

## **Play to Win stimulates a lively discussion**

by **Melissa Mendes Campos, Associate**



On May 18, David La Piana spoke with a group of Monterey Bay Area nonprofit leaders about his most recent book, *Play to Win: The Nonprofit Guide to Competitive Strategy*. The occasion was a nonprofit “book club” hosted by the Community Foundation of Santa Cruz County ([www.cfsc.org](http://www.cfsc.org)).

One participant reflected on her observations of a nonprofit environment in which there may be a high level of collaboration on one hand, while intense squabbling and aggressive positioning may occur behind closed doors.

Noting that this is not necessarily uncommon, David used this example to clarify that *Play to Win* encourages “ethical” competition: to be a competitive nonprofit doesn’t mean that you go out and try to put others out of business. Rather, you need to focus on and emphasize what your nonprofit does best, communicate confidence in your capabilities while always striving to do better, and work to get the resources you need to achieve your goals and advance your mission.

Recognizing that nonprofits may very well assume a collaborative role in one situation and act competitively in another, *Play to Win* cites the formation of alliances as a strategy that embodies both approaches. To this point, participants had an example close to home: the Human Care Alliance, a group of over 60 health and human service agencies that share efforts to garner support for this subsector. In such an alliance, nonprofits may actively compete when appropriate and yet join forces to lobby for public funds and contracts, or in other situations in which they have a common interest and can have a greater impact together than they could ever have on their own.

Participants discussed the premise of ethical competition among nonprofits, and several spoke about challenges they were experiencing in identifying and capitalizing on their organizations’ competitive advantages. One was the ED, the sole staff person, of a fledgling local group that had just spun off from a national agency. She wondered: *How can she be sure the plans she brings to her board are realistic and will take her nonprofit where it needs to go?* Another was an operator of a multi-tenant nonprofit facility that needs to answer the question: *What “added value” does her agency offer that a for-profit landlord does not?*

The group noted the importance of market research as a means to discover their nonprofits’ competitive advantages. For the solo ED, assessing the local market will provide an objective foundation from which strategic decisions about priorities and programs can be made. For the nonprofit landlord, learning what the community values in a multi-tenant facility is essential to assure that the competitive strategies it adopts are based in fact rather than the assumptions of the board and staff.

*Play to Win* offers loads of helpful advice to nonprofits on how to identify and strengthen their competitive advantages, helping them to learn how to best position themselves to and advance their missions. It provides useful methods and tools for conducting practical market research to better understand your customers/clients and their needs, and to identify the unique assets only your nonprofit can bring to bear to address these needs.

What questions or comments does the concept of ethical competition raise for you?  
Please share your thoughts with me: [campos@lapiana.org](mailto:campos@lapiana.org).