

Leadership can be lonely. Learning circles help nonprofit directors find community

The Nonprofit Center at La Salle University's CLEAR Circles convene local EDs and "emerging leaders" to share lessons and offer space for self-reflection among peers.



By [Grace Shallow](#) / contributor

At a conference about 15 years ago, [Laura Otten](#) learned about a peer-sharing technique that prompted Hawaiian nonprofit leaders to fly from the state's outer islands to [the Big Island](#) on their own dime.

Otten decided to bring the practice of learning circles to [The Nonprofit Center at La Salle University](#), where she is the director, and has been offering them ever since.

Learning circles are made up of leaders in the nonprofit community who share their experiences, obstacles and advice with one another. The Nonprofit Center officially calls them [CLEAR Circles](#) — an acronym for Cultivating Leadership Excellence and Responsibility — and offers both in-person and virtual options.

The center has circles for different tiers of employees, such as executive directors and "emerging leaders," aka people who report to EDs and may supervise others, Otten said. The center will be starting a new cycle of learning circles for EDs and emerging leaders in February 2019.

"There is a lot of benefit in having a group of peers who understand and to whom you don't have to explain every detail," Otten said. "I think the longevity of these groups speaks to ... the value of having that group of peers."

How they work

Despite supporting different types of nonprofit leaders, CLEAR Circles all share a similar structure:

- **Size** — A maximum of seven or eight peers
- **Frequency of meetings** — Monthly
- **Length of meetings** — About two hours
- **How long the circles last** — Roughly eight-month cycles

Otten compared the set-up of CLEAR circles to "think tanks" in the for-profit sector, with a key focus on nonprofit work.

Each circle is facilitated by an employee from The Nonprofit Center, who helps guide the discussions and ensures that each member is equally contributing to the conversation. Otten is the facilitator of the CLEAR Circle for the EDs.

There are also some ground rules that all participants must agree to, like confidentiality (“What’s said in the circle, stays in the circle,” Otten said). But the first — and perhaps most important — rule is perfect attendance.

“What makes the circles work is that this isn’t the ‘Drop in when you feel like it’ [group],” Otten said. “You’re going to be present in every session, you’re going to get to know people and you’re going to build that bond.”

Otten added that close relationships between participants often leads to them seeking support from one another through informal meetings and discussions outside their circle’s designated meeting.

The perfect attendance rule is a testament to the investment of time that the leaders must choose to make, but CLEAR Circles come at a cost, too: A full session is \$395 for a member of The Nonprofit Center, and \$470 for non-members.

Certain organizations, [like the Valentine Foundation](#), have funded some leaders’ participation in the past.

If there’s no outside support, Otten said leaders can be hesitant because they don’t want to seem greedy by asking a board or funders to cover the cost of their individual participation, but it’s ultimately worthwhile.

“People misunderstand the purpose of circles,” Otten said. “They think it’s an investment just in them. ... But the stronger your executive director is, the stronger your organization is going to be. In these sessions, what you’re doing is helping your executive director be a better, stronger executive director.”

The circles’ benefits: community and a chance to self-reflect

For nine of her 21 years as the ED at the [SeniorLAW Center](#), **Karen Buck** was a member of the CLEAR Circle for EDs. It was a consistent place to turn to when her “very lonely and isolating position of leadership” was especially challenging, she said.

As people move up in any organization, they may struggle with being further removed from their peers, the pressure of heightened responsibility and a lack of a built-in support system of colleagues, [according to a 2014 report](#) from the **International Journal of Leadership and Change**.

“[The circle] was in many ways like building a family of supporters and brainstormers that every month could help you step away from your daily grind and kind of find a space of solace to reflect and strategize,” Buck said.

The SeniorLAW Center uses the law to empower older people, but Buck said she was still able to find common ground with directors at organizations with differing missions. In CLEAR Circles, Buck said the three most common issues EDs discuss are funding, maintaining relationships with their board of directors and HR or staff issues.

And when these challenges are at their worst, and EDs feel like they have no time to spare for self-reflection, Buck said that's when it's the most necessary.

"Our role is helping others to do their jobs well," Buck said. "Sometimes we need some support to do our jobs well as well, and I think these leadership circles in some ways play that role."

As an "emerging leader," [Aarati Kasturirangan](#) also felt empowered by her CLEAR Circle. She is the director of programs at the [Bread & Roses Community Fund](#), a social justice fund that supports grassroots organizations working toward racial equity and economic opportunity.

She said the circle's members shared the experience of feeling "stuck in the middle position between the executive director and the staff in an organization. It can be challenging to navigate that."

Kasturirangan was also in a group of all women, and their discussions helped her learn to be more direct.

"All of us were very aware that we hadn't really been groomed to be assertive in our roles," she said. "That's something that typically comes more easily to men because that's just the way they've been socialized. I think that there's a balance of wanting to be assertive and wanting to take an authoritative stance but also to be a person who is driven by relationships and really understanding."

Kasturirangan's circle officially met between September 2017 to May 2018, but she said the members have remained in contact and still carve out time to see each other monthly at cafes in the city.

Otten said the longevity of the circles and relationships they build is not only driven by humans' inherent need for community, but the curiosity of the participating leaders.

"They really want to learn," she said. "They're committed to doing the very best that they can, and they recognize that doing the very best can be augmented by the ideas and the thoughts and the support of a group of peers that you really respect and trust."

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-Laura Otten