



# I've Been Thinking about...Networking

## How important are relationships with other nonprofit leaders? What value do they have for you?

By Martha Golensky



In the busy life of a nonprofit executive, there are never enough hours to address all the issues facing the organization. We learn early to prioritize, so time management becomes a necessary skill. One helpful technique is to rank-order activities according to their importance and urgency. Crises and projects with a tight deadline rate top consideration. Close behind are important matters that aren't urgent, such as long-range planning, staff development, and relationship building.

Also belonging in this second category is taking care of your health and mental well-being. That's something many CEOs neglect, perhaps fearing it's too self-serving to put on the same level as organizational needs. But think about it: How effective is your leadership if you aren't physically, mentally, and emotionally up to the task?

My first executive director position was at a national organization, where I was the only professional. I was responsible for everything from fund development to writing the quarterly newsletter. After a year and a half, I was experiencing clear signs of burnout. I made the fatal mistake of telling a board member I was having difficulty managing a particular problem. She spread the word to the other trustees; before I knew it, the board lost confidence in my abilities, and I lost my job.

When I became CEO for a second time, I was more fortunate. The local United Way had established an Executive Directors' Council for its

member agencies. We met each month to discuss mutual concerns. I became close enough to two of my peers that I could call on them for advice in total confidence, which alleviated a lot of stress. What would have really helped, however, is a resource that's available to executive directors in the community in which I now live—a county-wide consortium providing a host of services and opportunities for informal networking.

How effective is your leadership if you aren't physically, mentally, and emotionally up to the task?

For an annual membership fee of \$50 for nonprofits with five or fewer FTEs and \$75 for larger organizations, the entire staff and board can take advantage of all the benefits. These include monthly executive director and finance roundtables; access to IT and financial help desks; a Web site featuring job postings, searches, "wish" lists, and free items; a Middle Management Institute with monthly classes on various aspects of running an organization; announcement of upcoming events; an Executive Director Academy offering nine months of one-on-one coaching and workshops to build leadership capacity; monthly get-togethers to discuss best practices, with guest speakers; an annual celebration, where awards are presented to outstanding member organizations; and ad hoc programs to address members' emerging concerns. The newest

venture is a Board Development Academy, initially serving new board members but eventually to include more seasoned trustees.

The consortium itself is a nonprofit. With a part-time executive director and a part-time support person, it relies on member volunteers to carry out its work, to staff the three standing committees, and to provide peer expertise for many of the programs. As one CEO noted: "The Consortium allows me to make new contacts in the nonprofit community and community at large. I learn from others and I offer help as well. It makes my job easier and much more fun."

Two local foundations were instrumental in bringing together nonprofit stakeholders to explore interest in a capacity-building collaborative. The consortium began officially in 2004 when over 100 organizations became the initial members, and seems to grow in value every year. Continuing donor support makes it possible to keep the cost of participation low. Besides dues, some workshops have a modest fee.

This is a simple but effective model well worth replicating. Log on to [www.guilfordnonprofits.org](http://www.guilfordnonprofits.org) for further information. ■

*Martha Golensky, professor emerita of social work at Grand Valley State University (golenskm@gvsu.edu) is the author of Strategic Leadership and Management in Nonprofit Organizations: Theory and Practice, published by Lyceum Books, which draws on her 30-year career as a nonprofit executive, professor of nonprofit management, and consultant to local nonprofits on strategic planning, financial development, and board governance.*