

ECHOES

from the

FIELD



Proven Capacity-Building Principles for Nonprofits



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is the result of a study commissioned by the Environmental Support Center (ESC) and conducted by Innovation Network, Inc., (InnoNet) to identify best practices in capacity building for nonprofit organizations. The study focuses on issues related to progressive nonprofit organizations, especially grassroots community organizations.

Definition of capacity building

In this report, capacity building refers to any kind of activity that builds the capacity of an organization to achieve its mission. However, many community activist organizations and funders do not make a connection between mission and capacity building, even though leaders in the field of capacity building dedicated to social change do make the connection. Some practitioners outline a wider view that technical assistance should include help with any skill necessary to accomplish the organization’s mission, and even beyond the organization’s boundaries—the assistance necessary for the movement’s mission.

Key discovery

“Best practice” has more to do with the presence of certain core principles that govern the quality of the relationship between a competent consultant and a client ready and willing to participate in capacity building, than with any one set of activities or methods.

Methodology

Our methods of inquiry included a literature review and open-ended interviews. Thirty-eight expert providers¹ became the primary lens to describe “best” or what we call “exemplary” capacity building practices. An additional 19 interviews were conducted with representatives of recipient organizations who received assistance in capacity building from one of the 38 expert providers. The recipient interviews, while not a primary focus of this study, were an important complementary lens.

Provider profile

All 38 providers offered services to grassroots community organizations or were part of organizations that provided these services to community organizations, although not all the individual consultants or organizations focused exclusively on this constituency.

Principles of exemplary capacity building practice

In listening to these expert providers, we learned that exemplary capacity building is not a discrete set of actions, but rather the result of a quality working relationship between a ready and willing organization and a competent provider who operates with a set of core principles. We identified nine principles that mark exemplary practice:

1. A holistic “systems perspective” is essential for effective capacity building.
2. Effective capacity building is contextual.

¹ In this paper we use the term “provider” to describe the trainers and consultants we interviewed who provide capacity building services to nonprofit organizations.

3. Respect for the organization's ability to build its own capacity is essential.
4. A culture of ongoing questioning and learning elevates the quality of capacity building.
5. Team and peer learning promote effective capacity building.
6. Capacity building models should accommodate different learning styles.
7. A relationship of trust between the organization and the provider is essential.
8. The organization's readiness to engage in capacity building is essential for effective capacity building.
9. Capacity building should take place over time to the extent possible.

A relationship of trust emerged as an important essential for effective capacity building for both providers and those interviewed from recipient organizations.

Principles and competence are both necessary

Important as these principles are, we learned from our interviews that the provider's own competence is essential in knowing how to infuse these principles into one's practice. In other words, it is possible to have the best intentions toward clients and be committed to the principles that lead to exemplary practice, but lack the ability to apply them. We also realize that there are competent providers who may not share the principles we have described. It is the combination of competent provider, committed to the principles we have described, engaged in a relationship of trust with a ready and willing organization that can lead to exemplary capacity building.

Characteristics of expert providers

Applying these principles requires judgment, interpretation, analysis, knowledge, skills, and resources. As we listened, we began to see qualities emerging that characterize expert providers.

1. Expert providers have skills, and a breadth and depth of knowledge that makes a difference in the quality of the service they can offer.
2. Expert providers engage in ongoing learning, formal and informal, to grow and develop professionally; they regularly update their knowledge in their field of expertise.
3. Expert providers have a network of peers to whom they can refer clients, when appropriate.
4. Expert providers are proactive, seeking advice from constituent groups about what training and consultation clients would like as a basis for planning future training and consultation programs.

Special issues for activist or community organizations

Several issues surfaced in our interviews that are relevant to the nature of capacity building for activist and community organizations:

- There was general agreement among providers that there is often added value in having a trainer or consultant who represents the race or ethnicity of client groups. All of the providers we interviewed were either members of organizations that had a diverse staff, or were consultants who have a diverse group of colleagues that they work with and call upon

for advice. Many of the providers cautioned that while race and ethnicity are important factors to consider when matching consultants and trainers with organizations, this should not be seen as the only way to meet the needs of organizations whose members are of different racial and ethnic backgrounds.

- We asked the providers whether they thought it was important for the consultant or trainer to know the programmatic issues of an organization; there was not a clear consensus. Providers' opinions ranged from knowledge of the movement being not important at all to crucially important.

Providers and those interviewed from recipient organizations agreed that the most important factor is the providers' understanding of the challenges faced by nonprofit groups, especially grassroots groups working on controversial issues.

- Those from recipient organizations felt that it was essential for the provider to understand the culture of advocacy groups and membership groups—especially those that are controversial.
- Some providers felt strongly that they must only work with organizations that share their social change agenda, or commitment to a social change movement.

Barriers and opportunities

There was a clear consensus among providers and those interviewed from recipient organizations that financial cost is a primary barrier to effective capacity building. The research also reveals that beliefs and attitudes about capacity building are underlying barriers that lead to its lack of funding. A number of individuals mentioned the lack of access to capacity building providers as another barrier.

However, we found some regions—for example in the Pacific Northwest—where it is less of a problem to access technology training and other types of consulting. Networks of providers have also proven to be a significant means through which to leverage and strengthen capacity building.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study raises four questions for the field to consider.

1. How can the profession become focused on principles that govern a relationship of trust between a competent provider and a ready organization?
2. Under what conditions can small groups with limited human and financial resources succeed in capacity building—and what might that success look like?
3. How can providers assist organizations in capacity building without compromising the organization's values?
4. How can access to exemplary capacity building services be increased for groups that currently confront barriers due to location, language, and education?

INTRODUCTION

This report is the result of a study commissioned by the Environmental Support Center (ESC) and conducted by Innovation Network, Inc., (InnoNet) to identify best practices in capacity building for nonprofit organizations. The study focuses on issues related to progressive nonprofit organizations, especially grassroots community organizations.

Within the pages of this report, expert providers of capacity building services voice the message that “best practice” has more to do with the presence of certain core principles that govern the quality of the work relationship between a competent consultant and a client ready and willing to participate in capacity building, than with any one set of activities or methods.

We identified nine principles that mark exemplary practice. Through analysis and narrative, examples, and quotes from providers, we link these principles to direct practice. We also show that it takes a competent provider with his or her own set of professional qualities to incorporate those principles into practice and make that practice exemplary.

We also identified barriers that keep activist and community organizations from engaging in capacity building activities. The question of the “fit” between conventional organizational capacity building norms and practices and these progressive social change organizations is a running theme throughout the study. In the end, we raise some key questions for future examination.

The process of understanding best or promising practices in capacity building is still in its early stages. ESC and InnoNet hope that these findings will be useful to all those interested in increasing the effectiveness of nonprofit organizations, especially activist and community organizations and their partners—grantmakers, consultants, trainers, staff and volunteers, board members, and members of the research community. In addition, this information should be especially helpful to intermediaries who, like ESC, are “matchmakers” between community organizations and technical assistance providers.

DEFINITIONS

Organizational capacity for whom?

While organizational capacity issues affect all nonprofit organizations, ESC wanted to learn more about the best or promising capacity building practices that affect grassroots community and activist organizations. These organizations run the gamut from small groups that may shun formal incorporation to large national organizations with multimillion-dollar budgets and sophisticated organizational systems. While they all are considered “progressive” organizations, their missions vary widely. Some may provide direct services or legal representation for those in poverty or with low income. Others may educate or advocate for an issue such as environmental or racial justice, gay/lesbian rights, welfare rights, or fair housing, while a number of others engage in community organizing around the same issues. Some engage in a combination of direct service, education/advocacy, and organizing. Some of these organizations may also have membership as part of their structure.

Within this group, ESC is especially interested in community-based activist organizations that have difficulties addressing their organizational capacity needs because of one or more of the following reasons:

1. The organization lacks financial resources to invest in capacity building.
2. The organization has cultural differences that make it more difficult for it to enter into or benefit from capacity building as it experiences it in the mainstream dominant culture.
3. The organization has mission-based (political and value-based) issues that conflict with its understanding and experience of capacity building services.

What is organizational capacity?

When representatives of management support organizations, foundations, and nonprofit organizations and individual consultants or scholars talk about organizational capacity, there is some consensus on its meaning. One foundation describes organizational capacity as the “organization’s structure, policies, processes, and assets (leadership, management, physical and financial) dedicated to the delivery of its services and/or products.”

In *High Performance Nonprofit Organizations: Managing Upstream for Greater Impact*, widely cited because it effectively summarizes issues at the heart of many discussions of organizational capacity building for nonprofits, authors Letts, Ryan and Grossman specify three kinds of organizational capacity that we find helpful for this study’s discussion:

1. The capacity for program delivery
2. The capacity for program expansion
3. An adaptive capacity (Letts *et al.*, 1999, pp.20-21)

Program delivery capacity is the starting point to create impact. “For advocacy organizations, ‘program’ usually takes the form of research, analysis and communication strategies to advance a cause” (Letts *et al.*, 1999, p. 21). At this initial level of capacity, the organizational

(Excerpted from A Framework for Organizational Development: The Why, What and How of OD Work, Perspectives from Participants in the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation’s Organizational Development Program, 1995–1999, Ann Philbin and Sandra Mikush)

An organization’s effectiveness depends on a shared understanding of, and commitment to, the vision, values, and mission. In effective organizations, the vision, values, and mission inform all other components of organizational development. When one or more of the core components is out of alignment with the vision, values, and mission of the organization, the organization is unable to function effectively for the long term. Similarly, when the core components are in alignment with the vision, values, and mission, they are more likely to be in alignment with one another and lead to effective work and a sustainable organization. The core components of effective organizations are the following:

- Vision, Values and Mission
- Governance
- Strategic Thinking and Planning
- Program Development and Implementation
- Evaluation, Learning and Accountability
- Human Resource Management
- Organizational Culture
- Management Systems and Structures
- Legal Compliance, Fiscal Management and Public Accountability
- Resource Development
- Constituent Relationships
- Collaboration

effort beyond the program (if much even exists) is often informal and does not really affect the program's quality. Often the program and the organization may be one and the same.

At the second tier, as the program expands, performance, not just program, matters. Organizational decisions and capacity beyond what was needed to deliver the program enter the picture. At this fluid stage, emerging organizations begin to require structure, policies, and systems not necessary earlier in their life.

The third level of organizational capacity—adaptive capacity—means that an organization can change its ways if need be in order to stay on course and effectively accomplish its mission. This is the most sophisticated kind of performance. Letts, Ryan, and Grossman believe this last stage is most important for nonprofit organizations. This last level requires a different set of skills as well: the capacity to ask questions, listen, reflect and then change in order to keep the organization on course for the mission.

