

The background of the entire page is a solid light orange color. In the upper half, there is a cluster of overlapping circles in various colors including blue, green, yellow, and purple. Below this, the lower half of the page is filled with a pattern of stylized human figures in a darker shade of orange, arranged in a way that suggests a crowd or a community.

BUILDing for Growth Year 1 Report

Prepared by

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CONSULTING

"How do we grow with fresh eyes and an old soul?"

The CoP space was helpful for solidarity and brainstorming/sharing practical solutions with those in similar roles! The one learning session I attended on culture was excellent and extremely useful for an organization in a phase of growth like ours, and my colleagues remarked similarly on other sessions.

The overall engagement was great. I love how the workshop was structured; the speakers were well experienced enough to provide great insight on an overall picture of the subject. The CoP was also engaging; participants were free to express what was bothering them and possible solutions for a troubling workspace.

Mid-level management is a big concern - we had a pretty flat org chart until recently when we realized it wasn't sustainable; we've had to throw so many people a team of staff to supervise - we've offered coaching to those people, but there's definitely a lot of panic & stress that people experienced.

About 60% of our staff is less than a year into working with us; it's not so much maintaining culture, so much as how to continue developing a culture that reflects the change and new staff and our values.

Introduction

Over the course of the last few years, nonprofit organizations across the sector have experienced unprecedented and, in many cases, unexpected growth. For some organizations, growth was attributed to large one-time gifts, such as via Mackenzie Scott or another singular, large donation, and in other cases, growth was the response to a tense and divisive political climate and collective social justice reckoning, wherein individuals increasingly contributed to causes important to them that were deemed at risk. An increasing number of funders are also supporting internal capacity building. For example, the BUILD grant from the Ford Foundation allows organizations to focus their energies on building the infrastructure and capacity necessary to best advance their mission.



Rapid Growth Challenges

STAFF

- Maintaining organizational culture
- Naming and prioritizing needs
- Internal communication
- Skills and development
- Effective executive leadership and decision-making
- Preparing for leadership transitions
- Burnout

SYSTEMS

- Increased Human Resource needs
- Finding the right organizational structure and adding mid-level management
- Back-to-office challenges
- Updating and expanding operations and systems scope
- Updating IT needs for remote work
- Long-term financial sustainability beyond a specific donation bump

During this period of growth, many new and established nonprofit organizations doubled or even tripled in size. Amidst this once in a lifetime change, nonprofits were growing at rapid rates to address issues of social inequity and experiencing both the benefits and challenges associated with change. Dedicated to supporting these organizations, La Piana Consulting met with over 50 nonprofits experiencing growth in the summer of 2021 to better understand this phenomenon.

In these interviews, La Piana heard the same challenges echoed with precise consistency across the nation and observed a tangible feeling of isolation among organizational leaders tasked with guiding their nonprofits through this transformative period. Based on these conversations, La Piana identified the above *Rapid Growth Challenges* that organizations were experiencing.

To address these findings, La Piana Consulting, in collaboration with the BUILD program at the Ford Foundation, developed an evidence-based intervention called BUILDing for Growth.



Overview of BUILdIng for Growth's multi-tiered approach

BUILdIng for Growth is a customized capacity building program designed to help select Ford Foundation grantees navigate the challenges and opportunities of substantial, rapid, and unplanned growth, while developing the organizational infrastructure needed to drive sustainable impact.

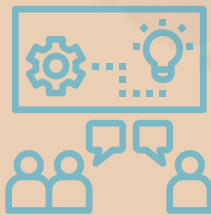
1



Communities of Practice

Learn from and with other nonprofit leaders from high growth organizations by problem solving real world challenges with peers in similar roles

2



Virtual Workshops

Engage in monthly interactive workshops (open to all staff and board) to delve deeper into understanding and addressing high-growth needs

3



Targeted Consulting

Access to individualized services from La Piana Consulting



The program was initially designed for 15 organizations.

Very quickly, more than twice that number of organizations were interested in joining.

As a result, Year 1 of BUILDing for Growth was launched with 30 organizations that all met the program requirements of:

1) experiencing rapid growth; 2) completing a needs assessment that evaluated need for support; 3) expressing interest in program; and 4) having capacity to participate in the program. Beyond these 30 groups, a number of organizations interested in the program were waitlisted to prioritize program participants in the highest need of support.



