

# What Makes an Effective Advocacy Organization?

A Framework for Determining Advocacy Capacity



*Funded by and prepared for:*



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# Foreword from The California Endowment

Evaluating advocacy and policy change efforts presents unique challenges—external players and dynamics, complexity, lengthy time frame, and the need to shift strategies, to name a few. Yet, evaluation is critically important, both for the foundation and the advocacy organization. Recognizing the limitations of most evaluation methods for policy activities, over the last several years, The California Endowment, along with several other foundations and consultants, have sought to develop frameworks and methodologies to be able to meaningfully evaluate policy change efforts. This growing field of policy and advocacy evaluation is predicated on a prospective evaluation approach that is intended to inform both the foundation and the grantee about the advocacy strategy during the course of the grant.

As part of that endeavor, The Endowment recognized that general support grants for advocacy organizations presented additional challenges, in terms of evaluation. Since general support grants, by definition, do not have specific objectives or goals attached to them, how should a foundation assess whether a grantee is a good candidate for such a grant or whether providing general support to that grantee is the right strategy? As a recent report by Grantmakers for Effective Organizations points out, general support is an important grantmaking strategy, particularly for advocacy; yet, foundations need better tools to answer those questions.

To that end, The California Endowment asked TCC Group to conduct an evaluation of a cohort of advocacy organizations who were receiving general support from the foundation. One of the important outcomes of that evaluation was a much deeper understanding of the characteristics of effective advocacy organizations.

Drawing on interviews with national experts, its past research on non profit organizational effectiveness, and evaluations of The Endowment's and other advocacy projects, TCC Group identified distinctive characteristics that are critical to high-performing advocacy organizations. In this paper, TCC Group outlines a model for evaluating organizational capacity for advocacy organizations and describes in detail the capacities that are critical to advocacy and how they interrelate to each other.

We believe that this analysis and framework can be useful to any kind of organization interested in increasing its effectiveness related to advocacy—regardless of whether it is dedicated to advocacy or not, has a big budget or small, or works on many issues or just one.

We also hope this paper will be of benefit to foundations who want to expand and improve their grantmaking to advocacy organizations, but felt limited by their ability to understand how to assess potential grantees or their capacity to carry out the proposed activities. Lastly, we hope this paper will provide new insights to evaluators themselves.

Sincerely,



**Barbara Masters**  
Public Policy Director



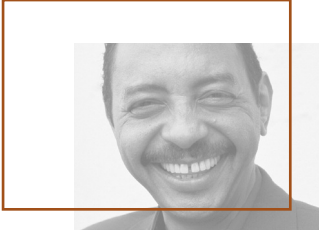
**Astrid Hendricks, EdD**  
Director of Evaluation

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# Table of Contents

<b>Part I: Background &amp; Overview</b>	4
Introduction	4
Why is Advocacy Organizational Analysis Critical Now?	5
The Historic Context for Understanding Advocacy Work	6
What are the Distinctive Characteristics of Advocacy Groups?	8
Adapting the Core Capacity Framework for Advocacy Organizations	10
<b>Part II: Critical Capacities for Advocacy Organizations</b>	12
Leadership Capacity for Advocacy	12
Motivation and Persuasion	14
Authentic Commitment	14
Relate to Constituents	15
Strong External Relationships	15
Board Leadership	16
Strategic Vision	17
Sharing Leadership	18
Adaptive Capacity for Advocacy	19
Building Strategic Partnerships	19
Strategic Positioning	20
Preserving Resource Flexibility	21
Monitoring and Measuring Progress	22
Management Capacity for Advocacy	23
Non-Staff Resource Management	23
Staff Coordination	24
External Relationship Management	25
Human Resources	26
Financial Management	26
Technical Capacity for Advocacy	27
Strategic Communication Skills	27
Policy Issues and Processes	27
Interpersonal Skills	28
Finance and Fundraising Proficiency	28
Legal Knowledge	29
Facilities and Equipment	29
<b>Part III: Conclusion &amp; Acknowledgements</b>	30
<b>Appendix: Evaluating Advocacy Organizational Capacity and Detailed Capacity Logic Model</b>	32
Advocacy CCAT	34



# Part I: Background & Overview

## Introduction

Advocacy as a strategy for the nonprofit sector has become increasingly widespread. Foundations are looking to fund more of this type of work; nonprofits are learning how to harness its power to achieve their mission; and both are trying to better understand how to evaluate success.

Rightfully, the focus has heretofore primarily been on how to use advocacy strategies as tools for effecting specific changes, and on building the basic skills necessary for employing advocacy tools (e.g., ad campaigns, meetings with policy-makers). Creating effective advocates has been the principle objective of these efforts. Yet little examination or analysis has been done to develop an organizational framework for evaluating and building the internal capacity of nonprofit advocacy organizations. Most analysis has focused almost exclusively on staff skills to carry out the work, as opposed to broader concepts that define the critically

necessary leadership, management and operations that make for an effective advocacy organization. It is our contention that nonprofit advocacy groups have developed to the point that it is time for a more comprehensive theory and framework.

The purpose of this paper, drawing on a variety of sources, is to look at the context for policy and advocacy<sup>1</sup> work and the distinctive characteristics of such work, outlining a model for evaluating organizational capacity and describing how this is adapted for advocacy organizations. In the nonprofit advocacy world, analysis of these capacities may be of use to many types of organizations, ranging from advocates on the ground to foundations that fund them ... from big-budget groups to small ones, national to international ... from those that use advocacy exclusively to address a problem to those that offer a variety of strategies, among which advocacy is only one component ... from those focusing on a

<sup>1</sup> For the rest of this paper, the term “advocacy” will be used as all-encompassing of policy and advocacy work. Policy work is often understood as one part of broader advocacy, so the single word is used here to eliminate the constant repetition of “policy and advocacy.” This is not meant by any means to diminish the importance of policy-specific work.



single-issue to those tackling a variety of different issues.

The paper begins with an overview of changes in the advocacy environment that are changing the way that advocacy work is carried out by nonprofit organizations. This is followed by a brief description of advocacy work and distinctive characteristics of advocacy organizations that make a conversation on advocacy organizational capacity both timely and relevant. Part I of the paper concludes with an organizational framework for examining organizational capacity: the Core Capacity Model. The Model looks at four areas of organizational capacity that work in coordination for effective organizations: Leadership, Adaptive, Management and Technical capacities.

Based on the Core Capacity Model, Part II of the paper examines critical organizational capacities of high-performing organizations doing advocacy work. While the capacities are interconnected, examining discrete aspects of each of the four capacities allows for specific analysis and diagnosis within a cohesive framework (see the logic model on page 7 for a picture of the overall model with specific capacities).

The existence of a concrete framework and specific review with an advocacy lens will allow advocates or funders to carefully examine how advocacy organizations do their work in order to increase effectiveness.

From there, evaluating organizational capacity then becomes a tool for enhancing performance and assessing likelihood for advocacy success.

## Why is Advocacy Organizational Analysis Critical Now?

Several changes in the environment in which nonprofits operate have precipitated the growth of nonprofit advocacy and focused greater attention on this area:

**Funding Opportunities.** Many funders have turned to supporting advocacy work as a tool for achieving their own missions, thereby increasing funding opportunities for advocacy groups. Some funders have even encouraged more traditional nonprofits, such as human service organizations, to incorporate advocacy into their programs and provided them funding and training to do so. Increased funding has enabled advocacy-only organizations to significantly raise their profiles and has permitted many multi-service organizations to incorporate advocacy as an additional strategy to achieve their missions.

**Increased Visibility.** Nonprofit advocacy organizations are increasingly visible, due to the explosion in the availability of electronic media, which has allowed nonprofits to reach more people with less effort and expense. Nonprofit advocates have now joined government officials and business executives as primary sources of information for journalists. Additionally,

high-profile advocacy organizations—such as Focus on the Family and the ACLU—have amplified the visibility of the sector as a whole.

**Devolution of Government.** The general trend toward devolution of funding and responsibilities for domestic programs from federal to state and local levels has inevitably increased the number of arenas and challenges for nonprofits: 50 statehouses and hundreds of counties and cities have become important battlegrounds for advocacy activities, as has the public at large through measures such as ballot initiatives. While local decision-making venues have long been a target of savvy advocates, the scope of potential avenues for advocacy intervention has never been so vast for nonprofits.

**Demand for Accountability.** The nonprofit sector in general has found itself under greater scrutiny and demand for performance accountability. And no part of the sector has been scrutinized more heavily than its advocacy ranks, thanks, in part, to their visibility. Beyond federal accountability (e.g., IRS oversight), advocacy organizations are increasingly being asked by donors to provide evaluation of their efforts and to achieve specific results.

**More Competition.** The number of nonprofit organizations utilizing advocacy has never been greater and the range of issues they cover has never been so extensive. While funders may have increased their support of advocacy,

the increased level has not kept pace with perceived advocacy needs, leading to intense competition for resources by advocacy organizations.

**Professionalization of Advocacy.**

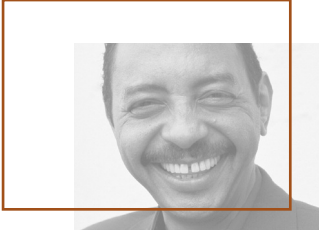
All the foregoing factors have combined to drive nonprofits to increase the training, sophistication, and professionalism of their advocacy efforts. Nonprofit advocacy efforts have become increasingly organized and complex.

