

Evidence Capacity in Organizations: A Snapshot of a Literature-Informed Framework

Annalisa Mastri, Heather Gordon, Ruth Neild, Elizabeth Alberty, Heather Zaveri, Megan McCormick, Veronica Sotelo Munoz, and Lance Bitner-Laird

Federal agencies often have experience with building and using evidence to design, manage, and improve their work on behalf of the public. All agencies, regardless of their experience level, can benefit from assessing their capacity to build and apply evidence in their work.

Evidence capacity encompasses the knowledge, skills, behaviors, and resources that support an agency's ability to build and use evidence to inform decisions and its work. An agency might have relatively stronger evidence capacity along some dimensions, and some offices or units within the agency might have greater evidence capacity than others. Importantly, evidence capacity can improve and deepen over time.

What is evidence?

We define *evidence* as facts, data, research, evaluation, or other information collected and used systematically to understand the effectiveness or efficiency of an organization's work, or to understand the context or communities in which an organization conducts its work.

An evidence capacity framework

This snapshot presents an evidence capacity framework that the Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) developed in partnership with Mathematica. The evidence capacity framework aims to help federal agencies and other organizations develop a shared understanding of the dimensions of capacity described in the literature. Developing this shared understanding is a step toward identifying areas of organizational strength and weakness and making plans to develop or deepen specific evidence capacities. Organizations can use the framework to guide an assessment of their evidence capacity. For each dimension of evidence capacity, organizations can use interviews, focus groups, document reviews, surveys, or reflection questions to gather information and initiate staff discussions about existing evidence capacities. Organizations can use this information to identify which dimensions have strong capacity and which could be strengthened.

Drawing on research literature supplemented with interviews and focus groups with federal staff, the framework includes five dimensions of evidence capacity in organizations. Those with a robust evidence capacity have:



Evidence culture. The organization routinely uses evidence to support the organization's mission, objectives, and program and policy choices. Staff regularly pose questions about the organization's work and effectiveness, and they review evidence to inform answers to these questions.



Evidence infrastructure. Evidence-related tools, resources, routines, and processes form an infrastructure that enables the organization to build and use evidence timely and efficiently. Infrastructure includes data collections and systems; policies and processes for planning, conducting, commissioning, managing, and/or reporting evaluations and performance metrics; and financial resources for carrying out evidence activities.



Engagement. Systems and processes promote collaboration among internal and external audiences. This includes communicating and connecting with a variety of audiences..



Human capital. Staff have the knowledge, skills, and abilities to build evidence and communicate about it, and opportunities exist for staff to develop this expertise. This includes having a variety of staff with a foundational understanding of logic models and evidence-building methods.



