

# What Are Different Ways to Engage Stakeholders?

A host of specific practices and activities can help grantmakers bring the voices of grantees, beneficiaries and community members into decision making and planning. These activities range from lower touch where grantmakers create vehicles to communicate with key stakeholders, to higher levels of involvement in shaping grantmaking programs.

## Levels of Engagement

Because stakeholder involvement is a key component to ensuring success of any grantmaking strategy, engagement activities are needed throughout all of our work. Grantmakers rely on grantee and community input to better understand the current state of affairs and more broadly envision the future. Key stakeholders can also help grantmakers more insightfully develop a pathway to action, as well as contribute to implementation.

In order to do this work well, funders need to aim to involve the right people, at the right time and for the right conversations. GEO and [Interaction Institute for Social Change](#) have identified a range of activities that grantmakers can undertake in the name of stakeholder engagement. These activities generally fall into three categories:

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

- **Getting started.** Grantmakers just beginning this work can start with “low-touch” activities. For example, surveys of grantees are an especially valuable way to begin tapping the power of engagement for better grantmaking results. This input helps grantmakers develop a more fine-tuned understanding of how our work is, or is not, helping nonprofits address challenges and meet their goals.
- **Gathering input.** Once staff and board begin to see the benefits of getting feedback from grantees and other stakeholders via surveys and other low-touch methods, then it might be time to explore doing more. Among the possibilities for soliciting input and ideas in more active ways is inviting grantees and community members to participate in focus groups, listening sessions, community convenings and other events.
- **Co-creating.** Co-creation or shared decision making means taking steps to ensure that our grantmaking is guided by the voices and perspectives of the people and groups it is designed to help. Two key strategies that help funders pursue a culture of shared decision making are:
  1. **Transforming staff and board.** Often, the people who serve on the staffs and the boards of foundations come from and live in a different world from the leaders and staffs of the organizations we fund. Even well intentioned staff members that don’t live in or have the daily experiences of beneficiaries aren’t able to always know how to best support grantees and communities.
  2. **Delegating decision-making authority to others.** Some grantmakers are taking stakeholder engagement in philanthropy all the way to its logical conclusion by opening up control over grantmaking decisions to nonprofit and community representatives.

## Map of Engagement Activities

While not an exhaustive list, here is a map of different engagement activities by level of involvement and type of stakeholder:\*

		Level of involvement (How)				
		Getting Started (Low)	→	Gathering Input (Medium)	→	Co-Creating (High)
<b>Stakeholders (Who)</b>	<i>Internal foundation staff</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Share ideas at staff meeting</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gather input around changes in funding priorities</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Consensus strategy development</li> <li>Staff planning committees</li> </ul>
	<i>Grantees</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Offer information through newsletter, websites</li> <li>Publish a foundation blog or wiki</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Do formal and informal surveys</li> <li>Conduct focus groups</li> <li>Conduct Grantee Perception Report</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conduct listening sessions for input</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Convene standing advisory group</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increase grantee presence on board</li> </ul>
	<i>Foundation peers</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Send a letter to inform of project</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Post question to email list or discussion board</li> <li>Solicit colleague input</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Share thinking for feedback on plans</li> <li>Convene sessions at field conference</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Convene a small group of funders to co-create a program or initiative</li> </ul>
	<i>Local community or community of practice</i>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Convene focus groups for feedback on plans</li> <li>Conduct Beneficiary Perception Report</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Convene community advisory group</li> <li>Setup a blog or wiki</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Create multi-stakeholder teams to advise on programs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Include community members on board or committees</li> </ul>
	<i>Thought leaders and experts</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use research and lessons to inform work</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conduct interviews</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Co-sponsor a learning event</li> </ul>	

\*Developed by IISC and GEO, 2008

## Conclusion

There are many ways to bring different groups of people and interests into the programs and initiatives we support. Grantmakers need to be intentional about who we engage, the level of engagement we seek, as well as the degree of control we are willing to share with grantees, community members, beneficiaries and other partners.