

Capacity Building: Strengthening Individuals, Organizations and Communities

Grantmakers in Health 2002 Annual Meeting

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One definition of capacity building:

Capacity building is the development of an organization's core skills and capabilities, such as leadership, management, finance and fundraising, programs and evaluation, in order to build the organization's effectiveness and sustainability. It is the process of assisting an organization or group to identify and address issues and gain the insights, knowledge and experience needed to solve problems and implement change. Capacity building is facilitated through the provision of technical support activities, including coaching, training, specific technical assistance and resource networking.

- from Reflections on Capacity Building by Laura Campobasso and Dan Davis (2001) available from tcwf.org or by calling the foundation at (818) 593-6600.

Grantmaking strategies that TCWF has tried to enhance capacity building:

Within the context of an Initiative:

- Add a line item to operational/program grants for technical assistance/capacity building so that sites can purchase services on the open market.
- Grant to an intermediary organization which contracts with a pool of consultants. They are then assigned to sites on the basis of geography.
- Grants to a pair of intermediaries with complementary skill sets who then collaborate on the delivery of capacity building services to sites.
- Grant to a “coordinating grantee” which then subcontracts with two other organizations with complementary skill sets, and in collaboration they provide training and capacity building services to sites.
- Grant to an intermediary that plans and conducts trainings for the sites. It also conducts diagnoses of their capacity building needs and acts as a “broker” to connect them to a selected rolodex of consultants.
- Grants to organizations to provide particular forms of capacity building with sites, e.g. training and site-specific consultation on media advocacy.

- Grants to “technical support” organizations to handle the logistics and expenses for convenings of sites for trainings and peer exchanges.
- Specific objectives in grants to Initiative evaluators to provide capacity building assistance to sites re: how to evaluate their work; how to interpret and use data.
- Grant to an intermediary to provide ongoing capacity building and support for a network of grantees that want to engage in joint advocacy activities.

Outside the context of an Initiative:

- Grants specifically for capacity building projects proposed by the organization itself.
- Core Operating Support grants, of which all or some can be used for capacity building.
- Core Operating Support grants to intermediaries such as Nonprofit Resource Centers to underwrite their ongoing capacity building work with health-related non-profits.
- Grant to an intermediary for a pilot project with a selected group of grantees that combines the “broker” model (diagnosis and referral to pre-selected consultants) with support for a facilitated peer learning circle among agency executives.

What are we learning?

Here are some preliminary insights that will shape what we do in the future:

- Effective capacity building requires a “safe” learning environment. That, in turn, relies on trusting relationships, and it takes time to build them.
- Assistance with capacity building should be totally voluntary. It is most powerful when the organization does not feel coerced or cajoled, but has decided to seek help on its own.
- That said, some form of diagnostic process can be very useful. Many organizations don’t know what they need.
- Many organizations could also benefit from help in becoming “informed consumers” in how to select and work with a consultant.
- Assistance that is “customized” for an organization or an individual is received better than “one size fits all” trainings. While they have their uses, there is a definite limit on how frequently grantees should be convened in large groups.

- Capacity building is most effective when skill development happens deep within the organization (i.e. more than just the Executive Director or Project Director). It increases the chances of the newly gained knowledge staying in the organization in the case of leadership turnover.
- A “champion” of capacity building is required inside the organization to facilitate the process of change over time.
- Peers can be valuable assets in capacity building and yet foundations rarely provide resources to support effective peer support networks.
- No single organization, no matter how multi-faceted, is likely to possess all the skill sets to meet a grantee’s total capacity building needs.
- Many grantees would prefer to receive assistance from capacity building providers who understand their culture and/or region.