Photo: Family Independence Initiative

From Input to Ownership
How Nonprofits Can Engage with the People They Serve to Carry Out Their Missions

By Matthew Forti and Willa Seldon[1]

In 1991, Molly Melching founded Tostan (meaning "breakthrough" in the Western African Wolof language), a community-based NGO that has so far brought its three-year health education program to more than 200,000 people in eight African countries. Working hand-in-hand with local residents and leaders, Tostan has helped thousands of West African communities to decide for themselves to abandon female circumcision and child marriage.

The roots of its community empowerment strategy go way back. Melching, who first came to Senegal as an exchange student and stayed on as a Peace Corps volunteer, describes a pivotal incident in her early years living and working in a village, where she was helping create education and development projects, including a new community garden. The garden at first seemed to be proceeding successfully, but as the weeks went on, fewer and fewer people showed up until almost no one came to work in the garden. "Finally," recalled Melching, "it occurred to me that I should ask the leaders of the community why it had failed." The project was set up wrong, they told her. The garden was communal, but the norms of the village were that each family needed to have a plot of its own. Why hadn't they bothered to tell her this basic fact of life early on? She seemed so excited by the project, the village leaders told her, and they didn't want to disappoint her. Also, she never asked. "Now [at Tostan]," Melching said, "We *always* ask."

This article is about asking, listening, and more. It looks at how some leading nonprofits are engaging clients, beneficiaries, or residents–their *constituents*–in order to deliver services more effectively and have more impact on the social concerns they are trying to address. Of course constituent engagement is nothing new, either in the US or globally. Across the US, for example, thousands of constituent-led organizations—parent groups, neighborhood associations, civil rights organizations, membership groups, and many more—are demonstrating every day the power of people to come together and act on their own behalf.

Yet for many social sector organizations, particularly those not founded and led by the people the organization is trying to benefit, constituent engagement is a challenge. While most of us understand that it makes sense to find out

what people think, it is often unclear what the best strategies are for eliciting useful and timely input, much less how to take action based on it. And with gathering and using input such a daunting task, many cannot imagine involving constituents in deeper ways, like developing programs together or giving constituents control of resources.

However, in fields such as education,[2] health care,[3] and neighborhood revitalization,[4] integrating constituent perspectives about what works in their contexts (let's call this "local knowledge") with what has been learned from broader evidence and experience ("technical knowledge") has sometimes led to better programs and greater impact.

In this article, we discuss some promising ways that nonprofits are engaging their constituents, combining local and technical knowledge to deliver better results. First we consider constituent input, with examples that build upon a robust review of leading practices and approaches by Fay Twersky, Phil Buchanan, and Valerie Threlfall in their recent article "Listening to Those Who Matter Most, the Beneficiaries."[5] Then we look at more intensive forms of constituent engagement, which we have termed "co-creation" and "ownership," where constituents play a more active role. Co-creation and ownership present powerful opportunities for nonprofits to enhance their impact, over and above the question of whether they believe constituent engagement is the right thing to do. Finally, we want to note that here we are looking at engagement from the perspective of nonprofits. There is an equally rich story to be told from the perspective of communities and residents who themselves organize and advocate to shape the work of schools, health centers, development agencies, and other institutions in their communities.[6]

---

2   For instance, integrating student feedback with more traditional measures (e.g., classroom observations and teacher pedagogical knowledge) is a better predictor of teacher effectiveness as measured by student achievement gains. See "Ensuring Fair and Reliable Measures of Effective Teaching," Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, January 8, 2013.
3   For instance, when patients have better communication with providers, when they understand treatment options and feel that they have some say in their own care, they are more likely to follow a treatment regimen and improve their health. See Moria Stewart et al, "The Impact of Patient-Centered Care on Outcomes," *The Journal of Family Practice*, July 4, 2000. See also Kristina Gryboski et al., "Working With the Community for Improved Health," Health Bulletin 3 (Washington, DC: Population Reference Bureau, 2006).
4   While historical attempts at neighborhood revitalization that employ either an "externally led" or "constituent-led" approach alone often have fallen short of expectations, new approaches that integrate the two, such as Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative's Boston Promise Initiative and SAFEWAYS at Autumn Ridge, are showing promise.
5   Fay Twersky, Phil Buchanan, and Valerie Threlfall, "Listening to Those Who Matter Most, the Beneficiaries," *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Spring 2013.
6   One example is the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative, which is governed by a democratically elected, resident-majority board, and has worked to organize its community and catalyze resident leadership in the Roxbury/North Dorchester neighborhoods of Boston for over three decades.

