

LeaderSpring: Reinvigorating Nonprofit Leadership By Deanne Stone

The exodus of nonprofit executive directors is well under way. Many are baby boomers nearing retirement, but others are simply burned out. Years of scrambling to raise money, working long hours and running agencies on a shoestring are taking their toll on directors. The leadership drain could not be happening at a worse time. A 2006 study by the Bridgespan Group estimated that over the next decade the field will have to add 80,000 new senior managers a year just to keep pace with demand.

One organization working to retain experienced directors is LeaderSpring, a leadership development program for executive directors of community-based nonprofit organizations in the San Francisco Bay Area. To describe it as a "leadership development program" doesn't do it justice: LeaderSpring's aims are more comprehensive and far-reaching than those words convey.

"We're not easily pigeonholed," says Cynthia Chavez, the executive director of LeaderSpring. "Yes, we focus on individuals, but we're just as focused on community building. Our mission is to foster high performing nonprofit organizations by strengthening and connecting the people who lead them. But the primary reason we do this work is to improve the quality of life for people living in low-income communities in the Bay Area."

LeaderSpring, located in Oakland, CA, operates as a fellowship program. Each year it competitively selects 15 fellows to participate in a two-year program that includes an opening and closing retreat, a monthly leadership circle, a one-week individualized study trip, and customized, professional coaching. The fellowship pays 100 percent of the costs of the fellowship, and competition for spaces is keen. Last year LeaderSpring received 120 inquiries from prospective candidates. After screening them by phone, LeaderSpring invites 45 to submit applications. Then, Chavez and Karen Anselmo, LeaderSpring's program and operations manager, joined by nine volunteers knowledgeable about the nonprofit sector, rigorously review and select the finalists.

"A key part of our program," says Chavez, "is creating what we call 'high intentionality' right from the start. I personally call each one of the finalists to be sure they understand what's expected of them. Then I ask them to sleep on their decision before making such a big commitment because if they were to drop out before finishing, they would have deprived another leader of the fellowship."

In selecting fellows, LeaderSpring considers the qualifications of the individual candidates but also the composition of the group. Believing that fellows can learn most from people different from themselves, its groups are made up of fellows of different ages and cultural backgrounds working in a cross-section of nonprofit agencies. Typically, 80 percent of the fellows are women and people of color. About 62 percent are in their thirties and forties. They work in the fields of health and human service organizations, education, and community development, and they represent direct service and advocacy organizations.

LeaderSpring is an offshoot of Eureka Communities, a leadership development program started in 1991 by Deborah Szekely, founder of Rancho La Puerta in Tecate

and the Golden Door spa in Escondido, California. Headquartered in Washington, DC, Eureka had satellite offices in five major cities. For more than a decade, Szekely and her team were successful in securing grants for Eureka Communities but after the dot.com crash, foundation support plummeted. The satellite offices had six to nine months to become operationally independent; the San Francisco office was the lone survivor. In 2005, Eureka Bay Area, renamed LeaderSpring, became an independent organization and a project of the Tides Center.

LeaderSpring has honored the original Eureka Communities model of small, diverse groups but it has also made several modifications. It created a more in-depth written curriculum, introduced intentional goal setting, brought in a team of top leadership and management trainers, started a pro bono executive coaching program, and encouraged more peer-led learning.

Chavez's association with LeaderSpring began in 1999 when she served as a consultant to Eureka Bay Area before becoming its executive director in 2000. Her family background and professional training read like a blueprint for her preparation as director of LeaderSpring. The daughter of working-class, second-generation, Mexican-American parents, Chavez developed an awareness of suffering and social injustice early on. "A lot of who I am today came from growing up with a sister who suffered from serious mental health problems," she says. "But the turning point in how I looked at the world came when my family took a trip to Mexico. Seeing the tremendous poverty there, I knew there had to be a better way for people to coexist on this planet."

Before joining LeaderSpring, Chavez worked on public policy issues at the local and state levels, served on the staffs of the Rockefeller and W.K. Kellogg Foundations, and consulted on management and diversity issues, in particular, leadership development, planning and governance. Her vast experience gave her intimate knowledge of the issues in education, youth violence, family services, and affordable housing that concern many LeaderSpring fellows.

"The brilliance of Szekely's model was that it allowed fellows to really get to know one another and to develop intimate and trusting relationships," says Chavez. "I don't know of other leadership programs that continue for two years." The bonding that takes place among fellows is integral to achieving LeaderSpring's goals of breaking down turfism and building a community of committed leaders. Beginning with the initial overnight weekend retreat, Chavez models behavior that is open, honest, and authentic. "We put a lot of emphasis on developing trust, intimacy, and heart connections among the leaders in our groups," she says. "We want our fellows to explore the edges of learning rather than stay in their comfort zones and for that to happen, they have to be willing to take risks in a supportive environment."

