

Bridging the Gap

A Review of Foundation
Listening Practices

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ABOUT EKOUTÉ

Ekouté is a boutique consulting firm that helps nonprofits and foundations leverage stakeholder input to inform strategy and performance measurement efforts. One over-riding belief guides our work: The most effective way for organizations to get even better at helping people is to ask them what they think, and systematically use their feedback to improve organizational decision-making. For more on how we use our ten-plus years of experience to help organizations learn from others, check out: www.ekoute.com.

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Background

The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation is seeking opportunities for its program staff to more intentionally listen and incorporate the perspectives of the people and communities the foundation seeks to help in their work, and to pursue that listening in a high-quality way.

As a part of this effort, the Hewlett Foundation's Effective Philanthropy Group (EPG) engaged Ekouté to conduct an external landscape scan that examines and draws lessons from the listening practices of other foundations. While we did not conduct an exhaustive scan of all foundations, Ekouté examined how a broad sample of foundations, including both domestically and internationally focused grant makers, listen to and incorporate perspectives from the individuals or communities they seek to help. Concurrent to our scan, members of the EPG team led five focus groups with program teams across the Hewlett Foundation to understand staff's current approaches to listening. Collectively, we seek to explore how a complex foundation like the Hewlett Foundation, with a diverse set of strategies and operational contexts, can meet the challenges of listening to and incorporating the perspectives of those the foundation seeks to help.

Ekouté's research was conducted across two phases from March through August 2019. During Phase I, Ekouté gathered publicly available secondary research, focused on foundation listening practices. Ekouté also conducted eleven interviews with individuals at philanthropic infrastructure and research organizations. During Phase II, Ekouté conducted 25 one-hour, in-depth interviews with foundation representatives to learn more about their organization's (or program area's) approach to listening to those they seek to help.¹

¹ See [Appendix 5](#) for Phase I and II interview focuses and interviewees.

Executive Summary

For the purposes of this work, we define foundation listening broadly, to mean funders' efforts to consider the views, perspectives, and opinions of the communities and people they seek to help, and to use those insights to inform internal deliberations and decisions. Listening in this way can take lots of forms—including direct listening, such as focus or advisory groups, but also prospective community research that seeks to capture the sentiments of populations that foundations seek to help. It can also include indirect approaches where foundations benefit from the listening efforts led by others such as grantees.

A Difference Between Intention And Action

Our overall findings about the state of the field's listening practices are sobering. In general, we found the ambitions, intent, and rhetoric around listening eclipse actual practice, especially at larger national and international foundations that tend to be focused on systems-level interventions.

Recent research and, especially of late, media activity have suggested that listening is an important *stated* priority for the field. For example, in the Center for Effective Philanthropy's (CEP) 2016 report, [The Future of Foundation Philanthropy: The CEO Perspective](#), CEOs described listening to end-clients as a primary source of insight.² Specifically, 69% of surveyed foundation CEOs cited *"foundations seeking to learn from the experiences of those they are ultimately trying to help"* as having *"a lot of*

promise for increasing foundations' impact in the coming decades" over other practices like learning from grantees, collaborating with other foundations, businesses, and government, and engaging in impact investing.³

However, in their conversations with CEP, more than half of the CEOs interviewed expressed concerns about the fact that real, on-the-ground listening is either limited or nonexistent.⁴ This contradiction—on the one hand, foundation leaders asserting the importance of listening and on the other hand, few organizations doing it in any substantial capacity—is consistent with a gap we observed in our own interviews. As one representative of an international foundation noted, *"the failing here is for our team to actually walk the walk, rather than just say we have these principles. There's a big gap between what we say and what we do."* Despite this gap in practice, we believe there

2 In their 2016 report, CEP fielded surveys to 167 foundation CEOs and conducted interviews with 41 foundation CEOs looking at future drivers of philanthropy and how philanthropy may need to change to address society's developing needs.

3 Buteau, Ellie et al. ["The Future of Foundation Philanthropy: The CEO Perspective,"](#) The Center for Effective Philanthropy, 2016.

4 Ibid.

is still reason to remain optimistic. To change practice, one first has to shift thinking and awareness. As one interviewee noted to us, *“Maybe the state of affairs is that people are starting to think differently and that wouldn’t be bad if that eventually leads to behavior change.”*

Moreover, as the contextual landscape around philanthropy continues to shift, foundations are being pushed to take unprecedented action on issues like equity, diversity, and inclusion, and are facing increased calls for participation and transparency.⁵ Listening and connecting with those they seek to help is one way foundations can become more inclusive. As one interviewee highlighted, without engaging end-clients, foundations miss crucial context:

“We often come in with our perspectives, ideas, and ‘brilliant’ strategies and drop these things into communities without ever engaging anyone in the community to ask them what they want, what they need, where they see opportunities.”

That said, some may wonder: Is listening appropriate for all foundations? Our analysis suggests that in almost all cases, foundations would benefit from building connections in some way with those they seek to help, primarily as a way to stay grounded. However, the breadth of the listening activity and how one chooses to listen will vary significantly depending on a foundation’s or program’s goals, its desired outcomes, and the scope of influence it seeks to have in its work. As noted later, for foundation initiatives that promote benefits that are almost akin to public goods (e.g., better functioning

democracies, a healthier planet), scoping listening efforts can be particularly challenging. But, even in these cases, there is likely value in experimentation to see if in fact, listening to the communities you are seeking to help with those public goods can shed new light on these efforts.

How Foundations Listen Across Different Contexts

Foundations leverage a myriad of tools or mechanisms for listening to and learning from the communities and the people they seek to help—including listening tours, advisory committees, surveys, focus groups, grantee convenings, and prospective community research. For our work, we have categorized these tools into two different categories of listening activity—direct listening or indirect (such as grantee-mediated) listening. In our research, we looked at how the decision to listen directly or indirectly plays out across different types of foundations depending on the following characteristics:

- **Geographic reach** (regional, national, or international)
- **Overall strategy** (movement building, field building, policy advocacy, research, or direct service)⁶
- **Phase of decision-making** (strategy formulation, implementation, evaluation, refresh, or exit)⁷.

⁶ The Hewlett Foundation advances a wide range of strategies in its work. Specific descriptions of foundation strategy referenced in this paper can be found in [Appendix 1](#).

⁷ The Hewlett Foundation defines the strategy life cycle in four stages: Originate, Implement, Refresh, and Exit. See [Appendix 2](#) for definitions.

⁵ Gibson, Cynthia, [“Participatory Grantmaking: Has Its Time Come?”](#), Ford Foundation, Oct. 2017.

BY GEOGRAPHIC REACH

In terms of the role of geography, we observe that foundations or programmatic initiatives engaged in place-based grantmaking tend to engage in more listening and especially in more direct listening—likely because it is easier for these foundations to identify relevant tools for listening and to determine who they should be listening to, especially if they support direct service. We do not observe consistent differences in foundation approaches to listening among national and international foundations (except for the obvious additional logistical complexities introduced as one gets less and less proximate to those one seeks to help).

BY OVERALL STRATEGY

At the strategy level, the systems-level funders we spoke with tended to display less institutional commitment to listening to those ultimately affected by their work—with the exception of funders focused on movement building. This is not surprising given the distance (literal and metaphorical) at which many systems-level funders are working. Systems-level funders we spoke with tend to see grantees (as opposed to themselves) as the logical initiators of end-client/community engagement, and some questioned the feasibility of their program area listening to the perspectives of those they seek to help, particularly when they consider a very diffuse beneficiary population like “all people in a country” to be the target of their work. Still, some interviewees stressed the need for listening, even at the systems-level, several steps removed from end-clients:

“If you’re going to get a more precise and accurate problem definition, and if you’re going to filter through potential solutions and pick ones that are more likely to work and be used, then that’s where ultimate beneficiaries can tell you a whole lot about why systems are or are not working from their point of view.”

Many systems-level funders expressed a reliance on grantees as conduits for on-the-ground perspectives. While this kind of grantee-mediated listening can be powerful, we did not consistently hear in our conversations how insights gathered by grantees are translated and make their way into deliberations at the foundation level. To be sure, there are notable exceptions in which foundations are learning actively and intentionally via indirect listening efforts, and we aim to draw best practices from those examples throughout this paper.

Adding to the complexity, we also observe select programmatic-specific listening efforts within many foundations. However, these programmatic-specific efforts tend to focus on programs where the definition of “community” or “end-beneficiaries” is more concrete (as is the case with place-based funders or programs focused on direct-service support).

BY PHASE OF DECISION-MAKING

We also see clear patterns in foundation listening practices depending on where foundations are in their strategy life cycle. For instance, foundation representatives repeatedly describe that listening to end-clients is particularly helpful and important when the organization is in the

“strategy determination” phase, whether initial strategy formulation or the refreshing of a strategy after initial implementation. In fact, this is where the bulk of listening activity is occurring within the field, with foundations listening to learn about community needs and/or gather input on a proposed plan, strategy direction, or theory of change. Some of the most common listening tactics used at this stage include: prospective community research, listening tours, and ad hoc surveys, interviews, or focus groups with community members or constituents.

The second most common “moment” for listening is during implementation, but approaches and tactics differed greatly between the strategy phase and the implementation phase. During implementation, we typically heard about foundations embedding listening expectations into grantee diligence efforts, using participatory evaluation methods, and supporting grantee-level surveying of clients through tools like [Listen4Good](#) or [60 Decibels](#). Some foundations are also exploring participatory grantmaking, albeit to a lesser extent.

Fostering Listening Practices Within Foundations

Throughout our interviews, we probed for ideas on how to get started and/or critical success factors for seeding intentional listening practices within foundations. One critical theme that came through is that listening practices have to stem first from demonstrated leadership commitment to values such as humility and an openness to new voices. Similarly, foundations

that demonstrate strong equity mindsets and commitments tend to see listening as a core practice.

Efforts to embed or scale listening practices (either within or across multiple program areas) tend to occur organically and are driven primarily by program-level experimentation within a foundation. However, for listening to “stick,” interviewees noted the importance of leadership commitment and staff buy-in—all of which are consistent with how we know change occurs within foundations.

While much has been written about how funders can pursue direct listening at the local scale, comparatively less has been written about how larger systems-level funders working across multiple geographies can approach this work in meaningful ways. Based on our research, we would recommend the following as particularly promising and relevant practices. Advisory committees, if structured correctly, can be powerful mechanisms for staying grounded across initiatives, even at a systems level. We would also recommend that foundations codify some kind of direct listening expectation as a required part of strategy origination/refresh through means such as listening tours or community research focused on its target population. This codification includes systematizing data collection but also developing processes for reflecting on what is learned. To the extent that foundations rely on grantees as its conduit for listening, foundations must also take steps to ensure that grantees are tapped into the perspectives of the people they seek to

help and are themselves employing high-quality feedback loops, and that the foundations have intentional moments to learn from their insights.

Listening is fundamentally an invitation to take in new perspectives and ways of thinking; however, for it to be systematic, it must be thought of as a set of muscles and structural reinforcements to be strengthened throughout an organization. Foundations, as institutions, must create cultures that are supportive of input, structures for carrying out high-quality

listening, and the means for holding people accountable to these expectations. Moreover, internally, leadership must demonstrate an authentic interest in consuming and using this new information. While what we are calling for is not an insignificant task, by aligning organizational cultures, internal mindsets, and creating strong infrastructure, foundations can effectively catalyze their listening journeys and benefit from new perspectives that will strengthen their ability to achieve their ultimate objectives.

Defining What We Mean By Listening

A key grounding issue for this work is aligning on what we mean by listening in this context. At its core, listening means: *“to hear something with thoughtful attention”* and *“give consideration.”*⁸

For the purposes of this research, we define listening as foundations’ efforts *“to consider the views, perspectives, and opinions of the communities and people that a foundation seeks to help—and to incorporate these perspectives into strategic considerations and deliberations.”*⁹

Our definition is deliberately broad, as we are interested in identifying the full range of listening approaches being employed by the philanthropic community. Under this broad definition, listening can fall into two distinct categories:

Direct listening occurs when foundation staff connect in-person or virtually with their end communities, or commission a third party (e.g., an ethnographic research firm) to gather input for them. In direct listening, foundation staff are the primary listeners or recipients of the insights.

Indirect listening occurs when foundations listen to individuals or organizations (e.g., thought leaders, community service organizations, grantees) about what they have learned from beneficiaries. In indirect listening, the individual or organization is the primary consumer of insights but shares what they have learned with the foundation. In this paper, we focus primarily on grantee-mediated listening, when foundations rely on grantees to listen to those the foundations seek to help and to report back to funders what they heard.

⁸ “listen,” Merriam-webster.com. 2011. Merriam-Webster, Jun. 12, 2019.

⁹ Twersky, Fay. Phone Interview. Dec. 17, 2018.

