

RESEARCH REPORT

# Assessing Generativity

## The Capacity to Innovate While Adapting

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# Assessing Generativity: The Capacity to Innovate While Adapting

## What Is Generativity?

Kenneth Gergen coined the term “generative capacity” as the “capacity to challenge the guiding assumptions of the culture, to raise fundamental questions regarding contemporary social life, to foster reconsideration of that which is taken for granted, and thereby to generate fresh alternatives for social action” (1978, 1,346).<sup>1</sup>

Generativity focuses on the capacity of a field, through organizations, to respond to challenges and changing contexts both positively and proactively. Generativity is central to the process of paradigm change. It signifies a field’s capacity for developing promising new ideas.

With the concept of generativity, then, we can better understand how “big bang” shifts occur in systems and organizational fields. Generativity is an essential asset of a system that indicates the potential for transformative change to occur. Generativity is simultaneously an organizational and system capacity. Much of the adaptation and change in a field is autonomous—led by individuals and organizations—and constrained by institutional, structural, and market forces.

The principal contribution of a focus on generativity is to draw attention to the link between organizations and wider systems and fields and the flows between the two spheres by highlighting how an organization’s ability to adapt and innovate can shape the actions of their broader field.

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Gergen, “Toward Generative Theory,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 36, no. 11 (November 1978): 1,344–360.

# The Pressing Need for Generativity in Nonprofit Human Services

Human services nonprofit organizations need to find new organizational forms, funding patterns, and programmatic pathways to confront the complex challenges and opportunities that are pressing the field. The field, saddled with greater competition and fiscal strain, is increasingly characterized by vulnerable organizations serving increasingly vulnerable populations amidst political and institutional environments that emphasize evidence-based practice and results. Amidst these challenges, human service nonprofits face increased demand for services as economic transformations increase income inequality and raise the risk of poverty for millions of Americans in addition to the need to adjust services to be suitable to meet the needs of people from varied ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds; different age groups; alternative family structures; and varied lifestyles.

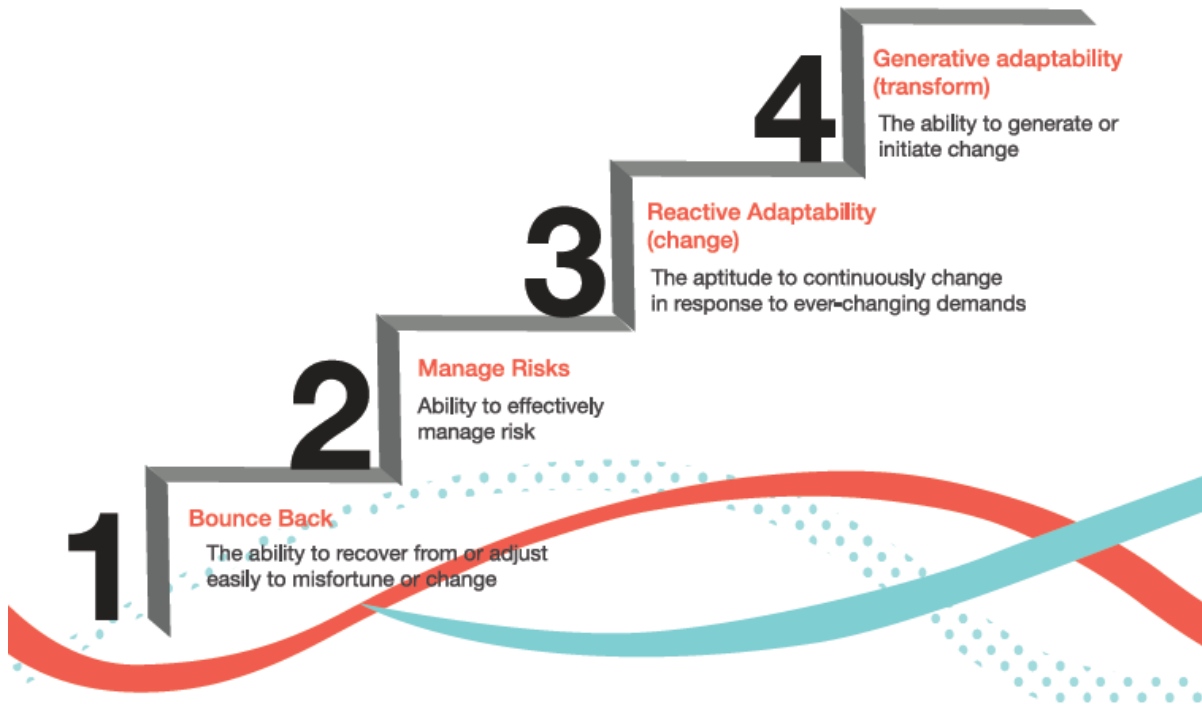
The capacity of the field to find and implement innovations will depend, in large part, on generative organizations who, through visionary leadership, are willing to take risks and lead the field down new pathways that expand the opportunity landscape for organizations and the individuals and families they serve.

