

## perspectives

a newsletter for the clients and friends of TCC Group

## Everyday Leaders: Building the Adaptive Capacity of Nonprofit Organizations

Anne Sherman

What does a nonprofit need to succeed in today's increasingly competitive and rapidly changing environment, evermore demanding of accountability? Look behind the curtains of an effective nonprofit, and chances are you'll find a leader who has created an environment in which continuous learning about how the organization is responding to the needs of the community is a priority.

Take Josh Elkin, for example. Rabbi Elkin is the founding executive director of the Partnership for Excellence in Jewish Education (PEJE), a national funding partnership and management assistance provider dedicated to strengthening Jewish day school education in North America, with an operating budget of approximately \$4.6 million and a grantmaking budget of \$1.5 million. In its first five years, PEJE experienced tremendous success and rapid growth. The organization was successful in bringing in new funders to the partnership. PEJE's staff were widely regarded in the field for their dedication, intelligence, and responsiveness to their constituents. Increasingly, the day school community looked to PEJE as a leader and innovator. The organization was busy, vital, and dynamic, due in large part to Rabbi Elkin's leadership.

So far, this story sounds like a nonprofit executive's dream, and in many ways, PEJE was in an enviable position. But as the five-year anniversary



PEJE Executive Director Rabbi Josh Elkin

approached, it also became clear that staff - including Rabbi Elkin - were stretched thin. In an effort to be responsive to the community, PEJE was trying to meet too many constituent needs. As a result, the programs were becoming unfocused, and staff were at risk for burning out. Staff were also sensing that PEJE's initial grant-making program, the cornerstone of its programming, was becoming less relevant to constituents, and that they might need to reassess their overall strategy.

Under the leadership of Rabbi Elkin and the board of directors, PEJE decided to take a step back and assess where the organization had been over the past five years, figure out what it wanted to do over the next five, and determine how it would get there. The organization engaged in a comprehensive strategic planning process that looked closely at what the organization had learned about the needs of day schools, clarified its own unique strengths and capacities, and carefully assessed other trends within the day school movement. The end result was a strategic plan focused around a clear mission and vision and a set of coherent, interrelated goals that made explicit what PEJE would and wouldn't be doing over the next several years. The board approved the plan and agreed to make the investment necessary to guarantee its successful implementation.

### CEO's Message

Over the past year, during our 25th anniversary, TCC Group practiced what we preach: we engaged in a strategic planning effort. We examined the changing environment for funders and nonprofits, the needs of our clients, and our internal capacity to address these needs. Among other things, our new plan focuses on how we will improve in knowledge management, technology, and professional development. We aim to provide even more effective services to our clients.

Since our last strategic planning effort four years ago, TCC Group has grown significantly. We have served over 300 clients during this period, and we have increased our staff size by over 30 percent. Last year, we welcomed seven new individuals with a diverse range of previous work experience at The Ford Foundation, Morgan Stanley, The University of Pennsylvania, the Philadelphia Department of Human Services, the International Rescue Committee, and Northern California Grantmakers, among others. (See "We Have Grown!" on page 6.)

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Today, PEJE is engaged in a smaller set of activities, and its grantmaking program has been redesigned: it is capturing the lessons learned through a knowledge management system and program evaluation. It is a stronger organization and is poised to be more effective because its leadership realized the need to reflect, challenge, listen, and, ultimately, change. Moreover, this happened at a time when it wasn't absolutely necessary, and arguably, things were going fairly well. Due to the shared vision of its professional and volunteer leadership, PEJE was proactive in determining its future, rather than responding to an internal crisis or dramatic external event.

PEJE exemplifies a growing trend in organizational development: the belief that a consistently successful non-profit is one that is aware of and responsive to its external environment, regularly assesses the effectiveness of the entire organization, consistently evaluates its programs, uses evaluation data to improve services, and plans ahead. In short, it's an organization that knows the importance of knowledge and uses it to understand the past, manage the present, and plan for the future. The term coined to describe this approach to attaining organizational effectiveness is *adaptive capacity*. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many nonprofits that have developed high levels of adaptive capacity share an important characteristic: leaders—staff and board—who have made adaptive capacity part of the way they do business.



