



**BUILDING
COMMUNICATIONS
CAPACITY:**

Experts Offer Lessons
Learned in Practice

WHAT WE ARE UP AGAINST: A TRUE STORY

I started working with nonprofits 16 years ago. Soon, I started training them to conduct better communications. The first time I led a training, I stood before a very tough crowd. They were a group of grantees. The funder made them come. They made a point of telling me how they had been through these sessions before, they never learned anything new, and then they made sure I knew how busy they were and (by the way) they had no time for a training like this. One attendee asked how old I was, and then proceeded to list what marches he had been to while I “was still in diapers.” PowerPoint wasn’t the tool to use yet and digital cameras were rare and expensive gadgets. I had read somewhere to make the training interactive, so rather than launching into my speech how to have better media relations, I asked if they had any questions related to media. From about mid-way back in the room, someone shouted, “How many pages should be in the press kit?”

And this is the first challenge to conducting capacity-building efforts—you have to get people to ask the right questions in order to create the right dialogue.

The coverage they wanted wasn’t about the magic number of pages in a press kit—it goes way beyond that. To illustrate the point, I started passing around pictures. In recent months, I had gone to the New York Times, the Associated Press, and ABC News. I had taken pictures of reporters’ and producers’ desks that were completely covered in stacks of press kits. At the Wall Street Journal, one reporter had taken over two desks, where the stacks resembled the Leaning Tower of Pisa. I also took pictures of several fax machines with waste bins stationed right underneath so that when the faxes got too high, they went right in the trash.

They looked at the photos, and I watched as light bulbs went on in the room. They finally understood—pages upon pages of information were not the answer. They could see that the carefully prepared press kits were merely doorstops to the writers. The weeks it took to get sign off didn’t matter. The arguments over words and sentences were lost. In this case, pictures truly were worth a thousand words.

And then the ah-ha moment happened—the gentleman who asked me about the magic number of pages now asked in a softer voice, “So how do we avoid being thrown in the pile?”

And so, with the right questions, come the right answers. It was then we could move beyond tactics. Together, we talked about strategies to develop better media relations. And while the conversation is now about junk email and filled in-boxes, the point remains the same—that a strategy needs to be in place in order to have a successful communications program.

But even with the renewed enthusiasm in the room, we then ran into the second problem with conducting capacity-building efforts—the internal hurdle. While many in the room had had an epiphany about how to think differently about communicating with the media, one more voice came from the crowd and said, “My boss will never agree to the changes I want to make.”

This is the hard reality of communications capacity building. It rarely involves helping one person learn a new skill that they will perform in a vacuum. It often means an organization will have to change how it does things and have the necessary support from its leadership. It requires a shift in priorities and an acceptance of trial and error. And it requires consistency to see the change through.

I told them the pictures were theirs as a souvenir to take back and spread the word.

The next day, I was at my desk and Mr. How-Many-Pages called. He told me how things had gone with his boss. Lukewarm. I coached him, and he tried again. For three months we conspired to change the way his organization conducted media relations. At the end of three months, there was light at the end of the tunnel. He had pulled his organization out of the dead press kit junk heap and put it on the radar screen of three beat reporters that were important to their strategy.

And there we have the third problem with capacity-building efforts—getting organizations to stick with their commitment to change. A report or workshop can jump start the thinking. Several days of training can arm people with tools and ideas. Webinars, listservs, and wiki-communities can create space to keep them thinking. But at the end of the day, capacity-building means seeing it all the way through until the change is the operational norm—requiring both time and patience.

The best capacity-building efforts I have been part of have figured out how to face and solve these problems. They get

participants to ask the right questions. They figure out how to involve an entire organization in the epiphanies. And they are involved long enough for the change to last. It's all about overcoming the top challenges grantees say again and again keep them from having a top-notch communications program. It's simply a question of working together, seeing the bigger picture, and finding the breakthrough that makes the right questions happen.

Kristen Grimm
Founder and President, Spitfire Strategies
Founder, Communications Leadership Institute

WELCOME

This report is an account of the lessons learned in the field—sometimes the hard way—as we traveled to conference centers and hotel ballrooms to expand people’s thinking about communications. Each observation comes from experts who have collectively led thousands of trainings, and continue to keep learning every time they stand in front of a group. It is our hope that these hard-won insights can help grant makers leapfrog from supporting limited capacity-building efforts to helping shape effective communications programs with higher impact.

