It is 8:00 a.m. on Friday, April 27th, as 600 people start arriving to take part in the Urban League of Broward County’s Grand Opening of The Community Empowerment Center. The 28,000 sq. ft. center, in the heart of Ft. Lauderdale, is impressive in its architectural design and reason for being. A cross-section of the community of all races, ethnicity and walks of life are present for this much anticipated opening, including people who have been served by the Urban League, politicians and business leaders from various companies such JM Family Enterprises. This is a project that began after several years of planning, but eighteen months prior to this opening, president and chief executive officer, Dr. Germaine Smith-Baugh, brought it to her CEO Forum group for discussion.

The National Urban League began 102 years ago, and for the past 37 years, the league in Broward County has been serving 8,000 children, families and adults annually through education, youth development, workforce development, housing counseling, foreclosure intervention and community and economic development. With the new center, that number is expected to double and, among other things, it will offer state-of-the-art digital classrooms where clients can use videoconferencing technology and other high tech equipment. It will provide private rooms for counselors and families to meet in, and it will continue to offer foreclosure prevention services, health education and job-training. The center is not just open for minorities, “We embrace anyone who needs services to improve themselves economically,” said Smith-Baugh.

Three meetings into her CEO Forum group, Smith-Baugh made a presentation about the Community Empowerment Center -- why they chose to build it and how they planned to raise 8.2 million dollars to build it. Over the course of 18 months, her group, which is headed by Louise Poirier of Balfour Beatty Construction, and comprised of women in the medical and environmental services, manufacturing, psychology and insurance industries were able to serve as her sounding board. “Because they were in the mindset of understanding my business, my CEO Forum group was able to ask a lot of clarifying questions and provide points of information that really helped me refine what we call in our world our Case for Support”, says Smith-Baugh. As a result, she was able to raise over 4 million of the 8.2 million needed. They also kept her on track by asking how things were going with the fundraising and construction, and as she put it, “They were with me the entire time.”

The second thing that her forum group did was allow her to present issues regarding the management of people and organizational strategy. The league employs close to 50 staff members, not including contractors. The group gave feedback regarding things that she had done well and things that she needed to rethink. She recalls after a five-hour session, that she was able to leave with additional tools in her toolbox in terms of being able to go back and handle challenging issues. Smith-Baugh also says that when others presented their human resource and capital management issues, she was able to give feedback on things that have worked for her, thereby validating some of the strategies that she had already put in place.

While the grand opening of the Community Empowerment Center was a huge success, Smith-Baugh has a lot more work and fundraising to do. To date, she has forum members outside of her group, who have become vendors of the Urban League, and she has received small philanthropic donations. She’s been able to strategize and re-strategize her game plan in support of business goals and resolve challenging issues. She has been a part of her CEO Forum group for the past three years, and she continues to look forward to her meetings. “The benefit of a forum group is great, but I also have to give credit to TCI, because the network of businesses it has to offer has really opened doors to other networks, and I’ve benefited tremendously. That combination in business is what you need.”

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