

Carson City Cultural Commission Capacity Building Plan for Arts & Culture Organizations

For some time now, communities have devised and implemented programs designed to build the capacity within cultural organizations to be more sustainable. A Carson City Cultural Commission Capacity Building Plan should be aimed at stabilizing finances and building the operational capacity of our community's most important cultural organizations.

The core common elements that affect capacity building are the following:

- Expert assistance that comes in a variety of ways, including organizational assessment, strategic planning and specific areas of technical assistance in operational and financial goals.
- The Cultural Commission will design a targeted focus on increasing the capacity of arts, cultural, and heritage organizations, thereby increasing the capacity of the cultural sector as a whole.

One observation that is fairly clear from capacity building literature is that it is all but impossible for an organization to increase its capacity all on its own. A holistic approach is needed that involves the Cultural Commission, the Arts & Culture Coalition, various funders, other cultural organizations, and the public. This means that the way in which a community's cultural sector currently interacts with the broader community will have an impact on the capacity building strategies its cultural organizations develop.

Of course, funding is necessary for increased capacity, but it is not sufficient. Public entities and private foundations invest in endowments and help pay off the debts of local arts organizations and provide them with operating subsidies, only to find ten years later that many of the same organizations are once again on the brink. It is more important that cultural organizations make adjustments to the way they think, plan, and operate to ensure long term stability.

For the arts, culture, and heritage community, where the results of the enterprise are considerably more ephemeral than for the rest of the non-profit sector, too few organizations have worked hard to identify the anticipated results, or outcomes, of their work. When an organization asks "Capacity building for what?" the answer tends to gravitate to such themes as "to get out of debt", "to build a stronger organization", and "to be successful." However, the first two are "means" and the last is an undefined "end". This lack of clarity between means and ends as well as the lack of well defined ends at all, can decrease the effectiveness of the capacity building process.

What is Capacity?

Capacity is the ability to perform or produce. Capacity is often used in reference to potential, as in "maximum capacity". Capacity is multidimensional. An organization's overall capacity to fulfill its mission depends on a variety of specific capacities. In addition, different organizations can fulfill similar missions by drawing on different capacities. Take for example, two organizations in Carson City that provide Community Theater. One relies on its ability to attract

corporate sponsorships and funding to hire technical staff to provide services, while the other draws on its ability to engage volunteers. Thus, Capacity Building is the mobilization of individual and organizational assets from the community and the combining of those assets with others to achieve organizational and community goals.

The Central Issue – The Mission

The literature is very clear on one point. To be successful, an organization must be mission focused—that is, it must have a clear understanding of why it exists and what it wants to accomplish. Although this should be obvious to most, numerous studies and reports have concluded that cultural organizations often lack a clear idea of what successfully achieving their mission would mean. Building an organization’s capacity to succeed requires that the organization be able to define success. Capacity building can help to build a better financial base, more adroit human resources policies, and can increase an organization’s ability to market its activities, but unless it has a clear understanding of the ends to which this activity is directed, it is bound to fail.

In the absence of clear “ends,” “means” often take their place. Developing a sound financial footing becomes an end in itself. More media exposure, recruiting high profile board members, and the like become measures of success rather than tools for success.

The Context of Culture

Arts, culture, and heritage experiences, however, are based on entirely subjective criteria. Community residents express appreciation for a continuum of activities — amateur and professional, formal and informal happenings in arts-specific (e.g., theaters, concert hall, dance studios, visual art galleries and exhibition spaces, and museums) and non-arts-specific places (e.g., community centers, church halls, parks, schools, libraries, restaurants, and night clubs). Participation is not just attendance, observation, consumption, or even audience participation. It includes many other categories of action—making, doing, teaching, learning, presenting, promoting, judging, supporting — and spans many artistic disciplines. It can be amateur or professional, active or passive, individual or collective, continuous or episodic, public or private. And people can be motivated to participate in cultural activities for aesthetics and appreciation of the creative process as well as for other reasons.

Arts, culture, and creativity have many stakeholders. Not surprisingly, given that such activities intersect with other community processes and priorities, many arts and artistic activities at the neighborhood level are made possible through the collective efforts of both arts-specific and non-arts-specific entities. A church-based youth dance ensemble, for example, may rely on monetary and in-kind support not only from the church, but also from youth service organizations, artists, and arts organizations, among other sources. It is not unusual to see otherwise dissimilar organizations coming together to bring opportunities for cultural engagement to fruition.

It is important that the Cultural Commission and our cultural organizations become actively involved in capacity building exercises in order to articulate their operational framework, thus lending consistency to their activities. What are elements of an operational framework?

Presence: The existence of whatever creative expressions a given community defines and values as community assets.

Participation: The many ways in which people participate in these creative expressions (as creators, teachers, consumers, supporters, etc.).

Impacts: The contribution of these creative expressions and participation in them to community building outcomes (pride, stewardship of place, tolerance, public safety, etc.).