IDENTIFYING THE HOT SPOTS

No matter what else is being asked at the time, grantees frequently list communications as a problem area in grantee surveys. It’s also no coincidence that foundations spend a fair amount of resources on trainings and toolkits to help grantees overcome this challenge.

That’s why the Communications Leadership Institute, including the SPIN Project, and Spitfire Strategies sat down together and decided to learn from our participants *before* they receive training. We reviewed 500 pre-workshop evaluations from the past year, and used them to understand what the top challenges were to organizations when it came to communicating better. The result? Not only a sense that communications overwhelms already stretched organizations, but that grantees want to learn ways to build their capacity.

Overall, the top 10 communications capacity-building “Hot Spots” include:

1. A general lack of knowledge, skills, and training.
2. Minimal staffing.
3. Limited time.
4. Tight resources/funding.
5. A lack of planning.
6. Trouble prioritizing.
7. Cross-cultural issues.
8. Message definition and consistency.
9. The organization does not value communications.
10. Communications are not part of the organizational structure.

Addressing the Hot Spots to Create Change

When planning to help improve the communications capacity of grantees, we need to take on these “Hot Spots” and use the lessons learned as a way to find solutions to them. While there is no magic formula to creating a 100 percent high-impact program, trainers in the field have come across these challenges time and again and have learned through trial and error the best way to create lasting results.

Offered by experts in the field, the following lessons demonstrate how we can shape capacity-building efforts from the beginning stages all the way through to follow-up dialogue. It’s a guide, a reference, and a tool to examine how we can set up capacity-building efforts for success. It’s about using what we already know to help grantees overcome the challenges they face in their communications efforts. By following this path, we can take these problems, get to the bottom of them, and find a breakthrough for those who need it most—the organizations working to create change.

“We have to focus on needs of trainees, and not just their funding sponsors. This doesn’t mean compromising quality. It’s just that the entire training experience has to be flipped to serve the people who will be making the change, and not only those who support it.”

—John Bare, Arthur M. Blank Family Foundation

LESSON #1: TAKE A COMMUNICATIONS AUDIT

Grantees need to know where they are and what they need before you can help.

They say they need to communicate better. But many grantees are not able to assess where they are already succeeding and where they are falling short. If you just dive into the training, your participants might have a nice checklist of your suggestions, but they won't understand how it applies to them. They quickly become overwhelmed. And even worse (from a trainer's perspective) they might not even believe that they need the specific resources you can provide.

The first step before grantees attend a workshop, read a publication, or engage a consultant is to have them—or an outside resource—conduct a communications audit. Communications audits come in a variety of formats, from a quick online survey or self-assessment to a full-blown analysis of communications infrastructure, collateral materials, skills, and past media coverage. An audit will reveal the details that grantmakers can have trainers address specifically. How well do they cover the basics, e.g., do they have audience targets? Do they tell stories? Do they give compelling presentations or could their presentations be a substitute for a dose of Ambien? You'll gain a strong understanding of what communications capacity they already have to work with (like a board willing to serve as messengers) and the challenges they have (communications is not on the board agenda).

The audit is the start of their blueprint for learning, indicating what knowledge, skills and training are most important for them. It helps them prioritize. Many nonprofit leaders need this blueprint, especially if they have not worked in organizations that have the resources to deploy a wide range of communications strategies. Simply by pointing out tools and approaches an organization isn't using, an audit can serve as the first education point and introduce leaders to new approaches and new resources.

True Story

*"A few years ago I conducted an audit for an up-and-coming membership organization, a group working on housing in a low-income community. They had built an appropriate communications infrastructure to reach their base, and had done a good job of reflecting the voice of their constituents through earned media efforts. The big problem was that in doing so, they'd really shot themselves in the foot by ticking off local policymakers, the people they needed to access and influence. They needed skills and goals to help them better align their base with their public affairs objectives. As I reviewed this good and bad news with the group, the staff grew somber thinking of the task ahead—redoubled member education efforts, major training needed for staff, retooling existing materials. Then one of their key volunteers remarked that, "Seeing all this media coverage makes me realize we are being heard. By ourselves. We need to be heard at City Hall." **Simply putting all the pieces together in one place makes trainees far more receptive to the recommendations for increased capacity and improved strategy.**"*

—Holly Minch, Spitfire Strategies

LESSON #2: HELP THEM MAKE THE CASE FOR CAPACITY BUILDING

Grantees need the support of their colleagues and organizational infrastructure.

