

Governance

Board speed dating introduces emerging leaders to nonprofits

The Nonprofit Center at La Salle University's School of Business recently took board development to a whole new level by introducing board speed-dating to an all-women class of emerging leaders and local nonprofit organizations.

The event evolved out of one of several professional development activities The Nonprofit Center has hosted thanks to funding from the Valentine Foundation, which supports organizations serving women and girls. Over the past four years, other activities have included Clear Circles, career workshops and counseling and—in honor of the Foundation's namesake—board leadership training for female emerging leaders that work for organizations serving women and girls.

"This year we held a board training for these emerging leaders, teaching them what the roles and responsibilities are of a nonprofit board member," said Dr. Laura Otten, director, The Nonprofit Center at La Salle University's School of Business. The Nonprofit Center then invited this class of women (and others who had completed board preparation classes through The Center) who hoped to one day be executive directors to the board speed dating event, because it would offer them insight into the relationship between the executive director and board from both sides of the table, she said.

"We added this speed dating event because we wanted to give these women the opportunity to use the knowledge and skills they had been gaining—and get them on boards—if they were interested in being a board member," said Otten. "Several of the participants told me that it was amazing how much you could learn about a person or organization in six minutes."

The Nonprofit Center hosted 19 organizations serving women and girls and 15 board candidates, the director said, and the organizations were required to bring their executive director and a board member. Once everyone arrived, The Nonprofit Center provided a brief biography of each individual and organization to all of the attendees and allotted six minutes for each candidate and organization to have a conversation.

"This wasn't necessarily a first date," Otten said, "but our goal was to allow the candidates and the organizations to get a quick peek at each other and make the decision whether they wanted to do a real first date."

Matches made in Philadelphia

Robert Jakubowski, CEO of Big Brothers Big Sisters of Burlington, Camden and Gloucester Counties, in Cherry Hill, N.J., said he was familiar with the good works of The Nonprofit Center and that his organization was seeking diversity on its board—in particular, women—so when he was invited, he thought he'd give it a try.

"The Nonprofit Center was pretty militant about [the time]," Jakubowski said. "We had to be sure we didn't run over our limit. We may not have gotten all of the answers to our questions in that amount of time, but you knew whether it was a nonstarter."

Jakubowski said during his brief introduction with candidates, both sides tried to determine if there was "mission fit," if the candidates fit geographically, and if there was interest on both sides.

"Every board is different, so we were selling ourselves and they were selling themselves," Jakubowski said.

The CEO said he followed up with everyone he spoke with the next day—even those that he knew weren't a fit. There are currently three or four candidates with potential, he said, so he'll be scheduling phone calls or sit down meetings with those individuals. Jakubowski said he will also meet with his chair to determine who meets his organization's board guidelines and possesses the skills his board needs most.

"There were positive leads, but we're not sure right now where it will lead," said Jakubowski. "We're not rushing into anything, and we like to be deliberate in what we're doing. But even those candidates that may not be a good fit on the board could be great on a committee."

Overall, the CEO said it was a great way to prioritize his time and he highly recommended this

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type of board speed dating, especially since these candidates were trained in board roles and responsibilities. “The Nonprofit Center at La Salle will try something new,” Jakubowski said. “Isn’t that the best thing about the nonprofit sector? We get to try something new and learn from it and build from it, so there’s always that entrepreneurial piece to the sector. And watching La Salle do that is fun, and being the beneficiary helps my capacity to do what I’m doing.”

Individual participants appeared to echo the CEO’s enthusiasm. Gail Crane, assistant head for Finance and Operations at The Quaker School at Horsham, in Horsham, Pa., said the meeting reinforced her desire to grow in a leadership role—a skill that she sees lacking within the nonprofit sector. Crane also has worked with a board in an administrative capacity and said she has been frustrated at times by the lack of board members’ understanding regarding roles and responsibilities.

“Most of my career has been in the nonprofit sector and I have been fascinated by leadership issues,” Crane, who returned to school recently to finish an M.S. in Human Resources and Organizational Dynamics, said. “I have seen too many organizations with deserving missions go astray due to lack of leadership.”

The assistant head said she was curious about the format and looked forward to attending. “I had some ideas of where I saw myself going,” Crane said, “but it really is like speed dating, because some of the organizations I thought I’d be intrigued by—maybe it wasn’t a good match chemistry-wise.”

The assistant head said that geographical location, fundraising skills, and potential board member donations were just some of the key issues addressed by both candidates and organizations, and that chemistry played a critical role.

“For the organizations where you connected, it wasn’t enough time,” Crane said, “and for the ones where you didn’t connect, it was more than enough time.”

Crane said she wished she had more advance notice about each organization, because after an hour, things did seem to run together, and she doesn’t want to lose her momentum, so she will reach out to two or three organizations soon.

The following morning, she said she was excited to see who emailed her, and she’s going to make first contact with those organizations that she hoped to hear from and didn’t.

“I have the highest praise for The Nonprofit Center and their work and similar institutions around the country,” Crane said. “It’s been a fabulous experience because there is a sense of gratification from being involved in this—this is the ultimate experience—all of this training and support. It’s something [The Nonprofit Center] should continue, because there are other constituencies that can benefit, not just women and girls.”

Beyond the board mystique

Immediately after the event, evaluations were sent to all of the participants, said Dr. Otten. All of the emails and conversations she’s had since then have been positive, she said.

“I get asked by individuals all the time, ‘I’d like to join a board so how do I go about doing it?’” said Otten. “This was a wonderful opportunity to take a look at the pool of resources that are out there. Too many nonprofits look for their board members in their smartphones. What we did was expose them to people that the smartphones of their board members would not have identified ... and we exposed individuals to organizations that they may never have been exposed to through the work of their own organizations. They ran into something they otherwise might not have run into.”

For more information

For nearly 30 years, The Nonprofit Center at La Salle University’s School of Business has been at the forefront in helping organizations throughout the Delaware Valley strengthen themselves, their boards, and their staffs. The Nonprofit Center recognizes that all nonprofits—no matter how admirable their mission—must be able to implement and maintain strong business practices in order to compete in today’s competitive and complex world. To learn more, visit www.lasallenonprofitcenter.org/. The Big Brothers Big Sisters of Burlington, Camden and Gloucester Counties has helped children realize their potential and build their futures. The Big Brothers Big Sisters of Burlington, Camden and Gloucester Counties nurtures children and strengthens communities. To find out more, go to www.bbbsbcg.org/. The Quaker School at Horsham provides specialized programs for gifted students with diverse learning styles within a small, caring community that embodies the Quaker values of integrity, equality, peace, and simplicity. To learn more, visit www.quakerschool.org/. ■