A day school supported by PEJE

## What Does Adaptive Capacity Mean?

In a 2002 study of management support and field-building organizations in the nonprofit sector, a team of TCC Group consultants, led by Paul Connolly and Peter York, identified four dimensions of organizational capacity considered to be critical to overall effectiveness. They are:

1. **Adaptive Capacity:** the ability to monitor, assess, respond to, and stimulate internal and external changes. It also involves being proactive and generative by playing an advocacy role and trying to shape the environment as well.<sup>1</sup> Assessment, planning, and evaluation are typical activities.

2. **Leadership Capacity:** the ability of all organizational leaders to inspire, prioritize, make decisions, provide direction, and innovate, all in an effort to achieve the organizational mission.
3. **Management Capacity:** the ability to ensure the effective and efficient use of organizational resources—quality of staff supervision, appropriate use of technology, or effective internal communications.
4. **Technical Capacity:** the ability to implement all of the key organizational and programmatic functions. Are programs as effective as they might be? Is the right number of appropriately trained staff in place?

Adaptive capacity is perhaps the least familiar of these four dimensions. What exactly is it, and why does it matter?

Adaptive capacity refers to an organization's ability to understand what's going on, both inside and outside the organization; to learn from this information; and to respond and plan

appropriately. This sounds great, but how does it relate to a struggling nonprofit, or even one that's doing moderately well? Adaptive capacity is relevant—in fact, it's essential—because, as Peter Senge notes in *The Fifth Discipline* (1990), it leads to results. Few, if any, nonprofits today can afford to ignore the pressure to be accountable and results-oriented, and the way to get results and achieve excellence is through learning, creativity, flexibility, and willingness to change, in short, through adaptive capacity.

Organizations demonstrating adaptive capacity aren't ones where information, ideas, and learning are guarded by a few at the top. Rather, staff and volunteers are encouraged, or even expected, to be critical consumers of information and contribute to the organization's continual improvement. Some examples include:

- Built-in systems for continuously evaluating the quality and impact of programs and services and using the data to improve effectiveness.

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## CEO's Message (con't)

In 2004, my colleagues published several pieces on employee involvement, governance, capacity building, and strategic planning. I encourage you to visit our website ([www.tccgrp.com](http://www.tccgrp.com)) to access these valuable resources. Please join our distribution list to start receiving our future publications via email.

Tragedies, like the recent tsunami disaster, remind us all of our interdependence and the critical importance of shared commitment. At TCC Group we are recommitting our efforts to this end. We look forward with anticipation to 2005 and the new challenges it will bring. We are eager to hear how we might assist your organization.

John E. Riggan

<sup>1</sup> This definition of adaptive capacity builds on earlier work by Christine Letts, William Ryan, and Allen Grossman, *High Performance Nonprofit Organizations: Managing Upstream for Greater Impact* (1999), and Carl Sussman, "Building Adaptive Capacity: The Quest for Improved Organizational Performance," February 2003.



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- Formal assessment of organizational strengths and weaknesses on an ongoing basis.
- Executive directors who maintain strong relationships with colleagues in the community to keep abreast of opportunities, to follow trends, and to be an important voice around issues of interest to the organization.
- Regularly conducted strategic planning processes that don't involve only senior staff and board members, but also include input from program and administrative staff, other volunteers, and clients or customers.

For every nonprofit or foundation leader who already practices this type of leadership, there are dozens more who would like to but are wondering, How can I possibly think about assessment or planning when there are two proposals due tomorrow and the program director just resigned? TCC Group has worked with many organizations in building their adaptive capacity, and we have learned that to build it, strong leadership is absolutely critical.

### Adaptive Leadership

*"Leadership is doing. It isn't just thinking great thoughts; it isn't just charisma; it isn't play-acting. It is doing."*

—Peter F. Drucker, *Managing the Nonprofit Organization*

When we think about strong nonprofit leaders, what comes to mind? Reflection, planning, evaluation? Probably not. More likely, we think of dynamic, charismatic visionaries who inspire staff, volunteers, donors, and the general public to become part of an exciting journey. To be sure, this type of leadership is critical for a nonprofit organization, particularly early on. It may not be enough, however, to ensure long-term sustainability and effectiveness. The adaptive leader is more likely to create a strong organization that supports the mission and programs.