Communities of Practice

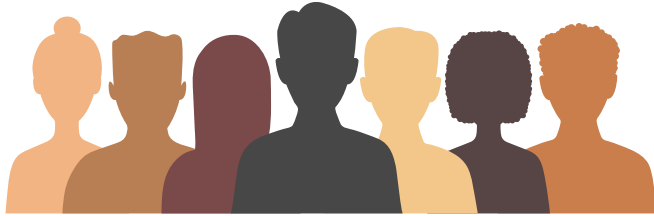
From November 2021 through June 2022, La Piana facilitated monthly peer-learning groups, called Communities of Practice (CoPs). The purpose of this intervention was to create a space for mutual support among nonprofit leaders in similar roles across rapid-growth organizations, thereby addressing the feeling of isolation La Piana heard so many of these leaders express. To this end, La Piana identified 8 different CoP groups, according to the following job titles: Executive Directors, Finance Directors, Development Directors, Operations Directors, Human Resources Directors, Research and Evaluation Directors, Legal Directors, and Program Leaders. In addition to these groups, we also convened a group for organizations who are Intermediary Grantmakers, as requested by some program participants, one group for BIPOC leaders, and one for Women leaders.

Each CoP session lasted one hour. Participants were encouraged to bring issues and questions they were wrestling with to the group for peer feedback. During each meeting, participants were also given the option to receive peer feedback on a specific situation through a 'clinic' approach. The format of the clinic is as follows:

- Participant briefly describes a complex challenge they are facing
- Group members ask the participant clarifying questions to ensure they understand the challenge
- Group members brainstorm and discuss ways to approach the challenge while the presenting participant listens and takes notes off camera
- Participant presenting the challenge shares a reflection on what was discussed by the group.



The group size for each CoP was capped at 15 members to ensure an intimate space where community could be built and people could share comfortably. If a group had more than 15 participants interested, two separate sections of the CoP were created. This was the case with Executive Directors, Finance Directors, Development Directors, Operations Directors, Human Resource Directors, and Program Leaders. Due to a lack of ongoing participation, three CoPs were eventually discontinued — Legal Directors, after learning that most legal directors were already participating in another Community of Practice, Intermediary Grantmakers, which convened once and didn't have enough participants to move forward, and Research and Evaluation, which met five times, but was challenged with inconsistent participation.



La Piana facilitated a total of 88 Community of Practice sessions, with all 30 organizations represented in at least one space.

Mid-way through the delivery of the Communities of Practice, we implemented a survey with participants to receive feedback and enhance the learning experience. From this survey, we learned that 77% of respondents agreed that their CoP was engaging and 81% of respondents agreed that their CoP lead was an effective facilitator for their group. Survey respondents spoke highly of connecting with their peers, breaking the sense of feeling “alone” in their position and respective challenges, appreciating the content & quality of group discussions, and valuing the contributions from their CoP facilitator. We also learned that while there was an appreciation for unstructured conversation, which allowed participants to discuss issues that are top-of-mind in real-time, there was also a desire among several participants to have more structure in the space. In response to this feedback, we developed monthly topics to discuss with the groups, based on the learning goals initially established in the space and overall learnings that were documented from the CoP facilitators.

Another useful piece of feedback was regarding scheduling challenges for a cohort of this size. To address this, we established consistent monthly dates and times for each Community of Practice to convene, allowing participants to anticipate their meeting time well in advance. This approach is also being continued in Year 2 of the program.

Throughout the program, La Piana also facilitated an internal “meta” Community of Practice with the firm’s staff who was facilitating each CoP. This was a space to surface challenges and ideas that spurred from each Community of Practice and to act on each accordingly. **One important outcome of this space was a comprehensive document outlining the top themes that emerged from each Community of Practice.** This list of findings became the basis for the monthly newsletter themes that will be implemented in BUILDing for Growth Year 2. **The three most significant findings across the Communities of Practice were: burnout among staff, challenges with transmitting and building organizational culture, and right-sizing staffing to current organizational needs.**



One-on-One Consulting

As part of the BUILDing for Growth program, La Piana made up to 25 hours of one-on-one consulting available to all participating organizations. Roughly two-thirds of the BUILDing for Growth organizations (listed on the right) reached out to engage La Piana in one-on-one consulting.

