
Using Training Strategically to Build

Organizational Capacity

*Does training make a difference?
A recent evaluation project looks
at this question in a new way.*

BY CHERYL GOODING

What good does training do for nonprofit organizations? The honest answer is we really don't know. It is difficult to assess the impact of training on individual and organizational development. Most often we don't even try—probably because we believe training has some intrinsic value that warrants the investment of time and money. Yet we are often left wondering...did it really make a difference? Should the organization continue sending people to training? What are reasonable expectations of training in terms of individual growth or organizational effectiveness?

I approach these questions with the assumption that training should build capacity at the individual, organizational, or community level—preferably all three. Capacity-building means an increased ability to do something: set a goal and accomplish it; assess a need and develop a strategy to reach it; develop a vision and organize around it; or any number of other important activities. I consider training a strategy, among many other possible strategies, toward the ultimate goal of building effective organizations and self-determining communities. To me, it is important to use training thoughtfully, as part of an overall strategy. When I evaluate training programs, therefore, I am less interested in short-term questions, such as how many people attended or whether the training went as planned, than in the question: What difference did the training make?

Too often we assume that training, alone, results in more capable individuals or organizations. The assumption looks something like this:

**MOTIVATED INDIVIDUAL + EFFECTIVE TRAINING =
IMPROVED PRACTICE**

This equation leaves out a critical variable: the organization. The truth is closer to:

**MOTIVATED INDIVIDUAL + EFFECTIVE TRAINING =
IMPROVED POTENTIAL**

My evaluation experience (discussed in the following section) tells me that actualizing that potential will depend, to a significant extent, on the organizational (and community) context within which the individual works. So the more realistic equation for building more capable individuals and organizations would be:

$$\text{MOTIVATED INDIVIDUAL + PREPARED ORGANIZATION + EFFECTIVE TRAINING = IMPROVED PRACTICE.}$$

This new equation implies a more thoughtful, strategic role for the organization than simply sending staff off to training programs. Making good use of training should be part of an organization's strategic planning, not just part of its budget development process.

In 1994–95, as director of the Nonprofit Education and Training Program of the Lincoln Filene Center of Tufts University, I initiated evaluation of three training programs. These programs represented a spectrum of training models from

short-term intensive training provided in the classroom, to long-term, organization-based training that integrated training with technical assistance. The chart below summarizes the key aspects of these three training programs.

Evaluation Results and Lessons

Evaluation provided an opportunity to compare the effectiveness of each training model. The results re-focused my attention away from assessing the relative value of various training models to evaluating the impact of the actions (or lack thereof) of the organizations sending staff to the program.

Based on that new perspective, I have divided the three training programs into two types: (1) short-term, intensive, classroom-based programs and (2) long-term, organization-based training. Following are the lessons learned from evaluating these two types of programs:

Overview of the Three Training Programs

	Management & Community Development Institute (MCDI)	Training of Trainers (TOT)	Participatory Evaluation Program (PEP)
Year Began	1983	1992	1994
Format	Week-long institute offering 1, 2, & 3 day courses on wide range of topics related to community & organizational development	Five day training of individuals in popular education theory and teaching methods offered at beginning and advanced levels	Six-month training of organizational teams
Size	400–500 participants annually	Maximum of 12 participants per session	Piloted with 5 organizations, total of 30 participants
Audience	Staff, volunteers of community-based organizations (national)	Community-based organizers & educators, especially people of color (regional)	Community-based organizations (pilot program targeted for women and girls)
Training Approach	Traditional and participatory classroom based	Popular education classroom-based	Experiential, organization-based
Location	Tufts University campus	Lincoln Filene Center	Within organizations
Post Training Support	None	Network of popular educators, bi-monthly meeting	Undecided
Cost to participants	\$110/day	\$300–400 for five days	No cost to organizations during pilot

ONE SHORT-TERM, INTENSIVE CLASSROOM-BASED TRAINING PROGRAMS: THE MANAGEMENT AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE (MCDI) AND THE TRAINING OF TRAINERS (TOT) PROGRAM

The Management and Community Development Institute (MCDI), established in 1983, offers (within a one-week period each June) over 30 courses, each of which lasts between one and three days. Courses typically include community and economic development; organizing; organizational development; speaking and writing skills; leadership and related issues. The program attracts close to 500 participants from around the country.

