



# What Makes a Difference in Leadership Development?

*An Evaluation Study of CRE's Leadership Caucus:  
Report Highlights*

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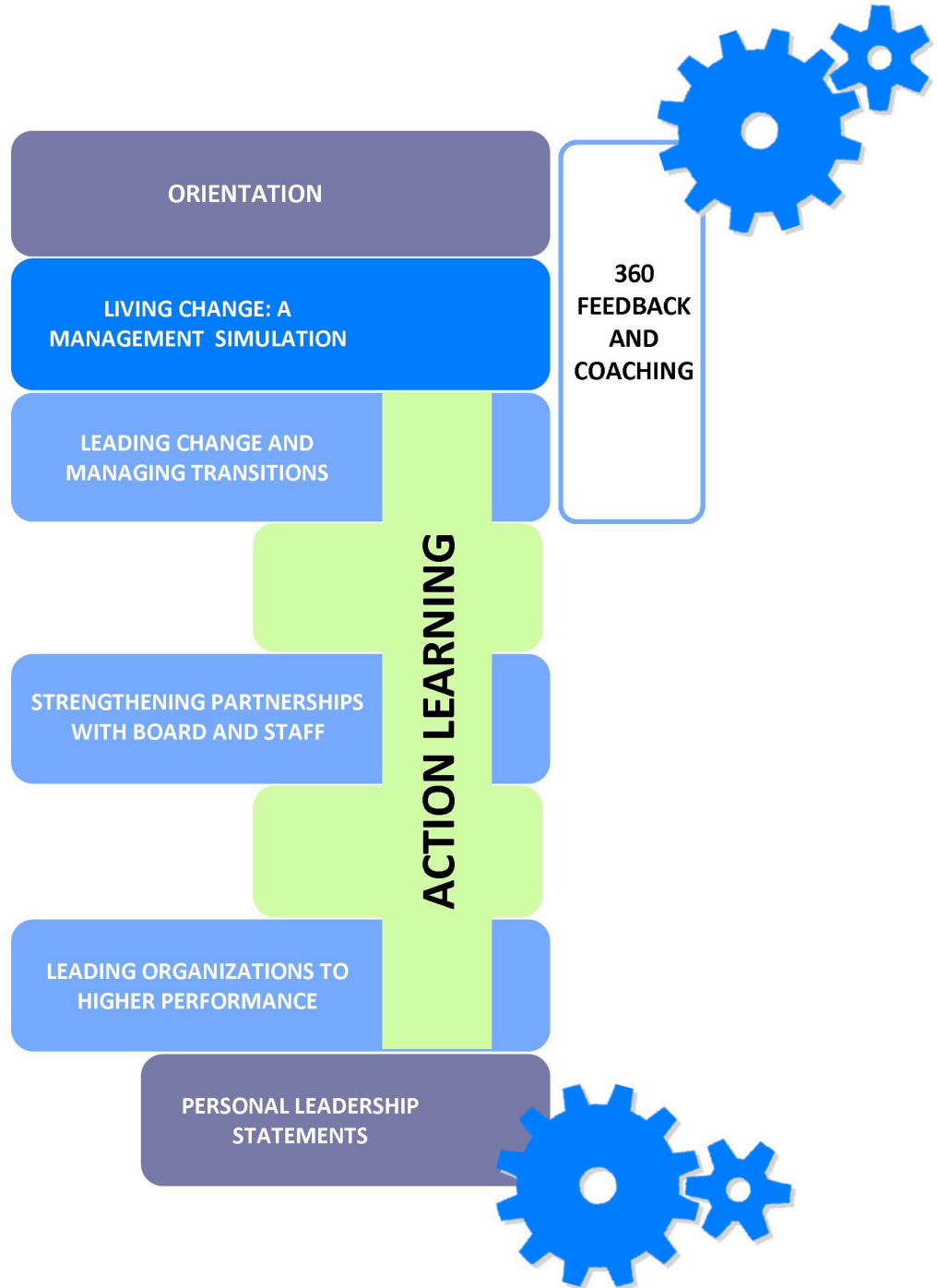
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The Leadership Center at CRE

**CRE**   
Community Resource Exchange

# LEADERSHIP CAUCUS PROGRAM DESIGN



## I. Introduction

The relationship between leadership development and effective organization is a subject of increasing interest to nonprofit practitioners and funders. The sector continues to seek ways to incorporate best models of leadership development into practice. It is also a nascent field, as research on the topic in the nonprofit sector is relatively recent. Community Resource Exchange (CRE) believes that the Leadership Caucus described in this study is a significant contribution to the budding knowledge base about this critically important field.

