



capacity building

means you can do much more



Capacity building refers to activities that strengthen an organisation, enhance its effectiveness, help it to fulfil its mission and goals, and sustain its work into the future.

Organisations, institutions and social fields are the means by which social and political objectives are met. Success is bound up with capacity – the ability to do something well, howsoever defined. For this reason, capacity building is a core concern in philanthropic literature. The ‘something’ could be:

- desirable (capacity for generosity, for bringing people together, for recruiting support) or undesirable (a capacity for ruthlessness, a capacity to carry on regardless, a capacity to alienate people)
- conscious (a capacity to train, to manage, to plan) or unconscious (a capacity for self destruction, for bouncing back, or getting stuck).

Organisations and funders invest their resources in building capacities to do this or do that. But what capacities are needed at any given time? Which capacities are weak, strong, missing or dysfunctional? Where do funders and grantees place their bets in knowing which approaches to use or who to engage in capacity building work? Finding ways to select an appropriate capacity building strategy is a capacity in itself. The literature on capacity building offers a useful repository of experiences and experiments to help practitioners to understand and build sustainable capacities in their organisations.

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A literature review commissioned by The Atlantic Philanthropies was carried out to guide case studies on capacity building in Ireland. It drew on literature from the public and private sectors, and from individual, group, organisational, inter-organisational and sector levels. The review:

- captures the diverse understandings of what constitutes capacity and illuminates the contested term 'capacity building'
- asserts that capacity building is influenced by understandings about the nature of organisational and social change
- suggests that the focus of intervention should be on sequenced and planned change initiatives

- looks at what forms of investment, and by whom, are needed to embed newly developed organisational and societal capacities
- emphasises the importance of understanding both the role of the change agent and the history of change in developing capacities in organisations
- signposts a number of practical ways to help practitioners assess capacity developments
- stresses that capacity building in a social field (where several organisations work either formally or informally towards a common goal) requires a specialised approach.

adding to your strengths so

What you can do

Explore, understand and agree how the language of 'capacity' is used in your organisation, because multiple meanings and understandings can camouflage differences in ideologies and diverse practices. By having a shared view of what capacity is in your setting, you have a solid base for capacity building work.

Examine the various **capacity frameworks** that propose how different forms and levels of capacity link to and depend on each other, and settle on a model; this will enable you to be clear about what features of organisational life should be the subject of capacity building at the individual, team, organisation, network, or field level and in what sequence, in your particular setting.

Must-dos for capacity building

Identify the capacities needed to achieve the organisation's mission and sustain it into the future.

Do a **capacity audit** to check strengths, weaknesses, underused and missing capacities in order to build an accurate picture of current and future needs and priorities.

Prepare a capacity building plan based on the audit.

Select an approach that fits with your assumptions about how sustainable change happens.

you can do your work effectively

An **organisation development approach** to capacity building would emphasise:

- vision and empowerment
- local ownership and the involvement of stakeholders
- the management of organisational learning and knowledge
- the need to take account of the organisation's context

Think about who can be a **change agent** in capacity building work; this will mean working out who has the capacity for capacity building, and balancing internal and external support.

Where external expertise is needed, work out how to manage that resource so as to strengthen internal capacity.

External support works best when the organisation and the external expert work out of shared assumptions about how organisational change happens and have agreed roles.

Build capacity **at the right level** – work out where capacity is most needed, whether at individual, team, leadership, whole-organisation or field-level, and tailor the capacity building work accordingly.

Have a clear picture of the capacity building strategy that is appropriate at each level. For example, field-level capacity building has its own unique challenges. Building field capacity means:

- knowing the field well and understanding its particular dynamic
- being able to say how the member organisations are connected, how they access resources, whether they collaborate or compete, and whether there are big power differentials among members.

& deliver **much more**

Sources, materials and other resources

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This summary was produced by Dr Susan Whittle, Anne Colgan and Mary Rafferty in conjunction with the Centre for Effective Services, an independent, all-island organisation that helps services for children, young people and the community to make better use of evidence of what works so that they can deliver more effective services. To download the full report and case studies accompanying this summary, please visit:

www.effectiveservices.org/our-work/promoting-capacity-building-in-ireland

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