

Nonprofit education is coming to



your town

Training for nonprofits has been transformed, thanks to an ingenious new collaboration.

BY JILL MUEHRCKE

Visionaries are those who don't ask "How?" till they've first asked "Why not?" They are those who embrace the invisible and welcome the impossible.

It's because of one visionary and her knack of asking "Why not?" that the pathbreaking Learning Institute for Nonprofit Organizations is a reality. Launched a few months ago, the Learning Institute offers a way for nonprofit leaders to get the training they need, easily and affordably.

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the vision

Katie Burnham, the Learning Institute’s founder, has been having “visions” for a long time. When she founded the Society for Nonprofit Organizations in 1983, her vision of one organization to unite all types and sizes of nonprofits was revolutionary. Her idea of collaboration between organizations and sectors was greeted by many with cynicism and mistrust.

But visionaries, especially those who champion collaboration, are well acquainted with cynics. They recognize the unspoken suspicions: “What’s *really* going on here? Whose interests are *really* being served?” They understand they’ll be watched to see if their actions fit their stated beliefs.

People have been watching for 14 years now, and even the skeptics agree that the Society has proven itself. It has earned worldwide respect for its ability to “walk the talk” of collaboration. When other nonprofit groups held tight to their “secrets,” the Society shared information with as many nonprofit organizations as possible—and kept looking for new ways to do so.

Thus, in 1994, the Society pioneered TeamTrack, a new approach to nonprofit education. TeamTrack was a response to Society surveys showing that nonprofit leaders were unhappy with traditional training. Unless they lived in a large city, where most training took place, they couldn’t afford the time and money it cost. When they did attend, they found the training rarely bore fruit. It didn’t change the organization, and it certainly didn’t change the community. Because it took place in isolation, there was no sense of continuity.

TeamTrack changed all that. Named for its conviction that learning works best in teams, TeamTrack visited the small towns with workshops tailored to the community’s needs. Its aim was to keep registration fees low so that teams of people from the same organization could attend.

Promising as the idea was, it proved impossible to keep costs low enough to make the concept work. Air fares went up, and expenses to move speakers around the country skyrocketed. The model proved sound, but the delivery mechanism was infeasible.

That’s when Burnham had her next vision: Why not use electrons rather than wheels or wings to bring people

together? If it was too costly to move people physically to small towns, why not move them in a virtual way?

Thus the Learning Institute was born. The Institute uses the latest technology to bring speakers to everyone’s community. People gather at convenient meeting places, where they watch a satellite-delivered program. But they do more than watch and listen. Linked by satellite, they’re able to interact with the speakers and with other attendees around the country, responding to what they say and asking them questions.

The first Learning Institute workshop, broadcast live from Washington D.C., featured a panel of experts on building effective nonprofit boards. “It was even better than being there,” according to one attendee. “On the big screen, I could see the panelists close up, better than I could have seen or heard them in a lecture hall. And it gave me access to the best and brightest in the country—people I wouldn’t ordinarily get to see.”

The Learning Institute builds on many of TeamTrack’s innovations. It too is founded on a bedrock belief in teams. “We know that when executives and board members attend a workshop together, they’re more likely to put the ideas they learn into action,” Burnham

Why Team Training?

Sending a team to training helps your organization in four ways:

1.

IT ENSURES CONTINUITY

If one or two key people leave your organization, there will still be team members to carry on the new skills and knowledge.

2.

IT GUARANTEES THAT IDEAS ARE CARRIED OUT

Team members are more likely to activate ideas than one person acting alone.

3.

IT CREATES SYNERGY

A team outperforms the same number of people working individually.

4.

IT BUILDS NETWORKS

People in your organization and in other organizations will begin to view one another as allies in solving community-wide, sector-wide, and world-wide problems.

says. Like TeamTrack, therefore, the Learning Institute offers discounts to organizations that send an executive-board team to a workshop.

The idea was simple. But putting it into effect took more than Burnham's visionary skills. It took her talents as a collaborative leader.



the partnership

Collaborative leaders possess something special, as David Chrislip and Carl Larson explain in *Collaborative Leadership*. They perform tasks similar to other leaders—setting a goal, aligning people in support of it, and inspiring them to achieve it. But they lead in very different ways. Their distinguishing feature is that they bring people together when nothing else is working.

