



ENHANCED PLANNING: A PRACTICE FOR ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND GROWTH

By Michael Courville, MA, MSW¹

Questions of growth bedevil organizations of all shapes and sizes. Yet growth can be measured in a variety of ways. Growth does not always mean more



resources, it can mean increased organizational complexity to bring about an intensified impact, or it can mean refining organizational services and staffing to advance a more crystallized mission. The

planning required to bring about such growth is often hard to define and poses a number of sticky questions for directors. Usually the questions stem from a sense that more capacity is needed, but the director is not yet sure to what end or to what extent such growth can be obtained.

Theory and practice on institutional and organizational development in the non-profit sector have frequently pointed to the value of strategic planning as the best process for promoting long-term management and growth. However, a closer look at existing organizational capacities and available resources can help directors make incremental, yet profound decisions to guide organizational growth and sustainability. In the ever-changing sea of economic uncertainty and increased demand that has become the hallmark of the nonprofit sector, organizations need to acquire an agility to modify structure in the face of constantly shifting resource allocations. Such agility can be more readily obtained through an approach to growth and change I call Enhanced Planning (EP).

EP was developed to provide legal services and other nonprofits with a finite and bounded framework for organizational growth. Unlike the din of strategic planning frameworks and practices that emphasize the end point of codified documents or plans, EP focuses on building organizational capacity in ways that allow concrete indicators of growth to be identified, pursued, implemented and experienced. EP is about helping

organizations, and organizational leaders, make clear choices about organizational enhancements (building blocks) that will lead to growth—increased organizational complexity to bring about an intensified impact or refined services to advance a more crystallized mission. EP will provide an organization with a pathway for continuous learning and responsive growth, which enables leaders to set a course for the substantive work of the organization that can be maintained and sustained with integrity, adequate resources and without the loss of direction. In this way, it gently redefines the concept of growth without ignoring the value of good strategy.

EP is a process that takes place within an established organization; it assumes some received capacity and existing structures already exist. EP is about setting the foundation for some planning that will enhance the existing structure and mission of the organization over a shorter time horizon, usually one to two years. It is a totalizing process, in that it requires a rethinking and assessment of how an organization is put together, the pieces and component parts that make it possible for the organization to “get work done” and to have a desired impact on the world. It goes beyond just crystallizing goals, it encourages organizations to take a more 360-degree view of the limits and possibilities for growth as defined above.

EP is an approach to growth and change that helps leadership teams make thoughtful decisions about changes to their organization. EP works best when implemented by a leadership team, or a director working closely with their board of directors. It is less successful when implemented independently by an executive director, other senior staff member, or when imposed by a board committee or external consulting team. If an organization does not already utilize an established leadership team as part of ongoing organizational management, choosing that team is a prerequisite for successful EP (for a good discussion of team development see Bonner, 2009²).

© ENHANCED PLANNING
Continued from page 13

- Once a team is established,³ EP can unfold over a relatively short time horizon—eight to twelve months on average. While some organizations can complete the process in less time, others may need more time. Here is how EP would unfold over an average time horizon:
- Step 1: Construct your Organizational Pyramid (1 Month)
 - Step 2: Assess Needs and Strengths (1-2 Months)
 - Step 3: Determine Desired Building Blocks for Growth (1-2 Months)
 - Step 4: Develop Growth Plans for Building Blocks, Set Benchmarks (2 Months)
 - Step 5: Communicate and Concretize Implementation Steps (2 Months)
 - Step 6: Implement and Assess Progress (4-5 Months)

The remainder of this article will focus on Steps 1-3 of EP, which are centered around constructing the primary tool of EP: the Organizational Pyramid.

The Organizational Pyramid

I have designed a conceptual tool to help organizations determine where they seek growth and how to identify a fuller view of their capacities. I call this tool the Organizational Pyramid. This conceptual tool

serves as a departure point for a director or a leadership team to reflect upon the current dimensions of their organizational structure and potential areas for growth. Composed of building blocks, which serve as placeholders for capacities, structures and elements of organizational functions, the organizational pyramid presents a structural picture of an organization as it is at one point in time (See Figure 1.0). By laying out the building blocks of their respective pyramid, a leadership team can then determine what kind of enhanced planning they want to embark upon. Different organizations will find they have different pieces of the pyramid already in place; others will identify where they have gaps or where they may consider enhancing or strengthening their organization with new staff skill sets, programmatic structures or management practices.