Defining What We Mean By Those Foundations Seek to Help

A second definitional challenge affecting our work is to align on what we mean by the individuals and communities that foundations seek to help.¹⁰

For some foundations, particularly those that are place-based or supporting direct-service interventions, the identification of their target population—or those they seek to help—is quite clear.¹¹ However, for others who are focused on systems-level change such as field building, policy advocacy, or work that targets people more indirectly, like environmental preservation, interviewees describe fundamental challenges in figuring out who they should be listening to:

“We are trying to be a catalyst to systems changes. Our goal is to make sure [organizations] who have to respond to [emergencies] are best suited to respond. In a case of a disease outbreak—is the beneficiary the people who had the disease? Or the people who are protected from getting it? It’s difficult to name who the beneficiary is.”

A Phase I interviewee further highlighted that *“the lack of clarity around [some foundations]’ beneficiaries is a [real] barrier to listening. [Foundations who do not demonstrate strong listening practices] often say, ‘We don’t even know who our beneficiaries are.’”* Sometimes, this lack of clarity reflects a lack of strategy within a foundation, but it also is a clear challenge when a foundation serves a very large population or aims for population-wide benefits that are akin to a kind of public good. That said, for most foundations, it seems probable that they can identify some group or sub group affected by their work from whom they could solicit input to inform their work.

How Foundations Listen Across Different Contexts

The Purpose Of Listening

Listening can have multiple purposes. A helpful frame for thinking about the different purposes of listening comes from the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2), an association that seeks to promote and improve the practice of public participation and/or public engagement

¹⁰ In this paper, we will use “constituents,” “clients,” “communities/community members,” and “individuals” interchangeably when referring to those individuals or people that foundations seek to help. These individuals are also often called “beneficiaries.” We say “seek to help” in recognition of the fact that foundations do not always reach the people they want to help.

¹¹ Twersky, Fay et al. [“Listening to Those Who Matter Most, the Beneficiaries,”](#) Stanford Social Innovation Review, Spring 2013.

in relation to individuals, governments, institutions, and other entities that affect public interest internationally.

In its [Spectrum of Public Participation](#)¹² (see Figure 1), IAP2 identifies different levels of public engagement. While designed for public engagement, we believe this framework aligns well to the goals and related approaches foundations use in their listening practices with some translation to the foundation context. In general, our research suggests that most foundation listening efforts fall in the categories of “consulting,” “involving,” or “collaborating,” under the IAP2 framework. A few foundations employ participatory grantmaking strategies, which align to the “empower” category, but these are less commonplace.¹³

Figure 1: IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation

	Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Empower
Participation Goal	To provide [those you seek to help] with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities, and/or solutions.	To obtain feedback [from those you seek to help] on analysis, alternatives, and/or decisions.	To work directly with [those you seek to help] throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with [those you seek to help] in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision-making in the hands of [those you seek to help].

In presenting this spectrum, we are not proposing that one needs to drive to the right side of the range in all cases of listening (i.e., to exclusively focus on “empower”). Rather, our research suggests that the appropriateness of shared decision-making depends on the context of a foundation’s strategy and goals. It also depends on where along the life cycle of foundation decision-making listening is being incorporated. Indeed, in our research, the bulk of activity appears to be in the categories of “consulting” and “involving” on the spectrum above; for some foundations, especially systems-level funders, this may be where they can reasonably focus and scale their listening efforts near-term.

12 [“IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation,”](#) International Association for Public Participation, 2018.

13 Gibson, Cynthia, [“Participatory Grantmaking: Has Its Time Come?”](#) Ford Foundation, Oct. 2017.

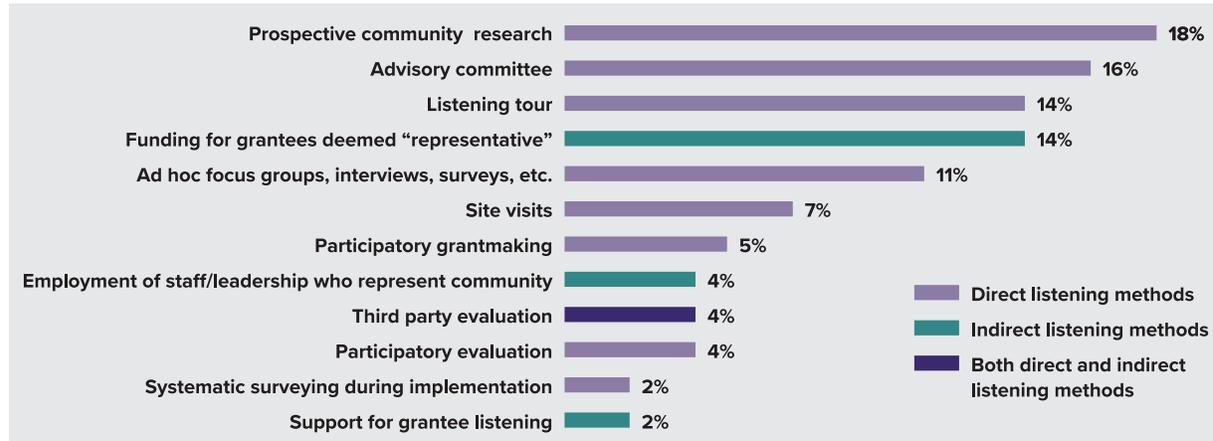
The foundations we spoke with provided various reasons for why they listen. The top three cited motivations were: to define problems and source effective solutions; to live out foundation values; and as a means of promoting equity and shifting power.

Motivation	As Described By Foundation Staff
<p>To define problems and source effective solutions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I am not the expert. I know a lot about the communities that I work in, but we really believe that we need to have somebody who lives in those communities to give us advice on the grantmaking. We don’t know what’s best, and we need to get feedback directly from the community in order to be able to inform what our investments look like.” • “Our belief is that we are not going to be effective in solving social problems if in fact we are not deeply engaged in listening to the people most affected.”
<p>To live out foundation’s core values</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Listening [comes from] values that are instilled from our board to our president to the entire organization—that we’re smarter, better, and work more effectively when we work with the people we serve. Humility is also a huge and core value for our foundation—you don’t have the answers and our leadership doesn’t want to see you acting like you have the answers, so you need to listen.... Our CEO has really honed that value and pushed that point even harder.” • “As a place-based regional foundation with a geographic restriction, being rooted in place and having a deep relationship with community and nonprofits is important to us.”
<p>To promote equity and/or to shift power</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “If you want to be inclusive and have opportunity for all, you need to know what ‘all’ is thinking.” • “We’re using listening as a catch-all for a whole set of different potential activities, which are all broadly about this notion of shifting power and the thought that we alone don’t have the answers.”
<p>To enhance community engagement</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Really primarily it was for the community to be empowered to make better decisions.” • “We want to inspire people to be more philanthropic, not just with their dollars, but with their time and talents, and so how do you create a shared sense of commitment to our community?”
<p>To evaluate progress</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “[Listening is an] opportunity to check and say, ‘Oh, I’m going in the right direction.’”
<p>To build accountability in the field</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “We also want to make the system accountable to our client population as well.... [We would see] our poll data was showing up in other people’s talks and presentations to help drive home the importance of doing X or Y and helping to create more accountability in the field.”
<p>To build accountability in the field</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Any time I need inspiration, reinforcement, or vision, I go sit down and talk to the homeless and formerly homeless and ask them to tell me their story. That [has been] a critical piece of keeping the work legitimate. I listen directly to learn and to make sure we were pressure testing our work against the reality of lived experience and to get inspired.... The insights people I talked to had were invaluable.”

How Foundations Listen

In terms of the tools or mechanisms for listening, foundations we spoke with describe a range of direct and indirect approaches (see Figure 2). Foundations tend to engage in more direct listening than indirect listening in general, although the delineation gets blurry across some approaches depending on how exactly the listening activity is implemented.

Figure 2: Approaches to Listening Mentioned (As Percent of Instances (n=85) Mentioned During Interviews)



The most frequently mentioned tools include:

- Prospective community research;
- Advisory committees;
- Listening tours; and
- Selecting grantees that are deemed to be “representative” of a community.

What is striking to us from the above is the relatively commonplace nature of the tools and approaches cited (e.g., site visits, focus groups, and surveys). These are tools that are employed frequently to connect with other stakeholders. In this way, listening to end-voices or bringing in client perspectives seems not to require that foundations employ radically new engagement approaches (although it does require some capacity-development), but rather to simply evolve whose voices are solicited and/or listened to. In short, it is about leveraging existing approaches but changing the cast of characters involved.

Further, the foundations we spoke with that engage in listening tend not to employ just one approach but, on average, describe three distinct approaches to listening, depending on:

- Their goals;
- Their relationships with end-clients;
- The foundation’s values; and
- What phase of the strategy life cycle they were in.

Next we highlight specific examples of the approaches foundations are employing for direct and indirect listening across various contexts.

LISTENING DIRECTLY

Direct listening involves deploying some of the tools mentioned previously—advisory committees, listening tours, prospective community research, or site visits—with foundation staff connecting in-person or virtually with their end communities, or commissioning a third party (e.g., an ethnographic research firm) to gather input for them. While direct listening can often be facilitated through the connections provided by grantees, foundation staff are the primary listeners or recipients of the insights.

Sometimes, the people being listened to are those benefiting directly from a foundation’s resources. However, more often than not, we heard about direct listening efforts that extend beyond a foundation’s direct catchment area, with foundations listening to a broader community than they actually provide funding to.

Place-based funders tend to espouse a particularly strong commitment to direct listening:

“As a regional foundation with a geographic restriction, being rooted in place and having a deep relationship with community and nonprofits is important to us. We need to be in the community because we work here, volunteer our time here, and feel we’re an integral part.”

These foundations cite the benefits of their proximity, especially when they are local, as a prerequisite for forming trusting relationships with the communities they serve:

“One of the things we’ve been able to do locally because we are so present in the communities is build levels of trust that help to bridge the power imbalance.”

Local or regional foundations we spoke with also cite their ability to leverage informal listening opportunities as ways of gaining insights. For example, the Colorado Health Foundation is a state-wide foundation with a commitment to “active listening” as a core approach to learning. Listening has been codified into the Foundation through its IMPACT Practice Model (see [Appendix 3](#) for a case study on the Colorado Health Foundation and its listening activities), which is a practice profile that lays out the behaviors and skills needed to work in the community. In addition to formal community engagement efforts—in which program officers meet with key providers, systems, coalitions, local leadership, and program participants and community members when exploring an issue area—program officers at the Foundation take advantage of informal opportunities to engage with the community and are encouraged to spend a minimum of 40% of their time in the community.

Despite this example, direct listening tends to occur at a larger scale for most foundations. We next expand upon some of the most common approaches we heard cited in our research.

PROSPECTIVE COMMUNITY RESEARCH

Conducting community research is a common tool for foundations to gain more insight into the context in which they are working. Although community research is at the fringe of what some may consider “listening” due to its arms-length nature, by leveraging tools like ethnographic research, polling, surveys, and broad market research, foundations have been able to dig deeper to learn more about the needs of and connect with their target communities.

Conducting community research particularly benefits foundations by enabling listening at a larger, more representative scale. As one foundation leader noted:

“You need to find authentic ways to hear from the population, not just the people at your tables. Four people do not represent 900 people.”

Below are some examples of how this approach leads to insights.

CALIFORNIA HEALTH CARE FOUNDATION

The California Health Care Foundation (CHCF) uses polls/surveys as a way to learn from and stay accountable to the needs of its target population. One such effort, [Listening to Mothers in California](#), leveraged a national survey, refining questions for a focus on California and fielding it for the first time both at the state level and in Spanish. Led by the National Partnership for Women and Families, the project was co-funded by the California Health Care Foundation and the Yellow Chair Foundation and gathered perspectives from approximately 2,500 respondents. The project focused on the experiences, outcomes, and views of childbearing women with an in-depth exploration of hospital maternity care experiences and postpartum well-being.¹⁴

Ensuring fidelity to mothers’ needs was a key motivation for the polling:

“We want to inform our work [and] make sure that we’re aligning with the real, key needs and priorities of the people we’re ultimately trying to serve. Being a systems-focused foundation means we work most directly with entities like health plans, clinics, and hospitals—so we’re a few levels removed from patients. Our survey/polling work helps us and our partners appreciate experiences on-the-ground and ‘keep our work real.’ It also provides a quantified voice for populations that often are overlooked or ignored,” explained one Foundation representative we spoke with.

