Constituent Voice/Feedback Commons

Introduction
By listening and responding systematically to the constituents of societal problems we can dramatically improve the effectiveness of our collective efforts to solve those problems. Organizations that operate effective feedback mechanisms improve performance and intended outcomes. As evidence to support these claims, we need look no further than the contribution that customer feedback metrics have made to the performance of consumer facing companies over the past 50 years. Now is the time to bring the benefits of disciplined, rigorous feedback mechanisms to social change work.

We created the Feedback Commons™ to make it easy and affordable for any social organization to collect and analyze high quality feedback from its constituents. Members of the Feedback Commons will be able to use this “one-stop shop” to:

• Assemble questionnaires from a data base of questions that other organizations have used and rated;
• Benchmark their feedback data with that of other like organizations;
• Access high quality technical knowledge and tools relating to data collection/surveys, data validation and analysis, closing feedback loops, and all other aspects relating to the craft of cultivating and using feedback;
• Identify and recruit vetted service providers and apps at the Constituent Feedback App Store (www.thefeedbackstore.com); and
• Ask questions and share experiences with other members of the Feedback Commons through a peer community of practice and knowledge.
Keystone history

Keystone Accountability was established as a charity in the UK in 2007 and in the United States and South Africa in 2008 with the mission to enable all organizations to cultivate feedback from constituents effectively and affordably. It is the world’s first nonprofit consulting firm specializing in constituent feedback to solve important societal problems, for which it developed a unique methodology, now trademarked as Constituent Voice™.

Keystone’s origins go back to 2003, when David Bonbright convened development leaders around the idea of improving social change measurement practices by listening more systematically to those who were meant to benefit from those practices. Several years of methodology development included deep dives into the domains of action research, participatory development, evaluation, accountability reporting, and performance management. A decisive step forward came in 2007-8 when Keystone began to blend customer service industry techniques with participatory development practices. It first published the resulting Constituent Voice™ methodology in 2009. Since then it has been providing feedback-based measurement services to a diverse and growing list of clients in over 14 countries. In launching the Feedback Commons, it is making a giant leap forward towards its mission of enabling every organization to practice Constituent Voice.

Figure 1: Work in progress: wireframe of Feedback Commons prototype (annotated)
Photo: Questionnaire development consultations with communities receiving post–flood assistance in Sind, Pakistan

Challenges
After years of field level experience and hard slogging, we are beyond “proof of concept” with respect to all the key elements of the model. We know firsthand and from our clients’ results that feedback works. We know that our Constituent Voice™ methodology works, and can be taken up effectively by diverse organizations. We know that benchmarks are an important tool to deepen the understanding of feedback data, and an important incentive to improving performance. Yet, despite the demonstrable power of the model, and the self-evidentiary character of the core propositions, it remains a significant challenge for organizations to take the leap to seriousness about feedback.

The absence of the power of choice in a marketplace
We learned from our interviews with the founders of the customer service industry that there was a similar challenge when that industry began in the early 1960s. Nurturing customer loyalty based on systematic surveys is now a well-developed craft that is taught in business schools and debated in a vibrant professional literature. There are formal professional qualifications, and a steady stream of conferences and professional associations. Consumers can compare user ratings on virtually any product, for free.

None of this is true for other constituent groups, such as the intended beneficiaries of public development services or the two billion plus vulnerable people affected by business supply
chains, including workers, small-holder suppliers, and communities neighboring mines and drilling operations.

Tried and tested customer service practices have not spread to these settings because these intended beneficiaries and affected communities – which we think of as the primary constituent of social change – lack the type of power that consumers have. The intended beneficiaries of government and non-profit services are normally not the direct payer of the service. They rarely have a choice between alternative providers. Intended beneficiaries, workers, smallholder suppliers, and affected communities are not visible to those who do have choice – affluent consumers, foundations, charitable givers, legislators.

**Five barriers to taking feedback seriously**

Focusing specifically on development services providers, we have seen that in principle these organizations want to be accountable to their intended beneficiaries. After all, their very existence is to serve them. But without direct incentives to listen, it is difficult for them to overcome five common barriers related to taking feedback seriously:

i. Capacity: the experience and craft of collecting and using feedback well.

ii. Negative consequences: perceived risks that feedback will generate expectations in respondents that organizations cannot meet, or that feedback will put organizations in a bad light to funders.

iii. Confounded priorities: the competing priority to listen to the main funders of their work – donors, foundations and governments.

iv. Excessive self-interest: the inherent tendency of organizations to value narrow organizational interests more highly than advancing the mission.

v. Arrogance: The subliminal but oft-observed “we know better” attitude that can infect professionals.

What this means for Keystone Accountability in general and for the Feedback Commons in particular is that we need to be realistic about the rate of growth to expect. We need to be rigorous in documenting the evidence of the benefits of feedback so that we can be more persuasive in “making the case”. We need to be patient, remembering that we are not likely to enjoy the rates of growth seen in the customer service industry.

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1 The 2009 Keystone Accountability and Alliance for Children and Families white paper, *The 21st Century Potential of Constituent Voice: Opportunities for Reform in the United States Human Services Sector*, found that human service agencies deeply valued client feedback, but did not get much value from their client satisfaction surveys, which were mainly undertaken as a federal or other funder-driven compliance exercise. Agencies said that they would like to put client feedback at the heart of their work, but that they lacked the specific know how to do so.