

# Which Stakeholders Should We Involve in Our Decisions and How?

Taking time early in the grantmaking process to map out the stakeholders affected by our work, and their position in the ecosystem, helps create a deeper understanding of key issues. It also prepares us to address future concerns and to tap stakeholder expertise in a proactive way that helps build agreement and buy-in that ultimately leads to more effective programs. In order to do this well, grantmakers need to master stakeholder analysis and determine how to bring key players into decision-making.

Involvement begins with understanding our stakeholders' interests and needs. Once we know the positions of key players, we then need to define which decisions need to be made, who should participate in making them and how to appropriately involve them. GEO and the [Interaction Institute for Social Change](#) have identified key tenets grantmakers can use to identify stakeholder interests and determine the right levels of involvement.

## Identifying Stakeholder Interests

Doing a stakeholder analysis will help answer the following questions for each stakeholder group:

- What do they bring to the process in terms of resources and expertise? Do they have the time to participate in an active way?
- What is their interest in this work and what would motivate them to participate?
- To what extent is their support and engagement essential to the ultimate success of this work?
- To what extent will their work, their lives and their neighborhoods be affected by the decision?
- What would be a win (value or advantage) for them regarding this issue?

For more on this topic, see [Do Nothing About Me Without Me](#), by J. Courtney Bourns, (Washington D.C.: GEO and Interaction Institute for Social Change, 2010).

## A stakeholder is any person (or group of people) who:

- Is responsible for key agreements or final decisions.
- Is in a position to implement the decision.
- Has expertise or information crucial to realizing the desired outcomes.
- Is likely to be affected by the outcome.
- Will need to be informed of the outcomes.
- Can block decisions.

The realm of likely stakeholders in a funder's work could include: Internal stakeholders, grantees, grantmaker peers, community members or beneficiaries, and thought leaders or other experts. All of these groups do not need to be involved in every initiative or process. The key is to identify those individuals and groups whose involvement is important to the success of the work at hand.

## Determining the Right Level of Involvement

The key to successful stakeholder engagement, according to Marianne Hughes, former executive director of [IISC](#), is to seek the “maximum involvement appropriate to the situation.” This means seeking the highest level of engagement of stakeholder groups possible given the tradeoffs and goals. IISC has identified four possible levels of involvement as follows:

- **Decide and announce** — The grantmaker makes a decision with little or no input from important stakeholders. The grantmaker then announces the decision to those who it will affect and explains the rationale. Questions to determine when this is the right approach:
  - Does our interest in making a quick decision and being in control outweigh the importance of reaching out for input?
  - Are we prepared to deal with possible blowback from those we have not consulted?
- **Gather input** — The grantmaker asks key stakeholders for input (e.g., ideas, suggestions, information). The grantmaker then makes a decision. Questions to determine when this is the right approach:
  - Do we have the time and resources needed to gather input and include whom we want to include?
  - Is it clear who the key stakeholders are? Is the group large enough to reflect a manageable diversity of opinion?
  - How will we use the feedback to inform our decision making?

- **Consensus** — A consensus decision is one that each member of a group is willing to support and help implement. All key stakeholders are given an opportunity to voice their opinion and to understand the implications of various options. Questions to determine when this is the right approach:
  - Are we prepared to give up our decision-making authority?
  - Do we have the time and resources to devote to a true consensus process?
  - Do participants have the collaborative skills needed to reach consensus?
  - Do we have a plan B if the group does not reach consensus?
- **Delegate decision with constraints** — The grantmaker defines the decision in the form of a question or questions, clarifies the constraints on the decision (e.g., budget, time frame, requirements), and delegates the decision to others. The grantmaker does not alter the decision as long as it adheres to the constraints. Questions to determine when this is the right approach:
  - Are we prepared to give decision-making authority to the group?
  - Do we have time to enable others to go through the process?
  - Do participants have the information, skills and expertise they need to make a good decision?

## Factors to consider when deciding how and when to engage stakeholders:

- **Stakeholder Buy-In:** How much do stakeholders need to be involved so that they can confidently support implementation of the change?
- **Time Available:** How much time can be spent on making the decision? Building the agreement? Planning the change?
- **Importance of Decision:** How important (versus how inconsequential) is the change to people?
- **Information Needed:** Who has information or expertise that can contribute to making a quality decision or agreement?
- **Readiness:** How capable and experienced are people in operating as decision-makers? Planners? How willing are they?
- **Building Teamwork:** What is the value of using this opportunity to create a stronger team and build relationships?
- **Building Power:** What is the value of using this opportunity to level the playing field?

## Levels of Involvement

The following table maps out considerations for funders at each level:

	Possible Advantages	Possible Disadvantages	Keys to Success
<b>Decide and Announce</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Decision can be made quickly.</li> <li>Leader is in control of decision.</li> <li>Implementation can begin immediately.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Decision may not be well-informed.</li> <li>Assigned Implementers may balk at decision.</li> <li>Those affected by decision may resent not being asked their opinion.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Explain the context for the decision when announcing the decision.</li> <li>Explain reasons for choosing the approach.</li> </ul>
<b>Gather Input</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Decision may be more informed.</li> <li>Decision is more likely to be carried out.</li> <li>Doesn't require a meeting of all the players.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Some players may feel excluded.</li> <li>If the decision conflicts with input, players may undermine decision or be less likely to provide input in the future.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Explain how people will be involved and your rationale.</li> <li>Explain what considerations are taken into account when making the decision.</li> <li>Be clear about the type of input you need from individuals.</li> </ul>
<b>Consensus</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Educates the team through active participation.</li> <li>High level of support for decision.</li> <li>Quicker implementation because more people are already up and running on the issues at hand.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>May take more time.</li> <li>Team members may not have the collaborative skills needed to reach agreement.</li> <li>People may interpret leader's choice of consensus approach as weakness.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Explain what consensus means and why it is the appropriate level of involvement.</li> <li>Clearly outline constraints, including time and finances.</li> <li>Identify a fallback level of involvement if consensus can't be reached.</li> </ul>





### Delegate Decision with Constraints

- 
- Frees leader up to deal with other issues.
  - Lessens likelihood of attempts to undermine the decision.
  - Develops leadership capability of others.
  - Team may lack the skill, experience or perspective needed to make an informed decision.
  - May take more time.
  - Team may take on issues outside the bounds of the task.
  - Explain how people will be involved in decision-making and provide rationale.
  - Clearly state constraints.
  - Build in milestone points to check in on process and content.
  - Be available to answer questions.
- 

## Conclusion

Taking the necessary time to engage stakeholders in a meaningful way has the potential to drastically improve both our grantmaking process and the effectiveness of our programs. This requires us to identify key stakeholders, their interests and needs. We also need to decide on the most appropriate level of involvement of stakeholders, considering the goals and tradeoffs. In order for this to be successful, communication with stakeholders must happen early and often to provide clarity and ensure understanding and alignment.