The Leadership Caucus aims to strengthen the leadership capabilities of existing and emerging community-based organization (CBO) leaders. It is a nine-month program comprised of four learning methodologies: (1) Issue-based Sessions on leadership topics; (2) Action Learning Sessions in small teams focusing on change initiatives; (3) 360 Feedback Surveys and individualized coaching; and (4) one-day Management Simulations. The Caucus is delivered by a team of CRE senior staff members, many of whom helped to conceptualize the program. It is highly interactive, grounded in the latest leadership development theory, and anchored in the realities of CBOs. The current design is a product of years of fine-tuning the Caucus' curriculum and methods.

The purpose of this study is to gain insight into what transforms a leadership development experience into positive change in leadership practices and organizational effectiveness. To do so, this report will assess the impact of the program on the five cohorts of CBO leaders who completed the caucus curriculum between 2004 and 2008. The population totaled eighty-eight participants. Thirty-eight more are presently participating in two cohorts.

## II. Research Design and Data Collection Methodology

The study employed a three-part analysis. First, it assessed the overall impact of the Leadership Caucus on individual leadership capacity and organizational effectiveness. Second, it sought to isolate the relative impact of the various components of the Caucus. Third, it identified common themes, attributes or contrasts that emerged among "low impact" and "high impact" Caucus participants.

The study then framed five levels of outcomes using three sources of data. The desired outcomes were categorized in order of difficulty to achieve, as follows:

- Level 1: Awareness and insights gained
- Level 2: Desire for/confidence to change
- Level 3: Discrete action steps actually taken
- Level 4: Changes in leadership practices
- Level 5: Changes in organizational performance

The three data sources included (1) *Personal Leadership Statements* completed by participants at the end of the Caucus; (2) *Post-Caucus Surveys*, which CRE administered between 1-4 years after participants completed the program; and (3) *In-depth Interviews*, which CRE conducted with "high impact" and "low impact" participants 1-4 years after completion of the program.

### **III. Summary of Results**

Overall findings demonstrate that the Leadership Caucus contributed to the individual leader's awareness, desire, and ability to change leadership practices, as well as the individual's ability to make a change in the organization. In certain cases, participants documented actual improvements in organizational effectiveness which occurred as a direct result of their Caucus experiences. Most were small, but significant changes were reported in some cases.

#### **A. Results from Personal Leadership Statements**

- Participants most frequently reported improving/improved leadership practices, followed closely by gains in organizational effectiveness. On one hand, it was somewhat expected that participants would report improved leadership practices. On the other hand, it was pleasantly surprising that relatively small, discrete action taken by participants during the program had begun to translate to organizational improvements.
- Increased desire for/confidence to change was the least frequently reported outcome. This could simply be that participants framed the benefits from the Caucus in terms of the end rather than the means. In other words, desire to change and increased confidence to make changes may have been antecedents to achieving the results. Still, this finding raises questions about the challenge of sustaining desire for/confidence to change once the participants go back to work.
- Participants commonly referred to gains in redefining or making shifts in leadership and management practices, and in continuous learning and self-development. In specific areas of organizational development, participants report the most gains in building talent bench, including succession planning and strengthening relations with the Board.

#### **B. Results from the Post-Caucus Surveys**

- As a total experience, 88% of Caucus participants achieved three of the four outcomes, specifically (1) increased awareness and insight, (2) a higher degree of confidence and desire to tackle challenges, and (3) the ability to improve their own leadership practices. Significantly, 80% reported that they made improvements in their organization, the most difficult outcome to achieve.
- The Issue-based Sessions that touched on specific leadership topics received positive ratings. More than 80% of participants achieved at least one outcome as a result of half of the issue sessions. And in 12 of the 13 issue sessions, at least 50% of the respondents reported that they achieved at least one outcome.
- "Leading and Managing" and "Leading Change and Managing Transitions" were the most highly-rated sessions. "Building the Talent Bench" and "Building Effective Teams" followed closely behind. These four issue sessions continue to form the core curriculum of the Caucus. Meanwhile, "Partnering with the Board" evoked mixed results. Although over 80% of respondents said that they achieved three of four outcomes, 50% indicated that actually making changes with the

Board will be possible only to a minimal extent. "Using Data as a Management Tool" received markedly lower rankings with 87% reporting that they could make only minimal changes in the organization in this area despite the high levels of insight and awareness instilled by the session. Due to this disparity between insight gained and change achieved, CRE must revisit the design of these sessions to bridge the gap more effectively.

- In terms of methodology, Action Learning, the Management Simulation, and 360 Feedback each had positive impact. In fact, participants cited the 360 Feedback Survey most frequently as having "positive impact to a great extent in all areas." It showed the highest gain in providing insights and proved to be a powerful learning tool when coupled with coaching. 77% of participants rated Action Learning as "making effective changes to the organization" and "improving own leadership practices," whereas 79% cited the Management Simulation as "engendering greater awareness." The simulation does show a sizeable drop in participants' ability to apply insights and achieve improvement, but application of those insights may be disguised in feedback/coaching.

