Strengthening the Next Generation: A Multi-faceted Program to Develop Leadership Capacity in Emerging Nonprofit Leaders

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Abstract

Nonprofits face a leadership crisis in the decade to come as senior leaders are expected to retire in record numbers and as emerging leaders fail to get the development they need to grow their skills. Identifying and preparing the next generation of leaders to develop themselves and eventually move into senior leadership roles is therefore important. In one United States community, this need is being met through the development of cohorts of emerging leaders participating in an 8-month leadership development program that includes distinctive features such as individual coaching, strong peer learning, involvement of exemplary senior leaders, and alumni engagement. This article shares the design and outcomes of the first four years of this initiative for other communities to customize and build upon to meet their own unique circumstances.

The nonprofit sector has always had one advantage over the for-profit sector in attracting and retaining key talent: nonprofit leaders experience deep meaning and sense of purpose in their work. Yet nonprofit leadership is facing a crisis—unless we do something, our supply of nonprofit leaders in the near future will fall far short of demands. As importantly, the generational divide between emerging leaders and senior leaders is significant. The result is that our nonprofit organizations lose some of their best young talent or fail to integrate the wisdom of senior leaders with the unique skills and insights of the next generation of leaders. A proactive
approach is required to address this predicament, to develop the next generation of leaders and to access their talents. This will further strengthen our nonprofit sector, now and in the future. This article describes the situation and its many aspects and outlines the structure and results of one leadership development solution for emerging nonprofit leaders.

Review of the Literature

The literature on nonprofit leadership and succession planning suggests myriad challenges for the future of the nonprofit sector. Understanding the challenges enables the creation of leadership development approaches for emerging leaders to ensure their readiness to assume the reins.

Nonprofit Succession Planning. In 2006, a report called *Daring to Lead* summarized a national study of the nonprofit sector showing that three out of four executive directors in the sector planned to leave their jobs within the next five years (Bell, Moyers, & Wolfred, 2006). Other researchers supported this claim that the nonprofit sector “will require an unprecedented number of new leaders in the near future” (Kerle’, 2009, p. 63). The Bridgespan Group report (Tierney, 2006) evaluated the growth the nonprofit sector will experience as well as how many senior leaders will leave the sector in the coming years. Their analysis indicated that by 2016, the nonprofit sector will require 78,000 new senior managers each year, 40 percent over the number needed just ten years earlier.

Another issue for nonprofits supporting the need for emerging leader development is that nonprofits have not demonstrated strength in developing and hiring from within (Kerle’, 2009; Tierney, 2006). Only about one-third of nonprofit hires are internal promotions as compared to approximately 60 percent in business. The most recent *Daring to Lead* survey (Cornelius, Moyers, & Bell, 2011) of Executive Directors reported that “thirty-six percent of leaders said there would not be a credible staff candidate for the executive position should they leave today” (Cornelius et al., 2011, para. 10). One of the key recommendations of the 2011 *Daring to Lead* study was that nonprofits “systematize leadership development.”

Ready to Lead? Next Generation Leaders Speak Out (Cornelius, Corvington, & Ruesga, 2008), the largest national survey to date of emerging nonprofit leaders, solicited the input of over 6000 potential nonprofit leaders. Underscoring the gap in leadership development, only 4 percent of survey respondents in this study experienced explicit development to become their organization’s future executive director.

Retaining Young Leaders. The concern about succession planning could appear less of a priority now since recent trends show some senior leaders are delaying retirement. According to Freedman (2008), extending work lives reflects the desire of senior leaders to continue to contribute and perhaps the necessity of extending their working years in challenging economic times. As senior leaders stay longer, there is a risk of younger leaders leaving to find advancement elsewhere if no opportunity for growth exists in the nonprofit sector. Thus, a unique opportunity exists for nonprofit organizations to grow more skilled leadership teams by successfully leveraging and integrating the talents of both existing and emerging leaders into a more high-functioning team. This requires a commitment to developing young talent, with a significant payoff for that investment.