The following figure illustrates this range of constituent engagement strategies for nonprofits.
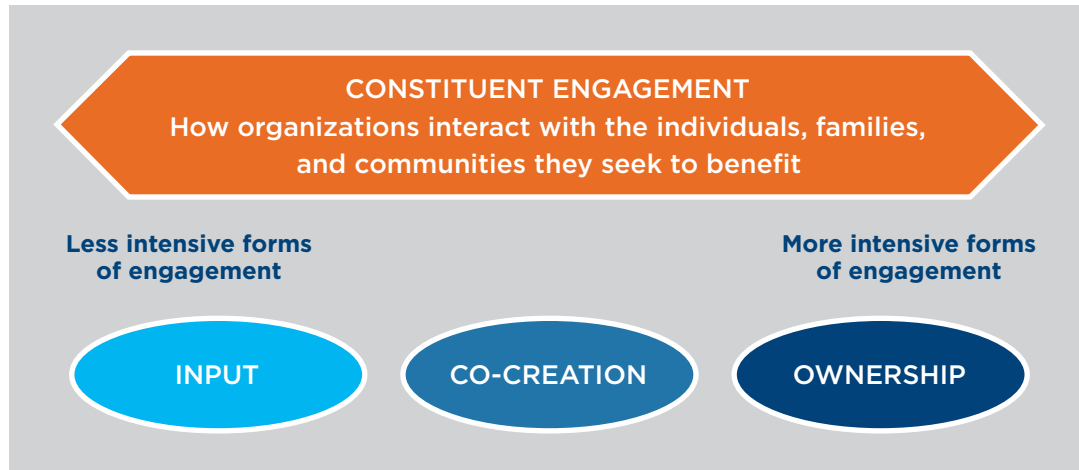
Constituent Input: Feedback You Can Use

"The greatest compliment that was ever paid me was when one asked me what I thought, and attended to my answer." — Henry David Thoreau

Nearly all nonprofits collect data from those they serve—at a minimum, demographic information and satisfaction surveys.[7] But organizations that have learned how to effectively tap into constituent input can get a deeper understanding of their constituents' aspirations, challenges, and strengths. The process starts with listening and trust-building, and ends with insights that can shape the organization's actions and increase its impact.

In business, it's commonplace that this kind of insight can be essential to success. When J.D. Power and Associates created new channels for consumer feedback about cars in the 1970s, they transformed the industry–leading to better information about quality, stiffer competition, and better products. And today, consumer voice powers entire industries like online marketplaces and travel reviews. But what may be a common strategy for businesses is still in stages of adoption for nonprofits.

A 2009 study by Keystone Accountability for the Alliance for Children & Families and the United Neighborhood Centers of America found that while virtually all human services nonprofit leaders believed that collecting constituent input was important, nearly half of the leaders surveyed described the input they got as "only

---

7   For instance, a survey of large human service organizations that are members of the Alliance for Children & Families or the United Neighborhood Centers of America found that 97 percent use satisfaction surveys. David Bonbright et al., "The 21st Century Potential of Constituency Voice," Keystone Accountability, March 2009.

sometimes useful."[8] One of the most consistent themes to emerge from leaders was that agencies were "using up" their feedback opportunities by collecting the information required by their government funders—what one called "compliance work"—rather than information they could actually use.

Effectively gathering and integrating what constituents have to say can sometimes be as simple as a well-structured focus group. Connected by 25,[9] a Florida-based nonprofit founded to help foster care youth reach adulthood successfully, conducted focus groups to understand why so many of these youth drop out of school. Instead of peppering the youth with a long list of questions, Executive Director Diane Zambito simply wrote on a white board: "Sixty percent of you drop out." The powerful stories these young people shared led to a new, albeit common sense, idea: providing school districts with a guidance counselor trained to help foster care youth navigate the special problems they face— particularly the challenges of switching schools so often during their teen years. The organization's principal funder liked the idea and provided money to a local school system to try it out. Within two years, high school graduation rates for foster youth rose by more than 50 percent, and the percentage of these students performing at or above grade level almost doubled. The school system has since decided to permanently fund the position.

