



Initiative seeks to bolster not-for-profit execs

Venture groups would go beyond professional

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The local not-for-profit Leadership Ventures plans to pilot a program that teams not-for-profit CEOs in monthly sessions where they'll jointly solve problems at one another's organizations.

Besides professional development, the Executive Director Venture Group program seeks to form lasting ties among these CEOs, who often serve in relative isolation and face myriad more duties than their counterparts in private business.

"There are a ton of support organizations for businesses, [but] how many are there only available for not-for-profits?" asked Ruth Purcell-Jones, president of Leadership Ventures.

Leadership Ventures, formerly known as Trustee Leadership Development, is a professional development and consulting organization for not-for-profits.

The Executive Director Venture Groups program is believed to be the first of its kind for not-for-profit leaders in this region.

Each group will consist of eight or 10 CEOs/executive directors, led by a facilitator. The first such leader will be Jean Paison, co-founder of Indianapolis-based Second Helpings, which collects leftover food from restaurants and re-prepares it for distribution by more than 50 social service organizations.

Not-for-profit leaders often aren't at ease to brainstorm or to conduct networking; they're constantly crowing for funding and struggling with paper-thin staffing.

Purcell-Jones said informal surveys of NFP leaders drew a great deal of interest in the concept of venture groups. For the pilot group, she asked each potential participant to propose a project involving his or her organization, one that the CEO and the members of the venture group would tackle.

The pilot group will consist of leaders of organizations with assets ranging from \$250,000 to \$1 million. These are small organizations, often with fewer than 10 employees.

Participants will meet for a half-day each month for at least seven months.

At least for the pilot, the cost is just \$25 per organization—thanks largely to a grant from the Nina Mason Pulliam Foundation. The idea is to subsidize future groups, as well, given that such programs offered in the private sector can run \$12,000 per participant.

Generally, not-for-profit executives rely on informal training and support from peers more than on formal coaching or mentoring, according to a survey by CompassPoint Nonprofit Services.

But the CEO often feels isolated, able to share only so much with a small staff one leads, said Dana Harrison, CEO of Indianapolis-based Dress for Success.

Harrison, a candidate for the pilot group, said the group dynamic promises to be of value to participants because Leadership Ventures plans to team up leaders from different backgrounds, ages and experience. They'll also come from diverse not-for-profit sectors.

"It's so unique to this area because it is a continuum. It's not a two-hour, flash-in-the-plan [professional development] class and then you leave," Paison said.

The benefits to CEOs will go beyond whatever solution is developed for one's own organization, she said; it's also the professional growth and satisfaction from helping other members of the group.

She likened the concept to similar programs intended for private enterprise, such as Vistage International. The San Diegobased group was founded in the late 1950s by Wisconsin businessman Robert Nourse, who, as Vistage likes to say, "understood the immense value in bringing executives together to help one another solve their toughest business problems."

Not-for-profit CEOs tend to grapple with a wider array of duties, due partly to modest funding that limits staffing. They also deal with everything from making the pitch to potential funders to dealing head-on with community and volunteer relations.

Not-for-profit CEOs also tend to spend inordinate amounts of effort trying to retain and recruit the best employees in an increasingly competitive and shrinking labor pool for their sector.

A CompassPoint survey of CEOs at notfor-profits with budgets of \$5 million to \$10 million found the largest challenge was not “finance anxiety” but “managing people.”

“On top of that,” said Purcell-Jones, “they are creating social change. They have a whole layer on top of that.

“The job is just a tough one. You have to be all kinds of things to all kinds of people. Depending on how large your organization is, you can wear 10 different hats.”



Purcell-Jones