



To Be an Ingenious Leader, Take Charge of Your Learning

Sharpen your swords, improve your outcomes, and advance your career with active learning.

By Karen Eber Davis

A common challenge for nonprofit leaders is that they feel isolated. Despite the educational opportunities available, few organizations help their leaders tackle advanced learning.

The solution? Take control of your own education, learning, and continuous improvement. Here are some points to keep in mind as you do so:

Seek Variety

Seek out opportunities to learn new skills. The topic needn't relate directly to your nonprofit work. It might be something you never tried before – perhaps learning to speak a new language or play a musical instrument. Becoming a beginner will remind you what it feels like to be a new board member, new employee, or first-time major-gift donor. Variety can also open the door to cross-pollination from a new field to your current work. How might you use your new meditation class to improve a board meeting, for example?

Be Picky

When you arrive at a conference or other all-day educational event, you're given the agenda. It includes several breakout

sessions. Which one, as an ingenious nonprofit leader, will you attend? Here's a suggested way to proceed:

- 1. At first, resist those** that appeal to you most.
- 2. Identify the best presenters** from their bios or your personal knowledge. We learn the most from those who teach the best.
- 3. From these, select the sessions** that will help you make progress on your long-term goals.
- 4. Since nonprofit success depends on relationships, prefer interactive skills** to media tactics. That is, select the session about how to ask vs. how to use Twitter.
- 5. If choices still remain, select** what appeals to you most.
- 6. At any time, if a session disappoints, move** to a new session or back to your work.

Likewise, beware of empty calories. Inspirational speakers often come with dessert and, like dessert, are sugary. You leave high and energized, but by the time you return to your desk, the inspiration has melted like cotton candy on the tongue. Seek advanced education with good nutrition.

Go Deep

You can spend hours engaged in educational opportunities and learn little. We tend to nibble at learning instead of sitting down for a full meal. People love TED talks (ted.com), and the best of these are a jolt of caffeine. They inspire and inform, but at 18 minutes, they lack depth. Contrast this with the Chautauqua Institution's learning model: They study a topic for a full week, in some cases multiple weeks over multiple summers. The Institute for Leaders in Development (bonfils-stantonfoundation.org/leadership) requires development directors to dig deep into development for a year.

This quarter, focus on one area. You might choose an area where you'll attend a conference soon. Prep for it. Read a book by a presenter. Study material on the conference's topic. Or, alternatively, choose a topic for the quarter. Focus on board development or how to help others interpret financial documents. Or, for lighter fare, read books about other nonprofits to learn how they succeed.

In part, we fail to go deep because we're bombarded with information. To avoid drowning, we swim fast. Unfortunately, this can make the learning, like water, roll off of our backs. Ingenious leaders skim media, but they also slow down to fully read and consider selected materials. Besides focusing on one topic at a time as you read or listen to articles, stop and ask: How can I incorporate this knowledge?

Create Your Own

Consider creating your own learning communities. With the right co-learners, interactive learning is almost always superior to individual learning. How about using Skype or Google+ Hangout to create your own advanced-learning

group, perhaps starting with the colleagues from across the country you met at the last conference?

Full Stop: How can you incorporate one idea from this article in your work? 

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