By Andy Segedin

They’ve been saving like misers for years. Watching the apples of their eyes grow, they’ve run the figures in their head a million times, trying to find the right chance to send them off to a quality education. The harsh realities of today, financial uncertainty and rising costs, make it harder and harder to bring this dream into reality.

No, it’s not parents saving to send their child to college. It’s about professional development for nonprofit staffs.

Walk into any conference, read any magazine or online article, and it’s clear -- there is value investing in staff with training and educational opportunities. For the average nonprofit manager sweating over how to keep the lights on, however, such stories are often more fiction than reality. When push comes to shove, professional development, if it was budgeted in the first place, is an easy place in the organizational budget from where to cut.

Preeta Nayak, partner in the Bridgespan Group’s San Francisco, Calif., office, said weighing the costs of professional development is a common issue with which nonprofit managers battle. “It is not uncommon for us to hear, when we ask leaders about how they are doing [professional development], that budget constraints are one of the first things mentioned,” she said.

To be sure, recent revenue figures or uncertainty surrounding new tax policy hasn’t driven nonprofits into a hole from some heavenly perch. Nonprofit managers weren’t throwing money around on professional development and now, suddenly, feeling some tightness. Still, investments now can pay dividends later, Nayak said. Research, some conducted by her colleagues, points to employees staying longer with organizations when they feel the employer invests in them.

“Invest” can be a fairly broad term. Nayak encourages organizations, constrained or not, to first take a step back when thinking about professional development. Have senior leaders set talent development goals? Set goals you want for your team and grow that as your first step. Before even thinking about how you’ll develop staff toward these competencies, what makes sense to grow? Many managers seldom identify the skills they want staff to become proficient in, and early in the year tends to be a good time for such goal-setting, according to Nayak.

From there, Nayak advocates for a 70-20-10 model of learning, 70 percent on-the-job, 20 percent through stretch assignments, and 10 percent via formal training. “Look at what stretch opportunities might help, maybe a webinar or training down the line. But, that’s a much smaller part of the overall equation,” she said. “If people can devote resources to that conversation and then follow up on that, you can get quite a ways along on relatively small budgets.”

When it comes to that final 10 percent, Nayak said that affordable options are always around and available. Nonprofit managers should be thinking about making sure that there is a plan for the investments the organization makes. Is that training course coming with further coaching and an opportunity to apply those skills on the job? If staff members are going to a conference without a sense of what they should learn and no follow-up, maybe there is a benefit, but it’s a benefit smaller in scale than if the employee had specific goals for the conference and was able to return and work with a superior toward implementing some of those goals into the organization. “Invest for sure, but be sure to put the emphasis on how you’re going to put that formal learning into action and account for, not just a training course,” she said.
The national office of The Y in Chicago, Ill., is one of the better large organizations at implementing these strategies, Nayak said. Onboarding and development looks a little different from Y to Y, according to Senior Vice President, Talent and Knowledge Management Terri Radcliffe. There are built-in tools created by the national office, but with hundreds of affiliates, practices vary location to location.

Say, for instance, a prototypical Y just hired a new program director, Radcliffe said. The branch executive, enabled by the human resources director, works with this program director from the start, onboards the new employee, and six months pass. It’s now time to plan how this program director will grow in the position. The branch executive and program director would download the Y’s development template, prompting discussions on what, exactly, is to be accomplished and how the new program director will get there.

The template asks the executive and employee for one or two development goals to set for the next year. Maybe they pick philanthropy because the branch needs the program director’s help on an upcoming capital campaign. From there, the pair asks three basic series of questions, guided by the 70-20-10 model:

• One, what class might the program director take to improve on philanthropy and when would it be taken?
• Two, what are potential mentorship opportunities and social networks that can be utilized to help push along this goal while on the job? Might there be someone on staff who is already well-versed in this subject who can be sought out?
• Three, what can the program director commit to in the day-to-day job to improve this skill? Maybe that includes a once per week meeting to explain the organization’s mission. “A lot of organizations think of training as classes and conferences,” Radcliffe said. “We think it’s so much more.”