The more favorable environment for nonprofit advocacy work has inevitably increased the need and urgency to examine the organizational frameworks within which nonprofit advocacy organizations operate.

## The Historic Context for Understanding Advocacy Work

There are several useful models in existence for developing and implementing advocacy work. These theories describe the processes by which policies are developed, influenced, established, implemented, and monitored.<sup>2</sup> The models provide a valuable context for understanding advocacy processes or outcomes and the strategies to achieve them.

To illustrate the basics of these various theories, **Figure 1** shows a logic model<sup>3</sup> which TCC Group has devised to depict the advocacy process, including strategies, outcomes, and impact. **Figure 1** demonstrates that advocacy strategies, such as issue analysis, grassroots organizing,

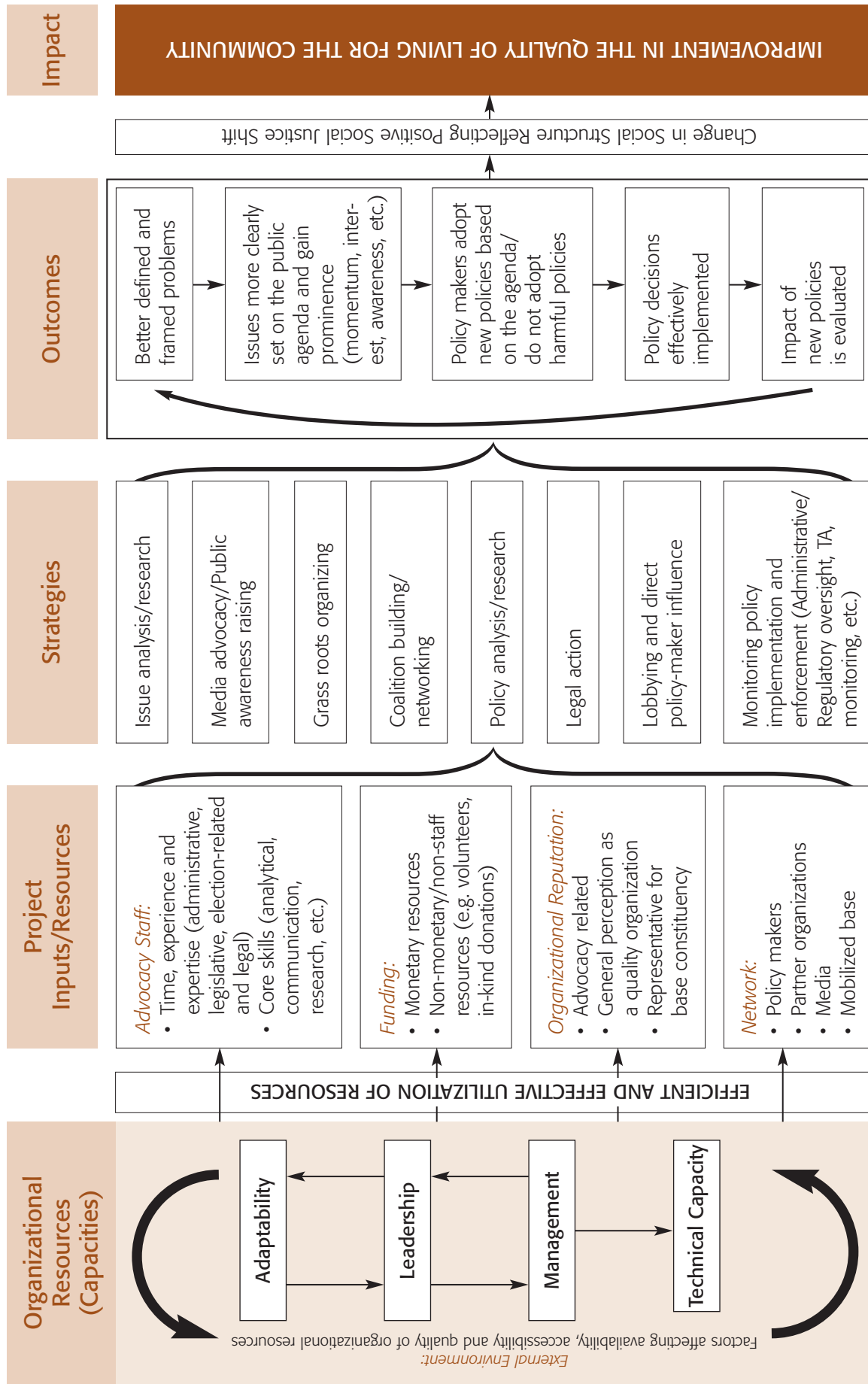


<sup>2</sup> Kingdon, J. W. (1995). *Agendas, alternatives, and public policies* (2nd ed.). New York: Longman. James M. Ferris and Michael Mintrom, "Foundations and Public Policymaking: A Conceptual Framework." Research Report 10, The Center on Philanthropy and Public Policy, University of Southern California (May 2002)

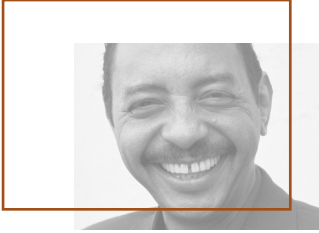
<sup>3</sup> For a brief overview of logic models, see "Learning as We Go: Making Evaluation Work for Everyone" by Peter York. Available at <http://www.tccgrp.com/pubs/evaluation.php>



Figure 1: Logic Model: Advocacy Initiatives



and lobbying, are used in varying combinations to achieve outcomes that range from better-framed issues to policy change to impact evaluation. In theory, these outcomes lead to changes in the social structure that improve the quality of life for one or more target audiences.



In addition, there has been some recent notable work attempting to evaluate the success of advocacy organizations, efforts, and initiatives. These evaluation schemes attempt to provide measurements of the success of a given initiative over time and identify what stratagems and mix of strategies can be most effective at achieving desired outcomes.<sup>4</sup>

Yet despite the efforts cited above, little work has been done regarding the resources and capacities – the “inputs” for developing and implementing advocacy strategies – that are necessary for the optimal support of effective advocacy. One exception is the Alliance for Justice’s (AFJ) Advocacy Capacity Assessment Tool. (“Build Your Advocacy Grantmaking: Advocacy Evaluation Tool and Advocacy Capacity Assessment Tool.”) This self-assessment tool, developed in 2005, is organized around nine broad indicators of capacity, such as decision-making structures, organizational commitment to and resources for advocacy, advocacy partners, advocacy targets, media skills and infrastructure, and knowledge, skills, and systems to effectively implement strategies. The AFJ capacity tool does an excellent job of identifying specific indicators of capacity, most of which relate

to the skills necessary for an effective advocacy program. But the AFJ tool and virtually all other models focus almost exclusively on staff skills, as opposed to the broader structures necessary to support the operations of an effective advocacy organization. And virtually no thought has been given to development of an organizational framework for supporting the internal capacity of advocacy organizations. It is the organizational capacities of advocacy organizations—which could be visualized as being to the far left of the advocacy logic model—that are the focus of this paper.

## What are the Distinctive Characteristics of Advocacy Groups?

Before examining organizational and internal capacities, it is useful to consider some of the distinctive characteristics and challenges of advocacy groups that must be considered when proposing a model to increase their effectiveness:

- Advocates think of themselves as active “doers” and the external nature of their work does not often allow time for thinking about institutional issues and internal processes. When asked to consider organizational capacity, the response of the advocate may be, “We are too busy doing the work to stop and think about theoretical ideas.”
- Nonprofit advocates frequently cite the need for programmatic skill development, such as media relations or grassroots mobilizing. But while those abilities are important, evidence has shown that, in isolation, strengthening those skills does

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Guthrie, K., Louie, J., & Crystal Foster, C. (2006). *The Challenge of Assessing Policy and Advocacy Activities: Part II—Moving from Theory to Practice*.

little to enhance programmatic performance. The reason is that skills are implemented within a structure. If the skills change, but the structure remains the same, there is only limited space for the new skills to operate and other activities are not prepared to leverage the new skills. There is a need for nonprofit advocates to move beyond technical skills in order to think more systemically about organizational capacity.

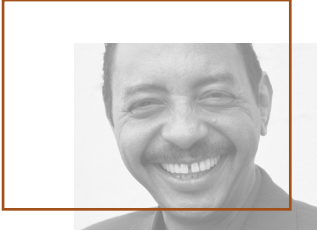
- In advocacy organizations, the distinction between programmatic work and organizational capacity is less distinct than in more traditional nonprofit organizations. Leaders in advocacy organizations must often do significant amounts of “program” implementation work, as well as manage other leadership responsibilities. In fact, the executive director of an advocacy organization often must lead the organization’s advocacy efforts and be the public face of the organization. As a result, questions of organizational framework and capacity are often shunted to the side or ignored in the hectic, day-to-day tumult of advocacy work.
- The external visibility of advocacy work exposes a nonprofit organization, and, by extension its board members, to greater risk—if not legally, certainly in terms of reputation. This heightened risk makes it important for boards and management—to ensure due diligence—to utilize organizational capacity as a critical indicator of evaluation and competence.

- The essence of advocacy requires an organization, regardless of the advocacy strategies it adopts, to be able to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances and environments. Adaptability needs to be inherent in an organization’s structure and capacity in order to encourage its advocates to be more flexible within the activist environment.
- Given the high level of uncertainty associated with the success of many advocacy efforts, funders may be anxious to ensure that their contributions are effectively utilized by advocacy grantees. An important evaluation question when a funder invests in an advocacy organization is, “How effective is this nonprofit with respect to its capacity to carry out a successful advocacy program?” This is particularly important when the funding provided is for general support, rather than for specific projects. Strong organizational capacity has the potential to be a reliable predictor of successful advocacy outcomes and can thereby assuage the concerns of funders (and board members) that general support funding is being well spent.