Thinking of organizational capacity as three-tiered is an idea worth “taking with us” as we listen to the providers throughout this report talk about the principles that are the foundation of their practice, and the challenges that they face in assisting organizations. Historically, nonprofit organizations, especially community-based and issue-focused organizations, highly valued the first tier, program capacity, and regarded the second and third tiers with increasing ambivalence.

Organizational capacity building

Organizational capacity building has different meanings depending on an organization's and an individual's perspectives and values. Understanding those different meanings is critical to discovering what the best practices for capacity building may be for grassroots activist and community organizations, no matter their size or budget.

In this report, capacity building refers to any kind of activity that builds the capacity of an organization to achieve its mission. While capacity building is often addressed in certain areas—such as fundraising, board development, strategic planning, technology, media/communications, and leadership development—capacity building is more than a matter of gaining certain skills in certain areas.

If anything, capacity building, as we learned from the literature and from interviews with both providers and recipients, is “messy,” comprehensive, and holistic. An organization's mission, values and vision as the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation sees it, are at the center of organizational development to build capacity (Philbin, 2000, p.3). However, many community activist organizations and funders do not make this connection, even though leaders in the field of capacity building dedicated to social change do make the connection between capacity building and mission.

In Capacity Building with Social Justice Organizations: Views from the Field, Ann Philbin calls capacity building “a process of developing and strengthening skills, instincts, abilities, processes, and resources that organizations and communities need to survive, adapt, and thrive in a fast changing world” (Philbin, 1999, p. 4).

For Philbin, capacity building is an important activity for the development of community within civil society—and human development is in turn critical for capacity building (Philbin, 1999, p. 5).

In fact, leaders like Philbin and activist educator Luz Guerra challenge the notion that organizational capacity building is a matter of simply gaining knowledge and skill in a discrete set of organizational practices or is even somehow the purview of “professionals” more interested in “business” than mission.

Guerra outlines a wider view of technical assistance, which, along with “organizational development” is sometimes used interchangeably with capacity building in the literature and by the individuals we interviewed.

In her 1998 Report to the Saguaro Grantmaking Board of the Funding Exchange, *Technical Assistance, and Progressive Organizations for Social Change in Communities of Color*, Guerra explains that technical assistance should also include skills particular to the mission of activist organizations such as certain legal and technical research skills, advocacy, and even more specific skills—for example, certain scientific research skills that an environmental justice organization may need (Guerra, 1998, p. 5).

Guerra also writes that technical assistance should be “... assistance in movement building for the long haul, developing skills in critical political/social/economic analysis, strategic movement building, working in coalitions, and skills to carry forward our anti-oppression work on racism, internalized oppression, sexism, classism, homophobia, etc.” (Guerra, 1998, p. 5).

Letts, Ryan and Grossman’s understandings also support this expansive view of organizational capacity building. “Whether they deliver programs, act as advocates or associations, or some combination, virtually every nonprofit organization obligates itself to three groups of stakeholders: clients, employees, and grantmakers. And organizational capacity—especially the adaptive capacity that links mission and outcomes—is a critical resource for doing right by these constituencies and honoring a nonprofit’s values” (Letts *et al.*, 1999, p.24).

Additional references on capacity building may be found in the bibliography in Appendix A.

METHODOLOGY

Our methods of inquiry included a literature review and interviews. Interviews with 38 providers, who were identified as “experts,” were the primary lens to understand and describe “best” or what we call “exemplary” capacity building practices. For a list of providers please see Appendix B.

An additional 19 interviews were conducted with representatives of recipient organizations who received assistance in capacity building from one of the thirty-eight expert providers.

Interview design and purpose

Our interview questions were open-ended and allowed for a broad range of responses. This design allowed us to explore in more depth the different issues in effective capacity building. This approach supports ESC’s intention to highlight issues that will foster further research and activity on how to improve capacity building services for their target constituency of grassroots community organizations.

The provider interviews aimed to learn from those who deliver capacity building services what qualities characterize exemplary practices—just the kind of information organizations should keep in mind when obtaining and engaging in consulting and training services, or when intermediary organizations are matching clients and consultants.

The recipient interviews, while not a primary focus of this study, were an important complementary lens for understanding the providers’ insights. Generally shorter than the provider interviews, each interview aimed to produce a better understanding of the organization’s expe-

rience of capacity building services from a particular provider whom we had interviewed. As a result, the focus of each conversation was different depending on the organization and the type of assistance it received. We did not discuss all the principles of exemplary practice or all the characteristics of expert providers in each interview.

Criteria for choosing providers

ESC staff and board provided a broad mandate for identifying expert providers for this study. They were interested in learning from those working in many social issue areas, including, but not limited to, the environmental movement, and from practitioners using a variety of strategies as a catalyst for change within client organizations. However, one criterion was that providers have experience with community organizations from low-income communities and/or communities of color, even if those groups are not the main focus of their practice.

Sources for interviews

Several sources contributed to the selection of these expert providers including: members of an expert panel convened in December 1999 composed of individuals from foundations and national and local nonprofit organizations that are knowledgeable about the fields of organizational development and capacity building; ESC staff and board members; and trainers and consultants. (The panel participants are listed in Appendix C.) Finally, we were led to some providers through on-line and other published material and through a modified serial method, where an interview with one provider led to an interview with another.

Provider profile

Twenty-eight of the 38 individuals interviewed represent national or regional organizations that provide a variety of organizational capacity building services, and the remaining 10 individuals are consultants. All 38 individuals provide services to grassroots community organizations, or work in organizations that provide these services to community organizations, although not all the individual consultants or organizations focus exclusively on this constituency. All 38 consultants are considered established or “expert” in either specialty areas or providing comprehensive organizational development services.

Twenty individuals provided consultation and training through either ESC’s Training and Organizational Assistance program (TOA) or ESC’s Leadership and Enhanced Assistance Program (LEAP), and one provider’s director serves on the ESC Board of Directors. Four of the 20 are from national or regional organizations that provide capacity building services to environmental groups and are identified as “Sister Agencies” that collaborate and partner with the Environmental Support Center: The River Network, Training Resources for the Environmental Community (TREC), Institute for Conservation Leadership, and the Land Trust Alliance.

The providers whose opinions are reflected in this study are diverse in many ways. They offer training and education in customized events, open enrollments programs, and intensive residential institutes. They consult, mentor, coach, circuit ride, and facilitate in many different areas of expertise, including financial management, technology, leadership development, strategic planning, media/communications, governance, fundraising, law, and architectural design. Some are “generalists” and provide a range of organizational development training/consultation. A few, such as those who work in law and architectural design, provide direct service and technical assistance to community organizations who need specialized skills to accomplish their missions.

Providers who work with national or regional groups or are solely dedicated to a social change agenda spoke of capacity building in terms broader than the boundaries of an organization. They spoke about the need to build capacity at a regional or state level, or the need to build the capacity of the movement.

DISCOVERIES

In this section we report on a set of principles that lead to exemplary practice and then describe the characteristics of expert providers. Next, we address special issues for activist or community organizations; last, we explore barriers and opportunities for effective practice.

Principles of exemplary capacity building practice

In listening to these expert providers we learned that exemplary capacity building is not a discrete set of actions, but rather the result of a quality working relationship between a ready and willing organization and a competent provider who operates with a set of core principles. In this way, exemplary “practice” becomes a verb, not a noun, characterizing the way consultants behave and engage with their clients, and, in turn, the way clients respond to the consultants. It is a holistic process that is marked by the following principles.

Core Principles of Exemplary Practice

- 1. A holistic “systems perspective” is essential for effective capacity building.**
- 2. Effective capacity building is contextual.**
- 3. Respect for the organizations’ ability to build its own capacity is essential.**
- 4. A culture of ongoing questioning and learning elevates the quality of capacity building.**
- 5. Team and peer learning promote effective capacity building.**
- 6. Capacity building models should accommodate different learning styles.**
- 7. A relationship of trust between the organization and the provider is essential.**
- 8. The organization’s readiness to engage in capacity building is essential for effective capacity building.**
- 9. Capacity building should take place over time, to the extent possible.**

1. A holistic “systems perspective” is essential for exemplary capacity building.

A “systems perspective” sees the organization as a holistic system. The providers interviewed

A set of principles governing a relationship of trust between a ready organization and a competent provider equals exemplary practice

understand that even the most seemingly isolated problems are based within a larger organizational system and should be addressed within that context. As one provider summarized:

“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.”

An organizer required to participate in an activity on fundraising led by one of the expert providers we interviewed explained that initially she did not want to attend:

“She (the Executive Director) actually made the organizing staff like me go ... which at first I thought was stupid. But it was actually very helpful ... and helped us center on what we need to do to keep the coalition going ... next time our fundraiser asked me for lists of people we can invite to this party, I wasn’t like why do you need those people? I totally was like, yes, I know why.”

The Executive Director had required the organizers to attend at the insistence of the provider. (Team learning that pulls people from across the organization is also the result of good systems thinking at play.)

A “systems” perspective holds that you can start anywhere in a system if everything is related. A systems perspective also acknowledges that the organization itself is part of a larger community system, which in turn is ultimately part of a global community. It is the very systems analysis that social change organizations use so well in analyzing issues for their program goals that can also be used to illuminate their own organizational processes and help them better accomplish their mission.

The Peace Development Fund, represented among our expert providers and working only with clients who share a social justice agenda, is an example of a provider whose systems perspective can home in on the pervasiveness of racism throughout an organizational system. Their consultants and trainers highlight racism’s affect on capacity building strategies, and they critique conventional organizational development models and practices against the mission, values, and cultural contexts of the organizations they assist as well as their own.

As we write about the other principles that we saw reflected in the practices of the expert providers we interviewed, you will see this holistic principle in play as the principles interrelate, affect, and are affected by one another. You will also notice that quotes and examples often can support multiple principles.

2. Effective capacity building practices are contextual.

Providers shared a variety of comments that indicated they believe 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. (This is the effect of seeing with a systems perspective.) Activities and strategies are customized and the more dimensions of an organization’s situation that can be taken into account in training or a consultation, the richer and more powerful will be capacity building. As one consultant said, *“Service providers have to be sensitive to the culture of the organization itself ... Organizations have different ways of operating.”*

For example, the consultant who offered the above comment had recently worked with a

Recipient sensitivity to language and culture

All of the recipient voices were from issue based or community organizations. Many of their own practices were marked by a keen sensitivity to the importance of language and culture in working with others.

