



**interaworks**  
Case Study

How The Athena Project teamed up with Best Year Yet Foundation to beat their fundraising stage fright and take on a larger role in their work to empower women in the arts.

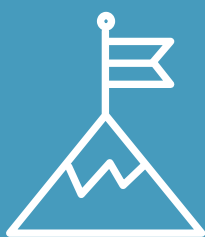
”Feel the fear but do it anyway.”



“Our Best Year Yet session connected the participants in a deeper way, resulting in the team being more energized.”

When we met Angela Astle, the Athena Project was in the middle of a growth spurt. “We had people burned out who had just left, and new people coming in with new skill sets and a passion to grow the organization to the next level,” Angela remembers; “We needed to harness the new energy while reflecting on the past challenges. We had a lack of systems, a lack of capacity, a lack of financial resources, and a lack of clarity on the most important goals on how to move forward.” And yet, brand recognition kept expanding, and they were being invited by community partners to do more events. “The Athena Project was at a pivot point in the growth of the organization,” says Astle. “We needed to come together as a team to connect in a deeper way to make key decisions and plan for our growth.”

## What Matters Most



Surpassed fundraising goal by  
34%



Created new Peer to Fundraising  
Campaign



150+ Artists impacted



3 new board members recruited,  
drawing new financial support  
within 6 months



619 Community members served  
by programming



Added a new session to Girls  
Create! summer camp

The Athena project is a Denver-based non-profit with a mission to empower women in the arts, and Angela Astle is the organization's Founder and Executive Producer. After several years as a successful theater director and producer in New York and Colorado, Astle noticed that, "There is an underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in the arts... Our mission is to create an awareness of the underrepresentation of women artists and give them an opportunity to have their voices heard." The Athena Project produces several annual shows including visual arts shows, fashion shows, music shows, dance shows, theater shows, summer camps for middle and high school girls, and mentoring and collaboration programs. These shows are all led by women and feature women artists.

As women strive to shatter glass ceilings and gain more parity in representation across sectors, the artistic depiction of women is more important than ever. "Being able to have women who write for female voices is so important because that way we can actually start seeing women for who they really are," reflects Athena Project Plays in Progress Actress, Kristen Poole



Art both reflects and shapes our cultural paradigms and power structures. American art, along with its representation of women and existing power structures, is exported all over the world. "When artistic leadership roles are dominated by men, women's voices, influences, and ideas are being systematically muffled," The Athena Project's website proclaims. The Athena Project galvanizes and empowers female artists to define themselves and create their own space in society through art. "I'm the father of a little girl, and I think about what will be available to her, and what opportunities she'll have," says Aaron Cohen, Best Year Yet Consultant, and Executive Director of the Best Year Yet Foundation.

He describes his work with Angela Astle and The Athena Project as a passion project: "The Athena Project is among the ranks of those organizations that have pioneered over the decades to see dramatic changes in the culture of our country. We selected the Athena Project as the Best Year Yet Foundation's first beneficiary because we have such a belief in who they are and what they do." Cohen has spent well over a decade in political and nonprofit development work.



He explains that nonprofits often face unique challenges because they must stretch financial and labor resources as thin as possible to accomplish huge goals. As a result, nonprofit workplace cultures are challenging and can lead to high burnout. Cohen says that he and Best Year Yet CEO, Laurie Oswald, developed the Best Year Yet Foundation to serve the servers who would otherwise not be able to access this work thanks to donors and corporate sponsors.

“Let’s say you’re a granting institution and you donate money to organizations doing good work in the world,” explains Cohen; “Wouldn’t you want to know that your money is being well spent because the nonprofit has a strategic plan for the year with an accountability structure built into it? Wouldn’t you want them to have performance tools and productivity solutions so they can focus on identifying and accomplishing the most important goals to their mission year after year?”

When Cohen met Astle and learned about the possibilities The Athena Projects creates for female artists, he knew he wanted to help them grow the organization to the next level. “We needed to address a capacity issue and a lack of financial resources to support the growing demand for the Athena Project’s impactful programming,” Astle remembers. “We needed to get together to talk about what we were afraid of. What did we want to achieve? What kind of organization could we become?” These are huge questions for an organization with such an audacious mission. It’s one thing to be a voice for change, it’s a new challenge when people start paying attention.

“We have such a belief in who they are and what they do.”

“As a result of the coaching we received during our Best Year Yet program,” says Astle, “we were able to embrace our vision and our uniqueness, and we were able to celebrate what we’re offering women in the arts rather than being fearful of questions like, ‘How are we going to raise money?’ and ‘Are we serving the right people?’ and those questions that an organization faces in this stage of growth.”



During their two-day facilitated program, Astle says her team was able to come together and figure out that “fundraising was something that we were most afraid of, and yet it really is the thing that is going to make the most difference in terms of the growth of our organization.” After facing that fear, the team went on in their Best Year Yet plan to create ten specific goals with clearly identified champions and an accountability system to help them achieve their goals.

Astle says that their Best Year Yet session was particularly valuable as it also “Connected the participants in a deeper way and resulted in the team being more energized.” Cohen continued to meet with the team monthly to bring the team together, discuss accomplishments and challenges, and get focused and re-energized on their goals.



”This has been our year of systems in an exciting way. We are formalizing more and more processes and procedures.”

Since the team began their work with the Best Year Yet Foundation, The Athena Project has been able to experience more financial growth than ever before: “We surpassed our fundraising goal by 34% from the year prior. That is huge and really speaks to the power of focusing and planning execution, which was one of our mantras that we came up with this year as part of our Best Year Yet programming.” Astle smiles as she explains that Best Year Yet helped her team go from being fearful of fundraising, to having a record fundraising year through coordinated, organized efforts: “This has been our year of systems in an exciting way. We are formalizing more and more processes and procedures. It allowed us to ‘feel the fear but do it anyway.’”

Astle estimates that over 150 artists benefited from the Athena Project’s work with the Best Year Yet Foundation, and that several hundred community members have been touched by the growth. Playwright, Rebecca Gorman O’Neill, is grateful for the programming opportunities The Athena Project has created: “Allowing women artists a space in which to find each other and collaborate is extremely empowering. It’s fostering a sense of community, it’s fostering connections - networking - and with the collaboration together we’re all stronger.” Girls Create! Summer Camp alumna and produced playwright, Eloise Cullen, says, “It’s empowering. It’s something that can help lift you up.” Fellow Girls Create! alumna, Asha Ritchie, agrees, “Just hearing people laugh - it’s good to know that your lines are appreciated. It’s a feeling like no other.”