Collaborative leaders are decidedly visionary—but about how people can work together constructively rather than about a particular solution to a specific issue. When they “model the way,” people are empowered. Many collaborative projects are begun by one person with the credibility to convince others that something can and must be done.

That is exactly what Burnham did. The result was an extraordinary collaboration. For the first time, partners from all three sectors—nonprofit, for-profit, and public—joined together. Each partner makes a unique contribution:

1. The Society for Nonprofit Organizations, the nonprofit partner, brings to the collaboration its 14 years' experience working with nonprofit organizations and its many resources, including *Nonprofit World*, the *Resource Center Catalog*, and its national network of experts.

2. The University of Wisconsin-Extension is the public partner. With over 100 years of service to its community, it was looking for new ways to reach out to citizens. The Learning Institute provided the chance to do so. UW-Extension's chancellor realized that increasing nonprofits' management skills was the perfect way to increase quality of life in the community. Extension faculty are available at each course to answer questions, distribute resources, and lead discussions after the course is over. Extension staff began helping the Society even before the final collaboration papers were signed. They created the Society's home page and transferred all *Nonprofit World*

articles—beginning with the first issue in 1983—onto a CD-ROM, further increasing nonprofits' access to the information they need. (To order this invaluable CD-ROM, see page 25.)

3. Television Wisconsin, Inc., is the partner from the for-profit sector. Led by David Sanks and Fred Sole, TV Wisconsin contributes the necessary satellite links for the broadcasts. It is also creating videos of the courses. Thus, people who can't attend in person can still benefit from the information. Attendees can use the videos to review what they've learned and share it with others in their organization.

Though these three groups had never worked together, Burnham convinced them of their commonalities and created a shared vision. She inspired them to buy into her dream by showing how all would be served by a common purpose. She breathed life into their hopes and showed them the exciting possibilities the future holds, as James Kouzes and Barry Posner advise in *The Leadership Challenge*.

Leaders who get extraordinary things done enable others to act. They encourage teamwork and make it possible

Join the Team!

Upcoming distance-education courses, presented by the Learning Institute, include:

Effective Communications in a Noisy World

Strategic Planning: Charting
Your Course for the Future

More Mission for Your Money,
Management I and II

Building a Board with a Passion for Mission

Effective Fundraising—Ideas that Work!

The State of the Nonprofit Sector

Unlocking Volunteer Potential

The success of this project depends on establishing a dialogue with nonprofits. Let us know what you think. If you have ideas for other courses or educational services, please let the Institute know. Contact the Learning Institute at 6314 Odana Road, Suite 1, Madison, Wisconsin 53719 (phone 800-424-7367 or 608-274-9777; fax 608-274-9978).

for others to do good work. Kouzes and Posner have “developed a simple one-word test to detect whether someone is on the road to becoming a leader. That word is *we*.”

Because of her emphasis on the “we” of things, Burnham was able to sustain the partners through long months of frustration. It’s at such times, when visions begin to look like pipedreams, that collaborative leaders stand out. They convince participants that each person’s input is valued. They bolster commitment to the process when quick solutions are offered. Collaborative leaders help groups do hard work when it would be easier to quit.

The amount of energy people invest in a collaboration depends on how credible and open they view it, as Chrislip and Larson note. Burnham made sure the project was *credible* by sharing the Society’s abundant research. Every survey the Society conducted made it clear that nonprofit leaders craved a new kind of education. The Society’s experiences with TeamTrack showed that the team model worked. And she made sure the project was *open* by being honest and receptive to all points of view.

In addition to the three main partners, Burnham is continually establishing other alliances. Her bias is always to include more rather than fewer people.

One such partner is the group of local volunteers who help out at each course. The Learning Institute has teamed up with the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) and similar volunteer groups, who help people register, hand out materials, and work with the faculty to encourage follow-up.

“After each course, local faculty and volunteers lead a discussion,” explains Burnham. “During this dialogue, attendees have a chance to critique the course. This follow-up evaluation will assure that we are meeting nonprofits’ ongoing educational needs.

“The Institute is also forming partnerships with nonprofit academic centers around the country to provide a curriculum that focuses on key management and leadership principles. Current courses are based on a recent survey of nonprofits, who told us what their greatest needs are. They include principles of fundraising, planning, marketing, management, and board leadership.

