Leveraging Diversity and Building Power
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The experience of Interaction Institute for Social Change (IISC) in building the collaborative capacity of leaders, organizations, schools and coalitions is consistent with the growing literature on diversity in workplaces and communities [1]. Unacknowledged, unappreciated, and untapped, cultural and other human differences can create substantial challenges to harmonious relationships and operational effectiveness. And, when differences are acknowledged, appreciated and engaged productively, the resulting relationships and enriched thinking can lead to better outcomes than would be possible in the context of homogenous groups. A central feature of our work, then, is to build the capacity and deepen the cultural competency of individuals and groups so that they experience the benefits of diversity and harness these benefits in service of social change.

Two strategies stand out as keys for enabling individuals and groups to deepen their cultural competency and work across differences in ways that maximize creativity, catalyze strategic thinking and build commitment to shared action. First, we as capacity builders must ***take a collaborative approach to our work and foster collaborative capacity*** as a foundation for cultural competency. Secondly, we must ***actively seek to build the power of individuals and groups***, focusing particular attention on those who traditionally wield less power in the organizations, communities and societies in which we work.

Fostering collaboration

Over the past several decades, more and more leaders in communities, corporations, government, and organizations of every description have embraced collaboration as a promising approach for unleashing the creativity, divergent thinking and commitment needed to achieve shared goals [2-12]. The literature and our practice have taught us about the value of enabling groups to articulate a collective vision, develop a shared plan, and pursue action in a concerted, coordinated way. Overall, the literature underplays the ways in which building collaborative capacity can create a powerful platform for deepening cultural competency. Conversely, it has also overlooked the importance of cultural competency for building collaborative capacity. As capacity builders, we can deepen cultural competency by focusing on a few essential aspects of collaborative capacity:

- o modeling collaborative values and skills;
- o encouraging effective communication;
- o focusing on systems and structures; and,
- o building shared knowledge and information.

Below, we consider each of these aspects of collaborative capacity and offer a set of questions to guide your reflections on your own practice.

Modeling collaborative values and skills
As culturally competent capacity builders, the most important thing we can do to foster collaboration in diverse settings is to demonstrate collaborative values, model skills and tools that support collaboration, and transfer collaborative capability in all of our interactions [13]. Ask yourself:

- o Do I truly believe that everyone has value and worth, simply because they are people? How can I communicate that level of respect in my interactions and in the way I structure my capacity building engagements?

- o Do I truly believe that we are smarter together than any one of us individually? How do I make space in my capacity building engagements for shared thinking and learning that leads to powerful insights and effective strategies for change?
- o Do I believe that my clients have as much to teach as they have to learn? Am I open to being influenced by the people with whom I work? Am I committed to co-design, based on the strengths, interests and capacities of my clients?
- o Do I make a point of guiding my clients to bring in the "unusual voices" and make space at the table for those who are likely to be left out?
- o Am I guiding people toward a deeper understanding of their interdependence? Am I enabling them to identify opportunities for working together more effectively in service of their shared goals?
- o How can I transfer skills and capabilities, even if the engagement does not explicitly involve "training" or "teaching," so that:
  - o leaders become more skillful in sharing their visions, engaging stakeholders, designing collaborative planning processes, facilitating agreement, coaching, celebrating success, setting teams up for success, and modeling shared responsibility for success.
  - o team members become more skillful in sharing points of view, listening, exchanging feedback, reconciling differences and facilitating agreement.
  - o everyone becomes more skillful in self-reflection, interpersonal communication and demonstrates cultural competence.
  - o power is exercised responsibly and is continually cultivated, and privilege and negative exercises of power are mitigated, inhibited or eliminated.
- o How can I use my own identity and self awareness as a tool for cultivating respect for difference? Am I bringing my whole self to my work? Am I aware of my privileges and working either to leverage or neutralize them? [14, 15]

