



Learning Circle Brings Development Directors to the Forefront to Drive Nonprofit Success

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As part of a continued commitment to fostering the growth of grantee partner leadership in the form of capacity-building support, grants, and initiatives, The New York Women's Foundation partnered with Cause Effective to launch the Development Directors' Learning Circle. Cause Effective is a New York-based nonprofit with 35 years of experience helping community-based nonprofits plan and implement effective resource development strategies. This six-month program combines peer support, leadership training, and customized coaching to help new development staff—who have anywhere from three days to three years in their current position—build their

skills, galvanize their staff, cultivate their donor base, and ultimately actualize their dreams for the organization and for themselves as leaders.

The Learning Circle was open to grantee partners of The Foundation through an application process. The first cohort of 10 people was selected based on shared goals and experiences, and ability to commit to the full breadth of the program, which included six monthly peer sessions and six private coaching sessions with a Cause Effective senior consultant. While primarily a professional growth opportunity, the Learning Circle's mission to bring directors of development

(DoD) together was key to its success. Often, DoDs can be a forgotten or disenfranchised group within the nonprofit sector, though their role of liaising between Executive Directors, donors, and program directors is invaluable. As such, many feel isolated in their professional journeys. The Learning Circle allowed for a safe space for DoDs to discuss their goals and personal challenges, compare notes, and share insights that help each other better serve their respective organizations.

The success of this initiative is clear. Participants reported gaining new fundraising wins, successfully executing new events and campaigns, and

renewing confidence in their abilities to effectively fundraise. As a result, many have advanced in their careers at their respective organizations, and some even advanced into new opportunities in the nonprofit sector. One great success story of this first cohort is that of Anika Nawabi, who not only created substantial fundraising growth for Chhaya CDC (where she served as Director of Development), but has since started a new job as the Executive Director of Muslim Community Network (MCN) in New York.

Nawabi started her career as a manager of resource development with Chhaya—a nonprofit that works with New Yorkers of South Asian origin to advocate for and build economically stable, sustainable, and thriving communities. Like many others, she was eventually thrust into the role of Development Director after a couple years. When she'd started, she originally wanted to be in Programs, but as she grew she began to realize the vital role of development within an organization. She was eager to learn as much as she could in order to perform her role to the best of her ability. When she heard about the Learning Circle, she was attracted by the duration of the program and, most importantly, by the idea of a peer network. She'd done a number of one- and two-day training workshops in the past, and found that after a while they became redundant. The Learning Circle promised to be



Chhaya Community Development Corporation

a great way to gain practical, realistic insights by talking to a group of peers who were dealing with the same issues she was.

When the program began, she was amazed to realize that all the women in the cohort were in her age group and all were working at small nonprofits. They were all pursuing the same goals and making the same mistakes. She was inspired by their collective passion and how much they truly cared about their organizations. At first, she took a step back and listened, eager to learn from their experiences and styles. But as time went on—and with the additional support of trainings, speakers, and educational materials provided by Cause Effective—she engaged actively and turned to the group as more of a shared resource than a learning group. Nearly a year later, they are a network, who still communicate regularly and meet once a month to exchange

tips and support. It is a model not found anywhere else in the nonprofit sector, Nawabi realizes upon reflection, which makes her that much more grateful for the experience.

Another key component of the Learning Circle was the private coaching sessions. Nawabi's experience with her coach, Greg Cohen (Cause Effective's Associate Director), built her confidence in fundraising and taking on a greater leadership role within the organization. While she'd worked with him prior to the Circle, learning methods of fundraising, her time during the Learning Circle was focused on strategies to build up greater sponsorships and run successful events. During that time, Chhaya was preparing for their annual Gala, which she'd been given the opportunity to lead. With Greg's guidance and encouragement, she gained renewed confidence in her ability to

run this event, resulting in an evening that exceeded the organization's expectations.

It was thanks to this experience that she felt ready to take on an Executive Director role at a small organization, when the opportunity presented itself. The Muslim Community Network's (MCN) vision is to help facilitate the emergence of a Muslim American identity that transcends generational, ethnic, gender, racial, and class-based boundaries. With newfound confidence and the opportunity to lead a mission she felt passionate about as a Muslim woman herself, she accepted the role of Executive Director of MCN in October 2018. Currently, she manages a team of four building out MCN's platform from the ground up and planning new programs to support the Muslim American community in New York.

As a smaller organization, MCN does not currently employ a director of development, so Nawabi is doubly grateful for everything she's learned. She values the importance of the Development Director role, and now has the thirst to do the work in a way she never did before. "You cannot be an effective Executive Director if you don't have the skills of a Development Director," Nawabi asserts. And it is her hope that, knowing what she now knows, she can manage her team and her organization in a way that is infectious, inspiring, and momentous.

Camille Emeagwali, *Vice President of Programs at The New York Women's Foundation, on the origins of The Foundation's partnership with Cause Effective and the purpose of the Learning Circle:*

"We've had a collaborative partnership with Cause Effective, and for this program we really wanted to focus on a particular group of leaders. Oftentimes, leadership programs focus on the executive director or board members—but nothing specific to the development role. What's interesting about that role is that it can be a great launching pad for the next leap to an executive level. If you're a good fundraiser and you know the programmatic side, you are really the person folks turn to.

"With this program, we wanted to offer tools and training, but also focus on leadership—particularly how to be a leader in the development role and work in partnership with other positions in the organization, and help participants build their professional network. The team at Cause Effective are experts. But there's nothing like talking to your peers to know different strategies and tips on how to be effective in your role. Cause Effective did a great job designing the program and the first year was very successful. It was transformative for participants professionally.

The program fits squarely in line with what The Foundation values: fostering women's leadership, supporting and strengthening sustainability for organizations, and then having them be able to think bigger about all of the different opportunities available for them to grow their work and their organization.

"The Foundation as a value has always invested in long term organizational sustainability just as much as we support the work they do. You have to invest in people. Organizations are people. We invest in people. We invest in leaders."