

Dear Social Work Practice Teachers and Leaders,

We hear quite a lot about capacity and capability building in the sector but what do people usually mean by this? Most of the time, they usually mean having the knowhow, resources and time to produce satisfactory outputs or outcomes. Why are these especially important in our context today? One possible reason is because we live in an increasingly complex, volatile, uncertain and ambiguous world and there is a need therefore to continue to ensure people of the basics of health, safety and a safe environment.

Generally, some of the core capabilities include the knowledge and skills to 1) deliver good quality service, 2) manage finances and resources for sustainability and 3) contribute productively to a community. The last point is important as agencies do not exist independently of their operating environment. Any agency therefore needs to be able to focus, plan ahead, avoid distractions and be nimble enough to respond to differing demands and expectations. It needs to be responsive and persistently purposeful in order to achieve long-term goals.

Interconnected capacities

The present challenge for many agencies is to systematically provide opportunities for workers to build core skills that are needed to deliver services well and to provide a learning and capacity building environment for workers to thrive. For many agencies in the social sector, the “what” of capacity building includes program skills, fundraising skills, and basic organizational skills. However, these alone are insufficient. What distinguishes the better from the good agencies is the recognition that knowledge and skills are a linked set of capacities, which have to be interconnected in an ongoing basis within the agency ie organisational function. *Coordinating and structuring the interconnectedness is a premium for effectiveness.* There is even now attention on building the capacity of capacity builders. Such capacities include developing more sophisticated diagnostic tools; engaging teams (rather than individuals); ensuring that change management is included as a part of the capacity building process; engaging diversity; designing participation¹ and inclusion; and developing the capacity of partner agencies. There is a realisation that the network of partners is as strong as the weakest link.

The world has changed, and the social sector has been responding. Non-profits, funders, government agencies and the private sector are acting together more often, whether forced by budget cuts or drawn by the promise of collective impact or social impact.

We also hear a lot these days about social innovation and its place in collective impact. What are some of the ideas that will enable us to build our capacity and capability? And how do they link to our reference to “the heart and mind (brains)”, and “passion and soul”?

Brains, soul, heart and courage

Brains: We should develop a deep knowledge in our area of work and stay updated on the current research on what works and how the elements or factors contribute to or influence outcomes.

Soul: We should be clear about the values that we stand for. Good leaders should lead with a compass and not by radar. While aware of the world around them, good leaders are oriented to a true north

¹ <http://tinyurl.com/designingparticipation>

that does not waver. In contrast, a leader who makes decisions by radar will be constantly changing in response to external stimuli.

Heart: We should be passionate about what we believe in and show compassion. Passion and compassion will root our decisions in concern for others. But passion and compassion are not sufficient. Good leaders will want to ensure that they remain competent and continually refresh their vision.

Courage: We should have good nerves to be bold and able to move toward our vision even with incomplete information or risky odds after deep thinking and analysis.

These are clearly valuable attributes in any leader.

Working with data and information

Most leaders will work with data and information. Data comes in the form of raw observations and measurements or chunks of data.

Information is created by *analysing relationships and connections* between the data. It is capable of answering the “Who/What/Where/How many/When/Why is” type of questions. Quite often, when we talk about data driven decision-making, it is information and not data that feeds into the actual decision-making. Information is a message with an (implied) audience and a purpose which is the reason why we often ask who needs the information.

Knowledge is a product of a synthesis in the human mind. This would mean that knowledge can only be shared as information and then becomes knowledge again in someone else’s brain. Knowledge answers the “How” question. It is contextualized and an example would be a local practice or relationship that works.

Decisions are often made based on information and knowledge and not data alone. Through processes like evaluation, research, observation and feedback, we generate new data, information and knowledge.

Translating evidence into policy and programmes

There is no doubt that social change efforts are accelerated by data. But investing in good quality research alone isn’t enough to produce solutions or outcomes. Funders and researchers have to invest more in translating research into action. Research findings tend to stop at producing data and information. There is a gap in translating the evidence and learning for practitioners and to enrich the experience for users of services.

To enable learning and discovery to translate into services for those who need them, it is useful to draw from research to shape the content and curriculum of programs and models to bring about positive change. By being more deliberate in shifting towards recognising outcomes that are linked to research findings, we will shape behaviours and interventions that target change in behaviour, wellbeing and outcome for clients. This requires a refreshed evaluation of programs and services drawing on what works in practice within resource constraints and consistency in implementation.

Difference between innovation and scaling

Another capability that agencies want to build in the social sector is that of innovation and the capacity to scale. Innovation and scaling require quite different skills sets. People with the talent and skills to innovate are unlikely to be the same people who can help scale. For example, football teams don’t

use the same players on their offensive and defensive lines. There is also a missed understanding that innovation must require innovation labs, consultants, new technology, and the other things popularly associated with it. Instead, it can in some instances, mean a small common sense tweak (like serving or making services available in a less obvious location or point) that is far enough upstream to change the entire trajectory of a program. Innovation can come about by thinking differently through an “out of the box” perspective and re-organising how a service is delivered by questioning assumptions. One such assumption is whether a procedure needs to be carried out by a particular person or by someone trained to do it.

Scaling on the other hand often requires a catalytic innovation. The best idea may reach a natural plateau at some point and getting to the next level requires not just working or pushing harder, but also doing something different - innovating, rethinking, perhaps even changing the way service delivery has worked for decades. Scaling often requires more stakeholders, partnerships and networks.

Equally critical is to enable leaders to know whether or not to scale. And it begins with gathering evidence of impact and how the impact happens. This is to ensure that what is to be scaled has evidential impact on the clients and is not used for promotional reasons. The evidence or data will instruct on the readiness to scale.

Social service leaders looking to scale any program or service should take a very critical look at their work, their program model, and their impact before tackling the question of scale. It is useful to answer these questions squarely: Is the program or service something that people really need? Can we prove that it works and will have a broader application? And, always, always, always check if anyone is already doing something similar and determine whether partnering might help them do it better. It is through partnerships that the social service sector can succeed at innovating and scaling social service delivery solutions. This is so because sustained interventions and solutions for the social needs in today’s complex world will require skills from across organisations.

So capacity and capability building is not an option but is critical in order for us to be relevant in the increasingly complex and unpredictable world.

Ang Bee Lian
Director of Social Welfare, MSF
3 May 2016