Stewardship Over Surge: Long-Term Relationships as an Organizational Capability

Thomas A. Guerriero, PhD

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Abstract

Mission-driven organisations are often judged by how quickly they can mobilise people and partners when need spikes. Surges matter, but they are episodic, and organisations that rely on them may find each crisis beginning from a standing start. This conceptual paper argues that the capacity to build and sustain long-term relationships with volunteers, partner organisations and communities is better understood as an organisational capability than as a by-product of goodwill. It draws on Lo's recent study of postdisaster digital volunteer collaboration, which reports that prosocial or value-oriented motivation and role or responsibility internalisation were directly associated with continuance commitment, while trust showed no significant direct association. It connects this finding to work on dynamic capabilities, repeated ties between partners, the developmental processes of cooperative interorganisational relationships, commitment and trust, and changing styles of volunteering. The paper proposes a relational stewardship framework with three elements: relational routines, role architecture and relational memory. Six propositions address continuity of contact between surges, role progression, repeated partnering, formal and informal processes, reflexive volunteering and the transfer of relationships when staff leave. No original empirical data are presented. The contribution is a bounded argument for treating relationship stewardship as a deliberate, manageable capability.

Keywords: relationship stewardship; organisational capability; volunteer commitment; interorganisational relationships; nonprofit management

Introduction

When a flood, an economic shock or a sudden policy change increases demand, mission-driven organisations are expected to respond quickly. Volunteers come forward, partner organisations offer space or staff, and communities share information about who needs help. This surge capacity is valuable and visible. It is also unreliable when treated as the organisation's main resource. People who arrive during a crisis often leave when it passes. Partners who cooperated under pressure may return to their own priorities. If nothing is done between surges, the next response begins with recruitment, introductions and negotiation that could have been completed in advance.

This paper argues that the more durable resource is the capacity to steward relationships over time. Stewardship here means the deliberate maintenance of relationships so that people and partners remain connected, informed and able to act together when needed. The paper treats this capacity as an organisational capability: a set of routines, roles and records that an organisation can build, assess and improve. The alternative view, that relationships are the product of individual personalities or good fortune, leaves leaders with little to manage.

The argument begins from a recent empirical study. Lo (2026) examined the conditions under which postdisaster digital volunteer collaboration is associated with continuance commitment beyond surge-like mobilisation. According to the publisher's abstract, the study used a cross-sectional online survey in a semi-closed volunteer coordination community and estimated a partial least squares structural equation model. It reports significant direct associations of prosocial or value-oriented motivation and of role or responsibility internalisation with continuance commitment, and a significant indirect association from motivation through internalisation, indicating partial mediation. Trust showed no significant direct association in the structural model, which the abstract suggests may mean that trust functions more as a proximal condition for entering coordination than as an anchor of continuance commitment.

The present paper is not concerned with any particular technology. It asks what Lo's findings, read alongside research on capabilities and interorganisational relationships, imply for how mission-driven organisations should build relationships that outlast a single crisis. It focuses on the organisational routines, role structures and memory through which relationships are kept alive.

The paper makes three contributions. First, it reframes relationship stewardship as an organisational capability, drawing on the dynamic capabilities literature to explain why such a capability may be valuable and difficult to replicate quickly. Second, it brings together evidence on individual commitment and on interorganisational relationships, two literatures that are often treated separately in nonprofit management. Third, it develops six propositions suitable for empirical testing.

The analysis relies on verified references selected for relevance rather than a systematic review. Claims about Lo (2026) are limited to the verified publisher abstract and metadata, because the full text could not be retrieved during preparation. No sample size, coefficient or detailed result from the article body is attributed to it. Its findings are cross-sectional associations from one community and are not treated as causal estimates. Claims about other cited works are limited to their verified abstracts and bibliographic records. Where this paper uses the language of influence or effect, it refers to proposed relationships to be tested, not to established findings.

Literature Review

Commitment beyond the surge

Lo's (2026) study offers a useful starting point because it distinguishes mobilisation from continuance. The abstract describes role or responsibility internalisation as a role-based identification and responsible self-positioning construct, and reports that it was associated with stronger continuance commitment in informal, high-uncertainty postdisaster digital collaboration. Motivation mattered directly and also through internalisation. Trust, by contrast, showed no significant direct association with continuance commitment.