Through these one-on-one consulting sessions, La Piana developed interventions on key areas of need identified by each organization. **Topics addressed included financial planning and budget processes, strategic planning, board development, evaluation, succession planning, and financial forecasting.** The one-on-one sessions were developed to meet each organization's particular needs.

Allied Media Projects
Alternate ROOTS
Black Voters Matter
BYP 100
Center for Innovation in Worker Organizing
Center for Popular Democracy
Firelight Media
First Peoples Fund
Justice for Migrant Women
Ladies of Hope Ministries
Movement Alliance Project
National Domestic Workers Alliance
Reframe
Roosevelt Institute
State Voices
The Studio Museum in Harlem
Transgender Law Center

Of the 20 organizations that engaged La Piana in one-on-one hours, six completed the firm's Prioritization Tool. This tool was designed to assist organizations in determining where they should deploy their resources. La Piana developed the Prioritization Tool, a real time dashboard that highlights an organization's highest areas of need, as a direct response to the consistent challenge we were hearing from BUILDing for Growth participants – **“we have so much to do, we don't know where to start.”** This feeling of being overwhelmed with decisions and tasks was present in participants throughout the entire first year of the BUILDing for Growth program. The Prioritization Tool sessions required a meeting with the entire leadership team of an organization, often taking up to 2 hours, where we assessed a variety of tasks in different issue areas by level of importance and value. Just creating the space for this conversation was a win, as allocating specific time to think comprehensively and strategically about organizational priorities is difficult to set aside time for. Discussions were in the weeds, at times leaders were not initially in agreement on scoring, but ultimately, organizations walked away with a much clearer picture of the high-priority tasks that they could no longer afford to postpone. Discussing priorities with leaders also helped highlight the vital reality that not all activities are created equal, even when it may feel like nothing can be taken off the 'organizational plate.' There are always activities or roles that can be sequenced differently or clarified to free up capacity and make more strategically oriented decisions.

Amid rapid growth, a think tank nonprofit was considering dissolving its Operations Department, and the person who had led operations functions was departing. At the same time, the organization had adopted a strategic plan that required significant operational changes and initiatives. La Piana reviewed the organization's structure, process, and strategic plan and memorialized all functions currently undertaken by the departing staff member. From there, pulling from best practices and current trends in the sector, La Piana created a memo providing two options – one where the organization continued to operate without a dedicated Operations Department, noting what roles could absorb what functions, and one within which the Operations Department would continue and be reshaped to reflect the priorities indicated in the strategic plan.

Participant Case Studies

A social justice arts collaborative had undergone significant leadership changes and rapid growth. This led to one department in particular being unsure of whether it had the skill sets and staff capacity to continue its work. The department lead, new to leadership and supervision, was concerned about team culture, team morale, and setting up a staffing structure that would lead to success. La Piana met with each team member in a confidential interview to assess skills and strengths, as well as to identify what key attributes of their work led to job satisfaction. Taking into account all these points of information and the organization's overall strategic plan, La Piana developed a recommendation for a team staff structure and new workflows. La Piana also undertook regular coaching meetings with the department lead, including coaching her on how to engage with the organization's co-executive directors to have her team needs met. Finally, La Piana developed an agenda for a team visioning and planning retreat and coached the department lead on how to facilitate the retreat.

One organization was focused on expanding the specific strategy they were developing to build up their individual donor pipeline. We met consistently throughout the program and felt so much traction with our conversations and work together that we continued to meet informally throughout the summer. La Piana also had a chance to meet with the client's summer interns and to include them into the development of this strategy. It was wonderful to see the growth of the client's confidence with this strategy and to see how certain goals that La Piana had set at the outset were achieved throughout our time together.

Workshops

In Year 1 of BUILDing for Growth, La Piana facilitated 8 workshops addressing the topics below.



Developing Socially Responsible Investment Strategies to Grow Your Organization

Creating a Healthy Organizational Culture and Effective Internal Communications

Reduce Your HR Worries and Woes: HR Strategy & Best Practices for Growing Organizations

Scaling Organizational & Leadership Structure in a Fast Growth Environment

Strategy Development & Scaling for Reaching New Heights

IT Systems and Cybersecurity in the Age of Trolls, Phishing, Malware, and Ransomware

5 Common Mistakes Nonprofits Make with Data and How to Avoid Them

Governance: Building a Great Board for a Growing Organization




The workshops were designed to address issues of urgent need related to rapid growth as identified by participants at the start of the program. La Piana identified both in-house and external experts to facilitate these workshops, and the sessions were structured to maximize time for questions and engagement from attendees.

