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INTRODUCTION

Capacity Building: The key to taking your work to the next level

Clients come to us for many reasons and with a variety of goals in mind; however, one challenge is almost always the same: the need for increased capacity.

Capacity needs aren't always well-defined to those who experience them, but in general, the team at Advocacy & Communication Solutions, LLC (ACS) finds that looking for "if only" situations is a way to recognize areas where capacity might fall short.

"If only we had another staff person to take this on."

"If only there were more time before this window of opportunity closes."

"If only we had the money."

Are you stuck in an "if only" rut?

Do you find yourself saying: "If only we had another staff person to take this on."

Or: "If only there were more time before this window of opportunity closes."

Your organization may have a capacity challenge. Advocacy & Communication Solutions' most recent newsletter is full of tips and tools to identify capacity challenges and address them.

In this newsletter, you'll find a number of tips for capacity building. Keep in mind that every organization is different, and the best capacity building strategies and tools are those customized for you.

The good news is that most organizations can overcome capacity-related challenges by making an intentional commitment to address capacity building. Capacity building focuses on developing processes, knowledge, and capabilities, so organizations are better equipped to accomplish their missions and goals. This also means focusing on and understanding the obstacles that prevent organizations from being as successful as possible and taking steps to address them. ACS provides a number of capacity building services, including the following:

- Facilitation Training
- Spokesperson Training
- Advocacy and Lobbying Training
- Communication Training
- One-on-One Coaching
- Collective Impact
- Customized Tools and Research

Whether implicit or explicit in our client engagements, capacity building is always part of our work. In fact, instead of depending on us to provide ongoing capacity, collectively with our clients we are the most successful when we help our clients develop the capacity to handle the challenges they face on their own. Instead of maintaining organizational operations at a static level, we help our clients move up to the next level, where we can address new challenges and opportunities together.

Want to learn more? Email us at info@advocacyandcommunication.org or call us at 877-372-0166.

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Tips to Build Capacity

Chances are you've been there: A great plan fails. The data you count on is inaccurate or incomplete. A project isn't working the way it should. Staff morale is low. These sorts of disappointments are rarely from lack of commitment. Most often, they boil down to a lack of capacity.

Even if an organization's strategy is on target, without proper capacity, projects likely will fail to meet goals or deadlines; relationships among staff and with community partners may be strained; data may not be adequately analyzed or used to its fullest potential; and plans and tools may quickly become outdated.

Fortunately, there are ways to identify and address capacity challenges in any organization. To do this, you must be willing to admit there is room for growth and improvement. Below are tips, tools, and examples to get you started.

First, identify capacity challenges to understand the barriers and opportunities.

1. **Determine the end goal and create a plan**—Put pen to paper. Decide where you want to take your organization or team, determine your end goal, and work to create a plan that includes strategies and a timeline to meet your organizational goals. For example, if you are creating a communication plan, [ACS' Dirty Dozen of Strategic Communication](#) tool can help you be purposeful and intentional about your communication. Following the rest of the tips in this newsletter will help you modify your plan based on your current capacity.
2. **Complete an internal assessment of assets and resources**—Review your organization's access to funding, the capacity of staff, and the time you have available to reach the goals. Be honest with yourself about whether you have the resources necessary to meet the goal. If you are focusing on public policy, use ACS' [Assessing Your Capacity for Engagement](#) to gauge your organization's readiness and capacity to meet your goals.
3. **Understand external assets and resources that may be leveraged**—Review the landscape and take tabs on community partners, allies, opposition, and external problems. Understanding how they are aligned with your organization may help you reach your organization's goals. Don't reinvent the wheel! Ask partners how they think your organization can be more effective and if they would be willing to partner with you to achieve your goal. Use ACS' [Network Mapping Tool](#) to clarify potential partnerships, determine next steps for collaborative activities, or uncover barriers for creating change in your community.

Next, it's time to explore ways to address those challenges and take advantage of opportunities.

