

Unpacking Organizational Capacity for Research

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Objective

To develop a grounded conceptual framework through which to understand and enhance the capacity of a health service organization to choose, create, and use research evidence; and to use this framework to evaluate a province-wide training program (SEARCH*) and make recommendations for future directions.

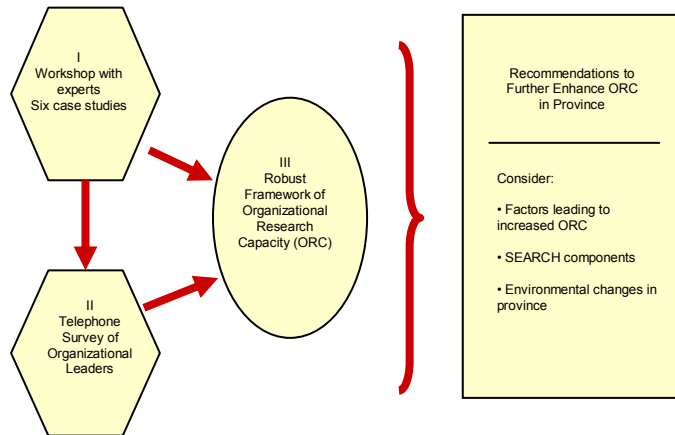
*The SEARCH Program (Swift Efficient Application of Research in Community Health) was the impetus for this work. A description can be found at <http://www.ahfmr.ab.ca>. The terms, choose, create and use are integral to the SEARCH program.

Study Design

The study design used three components:

1. Expert workshop;
2. Case studies of change initiatives involving group interviews; and
3. Telephone survey of managers knowledgeable about SEARCH program

The Approach to Framework Development and Development of Recommendations



Principal Findings

Six Case Studies in Regional Health Authorities: Major Themes

- Resources
- Process
- Links and relationships
- Individual characteristics
- Decision influences
- Culture/climate

Key Findings

- Considering the implications of a conceptual framework when delivering and evaluating capacity building programs enables more robust recommendations.
- Major components to consider when examining an organization's capacity to choose, create, and use research include:
 - attributes of key players and groups
 - focusing events
 - organizational structures and processes
 - extent and nature of external links and relationships
 - organizational norms, values and culture
 - the nature of the milieu within which the organization of interest functions (e.g. size of community, urban/rural location, etc.).
- It is essential to specify the "level" of the organization of interest when examining organizational capacity for research.

Components of the ORC Model

Forces for Action: The catalyzing events or influences which cause the organization to attend to a particular area.

Action Area: The policy issue upon which the organization's attention is focused by the forces for action and about which a decision is actively made. It represents fluid and intangible dimensions such as organizational culture. Resources are often significant "enablers" in the action area.

Actors: Actors may be individuals (e.g. CEOs) or groups of individuals (e.g. health professional associations). For example, if senior managers are closely involved in the issue, action is more likely. If actors include individuals with specific responsibilities for research or related areas (e.g. planning, information analysis, quality improvement), action is enabled.

Organizational Structures and Processes: Those aspects of an organization that one can "touch and feel". Coordinating committees, research policies, or expectations of senior executives are examples of structures and processes that influence organizational research capacity.

Information: Information is key to research transfer, as the results of research processes often materialize as information in one form or another. Information did not emerge as strongly as some other components of this model through the case studies, but given the particular focus of the model, it remains an integral component.

Links and Relationships with External Parties: External links were often the source of information. Personal relationships and mediated routes (e.g. internet) are key.

Leadership: In every case study, leadership was central to the action process. Leadership includes such things as clear executive leadership through business plans; focusing the agendas of other actors on the action area; and guiding participative processes.

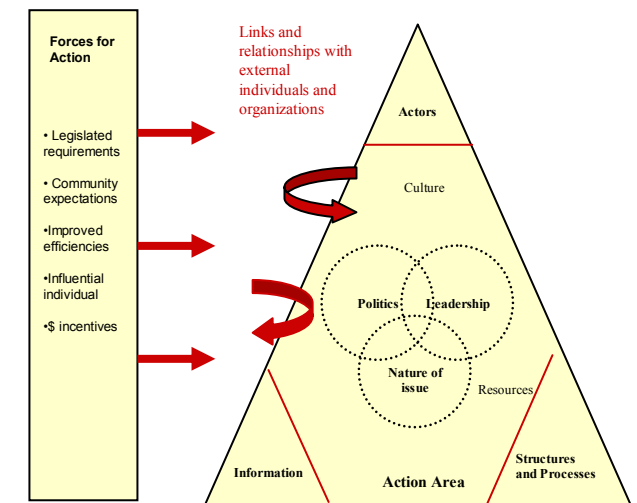
Politics: Social relations involving authority or power are inherently part of decision making processes in complex organizations. Politics are often closely intertwined with leadership dimensions and characteristics of various actors (either individual or groups).

Nature of Issue: If the issue under scrutiny is tightly coupled with organizational priorities, effective action is more likely.

Implications for Model from Evaluation Survey

- It is important to specify the organizational unit that is the target of focus (i.e. program, unit/department, organization, integrated delivery system)
- It is important to be cognizant of the organizational environment *vis a vis* competing issues and opportunities (e.g. fewer competing opportunities make impact of modest interventions more likely)

The Organizational Research Capacity Model



Conclusions

Without a robust conceptual framework to apply to analyses of capacity for choosing, creating, and using research in health organizations, efforts to build and evaluate such capacity are hampered. This study has developed, refined, and applied such a framework in a province-wide context with diverse organizations.

Implications/Relevance

This conceptual framework was used to guide the evaluation of a research capacity building program in the province (SEARCH). The evaluation results will be used to inform future capacity building initiatives of a provincial research funding organization (the Alberta Heritage Foundation for Medical Research); and may also be useful to those health organizations wishing to enhance their evidence-based decision-making. Use of the conceptual framework in the evaluation of a specific program made it possible to recommend future directions for the program with more confidence.