



## **Girls' Leadership Guide:** *The Founder's Loneliness: Why You Need a Peer Group*

### **Ivy Walker**

Serial Entrepreneur, Author & Risk Management Expert  
Treasurer, S.H.A.U.N. Foundation for Girls

You're making decisions that nobody else in your organization can make. You're holding the vision while managing the budget while navigating funder relationships while processing the weight of what you're trying to do for girls who need what you're offering. And you're doing it mostly alone.

This isn't metaphorical loneliness. It's the loneliness that comes with leadership.

Your board doesn't live this daily. Your staff looks to you for stability. Your funders want confidence, not doubt. Your family doesn't fully understand why you're this invested. So you compartmentalize. You perform competence. You try to figure it all out on your own.

Then something shifts. A funder pulls out, a key staff member leaves, a girl's crisis hits you harder than you expected and you realize you have nobody to call who understands what this feels like.

### **Why peer groups are different from mentors, therapists, or boards**

A mentor offers guidance but usually from a distance. A therapist offers processing but isn't navigating the same constraints. Your board offers accountability but not always psychological safety. A peer group (aka an accountability group) offers something else: people in the trenches with you facing similar dilemmas who are willing to be honest about how hard this is.

Peer groups work because nobody's performing. You're not proving anything. You're not just seeking advice; you're also bearing witness to each other's reality.

### **What it means when someone actually "gets it"**

People who get it don't need to have identical contexts. They just need to understand:

- The isolation of leading work centered on identity in a political climate that's hostile to that work
- The weight of knowing girls are counting on you

- The tension between staying true to your vision and keeping the organization alive
- That you can't just "move on" because the work matters too much
- That leadership in this space requires you to be both visionary and operator, both strategist and therapist to your team

## How to find or build a peer group

**Ask your peers what they do for support.** If they tell you about existing peer groups, consider joining one. If not, consider starting your own. You don't need ten people. Three to five other leaders doing similar work or who understand the landscape you're working in will suffice.

**Look for a mix of people slightly ahead and slightly behind.** Someone ten years into their nonprofit offers different wisdom than someone in year two. You need both.

**Be specific about what you need.** Are you looking for strategic feedback? Emotional support? Reality-checking on decisions? Understanding what you need will help you choose the best mix of people for you.

**Go deeper than networking.** Surface-level peer groups don't work. You need explicit agreements about confidentiality, honesty, and showing up. It requires vulnerability that doesn't happen at conference breakfasts.

**Meet regularly.** Quarterly is minimum. Monthly is better. Consistency matters more than quantity of people.

## The return

When you have people who get it, you stop performing quite so hard. You can say "I don't know" and "this is harder than I thought", and "I'm not sure I'm the right person to lead this anymore." You can be honest about trade-offs without someone trying to fix you.

Your girls need you whole. That requires you not to be alone.

Interested in learning more about peer groups? Check out this webinar I did on the concept a few years ago: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LU6R9tnzinI>