

Firelight Newsflash! 23 February 2009 - Focus on Organizational Strengthening

Dear partners,

You will soon learn more about Firelight's new strategic plan. In it, you will see that we have carefully reflected upon and included organizational strengthening as part of our vision, mission, theory of change, and strategies. Firelight found that the ideas of "capacity building" or "technical assistance" are too often focused on weaknesses, rather than strengths. But we know from our experience that there is indeed lots of capacity in each and every one of our grantee-partners, no matter how large or small. As the proverb goes, "It is not money that builds a house but wisdom."

As we "walk the path" with our partners in the future, we will be focusing on how we can best support you to become stronger - no matter what stage of organizational development you may be. The following Newsflash is focused on the ideas and principles that will continue to inform Firelight's perspective and approach to organizational strengthening.

In solidarity,

The Firelight Team

Why is organizational strengthening important?

Because strong programs for children, families, and communities are supported by strong organizations.

What is a strong organization?

A strong organization makes the best use of its resources to maximize its impact on children. Many factors enhance the quality and sustainability of an organization's programs. The strength of an organization does not come from its number of paid staff, budget size, or physical assets such as vehicles or computers. Organizations of any size that facilitate community action and provide access to services can be strong organizations.

What factors contribute to organizational strength?

There is no single factor that will guarantee organizational strength, but the following may contribute to success:

- local knowledge, sound understanding of the community context

- strong sense of direction and focus - organization works from its own purpose and principles
- visionary leadership and sound management that facilitates the work
- a well-organized, skilled, and committed staff (paid or volunteer)
- good systems for management and decision-making
- mobilizes and expresses the will and voice of the organizations' constituents
- a steady financial resource base
- ability to continuously learn and adapt from its own experience - organization asks questions of itself for reflection
- willingness to concentrate on what the organization CAN do, rather than mourn what it cannot do or influence
- good relationships with key external stakeholders - ability to cooperate and collaborate
- shared values that uphold mutual care and support, creativity, flexibility, and results
- the ability to respond quickly to opportunities and threats

Capacity building for DONORS

Let's turn the tables - The ability to understand and work with organizations (of any size, of any type) should be a core capacity of donors. What if donors' capacity was built to do the following:

- Ask the right questions that enable an organisation to take the next step on its own path of development.
- Ask questions that stimulate discussion, rather than demand an immediate solution.
- Conceptualise, and thus analyse organizations' strategy with intelligence and common sense.
- Observe accurately and objectively. Listen deeply. See the "invisible" realities of the organisation.
- Use understandable language to "close the gap" between donors (those who have resources) and grantees (those needing resources).

- Act with integrity. Generate trust that will allow the organisation and its members to really 'speak' and show themselves.
- Use stories, metaphor and imagination to help organizations become more creative and see themselves anew.
- Reflect honestly on one's own programs, and thus enable others to do the same.
- Remain positive and enthusiastic. Acknowledge fear, pain, and struggle. Help others to overcome cynicism and despair.
- Empathise (not sympathise), so that both compassion and feedback can be used in helping an organisation to become stronger.

Another proverb states, "A guest sees more in an hour than the host does in a year." When donors fully develop their own abilities to do this, they can be an asset to the organizations they serve rather than a burden. Firelight experience has shown us that capacity building efforts can 1) bring out hidden local knowledge, 2) support indigenous managerial cultures and systems, 3) bring out creativity and innovation in organizations, and 4) enable organizations to stay rooted in the community.

(Adapted from Kaplan, 1996.)

Components that Change as an Organization gets Stronger by Phil Bartle, PhD

(Adapted from: <http://www.scn.org/ip/cds/cmp/modules/cap-el.htm>)

(En Français - Seize éléments de capacité organisationnelle: <http://www.scn.org/gcad/modules/cap-elf.htm>)

The more capacity an organization has, and the more empowered it is. The more any organization has of each of the elements below, the stronger it is.

- 1) Altruism** - Members are ready to sacrifice benefits to themselves for the benefit of the organization as a whole – reflected in generosity, individual humility, communal pride, mutual supportiveness, loyalty, concern, and sister/brotherhood.
- 2) Values** - Members share values, especially the idea that they belong to a common vision.
- 3) Services** - All members have access to communal or shared facilities (such as meeting or working space, equipment, supplies, etc).
- 4) Communications** - Members have a willingness and ability to communicate effectively, which includes diplomacy and listening.
- 5) Confidence** - There is a belief that the organization can achieve whatever it sets out to do – reflected in positive attitudes and optimism. The organization is

self-reliant rather than dependent.

6) Information - Members jointly analyze information. There is a high level of awareness. Knowledge and wisdom is found within individuals and the group as a whole.

7) Intervention - The organization is not afraid to confront hard issues. Members are preventative rather than reactive to problems. Leaders challenge members to act and thus the organization becomes stronger.

8) Leadership - Leaders have the power, ability, willingness, and influence to move the organization forward. Leaders have a facilitating role for members to operate the organization in support of its goals.

9) Networking - The organization collaborates with other stakeholders that can provide useful resources to strengthen the organization as a whole.

10) Structure and Decision-Making - Members see themselves as having a specific role that contributes to the whole organization.

11) Political Power - The organization participates in decision-making that affects policies, practices, and resource allocations.

12) Skills - Members have the ability to get things done – managing, organizing, mobilizing, evaluating.

13) Trust - Members of the organization trust each other and their leaders – integrity, honesty, dependability, openness, transparency, and trustworthiness.

14) Unity - Members have a sense of belonging. They are willing to tolerate differences and variations among each other. They are willing to cooperate and work together.

15) Wealth - The organization has control over its actual and potential resources.

An organization does not become stronger simply by adding a few more facilities or by attending a few training workshops. Strengthening or capacity building involves social change -- development -- and that, in turn, involves all of the above elements of strength.

For more information, the Community Development Resource Association (<http://www.cdra.org.za>) has produced some very interesting work on challenging the current concepts of organizational capacity building.

To read more from them,

see: [http://www.cdra.org.za/LibraryandResources/Articles by CDRA.htm](http://www.cdra.org.za/LibraryandResources/Articles%20by%20CDRA.htm)

As part of the Firelight Foundation's Monitoring, Evaluation and Technical Assistance (META) Program, Firelight provides "Newsflashes" to share relevant resources and information with our active grantee-partners via weekly emails and via post on a monthly basis. We hope that by facilitating access to information for grassroots, community-focused organizations, programming for children and families, as well as organizational development, is enhanced. We welcome your comments, feedback and ideas for upcoming Newsflashes at newsletter@firelightfoundation.org.