Listening is not enough: an assessment of the Feedback Loop Methodology

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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Arbeitspapier / working paper

MAECENATA

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Opusculum No.165
July 2022

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Author's Thanks

The author would like to thank the following organisations: Feedback Labs, Keystone Accountability, Ekouté and Fund for Shared Insight.

The Maecenata Institute

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The **Opuscula series** has been published by the Maecenata Institute since 2000. It publishes smaller studies and research papers as well as work reports from Institute projects. The registration of this series, which is published in electronic form under the ISSN 1868-1840, as well as the allocation of individual identifiers (URNs) by the German National Library ensure the ability to cite the text in full. Cooperation with the Social Science Open Access Repository (SSOAR) project ensures permanent availability of all issues with a fixed URL address. An overview of the latest copies can be found on the last page of each issue.
The entire series Opuscula is available for free download: http://www.opuscula.maecenata.eu

Imprint

Published by
MAECENATA Institut
Rungestraße 17, D- 10179 Berlin,
Tel: +49-30-28 38 79 09,
Fax: +49-30-28 38 79 10,

E-Mail: mi@maecenata.eu
Website: www.maecenata.eu
Editors: Lara Brett, Marianne Sievers, Laura Pfirter

ISSN (Web) 1868-1840
URN: urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-79958-9

Maecenata Institute, Berlin 2022

This publication is supported by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation through the German Chancellor Fellowship for Prospective Leaders programme, which is under the patronage of the Federal Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany. Luisa Bonin is one of the Brazilian fellows selected for the 2021/2022 programme cohort. The project "Strategic Philanthropy: German and Brazilian Private Sector Practices on Social Investment - a Comparative Perspective" has been hosted by the Maecenata Foundation in Berlin, with the mentorship of Dr. Rupert Graf Strachwitz.

Unterstützt von / Supported by
Alexander von Humboldt
Stiftung / Foundation

Abstract: In modern philanthropy, it is becoming more common for funder organisations to claim they listen to the people they want to support, but often with a focus on how much they value listening, and not openly publicising the course corrections that have been made from that. The fundamental question of how funders and foundations listen to those who matter the most for their work and take their voices into account to make decisions may be related to how society criticises and trusts philanthropy. From the perspective that is essential to take beneficiaries' voices into account when making decisions to build a trustworthy philanthropic practice, this article offers an overview of the guidelines and theoretical basis of the “high-quality feedback loop” methodology, as the practice suggests a complete process to collect feedback and course correct in philanthropic projects. Based on published reports, also explores how some foundations in the US implement this process. Going beyond the analysis, it reflects on how the “high-quality feedback loop” process could be more valued by modern philanthropists and become a standard practice.

Contents

1 INTRODUCTION

In modern philanthropy, it is becoming increasingly common for funder organisations to claim they listen closely to the people they want to support, either from a management perspective, an accountability perspective, or even a public relations perspective. The CEOs of most foundations see "listening to and learning from those they seek to help as a path to greater impact".[1]

In this context, the practice of "listening" summarises a myriad of methods used by modern philanthropists: research, ethnography, human-centered approaches, design thinking, co-creation, etc. Whilst this is a vital step towards the essence of philanthropy, organisations tend to emphasise how much they value listening, and how much they learn from it. It is rare to see philanthropic organisations openly publicise the decisions made after listening, the course corrections that have been made, and thus showing how the beneficiaries' voices were taken into account to make those decisions.

The fundamental question on how funders and foundations - including the high and the ultra-high-net-worth individuals involved with philanthropic practices - listen to those who matter the most for their work and take their voices into account when making decisions, possibly relates to how society criticises philanthropy in this century, seeing "philanthropists as driven by a desire to impress rather than by altruism."[2]

All modern institutions need to deal with a lack of trust in their work and roles. Fifty-nine percent of the people interviewed in 24 countries say that "their default tendency is to distrust something until they see evidence it is trustworthy".[3] And this trust challenge is no different with philanthropic practices and foundations. Even with the level of trust in the sector rising after the pandemic, it is still at fifty-nine percent, ranked neutral according to the report's criteria: Distrust (1-49), Neutral (50-59), and Trust (60-100).

