Engage to Change

From Client Feedback to Participant Involvement
Engage to Change: Participant Engagement for Nonprofit Service Organizations

The New York Foundation (NYF) and the Building Movement Project (BMP) noted several years ago that some nonprofit service groups were changing their relationship with their clients. They were moving away from the common way of seeing people who come to their doors as recipients or beneficiaries of the organization’s expertise and services. Instead, this small – but growing – number of groups worked with their program participants as partners in making change in their own lives, the organization, and in the surrounding community. To understand this trend, we convened a series of conversations with a dozen New York City nonprofit service delivery organizations in a “Learning Lab” to discuss the motivation, benefits, and challenges of embracing this different way of engaging clients and community members.

Engage to Change comes out of our Learning Lab discussions and a mapping process to catalogue the varied modes of doing the work. We partnered with the Center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP) and design studio WeShouldDoItAll (WSDIA) in order to create a providers and funders concrete examples of why meaningful participant engagement makes a difference. We also include a link to a list of resources that can be helpful for those who want more information.

Service organizations are meeting the immediate needs of their constituents and provide essential supports. At the same time, many of these groups recognize how larger policies and procedures can make their job harder and limit options and opportunities of their program participants. With increasing inequality, slashes in public budgets, and greater demand on their services, nonprofits are looking for new ways to do their work. The set of strategies outlined here describes how some service organizations are integrating social change into their everyday work. Supporting the voice of their service recipients helps clients gain a sense of efficacy and gives organizations new ideas and people power for making needed change.

For more than 100 years the New York Foundation has been a supporter of community-initiated solutions to solve local problems. Believing that the resilience and vitality of New York City’s neighborhoods is its greatest resource, the Foundation supports work that inspires residents to become more informed, active participants in the life of the city.

The Building Movement Project views nonprofit groups as important players in addressing issues of inequality and helps them build their capacity to engage and support the communities they work with and serve. Building Movement Project has a decade of experience working with nonprofits, especially service providers, on how they can integrate social change practices into their everyday responsibilities.
Housing, food, counseling, and other social services fill critical needs in underserved communities.
But these needs are also the symptoms of systemic problems.
Some service organizations are addressing both these symptoms and their causes. And they’re doing it with the help of important experts: the participants they serve.
Client feedback vs. Participant engagement
Client feedback

helps organizations get answers to specific questions.

1) How would you rate our programs?
2) Are they making a difference in your life?

Participant engagement

asks participants for their expertise and engages them as decision makers. This helps ensure they’re getting the services they really need, and invites them to be partners in creating social change.
Here are strategies that some service organizations use to integrate social change into their everyday work.

Each organization is different! Size, mission, and capacity shape how different organizations carry out this work. One group may use many of these strategies, and another might focus on one.
Key principles that guide the work:

- Figure out the systems and structures that need changing
- Share power with participants
- Organize around long-term outcomes

Examples of activities used to achieve them
Figure out the systems and structures that need changing
Listen to participants, and identify and prioritize issues with them
Host civic education events
Share power with participants
Bring participants onto boards and advisory committees
Train and support participants as leaders within the organization
Create pathways for participants to become staff members
Organize around long-term outcomes
Introduce advocacy and community organizing activities
Register and mobilize voters
Train and support participants as leaders within the community
Key principles that guide the work:

Figure out the systems and structures that need changing

Examples of activities used to achieve them

Share power with participants

Organize around long-term outcomes
Example I: Changing organizational practices to meet community needs
Vision for change:
In a season of budget cuts, staff at a settlement house lobbied the state to keep funding vital programs. They reflected on their success and saw how the campaign complemented advocacy for community needs in other areas of their work. Staff decided an increased commitment to direct advocacy and community organizing throughout the agency would make them a stronger partner to their community in achieving social change.
What They Did:

- Created an advocacy committee to coordinate campaigns across departments and train staff on issues.
- Introduced a yearly Town Hall where participants and staff share budget priorities with elected officials.
- Added a commitment to organizing and social change to all full-time job descriptions.
Organization and participants advocate together for community needs
Impacts

01. Organization’s structure and hiring practices reflect commitment to community advocacy, leadership development, and social change

02. Staff and participants are aligned around community priorities and prepared to advocate for them
Example II: Focusing on leadership development to create long-term impact
Staff implemented health programming focused on improving individual health outcomes.

Vision for change:
A small community development organization envisioned improving individuals’ health by improving the broader health of the community. They saw focusing on youth development as a way to both improve health outcomes and foster a new generation of leaders in community-driven social change.
What They Did:

- Introduced a peer-to-peer education model
- Aligned programming to create an “empowerment pipeline” that supports youth from middle school to college or employment and beyond
- Integrated social justice and community organizing activities into youth programming
After:

Youth lead health programs with other youth, and participate in activities that develop them as leaders in creating a healthy and sustainable community.
Impacts

01. Youth are empowered as educators and agents of social change

02. Youth contribute directly to the long-term health and sustainability of their neighborhood
Example III: Re-framing roles to support participant engagement
Before:

Staff and volunteers served participants meals and provided other services

Vision for change:
A neighborhood-based soup kitchen envisioned not just alleviating but ending hunger and poverty. They evaluated their staff and volunteer models, and realized their participants could play a bigger role in carrying out that mission.
What They Did:

Instituted a membership model that treats everyone who walks through their door as a member and contributor to the organization, not as a client.

Created a Community Action Program, where members provide expertise and organize around policy issues.
Members and staff serve meals together. Members also help guide the organization’s programs, participate in advocacy campaigns, and engage in community organizing.
Impacts

01. Organization shifts from treating participants as clients to sharing power with them as members.

02. Membership programming provides a forum for identifying and prioritizing issues to organize around.

03. Members are engaged in shaping the organization and advocating for social change.
For more resources related to what you see here, visit www.nyf.org/engageforchange

Special thanks to the participants in the New York Foundation’s Learning Lab:

Bridge Street Local Development Corporation
Chhaya Community Development Corporation
Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation
Fifth Avenue Committee
Henry Street Settlement
Jacob Riis Settlement House
MinKwon Center for Community Action

Neighbors Together
Queens Community House
Red Hook Initiative
Resilience Advocacy Project
Union Settlement House
United Neighborhood Houses

This project is a collaboration of the New York Foundation, the Center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP), and the Building Movement Project.

The New York Foundation is a steadfast supporter of community organizing and advocacy. Our grants support community-initiated solutions to solve local problems, constituents mobilizing for adequate and equitable resources, and groups organizing a collective voice among those whose voices have not been heard. nyf.org

The Center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP) is a nonprofit organization that uses the power of design and art to increase meaningful civic engagement, particularly among historically underrepresented communities. welcometoCUP.org

The Building Movement Project develops research, tools, training materials and opportunities for partnership that bolster nonprofit organizations’ ability to support the voice and power of the people they serve. buildingmovement.org