The growth of nonprofit advocacy and the lack of research and theory on the best methods to build successful advocacy organizations, combined with the unique characteristics of nonprofit advocacy that make it more imperative (while at the same time more difficult) to improve organizational capacity, lead us to the question: What model or framework is best suited to most effectively enhance advocacy work?

## Adapting the Core Capacity Framework for Advocacy Organizations

Over its 25 years of research and experience, TCC Group has developed a model for generally describing and understanding organizational effectiveness in the nonprofit sector. This model, specially designed for nonprofits, identifies four core capacities,<sup>5</sup> which are adapted in this paper for specific use by advocacy groups:



- **Leadership:** The ability of organizational leaders to create and sustain a vision, to inspire, prioritize, make decisions, provide direction, and innovate—in an effort to achieve the organizational mission.
- **Adaptive:** The ability of a nonprofit organization to monitor, assess, and respond to internal and external changes (such as networking/collaborating, assessing organizational effectiveness, evaluating programs and services and planning).
- **Management:** The ability of a nonprofit to ensure the effective and efficient use of organizational resources.
- **Technical:** The ability of a nonprofit to implement all of the key organizational and programmatic functions (such as finance, budgeting, fundraising, technology, marketing, and communications).

Each of these capacities is relevant to the general nonprofit community in defining and diagnosing an organization's strengths

and challenges, and building up these capacities will increase an organization's effectiveness in general. However, it is important to understand that, within the framework of the core capacities, they will not all be defined as or "look" the same for all types of organizations. There are unique "backdrop" issues—community contexts, political realities, resource differences, organizational culture – that require different application and implementation of the core capacities from nonprofit to nonprofit.

One of the distinctions that require a singular approach to the core capacities is the use of advocacy as a strategy for achieving goals. The difference between advocacy groups and more traditional service-delivery organizations serves as a good example of how capacities must be approached differently in different types of organizations. Leadership capacity in a direct-service nonprofit, for instance, usually requires a much higher level of *internal* leadership and decision-making with respect to the delivery of services and how those programs will lead to widespread community benefit and change. A significant amount of leadership with respect to guiding, motivating, and inspiring program staff and service recipients alike is often necessary. Advocacy organizations, on the other hand, usually require leadership that is more *externally* focused: Media relations, coalition-building, external strategizing, mobilizing allies, and molding public opinion take up much more leadership time and resources in advocacy groups.

<sup>5</sup> Connolly, Paul and Peter York, TCC Group (formerly The Conservation Company) (2003). "Building the Capacity of Capacity Builders: A study of Management Support and Field-Building Organizations in the Nonprofit Sector," a report produced with funding from the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, with additional assistance from The Alliance for Nonprofit Management and Grantmakers for Effective Organizations.

The close relationship between the four capacities will be obvious. Each capacity that functions well allows and supports the others to perform at a more optimal level. However, not all capacities are created equal: The most essential relationship exists between leadership capacity and adaptive capacity. These two operate in a continuous, reinforcing circle, with leadership setting the vision and adaptive capacity monitoring and planning for the mission and then providing feedback on successes and challenges which, in turn, improve leadership decision-making. These two primary capacities set the stage for management, which provides for the ordering and use of technical skills and resources.

When all four core capacities are operating effectively in an advocacy organization, it can take advantage of what is sometimes called the “window of opportunity” – that often arise suddenly so as to lead to success. The window may come into play for both positive (opportunities) and negative reasons (threats). On the positive side, the window represents an opportunity to go on the offensive, pushing for a desired change in the policy environment. For example, a prominent individual who is diagnosed with cancer may present an opportunity for moving the cancer prevention agenda forward for some cancer organizations. On the negative side, the window represents a threat to the issue agenda and necessitates defensive strategies to stop a detrimental change to the policy

environment. For example, a dramatic rise in gas prices that leads to calls for oil exploration in protected areas would necessitate defensive strategies for some environmental organizations.

The window provides a chance to direct the skills and resources throughout the organization into the implementation of specific actions and strategies.

An organization can access the window when its capacities are aligned and effectively functioning:

- **Leadership:** There is clarity on how the window relates to the organization’s overall agenda and it possesses the credibility to address the specific opportunity.
- **Adaptive:** The group is monitoring for a window of opportunity and assesses the optimal moment of intervention.
- **Management:** There is the capacity to mobilize all the necessary resources toward the opportunity.
- **Technical:** The relevant skills to quickly move on the opportunity are all available.

This is the appropriate point to look at the specific characteristics associated with each capacity for advocacy organizations.

Not all capacities are created equal: The most essential relationship exists between leadership capacity and adaptive capacity.



## Part II: Critical Capacities for Advocacy Organizations

In **Figure 2** the basic Advocacy Capacity Logic Model is displayed, which is the focus of this paper. While many of the capacities illustrated are similar to those characteristic of all nonprofit organizations, they are described here for an advocacy-specific organization. That is, the operational differences for advocacy groups—necessitated by the unique nature of their work in framing, publicizing, and affecting public-policy decisions on an issue—are specifically shown in the model within the context of capacities common to all nonprofits.

Taken together, they all interact to create an organizational environment that allows advocacy to thrive.

### Leadership Capacity for Advocacy

Perhaps the most salient capacity for an advocacy program is leadership. Effective organizational leadership capacity in advocacy organizations begins with motivating and exciting employees to work in a unified direction and with engaging other stakeholders in the nonprofit's initiatives. Attributes

#### Leadership Capacities

##### 1. *Motivation and persuasion*

- Authentic organizational commitment to advocacy
- Ability to relate to constituencies
- Strong relationships with community leaders

##### 2. *Board leadership*

- Engaged and committed to advocacy work

- Diligence with respect to monitoring short-term and long-term objectives

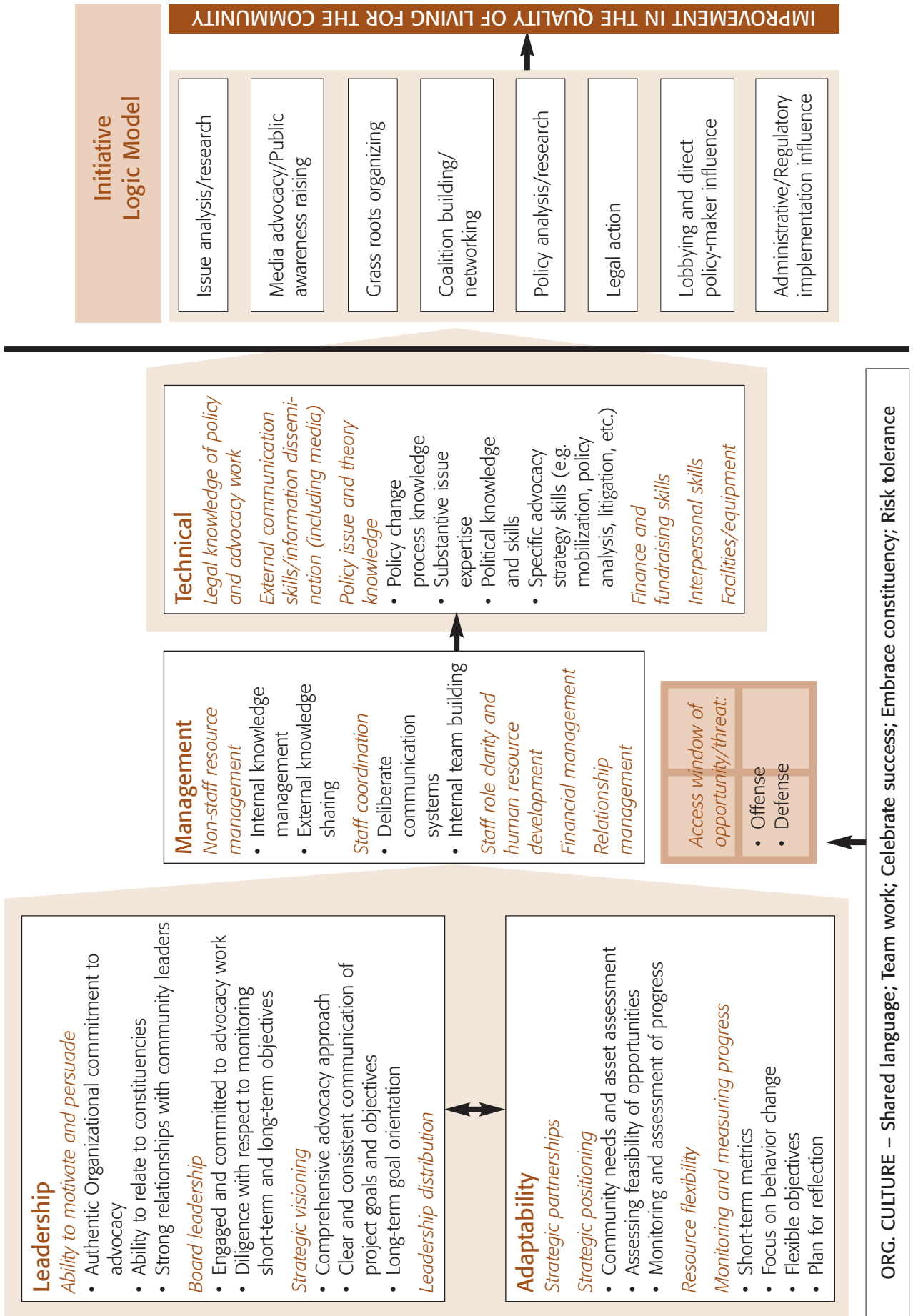
##### 3. *Strategic vision*

- Comprehensive advocacy approach
- Clear and consistent communication of project goals and objectives
- Long-term goal orientation

##### 4. *Leadership sharing*



**Figure 2:** The Critical Organizational Capacities for Advocacy Initiatives: The Logic Model “Inputs”



typically associated with organizational leadership capacity include vision, inspiration, motivation, prioritization, role clarity, and decision-making. Leadership capacities specifically centered on advocacy projects include:



### **Motivation and Persuasion**

Advocacy leaders must have the ability to understand how and when to motivate employees and outside stakeholders throughout the advocacy process. Such motivation frequently requires building consensus (including compromises) and persuading individuals toward a course of action. Underlying the ability to motivate and persuade are several leadership proficiencies.