To address the question of how trust in funders and philanthropic organisations can be monitored and assessed, the Maecenata Foundation's Philanthropy.Insight Project published, after a series of discussions with the sector, a framework and monitoring criteria that invite funders and foundations to assess their philanthropic actions with the trust lens using five monitoring criteria. The core criteria are Commitment, Public Purpose, Relevance, Performance, and Accountability, and each criterion is broken down into three qualities.[4]

Almost all criteria of the Philanthropy.Insight Assessment Tool reflect on how funders and foundations listen to those at the heart of their work and take their voices into account to make decisions, offering different perspectives and depths:

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[1] Buteau, E., Orensten N. and Loh C. (2016). Center of Effective Philanthropy - The Future of Foundation Philanthropy: The CEO Perspective. Available at:
https://cep.org/portfolio/future-foundation-philanthropy-ceo-perspective/ (Accessed: 18 April 2022).

[2] Breeze, B. (2021). In Defence of Philanthropy. Newcastle Upon Tyne: Agenda Publishing, p.48.

[3] Edelman (2022) Edelman Trust Barometer Report 2022. Available at:
https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2022-01/2022%20Edelman%20Trust%20Barometer%20FINAL_Jan25.pdf
(Accessed: 14 March 2022).

[4] Alter R., Strachwitz R.G. and Unger T. (2022). Trust in Philanthropy - A Report on the Philanthropy.Insight Project 2018-2021, Opuscula 161, ISSN 1868-1840, pp 15-20, p.15. Available at:
https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-77556-v2-4
(Accessed: 14 March 2022).

The framework starts with the "Commitment criteria", with the "Understanding" quality:

"**How is the voice of beneficiaries considered?**", and then this issue expands into more perspectives in the "Respect" quality, where the question is:

"To what extent does a spirit of respect for each and every human being pertain to all activities of the organisation?"

Moving onto the "Public Purpose" criteria, in the quality "Responsiveness", there are two related questions:

"How are institutions, programmes, projects, and actions based on real needs?";

"In what ways are partners, beneficiaries, and experts involved in decision-making processes?"

This issue also arises from an impact evaluation perspective, in the "'Relevance" criteria, in the quality "Impact", the question is:

"To what extent is a discussion process in place to ensure beneficiaries' participation in evaluating projects?"

In the "Performance" criteria, under the quality "Dialogue", there is another directly related question:

"To what extent does the organisation operate on a level playing field with partners and beneficiaries?"[5]

All these questions underline how essential it is to not only listen and collect data for learning purposes, but to effectively take beneficiaries' voices into account to build a trustworthy philanthropic practice. But, going from listening as a one-way extractive practice, such as surveys or consultations that do not involve people in exploring the problems they face and designing solutions, to listening as a practice that effectively creates dialogue, involves beneficiary groups participating in two-way problem-solving conversations that effectively impact the decision-making process, is something that challenges the core governance of many funders and foundations. This especially applies to those grantmakers that make top-down decisions, "where the role of beneficiaries in grant-making is not a priority"[6] Engaging in listening practices has the potential to expose the inherent power imbalance between funders, grantees, and beneficiaries, which is often a taboo. Addressing the issue of how to take beneficiaries' voices into account to make decisions is not an easy or an individual decision, but a collective and responsible endeavour undertaken by all leadership levels of a philanthropic organisation.

[5] Alter R., Strachwitz R.G. and Unger T. (2022). Trust in Philanthropy - A Report on the Philanthropy.Insight Project 2018-2021, Opuscula 161, ISSN 1868-1840, pp 15-20, pp16-20. Available at:
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(Accessed: 14 March 2022).

[6] Eikenberry and Mirabella, 2018, cited in Herro, A., Obeng-Odoom, F. (2019) Foundations of Radical Philanthropy. Voluntas 30, 881–890, p 883. Available at:
https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-019-00136-1 (Accessed: 14 March 2022).

