



Advancing Sustainable Professional Development in the Nonprofit Sector

Insights and Action from The Antorge Group 2025 Roundtable Series

This insight report captures the shared experiences, challenges, and forward-looking ideas discussed during The Antorge Group's roundtables on sustainable professional development in the nonprofit sector. This report is a synthesis grounded in dialogue, shaped by urgency, and open to what comes next.

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Q2 2025 Insight Report

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What started as a request to different leaders to convene to discuss Sustainable Professional Development in the Nonprofit sector evolved into a series involving many engaged leaders, robust discussion, and ongoing action. The Antorge Group launched the Sustainable Professional Development Roundtable to explore a persistent challenge in the nonprofit sector: how to build and sustain meaningful professional development opportunities for nonprofit professionals across roles, organizations, and funding environments.

A pre-roundtable survey revealed interest in high-quality professional development and also highlighted systemic challenges. Respondents cited underinvestment, donor perceptions that professional development is 'administrative' rather than strategic, and a pattern of development budgets being first to go in uncertain times.

Key findings from surveys and discussions identified a strong desire for role-specific learning, cross-organizational partnerships, and greater fluency in articulating impact.

A recurring theme through the survey and both roundtable sessions was the need to elevate professional development as a strategic priority rather than only a discretionary expense.

This report summarizes the process, themes, and key findings from both the survey and a multi-session roundtable convening of nonprofit professionals, board members, and sector leaders. It concludes with actions taken and recommended strategies that nonprofits, funders, and capacity builders can implement to keep professional development both visible and viable in a time of great need.

INTRODUCTION

Professional development is often viewed as a luxury, or "nice to have" or overhead in the nonprofit sector. While the significant role that nonprofits play in the community is often recognized and appreciated, support for nonprofit organizations tend to be provided when it directly funds programs and additional fundraising activities. The reality is that professional



development is essential to supporting the people doing the work¹. Leadership transitions, fundraising demands, and urgent shifts in community needs require organizations to retain the capacity to adapt, lead, and grow and nonprofit organizations are no exception.

As a line item in budgets, professional development remains vulnerable to decrease or elimination – and even more so during times of uncertainty. A pre-roundtable survey of nonprofit leaders and staff revealed consistent concerns: that training budgets are among the first cut during uncertain times, that boards and donors are more likely to focus on programs but not staff development, and that the profession itself is not always treated as a long-term, valued career path.

One respondent summarized this perception as follows:

“Professional development is a vulnerable line item when budgets are tight... despite the fact that there would be no programs without the people—from direct program staff to accountants and development professionals.”

Having identified this as an area of focus, the goal of the initial outreach to various sector and community leaders was to discuss the topic of sustainable professional development from multiple perspectives. The desired objective was to define and identify opportunities for professional development in the nonprofit sector with input from various areas of expertise in the sector. That goal evolved, becoming an action-focused discussion on how to create a more sustainable, actionable, and collaborative approach to professional development—one that affirms the sector’s talent, responds to emerging needs, and centers equity in access and implementation.

PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES OF THE ROUNDTABLE

The Antorge Group Q1 Roundtable on Sustainable Professional Development was designed to be a multi-faceted conversation about professional development in the nonprofit sector.

Prior to the roundtable, a 10-question survey collecting feedback from various roles in the nonprofit sector was shared online. The survey included questions about tenure in the sector, respondent roles, existing professional development available to the respondents, and desired professional development topics and delivery preferences. The sample size was small with 19 total respondents and 17 usable responses. The survey results were prepared as part of the participant packets for the Q1 roundtable.

The Roundtable was designed to do three things:



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1. Bring together diverse perspectives: Include voices from across the ecosystem—executive leaders, direct service professionals, funders, board members, and nonprofit association leadership—to reflect a holistic view of the sector.
2. Surface the realities: Define professional development, identify the current barriers, gaps, and patterns impacting access to and investment in professional development.
3. Build momentum toward solutions: Explore ways the sector can collaborate, innovate, and advocate for sustainable, equitable professional development as a strategic priority.

The individuals that graciously accepted the invitation to join the roundtable are leaders in their fields as well as in the San Diego community at large, each also recognized for demonstrating aligned leadership. The roundtable participants represented the following roles and perspectives:

- Executive Leaders (CEOs from nonprofits of different sizes and services)
- Funders (Individual major donors with business background and corporate funders or grant makers)
- Board Leadership including financial oversight (Current and former Board Chairs, Board Directors, Treasurer)
- Professional Development Experts and Association Leaders

Program and administrative staff perspectives were also represented through survey insights. This inclusive approach affirmed the belief that lasting development solutions require cross-functional and sector-wide engagement.