The building blocks in Figure 1.0 reflect those of a robust, stable mission-driven organization. The pyramid is laid out to emphasize that some organizational elements serve as “focal” points, the vision appearing just outside the pyramid to evoke the sense that it is so ideal that it is almost “above” attainment. The pyramid is then flanked by both a theory of change⁴ and the organizational values, both of which give shape and identity to an organization. The mission, positioned at the top of the pyramid, evokes the importance of having a centered, mission-driven organization. The remaining blocks include a thoughtful placement or order that balances staff and program elements squarely on top of adequate resource acquisition, executive practices and learning practices. Taken together, the blocks of the pyramid provide a sense of what is developed in an organization and how those capacities are dependent upon others being put firmly in place.

The utility of drawing an organizational pyramid is that it pushes a director or leadership team to confront the ways in which the organization has actually developed over the years, and to what extent the structure highlights barriers or possible pathways for new growth. Figure 1.0 provides a departure point for thinking about a well-developed organization. It will serve as a “check” for the leadership team as it begins to look more closely at the internal reality of their respective organization. The pyramid should be drawn in adherence to just a few key tenets:

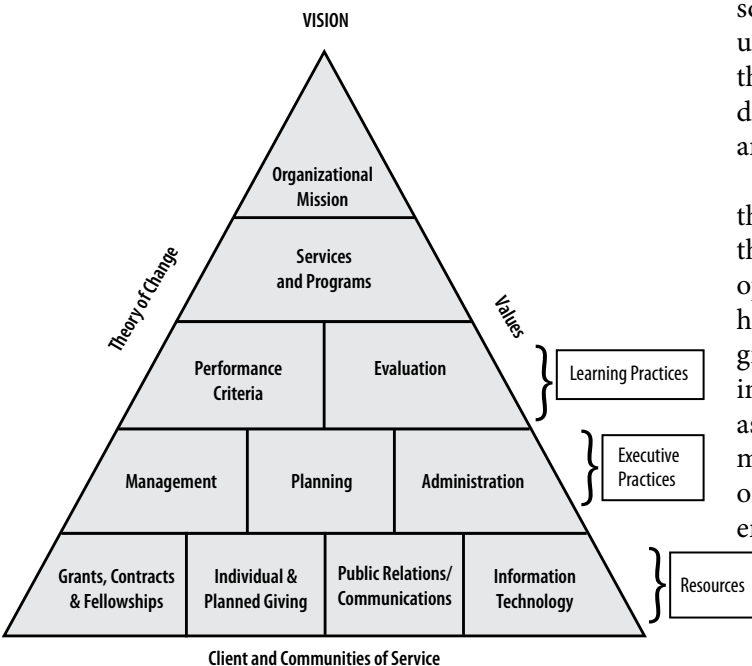


Figure 1.0: The Organizational Pyramid

- The base of the pyramid is made up of blocks that reflect organizational resources. Generally, these include funding sources but the can also include capacities that are

focused on resource leveraging such as information technology, fee for service and volunteer programs, including pro bono services.

- The top of the pyramid should be the location for determining if there is clear mission and vision for the organization, emphasizing the importance of being mission-driven in the overall orientation of the work.
- Executive Practices should be listed alongside one another to maintain a focus on the relationship of these practices to each other, and to emphasize those responsibilities conducted by all managers and directors in any organization, in general and within specific areas of specialization (e.g., human resources, finance, program).
- Learning Practices should be sequenced just above the Executive Practices and include organizational efforts to be responsive to the needs of clients, communities and staff. This includes efforts to acquire information, data or feedback about what goes on in an organization at any level, to identify promising practices, and to determine if there is need for improvement or changes at any level.

A quick look at some organizational pyramids from a handful of legal service and other organizations will help to make this a bit clearer.

