

## Developing Nonprofit Leaders Using a Learning Community Model

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### WHAT IS A LEARNING COMMUNITY AND HOW DOES IT SUPPORT LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT?

**L**a Piana Associates, Inc. works to build the capacity of the nonprofit sector through the design and implementation of leadership development programs. A hallmark of our model for leadership development is an intensive learning opportunity for executive directors, designed using a peer learning model, in which small groups of executive directors (12-15 participants) commit to learn together over an extended period, often a year. The groups are led and supported by consultants/trainers from La Piana Associates who are themselves experienced nonprofit leaders, skilled in leadership development, the design and implementation of learning communities, and organizational capacity-building. The learning community is typically sponsored by a foundation on behalf of a group of nonprofit leaders.

**THERE IS GROWING RECOGNITION THAT DEVELOPING AND SUPPORTING EXECUTIVE DIRECTORS IS A FUNDAMENTAL ASPECT OF BUILDING THE CAPACITY OF NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS.**

The goals of these programs are to help Executive Directors to:

- ◆ Enhance and develop their self awareness and understanding of the impact of their personality on their leadership—a process that stimulates positive personal change and, in turn, stronger leadership skills
- ◆ Strengthen their management and leadership skills

- ◆ Develop networks with other nonprofit leaders that support ongoing leadership development and reduce the sense of isolation that nonprofit leaders often experience

Our basic curriculum, which is customized for each project, generally covers the following areas:

- ◆ The role of the executive director—leading the organization
- ◆ The relationship of the executive to the board—getting the most out of the board
- ◆ Understanding and managing strategic issues—dealing with growth, competition, and new ventures
- ◆ Managing people, including volunteers, staff, and interns
- ◆ Communicating the message—developing and implementing internal and external communication strategies
- ◆ Developing a nonprofit that people want to support—raising funds
- ◆ Leveraging resources, including board members, consultants, peers
- ◆ Setting and measuring goals—adopting practical approaches and tools that are easy to apply
- ◆ Developing a lifelong, sustainable approach to leadership

The programs usually combine a small amount of relevant reading with discussions and role-plays. The leader seeds conversations and presents cases for discussion by the group. Group members are encouraged to contact one another between meetings—enhancing the peer-to-peer approach to learning and support. Examples of this include informal breakfast or lunch get-togethers, phone calls, and/or emails to discuss challenges/problems.

## WHAT ARE THE SUCCESS FACTORS FOR A LEARNING COMMUNITY FOR LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT?

Our staff includes experts in the design and implementation of learning communities, as well as in one-on-one coaching of organizations to support them in developing their capacity. Over time we have developed some generic tools and approaches that we adapt to the needs of the nonprofits we work with. These include:

- ◆ Curriculum for learning communities, addressing key aspects of organizational capacity, and including selected readings, participatory exercises, and discussion topics for each key area.
- ◆ Knowledge Center template—an online repository of resources and tools to support organizations in building their capacity, and to facilitate the sharing of information across organizations
- ◆ Self-assessment tool for identifying capacity building needs—Our LIFE Cycle<sup>sm</sup> Assessment Tool is designed to be an informative, interactive process conducted among the organization’s staff and board members, and to facilitate the prioritization of capacity-building needs
- ◆ Tools and resources for strategic planning, board development, human resources development, communication, marketing, and financial management

We draw upon these resources to enhance the learning of executive directors, and to facilitate deeper work within the nonprofits involved in our learning communities.

## THEORY OF PRACTICE: THE CONTEXT THAT INFORMS OUR APPROACH

**T**he connection between leadership development and increased capacity

There is growing recognition that developing and supporting executive directors is a fundamental aspect of building the capacity of nonprofit organizations. A study of nonprofit leaders, *Daring to Lead: Nonprofit Executive Directors and Their*

*Work Experience*<sup>1</sup>, points to the ongoing support of executive directors as a key strategy in capacity building and makes specific recommendations to funders regarding their role in developing and retaining executive directors. The report suggests that foundations should focus their resources on leadership services and financial support for professional development programs and executive coaching/mentoring.