We evaluated the impact of MCDI participants' new learning on their capacity to do their work more effectively. We also assessed the effects on their organizations' capacity in the areas studied: dealing with racism and doing business planning.

Participants of these courses reported learning important new concepts, such as a model of community economic development. An additional benefit of MCDI is the sense of community and shared commitment generated when people who are working on similar issues gather and share experiences.

But the question in which we were most interested was: What happened when participants returned to their workplaces? Some changed their behavior in important ways, as we might expect. Others, however, confronted serious organizational barriers when they tried to apply new learning. A typical example was an unsupportive supervisor who, not seeing the need for change in the organization's approach to community organizing, blocked a recently trained staff member's efforts to try new strategies.

We found that participants most successful in applying new learning at work shared at least two characteristics: *confidence in their abilities*, and *sufficient opportunity* to try new ways of doing things. The opportunity was determined by their job description and their organization's mission and culture. Participants most able to apply new learning had either the *authority* or the *autonomy* to make decisions about their work. In other words, their position in the organization did not constrain their capacity to act as they thought best. And the organization's mission or practices did not contradict the new philosophy or practices being implemented.

Like MCDI, the Training of Trainers (TOT) program is short-term and intensive. TOT is a five-day training to develop teaching skills based on popular education theory and methodology. Evaluation of TOT indicated that this training program is highly effective in building participants' conceptual and training skills in the popular education approach to training. All participants were able to apply their newly learned skills later in their work in designing and conducting training programs. The job description of each allowed plenty of opportunity for implementing new skills and knowledge. Several participants encountered problems when they sought to teach other staff new skills. One person found staff resistant to a new approach. Although the organization expected the training to be "brought back" to the

rest of the staff, it had done little to build commitment to new learning among staff members who did not attend the training.

Several factors help explain TOT's success. The training is intensive: five full days. Each class is limited to a maximum of 12 participants, so the training experience is more focused on individual needs than is possible in a larger class. The popular education approach allows participants to engage with concepts experientially and to practice new skills. In addition, there is generally a good fit between the content of the training and participants' job descriptions: Since the people who attend TOT are responsible for doing training and organizing, there are many opportunities for them to try their new skills in their jobs. Finally, because the group is small, it is possible to conduct a needs' assessment of participants before they attend, thus ensuring that participants' expectations are known and, to the extent possible, met.

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Both these short-term intensive training models successfully developed participants' skills and knowledge. However, neither program addressed the organizational realities participants would face as they sought to apply new learning at work. To compound the problem, few of the organizations that sent staff to these training programs did adequate planning to support staff as they applied new learning. Consequently, some participants faced barriers to practicing what they had learned, and the potential value of the organization's investment in training was diminished or lost.

TWO LONG-TERM, ORGANIZATION-BASED TRAINING: THE PARTICIPATORY EVALUATION PROGRAM (PEP)

The training model used in the Participatory Evaluation Program (PEP) was quite different from either MCDI or the TOT program. PEP applied a much more hands-on, organization-based approach to capacity-building. A facilitator/consultant was assigned to each team. The role of the facilitator was to lead the team through the process of participatory evaluation so that team members learned this method by doing it.

Each team was required to identify an evaluation project. As the facilitator worked with the evaluation teams in sessions held at the organization, each organization became a learning site.