2 THE "HIGH-QUALITY FEEDBACK LOOP" METHODOLOGY AS A POSSIBLE PATH

This assessment offers an overview of the theoretical basis of the "high-quality feedback loop" framework and its sources are the Constituent Voice Methodology by Keystone Accountability and the Feedback Loop Methodology by Feedback Labs. Both practices suggest a guided process to collect feedback and course correct that is based on respect and is only considered complete when an action is taken after the voices of those who philanthropy serves have been heard, meaningfully engaged with, and the decisions taken are communicated back to people who participate in the process.

The Core Principles of Feedback Loop, created by a group informally known as the "Irritants For Change" in 2017 at Feedback Summit in the United States of America, and publicised on the Feedback Labs website, are: "1. It supports human agency; 2. It cultivates power in people; 3. It enhances learning and effectiveness; 4. It's conversational; 5. It's inclusive and insight-driven; 6. It's responsive and continuous; 7. It's reported externally; 8. It's free of harm".[7]

Constituent Voice Methodology was created and practiced by Keystone Accountability, an organisation founded in 2004 in the United Kingdom. Keystone helps organisations understand and improve performance by considering feedback from the people they serve (Keystone Accountability, no date). The Feedback Loop Methodology was adapted from Keystone Accountability's Constituent Voice Methodology (Constituent Voice – Technical Note 1, Version 1.1, 2014), and is taught by Feedback Labs – a US-based organisation founded in 2014. It aims to make feedback the norm in aid, philanthropy, nonprofits, and government.[8]

This methodology and practice offer many possibilities for NGOs, governments, development agencies, funders, and foundations. The focus of this article will be on presenting the methodology and reflecting on how funders and foundations practice it, based on a report by the US based organisation Ekouté Consulting, written on behalf of the Hewlett Foundation (also US-based) in 2019: "Bridging the Gap: a review of Foundation Listening Practices".

2.1 Beneficiaries vs constituents

Beneficiary or final beneficiary is the most common word in philanthropy to refer to the people that are served by aid and philanthropy. But the use of this word potentially has an intrinsic meaning: that people who receive social services from philanthropic projects are in a passive position in the relationship. Renee Ho has written about the problem with the word beneficiary in a blog article called "Do you still use the word beneficiary?" for the Feedback Labs blog: "To be a beneficiary implies a relational weakness to the benefactor." As the "high-quality feedback loop" framework talks about how to effectively listen and act in response to feedback, using a word that empowers people is necessary for a good feedback practice, which is why the use of the word "constituent" is backed by organisations in the "high-quality feedback loop" field. In the same article, Ho returns to the basic meaning of the word "constituent," which is related to the ones that elect a body of representatives, but also an essential part of something, and in opposition to the word beneficiary, to be a constituent means that one is heard and have his/her voice taken into account.[9] Constituent Voice Methodology considers all stakeholders in a development project as constituents: the NGO, the donors, government, peer organisations, community groups, and those who are the primary

[7] Feedback Labs, no date. Homepage. Available at: https://feedbacklabs.org/ (Accessed: 14 March 2022).
[8] Feedback Labs, no date. The Core Principles Of Constituent Feedback. Available at: https://feedbacklabs.org/about-us/guiding-principles/ (Accessed: 14 March 2022).
[9] Ho R. (2015). 'Do you still use the word beneficiary', Feedback Labs Blog, 23 September. Available at: https://feedbacklabs.org/blog/2015/09/23/do-you-still-use-the-word-beneficiary/ (Accessed: 14 March 2022).

focus of the whole system of constituents, those who receive the service in the end, are called the "primary constituents".[10]

2.2 Agent and voice

Constituent Voice Methodology starts its technical note about the practice by presenting how the practice and methodology are built on two lines of thought in development, from Amartya Sen and Jean Drèze, that see human agency as a basic premise in development work. The second theoretical basis of the methodology is on the work of Albert O. Hirschman, which explores how people have two options when facing dissatisfaction as customers: reject the products and services or engage with the services in order to improve them, using their voices. And the methodology works on the premise of supporting people affected by development services to raise their voices to improve the services that are offered to them.[11]

