Sharing Power with Communities

A Field Guide

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Community Wealth Partners

by SHARE OUR STRENGTH

Through our work with a range of nonprofits and foundations and learning from the wisdom of other leaders and organizations, we at Community Wealth Partners are firm believers that those closest to the issues are also closest to the solutions. Yet many nonprofits and foundations, even those deeply committed to the communities they seek to serve, don't always know how best to engage those communities in shaping their work. If you believe engaging communities is key to furthering your mission but you're not sure how to go about it in authentic and meaningful ways, you're in the right place.

This field guide offers practical tips and examples to help you authentically engage and share power with the communities most impacted by your work.

Here's what you'll find in the pages that follow:

- A spectrum of community engagement to ownership (page 3)

- Groundwork before you begin (pages 4-5)

- Principles for doing this work (pages 6-9)

- Three models for engaging and shifting power to communities (pages 10-17)

- Choosing an engagement strategy (page 18)

- Common pitfalls (pages 19-20)

- Resources (pages 22-23)

DEFINITION

communities

In this field guide, we define "communities" as people with lived experience of the issues you focus on. This might mean residents of a certain neighborhood or young adults impacted by the carceral system in your region. Or, if you're a grantmaker, this might include both nonprofits that experience your funding and capacity-building programs, as well as the people they serve. Consider these questions to define community specifically for your organization:

- Who is the community you seek to serve? Who is left out of that definition?

- Within that community, who is most impacted by the issues you focus on? Who has the least systemic power to address those issues? Who is most often excluded from conversations about those issues?

- Whose voices and experiences do you need to prioritize?

DEFINITION

power

"An actor's ability to influence an outcome. This is affected by asymmetry in relationships. Power can be used both positively and negatively."

— definition from A Social Designer's Field Guide to Power Literacy, created by Maya Goodwill in collaboration with Kennisland

Facilitating Power's Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership

Our work draws on the framework [The Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership](), by Rosa González of Facilitating Power. The spectrum is intended to support community participation in solutions development and decision-making. The spectrum is a powerful resource we recommend you read fully. We include it here, reprinted with permission, to offer a framework on which you can map where you are now and where you want to go.

This field guide will primarily focus on what it might look like to "involve," "collaborate" with, and "defer to" community (columns 3-5).

One key message from Facilitating Power's spectrum is that it's not enough to engage individuals one-on-one; you must create spaces for community members to gather, share and hear experiences from one another, reflect on the challenges they face, and create shared understandings of those challenges and possible solutions.

THE SPECTRUM OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT TO OWNERSHIP

Facilitating Power

1 INFORM
Provide the community with relevant information

2 CONSULT
Gather input from the community

3 INVOLVE
Ensure community needs and assets are integrated into process and inform planning

4 COLLABORATE
Ensure community capacity to play a leadership role in implementation of decisions

5 DEFER TO
Foster democratic participation and equity by bridging the divide between community and governance, through community-driven decision-making

"If the people participating have not had the chance to develop a shared analysis of the problem or articulate a shared vision, values, and priorities, with their peers, then they don't actually represent a 'community,' they are simply participating as individuals, and therefore are only 'tokens' of the community they are supposed to represent."

— Excerpt from [The Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership](), by Rosa González of Facilitating Power

Groundwork

There are many things you don't need to wait for — like showing up at community events, cultivating relationships with community members, asking questions, and listening and integrating feedback when you receive it. And there are some things it can help to discuss with your team before you start more formally engaging community members in your work. Here's some groundwork you might do inside your organization before kicking off anything big.

Do This

Take a minute to reflect on these questions:

Why are you reading this field guide?

Where do you see your organization on the spectrum of community engagement to ownership, and where would you like to be? Why?

Check out our field guide Engaging Stakeholders in Developing Strategies. It focuses on how you might engage a diverse set of people (including communities, among other stakeholders) specifically when shaping an organizational or program strategy.

We're deeply grateful to the many people and organizations who influenced our thinking on sharing power with communities. In addition to our team's experience, this field guide draws on insights from all the people, organizations, networks, and resources you'll find in the appendix.

- **Know your 'why.'** Why does your organization want to do this? Is it to gather feedback from the community? To keep the community informed? To invite community members to co-design a solution? To give them more decision-making power? Be honest with yourselves. Your ultimate vision might be more aspirational than your current reasons; acknowledge both your current reality and what you aspire to.

- **Understand history.** What are community members' perceptions of your organization? Do you have the credibility you need to ask community members to engage with you? If not, what do you need to do to begin building credibility? How have they already been asked to engage with you? Avoid duplication by understanding who has been recently engaged and how. Understand and acknowledge ways your organization has broken trust in the past, and take steps to proactively rebuild trust in ways that center what the community wants.

