



PART ONE

Designing Capacity Building for Greater Impact

THE FOUNDATION FOR EFFECTIVE CAPACITY BUILDING

The Resilient, Inclusive, and Sustainable Economies (RISE) Program partnered with nonprofits to help strengthen organizational leadership and infrastructure. This series highlights lessons learned about the design and implementation of capacity-building investments and the impact they can have.



Community
Wealth Partners

by SHARE OUR STRENGTH

Capacity building starts with intentional design choices.

The design process for RISE began with a simple premise: locally rooted leaders play a critical role in communities that have historically been kept farthest from power and resources. They develop and lead strategies to expand economic opportunity, drawing on trust, local knowledge, and relationships that institutions outside these communities rarely hold. Yet their organizations have not received an equitable share of philanthropic investment, which too often mirrors the broader racial and wealth inequities these leaders are working to close. Our team at Community Wealth Partners was charged with building a multi-year strategy that would deliver meaningful investments to a cohort of these leaders and their organizations.

To decide where to invest, we began with secondary research in 38 cities, examining factors like city size, demographics, and the local nonprofit landscape. We then focused on a subset of those cities, interviewing more than 100 nonprofits, capacity builders, and funders to understand capacity-building dynamics and priorities in each area. Ultimately, this led us to Dallas and Miami-Dade, two places with a strong foundation to build on and a distinct role for RISE to play. The following elements proved critical as we built out the program.

KEY POINTS

- **Participant input**, so the design reflects what nonprofits need
- **A clear goal**, so decisions stay aligned
- **Paired investments**, so unrestricted funding reinforces other forms of support
- **Choice**, so nonprofits can decide where to focus

Participant Input

As we designed RISE, we sought input from organizations like those that would ultimately take part in the program. We reached out to local capacity builders and nonprofits early on, and compensated them for their time. Their feedback informed several decisions:

- They affirmed our commitments to a multi-year program, unrestricted funding, and opportunities for participants to connect with peers.
- They highlighted the importance of support that is customized and flexible, meeting participants where they are. We integrated this into the program design by giving nonprofits choices (see more in the “Choice” section below), ensuring we approached each interaction with this mindset, and selecting partners who could provide customized and flexible support to nonprofits.
- They strongly preferred that a range of nonprofit staff and board members participate, not just chief executives. It is hard enough for chief executives to be active participants given their limited bandwidth, they said, but it also puts the pressure of implementing changes solely on that person’s shoulders. We designed the program to engage two staff participants each year, with the chief executive participating in at least the first year to ensure buy-in from the top of the organization.

We also built in ongoing feedback loops by asking nonprofits to complete a year-end survey and interview so that we could refine the program design in real time.

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“RISE grants center organizational readiness and invest in resilience rather than project outputs, shifting power in a way that allows organizations to drive impact beyond any grant cycle.”

—Andreina Weichselbaumer,
Organizational Strengthening Partner

A Clear Goal

From the beginning, the goal of RISE was clear: strengthen local nonprofits working to expand economic opportunity in communities that have not had equitable access to resources. We were open to supporting a range of strategies, from creative placemaking to affordable housing.

That focus drew us to organizations with deep community ties and a track record of results. We looked for small to mid-sized organizations, with five to 20 full-time staff, large enough to have the bandwidth to engage in a capacity-building program, but small enough that the investment would be meaningful relative to their budgets.

By the end of the program, we hoped participants would deepen their leadership, build their organizational infrastructure, and grow their power and influence, including with new funders and peer networks.

Paired Investments

RISE was built as a three-year program, offering multiple types of support: an unrestricted grant, tailored organizational development, leadership coaching, and opportunities for peer learning. We paired these resources because a multi-year, unrestricted grant helps provide the stability organizations need to engage in capacity building while responding to urgent needs and maintaining the daily work that drives their impact.

For nonprofits facing tremendous pressures, this approach made a meaningful difference. **“In these types of organizations, you’re always living**

on the margins because you’re serving people on the margins,” said Chris L. Simmons, president of Cornerstone Community Development Corporation, an organization that helps residents in South Dallas break out of the cycle of poverty. **“The funding helped CCDC leverage additional dollars from other funders and pay salaries, including for Americorps Vista members impacted by federal funding cuts.”**

Flexible funding matters for capacity builders too. RISE’s organizational development supports were delivered by a vetted group of consultants, and each one also received an unrestricted grant. **“This was huge because we are also small businesses,”** said Tamika Mason of Building for Mission, a talent strategy consulting company. This support also enabled them to better serve participants: **“Multi-year and general operating support gives the flexibility to adjust and recalibrate in real time when designing complex solutions,”** highlighted Corey Davis of the Maven Leadership Collective, an ideas lab that creates ecosystems of support for queer and trans social impact leaders of color and allies.

This combination of unrestricted, multi-year funding and capacity-building support created the conditions for organizations to make the greatest progress over the long term.

“RISE grants center organizational readiness and invest in resilience rather than project outputs, shifting power in a way that allows organizations to drive



impact beyond any grant cycle,” said Andreina Weichselbaumer of Radical Partners, a social impact accelerator.

Choice

In RISE, participants played an active role in shaping their own capacity building. At the beginning of each year, we provided a list of four organizational development tracks, informed by early feedback from potential participants and spanning areas like fundraising, communications, and impact measurement. Each organization selected their top two choices and we matched them with a capacity-building partner in one of those areas. Similarly, participating organizations chose which member of their team would receive coaching each year, and that person got to select their coach.

Throughout this process, we served as thought partners, helping leaders weigh priorities and focus where the work would matter most. Pairing each organization’s knowledge of its own situation with partnership along the way meant the work targeted what they actually needed.

Recap

When designing an approach to strengthen organizations' ability to serve their communities, keep these in mind:



Participant input: Involve nonprofits and capacity-building organizations in shaping the design, and compensate them for their time.



A clear goal: Get really clear on your goals for capacity building before designing it.



Paired investments: Include unrestricted funding so that nonprofits have more bandwidth for capacity-building activities.



Choice: Create opportunities for nonprofits to identify their own capacity-building priorities.



Your Turn: Questions for Reflection

- Why do you want to design or redesign your capacity-building approach?
- How might you engage nonprofits and the organizations that would support them in designing a capacity-building approach? What have they already told you about their needs and interests?
- What types of funding would create greater potential for impact (e.g., multi-year funding; unrestricted grants)? Who would you need buy-in from in order to offer these options? How could you make a compelling case?
- How might you integrate choice into the approach?

Community Wealth Partners works alongside nonprofits and grantmakers to turn bold visions into lasting impact.

We offer strategy consulting, facilitation, and capacity-building support with a focus on shifting power and resources to create more equitable and effective solutions.

Learn more at communitywealth.com.