The affordability of professional development comes up a lot at the Y, despite the fact that as a federation it is one of the largest organizations in the country. Between 400 and 500 of the Y’s 850 branches are relatively moderate-sized operations, Radcliffe said, with budgets in the $2 million to $4 million range. Even large Ys keep mindful of development costs because about 90 percent of staff are part-time.

Anytime you train part-time staff members you have to pay their hourly wage, which can become expensive.

New swim instructors will go through normal sexual harassment and child safety training early on. They are provided with a training plan for their first few weeks that combines local and national elements. Organizational culture is important to convey, Radcliffe said, so the Y has developed a 15-minute program that new employees can access on their phones. There are also downloadable resources such as culture cards — cards that can be placed easily into a badge holder — that convey organizational priorities.

The Y has delved into what Radcliffe distinguished as web content, as opposed to e-learning, as the web content is meant to be quick and downloadable. Prior to an evening class, a program director might use a piece of web content to pull exercise instructors in, set goals for the evening, and celebrate successes of the previous night’s classes. Radcliffe sees the Y adding to its web content with videos and other resources. She believes that e-learning (of which the Y offers 72 courses) and in-person and virtual instruction will not fade away.

Virtual instruction, in particular, has been used to cut down on professional development costs while providing staff members with a greater working knowledge of new concepts. Instead of sending the afore-mentioned program director on
Continued from page 2

a three-day conference to cram in 24 hours of content, the Y — via virtual instruction — might have five, two-hour sessions over the course of a few weeks. The program director can learn in bite-sized chunks, apply what is learned, and return the following week ready for more.

Online content such as webinars are sometimes scoffed at, but there is excellent content to be had for those who know what they’re looking for, said James Chmura, executive director for the Society for Nonprofits in Livonia, Mich. Webinars can have the tendency to look more like advertisements than useful resources, but scrutiny, and related quality, is improving.

“I think not having the money often requires more of a time commitment,” Chmura said. “There is kind of a trade-off there. Google is your friend.” Chmura also suggests looking at resources such as the society and the Nonprofit Technology Network (NTEN) for potential resources.

Large organizations often have internal development teams, so the pressure is on smaller organizations with smaller staffs and no budget for internal workshops and academies. There is also an overhead issue. Organizations concerned about spending money on development with dollars not spent directly on missions are often scrutinized by the media and public. The result has been a piecemeal approach, seldom coordinated or consistent.

Chmura said that he has seen some pushback from organizations related to overhead issues and has encouraged smaller nonprofits to reach out for funding and grants for professional development. Grantmakers have — slowly — become savvier to the learning needs of nonprofit staffs, but, overall, they are not where they need to be, he suggested.

The idea that the formula to a successful nonprofit extends beyond mission and into organizational capacity building, learning, and infrastructure is more appreciated now than in any of Peter Berns’ 25 years in the sector. There’s a rub, though. Improved perceptions do not necessarily equate to the sudden availability of dollars to develop staff. Funding for

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professional development continues to be difficult to come by and is only exacerbated by uncertainty facing the sector, leading organization leaders to operate from positions of tight fists.

“I think it is true that in tight financial times, spending on professional development is easy to put on hold when you’re faced with a lot of difficult financial challenges and competing organizational needs,” said Berns, who serves as CEO of The Arc in Washington, D.C.

Leadership at The Arc has tried to spark professional development with practice groups and mentoring. The organization has four practice groups for staff to create learning opportunities for each member. Berns described the practice groups as “each staff’s homeroom,” a place to work with peers on matters of interest apart from daily job duties. The groups are self-directed and meet to discuss what they can learn from one another, ranging from grants management to communicating via social media. The Arc has between six and 10 initiatives staff might be concentrating on at any given time.

The organization has separately instituted a mentorship program, assigning every staff member a mentor. The idea has been to tap into the mentorship capabilities within the staff. Staff mentors conduct performance evaluations with mentees to identify ongoing professional development goals and to assess whether past goals have been met. Organization leaders have tried to get each employee to focus on at least one competency that they can work toward and achieve proficiency in each year.

