

BLACK MINISTERIAL ALLIANCE CAPACITY INSTITUTE
CASE STUDY OF THE CITY SCHOOL
SPRING 2014

It was late 2010. The City School had just completed a strategic planning project. TCS co-Directors Ruby Reyes and Seth Kirshenbaum, along with their staff and Board colleagues, were pleased to have it wrapped up. So when Ellen Bass contacted them to ask if they were interested in participating in two-year capacity building program, Ruby and Seth greeted the invitation with mixed emotions.

The strategic planning process had reaffirmed TCS' commitment to help youth become social justice leaders in their communities. It had helped them generate a "theory of change" that articulated the process by which their work would produce positive outcomes for youth, and in turn for the communities in which they lived and worked. The staff and Board had agreed on a program plan and portfolio, and had defined the competencies they wanted youth to develop. Finally, the plan included a set of operational improvements that would be required in order for TCS to actualize its ambitious vision.

And yet, despite the considerable progress TCS had made in defining goals and strategies for the next five years, there remained a deep sense of uncertainty and concern about the future. The challenges seemed formidable. Leading Boston foundations, along with government agencies and community leaders, were pressing youth development agencies like TCS to concentrate their programs and resources on college preparation. "The whole focus in Boston's funding community was on helping youth get into college, measuring success by how many young people achieved that goal. Youth development organizations throughout the city were under pressure", said Seth. If you wanted to compete for foundation grants and government contracts for your youth development program, the message from foundations and city and state government funders was "focus on college preparation." "We were bitter about it, the focus on grade point average, college admission, etc."

For TCS, having to measure its primary impact by this metric would divert them from their beliefs and goals. It would represent a short-sighted and narrow view of youth development. As Seth explained, "There are many young people who don't care about going to college. It's not

necessarily the right goal for everybody. We end up working with young people who have gone to college for a year or two and they drop out. And they are deep in debt. We've had principals tell us that their superstars did badly in college because they were not emotionally ready, they did not have the support structure, and were just not prepared." Ruby put it this way: "We don't believe that just because someone is able to get into college that they will necessarily succeed in college and in life. Things are not that clear and straightforward. We needed to make a strategic decision about whether to make college pursuit a central goal of our work. This was one of the key questions we were asking ourselves when Ellen Bass contacted us."

TCS knew they would receive a rich array of resources through the Capacity Institute (CI). They were attracted by Ellen's passionate and deep commitment to youth development and organizational improvement. They also like the idea of learning alongside their colleagues. Perhaps most importantly they were motivated by a desire to find a way to stay alive in a tough economic climate and extreme pressure from funders. As Seth stated, "We thought the CI could help us figure things out and manage through this tough time."

As they reflect back, Ruby and Seth are confident they made the right decision in accepting Ellen's invitation.

Perhaps the most significant benefit TCS derived from participating in the CI was increased confidence that its approach to youth and community development was unique and of great value. Building on the strategic planning the organization had done over the past decade, the staff and Board became more confident about their mission and goals and their particular approach to youth development. For Ruby, "The CI brought a new level of rigor to TCS and the way we thought about our work. It forced the staff and Board to articulate goals, outcomes and measures of success in ways we had never done. It forced us to make choices, including where to pursue funding and when to say no to grant opportunities. And it helped us clarify what we wanted young people to achieve and what impact we could and could not take credit for." As Seth explained, "Going through the CI process helped us understand that we were unique, that nobody else in the City was doing what we do. It helped us clarify who we were, what our unique value was, and what we wanted young people to achieve. It reaffirmed our determination to continue our work."

"The CI experience helped us build and strengthen our foundation", said Seth. We were able to seal cracks and become clearer about what we were trying to achieve. Now we are more honest about who we are. We have a clear political framework and know the outcomes we are trying to achieve with our youth. We are much more intentional about what we do. We have turned down contracts that would not fit with the outcomes we're trying to achieve. This process helped us learn more about ourselves. We are not fearful."

Speaking of fear, one of the key activities of the CI was a day-long "Theory of Change" session with David Hunter, a seasoned performance management consultant. By all accounts, a day with Hunter is not for the faint of heart; he can be combative, critical and at times just plain rude. As the day began, Hunter grilled TCS on their basic program design and the claims they were making about the benefits youth derived from their participation. He challenged the criteria TCS used to select program participants, arguing that they were overly simplistic, gave too much weight to a young person's socio-economic status and failed to take into account the traits that participants would need if they were going to succeed in the program. Hunter also argued that organizational and program resources were being spread among too many youth to have any measurable impact.

While his style was aggressive, the TCS staff knew he was making valid and important points, and that there was nothing personal about his criticism. He wanted TCS to succeed. The day proved to be transformational. "He got me to think differently about our program dosage and our program design," said Reyes. "He drilled down into the core purpose and really made us think about what we were trying to achieve and how we needed to do it."