### “Best practice” principles for establishing capacity-building programs

Given the connection between skills development for leaders and building nonprofit capacity, it is helpful to consider lessons regarding the role of foundations in capacity-building. When funding a third party to provide leadership development—or any other form of technical assistance for a nonprofit—there are implications for the relationship between the foundation and the technical assistance provider, as well as the relationship between the foundation and the program participants themselves.

A review of the literature on organizational development and capacity-building reveals that there are some agreed-upon principles associated with successful approaches to capacity-building, which are key to the development of a healthy relationship between the providers of technical assistance and the recipients of these services. These principles are drawn from the experience of foundations engaged in capacity-building for their grantees, and are consistent across the literature, as well as with our own experience.

**TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE IS MOST SUCCESSFUL WHEN THE RECIPIENTS UNDERSTAND THEIR OWN NEEDS AND VALUE THE HELP THEY RECEIVE. THIS CAN ONLY BE EFFECTIVELY ACHIEVED AND SUSTAINED WHEN RECIPIENTS ARE INVOLVED IN DESIGNING THE SOLUTIONS TO THEIR SELF-IDENTIFIED PROBLEMS OR NEEDS.**

<sup>1</sup> Peters, Jeanne and Timothy Wolfred, *Daring to Lead: Nonprofit Executive Directors and Their Work Experience*. San Francisco: CompassPoint Nonprofit Services, 2001.

These general principles are:

**1. The participants in the leadership development program should have input into the process of developing the program model**

Technical assistance is most successful when the recipients understand their own needs and value the help they receive. This can only be effectively achieved and sustained when recipients are involved in designing the solutions to their self-identified problems or needs.

This has been well-documented in the findings of studies of capacity-building efforts. The California Wellness Foundation, for example, found that its grantees greatly benefited from participating in a needs assessment that was grounded in helping them understand capacity-building concepts, and that informed both the foundation and the grantees regarding the grantees' needs and how they could address them.<sup>2</sup>

Peter Block, in *Flawless Consulting*, describes this as “mutual learning”—a situation where the provider is a participant in the process, not apart from it.<sup>3</sup> Essentially, the provider is a co-learner in the process.

In a study of outcomes of capacity-building, Innovation Network and the Environmental Support Center found that: “The most successful providers carry a deep respect for their clients’ ability to build their own capacity. They know that their role as providers is to lend help and expertise. But this realization is about more than simply enabling nonprofits to participate in the process. It’s about genuinely recognizing that an organization is in charge of its own capacity-building.”<sup>4</sup>

ANY PROGRAM FOR LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT OF EXECUTIVE DIRECTORS MUST ACKNOWLEDGE THE VARIED LEVEL OF EXPERIENCE AND ADULT LEARNING STYLES AMONG THE PARTICIPANTS.

<sup>2</sup> California Wellness Foundation: *Reflections on Capacity-Building*, [www.twcf.org/reflections/2001/april](http://www.twcf.org/reflections/2001/april).

<sup>3</sup> Block, Peter. *Flawless Consulting*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1981.

<sup>4</sup> Innovation Network, Inc. and The Environmental Support Center: *Echoes from the Field: Proven Capacity-Building Principles for Nonprofits*, 10/01.

**2. One size does not fit all—the approach to providing leadership development should be flexible**

Although it is important to develop a program framework that will provide structure for leadership development, the framework should accommodate differences, and should evolve and adapt over time. For example, any program for leadership development of executive directors must acknowledge the varied level of experience and adult learning styles among the participants. That is, adults tend to learn better in a model where their life experience is valued, and where they are called upon to be both teacher and learner.

There is no “one size fits all” with respect to learning styles. In any group, members will present with a variety of learning style needs. Additionally, adult learners benefit from a variety of teaching styles being used to create interest and to stimulate thought and discussion. This includes individual work, small group work, and large group work.

