson, 2021; Harvell, 2024). Nonprofits, including Chambers of Commerce, must intentionally develop boards that are both diverse and skilled to meet today’s governance challenges.

Research indicates that investing in ongoing board development builds essential knowledge and fosters a sense of belonging (Carman & Millesen, 2023; Temkin, 2024). Organizations can promote transparency, clarify roles, and cultivate a shared understanding of governance best practices by enhancing onboarding and professional development, resulting in a more effective board (Carman & Millesen, 2023). Improved recruitment and training are crucial to ensure boards can confidently meet contemporary governance demands.

Research shows that clear expectations and ongoing board education are vital for fostering cohesion and retaining members. When roles align with members’ skills, boards are more likely to stay strategically focused and avoid inefficiencies such as mission drift or ineffective fundraising (Kenny, 2025; Humphreys & Johnson, 2017). Structured learning opportunities enhance governance and improve board members’ sense of value and belonging (Mason & Kim, 2020; Kenny, 2025). The CEO’s role in promoting effective governance is critical. Gilmer (2012) emphasized that nonprofit executives need leadership development competencies that include board cultivation. CEOs guide and collaborate to create adaptive, informed, mission-centered governance. Poor onboarding can lead to inefficient boards, role confusion, poor decision-making, and strained staff relationships (Harvell, 2024; Thomas, 2024). Without regular onboarding, boards may struggle to fulfill their fiduciary and strategic responsibilities (Kenny, 2025; Carman & Millesen, 2023).

Board and CEO Relationship

The relationship between the board of directors and the chief executive officer (CEO) in nonprofit organizations is inherently interdependent, and its quality can significantly influence organizational performance and mission achievement. This relationship is especially important in Chambers of Commerce, where both the board and the CEO play crucial roles in advancing the organization's mission and addressing community needs (Adkisson, 2021; Feng et al., 2022). The board and the CEO relationship is often codependent, requiring mutual trust, respect, and strategic alignment to succeed (Feng et al., 2022). Adkisson (2021) emphasized that the CEO is accountable to the board for implementing strategy, maintaining financial oversight, and ensuring mission alignment, while also serving as the primary operational leader responsible for day-to-day management and community engagement. This duality can lead to tensions if not managed effectively.

A unique challenge within Chambers of Commerce is the frequent rotation of board chairs, which can introduce constant shifts in leadership styles, priorities, and expectations that the CEO must navigate (Adkisson, 2021). Each new board chair brings a distinct leadership approach, occasionally causing misalignment between the CEO's long-term vision and the board's evolving strategic priorities. This dynamic necessitates the CEO to develop high levels of adaptability, political acumen, and interpersonal skills to maintain consistency and organizational momentum despite changing leadership at the board level (Feng et al., 2022). Effective communication and clear delineation of roles and responsibilities are crucial for building a strong board-CEO partnership (Feng et al., 2022). Thomas (2024) noted that CEOs often have a deep understanding of daily operations, while board members may focus more on governance and strategic oversight. This divergence can lead to misunderstandings if not

addressed through open dialogue, collaborative goal setting, and consistent communication channels. Role clarity helps prevent board micromanagement and ensures the CEO can focus on leadership and organizational strategy (Thomas, 2024).

Trust between the board and the CEO forms the foundation of a productive relationship. When boards trust the CEO's leadership and expertise, they are more likely to delegate authority effectively, allowing the CEO to make operational decisions and implement the organization's strategy (National Council of Nonprofits, 2025). Conversely, a lack of trust can lead to micromanagement, conflict, and organizational dysfunction, ultimately hindering mission fulfillment (Thomas, 2024). A collaborative partnership between the board and CEO enhances strategic alignment and fosters a shared sense of purpose. By collaborating on strategic planning, program development, and community engagement initiatives, the board and CEO can leverage their complementary skills and perspectives to drive organizational effectiveness (Feng et al., 2022). The National Council of Nonprofits (2025) emphasized that a healthy board-CEO relationship is characterized by open communication, mutual accountability, and a shared commitment to the organization's mission and values.

The CEO actively facilitates effective governance practices by supporting the board in its development and engagement. Gilmer (2012) underscored that nonprofit executives must possess leadership competencies, including fostering board development and onboarding new members. The CEO often serves as a guide and partner, helping board members understand their roles, responsibilities, and the organization's strategic priorities (Gilmer, 2012). The CEO can build trust, enhance transparency, and strengthen the board's capacity to govern effectively through regular updates, strategic briefings, and collaborative planning sessions. Even in strong partnerships, conflicts may arise between the CEO and the board due to differing perspectives or

interpretations of the organization's needs (Thomas, 2024). Proactive conflict management, such as open dialogue, facilitated discussions, and clearly defined processes for resolving disagreements, can help mitigate these challenges. Feng et al. (2022) recommend establishing conflict resolution protocols and encouraging a culture of respect and constructive feedback to maintain a positive working relationship.

Ultimately, the success of nonprofit organizations, including Chambers of Commerce, significantly depends on the quality of the board-CEO relationship. A collaborative and respectful partnership fosters organizational stability, promotes adaptability, and enhances overall mission effectiveness (Adkisson, 2021; National Council of Nonprofits, 2025). Conversely, strained relationships characterized by micromanagement, conflicting expectations, or a lack of trust can impede the CEO's ability to lead effectively and may undermine the organization's impact in the community (Thomas, 2024). Building and maintaining a strong board-CEO relationship is crucial for effective governance and organizational success. Strategies such as clear roles, mutual trust, ongoing communication, and conflict resolution can cultivate a productive partnership that allows the organization to flourish in a dynamic and challenging environment.

Impact of Leadership on Organizational Outcomes

Membership-based nonprofit organizations face ongoing challenges in staying relevant and in attracting and retaining new members within a competitive and dynamic landscape (Andrews, 2023; DiSanto, 2021). Effective leadership is vital for navigating these challenges and achieving positive organizational outcomes, such as membership growth, member satisfaction, and community engagement. Andrews (2023) examined the impact of nonprofit leadership on membership organizations, emphasizing how strategic leadership practices directly influence

both membership growth and community involvement. Nonprofit entities, like Chambers of Commerce, should adopt continuous management strategies to improve membership engagement and ensure long-term sustainability (Andrews, 2023; DiSanto, 2021).

DiSanto (2021) identified six key strategies that Chambers of Commerce should implement to drive sustainable growth. These strategies are: (1) providing relevant programs and services to support existing members, (2) offering valuable benefits that distinguish the organization from competitors, (3) prioritizing strategic planning to align goals and resources, (4) fostering a welcoming and inclusive community culture, (5) maintaining effective communication to keep members engaged and informed, and (6) continually evaluating and adapting to member needs and market trends. These strategies emphasize the importance of leadership that is both proactive and responsive to members' evolving needs. Andrews (2023) stresses that significant organizational change often arises from making small, ongoing adjustments that accumulate over time, reflecting a gradual approach to change management.

Seeman et al. (2023) highlighted that every employee and volunteer in a nonprofit organization requires specific skills and competencies to perform well in their roles. Their study emphasizes the importance of leadership that sets a good example and demonstrates key leadership skills necessary for organizational success. These skills include adaptability, which helps leaders respond effectively to changing conditions; collaboration, which promotes teamwork and synergy; communication, which ensures that vision and goals are clearly conveyed across the organization; mission alignment, which connects daily activities to the overall organizational purpose; decision-making, which advances progress and solves problems; and strategic thinking, which anticipates future opportunities and challenges (Seeman et al.,

2023). Investing in developing these leadership skills among current and future leaders is essential for long-term success and sustainability.

Literature indicates that leadership has a cascading effect on organizational culture and outcomes. Leaders who demonstrate adaptability and collaboration foster an environment where innovation and collective problem-solving thrive, promoting higher levels of employee and volunteer engagement (Seeman et al., 2023). Effective communication and mission orientation also contribute to achieving greater alignment between staff, volunteers, and organizational objectives, ultimately enhancing the organization's capacity to fulfill its mission and goals (Andrews, 2023; DiSanto, 2021).

In conclusion, leadership plays a vital role in driving the growth, sustainability, and effectiveness of membership-based nonprofit organizations. By implementing strategic leadership practices, investing in leadership development, and fostering a culture of continuous improvement, nonprofit organizations can better navigate external challenges, attract and retain members, and achieve their mission-driven objectives (Andrews, 2023; DiSanto, 2021; Seeman et al., 2023).

Financial Constraints on Leadership Development

Nonprofit organizations (NPOs) are inherently mission-driven rather than profit-oriented; however, they must still demonstrate accountability, financial stewardship, and operational effectiveness to sustain their missions (Gilmer, 2012; Kenny, 2025). Financial constraints are among the most significant challenges facing NPOs, especially smaller organizations and local chambers of commerce. Many NPOs, including chambers, rely heavily on restricted funding sources such as membership dues, events, and sponsorships, which makes it challenging to

allocate resources to leadership development, onboarding, and succession planning (Kenny, 2025; Mathews, 2019).

The 2024 Chamber Salary Survey, conducted by the Association of Chamber of Commerce Executives (ACCE, 2025a), highlighted the financial challenges that smaller chambers face in securing funds for professional development. Over 50% of responding chambers reported annual budgets below \$450,000, and CEO salaries frequently fell below \$72,000. The ACCE study (2025a) illustrated the constrained fiscal environment in which many chambers operate. With limited discretionary funding, these organizations often prioritize direct program delivery and essential operations over investments in internal capacity building, such as training, professional development, or leadership succession planning (ACCE, 2025a; Gilmer, 2012).

Nonprofits often face challenges attracting and retaining top talent because of salary disparities compared to the for-profit sector. Many nonprofit CEOs and senior leaders are motivated by the intrinsic rewards of mission-driven work, yet they must manage high workloads with relatively low compensation (Gilmer, 2012; Kenny, 2025). These challenges become more pronounced during economic uncertainty, when private and public funding may decline because of inflation, market fluctuations, or changing donor and consumer behavior (Kenny, 2025).

Kenny (2025) observed that financial uncertainty has made it difficult for chambers to maintain effective onboarding practices or make significant investments in leadership development programs. Additionally, chambers that depend heavily on membership dues face challenges justifying and financing ongoing development efforts amid stagnant or declining revenue. Insufficient investment in professional development can create gaps in organizational knowledge, weaken board governance, and hinder strategic planning capacity (Mathews, 2019;

Sneath, 2021). Despite these financial challenges, some scholars argue that leadership development should be viewed not as an expense but as a strategic investment with long-term benefits. Sneath (2021) supported this view, highlighting the importance of investing in leadership capacity. Kenny (2025) also endorsed the mindset of investing in leadership, adding that smaller chambers need to improve organizational effectiveness, strengthen governance, and become more adaptable to external challenges. Instead of delaying development initiatives over budget concerns, chambers and NPOs are encouraged to adopt low-cost, high-impact development activities such as peer learning, mentorship, and board-led training (Day & Dannhäuser, 2024; Harvell, 2024).

A cultural shift is crucial to view leadership development as a core function of organizational sustainability rather than just an additional activity. The cultural shift paradigm recognizes that investing in the leadership abilities of staff, CEOs, and volunteers directly contributes to mission accomplishment and organizational resilience (Gilmer, 2012; Jordan et al., 2022). In resource-constrained environments, innovative strategies such as shared services, collaborations with other NPOs, and the use of technology for virtual training can help bridge the leadership development gap (BoardSource, 2024a; ACCE, 2025a).

While financial barriers persist, the literature suggests that strategic thinking and innovation provide pathways for chambers and other NPOs to prioritize leadership development, even in constrained fiscal environments. By reframing professional development as essential to organizational health, chambers can strengthen their leadership pipeline and enhance their long-term impact (Kenny, 2025; Gilmer, 2012).

Summary and Knowledge Gap

The literature for this research highlighted the significance of leadership development and structured onboarding for nonprofit CEOs, volunteers, and board members. Although there is increasing attention on leadership development within nonprofit environments, considerable knowledge gaps remain, particularly regarding the diversity and effectiveness of onboarding practices in chambers of commerce.

