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People Toolkit**

Field Stories

**Pierce Family Foundation**





# Pierce Family Foundation

[piercefoundation.org](http://piercefoundation.org)

## At a Glance



<b>Type:</b>	Family Foundation
<b>Service Area:</b>	Chicago
<b>Assets:</b>	\$8 million
<b>Founded:</b>	2007
<b>Current Talent Investments:</b>	Top Talent Institute, Peer Skill Share
<b>Past Investments:</b>	One-on-one, mid-level coaching

“It doesn’t take long to learn that no matter how brilliant a strategy is or how well it’s funded, if you don’t have the right people at the helm, something will go wrong or it won’t meet potential.”

Those words of wisdom from Marianne Philbin, executive director at the Pierce Family Foundation in Chicago, come from years of experience in the nonprofit sector. That experience, coupled with the interest of the Foundation’s donor, drove the Foundation’s emphasis on capacity building in general, and its evolution to investments in talent development specifically.

“We initially wanted to help grantees with the basics of operations and organizational development, especially fund-raising, but we found that the challenge wasn’t just in filling gaps in areas like donor management software or budgeting — it was personnel, skills, and capacity. We realized we needed to invest in staff, not just in tools and processes,” Philbin explains.

Investing in staff capacity is not something that the nonprofit sector has historically done well, especially

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when compared to the for-profit sector. And while many foundations make grants to help fund the technology, tools, and processes that Philbin mentions, few invest in nonprofit staff development in other critical areas, such as “Few people in the nonprofit sector are trained in how to manage and supervise other people, for example,” says Philbin. “There are a lot of cultural and market forces working against them. There’s a belief — even among many board members — that nonprofit staff don’t need or deserve corporate-style support and investment. And there’s a misperception that if an individual chooses to



work in a nonprofit, they know what they're getting into. These are shortsighted and often destructive ways of looking at nonprofit work."

As talent development became a clearer part of the vision for the Pierce Family Foundation, Philbin explains that "it took us a little time to figure out what would be most effective, and what specific programs would make the most sense for us." The foundation staff leaned into their relationships with grantees, listening carefully to the challenges nonprofits were facing and developing responses to address them.

The Foundation focuses most of its talent development investments on 12 "core grantees": organizations to which the Foundation has made a five-year commitment that includes \$25,000 in annual general operating funds

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and access to consultants who serve as "grantee support specialists" who are retained by the Foundation to provide technical assistance upon request.

## Targeting Mid-Level Talent

The Foundation's signature programs also include the Top Talent Institute (TTI), targeted specifically to mid-level managers from all disciplines, including development, finance, human resources, programs, and more. TTI is open to the Foundation's core grantees and was designed by Grantee Support Specialist Kris Torkelson.

"In my first year of working with Pierce grantees, I saw so many people who had never had any kind of management training, yet they were supervising staff," says Torkelson. "And while there were places for executive directors to go to learn these skills, the next generation of leaders coming up had no place to go. We realized that Pierce could offer that training and support before those middle managers took the next step."

Torkelson hunted for mid-level talent development models to adopt at Pierce but found none. So she developed her own approach, based on her knowledge of

executive programs and her own experience as a training program participant. The result was a cohort-based, nine-month program of three-hour, monthly sessions for 15–18 participants.

One unique aspect of TTI is that each cohort designs its own curriculum. "We really wanted participants to choose the curriculum, rather than mandate what it would be," says Torkelson. "I expected them to choose general nonprofit management topics — like how to do finance, run a board, or read a budget. But I quickly found that our participants really wanted to know more about how to manage people and teams, improve their leadership skills, and manage up the ladder. TTI became all about that."

TTI sessions have covered topics such as understanding and applying personal management styles, building teams, resolving conflict, hiring and firing, understanding intergenerational differences, managing through



change, breaking down departmental silos, and preventing burnout, among others. They've also included core operations skills such as understanding budgets, effective storytelling, and board management.

Torkelson intentionally populates each cohort with an eye toward diversity of all types, including age, race, ethnicity, gender, and roles. "There are always problems with different functions in an organization understanding each other," she explains. "We wanted our program to break those barriers by helping all participants understand and learn from one another."

