The Tagoras Collection

The Capacity Continuum

written by Jeff Cobb

This article was originally written and published in 2002, but the issues and ideas discussed in it remain highly relevant. Minor revisions have been made to the original version, primarily to emphasize and clarify key points.

The intense scrutiny by the nonprofit sector of topics like effectiveness, capacity, and learning leads naturally to the question of where and how, concretely, these things occur. The answers are important because they suggest where capacity builders should focus their efforts. But, as nearly every capacity builder and every organization knows, the answers can also be elusive.
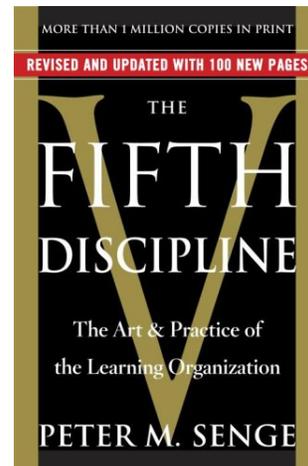
Presumably every organization puts at least some effort towards—in Peter Senge's words—"expanding its capacity to create its future." But practically speaking, a great deal of the capacity an organization builds over time cannot be identified with a particular event, a discrete point in time, or a specific individual or group. Even as focused efforts are everywhere occurring to build organizational capacity, there is a sort of indefinable nowhere in which time, relationships, reflection, and other intangible variables interact to make their own contribution to the capacity-building process. The often chaotic intersection of all these elements can be simultaneously fertile and frustrating for organizations and those who support them in the capacity-building process.

An approach to understanding the intersection is to think of capacity building as a continuum. One of the key characteristics of a continuum is that it contains no discernible divisions. The concept of the time-space continuum, for instance, is familiar to many people. In the human experience, time and space interact in a way that is practically inseparable. So, too, one might argue that the spheres in which capacity building occurs—individuals, organizations, and communities—are practically inseparable. But just as we can examine time and space

separately, we can also examine different elements of the capacity continuum separately, with the understanding that the continuum itself is greater than the sum of its parts.

Individuals

In *The Fifth Discipline*, Peter Senge argues, "Organizations learn only through individuals that learn. Individuals' learning does not guarantee organizational learning. But without it no organizational learning occurs." Very much in the spirit of Senge, Jan Masaoka and Ken Goldstein of CompassPoint have noted the disparagement of training for the individual even as the concept of the learning organization, pioneered by Senge and others, has gained currency. "[D]espite the new emphasis on capacity building for *organizations*," Masaoka and Goldstein write, "why are some technical assistance providers reluctant to see the value in capacity building for individuals…?" Investing in individuals – through, for example, investing in appropriate levels of training and education – can have positive impact on the capacity of the organization as a whole. Masaoka and Goldstein list three key areas in which this impact may be felt:

1. Staff recruitment
2. Staff retention
3. Team building

Each of these areas can obviously have a very direct impact on the individual, and presumably recruiting better employees, keeping them, and promoting good cooperation and collaboration among them should positively impact the organization. Of course, in order for this scenario to

occur, an organization must first be receptive to it occurring and put the proper support mechanisms in place for it to occur. How does this happen?

Organizations

There is a point after which individuals band together to form an organization when a feedback loop or virtuous circle develops. Individual behavior affects collective behavior and vice-versa, and the organization begins to take on a personality that is in many ways distinct from the individual personalities that comprise it. From the standpoint of ongoing capacity building, it can even be argued that the organization essentially takes on a life of its own. Doug Merchant, posting on the Learning-Org list serve, goes so far as to suggest that "…the environmental consequences of organizational behavior can be fed back to the organization and shape future organizational behavior without requiring individual learning at all."

Even if one accepts that at some point individual learning may no longer be *required*, the dynamic nature of the organization-individual relationship makes it nonetheless inevitable. Learning does not have to be mandated or formal. Even if an organization is in a state of atrophy, individuals will always learn, however passively, from "the environmental consequences of organizational behavior" and will continually contribute to the development of new behaviors.

The challenge for the organization seeking to build capacity is to ensure that individuals are conscious of and actively learning in positive ways from the evolving consequences of organizational behavior. Simultaneously, the organization must recognize and deal appropriately with the array of external forces that impact the organization-individual relationship, many of which originate in the broader community in which the organization finds itself.