Systems of Support: The resources (financial, in-kind, organizational, and human) that bring opportunities for participation in these creative expressions to fruition.

Operational Principles or “An organization must be ready for capacity building”

Cultural organizations can benefit from capacity-building services at many different stages of organizational life, size, budget, and staff — if they have the qualities that make them ready:

1. The organization is open to change and willing to question itself.
2. The organization can clearly describe its mission.
3. Key members believe that capacity building will help to further the mission.
4. The organization is prepared to commit the necessary time and resources to capacity building.

Effective leaders trust their own assessment of an organization’s readiness and weigh a variety of factors, including an organization’s openness, its resources for follow-through, the danger of hidden agendas in a group, and so on. An organization in crisis — frantic over a possible loss of funding — may not appear to be ready for capacity building, although the very process of capacity building can help such groups to focus on what matters.

Ongoing questioning means better answers.

The most successful capacity builders are those who ask questions and encourage change. It will be the Cultural Commission’s goal to facilitate a climate in which questioning and feedback are encouraged and a true understanding of growth is welcomed, not avoided. A multi-faced capacity building program will help an organization find out what it needs and help it look at the community to get a better idea of how existing skills can benefit both the organization and the community.

Capacity Building Tools Come in All Forms:

Peer and Team Learning

- Peer-learning occurs whenever two colleagues engage one another in an exchange, even informally;
- Team-learning is a learning experience designed specifically for people who work on teams.

These processes enable more people to contribute on improving the organization. Not only do these methods defeat the myth that a trainer has “all the answers,” but they also bring many more good ideas into the learning process. And these can provide the added momentum necessary for change. “If there isn’t a training team, one person goes back with all the excitement and enthusiasm but run into: “What happened to you? What do you mean; we have to do things differently?”

Capacity building program should accommodate different learning styles.

The Commission recognizes that individual people have different styles of learning. Some learn by doing. Others learn by experimenting. Some people need to talk. Others need to think things over. Some are more visual. Some are more verbal. Sometimes these differences reflect culture, class, or organizational culture. For instance, some individuals in a group tend to dominate conversation, while others tend not to speak up. One way to overcome that is to encourage people to express themselves in peer groups. Good capacity building programs take them all into account.

Every organization has its own history and culture.

To do effective capacity-building, we must take into account all of the forces that shape an organization: its mission, its values and organizational culture, the environment in which it has to navigate, and the culture(s) and circumstances of its constituents. The better we understand an organization’s situation, the more powerful the capacity building.

All people and all parts of an organization are interrelated.

An organization is a living body. Everything that happens within it affects everything else. A holistic perspective looks at all of the interconnections that make up the whole. No matter how specific the issue or the problem, it connects with the rest of the organization and must be dealt with in that way. In an attempt to understand or change an organization, we have a far better chance of succeeding if we involve people from many levels: staff, constituents, board members.

Capacity building takes time.

The most effective capacity building takes place over time. Extensive long-term trainings and apprenticeships — sometimes lasting for a year or more — prepare people to build organizations and to connect with constituencies. And afterwards, capacity building activities continue to be integrated into the organizations’ work. By introducing capacity building as a process that takes place in stages, we can help organizations to overcome the fear that “We don’t have the time” or “We can’t afford it.”

But this doesn’t mean that short-term capacity-building sessions aren’t valuable. Many organizations have found that such training can help to strengthen a particular skill, such as fund-raising, and to help new and existing staff to better understand a subject that is critical to decision-making. And sometimes it can help to solve a specific problem that is getting in the way of the organization’s overall mission.

The Capacity Building Process

There is a general consensus concerning the elements that are required in order to produce effective organizations. These include:

- A vital mission
- A well organized board with able, involved members
- Capable, strong leadership
- Motivated volunteers and staff
- Solid finances, including reliable and diverse revenue streams

Strategic Planning and Capacity Building

The overall capacity building process for arts and cultural organizations should not be materially different from that of social services, health providers, or any other kind of non-profit organization. What will differ are the details of the process.

All organizational capacity building begins with knowing where the organization wants to go. The one common denominator that keeps recurring is “clear vision and mission”. Without a clear and shared vision of the organization’s future, it is impossible to determine what capacities are needed to get there. This means that successful capacity building is predicated on the existence of an up-to-date and comprehensive strategic plan. Capacity building is not an alternative to strategic planning; it should grow out of the strategic directions of the plan.

Vision and Mission

The Vision Statement is an expression of the way the organization’s world should be. If you operate a community theater, your vision statement might sound something like “Every resident of Carson City has access to high quality live theater, covering a broad range of tastes and interests.”

The Mission Statement describes your part in achieving the broad vision for your community. It should be a rallying cry for the organization. It should state the organization’s “purpose for being,” in terms that engender enthusiasm and loyalty. If an organization’s strategies are the brains of the organization, then the Mission Statement is the heart and soul. The Mission Statement should embody the lofty ideals for which one works so hard and should transmit these to the reader.

