



On-Site Group Training Gains Popularity Among Nonprofits

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Dwindling resources have led nonprofit leaders, including foundation executives, to explore innovative ways to support the professional development needs of their staffs and grantees respectively. One solution is group trainings presented at an organization's site. In the Delaware Valley, a growing number of nonprofit staffs, board members, foundation grantees, collaboratives, nonprofit association members, and other member groups are participating in group training on a variety of subjects. The success of these initiatives suggests that foundations and nonprofits in other parts of the country may find such programs beneficial as well.

Group trainings, as their name implies, enable nonprofits to offer educational and professional development to multiple staff or board members at one time, in the locations of their choice. This educational format has several benefits beyond the cost-effectiveness of training multiple people simultaneously, rather than sending them to classes individually. Chief among these advantages are the convenience and time and travel savings resulting from the trainer's coming to a location chosen by the nonprofit, the team-building experience, and the consensus that stems from a shared learning experience. Foundations, cultural alliances, religious federations, and community development collaboratives are among the types of umbrella organizations supporting their memberships by making educational programs available to them.

Four Specific Examples

The Subaru of America Foundation, headquartered in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, recently sponsored a half day of training for local nonprofit organizations on practical strategies for surviving the volatile economy and become more sustainable. "Our board recognized that many nonprofits are looking for tools on how to emerge from this economic downturn a stronger and more efficient organization," said Sandra Capell, community services manager for Subaru of America, Inc. Subaru of America chose an educational seminar, which covered fundraising, strategic planning, financial management, human resources, marketing, and board leadership, as a way to reach out to a large number of nonprofits simultaneously, thus increasing the impact of their limited resources.

The Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation in Morristown, New Jersey, and the Pottstown [Pennsylvania] Area Health and Wellness Foundation have elected to support their grantees with a full and diverse roster of on-site professional development programs for multiple organizations.

The Dodge project has proved extremely successful in providing comprehensive leadership development for boards of directors and is entering its second year. It offers programs on board roles and responsibilities, including strategic planning, fundraising, succession planning, and financial management. Webinars are being incorporated into the project this year, to take the concept of cost-effectiveness and convenience of group trainings a step further, so that busy board members who also have jobs don't have to leave their offices for training.

Grantees have recognized the investment the foundation is making by providing board development programs to grantees. David Winitzky, producing director of the Playwrights Theater in Madison, New Jersey, noted, "The entire series has been a boon to grantees, and, if our experience is an indication, sure to make a great difference to the nonprofit community in New Jersey."

The Pottstown collaboration, entering its third year, concentrates more on staff development for its grantees, with programs enabling the executive directors and managers of grantee organizations to enhance their skills in business planning, building strategic alliances, program evaluation, and other key areas.

Individual nonprofit organizations, which often have little or no professional development budgets, are also embracing the benefits of on-site group training. Their focus is frequently on so-called people skills, such as time management, communication, and supervision, as well as more specific needs such as business planning and strategic planning.

The Chester [Pennsylvania] Youth Collaborative, a network of organizations that work with disadvantaged inner-city youth, made Certificate in Nonprofit Management training available to its member organizations, which include Boys and Girls Clubs, PAL, Big Brothers/Big Sister, and various arts, community development, and youth organizations. This training enabled participants to acquire a broad and diverse knowledge base in all aspects of nonprofit administration, operations, and management. An added value of certificate programs are the associated credentials that attest to a well-trained, professional staff, which is important to funders and other key audiences.

A Funder's Point of View

Wendy Liscow, program officer for the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, believes strongly in investing in capacity building for nonprofits: "The Dodge Foundation recognizes that technical assistance is the most effective means, beyond our grant dollars, to ensure grantees have the capacity to accomplish their stated goals. Building organizational capacity is a solid, effective investment that not only strengthens each individual organization, but also bolsters the nonprofit sector. To that end we will continue to provide quality, sequential, and meaningful opportunities for our grantees to come together to do the internal work that will increase their operational efficacy."

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Joan Mintz Ulmer, The Nonprofit Center, LaSalle University School of Business
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Joan Mintz Ulmer is director of marketing and communications at [The Nonprofit Center](#) at LaSalle University's School of Business. The Nonprofit Center, the largest provider of capacity-building services for Delaware Valley nonprofits, conducted the training programs described in this article.