THE 21ST CENTURY
POTENTIAL OF
CONSTITUENCY VOICE

OPPORTUNITIES FOR REFORM IN THE
UNITED STATES HUMAN SERVICES SECTOR

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Acknowledgements

Executive Summary

This white paper wrestles with a seeming paradox. There is an enduring and widely held conviction among human services leaders that feedback from primary constituents is of great – perhaps even paramount – importance in their work. And yet in practice human service agencies do not find current formal feedback practices to be helpful. The myriad forms of feedback human service organizations receive from service beneficiaries and other stakeholders (such as satisfaction and outcome surveys) are not realizing their potential for transforming the way human service providers, service beneficiaries and funders work together to create positive social change.

The project that created this paper was generated by our interest in learning why current practices are perceived as unhelpful and whether making data more comparative would improve the effectiveness and utility of feedback efforts. For example, would human service leaders be better able to use feedback to improve services if they could compare their results with those from similar organizations? Our conviction about comparative feedback as a promising remedy is inspired by the significant positive impact *comparative* customer feedback has had in the world of business, with the work of JD Power and Associates in the global car industry (starting with Toyota) over the past 45 years being an iconic illustration.[1] The customer satisfaction influence can already be seen in the world of nonprofits in the field of organized philanthropy through the Grantee Perception Reports™ of the Center for Effective Philanthropy. The key insight from these examples is that feedback produces improved outcomes more readily when it can be understood in relative terms. Our action learning explorations set out to discover whether and how this insight applies to feedback in the field of human services.

In this report, we share initial results from an ongoing learning and innovation project in which three organizations – Alliance for Children and Families, the United Neighborhood Centers of America (UNCA), and Keystone Accountability – tabled three initial questions with leaders from Alliance for Children and Families and UNCA member agencies and with strategic grantmakers:

[1] Denove and Power, 2006

Why have formal feedback efforts not been sustained, valuable or transformative?

What opportunities are there to reform current feedback processes to make them more useful and transformative?

What opportunities are there to develop feedback data and processes that compare across agencies?

To plumb these questions, we conducted a survey of leaders in Alliance and UNCA members, and held six focus groups, five with providers and one with government funders. Focus group participants represented diverse geography, staff roles and agency budget size. We also presented and discussed the preliminary findings at the Alliance for Children and Families annual national conference.

Our research discovered six distinct themes that define the role that feedback plays among nonprofit organizations and their stakeholders: fund accountability, improvement, strategy development, capacity building, civic engagement and societal education. We characterize these themes as the feedback purposes framework. This multiplicity of purposes complicates the development of effective feedback practices. We found that, typically, in the absence of a clear understanding of feedback purposes among those with the greatest stake in feedback, only the purposes of the funders would be met.

The findings from the survey and focus groups support and deepen our understanding of the challenges reflected in the multiplicity of feedback purposes. They indicate that inconsistency surrounding formal feedback can be attributed to disagreements and a lack of clarity between agencies and their funders (largely those from government) about the purposes of feedback. A simple example reflects the challenge diverse feedback purposes creates for using feedback effectively: Government funders may use feedback as evidence that grant monies are used for the precise purpose for which they were given (such as job training) whereas a human service provider may wish to use feedback to improve the services they provide. In such cases, agencies leaders defer to their funders, "using up", as they put it, their management quota for feedback by meeting the low-value requirements of funders at the expense of cultivating feedback for high value data that leads to improvements inside their organizations. We might think, "But it does not have to be this way." True. But this is the way it is today in human services in the USA.

The study has six principal findings:

1. **Measurement is a core management function.** All respondents participate in some kind of formal measurement activity and pursue a core set of measurement activities.

2. **Agency leaders believe in the transformative potential of feedback.** Study participants believe in the potential of feedback to strengthen their work.

3. **Feedback is underdeveloped and therefore of inconsistent value.** Nearly half of the respondents find the feedback they currently get is only sometimes useful.

4. **There is no consensus between providers and funders about the goals of feedback.** The goals that providers seek from feedback differ from the goals they are required to address by funders.

5. **Lack of capacity limits agencies' efforts.** Agency leaders have too little infrastructure to use feedback to improve their work in meaningful ways.

6. **Feedback data are not reported back to constituents; feedback is not used to foster mutual accountability.** Reporting is directed at funders and not toward meaningful discussion of results with the primary constituents who provided the feedback in the first place.

In sum, we found that agency leaders embrace feedback and its potential for creating learning relationships with their primary constituents, but a variety of critical factors inhibit them from creating the conditions for quality feedback and mutually accountable relationships around it. All stakeholders, most importantly those intended to benefit from human service organizations, are negatively affected by this state of affairs, and resources invested in them are not used to maximum effect.

There is great potential for reform, based in agency leaders' commitment to the transformative possibilities of feedback. We have drawn together five recommendations that together project a clear reform agenda.

1. **Human service organizations and funders should jointly adopt a comprehensive feedback purposes framework**

2. **Human service organizations should take advantage of the opportunity for leadership to improve feedback efforts**

3. **Feedback efforts (and measurement more generally) would be more effective and sustained if they were approached in a bottom-up fashion**

4. **Develop mechanisms to create genuinely comparative data to strengthen the utility of feedback for all stakeholders**

5. **Adopt the feedback principle of public reporting**

Reform requires close collaboration among all stakeholders: funders (particularly government funders—the dominant source of financial support to human service organizations), providers and primary constituents. Each must acknowledge the multiple goals of feedback, respect their importance to different stakeholders and align measurement activities with feedback goals. Each must be willing to change established practices. Funders must accept some provider independence in defining what feedback matters across multiple purposes. Agencies must be open to the potential of comparative data to illuminate the highs and lows in their performance. The beneficiaries of service must be involved in planning, reporting on results and progress. Creating comparative feedback data sets offers a proven way to do this. Another would be to adopt a reporting standard that requires that feedback on an organization's stated results always be included alongside the publication of those results.

Ultimately, this report points to two clear requirements to realize the transformative power of constituency feedback. First, funders, agencies and service recipients need a shared framework for understanding how feedback can be used to serve multiple purposes. Second, we need comparative feedback, which simultaneously clarifies the meaning of feedback data by establishing a norm, and creates incentives to take feedback seriously in order to be best in class.

This white paper concludes by highlighting a leadership opportunity for the human services field to innovate to develop the new tools required to realize multiple feedback purposes through data sets made up of comparative constituency feedback. More, it finds a large reservoir of interest and energy for the required innovation process. The Alliance for Children and Families, the United Neighborhood Centers of America, and Keystone Accountability look forward to working with human service leaders to cultivate Constituency Voice and increase the social returns for the families most affected by human service organizations.

Resolving the Paradox of Constituency Feedback

This white paper on constituency voice is offered to the field of human services to foster discussion and promote innovation. It wrestles with a seeming paradox. There is an enduring and widely held conviction among human services leaders that feedback from primary constituents is of great – perhaps even paramount – importance in their work. And yet in practice human service agencies do not find current formal feedback practices to be helpful.

This paper is part of a larger learning and innovation project in which the Alliance for Children and Families, the United Neighborhood Centers of America (UNCA), and Keystone Accountability are collaborating to improve the effectiveness of human service organizations through greater transparency and strengthened relationships among all stakeholders, in particular by improving the ways that service recipients provide feedback and in other ways influence the management and governance of the organizations that exist to serve them. The project began in 2007 with an initial feasibility consultation process.[2] This paper is the main output of the second phase, which has been conducted in an action research mode.

The second phase culminates with the March 2009 publication of this white paper along with a companion proposal proposing a number of possible ways in which Alliance and UNCA members may collaborate with Keystone and others to innovate new, more effective and more enduring forms of constituency feedback. This innovation process proposal is designed to launch a third 'action innovation' phase of the overall project.

Our initial hypothesis – honed through the 2008 consultation process – indicated that the perceived failure of existing constituent feedback data to make human service agencies more effective could be overcome if data could be made comparative. This white paper unpacks a number of enablers for such a step change in organizational performance based on comparative data, including: (a) the added power of comparative data over absolute data, (b) the emergence of benchmarking in other data areas for human services organizations, (c) affordable new communications technologies, (d) trusted associations of human service organizations, (e) supportive and engaged funders, (f) appropriate operational tools, and (g) organizational management cultures that are comfortable with comparative data.

