

FIELD SCAN MEMO

PREPARED FOR THE ROBERT WOOD JOHNSON FOUNDATION BY CORAZON CATALYSTS + PUBLIC PROFIT | MAY 2024

The Healthy Children and Families (HCF) theme of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation engaged Public Profit, an evaluation and strategy consulting firm, and Corazón Catalysts, a capacity-building and strategy consulting firm, to conduct a field scan as it seeks to understand how best to support its grantees to build capacity for health equity work. This memo summarizes the review of a range of capacity-building sources.

More background about this memo begins on page 2.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Findings from the field scan underscore the significance of transformative capacity-building approaches that embed social justice and anti-oppression values within nonprofits. These approaches challenge systemic biases, redefine success metrics, and prioritize liberatory practices. Specific strategies involve integrating equity values organization-wide, offering focused equity training and coaching, centering community empowerment, and investing in the capacity and liberation of people of color in leadership. This includes revising hiring practices, adopting equitable decision-making processes, and utilizing equity-centered evaluation practices. This memo also outlines the outcomes of investing in equity capacity-building, showcasing how these initiatives drive changes at individual, organizational, and community levels. While highlighting successes and effective approaches to capacity-building, the findings also address persistent challenges faced by nonprofits such as resource constraints and power imbalances in philanthropy. Ultimately, the findings reflect a call for a paradigm shift in philanthropy towards more justice-centered approaches that promote nonprofit resilience, empower communities and address systemic inequities.

ABOUT THIS MEMO

The Healthy Children and Families (HCF) theme at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) has provided equity-focused capacity-building to its grantees since 2017. HCF aims to identify a broad spectrum of equity-focused supports, ranging from immediate practical solutions to visionary aspirations within the capacity-building field. To achieve this, HCF enlisted the expertise of Public Profit, an evaluation and strategy consulting firm, and Corazón Catalysts, a firm specializing in equity-centered capacity-building and strategy consulting. Corazón Catalysts, with support from Public Profit, conducted a field scan, reviewing health equity support models, similar models supported by other funders, approaches from adjacent fields, and community-rooted initiatives. The findings in this memo are distilled from these diverse sources, through the lens of several guiding questions. To inform future approaches to equity-focused capacity-building investments, this memo highlights common practices and critiques of equity capacity-building approaches.

Guiding Questions

- How do different capacity-building models and practices contribute to advancing equity, and what transformational changes were achieved?
- What factors contributed to the success of equity capacity-building approaches, and what challenges were encountered?
- What criticisms exist regarding equity capacity-building, and how can philanthropy better support nonprofit capacity to advance health equity?

Terminology

In “What is Health Equity?,” Robert Wood Johnson Foundation offers the following definition of health equity: *Health equity means that everyone has a fair and just opportunity to be as healthy as possible. This necessitates the removal of obstacles to health, such as poverty, discrimination, and their associated consequences—like powerlessness and lack of access to good jobs with fair pay, quality education and housing, safe environments, and health care.* This concept of health equity serves as the cornerstone of RWJF's vision for a society where all individuals have an equal chance to lead their healthiest lives. RWJF's definition aligns with broader interpretations of equity. Consequently, the exploration of equity capacity-building in the field scan transcended a singular focus on *health* equity capacity-building. Equity capacity-building encompasses a diverse array of practices that aid individuals and organizations in advancing equity culture, policy, and practice change. This includes various forms of technical assistance, such as training, coaching, consulting, mentoring, and resource brokering. Capacity-building involves a deliberate and concentrated effort to empower an organization to better achieve its mission. At an individual level, capacity-building supports the development or enhancement of knowledge, skills, and abilities.

Types of Sources Reviewed

The sources reviewed present a diverse array of perspectives, encompassing various organizations, sectors, and types of capacity-building. We explored promising models from the viewpoint of recipients, not solely from the perspective of funders or service providers. These sources include reports from philanthropic studies, articles critiquing common philanthropic capacity-building approaches, and models developed by specific capacity-building organizations. The sources also highlight both current, past and evolving approaches to equity capacity-building across nonprofits, capacity-building organizations, and philanthropy. While the field scan covers a wide range of articles, reports, tools, and blogs on equity capacity-building practices and needs, there are some limitations. The field scan represents a snapshot in time – most sources are from the past 5 years – and reflects approaches that have accessible artifacts. The bibliography on page 20 provides a brief summary of each source.

Memo Structure

The memo is organized into sections that summarize the findings and provide examples from various sources included in the field scan.

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CAPACITY-BUILDING APPROACHES & PRACTICES

The sources we reviewed frequently highlight a holistic approach to capacity-building that aims to empower organizations to address systemic biases, foster authentic partnerships, and advance social justice goals effectively. The following are five transformative approaches to capacity-building that go beyond technical assistance to challenge systemic oppression, redefine success metrics, and prioritize liberation.

Build a foundation of values-centered competencies

This section covers a foundational approach to capacity-building involving embedding values of social justice, equity, and anti-oppression throughout the organization. The field scan surfaced the following practices that center equity values.

