

Parks, Health, Recreation, and Public Lands Policy Brief Series
Eppley Institute for Parks and Public Lands
Indiana University



Policy Brief

Improving Agency Performance Using best practices to build your agency's capabilities

Developing staff is about meeting overall agency needs

National security, defense, and corporate and business entities invest significantly in training and development for their employees to ensure they are capable, as an organization, to deliver essential mission services in an effective and timely manner. Most talent professionals report training expenditures between 10 and 14% of the organization's annual operating budget. (Training Magazine, 2015).

Government organizations like park and recreation agencies often struggle with budgeting adequate funding for training and development, or do not have a systematic business practice to determine and/or track training and development expenditures. Yet, it is a foundational method to improve the agency's overall performance and capability. As an example, in Eppley's work with the National Park Service, the Eppley Institute has helped to implement a systematic approach to improving facility asset management and a learning expenditure goal of between 2 and 4% of annual operations expenditures.

A deliberate approach to building the workforce's capabilities is needed

A context is important in understanding how overall capability is improved for an agency or organization. Building capability requires a deliberate and thoughtful approach, as well as understanding some key terms.

CAPABILITY

The collective ability of an organization, group or a system to complete or provide general services or products either inside or outside the organization (Vincent, 2008).

COMPETENCY

The knowledge, skills, abilities, and behaviors required of a position or positions to meet profession and/or job work requirements (Morgan, 2006).

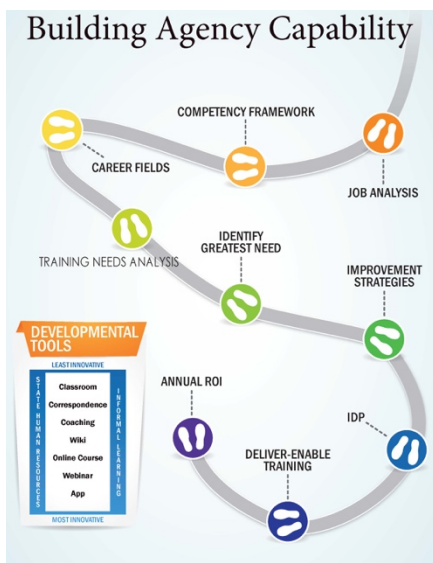
CAPACITY

The wide range of capabilities, knowledge, and resources that organizations need to be effective (DiTommaso, A., et. al. 2017).

The goal for all of this is of course building an organization’s credibility; in other words, “improving how positively an organization and those representing it are perceived by its key stakeholders – the people or entities that the institution relies on for its success” (Springer, 2008). In this regard, an essential function of agency leaders is to deliberately and thoughtfully plan the overall improvement of the organization. In parks, recreation, and public land management agencies, this is often a haphazard process that focuses on training, modifying position descriptions, hiring new staff, or procuring consultants.

A deliberate and thoughtful approach does not mean an expensive annual process, but rather using some key components managed by agency leadership. The following figure provides a brief outline of a standard process to improve an agency’s capability.

Figure 1: Building Agency Capability Road Map



Consider six best practices

As an agency looks to improve capability, the real goal is the agency’s “ability to sustain a stream of innovations and adapt” (Vincent, 2008). This should prompt agency leadership to consider best practices and training programs standards. The Eppley Institute works with their partners and clients to ensure that training meets standards that ensure training:

1. is delivered effectively,
2. is occurring and benefiting the agency,
3. is meeting the most important needs of the agency, and
4. is planned and organized in advance.

Eppley has been at the forefront of helping agencies like the National Park Service, Boulder Parks and Recreation, and others in organizing their agency efforts to build their staff competencies and eventually agency capability through organizing training and development. As Eppley assists an agency, six general best practices are implemented including:

1. Learning Needs Analysis – A Learning Needs Analysis (LNA) ascertains what currently exists and what is needed. The identification of training needs is the first step in an instructional design. Techniques used for this analysis include interviews and consultations with staff and a review of reports and relevant documents. The important

questions answered by this analysis are audience identification, level of existing knowledge, information that will be delivered, and recommended format for delivery.

