



## THE CHRONICLE OF PHILANTHROPY SPECIAL REPORT

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## Coming Together

### Nonprofit executives are forming support groups to improve their career skills and battle isolation on the job

By Sue Hoye

A year ago, Ruth Ann Binder was struggling with her board of directors, worried about budget shortfalls, uncertain about her organization's future, and, for the first time in her life, suffering from insomnia.

Now, she says, her organization, Rebuilding Together San Francisco, which renovates homes for low-income families, is strong, stable, and financially secure. And she is sleeping a lot better.

Ms. Binder says that the turnaround came about largely because of the help she got from other nonprofit leaders — people she met in a support group formed by LeaderSpring, an Oakland, Calif., organization that trains charity executives.

In a growing number of cities across the country, nonprofit leaders are starting such groups to help fight the sense of isolation that many chief executives feel.

The goal is not just to find emotional support, but also to make it easy for nonprofit leaders to teach one another the professional skills they need to succeed in their jobs. The groups have become so popular in some cities that charity leaders must compete in a rigorous application process, and many applicants are turned away because demand outstrips available groups.

Many nonprofit leaders could use some extra help. Three-quarters of nonprofit executive directors plan to leave their jobs within the next five years, mostly because of problems with their boards and fund-raising struggles, according to a study conducted by the Eugene and Agnes E. Meyer Foundation and CompassPoint Nonprofit Services, a San Francisco management-consulting group.

Ms. Binder says her peer group taught her specific skills for how to

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deal with her board and better manage financial issues. She recently completed a successful board retreat, for example, and is in the process of soliciting some donors who can make big gifts.

The group, she says, "helped me to step forward and say, 'Yes! I'm leading this organization.'"

### **Confidentiality Required**

The structure of executive-leadership groups varies, but they share many characteristics. Most of the efforts involve face-to-face meetings and demand that participants respect the confidentiality of their peers in talking about the group to outsiders. Most of the groups have at least seven and no more than 20 members; regular attendance is usually required.

Meetings often begin with participants giving a personal and professional update, which includes revisiting topics raised at past meetings. Many groups decide what to discuss ahead of time and are led by a consultant or other moderator, though moderators may not be used at every meeting.

CompassPoint began organizing "leadership circles" for charity executives five years ago. For nine months, seven leaders meet once a month for a series of discussions, beginning with training on how to coach fellow executive directors. After the last gathering, CompassPoint gets out of the way, but the groups usually continue meeting independently.

Most executive directors who participate say the biggest attraction of the meetings is spending time with a committed group of leaders facing the same career opportunities and challenges.

"It is very difficult when you are working in these positions," says Lindy Hoyer, executive director of the Omaha Children's Museum. "You've got a staff that reports to you, and you report to a board, and there really isn't a peer within the organization. The peer-to-peer support was what was attractive to me: 'Help me, talk to me, tell me it is going to be okay.'"

Ms. Hoyer participates in a Chicago roundtable for museum directors started by Will Phillips, president of REX (Roundtables for Executives), in San Diego, and by Durel Consulting Partners, in Baltimore.

After creating the roundtables in the early 1990s, Mr. Phillips and other consultants now hold such groups in or around Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, New Orleans, St. Louis, and Washington. The groups are led by a facilitator who does research on topics to be discussed and compiles reading lists for participants. A recent meeting, for example, focused on how to evaluate the performance of staff members.

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