The Listening to Mothers in California survey allowed the Foundation to hear expanded voices—for example, by oversampling under-represented groups such as Black women and by offering the survey in Spanish. Findings from the survey shined a light on the negative experiences and outcomes of Black mothers in particular, confirming to the Foundation the need for work on birth

¹⁴ Sakala, Carol et al. “[Listening to Mothers in California: a Population-based Survey of Women’s Childbearing Experiences](#).” National Partnership for Women & Families, California Health Care Foundation, and the Yellow Chair Foundation, Sept. 2018.

equity. Subsequent to the survey, the Foundation began to support quality improvement efforts in hospitals to address racial disparities and exploratory work in doula care. These data also will be featured in a CHCF upcoming Almanac publication on maternity care, a chart pack for policymakers and other high-level health care decision-makers.¹⁵

Beyond the Foundation, the population research has also proved useful in holding other actors accountable to mothers in California. Staff describe seeing their data from this listening research show up repeatedly in others' talks or presentations and in the media, giving the Foundation confidence that the findings and insights about outstanding needs of California mothers are informing the broader field's work and the public more generally.

OMIDYAR NETWORK

Omidyar Network is an international foundation that addresses economic, technological, and societal issues.¹⁶ While Omidyar Network recently evolved its strategic focus, under its prior strategy, Omidyar Network repeatedly deployed pop-up surveys using RIWI on various technology platforms with a nationally representative cross-section of the population as a way of gauging public perception on topics like how nonprofits are viewed and communities' understanding of political change: *"This form of listening gives us insights into what people care most about and why as we set priorities, and can help us to learn how priorities are shifting with the general public over time."* For example, Omidyar Network used RIWI data to inform the approach of a country-level investment strategy focused on strengthening the nonprofit sector.

BILL & MELINDA GATES FOUNDATION

In another example, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's Integrated Delivery team, which sits at the nexus of its Global Health and Development programs, has used human-centered design principles and anthropological research to inform how it thinks about approaching improved health outcomes in multiple geographies. For example, in Bihar, India, the Gates Foundation was seeking new ways to intervene earlier in addressing mortality and morbidity among children under age five. In partnership with an anthropologically oriented human-centered design firm in Delhi, the Foundation created a framework that allowed them to segment families according to five characteristics of social vulnerability. This helped to dispel common myths that there was one type of family structure—for example, one where the mother-in-law acted as the gatekeeper for access to health services—and informed a new set of design interventions and grant partners

¹⁵ The California Health Care Almanac provides objective information on health care costs, coverage, quality, and delivery supports effective decision-making with data and analysis on California's health care system.

¹⁶ ["Who We Are,"](#) Omidyar Network, 2016.

in India. The Foundation is continuing to extend the framework to include a focus on maternal health as well as to explore its applicability in alternate geographies.

“Taking the human-centered design approach upstream helped us to take what had previously been referred to as anecdotal information and stories that had been coming to us in pieces and put it into a framework that informed our decision-making,” describes a Senior Program Officer who works cross-functionally to help teams embrace human-centered design thinking to better understand the consumer/user in the Foundation’s products, services, and interventions.

ADVISORY COMMITTEES

Advisory committees are another frequently leveraged tactic for direct listening.¹⁷ For example:

BILL & MELINDA GATES FOUNDATION

[Teacher to Teacher](#) (T2T), an initiative of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, is a digital community of 1.6 million teachers that features a 250-member teacher panel that provides feedback on the digital ecosystem and education tools the Foundation is building. The primary goal of T2T is to facilitate meaningful connections between teachers. However, as the community has developed, the two program officers leading T2T have seen great potential for the Initiative, and the teacher panel in particular, to become a sounding board for the Foundation:

“We can have teachers at the table to inform our various bodies of work, whether it is at the very beginning of an idea, as it is starting to take shape, or whether it is in an Alpha stage and they could get their hands on something and test it early.”

Additionally, T2T also runs small communities within the network—“activation communities”—which connect foundation staff with teachers in order for foundation staff to learn and improve their work. Currently, about 200 teachers participate in the communities, and T2T plans to expand the number of communities and teachers participating in the 2019-2020 school year. Currently, one program officer is embedded in an activation community (which currently has 200 teachers), where he poses questions, engages, and talks directly with teachers about their feedback on a new Foundation project.

¹⁷ In a forthcoming report commissioned by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation looking at national foundation listening practices, Seema Shah provides detailed descriptions of the advisory work of two foundations, in particular, The Annie E. Casey Foundation and The California Endowment.

JOHN S. AND JAMES L. KNIGHT FOUNDATION

John S. and James L. Knight Foundation also leverages [advisory committees](#) across the 26 distinct communities in which it works. Knight is a national Foundation that maintains offices in eight cities and leverages community Foundation partnerships in another 18 cities where its original donors, John S. and James L. Knight, once published newspapers.¹⁸

Given the breadth of geographic areas covered by Knight, the Foundation has established community advisory committees in each of its sites that connect the Foundation to key community members and provide quarterly feedback on the direction of the community and opportunities for intervention so that the Foundation can be proactive in its grantmaking.

Advisory committee members are “*people who have their finger on the pulse of what’s going on in the community,*” such as activists or developers, describes a program director at Knight. In light of its national footprint, Knight Foundation is keen for local expertise to inform its grantmaking: “*We really believe that we need to have somebody who lives in those communities to be able to give us advice.*” Part of Knight’s listening efforts stem from the organization’s commitment to human-centered design as a philosophy, a practice it has embedded internally within the past five years.

VANCOUVER FOUNDATION

Vancouver Foundation used youth advisory bodies to inform two of its initiatives, one focused on immigrant and refugee youth (“[Fresh Voices](#)”) and the other focused on the transition from foster care to adulthood (“[Fostering Change](#)”). The advisory committees were formed to achieve better results:

“The genesis was a realization by staff that we could be more effective in our work if we were working directly in partnership and while being guided by people with lived experience.”

Youth advisors met regularly to learn about the policy landscape and to define relevant and proximate policy issues for the foundation to target.¹⁹ For example, staff and youth advisors in the Fresh Voices initiative successfully advocated to rename “English as a Second Language” to “ELL” (English Language Learning) in British Columbia and are continuing to advocate for ELL class graduation credits through the Make It Count campaign.

¹⁸ “[Community and National Initiatives](#),” Knight Foundation.

¹⁹ “[Vancouver Foundation’s Youth Engagement Report: Learning from Fostering Change and Fresh Voices](#),” Vancouver Foundation, 2018.

LISTENING TOURS

The third most cited listening approach in our research is listening tours. Foundations frequently use listening tours, particularly when there is a strategy or leadership change internally, to help ground staff with an understanding of the communities they serve and to get a better sense of outstanding needs. In these tours, foundations will speak with clients identified by grantees or engage broad groups of community members who may or may not be directly benefiting from the foundation's services. For example:

BILL & MELINDA GATES FOUNDATION

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's Pacific Northwest Initiative team, which provides community grants focused on homelessness, family stability, education, and community strengthening, used an in-depth listening tour as input into funding strategy focused on Native American communities in Washington State and the Portland, Oregon area.²⁰ With the goal of more clearly defining what they invest in, the Pacific Northwest Initiative team consulted with community members, with one program officer noting, *"I'm not native. Who am I to say, and how am I going to decide [what to invest in]?"*

A funding intermediary that had strong relationships with target communities and two local Native American leaders served as advisors to the team's listening effort. To round out the audiences they were listening to, the team also connected with Native American leaders doing on-the-ground work in education, health, and business. Over nine months, the Pacific Northwest team had conversations with each of these groups, culminating in a convening of all consulted members during which the group selected four primary target areas for a funding portfolio focused on young people.²¹

THE JAMES IRVINE FOUNDATION

In 2016, the James Irvine Foundation, a state-wide funder in California, evolved its strategy from a broad-based approach focused on arts, education, and voter and civic engagement for vulnerable individuals to a more targeted vision of making sure all low-income workers have the power to advance economically within California.²² Following the establishment of this new vision, the Irvine Foundation partnered with community organizations to hold 14 [community listening sessions](#) (in 10 languages) in six regions across California.

The focus of these sessions with more than 400 Californians was to better understand individuals' hopes, fears, challenges, and dreams.²³ Some staff from the Foundation describe being indelibly changed from these sessions and comment that the listening sessions, which were attended by

20 "[Pacific Northwest Community Grants](#)," Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2019.

21 Liu, LiLi and Dana Arviso. "[Supporting Native American Student Success](#)," Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Sept. 3, 2014.

22 Gulley, Kelley. "[Grounding our Work in Listening and Learning](#)," The Center for Effective Philanthropy, Dec. 4, 2018.

23 "[California Voices: California Community Listening Sessions](#)," The James Irvine Foundation, 2019.

a wide swath of Foundation representatives (including everyone from the IT and grantmaking staff to the CEO and board members), help to ground Irvine’s work:

“It influences our thinking as we’re considering specific strategies and grants such as where and who we may or may not fund. In some cases, it confirms a direction where we are headed; and in other cases, it helps to inform decisions such as where to go deeper or new areas to explore.”

To follow up on themes heard in the community listening sessions and get a representative take on the challenges faced by Californians who are working but still struggling with poverty, Irvine subsequently commissioned a [broad-scale survey](#) of more than 3,300 California residents.²⁴ The large number of survey participants allowed the Foundation to gain insights into the unique experiences of different demographic groups (e.g., by region, age, race/ethnicity). Learnings from the listening sessions and surveys helped to inform Irvine’s new seven-year, \$200 million investments into its Fair Work and Better Careers initiatives (e.g., need for pre-training prior to participating in apprenticeship programs).^{25,26} It also provided direction for new areas to explore, such as how the Foundation may play a role in addressing the housing crisis in California.

SAN FRANCISCO FOUNDATION

Another frequently cited listening tour example is the San Francisco Foundation, which hosted seven VOICE [sessions](#) across five Bay Area counties as part of its development of racial and economic equity as a core principle and goal. The VOICE sessions focused on the “daily struggles, challenges, inspirations, and wins” of residents and the role of the foundation, and were intended to ensure the foundation’s centering of racial and economic equity resonated.²⁷ As one foundation staff member described, the sessions explored:

“What would it mean for the San Francisco Foundation to be dedicated to a racial- and economic-equity based North Star and have a regional agenda connect to that North Star? It was, ‘Let’s hear different perspectives and learn about how the community could see us in that role.’ We went out in those listening sessions with pretty broad questions to ask people to reflect back to us based on their experience of their community, their vision for the community, the assets and challenges, and how they could see us advancing that equity agenda.”

With the listening sessions, the foundation heightened its focus on housing (given its impacts on racial equity and economic inclusion), building out a housing agenda focused on tenant protection, and housing preservation and production. More recent listening sessions in 2019 have led the foundation to focus on supporting women of colors leaders.

24 [“Worker Survey,”](#) The James Irvine Foundation, 2019.

25 [“Better Careers,”](#) The James Irvine Foundation, 2019.

26 [“Fair Work,”](#) The James Irvine Foundation, 2019.

27 [“Bay Area Voices,”](#) San Francisco Foundation.

LISTENING INDIRECTLY THROUGH GRANTEES

Grantees play a role in mediating foundation listening efforts in almost all cases. At minimum, they help to identify community members for foundations to connect with during site visits or listening tours. But, at the other end of the spectrum, grantees will actually lead efforts to listen to those the foundation seeks to help, use those insights to inform their own work, and share with funders what they heard.

The value of involving grantees to facilitate listening efforts is clear, as nonprofits are typically more proximate to end communities and likely have deeper context and relationships with them than foundations do. In their paper, [Meaningfully Connecting with Communities in Advocacy and Policy Work](#), the Aspen Planning and Evaluation Program described the dependence as follows:

“The trust and relationships that are so important to authentic listening and engagement may not be there [between a foundation and community]. In those cases, nonprofits [and funders] need to use partnership models that help them listen to or co-create with local organizations that are deeply rooted in the community.”²⁸

Further, when dealing with particularly vulnerable communities (e.g., undocumented immigrants, foster care youth), foundations we spoke with described being sensitive to the risks of coming in, as a relative unknown, and trying to engage with the community—particularly if they lack expertise in trauma-based interventions. In these cases, they tended to rely on grantees to lead listening efforts.

The risk of grantee-mediated efforts, however, is that their results do not always break through to the foundation and, given their indirect nature, they can have diminished influence on foundation decision-making. In addition, there is an inherent filtering process that occurs that can affect how insights are presented and interpreted. Finally, the reliance on grantee partners as conduits assumes the existence of high-quality feedback loops at the grantee level that may not always hold true.

