

Engaging Community in Decision-Making: A Roadmap for National Foundations

Change, for any institution, is hard and rarely happens overnight.

For larger foundations that wish to become more inclusive in their decision-making, it will be a journey that requires both tactical and structural changes. Smaller shifts that happen at a programmatic or departmental level coupled with broader structural changes at the organizational level can mutually influence one another and, over time, help national foundations embed community input more naturally into the DNA of their foundation.

This graphic lays out a roadmap for this journey, highlighting best practices at the staff and organizational level to do this work well.

STAFF SKILLS & COMPETENCIES

- Acknowledge and address power dynamics and try to mitigate them when possible.
- Listen deeply and remain open to influence. Approach community engagement with humility and a spirit of co-learning.
- Ensure staff are continually growing in cultural competency and getting ongoing exposure and professional development to build their cultural knowledge, skills, and awareness.
- Avoid jargon and attend to language needs, either through staff who are bilingual or multilingual, or translators.
- Ensure that staff are exposed to best practices in this field, as well as what has been learned from your organization's work, so that everyone is starting from a shared baseline and learning from there.

ORGANIZATIONAL BEST PRACTICES

- Provide compensation for time and expertise and ensure flexible payment methods, including pre-paid debit cards that do not require participants to have access to a bank.
- Communicate how feedback will be used (or not used) by the foundation. Create feedback loops to ensure transparency and close feedback loops, especially when feedback cannot be acted upon.
- Consider how community participants will benefit from their engagement and be mindful of engagement that is extractive. Examples include products (such as videos or reports that are shared with the community) or leadership development support.
- Pay attention to food, dress, choice of vendors, etc. and make sure they signal inclusiveness.
- Document lessons learned and create organization-wide protocols, guidelines, and timelines to institutionalize inclusion of community expertise.

SHORTER-TERM SHIFTS AT THE PROGRAMMATIC/DEPARTMENTAL LEVEL



REFLECTION

Get clear about why you are engaging directly impacted communities in decision-making and how specifically the team hopes to benefit from community-based expertise.

Take a close look at your existing practices and protocols and identify where there is room to be more inclusive. Can community constituents be integrated into advisory committees, review panels, or other processes?

Determine if it's helpful (given your context) to have intermediaries or other partners broker relationships with community constituents.



ACTION

Establish criteria for engagement, ideally with those whom you hope to engage.

Who will be included? How will participants be recruited? To what extent do they represent a cross-section of perspectives/experiences?

How long will the engagement last? What are the roles and responsibilities for advisors and foundation staff? What is the accountability mechanism for staff to use input from those engaged?

To the degree possible, codify these to promote transparency and to provide a roadmap for future efforts.

Provide orientation, training, and support for community advisors, as well as staff who will be working with the advisors.

Discuss how community advisors and the communities they represent will benefit from their engagement — and check to make sure they did.

For higher touch engagement, debrief with participants to identify what went well and what could be improved. Document lessons learned for departmental, organizational, and field learning.

LONGER-TERM CHANGES AT THE ORGANIZATIONAL LEVEL



VALUES

Articulate organizational values related to equity and inclusion, including the importance of engaging directly impacted communities in decision-making and an understanding of social context, historical context, and implicit bias in the foundation's work.

Engage the Board in defining organizational values and expectations for community engagement.



HUMAN CAPITAL

Integrate lived experience as a consideration in hiring practices.

Include expectations about connection to community in job descriptions and staff review/assessment criteria.

Review job responsibilities and ensure enough time is available to staff to support community engagement.



ADMINISTRATIVE PROCESSES

Assess financial, administrative, and programming protocols and practices for inclusion of community constituents.

Are there mechanisms to compensate people for their time? Are contracts and waivers written in plain language? What supports (child care, transportation, translation) are needed to facilitate participation?

Examine grant cycles to ensure that timelines and review processes allow for engagement from directly impacted groups.