The Learning Group Effect:
Leadership Development as Capacity Building

**A Five-Year Examination of the
Fieldstone Leadership Group Program**

September 2017

FieldStone
LEADERSHIP NETWORK

**University of San Diego
SCHOOL OF LEADERSHIP
AND EDUCATION SCIENCES**
CASTER FAMILY CENTER FOR NONPROFIT
AND PHILANTHROPIC RESEARCH

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.

University of San Diego
SCHOOL OF LEADERSHIP AND EDUCATION SCIENCES

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.

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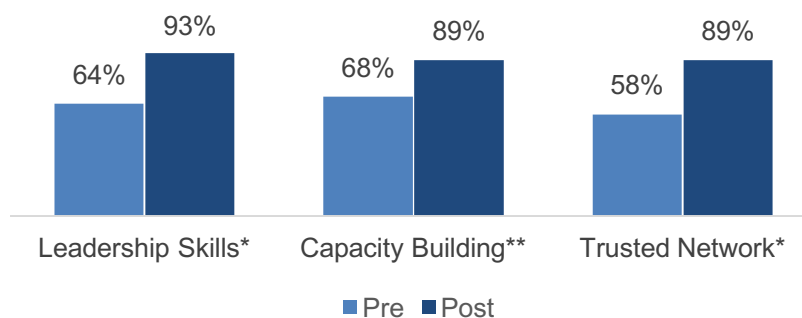
*5-point scale: 1=very weak to 5=very strong
**5-point scale: 1=lowest confidence to 5=highest confidence

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.

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

- **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.

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.
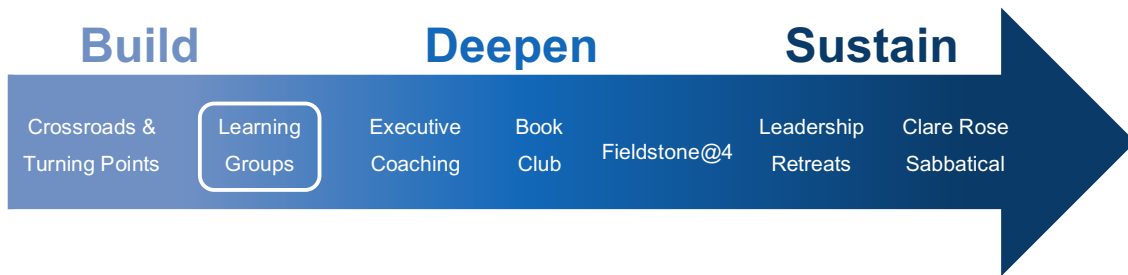
BACKGROUND

The nonprofit sector has a long history of underinvesting in its talent and infrastructure. Nonprofit leaders point to a lack of time and resources, as well as an overwhelming demand for services as reasons why these investments are often not made.[1] As a result, the sector suffers from high turnover, low retention rates, high vacancies, and sometimes, less than qualified leaders and staff.[2] Over the last two decades, scholars and practitioners have called attention to a leadership development crisis, arguing that investing in nonprofit leader development is critical to organizational effectiveness and, ultimately, advancing nonprofit missions.[3]

One organization that has been leading the way is the Fieldstone Leadership Network (hereafter referred to as Fieldstone for brevity),[4] which believes that people are the greatest asset of nonprofit organizations and that investing in leaders strengthens the capacity of nonprofit organizations and the sector itself. Created in 1993 to support nonprofit leader peer learning, the network is currently composed of more than 1,000 executive directors and senior leaders, and has evolved into an innovative continuum of leadership development programs.

Fieldstone Leadership Network's Continuum of Programs

Build		Deepen			Sustain	
Crossroads & Turning Points	Learning Groups	Executive Coaching	Book Club	Fieldstone@4	Leadership Retreats	Clare Rose Sabbatical

In 2012, the University of San Diego's Caster Family Center for Nonprofit and Philanthropic Research (Caster Center) evaluated four of Fieldstone's programs, resulting in *The Fieldstone Effect* Report which served as a benchmark for the organization.[5]

Fieldstone wished to continue evaluating the effectiveness of the Learning Group Program and commissioned the Caster Center to conduct a five-year evaluation from 2013 through 2017.

This 2017 report marks the final year of this 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's Executive and Nonprofit Leaders Learning Groups between 2013-2017.

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[1] *Carpenter, 2017*

[2] *Cornelius, Moyers & Bell, 2011; Light & Light, 2006*

[3] *Landles-Cobb, Kramer & Milway, 2015; Tierney, 2006*

[4] *In September 2017, the Fieldstone Foundation changed its name to the Fieldstone Leadership Network.*

[5] *The Fieldstone Effect Report evaluated the effect of Fieldstone's Four signature programs (Crossroads & Turning Points, Learning Groups, Executive Coaching, and Fieldstone @4) by surveying participants who were involved in at least one of the programs between 1994-2012.*

Description of the Fieldstone Learning Group Program

Fieldstone's Learning Group Program consists of groups of 10 to 12 nonprofit leaders who meet one full day each month for six months. Each year, trained facilitators with extensive nonprofit experience lead four groups. Two Learning Groups are conducted in San Diego and two are conducted in Orange County. One Learning Group in each county is tailored to Executive Directors/CEOs, and is subsequently referred to as the Executive Learning Group (ELG). The other learning group is tailored to senior leaders, and is subsequently referred to as the Nonprofit Leaders Learning Group (NLLG). Participants pay a nominal $350 fee and the Fieldstone's sponsors underwrite all other costs.

The curriculum addresses topics common to nonprofits such as:

Problem Solving	**Empowerment**
Leadership and Management	**Board Development**
Personal Leadership	**Strategic Planning**
Stages of Nonprofit Growth and Development	**Time Management and Delegation**
	Conflict Resolution and Persuasion

The curriculum also includes a monthly exchange of real case studies guided by a group problem-solving methodology that empowers participants to envision feasible solutions and craft action plans.