Multiple generations in the workplace create unique communication and leadership challenges (Brinckerhoff, 2007). Age groups differ in how they prefer to be treated as well as how they choose to lead (Brinckerhoff, 2007; Carman, Leland, & Wilson, 2010; Kunreuther, 2005). Emerging nonprofit professionals describe not feeling valued or heard by their organizations and being frustrated by their inability to have the impact they seek to have. The

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“growing disconnect between executive leaders and young professionals in nonprofit organizations” may contribute to the crisis of future leadership (Carman, Leland, & Wilson, 2010, p. 93).

Ready to Lead (Cornelius, Corvington, & Ruesga, 2008) offered a picture of the unique attributes of the next generation of nonprofit leaders. Forty-two percent of those surveyed in this study were younger than 30 years old. Only about one-third of the survey participants expressed a willingness to step into executive director roles in the future. Perceived obstacles included concerns about nonprofit leaders’ work-life balance, insufficient earning potential, lack of guidance and support from executive directors, and emerging leaders’ perceptions that the fundraising responsibilities of a nonprofit leader will be overwhelming (Berkshire, 2008; Cornelius, Corvington, & Ruesga, 2008).

The younger leaders who are positioned to succeed are part of a new, more tech-savvy generation who are eager to lead in their own way (Carman, Leland, & Wilson, 2010; Glasrud, 2008). Nonprofit organizations, particularly in the recent economic downturn, benefit from being open to input from their younger staff (Preston, 2008). Having their ideas valued and implemented serves as a motivator for upcoming leaders. Learning how to frame their input so it can be heard is a need that leadership development can address. These future leaders are inspired by those who preceded them, yet they are also impatient; they want their own unique gifts and approaches to be appreciated and utilized (Carman, Leland, & Wilson, 2010; Kunreuther, 2005).

Kunreuther (2005), in studying nonprofit leaders between the ages of 25 and 40, conveyed the importance of younger leaders’ development and promotion to sustain nonprofit organizations. She recommended that we invest in younger leaders by having experienced leaders take an active role in encouraging emerging leaders and that funders play a part in supporting the necessary staff development. Kunreuther (2005) also emphasized the importance of a healthy work-life balance if the nonprofit sector is to attract and retain younger leaders.

Mirroring and expanding on Kunreuther’s recommendations, Ready to Lead (Cornelius, Corvington, & Ruesga, 2008) suggested ways to build nonprofit leadership capacity for the future by: (1) boards holding executive directors responsible for developing leadership at all levels; (2) trainers upgrading programs to increase relevance, build concrete management skills required in the executive director role, and enable emerging leaders to develop their external networks; and (3) funders supporting leadership and training programs. The most powerful leadership development programs will incorporate or support these recommended strategies and demonstrate the resulting impacts.

Leadership Development and Coaching. “Effective leadership begins with leader development” (Day, Harrison, & Halpin, 2008, p. 3). Leadership development programs are powerful because they offer a structure for the development of skills and a learning community that supports individual growth, sharing, and mutual support. Leadership development programs should include a broad set of leadership skills, such as emotional and social intelligence, decision making skills, and the effective use of inspiration and influence, and should help leaders not just learn but apply these skills in their work (Day, Harrison, & Halpin, 2008; Riggio, 2008).

Leadership development programs are most effective when participants are motivated, developmentally ready to learn (Day, Harrison, & Halpin, 2008; Riggio, 2008; Sheridan & Howard, 2009), and have their organization’s support to commit the time and energy necessary for learning. Leadership development in group settings offers safe space for developing and practicing new skills that will translate into increased interpersonal abilities in the workplace. In the case of emerging nonprofit leaders, the need for development is for the individual leader and the sector as a whole, which benefits from growing its collective leadership (Kunreuther, 2005; Wilson & Gislason, 2010).
In addition to a curriculum providing specific knowledge and skills, 360 evaluation and feedback as well as individual coaching are valuable investments in the development of leaders (Day, Harrison, & Halpin, 2008). In one study of the effectiveness of coaching (Sheridan & Howard, 2009), executive directors reported an increased ability to balance their work and personal lives, an increased self-confidence, the ability to reflect on and consciously choose how to lead, and a continued commitment to self-improvement. The Coaching and Philanthropy Project (CompassPoint Nonprofit Services, 2010) documented coaching’s positive effect on executive directors’ self-awareness, self-confidence, leadership ability, and teamwork, including effective delegation. Fischer and Beimers described the potential long-term benefit of coaching in the nonprofit sector as “retention of high-quality nonprofit executives in the sector and enhanced stability in organizations” (2009, p. 509).

