



SST 39 – Capability



Story or Opening Scenario

A group of hikers become stranded on a mountainside during severe weather. As conditions worsen, a mountain rescue team is called into action.

The rescue team possesses specialised equipment, experienced personnel, reliable communication systems, and well-practised procedures. Team members understand their roles and coordinate their activities effectively. Despite difficult conditions, they locate the hikers, provide assistance, and bring them safely back to safety.

The rescue is successful because the team possesses the ability to achieve its intended objective.

Now imagine a different situation. Suppose the team lacks training, communication systems are unreliable, equipment is unavailable, and coordination is poor. Even with the best intentions, the rescue may fail.

The difference lies not in what the team wants to achieve but in its ability to achieve it.



The same principle applies to organisations, businesses, governments, and societies. Success depends not only upon goals and intentions but also upon the capacity to transform those intentions into real outcomes.

This capacity is known as Capability.

Formal Description

Capability refers to the capacity of a system to achieve intended outcomes. It reflects the extent to which a system can mobilise resources, coordinate activities, and produce desired effects within its environment.

High capability allows a system to translate intentions into outcomes. Low capability results in unmet objectives, declining performance, and reduced effectiveness.

Plain English Explanation

Many systems have ambitious goals. Governments want to improve public services. Businesses want to grow and innovate. Organisations want to achieve their missions. Communities want to improve the lives of their members.

However, having goals is not the same as being able to achieve them.

Capability concerns the practical ability of a system to turn intentions into results. It reflects whether the system possesses the resources, skills, structures, knowledge, leadership, and coordination necessary to achieve its objectives. Capability emerges from the effective integration of resources, skills, knowledge, and organisational arrangements.

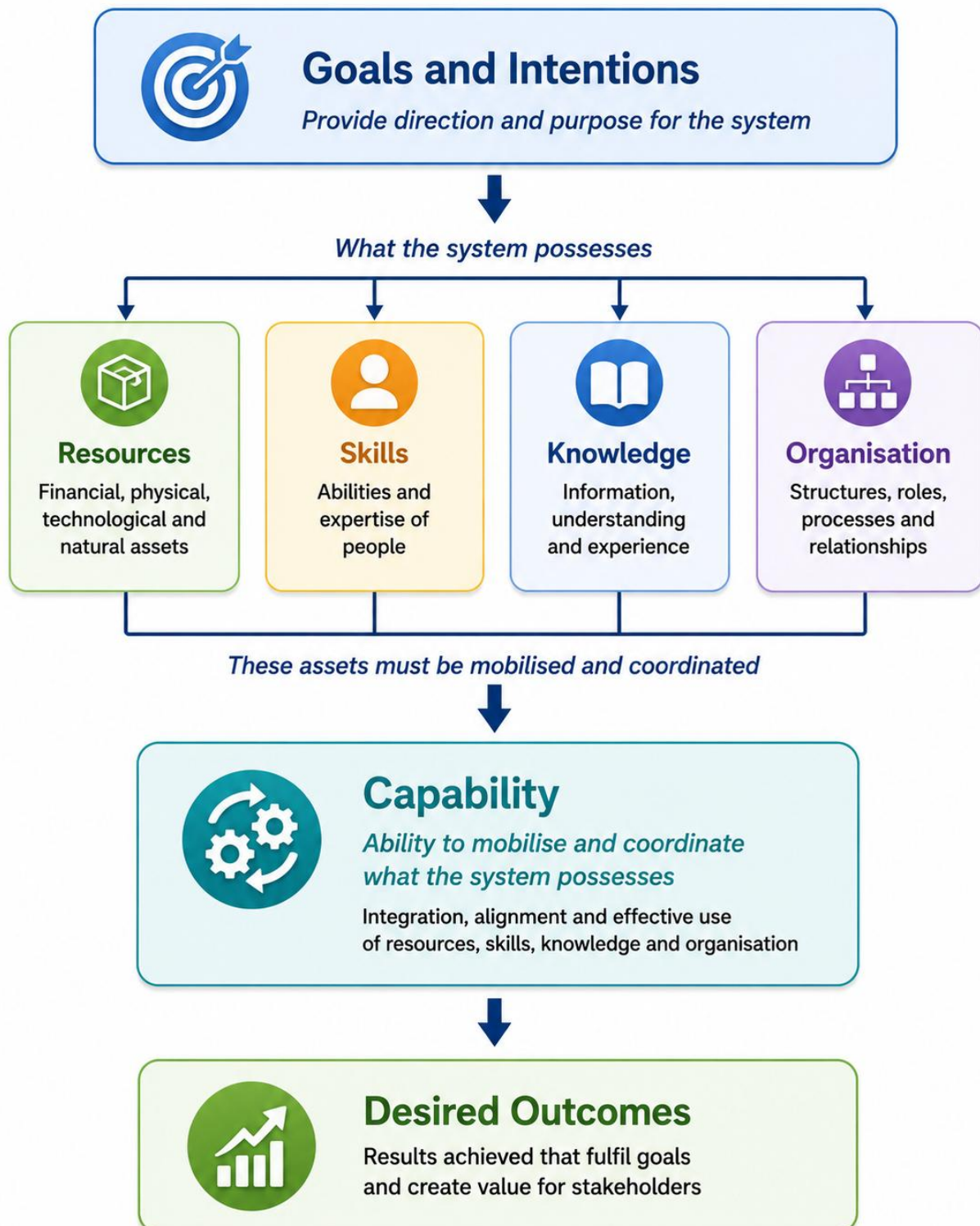
A highly capable system can often overcome difficulties and adapt to challenges because it possesses the means required to act effectively. A less capable system may struggle even when its goals are clear and widely supported.