Encouraging effective communication
At the heart of collaboration, people work well together in pairs and groups of various sizes. As capacity builders, we can foster collaboration at the interpersonal and organizational levels in diverse settings by demonstrating and transferring effective communication skills [13]. Ask yourself:
- o Am I modeling and encouraging others to make assumptions and underlying logic explicit and testable? [16, 17]
- o Am I using and teaching tools for effective inquiry into another person's thinking and productive advocacy of one's own point of view?
- o Do I acknowledge and value different viewpoints and the underlying assumptions and worldviews that inform them? Do I work toward mutual understanding?
- o How do I facilitate and model difficult conversations about racism, sexism and other forms of oppression? How well can I help people listen to one another, consider a range of experience and kinds of information, and foster genuine understanding and respect?
- o Can I design and facilitate processes for constructively engaging with conflict? Am I skillful in dealing with conflict when it arises outside of such processes?
- o Can I facilitate processes that enable groups to discover when differences need to be resolved and when they can agree to disagree?
- o Do I give and encourage others to give timely, actionable, constructive feedback?

Focusing on systems and structures
Effective collaboration among diverse people and groups requires attention to individual, interpersonal and team interactions and also organizational, community and societal processes, structures, and systems [13].

As you consider your capacity building work in organizations, collaboratives and networks, ask yourself:
- o Am I modeling a commitment to ongoing learning? Do I anticipate and encourage others toward openness to change as a result of engaging with people who have different experiences and views? [1]
- o Am I creating regular opportunities for people to build relationships and engage together in productive work? [18-21]

- o Do I design systematic, transparent, participatory processes for planning, consensus building, and decision making? [2]
- o Am I encouraging groups to examine and build organizational processes, structures, and reward systems that support and encourage interdependent work?
- o Am I guiding groups to ensure that formal reporting relationships and informal coaching relationships, roles and job descriptions for volunteers and staff are clear, fair, and appropriate to the work?
- o Do I support the design of work processes and team or department structures that are clear, efficient, and able to promote adaptability, problem solving, and creativity?
- o Am I encouraging groups to ensure that their hiring practices and personnel policies that are fair, transparent, and free of unintentional biases?
- o Do I guide the design of equitable performance management and compensation/reward systems that ensure clarity, offer regular and constructive feedback, encourage learning and growth, reward collaboration, and treat people with dignity?
- o Am I guiding groups to examine their work rules and personnel policies to ensure that they are not creating structural inequities?
- o Do I focus attention on the composition of the paid and unpaid workforce, ensuring that it is appropriate to the work and the mix of clients, participants, or constituents? Do I help them to understand such attention is necessary but not sufficient for taking a culturally competent approach to their work?
- o Do I guide groups to design systems and practices that support regular, substantive communication within staff, between staff and board, and with the group's constituents or program participants?
- o How do my engagements contribute to fostering organizational culture that both values and practices collaboration, learning, openness, respect, and shared responsibility for success?

As you consider the ways in which you facilitate the development of strategy, plans, and program or initiative design, ask yourself:
- o Do I facilitate the development of strategy, mission, vision and values statements are clear, compelling and provide guidance for day-to-day activities?
- o Am I ensuring that these strategies, mission, vision, and values, are developed and owned collaboratively by staff, board and other relevant stakeholders? [2, 22]
- o Do I routinely involve multiple stakeholders and multiple forms of data when designing processes by which programs are developed, progress is monitored, and impact is assessed?
- o Do I challenge groups to ensure that their programs and activities are designed with and appropriate for the intended clients, participants, or constituents, and that they are not built on untested assumptions or stereotypes? [23]
- o Am I guiding groups to consider the root causes of the issues they are addressing, and designing their work with root causes in mind? [23]
- o How can I enable groups to examine and undo forms of bias and oppression that are embedded in organizational or societal systems and structures? [24]

Building shared knowledge and information
Effective collaboration, especially in culturally diverse settings, demands that knowledge and information be understood and treated as a shared asset, and that ongoing learning be considered essential for success. Much of the knowledge and information a group needs to understand the context for its work and make wise decisions about how to proceed will reside in the group itself, and sometimes more will be gathered from beyond the group. Ask yourself:
- o Am I enabling the people with whom I work to co-create the knowledge and information they need to understand their work and make wise choices? [25]
- o Do the people with whom I work have the information they need to determine which conversations need to happen and how to frame them [26, 27]?
- o How can I support the development, management and dissemination of shared knowledge and information?
- o How can I model and structure activities that support ongoing learning? How can I support people in reflecting on practice, assessing their progress and engaging in learning rather than blame-finding?