Significant knowledge gaps remain, particularly regarding the variability of onboarding practices among chambers of commerce. Although there is a consensus on the benefits of such practices, practical implementation is often hindered by financial constraints, a lack of time, and inadequate organizational infrastructure (Burton, 2022; Gilmer, 2012; Thomas, 2024). Further investigation is necessary, especially about how chambers of commerce utilize or adopt onboarding strategies and adult learning principles in various local contexts. Understanding these dynamics will provide valuable insight into what constitutes effective leadership development and how these practices can be scaled and sustained within resource-limited nonprofit organizations.

Chapter three details the research methodology for examining onboarding and leadership development practices within chambers of commerce organizations. It conducts a collaborative analysis of these practices, building on the findings and gaps identified in the literature review. The focus is on how chambers implement structured onboarding, promote leadership development, and apply learning principles.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The problem this study addressed is that more than half of Chamber of Commerce (Chamber) boards in the U.S. receive little to no leadership onboarding or board development. The purpose of this comparative qualitative case study analyzed why some chambers are onboarding and developing their Boards of Directors, while others are not, and to explore effective onboarding and development strategies for Chamber boards (ACCE, 2025a; Burton, 2022). The purpose of this comparative qualitative case study investigated the imbalance in onboarding and development practices among different Chambers, aiming to explain why some Chambers successfully implement effective onboarding and develop their Boards of Directors, while others do not. I explored effective onboarding and development methodologies applicable to Chamber boards. Chambers play a crucial role in advancing local economic vitality and enhancing community quality of life by advocating for business interests, supporting retention initiatives, promoting tourism, and facilitating community engagement (Association of Chamber of Commerce Executives [ACCE], 2025b). Given their sizable impact on local communities, Chambers hold a vital position as the focus of this research. The effective functioning of Chambers of Commerce depends heavily on the leadership of executive leaders and board members, who are essential in guiding the organization's mission and vision (Carman & Millesen, 2023; Tyler, 2018).

Effective leadership development is crucial for the success of these organizations (Carman & Millesen, 2023; Harvell, 2024). Unfortunately, many chambers face challenges in onboarding and training, primarily due to limited knowledge among board members (Hunter, 2021; Kenny, 2025). Alarming reports indicate that 53% of chambers lack leadership development programs (ACCE, 2025a), and 73% of Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) report no

formal board training (Burton, 2022). These deficiencies in onboarding and leadership development lead to governance challenges and organizational dysfunction (BoardSource, 2024a; Dann, 2022; Harvell, 2024). Additionally, the underutilization of adult learning principles, especially Knowles's andragogy, continues to be an issue within nonprofit governance frameworks (Arden, 2023). There is a significant lack of empirical studies examining the impact of contextual factors on chamber leadership practices (DiSanto, 2021).

The chapter comprehensively describes the research methodology employed in the qualitative comparative case studies. The chapter includes detailed information on the target population, sampling strategies, and data collection instruments. Additionally, the chapter elaborates on the study procedures, underlying assumptions, potential limitations, delimitations, and ethical considerations. The appendix contains essential documents such as the letter to participants, the informed consent form, and the interview protocols tailored for CEOs and members of the Board of Directors.

Research Methodology and Design

Qualitative research offers a strong framework for exploring complex social phenomena, emphasizing depth, contextual understanding, and participants' lived experiences (Dinka, 2025; Gounder, 2025). In contrast to quantitative methodologies that mainly focus on statistical generalizability, qualitative approaches seek to clarify the "what," "how," and "why" of specific issues (Rogo, 2024). This orientation makes qualitative research especially appropriate for the current study, enabling me to examine onboarding and leadership development practices within Chambers of Commerce.

I used a case study design to conduct a comparative analysis of eight to ten Chambers of Commerce. The chambers will be classified into two groups based on their implementation status

regarding formal onboarding and leadership development practices. The case study method is beneficial as it enabled me to investigate real-world phenomena across diverse organizational contexts while maintaining analytical depth (Yin, 2018). Participants will include Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) and board members from each chamber. Including both perspectives is essential for fostering a comprehensive understanding of onboarding protocols and leadership development practices, as well as recognizing potential strategies that CEOs might use to enhance these functions.

As Yin (2016) emphasized, the case study method allows researchers to investigate contemporary events within real-world settings delimited by well-defined parameters. In accordance with this methodology, chambers will be chosen to represent a range of organizational sizes, structures, and resource availability. According to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce (2024a), some chambers are governed entirely by volunteer boards, while others may employ one or more paid staff members. Additionally, many chambers involve non-board volunteers in committee work, adding another layer of organizational complexity.

Among the five case study designs, historical, phenomenological, grounded theory, ethnographic, and the case study itself, the case study approach is deemed most appropriate for this research (Yin, 2018). A historical study investigates past events (Bischoff, 2020; Hussein, 2023) and was excluded because the problem under investigation is ongoing. A phenomenological study aims to explore individual experiences and emotions (Sinclair, 2023). While considered as a potential approach, it was ultimately rejected because I deemed it more beneficial to compare experiences across different Chambers of Commerce. Grounded theory examines how individuals navigate social issues (Dahwa, 2023), but this method was dismissed since the study does not focus on a specific social issue. Ethnography involves immersion within

a particular culture (Dahal et al., 2025). Although businesses possess varying cultures, Chambers of Commerce are characterized by similarities yet also exhibit significant differences (ACCE, 2025c; Adkisson, 2021). Resulting in ethnography being deemed unsuitable due to the absence of a singular cultural context. Conversely, the case study methodology enables an in-depth analysis of a person, group, community, or institution through multiple data sources, including observations, interviews, and document analysis (Dahal et al., 2025). Runeson and Host (2008) noted that case studies offer a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter.

For this study, the case study approach allowed me to conduct one-on-one semi-structured, open-ended interviews, with the possibility of asking follow-up questions for clarification throughout the conversations (Yin, 2018). This data collection strategy will facilitate the collection of detailed narratives, enabling meaningful comparisons between chambers that have implemented structured onboarding processes and those that have not. Through this approach, I generated actionable insights that inform effective leadership strategies within the chamber industry, while also acknowledging that factors such as time constraints and CEO expertise can significantly influence these processes.

Population and Sample

According to Yin (2018), a case study can examine an individual, a group, an entity, or even services within a specific area. For this study, the case focuses on the nonprofit Chamber of Commerce industry (one case). The study included eight to ten units of analysis from different chambers of various sizes across the United States. I striven to have a balanced sample to cover chambers that do and do not onboard. According to the United States Chamber of Commerce (U.S. Chamber of Commerce, 2024), there are more than 7,500 chambers in the United States, and only 17% of them are members of the Association of Chamber of Commerce Professionals

(ACCE, 2025a), which provides access to tools and resources to help build better boards and support leadership development for CEOs.

The target population for this qualitative study includes professionals affiliated with Chambers of Commerce, particularly those in leadership roles such as Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) and board members. These participants are ideally positioned to provide insights into onboarding practices and leadership development within their organizations. A purposive sampling strategy will ensure a balanced selection of cases that represent a diverse cross-section of Chambers of Commerce across the United States. This approach is appropriate for qualitative research that aims for depth and richness of data rather than statistical generalization (Braun & Clarke, 2009). Case selection will also consider organizational characteristics to capture variation across contexts. These criteria will include Chamber size (e.g., small, mid-sized, or large) based on operating budget, geographic region, and the extent to which the Chamber engages in structured onboarding and leadership development activities. Such diversity in the sample will enhance the study's ability to generate insights applicable to a wide range of chamber models and operational environments.

Participants were recruited from a private professional Facebook group titled "Chamber of Commerce Professionals," which encompasses approximately 1,200 members globally. I, asked permission from the group's administrator to distribute a letter that outlines the project's scope and solicits volunteer participants. This platform provides access to a focused, relevant pool of practitioners, thereby increasing the likelihood of recruiting individuals with direct experience and substantial contextual knowledge of the phenomena under investigation. Eligibility criteria stipulate that participants must currently hold, or have previously held, a position as either Chief Executive Officer (CEO) or as a board member.

The sample size for this study was sixteen (16) participants, representing nine Chambers of Commerce. Most participating Chambers had two participants: one Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and one board member. This approach ensures a balanced and comprehensive analysis of internal leadership dynamics and governance processes. All participants either currently hold or have previously held senior leadership positions, qualifying them to provide valuable insights into strategic planning, organizational culture, and leadership development initiatives.

By drawing on perspectives from Chambers with varying budget sizes, the study aims to develop a nuanced understanding of how leadership development and onboarding are approached across the sector. Purposive sampling, combined with targeted recruitment from a specialized professional network, supports methodological rigor and ensures the collection of data that is both contextually rich and analytically valuable.

Instrumentation

This researcher used semi-structured interviews as the primary method for data collection. Semi-structured interviews are particularly effective for qualitative research because they use open-ended questions that encourage detailed, reflective responses and allow follow-up and probing to explore emerging themes (Dinka, 2025; Gounder, 2025). The interview protocol will consist of specific sets of open-ended questions tailored to each participant group: Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) (See Appendix C) and board members (See Appendix D), ensuring that each inquiry is relevant and appropriate. Differentiating the questions for CEOs and board members facilitates the exploration of their unique perspectives, responsibilities, and experiences related to onboarding and leadership development. This tailored approach promotes open discussion, encourages rich narrative responses, and supports methodological triangulation by integrating multiple viewpoints within each case.

To ensure the validity and clarity of the interview questions, a subject-matter expert (SME) from the chamber industry will review the entire set. The SME will evaluate the instrument for potential bias and provide feedback to me to ensure the questions are phrased to elicit the most informative and relevant data possible. The interview protocols will be revised as needed in response to SME input.

Study Procedures

I engaged volunteer participants recruited from the Chamber of Commerce Professionals' private Facebook group, pending Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. I collected demographic information. Recruitment will begin with a formal invitation posted by the group's site administrator, in accordance with protocol (see Appendix A). The invitation will include a summary of the study's purpose, eligibility requirements for participants, and clear instructions for expressing interest in participation.

Data collection will use semi-structured interviews to guide the inquiry while remaining flexible in exploring participants' experiences, perceptions, and organizational practices. This approach aligns with qualitative best practices and is particularly effective at eliciting a comprehensive understanding of complex social and organizational phenomena (Yin, 2016). Interested individuals will complete a brief screening questionnaire to determine eligibility against predetermined inclusion criteria. These criteria include professional affiliation with a Chamber of Commerce and current or prior leadership experience, such as serving as a CEO or a board member. Eligible respondents will be asked to provide their contact information to facilitate scheduling interviews.

After confirming eligibility, participants received an informed consent form outlining the study's purpose, data collection procedures, measures to ensure confidentiality, and the voluntary

nature of participation. Once participants returned their e-signed consent forms, individual semi-structured interviews were scheduled via Zoom at mutually agreed-upon times. At the start of each interview, I provided an oral review of the critical components of the consent form. This included discussing the participant's right to withdraw from the study at any time, which is essential to uphold the principle of ongoing informed consent (see Appendix B). This approach is intended to reaffirm participants' understanding and voluntary agreement to participate in the study.

Data were gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom or Microsoft Teams, allowing me to observe participants' facial expressions. I will download only the auto-generated transcripts of spoken words, not the video files. The transcripts were then de-identified by replacing participant names and locations with pseudonyms. This digital platform enables participation from various locations and fosters a conversational style, improving rapport and engagement among participants. Interviews are expected to last approximately forty-five (45) minutes. With participants' consent, interviews will be recorded and transcribed verbatim. All identifying details will be anonymized during transcription to protect confidentiality. The procedures are carefully designed to adhere to ethical research standards, safeguard participant confidentiality, and maintain methodological rigor throughout recruitment, consent, and data collection. Additionally, all transcripts will be de-identified to ensure confidentiality and ethical compliance.

Data Analysis

I used thematic analysis to interpret and derive meaning from qualitative interview data. Thematic analysis is a foundational technique in qualitative inquiry that provides a flexible yet systematic framework for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns, referred to as themes,

within textual data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2009). It enabled me to explore participants' lived experiences and perceptions in depth, yielding nuanced insights into complex organizational and social phenomena.

The analytical process began with a data familiarization phase and open coding. During this stage, I read the transcribed interviews thoroughly to identify and label preliminary codes that capture meaningful features of the data. Subsequently, these codes will be reviewed, refined, and organized into broader categories, developing into cohesive themes and subthemes through a process of constant comparison and iterative reflection.