PROCESS OVERVIEW

Pre-roundtable Survey – Early Q1 2025

To inform the roundtable series, The Antorge Group launched a survey to nonprofit professionals across a range of organization sizes and focus areas. The survey focused on identifying current professional development practices, barriers, and needs. The respondents represented a variety of roles were represented in the nonprofit sector.



Key Insights from Nonprofit Professional Development Survey

Which best describes your primary role in the organization?

17 responses

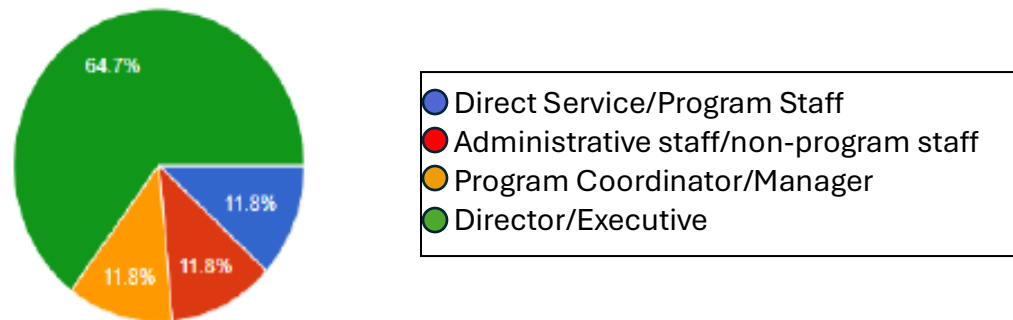


Figure 1: Survey Respondent Roles

Areas that Need More Focus in the Nonprofit Sector by Role

- **Directors/Executives:**
Leadership & Management, Change Management & Innovation, Strategic Planning, Crisis Management & Resilience, Collaboration & Partnership Building.
- **Program Coordinators/Managers:**
Grant Writing & Fundraising, Program Design & Evaluation, Strategic Planning.
- **Direct Service/Program Staff:**
Leadership & Management, Strategic Planning, Change Management & Innovation, Program Design & Evaluation, Financial Management & Budgeting, Cross-Cultural Communication.
- **Administrative Staff:**
Change Management & Innovation, Financial Management & Budgeting, Cross-Cultural Communication, Collaboration & Partnership Building, Crisis Management & Resilience.

Desired Skills for Greater Effectiveness

- **Across All Roles:**
 - Leadership/Management Skills



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- Financial Management/Budget Skills.
- **Notable Role-Specific Needs:**
 - Project/Program Management (Coordinators and Program Staff)
 - Professional communication and Interpersonal Skills (Administrative Staff)

Preferred Professional Development Methods

1. In-person workshops/courses
2. Mentoring relationships
3. Online workshops (live)
4. Peer learning groups
5. Online self-paced courses
6. Hands-on practice

All Roles Ranked In-Person Learning First – underscoring the value of live, interactive development opportunities.

Challenges with Accessing Professional Development:

Cost was selected as the most common challenge with accessing professional development opportunities, followed by time during work hours.

What are the main challenges you face in accessing professional development?

17 responses

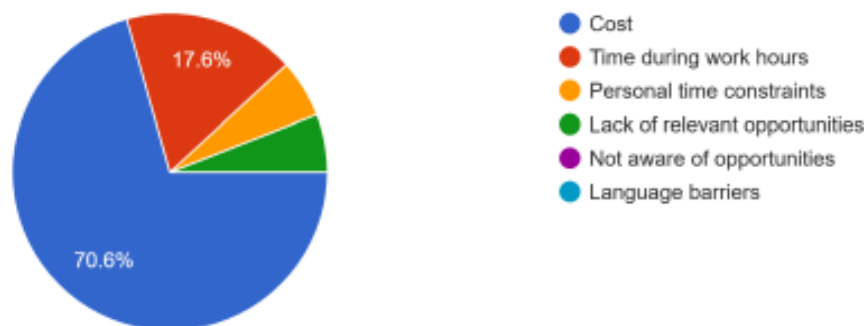


Figure 2: Responses to question about challenges with accessing professional development

Q1 Roundtable: Framing the Problem

Held in Q1, the first session focused on surfacing the core challenges and questions facing the nonprofit sector regarding professional development. This session was deliberately



broad, inviting reflection on systemic issues, resource constraints, leadership readiness, and future possibilities.