Three of the five organizations that participated in PEP completed their evaluation projects; the other two set goals that could not be completed within the seven-month timeframe of the program. Four of the five went on to identify new goals and

next steps in their evaluation process. These were major accomplishments for organizations that carried a heavy workload with limited resources. On-going work demands threatened to derail the evaluation process in several of the organizations. It is a testament to the participants' commitment to their own learning and to improving the effectiveness of their work that all the teams completed, or almost completed, their evaluation projects.

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Beyond all they learned through their evaluation projects, the organizations reported other benefits of the PEP model. Developing a team of stakeholders created a rare opportunity in each organization for communication across roles: Clients and board members worked with direct service and managerial staff. New lines of communication were opened, important perspectives on organizational questions were voiced, assumptions were challenged, and new organizational practices were planned. Group decision-making skills, such as agenda-setting, meeting facilitation, and task delegation, were practiced. A new leadership team evolved. Team members reflected on organizational practice at a far deeper level than usual.

From an organizational capacity-building perspective, the PEP model seems quite promising. It allows for a high degree of organization-specific planning and training. It occurs within the organization, and as a part of on-going organizational work.

However, this model does demand a large time commitment by participants. Thus, it is not as broadly accessible as short-term training, since many organizations are not able to make the time commitment required. Even the highly motivated organizations in our pilot program were constantly challenged by the difficulty of devoting time to evaluation activities.

An Organizational Model for Strategic Use of Training

We need to shift our attention to the organization as the context for practicing new perspectives and skills learned through training. Questions organizations should ask themselves include:

- Who in the organization should be trained? What are the organizational expectations of that person after the training and are those expectations realistic given that person's job description and level of development?
- What organizational factors might act as barriers to new practices?
- Is it possible to train teams, including staff supervisors?
- Can the executive director play a role in developing

organizational processes that support new learning and minimize barriers to new practices?

The framework below reconceptualizes capacity-building as a series of individual and organizational functions designed to initiate and maintain learning across the organization. This model is based on organizational planning for strategic use of training as part of an overall capacity-building effort. The goal of this model is to build organizational capacity. It involves four steps:

STEP ONE IDENTIFY PRIORITY LEARNING NEEDS OF THE ORGANIZATION.

The first step is to assess organizational learning needs, so that the capacity-building activities of individuals (such as training) are consistent with broader organizational needs and goals. The organization must answer several preliminary questions before it can determine its learning needs. When the organization asks itself in what areas it needs new or improved capabilities, it must first know what it seeks to accomplish and what resources and capabilities are required to realize its goals. Next, the organization needs to be clear about its current capacities: What resources—money, skills, volunteer labor, etc.—does the organization have and how are those resources allocated? Does this allocation leave any important organizational work undone or inadequately resourced? Now, the organization can identify gaps between its current and required capacities. Within these gaps are the organization's learning needs. For example, if fundraising is a critical organizational need, and current organizational capabilities do not adequately address that need, the organization has a learning need.

STEP TWO IDENTIFY CAPACITY-BUILDING RESOURCES AVAILABLE.

Rather than episodically considering whether to send a staff member or two to a particular training, the organization should consider all resources available to meet its learning needs for the year. These resources could include formal training opportunities; informal peer training and support organized as regular roundtable discussions or working groups; mentoring of staff by people within or beyond the organization; use of consultants; access to university-based resources such as faculty and students; recruitment of volunteers; delegation to the board; or some combination of each of these.

STEP THREE DEVELOP ANNUAL ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING PLAN.

Next, the organization needs to develop a plan for how it will use available capacity-building resources. This plan should answer such questions as these:

- Who in the organization will participate in which opportunities?
- What will the organization do to ensure that individual learning will be supported?
- How will broader organizational learning be facilitated? For instance, will teams within the organization be trained? Does organizational leadership, as a group, need support for its growth? Do organizational practices need to be initiated or changed so that the organization can move in new directions?

The learning plan should specify a time-frame for capacity-building activities. It should include check points to assess whether the plan is being implemented or if it needs to be adjusted. An annual budget should also be developed for the learning plan.