Our conviction about comparative feedback as a promising remedy is inspired by the significant positive impact comparative constituency feedback has had in the world of business, with the work of JD Power and Associates in the global car industry (starting with Toyota) over the past 45 years being an iconic illustration.[3] The customer satisfaction influence can already be seen in the world of nonprofits in the field of organized philanthropy through the Grantee Perception Reports™ of the Center for Effective Philanthropy. The key insight from these examples is that feedback produces improved outcomes more readily when it can be understood in relative terms. Our action learning exploration set out to discover whether and how this insight applies to feedback in the field of human services.

The project as a whole is motivated by a sense of urgency among many human service organization leaders to do more to produce societal change of a kind that addresses the root causes of poverty and ill-health. In taking our cues from the human services field, we begin by noting that most in the field recognize that at present their reach extends only to the margins of the community, family and individual problems that they seek to address. Improving relationships between providers and clients sits at the top of their 'to do' list for realizing significant progress.

How We Worked

Our work proceeded along three streams. First, we consulted with human service leaders and undertook a literature review to ensure that our research questions and framing of the problem were recognizable to practitioners. The resulting three research questions focused on formal feedback.

1. Why have formal feedback efforts not been sustained, valuable or transformative?

2. What opportunities are there to reform current feedback processes to make them more useful and transformative?

3. What opportunities are there to develop feedback data and processes that compare across agencies?

The second workstream involved a membership survey and the third workstream manifested through six focus groups. The membership survey asked about the current feedback activities, including sources of comparison for the data they collected. The focus groups, which took place after the initial survey data were collected, allowed us to explore the limitations of current feedback practices and opportunities for reform.

[3] Denove and Power, 2006

MEMBERSHIP SURVEY

We organized the membership survey into three parts: demographics, current practices and comparative activities. The demographic sections addressed respondent role, agency budget size, location and the agency's quality management function. The current practices section asked what leaders seek to learn from feedback activities, the kinds of activities they undertake, how agencies report their results and attitudes about feedback. The focus in the comparative dimension portion of the survey was current sources of comparison and leaders' interest in comparative data. We have provided a copy of the survey and results in the appendix to this report.

We invited people in senior leadership positions in Alliance and UNCA member agencies to complete the survey. We sought the broadest possible participation and accessed respondents in several ways. The survey was distributed to the executive directors from both organizations via e-mail. In addition, we distributed the survey to the Alliance's senior leadership group list-serv and reached out directly to professional colleagues in both organizations to encourage them to complete the survey. There were 75 survey respondents, which reflect roughly fifteen percent of the Alliance/UNCA membership, a solid response rate, when measured against similar surveys and research standards for generalizability. The use of additional data from focus groups (described below) and its alignment with the survey results make the findings more robust. Survey respondents represented a cross section of member agencies and staff roles, including executive directors (51%), quality managers (26%) and senior program staff (23%). More than 50 percent of respondents came from organizations with annual budgets over $10,000,000; another thirty percent had budgets between two and a half and ten million dollars, and fifteen percent had annual budgets less than that amount. Respondents came from 26 states.

FOCUS GROUPS

We designed the focus groups to generate a more in-depth understanding of the perspectives of Alliance and UNCA members regarding feedback. In selecting focus groups, we sought diverse groups that reflected several key criteria. First, we sought diversity in organizational role. It was important that we consider feedback not only from the perspective of executive directors, but also from senior program staff, and particularly, senior staff responsible for quality management or evaluation activities. Second, we sought groups that had a history of collaboration and high levels of trust among members on the assumption that such groups were more likely to speak candidly about their experiences. Third, we wanted geographic diversity to reflect the variation in feedback practices across the country. Fourth, we sought representation from both Alliance and UNCA members. Finally, as the critical influence of funders came

into bright relief, we added a focus group of public funders to learn about their perspective on the issues raised by providers. This session served our purposes particularly well because it followed the five provider focus groups. Table 1 provides summary information about the six focus groups.

Table 1: Overview of Focus Groups

Focus Group Location	Group Description	National	Professional Role of Participants	Number of Participants
St. Paul, MN	Metropolitan Alliance of Community Centers	Alliance, UNCA	Senior Staff	8
Bridgeport, CT	Connecticut Council of Family Service Agencies	Alliance	Executive Directors	6
Lansing, MI	Michigan Federation for Children & Families	Alliance	Quality Managers	6
New York City, NY	United Neighborhood Houses	UNCA	Executive Directors, Senior Staff	6
Tampa, FL	Children's Board of Hillsborough County Providers	Alliance	Executive Directors	10
Tampa, FL	Florida County Children's Boards	n/a	Commissioners	6

In order to try to make sense out of the diverse and often conflicting characteristics of prevailing management and measurement systems among human service organizations and their funders, we looked behind them for the purposes that drove them. We found six distinct purposes to feedback and other evaluative activities through a literature search, including academic journals, trade publications, popular media and websites of organizations involved with this issue. We then developed a framework based on these six purposes and used it in the survey and focus groups. We presented and discussed the framework and preliminary findings at the Alliance for Children and Families annual national conference.

We found that many human service organizations and their funders use feedback as a tool for advancing one or more of these six purposes. A principal finding of the study is, however, that few if any providers or funders work individually or together to articulate feedback goals across all six purposes. This lack is a major source of confusion and underperformance around feedback and other evaluative activities.

This paper proceeds in five parts. First, we present a brief historical context. Then we introduce our feedback purposes framework. Third, we recount the regulatory and financial context within which nonprofit human service organizations operate. Fourth, we report our findings. Fifth, we share our recommendations and conclusions.

Historical Context

This white paper grows out of two related traditions.

One is focused on empowering consumers to ensure that their voices are heard by those who create products or provide services for them. The other is based in concerns about how nonprofit sector leaders measure organizational performance. Both traditions have generated ongoing debates over the focus of their efforts and effective practice. New approaches have emerged in response to critiques only to be replaced by newer reforms defined by different critiques.

Consumers Union is the organization most associated with the consumer tradition; its history is representative of the consumer rights movement more generally. It began by identifying safety risks in consumer products defined by scientists and other specialists. Its original role was simply to publicize what it learned about consumer products to generate awareness and encourage change. President Kennedy's 1962 statement to Congress on consumer protection, and ensuing legislation, dramatically raised the profile of this issue.[4] Subsequently, Consumers Union evolved into a national organization, first emphasizing consumer voice through product surveys and later citizen advocacy as a means of creating policy changes focused on ensuring safety and fair treatment for consumers.[5] The "consumerism" movement continues to grow, and in its more recent manifestations it emphasizes the role of consumers as active partners in the creation of services, activities and the institutional frameworks within which they operate – including legal and regulatory. Applied to human services, consumerism argues consumers must have a voice in assessing the adequacy of services they receive or the community building processes in which they participate.

The second tradition focuses more on organizations that provide services than on their intended beneficiaries. The emphasis has been on organizational performance, defined in many different ways. Over the past forty years, nonprofit sector leaders have pursued a variety of approaches to assess organizational performance. Each approach has added value but has been ultimately unsatisfying and led to alternative methods. Reforms have reflected diverse feedback purposes (see the framework below), and reformers have struggled to find the right approach. Satisfactory performance measurement has remained an elusive concept; each iteration, however, reflects

[4] Special Message Protecting the Consumer Interest, 1962.
[5] http://www.consumerreports.org/cro/aboutus/history/printable/1940/index.htm.

increased learning and understanding. A United Way report chronicles this history, identifying several phases.[6] Those include financial accountability (1960s and 70s), emphasizing documentation that organizations spent the money they received; program products or outputs (1970s), providing descriptions of what organizations produced; adherence to quality standards, emphasizing best practices as guidelines and epitomized by the creation of the Council on Accreditation in 1977; participant-related measures (1980s) involving the collection of demographic data to ensure organizations serve those most in need; key performance indicators (1980s) defined in terms of key input/output ratios and; and client satisfaction (1980s), a nod to consumerism that underlined the role for beneficiary input about services received.

