



Take Your Passion and Make It Happen

Family Lifeline: One Agency's Reinvention

by Bob Jones, Ph.D.

Any agency that has been in existence for more than a generation knows that remaining relevant to the populations and communities we serve requires a continual process of “re-inventing.” Staying relevant and energized involves challenging the basic assumptions upon which our culture rests. Successful agencies do evolve, but only through a continual process of reinventing themselves, examining how and who they should be within the community, and then building excitement for those possibilities.

The process of organizational change frequently involves a good deal of organizational and personal anxiety. Realigning the vision and changing the culture of an organization is one of the most difficult challenges of organizational leadership—particularly so in times of economic uncertainty or scarcity the likes of which many of us have experienced over the past few years. Yet, that very process of self examination followed by an affirmation of a new and clear strategic vision can also be a powerful engine for driving the fundraising capacity of an organization. It both involves and energizes the board and staff and often spurs the agency on to develop new and needed partnerships and affiliations.

The impact on development can be powerful. Successful and sustainable fundraising is not about tactics. Genuine and sustainable success flows from a core set of values, the basic culture and strategic vision upon which we build relationships within our community. When “the difference we make in the world” is clear, it is much easier to begin to engage others in that dream, be they partners, investors, or donors. Fundraising is not about selling products and services; it is all about “selling a dream” and inviting others to join

us in building better futures. In many ways, it is also driven by the passion within that dream to make it happen.

Change Is Good

A wonderful story of such a reinvention, as well as passion for change and how it has fueled the philanthropic and organizational capacity of the agency, is Family Lifeline of Richmond, Virginia. I recently spoke with Reed Henderson, president and CEO, about what drove that evolution and how it has unfolded for the community and the organization.

Family Lifeline has gone through some amazing changes in the almost seven years Henderson has been leading the organization. Here are some of the key points in their evolution, told mostly in Reed's own words.

“It starts, and continues, with the board. The message from the search committee seven years ago was clear. We value our history, yet we think we have to be reinvented for the future. We don't know what that looks like. We're looking for someone to take us through that evolution,” Reed said. He went on to state that a new and a clear strategic focus continues to be critical to their success. In his role as CEO, Reed teams with the board to plan the future. He admits that over these seven years there is some culture drift as the board members rotate off. Thus, he spends time and energy working with the board on the vision and their role in creating it. Reed points out that for many on a board it would be easier to help solve the visible problems of today that they can more easily get their arms around. But in his book, agency transformation can't occur unless the board is on the strategic level and stays there.

Key Strategic Directions

When Reed arrived at Family Lifeline they had a traditional counseling program, staffed by very qualified people. It was about 25 percent of the budget, but 85 percent of the culture. Meaning, Reed said, “We're the experts. Come to us, we'll talk. You go home and do something about it.” He also quickly learned that 50 percent of the scheduled interviews were cancelled. “The population had changed. We no longer had people with flexibility in their jobs, cars that worked, and support for kids at home,” he explained. “These were folks in our poorest neighborhoods who would schedule appointments because we told them to, but they had no way to consistently get here. And, just as important, talking wasn't what they needed most. They needed to work on more concrete issues and needed help to do that. Relationships would develop out of teaming with them around urgent, day-to-day issues. So, we needed to be where they were, not ask them to come to us.”

Today, strategic planning is central to everything Family Lifeline does. They have four key strategic directions:

- Out of the office and into the community. They provide no services in an office location, they are all provided in homes, schools, host settings, etc., in the community.
- Work in partnership rather than alone. All new initiatives involve working with others. They don't enter into any community on their own. Programs with a longer history are finding partners to work with them, strengthening the programs offered.
- Focus on assets. They build on the resources that exist within individuals, families, and institutions in communities.

They are not interested in spending time on “problems,” instead they want to know where the strengths are. That’s where they begin to build increased competency and effectiveness and affirm the value of individuals, families, and communities.

- Create systemic change. They create venues in which individuals, families, and community institutions can work together on issues of common interest and concern. “Rather than giving someone a fish, we are teaching them how to fish,” Reed explained.

Building Blocks

At Family Lifeline the vision for every program includes three overarching goals that they view as the basic building blocks of healthy families and communities: Safe and stable housing, employment generating adequate income to support the family, and access to optimal (for the individual) education opportunities.

From Reed’s perspective, it won’t matter what else they do. “If families are struggling in these three areas, they will be vulnerable to continued dysfunction and limited capacity to

function effectively as a family,” he explained.

What has been the organizational result? Family Lifeline’s budget has grown from \$2.5 million in 1998 to \$4 million in 2004. United Way funding used to provide 42 percent of the budget, but that has dropped to 15 percent. Fundraising has increased from \$100,000 in 1997 to more than \$1,000,000 this year. While other organizations are losing money and cutting staff, Family Lifeline is growing their budget and increasing staff. Reed is “One hundred percent convinced that the community is giving us this increased support because of our new strategic directions. The institutional investors tell us that. They wanted something ‘new,’ and they wanted sustainable community impact, i.e. results.”