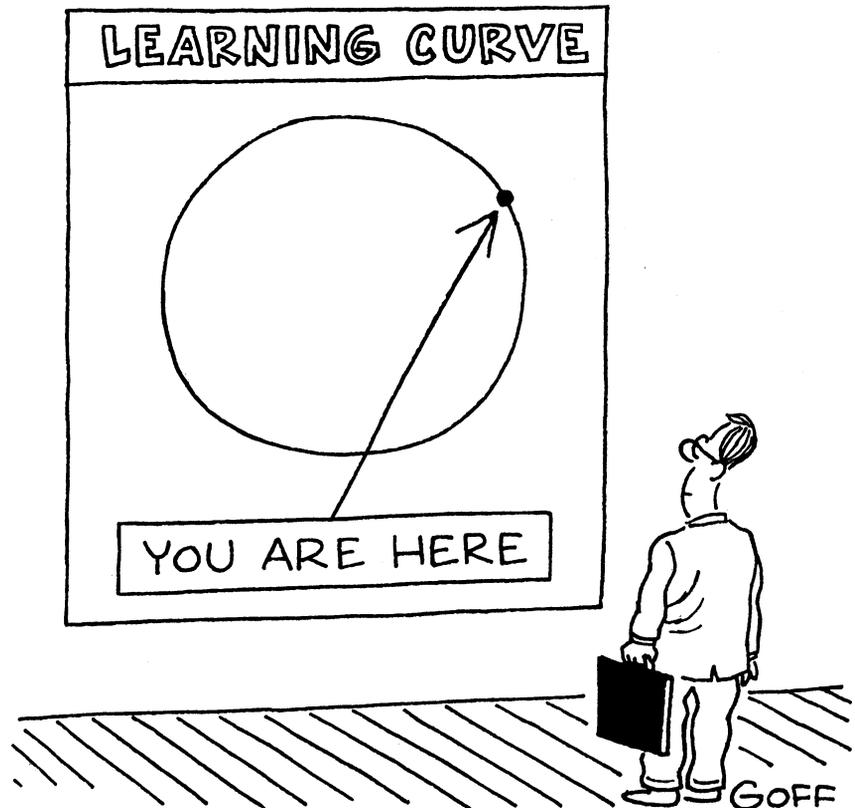
STEP FOUR EVALUATE RESULTS AND SET NEW GOALS.

Evaluation will encourage institutionalization of the capacity-building process. The organization needs to establish a process for this type of planning and evaluation. Organizational leadership—such as the board of directors or the executive director—will need to ensure on-going accountability to the process.

There are significant barriers to implementing this model in the real world of overworked, under-resourced community-based organizations, providers with limited resources and established practices, and ambivalent funders. To move beyond periodic training and/or technical assistance toward a more integrated approach to capacity-building will require new practices by community-based organizations, by providers of capacity-building opportunities, and by funders.

Challenges for Funders, Community-Based Organizations, & Providers

It is not realistic to expect community-based organizations, alone, to figure out how to develop internal capacity-building processes that build on the potential of external training events. Developing comprehensive capacity-building strategies requires a collaborative effort between providers of capacity-building activities, consumers (that is, organizations), and funders. We need to conceptualize and experiment with new models. How can we work together to help community-based organizations plan strategically for their organizational development needs?



1. Community organizations will have to increase their investment of time and money to build their capacities. There needs to be an organizational infrastructure that supports new learning and its application, as well as a planning process for organizational self-assessment and more strategic use of capacity-building resources.

Organizational leaders should not exempt themselves from capacity-building activities. To lead organizational capacity-building, they must acknowledge their own learning needs, not just help staff identify theirs. Organizational leadership can help establish a culture of learning within the organization and legitimacy for the idea of on-going investment in capacity-building.