Learning Group Objectives

Fieldstone's objectives for the Learning Group are the same as its three organizational priority areas, which are summarized and illustrated below:

1) Strengthen nonprofit leaders

2) Increase the capacity of nonprofit organizations

3) Ultimately sustain a vibrant nonprofit sector
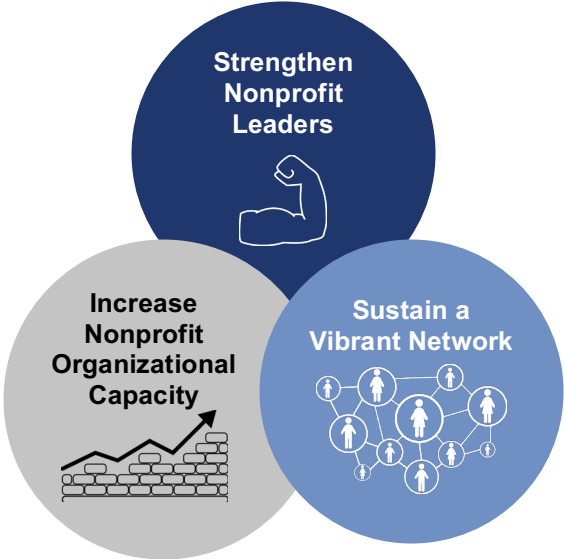
METHODOLOGY, ANALYSIS, AND PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The findings presented in this report are based on surveys administered to Learning Group program participants before and after the six-month program conducted each year from 2013-2017. The survey was designed by the Caster Center in 2012 to assess the Fieldstone Learning Group program's effect on three priority areas: leadership, organizational capacity, and sustaining the nonprofit sector. In total, there were 251 program participants across the five years, and 97% (n=243) completed both pre- and post- surveys.

243				
Participants Completed Pre- and Post- Surveys				
42	**50**	**51**	**56**	**44**
2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
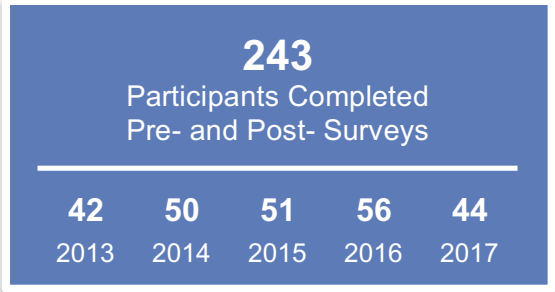
Analysis of the quantitative survey data included:[6]

- Descriptive statistics to summarize the data (i.e., frequencies, percentages)

- Paired-sample t-tests to test for statistically significant differences between pre- and post-mean (i.e., average) survey responses

- Repeated measures ANOVAS (i.e., Analysis of Variance) to test for statistically significant differences between pre- and post-mean (i.e., average) survey responses for three key metrics related to professional leadership skills, organizational capacity building efforts, and trusted networks across the following subgroups:

  - Learning Group Type
  - Region
  - Years in the sector
  - Gender
  - Ethnicity
  - Budget size

All figures and charts in this report present the percentage of respondents who gave a favorable rating (i.e., 4-5 rating on a 1-5 scale). The findings are presented in aggregate for all combined data from 2013-2017. Findings are also presented across all five years for the three key metrics: professional leadership skills, confidence in organizational capacity building efforts, and building a trusted network.

As outlined above, the research team also analyzed the mean ratings of all questions (i.e., the average rating on the 1-5 Likert scale) for the aforementioned subgroups. The primary objective of this program evaluation was to assess changes in participants' responses from before the Learning Groups to after the Learning Groups (i.e., pre to post). It is noteworthy that there were statistically significant increases in both the mean ratings and the percentage of favorable responses for all questions except one.[7] Therefore, the findings are also graphically presented for both the pre- and post- surveys.

There were also statistically significant differences in some of the average ratings between the ELG and the NLLG. These differences are graphically presented for each learning group on the

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[6] Data were analyzed using SPSS statistical software.

[7] The question approached statistical significance: I hope to work in the nonprofit sector as long as possible (p=.058).
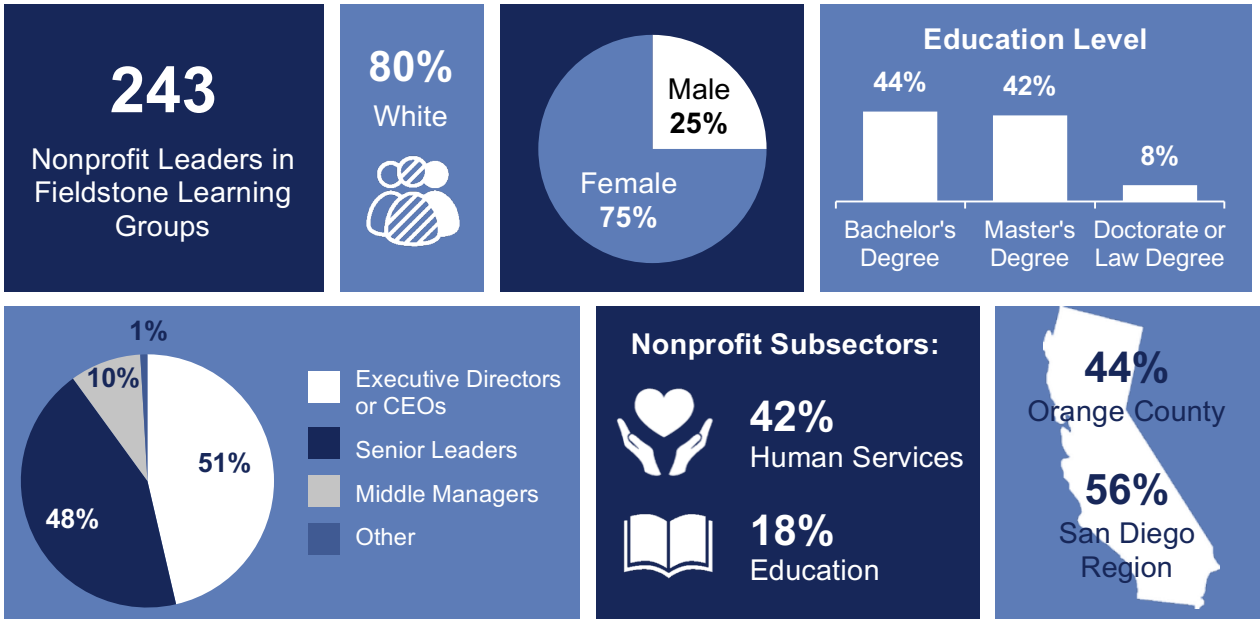
two key metrics – professional leadership skills and confidence in organizational capacity building efforts.

