

Need help?
Subscribe to
The Chronicle
RISK-FREE

SEARCH THE SITE

SITE MAP

SECTIONS:
[Front Page](#)
[Gifts & Grants](#)
[Fund Raising](#)
[Managing Nonprofit Groups](#)
[Technology](#)
[Philanthropy Today](#)
[Jobs](#)

FEATURES:
[Guide to Grants](#)
[The Nonprofit Handbook](#)
[Facts & Figures](#)
[Events](#)
[Deadlines](#)

CHRONICLE IN PRINT:
[Current Issue](#)
[Back Issues](#)

SPONSORED INFORMATION

PRODUCTS & SERVICES:
[Directory of Services](#)
[Guide to Managing Nonprofits](#)
[Continuing-Education Guide](#)
[Fund-Raising Services Guide](#)
[Technology Guide](#)

CUSTOMER SERVICE:
[About The Chronicle](#)
[How to Contact Us](#)
[How to Subscribe](#)
[How to Register](#)
[Manage Your Account](#)
[How to Advertise](#)
[Press Inquiries](#)
[Feedback](#)
[Privacy Policy](#)
[User Agreement](#)
[Help](#)

THE CHRONICLE OF PHILANTHROPY

SPECIAL REPORT

From the issue dated May 29, 2008

Turning to Their Peers

Nonprofit leaders share ideas in learning circles

By Darlene M. Siska

Hoong Yee Lee Krakauer, executive director of the Queens Council on the Arts, in Woodhaven, N.Y., had a problem: how to restructure her organization's board.

"We had loose bylaws, my board didn't understand its roles and responsibilities, and they weren't doing things they should've been doing," says Ms. Krakauer, whose group provides grants and services to foster local artists.

Although she had been leading her group for two years, Ms. Krakauer says she didn't feel she had the support or authority to impose structure on the board. But after Ms. Krakauer got advice from leaders of arts organizations in New York, as part of a formal program to help executive directors learn from one another, she was able to bring about change.

"My colleagues gave me the confidence to take certain steps with my board to the point where it is well-functioning," she says.

She hired consultants to help revise the bylaws; established four standing committees; and changed the board's structure so that small committees meet to solve issues and report back to the full board quarterly, rather than expecting the full board to hash everything out in endless meetings.

"By focusing on a specific area," she notes, "board members become more involved and invested in their work."

A Trend Grows

Six years later, Ms. Krakauer continues to participate in "peer-learning circles," an approach that is gaining popularity in the nonprofit world. She joined one run by the New York Foundation for the Arts but found the idea so appealing that she started her own learning circles at the arts council.

Penelope Dannenberg, director of programs at the New York Foundation for the Arts, says the organization decided to sponsor peer-learning groups after the 2001 terrorist attacks, as the economy took a downturn.

"That pointed out to us the fragility of the artist community and that arts leaders in the community had to mobilize or rethink how they were doing things," she says.

Sign up for Philanthropy Today

Daily e-mail
news updates
direct from
The Chronicle
of Philanthropy



3 minutes
that make a
difference

SIGN ME UP

**A free service
open to all**

Peer-learning programs appealed to the foundation because of the opportunity to share ideas and because of the low cost — only about \$600 for the facilitator and materials, says Ms. Dannenberg.

'Pretty Chaotic'

Learning circles go by many names, but they typically recruit people who work at similar levels in similar types of organizations. Members of the groups meet to share their knowledge and to solve work-related problems, but they may also read books on relevant topics, listen to talks by experts, and visit organizations or other places where they can learn new ideas.

Carter McNamara, a partner in Authenticity Consulting, in Minneapolis, which has helped create peer-learning programs for several nonprofit clients, including the New York Foundation for the Arts, says the efforts started gradually gaining steam in the mid-1990s.

"In any new movement, the first few years are pretty chaotic, with a thousand forms and interpretations, and that's where peer-learning programs are now," Mr. McNamara says.

Some nonprofit organizations — such as United Ways, or umbrella groups like Southern California Grantmakers, in Los Angeles — are sponsoring learning circles. Last year, Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, in Washington, started testing a program in New York, Palo Alto, Calif., Pittsburgh, and Washington that includes peer learning as a means to help participants solve work-related problems together. The group plans to form more learning circles this year, though locations have not yet been selected.

"We just needed to find a process that helped people to learn together where they don't end up being stuck in the details of day-to-day operations," says Roberto Cremonini, chief knowledge and learning officer at the Barr Foundation, in Boston, who helped push the effort in his capacity as a Grantmakers for Effective Organizations board member and participated in the first group. "This process works because it helps people learn a topic in general, then how to apply it in their specific situations," he says.

Low-Cost Learning

Learning circles took off in the business world more than a decade ago in part because many Fortune 500 companies had become disenchanted with the money they spent on employee continuing-education programs at colleges and universities. Mr. McNamara says they decided to look into "action learning," in which employees would learn from one another and then be required to act on that knowledge, an approach that worked well for many companies.

"At the same time, executive directors from small and medium nonprofits were desperate — they were going to programs that required them to spend a lot of time and money, but they began realizing that it was between sessions, when they networked with peers, that they learned best," Mr. McNamara says. "As a result, attendance in traditional environments, where attendees would sit in a

room listing to lectures, began to drop off."

The cost of more-traditional training programs, he says, was another factor in the rise of learning circles. In the more-informal programs, he notes, "you can exchange information and tips for a dime on a dollar." (Organizing a learning circle, he says, usually costs about \$2,000, though that could climb to about \$7,000 if the program is nationwide. Participants, he says, typically pay about \$100 each, to give them a sense of investment in their program.)