“One of the things that I did as a supervisor with my intern was we decided that my title when we were working together was not going to be site supervisor, that it was going to be site guide. And just kind of the change in language really evened out the power relationship between her and myself. Because I know that there are often a lot of people of color who have a problem with the word supervisor.”

Quaker group where everything was accomplished through consensus, which he then incorporated into his process and methods.

A consultant from another organization that works with environmental organizations talked about ensuring that language and examples relate to the organization and its constituencies. For example, the providers use different language and examples depending on whether they are in an urban or rural community, or depending on the educational level of the participants.

This was also a strong point of consensus for those interviewed from recipient organizations. Many spoke about the importance of having training and consulting tailored to the needs of the participants, when possible. They volunteered examples of experiences where a consultant did not do that—where a trainer came in with a preconceived notion of how things should be done, and were not flexible.

Truly exemplary practice providers are aware that even small details tailored to the organization and its constituents can make a difference. One provider told a story about pizza served at a technology workshop. The participants were women from Latin America, Ethiopia, and Laos. The Laotian women do not take dairy foods, but did not want to be rude, so they ate the pizza. The women were lactose intolerant and had to be hospitalized.

We cannot emphasize too strongly that grassroots organizations that address social change issues often have multicultural constituencies, so listening, communicating with a client organization, and developing strategies that take that context into account is not a simple matter.

This second principle has profound implications for consultants and provider organizations that wish to serve organizations and communities where class, race and ethnicity, gender, sexual preference, and religious beliefs intersect in complex ways.

3. Respect for the organization's ability to build its own capacity is essential.

Expert providers spoke with a deep respect for their clients' ability to build their own capacity. They see their role as facilitating that process, and adding their expertise as appropriate. They believe capacity-building efforts should be participatory, with mutuality marking the client/provider relationship.

However, this principle points to something more fundamental than simply making sure people participate in a process. The providers are voicing that they genuinely believe a client organization is in charge of its own capacity building.

An African American consultant working with an environmental organization on leadership development in sustainable communities captured the essence of this principle, especially when working with communities of color or other cultural groups that are different from the dominant culture, when he said:

“The notion that some group knows the best answer and the best answer is to get people of color into it, is not the best way to frame it.”

People need to be the creator or co-creator of their own destiny, not just included in someone else's agenda. The larger community loses out if they don't realize this. This same consultant continued to link this principle to his own work in the environmental community:

“What we've discovered or knew all along ... people from communities have a very significant set of experiences with the environment that are not really acknowledged as relevant to addressing environmental issues, which is sad ... That relationship is invisible in any environmental discourse about land resources.”

A recipient speaks about involving more community members who are directly affected.

“Though we had a strong solid group of people behind us, in many ways we felt that we needed to go deeper...get more from people who were impacted by all of this. And so it's very important to engage people effectively as they take ownership over this work. And I tell you, we involved people for a year in the planning process ... We wanted people engaged in this process so that in the end, we would have some direction, it would be legitimate, and we could say this is what people want. And they bought into it and by the time the year was up, I think we had a phenomenal involvement rate.”

The implication of this principle is that 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 questioning and learning elevates the quality of capacity building.

“Everyone in the organization should be learning and growing all the time. This prepares them for change. You are creating an environment in which they can be better prepared for changes that are around the corner.”

The providers thought it was important for groups to develop a culture where people are encouraged to question and probe, and where feedback is routinely sought. The capacity of the organization grows when individuals, programs and 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.

This is the kind of mindset and culture that Letts, Ryan, and Grossman link to the most sophisticated kind of organizational capacity—the ability to adapt and change to stay on course with mission.

One of the ways that organizations can develop a learning culture is through evaluation. All of the providers mentioned the value of the evaluation process, both for clients and for themselves as practitioners. They encourage their clients to set goals and monitor how well they were achieving their goals.

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.

There was a strong consensus among providers and those interviewed from recipient organizations that peer learning and team learning are important methods for participatory capacity building. These practices also reflect the reality that the consultant or trainer does not have all the knowledge.

Team learning refers specifically to learning opportunities for people who work on teams that benefit their organizational situation. Peer learning likely happens whenever team learning is underway, but in many other situations as well. Peer learning happens whenever two colleagues engage one another in an exchange. Peer learning may be formally designed into a program, but is often far more fluid and informal.

“People learn best by doing, that training that comes out of experience of members, and builds on it, is the best kind of training—is participatory training ... not to the exclusion of our introducing new ideas and theories and examples from other corners, but with a definite emphasis on their finding answers in themselves and our trying to structure learning and facilitated processes so that we're respecting expertise and experience in the group and in the room, while at the same time ... almost in a peer position bringing the learning and the experience and expertise that we've gained over the years.”

Appalachian Voices, an environmental organization with a mission to protect the forests and

Members of recipient organizations value peer learning

An interviewee reflecting on the value of participating in a leadership program spoke of support amidst diversity.

“For me it was to come together with other leaders and what stood out for me was that there was a diversity of groups, in terms of size and focus and budget ... But what helped ... me was that these people were going through the same thing I was and I felt that I wasn't alone. And that it was like—because I began to sort of internalize some of the struggles we were having in the organization and saying maybe I'm not the one to do this job. And ... the other leaders, coming together with them and developing a relationship with them over that time period was very helpful. And I learned from them.”

ecology of the Appalachian Mountains, assures there is plenty of peer learning among a mix of participants from diverse organizations when they conduct trainings, using a technique their board chair learned early on from the Midwest Academy's training. (See *Appalachian Voices: An Interview with Board Chair Harvard Ayers*, below.)

Appalachian Voices: An Interview with Board Chair Harvard Ayers

Appalachian Voices (AppVoices), founded in 1997, is “dedicated to protecting the forests and ecology of the Appalachian Mountains through research, education and positive solutions.” From its inception the organization has been concerned with 4 main areas: protecting forest health from the effects of air pollution; defending public lands against exploitation by industry; assisting landowners to manage their forests wisely; and mountain-top removal. Currently AppVoices organizes around these 4 areas with each area having a locally led task force.

Its staff and volunteers educate affected communities through outreach to schools, churches, environmental groups, and civic clubs; publish a newsletter, *Appalachian Voice*, distributed free of charge throughout the southern Appalachian region; and maintain a website—www.appvoices.org. The organization is unique in its capability to conduct scientific research on the effects of air pollution on the southern Appalachians.

In addition to directly providing these services, AppVoices uses its resources to provide assistance, including administrative, legal, financial, scientific and personnel support, to a network of local organizations.

The founding Board of Directors was composed of scientists, attorneys, and community organizers, many with extensive experience working on environmental issues. They came to AppVoices with strong opinions about the course that the organization should take. Harvard Ayers, a founding member and cur-

rent board chair, shared his thoughts about AppVoices' origins, growth, and development.

When the group was first organized, the board held a retreat at which it grappled with the most fundamental issue—the mission of the new organization. Ayers described the process as intense, but felt that it was absolutely necessary to give all of the members—not just the most vocal—an opportunity to express themselves. The retreat resulted in an affirmation of the organization's strong community focus—its commitment to organizing and supporting small grassroots environmental groups in the region by providing “anything that they needed that they couldn't do themselves.” Ayers proudly pointed out that several of these organizations have become very successful on their own.

Beginning with the first retreat, AppVoices has worked with Sara O'Neal of Green Pursuits, on both strategic planning with the Board and staff of the umbrella organization, and later, in fundraising workshops for many of the grassroots groups in the coalition.

The leaders of AppVoices are not strangers to training. Ayers is a graduate of the Midwest Academy's organizing training program, where he experienced first hand the benefits of training with participants from different organizations and backgrounds. An appreciation for these benefits has led AppVoices to include a range of groups within their fundraising training sessions. Highly educated leaders with years of experience in the environmental movement may sit side by side with individuals who previously may never have seen themselves as environmentalists, but who are now leading new groups organized around specific issues that impact

On learning styles

People with little formal education or who speak English as a second language, if at all, do not want the trainer's style to be a barrier to their learning.

“I think that the main thing, is really, ... language accessibility and then also having people, when doing the trainings, ... not kind of presuppose, a level of kind of school experience or, like, positive associations with school-like settings. I think that sometimes can be alienating for folks ... [Standing in the] front of the room talking and everyone else sitting looking at that one person, you know.”

daily life. Ayers believes that training grassroots community groups and more traditional environmentalists together communicates to grassroots groups that they are not alone.

Given their interest in training participants with diverse organizational needs, it was imperative that AppVoices find a consultant who was skilled working with a heterogeneous group of people. They found that person in Sara O’Neal. Ayers indicated that O’Neal has an ability to engage people in a way that makes everyone comfortable—helping to bridge the gap between participants that have different educational and other cultural backgrounds.

Relationships formed between individuals and groups that would otherwise not have recognized their common interests. Ayers described how participants who had extensive experience writing grants sat at a table with those who had never written any. The “back and forth” between the participants was not only helpful in building skills in grant writing, but in forming relationships.

O’Neal’s philosophy—practical rather than theoretical—is that participants should leave training with a skill that they can use immediately in their work. One of the small groups that participated in the fundraising training sponsored by AppVoices recently received a \$40,000 grant that will have a great impact for the group.

In addition to O’Neal’s expertise in fundraising, strategic planning and other organizational development areas, Ayers thinks her experience working with environmental groups allowed her to “hit the ground running.” This work is a “passion for her.” Groups sense her commitment to the movement and her knowledge of the Appalachian

region. “I think they very much sense that, and it just makes them at ease a whole lot more than would, say, someone coming from a distance.” While Ayers doesn’t consider it a prerequisite for a consultant to know the region or the environment, it is certainly an added value.

To work effectively with many communities, Ayers believes that preparation and research need to be part of an effective consultant’s game plan, including learning more about the specific participants coming to the training. Before fundraising workshops, O’Neal reviews information about the participating groups, including their level of sophistication in grant writing. Follow-up is also important to her. She is available for phone consultation.

Ayers indicated that the characteristics he values in O’Neal are those that he would seek in other consultants. The person needs to be expert in his or her field, and be able to adjust to different levels of knowledge and experience of groups. In fundraising, the consultant needs to understand the unique characteristics of the region, and the fundraising challenges they pose; for media training, they need to become familiar with the newspapers and other media in the region.

But it may be O’Neal’s personal approach to relating to people that is key to her success and a quality important to find in any consultant or trainer.