## The Link Between Generativity and Resilience

The concept of resilience is currently receiving lots of attention in public debate and decision-making. While definitions of resilience vary widely across disciplines, in the nonprofit sector, organization resilience is most often defined in reference to financial sustainability and continuity of operations and survival during recessionary periods. Generativity is a form of resilience. Unlike more basic forms of resilience that focus on the ability to bounce back, generativity focuses on an organization's capacity to be innovative and drive change as an adaptation to changing contexts.

FIGURE 1

### The Link between Generativity and Resilience



Source: Shena Ashley, *Assessing Generativity: The Capacity to Innovate While Adapting* (Syracuse, NY: Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University, 2015).

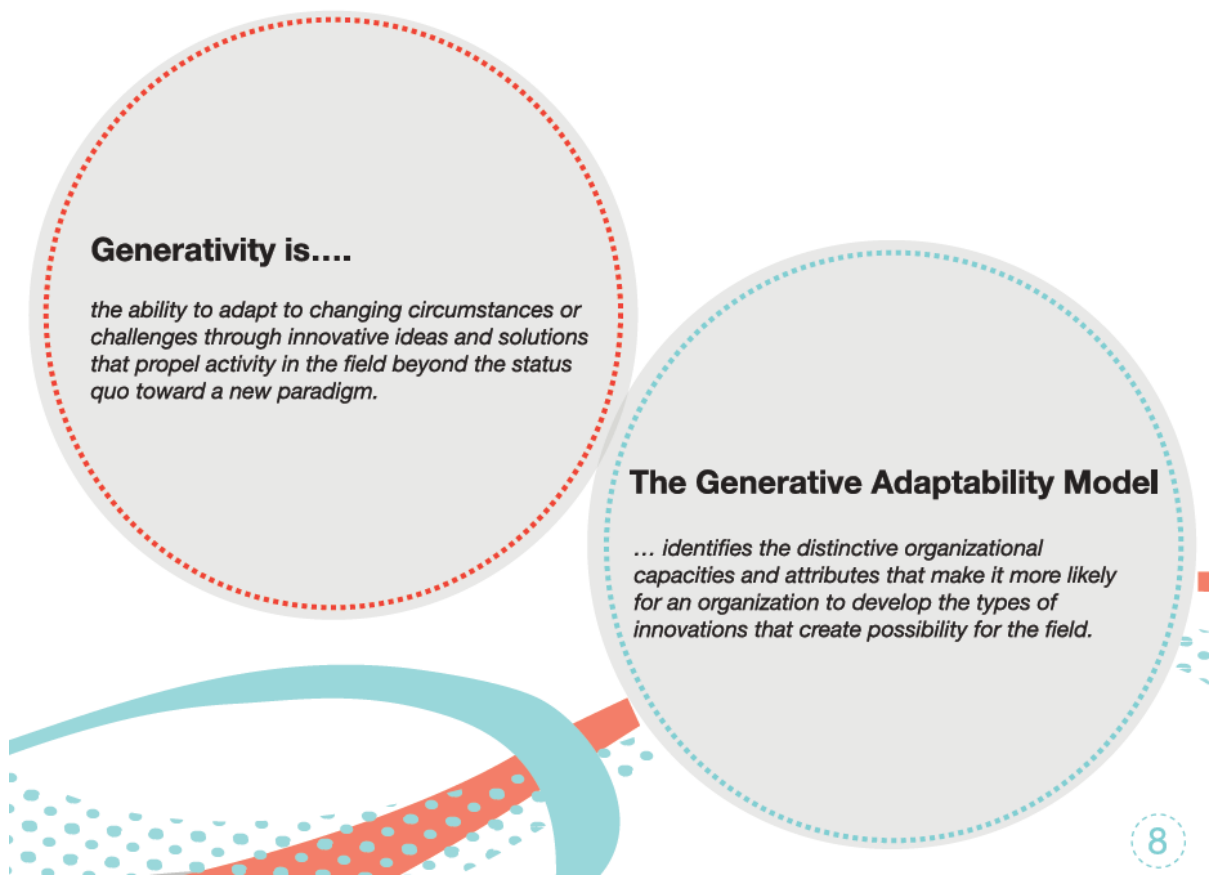
