

**No One Best Way:
A study of nonprofit leadership capacity building**

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Leadership matters. As one participant in this study of leadership capacity building said, “If you talk to any program officer about the biggest contributing factor for organizational success, the answer will always be effective leadership.” He was not alone in this opinion. In his study of 250 opinion leaders and 250 executive directors of high performing nonprofits, P. Light (2002) found that “No matter how the answers are assembled, leadership always emerges as the starting point for the journey toward high performance” (p. 58).

This report summarizes an interview study of the experiences of 29 participants who were engaged in leadership capacity building. Seventeen were funder/providers and range from very small to “top-25” large, 8 were non-funder/providers, and 4 were experts. The study began quite simply with interviews of five funders and four experts. The questions were very general and exploratory in texture. A second round of one-to-one interviews with more specific questions was conducted with a broader group. Interview transcripts were then reviewed along with relevant literature to develop the following logic model:

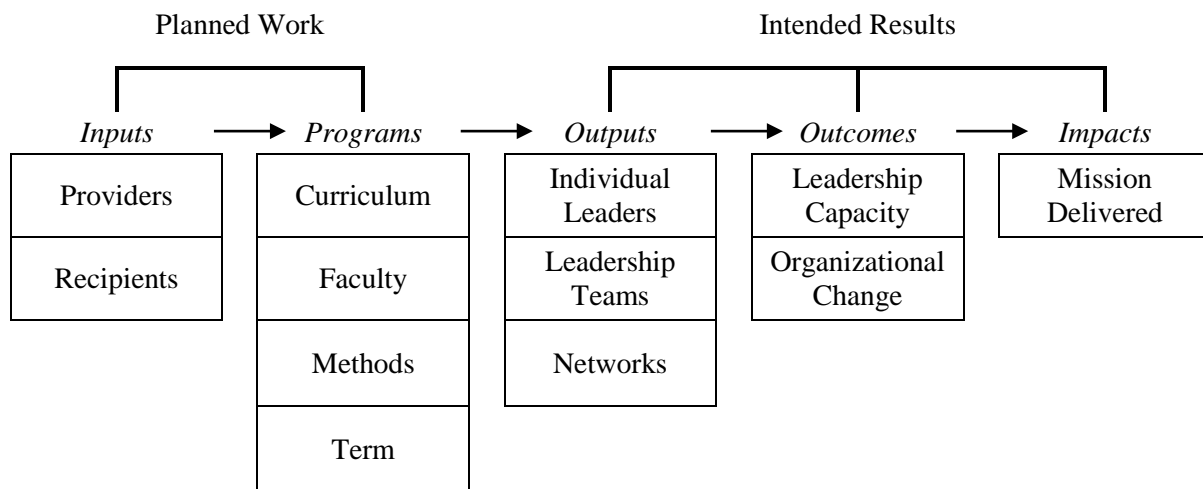


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Beginnings

When it comes to leadership capacity building, study participants talked about four issues that influenced their thinking. First, participants perceived a growing demand for leadership development driven by concerns about the capacity of nonprofit leaders to cope with increasing demands. This assessment is supported by empirical research; leading nonprofits *is* hard work. It shows in the median executive director tenure of four years or less, the 65 percent who are “once-is-enough” first timers in the job, and the less than half who want to play the role again because of “high stress and long hours, anxiety about agency finances, fundraising, and managing people” (Peters & Wolfred, 2001, p. 3).

Second, many participants also talked about the looming wave of executive transitions. Though speculative in texture, a study published by Third Sector New England in January 2004 found over 70% of executive directors imagined leaving their current jobs with five years (Randall, Mass, Ancrum, & Liss, 2004). The study’s estimated nonprofit turnover rates at 10-12% per year are in line with comparable rates in the for-profit sector (Hinden & Hull, 2002, p. 20; Lucier, Schuyt, & Spiegel, 2003). Relative to who will take the place of those retiring, a 2001 CompassPoint study found “a fairly healthy distribution of age, suggesting that the sector is attracting new leaders” (Peters & Wolfred, 2001, p. 10).

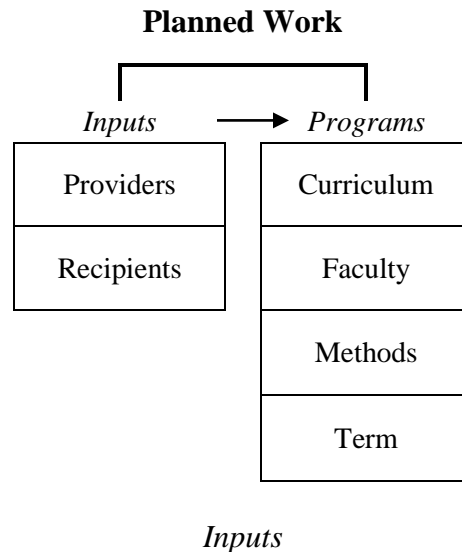
Third, results mattered when it comes to leadership capacity building, which is experiencing firsthand the accountability movement washing over the sector. Niven (2003) conjectures this is because of the “recent spate of corporate accounting scandals, a longstanding reliance on financial measures of performance as the one true way to gauge success, and the inability of many organizations to successfully execute their strategies” (p. 4).