Two features of this pattern are important for the present argument. First, internalisation concerns how people come to see themselves in relation to a role. That suggests commitment is not only a matter of what people bring with them but also of what the organisation offers them to take on. Second, the result on trust suggests that the conditions that bring people into collaboration may differ from those that keep them there. An organisation that invests heavily in initial trust but offers no meaningful roles may succeed at recruitment and struggle with continuity.

The study was conducted in a specific setting. It concerned digital volunteers coordinating after disasters within one community. Extending its implications to mission-driven organisations more generally is therefore a theoretical step, not an empirical inference. The paper takes that step deliberately and states its propositions so that they could be shown to be wrong in other settings.

Volunteering as a relationship over time

Wilson's (2000) review defines volunteering as activity in which time is given freely to benefit another person, group or cause, and organises explanations of volunteering around motives, rational action and social resources. The review also notes that research on the duration of volunteer spells and on turnover was only beginning at the time. That observation remains relevant. Much attention in practice still goes to recruitment, while the processes through which volunteers stay involved receive less systematic management.

Hustinx and Lammertyn (2003) examine the changing nature of volunteering through sociological modernisation theories. Their abstract argues that volunteer involvement should be

understood as a biographically embedded reality and constructs a framework of collective and reflexive styles of volunteering, explored along six dimensions that include the biographical frame of reference, the motivational structure, the course and intensity of commitment and the organisational environment. This paper uses the distinction in a broad sense, reading collective styles as involvement anchored in shared, established frames of reference and reflexive styles as involvement shaped more by individual biographical choice; that reading is an interpretation of the labels, not a finding attributed to the authors. For the present paper, the distinction suggests that stewardship cannot rely on a single model of loyalty. Some people may stay because they belong to a community that values the work. Others may stay only while the role fits their own circumstances and goals. A stewardship capability must be able to accommodate both.

Capabilities and their development

The dynamic capabilities framework, as set out by Teece, Pisano and Shuen (1997), locates competitive advantage in distinctive processes of coordinating and combining, shaped by an organisation’s asset positions and the paths it has adopted or inherited. Their abstract emphasises path dependence and the difficulty of replication and imitation. Although the framework was developed to explain wealth creation by private firms in environments of rapid technological change, its central insight transfers to mission-driven settings: capabilities that are built through accumulated practice cannot be acquired quickly when they are suddenly needed.

Eisenhardt and Martin (2000) argue that dynamic capabilities are specific and identifiable processes, citing examples such as product development, strategic decision making and alliancing. They suggest that such capabilities have commonalities across firms, often described as best practice, and that in moderately dynamic markets they resemble routines that are detailed, analytic and stable. In high-velocity markets, by contrast, they are simple, experiential and fragile. This distinction is useful for thinking about relationship stewardship. Between crises, conditions may be stable enough for detailed routines. During surges, conditions resemble high-velocity markets, and simple rules supported by existing relationships may matter more than elaborate procedures.

The inclusion of alliancing among Eisenhardt and Martin’s examples is significant. It indicates that managing relationships with other organisations can itself be treated as a capability, rather than as a series of one-off negotiations.

Repeated ties and the growth of trust between partners

Gulati (1995) examined how firms chose governance structures for alliances and challenged an exclusive emphasis on transaction costs. The abstract argues that treating each transaction as independent ignores the trust that emerges from repeated alliances between the same partners, and reports evidence, from comprehensive multi-industry data on alliances between 1970 and 1989, that repeated alliances between two partners were less likely than other alliances to be

organised using equity. The finding concerns commercial alliances, but its implication is general: prior relationships appear to change how partners structure subsequent cooperation.

For mission-driven organisations, the analogue is the partner who has worked with the organisation before. Such partners may require less formal negotiation, may be willing to begin work before every detail is settled, and may tolerate the inevitable confusion of a crisis because they have seen the organisation resolve problems in the past. None of this is guaranteed, and Gulati's evidence does not establish it for nonprofit settings. It does suggest that the history of a relationship is part of its value.

The developmental processes of cooperative relationships

Ring and Van de Ven (1994) examine the developmental process of cooperative interorganisational relationships that involve investments in deals that cannot be fully specified or controlled in advance. They propose a process framework focused on formal, legal and informal social-psychological processes through which parties negotiate, commit to and execute their relationship, and they offer propositions explaining how cooperative relationships emerge, evolve and dissolve. Their framing is helpful because it treats relationships as processes that move through stages and that require attention to both formal arrangements and informal understanding.

Many partnerships between mission-driven organisations fit their description. Agreements to share space, refer clients or coordinate services in a crisis can rarely be specified fully in advance. What sustains them is a combination of written understandings and the informal confidence partners have in one another.