### **Authentic Commitment**

Most notably, the leaders of an advocacy organization must demonstrate an authentic personal and organizational commitment to advocacy. Advocacy leadership requires the ability to articulate why the organization should be involved in a given issue. Because of the inherent element of persuasion required in advocacy work, the ability to communicate clearly and coherently the reasons why a group has chosen to advocate a particular policy or position is perhaps even more important than for traditional nonprofits. Organizations that engage in advocacy work because funding is available or because one board member thinks it is important or because it may look impressive in an annual report will generally lack the authenticity needed for effective advocacy work.

Establishing an organizational culture that is supportive of advocacy success is likewise imperative to promoting authenticity. Because of the strong influence that leaders have on establishing the environment within which the day-to-day work is done, it is incumbent on them to encourage a culture that includes a shared vision and an atmosphere supportive of working together as a unit toward a common goal. While there are numerous elements of organizational culture, high-performing advocacy organizations usually have three particularly notable cultural characteristics in common. They all:

- **Celebrate Success.** Advocacy work is hard and results are often ambiguous. In order to maintain momentum and morale, advocacy organizations need to take advantage of opportunities to celebrate both short-term minor victories and milestone successes, to give credit to staff and partners, as appropriate.
- **Embrace Constituencies.** All components of the working coalition should feel included and valued, especially those that are likely to be impacted by any success or failure of the advocacy activities. For example, some groups that worked against English-only legislation made special accommodations for their constituents, printing advocacy communications in multiple languages, even though it increased their costs.
- **Encourage Risk.** More than any other type of nonprofit work, advocacy has the least assurance of success and the

greatest degree of uncertainty. In order to operate effectively in this murky environment, staff members must be willing and encouraged to take calculated risks (e.g., risks informed by experience and knowledge, but without a certain outcome). To do this, they must know that their leaders will support them in taking measured risks. Leaders should make it clear that staff are encouraged to consider any strategy, as long as the ultimate goal remains intact.

### **Relate to Constituents**

Advocacy leaders must also be able to relate to internal and external constituencies. A constituency is defined as “the people involved in or served by an organization”.<sup>6</sup>

The exact make up of “constituencies” varies from organization to organization. However, it is likely that any given advocacy organization will have multiple groups which it is attempting to influence or serve.

In most cases, the primary constituency for an advocacy organization is the group most likely to be affected by changes in policy—e.g. a particular demographic. Effecting change through advocacy is essentially about persuading individuals to change behavior or take action: a legislator’s vote ... a judge’s interpretation of the law ... a citizen’s action on behalf

of change. Convincing people to change their behavior requires understanding their unique needs and desires—what they believe is important and beneficial.

An ability to empathize with a constituency increases the likelihood of appropriate focus and messaging and enhances the credibility of the organization as one that has the interests of its constituents at heart. Understanding constituents’ needs is akin to performing a cost-benefit analysis: The advocate must evaluate and articulate what the desired change means to the target audience by answering questions, such as “Does the cost of what we are asking them to do outweigh the benefit to them, personally or professionally?”

And “What reduced cost or additional benefit (or some combination of both) might change the cost-benefit equation so that their behavior would then change?”

Strategizing to maximize the cost-benefit ratio is key to effective persuasion.<sup>7</sup>

**“You have to be strong and credible enough to speak to the powerful and the powerless.”**  
— *Advocate*

### **Strong External Relationships**

Building strong relationships externally is also vital because without such relationships, the organization operates in vulnerable isolation. Alliances with community leaders from a variety of sectors—government, business, nonprofits—allow an organization

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/constituency>.

<sup>7</sup> It is important to note that cost-benefit ratios are constantly changing as the key targets’ environments change. Outside events, actions, and interests change which increase the “cost” and/or decrease the “benefit” for any constituent. This requires the persuaders to be sensitive to those changes and the effect they may have on the cost-benefit ratio, particularly for those whose ratio is close to 1.



to draw on additional resources and to position itself strategically. Coalition-building should encompass parties with any plausible interest in the subject, including not only those with direct concerns, but also those with more marginal, broadly defined, general interests in the community. Those with a direct interest are more likely to provide resources and strategic comprehension (e.g., whether to take a more circuitous approach to convince a city council's members or to make a direct assault on city hall), while those with broader interests provide an opportunity to bring new advocates to the issue and possibly to neutralize potential adversaries.

## Board Leadership

While board leadership is important to any nonprofit, there are two prerequisites for the leaders of a board that wishes to support a successful advocacy program. Board members must be:

- **Engaged and committed to advocacy work.** To whatever extent an organization engages in advocacy—whether it is focused solely on advocacy or utilizes advocacy as only one of several strategies for addressing an issue – its board must be actively and explicitly supportive and engaged regarding its advocacy activities. Not only is the organization's standing and credibility more exposed by engaging in advocacy, but by their association with an

organization doing advocacy work, board members put their own reputations on the line, particularly when the issues are controversial. As such, an advocacy agenda should be brought to board members for full consideration and should receive the explicit backing of the board.

Another reason to secure board members' support is to be able to tap those members for active involvement in advocacy efforts. Often, by virtue of board members' contacts and positions, they can play a greater role in assisting a nonprofit in accomplishing its advocacy goals than they could in achieving more traditional service program objectives. Board members

should be respectfully approached to provide access to key leaders and resources; to communicate the nonprofit's advocacy message within their own circles of influence; and to provide intelligence

and information on how others in the community may be thinking about the issue and its solutions.

- **Diligent with respect to monitoring short-term and long-term objectives.** Good boards understand their role in governance, particularly as it relates to fiduciary oversight and monitoring organizational performance. For advocacy organizations, there is an added responsibility: asking for and reviewing

**"Boards need to recognize that advocacy puts them in the public eye."  
— Advocate**

information on advocacy strategy, outcome benchmarks, and milestones. Further, because advocacy initiatives often lack clear timeframes and are subject to changing environmental factors (e.g., elections, delays in committee, defection of allies), an effective advocacy board will try to promote short-term objectives through a lens of progress towards longer-term advocacy outcomes. For example, one board of an environmental advocacy group tracked developments in local policy on watershed issues and assisted by monitoring and publicizing the overall health of the watershed through annual “report cards.”

### Strategic Vision

While the need for strategic vision – the specific goals that a nonprofit is trying to accomplish—is not unique to advocacy work, the need for clarity of long-term goals, and the ability to communicate them, is made even more crucial because of the uncertainty that frequently surrounds advocacy work. Advocacy leaders have the daunting task of arranging the pieces of a very complex puzzle in a way that will delineate a clear path to success—to plainly articulate the arrangement and interplay of particular strategies that will move the organization towards unambiguous short- and long-term outcomes. This vision must not only be conveyed to staff and the board, but also to funders, allies, and to the broader public. A strategic vision for an advocacy group will include several essential components:

- **Inclusion of all feasible advocacy strategies necessary to achieve success:**

Effective advocacy leaders must develop a vision that addresses each issue from multiple aspects. For example, consider a legislative initiative. After a bill has been introduced, advocacy leaders need to keep their groups strategically engaged through the entire committee process and continuing through to the general floor debate, vote and executive signature, not to mention actual implementation. At every stage, a different set of stakeholders presents a different agenda. In a day of sound-bites and instant gratification, ongoing motivation can be a real challenge. Advocacy leaders need the capacity to understand how and when to motivate various stakeholders throughout the process. An instructive case in point is the example of several advocacy nonprofits that pursued litigation early in this decade to address their civil liberties concerns about the detention of individuals on the grounds of terrorism. The organizations won several high-profile court cases, only to see the results overturned in the

**“The thing that allows us to shift course is that we all share the same mission, and its reinforced here all the time. So when something comes up, and you need to realign priorities, there’s no fighting about ‘my project’ or ‘your project.’ Its just sitting down to understand what we can do to best deal with the issue.”**  
— *Advocate*

legislative arena a short time later. To combat this, the organizations belatedly initiated a three-pronged strategy—legal advocacy, legislative advocacy, and grassroots mobilization and education—instead of relying on just one approach to address the issue.



