Developing an Equity-Based Approach to Communication Capacity Building

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Fenton

Learn how to create an equity-based communication capacity building model that is customized to your organization AND grantees.



1. DEFINE A VISION

What are your desired outcomes? How will communication capacity building support and advance grantmaking or organizational priorities?

At its most strategic, communication capacity building is integrated into the priorities of your foundation, creating focus, relevance and value. It should not be seen as a separate investment that lives apart from the rest of your work. Your program staff and leadership are more likely to support capacity building if they see its connection to overall priorities.

Identifying your goals and outcomes is critical to determining the scale of your program, and who should participate. It's important to partner with your grantees as you set goals and desired outcomes.

1. DEFINE A VISION

If you are tying capacity building to geographic programmatic priorities or strategies, consider the following:



- **Peer Learning:** Ensure peer learning by inviting grantees and/or other local partners in the region to co-present in trainings, sharing their unique expertise on communicating in the region and what has made past work successful.
- **Tailor Curriculum:** Do you want to help smaller organizations in a specific region to have a louder voice and increase their influence? Or do you find that many organizations are struggling to engage certain audiences in their community?

  - Consider a curriculum that is more focused on the relevant issues and dynamics of that particular community.
  - If you want to strengthen organizations' ability to advocate, then training that focuses on media relations, engaging government stakeholders and message development can take precedence.

- **Build Relationships:** Do you want to build greater relationships and community power among leaders and grantee organizations?

  - Consider which organizations might need to work more regularly together, and let that guide decisions on who should be invited to the cohort.
  - Build in space for networking and relationship-building in your time together, especially if participants haven't worked together before or represent different backgrounds or points of view.
  - Consider purposely incorporating training methods that build greater connection between participants, e.g., break-out groups during trainings or peer learning so that grantees can share and showcase their work.
  - Consider financial support to smaller organizations to make in-person networking and relationship-building opportunities feasible.

1. DEFINE A VISION

If you are tying capacity building to issue-based programmatic priorities or strategies, consider the following:



- **Creating Cohorts:** Identify and select cohorts of grantees that are aligned with issue-based programmatic work (e.g., a program priority that revolves around maternal child health or K-12 education).
- **Don't Rely on Evergreen Trainings:** Tailor the training content to the subject matter, focusing on the audiences and decision-makers that are most relevant.
- **Balance Local and National:** Ensure you are not overlooking how communication works in smaller regions by focusing only on how the issue is communicated nationally.
    - Consider limiting the number of participants in the trainings so you can dedicate time to discussing how the issue impacts their specific community or region.
- **Narrative Change:** Perhaps you're concerned that the current messages and dominant narratives around that subject matter are ineffective.
    - Consider training focused on how to drive greater narrative change. Or consider if there is a need for trainings on messaging research or message alignment to build consistency in communication.
- **Time-bound Issues:** If your goal is to make progress on an issue that is time-bound, focus on a short number of skills-based trainings that take place in close proximity, such as digital and earned media tactics.

2. LISTEN AND DO RESEARCH

What are the needs of the participants? The curriculum and training approach should be tailored to grantees' needs and goals. An equitable approach means jointly setting the parameters and priorities of the training program with grantees, and ensuring they feel vested in it.

Don't make assumptions about the skills, capacity and needs of grantees. Some ideas to consider:

- **Consult Program Team:** Gather information from your internal program team about what you have heard or observed about grantee communication capacity. Perhaps grantees have informally shared their point of view in other settings. Or perhaps your colleagues have observed them struggle or excel with various communication activities.
- **Conduct Surveys:** Conduct surveys to get a broad sense of what a group of grantees wants or needs from a capacity-building curriculum. Ask what sort of support they need to take advantage of this opportunity.
- **1-1 Conversations:** Consider having 1-1 conversations with grantees to identify opportunities for development or deeper communication needs.
- **Audit Communication:** What participants say they want or need can be limited by habit or knowledge. Consider auditing their outward communication to gauge their strengths and areas of opportunity when creating the curriculum.
- **Encourage Candid Feedback:** Make it clear to grantees that regardless of whether they participate in communication capacity support, it will not impact your relationship going forward, e.g., it won't adversely impact future grants or invitations to join other trainings.

2. LISTEN AND DO RESEARCH

Building power is never a one-and-done effort. What kind of ongoing support can you provide to ensure grantees are successful?



- **Ongoing Support:** Consider providing ongoing 1-1 support to organizations for an extended period of time even after the curriculum ends.
- **Build a Resource Database:** Create a database of the classroom learnings, templates and materials that are accessible to grantees, especially for new staff who join after the program ends.
- **Ongoing Dialogue:** Create space for grantees to continue to engage in open dialogue with program officers or others at the foundation about additional materials and resources they would find useful.
- **Future Grants:** Have a conversation with the grantee and program officer about how they can build communication capacity into future grants to support ongoing efforts.



3. THE IMPORTANCE OF BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

What is the interest and commitment of your grantees? Maintaining participation in capacity building training programs can be challenging unless you assess shared expectations and commitments early on.

In determining the rigor, intensity and time commitment of the program, consider the following techniques to maintain participation:

- **Optional Participation:** Programs should be optional. Define the training requirements clearly so grantees can assess whether they can commit.
- **Adopt an Equitable Approach to Delivery:** Be intentional about creating an equitable approach to delivery. Recognize the constraints or barriers to participation that your grantees may face.

  - Should materials be translated into multiple languages?
  - Do you need to bring the grantee's leadership into the conversation to help ensure their full commitment to the program?
  - Do participants live in areas where they don't have access to data, or where in-person meetings are otherwise necessary?
  - Are there cultural considerations you should take into account in setting up a training (e.g., starting with a prayer)?

THE IMPORTANCE OF BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

- Where in-person sessions are offered, participants from smaller organizations may need support to attend the sessions. Consider paying for mileage or hotel, or offering virtual options if possible. You might also consider offering on-site childcare.

Build Relationships: Building relationships during the program itself is critical to maintaining participation. Engage in ongoing, proactive outreach to grantees so they connect during the program. Where possible, begin the program with an in-person session so they can establish a relationship with the trainers and with each other.

Evaluate and Adjust: Build in robust program evaluation so you can make adjustments to curriculum and ensure that grantees find the program valuable. This can be short surveys at the end of each training, as well as a more in-depth questionnaire at the end of the program.

4. IDENTIFY YOUR RESOURCES

What kind of investment or budget limitations should be considered? What is your internal team's capacity for program management and involvement?

Comprehensive, intensive training programs are very effective, but require significant budget and time investment. If you're in a position where you must decide what to cut, here are some things to consider:

- **Classroom Sessions:** Providing 1-1 direct support to grantees is less effective without engaging in at least a few "classroom" sessions because many grantees may not know what to ask for, or may be unable to distill their needs into bite-size chunks.
- **Ensure Follow-Up:** Ensure you reserve dollars and time for investing in follow-up and relationship-building with grantees.
- **Collect Evaluation Data:** If this is a pilot program, ensure you assign a budget toward collecting quantitative and qualitative data to evaluate the program's impact and value.
- **Seek Values-Aligned Partners:** If you work with an external partner to develop and implement the program, a foundation communication staff person should be closely involved in the process. It's critical that your external partner is able to establish trust with grantees. Seek a values-aligned partner with a demonstrated ability to build trust with local organizations and communities.