United Way's outcome measurement movement, which began in the 1990s, stemmed from the concern that earlier efforts had not captured what happened as a result of the provision of services. In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in providing greater context for organizational outcomes, based on concerns that outcome data were difficult to interpret in isolation. As this report indicates, sector leaders have begun to look to comparative data to help interpret performance data. As our survey data show, benchmarking operational data is beginning to catch on across the sector. Comparative constituency feedback is still extremely rare, however, and where it does exist it is rudimentary. But there is now a well-developed example among human service organizations' funding partners in private organized philanthropy.[7]

This history reflects the ongoing effort in nonprofit management to include consumer voice in service delivery and improve performance measurement. Through the lens of this action learning project, we discern, in the history, an implicit but as yet unrealized goal to develop equitable partnership among stakeholders so that community-building efforts result in sustainable social change. We take this goal to be essential to carry forward, recognizing that a consensus about it needs to emerge if it is to be realized, including the place of constituency feedback within it.

[6] Plantz, Greenway & Hendrick, 1997
[7] www.effectivephilanthropy.org

Feedback Purposes Framework

We define feedback as the range of information organizations receive about their performance from various constituents (such as service recipients, funders and community organizations).

Feedback may be formal or informal. Informal feedback describes efforts that are less systematic but provide the information used by organizations to critique their performance, such as the stories or asides of service recipients that provider staff routinely share and discuss. Formal feedback refers to systematic collection of feedback data through well-regarded methodologies. For the most part, in this paper, when we refer to 'feedback' we mean formal feedback.

We began with the assumption that feedback from those who are meant to benefit from an organization's work can contribute significantly to improved organizational performance, but will only do so when there are sufficient consequences for organizations for not taking feedback seriously. In other words, given the existing structure of rewards and incentives, nonprofit organizations will heed other signals (notably, those of funders, board, and staff) most readily. As a result, the voice of primary constituents is grossly underrepresented in organizational decision-making.

A wide range of sources validates this assumption; however, writers rarely discuss feedback directly. In nearly all the sources we consulted, feedback was an important element in the relationship between nonprofit organizations and their stakeholders. Feedback per se, was rarely the lead subject; rather it was an essential but implicit means to an end. This is also apparent in the absence of explicit analyses of how organizations choose among competing stakeholder needs and interests with respect to feedback, or to the trade-offs between the purposes for which feedback is being sought.

Nevertheless, our research discovered six distinct themes that are most dominant in defining the role feedback plays in the relationship between nonprofit organizations and their stakeholders: fund accountability, improvement, strategy development, capacity building, civic engagement and societal education. While feedback is instrumental for all six elements, it plays a different role in each. Table 2 summarizes the framework, highlighting the predominant relationship dyads for each purpose.

Table 2: Feedback Purposes Framework

Feedback Purpose	Predominant Relationship	Role of Feedback
Fund Accountability	Funder/Grantee	Verifies Activities
Improvement	Provider/Staff	Provides Data to Improve Operations
Strategy Development	Provider or Funder/Staff	Provides Data to Improve Strategy
Capacity Building	Provider/Primary Constituent	Empowers Primary Constituents (through experience, confidence and access)
Civic Engagement	Provider/Primary Constituent	Facilitates Responsiveness to Primary Constituents
Societal Learning	Provider/Community	Communicates Learning to Society-at-Large; Empowers Primary Constituents (when public reporting includes constituency feedback)

FUND ACCOUNTABILITY

The fund accountability perspective highlights the relationship between organizations and their funders, using feedback to verify that funds were expended for intended purposes. Fund accountability seeks to ensure that the governments, private institutional funders, and individual donors who provide resources to providers know precisely how donated funds are spent. These resources are not given freely; they are intended to lead to a meaningful result defined by a contract, grant agreement, or other statement developed by an organization on its own or in collaboration with a donor. Fund accountability is about verifying that recipient organizations used the resources they were given to do what they said they would do and/or accomplish what they said they would accomplish.[8] This tradition provides the rationale for the popular funder emphasis on outcome measurement as a means of documenting what happened as a result of a funder's investment in an organization.[9]

Feedback from recipients of service is a source of information used to determine what happened in an activity or program paid for by the funder. While feedback comes from individual service recipients (or those otherwise directly engaged with the organization in its work), the accountability perspective emphasizes that funders are the primary audience for the feedback the organization collects.

[8] Benjamin, 2008; Carson, 2000; Coastal Enterprises, 2008; Easterling, 2000; Fischer, 2001; Hoefer, 2000; Jordan, 2005; Oxfam, 2008
[9] Julian, 2001

IMPROVEMENT

The improvement perspective emphasizes the primary value of feedback to provide organization leaders with information for strengthening performance,[10] maximizing critical management values, such as efficiency,[11] improving organizational learning[12] and assessing the overall effectiveness and impact of an organization's work.[13] Feedback from constituents provides organizations with information they can use to learn about and improve their performance and effectiveness. Writers who emphasize the importance of organizational learning identify feedback from primary constituents (service recipients) as the main source for that learning.[14] While primary and secondary constituents are likely to benefit from improved performance (and shape management values), the focus of data collection and analysis is strengthening internal operations.

STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT

Feedback data can be used to adjust program strategy. It can inform not only how an organization works, but also what other program activities it chooses to pursue. This purpose highlights the different uses that providers and funders can make with the same feedback. Providers and funders can use the data to inform both how they work and what they choose to do; however, because they do different things, they may focus on different issues. A funder may, for example, explore feedback from service clients to identify weaknesses in its current portfolio of grants, understand how it could develop new programs of non-monetary support for its grantees, or even how to interpret and share learning across different parts of the grantmaker's organization.[15] In the same way, governments use feedback from social service recipients as critical data to inform their understanding of social problems and their approach to addressing those problems, leading to new or modified service activities. In general, the more an organization considers the other actors in the ecosystem in which it operates, the more it will want to utilize constituency feedback to inform its strategy.[16]

CAPACITY BUILDING

Feedback quality over time depends on what happens with the feedback. Service recipients who find that their feedback "makes a difference" – who are empowered by and through the feedback process – invest more time to it. Typically, primary constituents come to organizations with little or no experience in providing feedback. In these very common circumstances, feedback activities succeed most when they build the capacity of feedback providers to participate and communicate their opinions. Creating spaces for primary constituent participation strengthens capacity for feedback. In this case, creating spaces for voice can make a contribution to the empowerment of

[10] Behn, 2003; Nicholson & Crotty, 2006

[11] Liner, Dusenberry & Vinson, 2000; Sawhill & Williamson, 2001

[12] Chemlinsky, 2001; deLancer & Holzer, 2001; Minett, 1999; Moynihan, 2005; Oxfam, 2008; Sterman, 2006

[13] Herman & Renz, 1997, 1999, 2002, 2004, 2008; Sowa et al., 2004; Thayer & Fine, 2001

[14] Chemlinsky, 2001; deLancer & Holzer, 2001; Minett, 1999; Moynihan, 2005; Oxfam, 2008; Sterman, 2006

[15] Alliance Online, 2007

[16] Keystone, 2008

disenfranchised communities[17] by providing new means of access to decision-making, contributing to healthy, competent and self-determined communities.[18]

There is an inspiring further twist to this empowerment dynamic to feedback. At times, the process of engaging in feedback and other evaluative activities can directly further the objectives of the intervention or organization. While not always possible to construct, there are examples of this kind of "ideal metric." One famous example comes from the addiction treatment regime of Alcoholics Anonymous, "I have been sober for 393 days." This metric is embedded in the ordinary functioning of AA meetings, and is both a measure of progress that is closely monitored by the addict and the organization, and it is an affirmation of forward resolve.

In sum, by improving the capacity for providing feedback, an organization raises feedback quality, which means the data will be more useful for multiple purposes. You could say that a 'purpose' here for feedback is to raise feedback quality, or to create the conditions in which that quality is maintained or improved. This implies that there are threshold conditions for effective feedback that may need to be put in place as part of any evaluative feedback activity. Often the skills and confidence of service recipients need to be enhanced in order for them to enter and engage effectively in participatory evaluation processes.[19] This means that providers need to invest in building those capabilities.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

In broad terms, civic engagement is about mobilizing citizens of a community to become involved in democratic governance so that their voices are part of decision-making processes. A growing number of human service agencies find that by enabling their service recipients to become active citizens their service recipients directly improve their lives while contributing to policy improvements.[20] This is based on the idea of "development as freedom," that where there is freedom, individuals and families are the best agents of their own development.[21] In this context, feedback is focused on advancing the collective thinking and action among service recipients for civic improvement. It is particularly useful for gauging the extent to which organizations are enabling the agency of their constituents.

