

Taking a step back — Nonprofit leaders rejuvenate so they can move forward

Written by Marlize van Romburgh
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Sometimes you just need a break from saving the world.

Or, as Sigrid Wright, assistant director at the Community Environmental Council in Santa Barbara, explains, “Sometimes you just need to be able to go into a room for two days and not have to solve a problem.”

That’s what *Courage to Lead*, a new Santa Barbara-based organization, aims to offer nonprofit executives: A chance to take a break, rethink and rejuvenate.

The program, still in its inception year, consists of a series of five quarterly two-day retreats at La Casa de Maria, a retreat center in the Montecito hills. There, 20 nonprofit executives gather together to share their experiences – or simply to take time entirely for themselves. The program currently serves nonprofits in the area from San Luis Obispo County down through Orange County.

Courage to Lead uses the principles taught by sociologist Parker J.

Palmer and the Center for Courage and Renewal, a national group. Palmer's teachings focus on practices of deep self-reflection, poetry reading, journaling and group listening.

Most nonprofits have had a particularly tough economic and fundraising year, with many having to lay off staff and downsize operations. It's a morale killer, particularly for nonprofits already struggling with limited resources.

Although many nonprofit leaders are initially drawn to their positions with a sense of life calling, many find themselves burned out after several years on the job. A 2006 study by CompassPoint Nonprofit Services and The Meyer Foundation found that nationally, nearly three-quarters of nonprofit executives surveyed plan to leave their jobs, but not the nonprofit sector, within five years. The problem is even more acute in smaller nonprofit organizations with fewer than 10 paid staff members, which are more likely to experience transition in the next five years than larger, more established nonprofits, the study found.

Ken Saxon, founder of *Courage to Lead*, said burnout is one of the main issues that his program attempts to address. When it comes to cutting costs, the first thing nonprofits usually put on the chopping block is professional development, he explained. "There's this whole scarcity mentality in the nonprofit world that leads these organizations not to invest in their people as much as they should," he said.

Monica Spear, Executive Director of Girls Inc. of Greater Santa Barbara, agreed. "Most nonprofit leaders, given the nature of the role, are capable, dedicated, hard working, and have learned what needs to be done to successfully manage organizations and do it, at whatever personal sacrifice might be required," she said. "The 'greater good' and the job responsibility take precedence over the personal needs of the executive director, often resulting in directors leaving their positions and organizations due to burnout or lack of self-care."

Even so, learning to relax at a *Courage to Lead* retreat takes some adjusting, said Wright. "When you have the workload that most nonprofit leaders have, it seems counter-intuitive sometimes to take time out and step back," she said.

Courage to Lead encourages its participants to separate themselves from their daily pressures so that they can get back in touch with their original reasons for joining the nonprofit sector and look at the larger picture of what their organization's mission is.

"Just having the opportunity to separate yourself - and having the space to step back - is such a relief," Spear said. "You come back to work with

such a sense of renewal.”

She said that she and her peers often feel stretched thin by the various pressures exerted on them. “Because of the requirement to constantly meet the diverse needs of so many, nonprofit leaders are often in a position of having to stretch so far from our center that it is almost inevitable at some point – perhaps temporarily or perhaps not – that you will lose touch with the core,” she said. “The core of both who you are as a person and a leader, and the core of the work you have chosen to do.”

Saxon has a background as a Silicon Valley entrepreneur, still guest teaches at Stanford’s Graduate School of Business – his alma mater – and serves on the boards of numerous Santa Barbara area nonprofits. He said that he thinks “nonprofit leaders often have a harder time than a lot of business leaders,” in handling the personal stresses of their jobs because these executives are constantly under scrutiny from a board of directors and donors. They often feel that much of what they do is out of their control, he said.

“Being a nonprofit leader can be a lonely position,” said Ernesto Paredes, executive director for Santa Barbara-based Easy Lift, a nonprofit providing curbside ride services to seniors and people with disabilities.

“In many ways, your board is like your boss, so you can’t always go to it with concerns you’re having,” he said. “And it’s not always appropriate to talk to your staff about concerns you have with the board.”

Courage to Lead practices a strict “double confidentiality” rule, which means that not only does what’s said at retreat stay at retreat, but even while there, participants don’t bring up issues raised by others during discussion again unless invited by the originators to do so.

“We spend a lot of group work time on practices of reflection, where we really try to help each other see the big picture,” Saxon said.

But these retreats also come at a premium price: \$3,100 for the year-long series. With nonprofit budgets tighter than ever, it’s a tough call for some to consider paying that much. In Santa Barbara County at least, the Santa Barbara Foundation has stepped up to commit scholarship funds to make the retreats accessible to leaders of nonprofits in the county.

What makes *Courage to Lead* unique is not just that it focuses on nonprofit leaders, but that it’s largely geared towards established, experienced leaders, Saxon said. “We’re talking about people who know how to run an organization, but who really want to renew themselves.”

In practice, that means that during those two-day escapes, the executives participate in organized group discussion time and poetry readings, as well as take personal self-reflection time to walk or write in a

journal – whatever the participants feel is necessary for them.

“Nonprofit leaders have to be able to inspire, and they can’t do that while they’re on the edge of burnout,” Saxon said. “A lot of them just need to take some time for some self-care.”