Before embarking on the capacity-building path, trainees need to advocate (over and over) to their colleagues why this is important, why it will help the organization achieve its mission faster and better, and what the individual colleague will get out of it and can share with others. Leaders of capacity-building efforts should send a clear message that good communications starts in-house, and that everyone has a role to play. They have to positively and persuasively present the idea that the organization has some bad habits they need to unlearn. They will need to convince colleagues to adopt best practices. Quite simply, support needs to reach critical mass for change to happen within the organization.

Clearly, this is not an easy task. But one of the best tactics—an easy way to alleviate this pressure—is to share success stories. It's simple. When organizations see other organizations making headway, they generally will feel inspired to try whatever it is that seems to be working. Trainees should be armed with concrete examples that show how an organization is raking in money because of a branding effort, or how changing internal structures can free up resources to communicate with target audiences. These real world examples provide the impetus for change. They show supporters that the possibility of an internal bragging opportunity is high. They'll see that they could get rewarded for participation, and are more likely to embrace change. Planning for this in advance makes change much easier later down the road.

LESSON #3: GIVE THEM A REASON TO PARTICIPATE

When grantees need to opt in, they will make the most of their experience.

Give them an overview of what you're offering, then fill the program through a nomination or application process. This will allow grantees to actively make a commitment to the program and consider what they want to get out of it. Without that critical buy-in, trainers often confront indifference or outright hostility from grantees, and valuable time is spent convincing them that the training is worth attending—even after they are there. An application process with questions allows grantees to articulate their needs and gives capacity-builders the data to tailor the training to those needs. Instead of feeling forced into another meeting they want no part of, grantees are proactively engaged in creating their own capacity-building program.

True Story

"When we started planning the first SPIN Academy in the spring of 1999, we thought we knew what we were doing. We'd been training grassroots nonprofits on strategic communications for almost two years and had developed a solid curriculum. We'd lined up a network of experts. We secured a site, and had a group of funders committed to our work. We sent out an invite to our core clients explaining all the great things we were ready to share, and talked up the site. We sat back and waited for the eager acceptances to come pouring in, and instead, spent the next few months trying to find people to attend.

After that initial year we made a number of operational tweaks and saw measurable gains, but we decided it was time for a big change in 2002. Instead of inviting folks to attend, we would invite them to apply for a seat at the event. Instead of handpicking the folks we really wanted to be there and begging them to come, we would spread the word about the Academy far and wide, and let them come to us. Not only did we not spend hours convincing folks to show up, when they did show up, they were already

bought in. They didn't need us telling them what communications could do for them because they already knew—that's why they had applied.

*What we learned was a very simple and basic insight about how participants view capacity building: **the difference between an invitation and an application is the difference between an obligation and an opportunity.***

—Heath Wickline, SPIN Project Director

LESSON #4: TARGET THE RIGHT PEOPLE

Lasting change will occur when we engage people with decision-making power.

It used to be that communications capacity building was reserved for the communications staff person. This is appropriate some of the time, but it also runs the risk of setting that person up to fail if they go back to work and can't implement what they learned. Change will only happen when you engage the people who can make decisions. If the goal is to alter the organizational approach to communications and integrate it into the core of the organization's strategies, it is vital that attendees have the ability to make organization-wide decisions.

In a 2005 evaluation of the Communications Leadership Institute's CLEAR program (formerly known as the Executive Training Program), respondents agreed with CLI's decision to target executive directors. All but a few CLI participants are executive directors, presidents, or chief executive officers—and they "disagreed strongly" when asked if it would have made more sense to involve a different staff member. However, they also commented that they would have liked an additional staff member to participate.

When a team of two to three people is sent to training, it not only sends a signal of organizational commitment, it allows people to work together to tackle real-world challenges. In a May 2007 survey of participants in one of Spitfire Strategies' largest team-based training programs for

foundation grantees (with an average of more than 100 participating grantees per year), the large majority of respondents endorsed the requirement that participating organizations send a team of two people to the training. Further, some respondents also mentioned the need to reach additional people within their organizations (e.g., project director, communications director, senior leadership). These respondents felt this outreach would help them secure broader support to execute their communications plans. For the staff people who will be implementing day-to-day change, having a comrade (or comrades) in arms helps them advocate for implementation of new ideas and approaches.

"The key challenge in building communications capacity remains that with rare exception, 'program' continues to trump 'communications'—whether for staff, attention, influence or investment. I often ask clients: 'What's the business you are in?' While blank stares initially greet this question, we invariably conclude that they are in the business of selling ideas, ideas that will lead to change. I then explain that if selling ideas is how the organization creates impact, communication is key. In the end, at some critical juncture, success always comes down to an ability to communicate effectively to a single individual. No one has ever met my challenge to provide a real world example where this is not the case. That's the first light bulb I am looking to switch on—at the end of the day the impact of an entire organization comes down to each relationship, through communications, with the chosen audience. That's the silver bullet for discussing communications, and it's often a startling, unsettling perspective for the 'program' people in the room."