### **C. Results from In-Depth Interviews**

- The interview data corroborate and expand upon the *Personal Leadership Statements*, the *Overall Evaluations of Caucus V*, and *Post-Caucus Surveys*. CRE selected "high" and "low impact" participants based on their responses in the foregoing data sources and from Caucus facilitator observations.
- High impact participants demonstrated significant improvements in their leadership practices and/or organizational effectiveness. Specifically, the main results indicated institutionalization of better program evaluation tools, a stronger and more cohesive management team, improved board governance, and greater accountability across the organization.
- Conversely, low impact participants have not been able to sustain gains despite any incidental benefits from the Caucus. They cited their preferred learning style (individual vs. large group setting), some design and facilitation aspects of the caucus, lack of time commitment needed for the Caucus, and an inability to sustain gains as reasons for not experiencing early benefits from the Caucus.

## **IV. Findings and Implications**

The key finding of this study is that the Leadership Caucus has had a positive impact on both nonprofit leaders and their organizations. Evidence confirms CRE's assumption that a well-designed and ably-executed program supports participants' ability to make changes in their leadership practices and in their organizations. Participants rated each component and methodology of the Leadership Caucus as having measurable outcomes for themselves as leaders, and/or as contributing to their ability to improve the effectiveness of their organizations.

This evaluation study produced a broad array of rich data which could be material for numerous discussions and further analysis. For purposes of this report, the following

discussion distinguishes between (1) implications for the Leadership Caucus as an offering and (2) implications for leadership development in the nonprofit sector.

**A. *Implications for CRE's Leadership Caucus***

- The Caucus is greater than the sum of its parts. Respondents rated the overall experience with high marks. They cited the various methods as reinforcing each other, the importance of the insights gained from different topics covered, the impact of building peer relationships, and the exchange about their shared experience as key elements of success. These are in line with the literature, which observes that the totality of a learning experience makes a difference in outcomes. There are strong indications that the multiplicative effect of the four Caucus methodologies together with the “reflective, learning space” and the bond that a group of peers develop create a conducive learning environment that leads to change implementation. It is unlikely that any one aspect of the Caucus could have had the overall impact that the many parts of it did together.
- The length and the pacing of the Caucus provide enough time and appropriate frequency to impact leadership practices. The duration and structure of the Caucus provide the learning environment for participants to make real change, both at the personal leadership level and at the organizational level, even if these changes are preliminary or reported as discrete “small steps.” Participants reported that they were learning-by-doing, trying out new behaviors and receiving reinforcement throughout the period of the program.
- The adult learning methods embedded in the Caucus design were essential to participants making actual changes in their leadership practices. Participants ranked the 360 Feedback Surveys as highly important and impactful. Several mentioned the coaching aspect of this as helpful and gave examples of changes they made as a result of the process. Action Learning Sessions helped to integrate formal learning with actual work challenges, and participants were able to point to examples of actions they took as a direct result of this methodology. Participant feedback highlighted the desire for even less lecture and more interactive methods, and this greater emphasis is already in the works for future cohorts. The Management Simulation received positive feedback from participants and seems to be an essential anchor to the curriculum due to its emphasis on real-life and immediate challenges that CBO Directors face and wish to find solutions for. Finally, the diversity of methods appears to have accommodated people with different learning styles, though the Caucus is run in a group setting and participants need to know that during the vetting process.
- The Issue-based Sessions triggered greater changes and improvements than anticipated. Of the four methodologies, the issue session is closest to the classic workshop format, which literature says has not produced the greatest impact. CRE believes two elements of the Caucus bring about this unexpected result. First, our approach to content focuses on participant experience and day-to-day realities. Second, the session topics are highly relevant to the participants and serve as the “staging point” for the other Caucus components to work well.

- The Caucus design is on solid footing, but CRE must continuously refine content. Topics covered by the issue sessions were well received with one exception. Respondents gave the session “Using Data as a Management Tool” markedly low rankings, suggesting a re-examination of its content, delivery and relevance. The session already has been redesigned for the current caucuses and will be carefully tracked for reactions and outcomes.
- CRE's prior relationships and familiarity with organizations has been important in attracting the right groups of participants and in ensuring the relevance of issues and examples raised during discussions. Participant comments support the idea that the more cohesive the cohort of learners, the stronger the learning outcomes. They defined cohesiveness by such factors as size of organization and length of experience. CRE's hands-on and early involvement with outreach and vetting of candidates was critical to both recruiting very busy (and sometimes skeptical) leaders to participate in the Caucus and then grouping those leaders into appropriate cohorts. This finding is notable as a non-design factor critical to the success of the Caucus.