There were no statistically significant differences by region, gender, ethnicity, or budget size.

Open-ended qualitative questions were analyzed using content analysis, a method for identifying themes in responses. Verbatim quotes are included throughout the findings to convey common sentiments from participants and complement the quantitative survey data.

RESPONDENT PROFILE: 2013-2017

243
Nonprofit Leaders in Fieldstone Learning Groups

80%
White

Male **25%**

Female **75%**

Education Level
44% Bachelor's Degree
42% Master's Degree
8% Doctorate or Law Degree

51% Executive Directors or CEOs
48% Senior Leaders
10% Middle Managers
1% Other

Nonprofit Subsectors:
42% Human Services
18% Education

44% Orange County
56% San Diego Region

The executive directors/CEOs and senior leaders were similar in demographics, except that executive directors/CEOs tended to be older, work for organizations that had smaller budgets and have slightly more experience working in the nonprofit sector.

FINDINGS

Overall, findings from the past five years indicate that Fieldstone Leadership Learning Group program is providing critical leadership development for nonprofit sector executives and leaders. Five years of data show consistent positive impacts in all three of Fieldstone's priority areas – strengthening leaders, building organizational capacity and sustaining a vibrant nonprofit sector. Furthermore, participants demonstrate satisfaction with this program, given that nearly all of them over the last five years are likely or very likely to recommend the Learning Group program to their peers (98%) or others at their agency (95%).

> **98% of participants are likely to recommend the Learning Group program to their peers.**

The sections that follow summarize the findings according to Fieldstone's priority areas. The results for all survey questions are included in Appendix B, and all verbatim responses from the post-survey open-ended questions are provided in Appendix C.

Strengthening Leaders

A key goal of the Fieldstone Learning Group program is to strengthen leaders. Survey data across five years indicate that leaders demonstrated improvement in several key areas, including **increased <u>strategic thinking and delegation,</u> greater <u>reflection</u> and improved <u>problem-solving</u>.**

Figure 1 shows that upon entering the Learning Groups, only 64% of participants across all years rated their <u>professional leadership skills</u> strong, compared to 93% of participants at the end of the program. Results for each individual year are also presented in Figure 1.
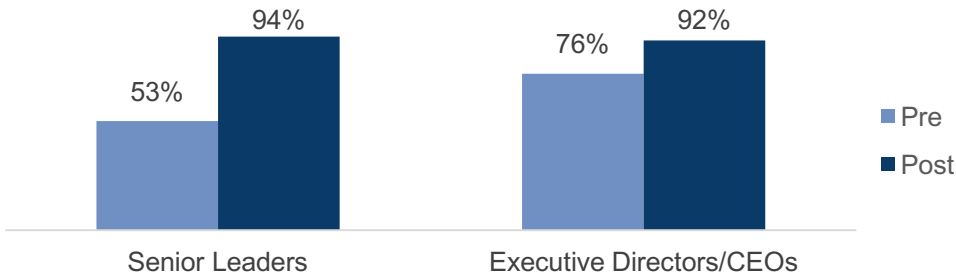
Figure 1. Percent of participants who rated their professional leadership skills "strong" or "very strong"*
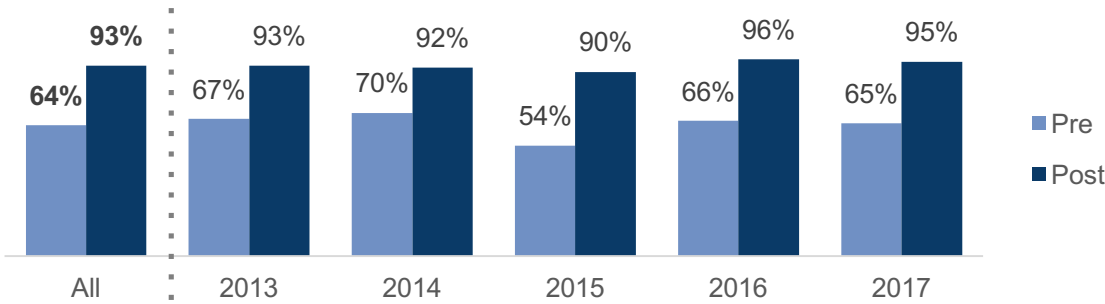
*4-5 rating on a 1-5 scale

Senior leaders in the NLLG reported a greater increase in their <u>professional leadership skills</u> after the program, compared to executive directors/CEOs in the ELG. As Figure 2 shows, there was a 41-percentage point increase in the number of senior leaders who rated their leadership skills strong compared to a 16-percentage point increase for executive directors.

Figure 2: Change in percent of participants (2013-2017) who rated their professional leadership skills "strong" or "very strong"* by learning group type**

*4-5 rating on a 1-5 scale
**The mean difference on the 1-5 rating scale was also statistically significant between learning group type (p<.05)

Strategic Thinking and Delegation

Figure 3 shows that at the completion of the Learning Group program, participants across all years increased their capacity to be strategic (22-percentage point increase), and delegate appropriately (25-percentage point increase).