Seth added:

He helped us clarify our program dosage and define our target population vs. our service population, referring to this as 'the egg yolk vs. the egg white.' If we were going to have deep impact, we needed to shift more resources into the egg yolk. We did not realize how small our egg yolk was. David pointed out that 70-80 of our young people go off to work with other organizations in the second year. With his help, we agreed that these young people are still part of our target population, our egg yolk, although it is harder to measure the impact we are having on them and the impact they are having on the partner organization. We did not realize how small our egg yolk was. The impact on the one-touch people is not worth talking about. As a result of our work with David, we now say we are working with a smaller group of young people more intensively. We see teenagers as complex beings. We offer

complex programming. We don't say if you get into college that you are good to go.

The work with Hunter, Ellen Bass and the other members of the CI team enabled TCS' staff and Board members to deepen their understanding of outcome measurement and program evaluation. Seth noted, "When I began working here, I had no clue about outcomes and indicators. Now I understand the difference. It was a huge and important learning curve. I needed to learn the language that everyone else was using. I saw how much we were swimming against the current."

The process helped TCS sharpen its identity and clarify its program goals and outcomes. As Ruby explained, "The work created a process for us to think about what areas to evaluate. The questions around academic evaluation, we were able to figure our way around. We figured out how to marry what we do with what funders want. It felt authentic to us. On a programmatic level, it helped us structure our summer leadership curriculum and understand what we needed to provide in terms of fundamentals."

With a more sophisticated understanding of outcome measurement, TCS was able to design its programs to achieve greater impact. For Ruby, Seth and the other staff, the outcome measurement work "stepped things up organizationally." They are now able to look at data and evaluate program strength and impact, identify where their efforts are failing to have the desired impact, and find ways to adjust their activities and program design to more effectively advance their mission.

While the CI experience was overwhelmingly positive and produced a host of benefits, there were some difficulties and disappointments. First, the CI program was largely structured on an academic calendar. For TCS, that schedule proved challenging. The staff needed to focus on preparing for their intensive summer program. And of course there was little time in the summer for anything else besides their program. For Ellen and many of the other CI cohort members, June, July and August tended to be more relaxed months, providing opportunities for working with consultants and colleagues. Not for TCS. Second, the CI program included funding and consulting support to help the cohort members strengthen their management information systems and databases, a key ingredient of performance management. However, for a variety of reasons, including time pressures, scheduling challenges and the widely divergent needs of the cohort members, TCS' progress on this front was limited. TCS was frustrated that the database work

came late in the process, as the calendar was running out. On the other hand, they learned enough to know that building a strong database management system was essential to their progress, and the introduction to Salesforce and Efforts To Outcomes gave them a sense of the benefits that a powerful database could provide. In fact, several months after the conclusion of the CI, TCS began working with a database consultant who proved to be a good match. Building on the what they had learned, they built a strong Salesforce database that has dramatically enhanced TCS' program assessment activities, relationship management and fundraising efforts. From Ruby's perspective, "Until we had the database functioning, we could not really assess whether our participants were really gaining knowledge and skills. The database helps confirm what we think is happening. It helps our staff people understand what people are getting out of us. The systems are in place. We all understand and are committed to outcome measurement. It is ingrained in the culture."

As Seth explained, "we are able to look at how individuals are doing year to year and are using a continuum to chart individual progress. Longer-term, we are depending on community partners to help us move young people along. We hold ourselves accountable and our community partners accountable and are using Salesforce to track our progress. We are looking at having all our partners on Board with us to help us achieve outcomes."

The CI experience helped everyone in the organization appreciate that performance management requires alignment throughout the organization. It must function as a finely tuned machine, with all facets pulling in the same direction. TCS' mission, goals and intended outcomes had to be clearly defined. Programs had to be redesigned to logically produce those outcomes. Tangible, measurable indicators of success had to be formulated. Data collection tools had to be reworked. The budget had to be built and managed to support and reflect goals and priorities. Workplans had to be developed for each member of the staff, with each reflecting organizational goals and rolling up into an overall organizational workplan. The Board needed to evolve and become more aware, engaged and supportive. Clear accountability structures had to be established. Virtually every aspect of the organization was examined and aligned.

Seth noted, "Our experience in the CI helped strengthen the organization from top to bottom. We all understand each other's roles. We all know whom to reach out to for support. It has made it more important to have clear workplans and goals. The process of doing work-planning together

has been much more collaborative and collective. We feel much more aligned throughout the organization."

The CI experience improved TCS' organizational culture on a variety of levels. The impact on the Board was indirect but it helped stimulate improvements. The Board became more active and engaged, developing a stronger understanding of TCS' theory of change and knowing what questions to ask in order to keep the organization on track. Ruby is pleased about the changes in the Board. "Our Board is awesome. The improvement is indirectly related to the CI/BCT. The improvements we made in our program design and impact have made it easier for the Board to understand our work and our impact. It has helped to activate the Board. They now have clear levels of accountability and greater connection between the workplans of the staff and the Board."

The City School entered the CI in early 2011 as one of the stronger members of its cohort. By the close of the CI it had grown even stronger, consistently earning near perfect scores on the assessment tool Ellen used with the organizations to evaluate their performance management. As Seth said, "Our strategic plan was about strengthening institutional structures. The CI process helped us create the structure and systems that are becoming a cultural norm. Someone new coming in would inherit all of this."