In 2011, the Pierce Family Foundation piloted a one-on-one coaching program for interested TTI alumni. Although the six who participated gave the experience favorable reviews, it was determined to be cost prohibitive and was not continued.

The biggest program that the Pierce Family Foundation developed is **Peer Skill Share** — a peer learning

exchange that matches grantees who have particular areas of expertise with grantees wishing to learn. This system, which Philbin describes as "kind of like Match.com for expertise," is open to all of Pierce's 90+ grantees and quickly grew so large that the Foundation handed its operation over to Forefront (formerly the Donors Forum) in January 2016. There are now 700 agencies in the "crowdsourcing" pool and 15 foundation partners that offer access to the Peer Skill Share exchange, which makes more than 300 matches each year. Many of those who participate in the Top Talent Institute go on to seek and offer knowledge via the exchange.

"Peer skill shares can be as detailed as how to work with a specific tab in a software program or as general as how to deal with difficult board members," Philbin explains. "We customized some off-the-shelf software to run it, and now it can cover any topic that any nonprofit employee wants to discuss with someone else in the field. Many of those volunteering their expertise come from a different role or experience than those they're matched with, so that makes for an even richer cross-pollination of ideas."

## Internal Investment

The Pierce Family Foundation staff is lean. Philbin works with one program director, an IT chief, and one administrative person. As a result, she views talent development as everyone's responsibility. In addition, the Foundation's 12 core grantees receive allowances for work with a number of outside support specialists, like Torkelson.

For Top Talent Institute, the Foundation invests roughly \$15,000–\$18,000 each year for planning, facilitation, logistics, and food, as well as administrative staff time to coordinate feedback surveys of each exiting cohort.

In addition, Pierce staff and board have made investments to help promote the idea of better compensation within the nonprofit sector — including compiling and distributing annual compensation information to area nonprofits, and helping Forefront launch a regional "Real Talk about Real Costs" initiative that drew nation-

al attention to the cost of delivering quality nonprofit services (of which talent compensation is a part).

"We're all about general operating, so we've been very active in getting nonprofits and funders to look at real, direct, and indirect costs of running an organization and understanding the cost of people you're employing to do that work," says Philbin. "When people are underpaid, their tenure is short-lived, and the next person who comes in is often barely trained. That's a perpetual barrier to longer-term planning and investment in a nonprofit's own organizational development. In response to our own talent conversations with grantees, one of our support specialists now accesses annual salary survey data, compiles it, and scrubs it down to usable information. Then she meets with groups to talk through where they want to fall in terms of leading, lagging, or meeting the average. Often this helps them see where salary might be a factor in turnover."



## Quick Case 1

### Uncommon Value

Sarah Borgeson, director of corporate and foundation relations at the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago, likes learning from others. She's curious and loves sitting down with someone new. That's not an opportunity that many mid-level nonprofit employees get to embrace in the Chicago area.

"You have a lot of entry-level training and then there are executive director boot camps, but the middle is so key and a lot of institutions are still trying to figure out that space," Borgeson observes. "The Top Talent Institute was one of the most valuable experiences I've found."

The multidisciplinary nature of the program was particularly attractive to Borgeson, who at the time had been senior associate for corporate and foundation relations at a housing organization for several years.

"This was a chance to get outside and see how others approach different lines of business," she says. "It's always beneficial to hear about similar experiences and share wisdom and knowledge. And it's helpful to hear the anecdotes and stories — the real-life experiences that people will share in a safe, confidential space — versus a training where you're thinking in the abstract). That's a great value of the cohort approach.

"In particular, I learned a lot from the differences in experiences between different age groups. So often you interact with people who are similar to your own age, and learning from intergenerational dialog was key."

But the biggest benefit overall, says Borgeson, was developing management skills. "I got a great overview from TTI, including conflict resolution, hiring, firing, and more. And I did it at a faster pace than I would have on my own. I interacted with people who have gone through various issues and experiences that I may not even have imagined. But now I'm ready, or at least have an idea of how to deal with those issues if they arise."

