

What Works When You're Working in Groups

For the past decade, TCC Group has had the privilege of being on the front lines of the nonprofit capacity-building movement, designing, implementing, and evaluating numerous capacity-building initiatives. Here, we highlight some of the lessons we have learned about what works, and what doesn't, in group-based capacity-building strategies.

Group-based capacity-building strategies are the most cost-effective way to support organizational effectiveness.

We know that effective capacity building requires a commitment of both time and money. However, it appears that capacity-building activities are subject to the law of diminishing returns—in other words, more is not necessarily more. In many cases, spreading the cost of capacity building by serving a cohort of nonprofits, rather than individual organizations, can yield greater results.

Peer exchanges are very powerful strategies.

Our research has shown that thoughtfully designed and well-facilitated peer exchanges, where nonprofit leaders meet regularly as a group, are one of the best and most cost-effective capacity-building methods for strengthening leadership, adaptive, and management capacities. Peer exchanges allow participants to exchange information and ideas and serve as coaches to one another. This strategy can be particularly effective for individual behavior change, a critical aspect of leadership development. Individuals who have

participated in peer exchange are more likely to apply what they have learned than are participants who have engaged in workshop/trainings or coaching, alone.

Peer exchange works best when the participants are at a similar level of leadership knowledge and experience.

The group must truly consist of peers in order for participants to gain maximum benefit. Homogeneity of this sort facilitates development of trust, a sense of group cohesion, and solution-oriented discussions.

Coaching helps individuals grow as leaders and managers.

Coaching, in which a nonprofit executive works over a certain period of time with a skilled coach, is often a component of a cohort capacity-building effort. Effective coaching helps individuals most by improving their “motivation” to act in ways that are closely aligned with their values.

In general, capacity-building efforts tend to go better when the funder has some depth of engagement in the design, and in some cases, implementation of the activities, sometimes including group facilitation.

For this to work, however, it is essential that the funder and participating nonprofit leaders have a (positive) history of working together and have developed some degree of mutual trust and respect.

Trainings and workshops can play a role in an effective cohort consulting initiative, but only when offered in conjunction with other strategies.

Trainings and workshops transfer specific knowledge and skills to people in a group setting. While this modality can be effective, it should not be the backbone of a capacity-building initiative. First, customization and one-on-one support is quite limited. Second, trainings can incorporate peer exchange and learning, but this tends not to be the focus. Third, unless group members are at a comparable level of knowledge and expertise, the training or workshop will, at best, receive mixed reviews from participants. Finally, our evaluations have shown that trainings and workshops are most useful for enhancing technical capacity, which while a necessary component of organizational effectiveness, is not on its own sufficient.

People learn when they can reflect, challenge, and validate their assumptions—most often as a result of exchanging ideas and knowledge with one person (or more).

In other words, groups are conducive to learning. And TCC's research evaluations have repeatedly shown that strong leaders are almost always people who value learning. Certainly, there are plenty of circumstances in which individuals learn on their own. But we also know that group interaction provides a stimulating and dynamic environment where the "whole is greater than the sum of the parts."