



## **Creative Problem Solving at the United Way By Karen Christie & Keith Kaminski**

The United Way of Buffalo and Erie County has a vision that we will create “A caring community with the highest quality of life in America”. The vision will be achieved through a careful focus on the mission of the organization “To work in partnership with others to build a stronger community by developing resources that effectively meet human service needs through prevention and intervention programs”.

The United Way of Buffalo & Erie County is local branch of the national organization. The United Way also operates in nearly 40 countries throughout the world. Locally we have helped our community for over 80 years, since 1917. The generous support of literally thousands of individuals, corporations, labor unions, foundations and providers supply the tools of time, talent and treasure needed to build and maintain a strong community.

United Way has a proud history as a community-based, volunteer-led organization which is both a catalyst and a participant in identifying and resolving our community’s health and human service challenges. Through the United Way’s Community Care Fund, donations are combined with others and invested in programs that serve priority needs in the most effective, efficient way. United Way investments are reviewed and tracked to make sure they are making measurable progress towards specific goals developed by expert Investment Team volunteers from the community. Only programs that demonstrate results are funded.

Over 90 cents of every United Way Community Care Fund dollar raised is invested into the community to build self-sufficiency, hope, supportive living situations and a stronger community.

Over the past ten years, the organization has seen erosion in the funding given to the community care fund and an increase in the donor directed giving to specific agencies. The trend has impacted the ability of the United Way to reduce the most pressing problems in the community. This trend has required that the United Way critically review its mission and activities. The review resulted in a decision to strengthen the level of activity at the neighborhood level in the communities we serve, and a revamped marketing message about the unique value of the Community care Fund to the community as a whole.

So how have the United Way and CPS-B worked together? It all started back in June of 2000 with an unusual request made to CPS-B to moderate a community meeting for the Western New York chapter of the American Red Cross. There was a heavy debate between the surrounding community and the Red Cross who had plans to remodel an unused part of their building into a temporary shelter for house fire victims. Now the particular issues of the debate are not so important with the exception that one of the attendees was from the United Way. This person was sent to observe as the Red Cross is a funded program provider of the United Way in Buffalo, New York. Keith moderated the community meeting with the charge to create a forum for both sides to have a voice (and to not let things get out of hand). With a clear brief on ground rules and strict management of process, a potentially volatile situation was tempered while still creating a forum for both sides share their point of view.

The success of this meeting resulted in a request from the United Way President (since retired) to facilitate a retreat for a New York State education agency for which he was a board member. Again, positive feedback was received for the facilitator of the retreat, CPS-B Associate, John Gaulin.

Seeing the United Way as an organization that CPS-B would be honored to serve, an invitation was offered to the United Way to have two of their people attend our Igniting Creative Potential course in November of 2000. Karen Christie, Vice President of Operations and Customer Service (or do you want my new title since July 2001 – Senior V.P. Strategy and Organizational Development) along with a regional director of Community Building (Rema's new title since July – V.P. Resource Development) attended the course. In addition, Karen and her colleague offered a task upon which the course participants could practice their new Creative Problem Solving skills. The challenge focused on certain aspects of managing a major internal transition. The long standing United Way President was due to retire and his successor had yet to be selected by the Board of Directors. The input to this challenge proved to be very insightful and a few key elements ended up being implemented to help manage the transition. In particular the idea of using the power of the "naysayers" by creating a focus group of those who felt the changes were leading to disaster. This focus group provided a forum for them to express their concerns and develop responses which resulted in positive energy. A rumor control hotline was created where anyone could post a concern/question anonymously and find the answer on the employee intranet within 24 hours. Karen and her colleague, being in key leadership positions within the United Way and having early success with using CPS, could see the wide applicability it could have in the organization. The road was paved for future working together.

In April of 2001, a customized, in-house, Igniting Creative Potential course was offered to mix of community builders and internal staff. The folks attending this first course work "in the trenches" both with agencies externally and together internally to make change happen. The course received a 4.6 rating out of 5.0 (a "1" rating means poor and a "5" rating means excellent). Getting impressive results on course feedback is one thing; however, the important questions that communicate benefits received from the training take time to answer. The key questions are:

- Will participants use their new skills?
- What will be the value add or impact as a result of the training?

In November 2001, we received some answers to these key questions when we held a half-day CPS refresher workshop with the course participants. As part of the preparation, participants were asked to document their impact with CPS by writing short stories. We took some time in the workshop to acknowledge and recognize those who took the time and energy to document the results they achieved.

So what impact have course participants had with CPS? The results are pretty impressive. The following three case studies highlight some of the impact.

One of the top corporate sponsors of the United Way was experiencing change from all different directions. The organization was going through merger negotiations with another company and was also renegotiating the labor contract with it's union. The enthusiasm to support the United Way from the previous year carried over, however, with no surprise, this organization was off to a slow start with their donation campaign for 2001. Seeing the changing environment for this corporate sponsor as a key concern, the course participant who was close to the situation put their skills into high gear to attack the issues proactively.

This person brought together a mix of the sponsor's staff and United Way staff to work through this challenge. The issues were framed as "how to maintain and expand the success of 2000 within the environment of 2001?" The group generated ideas using Brainstorming with Post-its<sup>®</sup> and focused using Highlighting. Seven concepts emerged from the meeting such as improving logistics, increasing campaign visibility, and expanding education, among others. When a concern was raised on one of the concepts, the ALUo (Advantages, Limitations, Unique Qualities, overcoming Limitations) tool was used to work it through. Each person was assigned a concept and specific actions were developed. The person facilitating didn't stop when this initial meeting was over. There was continuous follow-up on the progress for each concept and additional check-in meetings were held. As a result of pre-planning, developing action

plans, and following up to drive implementation, this corporate sponsor achieved and surpassed the campaign goal from 2000.