***B. Implications for Leadership Development in the Nonprofit Sector***

- The sector must create and nurture more Caucus-like settings for its incredibly taxed and stretched leaders. The Caucus “creates” a collaborative and networked setting that fosters learning and provides the connective tissue for the various components. It creates a microcosm of interconnected individuals who provide each other with support, ideas, and questions that go above and beyond the design/content of the Caucus. As a nine-month experience, the Caucus opened up a uniquely long-term “space” for participants to reflect and bond over time. The opportunity to break down the sense of isolation and burden that leaders experience led to real learning outcomes. The participants created an environment conducive to sharing of real challenges, problem solving together, and providing support to each other – creating a network that yielded organizational change in some cases. Survey responses contained a consistent message that participants value peer exchange and wish for more opportunities to share with each other, both during the Caucus and afterwards.
- Since the impact of traditional, one-off workshops and seminars is limited, more must be done to establish feedback-based, action learning environments like the Leadership Caucus as the norm for leaders and staff of CBOs. The totality of the Caucus methodologies is the foundation of solid outcomes reported by participants. Since the Caucus integrates four methodologies into a coherent learning experience, it is challenging and costly to design and deliver. It also requires a greater time commitment from participants. For the investment, however, evidence points to very strong learning outcomes. An earlier concern that CBO leaders would not sustain such a time commitment proved premature as participants “voted with their feet,” and the vast majority of them stayed through the entire nine months. This is perhaps the most forceful signal that there is a need and a committed market for the Leadership Caucus.
- The sector needs to figure out ways to increase the availability of this model of leadership development. Funding limits greater access. To date, 126 leaders

have attended CRE's Leadership Caucus. Certainly many others have attended similar types of programs. But, considering the number of CBOs in the greater NY area, and considering the relatively fast turnover rate among EDs (average of five years), these numbers are a drop in the bucket. Moreover, comparing the positive benefits of the Caucus with how few actually receive this relatively expensive, sophisticated learning experience suggests that there is a ready, underserved audience.

There may be ways to adapt the design to deliver the Caucus differently. For example, CRE is currently piloting an innovation with two organizations to deliver a shorter version of the model to reach more people, like management teams, within one organization. Though shorter in length, the upside of this approach is it allows for greater exposure to leadership development for the organization's management ranks. Going deeper within one organization would perhaps lead to more significant organizational outcomes.

- Moving forward, leadership development programs need to bridge the Board-ED partnership and address the special leadership challenges facing Boards in the nonprofit sector. Effective Board leadership is critical to the health of CBOs but relatively neglected when it comes to practical capacity-building opportunities. The Caucus includes an issue session for EDs on "Partnering with the Board." Participants reported on the session favorably: they now have greater awareness, desire and ability to improve their own practices regarding their Boards. On the other hand, they also disclosed that, only to a minimal degree, do they think they will be able to make a change in board governance. This lack of confidence that improvements can really be made may reflect their experiences that Boards are more difficult to influence, or it may simply acknowledge that Board members hold half of the relationship in improving board leadership and governance. The solution may not necessarily be in the design of that session as much as the need to include the Board Chair and other Board members in similar dialogues about leadership and governance issues. To this end, CRE has developed a Leadership Caucus for Board Chairs for rollout in late 2009.

The broader issue is the question of how the sector can bring best leadership practices to the Board "theatre." The unique nature of boards poses equally unique challenges: boards are made up of volunteers; there are diverse expectations about board roles on all sides; and there is a great deal of unevenness of board engagement in CBOs across the sector.

- The sector must provide effective and affordable follow-up after completion of the program. Sustainability is the big question mark. How well can participants sustain the gains they have made without further support? Participants have consistently suggested post-Caucus follow-up events. When a follow-up was made available to the cohort of Deputy Directors, the impact was noticeable. Some of them took on greater management responsibilities and others even became EDs. This challenge is related to funding but it also speaks to the need to try out innovative learning designs for CBO leaders. This year, CRE offered the "Leadership Circle" which met every month for six months to discuss day-to-day issues and challenges. The feedback from this first circle was very positive, suggesting that the Leadership Circle may be the appropriate follow-up vehicle.

## **V. Conclusion**

Leaders of community-based organizations grapple daily with poverty, injustice, and the problems of the most vulnerable in our society. They face essential yet unmet human needs under the pressure of scarce resources. To succeed, they must be at the top of their game as leaders. And they often must do this on their own, with very little support.

For the Leadership Caucus, this study has shown that it is delivering positive results for CBO leaders and their organizations. Moreover, the research described in this report has helped CRE to adapt and improve the design and delivery of the Caucus itself.

For the nonprofit sector, the study underscores the importance of leadership development to CBO leaders while pointing out the dearth of opportunities available to them. Most importantly, the study shows the promise of CRE's Leadership Caucus as a model for leadership development and the potential to magnify its unique impact on the nonprofit sector as a whole.