Asking the people we are working with about their own experiences seems too obvious to even count as a *strategy*, yet we are struck by how often organizations fail to seek out or heed this source of expertise, especially if it comes from a comparatively powerless group, such as young people. Speaking at a 2012 *Stanford Social Innovation Review* roundtable on collective impact,[10] John Bridgeland, president and CEO of Civic Enterprises, recounted an experience some years before when he was leading an effort to boost high school graduation rates. "Looking at research dating back to 1870, we found that nobody had ever listened to the customer—the young people who had made this dramatic and often tragic decision to drop out of high school. By talking to them we discovered the complexity of these young people's lives, [for example], the number of people who are caregivers at age 16 for a mom, a grandmother, or someone in the home. The young boys who felt they had to go out and get a job at an early age. What was significant about this process of listening was not just that it gave us a better understanding of the complexity of the problem, but that it also gave us the hope that this was actually a fixable problem."

Sometimes this process of listening can be more complex than a focus group. International Development Enterprises (iDE) is a $20-million organization that creates income and livelihood opportunities for poor rural households in developing countries, primarily through agricultural technologies. After a few early stumbles,

---

8   Bonbright et al, "The 21st Century Potential of Constituency Voice."
9   Perla Ni et al, "Nothing About Us Without Us' Approach Transforms Foster Care in Florida," *Stanford Social Innovation Review* Blog, April 23, 2012.
10 *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. Roundtable on Collective Impact, Fall 2012.

the organization became so impressed by the power of constituent input to help develop products that these rural households would enthusiastically adopt that it now regularly uses a form of ethnographic research pioneered by design consultancy IDEO called human-centered design.[11] This highly structured process examines the needs, dreams, and behaviors of the people organizations seek to affect, collecting observations and stories, and translating them into opportunities, prototypes, and ultimately solutions. iDE believes so much in the value of human-centered design that it had all of its country directors trained in the approach. CEO Al Doerksen explained: "Casual conversations are not enough. To be successful you need to have a formal process that builds trust and unearths latent preferences."

iDE's work with IDEO underscores the value of getting outside help to effectively engage constituents. In the same way that an organization doesn't need to invent its own accounting system or data management software, it can benefit from the expertise and experience of others in its techniques for eliciting constituent voice. As Twersky, Buchanan, and Threlfall reported,[12] new intermediaries are cropping up to help nonprofits do this. For example, Keystone Accountability is working with human service and global development nonprofits to build simple yet powerful "constituent voice" systems that translate input into performance measures that can help make organizations more accountable to their constituents. And Great Nonprofits, a Yelp-like entity for the social sector, offers a powerful online platform for constituents to share stories and feedback on their experiences with nonprofits.

Constituent Co-creation: Developing Solutions Together

Some organizations have chosen to take constituent engagement further into what we call co-creation—developing solutions *with* constituents. While deeper engagement is not necessarily better, some nonprofits are showing that constituents have more to contribute to a program's or organization's success than just their input.

Friendship Public Charter School, a $72-million charter management organization that runs six charter and five turnaround schools in Washington, DC, and Baltimore, demonstrates how integrating technical knowledge with constituent engagement can help overcome big challenges.[13]

Like many charter organizations, Friendship initially drew upon research-based strategies to increase student achievement: longer school days, double

---

11 *Human-Centered Design Toolkit: Second Edition*, IDEO, Undated. Also see Tim Brown and Jocelyn Wyatt, "Design Thinking for Social Innovation," *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Winter 2010.

12 Fay Twersky et al, "Listening to Those Who Matter Most, the Beneficiaries," *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Spring 2013.