2. Competency-Based Training Needs Assessments – Competency-based human resource systems represent the industry and government standard and outline the knowledge, skills, and abilities that are required for employees to perform duties at a defined level of proficiency. Competency-based training provides employees with outcome-based, learner-driven tools that help to improve their overall job performance as determined by competencies.

One such competency framework to consider is that offered by the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) which forms the basis for the Certified Park and Recreation Professional and the Certified Park and Recreation Executive. These certification programs are based on various competency models developed by NRPA professionals. Other organizations may elect not to use a competency model, instead relying on classification systems and/or position descriptions. A final approach would be to use a more comprehensive competency framework such as the World Park Academy’s more comprehensive 11 competency framework (<https://worldparksacademy.org/certifications/cpp/competency-framework/>) as described below.

World Park Academy Certified Park Professional Competency Framework

- Asset Management
- Landscape and Amenity Horticulture
- Operations and Maintenance
- Project Management
- Resource Management
- Business Acumen
- Supervision
- Interpretation and Education
- Public Health
- Leadership
- Recreation

The Boulder Parks and Recreation Department has implemented two Training Needs Assessments with the Eppley Institute using this competency framework as adapted for their agency, the most recent late in 2017. The results show the leadership of the Department a ‘road map’ to improving the staff’s ability to deliver services to a demanding group of citizens who love their programs, parks, trails, and facilities.

3. Determining overall agency strategic goals – The Eppley Institute, in partnership with the National Park Service (NPS), developed a Course of Study for the Facility Manager Leaders Program, which described the agency problems, such as succession management, that were addressed by this year-long educational program. The end result was a capability building training program for facility

managers that received the W. Edwards Deming Award in 2010.

For the NPS, the end result of this approach was to reflect on the agency’s need to improve results in asset reporting, budgeting, project management, and Total Cost of Facility Ownership, and deliver change within a highly managed federal agency. Currently, with over 160 current graduates deployed across the agency, the NPS has met major goals as originally designed using the best practices described in this policy briefing. Figure 2 shares a concept of how overall agency strategic goals underlie capability building activities.

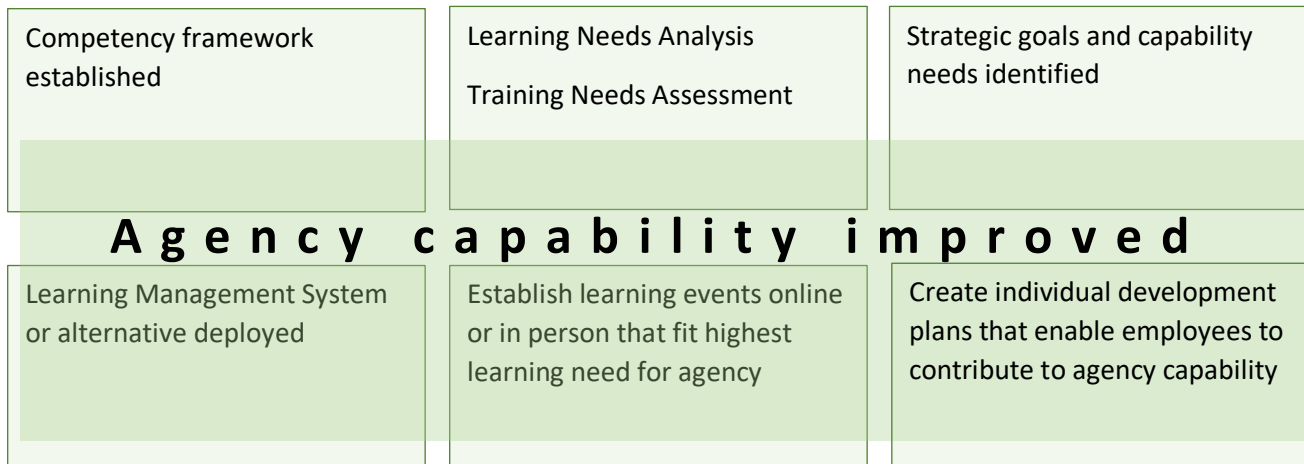
4. Implement a Learning Management System (LMS) – An LMS is essential for an agency to deliver comprehensive and strategic learning to affect organization performance and capability. An LMS allows agencies to create, assign, track, audit, and document learning that occurs in the organization. The Eppley Institute has helped implement and manage LMS for the NPS and USFS, and has developed its own LMS specific for park and recreation agencies called ProValens Learning, www.proValensLearning.com, which allows individuals to track their skill and competency development. Later this Spring, Eppley will be rolling out an agency-based LMS, which allows for tracking at an organizational level.