*—Will Novy-Hildesley,
Peregrine Strategic Consulting
and former program officer*

LESSON #5: DOUBLE-CHECK THEIR GOALS

If they don't have a game plan, they can't communicate clearly.

Quite simply, communications planning is not a substitute for organizational strategic planning. Clear communications are derived from an organization's goals and objectives. Grantees should be clear on these points before starting the capacity building. Confusing and lackluster communications start when strategy isn't set and organizations begin communicating.

The goals should all be able to ladder up to measurable results, which are necessary to help grantees plan their communications and assess if they are working. Doing this work up front means they won't do it in the training, wasting valuable time and resources. Instead, it will allow them to take advantage of learning opportunities and understand where they are headed.

To make sure everyone is on the same page, discuss this before paying for a grantee to participate in any communications capacity training. Ask grantees, "What is it you want to accomplish in the next 12 to 24 months?" Notice this is not "work towards," but what they will actually be able to get done. Facilitators can help them work backwards and create a strategy they can own. If they are still thinking about it, take it as a signal and have them work that out first.

Goals will also help them with follow up. Whether they are directing in-house staff or outside consultants, if they don't know what they are trying to do, and don't understand what communications needs to do for the organization, it will be nearly impossible to give strong direction.

"During my years working for a large environmental nonprofit, we designed and executed an ambitious awareness campaign. The quality of our PSAs was consistently high; our earned media placements were impressive; we even got positive feedback from audiences that had been exposed to our messages. **And yet, at the end of the campaign we could not tell whether it was effective. Why? Because we didn't have a clear goal to begin with. That's how I learned that 'raising awareness' is not a useful goal.**"

—Edith Asibey, Asibey Consulting

LESSON #6: GET BACK TO THE BASICS

Start with communications 101 and build from there.

When conducting audits, the thing we discover again and again is that the basics—when they do exist—are not in order. External audiences are confused about who the organization is and what it does. Fifty staff members will describe the organization 50 different ways. The Web site is out of date. They know they need to tell stories but don't. Many organizations are working on creating that "sacred bundle"(the organizational stories each organization should have), but it's a project that has been going on for three years.

Having clear, compelling communications with a defined audience, giving good presentations, holding meetings that get results—these are the things they need to concentrate on first. When they have done that, they can move on to more expansive communications tactics. With the basics in order, they'll immediately feel they have more capacity and some of their staffing issues will be solved. Give them a few tools they can use internally. If they haven't learned to swim, they can't jump right into the pool.

LESSON #7: TAILOR THE TRAINING TO THE AUDIENCE

Make a point of funding activities that adhere to best practices.

If presenters focus on a case study that has nothing to do with anyone's work in the room, it won't resonate. If they show case after case that address communications at the national level and the people in the room are working on the state level, they will miss the mark. When done poorly, trainings become a passive experience.

Recently, Spitfire ran into this stumbling block when conducting a training for a foundation. The training program had been a huge success domestically, and not surprisingly, all the examples were domestic. The same scenarios—like an example that used the Red Socks myth of the curse of Babe Ruth—were lost on an international audience, even going as far as becoming a distraction. Prior to the next training, Spitfire spent time developing several international case studies in order to illustrate the points in a way that was relevant to the audience. The attention span of the participants increased a thousand fold.

Trainers must use cases and activities that are realistic to the participants—it's a case where a little research goes a long way. This stuff is already hard enough to learn without having to compare apples to oranges. Give them apples. Funders should always ask the trainers to explain what they have done to specifically tailor the program to the participants in the room. If they can't do that, you'll definitely hear about it later.

"As I've worked with non-profits around the country, I'm consistently struck by their lack of grounding in basic skills. Then again, maybe I shouldn't be surprised. These people got into their current lines of work because they're passionate about the environment, public health, education, reproductive rights—pick your issue—but that doesn't mean they've been trained as communicators or campaigners. **That's why I believe communications training or capacity building should start with the basics (storytelling, presenting, campaign planning, etc.) and grow from there. Even if the people you're teaching already have some expertise, this approach would be like 'pre-season' training camp, which even veteran athletes manage to benefit from year after year.**"

—Andy Goodman, author,
"Storytelling as Best Practice"

"Don't overdose them. Trainers spend their time thinking about all the great things everyone else can do. But in the real world, most organizations will be lucky to make itsy bitsy improvements to their communications programs. Trainers should assess what an organization can realistically accomplish and then help staffers achieve the achievable."

