SITUATION OVERVIEW

Our local nonprofit sector can only be as strong as those who lead organizations. With our “beyond grantmaking” focus The John R. Oishei Foundation has an interest in supporting emerging leaders, poised to become the next generation of senior-level staff and executive directors.

Many of these professionals are handling multiple responsibilities, often in isolation, and as a result, often face stress and burnout. Without a network of other like-minded colleagues, many became discouraged without the support and collaboration of others.

A 2019 study from Nonprofit HR reveals that 45% of responding nonprofit employees say they will seek new employment within 5 years and 23% of those said that they would not pursue work in the nonprofit sector.

The Oishei Foundation wanted to find a way to support these professionals and connect them to each other in ways that would expand their circle of mutual support and add value to their work.
WHAT DID WE HEAR AND OBSERVE?

For many of these professionals, their work is their passion and saying “no” is not always easy. Finding time to take a break and reflect on their work can be nearly impossible for many. Even attending a conference or seminar, while serving to inspire and provide networking, can also add to information overload. As well, such professional development opportunities are many times out of reach for cash- and time-strapped nonprofits.

From our own experience in the field, we knew that a network was needed for like-minded colleagues to share ideas, understand how they might collaborate, or simply gain support and understanding for the roles they manage. For many, networking events did not afford enough time and opportunity to develop relationships that could be helpful in the future.

We learned about sabbaticals for nonprofit leaders including a 3-month leave supported by the Marguerite Casey Foundation, which allowed participants to disconnect from their jobs to rest and recharge while giving their staff the opportunity to run the organization without them. The underlying premise was that time away was not only healthy, but also critical, and offered the opportunity to think, restore, and develop other interests and talents. At the same time, staff could better understand how to manage the multiple facets of nonprofit leadership.

HOW DID WE RESPOND?

As a broad-based foundation providing support across many nonprofit sectors, the Oishei Foundation was in a unique position to bring nonprofit leaders together and provide an opportunity for rest, reflection, and rejuvenation. Rather than full sabbaticals for only a small number of professionals, we decided to focus on events that provided a shorter but significant break for a greater number of people.
Using the idea that relaxation is necessary for leadership, The Oishei Foundation developed the Oishei Leaders program in 2006 for promising young nonprofit leaders. We chose those from small to mid-size organizations that had few resources for professional development and from a cross-section of organizations.

Twenty young nonprofit leaders were invited to become part of our first group of Oishei Leaders, spending 24 hours together at an overnight, off-site venue. The event had no agenda and was designed to allow the participants to simply meet and get to know one another. We trusted that conversations and relationships would develop organically without the pressure of outlined outcomes. Participants were also invited to attend two shorter follow-up events to continue to foster budding relationships.

We intentionally chose participants across nonprofit sectors – arts, education, health, and neighborhood/community development – so that they could learn from each other and gain understanding of how those in other areas address challenges common to all nonprofits.

WHAT WERE SOME OF THE CHALLENGES?

Adding another commitment to time-strapped staff seemed counterintuitive. We knew, however, that an invitation from a funder would carry weight and allow the nonprofit leader to prioritize the invitation and justify attending to their board and staff.
It took some time for many to be comfortable with the “no-agenda” format, including some of our Trustees, when we initially proposed the idea. Participants also felt a bit out of their comfort zone without some type of programming or productivity as a focal point. We found that the overnight format provided spacious time to build relationships and trust, exchange ideas, and reflect on shared purposes and values.

After the first successful Oishei Leader group, the program gained more attention and subsequent groups embraced the no-agenda format. Since then we have invited seven more groups to participate, with the entire Oishei Leader network now comprising more than 120 leaders. “Alumni,” several of whom have moved outside of the region or have transitioned to roles outside of the nonprofit sector are always included, joining their colleagues for the overnight and subsequent shorter events to build even more connectivity.

**WHAT WENT WELL AND WHAT COULD WE DO BETTER?**

The Oishei Leadership program has fostered countless friendships, collaborations, and connections, while providing an opportunity for relaxation and reflection in a distraction-free setting.

Overall, our Oishei Leaders have embraced the program, building deep personal and professional connections. With Foundation staff playing a minimal role, participants have become comfortable with the format, with each other, and in sharing the challenges they face in the nonprofit sector.

While we initially planned on leaving the groups to engage entirely on their own, we discovered that the participants welcomed some limited staff participation in this relaxed format, which has led to strengthened relationships between staff and the nonprofit community.

While the participants were initially chosen by Foundation staff, we experimented with allowing the
participants to select the subsequent group, however, we found that approach posed many challenges and violated the “no responsibilities” focus of the program.

Initially, our hope was that each group would be self-sustaining and would find ways to convene on their own. While many friendships and professional networks were created, we found that the Foundation’s ongoing help with organization and cost is critical to the program’s sustainability.

WHAT’S NEXT?

The inherent strength of the program is in building personal relationships and enjoying time together in person. The COVID-19 pandemic forced us to put the program on pause, although many Oishei Leaders connect with each other informally. Plans are in the works for Group 9 in 2022, with the hope that in-person gatherings will again be possible.
BEYOND GRANTMAKING AT THE JOHN R. OISHEI FOUNDATION

The John R. Oishei Foundation is the most comprehensive private foundation in Western New York, with a mission to enhance the economic vitality and quality of life for the Buffalo Niagara region through grantmaking, leadership and network building.

Recognizing that our community faces numerous challenges and opportunities, we do much more than provide financial support. Our office of Philanthropic Support provides support to strengthen nonprofits and build their own capacity in the areas of leadership development, board governance, strategic planning, research, marketing and communications, and other services.
RESOURCES
Marguerite Casey Foundation https://www.caseygrants.org

Want to know more?
We'd love to share more!
Visit www.oishei.org or contact info@oishei.org.

The John R. Oishei Foundation
726 Exchange Street, Suite 510
Buffalo, New York 14210