If we apply this perspective directly to human service organizations, we would think of the organizations as polities, and the service recipients as constituents whose voice in the organization needs to be cultivated and listened to. This is not an unqualified argument for formal governance rights, although in some cases that is appropriate. From this perspective, data derived from feedback take a backseat to the ongoing relationships between organizations and their primary constituents. Civic engagement promoters value feedback as a way of engaging with constituents that "[puts] beneficiaries first."[22]

17 Fetterman, 2006
18 Coombe, 2004
19 Cornwall and Coelho, 2006; Johnson, 2000
20 Pinsoneault, 2006
21 Sen, 1999
22 Bonbright et al, 2006, p. 1

This approach emphasizes transparency and responsiveness to service recipients; it uses feedback activities to address inherent power imbalances in the relationships between organizations and their constituents.[23] Feedback from this perspective is the means for establishing terms of partnership between an organization and its primary constituents; it legitimizes organizations with their primary constituents,[24] builds trust, and ensures mutual concern and respect. Some argue that offering citizens the opportunity to define what feedback is important and participate in evaluation efforts increases trust in public institutions in general,[25] and potentially non-governmental organizations as well.

In this context, the learning that comes from getting and analyzing feedback is defined in terms of its value to primary constituents. This approach emphasizes that those most affected by the problems organizations seek to address are most likely to know what works well and what does not.[26] It also hypothesizes that the quality of the relationship with primary constituents is the best predictor of impact.[27] This is important for a field where impacts (defined as sustainable positive changes in well-being by service recipients) are often unknowable in the short term. This perspective is similar to the emphasis in the for-profit sector on getting feedback from customers to enable businesses to develop products that meet customer needs. One recent article describes how the San Francisco Opera used this kind of feedback. The Opera made changes in its operation based on surveys of what patrons "want to see, how they want to see it, how much they are willing to pay or donate, and what they expect in return."[28] The changes led to increased attendance and renewed energy in the organization.

SOCIETAL LEARNING

The feedback purposes we have discussed so far emphasize the relationships between distinct groups of stakeholders (human service providers, service recipients and funders). In contrast, the societal learning perspective reminds us that the work of human service organizations implicates a fourth stakeholder: the wider society within which that work takes place. Feedback plays an important role in determining what those involved in service delivery (providers and their constituents) have learned as a result of their work together. It is important that they share the knowledge they create together with the general public. What they learn puts the community into the day-to-day fight to address complex social problems. Sharing that knowledge can lead to changed attitudes, policy change, and more rapid diffusion of improved practices.[29] This purpose is grounded in a theory of change hypothesis that argues that societies solve important societal problems when they learn how to solve them.[30]

Feedback also generates new knowledge that, when put into the public domain, creates public goods. If a public reporting standard were adopted that requires that primary constituents' reviews of

[23] Bonbright, 2007; Kiryttopoulou, 2008
[24] Oxfam, 2008
[25] Yang & Holzer, 2006
[26] Kiryttopoulou, 2008
[27] Keystone, 2006
[28] Snibbe, 2007, p. 35
[29] Bonbright, 2003; Waddell, 2005
[30] Keystone, 2004; Keystone, 2006

an organization's stated results always be included alongside the publication of those results, then the purpose of societal education would also empower primary constituents.

Two Definers for Human Services: Finance and Standards

The pathway to our findings proceeds mainly through historical analysis of approaches to measurement, bringing us the feedback purposes framework.

To complete the picture, however, we need to highlight the two defining factors for human service organizations in the US today: finance and standards. There are, of course, other important factors, but field leaders and commentators most often cited these two dimensions.

The revenue environment within which nonprofit human service organizations operate shapes their approach to feedback. The Nonprofit Almanac,[31] using figures taken from the 2005 information return 990, reports that nonprofit human service organizations have three primary revenue sources, fees for services and goods (53%), government grants (23%) and private contributions (16%). The "fees" number includes income generated from government programs such as Medicaid and Medicare; private contributions include support from United Ways, foundations and corporations. Our action research involved two national human service membership organizations, The Alliance for Children and Families and United Neighborhood Centers of America (UNCA). Their members rely on five primary revenue sources: United Way, government grants (federal, state and local), foundation and corporate grants, individual contributions and fee income. A 2001 Alliance report describes the distribution of revenue for its members. They received 33 percent of their support from fee income, 29 percent from various public sources (entitlements, such as Medicaid and Medicare, and state and federal grants); 21 percent from various private sources (including foundations); and five percent from United Way. Table 3 summarizes these reports.

[31] The Nonprofit Almanac, 2008, p. 108

**Table 3: Major Revenue Sources
Nonprofit Human Service Sector (2005) and
Alliance for Children and Families Members (2001)**

Revenue Source	Human Service Sector (2005)	Alliance for Children and Families Members (2001)
Fees for Services and Goods	53%	33%
Government Grants	23	29
Private Contributions	16	26
Investment Income	3	7
Other	5	5

Government funders, foundations and United Way represent institutional interests with distinct reporting requirements, some of which require feedback from their primary constituents. United Ways across the country have embraced outcome measurement as a means of demonstrating accountability to their donors.[32] Public and private funders each have their own reporting requirements, each with their own preference for some flavor of 'outcomes' and 'results-based' management.

This state of affairs complicates reporting for the many Alliance and UNCA members balancing multiple revenue sources. For example, it is not uncommon for a human service organization to receive funding from federal, state and local governments, sometimes for the same service. This reality creates practical challenges for many organizations because each funder may have different reporting goals with different feedback required.

Furthermore, accrediting bodies define a wide range of practices organizations must follow, including feedback from primary constituents. Typical accreditation frameworks emphasize organizational leadership, infrastructure, setting expectations, data analysis, improvement processes and staff training. For Alliance for Children and Families and United Neighborhood Center of America members, the major accrediting body is the Council on Accreditation (some members also pursue accreditation through other organizations such as the Joint Commission (for hospitals and social service organizations providing medical care) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children and others).

The Council on Accreditation requires all accredited organizations to meet standards related to "performance and quality improvement".[33] The COA standards present a systematic approach to data collection and analysis that has the potential to complement the reporting requirements organizations face from public and private funders. For accreditation, agencies must meet standards in six areas (we have

[32] Plantz, Greenway & Hendrick, 1997
[33] Council on Accreditation, www.coanet.org

provided COA standards in the appendix). The standards include leadership support; infrastructure; collaborative development of measures and goals; effective plans for data collection and analysis; reporting and using findings for improved practice; and ongoing staff development.[34] The COA standards emphasize the process of performance and quality improvement and not specific measures. What is important, however, is that while COA and other standards may represent perceived best practices in performance management, there is little coordination between funders and accrediting bodies.

In sum, we found that efforts at establishing feedback mechanisms in human service organizations have proliferated over the past fifteen years as a consequence of the requirements of Federal government reporting, expansion of formal accreditation, and United Way of America's outcome measurement movement. We also encountered widespread and varied criticism from human service leaders of many of the ways in which "outcome" and "client satisfaction" requirements were applied to them. Some point to the limits of what providers can learn from what one sees as inflexible box ticking schemes. Others suggest that quality management efforts are too retrospective in nature. Still others point to the related attempts to create cross-organization comparisons as fundamentally misguided, under-appreciating the difference context makes in working with primary constituents. Finally, there are concerns that current feedback processes actually undermine the role of those giving feedback.

It is in this way that the collection and analysis of feedback has become a management norm, albeit a controversial one, for "effective human services management practice." Our collection of new data from Alliance and UNCA members allows us to explore these issues to determine how they are managing the challenges of feedback and to identify opportunities for improvement.

Findings

The findings from the survey and focus groups support and deepen our understanding of the challenges reflected in the feedback purposes framework.

In fact, the findings tell a clear story. They indicate that inconsistency surrounding formal feedback can be attributed to disagreements and a lack of clarity between agencies and their funders (largely those from government) about the purposes of feedback. As the agencies see it, they "use up" their management quota for feedback by meeting the very low-value requirements of funders at the expense of cultivating feedback for high-value data that leads to improvements inside their organizations and informs mutually accountable

[34] Council on Accreditation, www.coanet.org

learning dialogues with primary constituents. More research on funder perspectives is needed, although our funder focus group did indicate that there is scope for a generative conversation involving funders and providers to explore how to meet multiple purposes for feedback in a complementary way. Similarly, more research is called for on the primary constituents' experiences of giving feedback to discover when and how it can be valuable for feedback givers.

