

Building Grassroots Capacity

What are the best capacity-building practices for grassroots and community-based organizations? To find out, the Environmental Support Center (ESC) commissioned a study for which 38 providers of technical assistance, along with representatives of 19 organizations that had used those providers' services, were interviewed.

The results are reported in *Echoes from the Field: Proven Capacity-Building Principles for Nonprofits* (accessible at <http://www.envsc.org/bestpractices.pdf>).

Among the findings:

1. A "systems perspective" is essential.

Even the most seemingly isolated problems are based within a larger organizational system and should be addressed within that context. As one provider explained, "To accomplish organizational change, the project must work with the full organization. Projects that involve all management staff, line staff, constituents, and members of the board of directors, as appropriate, have a better chance of accomplishing organization change."

2. Effective capacity-building practices are contextual.

The best capacity-building activities are those that take into account an organization's situation—from the group's own mission, values and organizational culture, to the environment in which it has to navigate, and the culture(s) of its constituents. Good service providers recognize that even small details tailored to the organizations and its constituents can make a difference.

One group told a story about pizza served at a technology workshop which included participants from Laos. The Laotian women did not take dairy foods, but they didn't want to be rude, so they ate the pizza. The women were lactose intolerant and had to be hospitalized.

Grassroots organizations that address social change issues often have multicultural constituencies. Listening, communicating with a client organization, and developing strategies that take that context into account are not easy.

3. It's important to respect the organization's ability to build its own capacity.

Consultants contribute their expertise, but a client organization is in charge of its own capacity-building. When providers respect a community's ability to frame its situation and go after what it needs, and the provider's role is to facilitate that happening, the results of capacity-building strategies may look very different from what others outside the community may have planned.

4. Ongoing learning elevates the quality of capacity building.

The capacity of the organization grows when individuals, programs, departments, and the organization as a whole are continually looking for ways to learn how they are doing in and outside the organization, and then adapt and change accordingly to stay on track with their mission. Those providers who had ongoing relationships with community groups were better able to evaluate how well the groups were accomplishing their goals, even if there was not a formal evaluation process in place.

5. Team and peer learning promote effective capacity building.

A number of providers emphasized the importance of having more than one member of an organization participate in the capacity building process. "One of the hardest things about training is that if there isn't a team," reported one interviewee, "one person goes back with all the excitement and all the enthusiasm and people are [wondering], "What happened to you? What do you mean we have to do all things differently?"

A trainer described why it's valuable to have more than one person participate: "They go back into the organization and it is a difficult thing to bring back new ways of behavior, because of the organization's culture, and there's often not enough support for that kind of change. Things ultimately go back to the way they were. We believe that if we could get multiple individuals from the organization that there is support [for the] team...[to] go back with common language, common knowledge, common experience and perhaps common vision."

6. Capacity building starts with readiness.

Indicators of readiness include an openness to learning and change; a belief among key personnel that working on organizational change will enhance the group's ability to achieve its mission; an ability to articulate that mission; and commitment of both time and resources.

Several providers indicated that a group in crisis would not be able to engage in capacity building, but there was no clear consensus as to what would actually constitute a crisis.

Hidden agendas within an organization can also inhibit capacity building and will send an ethical consultant packing. Several providers related examples where the board of directors wanted to use a planning retreat as an excuse to fire the executive director; the providers declined the assignment.

7. Capacity building should take place over time.

Most of those interviewed from recipient organizations indicated that their groups engaged in capacity building on an ongoing basis. Once they started, they experienced a snowball effect. But "over time" can also mean episodes of capacity building that take place in fits and starts, as an organization grows more confident and gains more resources to continue.

Strategic uses of short-term training can also be beneficial—for example, as a way to orient new staff. In addition, there are times when short-term training can help the organization solve a specific problem that is consuming too much of its attention and energy.

Amigos Bravos was founded in 1988 to fight a proposed mineral waste disposal facility for the Molycorp Molybdenum mine near Questa, New Mexico. The fledgling group successfully defeated the proposal and went on to become a formidable statewide environmental organization.

Amigos Bravos has grown from an all-volunteer organization with a budget of \$12,000 and a membership of 35 to an organization with a staff of six, a budget of over \$500,000, and a membership of more 1200. Planning has been a part of the culture of Amigos Bravos since its founding and it has also been an important ingredient in its success.

"We're always looking for ways that can...strengthen the organization... knowing that we're here for the long haul and that we need to be able to really have the ability to be around," explains Brian Shields, executive director since 1996. The organization periodically gathers a wide range of individuals who are interested in river issues—including scientists, members of the media and legislators--to provide feedback on how to better serve its constituency. After its first retreat in 1993, Amigos Bravos decided to broaden its mission from protecting the scenic river section of the Rio Grande to becoming a statewide river conservation organization. The group's history

of working to build its capacity has been integral to ensuring long-term survival.

Shields had attended conferences of environmental groups and river leaders where the need for fundraising planning was a frequent topic. At the same time, several of the grantmakers supporting Amigos Bravos were encouraging the group to diversify its fundraising.

From his contacts among environmentalists, Shields met River Network's Pat Munoz, who helped the organization develop a strategic fundraising plan, which Shields describes as a "novel idea" at the time. Now the fundraising plan has become an integral part of their work. When Amigos Bravos realized they needed to target membership fundraising, even though there seem to be a limited number of New Mexico residents interested in supporting their efforts, the group contracted with a specialist in membership fundraising, who helped them develop a three-year membership development plan. Membership doubled in the first year, and their funding base has continued to increase.

Amigos Bravos recently entered a new stage of organizational growth; they have opened a satellite office in Albuquerque. During the ongoing planning process, they have been deciding on the most appropriate type of communications systems to link the two offices, the most effective methods of sharing files, and other issues pertaining to how the two offices will relate to one another.

Brian Shields believes that the importance of a consultant's knowledge about the group's particular issue, such as the environment, varies based on the situation. For example, in the strategic planning process, he believes strong process skills for a consultant are critical and knowledge of the environment less important, since the content and decisions comes from the group. However, membership fundraising, he believes, requires an understanding of the political and cultural issues of a particular region.

Shields recommends avoiding a consultant who comes in with "a formula for how to deal" with a particular issue—who has an approach, and tries to have the group fit into it. He told of one consultant who was wedded to specific approaches during a one-day workshop. When the participants expressed their discomfort with making "cold calls" to prospective givers, the consultant was not prepared to address their concerns and provide "alternative ways of approaching" the situation.

Amigos Bravos' appreciation for organizational capacity as an essential element in accomplishing their mission is evident on their Web site, where they have prominently posted their three-year strategic plan (<http://www.amigosbravos.org/publications/0405strategicplan/0405Strategic%20Plan%20Piece.htm>). The plan includes not only their goals, but "tools for success"—a special section that explains the capacities they need to achieve those goals.

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