On the related topic of fundraising, another trained facilitator received a call from the local chamber of commerce to facilitate a Board retreat to improve and enhance the chamber's key activities for the year. The facilitator carefully designed nine short sessions to tackle each of the chambers activities such as a golf outing, dinner dance, auction, and business showcase, just to name a few. Teaming up with a fellow participant from the CPS course to facilitate this large group of over 12 people, Wandering Brainwriting (see Toolbox for Creative Problem Solving: Basic Tools and Resources on page ## to learn more) was used to generate new ideas for each activity. Selecting Hits and Highlighting tools were used to focus on the ideas. Towards the end of the meeting, selected ideas were assigned to people in order to put them into action. At the time of this article, many of those ideas are well on the way to being successfully implemented. When asked about how the meeting was conducted, board members were pleased with the new approach, as they were able to really address and put issues on the table. There was also a noticeable increase of engagement and smiles when compared with previous meetings.

As result of this one meeting, the facilitator, who also worked in the Chamber's area landed three new corporate accounts. These corporate accounts run internal campaigns for their employees to donate to the United Way. The funds earned from these three new accounts equal 39% of this person's yearly goal for new business. All three of these new accounts also have great potential for growing their contributions in the years to come. Another benefit derived from the meeting was that the facilitator has made a key contact with an influential member of the community. This influential contact has provided opportunities for growing additional business.

Last, but certainly not least, this next story focuses on adding value to the community. Several schools within the city of Buffalo are experiencing low academic performance on statewide tests. These schools also happen to be located in neighborhoods where there are the highest levels of assault, teen pregnancy, asthma, and public assistance, among others, in the city. To address this pressing issue, the United Way, State, county, city, and board of education officials formed "The Closing the Gap in Student Performance Initiative". This initiative utilizes a full service school model, where the school becomes a central point for delivery for education, health, mental health, youth development, and family support services. A component of implementing a full service school model involves addressing non-academic barriers to student performance. Two trained facilitators teamed up to help one school of this six school initiative to do just that. The facilitator team worked with a diverse group of administrators,

teachers, and parents to generate broad goals and opportunities associated with non-academic barriers. Highlighting was used to focus on the large menu of options. Two key opportunities emerged from this CPS session – literacy at home and parental involvement in the school. Literacy at home was selected to work on first as many of the students’ families have English as a second language where speaking, reading, and writing in English are not strong. Without strong literacy skills at home, the student is missing an important resource for help and assistance with their schoolwork.

As a result of this diverse group of administrators, teachers, and parents having clear focus and support from the sponsoring officials, key grants were awarded to coordinate existing literacy services within city to help 15 student’s families, all within 4 months. This coordination has helped to maximize facilities and resources already available. For example, during the school day, parents can visit a facility run by the Boys and Girls club (this facility is only fully utilized for after school programs) to access tutors’, computers, and other resources to help improve their language skills. Specific next steps are also in place to further explore why parents are not involved with the school and plans to start a similar approach with other schools are forming.

These are three examples of how CPS played a part in adding direct and indirect value to the Western New York community.

So what does the future hold? The future for continued usage of CPS is bright due to the success achieved to date. The training of the staff at United Way will continue and the use of CPS with our customers in the community will continue and grow.

Using CPS has enabled the United Way staff to work with key groups, a sampling of which you heard about earlier, to design responses to the issues/problems facing the particular community group. The resulting action plans have a significantly improved chance of success because of the thoughtful and careful process with which it was designed. The CPS process is applicable to a myriad of situations and provides the United Way an opportunity to add value to any group process by utilizing it.

A program of the United Way called the Not For Profit Resource Center is currently exploring utilization of CPS with individual agencies to enable them to ensure their own viability, and to utilize CPS with clients to increase treatment plan success. At no time in recent history has the use of CPS been more necessary for the not for profit arena; traditional sources of revenue are collapsing, and the war on terrorism is profoundly effecting individuals and

families. New responses that are novel and useful are critically needed to shape the future.

**Acknowledgements:** The authors would like to acknowledge the contributions from Suzette Hayes, Chris Leed, Melissa Mummery, AnnaLisa Prada, and April Rogers. Their stories and insights have made this article possible.

To learn more about the United Way of Buffalo & Erie County and to give on-line, visit [www.uwbec.org](http://www.uwbec.org).

### **What have we learned? – (separate from article, to be placed in “What we’ve learned section)**

- *Provide a clear and measurable outcome and clearly describe how you will achieve that outcome.* A few participants mentioned the importance of being clear and explicit. In one session, the group pushed back on the facilitator, as they did not want to focus after they generated in the same meeting. By being clear on the agenda up front, this tension could have been avoided.
- *Know when it is best not to facilitate.* In one project, the facilitator was also the expert from United Way, which proved to be very difficult. In the future, this person will seek another person to facilitate on this project as she can add more value as a content expert.
- *Be deliberate when helping a group achieve consensus.* In one meeting, the facilitator did not anticipate the amount of time and energy needed for a group to come to a consensus. Some tools were used to help the group, however, it was acknowledged that pre-planning an approach to achieve consensus is critical.
- *Encourage fun and laughter when generating.* In one internal meeting where CPS was used, the atmosphere was very playful. Some of the best thinking was formed from combinations with silly comments. Hard work, getting results and having fun can happen at the same time.