Training, Workshops & Coaching:

- Conduct equity training, workshops and retreats for leaders to explore personal values, biases and systemic inequities.
- Provide ongoing coaching and advising to integrate equity principles into daily work and center values in professional growth and organizational improvement strategies.
- Focus on building allyship and advocacy skills through anti-racism and cultural humility training.
- Train board members on equity-centered governance and decision-making practices.
- Support executives and managers with participating in equity-centered leadership institutes and fellowships.

Human-Centered Design:

- Foster environments of compassion which center holistic care for staff and constituents.
- Support individuals and organizations in navigating change and shaping culture.
- Utilize frameworks like "appreciative inquiry" and "strengths-finders" for more liberatory and asset-based approaches.
- Provide choice in selecting capacity-building supports from a range of individuals, organizations and specialized institutes.

Approach in Action

Tiloma Jayasinghe, the president and CEO of Community Resource Exchange, a collaborative system designed to support communities in defending their rights, advocates for a positional shift towards "care-pacity building" where care for people is central in capacity-building efforts. It involves supporting individuals and organizations in navigating change, shaping culture, and fostering environments of compassion and support. Approaches like using "appreciative inquiry" and "strengths-finders" demonstrate a shift towards more liberatory and asset-based frameworks

for redefining success in organizational development. [*Capacity Building as a Tool for Transformation*](#), *Nonprofit Quarterly*

The National Equity Project, a nonprofit dedicated to fostering leadership and systemic change, provides a diverse array of capacity-building opportunities tailored for leaders across sectors. Through in-person institutes, multi-session virtual courses, single-session workshops, and community of practice sessions, they offer specialized training in areas such as Black teacher leadership, coaching for equity, designing meetings for equity, and liberatory design. Their approach emphasizes fostering relationships, deepening commitment to equity goals, and integrating personal and collective healing into professional development, ultimately aiming to advance social justice initiatives and create transformative change within organizations and communities. [*Center for Equity Leadership*](#), *National Equity Project*

Service Never Sleeps (SNS), an organization dedicated to empowering individuals and communities to catalyze social justice, offers comprehensive capacity-building through their Allyship Training programs. These intensive sessions, spanning two days for organizations and two consecutive days for individuals, delve into the core principles of allyship through the CLAIM framework (Care, Learn, Act, Influence, Maintain). Participants gain actionable tools and techniques to promote justice in their everyday lives, with a focus on centering people of color, navigating intersectionality, influencing others, and continuing self-work. Through a blend of education, interactive discussions, and real-world applications, SNS equips participants with the skills and mindset to foster genuine allyship as a way of life, driving meaningful change in their communities and workplaces. [*Allyship Training*](#), *Service Never Sleeps [2024, website]*

Embed equity-centered practices and policies organization-wide

This section exemplifies ways that nonprofits are more holistically integrating equity, justice and anti-racism policies and practices throughout the fabric of an organization. These practices collectively aim to embed and support equity-focused strategies across all aspects of organizational operations, promoting a culture of inclusivity and fairness. Below are several examples of the ways organizations have embedded equity values in their policies, practices and culture.

Integration of Equity Values:

- Ensure equity and social justice principles are clearly reflected in organizational strategic plans, values statements and metrics of success across all departments.
- Embed equity-focused approaches by revising hiring practices, creating inclusive workplace policies, and adopting transparent and equitable decision-making processes that share power.
- Form committees and task forces within the organization to support staff and board members with applying equity-centered practices in their roles and across departments.
- Provide mentors, advisors and affinity spaces for staff and board members to process their experiences with integration.
- Secure funding for equity-centered initiatives, such as staff training, strategic planning, and program development, to enhance capacity and advance equity goals effectively.

Approach in Action

Movement Strategy Center (MSC), a capacity builder for communities of color, collaborated with Positive Women's Network (PWN), a national membership body led by and for women living with HIV, to improve budget design. PWN worked with MSC to ensure that each of its chapters across the nation could manage its own budget, allowing for greater autonomy and strategic decision-making at the local level. PWN is now engaged in ongoing discussions about the relationships and investments they want to establish as an organization, considering historical inequities in financial institutions and practices that have impacted their membership.

[Transformational Capacity Building](#), *Stanford Social Innovation Review*

The SEIU Education & Support Fund (ESF), a nonprofit providing worker-centered education, training and professional development programs, conducted demographic surveys and data analysis to identify and address inequitable compensation gaps across race, gender, and other identities. This effort resulted in the hiring of more women of color in leadership roles and the implementation of fair compensation practices. ESF also assessed its learning culture against their equity values and initiated partnerships with consultancies to drive cultural change. This focus on learning and development contributed to improved morale and organizational effectiveness.