- How can I encourage people to acknowledge a wide range of expertise and to value various ways of knowing, including lived experience, formal education, research, observation, and theory building?

Building the power of individuals and groups

While mastery of the skills and tools of collaboration are critical for culturally competent capacity building, without understanding of power dynamics and how to build positive power, we can inadvertently reinforce the *status quo* [14, 26-32]. Capacity building is the act of increasing the ability of individuals, groups, or organizations to achieve their missions and pursue their visions. So, capacity building can be thought of as a process of building power within groups of people [32]. Capacity builders have the opportunity to build power in ways that are culturally competent.

Understanding power

Power is the capacity to bring about change by [33-38]:
- *influencing people* – "I/we can persuade others to do or refrain from doing something."
- *affecting one's environment* – "I /we can manipulate, change or control our environment."
- *addressing personal or group needs* – "I/we can ensure that our needs are met."
- *pursuing desires* – "I/we can take steps to get what we want."
- *protecting interests* – "I/we can make sure that we and what's important to us are protected."
- *defining issues, set agendas, and expand or limit the scope of discussion* – "I/we can determine what is discussed, how issues are framed, and what is on/off the table."
- *determining who can participate in decision making and how* – "I/we can decide who will make decisions and whose input will be considered."

Our work as capacity builders involves helping people to understand that:
- power is relational [33, 35-41]. It is socially constructed -- developed by and between people. It requires the conscious or tacit endorsement of others [33, 42, 43]. Power is not a "fixed asset" that one person or group can give or take from another person or group [33, 35, 37, 40, 41, 43, 44].
- power is not inherently good or bad. It can be used productively for positive or liberating purposes or destructively for oppressive or destructive purposes.
- power operates on individual, interpersonal, institutional, structural and cultural levels. We all have some capacity to exercise power in these different arenas, and part of the task of capacity building is to identify which kinds of power the groups we work with want to cultivate and where and how they want to exercise it.
- in order to build trust, it is critical to be transparent about power dynamics within the group [32]. It can be extremely helpful to acknowledge how power is at play – at all levels (individually, interpersonally, institutionally, structurally and culturally).

As we help people to focus more directly on building power, we can direct their attention to the many bases on which individuals, groups, organizations and societies rely (some more consciously than others) to construct and endorse power [33, 35, 45, 46]. Making these sources explicit can help groups to identify which kinds of power they already exercise consistently, and which they wish to develop more fully. Examples include:

- *Reward Power:* Having the capacity (real or perceived) to decide who is/is not rewarded and to give or withhold rewards
- *Coercive Power:* Having the capacity (real or perceived) to coerce, punish or employ physical force or to decide who will/will not be punished or hurt
- *Legitimate Power:* Having the interpersonally, organizationally, culturally or structurally endorsed ability to influence – seen as "legitimate" and therefore not questioned
- *Positional Power:* Having a position or role that gives one authority or responsibility to do certain things or make certain decisions
- *Referent Power:* Having the capacity to influence people because of one's association with an individual or group that is widely respected and admired

- *Expertise/Experience Power:* Having (real or perceived) expertise or technical knowledge
- *Ecological Environmental Power:* Having control over resources needed to meet one's own/one's communities' needs or satisfy desires; having the ability to decide how and for whose benefit resources are used
- *Issue Control:* Having the capacity to exercise control over the agenda, the framing of topics to be discussed and/or the information needed to make choices
- *Spiritual Power:* Having a deep conviction about one's purpose and identity, holding values that are expressed in one's behavior, and demonstrating an appreciation for the spiritual dimensions and ultimate worth of life [47].

