

Building Community Organizations (BCO): Helping Establish Strategic Leadership at Life Song School

By Teresa Comey, BCODN Member since 2004

December 2006, Life Song School approached BCODN for assistance in determining their school's strategic direction. They were in a near crisis situation, their current principal wanted to step away from her administrative role in the school and return her focus to the students and the learning environment. That meant they needed to define a new role for the principal...should it be a split position, a new principal, full-time or parttime? Life Song School was an independent school formed in 1987 to create an open learning environment that nurtured and supported the children and their families. Over the 20 years it was in existence it was a small school with an enrollment probably never exceeding 40 children, yet it spanned kindergarten to grade seven. Fall 2006, enrollment was down below 30 children and economically this created some challenges for the school as they wanted to plan their future.

BCODN members, Phyllis MacIntyre and I volunteered in January 2007 to participate in Building Community Organizations (BCO) – BCODN's community consulting program. We were very fortunate that Suzan Guest, a very experienced OD professional agreed to be our mentor in this project.

On January 30th, we had our first client meeting with the Board Chair of Life Song School. At this meeting we had a chance to hear about the challenges and future hope for the school. While hope and a strong desire to succeed were prominent in this project, the challenges for the school were many.

Value of a Mentor

A week after our initial meeting, our mentor Suzan Guest invited Phyllis and I to come together as a team, to define our goals for this project and for ourselves, and to develop a process to proceed. Suzan offered us direction, focus and lunch too!

Suzan's role in this project was to mentor us in a way that was most productive for us. Phyllis and I were not new to the roles as OD practitioners so we agreed to run with the project ourselves and to tap in to Suzan's expertise as we needed it. We also agreed to keep her abreast of the project. As the project proceeded, stalled, stalled yet again, and then finally started, Suzan reminded us that sometimes projects stopped and stalled and that this was important too.

Stop – Who is your leader?

There were several months of delays. Before things could proceed, we felt that Life Song needed to answer an important question before they could do any strategic planning: "who is your leader?" This question continued to stall the process. Would the current principal continue on in a reduced role? Would they hire a new principal? Could one of their teachers move in to this role? They interviewed several candidates and still the question was undefined.

In mid April, Phyllis and I were invited to a Life Song Board meeting. We wanted to learn more about the culture of Life Song, and get a sense of how we could help them move forward. When we arrived, the Board meeting was already in session and we were surprised to see an open bottle of wine and teary eyes around the table. What had we walked into? The principal of Life Song had decided to retire. Now, they officially had no leader.

Like good consultants, we observed, asked open questions and listened. What we heard was a school in crisis. Emotions were mixed and hard issues remained unanswered. How could we help them with a strategic direction for their school? Was there even a future for this school? Was closing an option they had considered? We probed, listened and sometimes sat silent. There were heated moments during the discussion, and we just sat still. Our presence in the room let the board members and staff speak freely and openly. They expressed their fears and concerns. They mourned the end of their old school and worried for the future. We left the school giving them homework. Answer these questions: Do you and your current membership want Life Song School to continue? Who is the leader? Who will be participating and at what level? We recommended that they seek a commitment before proceeding.

Since Phyllis and I were only available until the mid May for this project, we left thinking our work was done. It turns out we were mistaken.

Dust off and Start Again

In July, seven months after our initial meeting, I received a call from the former Board Chair of Life Song. The school had risen from the ashes, dusted themselves off and started again. They had a new name, Pacific Spirit School, a leadership plan, a smaller committed enrollment and excitement for the future. We were asked if we would continue helping them define their future. They wanted to do a strategic planning day.

Phyllis had started on a great new job and was no longer available to work on this project. After confirming the support of our mentor Suzan, I decided to finish this project with her guidance in the background.

A strategic planning session was planned for July 31st. The agenda was overly ambitious and the day presented even more twists and turns, but much was accomplished.

At the end of the 11-hour day, Pacific Spirit School had achieved:

- A draft vision and action to form a committee to complete the vision
- They had had a difficult conversation, using a talking stick, and clarified an important issue
- They defined an organizational model for their organization
- Identified a number of key objectives to achieve the draft vision – drafted goals and actions for the top objectives
- The group discovered they were more alike in their thinking and dreams than they realized.

The day ended with everyone excited about the future, somewhat overwhelmed about the work they had to do, but energized about their future. They broke out the champagne and toasted their new school. I slipped out, leaving them to celebrate. I was exhausted.

The Learning Continues

The purpose of the BCO program is to create ongoing learning opportunities for OD practitioners, provide senior mentorship and to give back to the community. This project met all of those objectives.

Phyllis and I experienced and learned a lot and we were grateful to our mentor Suzan Guest for her calm and level approach through the stop and go process. We witnessed the cycles of a project, struggled with undefined goals, project scope creep, and experienced the bumps and twists often typical of an OD project. We learned about sitting and pausing, and asking hard but valuable questions. We also learned to work with ambiguity. During it all Suzan's feedback reminded us of our role in the client's process.

It was an exciting but sometimes exhausting process. We learned and I think that we all did some very good work. Mission accomplished!