

## **CLEAR Circles: Supporting Nonprofit Leaders in a New Way**

By Joan Mintz Ulmer, Director of Marketing & Communications

The Nonprofit Center at La Salle University

Printed in Guidestar Newsletter 8/06

Being a nonprofit executive director can be isolating. Trying to create an environment that attracts and maintains committed and talented people on shoestring budgets can be exhausting. Working with boards of directors who may be dedicated to the organization's mission, but don't understand their true roles and responsibilities is frustrating. Confronting daunting social issues on a daily basis can be painful. Facing an increasingly competitive environment from a perspective that has not traditionally been competition-oriented is daunting. With weighty issues like these bearing down on daily basis, where can nonprofit leader turn for support and problem-solving?

The Nonprofit Center at La Salle University in Philadelphia, which is committed to strengthening the nonprofit sector through professional development, capacity building, and leadership initiatives, has adapted a national model first pioneered for corporate executives, to provide missing support for area nonprofit leaders.

The concept is simple, explains Laura Otten, Ph.D., director of The Nonprofit Center and a CLEAR Circle facilitator. A Circle is comprised of seven or eight executive directors and a professional facilitator, who agree to meet monthly for two-hour sessions for nine months.

"Discussion is driven and shaped by group members who help one another voice problems, share insights and experiences, questions and concerns, and jointly problem-solve. What is unique and valuable," Otten says, "is the strict adherence to confidentiality so people can say things they could never say to staff or board members. They are in the presence of people who truly 'get it,'" she added, "and that makes this program work."

What kind of issues get addressed in CLEAR Circles?

- My life is out of control. How do I get balance back between work and home?
- How do I get my board to do their job and not mine?
- What do I do about an employee whose personal life is impacting his work?
- How am I supposed to solicit major gifts when our own board doesn't support us?
- My last choice for board chair just got elected. Where do I go from here?

Sessions focus on group members helping each other achieve their professional and even personal goals through highly focused questioning and the exchange of feedback. At the end of each session, participants reflect on the quality of the process to ensure it remains highly relevant and productive.

“The modest fees for CLEAR Circles are meant to make them accessible, particularly because many executive directors are reluctant to spend money on their own development,” Otten said. “Each participant pays \$380 for all nine sessions, if they have a Membership in The Nonprofit Center. The cost for non-members is \$450. Many organizations consider the unique support so valuable and the advancement of personal and organizational effectiveness so measurable, that board members refer executive directors and cover the fees.

The Nonprofit Center currently operates six CLEAR Circles, half of which have elected to continue after the initial nine-month commitment. Given the overwhelmingly positive response from participants, new Circles are being formed in different parts of the Center’s service area so to be as convenient as possible for future members.

Quotes from CLEAR Circle members underscore their role and value:

*“The CLEAR Circle has been a terrific experience. Each person brings so much and we learn from each other. I was surprised...at how smart we have gotten. I thought the feedback we gave (to a member) could have come from a high priced consulting firm and the only difference would have been the packaging...”*

-Peter Rittenhouse, Executive Director, Friends Center Corporation 2-year CLEAR Circle Participant

*“CLEAR was exactly what I was looking for...There are issues that you just can’t really discuss with your board or staff, but about which you want advice. The best part of CLEAR for me is the open communication between participants... We give and receive honest and direct feedback that is very helpful. Sometimes just talking about situations I’m facing gives me the perspective I need. I am so thankful that The Nonprofit Center identified this need to provide this forum.”*

-Amy Holdsman, Executive Director, White Williams Scholars (two-year CLEAR Circle participant)

*“I became a member of Clear Circle, two years, ago...and it has been the best thing I could do for my development as a Director.”*

-Sandra Cross, Executive Director, Grand Central

For more information about CLEAR Circles, call Sonia Stamm, Director of Leadership Initiatives at The Nonprofit Center at 215-951-1711 or email [stamm@lasalle.edu](mailto:stamm@lasalle.edu)