Note that the "adaptive leader" may not be a single individual within an organization. While most organizations have one board chair and one CEO, adaptive leaders frequently are surrounded by others in the organization—both at board and staff levels—who share the commitment to anticipate and plan for change and rely on information to help them make good decisions. Because knowledge, improvement, and innovation are shared values, adaptive leaders tend to build leadership teams whose members can

challenge each other. Together, they build an organizational culture that embraces learning and continuous improvement.

Charismatic leaders may be born and not made, but it is possible for any leader to deliberately build adaptive leadership capacity into an organization. Strategies include:

- **Stay connected to the outside world.** Strong organizations don't operate in a vacuum. Their leaders are well known and highly regarded among colleagues and others, like funders or local policy makers, and they know how to use their networks to give and get relevant information about their operating environments. They know when and how to collaborate with other organizations, and when they are better off going it alone.
- **Make sure there's an organizational vision.** A clear vision that's linked to the organization's mission and is understood and supported by key stakeholders helps determine what kind of data is needed. All activities should be in support of the vision and the mission.
- **Engage in informed strategic planning.** Adaptive leaders realize the power of data and know how to use it to conduct high-impact strategic planning processes. Assessment based on good information about internal operations, program effectiveness, and the external environment is an important part of effective strategic planning. Perform ongoing assessments of their operations, systems and overall effectiveness and use this information for the purposes of strategic planning. Highly adaptive organizations also bring program evaluation data and findings to the planning table. As a part of any strategic planning process, effective organizations also reach out to people in the community to understand what types of changes have occurred that could affect their ability to achieve their mission, as well as formally assess their clients' needs on an ongoing basis. All of these adaptive strategies should be deployed for any strategic planning process.
- **Build a team of leaders.** Adaptive leaders understand the importance of creating an organization that can function effectively without them. An organization with a team of leaders—staff and board members—that shares an orientation to adaptive capacity building is more likely to anticipate and prevent crises than one that relies heavily on an individual.

## Staff Updates

**Chantell Johnson, Senior Consultant at the firm, is on the Host Committee of the Alliance for Nonprofit Management's conference in Chicago July 14-17.**



**Susan Misra, Consultant, is on the Steering Committee for Border Crossers, an organization that brings together elementary school children to learn about racism and how to work to cross borders in their communities.**



**Cara Cipollone has joined the Steering Committee of Emerging Practitioners in Philanthropy, an affinity group of the Council on Foundations that strives to support and strengthen the next generation of grantmakers.**



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Charismatic Leader	Adaptive Leader
• Owner of vision	• Implementer of the vision
• Attracts followers through strength of personality and ability to communicate vision	• Attracts followers through ability to communicate vision and plan to achieve it by using key information to make the case
• Likes change; prefers action to planning	• Embraces change after considering the data and related implications
• Does not need much data to make decisions, comfortable making decisions intuitively	• Builds a culture of learning by using information collected through assessment and evaluation to increase program quality; shares data with staff and board; more inclined toward collective decision making
• Is the star of the organization	• Nurtures future leadership by creating a deep bench of future leaders who value information-based decision making
• Is well connected and well known in the field	• Collaborates effectively and builds strong peer networks
• May not seek staff or board with differing or complementary strengths	• Is self-aware and seeks out staff and board who will examine information and challenge assumptions and decisions

- **Surround yourself with people who look at the world a little differently.** Effective leaders recognize both their strengths and their shortcomings. The charismatic leader, for example, may never come to embrace her inner evaluator, but she can accept that evaluation is important to long-term success and hire a senior manager who truly understands the concept.
- **Learn to love evaluation.** For many nonprofit executives, evaluation is a burden imposed by funders for accountability purposes and a distraction from other, more important, activities. What about evaluation as a way to increase impact? Evaluation where learning is the primary focus regards data collection and interpretation as strategies that allow a wide group of stakeholders to better understand program quality and progress toward achieving outcomes. There are many ways to build evaluative learning processes into an organization (for concrete suggestions on how to go about this, see TCC Group's briefing paper *Learning As We Go: Making Evaluation Work for Everyone*, available at [www.tccgrp.com](http://www.tccgrp.com)).