Figure 3. Percent of participants (2013-2017) who "agree" or "strongly agree"* they have the capacity to be strategic and delegate
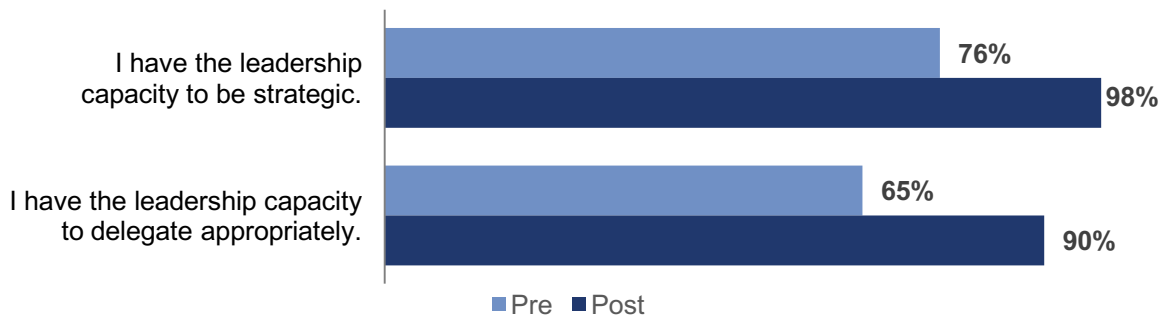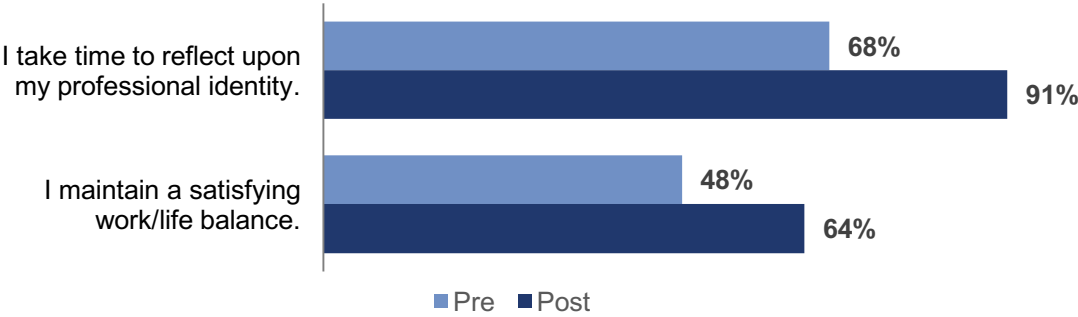

4-5 rating on a 1-5 scale

Well-Being

Figure 4 shows that more participants took time to reflect on their professional identity following their participation in the program (91%) compared to at the start of the program (68%). Although the number of participants who reported sustaining a work/life balance increased after the program (16 percentage point increase), approximately one-third were either still neutral or disagreed that they were able to maintain a satisfying work/life balance after the program.

Figure 4. Percent of participants (2013-2017) who "agree" or "strongly agree"* they devote time to their personal and professional well-being
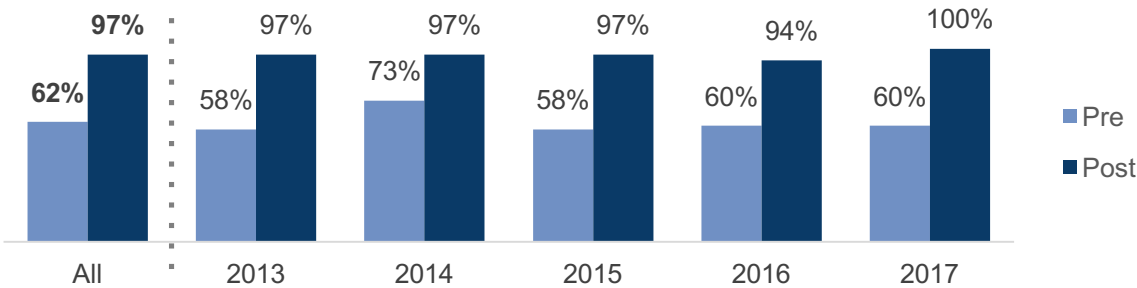

*4-5 rating on a 1-5 scale

"I think that I am more equipped to be a supportive supervisor because of the program. The regular reading and discussions made me self-reflect on how I am and if I'm holding up to best practices."
- Executive Leader, San Diego, 2015

Problem-Solving

Figure 5 shows that upon entering the Learning Groups, 62% of all participants across all years rated their confidence in group problem-solving as "high" or "very high" compared to nearly all (97%) of participants at the end of the program. Results for each individual year are also presented in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Percent of participants who rated their confidence in group problem-solving "high" or "very high"*

*4-5 rating on a 1-5 scale

Figure 6 shows that most participants across all years identified themselves as <u>good problem solvers</u> prior to entering (95%) and after completing (99%) the Learning Group. Following the completion of the program, they also reported increases in being able to <u>see a problem holistically</u> (13% increase).