—Jason Salzman,
Cause Communications

The Top Five Ways to Lose your Audience

The SPIN Project recently surveyed graduates of its SPIN Academy to help identify the biggest mistakes a trainer can commit.

- 1. Poor Facilitation.** Losing control of the room, letting one or two people dominate, or getting way off track ensures no one else gets anything out of the training.
- 2. Closing with a whimper.** Participants want to feel connected before—and after—the training. Offer a clear idea of what they are supposed to do with the information when they get back to the office.
- 3. PowerPoint abuse.** Never read the slides word-for-word. When used incorrectly (like a crutch) it is one of the fastest ways to put an audience to sleep.
- 4. Silly scenarios.** Make sure the training is grounded in real-life case studies and the actual work of the participants. Small group work to apply the concepts is a must.
- 5. Too much abstract theory.** The trainer must understand the challenges faced by the audience. Many know what to do, but don't see how they can implement theoretical ideas. Real-world examples make the difference.

LESSON #8: FIND SIMPLE WAYS TO APPLY THINKING

Use relevant, real-life examples.

When creating and implementing capacity-building programs, the fear that communications costs huge amounts of money and time needs to be dispelled. There are a number of ways to do this.

Participants can list all the communications activities they already have planned for the next month. Have them list meetings, presentations, newsletters going out, reports being released, Web sites being updated, and other applicable programs that are already in place. Then have them assess who the priority audience is for those activities. Ask them to assess if they have previously messaged to resonate with those specific audience targets, and get them to think about how to measure if the communications work. You can also ask what they are already investing—in dollars or staff hours—in existing communications activities. By leveraging existing programs, you will open their mind to how strategic thinking can be applied in a cost-effective, lasting, and realistic way.

Be realistic, however. Communications does cost money and take time. Organizations need to learn how to plan to earmark the appropriate level of resources to such a core component of any successful organization.

LESSON #9: GET OUTSIDE THE COMFORT ZONE

Give them permission to experiment and explore.

Effective communicating often requires reaching out beyond an organization's traditional supporters to communities with which they aren't familiar. Developing messages to reach those new audiences can be complicated and confusing—even the best intentions can be undone by cultural tone-deafness.

Capacity-building programs are ideal for bringing together disparate groups of people, often working on different issues, with a variety of backgrounds. In sharing their

challenges in reaching these new audiences, organizations often find that their training colleagues have faced similar problems while working on a different issue, or have a unique perspective on effective messaging for a particular community. The key to taking advantage of these opportunities, of course, is to create a safe space free of funders, media, or anyone else that might pass judgment.

Here's a good example. In a training of grantees, there was a group trying to connect with African-American women in order to promote depression screening. After conducting a materials audit, it was clear their existing materials appeal to white women—the messages, the images, the language were all geared that way. In fact, when we use the old materials as an example in a collaterals presentation today, most audience members believe they are for a campaign aimed at white senior citizens. The people developing the materials were using their own life experiences. They learned about do-it-yourself focus groups to help them understand and respect the values of their audience so that it was culturally appropriate. Once this exercise was complete, they had an epiphany that changed the way they were going to communicate. Nobody jumped all over them as they had this epiphany. They were given the space to come to their conclusions, learn from it, and make corrections.

“Help trainees put a lot more into truly understanding how people think about issues and developing and testing messages that will actually move issues forward. I find there is not enough analysis and measurement of alternative approaches. Most advocates are unaware of the wide array of options they have to telling their stories and this keeps them in the groove of predictability and sometimes failure.”

—*Douglas Gould,*
Douglas Gould and Company

LESSON #10: CELEBRATE THE AH-HA MOMENTS

Have participants identify the lessons they have learned.

One of the best ways to get grantees to digest all they have learned—and apply it quickly—is to ask them to pinpoint their “ah-ha moment” of the day. By figuring out what was most important to them and saying it out loud, they are taking one of the most important steps required for change. They are owning their own learning. It has to come from them. No matter how much someone else reviews and reminds them and makes lists on easels, if it's not something they decided was important to them, it's a missed opportunity.