## Concluding Thoughts

Seem overwhelming? Don't despair! Anyone who wants to build the adaptive capacity of their nonprofit can do it. Begin with small steps. Here are some tips for getting started:

- What are you most proud of in your nonprofit? What have you and your colleagues built that could be of value to others? What do you suspect could be strengthened or improved? Think about the legacy of your organization, and how information can help to build it.

- Think of one or two respected colleagues who have used information from evaluation or planning processes. Talk to them about why they started these initiatives and how they got them off the ground. What did they learn? What was most valuable to them? What would they do differently?
- Identify a few board or senior staff members who seem to have an interest in planning or evaluation. Get their ideas about what kind of data would be helpful for them in decision making. Maybe you could conduct a simple board assessment on an annual basis, or have volunteers follow up with a small sample of clients to ask them about the impact of the services they have received?
- Build in times for staff to discuss important issues outside of the organization that have implications for your work. Is there important new research on the type of services you either provide or fund? Is the policy environment changing in ways that will have an impact on important funding streams? Are staff seeing dramatic changes in the issues that clients are presenting? Find natural opportunities to build in times to discuss these changes, like staff meetings or brown-bag lunches, and make sure that you leave time to think about the implications or possible action steps.
- Funders play a critical role. Capacity building requires time, which in turn, requires money. Grantmakers should think about how their funding guidelines do (or don't) support adaptive capacity building and consider ways to directly encourage or support the ongoing learning and development of their grantees. ■

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## Current and recent work

A team of TCC consultants recently assisted **The Free Library of Philadelphia** and its 50 branches to improve their efficiency and effectiveness through a comprehensive strategic planning process. The final report included findings from a series of interviews and discussion groups, as well as research on general trends in the operation of urban library systems.

TCC is conducting a strategic review of the **Coca-Cola Foundation**. The work includes interviewing key managers, performing peer company research, and making recommendations for program strategy and grantmaking operations.

**The New England Foundation for the Arts** has retained TCC to design and conduct an evaluation of the Online Cultural Marketplace.

The firm recently developed a plan for **The Philadelphia Zoo** to evaluate its organizational effectiveness. This comprehensive evaluation included a mission-based logic model approach and extensive input from patrons and staff.

TCC was hired by the **Surdna Foundation** to prepare a report on the state of philanthropy in general and on trends and issues in the fields in which Surdna funds, including the environment, community revitalization, effective citizenry, arts, the nonprofit sector.

**The National Foundation for Teaching Entrepreneurship** (NFTE), a drop-out prevention and academic improvement program for at-risk youth, has engaged TCC Group to develop an outcomes assessment system.

TCC Group was hired to assist the **Tremaine Foundation** in defining a new direction for its learning disability grantmaking and to identify and assess the capacity of organizations that might be keys to success in this area.



We are conducting an evaluation of the **Conrad N. Hilton Foundation's** Humanitarian Prize Program. The Foundation is using this evaluation to assess its own internal operations related to the prize, as well as develop a better understanding of the image of the prize in the field and its impact on recipient organizations.

TCC is working with the **Independence Community Foundation** to conduct a feasibility study, testing the idea of developing a community foundation in Brooklyn.

A team of TCC consultants is leading a strategic planning effort for the **Henry H. Kessler Foundation** that includes a needs assessment in the field of the physically disabled in New Jersey and ongoing planning assistance.

TCC is helping the Phoenix-based **Valley of the Sun United Way** prepare a detailed business plan that will help the organization implement its community impact agenda.

TCC Group is facilitating a community building process to develop an education and workforce development plan for Martinsville and Henry Counties in Virginia. Our consultants are working collaboratively with **Harvest Foundation** staff, government officials, and key stakeholders in the communities.

