Relevant, Excellent, and Visible: Five Years of Capacity Building for California’s RCDs

California Association of Resource Conservation Districts and Solid Ground Consulting
Building District Capacity

- What does “capacity building” mean to you?
- What are some of your district’s or your state’s most important capacity needs?
Building District Capacity

- Board recruitment and development
- Strategic planning
- Staff leadership
- Collaboration between districts
- Communications
- Advocacy at the local and state level
California’s Resource Conservation Districts

- 98 RCDs
- 10 regions
- No baseline allocation from state
- Some districts have local tax base funding
The Need

- Proposition 68 funding expired – districts had been overly dependent on one funding source
- Need for a new funding model for districts
  - Growing environmental need – drought, wildfire, etc.
  - Agencies starting to think more regionally
“There was serious variation in capacity to complete projects and that put us in such a horrible position to seek statewide funding...

We had to circle the wagons in terms of who we were, who we wanted to be, and how to get out partners engaged.”

• Mandy Parkes
  Inland Empire RCD
VISION AND STANDARDS

• High-performing RCDs discussed ways to strengthen the statewide network.

• Group developed a vision:

  “RCDs will be Relevant, Excellent, and Visible ‘go-to’ hubs for natural resource conservation and agriculture on public and private land at the local, regional, state, tribal, and federal levels”

• Standards developed for RCDs: Tiers 1, 2, and 3
Capacity Building
For RCDs
5-year Capacity Building Program

- Survey to determine needs
- RCD leaders participated in design of program
- Program design
  - Trainings
  - Customized assistance for individual RCDs
  - Collaborative planning
  - Internal work for CARCD – planning, revenue, board
  - Knowledge Transfer
Group Trainings: Leadership Academies

- For district managers and board members
- Goal: develop leadership mindset and specific skills
- Intensive retreat followed by distance learning and peer support with 4 – 7 months of cohort calls

“For me, it brought greater awareness – I recognized myself in a leadership role, out and about representing the RCD. And after going through the training, I see leadership concepts at play in various other aspects of my life.”

-Brin Greer, RCD of Tehama County
Group Trainings: Advocacy Academy

- For district managers and board members
- Goal: develop understanding and comfort with outreach to elected officials
- One-day learning experience
- Followed by immediate legislative visits

“The Advocacy Academy increased my comfort level in talking with legislators.”
- Gordon Long, Director, Calaveras RCD

“The skills continue to be passed on... I even conducted a ‘mini-Academy’ here at the office. Everyone understands that we are always laying the groundwork for future projects whenever we talk about what we do.”
- Sara Letton, Western Shasta RCD
Group Trainings: Communications Academy

- Goal: Build RCDs’ ability to think strategically about communications
- Series of six online webinars
- Based on a statewide message platform developed for RCDs

“San Mateo RCD has been to a few communications workshops and gotten a lot out of them. Our communications have definitely improved as a result…”

-Kellyx Nelson, San Mateo RCD
Group Trainings: Annual Meeting Capacity Day

- For district managers and board members
- Goal: “Choose your adventure” organizational skill building day
- 8-10 sessions offered for all levels
- Held day before annual conference
Individual RCD Assistance

- Goal: Engage board and staff to improve key organizational practices
- Assessments
- Strategic planning
- Board development
- Staffing plans/team building

“From a personal perspective, I feel I have a much stronger connection to the Board and perspective of Board Members thanks to our meetings.”
Lessons Learned

• Differing capacity levels require different trainings
• Volunteer board members require different follow up than staff
• Power of face-to-face
• Even with attempts to make everything accessible, sometimes hard for very low capacity organizations to participate
Durable Collaborations

- Goal: Strengthen the entire RCD network by developing a scalable model for collaboration that reduces unnecessary competition & improves the ability of districts to meet their objectives
- Voluntary and accessible application process
- 7 cohorts ranging from large (11 RCDs) to small (2 RCDs) with a spectrum of trust, ambition, and capacity
Durable Collaboration Examples

• Information sharing
• Cooperation on discrete projects
• Equipment sharing
• Staff sharing
• Consolidation
• Pursuit of joint funding opportunities
Collaboration Process

• Pre-work to outline individual needs, hopes, and concerns
• Facilitated quarterly all-day meetings and monthly conference calls to reach agreement around key decision points and next steps
• Each RCD’s Board of Directors reviews and approves collaboration plan
• Legal review of any formal agreements
• Implementation of collaboration plan

“I wasn’t engaged with the other RCDs, or with CARCD in general, at that time. But I knew inherently that engaging with the larger group, thinking at a larger scale, would be helpful.

Thinking on a regional, watershed scale, you can get more collective bang for your conservation buck by collaborating. You see funders moving to work at a regional scale.”

-Jill Demers, Humboldt County RCD
CARCD’s Role

• Provide staff time for research, coordination, and other forms of support to the seven RCD cohorts
• Seek diversified funding to cover costs of facilitation services and provide stipends for RCD participant staff/travel time
• Review drafts of collaboration plans and legal contracts
• Conduct outreach to partner agencies about funding opportunities for RCD regional entities
Results

• At minimum the cohorts will produce a plan clarifying how they will work together
• Improved trust amongst RCDs
• For the first time, 2 RCD cohorts are pursuing funding opportunities as regional entities
• 2 RCD cohorts have a formal contract currently under (or close to) legal review
• Multiple rounds of match funding secured to support the RCD durable collaborations
• Paradigm shift from competition to collaboration

“When in one phone conversation you have nine district managers saying, ‘I’ll do whatever I can for the good of the whole,’ that’s a big turning point for the sector.”

— Devin Best, Executive Director
Upper Salinas-Las Tablas RCD
Lessons Learned

- Clear and consistent communication is everything
- Funding is critical
- Flexibility and inclusion are essential
- Participant leaders must be willing to step forward to help drive the process
- Project organizers must be willing to seek external support as needed
Capacity Building for CARCD
• 5-year goals for board development, advocacy, staffing, and revenue development.
Board Development

• Facilitated conversations led to re-thinking who serves on the board
• Established positions for some District Managers and outside partners
• Revised board member job description
• Identified skills and connections needed on the board.
Revenue Plan

- Developed a functional budget
- Built the case for support through increased membership dues
- Outlined targeted grants and pass-through funding from state agencies.
Communications Platform

• Messaging for use with key audiences (funders, legislators, member districts)
• Outline of outreach strategies, tactics, and tools
Knowledge Transfer

- Goal: Build CARCD capacity to continue the work
- Training CARCD staff
- Developing training resources for use at regional meetings and elsewhere
- Creating opportunities for peer-led training at future conferences and regional meetings
“This capacity building program has identified CARCD’s role. Through this process, they’ve heard from the districts what RCDs need. They are way more responsive now: they have gone out on our behalf and advocated for our needs.”

— Nicole Cartwright, Executive Director, Tahoe RCD
Inland Empire RCD

- Large, relatively urban district east of L.A.
- Programs in weed abatement, wetlands mitigation, agriculture
- Education program serving dozens of schools
- Participated in group trainings and collaboration planning
Keys to success

• Clear need and goals
• Funding source(s)
• Participation by districts in program design
• In-house capacity to manage the program
• Flexible, iterative approach
• Collaborative consulting partner(s)
Thank You & Questions

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