- **Clear and consistent communication of goals and objectives:** Leaders should frequently reiterate to staff and volunteers the purpose of specific initiatives and how they fit into the larger vision in order to keep them appropriately focused and motivated. For example, a nonprofit’s staff member working with a homeless individual to prevent wrongful seizure of his/her property may win a summary judgment in that one case, but not see the broader opportunity to address the legality of city ordinances that permit confiscation based on class status, thus missing the chance to help a much larger number of people. Leaders need to help ensure that staff understand the objectives of the broader advocacy agenda.
- **Long-term orientation:** Long-term goal orientation enables an organization to adapt strategically. In the absence of long-term goals, decision-making defaults to immediate “here and now” problem solving, leading to a focus on the most pressing or immediate concerns rather than on making decisions that are the most conducive to achieving the ultimate goal. Advocacy leaders should continually assess objectives within the context of the broader theory of change and its established goals.

## Sharing Leadership

Advocacy leaders need to be cognizant of opportunities to delegate appropriately not only some of their work, but also selected leadership tasks. This does not mean that an organization should necessarily reduce the visibility and role of effective leaders, but rather that such leaders should be willing to enhance their own effectiveness by knowing how and when to apportion the work and to enlist others in making decisions. Sharing leadership—sometimes referred to as distributed decision-making—can unleash enthusiasm and talent from those to whom work and decision-making is delegated. Such distributed leadership is most effective when it is encouraged both within the nonprofit (other staff members) and outside the organization (constituents and other organizations).

Because many advocates are highly energetic and engaging individuals—characteristics essential to their success as advocates—they often find it difficult to share leadership and delegate work. And many organizations often come to rely on one charismatic leader who is a very effective advocate. Nevertheless, such an approach is usually not sustainable over the long-term, due to both personal fatigue on the part of the individual and visibility fatigue—always seeing the same person—on the part of outside constituencies. It behooves organizations to encourage and promote distributed decision-making by leaders and management.



## Adaptive Capacity for Advocacy

Effective adaptive capacity for an advocacy organization refers to its ability to monitor, assess, and adapt the organization's work successfully to changing environments, both inside and outside the organization. Activities commonly associated with organizational adaptive capacity include evaluating programs and services, planning, collaborating, partnering, and strategizing. Some of the specific adaptive capacities important to advocacy organizations include:

### Building Strategic Partnerships

An important initial step to developing strategic partnerships is to identify explicitly the key targeted change agents on the path to reform (e.g., constituents, policy makers, researchers, media, legislators, legislators' staff, and the public or specific segments of it). It is then vital to understand which of these forces are currently allies (existing partners), which could potentially be allies (short-term

targets or long-term partners), and which will require convincing to join (ultimate targets for the victory). This appraisal may also bring opponents into clearer focus, identifying their spheres of influence and relative importance for achieving success.

Networking and collaborating with other individuals and organizations multiplies the impact of an advocacy organization by augmenting its work with more resources (money, time, experience, tools), by strengthening its efforts with complementary assets, and by reinforcing its message and outreach with multiple messengers. While creating a network is technically a leadership capacity, the maintenance, monitoring, managing, and strategic use of a network is an important adaptive capacity. Some of the key aspects of successful strategic network capacity are shown in the box below.

**"We look to develop partnerships with those organizations where we can fill a unique niche. What we do is research. We try to partner with organizations that can use that research to make policy change, and then monitor that change on the ground."**

*— Advocate*

### Adaptive Capacities

#### 1. Strategic partnerships

#### 2. Strategic positioning

- Community needs and asset assessment
- Assessing feasibility of opportunities
- Monitoring and assessment of progress

#### 3. Resource flexibility

#### 4. Monitoring & measuring progress

- Short-term metrics
- Focus on behavior change
- Flexible objectives
- Plan for reflection



But advocacy groups should be cautious: Network development and management is a time-consuming business. It may not always be a wise use of resources to participate in every available network focusing on a given issue. Over the course of any given initiative, an organization should be willing to engage networks and partners when it serves its strategic interest, moving in and out of relationships with fluidity, always taking care not to damage the long-term viability of its relationships with others.

### Strategic Positioning

It is important for an advocacy organization to understand its niche in a given policy area (e.g., lobbying, research, media, grassroots) and to position itself

strategically so as to make the optimal contribution to success on an issue. This requires a solid understanding of how the group's vision correlates to the broader environment. There are three underlying analyses that enhance the ability to position an advocacy organization strategically, including:

- **Needs and Resources Assessment:** Effective advocacy leaders recognize the needs of all constituents and partners engaged in an advocacy project, as well as what resources each can bring to bear to address the issue. Assets may include time, knowledge, best practices, funding, relationships, and intangible benefits like credibility. Before an organization can begin to act within the external policy

### Strategic Network Capacity

1. **Fill critical gaps and leverage resources:** Highly effective advocacy organizations form strategic partnerships to complement their strengths.
2. **Utilize established networks:** In many instances it is more efficient to identify established networks whose interests are compatible, though not necessarily identical, rather than to forge new alliances on each new issue.
3. **Understand how the organization's advocacy agenda fits into a broader network of issues:** Including what is the organization's unique niche or contribution.
4. **Bring key decision-makers to the table:** The ability to commit to a network resides in leaders and therefore it is vital for those key persons to be involved from the beginning.
5. **Recognize the range of partnership:** existing partners, potential partners, and necessary partners. Some parties may initially be the object of advocacy and later become partners. Strategically moving people from objects of intervention into partners for advocacy is one of the hallmarks of leadership. Be aware that some may never develop into partners, but rather may remain agents that are the target of network intervention.

environment, it must have a good understanding of the resources available within the community to bring to bear on an issue.

■ **Ongoing Environmental Assessment:**

A group cannot maintain the most advantageous position on an advocacy issue without constant, ongoing monitoring of new external opportunities and threats as they arise. Related to this is the need to incorporate interim successes and failures into its strategy (discussed more fully in the section on evaluation).

■ **Risk or Opportunity Assessment:**

A decisive skill for an advocacy organization is the ability to assess the relative feasibility of opportunities as they arise, and to calculate the associated risks and benefits of each approach or tactic. There is no standard formula for such an assessment, but a careful and methodical analysis will enhance the likelihood of realistic and accurate decisions, which should lead to more effective use of resources. In some instances, an organization may choose to pursue a “losing” strategy in one avenue, in order to advance its cause in another (e.g., bringing a court case that is likely to be lost in the litigation arena, but which will raise visibility of the issue so that a legislative solution can subsequently be pursued). Such a tactic can be highly effective as long as the ultimate advocacy goal is advanced.

## Preserving Resource Flexibility

Conducting a successful advocacy campaign usually requires an organization to be flexible and quick at allocating and reallocating resources as necessary. This flexibility is required for human resources, capital assets (such as website space), and financial resources. The ability to shift human resources may be necessary because of both workload questions, as well as skill sets and role changes necessary to meet varying needs and demands. For this reason it may be advisable to have some staff redundancy (people doing the same or similar jobs) or at least to ensure cross-training, job shadowing, and mentoring in some roles. The shifting of capital resources also often comes down to a matter of human resources (e.g., reallocating staff to make adjustments to a grassroots website or to organize a meeting space).

To ensure maximum flexibility of financial resources, advocacy groups can pursue several paths: diversifying the resource base (not being overly reliant on any one type of donor); negotiating more flexibility from donors in the use of funds (such as general operating support or unrestricted private donations); asking donors for flexibility to rapidly change funding allocations; and seeking closer relationships with funders to

**“Don’t think linearly. People need the freedom and flexibility to adapt to changing situations. Foundations need to incorporate that flexibility. Organizations need the ability to change course as they get feedback.”**

*— Funder*



facilitate fast engagement and flexibility in meeting objectives when the operating environment changes. Rather than be mired in an outdated work plan – as one organization was that continued to fulfill a grant objective to produce a policy paper even though another group had already released a similar document – an advocacy organization is better served if it seeks flexibility from its funding sources. Most advocates recognize this and funders are becoming more savvy about how to effectively fund advocacy work.

### Monitoring and Measuring Progress

The ability to evaluate and measure progress on an issue is crucial to successful adaptive capacity in an advocacy group. It is a prerequisite if an organization is

to learn from its mistakes and successes, in order to improve its performance. Developing a system or process for documenting, monitoring, assessing, and judging progress (or lack thereof) toward goals is the first step—for without formal metrics, an organization will likely find itself “waving in the wind.” Research and theory on systems to evaluate advocacy work are expanding and many promising practices have emerged, though efforts are still in their relative

infancy.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless several elements have been identified as important:

- **Short-term metrics:** In most instances, an evaluation that only looks at whether a piece of legislation passes or whether a referendum is defeated is too rough and undifferentiated to be of much use. However, articulating clear short-term goals that can be directly and simply measured is often a more realistic, relevant, and useful approach. For example, an organization could establish interim objectives for obtaining co-sponsors to a bill, adding allies to a coalition, or obtaining letters from grassroots supporters on an issue.
- **Behavior changes:** At its most basic, advocacy work is about changing the behavior of individuals—a legislator’s vote, a judge’s ruling, a citizen’s decision to write a letter, a journalist’s story, an editor’s choice to print an article. Evaluation of an advocacy campaign can therefore include an analysis of what behavior changes have occurred as a result of the organization’s work.
- **Flexible objectives:** While the goals of an advocacy campaign need to be clear and relatively unchanging, the strategies and interim objectives must retain some inherent flexibility. Variable tactics, new or different partners, and compromises on shorter-term objectives are all part of an effective campaign, and the measures of success will necessarily need to be adapted to reflect those

“You need to set outcomes/victories in ways that build, empower and encourage the constituency. The way that you frame the issue ought to give you latitude to hit certain low-hanging fruit, knowing in the short-term you may not hit a home run. There must be some aspect of the issue that you frame as winnable along the way to the homerun.”

