



I've always loved the expression, "Where the rubber meets the road." Until recently, I had no idea how or when that phrase slipped into my lexicon or where it originated. So, I did what all curious minds do. I googled it. Surprise. The idiom trail leads back to the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company and a TV commercial jingle from the mid-1960s.

Wherever wheels are turning,  
No matter what the load,  
The name that's known is Firestone,  
Where the rubber meets the road...

Double surprise. My grandfather, Pepe, was an engineer with Firestone in Fall River. Ok, so I discovered the subliminal source, but I really wasn't expecting a *literal* definition. After a little more googling, I found the metaphorical meaning: *the point at which a theory or idea is put to a practical test; where the real work happens*. And that's the definition I know and love. At that point in an organization--where the rubber meets the road--we're not talking theoretically anymore. We're in the car, shifting into drive, and accelerating.

In my last column, [Superheroes](#), I told you about the Institute for Nonprofit Practice's (INP) Core Certificate Program. The Foundation helped bring this award-winning leadership development program to the Cape and Islands in 2016 through a unique funder collaborative. Thirty-two nonprofits executives have graduated so far; 24 more will enter what I consider "Superhero Training Headquarters" this fall.

Over the next seven months, they'll be immersed in intensive management seminars, practice seminars, and one-on-one mentoring sessions. They'll receive cutting-edge training on capacity-building, fundraising, board development, volunteer recruitment, and community engagement. They'll also start building a local peer network that will support and strengthen them long after the program ends. And, when they graduate next spring, they'll be "burning rubber" just like the graduates before them.

Christine Menard, the Executive Director of the Family Pantry of Cape Cod, graduated from INP's inaugural class on Cape Cod in 2017. After a 30-plus-year career in Corporate America, Chris assumed the key role in this nonprofit organization which runs pantries in Harwich and on the Cape Cod Community College campus and partners with the Greater Boston Food Bank to supply 30 pantries/soup kitchens on Cape Cod and the Islands. The pantries serve over 9,300 clients and distribute over 73,000 bags of groceries every year. That's about 1.5 million meals. The bulk of her clients are working families. Most of her workers are volunteers--about 650 to be exact. Last year, she had several major internal projects that needed heavy volunteer buy-in, so she integrated components of a volunteer model she learned at the Institute into the process to develop motivated stakeholders and keep the projects on time and on track.

Not all learning leads to textbook solutions. Ask Jay Coburn, another 2017 alum of the Institute for Nonprofit Practice class on Cape Cod. As the CEO of the Community Development Partnership in Eastham, Jay is dealing with major issues across the Lower Cape, chief among them, the lack of affordable housing. When you're the head of an organization, especially a small nonprofit, there's that inevitable pull: how to stay focused on moving the organization forward while maintaining the programs and systems in place. The reflective leadership discussions throughout the program brought Jay clarity. It also coincided with a staff opening. Instead of filling the existing position, though, he restructured it entirely. He hired a "deputy" to supervise some of his direct reports and oversee the day-to-day operations, so he could focus on strategic development and community leadership.

The INP program is also fueling nonprofit collaborations. Three nonprofit leaders from the 2017 cohort are providing wrap-around services to Cape Cod Children's Place, led by classmate Cindy Horgan. The Family Pantry's Healthy Meals in Motion mobile pantry is distributing food to its clients. Big Brothers Big Sisters on Cape Cod and the Islands is matching mentors to children in need, and the Community Development Partnership is working on clients' housing issues.

The 2018 class, which graduated in May, is also gaining traction. They're already co-hosting conferences, sharing contacts and resources, and supporting each other with sponsorships and grants.

When we strengthen our nonprofit leaders, we strengthen our entire community. They lead their individual organizations more effectively; they collaborate more; they problem-solve collectively. This isn't a theory; this is progress in motion. Post-class is where the rubber meets the road. It's where the real work begins. And we're all working smarter because of the intensive training we received.

**THE TAKEAWAY:** In general, if you are a donor or funder, look for ways to invest in people. Specifically, hit the road with us. Join our funder collaborative to help ensure we can continue to offer INP's Core Certificate Program to local nonprofit leaders every year, or donate to the Foundation to help power up other initiatives that bring valuable resources and opportunities to our nonprofit community.

**PS.** I'm in hot negotiations for a new vehicle. Pepe would be proud if I could clinch the deal with a set of Firestone tires!