In larger studies as well, coaching has significant impact. One study sponsored by the International Coach Federation (2009) surveyed more than 2,100 coaching clients in 64 countries to discover the practical value they received as a result of being coached. The most frequently cited impacts (reported by over two-thirds of those surveyed) were improvements in self-esteem and self-confidence, relationships, communication skills, interpersonal skills, work performance, and work-life balance. Many of these variables are critical to nonprofit leader success.

Whereas individual coaching can be a costly investment, it makes sense to include coaching as a component of a leadership development program in order to enable individuals to apply what they are learning within the context of their own individual talents and the organizations they serve. In addition, the experience of being coached may facilitate adoption of a coaching approach by these young leaders in their organizations (Wilson & Gislason, 2010). The Emerging Nonprofit Leaders program (ENPL) was created in alignment with the issues and desired outcomes outlined here in order to develop the next generation to fill the shoes of existing nonprofit leaders when they retire and to bring all their considerable gifts in the meanwhile.

Method

Program Overview

Background. The Emerging Nonprofit Leaders program (ENPL) is a dynamic 8-month experience for the next generation of nonprofit leaders in Central Virginia, the metro area surrounding Richmond, Virginia, an area with over 2,500 nonprofit organizations and associations. ENPL is offered through Nonprofit Learning Point, a professional development program sponsored by Richmond’s Partnership for Nonprofit Excellence and Virginia Commonwealth University. In this engaging program, participants have the opportunity to deepen their understanding of their leadership capacity, advance their knowledge and practice of leadership in the nonprofit sector, and strengthen their network of nonprofit colleagues.

ENPL began in the Fall of 2007. During the first four years of the program, 76 staff members from 57 different nonprofits participated. The program format includes a series of daylong group seminars, an outdoor experiential team building experience, discussions with exemplary leaders from the nonprofit community, an intensive leadership assessment component, online dialogue, readings, individual leadership coaching, and individual consultations on strategic thinking. Altogether, these learning activities involve 102 hours of formal training and development.

The leaders’ organizations are involved throughout the program. An orientation session for supervisors teaches how to best support their participant with transferability of the learning to
benefit the organization. In addition, participants conduct a strategic planning interview with their own Executive Director or a Board member. Nineteen organizations have sent more than one participant, which, anecdotally, has facilitated the participants implementing what they have learned. Finally, Executive Directors participate in the ENPL’s opening session and graduation luncheon.

**Program Administration.** As an affiliated program of the Partnership for Nonprofit Excellence, Nonprofit Learning Point provides a direct connection between the program for emerging leaders and other key initiatives of the Partnership including volunteerism, consulting services, and a nonprofit web-based resource. The Division of Community Engagement at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) administratively house Nonprofit Learning Point and thus ENPL. VCU staff provide marketing and meeting planning support. A doctoral level external consultant with strong background in nonprofit leadership development was appointed as adjunct faculty to design and implement the curriculum. ENPL has an advisory group made up of representatives from the university, nonprofits, and the funding community as well as experts in leadership development, to provide essential curriculum input and community connectivity. A separate selection committee reviews applications and makes final decisions regarding the class composition.

Staff market the program through the Internet-based tool “ConnectRichmond,” e-mail lists of previous Nonprofit Learning Point students, and ENPL program alumni. Information sessions are held each summer for potential applicants. Candidates need to submit an application that includes a personal statement, a résumé, a nomination letter from their Board Chair, and a letter of support from their executive director. Selection criterion include that the applicant be a leader currently employed by a local nonprofit, have potential to make a significant future contribution in the community, have substantive history of involvement in the nonprofit sector, and demonstrate commitment to ongoing professional development.

