

How Do We Know if Our Stakeholder Engagement is Working?

Effective stakeholder engagement starts and ends with respect — respect for the expertise that those on the front lines bring to the problems affecting their community, and respect for their capacity to develop solutions if given the chance. Assessing whether stakeholder engagement strategies have truly taken hold requires a shift in our traditional approach to evaluation and learning processes and the factors that constitute success.

Dimensions of Success



Source: Interaction Institute for Social Change

When grantmakers assess a program or strategy, the focus is typically on results. However, looking at process and relationships as equally important dimensions of success can yield helpful insights, particularly in considering how effectively we have engaged external stakeholders.

For more information, see [Do Nothing About Me Without Me: An Action Guide for Engaging Stakeholders](#) (Washington, D.C.: GEO 2010).

In looking at these three interdependent dimensions of success, we can ask the following questions.

Results: accomplishment of the task; achievement of the goal.

- Are the results of high quality?
- Are the results timely?
- Do the results meet stakeholder requirements (internal and external)?

Process: how the work gets done; how the work is assigned and managed; how the work is monitored and evaluated

- Is the process clear and logical?
- Is the process efficient?
- Is the process appropriate for the task?
- Does the process involve the appropriate stakeholders?

Relationship: how people interact, how people relate to the organization; how people feel about their involvement and contribution

- Do internal and external stakeholders feel supported?
- Do stakeholders trust each other?
- Do stakeholders feel valued?

Engaging Stakeholders in Assessment

While we typically assess our success by the results we achieve, process and relationships are powerful (if hidden) drivers of our ability to achieve our intended aim. In contrast, if we emphasize results over process and relationships then we run the risk of undermining the success of our effort and can create lasting damage. Doing stakeholder engagement well sometimes means shifting more of our focus to process and relationship, rather than results.

The successful engagement of stakeholders is present in all three dimensions of success. An important measure of results success is the extent to which stakeholders provided input and are well served by the outcomes of the initiative. When talking about process success, we are assessing both our

overall plan for engaging stakeholders in an initiative (e.g. are we engaging the right people at the right time about the right questions?) and the specific opportunities we create for engagement (e.g. did we structure our meetings so that participants got the most out of it? Were our requests for input reasonable?). Success in the relationships dimension hinges on stakeholders feeling valued and supported as the strategy or initiative is being developed.

As we begin asking questions about success, it is important for us to remember that evaluation itself must be a collaborative process. Grantmakers can engage with grantees and community members to develop strategies for evaluating the results of key investments and community partnerships and for figuring out how to apply new learning (from evaluation and other activities) to the task of strengthening the work.

“One way to ensure the relevance and usefulness of an evaluation is to develop a set of evaluation questions that reflect the perspectives, experiences and insights of as many relevant individuals, groups, organizations, and communities as possible,” according to Hallie Preskill and Nathalie Jones of FSG. “By soliciting the opinions, interests, concerns and priorities of stakeholders early in the evaluation process, the results are more likely to address stakeholders’ specific information needs and be useful for a range of purposes, among them to improve program effectiveness, to affect policy decisions and/or to instigate behavioral change.”¹

What Happens When You Don’t Engage

Ineffective stakeholder engagement can result in a range of undesirable outcomes for the grantmaking strategy or initiative. These include “stakeholder sabotage,” when people who were not engaged or who were engaged poorly take actions that could imperil the success of a grantmaker’s efforts. Doing this work ineffectively also can result in grantmakers not having the information they need to make decisions. Perhaps you didn’t engage with the right people, or you didn’t ask the right questions and therefore don’t have good answers.

¹ Hallie Preskill and Nathalie Jones, “[A Practical Guide for Engaging Stakeholders in Developing Evaluation Questions](#),” FSG Social Impact Advisors, 2009.

Level of Involvement Makes a Difference in Results

A critical precondition for determining the success of stakeholder engagement efforts requires getting clear early in the work about what level of stakeholder involvement is appropriate and actionable. Otherwise, you run the risk of seeing results, process and relationships suffer because the level of engagement was not right. By taking the time to figure out the right level of involvement and communicating it to stakeholders (along with your reasoning), you can help set expectations and help people feel safe to engage with you.

Knowing if you got the right level of involvement is a key factor in understanding how well you engaged stakeholders. The key to successful stakeholder engagement, according to IISC's Executive Director Marianne Hughes, is to seek the "maximum involvement appropriate to the situation."

For more on different levels of stakeholder engagement, see Smarter Grantmaking Playbook question, "[What are Different Ways to Engage Stakeholders?](#)"

Conclusion

Underlying the success of any stakeholder engagement effort is a foundation of trust between stakeholder and grantmaker. As grantmakers, we can begin to build this trust with prospective stakeholders by taking the time to clarify internally why we want to bring the outside in and what our work will gain by doing so. We can lay the right groundwork for stakeholder involvement by clarifying what level of stakeholder involvement is realistic and actionable for our current context. By taking the time to get clear on the why and how of stakeholder engagement, we increase the likelihood of engaging with stakeholders in a way that is mutually beneficial and impactful to the work at hand.