Healthy Families is a model program for teaching/coaching child development, as well as assuring that kids have appropriate medical care. But the staff knows that if they focused only on the pure model, results would be less than good. “If families are struggling with the absence of basic necessities, it renders them vulnerable in many ways, including abuse and neglect of their children, no matter how much we poured the ‘model’

into them and visited them,” Reed said.

He recently went to a Healthy Families graduation for four single moms who had been in the program for four years, two dads attended as well. “The quality of the parent-child interaction was incredible. But what pleased me the most for these four women, who all were living on the edge when they entered the program, was that they were in safe and stable housing; all were earning enough money to support their families; and all were in advanced education.”

Staff Has Important Role

Reed stresses the key role of the partnership of staff (Marketing, External Affairs, and his office) with board members and community and business volunteers. A fourth grade mentoring partnership with Capital One is an example of the power of that partnership in building sustainable change and generating needed resources—both human and financial. The program involves more than 40 volunteers from Capital One, each giving up almost a day of work a week, plus program funding from the company. This is done all in partnership with the schools and Family Lifeline to create better Standards of Learning for kids, and ultimately for the community. A wonderful story of business leaders and corporate volunteers investing in the future of the community’s children with a return on investment for all, and a further strengthening of Family Lifeline’s capacity and position within the community to have a genuine impact.

Still Challenges to Meet

The challenges ahead in fund development include too much reliance on corporations and foundation giving; therefore, creating the need to increase donations from individuals. Reed thinks they still have a long way to go on the individual side. The board is becoming more confident and competent in individual fundraising, but as with many of our agencies in the Alliance network, this is a very slow process.

Changing the culture and the vision of the organization also meant finding the right human resources. As Reed said, “It has meant a lot of staff turnover. There were people who didn’t want to do the new thing, as well as mistakes on our part in finding the right people to make this work. It’s been a long process to get everyone—board and staff—to understand that creative outreach is what we’re all about. It’s our ‘one thing’

Reed Henderson

Reed Henderson is president and CEO of Family Lifeline, a family support organization dedicated to strengthening families in Greater Richmond and the Tri-Cities Area (Virginia). Henderson has 40 years of experience in providing strategic leadership to organizations that help strengthen families. Henderson began his career as a social worker in the Pittsburgh area, held management positions in New Jersey, including the New Jersey Division of Youth and Family Services. In 1983, he assumed the position of executive director of Family Service of Morris County, in Morristown, New Jersey. In 1988, he became senior vice president for programs and services at the Alliance for Children and Families. In 1997, he joined Family Lifeline as president and CEO.



Improving the Community One Family at a Time



Nearly five years ago, Family Lifeline partnered with a YMCA in Richmond to work with children and families to improve parenting. Reed Henderson explained, “Several years ago a YMCA in a very problematic neighborhood asked us to send a social worker to work with families whose children were out of control in the childcare center. The YMCA felt that if the parents were ‘better,’ the kids would be better behaved.

“We asked the YMCA to look at this in a different way. Consider that the YMCA is the only place these kids have to tell anybody how scared and angry they are about what they experience every day. Now, biting the teacher, running into the street, ripping up papers,

fighting, etc., aren’t appropriate ways to express that concern, but we think that if we work with your staff to increase their understanding and their responses, the kids will begin to channel their concerns into more acceptable forms of behavior. The most important thing we want to do is strengthen the relationship between parents and the YMCA because, together, you can begin to change things in this community.

“Our staff person, Jeff, who has a BA in Elementary Education, has a personal and cultural comfort in and with the neighborhood. Shortly after Jeff began working at the YMCA he reported that the first thing driving the kids crazy was staff turnover. The YMCA hired people from the community, but they had problems that eventually got in the way of getting to work regularly. They didn’t talk to YMCA administrative personnel for fear of losing their jobs—which happened all too often. Jeff became the in-house EAP for the entire YMCA staff. Turnover has been reduced from 27 percent to 3 percent—the lowest of any YMCA in the system. In addition, negative discharges from the childcare center have been reduced dramatically.

Our focus is on strengthening resources to increase capacity, thus contributing to systemic change in the neighborhood.”

(i.e. positioning and branding). Board and staff will always want to gravitate to the specifics of what we do because that’s more understandable and attractive. Interestingly, the corporate community picked up on our ‘one thing’ immediately. It fits with the way they think about their own businesses. Foundations have made the transition too. Many new partnerships have developed with organizations outside the traditional United Way network.”

Reed summed it all up, as only Reed can. “As the CEO, it’s tough and lonely. We’re creating the map, not following one already worked out. There’s a lot of risk in this, but

so far, the board encourages risk. Others are wary, and don’t want to get too close. It’s not always easy to find colleagues to commiserate with. But it means a lot to all of us when people don’t have to worry about bullets flying through their bedroom, that they know they have enough food to eat, and that they are excited and affirmed because of education opportunities that are available to them. And we now have a staff that creates that kind of opportunity.”

Family Lifeline also now has a clear and compelling strategic vision as well as the sustainable relationships within its community to drive the dream. In the final analysis,

resource development is less about the tactics and very much more about the dream we envision and articulate and the relationships we build to make that dream a reality. In other words, take your passion and make it happen. ▲



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