



A Capacity-Building Call to Arms

Keynote speech to the Alliance for Nonprofit
Management

Cleveland, Ohio

Jan Masaoka
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Thank you very much, Brooke, for that introduction, and I'd also like to thank the Alliance for inviting me to speak here tonight. I'm worried that it may be cruel and unusual punishment to subject all of you to an after-dinner talk, so I am planning to make some brief remarks that won't detain you, but are meant to spark conversations and arguments in the bar afterwards.

I was somewhat surprised to discover that this talk was initially given the title, "What Works and What Doesn't." I know a great deal more—from personal experience—about what *doesn't* work, and could certainly only speak about what has worked for us at CompassPoint, not about what works in general.

But in fact, this idea of looking at "what works and what doesn't"—which sounds disingenuously naïve, is actually at the heart of the surge of interest in evaluation. And this interest in evaluation has led, *inevitably*, to interest in capacity building. When looking at the outcomes for programs and initiatives, it quickly becomes clear that the ability of the organization to perform—even more than the specifics of the program design—is what makes or breaks the ability of outcomes to be achieved. As a result, much of the funding community, and the technical assistance community, has become acutely interested in growing the ability of nonprofits to execute ideas and programs that work.

This is the good news: that the nonprofit sector's attention has turned to the essential effort of building strength in nonprofits, and that we're seeing more and more funding initiatives focused on capacity building.

This new interest in capacity building is something for which our field has argued for years, and here it is. We have a tremendous opportunity in front of us. But there is also the opportunity here for us to screw up: to fail to deliver on the promise that technical assistance can raise the capacity not only of individual nonprofits, but of the nonprofit sector as a whole. In other words, we've been given a great chance; we cannot afford to blow this opportunity, and see capacity building become just another temporary fad.

Now those who know me know I spent a great deal of time ranting against what I see as the crimes perpetuated against nonprofits by foundations and technical assistance providers. So in that spirit, I would like to offer **four thoughts** about what our field—the field of capacity building and technical assistance—is doing wrong. I'm worried that if we don't address these concerns, our opportunity to demonstrate the value of capacity building will slip by.

First, we have pointed capacity building at problems, not at strengths. We ask nonprofits, “What are your needs?” and a nonprofit might respond: “We have a strong staff but our board is weak, so we need help with the board.” We have thought of ourselves as doctors, helping sick and weak organizations with their ailments.

If we begin to think, instead, of nonprofits as Olympic-potential athletes, and ourselves as coaches, we might start by helping an organization build on its strengths—whether that’s strong executive leadership, a strong board, or great community support. I worry that right now, if we in the technical assistance community were to talk to Michael Jordan, we

We have thought of ourselves as doctors, helping sick and weak organizations with their ailments We should begin to think, instead, of nonprofits as Olympic-potential athletes, and ourselves as coaches . . .

would advise him to work on his baseball game. If an organization has a strong staff but a weak board, I’d like us to begin by thinking about how to sustain and renew that staff and have *them* lead a change in the board. Rather than neglect organizational areas that are strong and focusing outside intervention on areas that are weak, we should be focusing on sustaining and renewing areas that are strong, and using those internal organization strengths to address areas that are weak.

Second, we have shown remarkably little imagination in answering—or even ASKING—the question “capacity to do what?” To a health foundation, capacity building means helping nonprofits increase their ability to deliver health services: to keep more babies healthy, to treat more sick adults. A capacity building initiative linked to funding for childcare is designed to raise the capacity of the grantees to care for more children and in better ways.

But nonprofit organizations, especially those based in communities of color, have profound roles to play within their communities *beyond* delivering health services or caring for children. In San Francisco, for example, the Black Coalition on AIDS is an effective AIDS provider, but much more: for its clients and their families, it is a gateway to other services; for the community, it is a significant employer and institution of political power; for its staff, volunteers and board, it is both a training ground and a platform for leadership. The multi-dimensional roles that nonprofits play are demonstrated by the fact that, when thinking of any minority community today, if people are asked to name its leaders, they are as likely to name the executives of human service nonprofits as they are to name businessmen, city council members, or clergy.

When we TA providers jet into a community we don’t know, or simply drive across town to an unfamiliar neighborhood, we see a nonprofit as its explicit self: an AIDS provider, a land trust. But when we are *part of that community* we are more likely to

know and appreciate the many dimensions of capacity that an organization has, and must have, to play its many roles well. Whether our relationship with a nonprofit has just begun, or whether we have longtime ties, we need to be sure that we *and* they articulate and aspire to its whole, complex destiny.

Third, people only know to ask for things they have heard of. A month ago I went to Japan, and now that I've seen some new and nifty electronic gadgets, I need many more things than I did a month ago! We are so eager to classify organizational matters as "strategic planning" or "organizational development" that nonprofits have only heard of a few types of technical assistance—and so that's all they think to ask for. When we do come up with something new—such as supporting organizations in CEO transition, or executive coaching, or strategic decision-making—we are surprised with the enthusiastic response to these new services. The ability to think imaginatively about what kinds of technical assistance will be helpful is an ability that is not innate, it is learned, and it must be articulated and nurtured in both client organizations and in ourselves. In our market research study of consulting to nonprofits, we learned more about how effective utilization of TA is a critical management skill that must be learned, just as supervision, fundraising, and communications are critical skills. As TA providers, we can do more to listen to nonprofits longer and more imaginatively, to understand all the TA they are trying to manage at the same time, and to coach them and their funders in managing capacity building so that they don't try to change everything at once.

