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# 6 Ways to Engage Your Stakeholders

## *Let the Key Players Improve Your Program's Success*

Key stakeholders have much to contribute to the decision-making process, and their involvement can dramatically improve the success of any funding program. Here we'll examine six ways to engage stakeholders and benefit from their input -- but first let's discuss who those key stakeholders are.

There are three types of stakeholders:

- The first are those most directly impacted by the problem you are trying to solve, the ones feeling the pain of the issue. They could be families living in the local neighborhood, youth in the school system, or women who are surviving domestic violence.
- The second group is made up of the people who are attempting to solve the problem -- whether they are neighborhood residents, nonprofit leaders, researchers, policy makers, or experts at any level.
- The third category includes those people who could be solving the problem with you, except that they either aren't fully aware of their role or they don't realize that the problem exists. For example, you might be trying to support youth employment in your community because you are concerned that many teens are not getting the job skills or training necessary to achieve success as young adults. The CEOs of banks or corporations within your community might not be aware of this problem -- or feel any connection to it. But you can help them understand, for example, that the success of their community and their businesses depends on a thriving workforce. Then they may see the importance of partnering with you on this youth employment project in order to protect their own futures.

All three categories of stakeholders can be engaged and involved in decision making. All have valuable contributions to make to the success of your programs and initiatives. Let's take a brief look at six ways stakeholders can help you in your grantmaking.

### 1. Understanding

In the early stages of your grantmaking and program development, you could engage stakeholders to help you understand the issues. Ask them questions like these: What are some of the challenges you face? Where are the greatest challenges -- in a certain part of your city, in a certain type of population, among particular kinds of organizations? Key stakeholders can help you think through and understand the issues, and the nuances of those issues.

### 2. Weighing Options

Once you have some ideas as to the direction of your grantmaking, you can vet your ideas with key stakeholders to help you better consider the pros and cons of different approaches. For instance, suppose you want to address substance abuse, but you're not sure whether to focus on treatment or prevention. Speaking with key stakeholders can provide a chance to understand some of the challenges and opportunities within each of these areas. That input should reveal valuable information and real-world wisdom to help you make an informed choice. It should also provide a heads-up regarding potential pitfalls.



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### 6 Ways to Engage Your Stakeholders, continued

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#### 3. Prioritizing

Once you've developed the five or six areas that you think you could successfully focus on, you can engage key stakeholders to help you prioritize among those areas. What's the most burning issue? Where could you have an early impact? What is some of the "low-hanging fruit" that could allow for immediate success? And what are some of the more challenging topics that you want to address down the road, once your efforts are underway? Feedback in this early stage is critical and can have a major impact on success rates.

#### 4. Implementing

Stakeholders can become key partners in helping you with implementation. It might be the nonprofit organization that you fund to launch a new intervention related to domestic violence, for example. It could be the university, and the researchers at that university, whom you engage to collect data and help inform the progress of your approach. It could be a policy maker who helps you scale your efforts to a statewide or even national level. It is better to work together than alone. Develop partnerships with your stakeholders as you implement your ideas.

#### 5. Cheerleading

Stakeholders can become champions. If you have engaged them from the beginning and kept them abreast of your progress and decision making, then they'll buy in to what you are trying to accomplish. Get that buy-in, and they may help spread the word about what you are trying to achieve. This, in turn, can engage other stakeholders and leverage additional resources to support your work.

#### 6. Evaluating

Stakeholders can be involved in evaluation planning, and they can inform your evaluation team about what's working and what's not working from their perspective. Whether these stakeholders are grantees or outside observers, they'll probably have a lot to say. Based on their feedback and other evaluation findings, you can take the cycle back to the beginning and engage those stakeholders in additional planning, refining, and refocusing of your grantmaking program.

It is to everyone's advantage to involve stakeholders in decision making. Their feedback and involvement can make tremendous difference in success versus failure for any initiative. Ask yourself: Who are your stakeholders? How are you engaging them? What can you do right now to reach out to those you've overlooked? Get your stakeholders involved. Working together to address issues is the best way to make progress.

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