

# The Capacity Institute: A Case Study of Roxbury Youthworks

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Members of Roxbury Youthworks (RYI) staff slowly gathered in a law firm's conference room in downtown Boston high above State Street. Outside it was a raw and rainy December morning. Nine members of the organization's staff – all five senior staff as well as four frontline workers – and a member of its board poured themselves coffee and picked-up a muffin before settling into seats around the long table. It felt like a long way from their offices in Roxbury.

Ellen Bass, from the Black Ministerial Alliance's (BMA) staff and the driving force behind its Capacity Institute, enthusiastically welcomed each person as they arrived. Ellen had conceived of the program, raised the funds for it, recruited organizations to participate, provided ongoing technical assistance to the participating organizations and infected all with her passion for performance management. Each organization participating in the Institute committed to a day-long theory of change workshop. This was RYI's.

David E.K. Hunter, the facilitator, had driven up from Connecticut that morning. He claimed a seat next to Bass. Hunter had extensive public and nonprofit sector experience, including a stint as superintendent of a state psychiatric hospital. As the evaluation director of the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation he had helped a portfolio of that foundation's grantees transform themselves, becoming more rigorous and achieving greater scale and impact. He had quite literally written the book on performance management: *Working Hard and Working Well: A Practical Guide to Performance Management*. The multi-day theory of change workshops he pioneered while at the foundation helped its grantees clarify their theory of change, develop logic models, identify performance metrics and data collection systems. This process was central to Bass' vision for transforming the Institute's grantees.

Unlike many of her peers who begrudgingly attending United Way outcome measurement workshops two decades earlier, Bass, who at the time was a young staffer at Federated Dorchester Neighborhood Houses, became an immediate convert who was eager to share her experience with others. She saw in data-driven theory of change-based practice a tool for improving people's lives. The Capacity Institute reflected her missionary zeal for the topic. Her infectious optimism, passion for social justice, confidence, personal warmth, knowledge of performance management practices and disarming southern accent helped her recruit organizations to participate in the Institute and later, as their technical assistance coach, kept them engaged in the difficult work of designing their performance management system. She also managed to win over a reluctant David Hunter who agreed to modify his training protocol to accommodate the Institute's funding constraints. Instead of three or four days, he would do one day of training, leaving Bass with the job of working with each organization to prepare logic models and a data collection system.

While the Institute had started months earlier with training workshops on topics such as positive youth development, for the participating organizations the real work didn't begin until each had had its day

with Hunter. RYI was the last of the Institute cohort to get on Hunter's schedule. As a result, for RYI the two-year schedule, already foreshortened by roughly 6 months due to the Institute's start-up challenges, lost another six months before they were able to engage with Bass on a one-on-one basis to design its own performance management system.

Like others in the Capacity Institute cohort, RYI had to be persuaded to apply for its spot. Bass and BMA were actively recruiting youth serving organizations. Mia Alvarado became RYI's executive director two years earlier and faced an agency in crisis. RYI's financial condition was grave. There were days she did not know if she would be able to meet payroll. Stabilizing the finances became a top priority. But it was not her only priority. One of the agency's core funders, the Department of Youth Services (DYS), changed its service model. This was a positive development. But Alvarado inherited a workforce that had low expectations for the youth and lacked the skills to implement the new model. As a result, she also found herself overseeing an almost complete turnover of the staff.

So Alvarado had a mixed reaction to Bass' initial entreaties to apply for the Institute. Yes, Alvarado wanted to make RYI a more data-driven and outcomes-oriented agency. However, it meant enlisting in a daunting and time-consuming commitment before she felt confident that the agency had stabilized. She told Bass she'd think about it. At the same time Katie Carlson, RYI's GIFT program director, received BMA's email with the request for proposals for the Institute. It immediately struck her as a good way for RYI to improve its programs. She passed the email along to Alvarado and RYI's deputy director, Diana Thompson. Thompson hardly needed to be convinced: Her brother, David Wright, is BMA's executive director. Seeing the interest and with Thompson offering to help with the application, Alvarado agreed to proceed and RYI joined the cohort.

The application included an organizational self-assessment. Working from several widely used capacity assessment rating scales Bass crafted the Institute's 17 benchmark self-assessment tool. She hoped to capture baseline data that she could compare with the results of a second assessment conducted at the conclusion of the Capacity Institute. After the organization rated itself Bass reviewed the scores with the organization's leadership, adjusting the scores after some give-and-take. For RYI, the exercise led them to reflect about where they stood as an organization and to realize they had room to do some capacity-building.