The Arc also leans heavily on its federation model of 660 state and local chapters. The organization offers conferences and meetings within the federation and also informal networking opportunities such as email discussion groups via Google and other platforms, enabling chapter leaders to share experiences and learn from one another. Inter-federation workgroups are promoted to create organized learning communities within The Arc’s network.

An example might be a planned giving work group, said Berns. Staff at chapters that have been looking to improve special-education advocacy, a priority of the organization, might discuss strategies and build professional development around that kind of work. At any given time, about seven or eight workgroups are in motion, Berns said.

National headquarters has also developed between 40 and 50 archived webinars and videos for chapters to orient or train new employees during the past several years. Such materials generally focus on the organization’s history and values, topics that as, Berns noted, cannot be learned at a typical professional development conference.

Berns sees similar measures being taken in state nonprofit associations. Berns previously was executive director of the Maryland Association of Nonprofit Organizations. The primary difference is that state associations tend to have to focus on the business-side of nonprofit professional development, as opposed to programming initiatives, as there is obviously less overlap in mission when nonprofits are grouped by state than by federation. Nonprofits of a similar type and location might also informally create cohorts to help provide development opportunities.

The Georgia Center for Nonprofits in Atlanta trains about 5,000 people per year, according to Kathy Keeley, executive vice president. The center has interviewed between 50 and 75 CEOs of state nonprofits and found general concerns about restructuring, training, and talent retention. Organization heads across subsectors including housing, food security, and like are preparing for budget cuts.

The center has responded by trying to tier pricing in a way that is more affordable to small organizations. For $2,000 per year, the center offers two seats in any class it holds, enough to provide sessions to between 100 and 150 staff members. Keeley said that this option is generally affordable for organizations with budgets of $2 million or more. Pricing also tiers down for smaller organizations. The center has partnered with Wells Fargo, which provides scholarships to classes for organizations with budgets of less than $1 million.

Absent clear development opportunities, many organizations go without, she said. Some will weed through the Internet for free webinars. In some subsectors, such as childcare, the state provides online training. Otherwise, inexpensive pickings tend to be slim.

“They’ll scour for as much as they can get for as cheaply as they can get,” Keeley said of Georgia nonprofits. “Getting quality training is tougher and there is a difference.”

Absent traditional courses, Keeley has seen or-
ganizations cross-train staff, providing opportunities to learn new skills they might not otherwise get in their day-to-day jobs. This tends to happen for two reasons -- in response to external pressures and concerns about having to slash budgets and as part of a deliberate succession plan. The latter is a best practice. Organizations have also turned to the expertise of board members to provide staff with content on law, finance, fundraising and, to a lesser extent, basic management -- which tends to be harder to come by.

Keeley believes that new, small alliances -- sometimes as small as two or three organizations -- gathering to pitch in and share training will be a trend of the future. Human-resource directors that she has talked to in recent months have created proposals for boards in an effort to highlight the benefits of training, but a lack of funds for any one organization to get much off the ground continues to be of concern.

"People are asking for training, but it’s a cost factor," Keeley said. "During the recession, they told us to do more with less. I don’t know what the phrase is now. Less with less?" 

"They’ll scour for as much as they can get for as cheaply as they can get. Getting quality training is tougher and there is a difference. -- Kathy Keeley"

The Georgia Center for Nonprofits trains about 5,000 professionals annually.

Applications for its third-year training program have already begun, and the organization expects to train at least 1,000 people this year. The center has also started an older volunteer program that matches experienced professionals with nonprofits.

"It’s a very exciting time," said director Kyrsten Hilt. "We’ve had a lot of interest. There are a lot of people wanting to get involved." 

"I think people are realizing the importance of having strong leaders," said Hilt. "It’s a matter of survival."
Collaborative Training Saves Cash, Builds Connections

BY ANDY SEGEDIN

Pressure to provide quality professional development at costs small and medium-sized nonprofits can afford helped create the Miami Valley Nonprofit Collaborative (MVNC) in southwestern Ohio’s Dayton area. The area used to have its own professional association with a full-time executive director, but the model was not sustainable and nonprofits couldn’t afford memberships.