– Advocate

<sup>8</sup> For additional information and resources see:  
• Guthrie, K., Louie, J., David, T., & Crystal-Foster, C. (2005). *The Challenge of Assessing Advocacy: Strategies for a Prospective Approach to Evaluating Policy Change and Advocacy*. Prepared by Blueprint Research Design, Inc. for The California Endowment;  
• *The Evaluation Exchange* Volume XIII, Number 1, Spring 2007, which is dedicated entirely to Advocacy and Policy Evaluation; and,  
• Innonet’s Point K Learning Center ([www.innonet.org](http://www.innonet.org)).

changes. Establishing short-term metrics help keep an initiative on course and – also important – reassure constituents and others that progress is being made, building their confidence in the organization and its competence.<sup>9</sup> An effective tool for establishing goals and outcomes is the advocacy progress planner, which can be found at: <http://planning.continuousprogress.org/>

- **Plan for reflection:** Effective nonprofit organizations purposefully create space for reflection to assess successes and failures in order to incorporate them into their next or other projects. Advocacy groups are no different. While the pace and tempo of advocacy work may make it more difficult to do so, organizational change management theory is clear on the necessity of taking time, even if only briefly, to reflect and draw conclusions. The benefit this will have for future initiatives and campaigns is undeniable. An organization's plan for reflection must be deliberately designed and scheduled, or it will likely not occur. The time taken need not be lengthy, but it should be focused on concrete issues and themes such as re-clarifying intent, anticipating challenges, managing knowledge gains, and strategizing for future success.<sup>10</sup> But reflection is of no benefit unless its conclusions are put to use. So a further step is essential: developing a concrete plan to integrate into *future* work what is learned from examining the past. (A useful template for debriefing after

an intense period and instituting a plan has been developed by Innonet and can be found on their website).<sup>11</sup>

## Management Capacity for Advocacy

Organizational management capacity refers to the ability to organize resources in a way that is both efficient and effective at accomplishing the mission.

In advocacy organizations, it includes the basic tenets for all nonprofits: good management of people, communications, and resources. Attributes commonly associated with management capacity include systems, procedures, staff roles, development, and oversight. The more important management capacities for advocacy organizations include:

### Non-Staff Resource Management

Advocacy organizations, like all nonprofits, need to effectively manage their resources. Of particular relevance to advocacy groups is the management of non-staff resources, such as volunteers, knowledge, and information. For example, nonprofit advocacy organizations frequently rely heavily on volunteers, particularly at the grassroots level, and thus need to ensure that volunteers are not only productive but also are satisfied with their experience. Managing such resources includes the ability to attract resources (*e.g.* get volunteers who are willing to call legislators), organize resources (*e.g.* provide scripts and telephones) and deploy resources (*e.g.* oversee the actual

<sup>9</sup> Metrics and evaluation are discussed in more detail in the Appendix, "Evaluating Advocacy Capacity."

<sup>10</sup> See "Learning in the Thick of It" by Marilyn Darling, Charles Parry and Joseph Moore, July-August 2005 *Harvard Business Review* for a description of learning in high-pressure and time-constrained situations.

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.innonet.org/client\\_docs/File/advocacy/innonet\\_intense\\_period\\_debrief.pdf](http://www.innonet.org/client_docs/File/advocacy/innonet_intense_period_debrief.pdf).



## Management Capacities

1. *Non-staff resource management*
  - Volunteers
  - Knowledge management
2. *Staff coordination*
  - Communication systems
  - Internal team building
3. *External relationship management*
4. *Human resources*
5. *Financial management*

calling and monitor progress). There are two components of knowledge management for advocacy organizations:

■ **Internal knowledge management:**

Within the organization, staff needs to be aware of and have access to

information that is relevant to their work. For example, a staff member working on a policy paper on obesity should be ensured access to the findings of another staff member who has been working with local school departments on an exercise curriculum. Making certain he or she has that access is the challenge: It could be ensured through an internal filing system (electronic or otherwise), regularly scheduled staff meetings, or formally established knowledge-management systems.

■ **External knowledge sharing:**

Outside the organization, an advocacy group needs the capability to share appropriate, strategy-specific information with stakeholders,

including other organizations, policy makers, the media, and grassroots citizens. Such knowledge sharing can range from the dissemination of research projects to the announcement of a rally at the state capitol building.

## Staff Coordination

Highly effective advocacy organizations are able to solicit and utilize input from employees across the organization and to coordinate disparate activities within the organization. Such coordination is similar to knowledge management, but focuses more on providing systems to ensure that staff interact with each other, one of whose benefits may be knowledge exchange. There are two underlying capacities that facilitate effective staff coordination:

■ **Concrete and purposeful communication systems:**

Communication systems, such as staff meetings, formalized progress reports, and internal memos, are key to enable the staff to learn what is happening across the organization and to find out where resources are needed and what resources are available. Because advocacy work can include

“There is an understanding here that you have a responsibility to share information with others whom it might benefit. There’s really an unwritten code against sitting on information.”

– Advocate



several parallel initiatives, effective organizations – even small ones— establish concrete and regular communication mechanisms, rather than leave interaction to chance.

- **Internal team building (team-based structures):** Advocacy campaigns often have multiple components, necessitating that a team of people work together. A team-based model, spanning several divisions or staff within a division, is often used because the individual “silo” approach can result in missed opportunities and unleveraged efforts. But while the team needs to function cohesively, it must still permit the scope for tasks to be executed individually or by sub-groups. Tasks should be agreed upon, delegated, and then the delegates be given the decision-making “space” to achieve those assignments. For example, by bringing lobbyists, grassroots mobilizers, policy analysts, and litigators together as a team, there will be multiplied coordination, collaboration, brainstorming, problem solving, and even leveraging of each other’s work (such as litigators utilizing mobilizers to bring media attention at a trial.)

## External Relationship Management

Effectively managing associations with external parties is the ability to oversee relationships with various stakeholder groups and engage them appropriately in the advocacy process. This requires a nonprofit and its advocates to be proficient in the four “R”s of relationships:

- Relevant to stakeholders’ interests;
- Receptive to stakeholders’ requests;
- Respectful of stakeholders’ time, ability and limitations (*e.g.*, legal or political), and
- Resolutely committed to stakeholder diversity.

The last “R” is particularly important because advocacy issues so often impact multiple stakeholders: The ability to engage a variety of stakeholders is therefore key. At the organizational level, this consists of recognizing disparate stakeholders and developing strategies that are appealing to multiple groups. A commitment to diversity includes ensuring clear communication, both in terms of accommodating cultural and linguistic differences, as well as stylistic and skill differences (such as literacy levels or knowledge of the policy environment). For example, an organization concerned that some groups participating in a march might become violent and offend other groups and participants, who would otherwise support the march, might convince the more vehement marchers to forego the possibility of unruliness at the march if another opportunity at a different place or time was offered to them to express their deeply held feelings. This was, in fact, the precise predicament that organizers of a World Trade Organization protest encountered and successfully negotiated.

## Human Resources

Beyond simply recruiting skilled talent (discussed in the technical section), retaining trained and experienced staff is a key management concern, particularly since effective advocacy work often revolves around personal relationships with external parties. Retention of employees who have built those relationships – by ensuring their job satisfaction through training, mentoring, benefits, and advancement – is crucial. In the same vein, retaining advocates who exhibit authenticity – who are committed to the issue and whose “heart” is demonstrably in their work – clearly contributes to the authenticity and credibility of a nonprofit organization on its issues. A critical facet of effective retention (and recruitment) of skilled talent is unambiguous job descriptions and role distinctions: One of the single most important management functions is to ensure clarity of roles and responsibilities. Given the fluid nature of advocacy work, specific staff jobs can sometimes become blurred, overlap, or change. There is evidence that such overlap may benefit advocacy organizations so that the organization can

**“The key to being effective is to be flexible, to be able to turn on a dime and deal with the issue at hand. And you can’t do that unless you have people who know the issues as well as, or better than, the [policymakers].”**

*– Advocate*

easily scale up certain advocacy tasks as needed.<sup>12</sup> However, ensuring clarity of roles on a given initiative (as distinct from clarity of individuals) ensures that there is not *unnecessary* duplication of effort.

## Financial Management

For any nonprofit, effective financial management and reporting are essential. However, given the complexity of federal and state tax and lobbying laws and regulations, financial management takes on an added level of importance for an advocacy group. The difficulties of complying with Internal Revenue Service rules limiting the amount a nonprofit may spend on lobbying and requiring detailed tracking of lobbying expenditures

are compounded by lobbying registration, reporting, and disclosure requirements at the federal, state, and even local levels.

Savvy financial management can also have a positive impact on the bottom line of an advocacy organization.