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A couple of years after completing TTI, Borgeson moved to a higher position in a new organization. However, she emphasizes that TTI was not just a career-builder for her; gave her the capacity to strengthen development practices at her past and current organizations as well.

"Experiences for mid-level staff are invaluable to organizations because they are a way to engage and retain talent and expand knowledge. The multidisciplinary approach provides knowledge about different types of fields, and I was able to bring back examples of what other organizations were doing. That helped my agency connect with and learn from other nonprofits in the community. To have that kind of resource available — at no cost — is an incredible value."

Borgeson also brought her new knowledge to a new post where she supervises a staff of her own. Although this organization is not a Pierce Family Foundation grantee, she hopes her staff will have similar development opportunities.

"Resources like TTI have shown me the importance of developing staff in a way that I might not have realized otherwise. I will highly encourage my staff to take advantage of any opportunity like this that comes their way. I'll definitely be proactive in presenting opportunities and making the space and time for them to engage. We owe it to our communities to do the best job we possibly can. And if you want to do the best you can, you have to invest in the people who are doing the work."



## Quick Case 2

### Coming Full Circle

When she was director of development at Spanish Coalition for Housing, Gabriela Román saw very few opportunities in the Chicago area for middle managers who wanted to grow professionally, learn about different areas of operation within an organization, and learn how to manage other staff. When she heard about Pierce's Top Talent Institute, she jumped at the chance, never realizing how quickly she'd need to apply her new learning.

Toward the end of her TTI experience, there was a sudden leadership departure at her organization, and the board asked Román to take the reins as interim executive director. Because the TTI curriculum had covered issues beyond development, such as HR and finance and management skills, Román felt more confident in accepting the interim post. But the support from the Pierce Family Foundation didn't stop there.

"After TTI, I immediately engaged in the Peer Skill Share," Román says. "I asked to be matched with other interim EDs, because I had a lot of questions. I was

able to talk with those who had been interims about how they worked with their staff and the board, and how they managed the change within the organization. As an interim ED, one big challenge is that it's not a permanent job, so you must get things done in a short time frame. The peers I talked to explained that I had to accept that the organization was mine to run now and made sure that I had a short-term action plan for all the activities I needed to do. They gave me excellent advice, which ultimately helped me secure the full-time executive director job."

Now Román uses Peer Skill Share to convey her own knowledge to others, and she has participated in sessions about supervising people, using social media, and even what it's like to be an interim executive director.

"It all came full circle," she says.

The same is true for TTI. After her own experience, Román sent four other staff members through the program: an accounting manager, an HR manager, a development manager, and a counselor. Since completing TTI, two of Román's staff have been promoted within the organization.

"In order to fulfill our mission, we need the best set of people," says Román. "From my experience, it's been better to develop our own people than to hire from the outside, because our line of work is so narrow. I definitely want to develop a pipeline of leaders, especially among those who have been here for a while, so that our organization can replenish itself. Programs like Top Talent Institute and Peer Skill Share enhance my staff's skills so they are ready to lead and advance."

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## Lessons Learned

1

### Tie talent investments to outcomes

If funders want to see a particular outcome from grant-making, they must take into consideration the capacity of the staff who will be expected to achieve it. If the capacity is not there, the outcome is not likely to happen. Funders should ask, “Who’s going to staff this effort, and how reasonable and realistic is that?” — then fund talent needs accordingly.

3

### Supervisory skill is a growth area

In the nonprofit sector in general, there is very little focus on teaching people how to supervise and manage, nor on how to develop the talent of those they supervise. This is an area in which skill development is sorely needed, and it’s an area of potential investment for funders who want to help create a nonprofit-specific curriculum, approach, or model that could be widely applied in multiple disciplines.

2

### Talent turnover is not a bad thing

There are many examples of individuals who have increased their personal capacity and then left their organizations for greener pastures. Turnover is a fact of life, but it shouldn’t be seen as a deterrent to talent development. Instead, funders and nonprofits should look for ways to institutionalize the knowledge that individuals develop so that it stays with an organization even if individuals leave. Funders also should realize that when talented individuals move from one organization to another, they are further benefitting the sector overall because they are sharing and applying the skills and knowledge they’ve learned more broadly.