[Health Equity Case Study Series](#), *The Hub Strategists*

Clear Impact, a company that provides performance management software, training, and consulting services to government agencies, nonprofits, communities, and foundations, created a comprehensive diversity, equity, and inclusion plan encompassing both internal and external policies. As a White-led organization, they are working to prioritize hiring and promoting staff of color and offering regular racial equity and implicit bias training. Externally, the company contributes to equity efforts through corporate giving, offering discounts and free tools to POC-led organizations, and delivering training services aimed at improving racial equity. [Clear Impact Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Plan](#) [2024, Website], and [Advancing DEI Inside an Organization: The UCare Equity Journey](#), [2024, Zoom]

The [New York State Network for Youth Success](#) (NYS), a nonprofit focused on supporting the academic, social, emotional, and healthy development of children and youth, embarked upon the development and implementation of a comprehensive organizational JEDI (Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion) strategy. Thrive Paradigm, a consultant team working to advance equity in the youth development field, facilitated a multi-year process that involved extensive data gathering through audits, surveys, interviews, and focus groups to assess the organization's current state of equity and identify areas for improvement. Following the discovery and learning phase, NYS staff and board members were engaged in designing a multi-year JEDI strategy covering various organizational dimensions including strategy, resource development, communications, operations, HR, and programming. *Corazon Catalysts, direct experience*

Invest in the capacity and liberation of people of color in leadership

This section highlights the evolving focus within nonprofits and capacity-building initiatives to intentionally invest in enhancing the capacity and liberation of people of color in leadership. The shift towards promoting cultures of liberation involves challenging systemic oppression and uplifting marginalized communities through strategic partnerships. Below are the practices identified through the field scan.

Liberatory POC-Led Organizations:

- Shift focus from technical capacity-building alone to promoting cultures of liberation within organizations.
- Provide grants to organizations led by people of color or serving marginalized communities, allowing flexibility in addressing specific capacity-building needs.
- Promote diversity within the sector by supporting organizations and consultants from diverse backgrounds, ensuring marginalized perspectives are valued and represented.
- Address multiple forms of oppression simultaneously and challenge systemic privilege and power, including equipping White leaders to champion change.

Support for POC-Leaders:

- Provide mentorship programs, leadership development fellowships and affinity groups to equip marginalized leaders with the tools, support and social influence.
- Recognize and address challenges like trauma, burnout, and systemic inequities faced by people of color by providing supports like fully covered sabbaticals.

Approach in Action

The Black Equity Collective (BEC), an ecosystem of funders and communities dedicated to enhancing the long-term sustainability of Black-led and Black-empowering organizations, made a purposeful transition from the term "capacity-building" to "organizational resiliency." This shift signifies a value for asset-based, transformative, and community-centered approaches. Unlike the traditional capacity-building framework, which tends to be deficit-based and prioritizes short-term outcomes over long-term structural change, organizational resilience emphasizes community-centered strengths-based approaches and transformative change that addresses systemic inequities. [*Should We Cancel Capacity Building*](#), *Nonprofit Quarterly*

The BIPOC Ed Coalition, a group of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color nonprofit executive directors across Washington state, offers a sabbatical program that is centered around addressing the critical need for rest, healing, and wellness among BIPOC nonprofit leaders. The initiative, which dedicates \$1.37 million to support 32 BIPOC leaders with sabbatical and respite opportunities, aims to provide leaders with essential time for refreshment, refocusing, and recovery from the cumulative impacts of managing social justice organizations while navigating structural racism. Sabbaticals challenge scarcity mindsets and disrupt extractive labor practices, creating a space of nourishment for leaders. By investing in sabbaticals, the program not only

supports individual leaders' healing but also contributes to organizational development and sustainability. [*Making Real the Radical Act of Rest*](#), BIPOC Ed Coalition

LeaderSpring, a capacity-building organization that works to foster a powerful, equity-driven social sector by strengthening leaders and organizations, provides the Women of Color LeadStrong Fellowship. Through this program, they invest in women of color by competitively awarding fellowships to social justice change-agents in leadership positions and have held an African American Women cohort, a Native American and Alaska Native Women cohort and a Women of Color cohort. The programs integrate leadership development and peer learning through monthly Leaders Circles, retreats, and executive coaching, emphasizing the importance of a love ethic and collective action in driving transformative change. Participants analyze structural inequities within the social sector, envisioning preferred futures for their organizations and communities, while deepening their sense of renewal and well-being. [*Women of Color LeadStrong Fellowship*](#), LeaderSpring

The Solutions Project, a nonprofit dedicated to advancing climate justice, noticed high levels of burnout among women of color executive directors. To mitigate burnout and support collaborative, feminine leadership, they provided \$10,000 Fighter League grants to Black and Indigenous leaders in the Gulf South. This pilot initiative centered on autonomy and flexibility, allowing leaders to use the funds to support their wellness and increase their capacity to collaborate during times of crisis. [*Reimagining Capacity Building: Navigating Culture, Systems & Power*](#), Grantmakers for Effective Organizations

CompassPoint, a nonprofit leadership development practice, shifted to a co-director model. They recognized that traditional hierarchical models did not align with their values or desired impact, leading them to experiment with collaborative and collective approaches. Shared leadership was an opportunity to reconcile historical inequities in leadership and power. This model aimed to enhance mission alignment and impact by fostering inclusive decision-making processes that values diverse perspectives and lived experiences. It is a values-centered approach seen as a way to promote systemic equity and inclusion in nonprofit leadership. [*Five Insights From Directors Sharing Power*](#), CompassPoint

Value lived experience at decision-making tables

The practices uplifted in this section underscore the significance of honoring community voice and lived experience in direction setting and decision-making. The source examples emphasize the importance of community-driven approaches to promote systemic change and ensure equitable resource allocation for effective pursuit of social justice goals. These approaches require adequate funding to implement in culturally responsive and meaningful ways on an ongoing basis.