Figure 6. Change in percent of participants (2013-2017) who "agree" or "strongly agree"* they are good at problem solving
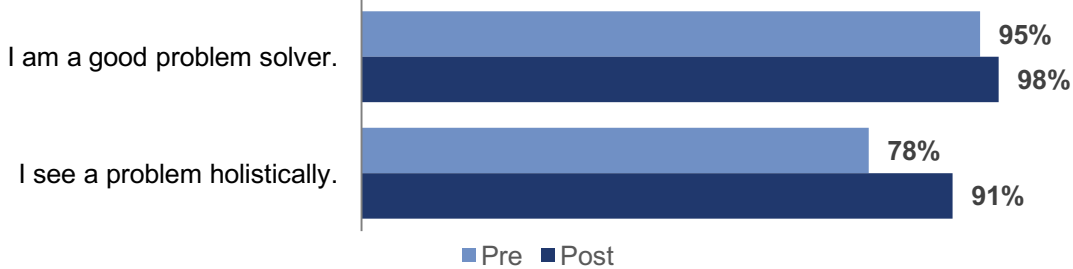
4-5 rating on a 1-5 scale

"My team frequently brings problems to my attention and my instinct was to immediately jump to solve the problem, often taking it upon myself. After contemplating the "monkeys on your back" principles [introduced during the program], I now ask them for their idea (or ask them to formulate a solution) and implement it! I now walk the halls flinging off those monkeys and expressing my confidence in my team (which is genuine)."
– Executive Leader, Orange County, 2017

Problem-Solving through Real-World Challenges

As part of the Learning Group, participants brought a specific leadership challenge that they wanted to address with their group. The examples below outline the initial leadership challenge participants identified in the pre-survey, and their post survey reflections on how they overcame the challenge. As the examples illustrate, participants felt the <u>group problem-solving process helped them face their challenges</u>.

**Examples of Leadership Challenges from Participants in 2017 Learning Groups**

	Prior to Participating in the 2017 Fieldstone Learning Group	**After Participating in the 2017 Fieldstone Learning Group**
Executive Leader San Diego, 2017	*"Demand for our services has doubled since the election. I would like to learn how to meet surging demands and best practices and strategies for doing so."*	*"[Our organization] was greatly impacted by the changes under the new administration. This became a significant challenge for us. The Learning Group helped me face and overcome the various levels of this challenge. I could mention an issue during "peaches and pits" and my colleagues offered practical and supportive feedback that directly impacted my decisions and priorities while also helping me maintain healthy work/life balance."*
Executive Leader Orange County, 2017	*"One great need for our agency is Board Development. We need a larger more diversified board and we also need to develop a culture of philanthropy within the Board. I am seeking guidance in this area."*	*"Board engagement has been a problem. Through participation in this program, I have identified new ideas for engaging members in ways that are meaningful to them as individuals, and [beneficial] to the agency."*
Senior Leader Orange County, 2017	*"There have been situations where [my colleague and I] disagree or were not communicating or collaborating as effectively as we could. In discussions with the CEO - there has not been any action on his/her part to help resolve these situations… I'd like to learn the skills and gain insight on being more confident in how to break the barrier to move forward."*	*"I led the organization through a restructure using the skills I learned about problem-solving and active listening to bring about a new way of looking at [our organization]. Also, I have been excited to continue to get the monkeys off my back and not taking on new ones."*
Senior Leader San Diego, 2017	*"Staff turnover is the biggest challenge my organization faces right now. It has a detrimental effect on patient care and staff morale."*	*"The Learning Group helped me to see the "passion" side of my staff and I have been working on growing that area of staff development in order to reduce turnover."*

Increasing the Capacity of the Nonprofit Organizations

Another key goal of the Fieldstone Learning Group program is to increase the capacity of nonprofit organizations. Survey data across five years indicate that as a result of this program, leaders increased their ability to **engage the board of directors**, **lead and support staff**, and **strengthen their organizational infrastructure.**

Prior to entering the program, 68% of all participants across all years rated their ability to lead capacity building and organizational development efforts "high" or "very high." By the end of the program, this increased by 21-percentage points. Results for the past five years and the combined total are illustrated in Figure 7.

Figure 7. Percent of participants who rated their confidence in capacity building efforts "high" or "very high"*
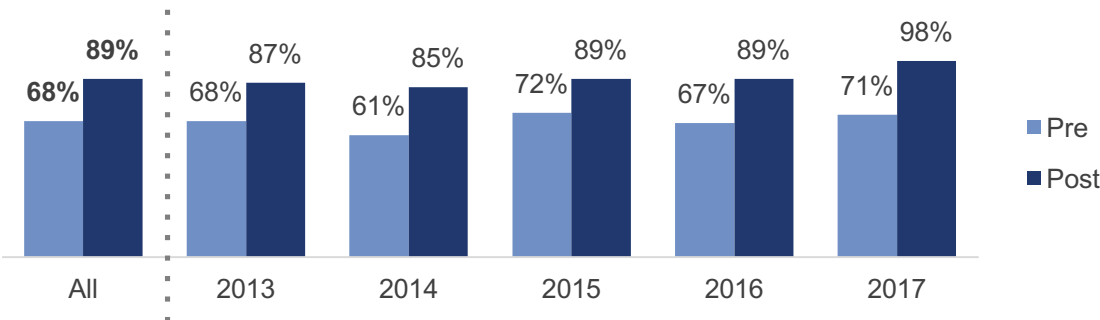
*4-5 rating on a 1-5 scale

Senior leaders in the NLLG reported a greater increase in their capacity-building and organizational development efforts after the program than those in the ELG. As Figure 8 shows, there was a 31-percentage point increase in the number of senior leaders who rated their leadership skills strong, compared to a 13-percentage point increase for executive directors.