Cultivating power for positive change

As capacity builders, we can guide individuals and groups to cultivate power in service of positive change. We can begin by guiding them to explore and promote understanding of how power -- both positive or liberating and negative or oppressive exercises of power – actually operates in their organizational and community contexts [30]. We can facilitate shared thinking about strategies that cultivate positive or liberating exercises of power and reduce or eliminate negative or oppressive exercises of power. This approach involves work at the personal, interpersonal, organizational, systems and structural and cultural levels. It involves guiding people and groups toward awareness of their power and the ways in which unearned privileges unfairly advantage some people and disadvantage others. It involves cultivating collaboration and building organizations that liberate the creative potential of everyone involved. It involves organizing decision making in ways that maximize meaningful engagement by those most affected. And, it involves guiding people and groups toward understanding and transforming systems and structures of oppression that interfere with achieving their noblest visions and goals.

About the authors

Cynthia Silva Parker, Linda Guinee, and Andrea Nagel are Senior Associates at the Interaction Institute for Social Change (IISC). IISC is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to ignite and sustain social transformation, catalyze collaborative action, and build collaborative skill to bring alive its vision of a just and sustainable world. IISC accomplishes this by providing network building, consulting, facilitation, and training services designed to transform communities and organizations and build the capacity of leaders of social change.

Cynthia Silva Parker has worked with IISC since 1993, cultivating collaborative skills, strengthening organizations, solving problems, developing strategic plans, and building multi-stakeholder networks for social change alongside leaders in communities and nonprofit and public sector organizations. Cynthia also co-leads IISC's internal learning and product development processes. Cynthia also serves as a member of the Advisory Group of the Alliance for Nonprofit Management's Cultural Competency Initiative (CCI). She and Andrea co-designed and co-delivered the CCI's first webinar, "Engaging Diverse Stakeholders." Cynthia's prior leadership experience includes directing Boston Freedom Summer and providing administrative leadership to The Algebra Project, Inc. She also provided technical assistance to nonprofit organizations as an Associate at Technical Development Corporation. Cynthia holds a Bachelor of Arts degree from Harvard-Radcliffe Colleges and a Master of Public Policy in city and regional planning from the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. She sees her most important accomplishments as works in progress: building a solid spiritual foundation, nurturing a loving family, and carrying hope into the world through her life and work.

Linda Guinee brings to her work a passion for social justice and peacebuilding, a lifelong commitment to social change and a belief in the potential of groups of people coming together to create powerful approaches to social issues. Prior to coming to IISC, Linda was the Associate Director of Client Services at the AIDS Action Committee, the largest AIDS Service Organization in New England. She also worked as a tour manager with the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt, traveling with the Quilt and organizing volunteers and displays around the United States. In a previous life, Linda worked at the Long Term Research Institute, where she was the senior researcher on a project studying the songs of humpback whales and co-discovered that humpbacks use rhymes as mnemonic devices in their songs. Linda was ordained by Thich Nhat Hanh and is a member of the lay Buddhist order Tiep Hien. She received her Bachelor's degree in Humanism and Cultural Change from the University of Wisconsin at Green Bay and a Master of Arts degree in Conflict Resolution at Antioch University - McGregor. She is a trained and practicing mediator and a member of the Public and Intense Conflicts Committee of the Association for Conflict Resolution. Linda delivers facilitation services and helps manage the content of collaborative efforts with a wide variety of IISC's clients.

Andrea Nagel loves people and life. She is driven by a desire to challenge inequity and bridge divisions among and between peoples. Born in Chile and transplanted to the suburbs of New York at the age of 8, her boundary-crossing experiences began at an early age. Andrea believes in the possibility of community because of her own experiences bridging cultural and socio-economic differences. Andrea began organizing around Latin American issues in college and then shifted her focus from global to local efforts in Roxbury, MA at the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative, a multicultural resident-led community-based planning and organizing organization. Andrea delved more deeply into leadership development activities at YouthBuild USA, where she served as a program advisor and training associate. In addition to delivering training, consulting and facilitation services to IISC clients, Andrea manages the Community Building Curriculum, a grassroots leadership development project. She offers many of IISC's services in both Spanish and English. Andrea holds a Bachelor of Arts degree from Tufts University and a Master in City Planning from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. When not working, Andrea enjoys dancing, running, dabbling in jewelry-making and sharing her home with family and friends.

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