

Transforming Capacity Support

Community Rooted Solutions for Equitable Support



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What is Capacity?

The ability of a nonprofit organization to deliver on its mission effectively now and in the future.

Capacity Building

“The process of building and strengthening the systems, structures, cultures, skills, resources, and power that organizations need to serve their communities.”

“Transformational Capacity Building,” Stanford Social Innovation Review, 2020

Common Needs of BIPOC “By and For: Organizations

- Grantwriting/Fundraising - access to diversity of funding sources (funding levels that allow for livable wages)
- Physical Space - affordable, welcoming, accessible
- Administration: grant management/tracking, reporting
- HR: Employee Onboarding, Policies, and Services
- Training and Leadership Development
- Technology
- Board Recruitment/Development
- Financial Management (budgeting, cash flow)
- Communications (website, social media)
- Not one-time, small amounts - longer term capacity building investments (at least 3 years) - \$, free/affordable space, other resources
- Funding and professional resources for audits

Capacity “Building”

- Often comes from a deficit perspective, looking at what needs to be “fixed” in nonprofits.
- Diverts attention away from the systemic problems that need fixing

“When grantmakers define the capacities that need to be strengthened, determine the nature of the intervention and choose the consultants who will help, capacity-building approaches can reinforce power dynamics and reflect historic patterns of paternalism within philanthropy — that funders know best, even though many funders have not managed a nonprofit themselves or lived experiences that reflect those of the communities nonprofits serve.” - Reimagining Capacity Building: Navigating Culture, Systems, and Power | Grantmakers for Effective Organizations | 2021

Organizational development theories and tools are often designed by white consultants for mainstream, white-led organizations with limited input from BIPOC practitioners. As a result, tools and approaches can feel disempowering to BIPOC communities and fail to achieve the desired outcome.

Capacity-building initiatives can miss important nuances related to identity and culture through designs that do not account for linguistic or cultural norms.

*- Reimagining Capacity Building: Navigating Culture, Systems, and Power |
Grantmakers for Effective Organizations | 2021*

Funders may view capacity-building initiatives as a way to help nonprofit organizations grow their scale, based on the assumption that bigger organizations achieve greater impact. Whereas some nonprofits may want to expand, the assumption that bigger is better can be problematic when neither an organization's leadership nor its constituents seek growth or when growth may have adverse consequences for the community.

- Reimagining Capacity Building: Navigating Culture, Systems, and Power | Grantmakers for Effective Organizations | 2021

Foundations often invest in executive leadership as part of their capacity-building support, yet doing so can reinforce Western models of leadership, which focus on individuals rather than the collective.

- Reimagining Capacity Building: Navigating Culture, Systems, and Power | Grantmakers for Effective Organizations | 2021

Monisha Kapila, founder and co-CEO of ProInspire, observes, “The traditional mindset of coaching is not rooted in race equity. It’s this idea that each person can solve their own problems. It does not address the fact that we have systems of oppression that impact people of color and women in the workplace differently.”

- Reimagining Capacity Building: Navigating Culture, Systems, and Power | Grantmakers for Effective Organizations | 2021

Transforming Capacity Support

- Co-Create (“Nothing about us without us.”)
- Support models of shared leadership, coalitions, and collaborations.
- Challenge assumptions (larger = better, you have to have capacity to build capacity, BIPOC organizations are more “risky.”)
- Invest in unrestricted, general operating support and capacity-building (as defined by the organizations)
- Systemic changes (more equitable funding applications & funding decisions, trust-based funding, nurturing BIPOC leadership in foundations, human services commissions, etc.)