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Build Capacity with High-Performance Teams

The third of a six-part series on developing and sustaining organizational capacity by Bruce Weber and Charlie Smith

► Capacity is about performance. An organization's structure embodies its culture by defining how people work together; that is, what performance means, what is valued and what is measured and celebrated as success. When people bring their hands, hearts and minds to their work, the groundwork is laid for building capacity. Individual contribution is important; however, it is when those individuals come together, blending their complementary skills in a drive toward a common goal, that operational effectiveness flows and results follow.

Why is a team structure so effective? Teams enable cross-discipline and cross-organizational interaction. Most organizations have silos, which are discrete units of operation. Silos are necessary because it is the linkage and flow of value-creation activities through operational silos that allow organizations to achieve mission objectives. Think of silos as critical functionality areas or critical success factors (CSFs); Wikipedia describes silos as "an element that is necessary for an organization or project to achieve its mission." Weber Group describes them for nonprofits in five key areas: People + Finance + Programs + Systems + Governance. For-profit CSFs will vary based on industry and markets. These critical success factors must work together seamlessly for an organization to achieve optimal performance.

Teams are the connective tissue that links the expertise residing in each silo into a dynamic force that informs and empowers the life of the organization to realize its potential. Teams brings ideas to life in ways that silo-focused activities never can. Teams move projects and priorities forward by successfully navigating bureaucracy and overcoming resistance. Teams are also excellent ways to discover talent and provide opportunities to develop future leaders.

High-performance teams (HPTs) are an effective organizational structure that discovers talent and drives exceptional operational results. They are not naturally occurring but, once set in motion, they are self-defining. An organization must be deliberate about identifying these HPTs, empowering them to get the job done, and providing resources and training. Then, the organization must give the team freedom within a framework to create new ways of doing work, to self-identify leadership within the team, and to move organically across and throughout the system to harvest what is needed to produce results that support the mission.

High-performance teams excel at strategy and connection. SHRM, the Society for Human Resources Management, describes a high-performance team as "a group of goal-focused individuals with specialized expertise



and complementary skills who collaborate, innovate and produce consistently superior results. The group relentlessly pursues performance excellence through shared goals, shared leadership, collaboration, open communication, clear role expectations and group operating rules, early conflict resolution, and a strong sense of accountability and trust among its members."

High performance teams are enablers. They build capacity by empowering the organization's talent to focus on key objectives.

Big ideas move organizations. Innovation, informed through curiosity and listening, bubbles up from inside the organization. High-performance teams, by their very nature, thrive on big ideas and innovation because they challenge the status quo, pierce operational silos and identify hidden talent. They are a combination of art and science. These teams have a clear strategy toward a common purpose and unique skills, such as listening, storytelling, collaborative mindsets and emotional intelligence grounded in self-awareness. They are eager to share their stories and to invite others into the conversation.

High-performance team characteristics:



Why do we need HPTs? A recent Glassdoor Survey revealed that the three greatest challenges facing CEOs today are "finding the right talent, building better operational processes and aligning employees to strategy."

High-performance teams allow leaders to rise organically within the unit. People trust that kind of leadership because they participated in creating it. They create sound processes for others to follow and build relationships to ensure that the work is understood across all stakeholders and process partners. They are great storytellers who inspire passion and encourage engagement. They are capacity builders.

Explore ways to create a culture that discovers talent and encourages the formation of high-performance teams. Then, allow them to flourish. ■

