

Sharing Power with Communities Toolkit: Starting Out and Making the Case

The resources offered in this toolkit are designed to guide nonprofit organizations, foundations, and folks working in the social sector in their pursuit of sharing power and resources with the communities they seek to serve. Toolkit resources include practical tips and guides for making the case along with facilitation guides and models for getting started.

7 Keys to Community Engagement and Powersharing

Our experience working with nonprofits and funders across a wide range of projects has taught us the importance of prioritizing these seven keys to sharing power with communities.

Relationships first (and second and third...)

- Create significant space at the start to build relationships. This may be 1-2 sessions or several months, depending on the work you intend to do together.
- Support the group in agreeing on how to show up together (e.g. norms) and how you will address conflict/repair harm
- Invest time in each meeting to check in and deepen relationships among the group

Be honest with yourself and those you engage

- Strive to cede as much decision-making power as you can, but be honest about your organization's limits (under promise / overdeliver)
- Clearly define participants' role (e.g., input vs. decision-making) and be transparent about how decisions are made and how power flows in your organization
- Communicate results of decisions the community has weighed in on back to those same community members share how feedback was used and ways to engage in the future

Resource the work (it will take more time, funds than you expect)

- Set aside budget for compensating participants, childcare, transportation, interpretation, food, computers/wifi (if meetings are virtual)
- Consider how you will compensate participants who are undocumented or receiving government benefits that limit income
- Give yourself a longer timeline than you think you need; prioritize flexibility/responsiveness to community needs over hard deadlines
- Facilitating a group and tending relationships takes time and skill to address power dynamics, build relationships, help people navigate differences and difficult conversation productively; assess whether your staff has this capacity or needs outside support

Clarify purpose, outcomes, process

- Understand what we want to achieve through engagement
- Identify who is most impacted by the issue at hand
- Define a process that centers those impacted and goes beyond the “usual suspects”
- Recognize that many different perspectives can exist within one community

Understand previous engagement with various communities

- Avoid duplication by understanding which groups have been recently engaged and how
- Acknowledge any previous challenges or missteps to build trust; understand and acknowledge broader historical context

Center those most impacted and value their insights

- Build on existing ways of engaging; work with partners who are well-known and trusted in the communities you are trying to reach
- Respect and value participants’ insights and time (e.g., environment, refreshments, compensation)
- Make participation accessible (e.g., location, translation, childcare, transportation)
- Listen empathetically, seeking to understand, not to reply or reframe

Take an asset-based approach

- Recognize that solutions to challenges exist within the community
- Seek first to understand the community’s strengths and assets