2.3 A mix of businesses and social development practices

The practices that built the Constituent Voice Methodology come from businesses and the development world. Businesses rely on customer service metrics and practices to innovate, stay relevant and grow. Constituent Voice Methodology comes directly from the customer service field. From the development field, the methodology was built on participatory methods, where constituents take part directly, such as focus groups, social mapping, participatory rural appraisal (PRA), and other participative techniques that started in the Fifties.[12]

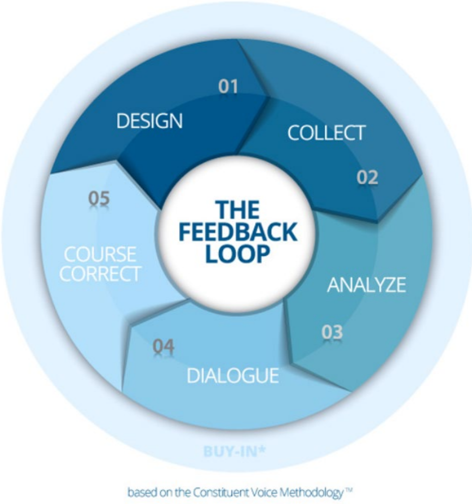
2.4 What does feedback mean in this context?

Feedback Labs defines feedback as the "thoughts, feelings, and perceptions from affected people about a product or service. Feedback is only feedback if it comes from someone, and only if that someone is the only source of that specific information. Feedback is not information about affected people" (Feedback Labs, no date).[13] Feedback can be part of an impact evaluation, that is defended by the "high-quality feedback loop" field, but, when it only concerns information about constituents, and not their perceptions and voices, it is not feedback. For example, in a social project that works to democratise access to period products for women in a community, the information about how many women have gained access to the products is a performance indicator, not feedback. The information on what the recipient thinks and feels about the product and service is feedback.

[10] Keystone Accountability. Constituent Voice – Technical Note 1, Version 1.1(2014). Available at: https://keystoneaccountability.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/08/Technical-Note-1.pdf (Accessed: 14 March 2022).
[11] Keystone Accountability. Constituent Voice – Technical Note 1, Version 1.1(2014). Available at: https://keystoneaccountability.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/08/Technical-Note-1.pdf (Accessed: 14 March 2022).
[12] Keystone Accountability. Constituent Voice – Technical Note 1, Version 1.1(2014). Available at: https://keystoneaccountability.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/08/Technical-Note-1.pdf (Accessed: 14 March 2022).
[13] Feedback Labs, no date. The Core Principles Of Constituent Feedback. Available at: https://feedbacklabs.org/about-us/guiding-principles/ (Accessed: 14 March 2022).

3 FROM LISTENING TO ACTIONS: THE METHODOLOGY

Different organisations in the "high-quality feedback loop" field called their feedback loop cycles slightly different names. The cycle presented here corresponds to Feedback Labs cycle (Feedback Labs, no date), which was based on Keystone Accountability's Constituent Voice Methodology, trademarked in the United States of America in 2013.[14]



(Source: Feedback Labs)

The process has five steps:

Design, collect, analyze, dialogue, and course correct. Before the process starts and during all the phases, the organisation should work to ensure that internal stakeholders (staff and leadership) and external stakeholders (constituents, broader community and others) are engaged throughout the whole process. They called that process **"Buy-in".**

The first step of the process is **"Design".** In this step, the organisation can internally align the goals of the process, and identify key constituents. To the funders and foundations that often have the relationship with primary constituents mediated by field organisations, this discussion is particularly important for understanding from whom they will collect feedback and how to do it in the right way - discuss the collection method, and costs, and make all the planning to this endeavour. Constituent Voice Methodology argues that, in that phase, is essential to involve the people who will provide feedback from the beginning.

The second step is **"Collecting".** This is the step where the feedback is heard. Constituent Voice Methodology uses continuous micro-surveys for that practice, often Net Promoter Score (NPS) questions, that give the respondent a 0 to 10 scale, and occasional in-depth surveys. Feedback Labs offers a range of possibilities on how to collect the data - there are pros and cons for each context. In both organisations, the process of buy-in from the respondents is essential in that phase: the methodology advocates that constituents need to understand why that survey is being done, how their data will be protected and processed, the feedback process timeline, and when they will hear back from the organisation with the results and actions. In both methodologies, this is one of the essential parts of cultivating constituents' voice and trust.