Some participants described this as a growing impatience for results; others see this as a natural evolution from the conceptually creative beginnings to the more regulatory approach as fields mature. This results orientation, which some participants refer to as a hardening of the field, may be shortsighted according to Pitcoff (2004), “As much as training, coaching, networking and other capacity-building tools are needed, practioners also need time to reflect, manage, lead, think, and even simply rest in order to remain effective” (p. 14).

Fourth, for participants, the purpose of leadership capacity building was to improve the effectiveness of organizations to achieve their missions. In terms of how effectiveness is determined, the most common method for participants was the goal model, which is consistent with its general popularity and frequency of use (Herman & Renz, 1999). Correct management practices was the second most popular method. The third most popular method of determining effectiveness for participants is multidimensional approaches that measure “effectiveness in several different ways simultaneously, often incorporating measures based on both the goal - attainment and system resource approaches” (Forbes, 1998, p. 186).

Interestingly, only one individual talked about the organization’s reputation as a measure of effectiveness. Reputational approaches take “the view that overall nonprofit organizational effectiveness *is* whatever multiple constituents or stakeholders judge it to be” (2004, p. 695 *italics as written*). These social construction approaches are popular in academic settings, but the

practical challenges are obvious. Nonprofits have multiple constituencies with vastly differing viewpoints and levels of experience. Stakeholders include clients who may be impoverished and living in ghettos and funders who may be very wealthy individuals living in gated enclaves. Perhaps this is why some worry about “the dangers of a situation where a single nonprofit has multiple funders, all of which put a high priority on building capacity and effectiveness but each of which favors a different path to enlightenment” (Kibbe, 2004, pp. 10-11).



Providers

Providers are the first input in the leadership capacity building logic model. Many have practitioner backgrounds, they are well read about leadership literature, and many have longer tenures in the sector often coming to the work from the practitioner side. Second, their primary motivation for doing this work is to impact the mission of the recipient’s organization. Third, resources spent are relatively modest. Few providers spend more than \$2 million each year and many were well below the seven-figure mark. Finally, relationships with recipients are commonly characterized as high touch.

Recipients

The second input is recipients. In general, most providers of leadership capacity building focus on individuals, some on teams, and still others on whole organizations, fields of practice, systems, or communities. For the study participants, grantee recipients for capacity building leadership development were very diverse. Sabbaticals programs seek seasoned leaders who are usually older in age. Peer network programs often seek diversity of ideas that come from boundary crossing. Some funders want just social entrepreneurs; others want diverse people of color and gender. Some focus on middle-level leaders in the organization or the next generation.

Leadership development always requires a commitment from the recipient. It includes time away from the work of the organization. Sabbatical programs typically require the executive director to take three months away from the work, which in turn requires running flat out for months in advance to prepare for this uninterrupted absence. Peer learning programs often last at least six

months and often span 9 to 18 months in duration. Not only is time a type of commitment, but the leadership development programs are often not gratis and require an outlay of money for fees and travel.

Whomever the recipient, they must be prepared to commit time and resources. Furthermore, the commitment of other leaders in the organization is important, “It’s easy to say, ‘We’re sending so and so to this training.’ That’s different than getting a level of commitment from the board that they really will create space for this person coming back.”

Programs

Curriculum

In general, leadership capacity building curriculum focused on management or interpersonal skills, which are sometimes called soft and hard skills or general management and human relations (Arthur, Bennett, Edens, & Bell, 2003; Collins & Holton, 2004; Pond, 2002).

In nonprofits, the answer to whether curriculum should be about management or interpersonal, soft or hard, is “yes.” Seventy-nine percent of nonprofits have budgets of less than \$1 million, 68 percent are less than \$500,000, and 36 percent are smaller than \$100,000; paid full-time staff are in short supply with half of all nonprofits having five or fewer employees (Arnsberger, 2003; Wiener, Kirsch, & McCormack, 2002).

For participants in this study, there were three primary curriculum categories: competencies, organizational development, and renewal.

Competencies

Competencies are clusters of capacities, the required abilities necessary to get the job done. One way to think about competencies is to define effective leadership and then design the work around them. The participants in this study identified four primary attributes of effective leadership:

Visionary - “They have a really clear vision of the future, and they translate that vision into strategies and goals that people can really understand and hold on to.”

Grounded - “They’re grounded and centered within themselves on why they do the work that they do, aware of their strengths and weaknesses, and they are unassuming.”

Collective - “They engage their staff and board members but also residents, constituents, allies, funders, public officials, banks - whomever they need to make it happen.”