- **Understand what the community wants.** Do they want a relationship with you? How do they want to interact? If there is a history of broken trust, what is required to rebuild trust? Read more about building or rebuilding trust in the "listen to the community and follow their lead" section (page 8).

Groundwork
(continued)

- **Align your team and leadership.** Work with key decision-makers inside your organization to understand the parameters. What's on and off the table? What staff and financial resources are available? What do they need to commit to before you engage the community? Who is making decisions, and how will those decisions be made? For example, your organization's leaders might point to a budget deficit that influences how many community members you can compensate this fiscal year. Or you might discover team members' resistance to engaging community members, which might mean you need to spend more time helping staff see the value and urgency of this work.

- **Examine your biases.** What assumptions does your organization hold about this community? How might these assumptions show up in your work with them?

- **Decide whether to hire a facilitator.** While it's critical that staff have personal relationships with community members, it's also helpful to have designated facilitators when groups of community members come together. Those facilitators might be staff members or hired consultants.

What role should a facilitator play?

When groups of community members gather, a facilitator can play a critical role in creating a culture in which community members feel comfortable speaking openly and even challenging the organization's assumptions, thinking, and approaches. A big part of the facilitator's job might include reaching out to members who are struggling to participate in order to understand additional support they need to engage in the work. They may also reach out to individual participants about harm that happened in a meeting and coach participants with more privileges on how they show up in gatherings. It's important facilitators bring a sharp awareness of power dynamics — both between the organization and community, and also between community members who hold different privileges given their racial, socioeconomic, ability, caregiving, and other backgrounds.

You might consider hiring an external facilitator — especially one who is from and trusted by the community — to bring strong facilitation skills, cultural competence, and help neutralize power dynamics. They can bring anonymous community feedback to you, and community members may feel more comfortable speaking freely with someone who isn't making decisions about their community's funding and programs.

If your organization does have in-house facilitation skills and staff dedicated to the work, take time to think through power dynamics. What boundaries might they need to draw with your organization? (E.g., facilitators will keep things shared in XYZ spaces confidential; facilitators will have no influence on program or funding decisions) What do facilitators need to tell participants so they feel clear on the facilitator's role?

Principles

Once you begin doing the work, here are some principles for how you might approach it.

Be Clear, Honest, and Transparent

You can build trust and set the right expectations by being clear, honest, and transparent within your organization and with the community.

- **Get clear on your values.** What values do you want to show up with? What practices or structures will help you live out those values? How can you learn what values the community wants to see from you?

- **Identify desired outcomes.** What do you hope will be different as a result of your work with the community?

- **Be clear about who you want to engage and why.** If you're a funder, consider how you can meaningfully engage, support, and be respectful of the grantees that hold relationships with the community members you want to engage. How is your engagement with the community different from what your grantees are already doing? How are you staying in communication with grantees about your actions and intent?

- **Be honest with yourselves and transparent with the community.** What are the organization's non-negotiables? What commitments are you confident you can follow through on? Strive to cede as much decision-making power as you can, but be honest with community members about your organization's current limits (e.g., maybe your staff is ready to cede power but your board isn't). Even as you discuss where you want to be, be honest about where your organization is right now.

- **Narrate decision-making processes.** Clearly define participants' role (e.g., giving input, making recommendations, or making decisions) and be transparent with community members about how decisions will be made and how power flows in your organization. If you're striving for consensus, create and share a back-up plan for what will happen if those at the decision-making table can't agree.

> ### ✎ Do This
>
> Practice asking and naming how decisions will be made in various aspects of your work (or even personal life — what's for dinner?) The stronger this muscle, the more you'll find yourself working to clarify decision-making roles and processes and the easier it will be to set clear expectations with community members.

- **Create feedback loops.** Share any decisions or changes you make with those who weighed in. Even if you decide not to act on their recommendations, it's important to share what you decided and why — and be ready to listen without defensiveness if they're upset.

Principles *(continued)*

Relationships First (and Second and Third...)

Relationships are crucial. The relationships you build (or don't) with community members will make or break your efforts to engage them in your work.

- **Create time for relationship building early on.** This may be a couple of meetings when you gather with the community, or it could be several months of getting to know one another.

- **Create space to go off topic.** Create opportunities for community members who are engaging with you to get to know each other beyond the role they're playing in your work. Build in breathing room in your agendas for off-topic conversations. Acknowledge big events in members' lives and create space for members to have fun and celebrate together. (Read more about how to facilitate intentionally on page 5.)

