

Building Organization Capacity: Interview With Helen Spector



As founding partner of Spector & Associates, [Helen Spector](#) is an organization development consultant, coach and facilitator. In this interview, she describes her work in helping organizations, communities, teams and individuals build their capacity over time.

Jathan Janove: What do you mean by “capacity building?”

Helen Spector:

The capacity of an organization, community, person or system is their current ability to meet their goals for what they want to get done, in the way they want to do it. Capacity building is supporting, coaching, encouraging and leading an organization to achieve what it is capable of doing.

Jathan: How do you begin?

Helen:

In most situations, I begin with the question, “What’s the work here?” Seems simple, but one of the biggest mysteries in an organization can revolve around the range of responses to that question. If they don’t all understand what the organization’s work is, leadership, managers and workers don’t have a clear context for defining *how their own work supports the goals of the company*. An important element for understanding the work is clarity about who is being served—customers and stakeholders of the company as a whole and at each level within the company.

Jathan: Can you share an example?

Helen:

In 2000, I was asked by the Bishop of a religious diocese of 50,000+ parishioners in over 250 parishes and other institutions to help them reorganize their central staff. I asked what the work of the staff was, and the answer was easy—to support the work of the people of the diocese. Then I asked, “What is the work of the people of the

diocese?" The project quickly took on a totally new scope and character.

We embarked on a grassroots visioning with the individual churches, and culminated in a two-day visioning for 700+ people, including 100 young people from across the region. From that local and central vision, the work claimed by the people of the diocese became clear, and the staff could be restructured to support that work.

Five years later, my path crossed with the Bishop again. When I asked if he remembered me, he said "Oh, yes! I remember you. You are the one who came and did the work with our diocese that enabled us to stay together and be present for one another when every congregation lost someone on 9/11!"

Jathan: Can you share an example from the corporate world?

Helen:

An early project in my career involved an internal processing redesign where a 2+ year backlog of insurance premium accounting transactions was cleared up by engaging two questions:

- What work does the company do?

and

- What is our Premium Accounting department's contribution to the company's success?

The first answer was simple: The company sells and services life and health insurance to policyholders, and pays claims covered by those policies.

The simple second answer was: We (the Premium Accounting department clerks) process the premium payments made by policyholders. However, the real mandate for the Premium Accounting department turned out to be—*we apply the payments sent in to keep the policyholders' coverage in force*. If a policy does not have all its paid premiums applied, the company cannot pay a claim covered by that policy.

The first answer focused on processing a premium; the second answer focused on serving customers by keeping their policies in force.

Focusing this department's efforts on a broader picture of their work enabled them to restructure the way premiums were processed—easy premium payments applied straight through the system, harder reconciliation cases going to the more experienced clerks who looked at the whole policy history and not just the individual premium payment, so they could reconcile all suspended premium payments and bring the policy into balance.

This restructuring of the files and splitting the workflow reduced the oldest backlogged files from 2+ years to 3 months, within 5 weeks of implementation. Morale improved, and staff and departmental manager retention increased significantly.

Together, we built the capacity of the department—its ability to do the work the company needed from it—which increased measurably, and continues at a high level today.

Jathan: What are the most common obstacles?

Helen:

Many times, people in one part of an organization don't understand who they serve, who their stakeholders are *internally* as well as *externally*. Enlarging the way that workers, managers and leaders understand the scope of their impact can crack open some of the big logjams and illuminate obstacles that keep them from seeing how

their work contributes to the whole, and to the organization's stakeholders.

Jathan: For leaders who want to maximize organizational capacity, what advice or suggestions do you have?

Helen:

I suggest that leaders replace the goal "to maximize" with the goal "to optimize." Optimizing means "aligning the performance of the parts to create the success of the whole," and it involves coordinating everyone's goals. So ensuring that each part learns how their work comes to them, who their work goes to, and how their contribution to the overall flow improves the organization's success, gives everyone a set of goals that they can relate directly to their own success.