Competent - “These leaders get things done and make things happen, are planful, and have financial acumen.”

Meehan (2004) lists seven attributes of the types of leaders grantmakers want to support: Fostering collaboration, rooted in public values, creating community driven solutions, crossing boundaries, promoting systems change, engaging in peer exchange and learning communities, integrating opportunities for reflection and renewal, encouraging new leadership. The Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) uses three: self-management, social, and work facilitation capabilities (McCauley, Center for Creative Leadership., & Van Velsor, 2004). Fewer competencies are better according to Conger and Ready (2004) who warn, “It is far from clear whether managers can focus developmentally on more than a few behaviors at a given time” (p. 44).

For participants, competency curriculum frequently starts out with multi-rater feedback, which some have called “the most notable management innovation of the 1990’s. Literally thousands (and perhaps now millions) of individuals have received written feedback from sources that were once thought to be nontraditional, or even taboo” (Atwater & Waldman, 1998, p. 423). Even though “little is known about the effects of 360 degree feedback programs in organizations . . . With careful planning and implementation, the benefits of 360 feedback can be clearly realized, rather than merely taken on faith” (Waldman, Atwater, & Antonioni, 1998, pp. 89, 93).

If the goal of 360-degree feedback is to change behaviors, House and Aditya (1997) issue a warning:

There is reason to believe that many individuals are not able to substantially vary their cognitive style or orientation, their dominant motives, or their global behavioral patterns . . . There is no available evidence that shows that individuals can substantially alter autocratic, participative, charismatic, task-oriented, or person-oriented behavior patterns. (pp. 460-461)

Furthermore, there is compelling evidence to suggest that 360-degree feedback hurts organization performance more than it helps (Pfau, Kay, Norwack, & Ghorpade, 2002). Watson Wyatt Worldwide (2005) cautions, “Our research has shown time and time again that 360 degree performance evaluations do not translate into improved performance . . . companies in which more employees evaluate their superiors tended to have lower performance levels” (p. 6).

For participants, the point of 360-degree feedback is not necessarily about changing personalities or improving performance. It’s more about alignment as Kincaid (in Grossmann, 2005) observes, “No matter the industry, no matter the job, one of the things that I’ve seen that contributes to success is a very close alignment between how you see yourself and how others see you. Tools like 360-degree feedback are designed to help close that gap” (p. 43). After all, a “leader who understands his or her style will be more effective than one who is blind to it” (Northouse, 2001, p. 199). As one participant describes it, “They have a chance to really examine themselves, and then be examined by others, and be assessed by others and by themselves, and then you compare how am I perceived, and how do I perceive myself. So there is that humbling experience.”

Self Competencies

CCL uses four subsets to describe the self competency: self-awareness, ability to balance conflicting demands, ability to learn, and leadership values (McCauley et al., 2004). Beineke and Sublett, writing in a W. K. Kellogg Foundation publication, describe it this way:

Leaders must be aware of their strengths and be able to manage their weaknesses. The ability to become a leader and assume responsibility for decisions and actions is at the core of self-knowledge. If leaders do not know who they are, followers certainly will not know or trust them. (p. 11)

Social Competencies

According to CCL, four capabilities make up social competencies: ability to build and maintain relationships, ability to build effective work groups, communication skills, and ability to develop others (McCauley et al., 2004). It is part “playing well with others” and part “coaching the team.” Said one participant, “If there is one guiding principle, it’s about my ability to successfully manage relationships minute by minute. From the moment I get up in the morning to the moment that my day ends, it’s probably the significant difference between a good leader and a great leader.”

Some use the term collective leadership to describe this competency and say it is growing in importance (Meehan & Arrick, 2004; Reinelt, Foster, & Sullivan, 2002). Allen et al. (1998) explain:

This new leadership paradigm has been called by a number of different names: shared, participatory, collective, collaborative, cooperative, democratic, fluid, inclusive, roving, distributed, relation and post-heroic. While consensus on the name of this ‘new leadership’ has not been reached, there is a growing understanding that the patterns of hierarchical leadership that served us in the past are not well suited to the global complexity, rapid change, interdependency, and multifaceted challenges. (p. 5)

For its believers, collective leadership isn’t just a social competency; it is a fundamental way of doing things, a core value of an organization. Says one participant, “The goal ought to be to share the leadership and encourage leadership on all levels of the agencies.”

Certainly, none of us longs for full-force command-and-control leadership as a daily feature of organizational life. Indeed, some people think the age of the individual leader should be brought to an end. This is because they equate individual leadership to command and control leadership, which has a decidedly mechanical texture to it, “We still think of organizations in mechanistic terms, as collections of replaceable parts capable of being reengineered. We act as if even people were machines, redesigning their jobs as we would prepare an engineering diagram, expecting them to perform to specifications with machinelike obedience”(Wheatley, 1997).