[14] Keystone Accountability. Constituent Voice – Technical Note 1, Version 1.1(2014). Available at: https://keystoneaccountability.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/08/Technical-Note-1.pdf (Accessed: 14 March 2022).

"Analyze" is the third part of the process. In that stage, both methodologies suggest: data aggregation (which creates one-dimensional data, e.g.: '50% of the constituents trust in the service'), as well as data segmentation (where data can be segmented by demographic data, such as race, gender, or location), and data cross-tabulation, showing how constituents answers to multiple questions are related to one another, e.g. '80% of those who trust in the service have said that the service is taken in a place and time that they can attend.' The methodologies also defend the use of benchmarking, comparing results with other internal data and even in comparison to other organisations.

The fourth part of the process is **"Dialogue",** when the organisation reports the data back to the respondents, engages constituents to make sense of the data together and discusses ideas for course correction or adaption, and matches these with the capabilities of the organisation. This phase can be a trap if it is not planned from the beginning: the organisation will only cultivate voices and trust if their dialogue phase respects the constituents and meet their expectations of the process. If at the beginning of the process, the organisations ask constituents questions about things that they know they cannot change, they will only cultivate disappointment.

The last phase is the **"Course Correct".** That final phase is when the organisation effectively closes the loop by putting the findings into action and communicating that back to the constituents. A "high-quality feedback loop"can lead to a series of improvements to the philanthropic practice, that can be incremental and quick to implement, or more medium and long-term improvements that need to be planned and require engagement from the senior leadership team. Feedback loop processes often lead to findings that the organisation cannot address, due to internal or external limitations. In that case, the organisation should still close the loop by communicating these limitations and sharing what they are or are not able to tackle, and with that, the constituents that offered feedback know that, besides limitations, their voices were heard and addressed.

After the course correct phase, the process starts again. It's only considered "high-quality feedback loop" practice when it is continuous and not a "once in a while" action.

3.1 Are funders and foundations closing the loop? A view from "Bridging the gap: A review of foundation listening practices"

The trust-based philanthropy movement and the feedback movement have helped to bring attention to this issue on the funders' side. In 2019, Ekouté Consulting launched a report called "Bridging the Gap: a review of Foundation Listening Practices," written by Threlfall and Klein. The report is available on the Fund for Shared Insight website as a resource on their "Funder Action Menu". The report looked at the extent to which U.S. based funders are listening – and they define listening in the report as when the listening practice informs and leads internal deliberations and decisions. The report started by saying that there is a huge gap between how foundations see the importance of listening and how they put the listening practice into action. The report presents different listening approaches and strategies practiced by the foundations interviewed and also features real case examples.

The report separates the practices by who they are listening to: from direct listening - when they hear directly from the primary constituent, to indirect listening - when the listening occurs via the grantee organisation. It ranks them based on the foundation's characteristics: Geographic reach (regional, national, or international), Overall strategy (movement-building, field building, policy advocacy, research, or direct service) and on the phase of decision-making (strategy formulation, implementation, evaluation, refresh, or exit) that the listening is happening.[15]

The report concludes that funders that are geographically closer to the community they support tend to listen more to their constituents directly, and the most used tools are prospective community research; advisory committees; listening tours; and selecting grantees that are deemed to be "representative" of a community.
The foundations that work on a system level show less institutional commitment to listening to the constituents, except for those who work with movement building. System-level funders tend to rely on the grantees as the bridge between them and the final beneficiary.