We elaborate the story of our findings in depth below.

1. Measurement is a core management function

We began with the assumption that measurement is very much on the rise at nonprofit human service organizations. The survey and focus groups provide empirical support for this assumption. All respondents indicated that they participate in some kind of formal measurement activity and members pursue a core set of measurement activities in nearly all organizations, most notably outcome measurement (99%), satisfaction surveys (97%), program evaluation (89%) and quality assurance (86%). Collecting feedback formally is understood to be a core agency measurement activity. Other advanced forms of measurement are also featured in the management of many organizations, such as community surveys (56%) and benchmarking operational and clinical data (28%). Figure 1 summarizes these findings.

Figure 1: Measurement Activities Undertaken by Alliance/UNCA Member Agencies
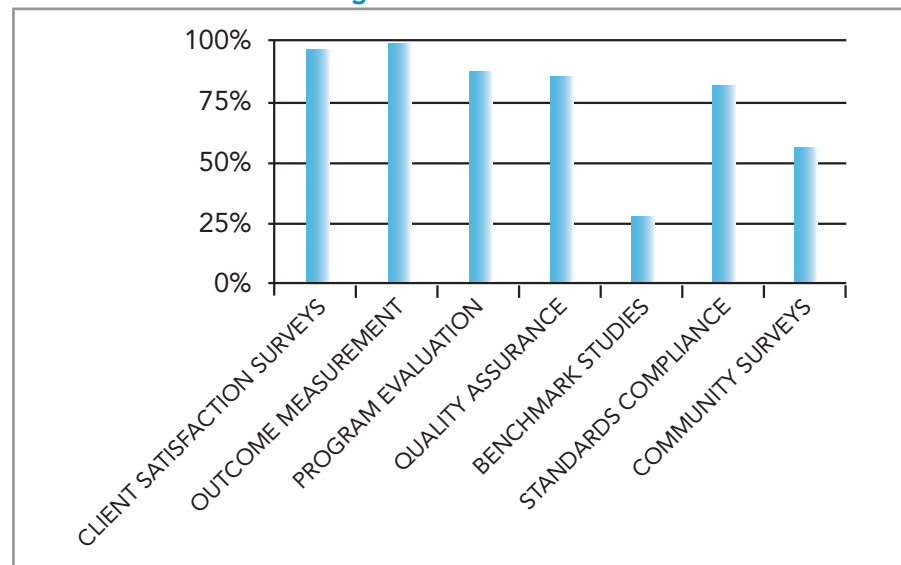
2. Agency leaders believe in the transformative potential of feedback

One of the major conditions contributing to the proliferation of measurement activities in Alliance member agencies has been an increase in performance measurement requirements from funders and accrediting bodies. The imposition of requirements from

external sources raises questions regarding what leaders of the organizations seek to achieve from measurement requirements. Survey respondents expressed strong support for measurement efforts and indicated that using the data they collect to strengthen their performance is a priority. Asked their level of agreement with the statement "Evaluation is an agency priority. Evaluation data are systematically analyzed to improve organizational performance," 74 percent indicated agreement or strong agreement; 15 percent disagreed.

3. Feedback is underdeveloped and therefore of inconsistent value

The first two findings tell a positive story, they indicate that there is considerable measurement activity taking place and that those agency leaders who are involved with measurement view it as a valuable enterprise.

Yet, that story is incomplete. When survey respondents and focus group participants were asked to go inside the measurement toolkit to look at formal feedback, they raised concerns that the data they get (and by implication the tools they use to collect feedback data) are of inconsistent value. One important measure of the value of feedback is the frequency with which feedback results in organizational change. In our survey, we asked how frequently feedback leads to changes in respondents' organizations. Respondents split their answers between sometimes (40%) and often (54%); less than five percent indicated that feedback always results in organizational change. One can interpret these results as a glass half empty or half full; however, with forty percent of respondents expressing ambivalence about how feedback affects organizational performance, there are legitimate concerns that the feedback they are receiving is not as useful as it could be.

Focus group discussions enable further interpretation of the survey results. One of the most consistent themes to emerge from the focus groups was that the quantitative methods organizations used to collect data (such as client surveys dictated by funders) are imprecise and do not provide useful information. Surveys tend to ask close-ended questions, using yes/no or Likert (five to seven point) scales. The most common objection was that agency leaders cannot interpret them effectively. There are two main reasons for this. First, information for improvements is not present. For example, simple satisfaction questions may not provide sufficient variation or specificity to provide guidance to workers trying to understand how to improve their programs. Averaging five out of seven points on a satisfaction scale does not give a leader the information needed to make changes in an organization's activities. Second, there is no context to understand what the score really means. A fever thermometer would have little value as a measure of one's health if it were not known that 98.6o is "normal." This interpretation problem is normally corrected by comparative data, but we uncovered no

experience of comparative feedback among those surveyed in the study.

Others suggested that data collection methods are not sensitive to cultural differences and affect the reliability of responses to survey questions. One focus group participant argued:

> New immigrants may not be familiar with American evaluation and customer service paradigms. There may be problems in survey data collection because clients may not respond honestly to evaluation questions, based on their perception of evaluation expectations.

Developing culturally sensitive feedback mechanisms required agency staff to be in constant conversation with their primary constituents so that the staff could get the feedback they needed to improve the program.

There was, by contrast, considerable support among nonprofit leaders for using more qualitative feedback methods, such as open interviews and focus groups. They argued in our focus groups that qualitative approaches were necessary to interpret results. That is, interviews and focus groups provide elaboration that moved beyond the limited information close-ended surveys provide enabling workers to develop more detailed diagnoses of what works and does not work for service recipients.

Through focus group discussion it emerged that staff tended to think of written client feedback surveys as unrelated to focus group and interview work. They did not seem to be aware of the common business practice of using written surveys to provide a first level diagnosis to be deepened through subsequent open-ended interview methods. Nor was there a sense expressed in which the written surveys could provide a "reality check" with respect to organizational investments made in response to diagnoses from interviews and focus groups. This lack of what might be termed a multi-prong approach may have something to do with the next finding, and may partially explain why providers "use up" their quota of measurement effort responding to what are widely perceived to be irrelevant donor requirements.

Similarly, the absence of a comparative approach to feedback is another indicator of the relative underdevelopment of feedback practices. The online survey showed 28 percent participated in benchmarking studies; presumably many of these were part of the Alliance for Children and Families' Benchmarking Initiative, which is run by Behavioral Pathway Systems. That effort provides cohort, state, and national comparative data for participating Alliance members on over 50 performance indicators across a range of administrative, financial, operational, and clinical data. It does not include feedback at this point.[35] Behavioral Pathway Systems CEO Paul Lefkovitz indicates that this Initiative has already in its first year enabled participants to work through the initial resistance to

[35] Behavioral Pathway Systems, 2007

being compared against others, to learn from each other, and begin to focus in on areas for improvement. The participants in this project, still only a minority of Alliance members, represent a leading trend to create a stronger evidence-based decision-making culture among human service organizations.

4. There is no agreement between funders and providers about the goals of feedback

The goals that providers seek from feedback differ from the goals implied in funders' reporting requirements. This theme dominated focus group discussions. Focus group participants discussed several common experiences that reflect this problem.

First, many of the feedback tools that funders commend to providers emphasize compliance over outcomes. Compliance gets at outputs, such as the number of units of an activity an agency provided, and standards, whether the agency carried out its activities in the way the funder (or licensing body) required. While this information may be useful—to a certain extent it gets at provider accountability through verification—it provides little information of value for providers. For instance, focus group participants wanted to know whether their activities led to any meaningful change for those who participated and what worked or did not work for their primary constituents. Government funders' tools do not generate that information. One person argued "funders want numbers: output and availability. It's 'make work' and meaningless." Another participant echoed that concern:

> All government sources want to do something when it comes to measurement, but most data mean nothing. The bar is too low. Data are not meaningful. They are making compliance work. We report outcomes, but there is not a lot of learning. The data provide us little to deal with.

A third participant summed up this perspective arguing that government measurement efforts amounted to "hoop-jumping" and "paper-pushing."