Command and control leadership goes by a variety of names including Newtonian, traditional, great man, heroic, and industrial. Collective leadership is quite different - whether you call collective, collaborative, networked, or relational - and according to its adherents, it is critical:

“Organizational capacity for leadership is expanded or developed by enriching the patterns of connectivity in order to overcome the limitations of an organization’s current capacity” (O’Connor & Quinn, 2004).

It is relevant to note that collective leadership is difficult to do. As Drath (1996) puts it, “The old fashioned John Wayne style has been out for some time, of course, and the newer, more sensitive and participative approach is very difficult to accomplish” (p. 1). Even in the face of two intractable obstacles - too many chiefs and diffused accountability - he maintains his optimism:

Attempts to make leadership more inclusive and collective have often - if not always - floundered on these obstacles. Such failures have made many people realistically pessimistic about the utility of a more inclusive and collective approach to leadership. Yet the promise of such leadership grows brighter as complex challenges surpass the ability of the individual leader to respond. (Drath, 2003, p. 5)

But this is tricky stuff, implying that individual leadership is no longer useful. Sometimes strong individual leadership is vitally important especially in entrepreneurial, start-up organizations, when time is of the essence, or during crisis. Furthermore, as one participant explains, “For an organization with a \$300,000 budget, the reality is that it is about a person. And maybe part of the capacity investment is getting it to the point where it’s not all about that person, but in most cases, it is all about individual leadership.”

Like many other aspects of leadership capacity building, it’s a “both/and” situation. Yukl (2002), for instance, reviewed 40 years of research and found “participative leadership sometimes results in higher satisfaction, effort, and performance, and at other times it does not” (p. 86). A participant agrees, “It’s like collaboration. It’s hard to say that all non-profit leadership should be collaborative, that it should be boundary crossing all the time. It depends on when and why.”

Work Competencies

At CCL, work competencies include management skills, ability to think and act strategically, ability to think creatively, and ability to initiate and implement change (McCauley et al., 2004). For the participants, these competencies are much broader including an “A to Z” menu of everything from fundraising to board relations, finance to marketing.

Some might argue that work competencies curriculum isn’t really leadership capacity building. For study participants, this distinction is academic, “If you didn’t have to worry about whether your payroll checks were going to bounce tomorrow maybe you would start taking time to cultivate your city council member, become more outspoken in the media about issues related to your organization, or raise more money.” A second person says, “There’s no shortage of good people with good ideas. The shortage is in the skill sets required to get the job done.”

Organizational Development

Curriculum that addresses organizational development was important to participants. One provider said, “Our goal is to create a space that is fulfilling, meaningful, authentic, that focuses

on real time compelling issues facing their agencies.” Another individual clarified, “We ask consultants to partner with the executive director to paint the picture of where the organization is trying to go and what they need to get there. What are the specific leadership challenges not just for the executive director, but for the board and the senior team? What is the leadership development plan so that they can get there?” A third person stated, “We don’t want to find just an executive director who thinks they might have some specific professional development needs unless it’s linked to how it’s going to move the organization forward.”

Renewal

A number of participants focused curriculum on renewal. This includes recharging seasoned executives, “For people who have been in leadership roles for a long time, or who have been in their jobs for 20 years or have been in their field for 20 years, it’s very easy to lose touch with why you’re doing the work.” Since 1992, for example, the James P. Shannon Leadership Institute at the Wilder Foundation has reached experienced executives through a yearlong program that seeks to “Renew. Recharge. Rededicate” (“James P. Shannon Leadership Institute,” 2005).

Renewal curriculum also includes executive transitions. “What about succession, and about bringing folks along, you know to really help folks within the organization also realize the leadership potential?” asked one participant. Another said, “Rather than just do organizational capacity grants, we’ve actually decided primarily to focus on and work with the sector, focus on the development of leadership transition. And that’s where we’re targeting the prime investments.”

Faculty

Faculty, facilitator, coach, consultant, trainer, educator, instructor, co-inquirer, these are all terms to describe the people who actually deliver the curriculum. The people that bring curriculum to life are rich in diversity, from coach/consultants to boundary-crossing peer learning to professional educators in classroom settings.

For the study participants, coach/consultants were popular, frequently in combination with peer learning. Indeed, sometimes the coach is both the facilitator of the peer learning group as well as a one-on-one resource to the group. In these cases, the coaches are actually consultants, “They’re not these kind of new coaches that have popped up recently who really don’t have consulting experience. Our coaches are all experienced organizational development consultants, and they’re picked because they’re also good coaches.”

Learning from peers is often place-based with executive directors across sector in a local community. Sometimes peer learning is cause-based where recipients are all from the same type of organizations or field. One participant said, “It’s an educational strategy, this acknowledgement that we learn from peers as well as from the experts.” Alumni networks were also increasingly popular.

Another participant found peer learning to be a very powerful learning method because it brings “people together to let them have some time together to talk and share problems, and get inspiration, and commiserate.” “Executive directors learn as much from their peers as they do from their faculty coaches. Somebody else in that group has done the same sort of project before, they learn a lot. And they learn how to network,” said a third participant.