Three categories guiding the discussion during the roundtable were:

- ROI: Demonstrating the value of professional development
- Funding strategies: Positioning Leadership Development as Essential
- Implementation and sustainability models: The balance of cost, accessibility, and long-term

Key Questions Emerged:

- *Where are the gaps in professional development across the sector?*
- *What prevents organizations from addressing those gaps?*
- *What could we collectively do to change this?*

This session prioritized shared understanding, honest dialogue, and a recognition of sector-wide interdependence.

Key themes from Q1 Roundtable:

- There is power and inspiration in gathering for a shared goal
- Education/training should involve all roles including boards
- Collaboration is key to sustained success
- We can shift sector narratives and culture

Q2 Roundtable: Moving Toward Action

The second session was designed as a deeper dive into the themes that emerged from Roundtable I. Participants reconvened with a shared intent: to transition from problem identification to action planning.

A key feature of Roundtable II was the use of breakout sessions aligned with three emerging action tracks:

- Convening: Exploring how to create consistent spaces for shared learning, vision-setting, and check-ins across the nonprofit ecosystem.
- Collaboration: Identifying how organizations can partner across boundaries to share development opportunities, resources, and training capacity.
- Courses/Workshops: Pinpointing what specific learning gaps exist and exploring responsive, high-impact ways to fill them.



Each group was invited to define opportunities, name obstacles, and propose concrete steps. This participatory format honored the expertise in the room and empowered each participant to help shape the way forward.

Throughout both sessions, the Roundtable was anchored in three core principles:

- Human-Centered – Honoring the lived experience of nonprofit professionals at all levels.
 - Action-Oriented – Moving beyond discussion toward tangible next steps.
 - Collaborative – Prioritizing shared leadership, trust-building, and sector-spanning input.
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KEY THEMES AND FINDINGS

Across both Roundtables, three core themes emerged as actionable focus areas for advancing sustainable professional development in the nonprofit sector. These tracks—Convening, Collaboration, and Courses/Workshops—reflected a shared vision for system-level change driven by participation, equity, and relevance. One participant also described the focus areas as Networking, Communication, and Education.

Track 1: Convening – Vision-Setting, Sector Check-Ins, Shared Learning

Participants named a strong desire for consistent, purpose-driven opportunities to gather across organizational roles and sizes. Convenings were not seen as passive events, but as vital mechanisms for:

- Sector-wide alignment on needs, priorities, and innovations.
- Regular check-ins to assess how professional development is adapting to evolving challenges.
- Peer learning spaces that prioritize reflection, cross-role dialogue, and the exchange of tested practices.

There was consensus that this work must be ongoing, inclusive, and rooted in relationship-building—not just reporting out.

Track 2: Collaboration – Cross-Organization Partnership, Shared Development Models

Collaboration emerged as both a theme and a strategy. Participants saw immediate opportunities to:

- Pool resources across organizations for shared trainings or development initiatives.



- Develop shared models for professional development that could scale across missions or regions.
- Involve funders, nonprofit professionals, and board members in co-creating development efforts.

Participants emphasized the importance of intentionally including smaller organizations, which are often left out of traditional development models. Collaboration was framed as not just cost-effective—but also equity-centered.

Track 3: Courses and Workshops –Filling critical gaps

Building on survey results and participant input, several development gaps were identified across roles and organizational levels. Key areas of need included:

- Leadership and change management
- Strategic and financial planning
- Professional communication and cross-cultural competency
- Crisis readiness and resilience

Participants expressed interest in courses that:

- Are responsive to role-specific needs
- Use preferred delivery methods (such as in-person, mentoring, and peer learning)
- Address real-world challenges, not just theoretical frameworks

There was also a recognition that many existing trainings do not sufficiently speak to the nonprofit context—or the evolving demands professionals face today.

A resounding theme across all tracks was the importance of multi-role engagement.

Participants emphasized that sustainable change requires buy-in and participation from:

- Nonprofit professionals at every level
- Funders who understand the value of investing in people
- Board members who champion development as strategy, not overhead

By bringing diverse voices to the table, participants believed the sector can shift long-standing dynamics and unlock untapped potential.