For example, a knowledgeable financial manager can structure an advocacy proposal so that it can be funded by a private foundation without compromising

<sup>12</sup>Generally, the less technical the strategy of an organization, the greater the value of some job redundancy.



the legal status of either the foundation or the nonprofit.<sup>13</sup>

## Technical Capacity for Advocacy

Effective technical capacity refers to the ability to implement all key organizational and programmatic functions in a comprehensive manner. At the center of technical capacity are the skills, tools, equipment, technology, and other resources necessary to support and underpin the other essential capacities. Attributes associated with technical capacity include fundraising skills, technology and networks, facilities development and maintenance, materials information, marketing capability, legal knowledge, and evaluation aptitude. It is knowledge and skills themselves that comprise technical capacity, which the other capacities *apply* in a meaningful way. Many technical capabilities are well-known to advocates and are covered in more detail in other resources. As a result, the outline below presents only the basic technical capacity categories and refers the reader to other materials, as appropriate.<sup>14</sup> The specific technical capacities important to advocacy organizations include:

## Strategic Communication Skills

External communication capacity refers to the ability to develop a strategic communications plan and to effectively communicate a nonprofit's advocacy goals to a variety of audiences, tailoring the messages so that they will resonate with any given audience. Critical aspects of communication capacity for advocacy work include strategy development, media outreach, and message development. For additional information on strategic communication skills, check out the Communications Leadership Institute resources at <http://www.smartcommunications.org/resources> or The Spin Project at [www.spinproject.org](http://www.spinproject.org).

**“Organizations need to have a broad-based connection in terms of grassroots, but in terms of really moving things forward the media becomes critical.”**

*— Advocacy Expert*

## Policy Issues and Processes

This is the technical capacity that comes to mind for most people when considering advocacy work. There are several different aspects of this capacity:

### Technical Capacities

1. *Strategic communication skills*
2. *Policy issues and Processes*
  - Policy change process knowledge
  - Substantive issue expertise
  - Political knowledge and skills
  - Specific advocacy strategy skills (e.g. mobilization, policy analysis, litigation)
3. *Interpersonal skills*
4. *Finance and fundraising skills*
5. *Legal knowledge*
6. *Facilities and equipment*

<sup>13</sup> See Asher, Thomas R. 1995. *Myth v. Fact: Foundation Support of Advocacy*. Washington, D.C.: Alliance for Justice.

<sup>14</sup> Additional policy and advocacy resources can be found in the Public Policy and Advocacy section of The California Endowment's website: [www.calendow.org](http://www.calendow.org).



- **Policy change process knowledge:**  
Understanding the nuances of the policy system and how it works.
- **Substantive issue knowledge expertise:**  
Having a thorough grasp of the content of any given advocacy issue.
- **Political knowledge and skills:**  
Comprehending the use of power and power distribution, and having the knowledge and experience to effectively navigate through a wide variety of political situations.
- **Specific advocacy strategy abilities:**  
Possessing the various skills necessary for effective advocacy, such as litigation, lobbying, and grassroots mobilization. While the actual advocacy skills necessary depends on the strategies being employed, two specific advocacy skills appear to be widely necessary:
  1. **Policy analysis and research skills:**  
Having the ability to create, analyze, or interpret policy proposals or other data and information. See Eugene Bardach's book *A Practical Guide for Policy Analysis* for more information on this.
  2. **Mobilization skills:** Having the knowledge and skills to engage internal and external stakeholders in an advocacy issue. For a broad overview of this topic, see *Organize! Organizing for Social Change* by Kim Bobo, Jerry Kendall and Steve Max. For a guidebook on mobilization,

see Policy Link's Advocating for Change manual at <http://www.policylink.org/AdvocatingForChange/default.html>.

## Interpersonal Skills

This skill set refers to the ability to interact effectively with others, even those with radically different perspectives. There are two aspects of interpersonal skills:

- **People skills:** The basics of so-called people skills come down to understanding what motivates others and using that knowledge to persuade them to act in the desired way. Often it involves being able to describe benefits so that they outweigh the cost of behavior change, or decreasing the cost of the desired behavioral change.
- **Self-reflection proficiency:** The ability to recognize one's own strengths and shortcomings makes for a more effective advocate. The philosopher's advice "know thyself" is more than moral guidance: Being able to conduct an "ego check" – and to enlist others to assist or lead when advisable – is indispensable in the make-up of a good advocate.

## Finance and Fundraising Proficiency

The knowledge and skill to solicit funds from a variety of sources for a nonprofit advocacy group is obviously important. An area of fundraising that appears to be particularly useful for advocacy organizations is the ability to raise

general support funding, which may include general support grants from private foundations, membership dues, and unrestricted individual donations.<sup>15</sup> This, as mentioned earlier, allows the organization to adapt rapidly to changing environments. Specific tools like logic models and value propositions can be very effective at helping to make the case to donors toward this end. Likewise, financial management skills are essential, such as the ability to assess both the cost of doing advocacy work in general as well as the financial implications of specific advocacy work or proposals, and the ability to record and track advocacy expenditures for reporting purposes.

### **Legal Knowledge**

Knowledge and understanding of the legal parameters within which an advocacy organization can operate – the limits as well as what may be “pushing the outside of the envelope”—is also part of technical capacity. See the Alliance for Justice website for legal information relating to nonprofit advocacy participation at [www.afj.org](http://www.afj.org).

### **Facilities and Equipment**

Last, but not least, sufficient working space, adequate office technology (computers, network servers, phones), and a congenial working environment underpin strong and successful advocacy groups. It is hard, for example, to build a grassroots arm without good list-maintenance software and adequate hardware. Likewise, the ability to share

information within and without the organization depends on satisfactory and reliable network interconnections. These resources, which are all-too-often taken for granted, can also set the right tone for an advocacy organization by fostering an image of professionalism, stability, and energy.

<sup>15</sup> A 2007 report from Grantmakers for Effective Organizations (GEO) entitled *General Operating Support: A GEO Action Guide*, provides a detailed look at how funders are increasingly viewing the role of general support funding.



## Part III: Conclusion & Acknowledgements

In conclusion, to what use can the foregoing discussion of the core-capacity model in **Figure 2** be put?

**For funders:** A foundation or other funder considering support for a nonprofit's advocacy program can use the model to assess how well prepared a nonprofit is to carry out proposed advocacy strategies. How well-articulated and well-integrated are its

advocacy goals, and how capable is its core-capacity infrastructure of supporting a successful advocacy program? In what ways could we support this organization to build its capacity? At the same time, a funder can use the model to assess its own readiness to fund advocacy and, even more importantly, to measure the outcomes of the advocacy work it supports. (see box on **Readiness to Fund Advocacy**).

### Readiness to Fund Advocacy

Questions to help guide a funder in determining its overall strategy related to advocacy it should assess:

1. To what extent is our own theory of change clear as to why we are looking to fund this particular advocacy project?
2. To what extent is advocacy important to achieving the goals of this funding?
3. In what ways is advocacy work related to other grants and strategies being funded in our portfolio?
4. How will we determine which advocacy organizations to fund to carry out the work?
5. Should particular capacities necessary for successful advocacy be specifically funded in order to strengthen a grantee's advocacy program, or is a general advocacy grant best?
6. What systems are in place (or could be put in place) to evaluate a grantees' ability to utilize advocacy as a strategy and to measure its likelihood of success?



**For organizations:** While every nonprofit is unique, it is possible for any nonprofit advocacy group to utilize the four-capacity model to assess and identify the areas in which the organization may or may not be performing optimally. The box on **Readiness to Implement Advocacy** can help guide an advocacy organization prepare for and implement a particular advocacy strategy.

Ideas for addressing many of these questions through evaluating organizational capacity are presented in **Appendix**. Ultimately, an advocacy organization with strong, reinforcing capacities is best positioned to take advantage of windows of opportunity and to advocate successfully on issues central

to its mission. And that, after all is the goal of funders and nonprofit leaders alike.

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### Readiness to Implement Advocacy

Questions an advocate or advocacy organization might ask as part of advocacy plans:

1. To what extent does our organization understand and clearly articulate our advocacy goals and does the board concur? (leadership)
2. To what extent is advocacy important to achieving our goals and related to our other strategies? (leadership)
3. How effective are we at monitoring the external environment for advocacy opportunities and the internal environment for capacity to respond? (adaptive)
4. What strategic relationships do we currently have and what relationships do we need to cultivate in order to be successful? (adaptive)
5. How is information about advocacy work shared throughout the organization? (management)
6. How well do our teams function in order to capitalize on our advocacy work and effectively utilize non-staff resources? (management)
7. What technical skills and resources do we have/need in order to implement our selected advocacy strategies? (technical)



# Appendix: Evaluating Advocacy Organizational Capacity and Detailed Capacity Logic Model

TCC Group recommends a two-pronged approach to evaluating nonprofit advocacy organizational capacity:

## 1. **General Organizational Capacities.**

An advocacy group should initially be evaluated as a nonprofit, using general nonprofit capacity benchmarks—such as clarity of mission, sound leadership and management practices, monitoring and evaluation activities, board composition, involvement, and activity.

## 2. **Specific Advocacy Capacities.**

The advocacy group should then be evaluated on the unique capacities of advocacy organizations, as outlined and discussed in this paper.

The methodology for evaluating general nonprofit capacities can involve traditional approaches and tools, such as organizational assessments (*e.g.*, TCC CCAT, EEMO, McKinsey). Further, standard information

that a nonprofit collects and summarizes in the course of doing business—such as Form 990s, budgets, staffing descriptions, proposals – can also be used as evidence in assessing general organizational capacity.

Appraisal of an organization’s specific advocacy capacity, however, requires a more nuanced approach. A few workbooks and checklists have been developed which rely primarily on guided self-evaluation. Such approaches to evaluating advocacy capacity can be very effective for organizations and lead them to ask and find answers to important strategic questions and should be considered as easy ways for organizations to monitor themselves on an ongoing basis. However, from an evaluation perspective, such approaches have certain limitations: Qualitative self-reflection often does not reveal “blind” spots in the organization (“I don’t know what I don’t know”) and because the questions are static, they do not encourage the organization to think deeper on certain issues. Checklists also usually lack a

## A Nuanced Approach to Dissecting Organizational Capacity

An advocacy organization's "Specific Advocacy Capacities" can be broken down even further to focus on the organization's Infrastructure capacities and its Implementation capacities.