I used NVivo 15 to manage and organize qualitative data. NVivo facilitates the storage, coding, and retrieval of large volumes of textual data, thereby enhancing analytical efficiency and deepening the interpretive process. Furthermore, the software offers visual tools such as word clouds, cluster maps, and matrix coding queries to assist in developing and presenting thematic findings.

Data triangulation will strengthen the study's credibility and trustworthiness (Yin, 2016). This process involved utilizing multiple data sources, specifically, various perspectives within each Chamber of Commerce, including CEOs and board members. Triangulation helps to validate emerging themes and enhances the study's transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Terrell, 2020). Engaging multiple informants from each organization facilitates cross-verification of findings and minimizes the influence of single-source bias.

An essential element of qualitative rigor is reflexivity, which requires researchers to critically evaluate their positionality and its potential impact on the research process. Bias remains an inherent challenge in qualitative inquiry because of the subjective nature of human interpretation (Jones & Donmoyer, 2021). Therefore, I adopted a reflexive stance throughout the

study, engaging in continuous self-assessment and documenting personal assumptions, values, and experiences that may shape data interpretation (Ide & Beddoe, 2024). Ultimately, this approach to thematic analysis, enhanced by technological tools, triangulation strategies, and reflective practices, yielded robust, credible, and insightful findings that deepen understanding of leadership and onboarding practices within Chambers of Commerce.

Assumptions

Assumptions are a foundational element of any research endeavor and are often understood as beliefs accepted as accurate without empirical verification, which can lead to potential misunderstandings (Ellis & Levy, 2009). Ellis and Levy (2009) recommend that researchers explicitly document these assumptions to reduce misinterpretations and resistance to research findings. This study is based on several key assumptions. The first assumption is that participants are expected to provide genuine responses, which is crucial in qualitative research, as the results largely depend on participant input (Yin, 2018).

Secondly, it is anticipated that Chief Executive Officer (CEO) participants will actively disclose their experiences with the onboarding of their board members and with facilitating leadership development, including the time, knowledge, and skills involved. This expectation is based on the assumption that CEOs typically engage in the onboarding of their board of directors. Thirdly, it is anticipated that limitations exist regarding professional development opportunities due to constraints related to time and financial resources. Fourthly, it is expected that volunteer board members will share their experiences during the onboarding process, including recommendations for enhancing ongoing onboarding procedures and initiatives focused on leadership development. These components are essential for improving the overall experience and effectiveness of board members.

In conclusion, it is essential for the audio and video recordings to accurately reflect the perspectives of all participants, their boards, and the dynamics of leadership development. Furthermore, it is expected that the volunteer board members will openly share their onboarding experiences, evaluate the effectiveness of the onboarding process, and express how standardized onboarding and leadership development programs can enhance their overall board experience and effectiveness.

Limitations

Acknowledging study limitations is essential for providing a balanced and transparent account of the research process. Limitations represent inherent constraints that may influence the study's findings but often lie beyond the direct control of the researcher (Ellis & Levy, 2009; Galvans, 2023). Recognizing these constraints allows for a more nuanced interpretation of results and supports the study's credibility and trustworthiness. Strategies can be implemented where possible to minimize the impact of these limitations and enhance the study's reliability and validity (Galvans, 2023).

One significant limitation of Chamber Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) is the time constraint. Chamber CEOs are often required to manage multiple responsibilities within their organizations (Adkisson, 2021), which can create substantial time pressures. Although some CEOs possess the skills and knowledge to effectively facilitate board onboarding and leadership development, they frequently encounter challenges in consistently implementing such initiatives. Another limitation relates to researcher bias, a prevalent concern in qualitative research. This bias may manifest through misinterpretation or inconsistent coding of participant responses, as well as the potential influence of the researcher's presence or demeanor on participants' answers (Knight, 2024). To mitigate these concerns, the present study will use reflexive journaling and

triangulation, as previously discussed, to enhance objectivity and minimize potential bias during data collection and interpretation. By recognizing and addressing these limitations, I upheld the principles of methodological rigor and transparency, thereby ensuring credible and contextually grounded conclusions.

Delimitations

Delimitations are the intentional boundaries established by the researcher to refine the scope of a study, thereby enhancing its focus and feasibility (Galvans, 2023). These parameters indicate what the study will address and omit, thereby clarifying the scope of inquiry and identifying the variables, populations, and contexts excluded from consideration (Ellis & Levy, 2009). This investigation examines the lived experiences of Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) and board members regarding onboarding and leadership development within Chambers of Commerce. The research uses qualitative inquiry to evaluate leadership effectiveness, explicitly omitting quantitative measures such as statistical analyses or numerical data. It prioritizes depth of understanding over breadth or generalizability by focusing exclusively on qualitative insights.

I focused exclusively on Chambers of Commerce within the organizational context. While many nonprofit organizations face governance and leadership challenges, other types of nonprofits were deliberately excluded from this research to maintain contextual consistency. This delimitation ensures that the findings are relevant and tailored to the unique structures and operational dynamics of Chambers of Commerce. Additionally, the research is geographically limited to the United States. Although Chambers of Commerce operate globally, this study does not include international contexts, acknowledging that cultural, regulatory, and organizational differences may impede the applicability of findings beyond U.S. borders.

Participant selection used a purposive sampling strategy targeting nine (9) Chambers of Commerce, resulting in sixteen (16) participants. Only individuals currently or previously serving in senior leadership roles, such as CEOs and board members, will be included. As a result, the perspectives of other stakeholders (e.g., staff, volunteers, or committee members) are outside the scope of this research. While these delimitations enhance the study's focus and coherence, they also limit the generalizability of its findings. The results will provide in-depth insights into the selected sample rather than represent all Chambers of Commerce across various regions or organizational models.

Ethical Assurances

Ethical considerations are essential to the integrity and credibility of this qualitative research study. In line with established ethical research practices, special attention will be given to informed consent, confidentiality, participant autonomy, and data security (Yin, 2016). Before data collection begins, approval will be obtained from the National University Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure full compliance with institutional and federal research standards.

Each participant received a detailed informed consent form via email (see Appendix B) outlining the study's purpose, the nature of participation, associated risks and benefits, data usage, and participants' rights, including the right to withdraw without penalty. Participation is entirely voluntary. Consent was documented via signed forms, and interviews will be scheduled only after participants confirm their understanding and agreement.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom after a preliminary screening questionnaire and participant confirmation. Before each interview, I reviewed the consent form with each participant, allowing time for questions or concerns. The pre-interview protocol is designed to ensure informed, voluntary participation in accordance with ethical research

guidelines. Confidentiality and participant privacy are paramount in this study. Each participant was assigned a numerical identifier to protect their anonymity; their actual names will be known only to the principal investigator. The final report and any published findings will not include personally identifiable information. Direct quotations and referenced insights will be attributed only to participant numbers (e.g., Participant 3, Participant 7). All data, including written notes, interview transcripts, and audio or video recordings, will be securely stored. Physical documents will be kept in a locked, fireproof safe. Electronic records will be stored on a password-protected, encrypted computer connected to a secure private Wi-Fi network. Access to these files will be restricted to the researcher.

I acknowledged the subjective nature of qualitative inquiry and the potential influence of bias. The primary instrument for data collection and interpretation will maintain a reflexive stance throughout the research process (Gounder, 2025; Dinka, 2025). Reflexivity involves critical self-awareness of personal values, experiences, and assumptions that may affect participant interactions or data analysis. This self-monitoring practice will be documented through research memos and analytical journaling, enhancing methodological transparency and ethical rigor. By implementing these safeguards, the study upholds the principles of respect, beneficence, and justice, ensuring that all participants are treated ethically and that their contributions are honored with the utmost care and professionalism.

Summary

This qualitative multiple-case study investigated disparities in onboarding procedures and leadership development practices among Chambers of Commerce throughout the United States. With a vast network of over 7,500 chambers, a significant portion (53%) report having minimal or no leadership development initiatives (ACCE, 2025a). This study elucidates the factors

contributing to this variability and outlines effective onboarding and board development strategies. The research is grounded in adult learning theory, particularly Knowles's (1975) andragogical framework, highlighting the critical role of leadership in enhancing the efficacy of nonprofit organizations (Carmen & Millesen, 2023; Harvell, 2024).

Using purposive sampling, the study recruited sixteen participants from a professional Facebook group of CEOs and board members affiliated with six to eight Chambers of Commerce. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom, which will enable in-depth exploration of leadership practices and the contextual factors influencing the onboarding and board development processes.

The anticipated findings clarify the reasons for the varying priorities of chambers regarding leadership development (RQ1), explain the methods by which CEOs can acquire skills that enhance governance, and evaluate the impact of effective onboarding on board member performance (RQ2). Significant challenges include financial constraints, insufficient executive training, and organizational diversity (Burton, 2022; Kenny, 2025; Hunter, 2021). I will adhere to strict ethical standards, including obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality, and securely managing all collected data (Yin, 2016).

This research contributes to the growing literature on nonprofit board development by providing actionable insights for Chamber leadership seeking to enhance governance practices. Chapter Four will present the study's findings, offering a comparative analysis of successful and underperforming onboarding and development strategies and outlining best practices tailored to the unique context of Chamber boards.

Chapter 4: Findings

The problem this study addressed is that more than half of Chamber of Commerce (Chamber) boards in the U.S. receive little to no leadership onboarding or board development. The purpose of this comparative qualitative case study analyzed why some chambers are onboarding and developing their Boards of Directors, while others are not, and to explore effective onboarding and development strategies for Chamber boards (ACCE, 2025a; Burton, 2022).

A qualitative case study approach was employed to explore the perspectives of volunteer Chamber of Commerce CEOs and board members regarding board onboarding and development practices. Participants provided informed consent prior to participation in the study. To ensure confidentiality, all participant names and organizational identifiers were anonymized to protect privacy and security.

Triangulation was used to enhance the credibility, depth, and reliability of the study by incorporating multiple data sources. Specifically, two participants were selected from each Chamber of Commerce, the Chief Executive Officer and one board member, allowing for comparison of perspectives across leadership roles and strengthening the trustworthiness of the findings. This research inquiry examined factors influencing variation in board onboarding and leadership development practices across Chambers of Commerce. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with CEOs and board members from eight chambers located in Massachusetts, Michigan, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Texas, and Washington.

The chapter outlines the data's trustworthiness and presents results derived from themes that emerged from the interviews. These themes are illustrated with supporting quotes and

findings from both CEOs and board members. The chapter concludes with the hypotheses related to research questions one and two, a brief evaluation of the findings, and a summary.

Trustworthiness of the Data

Research indicates that trustworthiness in qualitative research includes four key criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Ahmed, 2024, p. 1). Clarifying these criteria emphasizes the study's rigor and helps engage the audience by highlighting the measures taken to ensure integrity. Jones and Donmoyer (2020) discuss the challenges editors and reviewers face in evaluating potential researcher bias (p. 890). According to Ahmed (2024), credibility is strengthened through triangulation, engagement with participants, and the collection of rich, comprehensive data. In this study, credibility was supported by gathering perspectives from both Chamber of Commerce CEOs and board members. Triangulation was further enhanced by providing detailed explanations of data interpretation and analysis (Ahmed, 2024). Specifically, triangulation was achieved by collecting multiple viewpoints within each Chamber of Commerce through interviews with the CEO and one board member.

Confirmability refers to the extent to which findings are shaped by participants rather than researcher bias or personal preferences (Ahmed, 2024). To demonstrate this, confirmability was supported by triangulating interview data from CEOs and board members. Data were gathered through confidential one-on-one interviews with the CEO (Executive Director) and one board member from each Chamber. Dependability, which aligns with reliability in qualitative research, was established through transparency in research procedures and thorough documentation of the study process (Ahmed, 2024, p. 2). Triangulation also contributed to dependability by incorporating perspectives from both the operational leadership level (CEO) and the policy and strategic governance level (Board).

The study included eight randomly selected Chambers of Commerce from across the United States. Sixteen individuals voluntarily participated in the study: nine CEOs or Executive Directors and seven volunteer board members. All interviews were conducted individually and virtually. Each CEO was asked the same set of questions, and each board member was asked a separate but parallel set of questions (see Appendices C and D). The diverse sampling approach was intended to support the transferability of the findings, encouraging confidence in their relevance to similar nonprofit contexts.