Finally, because a good deal of the leadership capacity building is done via classroom setting, some faculty are professional educators directly affiliated with universities. Among universities specifically mentioned were Columbia, Georgetown, Harvard, Penn State, and Stanford. Among non-university based educators, participants mentioned CompassPoint, the Hartford Foundation for Giving’s Nonprofit Support Program, and the Center for Creative Leadership.

Methods

Methods are with how curriculum is delivered to recipients. Because classroom-based training accounts for roughly 80 percent of all leadership development in the for-profit sector, methods are often classified as either classroom or non-classroom, formal or developmental, less embedded in organization work or more embedded, executive education or action learning (Day, 2000; Dolezalek, 2004; Yukl, 2002).

For Day (2000), the classroom methods that epitomize executive education “suffer from transfer of training challenges and high start-up costs, among other limitations . . . the type of traditional, lecture-based, classroom training found in most formal leadership development programs is at best only partially effective at preparing leaders for 21st-century problems” (pp. 583, 601). A number of participants agreed including one who said, “Training is a particularly ineffective leadership development.”

Others participants disagreed, “My working theory of change right now is that leaders of non-profit organizations suffer from a skills deficit more than they suffer from a leadership deficit. So give them appropriate skills and tools and resources to do their jobs better and they will become the kind of community leaders that we would like for them to be.” In fact, some of the study participants combined executive education, peer learning, and action learning to create particularly powerful programs.

Many of the participants in this study provided programs with a texture of action learning. Conger and Toegel (2003) describe the concept:

Unlike traditional classrooms, in which learning may be removed from the day-to-day experiences of participants, action-learning programs send managers out to the field where they grapple with important challenges or opportunities specific to their organizations . . . Since the experience is grounded in actual organizational issues, learning is viewed as far more useful and therefore more appealing. (p. 333)

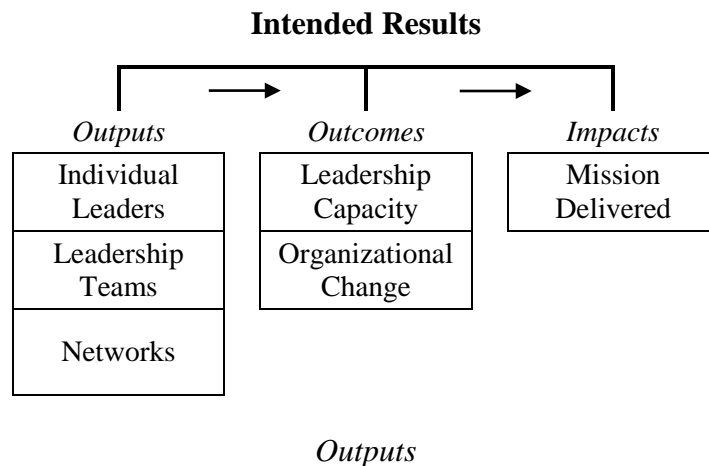
One person made it clear that “trainers in our year-long program drive people toward real life problems in their organization.” A different individual observes, “More and more programs are being designed to help recipients implement an explicit organizational goal, often a new project.”

Term

All of the elements of activities - curriculum, faculty, method, and term - are correlated in many cases. For example, executive education tends to be shorter in duration while peer learning is often longer. With this said, some executive education programs extended out over a period of 18 months while others are short one-day episodes. Treating duration as a variable in the logic model of leadership capacity building makes sense if only because of the time commitment asked of the recipients.

The dominant approach was longer with two-thirds of the participants describing their work this way. As one participant put it, “If you’re talking about helping people with respect to where they are in life and to reexamine their values and their commitments to their work and their career, you need a longer period of time to do that kind of self-examination.”

Not everyone subscribed to the longer is better philosophy. Executive education is a staple of many leadership development programs especially those that concentrate on work facilitation competencies. These are frequently delivered in short bursts, sometimes just half-a-day in duration, sometimes in two to five-day sessions. CCL delivers most of its curriculum in five-day sessions that use “a variety of in-depth self-awareness tools and activities to enhance leadership capabilities. Participants learn strategies for continuous development through extensive assessment, group discussions, self-reflection, small-group activities and personal coaching” (“Leadership Development Program (LDP)® - Overview," 2005).



In P. Light’s (2002) study of opinion leaders and executive directors of high-performing nonprofits, he found that leaders of effective organizations come “in many shapes and sizes, from the mythical heroic leader to the mild-mannered administrator . . . with sizzle or self-effacement, charisma or quietude” (p. 114).

The most common type of leader developed by participants was the individual leader. Some participants looked to develop “the social entrepreneur, the person who thinks outside the box, has big ideas, pursues them against the odds, can marshal resources, to deliver positive social change for the future.” Other participants were interested in the seasoned executive, “people who

have been in leadership roles for a long time, or who have been in their jobs for 20 years or have been in their field for 20 years.”

