

Thought swap

Springboard's executive jam sessions help nonprofits avoid business pitfalls

Steve Brier has 90 minutes to solve his problems.

Brier is executive director of the Little Dolphin School, a nonprofit preschool with campuses in Scarborough and Westbrook. At 7:30 on a recent Friday morning, Brier fires up his Power Point presentation for the latest Springboard session, a free brainstorming workshop for nonprofits sponsored by Common Good Ventures in Brunswick.

In every Springboard, a nonprofit executive presents a management problem to a panel of eight to 10 business people in a conference room at the Portland office of the VIA Group. Led by a volunteer facilitator and fueled by free bagels and coffee, the panelists offer suggestions on how the nonprofit can make itself stronger — how it can grow, for example, or weather a transition in leadership. By the end of the 90 minutes, promptly at 9 a.m., the idea is the nonprofit seeking guidance leaves with a boatload of direction.

More than 50 nonprofits have participated in Springboard since CGV launched the program in 2001. The program benefits nonprofits because the panelists and the presenter usually have never met before, so they can feel more comfortable being honest, explains Kristin Majeska, CGV executive director. "People can speak uncensored," she says. "When [nonprofits] are in relationships with boards, those [assessments] might not come out as easily."

To find nonprofits for Springboard, CGV typically asks for referrals from members of its "Corporate Circle," all of whom have donated at least \$1,000 to CGV. The Corporate Circle, Majeska says, often suggest nonprofit executives who'd be "receptive to ideas that are sometimes other than the status quo." Majeska also typically finds Springboard advisors from Corporate Circle referrals, but interested execs can also write to CGV's Anne Verrill to discuss participating in Springboard.



PHOTO/KERRY ELSON

Business therapy: Steve Brier, executive director of the Little Dolphin School, with Springboard panelists (l. to r.) Michael Bourque of MEMIC, Nancy Fischman of L.L.Bean, consultant Jim Ahearne and Chris Spoh of Maine Angels.

Brier's problem at this Springboard meeting is money. During his 10 minute presentation, he says he wants to add campuses to meet demand, but not until he can do so affordably. For now, tuition covers 95% of Little Dolphin's expenses, and the remainder comes out of Brier's bank account. Grant applications haven't worked out. "That last five percent is killing us," he says.

The panelists — including executives from L.L.Bean, VIA and MEMIC — offer their take. Could Brier franchise the Little Dolphin School? What about offering high-margin organic lunches for students? Or setting up on-site care at businesses like Idexx and Maine Medical Center? Panelist Chris Spoh suggests Brier needs to start from the beginning. "You don't lack for customers, so it's not a demand issue," says Spoh, chair of the investment group Maine Angels. "The problem is you don't have a business

plan that can support this."

At around 8:30 a.m., the session begins to wind down. "Any last thoughts about our process here today?" the facilitator asks. Most panelists advise Brier to get a stronger, well-connected board and invest in a development director who can secure national grants.

Four days later, speaking by phone from his Westbrook campus, Brier says Springboard affirmed his own concerns that he needs better leadership. "It was great [validation] that I need a better development director and a stronger board," he says. He also hopes a few panelists might volunteer more of their time. "I certainly hope I'm contacted by some of them because I could use them on my side."

Kerry Elson