13 The paragraphs that follow are derived from two sources: a) an essay by Patricia Brantley in *Leap of Reason: Managing to Outcomes in an Era of Uncertainty*, by Mario Morino (2011) and b) a Bridgespan interview with Patricia Brantley (February 8, 2013).

doses of math and reading, team teaching. But by 2006, student achievement gains had flatlined, prompting Chief Operating Officer Patricia Brantley to search for new ways to get better results. Friendship ultimately decided to engage its primary constituents—students and parents, as well as teachers—to co-develop a new approach to performance management that would enable continuous improvement.

Friendship gathered input from its constituents to create a list of leading indicators that drive student achievement. It then built a system for teachers to see this data in real-time. But, according to Brantley, Friendship realized that to "truly enable breakaway performance required making the data useful for students and parents." So teachers posted simple scorecards of classroom performance, including measures such as attendance and discipline, and offered incentives that motivated students to work together to improve. And they taught students how to track their own data. "We expect students as young as kindergartners to be able to explain and provide evidence of their progress to their teachers, their peers, and their parents," Brantley said. Younger students might affix stars onto a paper as they learn each of five vocabulary words that are their goal for the week. Older students use indicators such as mastery of core subjects to figure out if they're ultimately on track for college completion. They are taught to use the data to set more ambitious goals for themselves and share progress at parent-teacher "Data Nights."

By involving students in tracking their own progress and setting their own goals, Friendship engages students and parents as partners in the design and implementation

What can funders do to support constituent engagement?

- **Ask grantees what they're already doing to engage constituents.** Build dialogues on this topic into your due diligence, regular check-ins, and grant reporting processes. If you require your grantees to have some kind of constituent input (e.g., town hall meetings, advisory councils), make sure these aren't check-the-box exercises. Some grantees may already have found effective strategies to engage the people they work with. Learn from them!

- **Fund constituent engagement efforts.** Consider funding constituent feedback systems for individual grantees, when feasible, or for multiple grantees operating in the same field. Comparative feedback systems such as YouthTruth and Great Nonprofits, which have been strongly supported by philanthropic funders, have been highly successful at promoting feedback and transparency.

- **Take a second look at deeply constituent-driven organizations.** Organizations that engage constituents through co-creation and especially ownership often fly under the radar because they tend to be smaller and community-based. They may also struggle to fit into a "results-oriented philanthropy" model, since gains in constituent capacity and resilience can take a long time to measure. One foundation recently told us that they are launching a separate community-grants portfolio where grantees will be selected solely by community members.

- **Model good behavior** by authentically gathering grantee and community feedback in your own work.

www.bridgespan.org

of the performance management system. Achievement at Friendship schools is moving upward again—90 percent of the schools have seen sustained gains in reading scores, math scores, and attendance—and Brantley credits these efforts as the key driver.

Co-creation can go further, reaching into the design and delivery of programs, advocacy, and governance. Consider the example of YouthBuild, a network of 273 independent affiliates coordinated by YouthBuild USA that have worked with over 100,000 unemployed, low-income 16 to 24 year olds to build affordable housing, advance their education, and help them become community leaders. YouthBuild was founded upon the philosophy that young people must play a role in solving the challenges they and their communities face. One of its core convictions is that these youth and young adults "are capable of playing a leadership role and if encouraged to do so will bring enormous energy, creativity, and imagination to the work."[14]

But how does an organization as big as YouthBuild USA turn this lofty philosophy into true co-creation? For one thing, its youth participants help run each local organization. Youth Policy Councils, with members elected by their peers, are expected to meet weekly with each site's program or executive director (ED) to discuss issues such as program policies and staff hiring. Lots of direct service organizations have constituent advisory groups, but YouthBuild's Youth Policy Councils have actual power. For instance, they might choose among three candidates put forward by the ED for a senior staff vacancy or choose how additional funds should be spent. YouthBuild USA President Dorothy Stoneman recalled that, "I once made the mistake of not listening to the young people in a hiring decision, and it turned out they were right. The person was asked to leave the organization within six months. That was the last time I disregarded the voice of our constituents."