Participants received an email containing the consent form, which was reviewed at the start of each interview. They verbally acknowledged and accepted the informed consent terms on audio recording before any questions were asked or recorded. To ensure their comfort and trust, all transcripts and recordings are stored securely and are accessible only to the researcher. These materials will be retained for four years to maintain a complete audit trail of the collected data. Purposive sampling was used to include diverse perspectives, thereby enhancing the transferability of the findings to similar nonprofit contexts..

Results

The data analysis process began with a systematic review of each interview transcript. Multiple readings were conducted to develop a comprehensive understanding of the data. During this process, meaningful text segments were highlighted and coded to capture key concepts and patterns. Codes with similar meanings were then grouped into broader themes, including onboarding, board understanding, and leadership development. Recognizing these themes underscores their importance to nonprofit success, which should resonate with interest in organizational development (Carmen & Millesen, 2023; Harvell, 2024). Prior research has also indicated that chambers experience challenges in onboarding and training board members due to

limited board member knowledge (Hunter, 2021; Kenny, 2025). Each theme was systematically reviewed and refined to ensure accuracy and alignment with the data, resulting in a structured and rigorous analysis of the study's findings.

The participating chambers varied in size, geographic location, and board composition. Interview data were corroborated with an analysis of governance documents and observed professional development activities. The study surveyed nine (9) Chambers from Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Michigan, Washington, Oregon, and Ohio. The nine (9) CEOs, six (6) were Female, and three (3) were male. The Board members, five (5) were Female, with two (2) males.

Chart 1- Leadership Development among Chambers.

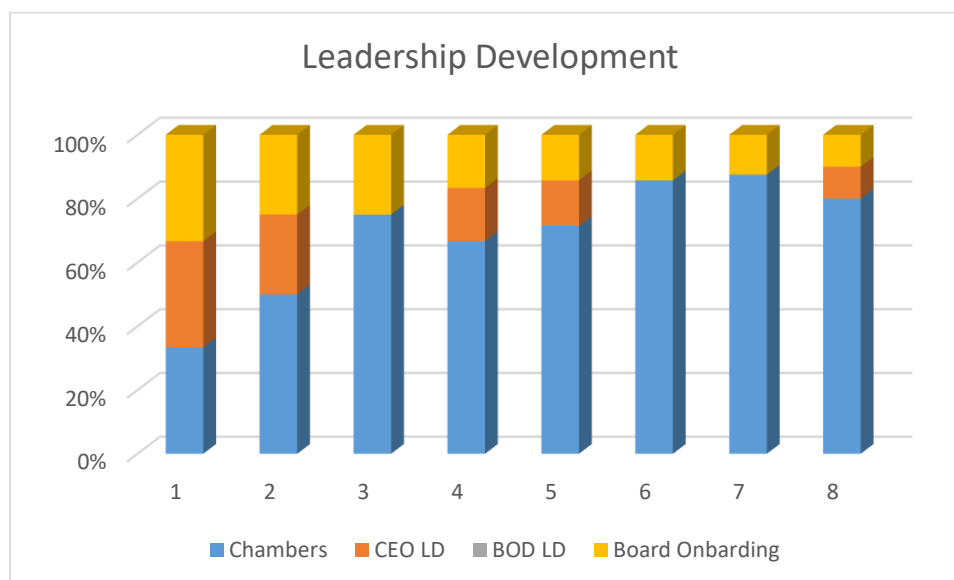


Chart 1 presents findings from eight participating chambers of commerce regarding board onboarding and leadership development practices. All participating chambers (100%) reported completing an initial onboarding process with their Boards of Directors. However, 100% of board members indicated a desire for more in-depth training beyond what they received during

the initial onboarding process. Recognizing this need can help stakeholders feel their input is valued and encourage ongoing engagement. Despite this expressed need, none of the chambers reported offering additional or ongoing leadership development opportunities for board members beyond onboarding.

Regarding executive leadership development, 60% of Chamber Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) reported participating in only limited leadership development activities. Despite this, all CEOs (100%) expressed a desire for more leadership development opportunities. This contrast highlights a significant gap between current practices and the leadership growth needs of CEOs.

Table 2 - Themes Emerging From Qualitative Data Analysis

Research question	Theme	Who does it impact, board member and/or CEO	How it relates to leadership development within the organization
RQ1	First time serving on a Board	Both	For many participants, service on a Chamber board constitutes their initial experience with board governance, emphasizing the necessity of intentional leadership development to support effective board participation.
RQ1	Approach to onboarding	CEO	Onboarding practices across Chambers are largely limited to the distribution of governing documents, such as bylaws and prior meeting minutes. Although some organizations provide additional orientation, onboarding is generally described as a one-time event rather than an ongoing process, underscoring a missed opportunity for sustained leadership development that could better prepare board members for effective governance.
RQ1	The board's understanding of roles and responsibilities	Board & CEO	Findings indicate considerable variability in board members' understanding of their roles and responsibilities. While some participants reported clarity, others identified gaps in knowledge and

Research question	Theme	Who does it impact, board member and/or CEO	How it relates to leadership development within the organization
			expressed a desire for more comprehensive guidance, suggesting a need for structured leadership development to support effective governance.
RQ1	Budget Restrictions	CEO	The majority of Chambers reported budgetary limitations that constrain leadership development opportunities for both board members and Chief Executive Officers (CEOs), indicating that financial capacity is a significant barrier to sustained leadership development initiatives.
RQ1	CEO professional development	CEO	CEOs reported making efforts to engage in professional development; however, most indicated that available resources are insufficient. Time constraints and limited financial resources were frequently cited as barriers, highlighting the need for more accessible and context-specific leadership development opportunities.
RQ1	Knowledge of organizations prior to board service	Board Member	Several board members reported limited knowledge of the Chamber's operations, governance structure, and strategic priorities prior to assuming board responsibilities, underscoring the importance of leadership development and orientation programs that build organizational literacy before and during board service.
RQ1	Onboarding	Board Member & CEO	Board members described onboarding as providing only a high-level overview of expectations. Many participants indicated that greater depth and clarity regarding governance responsibilities would have been beneficial, suggesting that onboarding could serve as a foundational component of ongoing leadership development.

Research question	Theme	Who does it impact, board member and/or CEO	How it relates to leadership development within the organization
RQ 1	Board Responsibility	Board Member	Participants generally articulated their responsibilities in broad terms and expressed a desire for clearer delineation of fiduciary, strategic, and oversight roles, emphasizing the need for leadership development that strengthens governance competence and role clarity.
RQ2	Board Leadership/Professional Development	Board	Most board members reported limited awareness of professional development resources designed to enhance board effectiveness, indicating a need for increased access to and communication about leadership development opportunities tailored to board governance..
RQ2	Board supporting CEO Professional Development	Board	Board members expressed strong interest in supporting CEO professional development, noting that additional leadership training could help CEOs navigate governance-related challenges, particularly in managing board dynamics and expectations.
RQ2	Knowledge of available resources	CEO	While many CEOs were aware of leadership development resources, they reported difficulty allocating time to engage with them. Others described the resources as overly general, suggesting a need for more applied and organization-specific leadership development offerings.
RQ2	Leadership Development	CEOs and Board Members	Overall findings indicate a clear need for more targeted, accessible, and applied leadership development opportunities for both board members and CEOs to enhance governance effectiveness and organizational leadership capacity.

The findings indicate that while leadership development exists within Chambers of Commerce, it is more commonly informal, optional, or limited to onboarding rather than sustained development. Differences in perceptions between board members and CEOs, as well as

varying beliefs about the necessity of leadership training, suggest inconsistent prioritization and implementation of leadership development across nonprofit organizations.

From the perspective of board members, most Chambers reported providing an initial onboarding process; however, few offered structured or ongoing leadership development opportunities beyond it. Several participants acknowledged the value of leadership development and expressed a desire for more consistent access, which can motivate stakeholders to support continuous improvement.

One board member from Chamber 7 expressed a desire for greater awareness and support, stating, "It would be helpful to be educated on resources available to assist the CEO with board leadership development." This response highlights a need for better knowledge of existing leadership resources, which can empower stakeholders to take action.

Similarly, a board member from Chamber 2 indicated that leadership development opportunities existed but were not board-specific, explaining, "The Chamber offers community leadership development, and the board can attend if they want." This optional structure limited engagement and accountability for board participation.

In contrast, a board member from Chamber 3 reported that leadership development was available to board members, stating simply, "Leadership development is offered to the board." However, the participant did not elaborate on the frequency or structure of the training, making it unclear whether the development was formalized or ongoing.

A CEO from Chamber 4 acknowledged the challenges of engaging the board, stating that "board apathy is real" and expressed interest in more accessible training options, such as virtual Institute for Organization Management (IOM) programs for board members. This suggests a

need for formalized, structured programs that could improve engagement and development outcomes.

A CEO from Chamber 5 emphasized the responsibility placed on executive leadership, noting, "It is somewhat our job to educate the board on their roles and responsibilities, but there is a lack of training in how to go about doing it." This response underscores a tension between expectations of CEO-led board development and the absence of formal training frameworks to support that role.

Not all CEOs viewed leadership development as necessary for board members. A CEO from Chamber 6 stated, "I do not think teaching professionals who are well into their careers soft skills [is effective]; they either have them or they do not." This perspective reflects a belief that leadership skills are inherent rather than developable, which may influence organizational investment in leadership development initiatives.

Conversely, a CEO from Chamber 7 strongly supported leadership development for board members, stating, "Leadership training for the board would be fabulous if they could carve out the time...to learn from the CEO's perspective what leadership looks like for the Chamber." This response highlights the perceived value of experiential learning and deeper board-CEO collaboration.

The analysis identified six primary themes that account for differences in board onboarding and leadership development: (1) first-time board service, (2) board members' understanding of governance responsibilities, (3) board engagement, (4) board professional development, (5) budgetary constraints, and (6) variations in onboarding methods.

Participants from Chambers 1, 2, 3, and 6 reported that many of their board members were serving on a governing board for the first time. As a result, these chambers recognized a

need for structured onboarding focused on governance roles, fiduciary responsibilities, and policy oversight. A board member from Chamber 6 noted that both the board and the CEO “*would benefit from formal training in policy governance,*” as current onboarding primarily relied on informal discussions of bylaws, meeting minutes, and expectations. While these practices offered basic orientation, participants said they did not sufficiently prepare board members for effective governance. Chambers with higher first-time board service rates were therefore more likely to identify gaps in onboarding and leadership development.

Across all chambers, Chief Executive Officers reported persistent challenges with board members’ understanding of their governance roles. Participants described instances in which board members demonstrated limited awareness of their responsibilities or engaged minimally beyond attending meetings. The CEO of Chamber 5 emphasized that “board members often require explicit education on the purpose, scope, and expectations of board service.” However, participants also acknowledged that CEOs frequently lacked the time, training, or institutional support to provide ongoing board development. These findings suggest that limited role clarity contributes to disengagement, and chambers without formal onboarding structures are more likely to experience governance challenges.

Although participants consistently recognized the importance of leadership development, CEOs across chambers reported substantial barriers to engaging in professional development. Budgetary constraints and competing operational demands limited access to formal training. Participants identified professional organizations such as the Institute for Organization Management (IOM) and the Association of Chamber of Commerce Executives (ACCE), as well as informal peer networks, as valuable resources. Nonetheless, financial limitations and time constraints often hindered sustained participation.

Research Question 1/Hypothesis

Why do some chambers engage in leadership development and others do not? Chambers do not engage in leadership development primarily because boards do not prioritize its value. In contrast, CEOs who independently pursue leadership learning recognize its importance but are constrained by limited time and financial resources.

Theme 1: Tools And Professional Development Resources. Variations in board onboarding and leadership development practices were partially attributed to disparities in chambers' access to professional development tools and peer-support resources. Participants identified several commonly used resources, including the Association of Chamber of Commerce Executives (ACCE), the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Institute for Organization Management, state-level chamber associations, and peer-based platforms such as Frank Kenny's Chamber of Commerce Professionals Facebook Group. These resources were described as important mechanisms for professional networking, leadership skill development, governance education, and exposure to best practices within the chamber industry.