In our experience as facilitators, we've seen that altering an agenda in the moment is sometimes the most important thing we can do. We've had participants share struggles their child was facing in school or an imminent threat to losing their housing. Giving space to their challenge was not only the right thing to do; it also allowed other participants to offer support and, if desired, brainstorm ways to address the challenge via ideas, connections, personal knowledge, etc.

> ✎ **Do This**
>
> **Identify where the community currently gathers.** It could be community institutions like a library or Boys & Girls Club; places of worship; physical spaces like a gas station; a popular restaurant; etc. Which of these spaces would you be most welcome in? What are ways you can spend more time there and build informal relationships?

- **Co-create norms for how groups will show up together.** If you're gathering a group of community members, work with that group to collectively agree on how each member will show up and how you all will navigate conflict and repair harm. You might find inspiration from existing lists of norms, like Equity Matters' Color Brave Space norms which can be licensed for use, but we encourage groups to collectively co-create norms that work for them.

- **Stay accountable for the long haul.** Regardless of whether there's active work with community members, continue to prioritize your relationships with them. Show up at community events and spaces community members often gather. Maintain your practice of being transparent, responsive, and accountable as you engage with them. Don't disappear or forget your responsibility to the community when the work or funding dry up.

Principles *(continued)*

Listen to the Community & Follow Their Lead

This work is all about learning to let community lead. Truly listening is one of the most important skills you need to do that.

- **Listen deeply.** It's important that community members feel (and are!) heard, especially those who have been systemically silenced and ignored. Listen, seeking to understand, not to reply. Listen with a willingness to be changed by what you hear. Be ready to hear many different experiences and perspectives within the community, including ones that run counter to your beliefs and assumptions.

- **Listen for community strengths.** The community knows how to address the challenges they face. Listen when they tell you solutions — these may not be the solutions you expect. Observe and lift up the community's strengths and assets. Even as many systems deny the community power, pay attention to the types of power they've built outside those systems — perhaps a culture of

> Looking to the community as leaders of your work means seeing their fullness — not just their challenges but also their strengths, diversity, complexity, and dignity. Explore Trabian Shorters' work to understand more about how to recognize and talk about communities in ways that lift up their assets, and find more resources in the appendix.

sharing generously with each other and looking out for one another, or strong communication channels through religious institutions, or generational knowledge of herbal medicine, or experience working together across language and cultural differences.

- **Accept "no."** Engaging in conversations with your organization may take an emotional toll on community members. Listen to their words, body language, and other cues they give you. Consistently offer them an out and accept when they say they don't want to work with you, or not right now. Recognize that some people won't want to engage with you at all, and honor their decision even if you don't understand it.

- **Don't become a spectator.** If you're a good listener, you might err on the side of not speaking at all. This could make community members feel like they're being watched and wonder what you're really thinking and planning. It also means that hard decisions are being made after community members leave the room, which is another way of holding onto power. Work to find ways to meaningfully participate even as you prioritize listening.

✎ Do This

Try incorporating pockets of silence into conversations. Small pauses can allow you to listen with undivided attention and then take a minute to process what you heard and formulate a response. It can also create space for others to think and speak up. You might tell people you're doing this, so they understand and don't rush to fill the silence. Another practice you can try is not responding to everything you hear. Allow comments and criticisms to flow without chiming in immediately to clarify or share your understanding or perspective.

dream forward

Principles *(continued)*

Resource the Work

It will take more time, skills, and funds than you expect.

- **Compensate participants.** Set aside funds for compensating participants and covering costs for childcare, transportation, language interpretation, food, computers/wifi (if meetings are virtual), and anything else community members will need to engage with you. Consider how you will compensate participants who are undocumented or receiving government benefits that limit income. Also, share that you're compensating participants and why with other organizations and government partners, and encourage them to do the same too.

- **Allocate time.** Give yourself a longer timeline than you think you need. Prioritize flexibility and responsiveness to community needs over hard deadlines — that's where trust is built. Dedicate staff time to nourishing community relationships and integrating them into your work.

- **Assess skills.** Facilitating a group and tending relationships takes time and skill to address power dynamics, build relationships, help people navigate differences, and manage difficult conversation well. Assess whether your staff has this capacity or needs outside support. (Read more about the role of facilitators, whether staff members or hired consultants, on page 5.)

✒ Do This

Map out how much time and money it would cost to interact with community members in new ways this year. Then add more. Use these new numbers when developing your budget and thinking about staff roles and time dedicated to community engagement.

But where would we find the money?

