What Does Collaborative Capacity Mean?
Moving Toward a Shared Understanding

A Research Note

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INTRODUCTION

Collaboratives continue to emerge as a viable and effective type of organization that can tackle today's most complex problems. Collaboratives reflect the best qualities of formal and informal organizations — durable and adaptable. To optimize these qualities, their capacity needs must be met.

The purpose of this research note is two-fold:

(1) to raise awareness that collaboratives (as a type of organization) have capacity needs just like all other enduring organizations, and

(2) to help develop a common language and understanding of collaborative capacity and other relevant terms.

In effort to move toward a shared understanding of what collaborative capacity means, it is helpful to take a step back and revisit how an organization is defined.

COLLABORATIVES AS A TYPE OF ORGANIZATION

Collaboratives are treated as a particular type of organization; they meet the well-accepted definition of an organization as described below.

What is an organization?

The textbook definition of **an organization** is:

> *A consciously coordinated social unit, comprised of two or more people, that functions on a relatively coordinated basis to achieve a common goal or set of goals* (Robbins and Judge, 2022).

While there are many ways to categorize organization types, the formal-informal categorization is one of the most easy-to-understand frameworks. In general, formal organizations are more structured, durable, and stable. They rely on an authority-based chain of command and have clearly defined job roles and explicit rules or policies. Formal organizations are found in public and private sectors and range from for-profits to non-profits across many industries.

Informal organizations are typically less structured and rely on shared authority. Relationships are more personal than role-related, and unwritten norms are followed. Informal organizations are found across a wide range of sectors and industries. Emergent networks, partnerships, and associations are some examples.

It is important to note that both formal and informal organizations are useful in their own ways and are necessary for different reasons. Moreover, there are benefits and drawbacks to both types of organizations. While informal organizations tend to be more adaptable and responsive to change, formal organizations are more durable and stable.

The promise of collaboratives

Collaboratives are arguably one of the most promising organizational structures in confronting today's complex problems due to their adaptability, in addition to a number of other reasons (e.g., members represent a diverse set of partners and groups). In this research note, the term **collaboratives** *represents the suite of organizations that typically start off as informal with the intention to engage in collaborative efforts such as networks and partnerships.* These collaboratives often emerge in response to a perceived need or opportunity and frequently span physical, political, and cultural boundaries.

Some collaboratives are temporary and will naturally dissolve. However, if a collaborative is to endure over time, it will need to incorporate some of the more structured elements of formal organizations. This also means that collaboratives develop similar capacity needs as any formal organization (i.e., for-profit, non-profit, government agencies, etc.). However, this is not widely understood or embraced.

There are several possible explanations for this lack of understanding. Some may assume that all collaboratives are temporary collaborative efforts with limited capacity needs. Others might not understand what collaboratives are or their potential, or some might think that organizational partners represented in a collaborative will provide for any capacity needs. Despite the different reasons, it is important to not only recognize that collaboratives have capacity needs, but also ensure they are well resourced to meet those needs.

STAYING ADAPTABLE, BECOMING DURABLE

In the most simple terms, **organizational capacity** *refers to an organization's ability to perform.* Therefore, the term **collaborative capacity** *refers to a collaborative's ability to perform.* All organizations have capacity needs in different areas, and these are met through capacity-building elements which are described in more detail below.

Capacity needs

To optimize its potential, a collaborative must remain adaptable and become durable. To do so, collaboratives should build capacity in the **four core capacity areas** identified as essential for non-profits — *adaptive, leadership, management, and operational/technical capacities* (Connolly & York, 2003).

In this research note, non-profit capacity area definitions have been adapted for collaboratives. The capacities are defined as a collaborative's ability to:

monitor, assess, and respond to internal and external changes (adaptive);

foster and support collaborative leadership behaviors and mindset across its members to achieve the collaborative's mission (leadership);

ensure the effective and efficient use of organizational resources (management); and

implement key functions to fulfill desired outcomes including equitable, scalable impacts and systemic change (operational/technical).

In this research note, the term **collaborative capacity needs** *represents the collective of needs across the four areas.* If capacity needs exist in a subset or single area, it is advised to specify the area of need (e.g., adaptive capacity need).

Capacity-building elements

To meet capacity needs, organizations build capacity in the four areas through capacity-building elements. **Capacity-building elements** *are described as the more specific elements needed for an organization to function, perform, and endure.*

While organizations have similar capacity need areas, how to best meet those needs differ based on organization type and other factors. The table below provides examples of elements that could meet a subset of needs in the leadership and management capacity areas for three organization types.

	Examples of capacity-building elements to meet **leadership** capacity needs	Examples of capacity-building elements to meet **management** capacity needs
FOR-PROFIT	qualified CEO/president & executive team	mid-level manager(s)
NON-PROFIT	a diverse board of directors & qualified executive director	program & project director(s)
COLLABORATIVE	steering committee & participants with collaborative leadership skillsets	coordinator(s) & working groups

Moreover, capacity-building elements can be categorized as 'structural' or 'binding.' **Structural capacity-building elements** *are defined as those that are essential for functioning by providing the basic framework or scaffolding necessary to meet capacity needs.* **Binding capacity-building elements** *are best described as the binding agent or invisible threads of glue that connect the structural elements together to meet the capacity needs in all four core capacity areas.* They help an organization move from basic functioning to optimal performance. Without binding elements, an organization will function, but won't meet its full potential.

Non-profits

For non-profit capacity building, seven elements have been identified as essential and are reflected in a non-profit Capacity Framework (McKinsey & Company, 2001, p. 36). Six of the elements can be categorized as structural and one as binding per the definitions above. Structural elements include: aspirations, strategy, organizational skills, human resources, systems and infrastructure, and organizational structure. Culture is the binding element.

Collaboratives

In a recent article, the Capacity Framework for non-profits has been adopted and adapted for collaboratives. Nine capacity-building elements have been identified as essential for collaboratives (deSilva, Farrell, & Knoblock, 2022). Six of these can be categorized as structural, and three as binding. The six structural elements include: collective purposes and goals; shared strategies and priorities; collaborative practices, skills, and tools; systems and infrastructure; coordination capacity; and decision-making structures. The three binding elements are: inclusive culture, meaningful relationships, and a collaborative mindset.

OPTIMIZING THE POTENTIAL OF COLLABORATIVES

To optimize the adaptable and durable qualities of collaboratives, they must be well resourced to meet their capacity needs. A key first step to unlocking the power of collaboratives is to recognize that they have capacity needs just like any enduring organization. In order to discuss how to most effectively meet these needs, a shared language should be embraced by those individuals working in and advocating for collaboratives. The purpose of this research note is to help them with the process of developing a common language and shared understanding of what collaborative capacity means.

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