More than 100 unique individuals, representing 28 of the 30 participating organizations, attended workshops over the course of the program, with most individuals attending more than one workshop.


At the end of each workshop, La Piana utilized exit polls to receive feedback from attendees on whether they found the content valuable and in alignment with the learning goals of the session. La Piana consistently used this data to inform ongoing workshop development.




Workshop Feedback



78% agreed or strongly agreed that they learned something new from attending the workshops



100% indicated that they discussed aspects of workshop content with colleagues



89% indicated that they implemented something new at their organization based on something they learned in a workshop

A full program exit survey at the end of Year 1 also assessed workshop content and learning, asking respondents to evaluate their experience of the workshops overall. Of the survey respondents who attended at least one workshop, approximately 78% agreed or strongly agreed that they learned something new from attending workshops, 100% indicated that they discussed aspects of workshop content with colleagues, and approximately 89% indicated that they implemented something new at their nonprofit based on something they learned in a workshop.

One of the participating organizations in BUILDing for Growth reported so strongly resonating with the workshop 'Scaling Organizational & Leadership Structure in a Fast Growth Environment' that they followed-up with an all staff meeting to discuss their organizational structure. Using the tools La Piana provided, the organization assessed whether their current structure was serving their needs, and it began to implement small changes to the managerial and overall organizational structure to better address staff needs and align with organization values, especially related to equity and emphasis on collaborative learning.

One of the participating organizations in BUILDing for Growth utilized tools shared in the workshop '5 Common Mistakes Nonprofits Make with Data and How to Avoid Them' to develop a data dictionary for their organization. Now, the organization is situated to measure and speak to organization-wide outcomes in a unified, consistent manner. This development will directly address their formerly inefficient and overly complicated reporting process.

After working closely for the past year with 30 nonprofits experiencing rapid growth, many themes emerged, all of which confirmed what was learned in the initial intakes.

Takeaways

1

Rapid growth is a unique challenge.

The assessments and conversations held throughout the BUILDing for Growth program strongly suggest that rapid growth brings about unique challenges specific to and magnified by growth. Reflection and retooling in the company of other organizations experiencing the same challenges can help organizations navigate this unique situation.

Rapid growth disproportionately impacts human resources and operations.

While it is clear that rapid growth has ramifications across the entirety of an organization, human resource needs and operational needs are significantly exacerbated during this period. These efforts require particular attention and resources for organizations to not only keep up with the growing burden on these departments, but also to be deliberate and strategic in the way they address the needs of a growing team.

2

3

Flexibility and clarity help staff during periods of rapid growth.

Across the sector, nonprofit staff are experiencing high levels of burnout, desiring increased transparency in decision making, and demanding less hierarchical structures of management. During periods of growth and change, many frequent decisions are required. Leaders must foster clear and consistent communication about these changes. Growing organizations were more successful when providing multiple opportunities for staff input, sharing clear decision-making processes, and creating opportunities for peer management, collaboration, and learning.

Despite a large influx of funding, sustainability must be prioritized.

One of the biggest concerns facing leaders of rapidly growing organizations is the question of long-term financial sustainability. It is critical to set aside resources and to plan for future sustainability during periods of growth. Many leaders raised concerns about changes in their funding patterns, as many donors were perceived as providing donations in response to specific factors in the current news cycle. Nothing is untouched by growth in an organization, and development plans and financial sustainability plans must be created that specifically account for maintaining the organization when growth slows or stops.

4

5

Pause and examine the internal strengths, infrastructure, and capacity of the organization before making big changes.

Many organizations successfully addressed rapid growth by turning their efforts inward, focusing on internal capacity building, strengthening infrastructure, evaluating and leveraging activities aligned with increased impact, and even pausing service delivery to tackle key internal challenges before regrouping and reopening stronger than before. Though the impulse is to continue to grow and build upon previous work, carving out purposeful time to reflect, plan, and retool was an invaluable asset for many.

Culture must both change and stay the same.

Since organizational culture is impacted by growth, leaders must find the balance between maintaining existing culture and adapting to account for new staff and an evolving social landscape. Successful nonprofits were able to create space for existing and new staff to refine the culture of the organization collaboratively, with strong support from leadership.

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