Communities are often asked for free access to their time, expertise, and wisdom. If your organization — and more specifically, staff with power to shape budgets — is committed to strengthening your relationship with the community, you'll find a way to prioritize compensating community members for the wealth of insight they're offering in return. Here are some ways to go about that:*

- Create an organization-wide budget specifically for community compensation

- Require each department to allocate community compensation funds in their budget

- Ask a donor to create a fund for this purpose

- Build a community compensation fund into grant proposals

- Seek out funders that offer unrestricted grants, or ask existing funders if they'd consider removing some or all of their spending restrictions so you can use the funds for compensation

- If your organization truly is operating on a shoestring budget perhaps as a volunteer-run organization, consider other ways you might offer value to community members (e.g., free childcare when you meet offered by one of your volunteer staff; introductions to others in the community they may want to meet; a community meal cooked by your team)

Thank you to Lara Pukatch of Miriam's Kitchen for naming many of these ideas in her 2020 webinar with Community Wealth Partners.

Models

In this section, we lift up three models of engaging communities: advisory team, participatory processes, and embedding community inside your organization. These certainly aren't the only models; we're highlighting them because they're ones we see often in our work. Shifting power to community can happen in myriad ways — from low- to high-touch engagement; from moment-in-time feedback to decades-long relationship building; from "inform" to "defer to" in Facilitating Power's "Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership." Explore the wealth of resources in the appendix for more examples of what it can look like to shift power to community.

Advisory Team

"If an organization is really not authentically doing this work, parents are very smart, and they see right through the fakeness. And organizations that don't partner well tell themselves that parents don't get it. And guess what, they do, quite well."

— Toyin Anderson, parent leader, Rochester, NY
Watch Toyin speak here

In this model, the advisory team could play a variety of roles from providing input to actually designing and deciding on solutions. You can create an advisory team for a specific initiative (e.g., setting a new strategic direction; advocacy efforts around a bill; how to use excess grant funding) or an ongoing advisory team that gathers regularly throughout the year. The team might be fully made up of community members or a mix of community and other stakeholders. If it's a mixed group, we recommend aiming for a critical mass (30-50 percent or more) of community members to help minimize the possibility of tokenization and help balance power dynamics.

Find out what community members need to participate (e.g., a certain geographic location, transportation, childcare, food, wheelchair-accessible buildings). Gather the team regularly and meaningfully (not necessarily frequently). Don't overburden team members with lengthy things to read before gatherings, but give ample time for them to do so if needed. Work to build a culture in which team members feel comfortable challenging the organization's approaches. We also recommend engaging community advisors as you implement the initiatives they helped select or design.

Models: Advisory Team *(continued)*

Shaping Policy Priorities with the Alliance to End Hunger
A multi-sector anti-hunger coalition

In 2017, the Alliance to End Hunger created an advisory team of individuals across the U.S. with current or recent experience with federal nutrition programs like SNAP, WIC, and free or reduced school meals. The Hunger Free Communities Network Advisory Council — whose participants (currently numbering seven) are compensated and were nominated by the Alliance's members and other stakeholders — began by meeting once a quarter to share experiences with government programs and offer feedback to the organization. Once trust was built, advisors asked to get more engaged in the Alliance's policy work. The Alliance facilitated an advocacy committee that met weekly to shape policy priorities for the coalition. These half-hour meetings were filled with advocacy professionals who frequently used acronyms, talked fast, and had an established dynamic. The advocacy committee agreed to open these meetings to all advisory team members interested in joining. After a difficult first meeting, the Alliance team began to provide briefings to the advisory council about relevant policy issues and acronyms and answer their questions. They created reports for advisory council members about what to expect at upcoming meetings. As the organization and committee made these meetings more accessible, advisory council members began to actively participate. Today, four of the seven advisory council members participate on a regular basis and are influencing coalition decisions. "Some of our policy priorities would not be there without people with lived experience," said Minerva Delgado, director of coalitions and advocacy at the Alliance.

"If you're benefiting from our suggestions and thoughts, you should also be providing resources to prioritize our wellbeing. Connect us to programs that address social determinants such as direct service providers, mental health options, opportunities for compensation, and professional development to support success."