Communities

Organizations and the individuals that comprise them do not exist in isolation. They are tied to communities both in a geographical sense and in a more philosophical or intellectual sense. The places in which organizations are located or deliver services are themselves dynamic systems in which change occurs constantly—change which may or may not be instigated by any given organization and which may impact it in any number of ways. Governmental budget cuts, for instance, create negative "environmental consequences" within many organizations and impact the behavior of both organizations and the individuals who comprise them. Those who actively learn to develop new responses to these negative "environmental consequences" will build the capacity to survive and thrive.

Perhaps one of the least understood ways in which responses to challenging circumstances are developed involves engaging the broader community in which an organization operates. *Community of practice* and *learning community* are increasingly popular terms that help express the connection among organizations that and individuals who pursue similar missions in similar ways. As a force for capacity building they are invaluable, but we are only beginning to understand how best to facilitate the networks that make such communities a reality.
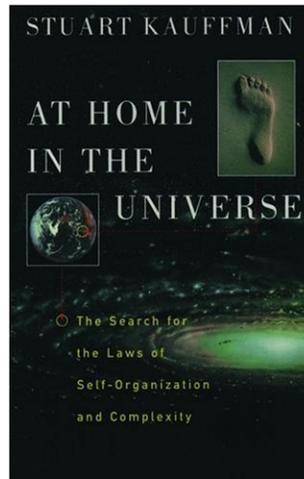
Buttons and Thread: The Importance of Networks

Every connection between parts of the continuum (individual to individual, individual to organization, community to individual—*ad infinitum*) represents a network, and networks naturally expand as more connections are made. If by nature a continuum contains no discernible divisions, networks are what are responsible for obliterating divisions between individuals, organizations, and communities. Networks are often places of anarchy and undisciplined thinking, a vast

tangle of invisible threads tracing communication among innumerable individuals. They are, to say the least, difficult ground for anyone obsessed with measurement and evaluation. And yet, while networks often seem to exist on the edge of chaos, they often are the drivers of a new order.

An example from the domain of complexity theory suggests how connections within a network ultimately accumulate into a cohesive whole. Stuart Kauffman, in his groundbreaking work *At Home in the Universe*, explores the ways in which order spontaneously arises in highly complex, seemingly chaotic systems. In describing the *phase transition* (basically, a big change) that occurs when systems reach a certain level of complexity, Kauffman asks the reader to mentally perform the exercise of connecting a large number of buttons with pieces of thread.

> *Randomly choose two buttons and connect them with a thread. Now put this pair down and randomly choose two more buttons, pick them up, and connect them with a thread… as you continue to choose random pairs of buttons to connect with a thread, after a while the buttons start becoming interconnected into larger clusters.… Obviously, as clusters get larger, they begin to become cross-connected. Now the magic! As the ratio of threads to buttons passes the 0.5 mark, all of a sudden most of the clusters have become cross-connected into one giant structure.*

This mental exercise illustrates the development of a simple network. If we rework it to imagine the buttons as individuals, the larger clusters as organizations, and the giant structure as the community, then we might also view the work of capacity builders as drawing the connections--forming the network--that will ultimately lead to a phase transition producing a spontaneous new order.

It takes time to build a network to the point where a phase transition occurs, and the necessary time must be supported by the necessary financial resources. Being able to demonstrate clearly the concept of the continuum and the networks that drive it is thus critical for gaining the support of funders—even if it means being prepared with a handful of buttons and a spool of thread! ■

References

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About the Author

Jeff Cobb is a co-founder and managing director of Tagoras. He has worked in the business of lifelong learning for more than two decades and has served as a consultant and advisor to a wide range of organizations seeking to maximize the reach, revenue, and impact of their learning businesses. Jeff is the author of multiple books, including *Leading the Learning Revolution: The Expert's Guide to Capitalizing on the Exploding Lifelong Education Market,* and he is co-host of the weekly Leading Learning podcast. For information about engaging Jeff to speak at one of your organization's events, visit http://www.jeffthomascobb.com/speaking.

About Tagoras

Through a combination of independent research, educational events, and strategic advisory services, Tagoras helps organizations in the business of lifelong learning maximize the reach, revenue, and impact of their offerings. We are the founders and hosts of Learning • Technology • Design and the Leading Learning Symposium, annual events designed specifically for organizations in the business of continuing education and professional development. To find out more about our offerings as well as to access a variety of free resources, please visit our Web site at www.tagoras.com.