Commitment and trust as mediating conditions

Morgan and Hunt (1994) theorise that successful relational exchange requires relationship commitment and trust, which they model as key mediating variables, and report favourable test results using data from automobile tyre retailers. Their work is grounded in commercial exchange and should not be transferred uncritically to voluntary relationships. It is included here because it represents an influential view in which trust is central to sustaining relationships.

Placed beside Lo's (2026) results, this view invites a qualification. In the voluntary setting Lo studied, trust was not directly associated with continuance commitment once motivation and internalisation were taken into account. One possible interpretation, consistent with the abstract, is that trust operates as a threshold condition: necessary for entry, but not sufficient to sustain commitment over time. If so, organisations may need to attend to trust when relationships begin and to roles and responsibilities as relationships continue.

Conceptual Framework and Propositions

Relational stewardship as a capability

The relational stewardship framework proposes that the capacity to sustain long-term relationships rests on three organisational elements.

Relational routines are the recurring practices through which an organisation maintains contact with people and partners between periods of high demand. Examples include regular updates on what contributions achieved, scheduled check-ins with partner organisations, joint planning exercises and low-intensity opportunities to remain involved.

Role architecture is the structure of roles available to volunteers and partners, including how people move from initial to more responsible roles and how responsibilities are defined. It reflects Lo's (2026) finding that role or responsibility internalisation was associated with continuance commitment.

Relational memory is the organisation's record of its relationships: who has contributed, in what capacity, with which partners, and with what results. It allows relationships to survive changes in staff and to be reactivated quickly when need returns.

The framework treats these elements as a capability in the sense used by Teece et al. (1997) and Eisenhardt and Martin (2000): a set of identifiable processes, built through practice, that cannot be assembled quickly when a crisis arrives. It also distinguishes between the two conditions those authors describe. Between surges, relational routines can be detailed and stable. During surges, the organisation draws on its existing relationships and on simple rules, and the quality of its earlier stewardship becomes visible.

Surge and stewardship as complementary

The framework does not dismiss surge capacity. Organisations will always need to mobilise new people and partners when demand rises sharply. The claim is that stewardship changes the character of a surge. An organisation with a strong stewardship capability begins each surge with a core of people and partners who already know their roles, and it can absorb newcomers by connecting them to this core. An organisation without such a capability must build its response from the beginning each time.

Stewardship also shapes what happens after a surge. People who joined during a crisis may be invited into lighter forms of continuing involvement, and partners who cooperated under pressure may be invited to review what worked. In this way, each surge can add to the organisation's relational base rather than leaving it unchanged.

Proposition 1: Continuity of contact between surges

If people who contribute during a crisis hear nothing further from the organisation, the relationship is likely to lapse. Relational routines that keep contact alive between surges, such as feedback on outcomes and low-intensity opportunities to remain involved, may preserve the motivation and sense of role that Lo associates with continuance.

Proposition 1. Mission-driven organisations that maintain structured contact with surge contributors between periods of high demand will retain a larger share of those contributors for subsequent periods of high demand than organisations that do not maintain such contact.

Proposition 2: Role progression and internalisation

Lo's (2026) findings suggest that internalisation of roles and responsibilities is associated with continuance commitment. An organisation can shape internalisation through the roles it offers. Clear pathways from initial tasks to roles with identifiable responsibility may help people come to see themselves as accountable participants rather than occasional helpers.

Proposition 2. Volunteers who are offered a defined pathway from initial tasks to roles with identifiable responsibility will report higher role internalisation, and in turn higher continuance commitment, than volunteers performing comparable initial tasks without such a pathway.

Proposition 3: Repeated partnering and the ease of cooperation

Gulati (1995) reports that repeated alliances between the same partners were less likely to be organised using equity, consistent with the role of trust emerging from prior ties. In mission-driven settings, an analogous pattern would be that partners with a history of working together rely less on detailed formal agreements and begin joint work more quickly when need arises.

Proposition 3. Partnerships between mission-driven organisations with a history of prior joint work will require less time to agree on arrangements for crisis cooperation than partnerships between organisations without such history, holding the scale of cooperation constant.

Proposition 4: Formal and informal processes together

Ring and Van de Ven (1994) emphasise that cooperative relationships develop through both formal, legal processes and informal, social-psychological ones. Relationships that rely solely on written agreements may lack the flexibility to adapt when circumstances change. Relationships that rely solely on personal understanding may fail when the people involved move on.