Not everyone concentrated on developing individual leaders, however. There are those that used the individual leader as the entry point and broaden into the leadership team from there. One sabbatical program, for example, begins with the seasoned executive, but eventually broadens into the entire senior leadership team including board members. Other programs will also involve concentrate on the individual leader, but offer some components to board members as well.

Two participants focused only on developing the leadership team, “meaning the board, the executive director and the senior team, working together to strengthen their leadership.” Another participant focuses some of its grantmaking at the board level, “Typically it’s about strengthening the partnership between the executive and the board to produce better outcomes for the organization.”

One participant talked about why she made shift from individual leader to leadership team:

We used to have executive directors come to our program with a project and they would have an executive coach. This is very similar to what we do now, except it was just the executive director. They’d come to the residency and have the late night talks; it was very transformative for many and very, very frustrating when they went back into their organizations. That’s why we shifted to a leadership team approach with the board chair, the executive director, and a senior staff member. In the executive director only approach, change just didn’t get done.

Other participants choose to develop networks of individual leaders, “Everything from child care providers, Head Start, heads of city agencies, the mayor’s office, representatives from the for profit sector. And there were educators. Libraries were there.” Networks are the focus of the Kellogg Leadership for Community Change program:

Traditional models of leadership are often not the best suited to the demands of contemporary communities. Increasingly, diverse populations must find ways to share power, resources and decision making. KLCC operates from the premise that while many 21st century communities are eager to shape new decisions for themselves, they often need the relations and collective leadership experience to realize these visions. Our goal is create opportunities for communities to cultivate the relations and expertise they need to pursue a more just quality of life for all. (“Exploring new frontiers in leadership development,” 2005)

In these times of increasing complexity, it is more difficult than ever to go it alone not only for the individual leader, but for the organization as well. So important are networks to Herman and Renz (2003) that they argue “*network effectiveness is becoming as important to study as organizational effectiveness*” (p. 8 italics as written). In the mid-90s, Provan and Milward (1995) found that nonprofits were “increasingly turning to various forms of cooperative alliances as a way of enhancing competitiveness and effectiveness” (p. 1). In their study of four community mental health systems, they determined that networks did improve outcomes, but it took

centralized coordination and adequate funding to do so. Another put it this way, “What you hear over and over again when you evaluate these programs is that what people must get out of them is the relationships that they develop with other people in the program.”

A third person explains, “This is a lifelong journey, it’s not a two year boot camp, but a longer-term place-based network of local leaders who continue to learn and grow together. Our long-term vision is a cross sector diverse coalition of leaders that transcend election issues and give roots to public policy over time.” And for good reason, as Gardner (1997) explains, “The citizen leadership we need for the 21st century requires a lot of people from every sector working very hard together to make our communities better places to live, work, and raise our children.”

Outcomes

Outcomes for leadership capacity building vary; some are quite complex as described by a sabbatical program provider,

First is a rejuvenated, a renewed leader. Second is keeping intelligence in the sector. And not necessarily at those institutions, but keeping them in the sector. Third, it’s also about trying to shift the non-profit culture in a direction that prioritizes human resources as the single most important asset that they have. Finally, we are trying to get organizations to treat their staff differently and to be more humane and to encourage people to pace themselves and to find non-monetary ways to reward people and recognize them, and encourage healthier living, so that they don’t burn out and get heart attacks and die.

For most participants, the desired outcome is leadership capacity or organizational change. One participant described leadership capacity this way, “Leaders matter. When you have strong leadership you will typically have strong, high performing, highly functioning organizations. The reverse can be true. When you have poorly run organizations you can often times point to the leadership.” Another said, “Our outcome is not just to build capacity in our organizations, but to build a capacity of current and future civic and philanthropic leaders.” A third individual explained, “When you give them the tools, the skills and the resources and the people to help them deliver on their mission, you enable them in many ways to make major contributions to the organizations long after they thought that they could or that they should.”

Other participants were interested primarily in organizational change, “It really involves coming to grips with organizational change in a very serious way. There are many non-profit leaders that have gone through organizational change that hasn’t been managed particularly well.” Another declared that “Our grantmaking engages the organization. Our work is at the organization level, but we look for organizations that are doing major development in some way. What we look for is the organization making a difference in the community relative to mission is and an organization paying attention to grassroots leadership development.” A third person illuminated the approach, “It became very clear very quickly that a major, major outcome from this program was that it really created abilities for host agencies to rethink and grow themselves.”

The desire by participants to connect leadership capacity building to organizational change is not unique to this study. Joyce Lewinger Mook (2004), Associate Vice President, at The

Rockefeller Foundation argues strongly for this, “Success now depends on our ability to marry knowledge and execution. This means supporting new types of training configurations. It means linking training to the broader goal of building organizations and institutions that are well-managed, strategic, and stable” (p. 2).