## The Generative Adaptability Model

The Generative Adaptability Model provides a conceptual framework for assessing the presence of the capacities within organizations that are necessary to **imagine, organize, and implement** game-changing solutions. The model specifies 10 characteristics that result from an interweaving of **dynamism and adaptability** through the **leadership and management** levels and through the **organizational structures and processes**.

The framework builds from theories and research related to organizational innovation, organizational resilience, organizational effectiveness, systems theory, and racial equity and inclusion. At its core, it is a multilevel framework designed to explicitly articulate the interrelationship between the micro level of individual organization practice and the macro level of organizational fields and systems.

FIGURE 2

## Generativity and the Generative Adaptability Model



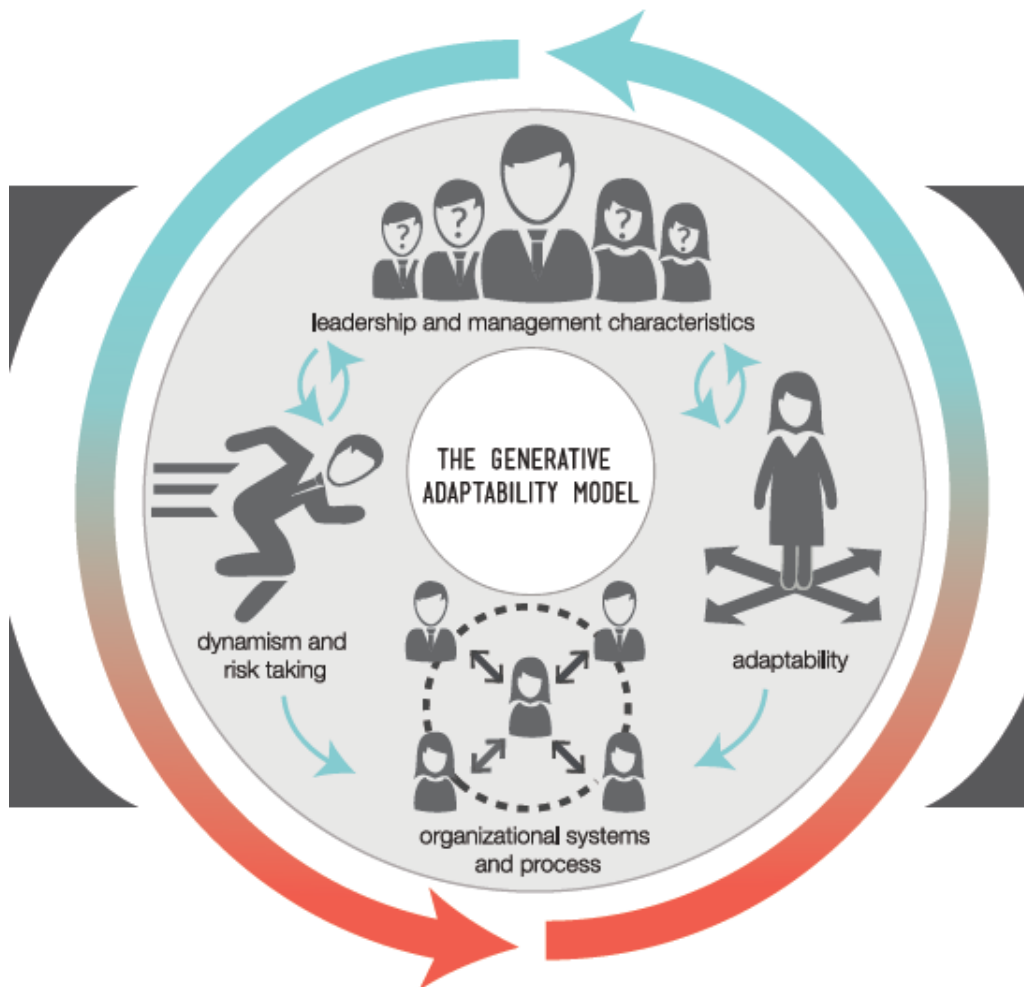
**Source:** Shena Ashley, *Assessing Generativity: The Capacity to Innovate While Adapting* (Syracuse, NY: Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University, 2015).