— Barbie Izquierdo, CEO of Community Driven Consulting LLC and member of the Alliance to End Hunger's Hunger Free Communities Advisory Council, Hunger Free Communities 2022 Summit Closing Keynote

Models: Advisory Team *(continued)*

From Community Advisors to Leaders with Greater Rochester Health Foundation

A funder on a mission to pursue and invest in solutions that build a healthier region where all people can thrive

Over the past few years, the Greater Rochester Health Foundation has been deepening its practice of sharing power with parents. It started with involving parents in decision-making for certain grants and on a committee to develop its Healthy and Equitable Futures Strategy. This strategy aims for racial equity in whole child health for Black and Latinx children 0-8 in Rochester, NY. Now, parents are routinely at the table as the foundation makes decisions about implementing the strategy. The foundation also encourages and supports nonprofit grantees in bringing parents into their decision-making. The foundation, parents, and grantees regularly come together in a learning community facilitated by the parents.

See the foundation, parent leaders, and other community partners talk about their experiences and lessons learned in sharing power in videos on this blog post.

Today the foundation continues to center families and community members as experts and leaders in decision making. No decisions about the Healthy and Equitable Futures strategy are made without Parent Leaders. This includes discussion and decision making regarding grantmaking, communications, strategy and evaluation. The foundation meets with Parent Leaders bi-weekly for strategy/advisory meetings.

In addition, all Parent Leaders are involved as facilitators in the Healthy and Equitable Futures

Learning Collaborative, a network of parents and organizations that are working to disrupt the conditions that result in racial and other health inequities and achieve justice and fairness in health resources to improve outcomes for children 0-8. Part of the collaborative's advisory/accountability group, this group meets twice a month for planning and facilitation. Some parents also work on additional projects, such as conference preparation for example, and meet with foundation staff as needed.

Parents set the agenda and lead the conversation related to strategy, grantmaking, the learning collaborative, creating more opportunities to engage parents as decision makers, and collective accountability. They also bring forward current events, resources in the community, and issues in their neighborhoods. The foundation considers Parent Leaders to be consultants offering their expertise and compensates them hourly for their involvement across the Healthy and Equitable Futures work.

Although Healthy and Equitable Futures is just one strategy under the focused, long-term work of the Health Foundation, it exemplifies how, throughout all their work, they are striving to shift and share power to create solutions together with people and communities most impacted by inequities.

Models

Participatory Processes

In this model, community members play an active role in co-creating. It could be through participatory budgeting, in which community members decide together how to spend public funds; participatory grantmaking, in which community members decide together how to allocate a grantmaker's funds; or participatory action research (PAR), in which community members design an initiative, conduct research, and identify solutions to the issues that most impact them. For example, in a process where community members decided how a grant would be used, Lamar Wilson, principal of Wilson Associates, described in this Candid article using practices such as asking community members to "write postcards from the future describing changes they envision in their neighborhood" or to "use Monopoly money to demonstrate how they would invest across various potential initiatives." Participatory processes are often much more time-intensive and require flexible timelines, skilled facilitation, and resources to compensate participants. This process must be followed by action to implement what was created or decided by the community; otherwise the experience can be tokenizing.

Read about the FRIDA Fund's experience and learnings following a three-year documenting process of their participatory grantmaking model: Resourcing Connections: Reflections on feminist Participatory Grantmaking practice

What Is Participatory Action Research?

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a process that upends the "us and them" dynamic of traditional research. In PAR, community members are the researchers. They're paid and supported to lead a process of understanding their peers and issues they're personally impacted by. It centers on the following:

- Partner with and pay community members to listen to their own communities and co-create findings and recommendations, centering those most impacted from the beginning of the design.

- Those on the PAR design and listening teams define research methods and do the research. When the data has been collected, members of the team review the insights and partner in developing the findings.

- The PAR teams have power to work with you on deciding and implementing the changes they recommend. Mutual accountability to action and change is critical to success.

- PAR processes are often supported by external facilitators who bring the group together, guide the process, and provide community members with any research tools or background on different ways to approach the research.

Our knowledge, experience, and understanding of PAR have been greatly influenced by Levana Saxon, who served as our coach at different points, and the work of Partners for Collaborative Change.

Models: Participatory Processes *(continued)*

Community-Led Research with Child Care Aware of America
A national nonprofit focused on quality and affordable child care

In early 2022, Child Care Aware of America was at a critical inflection point: They wanted to clarify their role in the wake of a global pandemic that upended the lives of children and families across the country. Community Wealth Partners worked with them on a strategic planning process driven by participatory action research (PAR) to set their strategy for the next three years.

To center parents' voices, Child Care Aware of America partnered with Community Wealth Partners to facilitate a Parent Listening Team PAR process. This group of 15 parent leaders represented the diverse spectrum of families across the nation while prioritizing the voices of those that had faced the greatest personal barriers to accessing affordable, quality child care in their communities. Drawing on their lived experience, personal connections, relationships, and resources, the Parent Listening Team surveyed and interviewed over 500 parents and caregivers to answer: "What are the greatest barriers to quality child care for those who have been historically marginalized and systematically denied access to it?" While the board would ultimately decide on the strategic plan, they committed to centering

the PAR team's report in their decision. As a result of the parents' work, the parent team provided a recommendations report that was adopted by the board and central to the organization's strategies and push for quality child care.