Figure 8: Percent of participants (2013-2017) who rated their confidence in capacity building efforts "high" or "very high"* by learning group type**
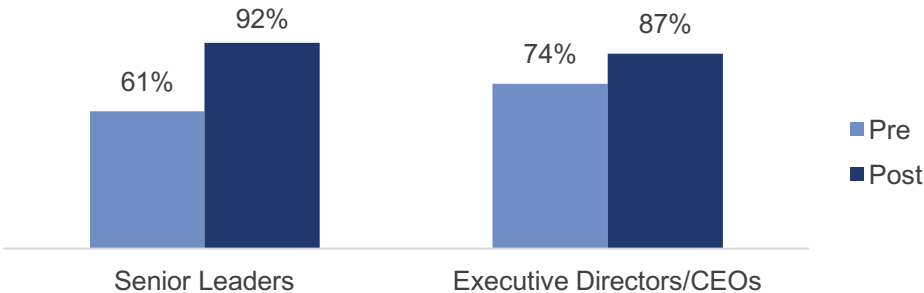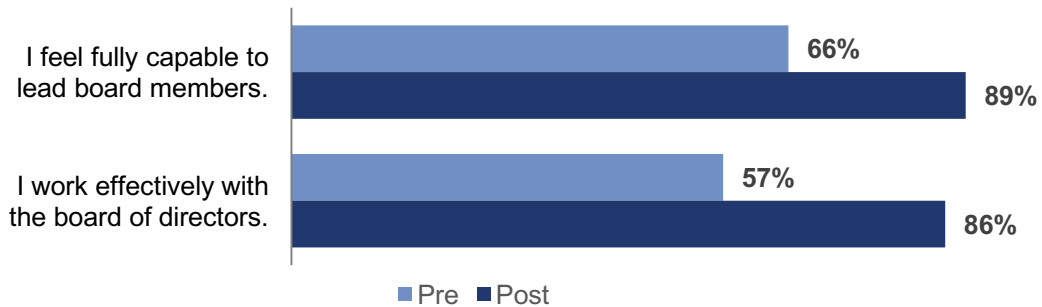

*4-5 rating on a 1-5 scale
* The mean difference on the 1-5 rating scale was also statistically significant between learning group type (p<.05)

Board Governance

Figure 9 indicates that participants showed a 29-percentage point increase in their <u>ability to work effectively with the board of directors</u> upon completing the Learning Group. Similarly, participants experienced a 23-percentage point increase in rating their <u>capacity to lead board members</u>.

Figure 9. Percent of participants (2013-2017) who "agree" or "strongly agree"* they have the capacity to work with their board of directors
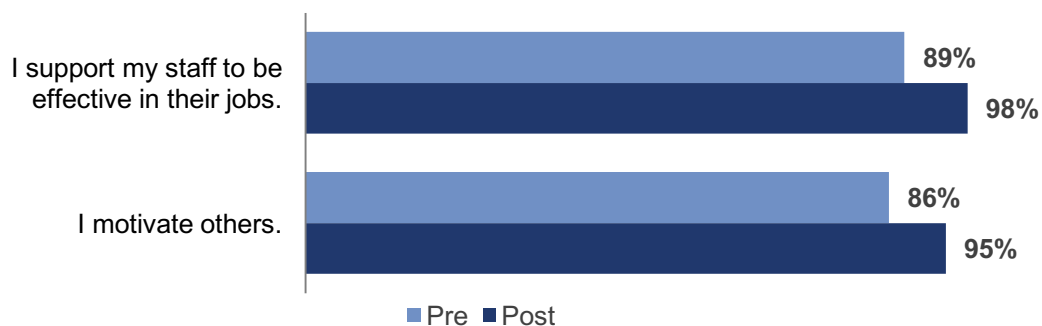

*4-5 rating on a 1-5 scale

> *"Fieldstone was pivotal in making me feel so very comfortable in addressing governance issues. As a leader, I had many challenges running a nonprofit. My gratitude to Fieldstone. I am very appreciative of all my learnings. Every session was powerful, interesting and empowering! Thank you!"*
> *- Executive Leader, San Diego, 2017*

Staff Management

Figure 10 shows that while participants across all five years rated themselves high on <u>supporting staff</u> (89%) and <u>motivating others</u> (86%) prior to entering the Learning Group, they also improved in both of these areas by nine percentage points (98% and 95% respectively) after participation.

Figure 10. Percent of participants (2013-2017) who "agree" or "strongly agree"* they have the capacity to manage their staff

*4-5 rating on a 1-5 scale

*"The Fieldstone Foundation has helped me become a stronger and
more confident communicator surrounding needs and expectations with
my leadership and staff. By modeling open and positive conversations with
realistic expectations, I have been able to support [and] transform what began
as a stressful group project to an exciting opportunity to collaborate.
As a result, I've seen more synergy and engagement in the project."*
*- Senior Leader, San Diego, 2017*

*"Challenging team members takes a lot out of me emotionally and
psychologically. Fieldstone's early sessions helped underscore
how leadership is [about] empathy/compassion to help everyone
in my team succeed. That helps with my perspective
when I now work with that challenging team member."*
- Executive Leader, Orange County, 2013

Building Infrastructure

Figure 11 illustrates that 93% of participants across 2013-2017 reported being able to create a stronger organizational infrastructure in their agencies following participation in the Learning Group, compared to only 68% before participation. Furthermore, they also increased their capabilities to fundraise for their organization by 22-percentage points.

Figure 11. Percent of participants (2013-2017) who "agree" or "strongly agree"* they have the capacity to support their organization's infrastructure
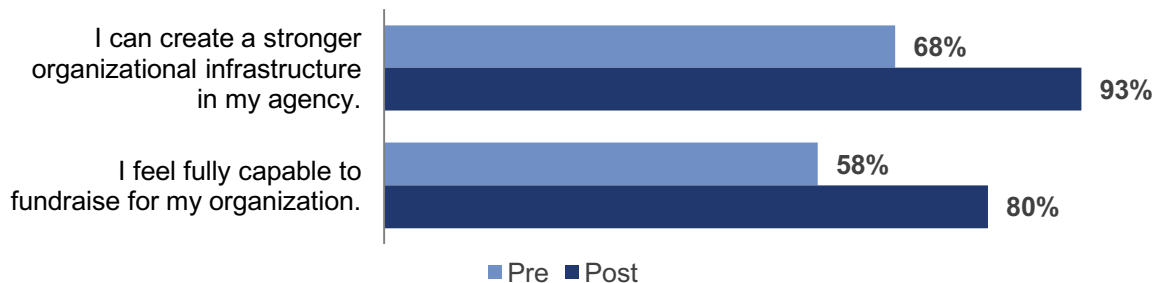
*4-5 rating on a 1-5 scale

