

**RESILIENCE!  
LEADERSHIP!  
FUNCTIONING!**



# BUILDING THE CONSUMER VOICE

How Executive Functioning, Resilience, and Leadership Capacity Are Leading the Way

By Phil Basso, Janice Gruendel, Karen Key, Jennifer MacBlane, and Jill Reynolds

Within the realm of scientific advances broadly writ—from the neuroscience of human development and the impact of adversity on that development, to implementation science related to policy, practice, and program change—we stand at the doorway of great opportunity.



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A number of health and human service practice models and frameworks hold promise for field innovation and a resulting advance in desired client and organizational outcomes. Consistent with the principles of APHSA's *Pathways* initiative, perhaps of greatest interest at this time are frameworks that hold the most potential for building capacity at the individual, community, agency, and partnership levels.

These skill-building and capacity-oriented frameworks focus on executive functioning, resilience, and leadership development. Each of these frameworks draws attention and interest from a subset of experts and practitioners who are working to advance them in both theory and practice. To date, however, efforts appear to be lacking to "cross walk" them and explore the ways in which they might, together, comprise a more powerful, holistic approach to individual, organizational, and community development across populations, settings, and challenges.

### THE PROMISE OF CAPACITY-BUILDING FOCUS

One of the compelling consequences of building these skills and capacities is that they are critical to setting and moving toward one's life goals. Without these capacities, people and organizations are impaired in their ability to imagine a different future and move toward it. Research on people impacted by trauma, for instance, shows that trauma impairs an individual's ability to "live from the future." Without that capacity—the ability to envision, select, and work toward one's life goals, shaping one's experiences versus primarily reacting to them—the skills and capacities one gains may amount to a pyrrhic victory. One can become better equipped for a journey but never set a destination or take the trip.

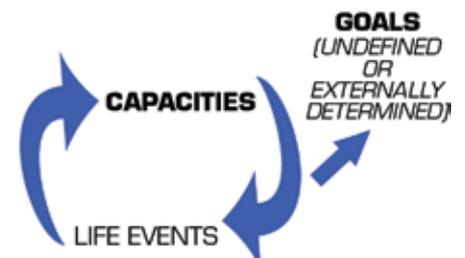
This important interrelationship might be described visually as follows:



In other words, building skills and capacities increases one's ability to set and achieve goals, which, in turn, strengthens skills and capacities, creating an upward spiral of momentum, growth, and achievement until one's goals are reached. Without this understanding, the assumption in working with individuals has often been that the measure of success in skill building is the achievement of certain life events—for example, graduating from high school or obtaining a job.

However, without the ability to set broader goals and work toward them, even the achievement of a milestone event can prove disappointingly limited in its impact on the longer term life course. Students who are supported in graduating from high school may disappoint adults and those who work with them with their next set of choices and outcomes, leaving program evaluators musing over the reason that "success" doesn't always translate into the longer-term, self-sustaining benefits envisioned.

A traditional way of thinking about this, then, looks more like the graphic below:



When an individual is taught skills that enable him or her to achieve someone else's goals, that individual has won a battle today but may still lose the proverbial war. A high school diploma or an entry-level job without the ability to identify and move toward the next milestone will not produce and sustain the hoped-for outcomes. But a person who is capable of goal setting and achievement is able to continue to shape his or her destiny. In this way then, capacity building around executive functioning, resilience, and leadership development holds the potential to deliver much more powerful results for the whole person over time than other interventions.

Given the parallel process that occurs when organizations embrace this capacity building for themselves, the results for the whole system over time has equally exciting potential impact. Instead of operating in a regu- lative mode—ensuring compliance to current policies and regulations— organizations with highly developed capacities in these three areas can more readily determine and achieve innovative strategies while also adapting them to an ever-changing, challenging environment.

Thus, more empowered and effective people are working with organiza- tions that are more empowered and effective. The potential upward spiral is very significant for our field and the society writ large.

### AN OPPORTUNITY FOR CAPACITY-BUILDING CONVERGENCE

Important work is currently underway to understand and apply effective practices within each of these

three areas of capacity building. These related capacities are driven by similar underlying skills and attributes as illustrated in Figure 1.

### EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING, RESILIENCE, AND LEADERSHIP: RELATED SKILLS AND ATTRIBUTES

While a complete convergence of these areas and drivers is an open question, the possibilities borne by more closely linking these separate constructs have powerful implications. All three of these capacity-building areas can be “unlocked” through an understanding of trauma and hardship, and they can be used to address the “upstream” risk factors related to later trauma and performance challenges. Trauma in high dose and/or duration negatively affects the brain. Yet various forms of hardship, adversity, and stress present opportunities for engaging individuals, families, organiza- tions, and communities in reflection, improvement, and growth.