TCC is continuing to work with the **Annie E. Casey Foundation** on developing and piloting a demonstra-

tion project of an outreach strategy in selected cities where there is philanthropic interest in place-based investment for the benefit of disadvantaged children and families.



**Goldman Sachs Charitable Services Group** seeks to develop a new strategic program with a focus on capacity building as a part of its Corporate Giving program. Goldman Sachs engaged TCC Group to develop the framework for the program, gain consensus and participation within the firm, and develop overall recommendations for the program.

TCC is now providing day-to-day administration and in-house management for the **Ohrstrom Foundation** and the **Dickler Family Foundation**. Our services include development and maintenance of administrative systems; soliciting, reviewing, and recommending proposals; managing and monitoring grants; and bookkeeping and financial reporting.

TCC has been hired to assist **Greenpoint Manufacturing and Design Center**, an economic development organization, to rethink its mission and programs to help it respond appropriately to major changes in its operating environment.



TCC facilitated a process that engaged **Howard Hughes Medical Institute** staff and program directors to deter-

mine the goals and strategies for its peer evaluation cluster process, and build staff evaluation skills. TCC is conducting further research to assess how the Pilot Project program directors have improved their use of evaluation since their participation in the process.

TCC Group is working with **New York Cares** on a comprehensive planning process that will explore options for programmatic growth, target opportunities to develop fundraising efforts, and improve external communications.

**Seedco**, a national community development operating intermediary, hired TCC to assess the organization and advise on how it can better fulfill its mission.

We are conducting a strategic planning process for the international development organization, **World Neighbors**. The planning process is helping to set a new direction under the leadership of its new CEO.

## We've grown

The firm welcomes the following new staff. Our entire team is shown in the photo below.

**Marcus Littles**, Consultant, was a Program Associate in the Community and Resource Development Unit at The Ford Foundation in New York.



**Jared Raynor**, Consultant, previously worked for the International Rescue Committee in Azerbaijan and specializes in program evaluations.

**Ashley Snowdon**, Consultant, has recent work experience at Northern California Grantmakers.



**Ana Ramos-Hernandez**, Consultant, has extensive experience in surveying, data collection, and quantitative and qualitative analysis.



The firm welcomes **Evan Kultangwatana**, a recent Wesleyan University graduate, as Research Associate.



## Our team



**Back row:** Evan Kultangwatana, Sheila Scott, Marcus Littles, Richard Mittenenthal, John Riggan, Julie Malloy, Jared Raynor, Thomas Knowlton.

**Middle row:** Ashley DelBianco, Ashley Snowdon, Judy Barci, Laura Colin Klein, Janice Brown, Shelly Kessler, Ana Ramos-Hernandez, Sally Munemitsu, Lois Chierico, Carol Gallo, Andrew Smith, Cara Cipollone.

**Front row:** Aracely Ruiz, Chantell Johnson, Paul Connolly, DeShele Dorsey, Peter York, Anne Sherman.

### BOARD OF DIRECTORS

**John Riggan**  
Chairman and CEO

**Richard Mittenenthal**  
President and COO

**Paul Connolly**  
Senior Vice President

**Shelly Kessler**  
Vice President and CFO

**Thomas W. Knowlton**  
Vice President

### PROFESSIONAL STAFF

**Carol O'Connor Gallo**  
Director of Administration

**Lois Chierico**  
Director of Finance

**Peter York**  
Director of Evaluation

**Laura Colin Klein**  
Senior Consultant

**Chantell Johnson**  
Senior Consultant

**Sally Munemitsu**  
Senior Consultant

**Jennifer Avers**  
**Judy Barci**  
**Irene Bostick**  
**Janice Brown**  
**Cara Cipollone**  
**Ashley DelBianco**  
**DeShele Dorsey**  
**Evan Kultangwatana**  
**Marcus Littles**  
**Julie Malloy**  
**Susan Misra**  
**Ana Ramos-Hernandez**  
**Jared Raynor**  
**Sheila Scott**  
**Anne Sherman**  
**Andrew Smith**  
**Ashley Snowdon**

### AFFILIATES

**Flynn Bucy, PhD**  
**Marcelle Hinand Cady**  
**Thomas H. Fox**  
**M. Patricia Hoven**  
**Shelby Miller**  
**Tom Stephens**

## We get around



On February 23, Paul Connolly helped lead a pre-conference session on capacity building at the **Grantmakers in Health** annual conference in San Francisco.