Training is about exposing people to new ways of thinking. Hopefully they will be stimulated, challenged, and will get more ideas than they can possibly act upon. They can leave feeling envious of organizations that do it all effortlessly or they can feel overwhelmed about all they have to do. Or they can leave feeling inspired and focused. That's where the ah-ha moment comes in. At the end of the session, they should say, “This is what I got out of this, and it came from all of my hard thinking.” It is a way to pat themselves on the back for taking advantage of the opportunity put in front of them. And perhaps most importantly, it makes it less likely that they will go home and go back to doing things they way they always have. It's a way to seal the deal.

LESSON #11: DIG DEEP

Build organizational change issues into training and follow up work.

If a strategic plan, business plan, or theory of change is in need of fine-tuning, it often results in unclear messaging or communications strategy. If lines of authority or staffing structures are blurred, it can result in confusion about who serves as spokesperson. When staff are having a hard time prioritizing communications among other work, it can signal larger confusion about organizational plans and priorities.

“David Garvin of the Harvard Business School says in his book, ‘Learning in Action,’ that learning is comprised of three distinctive steps: first, you acquire information; second, you interpret how it relates to you; and third, you apply it in your work. True learning occurs only when all three things take place. I’ve always tried to observe this principle in trainings, giving participants the time to think how the information I’m sharing fits their world, and also providing exercises that let them try it out. When I see trainers impart information without leaving time for the ‘interpret’ and ‘apply’ steps, I wonder if anyone in the room is actually learning—and I see this happening more often than it should.”

—Andy Goodman, author,
“Storytelling as Best Practice”

No capacity-building effort happens in isolation, and every organization is a complex arrangement of systems and processes—change one variable, and it has a ripple effect. Grantees and funders need to expect and plan for the reality that communications capacity-building will likely surface needs in other areas of the organization. They should go into any capacity-building effort open to the idea that to improve their communications efforts, they may have to extend beyond the communications department. Trainings should address these realities and the time they require. Participants should be given practical tools to help with buy-in so that there is a better chance of integration.

Participating organizations should also be prepared that they may realize they need to professionalize their communications more than they have in the past. What often happens is that organizations realize what all communications involves and then realizes it needs a different person or people to spearhead this important core function for the organization.

“Over and over again, I see organizations hire inexperienced communications people because they don’t cost much and then the organizations fail to achieve the results they want because the person is in over their head, doesn’t have the standing in the organization to put their good ideas across, and/or has no resources to work with.”

—Valerie Denney,
Valerie Denney Communications

“Trainings done well do help participants develop skills—that’s what sets them apart from ‘presentations’ or ‘education’—but it’s deer-in-the-headlights time when the trainee is back at her desk and the phone rings with a reporter on deadline on the other end. Trainings can let people know the range of skills they need, but to incorporate those skills into busy everyday lives people need coaching in real time.”

—Lori Dorfman, *Berkeley Media Studies Group*

These organizational capacity issues should be a central aim of follow-up efforts. Changing the organizational structure and culture is a tremendous ongoing challenge, and supports such as coaching—before and after the training—can help guide participants through this process.

LESSON #12: APPLY PRESSURE

Give them a reason to be accountable.

Training with no follow-up gives little incentive to grantees to change. Change is hard. It is rarely popular. There needs to be a good reason to create change, and making grantees accountable is the way to go.

Scheduling a relevant meeting for them, a conference call to explain their experience, a real-life application of the skills, or a forum to share their information is a good way to hold grantees accountable for their training—and an even better way to underscore the lessons learned. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation teaches its grantees to communicate with policymakers on Capitol Hill and their staffs—then apply those lessons through actual meetings with lawmakers. Other foundations conduct follow up to see what grantees have accomplished since the training. The David and Lucile Packard Foundation asked grantees that attended an international training to help train other groups.

You can also gather a few of the best resources and create a tailored set of tools. Hold working sessions and teach them how to use them. Suggest they use them for grant proposals. And then do something revolutionary—simply ask your grantees to use the tools you gave them. Just asking creates an incentive. If you just give them a link and say good luck, they won't use them. They will do things the way they always do. Encourage it. Require it. One way or another, find a reason why they need to get used to doing it in a way that you think is a solid approach to planning.

It would be great if grantees left every capacity-building intervention with the self-discipline to find ways to incorporate the new knowledge, but while they were away, their to-do list got longer, the work piled up, and it will seem daunting upon return. Being held accountable is the way to increase the chance that the knowledge is actually used to increase capacity.

