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***On the connections between quality of experience, capacity and results in AmeriCorps programs: A theory of change***

**Overview:**

A key predictor of organizational impact is the quality of the experience for those involved in the AmeriCorps program (member, supervisor, partners, etc.). When the quality of experience is good, sufficient capacity exists, additional capacity is built, and the impact is good and value is created. There are a number of contributing factors to the quality of experience, and the relative importance of these factors depends on a given individual and must be tailored to the particular circumstance. Hypothesis: This result holds true at the level of organizations and communities too. Hypothesis: This theory of change applies to nonprofit organizations generally

**General contributing factors:**

- Mission alignment and belief in the Theory of Change
- Making a difference (perception of important results)
- Appropriate level of challenge and support
- Skills are harnessed
- Sufficient time
- Positive interactions with people involved
- Reflection
- Little “wasted” / unaligned overhead time
- Opportunity to learn/grow in desired directions
- Perception of fair compensation

**Players:**

- Members
- Supervisors
- Program directors
- Program officers / Grant managers
- Interacting staff
- Community partners
- Beneficiaries
- Volunteers
- Funders

**Organizational considerations:**

- Clear mission and compelling Theory of Change
- Sufficient training and development
- Good support systems
- Time for reflection and celebration
- Appropriate pool of candidates (marketing, recruiting and selection)
- Managerial skill
- Sufficient resources and staffing
- Making use of best practices in program design

**Organizational mapping and diagnosis:**

What is the distribution of good experience? Isolated individuals? Pockets? Chains? Where are there blockages and why? Address them to create capacity and improve results generation. Hypothesis is that this works for all stakeholders and at all levels of analysis (person, org, community).

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## **Possible linkage with Paul Light's capacity building research**

### ***Light's logic model:***

Org. capacity -> Org. effectiveness -> Public confidence -> Discretionary giving/volunteering

There seems to be a similarity between what I am calling "quality of experience" and what Light calls "public confidence." In general confidence would be a result of a good quality of experience. I would argue that confidence is a subset of quality of experience.

Confidence is instrumental, focused on intended outputs/impact of a program. I am confident in a program that does what it says it will. Quality of experience is more encompassing, requiring that all results, both direct/intended and indirect/unintended effects, of a program be positive. Therefore, one may have confidence in a program to produce certain results and simultaneously not want to work/volunteer to support that organization because of the poor way that people are treated internally. Clearly this undermines the organization's mission over the long term and should be considered in assessing that organization.

Now consider the confidence that the PUBLIC has in the organization vs. confidence that other stakeholders like STAFF, or BENEFICIARIES have in the organization. These other stakeholders are likely to have more inside information on the program on which to base their assessment. Therefore, if these other stakeholders are confident, their assessment is more trustworthy. (This assumes that one can get an honest answer from them, which is somewhat tricky because there may be a conflict of interest. It also assumes Theory Y type motivation, which seems plausible for the nonprofit sector.)

I would hypothesize that staff confidence will predict public confidence, and that staff confidence is a good assessment of organizational effectiveness. I would also hypothesize that the quality of staff experience predicts their confidence in their organization. (Note: this assumes that the staff knows how good an experience is possible and are well informed on the nature of their program. These can be tested, fortunately.)

Therefore, we would have a new logic model:

Capacity -> Effectiveness -> STAFF quality of experience -> STAFF confidence -> PUBLIC confidence -> discretionary giving and volunteering

Which is very interesting and useful to know, if true. Quality of experience is relatively easy to assess, and a number of important conclusions can be drawn from it. Furthermore, in reality discretionary giving and volunteering directly increase organizational capacity, so we can see that there is a feedback loop and that a positive quality of experience is evidence that a virtuous cycle of growth and development is present in the organization. This is actually a better model for the "Development Spiral" that Light himself observes (Fig 6-1).