5. Develop and emphasize online learning where it fits best. LMS excel at promoting and using online learning. However, sometimes in-person training works best. It is also true that attendance at in person conferences or workshops is not always the best choice for your agency employees. A blending of online and in person training fits best.

Online Learning: Experiences vary, but can often meet individual and

- Mark Westermeier, Director of Gold Medal Award Winning Carmel Clay, Indiana Park and Recreation Department noted that “... The number of program offerings and variety of subjects offered by Eppley were far beyond my expectations and very reasonably priced. The courses, reference material, layout, and ease of learning were simply perfect. In fact, the learning experience was so enjoyable and satisfying that I continued taking courses after earning enough CEUs for my CPRP recertification. Eppley’s courses are a tremendous asset for the parks and recreation profession. In fact, I have encouraged my staff to take advantage of your resources at such a reasonable cost and recommended Eppley to many of my personal and professional acquaintances. ”
- Westermeier admits he accessed the Eppley Institute online courses to make sure he completed his CEU’s for certification in a short time frame.

Figure 2: Conceptual Blending of Agency Strategy and Capability Building



6. Creating Individual Development Plans (IDP) for each employee based on their individual professional and job class goals, but also on agency strategic and overall performance gaps. Implementation of an IDP for each employee is an essential employee development tool that allows employees to be accountable and responsible for their own professional and job class growth.

How does your agency stack up?

Context is important here; not all agencies can meet the best practices and requirements on their own to implement organization capability improvement. But agency leaders can implement parts or all of the best practices with help and some forethought and planning. The checklist below provides a ‘scorecard’ of sorts for agencies to use in determining how they compare.

Best Practice	Practice is Definitely Implemented in the Agency	Some of This is Implemented or Exists	Not Sure or I Know the Agency Does Not Have This Practice
Competency framework and classification system implemented	4	2	0
Learning needs analysis and training needs assessment exist in our agency	4	3	0
Strategic or system master plan goals have personnel and agency learning needs	5	3	0
LMS is implemented and used frequently by agency personnel	4	2	0
Learning events are designed and scheduled to fit agency goals and performance gaps	5	3	0
Agency has IDP’s for every employee or similar groups of employees	3	2	0

Scoring: Write down the score that best describes your agencies implementation of each best practice above, then total all the scores. An informal rating of final scores suggests that if your total is:

- ✓ Between 25 and 21: Great Job-Keep Up the Good Work as Your Agency Strives to Be Fully Capable
- ✓ Between 21 and 15: Work to be Done-But Moving in the Right Direction and Building Capability
- ✓ Below 14: Your Agency Cannot Reach Full Capability

Concluding Thoughts

Parks, recreation, and public land management agencies deliver critical public health and community quality of life services to citizens and they will have to focus on the best practices to manage all resources, including personnel. Having a deliberate and strategic program for maximizing that resource, which generally makes up over 75% of all agency funding, will be critical as demand for services increases with urbanization and technology.

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