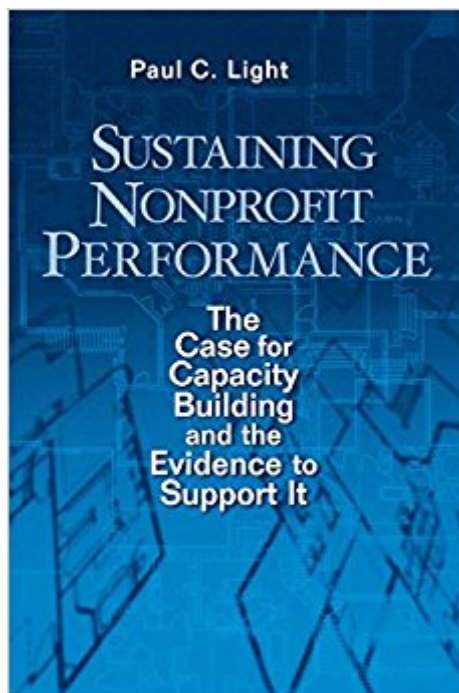




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Sustaining Nonprofit Performance: The Case For Capacity Building And The Evidence To Support It



Synopsis

"The nonprofit sector survives because it has a self-exploiting work force: wind it up and it will do more with less until it just runs out. But at some point, the spring must break." America's nonprofit organizations face a difficult present and an uncertain future. Money is tight. Workloads are heavy, employee turnover is high, and charitable donations have not fully rebounded from the recent economic downturn. Media and political scrutiny remains high, and public confidence in nonprofits has yet to recover from its sharp decline in the wake of well-publicized scandals. In a recent survey, only 14 percent of respondents believed that nonprofits did a very good job of spending money wisely; nearly half said that nonprofit leaders were paid too much, compared to 8 percent who said they earned too little. Yet the nonprofit sector has never played a more important role in American life. As a generation of nonprofit executives and board members approaches retirement, it becomes increasingly important to ensure that their organizations are prepared to continue their missions—that they are built to last in a supremely challenging environment. Paul Light, renowned expert on public service and nonprofit management, strongly argues for capacity-building measures as a way to sustain and improve the efforts of the nonprofit sector. With innovative data and insightful analysis, he demonstrates how nonprofits that invest in technology, training, and strategic planning can successfully advance their goals and restore public faith in their mission and capabilities. He explains the ways in which restoration of that faith is critical to the survival of nonprofits—another important reason for improving and then sustaining performance. Organizations that invest adequately in their infrastructure and long-term planning are the ones that will survive and continue to serve.

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Customer Reviews

"Sustaining Non-Profit Performance is crammed with thought-provoking data on the state of capacity building and organizational performance in nonprofit organizations." —Beth Gazley, School of Public and Environmental Affairs at Indiana University, Unspecified Book review

Paul C. Light is the Paulette Goddard Professor of Public Service at New York University. He is also Douglas Dillon Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution, where he founded the Center for Public Service. Light is the author of numerous books on public service and management, among them Pathways to Nonprofit Excellence (2002), Government's Greatest Achievements (2002), Making Nonprofits Work (2000), and The New Public Service (1999).

Paul Light's latest book is an excellent analysis of capacity building and nonprofit organizations, based on survey research which yields surprising and very valuable results. However, the book's credibility is harmed by a flawed marketing attempt to tie public confidence in nonprofits to 9/11 and assert that relative lack of public confidence in charities is a recent phenomenon and that the change post-9/11 was significant. Light begins with a simple, yet elegant, logic chain: organizational capacity tends to lead to organizational effectiveness, which, in turn, bolsters public confidence and increases discretionary giving and volunteering. As Light acknowledges, "Given the lack of objective data for measuring nonprofit capacity and effectiveness, perceptions will have to do for now." There is little data from the private (for-profit) sector on capacity-building, and most of that is negative or inconclusive as to what worked and why. He then reports on in-depth survey research he has performed with about 300 nonprofit organizations and their leaders. This research substantiates the basic validity of the logic chain and sets some indicators for organizational development and increasing effectiveness. Not surprisingly, planning for change activities greatly increases their chance of success. However, relatively few surveyed organizations employed significant pre-change planning. Working with consultants tends to increase success, but relatively few survey respondents were confident in how they selected their consultant(s). The presence of some external, directed funding increased success rates, but change activities paid totally through a grant or directed gift were not nearly as likely to be successful -- despite the omnipresent concerns

relating to the cost of change and the perception of diverting funds from direct service or activities more closely linked to charitable mission. Finally, Light outlines a five-tiered nonprofit "development spiral" with life stages that include: 1) organic; 2) enterprising; 3) intentional; 4) robust; and 5) reflective. He identifies the characteristics of each stage and the capacity-building activities most appropriate to each developmental stage. There is so much good information and insight in this book that it's hard to digest it all easily. One is tempted to read it with both a highlighter and a legal pad for notes. Some of the narrative recitations of the statistical data are tedious, but that does not mean that the text is too dense. There are a lot of "aha!" moments in the text, too, full of insight and ideas for both nonprofits and we consultants who seek to serve them and move their missions forward. Invest the time and energy in learning what the author has discovered. There's a lot of gold there, irrespective of whether 9/11 has had any measurable impact on public confidence in charities.

As an independent consultant, I work with non-profit organizations to facilitate strategy and help them articulate their vision and values. Paul Light's "spiral of sustainable excellence" is a useful, practical tool for meeting these organizations "where they are at ..." and keeping staff and volunteers on the same page. Lou Cartier
Cartier Outreach Associates
Greeley, Colorado

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