These local councils have been shown to be a positive factor in the organization's success: a 2009 Social Policy Research Associates study found that, holding other factors constant, local YouthBuild affiliates that had active Youth Policy Councils had better outcomes than affiliates that did not.[15] Yajaira Cortes is an alum of YouthBuild Providence and ran its Youth Policy Council when she was in the program. She said, "I wasn't afraid of telling YouthBuild's director if I didn't agree with something or of asking that a policy be changed. No major decision was taken without student input."

Youth participants also tutor each other, help staff implement community activities, and support advocacy, fundraising, and replication.[16] YouthBuild

14 YouthBuild website: https://youthbuild.org/mission-and-philosophy-0.

15 Wally Abrazaldo et al, "Evaluation of the YouthBuild Youth Offender Grants," Social Policy Research Associates, 2009.

16 For instance, YouthBuild enlists youth as spokespeople to communicate to prospective communities the value of a YouthBuild program.

Providence staff, according to Cortes, "would never go to an important meeting without at least one youth. "My voice influenced policy, decision-making, service projects, curriculum, and the overall direction of the program," she added.

Constituent engagement and accountability to its constituents are core tenets of the organization's work. Stoneman attends all YouthBuild USA Affiliated Network Young Leaders Council and National Alumni Council meetings. Five program graduates serve on YouthBuild USA's board of directors, and graduates have equal representation with EDs on the national policy council that sets program design and performance standards for the network. Reflecting on the role of constituents in an organization committed to social change, Stoneman said, "As a white participant in the civil rights movement in the sixties, I learned the importance of listening and holding myself accountable to the local community. I think constituent engagement is the big overlooked essential that today's generation of social innovators haven't been taught, haven't learned through actions, and haven't been pushed to consider by constituents, funders, and consultants."

Constituent Ownership: Who's in the Driver's Seat?

When we speak of constituent ownership of a nonprofit or some aspect of its work, we are talking not so much about legal ownership as we are about the power, resources, and decisions that reside with constituents. Organizations that embrace constituent ownership are motivated by a deeply rooted philosophy that constituents can and should be equipped and empowered to solve problems on their own, with the organizations' leaders and staff in the background. Indeed some organizations, like neighborhood groups, parent associations, civil rights organizations, and others, are created by constituents themselves.

"Poor people are broke, not broken," said Maurice Lim Miller, founder and CEO of the Family Independence Initiative (FII). In bestowing a 2012 "Genius Award" on Miller, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation lauded FII for partnering with and learning from low-income families.[17] Over the last decade, FII has demonstrated that investing in people's strengths and initiative delivers more powerful, sustainable, and cost-effective outcomes for low-income families. A recent third-party evaluation of FII in Boston[18] found that within two years of joining, approximately one out of every two families living below the federal poverty line at the outset moved above the poverty line, and that household earned income increased an average of 27 percent after two years.

Programs and services targeting low-income families and communities often use case managers and social workers who are supposed to direct and help their clients.

---

17 "Maurice Lim Miller Wins MacArthur Genius Award," NASDAQ OMX | GlobeNewswire, October 1, 2012, http://globenewswire.com/news-release/2012/10/01/494445/10006933/en/Maurice-Lim-Miller-Wins-MacArthur-Genius-Award.html.

18 Melanie Moore Kubo and Suki McCoy, "Family Independence Initiative: Boston Evaluation Report," *See Change*, December 2012.

Instead, FII encourages families to form groups that meet regularly for mutual support. These families, who already know each other and have chosen to work together, get access to computers, matching funds for their savings, low-interest loans, and other resources. FII staff, who are known as liaisons, meet regularly with the groups but are forbidden to deliver services themselves or offer specific directions and advice. Group members rely mostly on each other, not FII staff.

Candace Keshwar, a low-income mother of three who participates in FII Boston, explained: "FII felt respectful to the people they were trying to reach. Even though I may be in a tough situation right now, I still think of myself as smart and capable. They don't tell us what to do, or what's best." As for the FII liaisons, Keshwar said that they "really just sit in the background. If you ask them for something, they'll just say 'does your group know?' … And your group always does know!"

Ongoing measurement is an essential element of FII's work. But it's the families— not evaluation staff— who collect and report progress monthly. FII tracks about 200 pieces of data on each family. Because this kind of data collection is time-intensive, FII compensates families for reporting. This data not only helps inform the organization's overall efforts but also functions as a self-help tool for families to monitor progress over time and change course when needed. The groups meet regularly to reflect on what they are learning.