MVNC was launched from that void in 2015 with the help of the Dayton Metro Library, the local Better Business Bureau (BBB) and a chapter of SCORE, an organization that works to foster small businesses, according to Jenny Warner, founder and volunteer coordinator.

MVNC’s role has primarily been that of a convener. The collaborative’s monthly speaker breakfasts, for instance, typically draw between 40 and 50 people. It also conducts workshops ranging from fundraising to succession planning. Costs are kept down with MVNC’s all-volunteer staff and with aid from partners. The BBB serves as a volunteer fiscal agent. A local partner provides space and cafe services at a rate lower than Warner would be able to secure at a hotel.

Tightened purse strings during the past five years have made collaboratives a necessity, Warner said. It’s difficult for any organization to draw the revenue necessary to provide professional development on its own. Nowadays, funding sources might not even consider an organization if it isn’t furthering the impact of dollars through collaboration.

“We’re able to do it for the nonprofits in public sessions so the facilitator is reaching more people,” Warner said. “It makes it more feasible than just one organization.”

The model Warner helped build in Dayton is repeatable in other cities, she said. A lot of the programming MVNC has hosted came as the result of convincing area leaders to provide large discounts for their training services. Organization leaders can look for similar opportunities by leveraging the expertise of local chapters of professional organizations or local universities, some of which have workplace-development arms to aid local workforces.

Board members and donors might also be better utilized in aiding in development. Beyond seeking donations earmarked for leadership or professional development, a nonprofit leader might ask a supporter with financial expertise to donate some time to train staff. Nonprofit boards also tend to be rich with potential trainers. Many boards, for instance, have at least one member with a human resources background.

Mission Capital provides some of the same functions for organizations and nonprofit professionals in the Austin, Texas region. The organization operates three academies: one for nonprofit professionals beginning their career, one for mid-career professionals in need of some coaching, and a new executive academy for executive directors and CEOs who might be new to the job and looking for peers, according to Robin Llewellyn, learning and leadership manager.

Other offerings include intensives on topics such as strategic planning and conflict management and free mission meet-ups. The mission meet-ups generally last two to three hours and consist of a brief learning opportunity on a particular subject followed by networking.

“I think that we’ve heard over and over again this year, ‘How do we navigate uncertainty,’” said Llewellyn. “We are hearing that a lot. I don’t know if we’ll hear it in five years. We’re hearing it now.”
years, but that’s very much the reality for the last year and at least the next year.”

Similar to MVNC in Dayton, Mission Capital leaders see the organization as a conduit for connecting nonprofit professionals in organizations of similar growth, need, expertise, interests, and the like. Collaborations have been one of the leading changes in nonprofit professional development today as compared to years past. Sending staff across the country for several days for a conference is “not reality,” she said. In the past, organization leaders wanted to figure out problems on their own. Now, the emphasis has shifted to cohorts and networks.

“The uncertainty in our environment requires us to connect so that we have the strength of our network, the strength of our collective good,” she said.

The need to collaborate and leverage the expertise and experiences of peers is as true for a large research university as it is for a small operation in Austin or Dayton. Seeking staff and donor expertise has been a strategy Angela Stopper, Ph.D., has seen at all three of the schools she has worked at -- Pennsylvania State University, the University of California-Davis, and the University of California-Berkeley. Donating time to benefit the university workforce is a popular means for alumni and faculty to give back to the university, said Stopper, who currently serves as UC Berkeley’s chief learning officer and director of learning and development.

An example of this practice in action can be found in a recent staff-appreciation week during which the university organized events for employees throughout the week, including an eat, walk, and talk. A faculty member donated time during the event to discuss his work in the field of human emotion and conducted a session of positivity. Staff associations and affinity groups are other resources Cal Berkeley administrators have used to encourage continued learning among university employees. Affinity groups range in topic from facilitation to data and analytics. Staff from across different colleges, campuses, and units within the university all sharing a common interest come together and learn in an informal setting with the help of resources such as guest speakers.