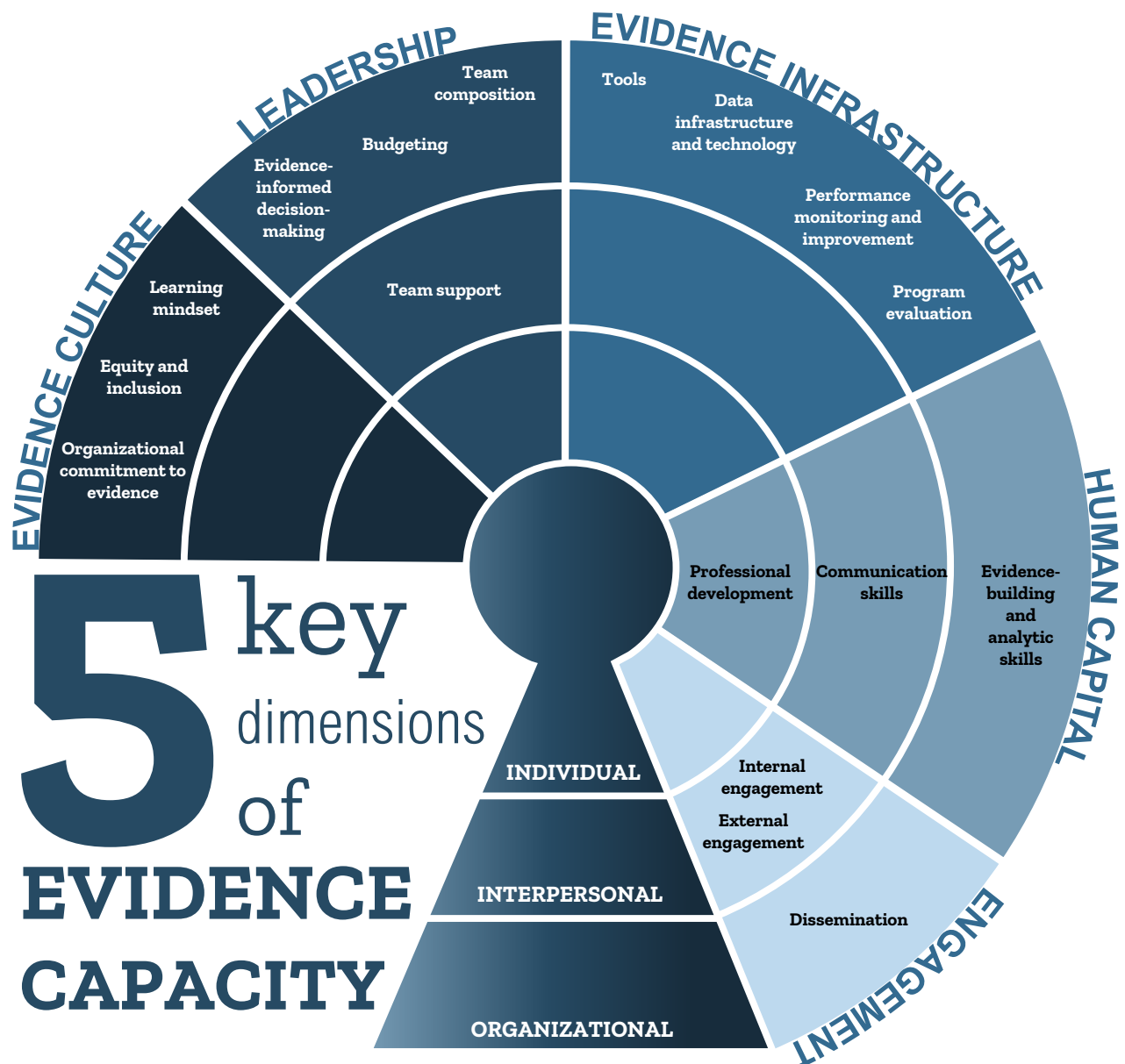
Leadership. Leaders foster an evidence culture, identify opportunities to build evidence, allocate staff time and other resources to support evidence activities within existing budget constraints, and make decisions transparently informed by evidence.

Evidence capacity at the individual, interpersonal, and organizational levels

Building from the literature on evidence capacity in organizations, the framework includes components (that is, inputs, outputs, or activities) of evidence capacity within the five dimensions. The components pertained to the individual, interpersonal, or organizational level. The graphic in **Exhibit 1** depicts these levels through three concentric rings. The *individual level*, the innermost ring in the graphic, encompasses an individual's knowledge, skills, and values (for example, how an individual values research, uses data in their day-to-day work, or synthesizes findings). The *interpersonal level*, the second ring in the graphic, focuses on interactions between people or groups of people (for example, communication and collaboration that takes place among staff). The *organizational level*, the outermost ring, identifies components relevant to an overall organization, agency, or office (for example, data infrastructure and technology) as well as the collective capacities of staff within these organizations.

Most components pertain to evidence capacity at the organizational level, with a few components at the interpersonal level and one component at the individual level. This suggests that much of evidence capacity is driven by organizational efforts and cannot be sustained by a few trained individuals in a silo.

Exhibit 1. Dimensions and components of evidence capacity at the organizational, interpersonal, and individual levels



December 2022

OPRE brief: 2022-308

Authors: Annalisa Mastri, Heather Gordon, Ruth Neild, Elizabeth Alberty, Heather Zaveri, Megan McCormick, Veronica Sotelo Munoz, and Lance Bitner-Laird.

Contributors: We'd like to thank Diana McCallum, Michelle Derr, Alexandra Stanczyk, and Jonathan McCay for their contributions to this brief.

OPRE project officers: Nicole Deterding and Lisa Zingman
Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation
Administration for Children and Families
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre>

Contract number: HHSP2332015000351/75P00120F37052

Project director: Heather Zaveri
Mathematica
1100 First Street, NE, 12th Floor
Washington, DC 20002-4221

Suggested citation: Mastri, Annalisa, Heather Gordon, Ruth Neild, Elizabeth Alberty, Heather Zaveri, Megan McCormick, Veronica Sotelo Munoz, and Lance Bitner-Laird (2022). Evidence Capacity in Organizations: A Snapshot of a Literature-Informed Framework. OPRE Report # 2022-308, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, the Administration for Children and Families, or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. This brief is in the public domain and permission to reproduce is not necessary

Connect with OPRE