The generosity of several funders subsidize the program tuition. The $900 tuition covers approximately one-third of actual program costs.

**Conceptual Framework.** The program is conceptually grounded in two contemporary models of leadership that are highly relevant to the nonprofit sector. In 2002, Daniel Goleman’s groundbreaking book, *Primal Leadership*, was the first major publication to tie the growing body of research on emotional intelligence to effectiveness in leadership. In other books and a series of easily accessible articles published in the *Harvard Business Review* (Goleman, 2000; Goleman, 2004; Goleman, Boyatzis, & McGee, 2001; Goleman & Boyatzis, 2008), Goleman illustrated the importance of and need to cultivate emotional intelligence in leaders. Developing effective relationships with a wide variety of stakeholders including donors, volunteers, board members, and staff has always been critical for nonprofit leaders. In addition, recent economic challenges have led to a call for local nonprofits to increase efficiencies through collaborative partnerships and mergers. Emotional intelligence, with its emphasis on self-awareness, interpersonal skills, and relationships, provides an excellent conceptual framework for developing nonprofit leaders.

Program developers also desired to have an emphasis on transformational leadership in order to strengthen emerging leaders’ capacity to foster positive change in the local community. The model of leadership developed by Kouzes and Posner (2007) and articulated in *The Leadership Challenge*, provides the second conceptual pillar for the ENPL program. Kouzes and Poster identified five practices of exemplary leadership: challenging the status quo, inspiring a shared vision, enabling others to act, modeling the way, and encouraging the heart. ENPL participants receive copies of the book as their text and also participate in a 360-degree feedback process based on these five leadership practices.
Participants

Approximately 90 percent of applicants in the first four years have been accepted into the program. As the program reputation grows and the economy recovers, competition for the 20 program slots will increase. Participants have represented diverse segments of the nonprofit sector, including the arts, health care, social services, youth development, housing, and foundations. The type of position held has covered the full range of positions in the sector, including fund development professionals, executive leaders, program officers, and volunteer managers.

The majority of the participants (86 percent) were women, a demographic reflecting the preponderance of women working in the nonprofit sector as a whole. Seventeen percent of the participants were African-American and 83 percent were Caucasian. While there is no requirement regarding age, a key selection criterion is that the participant be positioned to make a significant future contribution to the sector. Thus, the age bracket with the largest number of participants (50 percent) was emerging leaders between the ages of 31 and 40. Another 15.6 percent of participants were 30 or younger.

Program Components

Group Sessions. During each group session, the facilitator provides content related to key leadership skills and opportunities for the participants to apply what they are learning. Topics include emotional intelligence, leadership styles, strategic thinking, visionary leadership, leading change, managing conflict, and coaching skills. Facilitators use an interactive instructional style, with ample opportunities for peer learning. This high level of participation is critical in strengthening group cohesion and in turn leads to strong alumni involvement after the program ends. Following their strategic planning interview with their Board member or Executive Director, participants have an individual strategic thinking consultation with a local expert, a former CEO who has consulted with dozens of local nonprofits organizations on their strategic plans. Exemplary leaders from local nonprofits meet with participants to share their leadership journeys and discuss strategies for leading effectively. This enables emerging leaders to connect with senior leaders outside of their own organizations and to learn about the deep pool of wisdom and resources available in the community.

Leadership Coaching. During the program, participants have individual coaching sessions with leadership coaches to discuss developmental goals, debrief assessment results, and apply concepts from the group sessions to their organizations. Their four individual coaching sessions are initiated about one-third of the way through the ENPL program and completed shortly before program end. The coaches paired with the emerging leaders have experience with nonprofit organizations and have coached other nonprofit leaders. As a result, they have a clear sense of some of the specific challenges faced by the emerging leaders. The coaches are familiar with the ENPL curriculum and able to align the individual coaching work with the overall program goals.