While FII seeks to scale its impact nationwide by influencing other organizations and funders to recognize the potential for low-income people to improve their own lives, it currently works in only a handful of communities. Indeed most constituent-driven organizations operate in a single community or neighborhood. Can constituent ownership succeed at a much larger scale?

Tostan, mentioned at the beginning of this article, has well-publicized successes that are helping thousands of West African communities choose to abandon female genital cutting and child marriage, all rooted in its strategy of community ownership. The local community, not Tostan, selects participants for its three-year Community Empowerment Program (CEP). At the onset of the CEP, the community also establishes a management committee of 17 democratically-elected representatives, nine of whom must be women, who receive training in leadership, and financial and program management from a Tostan facilitator, often a program graduate from a nearby village. The committee coordinates project activities and continues them after the educational program ends, ensuring program outcomes are sustained. Finally, Tostan scales its impact through an approach called "organized diffusion." Participants use their existing social networks to spread and reinforce learning and social transformation within and between communities. While the CEP has directly reached over 200,000 participants, Tostan estimates that over two million lives have been changed as a result of organized diffusion.[19] And Tostan brings its own knowledge and

19 Tostan Prospectus: The Breakthrough Fund: Empowering Communities Across West Africa, September 2011.

experience to the table as well, using a curriculum and strategies based on its experience working in communities, constant application of community feedback, and a half dozen rigorous external evaluation studies the organization has commissioned.

Organizations like Tostan, FII, and YouthBuild draw on a rich literature of community empowerment. This core strategy of constituent ownership and empowerment has, from the beginning, been fundamental to who they are as organizations and how they seek to change the world. In fact, we know of no examples where conventional, service-providing organizations have imbued their programs and strategies with constituent ownership in the absence of a founding self-help philosophy and approach.

Under What Conditions Can Constituent Engagement Be Effective?

The examples shared above demonstrate that nonprofits can realize tangible benefits from constituent engagement. The most obvious of these is *more effective solutions*. If you want to know what might help students stay in school, it might be a good idea to ask them, as Connected by 25 did. Another benefit is the opportunity to *make fuller use of constituents' own knowledge and capabilities to address the problem at hand*. The reason that Friendship Public Charter School involves students so heavily in measuring their own performance is that it will ultimately be student efforts that are most critical in improving student performance. A third benefit is *more sustainable change*. When FII engages groups of low-income residents in American cities or Tostan engages members of African villages, neither plans to deliver their programming indefinitely. By building constituents' capacity and confidence, impact continues long after their work has ended.

Yet in our experience, these benefits remain unrealized by too many nonprofits today. Not enough gather and use input effectively, let alone participate in the kinds of real-time and comparative feedback systems that drive consumers' choices in the private sector, like eBay seller ratings or Yelp restaurant ratings. Even fewer attempt to involve constituents through co-creation or ownership— even when confronting challenges that have proven stubbornly resistant to technical expertise alone.

What's holding nonprofits back from engaging their constituents?

A variety of issues, nonprofits tell us. It's hard to know if you're engaging constituents effectively, with few agreed-upon ways of measuring the effectiveness of engagement techniques, particularly for forms of engagement that attempt to build capacity, confidence, and resilience. Also, there's the entirely reasonable fear that, the more constituents are involved, the longer it will take to get things done. Further, empowering disenfranchised populations can create risks. Tostan's Melching has written that "when women [in Tostan's programs] started standing up

to defend their rights in their communities, it often caused them more grief than joy because their husbands and village leaders were at first threatened by these new ideas and became angry and defensive."[20] The Tostan team had to figure out how to engage men on how these new ideas could bring well-being to their families and communities.

Beyond these challenges, even the most constituent-driven organizations acknowledge the limits of constituent engagement, as well its cost, typically using it only where it can add a real value. iDE has focused on constituent input in program design, Friendship on co-creation in measurement, Tostan on community ownership in program design, delivery, and scaling. In addition, the most intensive forms of engagement may not be appropriate for all populations served. It would be hard to envision Friendship giving its students control over how teachers use classroom time. Similarly, FII acknowledges its model of paying adults to set, monitor, and achieve their own goals, with no guidance from staff, may not be the most appropriate for certain populations, such as the chronically homeless or mentally ill.