*"Our organization is at a crossroads with key decisions pending on
new revenue resources. This "network" has given me the tools
(network, materials, and feedback) to handle these issues with
much greater confidence and stamina to go forward and get there."*
- Executive Leader, Orange Country, 2014

Sustaining a Vibrant Network

A final goal of the Fieldstone Learning Group is to contribute to the sustainability of the nonprofit sector. Five years of survey data show that as a result of Learning Group participation, leaders **learned more from their colleagues**, and **expanded their understanding of the nonprofit sector.**

Prior to entering the program, 58% of the participants rated their <u>trusted network of colleagues</u> as "strong" or "very strong." This number increased by 31-percentage points after their experience in the program. Results for the combined five years, as well as each year are illustrated in Figure 12.

Figure 12. Percent of participants who felt "strongly" or "very strongly"* they have a trusted network of colleagues
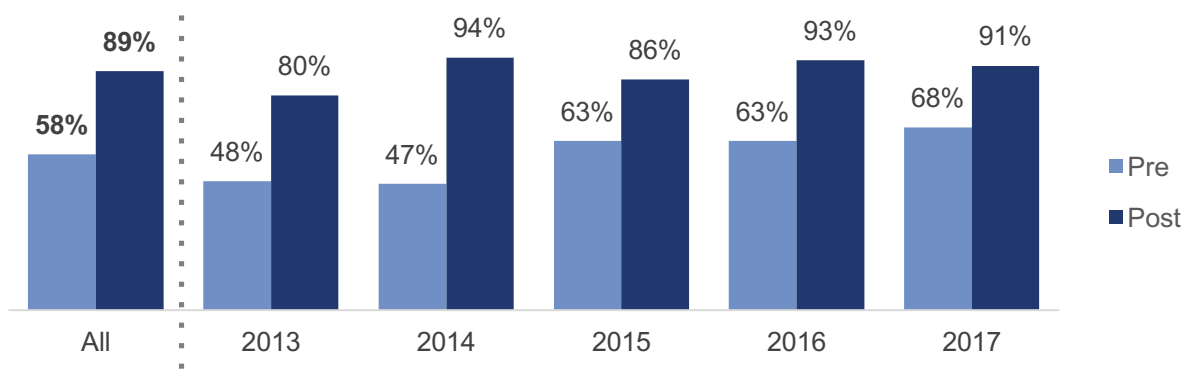
*4-5 rating on a 1-5 scale

Cross-Sector Knowledge and Expanded Understanding

Figure 13 shows that participants across all years expanded their ability to <u>think about the nonprofit sector as a whole</u> and increased their <u>understanding of how various issues of the subsector are intertwined</u> by more than 20-percentage points after participating in the Learning Group. Additionally, they reported a 37-percentage point increase in <u>learning from people who work in organizations different from theirs</u> and a 27-percentage point increase in ability to <u>enhance their nonprofit's impact on the nonprofit sector as a whole</u>.

Figure 13. Percent of participants (2013-2017) who "agree" or "strongly agree"* they have cross-sector knowledge

	Pre	Post
I think about nonprofits as a sector rather than just about my own subsector.	71%	92%
I understand how the issues of various subsectors are intertwined.	68%	92%
I learn from people who work in organizations that are very different from mine.	54%	91%
I enhance my nonprofit's impact on the nonprofit sector as a whole.	50%	77%
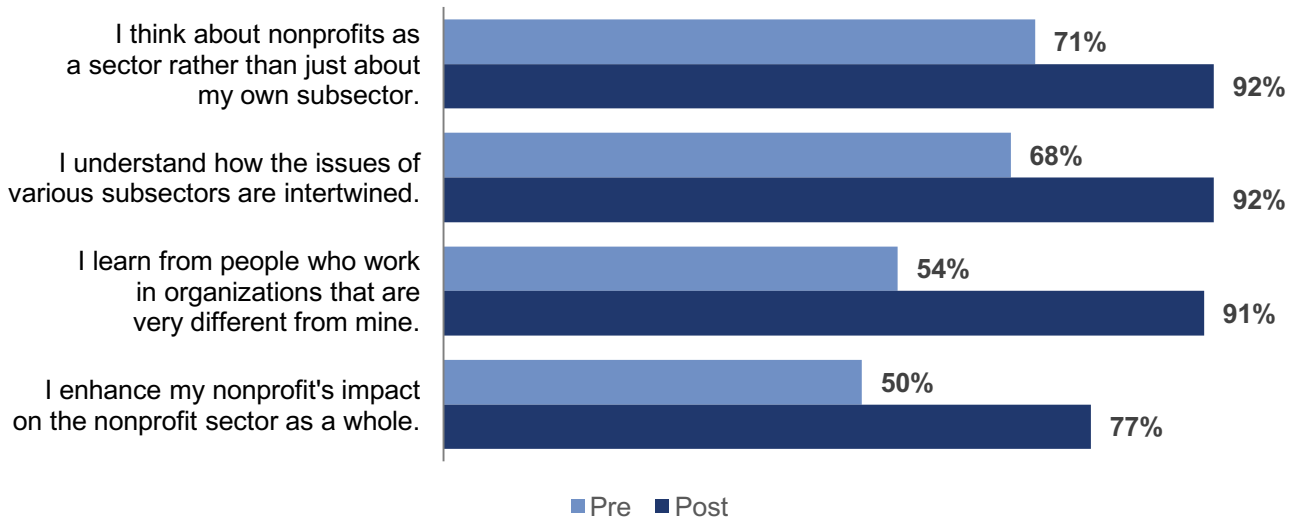
*4-5 rating on a 1-5 scale

"I appreciate the opportunity to be part of a trusted cohort that experiences the same challenges and problems regardless of the size, notoriety, history, etc. of each organization. Very affirming experience - gave me perspective, support, resources, referrals. Re-affirmed pride in the nonprofit sector and the work we do and how we change society. Inspiring!"
- Executive Leader, San Diego, 2017

"What an excellent experience…The sector can be lonely. Great to have colleagues to seek help/support/guidance in a CONFIDENTIAL setting."
- Executive Leader, San Diego, 2015

DISCUSSION

Results from this study suggest that the Fieldstone Learning Group program has had an overwhelmingly positive impact on its participants, the organizations they work for, and ultimately, the nonprofit sector in San Diego and Orange County. While these findings will inform decision-making and strengthen the overall mission of the Fieldstone, the implications of this five-year evaluation are far-reaching beyond the organization.