Participants' comments illustrate both awareness and uneven utilization of these resources:

"I have looked at and incorporated some stuff from ACCE and BoardSource." – Chamber 1 CEO

Participants' comments illustrate both awareness of and uneven use of these resources, highlighting specific gaps, such as a lack of familiarity with BoardSource and limited access to free or low-cost programs, which may hinder leadership development. For example, one CEO stated, "I have used ACCE and things learned from a class at IOM, and Frank Kenny's group, but I have never heard of BoardSource."

"Many do not understand the wealth of free information that comes from ACCE and Frank Kenny's group for about \$300 annually." – Chamber 4 CEO. "I was not given a lot of

resources; I had to learn and leaned on the State's Department of Commerce." – Chamber 7 CEO.

"Frank Kenny programs and the State Chamber Professionals group helped me, but I believe my experience and age provided additional knowledge that younger counterparts have not yet obtained." – Chamber 8 CEO

Although participants generally recognized the value of these tools, engagement varied greatly due to financial and operational challenges, such as membership dues, registration fees, travel expenses, and time away from daily duties. These barriers directly impact leadership development efforts, making it hard for chambers, especially smaller ones, to consistently participate in formal programs. As a result, awareness of leadership development resources doesn't always lead to meaningful involvement, which in turn affects overall leadership capacity.

Several participants described relying on informal, no-cost peer networks as substitutes for structured leadership development. In contrast, others reported making strategic decisions about which professional memberships or programs to sustain within limited budgets. These constraints contributed to uneven leadership development experiences and variability in governance practices across chambers. "Frank Kenny has been pivotal in helping me and directed me to complete IOM." – Chamber 5 CEO. "We get educational events with speakers, but it is not training." – Chamber 3 Board Member.

Importantly, participants emphasized that even when professional development resources were accessible, time constraints and operational demands significantly limited their capacity to engage in sustained leadership development and strategic governance activities. This underscores the need for more accessible, affordable, and practical leadership development opportunities that can fit into the busy schedules of chamber leaders, fostering a sense of hope for growth and improvement.

Theme 2: Time and Operational Demands Limit Strategic Capacity. Across all chambers, Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) described extensive operational responsibilities that significantly limited their capacity to engage in strategic leadership and board development. Recognizing these challenges can help the audience see their role in fostering leadership growth despite operational demands, making them feel valued in addressing these barriers. "We have discussed a board retreat, but what does that look like now?" – Chamber 7, Board Member.

As a result, leadership development and strategic planning were characterized as irregular and episodic rather than systematic. One chamber reported revisiting its strategic plan only when aligned with the board's scheduling constraints, illustrating how structural barriers can be addressed through targeted efforts. This perspective can inspire the audience to see their capacity to influence change in governance practices.

Participants emphasized that time scarcity functioned as a structural barrier rather than an individual failure to prioritize leadership development. CEOs consistently described their roles as reactive and constrained by competing demands. One participant stated:

"I would love to take a step back and consider the broader perspective, but I spend most days addressing urgent issues. It is difficult to engage in strategic thinking when you are responsible for tasks such as creating name tags, answering phones, and managing every event." Another CEO summarized this tension by noting: "We recognize the importance of a 30,000-foot view. However, we rarely possess the capacity to elevate ourselves to that level." – Chamber 1 CEO.

Chambers, with greater staffing capacity and more robust funding, demonstrated increased ability to engage in strategic planning and board development. Conversely, chambers with limited staffing and financial resources relied heavily on CEOs to manage operational and

governance responsibilities, constraining their capacity to implement consistent onboarding processes and leadership initiatives.

The findings indicate that leadership development gaps are not merely due to oversight but are structurally constrained by operational demands. When boards and CEOs lack access to systematic development, governance practices become reactive, diminishing strategic capacity and organizational effectiveness.

Theme 3: Budget Constraints Limit Access to Training and Onboarding Resources.

Financial capacity emerged as a critical determinant of chambers' ability to engage in structured board onboarding and leadership development initiatives. Smaller chambers, characterized by limited membership bases and revenue streams, consistently reported challenges in funding professional development programs, maintaining memberships in national associations, or engaging external consultants to facilitate governance training. Consequently, access to formal leadership development opportunities varied substantially across chambers. "I am not aware of professional development as a budgeted item." – Chamber 7, Board Member. "We do not have a professional development line item in our budget, but I would love to add it for myself." – Chamber 3 CEO.

Participants frequently referenced professional development resources as valuable for governance education and leadership development; however, participation often required significant financial investment. CEOs reported that tuition costs, travel expenses, membership fees, and time away from daily operations collectively limited their ability to engage in programs. "I cannot afford ACCE membership." – Chamber 5 CEO. "If professional development is not within commutable distance, my budget gets eaten up with one conference." – Chamber 1 CEO.

These findings suggest that budgetary constraints directly shape leadership development capacity. When financial resources are limited, chambers tend to rely on informal, experiential learning and peer networks rather than structured programs. Recognizing this shared challenge can motivate the audience to explore collaborative solutions to enhance leadership development. One CEO articulated the cumulative impact of cost and time: "IOM would be amazing, but by the time you add the tuition, travel, and a week away from the office, it is just not realistic for us." Another participant emphasized that even low-cost resources were constrained by time scarcity: "Frank Kenny's group is great. However, even using free resources takes time—time to watch, learn, and actually apply what you learn. Time is the one thing I do not have."

Beyond financial limitations, participants noted that board engagement levels also influenced whether chambers invested in leadership development initiatives. In contexts where board members demonstrated limited engagement or unclear understanding of their roles, leadership development was less likely to be prioritized or sustained. Collectively, overcoming structural constraints, such as time, staffing, and financial limitations, is essential for establishing consistent leadership development. Implementing targeted strategies, like leveraging peer networks or low-cost virtual training, can enhance board effectiveness and organizational leadership capacity despite resource limitations.

Theme 5: Lack of Structured or Formalized Onboarding Processes. Most chambers offer some initial orientation, but the lack of comprehensive onboarding limits leadership development. Brief overviews of bylaws and procedures often overlook governance leadership, strategic thinking, and fiduciary responsibilities, which are crucial for effective leadership growth.

Several CEOs openly acknowledged the limitations of their onboarding practices. "The process needs to be better," stated the Chamber 1 CEO. Similarly, the Chamber 3 CEO emphasized the need for foundational leadership education, noting that tools would be most helpful "for basic board training on what a nonprofit board is, what their role is." Chamber 4 reported that "in small communities, onboarding does not happen, despite recognizing its importance," highlighting how resource constraints disproportionately affected leadership development efforts.

Participants consistently linked weak onboarding to role confusion and diminished leadership effectiveness. A board member from Chamber 3 suggested that CEOs were not always transparent in communicating expectations, contributing to misunderstandings about governance responsibilities. This ambiguity also placed CEOs in challenging positions. As one noted, "It can be challenging to have the board chair enforcing policy governance; I should not be enforcing that" - Chamber 1 CEO. Another CEO observed, "If a board does not see value in a strategic plan or retreats, they do not want to do it" - Chamber 8 CEO, underscoring the connection between leadership mindset and engagement in developmental activities.

The absence of ongoing onboarding reinforced the perception that leadership education was only necessary at entry rather than throughout board service. When asked why onboarding was limited to new members, the Chamber 1 CEO explained, "I would feel like it was redundant...unless something changed in the expectations, then we would not go through a whole formal process again." This perspective contrasted with participants' broader acknowledgment that board leadership requires continual learning.

When resources permitted, some chambers sought external support to enhance leadership development. Chamber 5 described periodically engaging consultants to clarify board versus

staff roles: "If we can afford it, we bring in a consultant for a couple of hours...It really helps—but it does not happen every year." Board members expressed appreciation for these efforts and a desire for greater transparency and education, particularly regarding financial oversight and the complexity of governance. One board member reflected, "I wish they had told us that it is challenging to fund an organization primarily through events," while another stated, "We can always use more training...too often it is the director dictating to the board."

As Chamber 6's CEO summarized, "We do not call it onboarding; it is more of an orientation that is done annually. Board members do not know what they are supposed to do, and it is never made clear." This distinction between orientation and leadership development was central to participants' experiences.

Research Question 2/Hypothesis

How can onboarding and leadership development help the Chamber of Commerce board members be effective in their role? The research found that intentional leadership development is more effective, enhancing the effectiveness of Chamber of Commerce board members by increasing role clarity, strategic understanding, confidence in governance responsibilities, and alignment with the chamber's mission and CEO. Onboarding and leadership development support board effectiveness by clarifying governance roles, expectations, and decision-making authority, reducing ambiguity and disengagement among Chamber board members. The research also found that onboarding and leadership development support board effectiveness by clarifying governance roles, expectations, and decision-making processes, thereby reducing ambiguity and disengagement among Chamber board members.

Theme 4: Board Engagement Varies and Influences Development Practices. Board engagement emerged as a critical determinant of whether chambers could cultivate leadership

capacity and effective governance practices. Participants described a wide variation in board members' levels of participation, motivation, and understanding of their leadership responsibilities. Clarifying roles can help board members feel valued and confident, directly influencing chambers' ability to develop leadership beyond transactional service. Several CEOs emphasized that limited board engagement constrained opportunities for leadership learning.

"Leadership training for the board would be fabulous if the board could carve out time. If they could spend a few hours in my day-to-day life, it would be beneficial" - Chamber 7 CEO. Others described challenges such as board apathy, minimal involvement in advocacy or education, and unclear expectations regarding governance roles. Chamber 4, for example, observed that board members frequently declined to participate in no-cost statewide or national educational opportunities, even during periods when virtual access reduced traditional barriers.

Participants consistently framed these challenges as leadership development gaps rather than simple participation issues. As one board member stated, "Leadership training for the board, particularly more training on policy governance, is needed" - Chamber 6 Board Member. Another CEO highlighted the consequences of insufficient governance education: "At the end of a strategic planning session, I give them a written quiz asking, 'What three things would get a board member in trouble?' Most get the question wrong" - Chamber 8 CEO. These reflections underscored the disconnect between board members' positional authority and their preparedness to exercise leadership responsibly.

In contrast, chambers with higher board engagement reported more intentional approaches to leadership development. Chamber 3 emphasized the importance of understanding board members' motivations for service, referred to as their "why," as a leadership development

strategy. By aligning individual values with organizational mission, these chambers sought to deepen commitment and encourage leadership behaviors beyond routine meeting attendance. As one CEO explained, "During the board meetings, we try to do something like, why do I want to be a board member? And what do I get out of being a board member?" - Chamber 3 CEO. Another participant noted the leadership ripple effect of engagement: "If board members are delighted, they are willing ambassadors of the Chamber" - Chamber 8 CEO.

Participants emphasized that board engagement functioned as both an input and an outcome of leadership development efforts. Chambers with engaged boards were more likely to invest in governance education, while disengaged boards made such investments difficult to justify or sustain, creating a reinforcing cycle. As one CEO summarized, "Board apathy is real. We offer opportunities—conferences, advocacy days, policy briefings—and they do not take advantage of them" - Chamber 4 CEO. Conversely, another CEO framed engagement as a leadership responsibility: "We are really trying to understand their 'why.' If we know what motivates them, we can connect them to something bigger than just attending meetings." Role ambiguity further undermined leadership engagement. Several CEOs acknowledged that board members were often unaware of leadership expectations, partly because onboarding was limited. One chamber addressed this by intentionally redesigning meetings to generate discussion and invite board members to contribute as leaders, helping them feel empowered and actively involved rather than passive recipients of information.

Overall, variability in board engagement reflected bigger differences in how chambers conceptualized board service, as either a volunteer obligation or a leadership role requiring development, reflection, and accountability.

Theme 6: Board Professional Development. Findings indicate that intentional professional development is essential for preparing Chamber of Commerce board members to function as effective organizational leaders rather than passive overseers. While participants widely acknowledged the importance of onboarding and leadership development, these practices were described as inconsistent, informal, or largely absent across chambers. Emphasizing structured, leadership-focused professional development can foster board members' confidence in their ability to engage meaningfully in governance, advocacy, and strategic relationship-building.

Participants emphasized that professional development should be designed as a leadership development system—one that builds core competencies such as communication, engagement, strategic thinking, and ambassadorial leadership. Board members associated with Chamber 3 reported that professional development opportunities were virtually nonexistent and expressed a strong preference for workshop-style learning with clear, actionable outcomes. Priority areas included communication and relationship-building skills that enable board members to articulate the chamber's value beyond events, particularly in advocacy, workforce development, and business support.