“She’s not at all condescending. She’s always very willing to deal with people at a number of different levels and take them where they are and go from there and I know that you’ve had plenty of people say that that’s been part of the characteristic of a trainer and we got that.”

Note: Interviews with recipients were individualized so that we could understand the organization’s experience of capacity building services from a particular provider whom we had interviewed. As a result, the focus of each conversation was different depending on the organization and the type of assistance received. We did not discuss all the principles of exemplary practice or all the characteristics of expert providers in each interview.

A number of providers, like the Midwest Academy, also emphasized the importance of having more than one member of an organization participate in the capacity building activities. Consultations with individual groups lend themselves to having greater participation from members, because the work usually takes place on site. However, several programs, including those offered by Peace Development Fund and TREC, are specifically designed for teams from an organization to attend training workshops.

“One of the hardest things about training is that if there isn’t a training team ... one person goes back with all the excitement and all the enthusiasm and people are looking at him, like what happened to you? What do you mean we have to do all things differently?”

Another provider discussed the value of having 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 and can help to change the organizational culture as well as support each other in bringing other people into skills and knowledge base.”

Representatives from recipient organizations also emphasized the importance of learning practical skills that they could use. They did not want theoretical presentations. The more hands-on the training, the better. They valued those providers who helped them with implementation.

6. Capacity building models should accommodate different learning styles and include a combination of strategies.

Providers were aware that differences in learning styles were an important consideration, especially when planning training. In addition, research in adult learning theory and psychology offers evidence that people do indeed learn differently even within cultures. Some learn by doing—they have to be immersed in the situation. Others learn by experiments, tests, and role-playing. Some people need to talk. Others must reflect.

For example, a circuit rider helping small community based organizations address technology issues was especially aware that some people “were more visual” while others relied more on words. He attributed some of this to cultural differences.

He also realized that different styles of learning might be present in some situations because of class differences. He noticed that in meetings of a collaborative type that bring together lawyers and other well-educated individuals, and less-educated people such as farm workers, the well-educated dominate conversation. They have more confidence that they are right; the less educated defer to them and do not speak up.

“When you talk about culture, you have to take class into consideration, and class of course, works hand in hand with education. So when you’re dealing with folks who need more encouragement—some folks can’t speak in a group —it’s not something they’ve ever been exposed to ... sometimes it’s better to have something written or give people the option of speaking in their own language, or expressing themselves within a peer group ... they feel more comfortable ... ”

Another consultant, grounded in adult learning theory, pays attention to the flow, pacing, and content of discussions as indicators of when to try different techniques.

The trainers with the Safe Energy Communication Council use different techniques in their training activities, including music and humor, depending on the group's culture. When working with an AIDS activist group, they used music in their training, and the group "loved it." However, it was tried with another group, and quickly switched gears when those folks found the music irritating.

7. A relationship of trust between the organization and the provider is essential.

Trust is the quality that allows all of these principles to flourish, and at the same time is a by-product of the other principles. (As we mentioned earlier, within a systems perspective, principles both affect and are affected by one another.)

Many of the providers mentioned trust as an important quality of their relationship, or it was implied in their reflections. Every one of those interviewed from recipient organizations talked about trust as one of the important values necessary for effective capacity building.

Many of the recipient organizations have long-term relationships with consultants or provider organizations, such as the one between Jesus People Against Pollution, a grassroots Mississippi environmental justice group, and the Peace Development Fund. (See *Jesus People Against Pollution: An Interview with Founding Director Charlotte Keys*, below.) Interviewees say they contact a consultant or trainer when they need help above and beyond any follow through on a given project, and when they find the provider's approachability and access a valuable advantage.

Jesus People Against Pollution: An Interview with Founding Director Charlotte Keys

Jesus People Against Pollution (JPAP) is a grassroots environmental justice group working in south-central Mississippi not far from the Louisiana border in the rural town of Columbia. Charlotte Keys, JPAP director, founded the organization in 1992 to address the devastation inflicted on Columbia's residents from toxic waste that had spread throughout the community from the Reichhold Chemical Company's operation and the 1977 fire that destroyed the plant.

When Keys and her cohorts first surveyed 20,000 citizens in 1992, they not only successfully linked the pattern of community illness to the toxic plant chemicals, but they galvanized thousands of citizens for JPAP'S mission. JPAP addresses a complex set of issues, including health, housing and economic development,

that are part of a community's challenge in seeking environmental justice.

Today JPAP is a leading environmental justice organization with a national reputation. Ten to twelve committed volunteers work with a staff of four, two of whom are salaried (when the budget allows). And now, thanks to the work of JPAP and its partners, the Columbia community has a recognized number of designated "brownfields"—EPA's term for sites in a community that are abandoned or underused because of real or perceived toxic threats, and that are eligible for government redevelopment funds.

From the beginning, the organization's leaders were aware that they would not be able to effectively serve the community over time unless they also worked on strengthening the organization. Keys turned early on to the Peace Development Fund (PDF), who became a long-term partner and was instrumental in JPAP's development and growth:

“I could not afford not to be connected into Peace Development Fund with the organizational development training, because dealing with organization development training means that you are focusing on how to keep your organization together, and growing and developing the kind of leadership skills that it takes for an organization to stay alive and to stay focused on the goals that they set for a community in bringing them up to another level.”

Over the years, JPAP has participated in a number of PDF trainings, but it was strategic planning skills learned at a recent training that Keys and her colleagues were able to transfer to a community context and that have proven the greatest value. JPAP is among a coalition of government and community leaders launching a twenty-year strategic plan for Columbia as part of the Brownfields Economic Redevelopment Project.

“Having the information that Peace Development shared really gave some insights on the lines of how we need to interact ... We had to sit and help to organize how they were going to do the ... plan, but more importantly, how to do the environmental justice community outreach piece for involving the broader community. And by going through the Peace Development training and talking ... about long term strategic planning, we were able to hold some workshops and share with our community on the lines of their thinking about the 20-year future plan for what they would like to see Columbia look like.”

But what has brought Keys back over and again to the PDF trainings is not simply the content but style and process as well.

There were a number of aspects of the training methods that she and her colleagues found particularly effective. They thought that the hands-on practical participatory style helps people actually practice and develop the skills rather than just hear about their application. “They make you work when you come into their training.”

Keys also liked the mix of board and staff participation and the encouragement to bring up to four organization members. “You grow together,” she says, “You learn and grow together as a unit ... ” And she saw the team approach especially important for long-term sustainability: “What happens to many organizations, [is] they die out because they don’t try to develop the leadership skills of their board and staff folk.”

Finally, Keys believes having a diverse group of people participating in training provides a rich, culturally diverse context for networking and learning, with some of those relationships even sustained over time. “We learn from different groups ... the sharing and exchange that takes place is invaluable ... the networking is invaluable.”

Beyond the training itself, Keys has high regard for PDF’s comprehensive understanding of assistance. The director explained that many grassroots organizations need more than financial support to succeed. PDF has provided both training and support so that JPAP can put what they have learned into practice. On several occasions PDF subsidized the cost of consultants that the group needed to implement what they had learned in training.

As a funder focusing on organizational capacity assistance, PDF’s holistic view has led Keys to see PDF as a model for other funders and management support organizations:

“I think that that has been what has been lacking with a lot of funders, they just give money and then turn the group loose, you know, they don’t

Assessment Tips from Expert Providers

Expert providers suggest these practical strategies to understand the uniqueness of each organization's situation.

1. Maintain personal interaction as the key method in the assessment process.
2. Use an assessment instrument or application, but view these as "tools" — to begin a process, not to prescribe a solution.
3. Gather information from as many members of an organization as possible, including key leadership. Several providers insist that the executive director and the board chair both provide input.
4. Facilitate a discussion to help a group clarify what type of help they need.
5. Use the assessment process to educate members of community organizations about what is involved in the capacity building process.
6. Put your new client in touch with former clients to help them learn more about what they may expect, and to establish trust. This is also a good way to foster peer learning and networking.
7. After you have a conversation with an organization, follow up with written material that will reinforce the meeting's purpose.

really develop good working partnership-relationship and it makes it harder for organizations to do their jobs."

In addition, the fact that PDF staff are accessible for advice and assistance "makes all the difference in the world ... it is so good for folks not to just give a few dollars and think that that's all that a community needs ..."

Keys has found in the PDF staff qualities she deems most important when searching for assistance in organizational development:

"Look for people that had a spirit of humility, a spirit of love and compassion, a spirit to do the kind of outreach that they need ... and their willingness to roll up their sleeves and get busy in assisting that community. I would not make any recommendations for anybody that I felt in my heart that perceived of themselves separate and apart from the real struggles of life that is happening in these underserved communities..."

A representative of an organization providing direct legal support to environmental organizations, many of whom are poor and low-income communities of color, noted, "There is no short cut to building trust."

"You have to start where the client is and then develop trust." This same provider who represents an organization that provides management support for community based organizations details some of the actions that build trust, such as *"having a contracting discussion with the client ... You have to talk about what you think about what they are asking. You have to do education. You have to be flexible."*

8. The organization's readiness to engage in capacity building is essential for effective capacity building.

"Readiness is the readiness of the organization to look at itself and see where they are and what they need to do."

There was a consensus among the providers interviewed that organizations at different stages of organizational life, size, budget, and staff can all benefit from some kind of capacity building activities—if they exhibit certain readiness qualities:

- The organization is open to learning and change—there is a willingness to engage in "soul searching," and a willingness to learn and to accept that there will be change.
- Key organization members believe that working on organizational issues will contribute positively to the organization's ability to achieve its mission.
- The organization is able to articulate its mission. While providers felt that it was desirable for a group to have a written plan, it was not a prerequisite.
- The group is prepared to commit the necessary time and resources to the enterprise.

For many of the providers, determining these indicators was informal, holistic and a matter of their own judgment or the judgment of the organization with which they work. For example, in assessing an organization's willingness and openness to change, one provider indicated they would look at things like:

“The Executive Director and Board’s readiness to be flexible, and to experience reflective activities. What is working well [in the organization], what is not working well?”

A provider asked a leader of a community organization if they would consider merging with another group. The answer was “Never.” This gave the consultant insight into the organization’s readiness to look at themselves and where they were in the context of the environment. She decided to work with the group to help them realize that by being inflexible in what they would consider, they were foreclosing on some options that might result in better service to their clients.

A number of organizations use formal assessment tools but do not rely on them alone. The staff members of the Safe Energy Communication Council, whose mission is focused solely on media related capacity building, always talk to a representative of the group prior to training. Their goal is to understand the media challenges that the group faces. In a conversation, they find that someone will make a comment that provides insight that may have been missed on an assessment form.