Fourth, in evaluating the impact of capacity building, we are mostly asking the wrong questions of the wrong people at the wrong time. Imagine a scientist serving people carrots, and then asking them two questions: were the carrots delicious? and is your eyesight better? In other words, we first ask narrowly about customer satisfaction,

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and then about unrealistically ambitious, short-term impact. There are many reasons why people should eat carrots and why their eyesight is the way it is, and the benefits of eating carrots as part of a healthy diet are unlikely to be captured by evaluation consultants interviewing people who have recently eaten carrots.

I want to give just one example of the negative impact of poor evaluation practices on the field of technical assistance. Although this dampening effect has taken place in all aspects of technical

assistance, nowhere have we been led more astray by a narrow approach to evaluation than in the field of professional development and nonprofit management training. When evaluating training, we tend to focus on whether a participant uses the knowledge learned in a workshop. You know, I took a class in Astronomy in college, and today I am not an astronomer. But does anyone here think that taking Astronomy is a waste? I think in some way I'm better at everything I do because I took astronomy. I also took one of our own PageMaker classes at CompassPoint, and I

learned from that I should not use PageMaker. Sometimes I say that I use what I learned in the PageMaker class every day.

When Russy Sumariwalla, who is here today, did an in-depth, grounded research study for us on the impact of training on nonprofit staff a few years ago, he found that the most important change they reported was a change in attitude: they had a broader appreciation for the field, they had more confidence about their jobs, they felt better about what others in their organizations were doing: in short, they learned, as I did in astronomy, about the universe, the solar system, how we fit into it, and to reach for the stars.

Perhaps most importantly of all, we have done little to articulate or measure or learn to support the simple ability of nonprofit organizations to get things done: and that, after all, is ultimately what capacity means.

All this points to the importance of four approaches:

First, that we focus on strengthening and sustaining an organization's assets, and to begin there in addressing their deficits.

Second that we appreciate the full and rich role that a nonprofit organization plays in its community, an appreciation we can best achieve when we are part of that same community.

We need to appreciate the full and rich role that a nonprofit plays in its community, an appreciation we can best achieve when we are part of that community.

Third, that we be slower to put labels on what people are saying to us, that we learn the extent to which they are engaging in other technical assistance efforts, and that we remind our clients, their funders, and ourselves, that managing organizational change and technical assistance providers is a learned skill and a competency we should nurture and recognize.

And fourth, that we take a grounded and multi-dimensional approach to evaluation, one that begins with understanding all that the people in an organization are doing and will do, all an organization is going through and aspiring to, and all that the staff and volunteers in the organization will do with what have learned.

Sometimes we talk as if *organizations* work through people to effect change, but more accurately *people* with visions make use of nonprofit organizations as the vehicles through which they test new and controversial ideas and grow them into powerful forces. And so, despite having to listen to an after-dinner speech, I hope you'll agree with me that there couldn't be a better job to have than the ones we have: helping the

smartest and the best people in society, working through nonprofit organizations, create social change.

At CompassPoint we have an unofficial motto taken from Peter Drucker: Every important idea for social change has come from the nonprofit sector. The sector has turned its attention to building its own capacity; we in the technical assistance community must rise to this challenge.

Thank you very much, and I'll see you in the bar.

Question from the audience:

This morning Paul Light talked about how we should aspire to more “nonprofit-like.” What would your definition of non-profitness be?vv

I like Paul's main point, which is that being nonprofit, and being nonprofit-like, is something that we should be proud of. I think that the technical assistance sub-sector

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is actually a little guilty of just constantly bemoaning nonprofits and talking about how awful they are and how terrible their boards are, and on and on.

In fact, I think we know that nonprofits are much more efficient and effective than for-profits ever are. For just as one example, nonprofit staff recruit people, screen them, train them, supervise them, elicit world-changing work from them, and sometimes even fire them, and we don't even pay them. So supervisors at for-profit companies have a lot to learn from volunteer managers!

I have to say that in the morning session, when Paul asked the audience to think of attributes they would like to associate with “nonprofit-like,” I was disappointed that value statements were not part of that list. All the attributes mentioned are good ones, such as persistent, mission focused, hard working, customer-centered; in fact, all of those are attributes that any institution in any sector would probably aspire to or even claim rights to. A seldom-spoken aspect of the non-profit sector is its progressive nature. It's left of center. It is about social and economic justice. And if we don't go out front with those values, we'll lose the battle, not to mention the war, or our souls.

I would like to see the nonprofit sector be and describe itself as a social change sector, not just a sector with cliché, Boy Scout attributes. Our attributes grow out of our commitment to values rather than the other way around. We read a lot that the

technical assistance sector puts out, and there is a lot of wonderful management information in it. But very little is a call to the cause of social change, and I would like to see those of us who are technical assistance sector place ourselves as agents of social change, not just agents of sound management practices.

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