Capability should not be confused with effort. People may work extremely hard within a low-capability system and still achieve disappointing results because important resources, skills, or structures are missing.

Nor should capability be confused with power in the political sense. Capability refers to the effectiveness of the system as a whole rather than the influence of particular individuals or groups.

For this reason, capability is often visible through outcomes. Successful projects, effective services, productive organisations, and competent institutions usually indicate the presence of capability. Persistent failure to achieve objectives may indicate that capability is lacking, even when intentions are good.

Understanding capability helps us distinguish between wanting something to happen and actually being able to make it happen.





Example 1 – A Business

A company develops a promising new product idea. However, without skilled staff, production facilities, funding, and marketing capability, the product never reaches the market. The idea exists, but capability is insufficient.

Example 2 – A Public Service

A local authority wishes to improve public transport. It possesses funding, technical expertise, experienced managers, and effective planning processes. These capabilities allow the project to be successfully delivered.

Example 3 – A Community Group

A volunteer organisation wants to support vulnerable residents. The group has committed volunteers, good leadership, effective communication, and access to resources. As a result, it is able to deliver meaningful assistance to those who need it.

Provenance and Links

The idea of capability appears across management science, economics, organisational theory, military strategy, and systems science. Amartya Sen explored capability in relation to human development and opportunity. Organisational theorists have long studied the relationship between resources, competence, and performance. Stafford Beer emphasised the need for systems to possess the functional capacity necessary to maintain viability.

Within the Systemic Diagnostics framework, Capability represents one of the four primary viability dimensions. Whereas Potential focuses on future opportunities and Flow focuses on coordination and transfers, Capability focuses on the system's present ability to achieve desired outcomes. Together, these dimensions provide complementary perspectives on system viability.

Practical Exercise

Choose an organisation, business, public service, or community that you know reasonably well.

1. What are its main goals or objectives?
2. What resources, skills, knowledge, or structures help it achieve those goals?
3. Which aspects of its capability appear strongest?
4. Which aspects appear weakest?
5. Identify one objective that the system wishes to achieve and explain whether its current capability is sufficient to achieve it.