**Notes:** This version of the Generative Adaptability Model was developed from and is, therefore, most applicable to organizations. It is likely that the core concepts can be adapted to fit other contexts like networks and coalitions.



FIGURE 3

The Four Drivers of Generative Adaptability



Source: Shena Ashley, *Assessing Generativity: The Capacity to Innovate While Adapting* (Syracuse, NY: Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University, 2015).

## Characteristics of Generative Organizations

### Leadership and Management

#### DIVERGENT THINKING

Leaders in generative organizations have the ability to reframe social problems and their solutions in ways that challenge the dominant institutional logics. They are able to think beyond the accepted set of choices and imagine a higher number of proposed solutions.

## **PIONEERING ATTITUDE**

Some leaders see themselves not only as a leader within their organizational boundaries but also in their broader field. They have a desire to create public value. Those leaders with this view are generally more likely to seek innovative solutions that position them to lead the way for other organizations.

## **SYSTEMIC PERSPECTIVE**

Managers and leaders are able to see that they operate in a larger system with which they interact and influence in nonlinear ways. Through this understanding of complexity, they are better able to anticipate the emergence of new dynamics that open up new possibilities and options for change.

## **STRATEGY**

In generative organizations, managers and leaders have a clear sense of the organization's capacity as well as broad market intelligence to continuously evaluate whether the organization has the ability to innovate.

## **COLLABORATIVE**

Collaborative leaders seek purposeful relationships and have the capacity to facilitate mutually beneficial interactions within and across sectors. These leaders have greater contextual intelligence and a broader view of environmental resources and constraints.

## **CREATIVITY**

Managers and leaders of generative organizations make great effort to foster and model creative performance throughout the organization. Employees at every level are motivated and rewarded for thinking creatively and managers structure work environments that bring out individuals' creative functions at work.

# **Organizational Systems and Processes**

## **ADAPTABLE STRUCTURES AND PROCESSES**

Generative organizations have adaptable structures and systems that embrace change rather than inhibit it. Central to this is a culture of continuous learning that makes it possible for the organization to keep pace with technology advancements and shifts in market conditions. Structurally, these organizations tend to be less hierarchical with multiple points of control and decisionmaking.

## CLIENT-CENTRIC

A deep and comprehensive understanding of clients' needs and context is a critical capacity for forward-thinking organizations. These organizations have an intense focus on reviewing program data to understand which services are being used and why. They also place a high value on listening to the clients to find new ideas.