Board members also highlighted their leadership role in member engagement and retention. Training in mentoring, relationship stewardship, and follow-up behaviors, such as facilitating introductions, recognizing milestones, or conducting personal outreach, was viewed as critical to strengthening trust and long-term member commitment. These activities were framed not as administrative tasks, but as leadership behaviors that reinforce organizational culture and credibility within the business community.

CEOs acknowledged the need for foundational leadership training focused on governance roles, strategic planning, and board responsibilities, but cited persistent barriers, including limited budgets, time constraints, and perceived credibility challenges. In several cases, board members did not view the CEO as the appropriate facilitator of board leadership development, suggesting a need for alternative delivery models such as external facilitators, peer-led learning cohorts, or nationally recognized programs. This disconnect risked diminishing the perceived value and legitimacy of leadership development efforts.

Participants consistently referenced leadership development opportunities such as the Institute of Organization Management (IOM) as highly valuable for CEOs and staff, given the specialized context of chamber leadership. Several suggested creating a comparable program, or modular, virtual leadership development experiences, specifically designed for board members. CEOs emphasized that effective board leadership development must align with adult learning principles, favoring concise, relevant, and practical content. Scalable, low-cost virtual workshops can empower chambers to overcome financial constraints while supporting leadership continuity and shared expectations.

Board members' experiences further underscore the importance of leadership-focused onboarding. One long-serving board member from Chamber 3 demonstrated clarity in their functional role, supporting events, fundraising, and contributing business expertise, but noted that expectations related to time and financial commitments were not clearly communicated at the outset. Clarifying expectations can help board members feel more prepared and confident in their leadership roles. In contrast, another board member from Chamber 3 described feeling '*special and seen*' when selected to represent the Hispanic business community, illustrating how intentional onboarding can foster identity-based leadership, inclusion, and sustained

commitment. Notably, this individual reported having little understanding of the chamber prior to recruitment, reinforcing the need for pre-appointment leadership orientation.

Scheduling constraints further complicated leadership development efforts. While board members expressed interest in training during business hours or via virtual platforms, CEOs reported inconsistent participation when such options were offered. These findings suggest that leadership development cannot rely on standardized formats alone and must instead be tailored to the norms, capacities, and professional realities of each chamber community.

Collectively, Theme 6 highlights that board professional development must move beyond ad hoc training toward an intentional leadership development framework that prepares board members to act as strategic leaders, ambassadors, and stewards of the chamber's mission.

Theme 7: Board Supporting the CEO in Professional Development. Board members' engagement in professional development emerged as a critical factor in sustaining CEO leadership effectiveness and organizational capacity. Findings indicate that boards play a pivotal leadership role in legitimizing, prioritizing, and advocating for CEO professional development, particularly when CEOs perceive their growth as valued and strategically aligned with organizational success.

Participants noted that while numerous low- or no-cost leadership development opportunities are available through state chambers, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and the Association of Chamber of Commerce Executives (ACCE), board members often lacked awareness of these resources or failed to recognize their strategic importance. As one CEO stated, "I really have a supportive board of professional development, but it really comes down to budget" - Chamber 2 CEO. This framing suggests that professional development was frequently viewed as discretionary rather than as a core governance investment.

Several participants emphasized that nonprofit executive leadership requires a distinct set of competencies compared to for-profit leadership. A board member from Chamber 4 noted that chamber CEOs rely heavily on influence, collaboration, and relationship-building rather than positional authority to advance organizational goals. This reliance on relational leadership underscores the necessity of ongoing CEO development in stakeholder engagement, coalition-building, and navigating complex community dynamics. Participants suggested that onboarding processes should explicitly address the realities of nonprofit executive leadership to build board understanding and normalize investment in CEO development.

Inadequate onboarding further limited boards' capacity to serve as informed advocates for CEO growth. A board member from Chamber 6 noted that deeper education on committees, programs, and internal operations would have been essential before assuming governance responsibilities. Without this foundational understanding, board members struggled to fully appreciate the scope and strategic demands of the CEO role. Participants acknowledged that limited time, expertise, and resources hindered the design of comprehensive onboarding systems, yet emphasized that more explicit guidance and shared resources could mitigate these challenges.

The findings suggest that when boards lack a holistic understanding of chamber operations and the complexity of leadership, professional development is more likely to be perceived as optional rather than integral to leadership effectiveness. In contrast, well-designed onboarding processes that articulate the mission, operational scope, leadership expectations, and professional development pathways enable board members to actively support the CEO's learning and leadership sustainability. Participants emphasized that educating boards on programs, events, and sector-specific challenges strengthens their capacity to advocate for cost-effective training resources and strategic leadership development opportunities.

Overall, Theme 7 demonstrates that effective onboarding and ongoing board education are foundational to cultivating a governance culture that values leadership development at all levels. When boards understand the realities of chamber leadership and their role as partners in CEO growth, they are better positioned to contribute to leadership continuity, organizational resilience, and long-term chamber success.

Evaluation of the Findings

Leadership development is a vital factor in inspiring nonprofit leaders, board members, and stakeholders by emphasizing its role in ensuring organizational effectiveness and sustainability, primarily through board onboarding and governance. Research consistently demonstrates that nonprofits operating in complex environments achieve stronger outcomes when board members and chief executive officers (CEOs) are adequately prepared for their leadership roles (DiSanto, 2021; Johnson, 2022; Tyler, 2018). Consistent with prior studies, participants in this research identified leadership development as central to effective governance within Chambers of Commerce, citing improvements in role clarity, accountability, strategic engagement, and decision-making confidence.

Ongoing onboarding and leadership development programs can empower board members, helping them feel more confident and capable in their governance roles (BoardSource, 2024). When leadership development aligns with organizational goals, it reassures boards that their efforts directly contribute to purposeful governance and community impact. Leveraging members' diverse expertise to address industry gaps and community needs (Burton, 2022; Harvell, 2024) can foster a sense of collective achievement. Overall, the findings reinforce that leadership development, when intentionally designed, consistently applied, and supported by committed boards, can strengthen organizational effectiveness and members' confidence.

Chambers of Commerce are vital nonprofit organizations that rely on volunteer boards of directors to advocate for local businesses and foster economic growth in their communities (ACCE, 2025c). Despite their importance, many boards may feel uncertain or unprepared, as over half of Chambers of Commerce boards across the United States reportedly receive minimal or no formal onboarding or leadership development (Burton, 2022). Recent research highlights a knowledge gap that can leave board members feeling unprepared and disconnected from their roles, especially when CEOs struggle to deliver comprehensive onboarding and ongoing development. Addressing this gap can help boards feel more confident and aligned with their strategic responsibilities.

The findings of this study support these concerns. Participants reported that many chambers conduct onboarding only once, typically limited to providing bylaws and meeting minutes, without adequately outlining board members' duties and governance responsibilities. Several board members indicated they were required to learn about the organization independently and clarify their roles. One participant specifically emphasized that boards would benefit from receiving regular policy governance training and dedicated resources for leadership development. These findings underscore the need for nonprofit organizations to establish robust leadership development frameworks that enhance individual capacities while fostering a shared understanding of governance and accountability. By prioritizing ongoing leadership training, clear communication, and addressing resource limitations, nonprofit organizations can strengthen governance structures and improve service delivery and community impact.

Summary

This chapter presented the findings of a qualitative study examining leadership development and onboarding practices within Chambers of Commerce and their influence on

board effectiveness. Data were collected through participant interviews and analyzed to identify recurring patterns and themes related to organizational priorities, leadership perceptions, and structural constraints. Acknowledging potential limitations, such as sample size or participant selection bias, can enhance the transparency and credibility of these findings for scholarly and practical audiences.

Findings from Research Question One indicate that chambers' engagement in leadership development is primarily influenced by board-level priorities and resource constraints, rather than by a lack of awareness of its value. Board members generally prioritized immediate operational demands, member services, and revenue generation over long-term leadership capacity building. Although many CEOs demonstrated a strong understanding of the benefits of leadership development through self-directed learning, their ability to implement or expand such initiatives was constrained by limited time and financial resources, as well as insufficient board support. These findings highlight a misalignment between individual leadership awareness and organizational commitment, underscoring the importance of a shared purpose in leadership growth.

Findings from Research Question Two indicated that structured onboarding and leadership development are perceived as essential to board member effectiveness. Participants emphasized that onboarding improves role clarity, enhances understanding of governance responsibilities, and increases confidence in decision-making. Leadership development further supports board effectiveness by fostering strategic thinking, a shared language, and alignment with the chamber's mission and executive leadership. However, the effectiveness of these practices is reduced when onboarding and leadership development are informal, inconsistent, or episodic, especially when resources and support are lacking.

This chapter demonstrated that onboarding and leadership development contribute to board effectiveness when they are intentional, continuous, and supported by board leadership. To strengthen the scholarly context, explicitly connect these findings to the existing literature, highlighting how they confirm, extend, or challenge current understanding. This will help readers see the research's contribution and relevance to ongoing academic discussions.

Chapter 5: Implications, Recommendations, and Conclusions

The problem this study addressed is that more than half of Chambers of Commerce (Chambers) boards in the United States receive little to no formal leadership onboarding or board development. The purpose of this comparative qualitative case study was to examine why some Chambers implement structured onboarding and leadership development practices while others do not, and to explore effective onboarding and development strategies for Chamber boards (ACCE, 2025a; Burton, 2022). Specifically, the study investigated disparities in onboarding and development practices across Chambers to identify the conditions that enable some organizations to successfully prepare and develop their boards while others struggle to do so.

The study focused on the broader issue that many nonprofit organizations, specifically Chambers of Commerce, provide limited leadership development and onboarding for their boards. Guided by the purpose of increasing understanding of the need for leadership development and onboarding for Chamber Boards of Directors and CEOs, a qualitative research design was employed. The sample included nine Chambers of Commerce, with 9 CEOs and 7 board members participating. To protect confidentiality, all personal names and organizational identifiers were removed. Triangulation was achieved by selecting two participants from the most Chambers, a Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and a board member, which enabled comparisons across leadership roles and enhanced the credibility of the findings.

This study was further guided by the purpose of increasing understanding of nonprofit leaders' practices in board onboarding and leadership development, notably to support CEOs in developing the skills necessary to onboard board members effectively. Tyler (2018) identified that nonprofit leaders often lack critical skills needed to meet current and future leadership challenges, including effectively engaging board members (p. 78). The findings of this study

indicate that Chambers' engagement in leadership development is primarily influenced by board-level priorities, resource constraints, and organizational culture, rather than by a lack of awareness of leadership development's value. Although CEOs generally recognize the importance of onboarding and leadership development, limited time, financial constraints, and inconsistent board support often hinder their ability to institutionalize these practices.

The findings further demonstrate that structured onboarding and intentional leadership development are critical to board members' effectiveness, particularly in promoting role clarity, understanding of governance, strategic engagement, and alignment with the Chamber's mission and executive leadership. Conversely, when onboarding and leadership development are informal, inconsistent, or episodic, their impact is significantly diminished.

The limitations of this study are related to its design and participant sample. The methodology relied on participants to accurately and honestly describe their experiences and perceptions, and it was assumed that all participants provided truthful responses. Participants' recollections and interpretations may have been influenced by memory, personal bias, or contextual factors. Additionally, the study is limited by its sample size of sixteen (16) participants and by variations in participants' experience levels.

Strategies such as triangulation and reflexive journaling were employed to mitigate these limitations and enhance the study's credibility. Overall, this chapter positions onboarding and leadership development as essential yet often underutilized mechanisms for strengthening Chamber governance and provides the foundation for practical recommendations and conclusions.

Implications

The findings highlight that structured board onboarding can significantly boost governance confidence within Chambers of Commerce, reassuring stakeholders of its value. Chambers that adopt comprehensive onboarding are better equipped to prepare board members for effective governance. Such onboarding enhances understanding of fiduciary duties, strategic priorities, and fundraising expectations, leading to greater engagement and clarity compared to minimal or informal approaches that can create role ambiguity. The findings also emphasize that ongoing leadership development fosters sustained board effectiveness, encouraging Chambers to prioritize continuous learning.