All of the interviewees seem to trust their own “gut” response to the organization, weighing the organization’s willingness and openness with more technical issues such as their knowledge of what they need, or their resources to be able to follow through on engaging in the kind of capacity building activity they are considering.

Interviewees from recipient organizations agreed that key people in each organization believed in the value of working on organizational issues. Occasionally, it had begun with a lone executive director or a board member. In some cases the director or board member was hearing about the need to work on these issues at conferences and from grantmakers. That’s how Brian Shields, Director of Amigos Bravos, a New Mexico environmental organization learned about fundraising planning. (See *Amigo Bravos: An Interview With Executive Director Brian Shields* on page 20.)

Several providers indicated that a group in crisis was not able to engage in capacity building, but there was not a clear consensus on what constituted a crisis. Some providers equated “crisis” with survival:

“When people are operating in ‘survival mode,’ they don’t have the ability to grow and develop as an organization. They are just trying to stay alive.”

Some providers explained that groups fighting for survival and “frantic” about losing funding couldn’t concentrate. They need help to stabilize before they can address more strategic issues.

The view that organizations in a survival mode cannot engage in effective capacity building appears to be a difference from what the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation indicated in lessons they learned in capacity building (Philbin, 2000). They found that some organizations felt that the capacity building activities they engaged in actually made the difference in their survival. Without the capacity building they may have gone out of existence.

Providers talked about the need to help the group through whatever is distracting, so that they can work on growth and development. They also talked about the field’s need to address providing staff support for these groups, so that they could deal with capacity building and address their daily work.

“I think that the best providers are those that work with the nonprofit over time so that you can get through those periodic distractions and crises, and that share the motivation of the nonprofit ... nonprofits stop paying attention when a crisis occurs. You have to settle that crisis down for them. If you can provide both what you originally came on board to help with, as well as whatever emerges during the time you’re

working with them, you become a trusted source of support and information, you can get them through their crisis, you can work with them on crisis management, implement new systems, etc.”

Hidden agendas within an organization also keep an organization from being ready to work on capacity building and will often 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.

***Amigos Bravos:
An Interview with Executive Director
Brian Shields***

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 a staff of 6, a budget of over \$500,000 and a membership of over 1200 individuals.

Planning has been a part of the culture of Amigos Bravos since its founding and 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 organization’s history of working to build its capacity is an essential step in ensuring long-term survival. The people of Amigos

Bravos seek consultants and trainers to assist them at critical junctures in their growth.

For example, 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 Amigos Bravos’ grantmakers were encouraging them to diversify their fundraising, saying, “you guys have really got to figure out how you’re going to be around when we’re not funding you anymore.”

From his contacts in the environmental community, Shields met River Network’s Pat Munoz, who helped them develop a strategic fundraising plan, which Shields describes as a “novel idea” at the time. No longer “novel,” the fundraising plan has become an integral part of their work, and Amigos Bravos increases their fundraising each year.

At another point, 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. With a referral from Pat Munoz, leaders contracted with Amy O’Connor, a specialist in membership fundraising, who helped them develop a three-year membership development plan.

They are currently in the third year of that plan. Membership doubled in the first year, and their funding base continues to increase. The challenge, as always, is to increase their membership in a state where the potential members are relatively small compared with organizations in more populous states.

Amigos Bravos has recently entered a new stage of organizational growth; they have opened a satellite office in Albuquerque as a result of an ongoing planning process. Once again, Amigos Bravos entered this new stage in a proactive manner. They are deciding on the most appropriate type of communications systems that should be set up between the offices, the most effective methods of sharing files, and a host of other issues pertaining to how the two offices will relate to one another. Because the staff and board had been addressing management issues all along, this latest decision process is a relatively smooth one.

Brian Shields shared his perspective on some of the issues that they have faced in working on capacity building. As he pointed out, he has had “on the job training”: neither he nor the previous director had experience in organizational development prior to coming to Bravos Amigos.

The folks at Amigos Bravos put a high value on personal contact. The consultant needs to understand the culture of the organization. What matters most is that the provider listens and responds to their particular needs. Speaking of Amy O’Connor he says:

“She did take the time to come in and meet with everybody and really flush out sort of what our message was, who we were wanting to work with and what kind of work were wanting to be involved in ... So I feel that that’s probably one of the most critical aspects of working effectively with somebody ... when they can come in and spend some time there.”

Shields suggests that hiring a consultant who can work in more than one area is also a plus because it cuts down on the time preparation that multiple consultants would require. It consolidates the essential but time consuming preparation for board and staff to meet with consultants and to provide the needed background information.

He also believes that the importance of a consultant’s knowledge about the group’s particular issue, for example, the environment, varies based on the situation. For example, in the strategic planning process, he believes strong process skills for a consultant are essential 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 related an example when a consultant conducted a one-day workshop for the group, but was wedded to specific approaches. 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.

Shields and his colleagues have appreciated consultants who see their role as assisting the organization—to facilitate and ask questions, and interpret what they are hearing from the group.

“The consultant is really there to help ... identify the key areas that you’re going to want to look at and they’re also there to interpret ... what’s coming in ... But I think most of your expertise is going to be ... the expertise ... coming from the participants in the process, and then the consultant is the one that can ask the questions of ... who, when, where, and how.”

The organization’s association with the River Network has served them well. Shields values working over time with consultants and trainers like Pat Munoz and Amy O’Connor. They have been able to access

An ally for an Executive Director

Executive Directors sometimes need an ally to help ready their boards for capacity building activity, especially when it comes to fundraising.

“One of the functions that I felt was really important was that folks understand the fund-raising component. And there were board members who really understood that, so they were really supportive, particularly our executive committee, of, like, bringing somebody else in, because I could talk about it and, you know, we needed somebody else to tell us, you know, and sort of say, look, we, you know, this is part of our job and help folks understand what it was.”

River Network's broader network of trainers and consultants.

Amigos Bravos' commitment to organizational capacity as an essential step in accomplishing their mission is evident on their website, where they have prominently posted

their 3-year strategic plan (<http://www.amigosbravos.org/Publications/threeyear-plan7.html>). The plan includes not only their goals, but in their words—"tools for success"—a special section that explains the capacities they need to achieve their goals.

Recipients are ready for different things at different times:

"Our approach has always been at some point in development [of the organization], all a group really is ready to use [in terms of capacity building] is a telephone call, and at another they may be ready for a 3 hour facilitation, and at another point they might be ready for a very intense consultation, and at another time they might be ready to make a long term commitment to training and consulting and a lot of change."

Another provider noted, it's "complicated" ... "readiness comes in stages."

Some community organizations are not ready to make a significant commitment. When through the assessment process it becomes apparent that a group is not ready for the intervention that they requested, providers offer alternatives. For example, there are occasions when the Midwest Academy receives a request from an organization for intense individualized consultation work to improve their organizing, yet the Midwest Academy staff conclude through conversation that the organization is not ready for that level of work. They will suggest that the organization send several members to their five-day organizing training first. They will then assess whether there is a "good fit" for continued consultation.

Providers also believed that even if organizations are open to working on something, they might not be able to articulate what they need.

"Sometimes organizations think they are ready for an activity, for example strategic planning, but they may not be aware of what is entailed."

Then there is the question of whether organizations have the resources for what they want to do. The most important resources, after the resource of committed people, are time and money. As one consultant put it, organizations need "discretionary resources" in order to be ready to do capacity building.

"Sometimes they can get this with the promise of money from a grantmaker. We'll give you money to hire a consultant to ease your burden so you can do this. Or it may be time in a calendar when pressing demands have eased."

A number of those interviewed from recipient organizations mentioned that even after committing resources for capacity building, they constantly struggle to find the right balance between time devoted to organizational capacity building and time devoted to program implementation. They value providers who recognize their limited time, and try to find ways to be efficient. While they agreed about its value, almost everyone acknowledged that the amount of work involved in capacity building is challenging.

Several consultants also talked about the value of small grants, such as those provided by

Rapport and follow up make a difference

Many of the individuals from recipient organizations spoke of the informal relationships they had with consultants that continued to bring value to their organizations.

"He sends little things in the mail. He sent me a thing a couple of months ago, he said you might want to take a look at this invitation to a fund-raiser and compare it with what you did and think about using it next ... Always open to a phone calling, e-mailing, and very prompt responses ... I mean, it's a real confidence booster, it makes, I think, one feel and I've heard this from other groups the tenet that you're not alone. You didn't come away from a session and then just, okay, sink or swim. You felt like there's ongoing support and actually real interest and concern for us all making it."

ESC's Training and Organizational Assistance program, that enable groups to experience some capacity building training/consultation. These opportunities build credibility and prestige and are leverage for other funding. They help the group focus on infrastructure issues, *"where most of these little groups would not do that otherwise."*

9. Capacity building should take place over time, to the extent possible.

There was consensus among the providers that the most effective capacity building takes place over time. This was a common belief among those interviewed from recipient organizations as well.

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.

The four organizations profiled in sidebars throughout this report all have histories of ongoing capacity building and illustrate the value of long-term commitment. Consequently, many of the provider organizations represented in our interviews have developed programs that take place over time in contrast to a one-day training or consult.

For example, the Center for Third World Organizing offers the Minority Activist Apprenticeship Program (MAAP), an intensive seven-week, full-time field-based internship for movement activists of color, 18-30 years old, committed to learning the theory and practice of building social justice movements through community and labor organizing.

The Institute for Conservation Leadership combines many different strategies to meet the needs of clients over time. ICL staff believe *"Many of the tools in our toolbox are best used when they're used in conjunction with other tools."* Their strongest impact has been when they have used training and facilitation, consultation and mentoring—all with the same group.

But capacity building 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.

The Management Assistance Program (MAP) of the Justice Resource Institute will work with a group at different points in time. Sometimes a group needs an intervention to address a readiness issue. MAP has provided a short-term intervention, such as a team building training to "jump start" the organization to address some of their readiness issues. Sometimes staff is not communicating with each other, and by making a small intervention, the staff will be less anxious and more willing to be reflective.

Part of MAP's commitment to their clients is that they are available. Their services can take place over time because of a rapport between a client and a provider in which the client feels comfortable calling the provider to ask questions or a provider follows up to see how an organization is doing. One MAP consultant follows up three to six months later with clients with whom she has worked:

"It's my personal commitment to clients ... they need access to you."

There were numerous stories from those interviewed from recipient organizations of contacting the consultant to ask questions and in some cases, take advantage of the next stage of learning.