## EQUITY BACKBONE

Diverse perspectives and even conflicting assumptions are key to the kind of idea generation that is central to the pursuit of obtaining more innovative and effective solutions. Generative organizations pursue equity in their composition, culture, and policies to gain from the voice and experiences of those throughout the organization.

## EMPATHETIC SPACE

Individuals within generative organizations feel that others in the organization have an authentic understanding of their perspectives, priorities, and needs. This is one of the main sparks that empower and enable employees to question decisions, freely express ideas and concerns, and feel vulnerable yet respected through organizational change.

# The Generative Adaptability Organizational Self-Assessment

The self-assessment was developed to help organization leaders assess their organization's generative capacity. This tool is designed to be used by organizations to (1) evaluate the degree of generativity in an organization, (2) identify areas for organizational growth, and (3) make practical changes using the self-assessment as a guide. Ultimately, becoming more generative is about creating an organization where the appropriate set of attitudes, practices, and procedures are both present and widely acknowledged.

The self-assessment is designed to succinctly measure the presence of the 10 dimensions of generativity. The recommended measurement process is intended to assess how familiar and recognizable those dimensions are throughout the different levels of the organization.

## Developing the Self-Assessment

The self-assessment was developed over the course of 18 months. The conceptual framework was developed through a review and assessment of the relevant research literature. The development of the self-assessment involved many revisions based on feedback from scholars and practitioners. Further details on the methodology are provided in appendix B.

## How the Self-Assessment is Organized

The self-assessment highlights 10 attributes that were derived from intersecting the two main drivers of generative behavior (dynamism and adaptability) with two primary organizational dimensions that support action (leadership and organizational systems).

Within each of the 10 attributes is a list of specific, concrete “items” or practices. There is a corresponding scale ranging from “not at all” to “fully” that is used to evaluate the extent to which each item is practiced in their organization.

## Who Should Use the Self-Assessment

The tool is primarily intended to assist the leaders of an organization to assess the degree of generative capacity available in the organization. However, including all staff members in the assessment process offers the most accurate picture of how the organization runs, as well as opportunities to look for inconsistencies in how staff members assess practices and clarify discrepancies and confusion within the organization.

## How to Complete the Self-Assessment

Individuals completing the self-assessment are asked to read through each item and use a scale ranging from “not at all” to “fully” to evaluate the extent to which they perceive their organization having specific qualities. Individuals are asked to answer based on their experience in the organization over the past **six months**.

Individuals’ responses should remain anonymous so that the self-assessment can be completed as honestly and accurately as possible.

## How to Compile and Examine Self-Assessment Results

It is helpful for the organization to have a point person to collect the completed assessments from all respondents and compile the results. The following is a suggested method for compiling this information:

1. Using a table, enter each individual's response to each self-assessment item.

Sample:

	Respondent 1	Respondent 2	Respondent 3
Q	To a Great Extent	Very little	Very little
Q	Not at all	Somewhat	To a Great Extent

2. Using the information entered above, count the total number of not at all, very little, somewhat, and to a great extent responses for each self-assessment item across respondents.

Sample:

	Not at All	Very Little	Somewhat	To a Great Extent
Q	0	2	0	1
Q	1	0	1	1

## Understanding the Self-Assessment Results

To identify areas for change, organization leaders should look for items where responses are mainly “not at all” or “very little” as these are practices that most respondents feel the organization is lacking. It is also helpful to examine items where the range of responses are extremely varied. This lack of consistency among respondents may be due to a lack of understanding of the item itself, a difference of perspective based on a person's role in the program, or a misunderstanding on the part of some respondents about what is actually done on a daily basis.

To increase an organization's generative capacity, organization leaders need to examine assessment results, identify those areas where practice is not consistently present in the organization, and develop a plan for incorporating those self-assessment practices.

## Practical Tips

- Organizations are most successful when the assessment process is transparent and all staff participates in discussions about the self-assessment results.
- Successful discussions must involve giving staff at all levels of the organization a space to voice their opinions about areas of need and changes that would be helpful.
- Specific people are identified who will be responsible for monitoring progress towards the organization's change goals. It is helpful to put structures in place to monitor progress towards goals and keep the commitment to being generative in the forefront.