4. **Upgrade your skills**—Identify areas of expertise that are missing on your staff or board, and find ways to build upon or improve those skills. The realm of professional development opportunities is practically endless and could include leadership development, advocacy training, network building, and more. For example, to ensure that a statewide outreach and engagement campaign would be successful, ACS client [First Things First](#) in Arizona provided media spokesperson training and facilitation training for all key staff members. ACS developed the following tools that were used in a customized facilitation training: [Active Listening Techniques](#), [Facilitation Planning Checklist](#), and [Understand & Solve Facilitation Challenges](#).
5. **Partner with others**—You and your organization do not have to do it all. Look outside your organization to find partners that might share responsibility on a project or initiative. This could be staff sharing, financial backing, or someone else taking responsibility for a piece of the project (such as data management). For example, to address youth homelessness in Cuyahoga County, Ohio, the organizational members of [A Place 4 Me](#) divided up tasks in a very complex process and delegated them to partner organizations in the network with the best capacity to complete them. While one organization applied its expertise in managing data collection, another specifically focused on making policy changes to support youth in foster care. Check out ACS' [Collective Impact: Mutually Reinforcing Activity Checklist](#) to help you boost the power of multiple organizations working on shared planning and activities to accomplish a common agenda.

6. **Leverage the board**—Use the connections and expertise of your organization’s board or volunteers and ask for their help to reach your goals. When the [Wisconsin Alliance for Infant Mental Health](#) (WI-AIMH) asked ACS for assistance creating their communication plan, they understood they needed to leverage their board members to help their small but mighty staff implement the plan. They included their board in the planning process through a two-day communication planning session, which led to a much more informed strategy and greater buy-in and capacity to help support implementation. WI-AIMH ultimately leveraged their communication plan and received positive coverage from the [World Association of Infant Mental Health](#) and [Stevens Point Journal](#).
7. **Research best practices**—Knowledge and information boosts your ability to make good decisions and increases the likelihood of success. Explore models and best practices, and reach out to experts in your field who are willing to share information. Do not re-create the wheel! Conduct a scan of other organizations or programs doing similar work, find out how they accomplished their goals, and leverage their lessons learned. Researching best practices was a key component of building knowledge for the City of Little Rock, Arkansas, when it set out to create its first-ever [Master Plan for Children, Youth, and Families](#). Understanding that it needed to identify practices that might work in Little Rock, the City engaged ACS to conduct a national scan of other successful programs, and used those findings to inform the City’s own planning process.
8. **Develop, assess, or revise organizational or coalition structures and practices**—Assess how your organization or coalition does its work. Capacity challenges often arise from inefficient practices or misalignment of responsibilities. Does the staff, board, or decision-making structure help accomplish your goals? Do practices support or take away from your goals? Where does staff need additional support or training? ACS has worked with clients like the [Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s Forward Promise](#) grantees to help them develop organizational structures [that support boys and young men of color strategies around the country](#). Check out ACS’ [Collaboration Glossary of Terms](#) to explore different ways of collaborating with your partners.
9. **Get ready to make hard choices**—Another common source of capacity challenges can be found when an organization takes on too much or doesn’t know where to

What Does Capacity Building Look Like?

Capacity building can take virtually any form, based on the needs of an organization and the individuals working within it. Below are examples of how capacity building might help your organization:

- **Improve facilitation skills**, both for internal group trainings and seminars, and external opportunities during conferences and coalition meetings.
- **Build leadership** among staff to improve connection to your organization’s strategic direction and to implement plans.
- **Use applied research** to better inform your organization’s goals and priorities.
- **Connect impact to data and outcomes** to demonstrate the effectiveness of your approach and to inform baselines and benchmarks.
- **Engage the community** or conduct outreach to increase the visibility of your organization and gather feedback from stakeholders.
- **Develop, assess, or revise organizational capacity, structures, and practices** to increase organizational or team effectiveness.
- **Identify or develop a backbone organization** to enhance leadership within a coalition that can better manage strategy, timelines, and outcome data.
- **Communicate effectively and strategically** to meet your organization’s goals.
- **Develop and implement an advocacy approach** that includes engagement with local, state, and federal policymakers that will meet your goals.
- **Train staff, board members, or other partners as spokespersons** to engage successfully with the media and other target audiences about your organization or issue.
- **Review and provide recommendations on local, state, or federal policy changes** to allow your organization or coalition take the next step.

start. Determine what is a “want” and what is a “need,” and get ready to say no to “wants” that will not help you achieve your goals. For example, in 2016, ACS worked for six months with the board of directors and staff leadership of the [J. Marion Sims Foundation](#) culminating in a strategy session that helped them make tough decisions and zero in on a strategic vision. ACS continues to provide thought leadership and communication support to the foundation to ensure they stay focused on achieving their organizational goals.