But, when it works well, grantee-mediated listening can be very powerful. For example:

THE HARRY AND JEANETTE WEINBERG FOUNDATION

The Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation funds direct services for low-income and vulnerable individuals and families in the United States and Israel. The Foundation considers whether grantees listen to constituents by asking applicants how they listen to the people they serve and how applicants work with them to develop programs. The Foundation depends on its grantees to be experts on the communities they serve. Foundation President and CEO, Rachel Monroe notes: *“Because the Foundation focuses its support on nonprofits that are providing direct services,*

²⁸ [“Meaningfully Connecting with Communities in Advocacy and Policy Work: A Landscape Scan Commissioned by Fund for Shared Insight,”](#) Aspen Planning and Evaluation Program, April 2019.

we look to see that they listen to, survey, and get input and feedback from their constituents as part of their ongoing work.”²⁹ The Weinberg Foundation was featured in CEP’s report, [Staying Connected: How Five Foundations Understand Those They Seek to Help](#), as being among the top 15% of foundations in CEP’s comparative dataset on grantees’ ratings of how well foundations understand their beneficiary needs.³⁰

WILLIAM AND FLORA HEWLETT FOUNDATION

In 2013, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation funded a human-centered design partnership between IDEO.org³¹ and Marie Stopes Zambia (MSZ)³² to inform new programming targeting adolescent reproductive health.³³ In describing the rationale for the approach, the former program officer for this project at the Hewlett Foundation notes, *“Because human-centered design has the value of putting young women—who in any country in the world are largely underserved and not a powerful population—at the center, it felt like an appropriate methodology, aligning our process and what we are trying to achieve.”*

IDEO.org spent weeks immersed in the lives of Zambian teens and partnered with Marie Stopes to design Diva Centres, where adolescent girls do their nails while concurrently having formal and informal conversations about boys and sex, learning about contraception from trained peers, and getting counsel and access to a variety of birth control methods from trained professionals.³⁴

Whereas MSZ’s traditional clinics saw almost no teenage girls, Diva Centres have served thousands of girls, the strong majority of whom have adopted some form of birth control.³⁵ The Hewlett Foundation has continued to fund various grants to Marie Stopes International, supporting human-centered design addressing adolescent reproductive health.

CHILDREN’S INVESTMENT FUND FOUNDATION

The Children’s Investment Fund Foundation (CIFF) based in London, England has collaborated actively with the Hewlett Foundation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation in advancing a human-centered design approach to the field of adolescent sexual and reproductive health, and across other program areas.³⁶ For example, in partnership with its grantees, CIFF and the Hewlett Foundation sponsored a human-centered design process to deeply understand the barriers facing adolescent girls seeking to access contraception and test prototypes for addressing these.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ IDEO.org is a human-centered design firm that designs products, services, and experiences to improve the lives of people in poor and vulnerable communities.

³² Marie Stopes International is an international nonprofit providing contraception and safe abortions to empower women and girls to take control of their futures.

³³ In 2015, the Hewlett Foundation funded similar work with Marie Stopes Kenya, resulting in the development of Future Fab.

³⁴ [“This Manicure Might Just Save Her Life,”](#) IDEO.org.

³⁵ Ibid. 2015 data from IDEO.org showed that Diva Centres had served more than 5,000 girls, 82% of whom had adopted some form of birth control.

³⁶ [“Who We Are,”](#) Children’s Investment Fund Foundation.

As a result of their research, CIFF supported In Their Hands, which provides young people access to a digital ecosystem that connects girls to quality services, allows them more choices in where subsidies are directed, and allows them to review the services they receive. They are also rewarded for healthy behaviors using a loyalty point program.

This wasn't a one-off exercise—continuous feedback from clients has influenced the program to include pharmacies as well as clinics, innovate on client engagement, and provide more options for feedback. The model has been very successful, serving over a quarter million girls in just two years.

Supporting human-centered design efforts at the grantee level has led to shifts in overall orientation at both the Hewlett Foundation and CIFF. The former program officer for the Hewlett Foundation, describes the impact from engaging in human-centered listening on the foundation, noting:

“It made me, as a program officer, recognize when I was sitting in a conference room with a bunch of funders and making up ideas we thought were good. It became painfully obvious that it should not be people in a conference room cooking up ideas about what’s happening in Zambia. It emphasized the importance of listening—through our grantees who are listening—and making sure that what the Foundation funds does not take a top-down approach.... I think there’s a recognition that ‘if you build it, they will come,’ is not a good idea, especially from a rights perspective.”

Similarly, the value of elevating and designing around the voices of girls is now well acknowledged at CIFF. Julia Greenland, a manager in the CIFF Nairobi office, notes:

“CIFF’s systems work to keep the focus on girl-centered insights during the implementation of its programs. For example, feedback from girls and key insights generated during the HCD process are regularly revisited during program review milestones.”

How Listening Varies By Foundation Characteristics

Across our qualitative research, we looked at how the decision to listen directly or indirectly, and the choice of listening methods, plays out across different types of foundations depending on their geographic reach (regional, national, international); overall strategy (e.g., movement building, field building, policy advocacy, direct service); and their phase of internal decision-making (e.g., strategy formulation, implementation, evaluation, or refresh, or exit.³⁷

GEOGRAPHIC REACH

In terms of geographic reach, regional funders have an inherent advantage to engaging in direct listening due to their proximity to those they seek to help. We did not see any meaningful pattern

³⁷ The Hewlett Foundation defines the strategy life cycle in four stages: Originate, Implement, Refresh, and Exit. See [Appendix 2](#) for definitions.

in listening practices among national and international funders—with some choosing to listen directly and some indirectly—irrespective of their distance from their end communities.

When foundations felt unable to connect directly, they stressed the importance of finding grantee partners that are trusted by the community and genuinely represent their perspectives in order to make listening reliable.

As one international funder who focuses on disaster response described:

“We try to decentralize listening and decision-making to get more of the local player perspective with the assumption that local players will be closer...and so will have a better pulse of what they need or their communities need.”

FOUNDATION STRATEGY

Foundation listening patterns across strategy approach are also hard to generalize, particularly given the diversity of approaches that can be employed by one foundation; but, we did observe a few trends. In general, the systems-level funders we spoke with tend to display less institutional commitment to listening to those ultimately affected by their work—with the exception of funders focused on movement building. Systems-level funders in general were inclined to describe grantees (as opposed to themselves) as the logical initiators of end-client/community engagement and sometimes had trouble seeing the relevance of engaging individuals beyond the grantee as core constituents. We highlight some of the nuance among systems-level funders’ listening practices below.

MOVEMENT BUILDING

Funders that focus on movement building spoke about their decision to rely on grantees uniquely. In particular, they spoke of the implicit, assumed overlap with advocacy organizations and the people they represent—almost by definition. As one interviewee described, *“If one is supporting work that is community rooted or grassroots, then community and organization aren’t so distinct. In listening to your partner, you’re also listening to your community.”* The Aspen Planning and Evaluation Program highlights that organizations considered to be “grassroots” are indeed viewed to be *“of the community”* and a *“close proxy for—or perhaps the same thing as—connecting with individual members of the community.”*³⁸

Funders supporting movement building subsequently describe their primary role to be about building organizational capacity at the grantee level to listen. A program officer from the Ford Foundation, for example noted:

³⁸ [“Meaningfully Connecting with Communities in Advocacy and Policy Work: A Landscape Scan Commissioned by Fund for Shared Insight,”](#) Aspen Planning and Evaluation Program, April 2019.

“We support a lot of movement, base-building, and power-building organizations. Those are groups that have to do a lot of listening to folks on the ground.... An appropriate role is the foundation helping them get better at listening to, engaging and mobilizing, and learning from their constituencies.”

POLICY ADVOCACY AND RESEARCH

Listening practices among policy advocacy and research funders we spoke with were more varied. Some foundations that focus on advancing policy spoke about working with grantees to engage people with lived experience—not to change the foundations’ strategies, but more to shape the content of their collective policy agenda. The Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, for example, supports their partner, the Corporation for Supportive Housing’s [Speak Up! Program](#), which *“empowers formerly homeless individuals to use their personal stories as an advocacy tool in the fight to end homelessness.”*³⁹ By lifting up the stories of formerly homeless individuals and providing educational sessions for them on topics such as housing policy, advocacy, storytelling, narrative development, and public speaking, as well as opportunities to advocate to local, state, and federal leaders, the program aims to engage people with lived experience to provide input on and improve the quality of homelessness services and systems.

In June 2019, the Foundation hosted an exploratory convening, Collective Voices for Change, to help *“guide how philanthropy and nonprofit organizations can partner with people with lived experience to enrich each other’s perspectives, build connections, and inform future work.”* Attendees of the meeting were primarily people with lived experience of chronic homelessness, foster care, substance use, and youth disconnection (the Foundation’s four domestic areas of focus).⁴⁰ Over two days, Foundation staff and people with lived experience met to talk about policy, issue, and service needs and to discuss opportunities, challenges, and processes in building true community partnerships. While the Foundation is still exploring the implications of the meeting for itself and for philanthropic organizations more generally, program staff note they are hopeful it will lead to increased participation by people with lived experience in their programmatic decision-making and strategic learning.

At the same time, other policy funders we spoke with questioned the relevance of end-client insights to their work, and thus do not point to listening as one of their significant interests. The [Aspen Planning and Evaluation Program’s paper](#) (mentioned previously) cites one particular example of a funder managing an education policy portfolio. The funder’s focus was on understanding policymakers’ perspectives rather than understanding the perspectives of end-clients (here, students), and so incorporating end-clients was seen as irrelevant. The funder noted:

39 [“CSH Speak Up! Advocacy Program Fact Sheet,”](#) Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, 2019.

40 C4 Innovations “Collective Voices for Change Agenda and Meeting Materials,” July 14, 2019.

“The question I would ask of grantees is not whether they understand students and communities of color, but, if their job is to get money to do research and publish around evidence-based policymaking, did they take into account how policymakers used that data, want to see that data, hear about that data, engage with that data?... The students are very indirect elements of any of the proposals that have been brought to me.... For most of my grantees, the students were fairly inauthentically engaged as entertainment. So, you have a bunch of students in the same shirt singing, ‘I believe I can fly’ at the reception of a policymaker conference.”⁴¹

However, the Aspen Planning and Evaluation Program team notes that a greater focus on listening to end-constituents was emerging across the policy advocacy field, and even the funder quoted above was beginning to think through how to listen to end-constituents more frequently in their work.⁴²

FIELD BUILDING

By definition, fields are composed of multiple actors with different and complementary roles (e.g., funders, researchers, advocates, policymakers) connected through a network.⁴³ Funders’ grantmaking in this area can thus take a variety of different approaches and range from being relatively removed from on-the-ground work to being very involved. This may explain the diversity of perspectives we heard around listening when engaged in systems-level change at a field level. One funder we spoke to, focused on building partner capacity around emergency response internationally, questioned whether any listening—direct or indirect—was relevant for her work given her focus on quantifiable impact metrics:

“Our end is about systems-change. It’s about making sure [nonprofit delivery partners] have the tools they require to assess and respond rapidly to [emergencies]. If there is a new innovation in the field, they can implement it systemically because they already have the proof from research that if it is well implemented, people will be saved.... More than the feedback, it’s about what are you trying to achieve? If my aim is that the next Ebola outbreak doesn’t make it to 3,000 people, then my measurement is how many people died and in day one do they have the protocols in place.”

But a different systems-level funder who frequently engages in strengthening fields (and acknowledges his foundation is not listening as well as he would like), notes the importance of listening to those you ultimately seek to benefit, even though one’s strategy might be a few steps removed:

⁴¹ [“Meaningfully Connecting with Communities in Advocacy and Policy Work: A Landscape Scan Commissioned by Fund for Shared Insight,”](#) Aspen Planning and Evaluation Program, April 2019.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Petrovich, Janice, EdD. [“Building and Supporting Sustainable Fields: Views from Philanthropy: A Study for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation,”](#) Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, July 2013.

“If you’re going to get more precise and accurate problem definition and if you’re going to filter through potential solutions and pick ones that are more likely to work and be used, then that’s where ultimate beneficiaries can tell you a whole lot about why systems are or are not working from their point of view.

You can’t fix the system if in fact you don’t understand how beneficiaries are interacting with the system, even if they may be in fact powerless to change the system.... A lot of our work is several years and several levels removed from real people and impact just because we do work that affects the system leader. The system leader does work that might affect practitioners that might in turn affect kids. But at some point in your work, if the effects of your systems-level reforms are not actually being felt where it matters, then one really does have to question the value of the work you did.”

Listening Across The Strategy Life Cycle

As noted, it is hard to determine significant patterns, beyond a few trends, in looking at foundation listening practices by strategy or geography. In marked contrast, where foundations are in their strategy development process seemed to be a significant determinant of how outputs from listening are used by foundations across our research. For instance, foundation representatives repeatedly explain that listening to end-clients is particularly useful when the organization is in a strategy determination phase, whether that be initial strategy formulation or the refreshing of a strategy after initial implementation. The second most common area of life cycle listening is during implementation, but approaches and tactics differed greatly between these two phases.

LISTENING DURING STRATEGY ORIGINATION AND REFRESH

Listening to end-constituents most frequently occurs when foundations are determining strategy, whether that be determining their initial strategy or refreshing a strategy after some initial implementation.⁴⁴ In fact, two-thirds of the listening examples we heard about through our research occur during these phases. Foundation leaders describe how listening has given them an overall grounding for their future work, including greater overall context, more nuanced understanding of the needs they were seeking to address, and sometimes even insights into future receptivity to their proposed strategy and/or potential implementation risks.