CONCLUSION

Now that you've learned from those in the field, it's important to make sure that everyone involved in the development and funding of communications capacity-building programs asks the right questions. Based on the experiences we've encountered, here are a few to help you get started:

1. Based on the grantee survey mentioned on page three, how are your communications capacity-building efforts helping grantees overcome their stated hot spots?
2. What kind of communications audit will best help you find out exactly what the participants need and what basics they need to get in order?
3. How will participants talk about the effort with their colleagues to build in buy-in from the beginning?
4. How can you make the effort something they want to apply for?
5. Is the person(s) attending the one who can apply the learning back home?
6. Does the participating organization have a clear sense about what it needs to communicate about and to whom based on their theory of change? (If the answer is "yes" to the general public about their issue, go back to the drawing board.)
7. Is the ratio of talking at them greater than the time devoted to interactive exercises and implementation? If yes, it is not a training. It is a presentation, and possibly a boring one.
8. Has the effort taken into account who is in the room and how to make the information relevant to their circumstances?
9. What incentive is in place for them to apply the learning in the near future?
10. Is there a safe space where grantees can say "I don't know"?
11. Will the skills and strategies make their lives easier?
12. If you want them to do it differently down the line, have you built in the time and the coaching needed to make that happen?
13. Are you holding them accountable for using the knowledge after the fact?

We hope our lessons learned in the field help make your capacity-building efforts easier, and your grantees communications more effective. Good luck.

APPENDIX

In the Know: Communications Capacity Resources

Below is a list of our favorite tips, tools, and training opportunities created expressly for nonprofits to help bolster their communications savvy and make their communications efforts more effective.

FROM THE REPORT CONTRIBUTORS:

Smart Chart: The Spitfire Strategies Smart Chart for Strategic Communications is a tool that helps organizations understand the communications planning process and improves their ability to create or review communications efforts. www.smartchart.org

The Activation Point: If knowledge alone was enough to inspire action, the world would already be a better place. Real change requires action, and the key to moving people from knowledge to action is persuasion. The Activation Point, offers best practices for planning for persuasion, tailored to the unique needs of social change organizations. www.activationpoint.org

SPIN Works!: Published by The SPIN Project, a program of CLI, this media guidebook for grassroots organizations was published in 2000 and since then has sold nearly 9,000 copies. It remains the preferred resource for many community groups and nonprofits as they tackle their communications challenges. www.spinproject.org/catalog/

The SPIN Project's Tutorials and Toolkits: SPIN Project tutorials offer concrete advice on various aspects of strategic communications. Topics include Writing for Communications, Working With PR Consultants, Strategic Communications Planning, Community Organizing and Strategic Planning, and many more. The SPIN Project also offers several issue-specific communications toolkits intended to support community groups working on issues like living wage, community benefits, and more. Go to www.spinproject.org/ and click on Resources. New tools are added to the site each month, so check back often!

Storytelling as Best Practice: Whether you work at a small nonprofit, large foundation, or any public interest organization in between, storytelling remains your single most powerful communications tool. The only question is: are you making the most of it? "Storytelling as Best Practice" can help ensure you do. Written by Andy Goodman expressly for public interest communicators, this booklet culls the best advice on storytelling and puts it all together in one convenient, entertaining place. www.agoodmanonline.com/publications/storytelling/index.html

When Bad Presentations Happen to Good Causes: Would you like to deliver more engaging, informative and persuasive presentations? Do you supervise colleagues who must give presentations on a regular basis? If you have wasted enough time with bad presentations—on either side of the podium—this book is for you. Written by Andy Goodman, a nationally-recognized public speaker and founder of a goodman communications, this book can help you avoid the most commonly made mistakes ("The Fatal Five"), structure your information in ways that help audiences absorb it, use PowerPoint more effectively, and deliver your talks with greater confidence. www.agoodmanonline.com/publications/how_bad_presentations_happen/index.htm

Free Range Thinking: A monthly journal of communications best practices and resources for public interest groups, foundations, and progressive businesses that want to reach more people more effectively. www.agoodmanonline.com/newsletter/index.html

News for a Change: Here is a guidebook for developing a strategy that combines key elements of social change—research, community organizing, policy development, advocacy, and politics—with the news media. The authors are seasoned activists and not only provide step-by-step instructions for working with media to promote social change, they share their own valuable insights and experiences. News for a Change is a must read for individuals and organizations who want to participate in the public debate and get their message across.

