



Executive Leadership Program

A powerful model for peer-to-peer executive professional development

By Eileen Lavigne Flug
February 2015

Fairfield County's Community Foundation Center for Nonprofit Excellence Executive Leadership Program

It can be lonely at the top. That's the thinking behind the new peer-to-peer Executive Leadership Program at the Center for Nonprofit Excellence at Fairfield County's Community Foundation in Connecticut.

Modeled after proven executive peer-to-peer coaching organizations in the for-profit world, but tailored for effectiveness for nonprofits, the Executive Leadership Program brings CEOs from nonprofits around Fairfield County together in a spirit of respect and trust to discuss their challenges, concerns and opportunities in order to be more effective leaders.

The Executive Leadership Program started with half-day monthly meetings in early 2014, and the executives themselves soon asked to expand the sessions. In only one year, the leaders and nonprofits involved have benefited from personal and professional growth creating stronger and more confident executives, more effective staff, increased board engagement, better financial management, and better fundraising.

"The world is spending \$60 million on these ten organizations, and for \$60,000, we have a shot at being a game changer for the executive directors themselves and their organizations.

Inexpensive, impactful, scalable. A financial no-brainer."

*Dan Levinson
Program Catalyst*

How it Began

Daring to Lead 2011¹ sounded the alarm about the need for succession planning and professional development for nonprofit executives. This national survey of over 3,000 executive directors revealed that 67 percent of executives anticipated leaving their jobs in the next five years, signaling widespread turnover at the top, and that already, almost a third of the executives surveyed had been in their positions for fewer than three years.

The survey also showed that after the initial honeymoon period, job satisfaction for new executives dropped remarkably for the next three to four years before eventually approaching the same satisfaction levels as the first year.

The study surmised that "many boards see executive transition as ending with the hire, when in fact leaders—nearly all of whom are in the role for the first time—need intentional support and development as they build efficacy in the executive role."²



Source: Daring to Lead 2011, CompassPoint Nonprofit Services and the Meyer Foundation

¹ Cornelius, Marla; Rick Moyers; and Jeanne Bell, *Daring to Lead 2011: A National Study of Nonprofit Executive Leadership* (San Francisco, CA: CompassPoint Nonprofit Services and the Meyer Foundation, 2011). Daring to Lead 2011 is the third Daring to Lead study; previous studies were published in 2001 and 2006. Over 3,000 Executive Directors participated in the 2011 study.

²Daring to Lead 2011, page 5.

The three executive training methods that the executive directors themselves rated as most effective were:

- Executive coaching
- Peer networks
- Leadership development programs

Spurred to action, the Community Foundation's Center for Nonprofit Excellence brainstormed with its key advisors to develop a program to increase the capacity of nonprofits in Fairfield County by strengthening their leadership.

Using Vistage, the Young Presidents Organization and other established business and nonprofit peer-to-peer group coaching models as a starting point, the Center for Nonprofit Excellence developed a comprehensive program consisting of:

- Monthly one-on-one executive coaching
- Monthly five-hour, peer-to-peer network meetings to work through issues raised by members during the coaching sessions
- Bi-monthly three-hour best practice sessions with recognized experts

Key Components

CNE Leadership and Staff

The Center for Nonprofit Excellence (CNE) is headed by Elaine Mintz, who previously ran the Greater Danbury Nonprofit Resource Center (which merged with CNE in 2008), and who has extensive nonprofit management advisory experience and a passion for increasing the capacity of nonprofits. Elaine spearheaded the Executive Leadership Program effort at the Foundation.

Advisory Team

CNE assembled key advisors to create and oversee the new leadership program. Included on the Advisory Team were Dan Levinson, a key donor and successful business leader and entrepreneur with a passion for coaching and developing leaders; Peter Baiardi, a 30-year award-winning TEC/ Vistage leader; and Deann Murphy, an experienced chair of a major nonprofit with extensive Vistage experience.

The Advisory Team shared their experience with peer-to-peer models, helped adapt those models for nonprofits, helped fund the program, provided a deeper understanding of entrepreneurial management and growth, helped select the facilitator and the first cohort of executives, set goals, monitored progress and impact, and provided strategic direction to the program.

Facilitator

Molly Penn of Penn Flood Consulting was selected as the paid facilitator of the Executive Leadership Program. Molly has over 25 years of experience in executive and cohort coaching and management consulting for nonprofits and is a recognized expert in strategic development

"When a nonprofit has strong leadership, it attracts donors, retains top staff, stays focused on its mission, and creates maximum impact."