Evaluation Method

ENPL participants complete online evaluation surveys a week after each group session, providing ratings for session components and particular learning objectives and responding to open-ended questions regarding their perceptions of the session. In addition, participants complete pre- and post-program self-ratings of their skill level in twelve key leadership competencies. These anonymous self-ratings are on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 representing low
level of skill and 10 indicating the highest possible skill level. At the end of the program, participants also respond to a survey regarding their experience in leadership coaching.

In the Fall of 2010, the ENPL alumni from the first three years were surveyed via an online tool regarding their accomplishments since program completion and the extent to which they had sustained key leadership skills. Time since program completion varied for each cohort group and ranged from 6 months to 2.5 years. Fifty-four out of fifty-seven alumni (95 percent) from the first three cohort groups responded to the survey. Additional detail was sought by completing follow-up interviews with approximately one-third (32 percent) of participants.

**Results**

**Session Evaluation**

In all four years of the program, response from participants has been very positive. The average ratings on a 5-point scale (where 1 indicated “poor” and 5 indicated “excellent”) across all participants for all of the group sessions were 4.63 in 2008, 4.57 in 2009, 4.47 in 2010, and 4.64 in 2011. The teambuilding day at the outdoor experiential learning center received ratings above 4.70 all four years, and responses in the open-ended section amplify the positive impact of the day, particularly on group cohesion. Ratings for the 19 sessions with exemplary local leaders averaged 4.13 or higher every year (on the same 5-point scale) for all but one of the sessions. Participants have been particularly appreciative when leaders discuss real-time challenges, such as when a leader shared openly about a merger in her organization or when other leaders invited the group for tours of newly renovated facilities and discussed the associated issues of strategy and fund development. Evaluative comments often reflect that the accomplishments and perspectives of these more experienced leaders inspire the participants.

Using a 5-point scale, participants are asked to indicate the extent to which they agree that they have accomplished particular learning objectives (1 indicates “strongly disagree” and 5 indicates “strongly agree”). Ratings have ranged from 4.05 to 4.89, with the average scores across all objectives indicating a very high level of achievement of learning objectives (means = 4.61, 4.51, 4.47, and 4.53 across the four years). The highest ratings tend to be on learning objectives related to awareness of leadership strengths and weaknesses, strengthening relationships among participants, and understanding leadership styles. Lower ratings tend to be in more challenging skill areas such as enhancements in ability to think strategically or lead people through change.

Since the individual coaching is the largest line item in the program budget, detailing its usefulness is helpful. As can be seen in Table 1, reaction from the participants to the coaching has been very positive. When asked what they gained from the coaching that they would not have gained from the group sessions alone, the majority noted that coaching provided them opportunities to apply material from the group sessions to their unique circumstances and that the personal, confidential nature of the coaching was beneficial. Participants’ responses to the question regarding topics of their coaching sessions covered more than 16 separate topics, indicating that each person is pursuing the topics most critical to them. The most frequently mentioned topics include managing conflict, career goals, confidence, work relationships, and applications of the Myers Briggs Type Inventory. The most frequently mentioned benefits of coaching include the individualized attention, the objective perspective and insight into leadership issues, and listening skills of the coaches. More than half of the comments about ways to improve ENPL were requests for additional coaching sessions.

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Table 1
Mean Ratings of the Coaching Experience Across Four Years (scale of 1 to 5 where 1 represents “poor” and 5 represents “excellent”)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evaluation Items</th>
<th>Mean Rating</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My coaching sessions were valuable.</td>
<td>4.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The coaching sessions were of benefit beyond what I would have gained from</td>
<td>4.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>participating in the group sessions alone.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The coaching contributed to my ability to be effective in my leadership role.</td>
<td>4.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My coach was knowledgeable about leadership issues.</td>
<td>4.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My coach understood the nonprofit work setting.</td>
<td>4.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was comfortable talking about important issues with my coach.</td>
<td>4.61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Follow-Up Study

Ninety-two percent of the respondents are still working in the nonprofit sector, indicating a positive impact on retention of our talented emerging leaders. While 54 percent of alumni are in the same positions as they were when they finished the program, 34 percent have already accepted positions of greater responsibility at their original agency or another nonprofit. During phone interviews, ENPL was often credited with providing the emerging leaders with key skills they are using in their new roles. As would be expected, those graduating in June of 2010 were less likely to have accepted a new position with only three 2010 alumni reporting a promotion. In comparison, fourteen members of the classes of 2008 and 2009 reported being in positions of higher responsibility.

