

Service Spotlight: Executive Coaching - Full Transcript

Maree G. Bullock, Vice President, The Alford Group: We at the Alford Group are honored to be joined today with Christy Brown. Christy Brown is the Chief Executive Officer of the Girl Scouts of Wisconsin Southeast. She came to the Alford Group seeking strategic coaching, and we had the privilege of providing that service to her and to the Girl Scouts. I'm also today joined by Lieve Hendren, a consultant with The Alford Group.

Today we're going to interview Christy regarding some of her thoughts, outcomes and insights regarding strategic coaching. So let's kick it off. Christy, the first question would ask is **what brought you to The Alford Group? Was there a specific problem you were trying to solve? What was the issue that you wanted help with or assistance with?**

Christy L. Brown, CEO, Girl Scouts of Wisconsin Southeast: Actually, the biggest issue was that I was new to the CEO role when I entered this job in 2012. My board decided that it might be a good option for me to have additional professional development, since I have not been in a CEO role previously. It was my decision though. They said, if you feel like you need it, please do it. If not that's fine. I felt that because it was a new role for me, I would benefit greatly from being able to have someone else to learn from, someone who was familiar with the challenges of my new role. So we sought out a consulting group.

So our CFO did the initial evaluation. She did an initial evaluation looking at any consulting firm or consultants who had nonprofit backgrounds, familiarity with philanthropy and who would be able to have other clients with a broad background. We didn't want someone who had only consulted, for example, five times with other CEOs. We wanted someone who had a breadth of experience, was knowledgeable, and had a good reputation. Actually our CFO was familiar with the Alford Group. Then I did an evaluation and interviewed potential consultants.

When I spoke with Maree, I thought, this seems like it would be a match made in heaven! Not only did she have the nonprofit experience, but she came from a business background. I was not coming traditional route myself. She had been engaged with finance, which is what my previous role had been as Vice Chancellor for Finance and Administrative Affairs.

Although the firm came highly recommended, not only by my CFO but also from others, I felt like I was matched with was a person who would be able to give me great guidance. Because Maree had walked in my shoes.

Maree G. Bullock: Christy, I remember so well that telephone interview. You certainly did your due diligence. You had a lot of questions. You ask a lot of the right questions. And so we were honored then to be chosen as your partner in this initiative. **If you were to articulate three or four benefits or outcomes from executive coaching, what would those be?**

Christy L. Brown: I work at Girl Scouts, where we build girls' courage, competence and character. I don't know that Maree helped build my character, but I do feel like in this role, she helped build my courage and confidence as a new CEO.

I gained confidence every time I spoke with Maree, because she would usually say, "You are on the right path." She would validate my thinking about things. She never said, "That's the wrong thing." I feel as though she would ask me gentle questions and probing questions that would help me think about another approach.

Sometimes she had a different perspective on the issue that I was thinking about, but there never was a hard “no” from her. There was always a gentle kind of probing. Asking questions is the best thing that anyone can do. You always learn from that. She also gave me examples from her own experience of things that she had confronted that might have been similar. That was always helpful as well.

I needed some guidance and a plan and assessment of our philanthropic practices and development. Because the Alford Group had that as an area of expertise, we took advantage of that opportunity to collaborate. That was a definitely a benefit not only of using Maree, but also of partnering with the firm in addition to the Executive Coaching. The Alford Group has a great portfolio of services that you provide. The partnership was good in that respect.

Another benefit was that I had the courage, coming to the role from a different place, that my thought process was generally solid. In the beginning I was trepidatious about making judgements on things that I didn't know about. I didn't come from a membership organization or a philanthropic background, but I did see things with my staff that I thought that did not seem quite right to me.

Maree would say, “Stick with your instincts. You don't have the courage to go forward on the path that you're going on because you are correct. And often you come, Christy, from a different perspective which is valuable.” Many of the staff that I was working with had been there for years. And Maree said, “Have the courage to go by your convictions. If you think that they're going in the wrong direction say, I think we need to go this way. They'll definitely listen.” I've always been an empathetic, listening leader, but she said, “Listen to them and then make a decision based on your own intuition.”