Figure 2.0 shows a pyramid for a large legal services organization (Organization A) with a robust

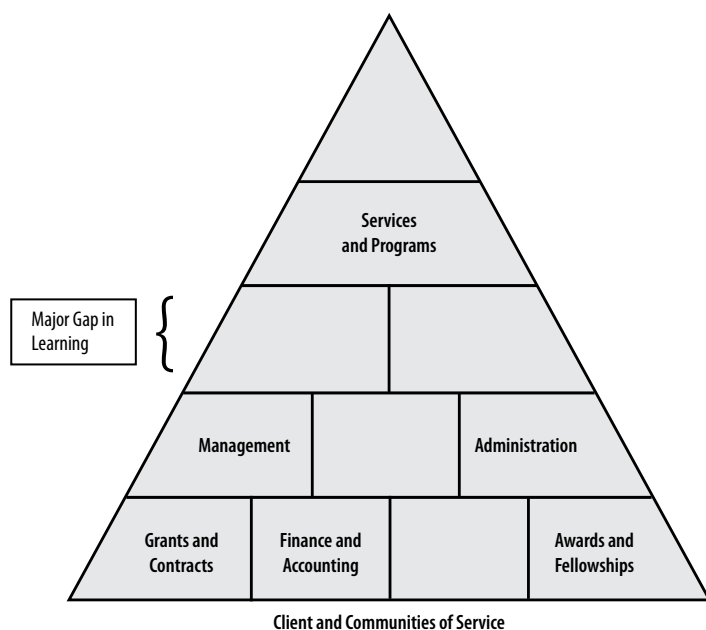


Figure 2.0: Organization A

EP Definitions at a Glance

- **Organizational Pyramid:** A conceptual tool that aids organizational leaders to identify actual and desired capacities within an organization and the developmental relationships between those capacities.
- **Building Blocks:** The component parts of an organizational pyramid, representing specific capacities, practices and structures that shape and support an organization.
- **Excavation:** The practice of revisiting or rethinking an underdeveloped or underutilized building block, which has become less prominent in an organization over time
- **Executive Practices:** The activities of planning, managing, administering and monitoring the direction, activity and health of an organization on a timely, recurring basis. Blocks at this level of the pyramid help create the link between the use of resources, the performance of those using resources, and the direction for new resources.
- **Learning Practices:** The activities within an organization related to understanding the effectiveness of services and programs, the use of data to determine impact, the use of resources, the professional development and performance of those doing the work and the evaluation of overall success in advancing the mission.

history of aggressive impact litigation and limited resource generation. The size of the organization and the emphasis on litigation, in this example, has shaped the pyramid in a way that has little developed the complex management and planning that is required to ensure the responsiveness of programs and services to contemporary community needs. There is an absence of any vision, and the direction of the organization may be unclear for the leadership team, making new resource acquisition that much more difficult to align with program and services. These are all important concerns to be addressed through EP, if this organization wants to see a stable, robust financial future that allows a contemporary cohort of advocates to advance their mission well into the future.

A consideration of a pyramid from a medium-sized nonprofit (Figure 3, Organization B) reveals a different

© ENHANCED PLANNING
Continued from page 15

structural starting point. In this example, there has been a great deal of attention developing the external dimensions of organizational growth (e.g., the values, the vision, the theory of change) but less attention to learning practices and some gaps in executive practice that would more adequately provide for advancing a clear mission over time with sufficient resources. Some capacities or blocks are less prominent, though in place, and may need some excavation before they can be fully developed. For example, there is some management capacity but it is not intentionally cultivated (denoted in the organizational pyramid by the use of parenthesis). Organization B may decide to excavate further and make that capacity more prominent, dust it off, if you will.