Several community organizations interviewed have used the same consultant at different intervals. One organization is about to work with the same consultant for the third time. These organizations think it's very valuable to work with the same person. The returning consultant brings new value each time, having gained experience in the interim.

Competence and experience through the eyes of the recipient

This technical assistance recipient was aware both of the consultant's style of communication and his knowledge.

"With development and fund-raising [he was] gently, but very clearly pointing out how that can be improved. He always had statistics to back him up. This is why I'm saying this. This is my experience and he would give anecdotal experiences with environmental organizations that we were all familiar with, and he would give numbers, I mean, you know, just very sound, you know, background on why he was saying what he believed to be true."

“I think particularly given that you’ve got enough time and distance in between each session, that she’s not coming back at it with the same perspective. That she has, over that period of time, gone, did other stuff, and so she’s almost coming back at it fresh.”

“It’s that balance between someone who’s familiar with your organization, its mission, its challenges, its opportunities, but balancing that with making sure that person doesn’t get too blinded by how they perceived the world five or six years ago. And I think part of that is just, you know, the ability of the consultant.”

Despite the consensus that the most effective capacity building takes place over time, these same providers believe that short-term training has a place in the capacity building process. Many providers distanced themselves from the type of training that is conducted in a vacuum, without any follow up and outside of the context of an overall plan.

Trainers and consultants we interviewed advocated several strategic uses of short-term training. Short-term training can be a way to orient members of an organization about what is involved in a particular type of capacity building endeavor, such as strategic planning. New and existing staff can benefit from short-term training when they need to understand a subject that is critical to their decision-making. Finally, there are times when participating in training helps the organization solve a specific problem, eliminating a barrier by freeing the group from a problem that is preoccupying its attention and energy.

CHARACTERISTICS OF EXPERT PROVIDERS

Important as the core principles are, we realized in the reflections providers shared that their own competence was essential in knowing how to infuse these principles into practice: one must have an idea of how to go about establishing and maintaining trust, a sense of how to encourage a learning culture. If they are to help an organization assess its readiness, they must bring something to the table that will help them discern the readiness.

In other words, it is possible to have the best intentions toward clients and be committed to the principles that lead to exemplary practice, but lack the competencies to apply them. We also realized that there are competent providers who may not share the principles we have described. It is the combination of competent provider committed to the principles we have described and a relationship of trust with a ready and willing organization can lead to exemplary capacity building.

To put these principles into practice requires judgment, interpretation, analysis, knowledge, skills, and resources. As we listened, we began to see qualities emerging that characterize expert providers.

Characteristics of Expert Providers

- 1. Expert providers have skills, and a breadth and depth of knowledge that makes a difference in the quality of the service they can offer.**

2. Expert providers engage in ongoing learning, formal and informal, to grow and develop professionally; they regularly update their knowledge in their field of expertise.

3. Expert providers have a network of peers to whom they can refer clients, when appropriate.

4. Expert providers are proactive, seeking advice from constituent groups about what training and consultation clients would like, as a basis for planning future training and consultation programs.

1. Expert providers have skills, and a breadth and depth of knowledge that makes a difference in the quality of the service they can offer.

Expert providers have considerable skill and knowledge in organizational development or in an array of specialty areas such as technology, fundraising, or media development. In addition, they rely on their cumulative experience to understand underlying issues and to ask appropriate questions.

The provider's level of skill and knowledge in his or her field was an important theme in interviews with those from recipient organizations. In interviews with providers and those from recipient organizations, we found examples of providers who from their experience were able to home right in on what a group needed, and then back up their opinion from experience with other groups.

For example, after years of experience, the staff of the New England Grassroots Environment Fund knows whether a group is requesting an appropriate intervention. If a group applies to attend fundraising training, but they are having difficulty articulating their issue campaign, staff will suggest that they take the issue campaign seminar first. On the other hand, if a group is clear about their message, but is uncomfortable asking for money, they are directed to fundraising training.

2. Expert providers engage in ongoing learning, formal and informal, to grow and develop professionally. They regularly update their knowledge in their field of expertise.

Many of the interviewees obtain advice from colleagues on an ongoing basis. Some providers have coaches. Some have peer groups where they can discuss "cases" that they are working on. Several providers suggested that having an active peer group to consult with was critical, and should be a qualification that groups and intermediaries look for in a consultant.

One consultant talked about having "supervision" similar to the supervision model for professionals in the counseling profession. She regularly meets with a colleague to review case studies of her work. She referred to this process as "critical."

"It's what sets me apart; you can't do this work if you don't know yourself—if you're not authentic."

The extent to which practitioners engage in evaluating their practices depends on a variety of factors—most importantly, their level of expertise and resources. Several of the consultants regretted that they weren't able to do more than ask for immediate feedback at the time of the

consultation or training workshop. Many providers expressed the desire to learn more effective strategies for evaluating their efforts.

Another consultant emphasized how important it is that the provider community is beginning to support and encourage professional development and networking for consultants and trainers who work with grassroots groups. As a result of participating in programs operated by Training Resources for the Environmental Communities (TREC) and the Institute for Conservation Leadership (ICL), she has felt less isolated. She wished this had been available to her several years ago, when she was starting out as a sole practitioner.

3. Expert providers have a network of peers to whom they can refer clients, when appropriate.

Providers pointed out that there are occasions that they have neither the skills needed, nor the time available, to meet the needs of a given organization. Those providers who have an extensive network of colleagues are often able to refer a client to another consultant. Provider organizations often have multiple areas of expertise and are able to refer within their own organization.

Having a network is very important—it is an “enormously valuable skill for people building a consultant or capacity building relationship ... These are important assets that consultants carry with them—what are the world of people that they know best.”

Almost all of the recipients at some point had taken advantage of a provider’s network. In many cases, a key member of the organization knew someone from a previous job, or through a network, such as the River Network. Most people were dealing with a “known commodity” in the provider with whom they worked.

4. Expert providers are proactive.

As a basis for planning future training and consultation programs, expert providers seek advice from constituent groups about what training and consultation clients would like. For example:

Technical Assistance for Community Services (TACS) sends out periodic surveys to nonprofit groups in their geographic area to determine training topics of interest to groups. This information is used to develop their training calendar. They also regularly consult with their networks of executive directors to make sure that their offerings are meeting clients’ needs.

The North Carolina Center for Nonprofits monitors the requests that it receives from its help line, to add to its understanding of the sorts of assistance groups are requesting and the questions that are being asked.

SPECIAL ISSUES FOR ACTIVIST OR COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

Several issues surfaced in our interviews that are relevant to the nature of capacity building for activist and community organizations.

The value of providers and groups being of the same race or culture

There was general agreement among providers that there is often added value in having a trainer or consultant who represents the race or ethnicity of client groups. Consultants believe that many times being of the same ethnic groups aids in building trust. All of the providers we interviewed were either members of organizations that had a diverse staff, or were consultants who have a diverse group of colleagues that they work with and call upon for advice. They also believe that programs that nurture and develop minority consultants and trainers, such as the Grassroots Institute for Fundraising Training, should be replicated.

Providers advocate that all trainers and consultants should make sure that they address diversity by learning about the cultural traditions of groups and communities they work in; by monitoring the anecdotes and stories they use to be sure they are culturally appropriate; and by talking with clients forthrightly about the possible barriers that differences in race and ethnicity might pose.

However, many of the providers cautioned that while race and ethnicity are important factors to consider when matching consultants and trainers with organization, this shouldn't be seen as the only way to meet the needs of organizations whose members are of different racial and ethnic groups.

One grantmaker's evaluation of a capacity building effort found that while organizations with Hispanic staff at first were adamant about having a Hispanic consultant, what mattered to them in the end was whether the consultant understood their organization's work, the environment in which they were working, and how to work effectively with a nonprofit organization.

Does a consultant need to know the issue area of an organization to be effective?

We asked the providers whether they thought it was important for the consultant or trainer to know the issues of the organizations, but there was not a clear consensus.

Providers' opinions ranged from knowledge of the movement being not important at all to crucially important. Here is just a sampling of that range:

"An organization is an organization is an organization."

"If you have knowledge in the specifics of an issue, people will pay more attention."

"It is important to understand as much as possible, and those who dismiss this are arrogant."

"Every movement has its idiosyncrasies, and the more you can understand what it is like to run a particular type of group, the more help you can be to help that group think more deeply and broadly. In addition, issue-related knowledge is the one way that a consultant can develop trust with the organization."

Some providers who worked with advocacy organizations also thought that knowledge of those groups was important:

“It’s very important to have an understanding of advocacy groups—not just service groups. There are levels to environmental issues that are more complex than some other issue areas. One factor is that the environment is unique in that much of it is locally based.”

Several providers who worked in the environmental movement thought knowledge of that area was important:

“It’s very important to understand environmental issues. It makes it much easier to walk in and understand issues and speak their language and have some relationships and trust to work with them.”

“For some parts of the environmental movement, it is critical to understand the specific issues, for example land trusts.”

But then others said,

“Environmental groups should not limit with whom they work. They should have the benefit of those with a broader perspective.”

“There is value added to knowing the environment, but it is more important to be empathetic, and to understand the nature of activism, and the challenges of nonprofits.”

While all those interviewed from recipient environmental organizations believed that the provider’s knowledge of the environment added value to successful capacity building, the majority did not believe it was an essential element. However, here are two reflections from individuals who believe a provider who knows environmental issues is critical to effective capacity building in fundraising.

“I think that there are issues that are definitely specific to environmental fund-raising. First, it’s important for the consultant to have a background or an understanding of environmental work. Number one, their resources connecting us to environmental funders, and how to approach donors, funders, and members specifically with environmental work. A lot of the trainers that were involved are well versed ... but he [the consultant] has a really strong environmental background.”

“The previous development person that was here before me ... said that her main complaint ... is that ... trainers ... didn’t address environmental nonprofit at all, and had no background in environmental ... a lot was addressed toward direct social services and lots of other nonprofit areas, but she felt like she didn’t really learn that much because it wasn’t directed towards environmental ... and a commonality ... is people who are involved in the work or are involved with social justice issues, as well. Things came up during the training that would probably never come up in any other training.”

Providers and those from recipient organizations did agree that the most important factor is the providers’ understanding of the challenges faced by nonprofit groups, especially grassroots groups working on controversial issues.

“Knowing the issue area when working with emerging groups is more important than with those more established ... to be able to help them to articulate what they need to communicate with media, lobbying and with fundraising.”