That's how, many months later, the RYI team found itself anxiously assembling downtown. They had heard stories from other members of the cohort about Hunter's aggressive and uncomfortably confrontational workshops. Members of the RYI staff admitted afterwards that they were dreading the session. Even in his three and four day theory of change workshops Hunter is intentionally provocative. However, with only one day, Hunter did not have the luxury of spending a day building trust before challenging the organizational stakeholders participating in the workshop. Unless he succeeded in disrupting the business-as-usual organizational equilibrium, Hunter knew he would be unable to motivate the Capacity Institute participants to embrace the radical cultural makeover required to transform themselves into high performing, data-driven organizations. He had no time to waste: He needed to provoke an emotionally charged atmosphere almost immediately. So, after some introductory remarks and a description of how the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation transformed itself

during his tenure as its director of evaluation, he launched into a harsh critique of the RYI's mission, business model, program designs and claims of effectiveness. Unlike the high performers the Foundation funded, Hunter argued, RYI lacked any evidence that it accomplished any good.

The discomfort was palpable and, predictably, elicited a defensive response. "We need to be truthful, we are not all bad. We have come a long way..." Hunter pushed back, focusing on RYI's DYS-funded District Offices program. He observed that RYI's activities under the contract are fashioned to comply with DYS' expectations rather than reflecting RYI's own standards and accused RYI of "outsourcing its management" to its funder. This was the first in a succession of critiques. He juxtaposed each with anecdotes from his personal experience describing how high performing organizations had successfully dealt with equivalent challenges. With each iteration Hunter introduced another core performance management concept: setting goals and objectives, measurement, continuous improvement, governance, accountability, etc.

Then Hunter turned to RYI's mission statement:

*Roxbury Youthworks' mission is to create healthy families and strong communities; to inspire young men and women to recognize and develop their strengths; and to prepare them to lead independent and self-sufficient lives.*

He questioned how RYI could possibly create strong communities: "Do you do community organizing," he asked. "Can you really create healthy families?" At this point, the tension broke as Hunter invited the group to rewrite its mission statement. The resulting give-and-take search for language which might succinctly convey RYI's purpose shifted the energy in the room. This was content about which the staff cared deeply. Hunter's persistent questioning forced the group to be clearer about whom RYI serves and the outcomes it sought to achieve. Half an hour later and in half the words – short enough to Tweet – RYI had crafted a new and concisely worded mission statement:

*Roxbury Youthworks, Inc. helps youth caught in cycles of poverty, victimization, and violence transition successfully to adulthood.*

From both a process and product perspective, arriving at this mission statement during the morning proved to be important. Months later a key member of the RYI team reported, "We love the new mission statement;" a sentiment echoed by others. She admitted, "I could never keep the old mission statement in my head and it wasn't fully reflective of who we are." The exercise gave the group a taste of the cognitive discipline required to implement performance management practices. They were forced to grapple with the defining characteristics of their work; important details RYI had, like most human service organizations, glossed over with generalizations: What is the target population? What are the program design specifications? What does a successful outcome look like? How would we determine – measure – whether program participants are achieving and sustaining positive changes?

Perhaps most importantly, in guiding the group through the process of revising the mission statement Hunter had managed to shift the group dynamics. The combative and defensive exchanges evolved into a series of challenging but constructive Socratic exchanges: Hunter pressing the group with questions about each program and precisely how it advanced RYI's mission and members of the staff engaging in

critical thought. Between the penetrating questions, Hunter also began to coach the group. It continued to be a very difficult conversation, but it had become constructive, engaging and exploratory.

Reflecting back on the workshop days and months later members of the staff offered the same appraisal: "Everyone came out feeling it was challenging. But at the end of the day, it was the best thing that could have happened." Almost a year and a half later one of RYI's managers reminisced, "I loved that he challenged us the way he did."

Perhaps the low point during the day-long workshop revolved around Hunter's searing observations about the DYS program. The group seemed like they were on the ropes. Yet it produced an important insight: RYI had the authority to initiate innovative programming for young people returning to the community after a period of juvenile detention. Despite that, RYI had been operating the program as it had before the DYS policy shift. The contract no longer required DYS caseworker approval for programmatic decisions about each young person. It took Hunter's aggressive questioning for members of the staff to decide to take charge. As one manager later observed, "We always asked permission from the case worker for everything. We are now just going ahead, connecting the kid and a program and saying to the case worker, 'Oh, by the way, this kid is enrolled in... We do not give them an opportunity to say no.'"

Does this mean Hunter achieved in one day what he would ordinarily do in 3 or 4? No. Instead, Bass spent weeks with each organization assisting them to prepare a logic model for each program, identifying outcomes, and agreeing on how to measure those outcomes. Bass' work built on the foundation that remained after the storm-surge Hunter. He had cleared away the resistance virtually every organization erects when initially faced with the need for change. For RYI this meant that Bass trained the entire staff in logic models and then worked with a small team from each program to develop its own logic model. For some members of the staff, the training seemed long and not especially useful. But to the teams that actually developed the logic models and for the agency's approach to its work, creating the logic models had a transformational effect. "None of us had gone through the logic model process," one of the managers noted. "We hadn't thought what we would want to measure. What do we really want to push the kids to excel at? If we were just to pick these kids off the street, what would we want for them? It was a new way for us to think."

