

# Theater giving acting seminars



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A small nonprofit theatre group is making a bid to bolster sagging revenue with seminars that teach presentation skills.

West Islip-based [Airmid Theatre](#) launched “Taking the Stage: Business Skills Development Seminars” earlier this year and has been performing seminar demonstrations for the past few months. The seminars, which are influenced by producing artistic director Tricia McDermott’s own theatrical training, cater to everyone from sales professionals to school administrators.

McDermott sees Airmid competing effectively in the crowded corporate development field because of the program’s theatrical flavor and the corporate curriculum experience of her partner, Kelly Woodward, who has worked in that field for 20 years.

What may be most attractive about Airmid’s program, however, is its cost: A one-day seminar for 16 participants costs about \$5,000, or about \$300 per person, while Airmid’s Hauppauge-based competitors have priced their longer-running programs at nearly \$2,000 per attendee.

McDermott plans to use the profits from her program to provide financial stability to her organization. Airmid had a 25 percent loss in state grants, federal funding and private donations during the recession. McDermott added that donors often leap to sponsor a production, but are less eager to spring for the less-glamorous administrative costs necessary to keep a nonprofit running.

Eventually, McDermott hopes to do one session per week, though she has a network of professionals she can tap if demand surges. McDermott wants to see Airmid’s budget split 50-50 between earned income, like T-shirt sales or business seminars, and unearned income, such as grants and subsidies. The old business model had the split at 70-30, she said.

Paradoxically, the still-down economy could provide a boost to the seminars. With so many job seekers competing for few openings, presentation skills can make a difference between a rejection letter and an offer.

That's sometimes true, according to industry veterans. Ellen Cooperperson, CEO of Hauppauge-based [Corporate Performance Consultants](#), who has been in the business for 30 years, said she had a 15 percent increase in business in the worst of the recession. Last year, she garnered 23 new clients and recently was able to license some of her training programs to companies in New Zealand and Australia.

David Fagiano, chief operating officer of international training program [Dale Carnegie](#), had a different take on the economy's effect on corporate development. He said Hauppauge-based Dale Carnegie, which is trying to move into the webinar space, was hurt.

"It's the second thing to go," Fagiano said. "The first thing is advertising. And the third is, they cut people."

Like Airmid's seminars but unlike the Dale Carnegie method, which takes its cue from the book "How to Win Friends and Influence People" and from human relationships, Cooperperson's approach employs acting skills. But, she said it's combined with psychology, public speaking and business.

"The key is understanding business and what a business presentation looks like," she said.

Acting skills may help speakers make better presentations before an audience, but Cooperperson said she helps workers get to root issues impeding their work lives without embarking on a three-year long therapy session. In a common scenario, she helped an attorney aspiring to become partner to work on business development, or selling the firm's services, by coaching the attorney to get beyond the negative traits associated with salespeople.

Airmid's program will use acting techniques to help business people convey their messages, McDermott said. Actors learn to speak to the rafters, similar to how a speaker must fill the room with his voice at an event. McDermott's students will learn how to listen for their voice to "ping" back to them in some of her exercises, making for more powerful presentations, she explained.

McDermott also hopes to conquer the lack of communication among departments in an organization, or "siloeing," with repetition exercises in which workers practice repeating the same phrase to each other again and again. The goal is for them to learn to listen carefully to their partners, and by extension, other employees.

McDermott admitted the hardest part of starting the seminar program has been attracting attention from the people holding the corporate purse strings.

Robert Micera, the human resources director for Garden City-based accounting firm [Margolin, Winer & Evens](#), would consider hiring a group like Airmid. But before making a spending

commitment on professional development, he looks first at credentials and then at the program's content.

The instructors have to understand the industry of the people they're working with, as well, Micera said. He recently sent Margolin Winer & Evens staffers to a development consultant, but found the company offered some advice that did not gel with the accounting industry. The company, which he declined to name, suggested accountants wear bold colors and florals, a no-no in the usually staid field.

"I get the whole theater group thing, but I have to understand the bit about the acting and the concept," Micera said. "I have to see the program and what is their experience and expertise in my industry."