Specific examples of foundations using listening to inform strategy development include:

⁴⁴ The Hewlett Foundation defines the strategy life cycle in four stages: Originate, Implement, Refresh, and Exit. See [Appendix 2](#) for definitions.

SAN FRANCISCO FOUNDATION

The example cited earlier of the San Francisco Foundation’s [VOICE](#) Bay Area listening sessions. After gathering input on community aspirations and how the foundation could support those aspirations through a broadened racial and economic equity lens, the foundation went back to the community to find its focus within the identified issues areas of housing, thus leveraging an iterative approach to its strategy development:

“In the last month or so [of the listening tour], we [went] back to folks to say, ‘Here is where we are at with the equity agenda. Give us feedback, let us know where we’re hitting the mark, where we’re not, and what we are missing; i.e., any present challenges we’re not partnering with you on or one that is emerging we should pay attention to.’”

These later sessions in the listening tour—smaller, longer, and structured differently than earlier sessions—identified specific focuses within already identified issue areas from the listening tour, with the foundation ultimately narrowing in on building out a housing agenda focused on tenant protection, housing preservation, and production.

THE JAMES IRVINE FOUNDATION

In a similar vein, the Irvine Foundation heard a lot about the need for affordable housing throughout California through its 2016 [listening tour](#) in 14 communities and a [broad-scale survey](#) in 2018 of more than 3,300 Californians. At the time, the Foundation had no specific strategy around housing. However, the Foundation leveraged some of what it heard from these and other sources and is currently exploring a possible strategy around housing, noting that its current strategies in workforce development cannot result in living wage lifestyles if people don’t have an affordable place to live.

JOHN S. AND JAMES L. KNIGHT FOUNDATION

Knight Foundation uses its [Soul of the Community](#) survey, a three-year Gallup study of 26 U.S. cities to inform its grantmaking activities. In the 2010 study, Gallup interviewed a representative sample of 400 adults in each of Knight’s communities (speaking with more than 15,000 people in total) in order to understand what attaches people to where they live. They learned that openness, social offerings, and aesthetics were primary drivers across all 26 communities. Local communities then leveraged these findings to inform their work. For example, in Charlotte, North Carolina, Soul of the Community results provided a research platform for a university partner of the foundation’s to inform a collective community reutilization plan and attract more youth to participate in the

community. In Miami, Florida, Soul of the Community results were used by Knight’s community foundation partner, The Miami Foundation and Knight to inform the creation of an information campaign called ‘Engage, Miami’ that aims to create a more engaged and aware local populace. Examples like these highlight how Knight uses the survey results to continually hold itself accountable to local priorities.⁴⁵

Some foundations use similar mechanisms to refresh existing strategies, connecting with communities to see what needs had been met and what needed to be further invested in.

COMMUNITY FOUNDATION FOR GREATER BUFFALO

The Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo undergoes a strategic refresh every five years and conducts a listening tour across its communities in order to re-examine its community goals. In 2017, the Community Foundation worked with community-based partners to engage more than 60 community leaders, representatives from close to 300 nonprofits, and more than 800 community residents through interviews, focus groups, and surveys.

As a result of input collected, the Community Foundation has refined its overall strategy and specific approaches within those strategies. For example, the foundation had been planning to invest in transportation and childcare to support low-income residents before collecting input. After, the foundation pivoted, focusing instead on systems-change within education and workforce training to address the root causes of the challenges residents from low-income households were facing. (For additional detail on the listening efforts of the Community Foundation for Buffalo County, see [Appendix 3.](#))

A few foundations also describe how they gather feedback (e.g., through listening tours/sessions, ad hoc surveys, interviews, or focus groups with clients) on proposed strategic directions or theories of change after they have developed preliminary frameworks. One funder described how a request for feedback on a developed theory of change turned into an 18-month process of consulting with a funding intermediary. That intermediary connected with their end-clients and other community partners who then pulled apart and put back together a theory of change that stayed faithful to the funder’s original goals, but also better reflected the community’s needs.

LISTENING DURING IMPLEMENTATION

The next most common phase for a foundation to focus on listening to constituents is during the implementation stage of its strategy. Listening during implementation occurs in a few different ways.

⁴⁵ [“Soul of the Community.”](#) Knight Foundation, 2019.

GRANTEE SELECTION

Foundations sometimes bring forward beneficiary perspectives to inform the grantee selection process, formally or informally. Three foundations we spoke with describe connecting with community as a kind of informal quality-check on proposed grantees. One interviewee describes his foundation's process as follows:

“We will ask new grantees to provide end-clients as a sort of reference so we can have direct conversations with clients about feedback on grantee services and how they’re being represented. That helps us prove to ourselves that they have those relationships and can deliver what they say.”

In other cases, some foundations ask grantees to formally describe how they connect to the community and ensure that the community informs their work as part of their grant applications. Through Ekouté’s work with Fund for Shared Insight, we know of at least six foundations that have integrated questions about grantee-community connections into their grant proposals, including: The James Irvine Foundation, the JPB Foundation, The Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, United Way of Greater St. Louis, and The Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation.

Community members or citizens can also inform grantee selection through participatory grantmaking in which individuals from a community are given decision-making power over grantee selection for a discrete amount of funding on behalf of a funder.⁴⁶ In the paper, [Participatory Grantmaking: Has Its Time Come?](#), Cynthia Gibson identifies three stages at which foundations and community members can work together:

- Pre-grant, by developing the application process, decision-making criteria, and guidelines;
- During the granting process, by reviewing and making changes to the review process, deciding which applicants receive funding, and what resources will be given to successful applicants; and
- Post-grant, when reviewing grantee evaluations, reports, and/or activities.⁴⁷

Gibson’s report highlights participatory grantmaking programs across multiple foundations. However, she notes that although there is *“a great deal of talk about participation in the field,”* there is *“comparatively little commitment to integrating these practices into foundations’ strategies and activities, and especially their cultures, over the long term,”* making it an emerging practice area.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Gibson, Cynthia. [“Participatory Grantmaking: Has Its Time Come?”](#), Ford Foundation, Oct. 2017.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

LISTENING AS PART OF MONITORING AND EVALUATION

Feedback from end-constituencies or communities can also provide complementary data to more traditional monitoring data (e.g., progress indicators, client behavioral changes) examining the relative effectiveness of specific interventions. Foundations described to us how the administration of focus groups, interviews, or surveys with end-clients—either directly, mediated through grantee partners, or as part of third-party evaluations—can be used for their own learning. When we look at how this data is leveraged, we see two major use-cases.

First, constituent feedback is collected to facilitate learning and reflection at a strategy or portfolio level. For example, to see how it is tracking against its goals, the Packard Foundation has established five principles for its monitoring, evaluation, and learning work. These principles are the *“guideposts directing how the foundation partners with its grantees and those impacted by its work to monitor, evaluate, and learn.”*⁴⁹ Two of the foundation’s principles—Learning in Partnership and Using a Variety of Information—specifically call out that *“those impacted by the work are [to be] engaged in the design, implementation, and reflection of our combined efforts with the goal of codifying expectations for engaging constituents in this work.”*⁵⁰ (See [Appendix 3](#) for additional detail on the Foundation’s policies around listening.)

Secondly, some foundations use constituent feedback data to inform portfolio management efforts, with foundations receiving data about specific grantees.

THE ROCKEFELLER FOUNDATION

The Rockefeller Foundation, which is focused on advancing science, data, policy, and innovation to solve global challenges related to health, food, power, and economic mobility, collects feedback data from the clients served by its grantees in two program areas through the Lean Data platform of [60 Decibels](#): *“The feedback data is really giving us a point of view of what farmers [in our agricultural portfolio] think about the work they’re engaging in and support they’re getting.”*^{51,52}

Rockefeller program staff use Interactive Voice Response (IVR) and Lean Data datasets to do pulse checks and course-correct, when necessary as the data reveals who is actually being reached by grantees as well as whether services are being delivered in the way intended: *“We know our evaluation and validation of impact is robust, but we can’t wait five years [to get that data],”* describes foundation staff. For example, the Foundation recently deployed a micro-survey using IVR across its agriculture value chains in Africa to validate: who farmers are; what kinds of support they have received; and what difference it might have made in their lives. The Foundation learned

49 [“Guiding Principles and Practices for Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning,”](#) The David and Lucile Packard Foundation, June 2018.

50 Ibid.

51 [“Our Work,”](#) The Rockefeller Foundation, 2019.

52 Lean Data is an approach that helps social enterprises quickly and easily hear from customers about their behavior, feedback, and social performance. Source: Klement, Amy and Jessica Kiessel, [“Learning by Listening to Those We Serve: Why We Invest in Measuring Social Impact,”](#) Omidyar Network, May 2, 2019.

some of its end-users were not actually receiving services and subsequently, after exploring further, pivoted their partnership strategy as a result. Had the Foundation only relied on self-reported grantee data, staff may not have uncovered that resources were not reaching end-users and clients. Armed with the data, Foundation program staff can now intervene more quickly.

OMIDYAR NETWORK

Omidyar Network also offered access to Lean Data tools to its investees (which are a combination of nonprofit and for-profit entities) across program areas, and saw major uptake within its education portfolio. Specifically, 24 investees opted into a 12-week effort to collect customer feedback and impact data in 2018. In this effort, the Lean Data team listened to more than 4,800 customers in 14 countries through a combination of phone interviews and online surveys administered in 11 languages.⁵³

Omidyar Network used this data to compare results across organizations to identify what's working and where investees can improve. It also looked at patterns across sub-segments of its portfolio by program model and combined survey data with internal data to validate earlier impact data. For example, Omidyar Network learned that clients of "ed tech" organizations were most concerned with the depth and variety of content and the user experience, whereas clients of early education organizations wanted wider choices in content and were most focused on the quality of the content. Omidyar Network shared these insights with other players in the sector and used them to guide future investment and strategic advisory services provided to investees.⁵⁴

Finally, 87 foundations have joined [Listen4Good](#), a capacity-building program operated by Fund for Shared Insight that enables funders to learn alongside nonprofits as the nonprofits gather constituent feedback.⁵⁵ As co-funders in Listen4Good, individual foundations sponsor nonprofits to receive a matching grant from Fund for Shared Insight and to access Listen4Good's tools and coaching resources in order to build their client-focused feedback practices. Sponsoring foundations of the nonprofits are not provided with access to grantees' data through Listen4Good, but grantees are encouraged to share their results with their nominating funder.

Evaluation results of Listen4Good in 2017 looking at co-funder involvement highlight that many funders see Listen4Good as a means for living out their belief that if nonprofits listen to those they serve, they will improve programming and impact on end communities.⁵⁶ While funders primarily describe their role as sponsors helping their grantees to better listen to clients, about one-third

⁵³ Ibid

⁵⁴ ["What did we learn from listening to 4,800+ customers in Omidyar Network's Education portfolio?"](#) Omidyar Network, May 2019.

⁵⁵ Ekouté provides both leadership and staff support to Listen4Good. Valerie Threlfall is Managing Director of Listen4Good.

⁵⁶ ["Fund for Shared Insight: Listen4Good Co-Funders: One Year In."](#) ORS Impact, Nov. 2017.

of participating funders report changes within their foundations based on their participation in Listen4Good. For example, funders credit Listen4Good with motivating them to consider new grant application questions focused on feedback, spurring internal conversations about equity and inclusion, and motivating internal “how-to-listen” sessions for foundation staff and/or grantees.⁵⁷

The challenge inherent in these implementation listening efforts, like all grantee-mediated efforts, is ensuring actionable data is collected and used by the foundations, not just by the nonprofit partners. One way to do this is to have the foundations see the data collected, as in the cases of The Rockefeller Foundation and Omidyar Network. However, one could argue that shared visibility could lead to “gaming” if the power dynamic between funder and nonprofit is not appropriately addressed. In the case of Omidyar Network, for example, leadership took steps to frame the listening efforts as an opportunity for it to learn *“how it could serve investees better, provide better support, and have a more relevant strategy, while also giving investees information that would be valuable to them.”*

LISTENING THROUGH REPRESENTATIVE FOUNDATION STAFF

Finally, a few foundations describe hiring people from the end community to implement or lead the work as a way of staying connected. For example:

CONRAD N. HILTON FOUNDATION

The Conrad N. Hilton Foundation hires people with lived experience into its internship program. Due to privacy restrictions, interns are not identified as people with lived experience to all employees, but do provide input or perspective on program areas connected to their lived experience when appropriate.