But is there a conflict between the use of evidence-based programs and constituent engagement? In many cases, we think not. While evidence-based models will have core elements that must be implemented faithfully, they usually have other elements that can and should be tailored to local needs. Further, real-time constituent input can serve as a leading indicator of whether an evidence-based program is being carried out as intended. And we have been struck by how constituent-driven organizations like Tostan, FII, and YouthBuild have been successful precisely *because* they marry constituent engagement with a commitment to building an evidence base—by measuring, learning what works, and standardizing certain features of their programs across sites and contexts.

How Should *You* Engage?

The past decade has seen a major injection of business discipline into the social sector. Terms like "business plan" and "best practice" are everyday lingo even among smaller nonprofits. But as a sector we may too often have neglected another kind of best practice: tapping into constituents' own knowledge and understanding of their conditions and contexts.

While some sector-wide efforts are on the horizon (for instance, Charity Navigator's 3.0 version will penalize nonprofits that don't gather, use, and publish constituent input), we believe the greatest change will come when individual nonprofits ask where they can enhance their impact by better engaging constituents.

---

20 Jess Ellison, "Molly Melching: Enlist the Men!," *The Daily Beast* (blog) March 10, 2012, http://www. thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/03/10/molly-melching-enlist-the-men.html.

We would share three pieces of advice for nonprofits in the early stages of constituent engagement or interested in further exploring its potential:

1. **Start with input.** Listen to your constituents and understand the special knowledge they bring. Take advantage of free tools and guides, such as IDEO's human-centered design toolkit,[21] Keystone Accountability's constituent survey guide,[22] Harwood Institute's Turn Quiz,[23] and the Positive Deviance Initiative's Basic Field Guide.[24] Learn from and partner with other nonprofits, religious institutions, or community associations who may be engaging the constituents with whom you work. Consider technologies like social media, community mapping, and smartphones that can make constituents easier and cheaper to engage. As one organization recently told us upon discovering its constituents had already launched a Facebook group with hundreds of followers and comments, people are making their voices heard, whether or not you want them to!

2. **Once you're comfortable with real input, experiment with co-creation and ownership.** By inviting the perspectives of constituents, you may encourage them to play a more active role in your organization's work. Input will always be important, but you can go further and take advantage of opportunities for co-creation and ownership by examining where constituents can become more involved and which decisions they can help you make or make on their own. You may want to start with an experiment or two, with clearly defined learning objectives and measurement.

3. **Engage authentically.** Nonprofit leaders who have seen real results from constituent engagement identify a few critical factors. First, it starts from the top, with senior nonprofit leaders directly participating in, rather than delegating, constituent engagement. Second, they engage all types of constituents, not just those with the greatest potential or time. Third, they seek to continuously improve their constituent engagement, with regular processes in place to measure, learn from, adapt, and share results back with constituents. In a word, their engagement is authentic.

• • •

Constituents are too often forgotten partners in advancing the missions of nonprofits. We believe that many organizations will find that, when properly tapped, the knowledge and assets of the people they serve will prove a resource in getting the job done. There is a lot to be learned from organizations whose programs and initiatives are constituent-founded and led across the spectrum

---

21 *Human-Centered Design Toolkit*, Second Edition, IDEO.
22 Keystone Accountability Constituent Survey Guide, http://www.keystoneaccountability.org/resources/guides.
23 The Harwood Institute, The Turn Quiz, http://www.theharwoodinstitute.org/the-turn-quiz.
24 Positive Deviance Initiative, *Basic Field Guide to the Positive Deviance Approach*, http://www.positivedeviance.org/resources/manuals_basicguide.html.

of engagement. Engagement itself takes practice, persistence, a willingness to learn, and a recognition that constituent perspectives are not a panacea. Our hope is that, as more organizations use constituent engagement, the social sector will learn more about what approaches work best, and how engagement can better be integrated with evidence-based practices and programs.

How will you engage your constituents as partners to drive impact?