
The Learning Group Effect: Leadership Development as Capacity Building

A Five-Year Examination of the
Fieldstone Leadership Group Program

Executive Summary | September 2017





About the Fieldstone Leadership Network

The mission of the Fieldstone Leadership Network is to provide reciprocal learning opportunities which build, deepen and sustain personal and professional capabilities and relationships among nonprofit professionals so they are better able to lead, collaborate and problem solve.



About the Caster Family Center for Nonprofit and Philanthropic Research

The mission of the Caster Center is to provide research, evaluation, and consulting services that build the leadership and strategic- and evaluative-thinking capacity of local nonprofits, as well as to be the leading source of information, data, and research on the local nonprofit sector.

Project Team:

Mary Jo Schumann, PhD, Director of Research
Tessa Tinkler, PhD, Senior Research Associate
Michelle Ahearne, MA, Doctoral Research Assistant
Aya Tore, MA, Research Assistant
Connelly Meschen, MA, Coordinator

Copyright © 2017

All Rights Reserved

Caster Family Center for Nonprofit and Philanthropic Research, a division of The Nonprofit Institute
School of Leadership and Education Sciences
University of San Diego
www.sandiego.edu/npresearch

Cite As:

Ahearne, M., Tinkler, T. & Schumann, M.J. (2017). *The Fieldstone Learning Group Effect: Leadership Development as Capacity Building. A Five-Year Examination of the Fieldstone Leadership Group Program*. San Diego, CA: Caster Family Center for Nonprofit and Philanthropic Research, University of San Diego.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“Knowing that other leaders struggle with many of the same challenges that I do has helped me become more patient and thoughtful.”

- Executive Leader, San Diego, 2016

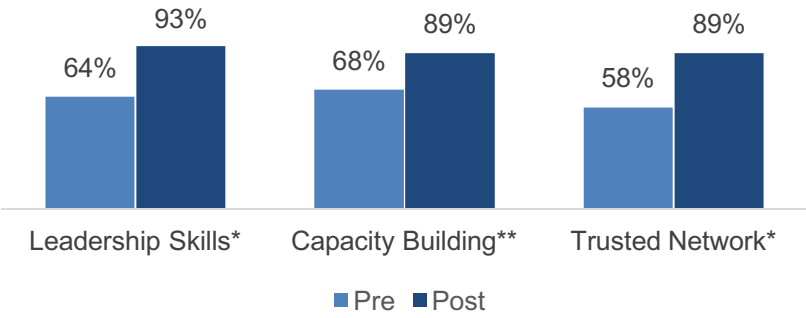
The chronic underinvestment in nonprofit leaders has resulted in a leadership development crisis that has weakened the very foundation of the nonprofit sector, as evidenced by high turnover, low retention, and individuals in roles they are not equipped to handle. This is concerning as nonprofit organizations are struggling to fulfill their missions in increasingly complex environments with limited resources.

In response to this problem, the Fieldstone Leadership Network developed the Fieldstone Learning Group Program, a six-month peer-based learning community model to support the leadership development of both executive directors and senior leaders of nonprofit organizations. This program was designed with the belief that by investing in leaders, capacity will be built on the individual, organizational and sector levels.

This 2017 report marks the final year of a five-year program evaluation, and presents the results of pre- and post- surveys collected from 243 nonprofit leaders across five cohorts in San Diego and Orange County who participated in The Fieldstone Leadership Network’s Executive and Nonprofit Leaders Learning Groups from 2013 to 2017.

Overall, findings from the past five years indicate that Fieldstone Leadership Network’s Learning Group program is providing critical leadership development for both executive and senior nonprofit leaders. Five years of data show consistent positive impacts in all three of Fieldstone Leadership Network’s priority areas: 1) strengthening leaders; 2) building organizational capacity; and 3) sustaining a vibrant nonprofit sector.

Participants Increased their Leadership and Capacity-Building Skills and Expanded their Network (percent who reported a 4 or 5 rating on a 1-5 scale)



*5-point scale: 1=very weak to 5=very strong
**5-point scale: 1=lowest confidence to 5=highest confidence

Findings show that as a result of participation in the Fieldstone Learning Group:

- **Leaders were strengthened.** Participants increased their confidence, strengthened their leadership skills, made more time for reflection, and improved their problem-solving abilities. While this was true for both executive directors and senior leaders, the senior leaders showed an even greater improvement in the strength of their professional leadership skills. This finding has implications for the impending retirement of many baby-boomer executive directors, as well as the nonprofit sector's need to better develop and recruit internal talent.
- **Organizational capacity was built.** Participants reported a greater ability to lead organizational development efforts, engage their boards of directors, lead and support staff, and strengthen organizational infrastructure. These data support the Fieldstone Leadership Network's philosophy that developing nonprofit leaders is critical for organizations to be able to fulfill their missions. Furthermore, open-ended responses from participants indicate that senior leaders and executive directors are actually initiating change at their organizations by addressing challenging situations with staff and boards, and using problem-solving and listening skills learned in the program.
- **The San Diego and Orange County nonprofit sectors are better sustained.** Participants strengthened their networks of support, expanded learning from colleagues, and broadened their understanding of the nonprofit sector. The importance of both executive directors and senior leaders developing and strengthening a trusted network of peers and colleagues as a result of the Learning Group cannot be underscored enough. In an increasingly interconnected world, it is imperative that leadership networks and collaborations develop and thrive in order to effectively address our world's social problems.

As a result of participating in the Learning Group, leaders significantly increased their leadership and problem-solving abilities, and their organizational capacity building skills.

In sum, five years of data show that developing leaders using Fieldstone Leadership Network's peer-based, learning community model yields significant gains for the individual, organization, and nonprofit sector. The Learning Groups had an overwhelmingly positive impact on participants, helping them more effectively wrestle with the real-life tensions of nonprofit leadership.