2. Providers may need to broaden their own capacities to support organizations in this work. They should ask themselves questions such as these:

- What follow-through to training can we offer to facilitate organizational, rather than just individual, learning?
- How can we use the training itself to explore the question of how participants will apply new learning, and to get support for addressing organizational barriers?
- Do executive directors or other organizational leaders need help in using training for capacity-building? Can we offer workshops or discussion opportunities for this purpose?

Instead of just designing training sessions, providers could offer assistance to organizations as they proceed through the steps of self-assessment, identification of resources, development of a learning plan, and evaluation. If a provider does not have the capacity to offer these services, a referral can be made. Various services exist to assist in identifying resources. These include the computerized Resource Bank offered by the Nonprofit Education and Training Program at the Lincoln Filene Center, or the annually-printed list of nonprofit management resources offered by the Applied Research and Development Institute in Denver, Colorado. (See “How to Identify Further Resources” on the right.)

Finally, in order for community-based organizations to think annually about their capacity-building needs, providers will need to develop and publicize an annual calendar of their programs, whenever possible. Such calendars may also help providers avoid replication of each other’s services.

3. Funders can play a pivotal role in enhancing opportunities for capacity-building at the organizational and community levels. While funders continue to focus on funding *programs*, they are beginning to recognize the need for investing in *infrastructure* through long-term capacity-building. Some funders encourage organizations to use staff development for broader organizational development. Funders can address one of the primary barriers to the development of effective community-based organizations: lack of time and money to invest in organization-building. Funders could work with providers to develop a quarterly or annual calendar of events and other opportunities.

Short-term training of individuals is only one step toward building individual or organizational capacity. This may be a statement of the obvious. But how often have we seen training looked to as a panacea for organizational needs?

Just as organizations should give careful consideration to the appropriate use of consultants, they should view training as one dimension of an overall capacity-building plan. They should give special attention to organizational barriers that may block new learning by staff who are not in a leadership position. Organizations capable of making an investment in training should spend some time, along with their money, to think through how to get the most out of their investment. ■

Cheryl Gooding has been an educator for the past 20 years in Boston-area community-based organizations, labor movement, and academia. Formerly a program director at the Lincoln Filene Center, she is currently the associate director of the Center for Labor Research at the University of Massachusetts-Boston. She also works as a consultant to nonprofit organizations. You may write her at 45 Eliot Street, Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts 02130 or fax her at 617-524-4471.

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How to Identify Further Resources

The following providers can help organizations identify resources:

Nonprofit Education and Training Program
Lincoln Filene Center
Tufts University
Medford, Massachusetts 02155
Phone 617-627-3549; fax 617-627-3401

Applied Research and Development Institute (ARDI)
2121 South Oneida Street, Suite 633
Denver, Colorado 80224
Phone 303-691-6076; fax 303-691-6077

The Society for Nonprofit Organizations
6314 Odana Road, Suite 1
Madison, Wisconsin 53719
Phone 800-424-7367; fax 608-274-9777

In addition to the evaluations in this article, training programs have also been evaluated by the Support Center of America and Applied Research and Development Institute (ARDI). For results, see “Profiles on Support Center Training: A Report on the Evaluation of Support Centers of America’s Training Programs” by Laura Sperazi and Don Cichon, October 1994, available through the Support Center, 706 Mission Street, 5th Floor, San Francisco, California 94103 (phone 415-541-9000; fax 415-541-7708) and “Evaluation of the Longterm Impact of Workshops for Effective Nonprofit Boards of Directors,” April 1993, available through ARDI, 2121 South Oneida Street, Suite 633, Denver, Colorado 80224 (phone 303-691-6076; fax 303-691-6077).

Independent Sector emphasizes the importance of continuous evaluation in its report “A Vision of Evaluation: A Report of Learnings from Independent Sector’s Work on Evaluation,” available from Independent Sector, 1828 L Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036 (202-223-8100).

For more information on training facilitators, see *The Compleat Facilitator*, available through the Society’s *Resource Center Catalog*, included in this issue, or call 800-424-7367.