- 10. Prepare to adjust**—Check in regularly on how your plan or project has evolved, and be ready to adjust your timeline depending on relevant outcomes. Checking in on a regular basis may reveal additional capacity challenges or assets that you did not originally see, and you may have to course correct to meet your goals. Check out ACS’ [Assess Your Collaboration](#) to help collaborative efforts reflect on their progress, no matter what stage they are in: during planning, throughout implementation, or as your collaborative effort is winding down to completion.

Six steps you can take right now:

- 1. Start talking**—Make capacity a topic for discussion during your next staff or board meeting. Ask others on your team where they see capacity challenges and what it might take to address them. Ask them to read up on capacity building and report back, and then continue the conversation.
- 2. Frame capacity issues positively**—Sometimes it’s easy to think of lack of capacity as a criticism instead of an opportunity. Avoid blaming individuals for lack of capacity. Instead, offer capacity building as a way for everyone to grow and improve your organization together.
- 3. Consider the obvious**—It’s likely that you already have an idea about where capacity in your organization might improve. What might you do in the short-term to move toward increasing that capacity? For example, if you are a CEO with the nagging feeling that no one in your organization will be ready to take the reins when you retire, start looking for leadership development opportunities for those on your senior leadership team.
- 4. Look beyond the mirror**—Even when taking an honest look, capacity issues are sometimes invisible to those inside an organization. Find an outside resource to help you look objectively at your operation and help you see past your blind spots to identify opportunities for increased capacity.
- 5. Remember, one size does not fit all**—Solutions to your organization’s challenges will evolve over time, and the solutions will be unique to your organization and goals. Don’t be tempted to only follow an off-the-shelf solution.
- 6. Think long-term**—If you think of capacity only as a quick fix, you’ll constantly wrestle with capacity issues. Instead, understand the capacity you’ll need to meet your goals 2, 5, 10, or 20 years down the road and plan (and invest) accordingly. When capacity is an ongoing part of the equation, it’s more likely to become a continual part of the solution rather than a constant challenge. ●

“When we received a large grant from a major national funder, we were thrilled, but we quickly realized that we’d need to up our game in order to make the most of the opportunity. ACS helped us build capacity to implement our project, including the ability to research, plan, create a strategy and timeline, and staff up appropriately. Their capacity building support was absolutely critical to our success, and will continue to be as our project evolves over the next three years.”

—Beth Oppenheimer,
Executive Director,
[Idaho Association for
the Education of Young
Children](#)

ACS Welcomes New Clients

ACS is delighted to welcome five new clients, all of whom are taking advantage of our capacity building expertise—either explicitly or implicitly—as part of a broader engagement.

With new Vice President of Development Megan O'Bryan at the helm, the [Cuyahoga Community College Foundation](#), which raises funds for student scholarships and educational program development, is working to increase staff capacity to meet the foundation and college's strategic goals. Using an in-depth survey and staff interviews, ACS has gathered data on how the foundation team approaches their work, autonomy, and understanding of their roles. The information gathered informed a robust staff retreat in April designed to increase team collaboration and the efficacy and efficiency of the foundation team.

The [William J. & Dorothy K. O'Neill Foundation](#) is enhancing its internal capacity by engaging with the trustees, family members, grantees, and philanthropic leaders to zero in on an updated strategic direction by conducting interviews and surveys, and leading a retreat with family members. The O'Neill Foundation is a 30-year-old private family foundation. The focus of their work is on the family, and four generations of the O'Neill family who work in collaboration and partnership with organizations that share their desire to improve the quality of lives for families and communities.

The [Health Foundation of Western and Central New York](#) (HFWCNY) sparks lasting change in health and health care across western and central New York with a special focus on young children and older adults, and the systems serving them. In 2017, ACS is helping HFWCNY communicate about their "[Triggers of Decline](#)" framework. A natural byproduct of aging are events, changes, or interruptions that lead to reduced wellness, called Triggers of Decline. These triggers can range in severity and complexity—such as falls, chronic illness, medication mismanagement, or limited access to caregivers—and their impacts can result in changes to an individual's daily activities and ultimately, the loss of independence. Triggers of Decline can happen at any stage of life – not just among older adults—and have a tremendous effect on the entire family. The goal of The Health Foundation's triggers of decline framework is to help stakeholders understand and recognize interruptions to healthy aging and support organizations who address them.