Most importantly, the results further strengthen the connection that exists between developing nonprofit leaders and building organizational capacity, which are frequently understood to be mutually exclusive. While the management literature has been able to link leader development to organizational development,[8] few nonprofit-specific studies have explored the relationship between the two. What little has been studied, however, has shown that leaders participating in capacity building interventions increased their self-efficacy and took action in an organizational context, improving their ability to engage with staff, develop the executive-board relationship, and actively develop external relationships.[9] The results from this evaluation confirm similar findings. Leaders indicated increases in personal leadership skills, as well as improvements in fundraising capacity, working with boards, managing staff, and feeling better abe to focus on infrastructure of their organizations.

This is important because nonprofit leaders often have difficulty justifying leadership development expenditures. Similarly, in allocating resources toward capacity building, the focus has been on systems and structures, when in reality they are established and executed by people. Perhaps these findings can be used to bolster the case to funders and nonprofit leaders that investing in the capacity of leaders can also be an investment in the capacity of organizations.

In addition to using these findings to justify increased investments in leadership development as an organizational capacity building strategy, it is important to highlight the distinctive components of the Fieldstone Learning Group program that appear to play a critical role in helping leaders improve the capacity of themselves, their organizations and the sector overall.

1. **Developing executive directors *and* senior leaders.** The Learning Group program acknowledges that leadership development starts with, but extends beyond, the executive director/CEO. Frequently, the demands on the executive director do not allow time for reflection, skill-building and systematic performance feedback, which can translate to a lack of investment in their respective organizations and their people. As part of the Learning Group, executive directors/CEOs had time for reflection, gained knowledge and were able to transfer it to their respective organization. Similarly, senior leaders were able to do this with even greater improvement than their counterparts. It could also be argued that senior leader development may be even more significant because: 1) they are frequently responsible for executing on the executive director/CEO vision, and 2) as baby boomer executive directors/CEOs begin to retire, there will be stronger, more connected senior leaders to fill their shoes.

2. **Learning together in community**. Gathering in the same cohort every month for six months provided an environment where leaders could share vulnerably, encourage each other and, with the help of a trained facilitator, challenge each other and their own assumptions in a safe, supportive, and contained space. As a result, leaders transcended silos that typically isolate them (e.g., subsector, generational, budget size, geography),

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[8] *Argyris & Schon, 1978; Crosson, Lane & White, 1999; Schon, 2006*

[9] *Sobeck, Aguis & Mayers, 2007; Bryan, 2017*

resulting in the creation and sustainment of very strong professional and personal networks of trusted peers. The gains in this area were some of the strongest and the value of these relationships cannot be underestimated. The Learning Groups were essential in increasing connectivity and social capital among leaders, which may translate to increased collaboration in the future. This is particularly significant because scholars have suggested that single leaders and/or organizations are no longer sufficient to address 21st century complexities and challenges. Rather collective leadership will be required, where people must come together within and across organizations, and in partnership with community to develop innovative solutions to social problems.[10]

3. **Translating knowledge to real-world nonprofit leadership challenges:** Learning Group participants reported significant gains in knowledge and skills related to their own leadership, as well as their ability to effect change in their organizations and the larger nonprofit sector. While gains were only measured in the short-term, there was evidence that the new knowledge and improved skills translated to behavior changes by leaders who built capacity in their respective organizations. Asking leaders to present real organizational challenges they are grappling with as part of the program design provided an opportunity for them to apply the learning and skills developed during the Learning Group. Analysis from open-ended problem-solving questions indicates both executive directors/CEOs and senior leaders were able to confront challenging staff and board members, develop their boards, change their communication style as a strategy to address employee retention, and enter new partnerships and collaborations to support organizational growth. This is consistent with findings from other nonprofit capacity building programs, in which cognitive learning led to behavior change in the context of the organization.[11]

In conclusion, the Learning Groups are effective in furthering the Fieldstone's three strategic priorities. Participants learn and change. They become more confident, more capable, and more connected. They develop and apply skills, improve their own effectiveness and that of their organizations, and help each other have a wider impact through ongoing collaboration. Moreover, the longer-term effects of the Learning Groups may be even greater than the immediate gains measured because participants are fortified with a toolbox of valuable skills and knowledge, as well as a trusted network of peers.

While the long-term impact of the Fieldstone Learning Group has not yet been systematically studied, there are anecdotal stories from Learning Group participants who still meet annually for many years after participating in the program to talk through challenges, celebrate accomplishments, and feed their collegial friendships. These stories confirm lasting positive effects of the program and the sustainability of a strong and thriving support network of nonprofit leaders.

"This program empowered me by giving me strategies to try in my efforts to improve our relationship - with realistic expectations that they may or may not work. As a lifetime learner, I found this program extremely helpful both for providing a "toolbox" and a new network of other nonprofit professionals."
– Senior Leader, San Diego, 2017

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[10] *Hardina, Middleton, Montana & Simpson, 2007; Oftelie, Booth & Wareing, 2012*

[11] *Bryan, 2017*