Becoming more generative is as much about changing an organization's culture as it is about changing practices and policies. Changing the culture of an organization can be difficult, as attitudes and values are often subtle, ingrained and hard to identify and shift. As an organization begins to incorporate new practices, it is helpful to have continued discussions about the ways that these practices are attempts to shift tone, culture and atmosphere in the organization.

# Appendix A. Generative Adaptability Organizational Self-Assessment

Leadership and Management Characteristics	Not at all	Very Little	Some-what	To a great extent
To what extent does the leadership draw on rapidly expanding evidence about what works and what does not at the business model and systems level?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To what extent are diverse opinions and alternatives put forth and debated?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To what extent does the organization contain and tolerate people with different backgrounds, skills and viewpoints?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To what extent is the leadership seeking for better solutions by challenging the status quo instead of acting according to routines?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To what extent do managers support the work of other organizations for instance listening, discussing, complementing and supporting others' ideas?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To what extent does the leadership explore opportunities to collaborate with other agencies and across sectors to confront collective challenges and embrace innovative solutions?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To what extent does the leadership recognize their organization's interdependence with their environment and the need to leverage capacity, resources and allies from outside the organization?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To what extent does the leadership look for opportunities to seed the environment with new ideas and influences?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To what extent does the organization have and practice structured strategy-enhancing methods and mechanisms, including methods to enhance strategic thinking, follow up actions, clear frame and focus, and benchmarking strategic methods?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To what extent are vision, mission and goals shared in a clear way with the staff and stakeholders, in order to create a sense of mutual purpose?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To what extent does the organization's goals create the potential for system-level effects?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

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## Organizational Systems and Processes

	Not at all	Very Little	Some-what	To a great extent
To what extent are employees involved in goal setting and strategy planning?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To what extent do managers involve clients in decisionmaking instead of isolating and suppressing ideas?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To what extent is client input a practiced value that is asked for in the organization?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To what extent do managers support clients by ,for example, considering their points of view, having an open communication and talking their language, believing in their capabilities, keeping them satisfied and providing them with feedback?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To what extent does the organization have the reputation, resources and access to the broader field to be recognized as a model organization?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To what extent does the organization have sound financial management systems to translate bold ideas into action?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To what extent is it acceptable to make mistakes or fail with an idea?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To what extent do respectful warm relations, humor and playfulness exist among people?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To what extent is risk-taking behavior encouraged over change resistance?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To what extent are people assigned to tasks that require them to utilize a wide variety of their skills and that stretch their minds?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To what extent is there a balance between freedom and autonomy, with the rules and routines for how to carry out the work?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

	Not at all	Very Little	Some-what	To a great extent
To what extent do there exist management practices that enhance creativity?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To what extent is enough time allocated to creative actions?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To what extent does the organization develop continuously in a fast pace?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To what extent are financial resources allocated to support the testing of ideas?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>



# Appendix B. Methodology

The generative capacity assessment was developed over the course of 18 months. The development of the assessment items and domains was based on extensive literature review and feedback from scholars, students, and practitioners in the health and human services fields. All of the attributes in the model are supported by references to be considerable in constructing generativity. The attributes were then filtered, grouped, and categorized, leading up to a model that describes the different and interlinked building blocks of generative capacity in organizations. In addition, lab and field testing of the model and checklist were conducted to make it a practically useful tool.

The focus of the lab and field testing was to address the following questions:

- Are the questions constructed in a clear and meaningful way?
- Are respondents consistently clear of what is being asked of them?
- Can the questions be understood in the same way by people who differ in many ways?
- How is the language understood by practitioners in different settings?
- What are the best types of response options for the assessment (mutually exclusive response categories versus Likert-type response categories)?
- How can we maximize true responses and minimize socially desirable responses?
- How valid is the instrument for measuring the underlying construct (we used face validity methods—each item appears on its face to logically indicate the component—and item analysis methods to examine the extent to which expected responses to individual items are related)?

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