### THE SEEDS OF PRACTICE AND ORGANIZATIONAL INNOVATION: A PARALLEL PROCESS DRIVING BETTER OUTCOMES

The overarching vision of this approach is to help advance inno- vative practice through a unifying framework, at both the casework and organization-wide levels. This innovative framework could improve both organizational functioning and individual and community outcomes— through building capacity in executive functioning, resilience, and leader- ship—concurrently. A parallel process emerges through the convergence of frameworks and strategies for both the people served by a system and for the improvement of the system itself.

The theory of change connecting capacity to outcomes envisioned in Figure 2 on page 34.

In a system that forges the parallel process suggested here, caseworkers may come to view adversity, hardship, and various stressors as the expe- riential basis for capacity-building development and targeted interven- tions. This could occur through an engagement process that guides individuals and families to assess their current capacity across the underlying capacity drivers and in line with their goals and needs, and then customize capacity-building plans that leverage current strengths and address the reasons for current gaps. Agencies would, at the same time, frame their own capacity-building needs in the same manner, using the same underlying drivers for building their executive functioning, resilience, and leadership capacity—using their resulting assessments to design and improve their selection, performance improvement, reward, succession planning, employee retention, and staff development programs.

### CURRENT INNOVATIONS

Many examples and demonstra- tions already exist from which to expand these practice innovations and strengthen the parallel process con- nections that are possible. The mental

*See Consumer Voice on page 34*

**FIGURE 1: Executive Functioning, Resilience, and Leadership: Related Skills and Attributes**

Executive Functioning	Resilience	Leadership
Engaging in group dynamics, knowing when to speak and listen	Accessing social supports and role models	Empowering the organization Social and emotional intelligence
Including past knowledge and experience in current ideas	Optimism balanced by realism	Political savvy and adaptability Knowledge of the organization
Asking for help when needed Making plans	Faith in something larger than one's self	Projecting into the future
Monitoring the consequences of action Evaluating and reflecting	A sense of meaning, morality and ethics	Advancing values and principles
Making mid-course corrections Learning from mistakes	Reframing circumstances & events as constructive and instructive	Being agile to get to the goal Ability to sense and respond
Keeping track of multiple things, keeping track of time	Problem-solving skills	Connecting strategy to management
Sustaining effort	Facing and overcoming fears	Challenging the norm
Managing frustration and regulat- ing emotion	Forgiveness	Breaking down barriers
Managing frustration and regulat- ing emotion	A sense of humor	Maintaining perspective
Memorizing and retrieving information from memory	Brain fitness, physical fitness, and stress management	Self-management

health field has developed and tested person-centric models of care directly relevant to what we envision. Many studies are underway to better understand executive functioning and how to assess and enhance it, including those from the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

Both the MOMS Partnership in New Haven and the Crittenton Women’s Center are interested in discussing how this work might inform and be informed by their practice models. The Girls Educational and Mentoring Services (GEMS) program in New York State explicitly links post-trauma recovery with leadership development for sexually exploited girls and women. The Olmsted County Department of Community Services has trained its staff on resilience. Sonoma County, Calif.; Hampton, Va.; Suffolk County, N.Y.; Washington, D.C.; and Boulder County, Colo., have all stated their interest in developing a more strengths-based approach to consumer service and organizational improvement that would be informed by this framework. And the San Diego Department of Health and Human

Services as well as Eckerd have asked APHSA to be included in a future demonstration of emerging practice and parallel process innovations.

Many academic institutions are also working on these three constructs. Of note, the Department of Justice and the U.S. military are focused on advancing resilience, the Administration for Children and Families uses the term “resilience” in its mission statement, and there is an international Resilience Alliance that seeks to advance and integrate studies of environmental, governmental, and organizational resilience.

**IMPLICATIONS**

There are both significant opportunities and challenges involved with advancing these connected frameworks for capacity building at the level of organizational management as well as at the level of individual and family-focused front-line practice.

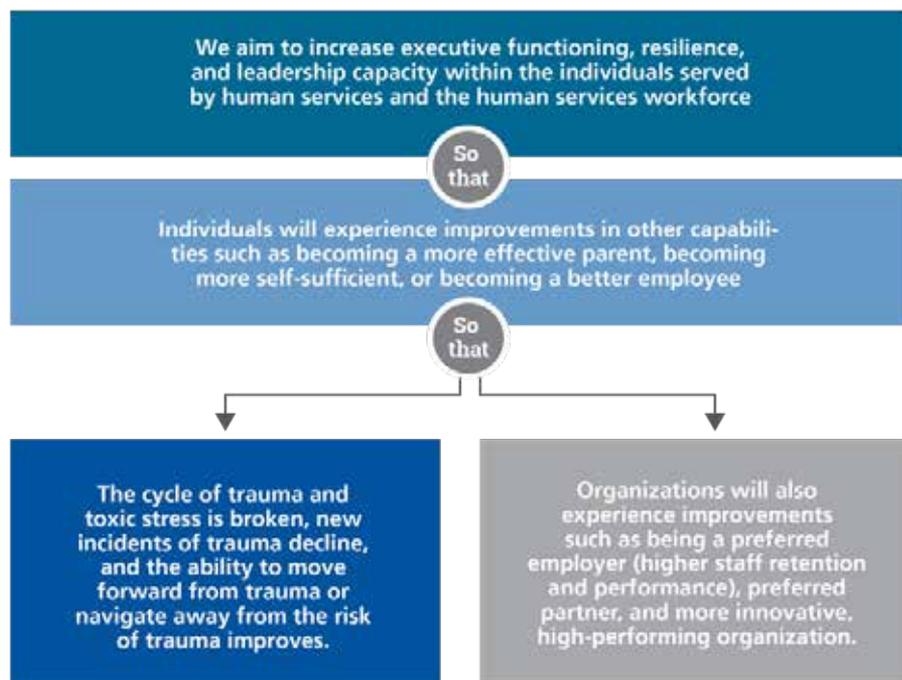
Taken together, the opportunities include focusing on learnable skills and competencies in addition to environmental (e.g., poverty) or on individual (e.g., single parenthood)