Other resources we recommend:

The Jargon Finder: As an author of several book length essays on the epidemic of jargon in the foundation and nonprofit worlds, Tony Proscio has become a revered expert in clear, concise communications for these sectors. Developed in conjunction with the Edna McDonnell Clark Foundation, Tony's Jargon Finder will help you to locate and forever banish confusing jargon from your communications. Tony Proscio's books, "In Other Words," "Bad Words for Good" and "When Words Fail," are also available for download. www.comnetwork.org/jargonmain.htm

Robin Hood Marketing, Stealing Corporate Savvy to Sell Just Causes: How do you motivate people to give money, take action, or otherwise advance your worthy cause? The answer is marketing, and whether you're a nonprofit executive or a PTA volunteer, "Robin Hood Marketing" shows you how to sell your mission as successfully as the great marketing minds of corporate America sell their products. Written by Katya Andresen, a veteran marketer and nonprofit professional, this book demystifies winning marketing campaigns by reducing them to 10 essential rules and provides entertaining examples and simple steps for applying the rules ethically and effectively to good causes of all kinds. To purchase "Robin Hood Marketing," please visit Amazon.com.

Network-Centric Advocacy.net: From Martin Kearns, co-founder and executive director of the Green Media Toolshed, comes Network Centric Advocacy, a blog dedicated to helping nonprofits adapt advocacy and traditional grassroots organizing to the age of connectivity. Chock full of tools, tips and trends, nonprofits of all sizes will find useful information about how to seek out and meaningfully engage with their supporters in today's often overwhelming electronic age. www.network-centricadvocacy.net/

Getting Attention: Written by nonprofit marketing expert Nancy E. Schwartz, the Getting Attention newsletter and blog are great sources of ideas, tactics and tips for nonprofit communicators focused on helping their organizations succeed through effective marketing. www.gettingattention.org/

Flipping the Funnel: Written by marketing guru Seth Godin, the e-book Flipping the Funnel introduces you to a new set of online tools that can help you use the Internet to empower the people who like you, respect you and have an interest in your success and turn them into your own personal fan club—not just willing but excited to act as cheerleaders, messengers and fundraisers for your cause. Download the version for nonprofits free www.sethgodin.typepad.com/seths_blog/files/FlippingNOpro.pdf. Seth also has a great blog (www.sethgodin.typepad.com/) and a plethora of books (www.sethgodin.com/sg/books.asp) designed to change the way people think about marketing, change and work.

Don't Make Me Think: The subtitle of this book, "A Common Sense Approach to Web Usability" says it all. If you're worried that your Web site is user-unfriendly, but don't have the budget to hire a consultant to tell you how to fix it, Steve Krug's book is for you! Concise and funny, this book is perfect for nonprofits (or anyone) looking for ways to improve their Web site quality without spending a lot of money. <http://www.sensible.com/buythebook.html>

The Communications Toolkit, A guide to navigating communications for the nonprofit world: A comprehensive resource written by Christine Hershey, this guide offers practical information in virtually every area of communications based on findings from national qualitative and quantitative surveys of what nonprofits want in the area of communications. Available to download in PDF format at www.hersheycause.com/clients-cause.php

Making the News: A Guide for Nonprofits and Activists: Written by Jason Salzman, this book explains how to combine creativity with nuts-and-bolts media skills to score news coverage for important issues or nonprofit causes. Jason also distributes a free monthly newsletter, located at www.truespinconference.com/.

BMSG Issue Series: Berkeley Media Studies Group has published a series of case studies of how real issues—from soda in schools to paid family leave—have been framed in the media and what advocates have done to reframe the debates. <http://www.bmsg.org/pub-issues.php>

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Communications Leadership Institute: The Communications Leadership Institute is a nonprofit organization dedicated to providing nonprofits with the training and tools they need to increase their communications capacity and use high-impact communications campaigns to achieve their goals.
<http://www.smartcommunications.org>

The SPIN Project: The SPIN Project strengthens nonprofit social justice organizations, small and large, to communicate effectively for themselves by providing accessible and affordable strategic communications consulting, training, coaching, networking opportunities and concrete tools. The SPIN Project develops communications skills, infrastructure and leadership, leaving stronger organizations with the ability to amplify their work with messages that evolve from the grassroots.
www.spinproject.org.

Spitfire Strategies: Spitfire Strategies provides strategic communications solutions to promote positive social change. Our goal is to help social change organizations use their voice in a strong, clear and compelling way to articulate their vision of a better world. We craft effective communications strategies and bring ideas to life. Spitfire then works with our clients to build the best team to implement those ideas. We work with organizations to build the necessary internal capacity to communicate effectively over the long term.
<http://www.spitfirestrategies.com>

