



Deborah Laurel, The Peer Learning Institute

IB's Professional of the Week is the premier way to meet Dane County's professionals. This week features Deborah Laurel, co-founder and chief learning officer, The Peer Learning Institute.

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[Site Staff](#)



What are the most challenging and rewarding aspects of your job and why?

The challenge is getting the word out about our unique peer-learning process for management development. The reward is seeing managers who had no previous management training or experience start to use management and interpersonal communication skills that increase their employees' engagement, performance, and retention. The managers and their employees are much happier!

Who do you look up to or admire in business and why?

I admire Gail Johnson, who is the corporate relocation manager/concierge director for Restaino & Associates Realtors. She is incredibly successful, due in great part to her ability to develop and sustain relationships with a wide variety of organizations. She is also a wonderful mentor, willing to brainstorm and share practical suggestions for business development and provide very useful referrals.

What has been the high point of your career so far?

As a curriculum designer and facilitative trainer for over 35 years, the high point of my career has been working with USAID [United States Agency for International Development] to build training competencies in Croatia, Nigeria, Zambia, Kenya, Jordan, and UAE. I have loved meeting the people, experiencing their cultures, sharing stories, and learning from each other. It is a wonderful feeling to see trainers and managers use what they've learned to make a real difference in their worlds.

Thinking back on your career, what advice would you give your 21-year-old self?

Trust in your strengths and your ability to continually learn and pivot. When opportunities present themselves, jump in with both feet. Don't let imposter syndrome derail you. Don't be afraid to walk away when work situations become damaging to you personally and professionally. Make a concerted effort to work with international agencies so you can learn and grow as you travel the world.

What would you say are the best things about living and working in Dane County?

This is a great place to raise and educate a family. The amount of cultural, ethnic, and educational events is astounding. State government agencies, the university, the vocational college, and companies of varying sizes provide huge opportunities for building a business. I love the lakes, the gardens, the small town feel of Madison, and its liberal values.

Do you have any secret talents or abilities that people would be surprised to discover?

I'm a playwright and an actress. I co-founded the first feminist theatre in the Midwest, The Apple Corps Ltd. We produced plays I wrote — *Empty Space Blues* and *Women Alone Together* — and toured the state with an NEA grant, performing at universities and NOW conferences.

What are your guilty pleasures?

I love to read mysteries that have female protagonists, are well written, and have a sense of humor. If a copy is around, I'll read *People* magazine. Going for long walks listening to audio books is a daily favorite pastime. I had my children 18 years apart, so I get to enjoy them as they live their lives. I enjoy making bread. The first time I made a yeast bread, I waited two days for the yeast to bubble. It did not turn out well.