



Organizations may want to build their capacity on topics such as compliance and management, scaling, evidence, sustainability, data collection, evaluation, and communication to strengthen their staff's skills and enhance program results. Previous AmeriCorps-funded programs have demonstrated that efforts to build an organization's capacity include providing opportunities to learn through experience, tailored support, peer learning, support for data capacity, transparency about needs and expectations, and support to translate short-term learning into enduring institutional knowledge. See the "About This Tip Sheet" box for more information.

This tip sheet describes various approaches to capacity building, the importance of building data capacity, and action-oriented recommendations on how to strengthen capacity-building efforts.

Methods to Build Capacity

Three main methods can help build staff capacity: experiential learning, tailored support, and peer learning. These methods can be used together to deepen and reinforce skills, providing staff with different ways to engage and learn. For example, a group workshop with individualized activities and opportunities to share with peers combines all three methods for stronger results.

Experiential learning: Helping staff master and apply new concepts through interactive, iterative steps that gradually deepen and solidify learning.

What your organization can do to **provide experiential learning:**

- Reinforce ideas by pairing general content with opportunities for experiential learning.
- Use various formats or approaches to fit different learning styles and preferences (for example, homework, webinars, in-person working groups, interactive trainings, one-on-one mentoring, opportunities for real-world implementation).
- Offer training that is relevant to the activities staff are engaged in, so they have the context and framework needed to apply what they learn.
- Plan capacity building as early as possible based on anticipated needs but be flexible and adapt this schedule when other needs arise.

Tailored support: Providing individual support or offering opportunities in group settings for staff or programs to apply what they have learned to their work.

What your organization can do to **provide tailored support:**

- Find ways to tailor group capacity-building activities to address individual challenges (such as using individualized role plays, opportunities to apply what was learned to individual situations).
- When working with many people in training, group participants by level of experience to provide more tailored capacity-building opportunities.
- Ask probing questions to help staff refine the way they apply critical thinking skills to their work.
- Create a problem-solving environment that consciously avoids engaging in criticism or blame.

Peer learning: Bringing together individuals with similar challenges to learn from one another and build capacity.

What your organization can do to **create and support peer learning:**

- Provide opportunities for staff to convene and share best practices, proven or promising methods, and solutions to common challenges (for example, in-person convenings, webinars, conference calls).
- Connect individuals who work on similar programs or encounter similar challenges and encourage them to form ongoing support networks.
- Provide opportunities to build community by sharing struggles and successes.

Incorporate Data-Focused Capacity Building

Organizations can build their capacity in using data to enhance their programs by establishing appropriate metrics, collecting data efficiently, analyzing data effectively, and adapting programs accordingly. This approach includes establishing regular reporting mechanisms to consistently collect needed data and providing tailored training on interpreting data to improve programs. View the [Partnering on the Evidence Journey](#) and the [Evidence Continuum](#) videos for examples of how AmeriCorps uses data and evidence to strengthen its capacity to deliver on the agency's mission.

What your organization can do:

- Build a "data culture" by demonstrating how data can provide the foundation for program planning and improvement.
- Provide the skills needed to set up data metrics, interpret data, use results to make programmatic changes, and encourage thinking about how the new insights can be applied to other areas of the organization's work.

Be Transparent and Encourage Communication

Transparency helps staff feel comfortable raising concerns or asking for support and demonstrates that capacity building is not just for programs or staff members experiencing adversity. Organizations should foster open, transparent relationships that encourage improvement for everyone.

What your organization can do:

- Establish an environment where everyone feels safe communicating their challenges and where leaders and staff can exchange feedback.
- Act as a thought partner and problem solver, cooperating with staff to provide support without micromanaging.
- Communicate that capacity building, growth, and improvement are for everyone—even the highest performing staff and programs.

Plan Ahead

Sustaining capacity-building efforts requires that the organization can pass its learning on to the "next generation" of staff. To be most effective, capacity-building efforts should identify "backup" or "successor" staff to train and determine how the organization will teach staff the new skills. Choosing the right staff to receive initial capacity-building support can be essential in extending this knowledge to new staff and institutionalizing the organization's knowledge.

What your organization can do:

- Emphasize the importance of transferring skills to others and provide the necessary strategies for doing so.
- Encourage staff to think broadly across the organization, recognizing potential "silos" and initiating communications to break them down.

About the Office of Research and Evaluation

The [AmeriCorps Office of Research and Evaluation](#) assists AmeriCorps and its partners in collecting, analyzing, and disseminating data and insights about AmeriCorps programs and civic life in America.

About AmeriCorps

AmeriCorps, the federal agency for national service and volunteerism, provides opportunities for Americans to serve their country domestically, address the nation's most pressing challenges, improve lives and communities, and strengthen civic engagement. Each year, the agency places more than 200,000 AmeriCorps members and AmeriCorps Seniors volunteers in intensive service roles and empowers millions more to serve as long-term, short-term, or one-time volunteers. **Learn more at [AmeriCorps.gov](#).**

About This Tip Sheet

This tip sheet was based on research sponsored by the AmeriCorps Office of Research and Evaluation that collected data from five grantees, five subgrantees, and one grantee partner from the Social Innovation Fund (SIF). The [SIF issue brief](#) was originally developed by ICF (authored by Lara Malakoff, Janet Pershing, and Janet Griffith) and published in 2015 as a deliverable of the SIF Classic National Assessment and synthesized for this document. If you have any questions, please reach out to evaluation@cns.gov.