



Inspiring nonprofits to greatness through the leaders among us.

 **The Gold Standard**

Thursday, November 21, 2013

Annenberg Alchemy Voices: David Andrés Kietzman

by David Andrés Kietzman - Youth Speak Collective



Effective nonprofits are built on commitment.

But nonprofit training can sometimes be a commitment-free zone – where we take a break from work, sit and listen to information we’ve probably heard before, and leave unchanged.

Annenberg Alchemy is different. You don’t even get to walk in the door unless you make a commitment up front.

The main commitment is that the executive director and the board chair of the organization *must attend all Alchemy sessions together*. I’m the executive director for [Youth Speak Collective](#). We help low-income, at-risk youth from the

Northeast San Fernando Valley to develop – and participate in – programs that strengthen their own neighborhoods.

About three years ago, I attended the Alchemy Leadership Seminar with my board chair at the time, Norma Cardenas. We were surprised by a few things. All of them good.



- **The Annenberg Foundation set very high expectations.** For us and for themselves. They had a fresh take on the information they gave us, and they obviously put a lot of time into making sure the program was relevant.
- **The staff of the foundation interacted extensively with all the participants** – pretty much erasing the line that can exist between funders and nonprofits.
- **The participants came from all over the county** and worked in lots of different program areas. In a group of 20 people, I knew just one person. That was great for relationship-building.

One of the best things for the board chair and me was speaking candidly about our organization, its issues and its potential for growth - not just with each other, but with the other nonprofits in the room.

When we arrived at the training, our board performance was good. By the end of the training, we had a picture of how we could make that performance great.

To reach that goal, my board chair and I decided we needed to meet more often – face-to-face, not just over the phone – so we could be on the same page when it came to leading our organization.

Youth Speak Collective ended up implementing a consent agenda for board meetings and creating two-year agreements for each board member to sign. But the biggest effect of the Alchemy training came from this simple fact: *board members could see that their executive director and their board chair were united.* Our commitment made it easier for our board members to further their own commitments to our organization.

Here's an example. We used to ask our board members to give us the business cards of ten of their colleagues to contact as prospective donors. We came away from our Alchemy training with the idea that board members needed to be more personally active in fundraising. So I started joking with my board members – as well as the members of our advisory council – that I should know ten of their closest friends, and they should know ten of mine. If we're all committed to this cause, I would say to them, we should be introducing our friends to Youth Speak Collective and seeing them at events. Eventually, we started doing mini-fundraisers and friendraisers tapping into the circles of people that board members know. These are small events, 20-30 people, but they've been really effective in building new friends for our organization.

This October, we started Alchemy+.

The first session, with trainers from the Nonprofit Finance Fund, was pretty incredible. They didn't just tell us what to do; they showed us how to do it.

Sometimes we nonprofits look at finances just through the board's lens, or the lens of program staff or a particular funder. But this session helped us look at multiple perspectives and say – "Okay, looking at the whole pie, this is what an effective organization has to have in place."

I was inspired. After the finance session, I spent a half-day with my accounting manager reviewing the Alchemy+ information.

We're a growing organization, with an annual budget of about \$1 million. Like other nonprofits, we sometimes just look at the numbers and try to figure out what happened. Now we are looking at doing financial forecasting so we can more accurately predict cash flow for the year.

At Youth Speak Collective, we've learned that every kid has a different hook that is going to keep him or her engaged in school, help him or her stay out of trouble and help him or her graduate from high school and go on to college. So our goal is to find that hook. It might be creating a mural or learning how to shoot a video or taking care of a community garden or just meeting the right person who can act as a mentor or a friend. We want youth to commit to something – commit to speaking up about issues in their community and being leaders in their schools and families.

Everyone says they want their organization to grow or their board to grow, but Alchemy is more than just words. It means being mentally ready to commit to the work it takes to make growth happen. I like that.

Alchemy is challenging. But the commitment it demands can spread within your nonprofit. When staff and board members see their board chair and executive director united for growth, really beneficial things can happen.