1. **Organizational Infrastructure Capacities:** Advocacy organizations and those doing advocacy programs are generally nonprofits. As such, capacities related to the nonprofit sector are applicable. That said, working within the four core capacity model, there are "infrastructure" (or what some call "operational") differences and/or nuances for advocacy organizations (as compared to nonprofits in general) that pertain to the overall way that an advocacy organization operates.
2. **Advocacy Implementation Capacities:** Advocacy organizations, writ large, are engaged in a process leading to outcomes around framing issues, providing visibility for those issues and affecting public policy decisions on those issues. As such, there are capacities unique to advocacy organizations that pertain to their specific programmatic strategies.

It may be useful to think about this distinction—capacities for running the organization "big picture" and capacities related to the programmatic work—when considering advocacy capacity. A very detailed logic model that shows how this distinction looks can be found on page 36 (**Figure 3**).

framework for considering the interrelations between and among various areas; questions are answered "yes" or "no," indicating areas of potential focus, but the interrelation between the answers is not addressed. Moreover, "group think"—when a group of individuals ends up discussing a topic in a very narrow and "safe" way that limits the scope of the discussion – often results due to power differentials, cultural norms and values, or an effort to expedite the assessment.

In order to overcome these disadvantages, TCC Group recommends a three-part approach for evaluating specific advocacy capacity in an organization:

- First, TCC recommends utilizing a concrete framework and preferably a quantitative assessment tool that specifically includes advocacy capacity. For this purpose, TCC has created the Advocacy Core Capacity Assessment Tool (ACCAT), described below, which is a supplemental companion to TCC's general CCAT.
- Second, utilizing the framework and quantitative assessment as a starting point, TCC recommends interviews with key organizational personnel, including, at a minimum, the executive director and board chair, but perhaps also extending to senior management,

other board members, external partners, clients, and donors.

- Third, use qualitative self-reflection to unpack findings from concrete data. This should occur regularly and need not always follow the previous two.

Such an approach, utilizing triangulated data, provides a broader factual basis on which to make a more comprehensive evaluation of the organization.

## Advocacy CCAT

TCC Group's Advocacy Core Capacity Assessment Tool (ACCAT) is a quantitative assessment tool designed specifically for nonprofits engaged in advocacy. It is not duplicative of TCC's basic Core Capacity Assessment Tool (CCAT) developed for nonprofits generally, nor of other assessment instruments available. Instead, it covers the critical aspects of advocacy organizations in a set framework and quasi-quantitative (independent self-report) descriptions.

ACCAT is a 180 degree assessment tool containing 100 statements on a 5-point Likert scale. The statements describe very specific organizational actions and practices (rather than processes), the answers to which are compiled and scaled, and, taken as a whole, present a wide-ranging snapshot of an organization's advocacy-specific capacities at a given point in time. ACCAT is administered to multiple people (a minimum of three) in the organization, including leaders, management staff, board members, and, in some cases, active volunteers, all of whom complete the instrument independently, thus reducing the potential for group think.

The ACCAT scales are framed within the four core-capacity model, each of which contains several sub issues. The capacities and sub issues are presented in the box below.

### ACCAT Scales

#### *Leadership*

- Advocacy Board Leadership
- Leadership Persuasiveness
- Community Credibility
- External Credibility
- Leadership Strategic Vision
- Leadership Distribution

#### *Management*

- Advocacy Staff Roles and Management
- Advocacy Management Systems
- Staff Coordination
- Advocacy Resource Management

#### *Adaptive*

- Strategic Partnerships
- Measuring Advocacy Progress
- Strategic Positioning
- Funding Flexibility

#### *Technical*

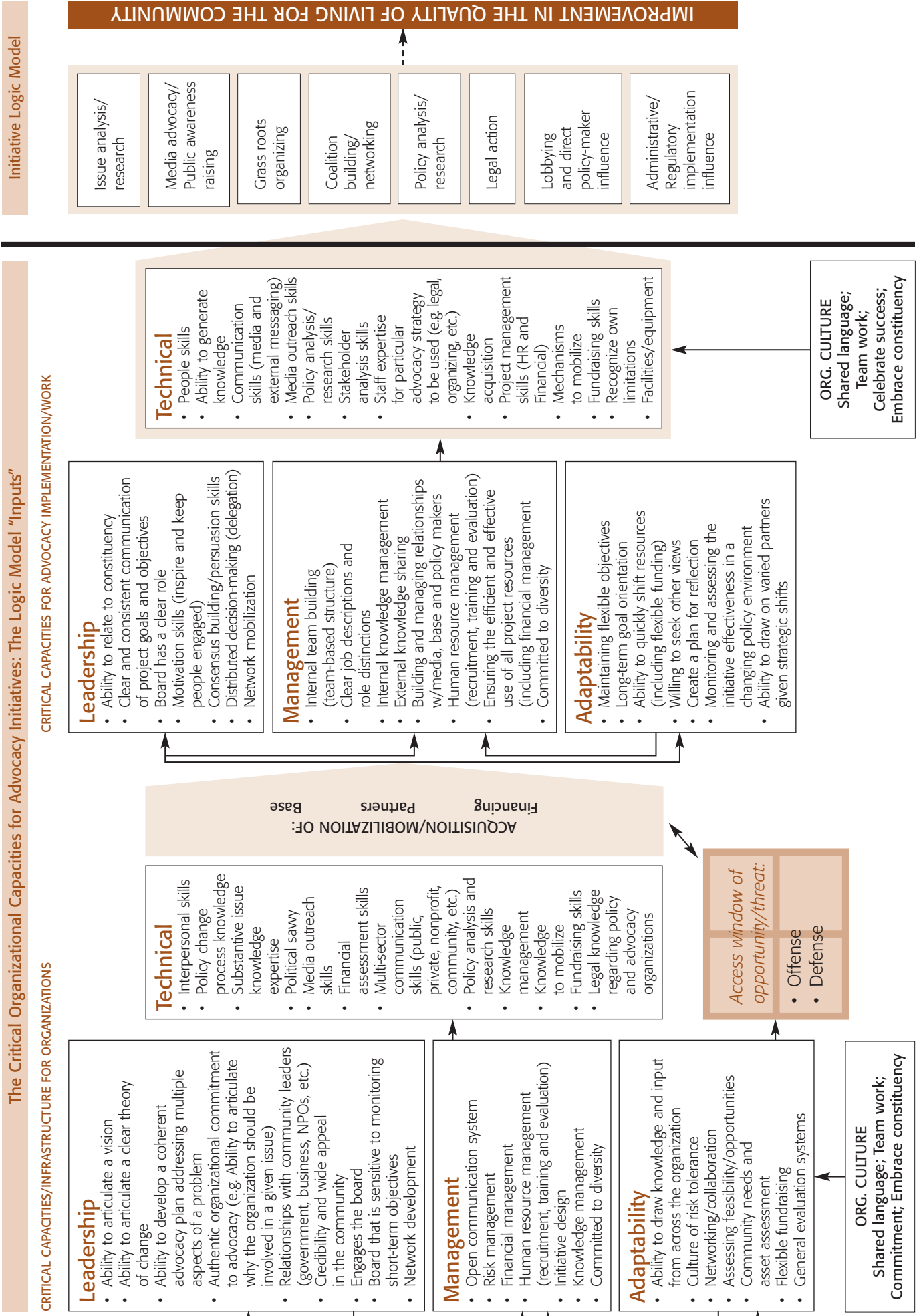
- Strategic communication skills
- Policy issues and Processes
- Interpersonal skills
- Finance and fundraising skills
- Legal knowledge
- Facilities and equipment



ACCAT also captures several cultural elements that are important to advocacy organizations, for inclusion in the assessment, such as:

- Willingness to take risks and advocate even when success is not guaranteed.
- Overt acknowledgement of the value of partner organizations.
- Overt acknowledgement of the value of individual staff members.
- Celebration of successes, both small and large.
- Staff commitment to the issue.

Figure 3: Detailed Capacity Logic Model







strategies to achieve social impact

For more than 27 years, TCC has provided strategic planning, program development, evaluation and management consulting services to nonprofit organizations, foundations, corporate community involvement programs and government agencies. In this time, the firm has developed substantive knowledge and expertise in fields as diverse as community and economic development, human services, children and family issues, education, health care, the environment, and the arts.

From offices in New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago, the firm works with clients nationally and, increasingly, globally. Our services include strategic planning, organizational assessment and development, feasibility studies, long-term capacity building, program evaluation and development, governance planning, restructuring and repositioning, as well as grant program design, evaluation, and facilitation. We have extensive experience working with funders to plan, design, manage and evaluate long-term capacity-building initiatives.

Our approach is governed by the need to establish a clear and engaging consulting process that offers structure and predictability as well as flexibility to meet unforeseen needs. Working in multidisciplinary teams, we tailor each new assignment to meet the individual needs and circumstances of the client. We develop a scope of work that responds to the particular challenges, timetable and budget for the assignment.

Sometimes clients engage us for short-term research, problem solving, or facilitation projects. Other times we provide comprehensive planning and evaluation assistance over a longer period or conduct other activities, over one or more years. Increasingly, TCC helps clients manage and implement their work and provide advice on an ongoing basis. We bring to each new assignment the perspective of our expertise, broad experience and the enthusiastic commitment to get the job done right.



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