

Puget Sound Business Journal (Seattle) - January 18, 2010
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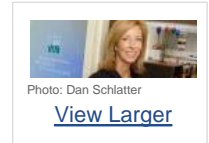


Friday, January 15, 2010

Questions for: Carla Lewis

Puget Sound Business Journal (Seattle) - by [Clay Holtzman](#) Staff Writer

Carla Lewis is president and a founding member of the Washington Women's Foundation, a Seattle philanthropy that pools its 500 members' annual dues to make \$100,000 grants. Lewis spoke with the Puget Sound Business Journal about the power of combining donations, measuring outcomes and the foundation's popular operating model.



How does the foundation work? Our foundation is very hands on, participatory and democratic. Every member makes the same financial contribution (\$2,300), gets to vote on where grants go and is welcome to be part of the grant committee. Each member brings their own expertise and we gain the benefit of that experience and perspective as we work through our grant process.

Where do member fees go? One thousand dollars go into the (foundation's) grant pool, \$1,000 is eligible for each individual member to make as a personal grant, and \$300 is used for education and program support.

What is the goal of bringing women together to give? There is so much leverage in doing much more together than what any of us could do individually. Most of our grants are for \$100,000. It is something most of us could never dream of doing alone. We are not focused exclusively on funding women's issues, although we certainly have. We are more of a general community grant maker. We are open to all women who are interested in philanthropy. Many of our members are sophisticated philanthropists, and just as many are new to philanthropy.

How do you measure outcomes and share that with members? When we make a \$100,000 grant to an organization, that is usually paid out over three years. We develop a close relationship and understand how that grantee wants to measure success. We form a small team of our own members and an executive director from another nonprofit. That team visits the grantee over the course of the grant to keep in touch to ensure that our investment is doing what we planned it to do. We report that back to our members.

How have others taken note of your business model? Many organizations across the country have modeled themselves specifically on us and we have more than 20 sister organizations that our founder, Colleen Willoughby, and some of the other board members are actively mentoring.

How has your membership been affected by the recession? Our renewal rates have stayed really strong and over the last year, we have had over 70 new members join. Our (member loss) rates are consistent and run pretty low — between 7 and 10 percent. Last year we were within that range. We think that is pretty low for an organization that has a reasonably high threshold.

What do you gain from the range in ages of your members? Our members range from their early 30s well into their 80s. We have nearly 100 members who have been with us since the founding (in 1995). There is a great deal of philanthropy mentoring here.

Why do you offer your members training? We believe it is all about effective philanthropy and leadership. All of our programs focus on some element of community need and how philanthropy can make the most impact. We also offer programs related to skills building in terms of effective grant making. The net result of our work is to expand the number of women leaders in philanthropy. We are definitely seeing that happen — more than 60 percent of our members serve on one or more nonprofit boards.

— Interview conducted and condensed by CLAY HOLTZMAN

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