Here's what the process looked like:

- Hired a team of 15 parents of kids age 0-5 to develop recommendations on ways to expand quality child care for those historically denied it

- Team met for 2 hours weekly by Zoom for 4 months, with facilitator support and parent compensation

- Team designed a survey of 400+ parents and conducted over 100 focus groups and interviews

- Made recommendations on ways to improve affordability, accessibility, safety/trust, and finding resources

- Parent team met with the nonprofit 3 times and presented to their board, which adopted their recommendations in the strategic plan.

- Parent team is now serving as an accountability team to the nonprofit as they execute the strategic plan.

Models: Participatory Processes *(continued)*

Co-Designing with Community with United Way of Rhode Island

A grantmaking nonprofit focused on uniting community and resources to build racial equity and opportunities for all Rhode Islanders

In response to the crucial need to support the state's nonprofits and the essential work they do, United Way of Rhode Island (UWRI) wanted to explore feasibility for a statewide resource center aimed at strengthening the capacity of nonprofit organizations, in particular organizations that are small and led by Black, Indigenous, or other people of color (BIPOC). They wanted this resource center to be shaped by the nonprofits it intended to serve. So they worked with Community Wealth Partners to recruit and facilitate a design team of 11 nonprofit leaders from across the state to actively engage the broader nonprofit and philanthropic community in understanding nonprofits' challenges and needs and identifying opportunities the center could respond to.

Here's what the process looked like:

- Recruited 11 design team members from nonprofits across the state, with greater representation from leaders of small organizations and BIPOC leaders

- With compensation and facilitator support, team met every other week

- Team engaged nearly 400 people through focus groups, interviews, input sessions, visioning sessions, and surveys

- Team and members of UWRI staff reached consensus on some key components of a business model to guide the center's launch. This included clarity on the target audience for the center, a vision and values to guide the center's launch and evolution, four service areas the center could prioritize, and conditions that are important for the center's long-term sustainability. They left specific programmatic and financial decisions to be made later by the resource center's leadership, which UWRI plans to hire in 2023.

Models

Embed Community Inside Your Organization

This model is about changing who are in the seats of power in your organization. You can bring community members onto your board, staff, and executive leadership. You could hire them for a time-bound fellowship. You can hold seats for them in your organizational groups. This model is about changing the "us" and "them" dynamic so that anyone in your organization might have lived experience of the issues you're addressing.

If you bring community members into a group like a board or committee, we recommend aiming for a critical mass (30-50 percent or more) of community members to help minimize the possibility of tokenization and help balance power dynamics. Of course it takes time to get there. Set goals for when you will achieve this, and be patient as you go through the growing pains and joys of this transition.

"You can't do the work piecemeal. Engaging with our guests, collaborating with them, ceding power to them, is not something we can do just in one department. We had to do it across the organization."

— Lara Pukatch, Miriam's Kitchen

✎ Do This

Map out a plan for embedding community inside your organization. To do that, examine the structures you currently have and consider new structures (e.g., a programmatic advisory group). Also, take time to reflect on your board and staff composition and identify opportunities to recruit people with lived experience.

Models: Embed Community Inside Your Organization

Community Leadership with Miriam's Kitchen

A nonprofit focused on ending chronic homelessness in Washington, D.C.

In everything Miriam's Kitchen does, they strive to center guests, which is how they describe people who access their services and others with lived experience of homelessness in D.C. Several years ago, Miriam's Kitchen had a series of town hall meetings, working groups, and conversations with guests to ask questions like, What do you want to see the mayor do to end homelessness in DC? What should be prioritized for funding in the next budget cycle? While the organization received responses to these questions, they also received feedback on things like their hours of operation, the meals they serve, the lack of storage space, and other topics. "It was an 'aha' moment for us," said Lara Pukatch, chief advocacy officer, in a 2020 webinar with Community Wealth Partners. "You can't do the work piecemeal. Engaging with our guests, collaborating with them, ceding power to them, is not something we can do just in one department. We had to do it across the organization."

Today, the organization centers guest leadership in many ways:

- A guest advisory board, which gives guests more decision-making power and elevates the role of guests across all organizational departments. This group offers a structure for guests and staff to work more closely together, with more than half of seats reserved for compensated guests. The group has worked on issues like helping guide a strategic planning process.