As can be seen in Figure 1, alumni are heavily engaged in the community outside of their own paid work roles. Seventy-seven percent indicated service on the Board of another nonprofit, as a volunteer in the community, or in a leadership role with a professional organization since program completion. Involvement in these leadership roles tends to increase with time since ENPL program completion. For the cohorts completing ENPL in 2008, 2009, and 2010, participants reporting Board service number 14, 8, and 6, respectively.

![Figure 1](http://www.jnel.net/)

*Figure 1. Percentage of alumni engaged in community roles.*

The value of leadership coaching is enduring for the graduates of ENPL. Thirty-seven percent reported utilizing individual or group coaching since the program. Seventy-eight percent agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “the coaching experience made a lasting impact on
Participants often recommend leadership coaching for other top leaders in their organizations and thus aid the local nonprofit community in accessing coaching as a key resource for professional development.

As part of the ongoing program evaluation, participants complete pre- and post-self-ratings on twelve key skill and knowledge areas. In each year of the program, participants have achieved significant increases in their ratings from start to end of the program. In order to evaluate how well participants sustained these increases over time, participants rated themselves again on the same twelve items. As can be seen in Table 2, the three-year follow up ratings are close to the post-ratings at the time of program completion, indicating that participants are sustaining the gains realized during the program itself. The list of particular competencies can be seen in the table, while Figure 2 provides a visual of these ratings.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership Competency</th>
<th>Pre</th>
<th>Post</th>
<th>Follow-up</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Understanding of unique aspects of leading in nonprofit</td>
<td>5.91</td>
<td>8.27</td>
<td>7.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sector</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strength of network of nonprofit colleagues</td>
<td>5.33</td>
<td>7.89</td>
<td>7.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of leadership strengths and weaknesses</td>
<td>5.92</td>
<td>8.50</td>
<td>8.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness of how leadership is perceived by others</td>
<td>5.47</td>
<td>8.00</td>
<td>7.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of latest thinking re: effective leadership</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>8.18</td>
<td>7.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic thinking skill</td>
<td>5.87</td>
<td>7.73</td>
<td>7.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to articulate clear vision</td>
<td>6.31</td>
<td>8.01</td>
<td>7.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to manage conflict constructively</td>
<td>5.73</td>
<td>7.52</td>
<td>7.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skills in leading change</td>
<td>6.12</td>
<td>7.93</td>
<td>7.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skills in coaching &amp; developing others</td>
<td>6.07</td>
<td>7.79</td>
<td>7.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capacity for fostering collaboration</td>
<td>6.83</td>
<td>8.40</td>
<td>7.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall confidence in ability to lead</td>
<td>6.56</td>
<td>8.40</td>
<td>8.15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. Pre-, post-, and follow-up competency ratings.
Alumni were asked to select the competency areas that improved most due to their participation in ENPL. Thirty-three alumni (62 percent) indicated that knowledge of their own leadership strengths and weaknesses was one of the areas of most improvement. During follow-up phone interviews, alumni explained that understanding their strengths and challenges made them more reflective leaders, able to adapt to different circumstances and more adept at leading teams of different types of people. A second competency area often cited (46 percent) was that of developing a stronger network of nonprofit colleagues. As one person shared in the phone interview, “I feel a lot more connected to other non-profit professionals in the Richmond area. This helps me share thoughts with others, and I love having the network to bounce ideas off of.” Program administrators believe the strength of this network is contributing to the high level of participation in ongoing alumni activities.

Fifty-seven percent of alumni have participated in collaborative efforts with other nonprofits since participating in the program. Alumni are also strong supporters of ENPL, with 98 percent of the respondents noting they have recommended the program to others.