On January 19, Peter York and Tom Knowlton presented "Tracking and Evaluating Corporate Volunteerism" to the **Corporate Volunteers of New York**.

On December 7 of last year, Paul Connolly gave a keynote speech on "Promising Practices for Nonprofit Capacity Builders" at a symposium in Detroit sponsored by the **Michigan Nonprofit Association**.



On November 16, Peter York presented on capacity building and organizational assessment at the **Compassion Capital Fund Leadership Workshop**. This federally funded national initiative aims to strengthen

the organizational capacity of faith-based organizations. Attendees included intermediary organizations receiving funding from the president's faith-based initiative.

Susan Misra co-facilitated three sessions at the **17th Annual Creating Change Conference**, the annual conference of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Organization Institute, "People of Color Institute," "Anti-Racism Discussions," and "Immigrant Rights Organizing for LGBTSTQ People of Color."



In October, Richard Mittenenthal presented at **The Philanthropy Workshop** in Connecticut on "Success and Failures in Philanthropy," which included examples of successful strategic grantmaking. The workshop was organized by **The Rockefeller Foundation** and the **Bertelsmann Foundation**.



On September 3, the firm's CEO, John Riggan, gave a presentation on corporate philanthropy and social enterprise at the **Economic Forum at Krynica** and present-

ed on the same topic at a seminar in Warsaw, Poland.

### Corporate Community Involvement Management Structure Survey: A Call for Participation

As corporations continue to expand their involvement with the community, there is increasing interest in determining the most effective structure and process to fully leverage the resources of the company. Despite this growing trend, there is a scarcity of information regarding the organizational structure of community involvement activities.

In response to this interest, TCC Group has begun to build a database of information that will provide guidance to any company looking for facts and data to inform the development of their own internal Corporate Involvement (CI) structure.

TCC Group has collected information from 19 companies on their internal CI structure, and

new companies will be added monthly. A report on the survey findings is available free to any company that participates in the survey. The information provided is confidential and is used only in the aggregate for the report.

The report includes information on structure (staffing, relationship with other departments, geographic reach), program (types of programs, focus), and experience (staff experience, company history).

If you are interested in receiving a free copy of the report and participating in the survey, please go to [www.tccgrp.com](http://www.tccgrp.com) or call Tom Knowlton, Director of the Corporate Practice, at 888-222-2283.

### Workshop Datebook

Peter York will present a session on March 18 at the **Ohio Grantmakers Forum** on effective grantor-grantee relationships.

Chantell Johnson and Peter York will speak on evaluation methodologies at **N-TEN!**, the Nonprofit Technology Enterprise Network's annual conference, at the Chicago Marriott, March 23-25.

Paul Connolly will present on how funders can tailor investments to support the lifecycle stages of their grantees at the 2005 **Council on Foundations'** annual conference in San Diego, CA, April 10-12. Gayle Williams, Executive Director of the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation, and Moy Eng, Director of Performing Arts at the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, will present at the session as well.

Peter York and Chantell Johnson will co-present "Marketing Your Organization's Impact," and Paul Connolly and Jennifer Avers will co-present "Using Market Research to Develop Strategies to Engage Your Audiences and Communities" at **North Park University's Axelson Center Symposium** on May 11 in Chicago.



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Philadelphia ■ New York ■ Chicago

strategies to achieve social impact



## perspectives

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Winter 2005

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### WHO WE ARE:

TCC Group (formerly The Conservation Company) is a consulting firm that develops strategies and programs that enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of nonprofit organizations, philanthropies, and corporate citizenship programs to achieve social impact.

### WHO WE SERVE:

- Philanthropic organizations
- Nonprofits
- Corporate citizenship programs
- Nongovernmental agencies
- Government

### WHAT WE DO:

- Planning
- Evaluation
- Grantmaking assistance
- Program and strategy development
- Needs assessment and competitive analysis
- Organizational development