RYI identified two other capacity-building activities they were counting on the Institute to deliver in the months following the theory of change workshop: A data management system for tracking program outcomes and a human resource performance management system.

The organization lacked the technology infrastructure to manage program performance data. They relied primarily on spreadsheets. Moreover, to the extent they were collecting data, it was primarily basic demographic data. They lacked the tools to collect outcome data. Becoming an organization that had a data collection system to drive program performance would entail a giant capacity-building step to say nothing of the culture shift required to implement it. The capacity self-assessment RYI completed as part of the Institute's application process, showed the organization knew this would be a challenge.

They scored themselves level 1, the lowest level, on the technology, data management and data analysis related benchmarks.

RYI would need to choose a software platform and figure out how to structure data. The staff would need to be persuaded of the value of the data if RYI were to count on them to enter data. No one had the time to devote to data analysis and utilization. And all of that presumed RYI's programs had settled on indicators and data collection tools that would generate telling information. Becoming a data-driven organization also had budgetary implications.

The Capacity Institute provided participants with a small grant to spend on information technology consulting. RYI joined with other grantees to pool these resources. They agreed to adopt the same database platform and be trained together. Doing so would maximize the residual funding each could use to cover the cost of individualized database customization assistance. The arrangement worked. They settled on Salesforce. The training, which was conducted on-line as a webinar, was cost-effective although RYI staff felt they really needed hands-on training. The individual consulting, on the other hand, was enormously helpful. Over a year later, RYI staff are entering data into the system. They are also beginning to appreciate the steep learning curve they are climbing. The information being entered comes from data collection tools they are piloting. They look forward to analyzing the data at the end of the current fiscal year. In addition, they have raised and budgeted new funds to support the continued development of the data management system; an indicator that RYI recognizes that an on-going investment will be required to develop and provide on-going support for this essential performance management function. As their post-assessment scores demonstrate, the data related benchmark scores showed improvement. However, RYI's leadership recognizes it has only just begun this capacity-building journey.

The other post-workshop capacity-building challenge RYI faced was to align job performance with identified programmatic outcomes. Human resource management was an area managers knew needed attention, although the before and after self-assessment score of 3 out of 4 does not reflect that self-knowledge. Most importantly, RYI's management was concerned about their need for a performance appraisal system. Following the human resource training workshop, the organization realized their job descriptions, which follow the duties and qualifications format, needed to be completely rewritten to describe the outcomes employees would be accountable for achieving and the competencies they need to do so. As with the database management capacity-building framework, following the human resource consultant's well-received training for all the grantees, each organization received individualized consulting services from the Institute's human resource trainer. Here the assistance was less successful. In the end, RYI felt it did not get the help it needed revising job descriptions and designing a performance appraisal system that would provide staff with useful feedback. Nonetheless, the managers have continued to make progress on both although without the technical support they were hoping to receive.

In December 2012, as the Capacity Institute reached its scheduled conclusion, several of RYI's managers asked the same question: "How much of this will stick?" It was a good question. The database existed skeletally, but the organization's commitment to collecting and using the data had not yet been tested.

Would it become a dynamic resource to drive programmatic performance? They had defined a set of program outcomes to pilot, but it was far from clear these would be the guideposts they would eventually rely upon. Performance-based job descriptions and a written employee performance appraisal system were incomplete. As they reflected back on the experience a year later, RYI's management team sees they had too little time and perhaps had unrealistic expectations given both the short duration of their participation in the Capacity Institute and their financial and human resource constraints. To realize improved outcomes through performance management, organizations need to accept that the lean management model that is too frequently the norm in the sector needs to change. Nonetheless, RYI's managers were able to look back on their progress a year later and agreed: It did stick. Yes, progress has been slow. But it has been steady. More importantly, progress continues to be made because RYI has internalized the link between performance management and helping "youth caught in cycles of poverty, victimization, and violence transition successfully to adulthood."

The "will it stick" question could be asked again after another year. The answer will depend on its progress in two areas. First, has RYI linked its human resource management to its performance management model? In other words, will it have performance-based job descriptions tied to programmatic outcomes and will it have implemented a performance review process tied to those job descriptions? Second, will RYI's rudimentary data collection system evolve with the new resources RYI has raised for this purpose into a propulsive force for improving performance? On both counts there are reasons for optimism. RYI has a timeline for completing the performance appraisal system and for assessing the data its staff has been entering into the new system.

All high-performing organizations learn that making a difference is a never-ending journey of change and self-improvement. RYI began its journey apprehensively on that raw December day with their theory of change workshop. It seemed improbable that the uncomfortable and confrontational session with David Hunter would be a turning point. Yet that appears to be what happened. Today RYI is fully committed to the promise of performance management. While its journey remains a work in progress, a year after "graduating" from the Capacity Institute, RYI continues to press on and make progress.