Competency Building:

- Shift mindsets around expertise and the value of lived experience to disrupt ways that elitism and colonialism show up in leadership and decision making.

- Make capacity-building best practices and tools accessible to a wider audience to facilitate knowledge sharing and collective learning.
- Train in community organizing and facilitating participatory decision-making processes.
- Facilitate knowledge exchange, resource sharing, and collaborative capacity-building efforts.

Community Engagement & Power Building:

- Build partnerships with grassroots organizations to engage historically marginalized communities in identifying assets and opportunities.
- Host community dialogues or forums on systemic oppression in partnership with grassroots organizations to advocate for policy change.
- Foster cross-sector partnerships, establish community advisory boards, and form partnerships with equity-centered organizations to ensure marginalized voices are included in decision-making processes.

Approach in Action

More for Memphis, an initiative led by Seeding Success, formed anchor collaboratives composed of multiple organizations to galvanize sectors and ensure diverse representation in their work. This involved engaging community members, including parents, youth, organizations, government, and key sector leaders, to identify priorities for improving social and economic mobility. Seeding Success, a cradle-to-career backbone organization, provided initiative partners with technical assistance and training around race equity to facilitate results-based conversations and strategies. This included developing capacity within anchor collaboratives to drive equity-centered approaches. [Centering Equity in Challenging Times](#), *Collective Impact Forum*

Sarah EchoHawk, CEO of the American Indian Science and Engineering Society (AISES), an organization working to substantially increase American Indian and Alaska Native representation in science, technology, engineering, and math fields, highlights the hurdles encountered by Indigenous-led nonprofits when dealing with philanthropic funding that imposes external definitions of success and prescriptive approaches, echoing colonialist dynamics. She emphasizes the need for increased representation in philanthropy and advocates for long-term funding commitments that prioritize mutual respect and shared decision-making with Indigenous communities. EchoHawk underscores the importance of acknowledging historical injustices and reforming funding practices to uphold Indigenous peoples' autonomy and self-determination. [Unpacking Capacity Building](#), *Nonprofit Quarterly*

Nexus Community Partners engages in community-driven equity work by centering culture and promoting democratized labor through initiatives such as supporting worker cooperatives that anchor wealth within marginalized communities. They consider the cultural, linguistic, and organizational context of each entity when designing capacity-building initiatives. This entails ensuring consultants possess the necessary expertise and collaborating with grantee partners to address specific needs. Implementing peer learning models can facilitate knowledge exchange

and problem-solving among peers, shifting away from expert-driven approaches. [Reimagining Capacity Building: Navigating Culture, Systems & Power](#), *Grantmakers for Effective Organizations*

The National WIC Association (NWA), a nonprofit representing public health nutrition service provider agencies and families, works to strengthen the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) to promote healthier families nationwide. NWA established a WIC Participant Advisory Group (PAG) to actively engage WIC participants in decision-making processes. The PAG provides a platform for participants to share insights, perspectives, and recommendations directly with the NWA Board of Directors and staff, promoting a more inclusive and community-centered approach. Additionally, NWA conducted a comprehensive landscape survey with over 1,500 responses to assess the training and education needs within the WIC community and ensure programs and services are responsive to the evolving needs of constituents. [Health Equity Case Study Series](#), *The Hub Strategists*

Engage in equity-centered evaluation and continuous improvement

This section highlights the importance of data utilization for equity purposes, challenging power dynamics in evaluation and data practice, and employing comprehensive evaluation approaches centered around equity. The practices and examples underscore the significance of explicitly centering equity within organizational learning processes to support strategic development and progress aligned with unique contexts and goals. Nonprofits are seeking greater autonomy with determining metrics of success and require increased resources to meet the capacity needs of collecting, maintaining and analyzing equity evaluations.

Data Utilization and Equity-Centered Evaluation Practices:

- Conduct assessments and evaluations with a diversity, equity, and inclusion lens to identify improvement areas and inform targeted capacity-building initiatives.
- Co-create evaluation frameworks with stakeholders that prioritize qualitative and quantitative indicators that are responsive to what matters most to communities.
- Engage in participatory evaluation processes involving community members to define goals, interpret findings, and identify solutions.
- Strengthen organizations' data capacity by developing data collection systems and employing evidence-based strategies to promote equity and inclusion.

Continuous Improvement and Decision-Making:

- Provide training and technical assistance on collecting disaggregated data and developing data dashboards to track equity-related progress.
- Offer technical assistance, coaching, and tools to integrate equity considerations into strategic planning, program development, and evaluation processes.
- Utilize data and evidence to inform decision-making and measure progress towards equity goals.

Approach in Action

Catalyst:Ed, a nonprofit working to transform the capacity of the nation's education ecosystem, supported nine nonprofits in enhancing their strategic learning capabilities with a focus on equity. Their initiative emphasized the importance of explicitly centering equity within organizational learning processes, utilizing a self-reflection framework to assess and develop relevant skills and practices. By facilitating tailored technical assistance projects and promoting flexibility in approach, Catalyst:Ed empowered organizations to establish their own strategic learning structures aligned with their unique contexts and goals. [*Supporting Equity-Centered Strategic Learning Practices*](#), Catalyst Ed.