As for closing the loop in practical terms, the report says that the research was not able to see clearly that practice happens in the major part of interviewed foundations, and concludes with tips from the authors on how to leverage the practice. Examples of these tips include: being clear about why are they listening and what will they do with the information (that includes being transparent about the limitations of their decision making process after listening); having an adaptive strategy; build listening skills in both staff that is involved in the process, and in the community members involved; and promote openness and connection in order to enable honest voices in a power imbalance context.[16]

The barriers to the listening practices listed by foundations interviewed in the process were: "limited staff capacity and the resources needed to do it well; concerns about the listening outputs (negative feedback, opening expectations that they cannot deliver, or even the ability to get candid feedback due to the power imbalances); attitudinal barriers from foundation staff such as the "expert" hat they put on during every decision-making process, and a general lack of systems in philanthropy that support the practice: case studies, a community to exchange challenges and learnings, etc" (Threlfall and Klein, 2019, p. 38).

3.2 How power imbalance possibly operates inside the feedback field

The power imbalance in philanthropy is a complex issue openly discussed in the Feedback field by the majority of actors, and even as an open discussion, it is possible to see power dynamics playing a role in the way the own feedback practice is perceived when done by NGOs in comparison to funders. The expectations of NGOs to do that are higher in comparison with funders or foundations, and these higher expectations can be perceived by some as natural, considering how close NGOs are to primary constituents, and how the ability to listen is pursued with more engagement by organisations that work directly with the primary constituents.

On the funders' and foundations' side, the lack of a direct relationship with primary constituents can possibly make the process of listening not a natural skill they have intrinsic to the practice of grantmaking. Grantmaking can be, in comparison with NGOs, more bureaucratic and more performance-oriented, in a way that the tolerance for those funders and foundations that do not do "high-quality feedback loop" practice is higher. And that can lead to normalising the struggle that funders and foundations have to put listening into practice, in a way that does not urgently demand them to rethink this part of their culture. And when we tackle corporate responsibility practices or even corporate foundation practices that have their culture created by the business and with no relationship with primary constituents, this process can be even more difficult to address.

[15] Threlfall V., Klein R. (2019) Bridging the Gap: A review of Foundation Listening Practices. Available at: https://www.ekoute.com/publications/2019/10/9/bridging-the-gap-a-review-of-foundation-listening-practices (Accessed: 14 March 2022).
[16] Ibid.

3.3 High-quality feedback loop practice as a performative measure

Due to the process of increasing strategies and practices adopted by non-profits from businesses in the last decades, often funders, foundations, and corporate social responsibility actors invest and engage in impact evaluation, research, management tools, and external consultancies. They do everything in order to make philanthropy effective, strategic, and trustworthy.

A good question in this context that often lacks primary constituent voices leading to decision making is: are the projects also strategic and effective for primary constituents in the same way they are presented as strategic and effective for funders and foundations?

The business technical approach, when adopted in philanthropy, may instil the false notion in leaders that they are already using all the tools available and doing all they can to do it correctly. But this same business logic and techniques are only praised as efficient in the business world when backed by profit results. And these profit results are, according to business logic, market signals from customers - such as increasing or decreasing consumption of certain services or products.

In philanthropy, where market signals (customer feedback) are not intrinsic to the practice, there is no automatic mechanism to do that.[17] So, it is possible that, when philanthropists apply business tools and frameworks without internal processes and techniques that actively listen to and address primary constituent voices and turn that into decision-making and strategies, philanthropists are not just neglecting to serve the ones they promise to serve, they are also potentially misusing business tools, with the false notion that they are, indeed, on the best strategic path.

What the Feedback field calls “high-quality feedback loop” practice (when the cycle of the feedback loop is complete and actions are taken from the primary constituent voice and communicated back to them) should be, together with all the other business performance tools such as impact measurement, project management, external consultancies, etc, a practice that is essential to consider a funder, foundation or a corporate social responsibility philanthropic practice effective and strategic in a business logic way. If this practice is included within a performance measurement, from a business market logic, it can perhaps be defended by more leaders as playing a key role in how strategic and effective a funder, foundation, or a corporate social responsibility project is perceived, and with that, maybe become a more massive trend practice in the modern philanthropy toolkit.

[17] Feedback Labs, no date. The Core Principles Of Constituent Feedback. Available at: https://feedbacklabs.org/about-us/guiding-principles/ (Accessed: 14 March 2022).

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URN: urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-79958-9

ISSN (Opuscula) 1868-1840