

BOARD DEVELOPMENT CONSULTING

Case Study: Lifeline Theatre

Founded in 1982, Lifeline Theatre is dedicated to performing art that is relevant to its surrounding community through original literary adaptations. Theatrical performances include three MainStage and three KidSeries shows each season, as well as various programming for adults and children for which Lifeline has received numerous awards and nominations.

The theatre was faced with some of the universal challenges that many non-profit arts groups encounter: administrative transitions, the need to strengthen the organization's infrastructure to position the theatre for growth, and to reinforce the board's role to support that growth. With a firm desire to move the board and organization forward, Lifeline Theatre took the Arts & Business Council's (A&BC) SmARTscope[®] assessment, which helps arts groups pinpoint opportunities for improvement and growth as it measures management-related capacity and performance, forming an ideal basis for an organization's strategic planning.

After undergoing its smARTscope[®] assessment in 2006, the organization's board approached A&BC's Board Development Consulting (BDC), a service specifically designed to improve board effectiveness in non-profit arts groups. A&BC senior consultants, Tim Ridge and Steve Carlson, were chosen to work with Lifeline to develop the theatre's plan of action. Both consultants brought impressive credentials to the project and with their guidance in the initial assessment, the organization uncovered the primary issues that needed to be addressed.

The consultants facilitated Lifeline's board retreat in June 2007, which identified a number of opportunities for organizational growth. "At the conclusion of the retreat, the board had a clearer view of what they needed to get done, who would be responsible for doing it, and what the likely outcomes would be," Ridge said. The board of this mid-sized theatre company positioned itself to move from a working board to a governing board, with clear objectives to develop a fundraising plan and to manage the significant cultural change envisioned by the Board and company.

With continued support from their BDC consultants, the necessary organizational structure fell into place. "The menial tasks with the board are now off the table," Lifeline's Board President Donna Mavros said, "and now we can look to create a strategic plan." To date, the board conducted a workshop focused on fundraising, particularly as it related to the theatre's 25th anniversary benefit, which was a great success far exceeding the organization's expectations and budget. Planning is also underway for a second workshop to lay the foundation for a long term strategic plan.

"The initial success has been energizing the board," Ridge said of the results to date, "having them understand and embrace the responsibilities in moving the board to the next level." Ridge describes his work with Lifeline not as a project that is complete, but as an ongoing process that has helped to position the organization for change, as the board now acts as one, effective governing body.

Mavros, and Lifeline's Managing Director, Angelo Barone, noted that in order to gain this momentum and to minimize the organization's resistance to change, it was crucial to have outside experts drive the process and facts home to their team. "As the organization changes, it's required that the board changes as well," Barone said, "and that's where Arts & Business Council is a huge help to us—to transition the board members into ambassadors and fundraisers."