Tipping Point Community, a funder and capacity-builder supporting the most promising poverty-fighting solutions in the Bay Area, launched an Impact Cohort program involving seven organizations to enhance their capacity and utilization of data for equity purposes. Within this cohort, member organizations focus on developing their ability to collect, analyze, and leverage data related to their clients' racial backgrounds, risks, and protective factors. Tipping Point offers technical support and coaching in data analysis, along with access to DEI experts who facilitate discussions among leadership teams and guide internal change management processes within these organizations. [*Advancing Equity: Data for Equity Capacity Building Cohorts*](#), Public Profit

The Equity Lens for Decision Making, a tool adapted from the Portland State University Equity Lens Assessment Tool, is an example of one of many “equity screens” that has been utilized to intentionally center values across institutional practices. During strategic planning, the tool is used to assess strategies and policies for systemic biases and supports alignment in program design with diverse community needs, promoting responsiveness and inclusivity. It is also used to monitor progress towards equity goals, analyzing data through an equity lens. [*Equity Lens for Decision Making*](#), Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health

Frontline Solutions, an intermediary hired by foundations to assess and support nonprofit grantees, elevates concern for how the capacity-building process often reinforces power dynamics favoring funders and consultants over community-based organizations, reinforcing an imbalance in decision-making and resource allocation. The use of third-party assessment tools to evaluate nonprofit grantees' skills and competencies is described in this article as undermining the agency and expertise of community organizations, as assessments are often conducted based on assumptions of the funder's superior knowledge. [*Should We Cancel Capacity Building*](#), Nonprofit Quarterly

Sheryl Petty, the Founder of Movement Tapestries and Associate Consultant at Change Elemental, advises an approach to evaluation that is equity-centered, comprehensive, deeply analytical. Key aspects of the evaluation process include designing protocols that probe into system functioning with precision, analyzing data to identify critical patterns across various levels (individual, interpersonal, institutional, systemic), and translating these insights into intentional actions for transformation. This approach emphasizes the importance of accurate data collection and securing buy-in from influential stakeholders to ensure the evaluation leads to meaningful progress and alignment towards equity goals. [*A Change Management & Deep Equity Primer*](#), Movement Tapestries

OUTCOMES OF INVESTING IN EQUITY CAPACITY-BUILDING

Capacity-building initiatives drive transformative changes across various levels, empowering individuals, developing organizations, and enhancing service delivery. These changes are critical for promoting positive social impact and equity within organizations and communities. Below are examples of the outcomes of capacity-building investments.

Individual Change

Meaningful participation in capacity-building boosts confidence, expands knowledge, hones skills, and refines abilities, leading to shifts in mindsets and behaviors. This enables individuals to become more effective leaders and change agents, driving positive social change within organizations and communities.

The Community Memorial Foundation, a health-focused private foundation, provided the Ladder to Leadership program that equipped Deb Baker, an assistant to the outgoing executive director at HCS Family Services, with crucial skills and confidence that enabled her to stabilize the agency after a leadership transition. Her ability to clarify roles and set achievable goals restored staff and funder confidence, leading to her appointment as the new executive director. Further supported by CMF with an executive coach, Baker achieved significant milestones like opening a school-based food pantry and securing a substantial grant, saving the organization from potential collapse. CMF's investment not only empowered Baker but also exemplified the critical role of leadership development in fostering organizational resilience and success amidst adversity. [*Field Stories, Community Memorial Foundation, Fund the People*](#)

Young professionals participating in an equity-centered leadership development fellowship provided by the California School-Age Consortium, a youth development capacity-building and advocacy organization, reported increased awareness of the importance of building social and emotional competencies, understanding the impact of their leadership approach, and improved listening skills. The program also deepened participants' understanding of challenges in their field, organizational structures, and systems change. Furthermore, the experience boosted their confidence in their abilities and marketability to potential employers. [*Leadership Development Institute Evaluation, Public Profit*](#)

The Alliance for a Healthier Generation (AHG), an organization working to ensure every young person is healthy and ready to succeed, engaged in coaching sessions, peer support activities, monthly office hours, and a quarterly speaker series. These opportunities provided valuable networking and shared learning experiences with other health equity professionals. The Hub Strategists, AHG's capacity-building partner, also held conversations that empowered participants to address hidden team dynamics openly and foster safe discussions around equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) topics. As a result of the program, participants reported tangible changes such as improved HR and recruitment processes, enhanced workplace safety in EDI conversations, and increased engagement in discussing EDI topics among staff. [*Health Equity Case Study Series, The Hub Strategists*](#)

Organizational Transformation

Equity capacity-building initiatives drive transformational changes within nonprofit organizations, fostering inclusive and justice-centered environments and outcomes. The examples below highlight intentional infrastructure and practice changes that support organizations with effectively reaching leading programs that tackle root causes of inequities.