Implications for Leadership

The study underscores the vital role of Chamber CEOs in shaping onboarding and leadership growth, empowering leaders to drive organizational success. Strengthening collaboration between CEOs and board leadership may help prioritize governance development. When executive leadership and board chairs jointly support onboarding initiatives, leadership development is more likely to become embedded within organizational practice. Clear expectations and consistent support from board leadership may also enhance board accountability and participation.

Additionally, the findings suggest that Chamber CEOs benefit from continued leadership development themselves. Several participants described pursuing professional learning independently through leadership literature and peer networks. Expanding access to professional development resources for Chamber executives may strengthen their capacity to implement effective onboarding and board development strategies.

Implications for Nonprofit Governance

The findings reinforce existing research emphasizing the importance of well-prepared boards for nonprofit effectiveness. Chambers that prioritize onboarding and leadership development are more likely to cultivate engaged board members who contribute to policy governance, strategic planning, and community leadership. Effective onboarding strengthens both individual board member performance and overall governance capacity.

Conversely, the absence of structured onboarding may contribute to unclear expectations, inconsistent participation, and limited strategic engagement. These governance challenges may affect an organization's ability to fulfill its mission. Investing in board development, therefore, represents an important strategy for strengthening nonprofit governance and organizational sustainability.

Implications for Future Research

The results suggest several directions for future research. First, additional studies could examine the effectiveness of specific onboarding and leadership development models within Chambers of Commerce and other nonprofit organizations. Comparative research across nonprofit sectors may help identify practices that can be adapted to different organizational contexts.

Second, future research could explore the relationship between board onboarding and measurable organizational outcomes such as board engagement, fundraising effectiveness, and strategic planning capacity. Quantitative or mixed-methods studies may provide further insight into how leadership development influences nonprofit performance.

Finally, research examining the role of professional associations and sector networks in supporting leadership development may help identify accessible and scalable resources for nonprofit executives and board members.

Discussion

Current research indicates that nonprofit organization (NPO) boards of directors and chief executive officers (CEOs) often lack sufficient training and structured onboarding processes (Tyler, 2018). Prior studies have further suggested that many NPO leaders lack adequate knowledge or formal preparation in governance, leadership development, and board management (Tyler, 2018). The present study contributes to existing theory and research by addressing these persistent gaps, which are critical for nonprofit stakeholder engagement and organizational success.

First, this study documented the lived experiences of Chamber of Commerce CEOs regarding board onboarding, emphasizing how effective onboarding can empower leaders and motivate board members. Participants consistently reported that onboarding was typically a one-time event and primarily consisted of a broad overview of organizational bylaws, programs, and events. These findings suggest that onboarding practices are largely procedural rather than developmental. Second, CEOs highlighted significant constraints on time and financial resources, which hindered their ability to implement more comprehensive onboarding and leadership development initiatives. Many acknowledged resource limitations but also expressed a desire to improve, helping readers feel understood and supported in their efforts.

Research Question 1:

Why do some chambers engage in board onboarding and leadership development, and others do not?

Findings from both CEO and board member participants indicated that onboarding typically consisted of a fundamental organizational overview, distribution of bylaws, and access to prior board meeting minutes. While this approach provided foundational information, board members consistently expressed a desire for more comprehensive onboarding, including in-depth instruction on policy governance, more precise explanations of organizational programs and events, and explicit clarification of board roles and responsibilities. Many participating CEOs acknowledged that they had not received formal training or professional development on how to onboard board members effectively. The effectiveness and sustainability of nonprofit organizations are closely linked to the leadership competencies embedded in their governance structures, particularly in board onboarding and leadership development (DiSanto, 2021; Johnson, 2022; Tyler, 2018). This suggests that nonprofit leaders should prioritize developing structured onboarding programs, as these are vital for building leadership capacity and ensuring organizational resilience in complex environments.

The theoretical framework for this study is grounded in Malcolm Knowles's theory of andragogy (1975), which emphasizes adult learners' self-concept, prior experiences, and readiness to learn. This framework is particularly relevant to nonprofit governance, as volunteers serving on boards, including those within Chambers of Commerce, often seek opportunities to enhance their leadership skills while contributing their professional expertise to the organization (Jorden et al., 2022; Sung et al., 2023; Thomas, 2024). Allen et al. (2021) argued that adult learners must clearly understand their purpose and opportunities for personal and professional growth. Several CEOs reported providing only a single onboarding or training session, citing limited tools, time, and financial resources as primary constraints. They emphasized that ongoing, structured leadership development is essential for growth, and board members across

all participating Chambers expressed a strong desire for continuous learning opportunities, fostering a sense of possibility and development.

Research Question 2

How can onboarding help Chamber of Commerce board members be effective in their role?

Research on andragogy underscores that lifelong learning is foundational to adult education and that individuals continuously acquire new knowledge, skills, and perspectives throughout their lives (Sung et al., 2023). The findings of this study suggest that Chamber of Commerce board members exemplify lifelong learners who engage in volunteer leadership to contribute to their communities and advance organizational missions. However, the existing literature indicates that nonprofit organizations (NPOs) frequently struggle to develop and sustain effective leadership due to constrained resources, complex governance structures, and rising expectations for accountability and performance (Burton, 2022; Johnson, 2022).

Consistent with prior research, board members in this study often reported seeking information about their roles and responsibilities independently because formal onboarding processes were perceived as inadequate or inconsistent.

Most participants described onboarding as limited in scope, typically lasting one hour to a full day, and focused primarily on procedural elements, such as reviewing bylaws, past meeting minutes, and organizational programs or events. While these components are necessary, they are insufficient for preparing board members to fully understand their governance roles, fiduciary responsibilities, and strategic contributions. Similarly, several CEOs expressed ongoing challenges in maintaining meaningful board engagement, suggesting that current onboarding practices do not fully align with andragogical principles—particularly those emphasizing relevance, experiential learning, and self-directed development (Terrell, 2020). This

misalignment may contribute to role ambiguity, uneven participation, and varying levels of board effectiveness.

Prior research indicates that nonprofit volunteers often seek opportunities to develop leadership competencies, including communication, relationship-building, advocacy, and governance (Allen et al., 2022; Arden, 2023). These findings align with the second principle of andragogy, which posits that adult learners draw upon prior experiences as a foundation for new learning (Terrell, 2020). In this study, one Chamber CEO noted that their previous experience in the for-profit sector significantly shaped their approach to leadership development and board onboarding, reinforcing the importance of integrating real-world experience into training and orientation.

Despite widespread acknowledgment of the importance of effective onboarding, gaps persist in both practice and scholarship regarding the quality, consistency, and impact of nonprofit board onboarding (Mason & Kim, 2020; Mathews, 2019). Findings from this study indicate that while most Chambers implement some form of onboarding, these efforts are often minimal, informal, and insufficiently structured. Many boards lack clearly defined role descriptions, formalized expectations, and ongoing training opportunities, which contribute to role ambiguity and governance challenges (Carman & Millesen, 2023; Kenny, 2025; Tyler, 2018). These findings highlight the need for more comprehensive, structured, and standardized onboarding processes that clearly define board roles, responsibilities, and performance expectations.

Participants also emphasized that leadership development opportunities are frequently constrained by time and budgetary limitations. Several CEOs reported that financial barriers prevented them from accessing professional development resources offered by organizations

such as the Association of Chamber of Commerce Executives (ACCE) and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, owing to high membership dues and additional training costs. Recognizing these constraints can foster a sense of shared challenge and motivate the pursuit of accessible, affordable leadership solutions.

Overall, the implications of this study suggest three primary challenges affecting board onboarding effectiveness: one, insufficient resources for CEOs to develop and implement high-quality onboarding materials; two, limited time and budget for leadership development and professional training; and three, inconsistent board engagement, which may be partially attributed to inadequate onboarding practices.

Summary of Findings

This comparative qualitative case study examined why some Chambers of Commerce implement structured board onboarding and leadership development practices while others do not, and how onboarding can support board member effectiveness. Interviews with nine Chamber CEOs and seven board members revealed several consistent patterns related to onboarding practices, leadership development, and governance capacity.

First, most participating Chambers provided some form of onboarding; however, these practices were generally limited in scope and primarily procedural. Onboarding typically consisted of distributing bylaws, reviewing prior board meeting minutes, and providing a general overview of Chamber programs and events. While these activities offered basic orientation, board members consistently reported that they did not provide sufficient preparation for understanding governance responsibilities, fiduciary duties, or strategic roles.

Second, findings indicate that leadership development practices are influenced primarily by organizational priorities, resource constraints, and board culture rather than by a lack of

awareness of their importance. CEOs widely acknowledged the value of leadership development but reported that limited time, financial resources, and competing operational demands often prevented the implementation of structured training programs.

Third, board members expressed a strong interest in additional learning opportunities that would clarify governance roles, strengthen strategic engagement, and support collaboration with executive leadership. Many participants described seeking information independently to better understand their responsibilities, suggesting that existing onboarding practices do not fully meet board members' learning needs.

Finally, the findings highlight the importance of aligning board onboarding practices with principles of adult learning. Participants indicated that effective onboarding should include opportunities for discussion, experiential learning, and practical application rather than relying solely on informational materials. These findings suggest that more structured and ongoing leadership development practices may strengthen board effectiveness and improve governance within Chambers of Commerce.

Recommendations for Practice

Results from this study on the perceptions and understandings of Chamber of Commerce CEOs and board members regarding leadership development and onboarding highlight critical insights. These findings provide several practical and theoretical recommendations for nonprofit organizations (NPOs). Overall, the study identified a clear need for more accessible, practical, and structured leadership development and governance training tailored specifically to the unique context of Chambers of Commerce and similar NPOs.

Although many NPO CEOs recognize that organizations such as BoardSource, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the Association of Chamber of Commerce Executives (ACCE), and

State Chambers offer valuable governance training materials and leadership development resources, access to these programs is often limited by costly membership fees, conference attendance, and additional training expenses. Many Chambers participating in this study reported that financial constraints, limited staffing, and competing organizational priorities hindered their full engagement with these professional development opportunities. Consequently, CEOs expressed a strong desire for a practical, customizable workbook or editable training toolkit that could be adapted to their specific community, organizational size, and local needs.

Several CEOs indicated that they assumed their roles without prior formal training in nonprofit governance or board leadership, leading them to learn and develop onboarding practices through trial and error. Those who attended industry conferences, such as the Institute for Organization Management (IOM), found the experience valuable for professional networking and knowledge acquisition. However, they reported difficulty translating conference learning into sustainable internal processes due to time constraints, limited administrative support, and the multifaceted nature of their daily responsibilities, which hindered effective onboarding and ongoing development.

Chamber-oriented training programs offered through State Chambers, ACCE, and the U.S. Chamber, as well as peer engagement within the Chamber of Commerce Professionals Facebook group, were identified as beneficial sources of insight and best practices. Nevertheless, many CEOs reported feeling overwhelmed by the volume of information available and uncertain about how to effectively apply or customize these resources to fit their individual communities. Based on these findings, a primary recommendation of this study is the development of more affordable, practical, and easily accessible professional development resources specifically designed for nonprofit and Chamber executives.

Board members in this study consistently emphasized that Chamber CEOs would benefit from a clearer, standardized onboarding template that outlines board roles, organizational programs, fiduciary responsibilities, and governance expectations. Participants suggested that both boards and CEOs must see themselves as collaborative partners working toward a shared mission rather than as separate or hierarchical entities. Additionally, CEOs would benefit from targeted leadership development focused on effective board engagement, facilitation, and relationship-building strategies. Accordingly, Chamber CEO leadership development should prioritize board development, governance effectiveness, and strategic planning competencies.

Findings further indicated that board members require a stronger understanding of their roles and responsibilities, particularly regarding policy governance, fiduciary oversight, and strategic direction. Several board members noted that they often had to independently educate themselves about Chamber programs and events due to insufficient onboarding. One board member explicitly requested more formal governance and policy training. These findings suggest that nonprofit leadership development should extend beyond CEOs to include structured training for board members, with a particular focus on clarifying roles, expectations, and collaborative relationships between boards and executives.

Consistent with prior research, this study reinforces the need for continued attention to leadership development within nonprofit organizations and its impact on organizational effectiveness (Tyler, 2018). Findings demonstrate that both CEOs and board members implicitly applied principles of adult learning theory to make sense of their roles, responsibilities, and leadership development needs. This aligns with Knowles's (1975) andragogical framework, which emphasizes self-directed learning, relevance, and experiential knowledge.