An alumni executive committee has been formed and coordinates several social and learning experiences each year. For example, alumni gather at the Nonprofit Learning Point fall conference and are guests at one of the ENPL sessions and at the closing luncheon. Further professional development has occurred through a group coaching experience and a training program on effective board service. Eighty-four percent have attended one or more of the various alumni events offered. In addition, alumni report being in touch with each other informally regarding potential partnerships, professional development, networking, workplace challenges, and job opportunities. There were no differences between the cohort groups in terms of the extent of contact with other alumni, suggesting that participants are maintaining these collegial relationships over time.

Discussion

Succession planning and human resource development for leaders in the nonprofit sector are necessary to secure our future and to enhance the way nonprofit leaders work together in the present. This article suggests one option for developing emerging leaders in the context of a cohesive community of peers who augment one another’s learning as they share their challenges, experiences, and strengths. Initial results have been extremely promising, and there is more work to be done to build on the foundation of the current ENPL program.

Strengths

This program evaluation suggests that some of the most impactful aspects of the program have been the creation of enduring relationships with a network of peers, the development of self-awareness and a practice of reflection, and the knowledge of senior leaders as resources. The collaborative efforts of members of all the cohorts and their continuing involvement in the alumni community have served to create a system of support and ongoing learning.

The literature review for this evaluation suggested that nonprofits have performed inadequately in growing their talent internally. Research on the generations in the workplace suggested impatience on the part of the younger generations when they were unable to make a significant contribution. This program evaluation showed advancement and promotion of emerging leaders since ENPL program completion as well as community leadership such that participants are gaining opportunities to use their skills in more challenging roles and are developing towards senior leadership roles in the future. This is likely to maintain emerging
leaders’ motivation to remain in the nonprofit sector as well as improve their readiness for more senior leadership positions as these open.

Limitations

Four cohorts of leaders, a total of 76 individuals, have completed the ENPL program and are beginning to realize its value in their work and lives. Yet the true impact of the ENPL leadership development will not be evident for some years as the Central Virginia community begins to see the retirement of its senior nonprofit leaders. It is only then that we will have the opportunity to determine whether the investment made in these emerging leaders has provided the bench strength necessary.

While the evaluation efforts for the ENPL program have been positive, the program participants were nominated for participation because of their potential as future leaders. Thus, many of them might have been increasing their skills and advancing in their positions regardless of participation in a program such as ENPL. To demonstrate that participation in ENPL has created more rapid and sustained skill development than participants would have realized without the program would require comparison to a control group. Practical considerations prevented that from being a part of the ongoing program evaluation.

Another aspect that may prove limiting to other communities trying to implement similar approaches is that of trainer and coach capacity. Both require significant expertise and an agreement to participate at significantly reduced fees. Other communities are encouraged to invest in program management staff who are able to identify and retain talented professionals to serve in the program. In addition, it will be essential to develop the next generation of emerging coaches and facilitators to assume leadership of the ENPL program in the future.

A final potential limitation is that Central Virginia is a medium-sized metropolitan region. This enables easy accessibility to training sites since most are within a 30-minute commute from the leaders’ organizations. The size of the community also enables strong connections to continue after the program’s end with relative ease. Larger cities and communities covering a larger geographic area may find that creativity will be important in customizing the program to their needs. For example, they may want to explore adding more distance learning aspects to the program. Emerging leaders themselves can offer some of these solutions, given their greater comfort with technology and all it offers.

Implications

A common complaint in the nonprofit sector is that neither money nor time is available for leadership development. To the extent that these resources are accessible, they have typically been reserved for the top leaders in nonprofit organizations rather than for the emerging leaders who will succeed them. The model used here is one that is affordable financially, costing far less than similar programs in the for-profit sector because of its eight months spread and because it respects the time commitment required and provides ample opportunity for applying new skills. The results thus far have been measurable, and the impact over time is likely to go well beyond the immediate value of the program as alumni continue to collaborate and to step into the next levels of leadership. Developing and customizing similar leadership development models in other communities is one potentially powerful way to motivate and to develop emerging leaders and thereby strengthen capacity in the nonprofit sector as well as address the anticipated shortage of nonprofit leaders in the future.
References


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