- A speaker's bureau. Guests are invited to serve on the speakers bureau and given training, support, and compensation so they can share their lived experience and expertise with media, lawmakers, donors, volunteers, and others. Each year, guest members identify what they want to learn and what skills they want to build, and they co-create a curriculum around that. The speaker's bureau also provides a space for guests to gather, process the experience of speaking publicly, offer advice to one another, and process other events happening in the city and world.

- An annual nine-month advocacy fellowship, in which a guest is hired to help shape and implement advocacy efforts and work toward their professional goals

- A full-time staff position dedicated to supporting guests and fostering guest leadership

- Funds within each department's budget specifically to compensate guests who engage with the organization

dream forward

Choosing an Engagement Strategy: Questions to Consider

As you consider the three models above and others not included in this field guide, here are questions to identify an engagement strategy for your organization right now. Eventually, we hope you'll get to the point where you seek out community members to shape specific initiatives in addition to integrating their leadership in every aspect of your work.

✐ Do This

As you prepare to try a new model of engaging community, bring this list of questions to your colleagues. Talk through each question together.

What is the goal of this process?

Who is most impacted by your work?

- What engagement methods work for them?
- How much time and interest do they have to participate?
- What do they need in order to participate? (e.g., compensation, a laptop, transportation reimbursement, childcare, language interpretation services)
- Do you have the relationships or partnerships to recruit the community members you need?

How many people will you involve?

- How many perspectives do you need? From which groups?

What power will they have?

- What decisions will community members have the power to make?
- Are certain things off the table?

How long will the engagement last?

- Are you seeking input on a discrete topic or ongoing advising?
- How much time do you think it will take? Budget for more time than you think you'll need.

What is your capacity to manage the work?

- What time and skills does your team have for this work? (See more about whether to hire a facilitator on page 5.)
- What is your budget for compensation and support?
- What time and capacity do you have to follow up with community members and stay accountable to what they share with you?

Pitfalls

Here are some common pitfalls we've seen and ways you might proactively navigate through and around them.

Missteps are inevitable; that's what happens when you try. But you can change the conditions that led to these pitfalls, repair any harm you caused, and rebuild trust through the process of repair.

For a great resource on repairing harm, explore Mia Mingus' The Four Parts of Accountability & How To Give A Genuine Apology.

A few participants dominate the group while others rarely engage.

This could indicate power dynamics are at play.

What To Do

- Establish a norm of **"make space, take space"** — invite people who have been participating the most to shift focus to listening, and vice versa.

- Create a **variety of ways to engage** — e.g., raise-your-hand activities, individual reflection, paired or small-group breakouts (perhaps ones in which you designate who will report back), round robin discussions in which everyone shares something, sticky-note brainstorming, sticky dot voting, five-finger voting, etc. This can help ensure that speaking — and speaking in a large group — aren't the only ways people can participate. (See Seeds for Change guide and website and Liberating Structures for more ideas of different ways to engage participants in a meeting.)

- **Identify what power dynamics may be at play.** Pay attention to whether participation aligns with types of privilege. You might name your observations to the group or address them with specific individuals.

You rush the process.

Maybe you got wrapped up in your excitement for the outcomes of your work, or you felt pressure from staff or board members.

What To Do

- **Build in more time than you anticipate** as you design the process and facilitate conversations. Regularly ask people if it's moving too fast. Talk with staff/board about the values you want to incorporate or avoid (such as a false sense of urgency) and expectations for the process.
- **Be flexible.** Be willing to adjust the process and timeline as needed.

Pitfalls *(continued)*

You encounter internal resistance.

Some staff or board members are not ready for deeper community engagement. Maybe they thought they were ready at the beginning of the process, but resistance surfaced as they realized the work is harder and will require more than they anticipated (more time, more resources, more changes in organizational culture, etc.)

What To Do

- At the beginning of the process, take lots of time to **get clear** about what the process and time frame will look like (give yourself more time than you think you need), the guardrails for decision making, how decisions will be made, etc.

- As resistance surfaces, **take time to understand where it's coming from.** What's at the root?

- Start from what you all have in common (including a dedication to your organization's mission) and **help those who are resistant see how deeper community engagement might help them and the organization**.

Participants can't reconcile disparate points of view.

What can you do when everyone disagrees?

What To Do

- **Clarify whether alignment is necessary.** Is there a way for the group to feel comfortable moving forward even if everyone isn't on the same page?

  - When alignment is necessary, work to unearth and create a shared understanding of what's at the root of the disagreement. **Invite proposals from participants on how to move forward.** Explore alternatives to consensus like consent-based decision-making, in which groups don't seek full alignment but enough alignment that they're in their zone of tolerance. (See Circle Forward's description of consent-based decision making.)