Finally, a pyramid from a smaller legal services organization (Organization C) that describes itself as “stuck” between a desire for growth and a limited set of resources to expand capacity. In this particular example, Organization C has consolidated a great deal of varying skills, practices and structures at the expense of developing more stable, incremental capacity enhancements. The centrally clustered blocks in this pyramid helps an organization identify a tendency to “do more with less” without considering how the “less” can really

do more effectively over time. Resource acquisition is narrowly focused on grants and contracts. If Organization C wanted to pursue new resources such as individual giving, more Executive Practices will be needed to manage new demands for program performance from a wider array of donors. At the same time, some new Learning Practices will need to be phased in to ensure that new resources are balanced with existing information technologies and the existing evaluation programs. The absence of an organizational mission also points to the potential for organizational drift, and even dissolution.

Capacities and Building Blocks

The Organizational Pyramid is a conceptual guide; it is not intended to be an ideal model for generating a prescriptive remedy. It helps to concretize and identify the discrete building blocks within any organization, and then allows a leadership team to determine which additional blocks make sense for the desired growth. Keeping in mind that growth is defined under Enhanced Planning as a dimension of capacities, not necessarily increased staff size, offices or dollars. The level of implementation required to add a block or to reposition an excavated piece of the pyramid would vary by organization. The process of Enhanced Planning allows the team to identify the blocks for growth, and then map out the steps and benchmarks for

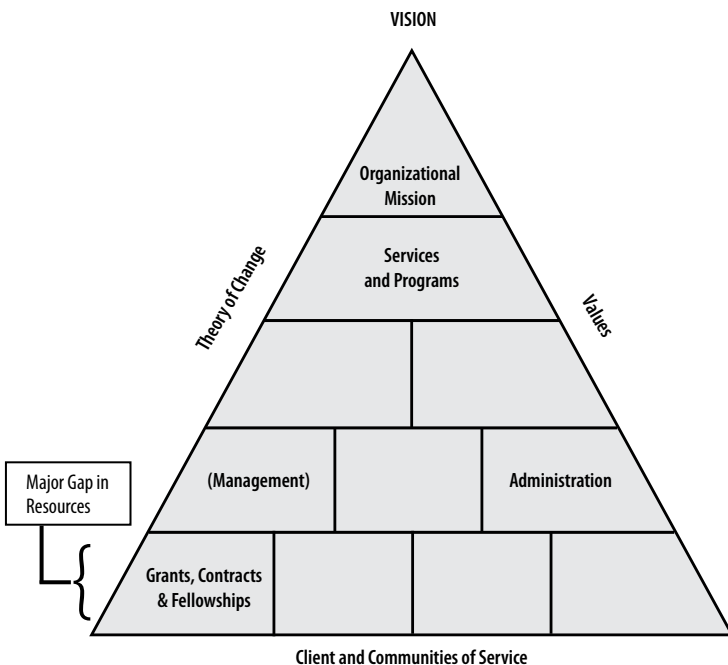


Figure 3.0: Organization B

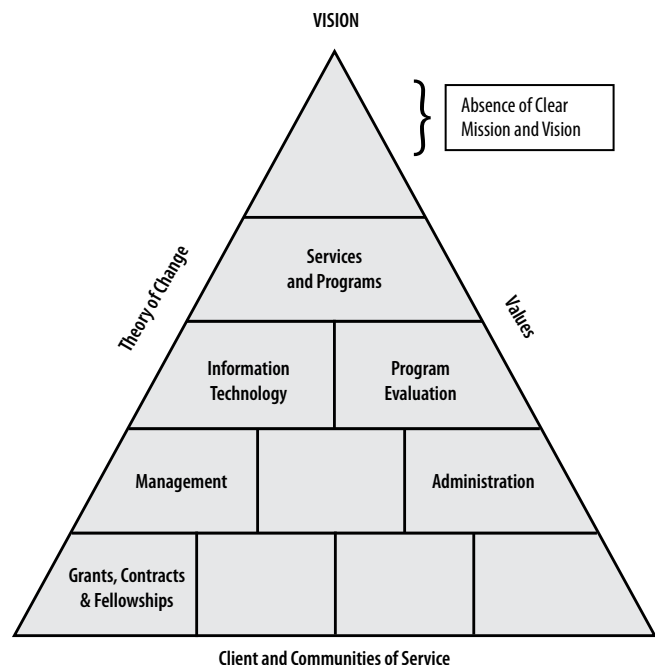


Figure 4.0: Organization C

establishing the new piece of the Organizational Pyramid. The more fully formed a pyramid the stronger an organization, and the more likely that shifting external shocks to the organization can be absorbed and balanced by the more evenly developed structure.