A second example of the disjunction between government funders and provider agencies is the perception that the outcomes government funders seek are either the wrong outcomes or are not really outcomes. This concern reveals the deeper political chasm that sometimes separates government funders and agencies. In each of the focus groups, participants noted that with some programs, what they were seeking to accomplish was not the same as what their funders were seeking to accomplish. As a result, agencies solicit feedback to measure outcomes that are not meaningful to them, and the data the outcome measurement tools generate is not useful. One focus group participant commented:

> We follow funder prescriptions for collecting feedback, but they don't measure the change that would make a difference. We're measuring the wrong things. It's a systemic problem. There is a disconnect between organizations and funding systems.

In one example, an agency representative indicated that a program serving at-risk youth measured changes in behavioral choices but not changes in the underlying condition driving those choices. In that program, the underlying condition was immigration status. For the staff from that agency, data on challenges associated with immigration status would have been more useful – in, for example, reforming the public policies that were contributing to unwanted youth behavior – than the data they collect about behavior change; however, funder requirements focus their feedback efforts on behavior.

Third, focus group participants expressed concern that feedback tools are "cookie cutter" and that government funders are not attentive to the local context in deciding what measures are important. This concern was mentioned in several settings with respect to the cultural differences among the primary constituents served by government-funded programs. Program effectiveness depends on providers' cultural competence, on their ability to understand and respond to primary constituents. Feedback tools that do not solicit information reflective of the shared cultural understanding of the agency worker and the primary constituent may miss what is most valuable to constituents in their relationship with the agency.

Fourth, in several focus groups we learned that government funders do not consistently share the results of feedback efforts with contracted agencies, or they share results so long after the data are collected that they are no longer meaningful. This suggests that government funders view feedback data as valuable only to them and not to agencies or service recipients. It re-enforces the idea that the goal of feedback is compliance with government mandates and not learning or performance improvement. In several focus group sessions, participants expressed frustration with the one-way nature of their relationship with government funders. Not receiving data back from the funders indicates to agency leaders that government funders view them strictly as vendors and that the role of government is reduced to that of determining whether agencies met contractual obligations. Focus group participants expressed a desire for greater partnership with government funders. One agency director indicated:

> It used to be that nonprofits and public funders were partners with the state. Now it's more adversarial. The partnership is disappearing. They (public funders) are looking for contract relationships—it's the walmartization of government.

The view that government funders are obsessively concerned with getting "the lowest price" was widely held in the five provider focus groups. With respect to reporting outcome and feedback data, this means a priority to assure compliance, and little to no interest in what agencies are learning, or in the quality of their relationships with primary constituents. This modality seriously inhibits agencies and funders from having meaningful conversations about improving programs based on feedback from primary constituents, or from paying attention to important milestones to outcomes such as the quality of relationships between an agency and its primary constituents. Participants suggested that a closer partnership with funders would provide a greater opportunity to ensure there was agreement over the goals of funded programs and by extension, agreement about what to measure. They consistently argued that they were interested in feedback mechanisms that encouraged conversations about how to improve their work with primary constituents.

Finally, we could discover very little about dialogue between government funders and nonprofit agencies about strategies to improve measurement efforts. Focus group participants indicated that discussions with government funders emphasized the process of measurement, such as ensuring timely data collection, more than its content. Agency leaders perceive that government funders value receiving data more than analyzing and using it.

Nonprofit leaders expressed frustration that for many government funders measurement seemed an end in itself. They perceive that government funders use measurement as a means of demonstrating a very narrowly defined understanding of accountability. As a result, one executive noted that government funders do not work with contract agencies to develop potentially transformative feedback activities using approaches such as reflective practice and participatory evaluation.

One experience described by focus group participants addresses this challenge particularly well. One set of agency leaders we met with expressed frustration that the data they collected on a regular basis did not help them to understand why rates of infant mortality in one community were not being positively affected by their efforts. Government funders were not responsive to the providers' need for different kinds of data to learn more about this problem. Instead, agency leaders pursued political action to address the issue. They worked with elected officials to secure a one-time grant from the state legislature to conduct focus groups and interviews with members of the community affected by the high infant mortality rates. The results of that study led to a deeper understanding of the problem and important changes in the providers' interactions with their primary constituents – a good outcome. But the providers viewed this effort as requiring them to bypass their relationships with government funder officials to work through the political process to solve the problem. The leaders in this effort viewed their government funders as wedded

to measurement approaches that did not generate meaningful data and as unwilling to be partners with them in developing more useful approaches to measurement.

5. Lack of capacity limits agencies' efforts

As noted, there is considerable measurement activity in Alliance and United Neighborhood Center agencies; yet, many agency leaders indicated that they have too little capacity to accomplish what they wish to accomplish in their measurement efforts. For example, 70% percent of survey respondents expressed agreement or strong agreement with the statement "evaluation is an agency priority but resource constraints limit our ability to use it as much as I would like."

Focus group participants elaborated the capacity challenge in two ways. Some argued that they lacked the resources and infrastructure to carry out measurement activities effectively. They indicated that without capacity it is difficult, if not impossible, to make measurement activities, such as data analysis and review, a priority. Several expressed frustration that government funders who prioritize measurement do not provide resources to create requisite capacity in funded agencies. This perspective was particularly common among representatives of agencies with smaller budgets. A second group indicated they use what capacity they have first to meet the measurement demands government funders make. Those demands are a priority because government funding is a primary source of agency resources, and compliance with measurement demands is necessary for them to maintain good relations and secure contract renewals. In that they have capacity left over they operate what several leaders referred to as "parallel systems" in order to "measure and report in a way that responds to our needs."

Capacity constraints reinforce the notion of agency frustration with the norms of measurement. All agencies have some capacity, but the representatives we spoke with were dissatisfied with the ways in which they used that capacity. As one executive put it, "We are not capable of measuring the right things. Or we might be measuring the right things, but we don't know it since we can't interpret the data properly." Investing limited evaluation capacity in measures that agency leaders found of questionable value frustrated them. They would have preferred to use their capacity in more meaningful ways. Reflective practice, participatory evaluation, and learning dialogues with their primary constituents were all mentioned preferable methods.

But, specifically with respect to feedback data, it was also admitted that often the providers were not milking the data that they did have. One focus group participant noted:

> We ourselves are not using the feedback that we are giving to funders systemically, however limited it may be. The questions that arise from the data are often not

followed up on. We talk about it at a meeting sometimes, but we don't look at what it really means. And we certainly don't act on it often enough.

We also looked for capacity constraints relating to participating in comparative data exercises and found that there did not seem to be additional or related capacity constraints. One important area where capacity does not seem to be a constraint is technology. Participants in the study were aware that readily available Internet technology made it quick, easy and inexpensive to administer, collate, analyze and share data for fairly complex surveys. Their staff attend 'webinars' and utilize other Internet learning tools to exchange experience and insights on other topics. Given the wide adoption of the required technology across human service organizations, the constraint here is not technology, but rather the lack of the institutional arrangements to undertake comparative feedback efforts.

6. Feedback data is not reported back to primary constituents; feedback is not used to foster mutual accountability

In each of our focus group sessions, we asked participants about whether and how they shared feedback results with their primary constituents, the beneficiaries of the services they provide. Each time, the question generated discomfort. Agency leaders consistently report service information in annual reports, some of which includes client responses to satisfaction data. For the most part, focus group participants noted that annual reports were the primary source of reporting results. The target audience for annual reports, however, was not service recipients. Our survey results indicate that providers are far more likely to report feedback to funders than to primary constituents. For example, we asked respondents to indicate which forms of feedback they consistently report to key stakeholders. The survey indicated that government funders receive more information on the results of outcome measurement efforts (77%) and satisfaction surveys (55%), than do primary constituents (30% and 40%, respectively).

The discomfort agency leaders expressed on this topic in the focus group suggested these percentages might actually under-represent the failure here. Focus group participants clearly acknowledged that their use of feedback was incomplete if it did not involve meaningful reporting or discussion of results with their primary constituents. They understood that reporting back was a reasonable expectation, if not an obligation, and a critical opportunity for learning. They also understood that effective reporting back modeled something that they valued highly—responsiveness to service constituents. Finally, there was agreement that by investing in reporting back, they could improve the quality of future feedback data.

This begs the question why, given the "high interest" in feedback, is

Our primary constituents are providing plenty of feedback. They talk to their sisters, their neighbors, even their local storekeepers. They just aren't providing it to us. The real question is how can we become worthy of their feedback?