Those from recipient organizations felt that “across the board” it was absolutely necessary for the provider to understand the culture of advocacy groups and membership groups—especially those that are somewhat controversial. For example, Kelpie Wilson, Executive Director of the Siskiyou Project in southern Oregon, believes that One/Northwest’s knowledge of environmental organizations—and the specific issues that the Siskiyou Project faces—significantly contributed to the success of their work together. (See *The Siskiyou Project: An Interview with Executive Director Kelpie Wilson* below.)

The Siskiyou Project: An Interview with Executive Director Kelpie Wilson

The Siskiyou Project, with a mission to protect the forest and the rivers in Siskiyou National Forest, was an all-volunteer organization from its incorporation in 1983 until 1990 when it hired its first staff. Since that time the organization has grown; its current budget is above \$500,000. The Siskiyou Project is multifaceted, with programs in conservation advocacy, environmental law enforcement, education, and scientific inquiry. The organization is an obvious adversary of the region’s mining and logging industries.

Kelpie Wilson has been the executive director since 1990. Wilson indicated that the Project has engaged in capacity building throughout its history. The organization has worked with ONE/Northwest to more effectively use technology and Technical Resources for the Environmental Community (TREC) to strengthen its organizational capacity, especially in membership fundraising.

Wilson credited this aspect of the organization’s culture to one of the founding members of the organization, who understood the need for people to feel supported, and saw that creating a more effective organization would create a culture where staff would be “taken care of.”

“You know I can tell you where the motivation really came from and it came from the beginning. One of our

founders is a person who is very concerned about interpersonal interactions and how people work together and how things feel, you know, how people get along. And so we always had somewhat of a focus on that, and wanting to take care of ourselves. And knowing that the work is a real burnout. And so, at this one point in 1990 when the organization made a transition to really having a paid staff ... she hooked us up with TREC. She said, ‘you guys really need to, you know, you need some help here’ ... We had a consultant, ... come down and help us kind of reformulate the group. So we had a consultant come in on the ground floor during a period of reorganization.”

Obtaining capacity building services has been a challenge for the staff of the Siskiyou Project, despite the value that it has for the organization. The Project is located in Cave Junction, Oregon, on the Oregon-California border—a rural area that has few services. Medford, the nearest town, at 40 miles away, is occasionally the setting for nonprofit fundraising workshops. But those events are generally targeted to nonprofits with service missions, and would not be applicable to the fundraising needs of the controversial environmental advocacy organization.

Seattle—where most relevant training is held—is 500 miles away. As the Project has grown, they have been able to send some staff

members for training in Seattle. However, Wilson lamented the fact that board members and volunteers are often prevented from participating in training because to do so would involve spending time away from their jobs and family, and the travel and accommodations are prohibitively expensive. As a result, the board members have not been able to avail themselves of training they need.

“It’s really great if it can be done on ... a casual basis, where they have more than one chance to do it. But to try and ... even bringing someone in from outside, well, you’ve got to schedule it, and you’ve got to get everybody together at the same time. And it’s really hard to do.”

The experience with ONE/Northwest

With a background in engineering, Wilson was comfortable using technology, and during her tenure the Project has increased its use of desktop publishing. Since 1995 the organization has increasingly used the Internet to enhance its work. Because of the wide range of activities that the staff is involved in—especially in educating the public—their website (<http://www.siskiyou.org>) has become a significant tool to accomplish their goals. However, until several years ago, the staff of Siskiyou shared a dial-up access to the Internet; only one person could communicate by email at a time. As Wilson explained, “this really slowed us down.”

With assistance from ONE/Northwest, Siskiyou applied for, and received, a networking grant from the W. Alton Jones Foundation.² The assistance began with an assessment tool that staff of Siskiyou filled out about their technology needs. Armed with the assessment information, the staff of

ONE/Northwest worked with the Project staff to develop a plan for upgrading their technology infrastructure. Staff of ONE/Northwest and a circuit rider from the W. Alton Jones Foundation traveled to the Siskiyou offices and installed their equipment, set up the network, and trained the staff over a two-week period.

Wilson points out that the training was critical to the success of the effort. There are a limited number of technology contractors nearby; the controversial nature of the work that the Project does presents barriers to working with the few contractors that do work in the area.

The understanding that ONE/Northwest brought about the controversial nature of Siskiyou’s work contributed significantly to the successful relationship that developed between the two organizations. Because there is some tension between the Project and the community in which they work, it was valuable to have a group that Siskiyou knew they could trust. Said Wilson:

“It certainly helped with communications, you know. I didn’t have to explain things. I didn’t have to explain what we were doing to them. They knew. They knew how we operated, they knew what we do. They knew, for instance ... that in the last four or five years that environmental activists have become completely and totally reliant on e-mail. And I don’t know if that’s true for other nonprofit-type groups, but as advocacy groups, you know, communicating to grassroots constituency ... email is our number one tool ... They understood ... without us having to tell them that that was our number one need.”

² According to an article on the ONE/Northwest web site, “The Foundation has identified the Klamath-Siskiyou bioregion of southwest Oregon and northern California as one of its priority areas, and was interested in building the electronic communications capacity of its grantees in the region as an essential component in its larger strategy of helping its grantees become more effective advocates for Klamath-Siskiyou wildlands.” This was a good collaboration for both the Foundation and ONE/Northwest.

Capacity building to strengthen the movement

Some providers feel strongly that they must only work with organizations that share their social change agenda, or commitment to a social change movement. This applies to consultants as well as support organizations. These are examples of providers who are being proactive about believing the match is important in their work and also understand capacity building as movement building.

The Peace Development Fund (PDF) clearly communicates to groups that PDF has a social agenda of building a movement for social change, and they are only interested in working with groups that embrace their anti-racist approach to organizational development.

The Center for Third World Organizing is another example of a group whose mission is to support community organizations interested in challenging relationships of power—fundamental social change in their view.

Organizations dedicated to social change also see power analysis as a constituent part of their work in building the capacity of organizations and the capacity of movements. One provider spoke of *“building a base of power [for the mission] in whatever system they are in.”*

BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION

In the course of our interviews, people identified barriers that keep organizations from engaging in capacity building. There was a clear consensus among providers and those interviewed from recipient organizations that lack of funds is a primary barrier. We suggest beliefs and attitudes about capacity building are underlying barriers that lead to lack of funding. Finally, a number of individuals mentioned that lack of access to providers of capacity building services is a barrier.

Funding

Throughout our conversations funding was identified as a primary barrier for organizations to obtain the capacity building services they need.

As an October 2000 *Foundation News and Commentary* article pointed out, “For all the buzz we’ve heard about ‘capacity building’ and supporting nonprofit infrastructure ... technical assistance to nonprofit remains extremely underfunded.” Relatively few organizations are able to avail themselves of these funds, which are unevenly distributed throughout the country. Lack of funding continues to be the greatest barrier to implementation of these programs and services.

For many consultants, money is a huge barrier to implementing their services in ways that they believe are most effective. Providers respond in a number of ways. Sometimes, providers scale down the intervention that they think would be optimal, to accommodate the financial means of the recipient group. One provider has developed a shortened version of strategic planning to use under these circumstances. Sometimes this approach is effective, but sometimes they *“look back and wonder”* whether they have *“done too little.”*

One consultant talked about the prohibitive expense for a small group to engage in strategic planning. She considers her work with small groups on strategic planning a “labor of love” because in order to do a good job, she spends much more time than most groups can afford.

Another consultant arranged to work with an organization that didn’t receive all the money it

expected from its grantmaker. She had to eliminate her site visits, and conducted all of her service by phone. She described this as “a huge barrier. The distance can’t build trust and rapport to do it right.” There were times when she misread the reaction over the phone that she would have interpreted correctly in person.

The Institute for Conservation Leadership, Grassroots Institute for Fundraising Training (GIFT), Training Resources for the Environmental Community (TREC), Pratt Institute Center for Community and Environmental Development, and ONE/Northwest are examples of providers who offer services to client groups at low cost, or on a sliding scale. The Leadership Institute for Sustainable Communities of the Urban Habitat Program is one of several programs that encourage participation by providing stipends to their participants.

While funding is a primary barrier that keeps capacity building from being a priority for many organizations, especially those with small budgets, the attitudes and beliefs about the value of funding for capacity building is a barrier as well.

Beliefs and attitudes as barriers

Just as the principles we found in exemplary practice can work together to create a virtuous cycle of effective capacity building, so too can negative attitudes and wrongly held beliefs combine to foster a vicious cycle that resists the capacity building organizations need.

While funding for capacity building has increased in the past several years, thanks to work by Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, the James Irvine Foundation, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, and the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation, among others, many foundations are exclusively program oriented. They do not hold a holistic view of what makes those programs successful.

A larger public that is also suspicious of donations and funds that go to anything but programs and services joins them in these sentiments. Add to the mix activist organizations that have beliefs and attitudes that hold capacity building as a deterrent from the “real work” they accomplish with their programs.

And consider providers. Many of the providers we spoke to, considered expert and exemplary here, noted that in general the principles they are committed to in their practice are hardly universally agreed upon. In fact, they thought some consultants and trainers hold attitudes and beliefs that run counter to these principles:

“A lot of times, we as experts go in and just implement our vision—we say this is what we know—this is what we are going to give you, instead of really finding out what these organizations truly need, really spending the time looking at the community doing the real assessment with the community—not for the community, but with the community—and getting a better idea of how our talents and our skills as service providers can benefit these community organizations.”

As long as that is the case, organizations who already may feel skittish about capacity building’s “fit” as relevant to their mission, may have those negative attitudes and beliefs even more deeply reinforced when they meet an unprincipled or inexperienced consultant or trainer who does not take their organizational culture or mission into account.

Funders, providers, the general public and organizations themselves hold beliefs and attitudes that conspire at any given time to make the barriers for capacity building more firmly entrenched.

Lack of Access

A third barrier we heard concerned the reach and diversity of the consultant pool.

There is an uneven distribution of capacity building providers in certain parts of the country. Some providers think the issue of ensuring best practice are moot for many groups if they are out of the loop altogether. Many providers and those interviewed from recipient organizations were especially concerned that rural areas (some identified the South in particular) are at a clear disadvantage. There is additional expense incurred both for consultants and for participants in training for those from rural areas, and for those volunteers who cannot afford to take time from work, or to pay for transportation and childcare.

Providers suggested that more research could be done to understand and explore the gaps in access for organizations in rural areas.

Several of those interviewed also mentioned that there are not enough consultants who can address differences in language and education among recipient organizations. Finally, there are simply not enough people of color and diverse ethnicities to serve the entire sector.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION

While we have identified barriers we also have found opportunities that add value to capacity building. Some regions of the country have unique resources to contribute to capacity building services. Networks have also proven to be a strong resource in facilitating and strengthening capacity building.