“Many nonprofits have developed excellent educational materials and programs but lack the resources to deliver them at the local level,” Burnham adds. The Institute will deliver these materials to local communities. It will take nonprofit training out of the void and connect it to a continuing stream of learning and growth.

Attendees receive tools to take back to their organizations—tangible tools to use in creating change. These include workbooks with concrete steps for putting new ideas to work. The Institute also offers periodic roundtables, where attendees can network with their peers, discuss how they’re using their training, and set new educational goals. In addition, it offers ways for people who are new to the nonprofit sector to work with seasoned practi-

How to Get the Most from Training

1. Create a team of key people to attend the training. Be sure your team includes the executive director and at least one board member.
2. Have your team meet *before* the training to discuss what the organization hopes to gain.
3. During the training, have team members ask questions to ensure that the organization’s goals are met.
4. After the training, be sure attendees have the authority and opportunity to put their new learning into action.
5. Make certain that attendees share their new knowledge with others throughout the organization.
6. Have team members meet regularly to discuss how they’re using their new learning and how they can apply it to problems that come up.
7. Periodically, evaluate the results of the training, and set new educational goals for the organization.
8. Write resources for training into your budget.
9. Be sure that all key members of the organization, especially the executive director, support the idea of continuing education.
10. Create a learning environment, in which everyone in your organization welcomes new ideas and embraces change.

tioners. This mentoring program will create yet another learning exchange.

The partnership received a big boost with a \$1.5-million grant from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation of Battle Creek, Michigan. The Foundation, which has long supported nonprofit educational programs, was seeking ways to help such programs reach smaller nonprofits in far-flung regions of the country. The Learning Institute provided an ingenious solution.

“Although its main goal is to educate nonprofits, the partnership has many other benefits,” Burnham points out. “It provides opportunities for local volunteers. It helps

Are You a Collaborative Leader?

Do you have what it takes to be a collaborative leader? Ask yourself the following questions:

1. Can you inspire people's commitment even when you have no authority over them? Collaborative leaders have no formal power. They exercise leadership in the hardest situation—when all are peers.

2. Do you invest your energy in people? Collaborative leaders focus on how people can work together rather than on solutions to specific issues. Collaborative leaders are experts at building relationships among many diverse people.

3. Are you credible? Do you lead by example? Does what you do match what you say? If you espouse collaboration, do you yourself collaborate?

4. Are you open and inclusive? Collaborative leaders make an effort to include all stakeholders. They take great pains to be inclusive, realizing that collaboration fails when the right people aren't included.

5. Can you sustain people's hope when they become discouraged? When the inevitable frustrations occur, can you keep people focused on the vision? Do you continually set goals and encourage celebrations of achievement along the way?

Adapted from *Collaborative Leadership* by David Chrislip and Carl Larson. To order, see the Society's *Resource Center Catalog*, beginning on page 25 of this issue of *Nonprofit World*.

build the capacity of the entire community. And it models the kind of collaboration all communities should consider as they work to create meaningful change.”



the future

“Right now, we’re concentrating on Wisconsin,” Burnham says. “But that doesn’t mean nonprofits in other states can’t receive our programs. We encourage anyone who’s interested, wherever they are, to link up with us. Ohio, Michigan, and Minnesota have already let us know they want to join us. Anyone who wants programs downlinked in their area can call their local Extension office, or call the Society, and we can arrange for a downlink. All land-grant universities have Extension offices. For those who aren’t near a land-grant university, we can hook them up to a technical college, library, school, or other convenient meeting place.”

Burnham stresses that “nothing is written in stone. We are open to suggestions and input from *Nonprofit World* readers. Our commitment is that we will listen and respond with the highest quality services our partnership can provide. We hope to receive many, many responses.”

The Learning Institute program will do far more than transfer skills. It will bring about a common vocabulary—long needed in the nonprofit sector—and set of common principles. Eventually it will lead to a global certificate in nonprofit management that will have credibility throughout the world. Thus, for the first time, nonprofit managers can earn a diploma that has measurable value anywhere on earth. The opportunity to earn such a degree will also help build a strong nonprofit sector across the globe.

“But that,” says Burnham, “is a vision for the future.” ■

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These publications are available through The Society For Nonprofit Organizations’ Resource Center. To order, see the Society’s *Resource Center Catalog* or contact the Society at 6314 Odana Road, Suite 1, Madison, Wisconsin 53719 (608–274–9777).