*Elaine Mintz
Director
Center for Nonprofit Excellence*

"At the Community Foundation, we strive to partner with successful business executives to create and launch new, impactful best practices to help our community as a whole."

*Vicki Craver
Board Chair
Fairfield County's
Community Foundation*

and planning. She had previously run a similar monthly nonprofit CEO roundtable for four years in Westchester County, New York.

Cohort

CNE and the Advisory Team sought 10 cohort executives from the Community Foundation grantee organizations who were eager to grow and learn, were willing to be open with colleagues to benefit from peer learning, were able to commit the time needed, and who also had in common:

- Budget sizes between \$500,000 to \$3,000,000 (small to mid-sized organizations),
- Organizations that had just been through, or were going through, significant change and growth,
- Experience as executive directors, but with relatively short tenures in their current position, and
- As executive directors, had demonstrated an appetite for growth and development by taking advantage of other professional development opportunities.

Funding and Donors

The budget for the pilot year of the program was approximately \$60,000, of which each participating nonprofit contributed \$750 per year. The remaining funds were contributed by the Community Foundation, and by individual, corporate and foundation donors who embrace leadership development and who want their donations to have a deep impact on each organization and a wide impact on many organizations.

How It's Done

The Executive Leadership Program has three key components:

1. Monthly One-on-One Coaching

- The facilitator coaches each CEO in a one-hour session each month. Every other month they meet at the nonprofit's location, and in alternating months the coaching session is by phone.
- Executives complete preparation forms for the facilitator prior to meeting, in order to focus on how they will best use the coaching time.
- As part of the coaching, the facilitator keeps an ear out for revealing issues to share at the monthly meetings and helps the CEO prepare the issue for discussion.

"The one-on-one coaching sessions have provided great feedback and guidance on the most effective ways to deal with a range of organizational challenges, from problem staff to delicate board issues, and have helped prevent larger problems from emerging."

Participating Executive

2. Monthly Executive Leadership Sessions

- The Executive Leadership Program is attended only by the executives, no delegates.
- Meeting locations rotate among the member nonprofits, allowing members to understand each other's contexts and missions.
- Cohorts set their own ground rules in the first meeting. Setting their own ground rules helps build trust and cohesion. Rules for the first cohort included strict confidentiality, how to give and receive feedback productively and supportively, an agreement to not solicit each other's donors, alerting the other cohort members in the event of an

absence, and nurturing an ethos of support.

- Monthly meetings are primarily for discussing the issues selected by the facilitator that have been raised in one-on-one coaching. The format for presenting issues includes: (i) the presenter gives a brief background to set the stage, summarizes the issue, describes the options and which option they are inclined to pursue, and explains the type of feedback they want from the group, (ii) the group asks clarifying questions, and (iii) the group gives feedback. Each issue takes approximately one-half hour, and the meeting generally lasts five hours.
- The facilitator runs the meeting and moderates the discussion of the issues but tries to keep her management expertise out of the room, to make way for the open flow of feedback from the other CEOs.
- In order to encourage a continual support system between meetings, the facilitator set up an online platform for group chats, feedback and file sharing.

“The establishment of a confidential and deeply talented peer group has helped guide and support my decision making. I have brought several issues to the group and have found the diverse feedback has helped me think deeper about those issues, encouraged me to explore multiple approaches, and to ultimately gain the confidence to act.”

Participating Executive

3. Bimonthly Best Practice Sessions

- At the beginning of each year, the cohort selects topics for best practice sessions, to be held for three or more hours every other month directly after the regular monthly session.
- Topics in the first year included managing boards, staff and growth, fundraising, financial management, and outcomes measurement.
- Best practice speakers are experts in the chosen area and are drawn from the facilitator’s networks. Speakers are offered a small honorarium.
- The sessions are content-rich presentations followed by questions and answers.

“Best Practice sessions have provided a wide range of invaluable training that has improved my set of skills and effectiveness as a nonprofit leader.”

Participating Executive

Program Impact

After the first year of the Executive Leadership Program, the executives and their board chairs were asked for feedback about the year, and they reported:

- **Increased confidence and decreased professional isolation.** Many executives remarked on the sense of confidence that comes from knowing that issues are not unique to one organization and that they had the support of their peers.
- **Better problem solving.** Monthly evaluation of issues expanded problem-solving abilities and allowed participants to see issues from different perspectives.

