



Raising constituent voice

By listening and responding to beneficiaries, impact will be enhanced, says David Bonbright.

I WRITE TO herald a young, but most important trend in the world of charities – listening to those we intend to help.

Everyone listens informally, but what I am talking about is listening systematically through rigorous surveys, in ways that are fully reflected in management dashboards, that are followed through by closing the loop with survey respondents, and that transform the cultures of our organisations so that they become truly constituent-centered.

Listening and learning

I mean listening in the way that Apple or Enterprise Rent-A-Car listen to their customers. This revolution in organisational culture began in the business sector in the 1960s.

‘Customer satisfaction’ has since grown into a multi-billion dollar global industry that enables millions of companies to listen, learn and respond – effectively and profitably – to their customers.

In the commercial sector, nurturing customer loyalty is a well-developed craft that is taught in business schools and debated in a vibrant professional literature. Consumers can compare user ratings on virtually any product, for free.

A 2008 study of ‘beneficiary feedback’ in the USA (*The 21st-century potential of constituent voice*, available at www.keystoneaccountability.org/node/341) found that:

- Every charity had complaints mechanisms they took seriously;
- They all undertook ‘client satisfaction surveys’ but no one got much value from them, mostly

because the feedback was uniformly positive;

- None of the charities reported back to survey respondents what they were hearing; and
- Most were aware that they were leaving the real value to be found in feedback ‘on the table’.

“ We need our sector’s equivalent of the ‘customer satisfaction’ industry ”

Five years later and things are moving, with a groundswell of awareness about the importance of feedback and a few early pioneering examples.

If we want action – organisations listening and responding to their constituents in a way that raises performance and enhances impact – we need to stimulate the demand for feedback and provide the professional support infrastructure to meet that demand. We need our equivalent of the ‘customer satisfaction’ industry.

This raises a couple of important strategic questions concerning the field of ‘constituent voice’: how do we get an appropriate infrastructure for a scale-up of constituent voice; and what would it look like?

During the early stages, funders will have to play a leadership role:

- First, they can stimulate demand by asking grantees to report on what their primary constituents think about their work;
- Second, they can provide adequate financial support to collect and use this feedback; and
- Third, they can invest in the development of the wider

infrastructure of support for constituent voice.

With new communications technologies dramatically reducing the cost and effort required to collect feedback, now is the moment to invest in constituent-voice data-infrastructure and services.

Rating charities’ performance

Perhaps the most important contribution to date is by Charity Navigator, the world’s largest charity rater, based in the US. Its 2013 Results Reporting model incorporates constituent voice at its heart. In the future, it will rate US charities according to their answers to the following six questions:

1. Does the charity publish feedback data from its primary constituents?
2. Does the published feedback data include an explanation of how likely it is to be representative of all primary constituents?
3. Does the data include an explanation of why the organisation believes the feedback is frank and honest?
4. Is that data presented in a way that shows changes over time, going back at least one year?
5. Does the data include questions that speak to the organisation’s effectiveness?
6. Does the organisation report back to its primary constituents what it heard from them?

Consider how transformative it would be if civil society organisations everywhere could answer each of those questions in the affirmative. ■



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