characteristics. In addition, the opportunity side of this equation offers a focus on individual and/or organizational strengths and assets within the context of managing one’s self in one’s environment (i.e., executive functioning), building strengths in the face of adversity (i.e., resilience), and advancing individual and collective leadership. This affords us the broader opportunity to move back into the realm of “prevention and early intervention” with a strong basis in emerging science. Coupling this approach with a focus on leadership, informed by executive functioning and resilience, increases the likely sustainability of organizational and practice change that emerges. Given the changing demographics of the U.S. workforce in general, and within our agencies in particular, the time is right to expand these capacities at all agency levels.

The opportunities for reframing how we communicate about the work of our field might also benefit greatly. For example, resilience is a politically neutral, salient construct that can appeal to everyone; it has been developed outside of our field and touches upon unifying themes in our culture. And in a recent survey of private-sector executives exploring experiences that contributed most to their leadership capacity, a majority identified challenging assignments, difficult people, professional failures and setbacks, and hardships experienced earlier in life (Center for Creative Leadership, 2014). We often hear this anecdotally from well-known leaders, yet most leadership development efforts do not connect “negative” experiences explicitly to capacity building and growth, therefore leaving their effects under-leveraged and untended.

But there are risks as well. For example, if executive functioning theory is interpreted to suggest that “the game is over” if interventions fail to address the root causes of early life trauma and systemic adverse circumstances—like living in chronic poverty—then we will not design

**FIGURE 2: Connecting Capacity to Outcomes**



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interventions for the continued growth of individual skills and competencies. Similarly, if resilience is viewed as the result of “pulling yourself up by your bootstraps,” then attention will be directed away from understanding what drives the development of “strength in the face of adversity,” supporting people as they build those drivers, and addressing environmental root causes of poverty and trauma.

Finally, if leadership development is focused only at the upper levels of agency hierarchy, then opportunities for mid-level management, supervisors, and front-line staff to grow and change will be lost—in turn limiting the practice strategies that can result in greater leadership capacity for our consumers. This will prove to be too limiting, as the most senior executives come and go while middle management, supervisory staff, and front-line workers tend to remain longer in their respective positions and roles in ongoing leadership. Leadership capacity building can also be the providence of those risking trauma or experiencing it—not just the privileged, predisposed, highly educated, or highly credentialed.

Still, the human service field is in a position to serve a vital role in building these capacities throughout our society. We are in the business of working with people and communities who have experienced trauma and hardship or are at risk of doing so. We can therefore innovate in what we do—not only to better serve those most directly involved in the health and human service system, but also to serve as a model for capacity building in our society generally.

Our entire economy experienced a near-collapse in the past decade, arguably related in some part to deficiencies in these three areas. We’re not used to thinking of the captains of Wall Street as having executive functioning deficits, or kids living in poverty as having unlocked leadership potential. But our field can contribute to a more objective, powerfully transformative view—one that sees beneath both achievement and struggle to what truly drives our individual and collective capacity and actions.

## LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Consistent with APHSA’s value proposition and in light of the rapidly expanding base of knowledge emerging from the science of executive function, adversity and resilience, and leadership development, we believe that the time is right to focus on transformational thinking at the intersection of these three frameworks. Specifically, we seek partnership opportunities to conceive and launch an effort to link these three general frameworks within the context of clearly articulated operational definitions, then gather, design, and implement casework and organizational improvement practices whereby these capacities can be built both within our agencies and the families and communities that they serve.

We also seek to hold a national symposium of experts and stakeholders in the health and human service field, including child welfare, to further inform this plan and its initial steps. It will also be essential to establish a “circle of innovators” for building these capacities with the family and within all agency levels, to

generate real-world demonstrations and tests of related innovations and their impact on desired outcomes over time, leading to a growing body of evidence required to bring these innovations to scale. 

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