The Ability Equation

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Have you ever wondered what is the difference between the words "ability" and "capability", both linguistic wise and management science wise? You probably did just like many people do mix the use and meaning of the two words. Although in our field of work in management consulting and training we use the word "capability" with more formal meaning as a terminology, unlike the word "ability" which is usually used as a general word with no specific associated meaning as a terminology. Management frameworks and standards in various disciplines refer to the word "capability" to mean points of strength of an individual or an organization, simply what they are capable of doing, specially when assessing the maturity or the level of some aspects within a certain scope.

Example Uses in Management Frameworks

- **Capability Definition in ITIL:**
"The ability of an organization, person, process, application, IT service, or other configuration item to carry out an activity. Capabilities are intangible assets of an organization."

- **Capability Definition in TOGAF:**
"An ability that an organization, person, or system possesses. Capabilities are typically expressed in general and high-level terms and typically require a combination of organization, people, processes, and technology to achieve."

- **Capability Definition in ISACA:**
"An aptitude, competency or resource that an enterprise may possess or require at an enterprise, business function or individual level that has the potential, or is required, to contribute to a business outcome and to create value."

- **Capability Definition in CMMI:**
Capability Level : Achievement of process improvement within an individual process area. (See also "generic goal," "specific goal," "maturity level," and "process area.") A capability level is defined by appropriate specific and generic goals for a process area.

Capable Process: A process that can satisfy its specified product quality, service quality, and process performance objectives. (See also "stable process" and "standard process.")

- **Capability Definition in OPM3:**

"A capability is a specific competency that must exist in an organization to execute project management processes and deliver project management services and products. Capabilities are incremental steps leading up to one or more Best Practices."

The Ability Equation™

At the personal level, as well as at organizational level, when describing an entity as being "able" has a different connotation than being "capable". One can be capable of doing something in terms of his skills and qualities, but not able to do it because of not having what it takes, the enablers. Capability should not be defined as an ability, capabilities are qualities, while abilities are powers.

Ability includes capability, that's capabilities + enablers = abilities. For example, an entity can be possessing knowledge and expertise (capabilities) but doesn't have the resources and systems (enablers) to be able to use that knowledge and expertise in operational activities (abilities) to get outcomes.
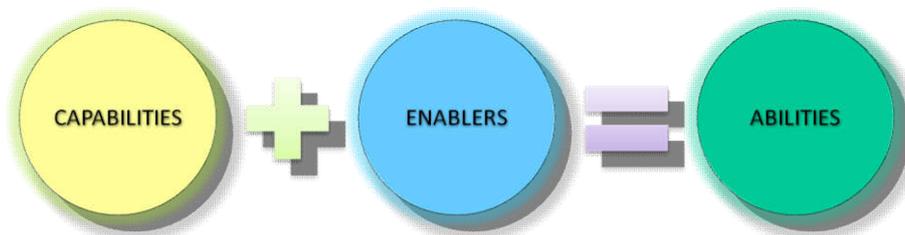
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In a relevant sense, OPM3 defines "Organizational Enablers" as "structural, cultural, technological, and human-resource practices that can be leveraged to support the implementation of Best Practices in portfolios, programs, and projects in support of strategic goals".

This definition is in light of the purpose of the OPM3 as a model for assessing and improving the maturity of organizational project management practices specifically, and it is focused on supporting practices that enable implementation of project management practices. Although I would have a reservation on defining enablers as "practices", because enablers can be practices, systems, or resources, and the organizational enablers list of the model are not all practices, so probably the use of a more overarching term would be more suitable in this definition. They are probably defined as "practices" to be in line with the overall structure of the model which is designed around best practices.

Applications in Management Context

Organizations have used to pay attention to improvement of capabilities or development of new capabilities, in order to increase maturity of their processes and operations. Shift of focus to be on abilities instead will give a wider scope and more realization of the big picture, by considering enablers along with capabilities, which will reduce the probability of working in the wrong direction or missing necessary components (capabilities / enablers) of the improvement endeavor.

The sequence of steps will be worked top-down, starting from the strategic goals of the organization under consideration. From those goals, the organization will identify what outcomes are supposed to be achieved for this goal to be achieved, which will define the desired abilities, which are in turn factored out into capabilities and associated enablers.
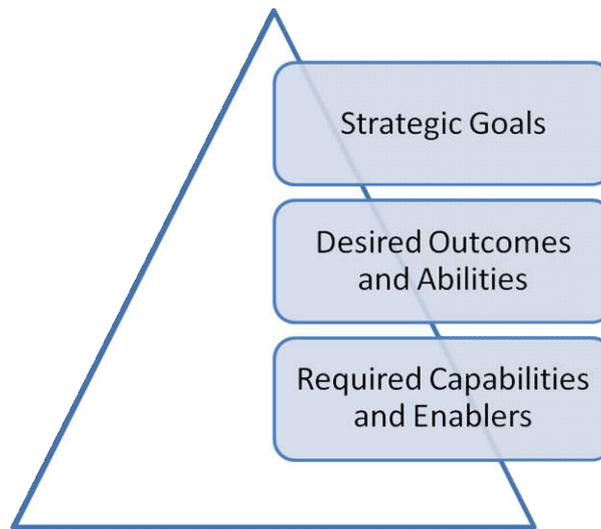
The key point behind this concept is shift of focus, or more accurately expansion of focus, taking in consideration what it takes to turn the newly developed / improved capabilities into real day to day activities in light of the new abilities of the organization, by defining capabilities as they are and enablers are they are, and understanding the different nature and purpose of each, so that each is managed accordingly, and nothing is overlooked.

The list in the following table is an illustrative example:

Goal	Abilities	Capabilities	Enablers
Creating a new business line for providing call center BPO services	Ability to provide call center services	- Customer Support - Call management - Reporting - etc.	- Human resources - Financial resources - Infrastructure - Processes & tools
	Ability to penetrate market	- Image and credibility - Business relationship management - etc.	- Marketing and sales staff - Budget - Channels