Staff associations are similar, but more demographic in focus, with networks ranging in members from women to Native Americans. The networks are an effort to tap into support needed for people of similar backgrounds, experience, or work goals, said Stopper. The university is additionally in the process of building an apprenticeship and fellowship programs to aid in staff’s efforts to take advantage of stretch assignments and test new skills.

Stopper has spent her entire career at large universities, but encourages nonprofits just starting out on professional development programs, or looking to improve, to think small. Recently having read that the same skills that make people successful in their job today will not be the same skills that will make them successful in five years, Stopper believes that there is big opportunity in workplace development even with moderate measures.

“My advice would be, you don’t have to be huge and everything to everyone at once,” Stopper said. “Figuring out where needs are and how you can help and starting small is impactful. I feel like, sometimes, we want perfection, we want to build this perfect, huge thing. And because we are looking for that perfection, we miss opportunities to make impact in smaller ways.”

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On The Move: Here Are Some Recent Executive Appointments

Erin Broussard was appointed senior executive director for Buckner Children and Family Services in Houston, where she served as deputy director and chief operating officer. She was responsible for NAM’s grant writing and managed 11 program directors, human resources and the chief financial officer.

Previously the program manager for Odyssey House in Houston, Broussard served with the United States Air Force, achieving the rank of technical sergeant/E-6. She specialized in logistics, managing an $88 million budget in Iraq. During her service, she earned the Joint Service Commendation Medal in Iraq. During her service, she earned a bachelor’s degree in business administration and three higher-education degrees.

Carol Coletta, a senior fellow at The Kresge Foundation in Detroit will be the new president and chief executive officer of The Riverfront Development Corporation (RDC) in Memphis, Tenn.

Coletta, a native Memphian, will serve in a loaned executive role from the foundation. She has played a central role in the Kresge Foundation’s efforts to contribute to Memphis’ revitalization and has led the Reimagining the Civic Commons initiative. It is a $40+ million national collaboration of foundations, nonprofits and governments working to demonstrate the ways in which a connected set of civic assets can yield increased and more widely shared prosperity for cities and neighborhoods.

Prior to her work at The Kresge Foundation, Coletta was vice president of Community and National Initiatives for the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. She led the two-year start-up of ArtPlace, a public-private collaboration and was president and chief executive officer of CEOs for Cities for seven years.

Robert R. Lane was appointed chief development officer of Blythedale Children’s Hospital in Valhalla, N.Y. He most recently was vice president for development and external relations at Phelps Hospital in Sleepy Hollow, N.Y.

Prior to Phelps Hospital he served as president of the Saint Francis Healthcare Foundation in Poughkeepsie, N.Y., where he completed a $15-million capital campaign, which financed the construction of the hospitals’ new level II trauma center.

Lane also served as executive vice president for external relations at EcoHealth Alliance, an international conservation organization focused on the field of conservation medicine.

Tiffany Dena Loftin was appointed director of the youth college division of The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in Baltimore, Md.

She joined the NAACP from the National Education Association where she was senior program specialist in community advocacy and partnership engagement at the Center for Social Justice. Previously, she served as the racial justice program coordinator for the Civil, Human, and Women’s Rights Department, where she played a central role in guiding the work of the AFL-CIO Labor Commission on Racial and Economic Justice. She has also worked at the American Federation of Teachers.

Dennis Vega is the new chief operating officer of America’s Promise Alliance in Washington, D.C.

Vega spent the past nine years in the federal government, serving in senior positions at the U.S. Agency for International Development and the Department of State. Most recently, he served in the Department of State’s Office of U.S. Foreign Assistance Resources as the managing director for regional and global issues and, previously, as the managing director for planning, performance, and systems.

Prior to government service, Vega worked for the 2008 Obama Presidential Campaign, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, and Missouri State Public Defender.

Erin Broussard

Carol Coletta

Robert R. Lane

Tiffany Dena Loftin

Dennis Vega

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