LeaderSpring rotates the monthly day-long leadership circles among the fellows, giving each a chance to make a presentation about his or her agency and to get feedback from the group. By the time the two-year program ends, the fellows have visited 14 other agencies and have a sense of how their work overlaps. "A lot of collaborations in the nonprofit sector fail," says Chavez, "because they're imposed from the outside by funders or they lack trusting partners. In LeaderSpring, the collaborations develop naturally among fellows who trust one another and have an intimate knowledge of one another's organizations."

Lena Miller, the executive director of Hunters Point Family, an organization providing support services for youth in the tough San Francisco neighborhood of Bay View, recently completed the LeaderSpring program. As beneficial as the training and coaching were, she says the biggest rewards were interpersonal. The turfism that exists in the nonprofit sector is compounded by the fierce competition among agencies for funding. Like many leaders, Lena Miller felt isolated from her colleagues. "After seven years as executive director, I often felt as if I were doing this work alone in the wilderness. We all deal with crises, but I couldn't talk about them because others might gossip or use what I said against me. That wouldn't be good for me personally or for my agency."

After two years in LeaderSpring, Miller now has a network of colleagues whose friendship, judgment and leadership abilities she trusts. "I can get right down to the nitty-gritty with them," she says, "and know that they'll understand what I'm going through and treat it as confidential. We developed a deep love and respect for one another. Having the acknowledgment and support of my peers means so much to me."

Tom DeCaigny has been the executive director of Performing Arts Workshop for five years. At age 30 and the youngest fellow in the class of 2007, he appreciated the opportunity to learn from more seasoned executive directors. "Before this experience," he says, "I never could have imagined the depth of the relationships I've developed with the people in my class. Coming from different sectors, we got to look at the big picture of services in the Bay Area and also to see how our work intersected with others." The Performing Arts Workshop is a natural fit with agencies serving youth, and DeCaigny is currently developing cross-sector partnerships with three fellows in his class whose organizations are synergistic with his own. These partnerships are enabling LeaderSpring agencies to integrate services and take their programs to a larger scale.

A hallmark of LeaderSpring is the individual five-day study trip that allows fellows to travel to another city to observe and learn about an agency that they have chosen and that has been vetted by LeaderSpring. Eli Horn, executive director of Visitacion Valley Beacon Community Center, recently returned from San Diego where he met with the staff of Social Advocates for Youth, a multi-service, locally based program. "This was one of the most profound experiences of my professional career," he says. "I would actually rate it higher than a seven if the scale allowed. Throughout my whole trip, I was learning new concepts, policies, and strategies that I could immediately apply in my work."

The Class of 2007 decided on its own to continue getting together quarterly for dinner and social activities, but LeaderSpring is also developing a formal alumni network. "The alumni are coming out of the program with a high level of commitment to giving back to LeaderSpring," says Chavez. "They want more leaders to benefit from the program, and they have agreed to host events to help us reach a larger audience and promote our work."

LeaderSpring has a lot to be proud of. With a staff of only three full-time employees, it is fulfilling its goals of retaining excellent leaders and fostering cooperation among organizations. Over the past nine years, LeaderSpring/Eureka Bay Area has graduated 100 fellows, 70 percent of whom have continued working as executive directors or taken another position within the nonprofit sector. That's an impressive record in a field in which three out of four executive directors are leaving their jobs.

LeaderSpring is uniquely helping agencies retain experienced and talented leadership that is essential to overall higher performance among nonprofits.

Currently, LeaderSpring operates on an annual budget of \$500,000. Like many of its fellows' agencies, LeaderSpring relies largely on foundation funding. Chavez is eager to diversify the organization's revenue base. Developing a long-term sustainable program related to LeaderSpring's core expertise requires building an infrastructure, and that means having to raise more money. "We're looking at ways to build earned revenue," she says. "We've been approached by local government offices, foundations, and other nonprofit organizations that want our help in developing mentorship programs, so we have to plan carefully how to best use our resources."

After almost 25 years of working in government and the nonprofit sector, Chavez takes a clear-eyed view of what is needed to make headway in improving the lives of people in low-income communities. "Working in Sacramento I saw the disconnect between the decisions made in Sacramento and what nonprofit organizations were doing in their communities. What's been missing are locally based cross-sector communities of leaders who are mobilizing their resources to achieve greater impact beyond what they can accomplish as individual agencies. LeaderSpring hopes to change that."

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