Proposition 4. Partnerships that combine written understandings with regular informal contact between staff will be more likely to persist through changes in personnel than partnerships that rely predominantly on either formal agreements or personal relationships alone.

Proposition 5: Accommodating reflexive volunteering

Hustinx and Lammertyn (2003) distinguish collective from reflexive styles of volunteering. On the broad reading adopted here, reflexive volunteers may be less likely to stay because of belonging and more likely to stay when roles fit their own circumstances. A stewardship capability that offers flexible, time-limited and clearly bounded roles may retain such volunteers, while one designed only around long-term, membership-style commitment may lose them.

Proposition 5. Among volunteers with a predominantly reflexive style, the availability of flexible and clearly bounded roles will be more strongly associated with continued involvement than it is among volunteers with a predominantly collective style.

Proposition 6: Relational memory and staff turnover

Many relationships in mission-driven organisations are held by individual staff members. When those staff leave, relationships may be lost. Relational memory, meaning shared records of contributors, partners and the history of joint work, may allow successors to resume contact and preserve the path-dependent value that Teece et al. (1997) attribute to accumulated capabilities.

Proposition 6. Organisations that maintain shared records of relationships with volunteers and partners will experience smaller declines in partner and volunteer engagement following the departure of the staff who managed those relationships than organisations without such records.

Discussion

Why treat relationships as a capability

Describing relationship stewardship as a capability has practical consequences. If relationships are simply the result of goodwill, there is little to plan, measure or improve. If they rest on routines, roles and records, leaders can examine each element and decide where to invest. The capability view also explains why organisations that neglect stewardship cannot easily catch up when a crisis arrives. On the logic set out by Teece et al. (1997), capabilities that are path dependent and built through accumulated practice are difficult to replicate quickly.

The view also has limits. Capabilities in the dynamic capabilities literature are typically discussed in relation to competitive advantage among firms. Mission-driven organisations may compete for attention, volunteers and partners, but their purpose is not to outperform rivals. The paper uses the capability concept to describe how an organisation’s capacity is built and sustained, not to suggest that mission-driven organisations should pursue advantage over one another. In many settings, the most valuable relationships are those that connect organisations to each other.

Trust at the threshold, roles over time

The paper's treatment of trust follows Lo's (2026) abstract closely and should be read with that limitation in mind. The study found no significant direct association between trust and continuance commitment, which the abstract interprets as suggesting that trust may function as a proximal condition for entering coordination. This does not mean that trust is unimportant. It may mean that trust and roles do different work at different stages. Morgan and Hunt's (1994) model, developed in commercial exchange, places trust and commitment at the centre of relational success. Lo's result in a voluntary, high-uncertainty setting suggests that, at least there, the roles people take on may matter more than trust for whether they stay.

For practice, the implication is a sequencing of attention. When relationships begin, organisations may need to establish trust through transparency, reliability and respect. As relationships continue, they may need to ensure that people have roles they can take responsibility for. An organisation that invests only in the first may attract people without keeping them.

Stewardship of partners as well as people

The paper extends Lo's findings on individual volunteers to relationships between organisations. This extension rests on analogy and is supported by different evidence. Gulati (1995) and Ring and Van de Ven (1994) address interorganisational relationships directly, and their work suggests that repeated interaction and attention to both formal and informal processes help relationships develop. Treating volunteers and partners within one framework has value because many mission-driven organisations manage both, often through the same small staff. It also risks overlooking differences. Organisations have their own goals and constraints, and their commitment may depend on factors, such as alignment of priorities and leadership changes, that do not apply to individuals in the same way.

The cost of stewardship

Stewardship requires time and attention. Relational routines take staff time, role architecture requires thought about how volunteers progress, and relational memory requires disciplined record keeping. In organisations with very limited capacity, these demands compete with immediate service delivery. The framework does not assume that every organisation can invest heavily in all three elements. It suggests that some investment in each may yield more than heavy investment in recruitment alone, but this suggestion is itself a proposition to be tested rather than an established result.

Risks of formalisation

There is a risk that treating relationships as a capability leads to excessive formalisation: contact schedules that feel mechanical, role ladders that feel bureaucratic, and records that intrude on people's privacy. Hustinx and Lammertyn's (2003) distinction between collective and reflexive

styles is relevant here. Reflexive volunteers may resist structures that assume a long-term, membership-style commitment. Stewardship should therefore be designed with flexibility, giving people meaningful roles without imposing obligations they did not seek.

