

PEOPLE MAKE THE DIFFERENCE

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT BUILDS CLUB'S LEADERSHIP AND CAPACITY

By Greg Tolbert

In 15 years as chief professional officer at Boys & Girls Clubs of the Upstate in Spartanburg, S.C., I've learned the value of professional development. People make the difference at Boys & Girls Clubs. If we don't invest in staff members, we're missing an opportunity to train and retain Club professionals, and make more of an impact on Club members.

Professional development increases job satisfaction, leads to lower turnover and produces better youth outcomes. Staff members stay longer and become more committed to the Boys & Girls Club mission. Ultimately, the best trained staff will inspire young people, volunteers and colleagues.

LEADERSHIP U.

Our Club takes full advantage of Boys & Girls Club Leadership University, which all staff members have attended in person or through online distance learning courses. This includes new employees, who the Club requires to complete the University's Foundation Level as Youth Development Professionals within two weeks of their hire date.

The University curriculum helps staff members understand the unique skills a Club professional needs to forge an impactful relationship with young people. It also helps new staff members to realize they are part of a much larger Movement with a long, successful history that offers career opportunities beyond our local organization.

I had wanted to take part in the Executive Advanced Leadership Program (ALP) of Leadership University for some time. But I wanted the perfect confluence of the right team at the right time in the Club's development. So I waited.

Then our board rolled out a new strategic plan in 2009 that included opening 40 Clubs in 10 years within local schools to increase capacity and impact more youth. To make this leap, key staff members

would have to take on new leadership and decision-making roles. Ready or not, it was time for us to participate in ALP.

RETURN ON INVESTMENT

Our two unit directors, grants manager, chief financial officer, director of operations, area director and I enrolled in the six-month ALP team training. Our primary goal was to prepare and position our organization to open a Club in every local elementary school over the next decade.

At a time when few grants are available for direct services, ALP provided with us a template to write compelling grants for local capacity-building dollars. As a result, one foundation that previously passed on our applications, awarded us our first capacity-building grant.

Most importantly, ALP taught me how great my people really are. I ended up realizing that, for years, I had been the bottleneck. While everyone looked to me for direction, I often felt there were only a couple of point people to whom I could safely assign important projects. As a result, this often meant that little or no progress was made.

Now, as long as we clearly define goals, roles and processes, we can diversify our project assignments and trust that progress will be made. Our folks always had the wherewithal. As their leader, I had to learn how to let go and trust them. They had to learn that their input and action was valued, wanted and needed.

Because we learned how to share responsibility, we now make better use of each staff member and accomplish so much more. If an executive team member is not available, Club staff members look to each other to make decisions. As we empower people at every level to take on new responsibilities, I see increased eagerness and ownership in their eyes and actions.

MORE WITH LESS

Because the central action behind ALP are leadership teams, tackling actual issues as a team are part of every training. Our team's project was to determine how we could increase staff capacity to accommodate new school-based units and – other than a director at each new site – not add non-program staff. ALP helped that goal to become a reality.

Doing more with less is a challenge of all organizations these days. While we were not interested in cutting our staff, ALP enabled people throughout the organization to take on new responsibilities.

As we completed the program, the economy was in recession, donations were on the decline, and previously steady grant sources were faltering. Even so, Boys & Girls Clubs of the Upstate opened two new units in 2010. Today, we have six fewer full-time positions than we did two years ago. But through consolidation and partnerships, every child served in 2010 still has access to a Club. Our one free-standing facility is now fully utilized, with average daily attendance up by 10 percent. Instead of

fundraising to maintain an office position, we're raising money to accommodate more children. And seeking funding to increase membership and attendance is a much easier sell to board members and donors.

Investment in our staff continues to pay huge dividends. Since our initial experience, 19 more staff members have attended various Leadership University trainings. We are poised for growth when the economy recovers and funding sources stabilize.

Going through ALP has enabled us to open lines of communication, more clearly define roles and responsibilities, and provide staff members with opportunities to gain experience in several fields. This increased productivity has allowed us to weather declines in income while increasing services to youth.

Clubs help young people build their great futures. Isn't it just as important that Clubs be the place where our staff members build great futures, too?

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