Added value in certain regions

Some regions of the country, like the Pacific Northwest, may have advantages in implementing effective technology training and consulting. For example ONE/Northwest's new training program, Web University, is offered to 10 organizations whose websites are "underachieving." Their stable of high tech volunteers includes the software developer of PhotoShop, who is designing the curriculum for the course. They also report that in the communities that they serve, leaders in nonprofits are more likely to be open to and skilled at using technology. Foundations that fund environmental groups in that region are tech savvy, and are therefore willing to fund technology, including equipment.

Many of the technology assistance providers are sharing their tools on-line, so that those less isolated can benefit to some degree.

Networks are an important resource

The providers we interviewed and the representatives of recipient organizations often spoke of a circle of colleagues and organizations through which they hear about new ideas, and to which they can refer organizations or seek referrals for their own needs. The people who were part of local, regional or state or national networks knew more about resources and opportunities available to them, as well as potential problems and issues.

We also heard in interviews of the importance of networks in building the capacity of a movement. For example, a loose coalition of 50 citizen organizations across a western state who train

on the Caesar Chavez model of organizing turned to the Midwest Academy, which trains on that same model, to help them educate new staff. Together they customized Midwest's training to cater to the needs of their members. The organization, which originally had only planned to train new staff members, decided to open up the training statewide to coalition members and friends, so that a much broader network of people would have common understanding.

“Organizers have their own kind of language when you do citizen and community organizing, and its helpful when everyone kind of understands the same organizing model ... we wanted other folks, other organizers in the state of Colorado who we work with in our movement to be trained or at least get an idea of this direct action model ... ”

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study identifies core principles and competencies of a network of exemplary providers. The trainers and consultants are diverse in many ways. Yet, the patterns of excellent practice lay the groundwork for the development of a common set of expectations for grassroots nonprofit organizations and providers. While the study raises special issues relevant to activist or community organizations and identifies barriers to capacity building, it also highlights opportunities. The Environmental Support Center is encouraged to seek a broad range of partners who share an interest in some dimension of this work to join them in further exploring the results of this study. Some of those potential partners have been identified through this research.

In conclusion, we raise several key questions for the field to consider.

1. How can the profession become focused on principles that govern a relationship of trust between a competent provider and a ready organization?

The principles identified in this report, along with the characteristics of exemplary providers, can be a reference point for reflection at national forums as well as online and in print, on what will best serve to build the capacity of activist and community organizations. Across the sector and within particular communities—such as the environmental community or among providers supporting social change organizations—researchers, providers, organizational leaders, and grantmakers can examine, debate, refine, and expand these principles and characteristics.

2. Under what conditions can small groups with limited human and financial resources succeed in capacity building—and what might that success look like?

In *High Performance Nonprofit Organizations*, Letts, Ryan, and Grossman implied that small organizations can successfully benefit from certain types of capacity building. They even indicated small organizations might see organizational effects more quickly because they have fewer organizational layers. Although, as they also point out, this is often not the perception (Letts *et al.*, 1999, p. 25).

“It has often been assumed that smaller nonprofits cannot and need not, build the organizational capacity to perform well ... considering the vital role small nonprofit play in meeting social needs, this cavalier attitude is risky” (ibid. p.25).

That being said, it should be noted that some of our interviewees suggested that there is unreasonable pressure on grassroots groups to strengthen their organization when they should be devoting what resources they have to advance their issue.

The question lingers of whether groups working on a short-term issue really need to develop organizational structures, such as developing a board of directors, becoming incorporated, or creating administrative hierarchies.

Further research is needed to identify capacity building practices that combine training and consultation with the resources to implement them, to ensure that groups with few financial or human resources to spare can strengthen their organizations.

3. How can providers assist organizations in capacity building without compromising the organization's values?

There are perceived contradictions between conventional structures and processes that non-profits use and the tenets of the social change movement. Several providers expressed concern that certain organizations whose goals are to empower the “unempowered” may find the organizational structures embedded in traditional capacity building in conflict with their organization's mission.

We encourage the field to continue to examine the “uneasy fit” between activist community organizations and conventional capacity building practices. Continued examination can resolve misperceptions and wrongly held beliefs that block organizations from engaging in capacity building. It can transform conventional capacity building norms and attitudes that do not yet consider the mission, values, and culture of activist or community organizations essential for effective capacity building.

4. How can we increase access to exemplary capacity building services for groups that currently confront barriers due to location, language, and education?

We encourage research to identify groups (*i.e.*, small, rural) that do not have access to consultants, trainers, programs, and other resources. We suggest beginning with the networks of service providers that currently exist, to develop an understanding about what information related to capacity building activities exists, who uses it, and how it is used.

The field can consider how best to expand these networks to underserved constituencies, and focus on understanding who is “out of the loop” and what can be done to incorporate the groups into networks. The funding community has a key role to play in responding to each of these questions by supporting research and worthy strategies.

Appendix A

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Appendix B
Expert Providers

Name of Interviewee	Serve Primarily Environmental Groups	Area of Expertise
Interviewees in Organizations		
Michael Barber Affordable Housing Network of New Jersey		Broad range of services
Taryn Clark Berkeley Community Media Workshops		Media/communication
Rob Freda-Cowie The Biodiversity Project	X	Media/communication
Diana Degel Blandin Community Leadership		Program Leadership development
Russ Moxley Center for Creative Leadership		Leadership development
Julie Quiroz- Martinez Center for Third World Organizing		Organizing Fund raising Organizational development
Jennifer Beckett Erik Recinos-Rosas CompuMentor		Technology
Don Wells Duke University Certificate Program in Nonprofit Management, and Institute in Nonprofit Leadership		Leadership Organizational development
Mike Roque Grassroots Institute for Fundraising training (GIFT)		Fundraising
Dianne Russell Institute for Conservation Leadership (ICL)	X	Broad range of services
Deborah Strauss IT Resource Center		Technology
Savonala Horne Land Loss Prevention Project	X	Legal services
Andrea Freeman Andrew Zepp Land Trust Alliance	X	Broad range of services

Name of Interviewee	Serve Primarily	
	Environmental Groups	Area of Expertise
<u>Interviewees in Organizations</u>		
Laura Fuzik Management Assistance Program of the Justice Resource Institute		<u>Broad range of services</u>
Jackie Kendall Midwest Academy		<u>Broad range of services</u>
Cheryl King Fischer New England Grassroots Environment Fund	X	<u>Broad range of services</u>
Johnnie Sutherland North Carolina Center for Nonprofits		<u>Broad range of services</u>
Denise Joines ONE/Northwest	X	<u>Technology</u>
Bree Carlson Peace Development Fund		<u>Broad range of services</u>
Rudy Bryant Pratt Institute for Community and Environmental Development	X	<u>Organizational development Leadership Board development</u>
Pat Munoz River Network	X	<u>Broad range of services</u>
Linda Gunter Safe Energy Communication Council	X	<u>Media/communication</u>
Kay Sohl Technical Assistance for Community Services (TACS)		<u>Broad range of services</u>
Dyan Oldenburg Training Resources for the Environmental Community (TREC)	X	<u>Broad range of services</u>
Carl Anthony Urban Habitat: Leadership Institute for Sustainable Communities	X	<u>Leadership</u>
Jane Vella Founder, Global Learning Partners		<u>Popular Education training</u>
Patrick Sweeney Western Organization of Resource Councils (WORC)	X	<u>Broad range of services</u>

Appendix B
Expert Providers
(continued)

Name of Interviewee	Serve Primarily	
	Environmental Groups	Area of Expertise
Consultants		
Sharon Behar	X	Broad range of services
Diane Brown		Broad range of services
George Coling		Organizational development
John Doxey		Board development
Sarah Gallant		Organizational development
Jeff Malachowsky		Organizational development
Terry Miller		Financial management
Amy O'Connor	X	Membership development
Sara O'Neal	X	Organizational development
Andy Robinson		Fundraising

Appendix C
Members of Expert Panel

Sharon Behar	Penn Loh, Alternative for Communication and Environment
Heather Berthoud	Pat Munoz, River Network
Michael Burns, Brody & Weiser	Carolyn O'Brien, Environmental Federation of New England
Bernadette Delkiaro, Toxic Action Center	Carolyn Patterson, Nonprofit Boards Clearinghouse
Pablo Eisenberg, Georgetown Public Policy Institution	Diane Russell, Institute for Conservation Leadership
Rita Fuerst, Charitable and Philanthropic Management Counsel	Karen Simmons, Nonprofit Management Development Center
Elan Garonzik, The Charles Steward Mott Foundation	Deborah Strauss, Information Technology Resource Center
Jim Gomes, Environmental Lobby of Massachusetts	
Barbara Kibbe, David and Lucile Packard Foundation	

Appendix D

Best Practice Provider Interview Protocol

1. What are the key characteristics of your (your organization's) approach to capacity building? Training and consultation? (*i.e.*, follow up, peer to peer, coaching, etc.)
2. What types of groups do you generally work with?
3. Is there a theory of organizational development, or a philosophy of learning that underlies your practice? If so, what are the specific practices that reflect that philosophy? How would you describe what distinguishes your practice from other consultants/trainers working in the same area? For your specific area of expertise, are there any "best practices" that you think are critical to the effective delivery of service?
4. Once you agree to work with an organization/individual, is there any sort of assessment or preparation that you suggest a client does? Please describe, and give some examples. Once you agree to work with an organization/individual, is there any sort of preparation that you do to better understand your clients? Please describe, and give some examples. Do you ever tailor your program of assistance in response to that information?
5. We're interested in understanding what conditions organizations need to have in place in order for you to implement your practice most effectively. Can you describe them? Levels of readiness, such as stage of organization's life cycle, size, budget, etc. What are the greatest barriers that prevent you from working effectively with an individual/organization?
6. Do you have experience working with organizations in low income communities and/or communities of color? How do you address some of the cultural issues such as language, race and ethnicity and differences in advocacy groups and other types of organizations?
7. How do you define a successful outcome? What do you want your recipients to know or be able to do after your work with them? How do you evaluate the effectiveness of your work with individuals/organizations? Has there been a formal evaluation of your program? (We should know most of this ahead.)
8. Have you had any professional relationship with the Environmental Support Center? Other environmental organizations?
9. We would like to talk to several groups that you have worked with to understand from their perspective what aspects of your training/consultation/practice they have found most useful.



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