THE BLAGRAVE TRUST

The Blagrave Trust, a UK-based foundation supporting young people experiencing disadvantage aged 14-25, is in the midst of transitioning to becoming a youth-led rather than a youth-focused funder. One aspect of this is its evolution to a predominantly youth-led executive board.⁵⁸ Having more youth involvement has informed, among other things, a shift in the Trust’s policy analysis to new areas of interest such as climate, given youth interests. (See [Appendix 3](#) for a more detailed description of the Blagrave Trust’s listening journey.)

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Wells, Jo, “[‘Reducing social distance’ starting with governance: Why we are moving towards becoming a youth led Trust and what this means.](#)” The Blagrave Trust, Feb. 22, 2019.

COMMUNITY FOUNDATION FOR GREATER BUFFALO

The Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo ensures that community members are part of its program leadership: “We are very committed to ensuring we have people with lived experience at the decision-making table.... If we are working on re-entry, we want people who have experienced re-entry at the table leading the effort.” Throughout the scoping process of new initiatives, natural leaders emerge from the community who are then invited to lead, monitor, and oversee the implementation of programming. (See [Appendix 3](#) for a more detailed description of the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo’s listening work.)

The National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy identifies bringing community members onto foundation boards and staff as one of the most significant ways to share power.⁵⁹

LISTENING DURING EXIT

It was much rarer in our research to hear of foundations that employ specific listening efforts as they exit a strategy. We only heard of two relevant examples. One foundation described how the output from listening during implementation ultimately influenced the foundation’s decision to exit a strategy:

“We worked with various youth-focused organizations and would ask, ‘Give us your experience of how you see this work going.’ As an output, we had videos and documentaries of the young people about their experience [with] program implementation.... Ultimately, all of that information helped inform our decision to leave that space” as it became clear the foundation was not going to have the impact it sought.

The Packard Foundation describes listening to inform their exit of a strategy around ocean conservation, using participatory evaluation to close out and collect final learnings from end-clients:

“We had local community members ‘walk’ through our strategy and say how it’s evolved over time. It was retrospective, focused on what might we learn for other programming... and putting the local community members we had funded, who had really been doing the work for the last 20 years, at the center of talking about what they thought was successful and not successful.”

⁵⁹ Raghelli, Lisa, and Jennifer Choi. [“Power Moves: Your essential philanthropy assessment guide for equity and justice.”](#) National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, May 2018.

Fostering The Development Of Foundation Listening Practices

Throughout our interviews, we sought tips on how to get started and/or critical success factors for seeding intentional listening practices into foundations. One critical theme that has come through is that listening practices have to first stem from organizational values such as humility and an openness to learning. Many foundations recognized that while they may not have the answers, they have the power to create space for people who do:

“As a funder, we’re having the realization—that many funders are having—about being humble that we are not in the best position to know what [the people we serve] might need but we are in the best position to create structures that allow [the people we serve] to have space and voices that they might not otherwise have.”

Similarly, foundations that had strong equity mindsets and commitments saw listening as a prerequisite and core practice given their goals. Indeed, the ongoing conversations around equity and inclusion within the sector seem to be providing new momentum to open up channels for listening of all kinds within foundations.

But how does the sector materially advance and begin to embed listening practices?

Scaling or embedding listening practices (either within or across multiple program areas) has occurred in a variety of ways across the foundations we have spoken with. Interviewees frequently describe how practices grew out of experimental approaches at their foundations in a non-planned and organic way. One program officer aptly described the progression this way:

“We did it sort of by accident. We didn’t realize that it was what we were going to do. We just sort of said, ‘Okay, we’ve got this big community. We’re going to add a [client] panel and see how it works.’ Once that started working, we built a survey tool. Once that started working, we built an initial model for the activation series that we’re doing.”

Experimentation in one program area often leads to replication in other areas, as it suits the needs of similar teams. However, to have listening “stick,” interviewees noted the importance of leadership commitment and staff buy-in to the work. One program officer from a national foundation told us:

“I do think that it is probably necessary to have support and maybe even a mandate from your board and executive leadership, especially your CEO. If they’re not bought in, if it’s a secondary priority for them, then they’re not going to amplify the findings or be influenced by them.”

Similarly, other foundations describe the importance of their efforts to socialize the work and acquaint multiple members of teams with both the why and what of listening—all of which is consistent with how we know change and knowledge diffuses across foundations as institutions.⁶⁰

Foundation leaders describe the following best practices for instituting effective listening approaches:

- **Being clear about the parameters of a listening project.** Foundations must be clear about the expectations they set up with communities and constituents to whom they listen—e.g., what the foundation’s goals are for the process, how listening will inform future funding priorities, how input from advisors or the community will be used, how decision-making rights will be shared across a listening committee and program staff, and what timeline the foundation is working on. For example, before the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation’s Pacific Northwest Initiative launched, the team internally set out parameters for what the foundation could/couldn’t do in terms of new strategy areas, so they could be consistent in their communications with Native American leaders.

Similarly, closing the loop and sharing what the foundation is doing in response to what it heard is as core in order to make listening not merely an extractionist practice. The iterative approach the San Francisco Foundation took in its listening work is a great example of closing the loop with those consulted. The importance of closing the loop at both the foundation and nonprofit level is captured by this researcher in a recent blog post:

“My colleagues and I were often dispatched to gather data in the area.... Frequently, our ‘target populations’ were excited to see us conducting this research. Unfortunately, though, once we had obtained our data, we’d disappear as though we’d never been in the community at all. One day, I was passing back through one such community when I came across two of our former respondents. They lamented: ‘So basically, you just came here to waste our time collecting our opinions—and then that’s that: you disappeared! Since then, we’ve never had anyone come back to tell us the outcome or results of what you were doing here.’”

This frustration epitomizes how communities can often feel after data is collected without follow-up.⁶¹

- **Making room for adaptive strategy.** In order to respond to input from communities, foundations must have the flexibility to change course. Interviewees affirm the importance of being ready to respond to what you hear before engaging in any listening. *“The work is iterative, and you have to be open to that. You have a path that you’re following but you have to be open to allowing the input to dictate where you’re going,”* described one foundation evaluation officer we spoke

60 [“Peer to Peer: At the Heart of Influencing More Effective Philanthropy: A Field Scan of How Foundations Access and Use Knowledge.”](#) Prepared for the Hewlett Foundation by Harder + Co, Feb. 2017.

61 Kashurha, Christian Chiza. Translated by Sara Weschler. [“Hold on; we’re still thinking it through. ‘When will we get a report on your findings?’”](#), Governance in Conflict Network: the Bukavu Series. June 3, 2019.

with. As such, foundations must “ensure that the board and leadership are okay with being flexible and have expectations that are tuned to what can be produced from an approach like listening.” The foundation must, in short, have a point of view on how listening and strategic philanthropy can coexist—something indeed possible but that requires deliberative intent.

- **Building the capacity of both staff who are engaged in listening work and the individual community members or clients involved.** While listening tactics may be relatively commonplace, conversations between foundation representatives and community members likely feel very new and like uncharted territory. For example, staff who led the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation’s Collective Voices for Change convening, which brought foundation staff and people with lived experience together, spoke to the learnings and growth that all participants had. Due to the personal nature of stories shared, staff were reminded again of the importance of being trauma-informed in order to support people with lived experience as they share their stories, adding to the extensive preparatory work staff did early on to make the convening accessible, comfortable, and a safe space. Staff also recognized they need to unpack how decision-making processes can authentically integrate people with lived experience in careful avoidance of tokenism. Building the capacity of staff and community members across the board to support meaningful engagement—from accessibility logistics to effective communication and participation strategies—was key.

Moreover, staff at foundations sometimes have to be trained to treat listening outputs as evidence. As the senior director of learning and evaluation at the Colorado Health Foundation describes, *“A lot of foundations tend to generate evidence through metrics and quantitative measures, but we wanted to train program teams to treat listening as evidence as well...to come at it with rigor, understand how to pressure test it, and be committed to pressure testing their own thinking about the issue and potential solutions in each community.”*

- **Promoting authentic openness and connection.** Listening within a context that has fundamental power imbalances is challenging. Courtesy bias will often lead those being asked to say what they think those with power want to hear. Additionally, those in power will be selective in what they choose to really hear. As such, foundations describe to us how, in bringing voices to the table, they have had to change the framework of who is leading.

“[We had to] make sure [community members] have the efficacy to push back. We had to prepare people so they’re not tokenized and have a voice.”⁶²

Foundation leaders must also be prepared to listen and be changed. Kelley Gulley of the Irvine Foundation describes that funders “must listen deep enough to be changed by what [they]

62 “Confronting Power Dynamic and Engaging the Community’s Voice in Collective Impact,” FSG and the Aspen Institute, 2016.

hear.” Some foundation program officers even took issue with our frame of listening in this paper, as they felt it kept the foundation too primary and established in its position of power. Overall, funders note the importance of building meaningful connections with those you seek to help, citing humility and authenticity as key ingredients.

Yet barriers to listening still remain. Foundations we interviewed describe the following as challenges:

- **Limited capacity:** Lean staff and limited time were the most often cited challenges in our interviews. Direct listening efforts in particular are seen as time- and resource-intensive, and some foundations expressed apprehension about the resources needed to do it well.
- **Concerns about listening outputs:** Foundations fear making false promises by soliciting feedback on changes the foundation cannot make, and express concern about their ability to get candid feedback from communities in light of the major power imbalance at play within the sector. Some also express fear at hearing negative feedback.
- **Attitudinal barriers:** Given foundations’ long-standing history of privilege, some interviewees note that colleagues can often feel their “expert” insights are of greater consequence than the insights of those they ultimately seek to help. Relatedly, some foundation staff consider constituent or community perspectives to be “soft” or “unreliable” and struggle to reconcile lived experience with other more objective measures of “evidence.”
- **Lack of systems to support listening:** Finally, some foundations describe being unsure of how to undertake listening, noting the lack of use-cases and models in their context, and the critical challenge of how to manage the outputs from listening in a non-burdensome and useful way (both as they are procured and in terms of knowledge management). For example, listening activities can run counter to many established institutional practices, such as financial procedures and policies around use of foundation space. Vancouver Foundation, in its report on its youth engagement in *Fostering Change and Fresh Voices*, noted its need for internal capacity building to adjust organizational practices to better support its listening work:

“Organizational choices, such as whether or not to allow evening or weekend meetings in the office or how honoraria should be disbursed, had an effect on the overall climate of inclusion/exclusion. Twice, Foundation administration changed the way youth advisors received compensation. In one case, a youth advisor living in social housing became ineligible for his apartment because he had to declare the Foundation bursary as income.”⁶³

63 [“Vancouver Foundation’s Youth Engagement Report: Learning from Fostering Change and Fresh Voices,”](#) Vancouver Foundation, 2018.

Conclusion

While the best practices we have discussed apply to all foundations, we repeatedly heard inquiries from foundations, especially larger systems-level funders working across multiple geographies, about how they can and should approach this work. Thus, if we had to recommend strategies that seem particularly relevant for these types of funders, we would consider the following entry points as being particularly apt based on our research. [Appendix 4](#) provides a menu for foundation staff to also work through as they consider their listening options.

Institutionalizing Advisory Committees

Advisory committees can be powerful as a grounding force. Having an advisory group of constituents (or representative grantees that are authentically connected, at a minimum) that check in with program teams throughout strategy development and implementation can help ensure strategy remains relevant, help set context, and provide a strong “reality check” for grantmaking as it rolls out. As our research demonstrates, being creative about “how” one pursues listening is often as important as the specific approach selected, particularly given the regularity of many tools and tactics. For systems-level funders to consider how advisory committees could positively translate to their context seems like a strong opportunity for expanding the bounds of how people have traditionally thought about advisory committees, as they often tend to be associated with place-

based efforts. We encourage systems level funders to consider them and experiment to see what they learn.

Codifying Listening During Strategy Development/Refresh

We encourage foundations to codify connecting and reflecting on input from communities or those foundations seek to help as part of the required processes for developing new strategies or pursuing a strategy refresh.

Listening efforts during strategy development/refresh can take multiple forms. The choice of approaches can and likely should vary by program area. Regardless of the chosen method, we would encourage embedding at least one direct listening opportunity as a required part of regular organizational practice. At minimum, prospective community research seems like an especially low barrier to entry way for helping foundations to gain more insight into the context in which they are working at a large scale.

While we have not spoken to the importance of codification significantly throughout this paper, among larger institutions, in particular, we think it is critical to codify expectations for listening by program staff into the written guidelines of the foundation. Along with this, performance assessments and incentives have to be aligned with these guidelines, but it seems critical to both elevate listening as an organizational priority and also make it something to which people are held accountable.

Fortifying Indirect Listening Efforts

Foundations will inevitably continue to rely on indirect listening efforts, particularly through grantees. Given this, we would encourage the foundations that use these approaches to focus on the *efficacy* of these listening efforts to ensure that grantees themselves are implementing effective listening efforts and not merely assume that these organizations have the ear of the people they serve, and to make sure that the foundation avails themselves of the insights from grantee-level listening efforts. In this way, a feedback system is like a chain that can have no broken links.