ADDITIONAL INSIGHTS AND HIGHLIGHTS

The survey conducted in advance of the first Roundtable, though small in sample size, confirmed many of the key themes that emerged during discussions:

- **In-person workshops** were the most preferred learning method across all roles.
- **Mentoring relationships and peer learning** were ranked as highly valuable.
- Directors/Executives and program staff had similar top 3 recommendations for the sector **leadership and management training, Change management and innovation, and strategic planning**.
- **Crisis management and Resilience** was also an area of interest for Directors/Executives

From Roundtable Participants

- Participants noted how valuable—and rare—it was to have perspectives from leaders, funders, and practitioners in the same space for dialogue.
- Several participants committed to sharing information about training opportunities and peer groups with other organizations or inviting peers to join their development efforts.
- There was a collective recognition that building **advocacy fluency**—to connect day-to-day work to organizational impact—should be a core skill across roles.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Expand Role-Inclusive Convenings

- Regularly convene mixed-role cohorts across the nonprofit ecosystem.
- Use the sessions as a forum for strategic alignment, reflection, and feedback.

2. Pilot and Scale Collaborative Learning Models

- Encourage organizations to co-host or open existing training to peer nonprofits.
- Provide infrastructure (templates, scheduling tools, facilitation) to make this easier.

3. Position Professional Development as Strategy



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- Create and share messaging frameworks that help nonprofit leaders make the case for development investment to boards and funders.
- Emphasize the strategic value of professional development, including board readiness, especially in uncertain times.

4. Design Offerings That Reflect Sector Needs

- Prioritize relationship-based formats (mentoring, in-person sessions, peer learning).
- Ensure offerings reflect content areas named as urgent across different roles.

5. Ensure Access for Smaller Organizations

- Funders and associations can play a pivotal role in ensuring smaller nonprofits access high-quality development without disproportionate financial or operational burden.

CONCLUSION

The Roundtable series highlighted sustainable professional development as a **sector-wide lever for resilience, equity, and growth**. By bringing together multiple roles in shared dialogue, this initiative modeled what an inclusive and strategic approach to professional development can look like.

Sustainable professional development is attainable. It requires that the sector and its supporters invest with intention, collaborate across roles, and commit to a long-term vision rooted in equity and effectiveness



APPENDICES

Appendix A: Thank You to our Roundtable Participants

Thank you to the roundtable participants for your engagement, insights, and action towards the goal of sustainable professional development in the nonprofit sector. Your time, insights, and passion created an opportunity for inspiration and action. With gratitude to:

A. O'Donnell, D. Wright, E. Fitzsimons, K. Omidiji, M. Newman-Tsay, L. Deitrick, N. Clay, R. Ewell, S. Vivek, T. Craver and to B. Collins for administrative support.

Appendix B: Q1 2025 Roundtable Summary

Executive Summary

The Sustainable Professional Development in the Nonprofit Sector Roundtable explores strategies for integrating professional development (PD) into nonprofit operations to enhance capacity building, succession planning, and long-term sustainability. By shifting the focus from individual training to holistic workforce development, organizations can align mission, values, and strategic objectives while fostering a culture of growth and connection.

Key Discussion Areas

- Rethinking Professional Development
- Aligning with Mission, Values & Strategic Goals
- Strengthening Organizational Relationships & Connectivity
- Embedding PD for Long-Term Sustainability
- Board & Leadership Development
- Shifting Nonprofit Workforce Culture & Changing Sector Narrative

Appendix C: Q2 2025 Roundtable Presentation Notes

Convening

Discussion points focused on gaps, opportunities, and defining effective convening formats. Suggestions included large sessions with breakout groups and a model for rotating funder-led convenings.

Collaborating

Participants explored best practices, shared challenges, and emphasized simplifying access, supporting non-C-suite staff, and celebrating sector wins to drive collaboration.



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Courses

Discussions focused on course gaps such as training for management transitions, crisis leadership, and board alignment. Bandwidth constraints for small teams and ideas for capacity building were also shared.

Additional Insights

Cross-cutting themes included the importance of funder transparency, proactive planning around program cuts, and cultivating advocacy fluency to articulate PD impact.

Appendix D: References and Additional Resources

1. https://nonprofitquarterly.org/wp-content/uploads/OverheadMyth_ONLINE.pdf
2. <https://www.bridgespan.org/insights/nonprofit-leadership/how-nonprofit-leadership-development-sustains-organizations-and-their-teams>
3. <https://www.bridgespan.org/insights/nonprofit-leadership/how-nonprofit-leadership-development-sustains-organizations-and-their-teams>