Lo Berry, Project Director, Central Hillsborough County Federal Healthy Start Project

there a relatively low level of investment in it? Explanations for this seeming contradiction may be found in our research. Several factors seem to "weigh down" investments in feedback – the low utility of data gathered through prescribed customer satisfaction surveys; failure of donors to appreciate those aspects of feedback other than as a way to provide evidence of follow through on contractual obligations; and, the unfamiliarity of donors and agencies alike of these dimensions of evaluative action. It is a strong human services leader indeed that can heft this weight, and go the extra distance to cultivate feedback in order to produce Constituency Voice.

Two illustrations that were offered in more than one focus group may support this interpretation, while offering up two further possible explanations – the absence of either negative consequences or ready solutions. Every focus group volunteered that whenever feedback generated an individual grievance, this was recorded and followed up as a matter of management priority, with status reports on outstanding grievances featuring, for most organizations, in weekly management reports reaching the CEO. This was true irrespective of how the grievance was expressed – at the instigation of the aggrieved party or in the normal course of data collection through some other mechanism. The fact that providers seem to have a "zero tolerance policy" for failure to respond to grievances stands in stark contrast to formal constituency feedback practices more generally.

The second illustration comes from therapeutic practice. Two focus groups volunteered that they used and liked a method to evaluate counseling sessions that enabled both patient assessment on performance and a discussion of that feedback right at the session. Known as the Scott Miller Session Rating Scale, this method invites the patient to set the goals and expectations at the beginning of a session, and then to come back to and reflect on them at the end. The therapist and the patient have a short discussion about the patient's assessment.

In sum, agency leaders embrace feedback and its potential for creating learning relationships with their primary constituents, but they do not invest in creating the conditions for quality feedback and mutually accountable relationships around it. In some cases, they may not have the tools and capacity to create those conditions.

Recommendations

These findings lay out challenges for improving feedback mechanisms and opportunities for improving utilization of feedback data across multiple purposes by agencies and funders. We have drawn together five recommendations that together project a clear direction for reform.

1. Human service organizations and funders should jointly adopt a comprehensive feedback purposes framework

The diversity of measurement goals ascribed to government funders and human service organizations explains why measurement efforts often appear to be at cross purposes: there is no goal alignment or coordination among key stakeholders in the measurement process. At the beginning of this paper, we identified six different feedback purposes: fund accountability, improvement, strategy development, capacity building, civic engagement, and societal learning. Our findings indicate that all six operate in feedback efforts in nonprofit human service agencies. All six are valuable. None are inherently incompatible with the others, although in the absence of clear intention they readily come into conflict. This study indicates that absent clear agreement regarding intentions across the purposes of measurement, frustration and confusion among all parties is almost guaranteed. Our reform opportunity is to clarify the different purposes of measurement among core stakeholders (funders, providers and primary constituents), identify the best ways to collect feedback that meets those purposes, and use the capacity available in provider agencies to improve the measurement system.

For example, government funders may seek feedback to demonstrate conformity with contracted activities or as a basis for assessing their funding priorities, while providers seek feedback as the basis for shared learning with primary constituents. The different feedback purposes raise difficult management questions because they could imply different questions and methodologies, different relationships between stakeholders. Fund accountability-oriented feedback efforts emphasize government funders' roles as contract managers overseeing agencies and ensuring that they meet contractual obligations. That model emphasizes the power public funders hold over contracted providers, and drives feedback mechanisms into tight and narrow channels. In contrast, the civic engagement model seeks to rebalance power relationships in favor of marginalized stakeholders in order to create the conditions in which all stakeholders can work together to address shared public concerns. This approach argues for feedback systems that are more open, deliberative and aim for ongoing mutually accountable dialogues.

These tendencies are not irreconcilable, although they do pull in different directions. It is perfectly possible to design a feedback system that provides the needed data for fund accountability while nurturing the desired relationships and learning for Constituency Voice. But it requires clear-eyed intention of design to do so from the outset.

Another example stems from the different uses that funders and providers put to the same feedback. The providers we spoke to expressed fear that negative data will be used to punish them. They noted that funders tend not to invite provider participation in their decision-making strategy choices, perhaps for fear of losing control and autonomy. The result is that the significant opportunities that could be opened up through true partnership are lost. If shared explicitly, these different data purposes and related decision-making could be aligned to achieve greater learning and progress for both sets of organizations – all in the name of the overarching goals of improved human well being. We can see now that the missing ingredients are transparency and a framework within which to align multiple purposes.

This implies that organizations will behave rationally in the face of objective evidence. The focus groups made it clear that this is not a given, and that the pursuit of a strong evidence-based organizational culture could often run into conflict with the wider social and political environment that exerted what was often a stronger influence on organizational choices. The example of the conflict in one focus group area between state immigration policy and the "rational" way to channel youth gang activity into more productive roles was shared earlier, and such examples abound if usually in less dramatic ways. The point to this is that this is not a reason not to collect and work to good evidence, but to recognize that it will take strong leadership and ongoing engagement with the wider political domain to win sufficient support for the solutions that our frontline human service captains believe to be best.[36]

2. Human service organizations should take advantage of the opportunity for leadership to improve feedback efforts

Agency leaders now feel caught in a cleft stick. They believe in the potential of taking primary constituency feedback seriously – including the transformative step from feedback to voice. But they feel they must prioritize what they experience as a conflicting imperative to report back to funders about their activities and outcomes. Funder-mandated 'client surveys' currently yield little value for either agencies or funders. There is general agreement about this, which means that providers have a leadership opportunity – if not obligation – to present government funders with enriched approaches to constituency feedback, thereby converting a burden into a catalyst for improvement.

[36] This recommendation and the related findings suggest there would be great value in a more focused analysis of specific feedback mechanisms required by funders and their perceived lack of utility for providers. Such a project would provide nuance to the attitudes expressed by participants in this study.

A persuasive precedent for this may be found in the business literature on customer satisfaction. Over fifty years of data from diverse companies shows a clear correlation between customer loyalty and growth and profits.[37] It is time for human service organizations to marshal the empirical evidence required to map the fine details of the links between outcomes and the quality of agency-service recipient relationships.

3. Feedback efforts (and measurement in general) would be more effective and sustained if they were developed from the bottom up

In order for providers to take up the opportunity to bring funder reporting requirements into line with a more comprehensive and integrated understanding of the multiple purposes of feedback, it is necessary first to overcome a fairly deep skepticism among providers about the prospects for changing funder approaches to measurement in general. In our focus groups, providers described the feedback instruments they used as largely imposed by government funders. Human service leaders viewed themselves as excluded from discussions about the development of effective measures. Because they had no involvement in the process that generated the measures, and they did not perceive the measures as useful, they had limited enthusiasm for the measures. There was no buy-in. This approach undermines not only the measurement process, but also the relationships between funder and grantee. It inhibits whole system learning and improving. Without consensus about measures or their utility, there is no commitment between government funders and providers to learn together about their work. The clear lesson is that reform efforts must build on providers' and funders' shared belief in using feedback as a way to learn from primary constituents to improve services. To do that effectively requires collaboration between government funders and providers in the development, implementation and learning from feedback measures.

It is a weakness in this study that we did not engage directly with service recipients. While in this case we do not think this undermines our findings or recommendations, improvement efforts would be invalid to the extent that they failed to include primary constituents.

4. Develop mechanisms for comparative data to strengthen constituency feedback

We began this research project with an interest in the potential comparative data presented for improving how nonprofit human service organizations undertake and utilize feedback from primary constituents. Our research led us deep into the tangled thicket of outcome-oriented management and measurement practices, and our overall conclusion confirms our initial value proposition. There is now an important opportunity to develop transformative

It is a weakness in this study that we did not engage directly with service recipients. While in this case we do not think this undermines our findings or recommendations, improvement efforts would be invalid to the extent that they failed to include primary constituents.

[37] Reichheld, 2006, p. 15

new mechanisms of constituency feedback, notably through the development of comparative data sets. The argument for this is set out in this paper, but it is also based on the express willingness of a large majority of the human service sector managers that participated in the study.

We used the six purposes of evaluative practices to disentangle a number of specific management and measurement challenges, and found a general lack of attention to thinking in an integrated way across all six purposes. While our study had to disentangle the front end of the measurement process (why and how measures are developed and collected), when we finally arrive at the back end of the process (how data are analyzed) we see clearly that our conviction about the value of comparative constituency feedback is affirmed. A very high proportion of survey respondents (86%) indicated that feedback would be more meaningful if it were comparative. Another 62 percent indicated that they were very or extremely interested in participating in a pilot project that involved the use of comparisons across organizations.