Executive and Learning Practices are often two areas where organizations are under-developed. The high demand for services and the relentless pursuit of funding can make it very hard for organizational leaders to find time to determine strategic growth in these particular areas. EP is one method that facilitates good analysis of organizational need and growth in both areas, without requiring multi-year planning meetings and an over-reliance on external consulting services. The pyramid will serve as a tool that both concretizes planning needs and builds participatory leadership that can bring about the implementation of new practices, the establishment of new capacities or the strengthening of latent structures. Learning Practices can include, for example, the implementation of a quarterly survey tool with field office staff to determine how effective communications were conducted on new policy or change to management practice and how to conduct better internal communications in the future. An Executive Practice related to decision-making and management could include some agreement by the leadership team to adopt a formal decision making protocol (e.g., 5-finger voting) for future decisions to improve organizational capacity to conduct good management practices.

Choosing the right building blocks means taking some time to assess the needs and strengths of your organization, both from the vantage point of your unique Organizational Pyramid and the on-the-ground realities of staff, skill sets, economies and professional development. There are a variety of tools available for conducting a needs assessment or strengths inventory, and for this reason I will not take up space to describe this step in much detail. The results of that inventory or assessment will serve as the menu from which choices will be made around new building blocks. The leadership team will want to look for alignment between the findings of the assessment and the existing or missing blocks in their organizational pyramid. Once an organizational pyramid is established and shared with members of the entire leadership team, a focused discussion can then commence on direction for change and growth.

Growth Revisited

The leadership team can now go about the business

of sequencing and timing the action steps that will be required to develop the chosen building blocks for growth within the organizational pyramid. This is probably one of the hallmarks of EP, because it forces the team to think through the necessary preconditions and requirements for growth that will benefit the organization over a longer time horizon.

EP offers a unique approach to answering questions of growth, while also challenging the commonly held assumption that the end game for organizational growth comes through a quantitative change in resources. EP practices and tools guide and strengthen the holistic thinking of the entire leadership team, cultivating new habits of good planning.

By charting change in a dynamic way that aligns internal capacity with intended growth goals, organizations begin to transform their structures and develop useful practices that promote long-term stability. The action-oriented approach of EP makes it possible to remain strategic and responsive in a constantly shifting world.

For more information about the steps of EP presented here, or the remaining steps not covered in detail, please contact the author.

- 1 Michael Courville is currently Director of Planning and Development for California Rural Legal Assistance. He has over sixteen years of experience as a program and administrative director in the non-profit and public sectors. Michael's work is shaped by an ongoing commitment to promoting human development and creating distributive systems that advance equality in rural areas. He holds graduate degrees in political economy and non-profit management from the University of California, Berkeley. His writing has appeared in *Social Policy*, *The Kappan* and *the Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*. He most recently served as co-editor of *Promised Land: Competing Visions of Agrarian Reform* (Food First Books 2006). Michael may be reached at mcourville@crla.org.
- 2 Bonner, Leslie. Nonprofit Leadership Development: A model for identifying and growing leaders within the nonprofit sector. Dewey & Kaye. http://www.deweykaye.com/assets/documents/DK_NonprofitLeadershipStudy.pdf
- 3 The age of a team, and the level of trust within that team, will positively impact the efficiency and time required to engage in EP. A newly formed team may take longer to complete EP as their own internal sense of trust and experience working collaboratively will be weaker than

Continued on p. 45

⊙ ENHANCED PLANNING
Continued from page 17

with more experienced teams. For this reason, an executive director or board of directors may want to spend time cultivating a leadership team three to six months prior to starting EP as described here.

- 4 A theory of change is an assertion or fundamental assumption about how the world works and the effect of an organization's work on the world. I would equate this somewhat with the concept of "world view," a core conviction that asserts how the organization operates in the world.