UCare, an independent nonprofit health plan based in Minnesota, actively works towards becoming a more equitable and inclusive health care organization by adopting a comprehensive approach that integrates evaluation, data analysis, policy reform and community engagement. UCare implements data-driven approaches to identifying and addressing disparities within its organization and among the communities it serves. This includes an explicit commitment to being an anti-racist organization in their employee Code of Conduct guide and hiring key leadership like Joy Marsh as the Associate Vice President of Equity and Inclusion in 2021, who is responsible for increasing accountability and leadership in DEI efforts. UCare emphasizes systemic change by dismantling racism within policies and procedures and investing in employee training programs focused on anti-racism and cultural competency. Moreover, UCare collaborates with community partners and stakeholders to leverage resources and expertise in promoting health equity. [*UCare, Other Minnesota Top Workplaces Trying to Make Diversity More than a Buzzword*, Star Tribune](#); [*Advancing DEI Inside an Organization: The UCare Equity Journey*, Zoom](#); [*UCare website*](#)

ChangeLab Solutions, a nonpartisan nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing health equity through legal and policy tools, underwent a strategic reevaluation of their messaging and community engagement practices to align with equity, diversity, and inclusion principles. They crafted communication strategies that not only highlighted their mission and programs but also emphasized their commitment to addressing health disparities through an equity lens, aiming to resonate more deeply with diverse stakeholders and communities. They actively involved communities in shaping their communications, which helped to ensure cultural responsiveness, foster trust and credibility, and strengthen relationships. [*Health Equity Case Study Series*, The Hub Strategists](#)

Rainier Valley Corps's (RVC) capacity-building support helped significantly advance the Somali Parents Education Board (SPEB), an organization empowering Somali youth and families in Washington. Through long-term general operating funds, SPEB tripled its budget, allowing them to transition from an all-volunteer effort to hiring staff. RVC's staff development and infrastructure-building assistance empowered SPEB to strengthen its organizational practices and focus on mission delivery. Participation in peer cohort spaces strengthened advocacy efforts and personal development for SPEB's Executive Director, Regina Elmi, who later joined RVC's board to ensure partner voices are integrated into governance structures, fostering accountability and effective collaboration. [*Transformational Capacity Building*, Stanford Social Innovation Review](#)

The [*Partnership for Children & Youth*](#), a nonprofit focused on enhancing learning opportunities and conditions for California's youth, underwent a transformative shift to a co-CEO model. With backing from philanthropic partners, the outgoing founding CEO enlisted consultants to aid in

the transition. This included support with hiring, the onboarding of the new co-CEOs, and tending to the staff experience through change. The new leadership then engaged staff in a year-long exploration of organizational culture, practices, and policies, resulting in an equity-centered culture guide. This process involved redefining performance reviews and compensation to reflect their equity and anti-racism values. The dedicated capacity-building funds enabled the staff and board to navigate a significant executive transition and shift in leadership structure successfully. *Corazon Catalysts, direct experience*

Mission Impact

Equity capacity-building drives mission impact by enhancing the quality of service delivery and improving access for marginalized populations. A focus on diversity, inclusion and cultural responsiveness breaks down barriers, ensuring services are responsive to underserved communities and boosting participant engagement. Additionally, equity-centered capacity-building addresses systemic biases and leads to sustainable change, tackling root causes of inequities and promoting social justice. Below are a few mission impact examples from the field scan.

The Nurse-Family Partnership (NFP) strategically invests in capacity-building by implementing formalized client feedback systems, enhancing language accessibility, and integrating diversity and anti-oppression principles into their programs. NFP identifies disparities and tailors services through client-centered approaches and feedback analysis to meet diverse populations' unique needs, aiming to reduce inequities in client satisfaction and outcomes. The introduction of a Cultural Consciousness Pathway for nurses ensures culturally competent care delivery. NFP adapts services promptly with real-time feedback monitoring, exemplified by providing in-person interactions during the pandemic based on client feedback. These efforts positively impact communities served by NFP, enhancing the organization's ability to deliver equitable, responsive, and effective support to families, ultimately advancing health equity and improving program outcomes. [*Nurse-Family Partnership: Listening and Learning from Families, Fund for Shared Insight*](#)

The National Community Development Institute (NCDI) engaged in a long-term capacity-building partnership with the Asian Immigrant Women Advocates (AIWA), an organization focused on improving the living and working conditions of low-income Asian immigrant women and their families. NCDI aided AIWA in organizational planning, leadership development, and strategic initiatives for over ten years. NCDI employed a co-design process, tailoring support based on cultural norms and practices. This included conducting meetings in native languages and developing culturally-authentic spaces for participation. With the support of NCDI, AIWA developed a specific leadership methodology, the Community Transformational Organizing Strategy. This program was a culmination of many years of learning from the community to inform a design that responsively engages immigrant women and youth to lead campaigns that directly improve their lives. [*Cultural Competency in Capacity Building, CompassPoint*](#)

BARRIERS AND CHALLENGES

The social sector has invested greatly in equity-focused capacity-building efforts; however, significant challenges persist. Resource constraints and short timelines have hindered progress toward longer-term equity goals, while power imbalances in philanthropy impede nonprofit autonomy and effectiveness. In addition, the lack of diverse representation in nonprofit and philanthropic leadership remains a barrier to the inclusion of marginalized communities in decision-making roles.