Focus group participants noted that comparative data could be valuable in providing a frame of reference for the interpretation of the feedback they receive. Without a source of comparison, the meaning of relatively high or low scores on feedback data measures is difficult to interpret. There was also a quiet recognition that a sense of how one is doing against others in your cohort would provide a needed incentive to take feedback seriously.

5. Adopt the Feedback Principle of Public Reporting

Discussions about outcomes and impact tend to involve government funders and human service providers to the exclusion of service recipients. In our focus groups there was limited discussion of the role service recipients play in defining success and setting program goals. In the context of feedback, public funders and agency leaders treat service recipients as sources of data, and not as partners in creating measures and reckoning with results. This state of affairs is problematic but understandable given that there are no strong incentives to report back to those providing feedback. Providers orient their conversations about client feedback towards government funders because this is what funder requirements dictate.

This lesson is consistent with recent research on customer satisfaction taken from the business world, which provides a helpful marker for improving feedback in human services. Honing in on the quality of loyalty in customer relationships, it teaches that people are not like water taps. You cannot simply turn them on and off and expect an even flow of water at just the right temperature. Quality feedback needs to be cultivated with care. And it needs to be acted upon. Applied to human services, this approach involves three simple steps. First, before seeking feedback, establish expectations around it. What is expected of the client? What is expected of the

provider? If there is a third-party feedback specialist involved, is it absolutely clear what its role is? Second, in gathering data keep it simple and easy for the provider of feedback. Third, once feedback is collected make sure that you meet the expectations set up at the outset. This will usually involve three things: (a) reporting back what you heard in the feedback and what you propose to do about it; (b) make recommended improvements in services; and, (c) sustained mutually accountable learning dialogues with constituents outside formal feedback activities.

One way to address this issue would be to embed feedback in standards for public reporting (including in funder accountability reporting) by human service organizations. A feedback principle of public reporting would say, "report your results (using your metrics and other evaluative data), but also report what your primary constituents say about those results." If nonprofits, donors and accreditors were to embrace this Feedback Principle of Public Reporting, it would realign the conversation about results around all stakeholders and in the process enhance Constituency Voice.

Conclusions

Taking feedback seriously means ensuring that the enabling conditions for feedback quality improvement are in place. Providers and funders need to invest in the expectations and capabilities of service recipients so that they can clearly experience direct benefits from participating in feedback activities.

The results of our survey and focus groups suggest the core elements for a reform process. Reform efforts need to address all stakeholders, notably funders (particularly government funders—the dominant source of financial support to human service organizations), providers and primary constituents. The multiple goals of evaluation and feedback efforts need to be explicit and the development of feedback activities needs to be aligned with those goals. Finally, change must address the development of feedback measures, their analysis, reporting feedback data back to those who provided it, and the way in which feedback is shared so that it can incentivize remedial action. Creating comparative feedback data sets offers a proven way to do this. Adopting the Feedback Principle of Public Reporting is another.

Ultimately, this report points to a leadership opportunity for an innovation process to develop new tools for comparative constituency feedback that can meet the multiple purposes of the three core constituents in human services—service recipients, providers and funders. The twin benefits of comparative constituency

feedback – clarifying the meaning of feedback and creating incentives for taking feedback seriously – offer the opportunity for a transformative improvement in the attainment of well being among service recipients.

The fact that other factors – including powerful political factors – do arise and vitiate organizational commitments to operating from good evidence is not an argument not to create good evidence. Quite the opposite, the development of ever stronger evidentiary bases for decision-making, particularly evidence that is grounded in the empowered voices of those meant to benefit, is the best possible way to address the political dimensions of the challenge.

In considering this leadership opportunity, this paper has argued that some exciting external enabling conditions – such as affordable new communications technology and ready expertise from the customer satisfaction industry – are present. It remains now for the human resources field to consider whether the necessary internal enabling conditions are present. Are relationships among providers – perhaps stewarded by their associations – able to support the creation of a comparative feedback data set? Can we build comparative feedback innovation onto existing benchmark data efforts for operational and financial indicators?

We found during our work that some public and private funders are prepared to invest in a process of 'next practice' innovation with respect to constituency feedback. The task now is to channel this commitment into fully realized demonstrations of comparative constituency feedback. The immediate opportunity is to create an affordable, scalable mechanism for comparative constituency feedback.

These and other similar opportunities point the way forward to new and better ways to cultivate Constituency Voice in human service organizations. The Alliance for Children and Families, the United Neighborhood Centers of America, and Keystone Accountability look forward to working with human service leaders to cultivate Constituency Voice and increase the social returns for the families most affected by human service organizations.

Biographies

David Bonbright

David Bonbright is Chief Executive of Keystone Accountability. Over the past three decades he has alternated between grantmaking and social entrepreneuring roles, concentrating throughout on innovations to strengthen social organizational practice. He has worked in program and leadership roles for Ford Foundation, Aga Khan Foundation, and Ashoka: Innovators for the Public.

David Campbell

David Campbell is assistant professor in the College of Community and Public Affairs at Binghamton University in Upstate New York. In addition to constituency voice, his research interests include a range of nonprofit management issues, including the emergence of new organizations and the use of mergers and related strategies to respond to changing conditions. Earlier in his career, he held senior program and research positions at Alliance for Children and Families member agencies in New York (Community Service Society) and Cleveland (Center for Families and Children).

Linda Nguyen

Linda Nguyen is director of civic engagement with the Alliance for Children and Families, a network that serves and represents 360 nonprofit community-based organizations across North America. Linda supports and develops organizations' efforts to facilitate democratic participation through community organizing and mission-based advocacy. Her background includes transformation and organizational change work with the YWCA and the Young Nonprofit Professionals Network.

Organization Profiles

Alliance for Children and Families

The mission of the Alliance for Children and Families is to fuse intellectual capital with superior membership services in order to strengthen the capacities of North America's nonprofit child and family serving organizations to serve and to advocate for children, families and communities so that together we may pursue our vision of a healthy society and strong communities for all children and families. With more than 350 members, Alliance for Children and Families members represent a significant force in the human services sector. Alliance members have a cumulative operating budget of $3.6 billion, almost 53, 000 FTEs, 7,000 board members, 58,000 volunteers and serve over 8,000 communities in over 2, 700 locations. Alliance member organizations also have over 560,000 individual donors. In all, over 3.4 million clients participate in Alliance member services annually. The Alliance and its members are leaders in promoting civic engagement and constituency voice among human service organizations nationally.

United Neighborhood Centers of America (UNCA)

United Neighborhood Centers of America is a voluntary, nonprofit, national organization with neighborhood-based member agencies throughout the United States. Formerly known as the National Federation of Settlements and Neighborhood Centers, it was founded in 1911 by Jane Addams and other pioneers of the settlement movement. UNCA's original and continuing purpose is to improve the quality of life at the neighborhood level. UNCA works in partnership with neighborhood centers to find solutions to social challenges which hinder individual self-development and prevent productive community life. UNCA's history and values reflect its commitment to ensuring that community members and service beneficiaries are central players in the dialogue with member agencies and their funders in the improvement of community life.

Keystone Accountability

Keystone Accountability is a social purpose organization committed to enhancing the effectiveness of organizations working to solve important social and environmental problems. David Bonbright and André Proctor founded Keystone in 2004, along with other practitioners each with more than 20 years of experience in the field of social and economic development in Africa, South Asia, and the Americas. The purposes were and are to address the weak accountability (albeit unintended) among funders and civil society organisations to their beneficiaries, and to innovate measurement tools that support meaningful and lasting developmental impacts.

Over the last four years, Keystone has worked with a wide range of funders, civil society organizations and social enterprises to design new practical ways of planning, measuring, learning and communicating social change that foster accountability and learning among all constituents, and enhance positive outcomes.

Partners include, among others, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Omidyar Network, the Ford Foundation, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the Nelson Mandela Foundation, Grassroots Business Fund, iScale, British Overseas NGOs for Development, the Philippine Council for NGO Certification, Ashoka, Synergos Institute, AccountAbility, USAID, Center for Effective Philanthropy, Aspen Institute Nonprofit Sector Research Fund, and GiveIndia.

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