4

### Acknowledge participation

Small financial investments can make a big difference. The Pierce Family Foundation has supplied agencies of TTI participants with \$250 parking stipends, as well as providing individual participants with commemorative desk sculptures to mark their completion of the program. It also provides small stipends to those who offer their expertise through Peer Skill Share. While minimal in terms of cost, these actions show participants and their organizations that the Foundation values their time and their contributions to the programs.



## Looking Forward

When contemplating the future of Pierce's investment in talent development, Philbin envisions a deeper relationship with a smaller number of organizations. Now that the broad Peer Skill Share program is operated by Forefront, the foundation can add more to the menu for its core grantees.

Pierce will explore new ways to build out the Top Talent Initiative, using suggestions from participants as a guiding light. It also hopes to do more to support succession planning within its grantee base, as it sees a number of nonprofits facing leadership transitions in the near future.

And while they're at it, Philbin and her team would like to figure out a way to conduct board education about the importance of investments in talent compensation.

"We're asking, as a funder, what we can do to advance conversations about making compensation more appropriate for nonprofit employees," she says. "What makes sense for us to look at? You can't just say to a nonprofit, 'You should pay your people more.' It's all connected to talent development and capacity building. For example, an agency can't recruit more effectively until it can compensate; it can't compensate until it has strong fund-raising; and it can't have strong fund-raising until it has strong talent. It's all tied together, and it all has an impact on our effectiveness as a sector."







## Pierce Family Foundation Leadership Programs

Program name	Top Talent Institute	Peer Skill Share	Mid-level Coaching (no longer funded)
Target participants	Mid-level leaders at 12 “core grantee” organizations	Any staff at all grantee organizations supported by participating funders	Mid-level leaders at core grantee organizations
Number of participants per year	15-18	300 + matches involving 600+ people	6
Content partner	Contracted grantee support specialist and various experts	Now operated by <b>Forefront</b> of Chicago (transferred in 2016)	Various vetted coaches
Topics covered	Determined by preferences of each cohort	Tailored to the needs of the individual	Tailored to the needs of the individual
Time commitment	9 months	One meeting to several meetings	6–8 months
Annual program cost	\$15,000–\$18,000	\$30,000–\$40,000 for contractual coordinator/admin, software fees	Tailored to the needs of the individual
Year started	2011	2008	2013 pilot



## About Fund the People



Fund the People is the national campaign to maximize investment in the nonprofit workforce. To achieve this goal, we make the case, equip for action, and build a movement to change the attitudes and behaviors of funders, fundraising nonprofits, and the intermediaries that support them. There is a long-standing, sector-wide deficit of investment in the nonprofit workforce. Nonprofit professionals work in environments typified by high burnout and stretched resources. So there is a real demand for equitable salaries and benefits; more and better professional development; improved

human resources functions; and healthy organizational culture. Together, we can address these challenges by reshaping existing resources to prioritize nonprofit people as the central asset of nonprofit performance. Now more than ever, we can ensure that America's civic leadership is diverse, well-supported, high-performing, and sustainable for the long haul. Launched in 2014 and headquartered in Beacon, NY, Fund the People (originally known as Talent Philanthropy Project) is a project of Community Partners. Our work is informed by an Advisory Council of diverse leaders and a team of skilled staff and consultants, and is supported by a coalition of regional and national foundations.

To learn more about Fund the People visit: [fundthepeople.org](http://fundthepeople.org)

## About Putnam Consulting Group



### Putnam Consulting Group

*Confident Giving • Dramatic Return*

Authored by Elizabeth Russell and Kris Putnam-Walkerly, MSW, Putnam Consulting Group.

Fund the People commissioned Putnam Consulting Group to produce this field story. This is part of the field story collection in the Fund the People Toolkit, a source of practical resources meant to help funders and nonprofits to maximize their investment in the nonprofit workforce.

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