Lieve Hendren, CFRE, Consultant, The Alford Group: That's wonderful. And as you stepped more fully into those leadership goals and benefits, **I'm sure that the coaching process was not only a professional journey, but also a personal journey. Would you share with us how you liked that process as it unfolded?**

Christy L. Brown: I liked the process. Maree was able to validate a lot of things that I was doing. She gave me professional tools that I continue to use to this day. Maree gave me structure and the 30-60-90-day tool. She helped me realize that you can't just be thinking about today. Her focus was helpful to me in terms of my own professional journey. It's something that I've been able to use going forward. I feel more comfortable about my leadership style.

I do not have to be the kind of leader that I have seen in the past. Maree empowered me as a leader to step into my own kind of leadership. I had never been a CEO. I had been in organizations in other roles, but it was different being the person at the top where all of the responsibility or liability or accountability fell. With Maree's help, I knew I can handle this. You can own your leadership style, be yourself, and keep going forward. That will help me in any role that I might ever have in the future.

Lieve Hendren: Might you tell us a little bit about the then and now? It's been quite a while since that strategic coaching process. **Now that you've really stepped into your new role, how have you and your organization changed?**

Christy L. Brown: We've changed in the way that we're able to better serve our membership. Because of Maree's insight and the things that she was able to help me understand when I entered the role, I've become more visible and ensure our service to all aspects of our

community, which were also goals of the Board. Previously we were not serving under-represented populations in our community. That was one of our biggest challenges.

Another challenge was that staff were telling me we could not carry out certain initiatives wanted by the board because it was not sustainable.

Maree encouraged me to look at what the staff were saying and consider, "how can we look at this differently? How can we move forward?" Today we have been serving that same population and grown our urban initiative. We increased our Latina initiative by 48% since I've been here. Now this year is a setback because of COVID, but prior to COVID we've had growth in our outreach program. And I think being able to bounce ideas off of Maree was very helpful in charting that course.

Maree helped me reframe the problem. We discussed, what is it that the global board wants us to do? How might we get to that goal? Maree's business advice in terms of looking at the whole picture of what we're doing right helped us get good perspective.

The iconic cookie sale produces about 60% of the revenue that girl scout thing uses to facilitate girl programming, adult membership, training, and all those types of things.

And Maree helped me see that, you know, you've got to keep your eye on how you're building revenue and maintaining revenue as you're moving forward, because we also could not continue to invest in the same levels that we had in our urban initiative and our Latino initiative when they were not sustainable in the long-term. I had to look at how we could continue to get membership revenue while also fund outreach through philanthropy or other sources to realize our mission to have access and equity for underrepresented groups.

I think Maree had a good business focus to keep my eyes focused on the whole picture and the whole pie chart. We have been able to go up to second in the United States for market share. We were between tenth and fifth when I arrived in girl scouting. The average across the United States is about 5% of girls who are able to be in girl scouting. Fiscal year 2020, we were 10.7% of our population in girl scouting. Had we been able to serve Milwaukee and other counties, which is where our populations of color primarily exist, it would have been higher. We've been able to grow and maintain that growth thanks to Maree, because of the insight that she gave me when I arrived. I don't know that I would have been able to do had I not had Maree's guidance and support.

Coaching it not only support, it's also venting. And Maree saying, don't stress about that. She kept my eyes on the important things. I was able to talk with her when I needed to vent to somebody. You cannot vent to your board, but I was able to do that with Maree as well.

Lieve Hendren: Every part of organizational growth certainly deserves a very hearty congratulations. It looks like you're very proud of your whole organization and those achievements and in carrying out your mission.

Christy L. Brown: Certainly. And I would top it off by saying we also more fiscally healthy now than we have been. So we've been able to maintain membership, maintain mission, and maintain the money that we need to do all of the things we want to do for girls.

Maree G. Bullock: Thank you, Christy. You are a shining example of leadership. The Alford Group is proud to call you a partner.

Christy L. Brown: Thank you so much. I could not have done it without you. And because of you, 16,000 girls and 6,500 adults are enjoying girl scouting in south Southeastern Wisconsin.