As further evidence for the outcome of organizational change, three participants in the study looked for the right timing, trying to find inflection points where the organization is ready to take that next major leap forward. One person called this ripeness and looks for a very specific outcome, “Dramatic and quick change.”

A different person said, “We look for high-potential groups, groups that are at a certain sort of inflection point in terms of growth or development. They’re looking for the next sort of big hurrah, if you want to call it that. You see some programmatic replication, expansion, growth, etc. We believe in them and we believe that if there’s an additional development of resources in leadership and executive capacity, they would be able to take it to that next level.”

Interestingly, some programs bring their own inflection points. Sabbatical programs that require the executive director to be off-site for three months are a good example. The sabbatical period is too long for people to simply muddle through and make do. As described by one participant, “Board and staff must pull together to make it possible for sabbatical possible for the executive director, who has often has to make fundamental changes in the way he or she works with others.”

Impacts

The desired impact of leadership capacity building is to deliver on the mission. One participant said, “We launched our program to develop organizational leadership - meaning the board, the executive director, and the senior team - so that they can advance their organization’s mission.” Another stated, “Our outcome is improved performance, heightened impact, increased relevance and we also expect that the executive director has improved effectiveness in his or her ability to develop, implement, and advance the organizational mission.”

Three Realities

The first reality about leadership capacity building is that context matters. Even the best leaders cannot succeed at growth in the face of a major crisis or downturn in the economy that significantly diminishes funding. Participants in this study seem to take Gardner’s (1990) advice seriously, “Acts of leadership take place in an unimaginable variety of settings, and the setting does much to determine the kinds of leaders that emerge and how they play their roles” (p. 6).

For participants, respecting context included recognizing that each grantee is unique in their life experience. As one funder noted, “People develop their leadership skills mostly from the role models that they’ve had throughout their career, especially early in their career. The best thing that can happen to somebody is go to work for a really good boss, because that’s where you develop an awful lot of patterns.”

Another described his experience this way: “It’s a one-person-at-a-time kind of exercise to figure out what that organization’s like, what stage they’re at, that that person’s skill set is, their background, and then matching the resources.” A third person simply stated, “We take folks where we find them.” Taking people where they are may improve the chances of success. A study of people engaged in high-risk behaviors (e.g. cigarette smoking, alcohol abuse) found that “fewer than 20 percent of a problem population are prepared for action at any given time. And yet, more than 90 percent of behavior change programs are designed with this 20 percent in mind” (Prochaska, Norcross, & DiClemente, 1994, p. 15).

Leadership capacity building programs are useful for different people at different times. A sabbatical for a first-timer makes little sense, but neither does action learning. A first timer will likely find executive education like CompassPoint’s Executive Director 101 more useful. ED 101 is a three-day program offering executive-level curriculum to new executive directors around five key topics: leadership and management; financial management and accountability; boards, governance, and strategic planning; fundraising; and human resources. Thus, one way to make sense of the leadership capacity building landscape is to add the dimension of career experience as shown below:

Curriculum	Organizational Development		Renewal
	Competencies		
Faculty	Educators - Peers		Coach - Consultants
Methods	Executive Education		Action Learning
Term	Shorter		Longer
Attendees	First Timer		Seasoned Executive

A deep respect for context leads to flexibility, the second reality. Flexibility showed in the choice of recipients, “One thing that we originally thought about was that any support would be to the executive director in conjunction with the senior leadership on staff and possibly the board leadership. And we decided we would be flexible. That if they wanted to work in a team fashion, that’s great. But it didn’t have to be.” Flexibility showed in the curriculum where most providers offer more than one intervention. Indeed, some programs offer a package of interventions in one program such as multi-rater feedback, executive education, peer learning, and on-demand personal coaching. Flexibility is also evident with faculty where combinations are common. It shows in methods. A participant summed it up this way:

That there is no such thing as one size fits all because organizations go through a life cycle and it’s not a straight-line development. And neither is it for human beings, teenagers. They’re not on a straight path to adulthood. There are these round robins. They go two steps forward and three steps back. You don’t know what to expect from one day to the next.

The third and final reality was that whatever program you chose, it should be tied directly to the work of the organization. According to Day and Halpin (2001),

The state-of-the art in leadership development practices is tying efforts to a current business imperative. In many organizations, there is a distinct problem-solving focus to the “what” (i.e. content) of leadership development . . . Regardless of the specific business imperative, there is a tight link between the content of the development programs and the strategic vision of the organization. (p. 51)

Participants in this study whole-heartily agreed with this viewpoint. Without exception, there was an unwavering intentionality about embedding leadership capacity building in the work of the organization. As one person explained, “Every piece has to relate to Monday morning. No matter how good the experience is, whether or not they’re all holding hands at the end and singing, it’s not good enough if they don’t have something specific to do on Monday morning.”