One way to monitor the efficacy of indirect approaches is to ask grantees about both how they listen and the specific results of their listening efforts as part of the foundation's standard diligence approach. Capacity-building support for listening and responding may also be needed to ensure listening is not an unfunded mandate.

Moreover, if foundations seek to rely on grantees for their listening efforts, they will need to create intentional moments where the foundation and grantee focus on potential shared learnings from the listening efforts. Here again, being thoughtful about “how” this is done to ensure it is maximally authentic and consistent with a spirit of learning is more critical than the “what” of having a meeting.

As recipients of this data, foundations further need to ensure they take positions of humility and openness in consuming the outputs—

listening with empathy and creating space internally to shift their programmatic initiatives and strategies in response to what they hear.⁶⁴ By strengthening these feedback loops at multiple levels, foundations will be able to reliably and credibly learn from partners' listening efforts.

Diversifying Internal Representation

Perhaps the most enduring way to change connection to community and those foundations seek to help is to bring representatives with lived experience into the foundation walls. While less profiled in this paper, we encourage foundations to consider ways to continually diversify their experience base and backgrounds of board, program and administrative staff in a high-quality manner.

Creating Time for Connections

Relatedly, foundations must structure roles so that staff of all levels have repeated opportunities to get proximate to the communities and people they seek to help. We heard from many program officers that they do this naturally as they do not think they can be effective at their jobs if they are not “out in the field,” but foundations must create additional flexibility in roles and demands on program positions to enable these opportunities to flourish. One could envision a 20% “listening allocation” being added to all program staff's roles as a way of creating intentional space for staying connected.

⁶⁴ Kramer, Larry. [“Listening to the people who think we are wrong,”](#) William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, Jan. 10, 2019.

Listening is fundamentally an invitation to take in new perspectives and ways of thinking; however, for it to be systematic, it must be thought of as a set of muscles that have to be strengthened throughout an organization. For it to take hold requires taking a systems mentality. Foundations, as institutions, must create a culture that is supportive of input, structures for ensuring that high-quality listening activity happens, and means for holding people accountable to these expectations. Moreover, internally, leadership must demonstrate an authentic interest in consuming and using this new information, and signal this is a priority to others in the foundation. All pieces of the system must be addressed to lead to change.

We realize what we are calling for is not an insignificant task, but by aligning organizational cultures, internal mindsets, and creating strong infrastructure for listening, foundations can effectively catalyze their listening journeys and benefit from new perspectives that will strengthen their ability to achieve their ultimate objectives.

APPENDIX 1 — FOUNDATION STRATEGY DEFINITIONS

The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation has defined various types of strategy that it can engage in. Relevant to this paper are the following:⁶⁵

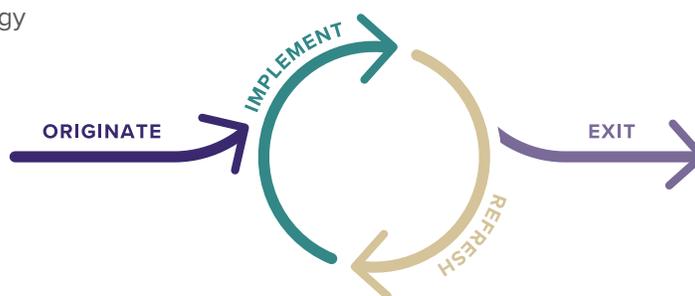
- **Movement Building:** Organizations that follow movement building strategies “*generate energy around an issue and ultimately influence policies, beliefs, and behaviors.*” Typically, movements have “*a clearly articulated vision; an organized and authentic base; strong, diverse grassroots leadership; strategic alliances and relationships, and well-developed communications and advocacy infrastructure.*” Funders in movement building may fund grantees that seek to increase the scale/reach of their movement and the strength of their connections and aligned actions with other key actors (e.g., in research or advocacy). Funder and grantee goals may include change in social norms or public opinions, change in knowledge, attitude or behavior of decision-makers (e.g., policymakers), adoption of new practices among organizations targeted by a campaign, or changes in media framing around an issue.
- **Policy Advocacy:** Organizations that follow policy advocacy strategies engage in a vast array of activities from public awareness campaigns to federal policymaker education in order to change public opinion about an issue. Strategies for advancing policy range from community mobilization to regulatory feedback, among others. Funders primarily support policy advocacy grantees through grants and capacity-building efforts, and their funding is limited to permissible forms of support only, such as the general operating support grants that grantees can allocate at their discretion and project support grants for nonlobbying activities.
- **Field Building:** Organizations that follow field building strategies aim to build the capacity of a network of actors in complementary roles (e.g., funders, researchers, advocates, and policymakers). A strong field can be defined by “*shared identity among actors in the field, standards of practice, a shared base of research and knowledge, leadership and grassroots support, funding, and supporting policy.*” Funders may fund grantees that seek to develop those components—e.g., by building standards of practice, doing research with other key actors, or supporting convenings that promote collaboration or knowledge-sharing. Funder and grantee goals may include changes in knowledge, attitude, or behaviors of actors in the field or scaling of pilot approaches across the field.
- **Research:** Organizations that pursue inquiry to identify new opportunities and best practices in an area, to identify gaps in a landscape, or to generate knowledge for a field—and to have that knowledge shape policy and practice.
- **Direct Service:** Organizations that provide services or programming to individual clients or community members, either directly or indirectly by leveraging an intermediary/distribution partner.

⁶⁵ “[A Practical Guide to Outcome-Focused Philanthropy](#),” William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, Nov. 2016 and Twersky, Fay and Lindblom, Karen. “[Evaluation principles and practices](#),” William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, Dec. 2012.

APPENDIX 2 — PHASES IN FOUNDATION STRATEGY LIFE-CYCLE

For the Hewlett Foundation, the strategy life cycle has four stages:

- 1) Origination, 2) Implementation,
- 3) Refresh, and 4) Exit.⁶⁶



Definitions and key activities in each stage are below.

Originate	Implement	Refresh	Exit
The process of selecting and defining a problem or opportunity, and devising an initial approach to addressing it.	Putting initial plans into operation and execution. Learning, reflection, and adaptation are crucial in this stage.	A more thorough review of a strategy. While good implementation includes ongoing evaluation and tracking of progress, at some point—typically after several years—staff should take a deeper and more comprehensive look at how strategy is going.	The process of winding down a line of work, in whole or part (though it is rare for the foundation to leave a field entirely). Unlike program strategies, exit is built in to the foundation's initiatives, which are time-limited from the outset.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defining the problem or opportunity • Identifying promising approaches • Exploring opportunities for leverage and partnership • Setting the goals and outcomes, tracking progress, and evaluating the work • Developing the strategic approach and implementation plan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Selecting, supporting, and engaging grantees • Engaging other funders and stakeholders in the field • Tracking process and evaluating work • Monitoring the external and internal landscape 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessing progress to data • Scanning for developments in the field and at the foundation • Refining the strategy • Contemplating exit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planning for an exit • Understanding and summarizing results • Managing the exit with external and internal stakeholders • Using and sharing what we have learned

⁶⁶ "A Practical Guide to Outcome-Focused Philanthropy," William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, Nov. 2016.

APPENDIX 3 — FOUNDATION CASE STUDIES

The Colorado Health Foundation

The Colorado Health Foundation invests in non-profits, communities, and the public and private sectors to improve health and health equity across Colorado.⁶⁷ In 2017, the Foundation fundamentally reorganized its approach to impact. Its [Community Engagement IMPACT Practice Model](#) is a multi-stage approach to support communities, which embeds “active listening” as a key part of foundation staff’s information gathering.⁶⁸ A new CEO, with a fundamental commitment to equity, catalyzed this shift in approach but the new practice model has been adopted and nurtured by staff throughout the foundation.

Across all its work, the Foundation prioritizes listening as a key source of insight for its staff. In addition to extensive formal community engagement—program officers meet with key providers and nonprofits; systems, coalitions, and other nonprofits; local leadership; and program participants and community members when exploring an issue area—program officers also take advantage of informal opportunities to engage with the community:

“We have our program officers spend a minimum of 40% of their time in the community, with the idea that you need to be out there, talking to different groups, to build a deep understanding of the context, places, and issues from different points of view.... [Program staff] will even informally chat to folks who they meet on the street or talk to the owners of the coffee shop they’re at.”

67 “[Vision & Mission](#).” The Colorado Health Foundation, 2019.

68 “[Community Engagement Impact Practice Model](#).” The Colorado Health Foundation, Nov. 2017.

Community Engagement IMPACT Practice Model



In addition, the Foundation listens through research—e.g., learning from local newspapers, conducting local media audits and social listening, commissioning studies that tap into the wisdom of those being impacted by health disparities in the community—and through advisory groups.⁶⁹ The Foundation also integrates listening into its evaluations, structuring data collection around the people implementing interventions and those receiving them. Finally, the Foundation has incorporated listening approaches into its strategic communication efforts, particularly through the development of organizational listening tours and road trips to communities across Colorado; through the registration process for and in designing event formats; as well as through customer-service surveys that target email and phone surveys to grant applicants to understand their application experience. Recently, the Foundation launched a new effort focused on public polling related to health issues in Colorado, which they consider to be simply another form of listening.

When considering to whom to listen, the Foundation takes a broad view:

69 Media audits include analyses of the frequency and sentiment on issues that come across media stories via radio, local TV, and newspapers. Social listening pursues the same inquiry leveraging social media platforms.

 APPENDIX 3 — FOUNDATION CASE STUDIES CONTINUED

“We want to hear different perspectives from all actors. So, the end-beneficiaries—clients of the service itself—but also folks who are the deliverers of the service (those running nonprofits and creating programs they will deploy, and government folks in those communities). We think of a community as an ecosystem that is made of all those parts.”

At the same time, the Foundation is intentional around prioritizing perspectives less heard for greater equity:

“We listen equally to everyone, but we prioritize the voices and perspective of those who are low-income and may have historically had less power and privilege, with a particular focus on listening to people who are impacted by any given intervention. We think about how to help them have a voice and a role at the decision-making table.”

Listening efforts inform foundation strategy and implementation, as the Foundation holds monthly meetings that include discussing listening outputs, reflecting on practices around the IMPACT model, and considering how what staff are learning should inform the Foundation’s thinking:

“We take an adaptive strategy approach. Strategies are constantly being planned and re-planned. So, you’ll hear people say, ‘When I was in Alamosa, I heard X about the food system, so we should do Y.’ Then [staff within a cross-functional team] can get into conversations about ‘who did you hear that from? How does that line up with other evidence? What additional evidence do we need to expand or test our thinking?’ We know each person has a slice of the pie and so when we get together, we try to share stories that may bolster or counter what others are hearing, and put evidence together to make sense of it...that helps us figure out what we

should pursue, how we should pursue strategy, which groups have what perspectives, and how we should prioritize.”

As the Colorado Health Foundation has built listening into its priorities, the foundation has been intentional about building staff capacity and understanding of listening as evidence:

“A lot of foundations tend to generate evidence through metrics and quantitative measures, so we wanted to train program teams to treat listening as evidence and...to come at it with rigor, understand how to pressure test it, and be committed to pressure testing their own thinking about the issue and potential solutions in each community.” Another key infrastructure need was building up a tool for knowledge management:

“In listening, it helps to remember what you’ve heard and use what you’ve learned as sources to go back to and mine. It’s a challenge for us when we think about how we synthesize information. We have a system where folks can enter information about their interactions... It’s one of the biggest challenges—we’re out there, pounding the pavement, learning and listening, but how does that come back to the foundation to become useful streams of evidence both for yourself and for others?”

Despite the challenges, Foundation staff describe the foundation’s commitment to listening and its efforts to ground conversations about effectiveness and assessment with a commitment to equity as having fundamentally changed the Foundation.

“At the Foundation, community engagement is a cornerstone of the work we do. It’s both an outcome we strive for, and a process we orient our staff and work around.”

APPENDIX 3 — FOUNDATION CASE STUDIES CONTINUED

The Blagrave Trust



The Blagrave Trust is a UK-based foundation with approximately \$51 million in assets that supports disadvantaged young people aged 14-25 to enable more positive transitions to adulthood.⁷⁰ Specifically, the Trust aims to:

- **Promote and empower young people as powerful forces for change, and ensure their voices are heard in matters that affect them; and**
- **Achieve social impact beyond immediate partners in pursuit of a fair and just society.**⁷¹

As part of its strategy, the Trust prioritizes funding organizations that listen to young people across their work.⁷²

For example, the Trust's policy agenda historically focused on supportive issues such as housing and employment; however, through listening to young people and witnessing youth-led campaigns (on, for example, climate justice with Youth Strikes 4 Climate), the Trust realized that to be led by young people meant being open to supporting the diversity of issues relating to identity, place, or themes which are important to them. This led them to shift their internal policy focus to include climate change.