And, Mr. McNamara notes, learning circles can be designed to fit into the busy schedules of nonprofit leaders, as well as to complement other forms of training, like workshops. What's more, he says, they often do much to end the sense of isolation many nonprofit leaders feel in their job.

Finding Support

In fact, it is the support from other nonprofit executives that may be the biggest benefit of joining a learning circle, say many participants.

Curt Mooney, president of DePelchin Children's Center, a Houston group that offers mental-health services, joined a learning circle in 2003 sponsored by his local United Way, after being frustrated by the cost and time commitment required by continuing-education programs offered by for-profit groups.

"This one sounded more doable," he says. "Not a lot of time and expense involved."

The learning group, made up of about a half-dozen nonprofit chief executives, is led by both professional coaches and United Way staff members and meets for two hours a month. Each participant can talk for 10 minutes about the issues he or she is facing on the job. At the end of the meeting, participants are required to make a commitment to an action they will take in their work.

Mr. Mooney says the group has particularly helped his perspective on filling a fund-raising position at DePelchin that has been open for a long time.

"In our city, fund-development positions have been difficult to fill," he says. "I heard in the circle what others are looking for and what's available from their standpoint. I realize hearing from the others that I need patience to really find the right person."

In the circles sponsored by Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, nonprofit groups are required to send more than one person to participate.

Mr. Cremonini participated in his Grantmakers for Effective Organizations learning circle with a colleague from the Barr Foundation. "It creates shared accountability," he says. "If just one person goes, it could be difficult to make change back at the office."

Making a Difference

Although foundations often provide money for grantees to participate in learning circles, some philanthropy observers say that grant makers tend to see peer learning as more an activity for their grantees and less a useful tool for themselves.

Mr. Cremonini says many grant makers think they cannot learn from one another because their issues and operations vary so much. But, as a participant in Grantmakers for Effective Organizations' first peer-learning group, he says the approach works well because "it forces individuals to transcend their own organizations."

Other nonprofit leaders say the impact of peer-learning programs needs to be documented to prove their worth.

Thomas E. Backer, president of the Human Interaction Research Institute, a nonprofit group in Encino, Calif., that conducts research on innovation and change, has done an analysis of a learning circle for family foundations run by Southern California Grantmakers, in Los Angeles.

He says there is anecdotal evidence that peer learning has improved their grant making. But, he adds, "there's not a lot of hard evidence to back it up. Without convincing evidence they have some impact, sooner or later there may be a reduction in their numbers as people ask if they really work."

Still, other observers say peer learning is catching on among grant makers, albeit slowly.

"My sense is that there is more acceptance now among funders that they also need to be learners," says Jan Kern, a program specialist at Southern California Grantmakers.

Ms. Kern, who had developed peer-learning groups for charities earlier in her career, began a learning circle in 2004 at Southern California Grantmakers called the Family Foundation Information Exchange.

Identifying Goals

Interest from potential participants sparked the creation of a second group last summer. Both groups bring 14 family grant makers together for discussions, readings, and speakers to discuss how to shape and carry out a mission, and finance advocacy efforts and charter schools.

About 80 percent of the peer group's activities and content is driven by group members themselves, says Ms. Kern, who serves as both groups' facilitator, coordinating discussions and providing speakers and reading materials.

"The group has the ability to go deeper and follow up something that tweaks their interest," she says.

Members have also begun supporting some of the same charities — an unexpected outcome, she says. Her work has led to creation of a peer group for family foundations at the umbrella association San Diego

Grantmakers.

To get the most out of a peer-learning program, Mr. Backer recommends that sponsors identify a clear goal that can be stated easily to others. Then, he suggests, find other people interested in working on that same goal, set up an exploratory online or in-person meeting to find whether a good learning circle can coalesce, and set clear expectations for how the group will function.

And finally, he says, "have a 'check in' time each session about how the group is going and whether some kind of improvement needs to be made."

He also says that grant makers "would be well advised to make an investment in identifying best principles and practices to how peer groups work effectively. That will provide evidence to trustees and program staff that it's worth it to continue to invest in these practices."

Ms. Dannenberg, of the New York Foundation for the Arts, says she thinks that one reason her group's learning circles produce good results is that they last for just six months.

"It's more constructive that way," she says. "They are given a limited time to focus on their challenges. Then they are asked to evaluate what they've learned, how they got what they needed from the circle, and how they helped their peers."

A good facilitator is also important, says Cathy Hession, president of the Carol and James Collins Foundation, in Culver City, Calif., and a member of the Family Foundation Information Exchange at Southern California Grantmakers. "Our facilitator keeps us organized, keeps good notes from meetings, sends us materials beforehand on topics we'll discuss, develops good questions, and helps us really move the discussion along," she says.

But according to Ms. Krakauer of the Queens Council on the Arts, participants' discretion and the ability to speak candidly are the most important hallmarks of a good peer-learning program. She says that close relationships most easily develop when a learning circle's members aren't from competing organizations.

"You trust a person who helps you correct a mistake," she says. "On a professional level, that is a wonderful thing to have."



[Easy-to-print](#) version



[E-mail](#) this article



[Subscribe](#)

To discuss this item with other readers, go to <http://philanthropy.com/forums/>. You may also send a private message to comment@philanthropy.com.

Copyright © 2008 [The Chronicle of Philanthropy](#)