Lessons Learned

End in Mind

The first lesson learned is to begin with the end in mind or, as one participant advises, “Know your philosophy and what your operating principles are, make that explicit.” So too with another who recommended, “The most important thing is to have a strong alignment with the objectives of the program and the program design strategies. From a generic standpoint, do the front-end work. A lot of times for example you can go in and talk to a leadership development program and they haven’t thought through something as simple as your target population.”

Though participants in this study were clear about the ends they had in mind, some were quick to note that there are things that emerge, unanticipated outcomes and impacts, “Emergence is absolutely the way that things take place. We don’t believe that you can just dictate what’s going to happen. It’s not that you don’t have outcomes; it’s just that you don’t start with a set of narrow outcomes.”

Knowledge Works

Knowledge works is the second lesson learned by the participants in the study. For some, it begins with their own personal journey. Said one participant, “People who are prescribing a course of treatment in terms of leadership for an organization, but haven’t ever gone through any process themselves, are giving suspect advice.” Another person declared, “When I see a foundation set up its own leadership training program, not willing to go test the field, go to training, or figure out what they need, it’s very disappointing.”

For others, knowledge works included building a base of knowledge of the field, “First, go out on the street, figuratively or literally, to walk with and listen carefully to the people who will receive the program, and those people who will deliver it. Next, read many books, and anything by John Gardner, followed with a biography of an admired leader. Finally, if your vision of leadership has something to do with change, find the best book that fits your model. Read it. Then find the book that takes exactly the opposite approach. Read that too.”

Knowledge works continued with a commitment to be a learning organization. One person explained, “We try very hard to be a learning organization so we will be flexible and try new things. I think our entire network is fairly successful because it is flexible and it responds to the feedback from the nonprofits who are participating.” Another said, “We built incrementally. We didn’t have a grand vision when we started out. And I think that’s helped, rather than rolling out five new programs at once and then figuring out where we made mistakes.”

Finally, participants were nearly unanimous in their commitment to evaluation, which is a counterpoint to Avolio’s (2005) claim that there are “very few (less than 10%) leadership development programs that have been evaluated, regardless of claims to the contrary” (p. 161). Indeed, all but one of the participants evaluated their programs. With that said, most participants found it difficult to do evaluation especially when it comes to outcomes and impacts. One person put it bluntly, “The evaluation of services that have a medium to long-term impact is challenging. For example, you provide funding, they do some sort of a plan. How do you know whether it helped? We already get rave reviews, but that doesn’t really help us know about the real impact.”

All of the participants took advantage of information readily available from recipients in the form of satisfaction surveys, anecdotes, and stories. This is consistent with a 2004 study done by the American Society of Training and Development that found nearly three out of four organizations use participant reaction information compared to just 8% who evaluate the link between learning and organizational performance (Sugrue & Kim, 2004).

Because of the reliability problem with participant responses, experts Craig Russon, at the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, and Claire Reinelt (2004) recommend that using a variety of sources of response information to mitigate the problems with self-reporting, finding that “there is an over-reliance on data collected from program participants. Self reported data is notorious for being subject to bias” (p. 107). Scholars in general agree with this assessment, “There is very little reason to believe that how trainees feel about or whether they like a training program tells researchers much [but] anecdotal and other evidence suggests that reaction measures are the most widely used evaluation criteria” (Arthur et al., 2003, p. 235).

Mindfulness

Mindfulness begins with the rule of “Do no harm.” One person observed, for example, that grantees can sometimes “feel like they have to participate in this because it is a kind of hoop they have to jump through in order to get the resources that they really need.” At a minimum, leadership capacity building requires a time commitment from recipients, time that can be used for other deserving purposes. At its worst, leadership capacity building can actually be a hindrance to mission delivery. One individual explained, “I’ve heard this over and over again in my evaluations, individuals will tell you that they personally have been transformed in some pretty significant ways. When they try to go back to their organizations, they have a very difficult time sharing what they learned or really engaging people around what they learned and having any impact on the way the organization functions.”

Another aspect of mindfulness is a grounded realism about what leadership development can deliver. On one hand, many providers of leadership development agreed with one participant who says, “The small dollars we spend deliver incredible returns.” On the other hand, another said, “A 5-day program ain’t gonna renew the face of the earth and it ain’t gonna get them from here to eternity.”

Final Thoughts

I began this study seeking the Holy Grail of leadership capacity building, the one best way. Early interviews suggested that action-learning methods targeting the leadership team was the way to go. But as the study broadened out to include more participants, flexibility became the common denominator.

The most important finding of all is that there are many different paths to leadership capacity building, each arguably legitimate and strongly advocated. This will certainly disappoint those who seek certain truth, but in these times when so many want “just the facts,” it is an uplifting message. As Avolio (2005) so eloquently writes, “The truth is that there are many ways to develop your full leadership potential based on your unique talents, strengths, and experiences. There are many avenues to explore. There simply is no one best way, and even if there was, it would change as the dynamics of leadership change” (p. 8).

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