Relational memory raises particular concerns about personal information. Records about volunteers and partners should be limited to what is needed, kept securely and handled in line with applicable data-protection requirements. The purpose of relational memory is continuity of relationships, not surveillance of contributors.

Surges as opportunities for stewardship

The framework also suggests that surges themselves can be occasions for building stewardship. A crisis brings new people and partners into contact with the organisation. If the organisation records these contacts, thanks contributors, explains what was achieved and offers lighter forms of continued involvement, it may convert part of a surge into lasting relationships. If it does none of these things, the surge leaves little behind. This is perhaps the most practical implication of the argument: the period immediately after a surge may be when stewardship investment matters most.

Practical Implications for Nonprofit and NGO Leaders

The framework suggests several starting points for leaders. These are offered as design suggestions consistent with the argument, not as evidence-based prescriptions.

First, review what happens after a surge. Leaders can ask whether people and partners who contributed during the most recent period of high demand received feedback on what their contribution achieved, whether they were invited to remain involved and whether their details were recorded in a way that would allow contact next time.

Second, map the roles available to volunteers. Leaders can identify which roles carry identifiable responsibility, whether there is a pathway from initial to more responsible roles, and whether roles of different lengths and intensities are available for people with different styles of involvement.

Third, maintain contact with key partners between crises. Brief, regular contact can keep relationships active, and joint planning or review exercises can build the shared history that may make future cooperation easier.

Fourth, combine written understandings with personal contact. Written agreements help relationships survive staff changes, while personal contact allows partners to adapt when circumstances change. Relying on only one is likely to leave relationships vulnerable.

Fifth, build relational memory. A shared and secure record of volunteers, partners and the history of joint work can help new staff resume relationships rather than starting again. Records should be proportionate and respect the privacy of the people described.

Sixth, assess the stewardship capability periodically. Leaders can ask simple questions: what share of surge contributors were still involved a year later, how many partners have worked with the organisation more than once, and how quickly relationships recovered after staff changes. These measures are imperfect but give a starting point for improvement.

Seventh, communicate stewardship priorities to boards and stakeholders. Boards often see the visible results of surges. Explaining that stewardship work between crises is what makes future responses faster and more reliable can help secure the time and attention it requires.

Limitations and Future Research

This paper has several limitations. It is conceptual and presents no original empirical data. Its propositions are theoretical and require testing.

The focal evidence is limited. Claims about Lo (2026) rely on the publisher’s abstract and metadata, because the full text could not be retrieved during preparation. The study’s findings are cross-sectional associations from one community of digital volunteers after disasters. Extending them to mission-driven organisations generally, and to relationships between organisations, is a theoretical step that may not hold.

Several supporting works were developed in commercial settings. The dynamic capabilities literature addresses private firms, Gulati (1995) studied commercial alliances and Morgan and Hunt (1994) tested their model with tyre retailers. Their relevance to mission-driven organisations is argued by analogy and should be examined empirically.

The relational stewardship framework is not exhaustive. Other factors, including leadership, the availability of resources, the policy environment and the characteristics of the communities served, are likely to affect relationships. The framework isolates routines, roles and memory because they are within an organisation’s control, not because other factors are unimportant.

The paper does not address power differences in relationships. Partnerships between large and small organisations, or between organisations and the communities they serve, may involve unequal influence. Stewardship that serves the interests of the stronger party could reinforce such inequalities.

Future research could test the propositions in several ways. Longitudinal studies could follow surge contributors over time and examine whether structured contact and role pathways are associated with retention. Comparative case studies of partnerships could examine how prior joint work and the combination of formal and informal processes affect cooperation during

crises. Studies of staff transitions could assess whether shared relational records reduce the loss of relationships. Research could also examine whether the distinction between trust at entry and roles over time, suggested by Lo's findings, holds in other voluntary and interorganisational settings.

Conclusion

Surges will always be part of the work of mission-driven organisations, but organisations that depend on them alone begin each crisis from the start. This paper has argued that the capacity to sustain long-term relationships with volunteers, partners and communities is better understood as an organisational capability, built through relational routines, role architecture and relational memory. Drawing on Lo's (2026) finding that role or responsibility internalisation was associated with continuance commitment while trust was not directly associated, and on research on capabilities and interorganisational relationships, it has proposed six testable propositions. The central claim is modest but practical: relationships that last are rarely accidental, and organisations can choose to steward them.

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