Moreover, in the design phase of a new leadership development effort, it is difficult to precisely predict what the most successful strategies will be. The program should develop a core set of skills, and provide access to resources to develop those skills. This approach illustrates the benefits of ongoing assessment of what is working and what is not, and it models ongoing incorporation of lessons learned.

**3. Team and peer learning are important capacity-building tools**

The value of peer learning is increasingly acknowledged in the field of nonprofit capacity-building. As the authors of *Echoes from the Field* state: “Networks, in fact, have become a major force for capacity-building nationwide” . . . they “are a resource with amazing potential.”

*Daring to Lead* reinforces this principle in its finding that executive directors rely on their peers as one of the most used sources of support. Thus, it is important to design a program that is grounded in peer learning, capitalizes on existing networks and support of colleagues, and results in the strengthening of ties among colleagues in a way that will be useful and productive into the future.

The PONO Leadership Institute described in our recent newsletter (February 2006) provides examples of the development of these networks and how they can be sustained over time.

#### **4. The approach to developing executive directors should be “asset-based”**

In developing a program to build the management and leadership skills of executive directors, it is important to start by identifying the strengths of the participants, and then encouraging appropriate skills-building. This approach will result in a program described in *Daring to Lead* as one that is “sustaining rather than depleting . . . and fosters retention instead of contributing to burnout.”

#### **THE VALUES<sup>5</sup> OF A SUCCESSFUL TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PROVIDER**

Just as certain principles are associated with “best practice” technical assistance provision, there are also certain values that are associated with a healthy relationship between technical assistance provider and recipient. These values are conducive to achieving optimal outcomes. Ideally, providers and recipients should share the following values:

- ◆ Continuous learning
- ◆ Ongoing self-assessment and improvement
- ◆ Openness/transparency
- ◆ Mutual respect
- ◆ Collaboration
- ◆ Shared information and knowledge
- ◆ Inclusiveness
- ◆ Clear communication, grounded in dialog and engagement
- ◆ Capacity is built from within
- ◆ Diversity and sensitivity to cultural differences<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> In this context, we define a “value” as a standard or ideal of conduct; something that is valued, prized, treasured, esteemed within an organization or entity.

<sup>6</sup> Here, we refer to “culture” in a broad sense that includes organizational culture and geographic/regional culture.

#### **CONCLUSION: LEARNING COMMUNITIES—AN EFFECTIVE TOOL FOR LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT**

Our experience working in the area of leadership development among nonprofit executives is that it can enhance the participants’ skills, effectiveness, job satisfaction, and commitment to their jobs, in particular, and to the nonprofit sector, in general. We have witnessed the reduction in stress that comes from strong peer networks, greater confidence in one’s skills, and a renewed or enhanced sense of purpose. As a result we believe the investment of time and money in well-crafted, long-term leadership development initiatives can pay substantial dividends to the individual executives involved, their nonprofits, and their communities. (See the related article in our February 2006 newsletter.)

We also believe that the opportunities for skill and network building available through leadership development programs should not be limited to executive directors alone. Middle managers, board members, and front-line workers can all benefit from well-crafted adaptations of the basic leadership model we use. In fact, team involvement in leadership programs can be particularly powerful in promoting rapid organizational change.



**La Piana Associates, Inc.** is a management consulting firm focused on helping nonprofit organizations and philanthropic foundations effectively address the strategic issues they face. We are dedicated to improving the capacity of the nonprofit sector, and specifically to helping nonprofits become stronger, more effective, and sustainable for the long-term.

**Our Mission** is to transform the way nonprofits are led and managed so that they have a more powerful impact on society.

For further information, please visit our website at [www.lapiana.org](http://www.lapiana.org) or contact us at [info@lapiana.org](mailto:info@lapiana.org).

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT AMONG NONPROFIT EXECUTIVES CAN ENHANCE THE PARTICIPANTS’ SKILLS, EFFECTIVENESS, JOB SATISFACTION, AND COMMITMENT TO THEIR JOBS, IN PARTICULAR, AND TO THE NONPROFIT SECTOR, IN GENERAL.