Resource constraints hinder longer-term, more sustainable equity goals

Limited funding and resources present significant obstacles to the implementation of sustainable equity capacity-building initiatives. Nonprofits, especially those serving marginalized communities, already struggle to secure adequate financial resources for foundational operating needs. Moreover, prevailing capacity-building models often prioritize short-term outcomes, which may not align with the enduring and evolving needs of nonprofits, hindering their ability to achieve sustainability and expand impact. Additionally, the complexity and resource intensity of collecting and analyzing data to measure progress creates further challenges. Smaller organizations with limited capacity for data collection and management face difficulties in ensuring that their methods are equity-centered, highlighting the pressing need for increased support in this realm.

Power imbalance vis-à-vis philanthropy undermines nonprofits

A significant power imbalance exists between funders and nonprofits, wherein nonprofits may feel obligated to accept funding with attached conditions, even if it means conforming to externally imposed definitions of success. Funder-directed capacity-building often fails to address changing needs and undermines the autonomy and effectiveness of nonprofit organizations. Consequently, nonprofits can feel pressured to prioritize funders' agendas and expectations over the genuine needs and priorities of the communities they serve, resulting in a misalignment between organizational goals and community needs. This misalignment undermines efforts toward equity-focused capacity-building and organizational outcomes.

Lack of representation and inclusion in decision-making persists

The challenges of representation and inclusion persist in nonprofit and philanthropic leadership, with a lack of diverse representation in executive positions and boards hindering the inclusion of marginalized communities in decision-making roles. This perpetuates inequities and limits organizations' ability to holistically serve diverse communities. Traditional capacity-building models often overlook these issues, reinforcing power structures and philanthropic standards that may not align with equity-centered values and practices. Overcoming this requires a shift away from a White-dominant lens and deficit view of nonprofits and communities. Philanthropy and nonprofit leaders need to align with equity and justice-centered values and practices to move beyond token representation towards genuine inclusion at all levels of decision-making.

ADVICE FOR PHILANTHROPY

Funder-directed capacity-building operates within traditional power dynamics of philanthropy and nonprofits. When developing equity-focused initiatives, it's important to consider critiques of philanthropy, like unequal power dynamics and biases in funding. Even as they support the advancement of equity through capacity-building, philanthropy must critically reassess their own practices to ensure they uphold principles of social justice and equity. Philanthropic leaders should adopt an equity-centered approach in their internal practices including funding allocation and capacity-building endeavors as well as actively addressing systemic biases and advocating for equity across the sector.

Share more power and decision-making with nonprofit leaders

To enhance capacity-building support for nonprofits, philanthropy must address power dynamics within the sector to cultivate authentic and trusting relationships with nonprofit leaders, particularly leaders of color. This involves funders proactively recognizing and mitigating biases and power imbalances inherent in capacity-strengthening programs, such as setting equity goals, engaging underrepresented groups, and promoting inclusive grantmaking processes. Building relationships based on mutual respect and transparency requires open communication, transparency and collaborative decision-making among funders, nonprofits, and constituents. Philanthropy should prioritize listening to and working with nonprofits to address shared challenges and goals, leveraging their insights and experiences to inform future initiatives. Empowering nonprofits to determine their capacity-building needs and allocate resources strengthens relationships and advances equity.

The Roberts Enterprise Development Fund (REDF), a social enterprise investor that aims to expand job development opportunities for individuals facing significant barriers to employment, shares power with grantees by ensuring that funding for capacity-building projects does not hinge on specific conditions but rather aims to amplify impact. They collaborate with grantees to identify capacity-building priorities based on their specific challenges, offering flexible and tailored support. Additionally, REDF provides long-term, multi-year funding and capacity-building assistance, enabling organizations to pilot new ideas and focus on responsible internal investment for growth and scaling. These practices empower grantees and foster open, supportive relationships where leaders feel at ease discussing challenges and receiving assistance without apprehension of criticism or fear of losing funding. [*Four Principles for Equitable Capacity Building*](#), Roberts Enterprise Development Fund

The Overdeck Family Foundation, dedicated to providing all children the opportunity to unlock their potential, has demonstrated a trust-based approach to supporting nonprofits. They engaged in open dialogue with grantees to understand their specific challenges and needs, fostering mutual accountability and valuing grantees' expertise in addressing local issues. By co-creating tailored support plans based on identified priorities, offering comprehensive assistance beyond financial grants, and promoting equity in decision-making and resource allocation, the foundation empowered nonprofits to strengthen their capacities and achieve

sustainable impact. Their commitment to humility, continuous learning, and ongoing engagement ensured that capacity-building efforts were effective, adaptive, and responsive to the evolving needs of grantees. [*Building Nonprofit Capacity, Hand in Hand*](#), *Stanford Social Innovation Review*.