The Mission Statement answers a few simple questions:

- What are we? (e.g., a non-profit dance company)
- Whom do we serve? (e.g., children, all ages, etc.)
- Where are they located? (e.g., City, region)
- What do we do? This is the toughie. It has to be worded at the corporate level -- a definition that encompasses the entire organization in one concept.
- Why do we do it?

- What makes us different from other organizations? Your uniqueness gives you your special character.

Strategic Directions

The organization’s strategic directions, or goals, should be mission-directed: “we have to do this to achieve our mission,” challenging, and measurable. It is essential that the organization develop a common understanding of what success means, and how it will know if it achieves it. This requires that, to some degree, the organization must distill the results of the relationship between the organization’s activity and the individual’s experience into something that approaches measurability.

If it wasn’t done during the strategic planning process, then when an organization begins to look at capacity building, it should look at each goal and ask the question, “What skills, knowledge, and assets do we have in place to accomplish this, and in what areas are we lacking?” This interrogative process produces two lists – one consisting of human and physical (building, equipment, etc.) strengths and assets that are already present, and one consisting of the human and physical deficits that need to be filled.

A Capacity Building Model

Let’s divide organizational capacity challenges into two major areas with sub-groups.

Asset and Gap Analysis

The capacity building process in an organization begins with an understanding of the organization’s assets and liabilities in relation to the achievement of the organization’s mission. Using the three capacity areas– Funding, Human Resources, and Structural – the organization should undertake a review of the internal and external assets that it can call on to achieve its goals. Essentially, the organization sets out what it wants to accomplish, and then identifies what it has at hand that can help it achieve that.

Funding assets might include such items as:

1. Strong ticket sales
2. Successful gift shop
3. Strong local government support

Human resources assets might include such items as:

1. Knowledgeable and experienced executive
2. Well trained board of directors
3. Strong volunteer corps
4. Strong “friends of” group
5. Highly skilled and experienced performers/curators/choreographers/artistic directors, etc.

Organizational Asset Analysis

Structural assets might include such items as:

- Up-to-date risk management policy
- Modern building
- Excellent strategic planning processes
- Up-to-date computers and software

After identifying the assets it controls, the organization should repeat the process to identify specific gaps in its skills, knowledge, expertise, physical plant, etc. that will frustrate its ability to achieve its goals and through them, its mission.

Finally, there are core functions of these capacity building processes:

- **Comprehensive.** Most effective capacity building activities offer some degree of “one-stop shopping” in which organizations can access a range of assessment services, technical assistance, financial aid, and other kinds of support. The BRIC was created to be this “one-stop shop.”
- **Customized.** The most effective capacity building services are custom tailored to the type of nonprofit, its community environment, and its place in its “organizational life cycle.” Young, start-up nonprofits are likely to have needs very different from more-established organizations).
- **Competence-based.** The most effective capacity building services are those that are:
 - Offered by well-trained providers and,
 - Requested by knowledgeable, sophisticated “consumers” - nonprofit managers and board members.
- **Timely.** The most effective capacity building happens in the balanced space between action taken too slowly to be relevant and action performed too quickly to allow the flowering of an intervention in a complex context.
- **Peer-connected.** The most effective capacity building happens when there are opportunities for peer-to-peer networking, mentoring, and information sharing.
- **Assessment-based.** The most effective capacity building begins with a thorough assessment of the needs and assets of the nonprofit and the community in which it operates which in turn drives the types of capacity building services provided.
- **Readiness-based.** The most effective capacity building occurs when the nonprofit “client” is ready to receive this specialized kind of service (e.g., the nonprofit is not in the midst of a major crisis that would make it unable to benefit from the intervention at that time).
- **Contextualized.** The most effective capacity building occurs in the larger context of other strengthening services a nonprofit is receiving and other elements of the current community environment.

The Carson City Cultural Commission’s Capacity Building Plan is to Facilitate Accessing Needed Resources:

The core of capacity building is identifying and accessing the resources that an organization needs in order to excel, but does not currently have. There are resources available to our cultural non-profit organizations that the Cultural Commission can facilitate access to help our non profits build their ability to achieve their mission.

First, the Commission assembles a faculty of professional people with talents, knowledge, skills, and expertise in areas in which the organization is deficient, who can be convinced to provide their services to worthy organizations for free. The BRIC with its research capability, its classroom space and its access to the Foundation Center is the ideal home where these seminars and peer-to-peer activities should take place. Then, class curriculums need to be developed in the following areas:

- Building a sustainable cultural nonprofit organization
- Guidance on financial management and budgeting
- Management and governance best practices
- Board development
- Staff development
- Volunteer training
- Assistance with Strategic Planning
- Fundraising
 - Developing a fundraising plan
 - Proposal writing
 - Grants research
 - Grant writing
 - Grants management
 - Foundation fundraising
 - Cultivating grant maker relationships
 - Securing corporate sponsorships
 - Building a membership base