To more directly influence the Trust's own strategy and distribute power to young people, the Trust is in the midst of transitioning to a youth-led board.⁷³ This will have significant strategy implications according to Trust Director, Jo Wells:

70 "Report and financial statements—For the year ended 31 December 2017," The Blagrave Trust / Sayer Vincent, Oct. 1, 2018.

71 "About Us," The Blagrave Trust.

72 "Commitment Statement," The Blagrave Trust.

73 Wells, Jo, "Reducing social distance' starting with governance: Why we are moving towards becoming a youth led Trust and what this means," The Blagrave Trust, Feb. 22, 2019.

 APPENDIX 3 — FOUNDATION CASE STUDIES CONTINUED

“If we are youth-led in terms of our funding, the nuance of what we fund may be completely different, and we will be funding across a range of areas that are important to young people that we might not have identified in the normal parameters of adult priorities.”

Becoming a youth-led organization is the latest step in the Trust’s journey to becoming more influenced by youth voice:

“It started with gathering feedback, grantee feedback, and a grantee perception report. Then it went to regular touch feedback with grantees. Then it went to bringing our grantees together. Then it went to consulting with them on our policy actions. Now it is going directly to young people, bypassing our partners in some ways and funding a Listening Fund [where we are supporting grantees’ efforts to listen].⁷⁴ I would describe all of it as, at its core, how we listen to people who really count and don’t control what is happening with the assumption that we’re experts, but instead recognize other people have useful things to say and that we have a role to play in re-balancing whose voices are heard in decision-making.”

Integrating youth voice and leadership has required significant capacity building for both end-clients and groups like the Trust’s current board:

“There’s lots of examples of bringing people into a room they’re not familiar with and it’s a disaster. One thing I’ve questioned my adult board—‘Do you want these young people on the board to assimilate into how we already work, or should we change how we work to accommodate them?’”

⁷⁴ The Blagrave Trust is a key partner in a UK-based funder collaborative called the [Listening Fund](#), which invests in scaling practices among grantees that advance youth voice, youth advocacy, and youth feedback to inform programming, and analyzes the difference this makes.

 APPENDIX 3 — FOUNDATION CASE STUDIES CONTINUED

Community Foundation of Greater Buffalo

Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo is a \$485 million community foundation whose mission is to “connect people, ideas and resources to improve lives in Western New York.” The Community Foundation’s current goals center around: education and workforce readiness, racial equity, the environment, and arts and culture.⁷⁵

Listening is a major priority for the Community Foundation and key to its overall goal of a “thriving and inclusive region with opportunity for all.”⁷⁶ From the Foundation’s perspective, listening helps drive equity—“If you want to be inclusive and have opportunity for all, you need to know what ‘all’ think”—and effective development of sustainable solutions. Listening takes place across four levels within the foundation:

1. Organizational strategy;
2. Program strategy;
3. Community leadership of initiatives once developed; and
4. Evaluation of initiatives once implemented.

Examples across the levels include:

- **Organizational strategy:** The Community Foundation undergoes a strategic refresh every five years, during which it conducts a listening tour across its communities to re-examine its community goals.
- **Program strategy:** The Community Foundation had been planning to invest in transportation and childcare to support low-income residents. After community input, the Foundation pivoted, focusing instead on systems-change within education and workforce training to address the root causes of the challenges residents from low-income households were facing. As a representative from the Foundation noted, taking an iterative approach to strategy was key to making this happen.
- **Program implementation/leadership by community members:** “We are very committed to ensuring we have people with lived experience at the decision-making table.... If we are working on re-entry, we want people who have experienced re-entry at the table, leading the effort.” Throughout the scoping process of new initiatives, community leaders emerge, who are then invited to lead, monitor, and oversee the implementation of programming.
- **Evaluation:** The Community Foundation ensures that their community members have the opportunity to voice the impact an intervention had on them. For example, in evaluating its \$2.6 million scholarship program, the Foundation made sure to hear from Western New York students with the least opportunity by including those students’ perspectives in their evaluation.

⁷⁵ “About.” The Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo, 2018.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

 APPENDIX 3 — FOUNDATION CASE STUDIES CONTINUED

The David and Lucile Packard Foundation

The David and Lucile Packard Foundation focuses on *“improving the lives of children, enabling the creative pursuit of science, advancing reproductive health, and restoring the earth’s natural systems”* through core program areas such as climate, population and reproductive health, ocean, and land.⁷⁷

The Packard Foundation is in the process of formalizing listening across program areas and codifying listening as required practice in its strategy development, and monitoring, evaluation, and learning policies. Specifically, staff are exploring how listening can be integrated into strategy processes and guidance, the grantee decision-making process, and through financially supporting grantees to listen to their end-clients. For example:

- To inform a new initiative, the Foundation’s Children, Families, and Communities (CFC) team commissioned ethnographic research about informal childcare. Lacking extensive literature, *“nobody knew how to work out of the known formal systems for early childhood education,”* so the foundation *“engaged research firms to go out to a handful of communities in California to conduct ethnographic-style research and reach out to grandmas, cousins, friends, and neighbors who were all doing informal care and to source from them inputs to a strategy.”* The CFC team used this input as *“a springboard for its early childhood strategy.”*

- The Foundation is emphasizing the importance of grantee listening by asking grantees to describe how they listen to end communities as part of their standard grant application and by supporting grantees financially to listen. In addition, the Packard Foundation has nominated five organizations to participate in Listen4Good, and in 2018, the foundation provided funding to ten grantee organizations working on advocacy and policy to connect with the people they serve.
- The Foundation incorporated participatory evaluation techniques, such as transect walks, to close out and collect final learnings from end-clients during the exit of a multi-decade strategy:

“We had local community members ‘walk’ through our strategy and say how it has evolved over time. It was retrospective, focused on what might we learn for other programming...and putting the local community members we had funded, who had really been doing the work for the last 20 years, at the center of talking about what they thought was successful and not successful.”

77 [“Our grantmaking.”](#) The David and Lucile Packard Foundation.

APPENDIX 4 — MENU OF LISTENING APPROACHES

Many foundations express concerns in figuring out how to get started with listening. The below menu is meant to serve as a resource for foundations considering how to incorporate listening into their work. The menu organizes potential tools into two major sections:

- **Broad listening approaches** that gather general perspectives from a large number of constituents
- **Deeper listening efforts** that listen and/or engage fewer constituents but in a more intensive, in-depth manner

An overall distinction between these categories is that broad listening can often be more representative, whereas deeper efforts that involve a smaller group of people provide opportunities for more meaningful connections but potentially harder-to-generalize takeaways. In addition, we show advantages and considerations for each approach because we believe that all methods involve tradeoffs; it's just about determining which are most benign given your context.⁷⁸

BROAD LISTENING APPROACHES

Approach(es)	Advantages	Considerations
Funding for grantees that are deemed to have a pulse on the community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less resource-intensive • Maintains grantee as primary initiators of listening efforts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintains grantee as primary initiators of listening efforts • Limits foundation's direct engagement with end-community/client • Community may not feel that grantees accurately represent their community
Listening tour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allows for direct listening across wide swath of community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resource-intensive process • Inevitably involves a subsample of people
Prospective community research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allows for direct listening across wide swath of community • Less of a departure from traditional foundation activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Likely requires third party to implement • Can be considered extremely "arms-length" listening lacking engagement
Support for grantee-initiated listening efforts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensures grantees are listening to those they seek to help • Maintains voice of those grantees seek to help through interventions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insights may not be shared with foundation • Insights may not be viewed to be applicable to foundation, given frequent focus on service experience (and thus, on grantee implementation)
Site visits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides opportunity for foundation staff to directly listen to community/clients 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experiences put together can often promote "token" participation of clients or community members • Curated connection(s)

DEEPER LISTENING EFFORTS

Approach(es)	Advantages	Considerations
Ad hoc focus groups, interviews, surveys	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexible approach that can be less resource-intensive • Can be responsive or tailored to specific issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited opportunity for accountability • Can be challenging to generalize results if small sample
Advisory committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embeds those a foundation seeks to help into decision-making bodies on sustained basis • "On demand" source of insight 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Requires intentional time/effort to influence and shift decision-making processes and power dynamics, and move beyond 'token' participation
Employ staff that represent community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Puts people with community connections or lived experience directly in decision-making roles • Advances broader diversity objectives within sector 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Takes sustained commitment and long time to shift foundation staffing patterns
Participatory grantmaking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embeds those a foundation seeks to help directly into resource allocation decisions for sustained period of time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resource-intensive • Challenging to do at scale

- Which 2-3 approaches seem most relevant for your foundation?
- Why did you select the ones you did? For those approaches that seem less applicable, what would have to change within your foundation to make them potential paths to pursue?
- What is one thing you can commit to do to get started in more active listening near-term?

⁷⁸ Adapted from: Louie, Lindsay, et al. "How might we increase & amplify underrepresented groups in collaborative fund structures?," A discussion document from a Gates Foundation-sponsored series of meetings on funder collaboratives, 2019.

APPENDIX 5 — RESEARCH SOURCES

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PHASE I INTERVIEWS

Phase I interviews probed on:

1. Common methods funders use for listening to their end-constituents, including both direct and indirect listening (e.g., grantee-mediated);
2. Differences in listening practice between funders with different focuses in terms of scope and geography (if any);
3. When and for what purpose foundations listen; and
4. Barriers to and missed opportunities in foundation listening practice.

Organization	Interviewee
60 Decibels	Sasha Dichter, Co-Founder
The Aspen Institute	David Devlin-Foltz, VP - Impact Assessment Susanna Dilliplane, Deputy Director of Aspen Planning and Evaluation Program
The Blagrove Trust	Jo Wells, Director
The Center for Effective Philanthropy	Kevin Bolduc, VP - Assessment and Advisory Services
CFLeads	Deborah Ellwood, President & CEO
Feedback Labs	Dennis Whittle, CEO
Fund for Shared Insight	Melinda Tuan, Managing Director
IDEO.org	Jessa Blades, Managing Director - Health program
National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy (NCRP)	Aaron Dorfman, President & CEO
ORS Impact	Juan Clavijo, Consultant
The Rockefeller Foundation	Roy Steiner, Managing Director - Food Initiative

APPENDIX 5 — RESEARCH SOURCES CONTINUED

PHASE II INTERVIEWS

Phase II interviews probed on:

1. Methods foundations use for listening to end constituents, including both direct and indirect listening;
2. When and for what purpose foundations listen;
3. How data has been used to influence decision-making or conversations internally; and
4. Barriers to and missed opportunities in foundation listening practices.

Foundation	Interviewee
California Health Care Foundation	Eric Antebi, Director of Communications Stephanie Teleki, Director of Learning and Impact
The Chicago Community Trust	Jean Westrick, Director of Civic Engagement and Partnerships
Children's Investment Fund Foundation	Scott Chaplowe, Director - Evidence Measurement and Evaluation (Climate) Miles Kempay, Executive Director - Adolescence
The Colorado Health Foundation	Kelci Price, Senior Director of Learning and Evaluation
Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo	Cindy Odom, Chief Community Impact Officer Clotilde Perez-Bode Dedecker, President & CEO
Ford Foundation	Chris Cardona, Program Officer - Philanthropy
Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation	Valerie Nkamgang Bemo, Deputy Director - Emergency Response David Bley, Director - Pacific Northwest Initiative Tracy Johnson, Senior Program Officer - User Experience and Innovation LiLi Liu, Program Officer Pilar Pachecko, Program Officer - Emergency Response Mariana Preciado, Program Officer Kenie Richards, Program Officer David Wertheimer, Director of Community and Civic Engagement
The Heinz Endowments	Matt Baron, Program Officer - Sustainability
William and Flora Hewlett Foundation	Margot Fahrenstock, Program Officer (formerly)
Conrad N. Hilton Foundation	Kristin Aldana-Taday, Program Officer - Domestic Programs Jenn Ho, Learning Officer Bill Pitkin, Director of Domestic Programs Sam Spiewak, Program Officer - Domestic Programs
The James Irvine Foundation	Kim Ammann Howard, Director of Impact Assessment and Learning
John S. and James L. Knight Foundation	Lilly Weinberg, Program Director for Community Foundations
The Kresge Foundation	Chera Reid, Director of Strategic Learning, Research, and Evaluation
Omidyar Network	Jessica Kiessel, Director - Learning and Impact
The David and Lucile Packard Foundation	Meredith Blair Pearlman, Evaluation and Learning Director
The Rockefeller Foundation	Veronica Olazabal, Director of Organizational Performance
San Francisco Foundation	Judith Bell, Vice President of Programs
Thousand Currents	Solomé Lemma, Executive Director
Vancouver Foundation	Trilby Smith, Director of Learning and Evaluation
The Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation	Amy Kleine, Program Director - Housing