Rather than prioritizing additional academic studies that reiterate existing challenges, this study suggests that the nonprofit sector would benefit more from the development of practical, scalable, and cost-effective leadership development solutions that resource-constrained organizations can realistically implement. Recommended approaches include standardized onboarding toolkits, modular virtual training programs, peer mentorship initiatives, and collaborative learning networks tailored to Chambers of Commerce's governance structures. Implementing such solutions can empower organizations to strengthen board effectiveness, improve CEO-board relationships, and enhance organizational sustainability and impact.

Recommendations for Future Research

Chambers of Commerce, like many nonprofit organizations (NPOs), continue to face an ongoing leadership deficit that places substantial responsibility on both executives and board members to provide strategic direction, ensure organizational sustainability, and adapt to evolving economic, social, and community needs (Carman & Millesen, 2023; Tyler, 2018). Despite increased attention to nonprofit governance in recent years, persistent challenges in board onboarding, leadership development, and board–CEO collaboration suggest that additional research is needed to understand better and address these issues. Future studies should build on this study's findings by further examining why nonprofit organizations continue to struggle with effective board onboarding and by identifying evidence-based strategies to improve leadership development within this sector.

Specifically, future research should compare onboarding practices across nonprofit types, including Chambers of Commerce, to identify systemic issues and sector-wide challenges that inform leadership development strategies. Additional studies should examine best practices for board training across nonprofit organizations, systematically compare onboarding models across

regions, and assess the long-term impact of structured onboarding on board engagement, governance effectiveness, and organizational performance. Longitudinal research would be particularly valuable in determining whether comprehensive onboarding and ongoing leadership development lead to improved board participation, stronger strategic decision-making, enhanced fundraising outcomes, and greater organizational stability over time.

Future research should investigate how technology-based training platforms, virtual learning modules, and peer learning networks can supplement or enhance traditional onboarding approaches, particularly in resource-limited settings. As many Chambers operate with small staffs and limited budgets, understanding how digital tools and collaborative learning models can support leadership development is critical. Studies could evaluate the effectiveness of online governance training, mentorship programs, and communities of practice in strengthening board competencies and CEO-board relationships.

Finally, scholars should explore how adult learning theory, particularly andragogy, can be more intentionally integrated into nonprofit board training and leadership development. Research examining how self-directed learning, experiential knowledge, and peer collaboration shape board member engagement and effectiveness would contribute meaningfully to both theory and practice in nonprofit governance.

Conclusions

The purpose of this comparative qualitative study was to examine why some Chambers of Commerce effectively onboard and develop their boards of directors while others do not. The study included nine Chamber CEOs and seven board members from Chambers across Washington, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Michigan, Oregon, and Ohio, who shared their lived experiences and perceptions regarding board onboarding and leadership development.

By capturing multiple perspectives, this study provided a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that facilitate or hinder effective governance practices within Chambers of Commerce.

Findings indicate that both CEOs and board members desire additional leadership development opportunities that are practical, digestible, and tailored to the unique governance structures and operational realities of Chambers of Commerce. Highlighting these tailored solutions can foster a sense of hope and confidence in achievable improvements.

Chamber CEOs (Executive Directors) require better tools, preferably free or low-cost, that enable them to customize training for their boards based on organizational size, mission, and community priorities. Many CEOs expressed frustration with existing resources that were either too expensive, overly complex, or not sufficiently adaptable to their local context. Board members, in turn, need clear, structured training that addresses governance responsibilities, fundraising expectations, fiduciary duties, and an overview of the Chamber industry. Additionally, training should clarify how board responsibilities may vary across specific Chambers and community contexts, recognizing that governance practices are not one-size-fits-all. Many Chambers are led by local community leaders who may lack formal training in nonprofit governance, creating systemic challenges that hinder effective onboarding and strategic planning (Tyler, 2018). Recognizing these broader issues can motivate stakeholders to collaborate on targeted solutions.

This study provides valuable insights into the experiences of Chamber CEOs and board members, highlighting systemic challenges that influence onboarding effectiveness and leadership development. Findings support and extend prior nonprofit leadership research by providing empirical evidence of persistent gaps in board onboarding practices, particularly in

resource-constrained organizations. These insights can inform academic institutions, nonprofit support organizations, and leadership development programs in designing curricula and training initiatives that better address the needs of nonprofit leaders and board members.

Ultimately, this study suggests that improving board onboarding and leadership development is not merely an administrative concern but a critical factor in nonprofit effectiveness and sustainability. By investing in accessible, practical, and ongoing training, Chambers of Commerce and other NPOs can strengthen governance, enhance board engagement, and better fulfill their missions in service to their communities.

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Appendix A: Participant Recruitment Letter

Dear Chamber of Commerce Professionals,

Your role in the Chamber of Commerce is not just significant; it is essential. As passionate advocates for a robust economy and a vibrant quality of life, your involvement in my doctoral research study is not only welcomed but critical. This study examines the pivotal leadership role of Chambers of Commerce and their profound impact on communities. Your insights will be a driving force behind its success.

Your unique experiences are invaluable and form the foundation of this research. By participating, you will enrich our understanding of how Chamber professionals like you lead and inspire their organizations. This initiative aims to elevate the dialogue surrounding Chamber leadership and its impact on the broader community. We are actively seeking board members and Executive Directors/CEOs from Chambers across the United States to share their perspectives, as your contributions will significantly enhance the depth and relevance of this study.

What can you expect? Each interview will be conducted via Zoom, providing a convenient and accessible platform for your participation. We plan to commence the interviews in about three months, allowing you ample time to consider this opportunity and prepare for a meaningful discussion.

Rest assured, your confidentiality and anonymity are our highest priorities in this research endeavor. We adhere strictly to university ethical guidelines, ensuring that your names, cities, and communities remain confidential, safeguarding your personal information and fostering trust in our research process.

This is an exceptional opportunity to make a lasting impact on the future of Chamber leadership. If you are passionate about making a difference and are interested in participating, please click the link below.

Thank you for considering this opportunity. I genuinely look forward to the possibility of your participation!

Warm regards,
Cheryl Viola
Doctoral Candidate, Organizational Leadership
National University
701-260-6956

Your confidentiality and anonymity are of utmost importance in this research endeavor. We strictly adhere to all university ethical guidelines, ensuring that individual names, cities, and communities will remain confidential and will not be included in the data. This commitment to privacy safeguards your personal information and builds trust in our research process.

Appendix B: Consent Letter

My name is Cheryl D. Viola, and I am a doctoral student at National University (NU). I am a ten-year veteran of the nonprofit sector Chamber of Commerce Industry. I also work as a rural economic development professional with Rural Economic Development Professional Services.

I am asking you to take part in a research study about the onboarding of Chamber of Commerce Boards of Directors and leadership development. The name of this research is “A Qualitative Case Study of Leadership Development for Chambers of Commerce CEOs and Boards of Directors.”

You may participate in this research if you meet all of the following criteria:

1. You are at least 18 years of age or older.
2. You are either a Chamber CEO or a Board member.

I hope to include 16 people in this research: one CEO and one board member from up to 8 different chambers.

Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to take part in the study.

What you will be asked to do: If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following activities:

1. Participate in a 1:1 interview over Zoom for 15 – 30 minutes.
2. Review your interview transcript via email for 10 – 15 minutes.

During these activities, you will be asked questions about:

- Board Onboarding
- Does onboarding continue?
- Are the roles and responsibilities clearly understood?
- Would Leadership Development training be beneficial to the CEO and Board?

Risks: There are minimal foreseeable risks or discomforts associated with this research. You can still skip any question you do not wish to answer, skip any activity, or stop participation at any time.

Benefits: If you participate, there are no direct benefits to you. This research may increase the body of knowledge in the subject area of this research.

Recording: I would like to audio/video record your responses with Zoom during the interview. You can disable the video function of the online meeting platform at any time.

Confidentiality: I will keep the records of this study private and take reasonable measures to protect the security of all your personal information. In any report I make public, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. This data could be used for

future research studies or distributed to other investigators for future research studies without additional informed consent from you or your legally authorized representative. I will securely store your data for 3 years. Then, I will delete electronic data and destroy paper data.

Taking part is voluntary: Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may quit at any time.

If you have questions: Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me c.viola2399@o365.ncu.edu or at 701-260-6956

If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a subject in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) via email at irb@nu.edu

Appendix C: CEO Interview Protocol and Questions

The purpose of this study is to analyze why some chambers are onboarding and developing their boards of directors while others are not, and to explore effective onboarding and development strategies for chamber boards.

With your approval, I will record this interview session to collect the necessary data, capture the conversation, and analyze the information you provide later.

This study focuses on chamber onboarding and leadership development. I will ask you about your experiences as a CEO. If at any time during this interview you choose not to answer a question or wish to stop the interview, please let me know, and we will end the session.

Onboarding is described as:

Onboarding is the process of introducing volunteer board members to their duties and responsibilities. It includes an introduction to the organization, its mission, and programs, as well as the organization's purpose, helping to integrate them into the organization (BoardSource, 2024b; Rogozicska-Paweaczyk., & Jankowski, 2024).

Leadership development is described as:

Leadership development is a process that enhances individuals' skills, shaping them into effective leaders. It involves training, mentoring, and real-world experiences to build essential leadership skills in strategic thinking and communication (Day & Dannhauser, 2024).

Now that we have established what onboarding and leadership development are, could you please introduce yourself and provide a brief professional history detailing how many years you have been with the Chamber as CEO?

RQ1: Why do some chambers engage in board onboarding and leadership development and others do not?

1. Tell me about your onboarding process for board members, and how regularly you onboard existing members.
2. If there is onboarding, please tell me how you selected the approach you use and what makes it valuable.
3. As CEO, what training have you received to understand the onboarding process better?
4. Please explain how you have enhanced your onboarding and leadership development skills.
5. Please elaborate on why onboarding does not occur?
6. Tell me what you do for professional development for yourself and the staff.
7. Tell me about the tools and resources you are aware of that you have used to better onboard the board.

RQ2: How can onboarding and leadership development help the Chamber of Commerce board members be effective in their role?

1. Tell me what leadership development training would be most beneficial to your board.
2. Tell me what training you participate in to enhance your leadership skills.
3. Talk to me about the challenges you face that limit your opportunities for participating in professional development.
4. Tell me what tools would be most effective to help the board understand their roles and responsibilities.

Appendix D: Board Member Interview Protocol and Questions

The purpose of this study is to analyze why some chambers are onboarding and developing their boards of directors while others are not, and to explore effective onboarding and development strategies for chamber boards.

With your approval, I will record this interview session to collect the necessary data, capture the conversation, and analyze the information you provide later.

This study focuses on chamber onboarding and leadership development. I will ask you about your experiences as a board member. If at any time during this interview you choose not to answer a question or wish to stop the interview, please let me know, and we will end the session.

Onboarding is described as:

Onboarding is the process of introducing volunteer board members to their duties and responsibilities. It includes an introduction to the organization, its mission, and programs, as well as the organization's purpose, helping to integrate them into the organization (BoardSource, 2024a; Rogozicska-Paweaczyk., & Jankowski, 2024).

Leadership development is described as:

Leadership development is a process that enhances individuals' skills, shaping them into effective leaders. It involves training, mentoring, and real-world experiences to build essential leadership skills in strategic thinking and communication (Day & Dannhauser, 2024).

Now that we have established what onboarding and leadership development are, could you please introduce yourself and provide a brief professional history detailing how many years you have been with the Chamber, your position, and any roles you have held on the board?

RQ1: Why do some chambers engage in board onboarding and leadership development, and others do not?

1. What is your understanding of your role and responsibilities as a board member?
2. Please tell me about the onboarding if any that you had when you joined the board.
3. Tell me what you wish you had been told about when you first became a board member?
4. Please share ideas on how the board can support the CEO so they can attend professional development and leadership training.

RQ2: How can onboarding and leadership development help the Chamber of Commerce board members be effective in their role?

1. Tell me what other leadership training is offered to the board?
2. What experience most contributed to your growth as a leader?
3. What leadership development skills training would benefit you and why?
4. Would you provide your thoughts on which leadership skills training would benefit the CEO in supporting the board onboarding?