  - When alignment isn't necessary, create space for disparate points of view **without the need to reconcile them**.

Closing

If you take anything away from the field guide, we hope it's this: **find and prioritize ways to be in relationship with communities.**

This work takes time. It's messy and can be painful. And it is infinitely worthwhile. Community-driven work leads to better impact, more sustainable solutions, and more powerful communities. And when communities get stronger, we all benefit. Be patient with yourself and the process. Identify small steps you can take to get started. Celebrate your progress. Connect with others for support. Most of all, get going and keep going.

"It's been an impactful and messy journey. But what is most amazing is that parents are incredible leaders for change, and they stand in their power, and they invite organizations like us to come together to grow and to shift and change and adapt. And they're gently kind of pushing against the status quo. And there's this way where they're gently inviting us to grow. Giving us new lens, perspective, insights. And sometimes that feels really uncomfortable and really messy because we're in systems and structures that operate uniquely, differently."

— Anita Black, Greater Rochester Health Foundation
Watch Anita speak here

Do This

Consider your influence in your organization.
What are 1-2 next steps you'll take to help your organization shift power to communities?

Resources

General Community Engagement

- The Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership, Rosa E. González, Facilitating Power
- 4 Questions to Sit With as you Learn to Let Communities Lead, and corresponding Google Drive folder of resources, Walter Howell and Lauri Valerio, Community Wealth Partners
- Community Engagement Guide for Sustainable Communities, PolicyLink
- What Institutions Get Wrong About Community Engagement and How They Can Improve, Marnita's Table
- A Guide on Community Engagement: Making Social Justice Work Inclusive, National Gender and Equity Campaign
- Tools to Engage: Constituent, Client, and Civic Engagement, Building Movement Project
- Community Engagement Toolkit, Collective Impact Forum
- 10: A Guide for a Community-Based COVID Recovery, Tamarack Institute
- Interested in working with Tribal communities? Consider these 6 things first., Healthy Food Community of Practice
- Engaging Stakeholders in Developing Strategies: A Field Guide, Community Wealth Partners
- Engaging Stakeholders in Strategy webinar, Community Wealth Partners
- Sharing Power With Community Members: Perspectives from Rochester-Area Funders, Nonprofits, and Parents, Community Wealth Partners
- The Four Parts of Accountability & How To Give A Genuine Apology, Mia Mingus

Facilitation

- Facilitation Guide for Community Engagement, National Gender and Equity Campaign in Minnesota
- Liberating Structures
- Consent is a Third Option, Circle Forward

Asset Framing

- Trabian Shorters' website
- "The Power of Perception," Trabian Shorters, Communications Network's Change Agent
- "The Power of Asset Framing: A Conversation with Trabian Shorters," Skillman Foundation
- "Trabian Shorters: A Cognitive Skill to Magnify Humanity," On Being
- Opportunities for a Fresh Start on Race, Trabian Shorters, Stanford Social Innovation Review

Power

- A Social Designer's Field Guide to Power Literacy, Maya Goodwill (with Kennisland)
- Three Frameworks for Shifting Power for Greater Equity and Impact, Lori Bartczak, Community Wealth Partners
- Sources of Power, National Community Development Institute
- Power: A Practical Guide for Facilitating Social Change, Raji Hunjan and Jethro Pettit, Carnegie UK Trust and Joseph Rowntree Foundation

Resources

Participatory Processes

- The Participatory Budgeting Project website
- Participatory Grantmaking suite of resources, Candid
- Participatory Action Research and Evaluation, Organizing Engagement
- Participatory Action Research overview, Partners for Collaborative Change
- The Value of Building Community Power Through Research, Beloved Community, Anti-Racism Daily
- Community-Led Change: How the Wells Fargo Regional Foundation Builds the Capacity of Nonprofits and Communities to Shape Neighborhoods Together, Candid
- Resourcing Connections: Reflections on feminist Participatory Grantmaking practice, FRIDA Fund
- Levana Saxon, who served as our PAR coach at different points, and the work of Partners for Collaborative Change
- "Why Am I Always Being Researched?" by Chicago Beyond

Community Wealth Partners
by SHARE OUR STRENGTH

Who We Are

Community Wealth Partners is a social impact consulting firm guided by a vision of a world where all people have what they need to fully live into their potential, particularly those who are kept furthest from resources and power. We were created by the nonprofit Share Our Strength to partner with social sector organizations to figure out what works and share what we learn with others.

Get In Touch

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