The [New York Early Childhood Professional Development Institute](#) brings together city and state agencies, a consortium of private funders, and the nation's largest urban university to support the development of all early childhood educators in New York. ACS was brought on board to help bring clarity to the work of

ACS Appearances

On January 24, ACS President Lori McClung attended the A Place 4 Me annual youth homelessness symposium which was designed with the help of ACS. [A Place 4 Me \(AP4M\)](#) is a cross-sector initiative that harnesses the strengths and resources of many partners to prevent and end homelessness among young adults age 15 to 24 in Cleveland and Cuyahoga County. The initiative is collaboratively led by a steering committee of the YWCA Greater Cleveland; Cuyahoga County Department of Health and Human Services, including the Division of Children and Family Services and the Office of Homeless Services; FrontLine Service; the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative; and the Sisters of Charity Foundation of Cleveland. This year's symposium featured the success of AP4M in meeting its goal of permanently housing 100 homeless youth in 100 days, as part of a 100-Day-Challenge that took place in Cleveland, Los Angeles, and Austin. With the help of ACS, the Cleveland/Cuyahoga 100-Day Challenge has received news coverage from [Cleveland Plain Dealer](#), [Fresh Water Cleveland](#), [ideastream](#), and more. Check out the press release [here](#).

On February 26, Lori McClung and ACS Strategist Cassie Batson conducted workshops for hundreds of National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) affiliates at the [NAEYC Public Policy Forum](#) in Washington, DC, which ACS also helped to plan. While Lori helped participants understand the power of network mapping, Cassie provided guidance and advice for creating powerful communication about early childhood education as a critical profession for maintaining a vibrant society.

On April 18, ACS presented [messaging tools](#) and tips to local government leaders, post-secondary educators, representatives from K-12 school systems, and other program and policy leaders that are part of the [National League of Cities' Cities Supporting the Early Childhood Workforce](#) initiative. The initiative spans five cities and includes Hartford, CT; Jacksonville, FL; Rochester, NY; Richmond, VA; and Kansas City, MO. By using effective messaging about the early childhood workforce, cities can increase support and resources, and ultimately ensure children receive high-quality early learning experiences.

the organization to build better brand awareness among target audiences, by revising the Institute's messaging, drafting communication collateral, and creating a comprehensive and coordinated communication plan to guide communication activities.

The [Franklin County Department of Job & Family Services](#) (FCDJFS) in Columbus, Ohio is focused on ensuring the children of Central Ohio have access to high quality early learning experiences, that their parents understand the value of that experience and that child care providers seek to become and remain high quality child care centers/homes. To help begin to build awareness on this issue FCDJFS has awarded the County's first Quality Early Learning media campaign contract to ACS. Through this effort, Franklin County seeks to increase the number of early care and education providers entering into [Ohio's Quality Rating Improvement System](#) (QRIS), and increase the number of parents and families that understand the value of quality early learning experiences and the impact of those experiences on children for the short- and long-term. ACS will develop and implement the plan to help set a foundation upon which future efforts are based. ACS is honored to have been awarded this critical work for the children, parents, and families of central Ohio. ●

"As a new CEO for this foundation, I knew we needed to build our capacity for community engagement. ACS started by helping us understand the capacity we had and how we could leverage it. Then, they conducted a national scan of best practices to inspire our board about what was possible and worked with our board members to help them develop the skills to get there. As we've begun our journey, ACS has continued to be our capacity building partner, helping us develop our strategic direction, creating and implementing a communication plan, and serving as mentors to our staff."

—Susan DeVenny, President & CEO,
[J. Marion Sims Foundation](#)

Connect and Collaborate with Us!

ACS is now on LinkedIn and Medium.com! We are sharing tools, resources, and stories about our clients. Find us at:

<https://www.linkedin.com/company/advocacy-&-communication-solutions-llc> and
<https://medium.com/@acsllc>

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