“I have become a much more effective communicator with staff and board. Board engagement and meeting efficiency have improved, and I have become more structured and effective in guiding staff with more regular and productive meetings.”

Participating Executive

- **Greater community involvement.** One participant credited the Executive Leadership Program with her receiving multiple invitations to sit on advisory boards. Participants also noticed increased respect from board, staff and the community.
- **Better board and staff engagement and effectiveness.** Participants credited the feedback and guidance they received for greater effectiveness with their staffs and boards. Feedback encouraged some CEOs to reflect more and be more aware of their leadership style on others (tone, body language, words used to communicate).
- **Best practices.** Participants praised an increased knowledge of best practices, increased skills, and helpful management tools to use with staff and board.
- **Better networking.** Nonprofits shared access to greater resources and better vendors.
- **More effective and meaningful fundraising plans,** due to using best practices for marketing and donor relations and due to sharing grant opportunities.
- **Better management.** Participants reported more effective meetings, better board member engagement due to implementing best practices, staff that felt valued and supported, and better systems and management protocols to enhance operations and develop their staff.
- **Better financial management** through implementation of best practices.

Program Keys to Success

The creators of the Executive Leadership Program credit the following key factors for the success of this form of professional development:

- **Carefully recruited cohort.** The selection process used was successful because it created a cohort of executives with similar experiences and a common desire to share, trust, analyze, learn, excel and commit the time to participate.
- **Experienced leadership.** The CEOs' trust in the other members of the cohort is critical for open sharing of delicate issues.

An experienced facilitator engenders trust by allowing the members to get to know each other in their own nonprofit spaces, allowing the cohort to create its own ground rules, and adhering to the structure devised in order to create a strong, supportive environment.

A skilled facilitator knows when to step back and let the members do their work, and when to encourage members to reveal more in order to reach the key issue, which may be personal or sensitive.

- **Financial support.** At a total cost of \$5,000 per CEO and a participation fee of only \$750, the Executive Leadership Program relies heavily on donors who are dedicated to building capacity through strengthening nonprofit leadership.

Donors who have successful personal experience with for-profit peer-to-peer coaching networks are particularly drawn to funding this model, as are donors who want to leverage their dollars by investing in a broad, lasting, structural impact.

Next Steps

In entering its second year (2015), the Executive Leadership Program is adding new members to the cohort to replace those needing to depart.

New CEOs are chosen using the same requirements as before, and they are introduced to the cohort one at a time in order to preserve the successful group dynamic created over the past year.

The new group will be selecting areas for best practice sessions and developing additional areas for leadership growth. Most importantly, they will continue to bring back to their non-profits the confidence, skills, connections and support provided every day by the Executive Leadership Program, making it no longer lonely at the top.

"[Our CEO] herself regards the Executive Leadership Program as an important resource in her development, and the board shares her view. We would enthusiastically recommend this resource to other organizations, and support the Community Foundation's outreach to donors to sustain it."

Board Chair

For more information about starting an Executive Leadership Program in your region, or to help fund this program, please contact Elaine Mintz, Director of the Center for Nonprofit Excellence at Fairfield County's Community Foundation, 383 Main Avenue, Norwalk, CT 06851; EMintz@FCCFoundation.org.

About Fairfield County's Community Foundation

Our mission is to promote philanthropy as a means to create change in Fairfield County, focusing on innovative and collaborative solutions to critical issues impacting the community. We bring together passionate people and trusted resources to create lasting change.

Founded in 1992, we serve the 23 southwestern cities and towns of Fairfield County, Connecticut, which includes the four largest cities in the state. We have awarded over \$180 million in grants to nonprofits in Fairfield County and beyond.

To learn more about Fairfield County's Community Foundation and its Center for Nonprofit Excellence, visit www.FCCFoundation.org.

About the Center for Nonprofit Excellence

Fairfield County's Community Foundation created the Center for Nonprofit Excellence in 2008 to enhance the effectiveness and capacity of Fairfield County nonprofit organizations. Services provided to nonprofits include professional development workshops, gatherings for nonprofit leaders, leadership training and coaching, technical assistance, discounted access to an online database of grant makers, a countywide calendar of nonprofit events, and more.