The Community Memorial Foundation (CMF) engaged nonprofits by understanding their challenges and priorities through needs assessments and meetings. Based on this feedback, CMF collaborated closely with nonprofits to design programs that addressed their specific needs. Throughout program implementation, CMF maintained open feedback loops and made real-time adjustments based on nonprofit input to ensure programs were effective and relevant. CMF made adaptive adjustments to program components, schedules, and delivery methods in real-time, tailoring them to suit evolving needs. This approach fostered collaboration and ownership among nonprofits, enhancing the success of capacity-building efforts. [*Field Stories, Community Memorial Foundation, Fund the People*](#)

Fund capacity-building supports that promote nonprofit resilience

Nonprofits rely on philanthropic support to strengthen their capacity and resilience. Multi-year, unrestricted funding supports sustained organizational development and adaptation. Philanthropists should avoid overly rigid funding criteria to encourage innovation and agility within nonprofits and rethink readiness criteria to expand support to early-stage nonprofits that are in need of greater capacity. Nonprofits are also in need of holistic capacity-building that invests in infrastructure and strategic impact as well as the wellbeing of the nonprofit employees. Alongside financial support, philanthropy should provide resources like customized training, leadership development, and technical assistance that are grantee-driven and cover the full cost of participating in these non-monetary supports, including staff time. Additionally, philanthropy can leverage its knowledge and influence to build the social capital of nonprofits, especially for organizations led by people most marginalized from positional power. Philanthropists have the opportunity to help forge trusting relationships, promote cross-grantee collaborations, and cultivate peer learning and consulting spaces. By centering equity, justice, and the resilience of nonprofits in capacity-building, philanthropy can address systemic disparities that hold nonprofits back from their full potential.

The Wilburforce Foundation, dedicated to empowering conservation leaders, provides long-term, direct support to grassroots environmental organizations, emphasizing funding continuity with some grantees receiving support for up to two decades. Additionally, Wilburforce funds capacity-building for its grantees through a longstanding partnership with Training Resources for the Environmental Community (TREC). This sustained commitment fosters meaningful, trusting relationships between TREC and its sponsored organizations, enabling engagement in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work within the environmental sector. [*Transformational Capacity Building*](#), *Stanford Social Innovation Review*

The East Bay Community Foundation provided a comprehensive seven-year, \$13 million capacity-building and leadership development program specifically designed for Black-led organizations. The ASCEND: BLO initiative consists of two cohort-based programs that engage leaders in peer-learning and capacity-building activities. Participants received substantial financial support, with each organization receiving up to \$100,000 annually for three years, alongside additional capacity-building assistance. The program aims to create safe and supportive spaces that foster peer sharing, support, and leadership development among Black-led organizations while also offering a directory of Black-led organizations and access to resources and funding opportunities to further amplify their impact. [How Funders are Strengthening Nonprofit Capacity Building](#), Hewlett Foundation

Tipping Point Community supports the wellness and resilience of nonprofits through several targeted initiatives and resources. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Tipping Point activated a network of mental health professionals from institutions like Stanford and UCSF to provide customized support to grantees facing increased mental health challenges among clients and staff. Additionally, Tipping Point designs specialized programs like the POC-Led Executive Fellowship to support the leadership trajectory and career development of leaders of color within grantee organizations. This program was intentionally co-designed with grantees and was intended to build the social capital of leaders of color while investing in collective rejuvenation. POC-Led is part of Tipping Point's larger investment in organizations led by individuals with closer proximity to the communities served, which includes capital, strategic partnership building, and capacity-building. [Support Today for Impact Tomorrow](#), Tipping Point Community.

CONCLUSION: BOLDLY SHIFT THE PARADIGM IN PHILANTHROPY

Countless reports and articles have examined how philanthropy can better support nonprofits in creating transformational impacts in communities. This field scan presents another opportunity for philanthropy to heed the ongoing calls from nonprofit leaders for a justice-centered paradigm shift in the field. While philanthropy inherently embodies inequity through disproportionate wealth, leaders have the choice to perpetuate or dismantle systems such as power hoarding, homogeneous decision-making, and elitism. By practicing deep allyship and genuinely valuing the lived experiences of communities, philanthropic leaders can share power in decision-making and accountability in the allocation of resources or redistribution of wealth all together. Philanthropy has the opportunity to transfer wealth and power to historically oppressed and intentionally marginalized communities in America. Approaches by philanthropic leaders like MacKenzie Scott and shifts in generational wealth are paving the way for more seismic shifts in philanthropy that address systemic inequities.

MacKenzie Scott is challenging traditional views on wealth creation and emphasizing the collective effort and societal structures behind economic success. She models a new approach that empowers recipient organizations with unrestricted grants and long-term support, shifting power dynamics away from donor-centric approaches towards community-driven initiatives responsive to local needs. Scott redefines "strategic" philanthropy by advocating for flexibility and trust in grantmaking, prioritizing impact and effectiveness in addressing systemic issues, and promoting transparency and accountability in decision-making processes. Her recognition of the ethical implications of wealth origins underscores the importance of contextualizing philanthropic efforts within broader discussions of economic justice and corporate responsibility. Overall, her approach aims to democratize and decentralize philanthropy by challenging norms and fostering collaboration with local communities. [*MacKenzie Scott & the History of Challenging Philanthropy's Status Quo*](#), Medium

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