



## **NAVIGATING THE CAPACITY BUILDING DILEMMA**

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It is easy to get caught up in the wave of “capacity building.” Government, donors, consultants, board, and staff all want you to build capacity. But how are you supposed to put that vague directive into action? Is it technology, board, procedures, facilities, or staff into which you should invest your energy? How do you even know if once you’ve done it, you’ve actually built any capacity? This is where oversimplifying comes into play. At times, we must go back to the grounded roots of an idea in order to understand which branch we ultimately should follow to reach our prized piece of fruit. To start we must consider what “capacity” has relevance to our mission and work. Does capacity refer to the quantities or the quality of what we do and which of these measures is ultimately more important to us?

Consider the difference between the capacity of the food pantry versus the capacity to cook. Increasing the size of the pantry can lead to increases in the amount of food being prepared, but doesn’t necessarily better the quality of that food. Investing in culinary training improves the quality of the food but doesn’t ensure more quantity. To run a kitchen, you need to determine which of these two capacities is more important before investing time and energy. Do you increase the pantry size and focus on producing more food for more people, or do you invest more money on training to produce higher quality food (and potentially more efficient use of supplies), but in smaller amounts that may still leave people hungry?

### **5 Steps to Navigating the Capacity Building Dilemma**

#### **1. Clarify what “mission fulfillment” means for your organization**

The ultimate “capacity” is your ability to fulfill your mission. That is, in fact, the basis of your nonprofit’s existence. Therefore, you must develop a clear understanding of the tangible outcomes that represent mission fulfillment for your organization. The ultimate capacity you are striving to build is the ability to achieve the organization’s mission either more effectively, more efficiently, or more broadly.

#### **2. Revisit your methods for evaluating and assessing current capacity**

Your evaluation tools must include some way of measuring success as it relates to mission fulfillment. To build capacity, first, you must be able to measure current capacity. Without this you have no way of knowing whether anything has been increased, improved, or impacted by your efforts. Map out what resources and skills are needed to carry out your programs. Determine whether the resources are being over- or under-utilized.

#### **3. Identify the “capacity” that matters**

What is more important to your mission fulfillment – to cook higher quality food, to cook more efficiently, or to cook greater quantities of food? Based on your mission and the results of your evaluation and assessment, make a determination as to which skills or resources actually need attention, and which ones have the most potential to contribute to mission fulfillment. Be sure to consider both infrastructure resources as well as program specific ones.

#### **4. Invest in targeted capacity growth**

Once you know what “capacity” matters, make targeted investments of time and energy in that area to generate tangible change. Allow for enough time for the change to manifest itself. Short changing an effort only cheats the organization out of the potential gains that the effort may produce.

#### **5. Evaluate your level of mission fulfillment**

You must be able to demonstrate change. Revisit your evaluation step and determine if the investments produced the impact intended.

As an organization, you must break down the vague concept of capacity building; ground the effort back into the mission of your organization; and define the specific areas where YOUR organization can make progress towards greater mission fulfillment.

For more on capacity building and setting priorities during tough times, see [WWW.MARYLANDNONPROFITS.ORG](http://WWW.MARYLANDNONPROFITS.ORG)