

INVENTING • SOLUTIONS • TOGETHER

STAKEHOLDER ASSESSMENTS (Feedback Mechanisms)



mailing address
540 N. Lake Pine Drive, #2
Marblehead, Ohio 43440

office
419-732-1770

cell
419-260-3949

email
cathy@creativeoptionc.com

web
www.creativeoptionc.com

Who is a “Stakeholder” and What is a “Stakeholder Assessment?”

A “stakeholder assessment” is a process for determining how an organization is doing from the perspective of its stakeholders – groups and individuals who hold a stake in its success or failure. Those with the keenest interest are “internal stakeholders” – board members, staff, and direct customers. “External stakeholders” can include indirect customers or others receiving services, funding partners, colleague organizations, governmental regulators, community opinion leaders, and others. For some agencies, the ultimate stakeholders are taxpayers and voters.

Unless we ask, we really do not know how we are viewed by others.

Why conduct a stakeholder assessment?

Unless we ask, we really do not know how we are viewed by others. We may get feedback from time to time, but until we actively solicit the opinions of all those with whom we do business we do not know whether what we hear represents general opinion or merely the opinion of those who are most willing to offer it, which tends to be the very happy and the very unhappy. Not knowing what we don’t know about the expectations and experiences of those in the middle can be harmful to the long-term health of an organization.

Many governmental agencies and non-profits are required to perform some sort of regular stakeholder assessment, either by state or federal rule, or by a funding source. In Ohio, for example, to receive accreditation from the state, each county board of mental retardation and developmental disabilities must be in compliance with a rule requiring annual stakeholder input. The rule lists the stakeholder categories, and defines what information must be developed. Most other local entities, including schools, have similar requirements. In addition, many public and private funders require documentation of need and community support before they will make a grant.

Even where not required, however, there are other excellent reasons to ask for feedback.

- ◇ **Strategic Planning:** Do your stakeholders understand your mission and vision? What do they value most and least about the services you offer? Understanding the hopes and expectations of your stakeholders can be a very important part of the process of choosing priorities and establishing performance goals. Organizational leaders can use a stakeholder assessment to discover how others view their strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (called a “SWOT analysis.”) Asking stakeholders what they would like to see the organization accomplish in the next year or two helps leaders decide what services to grow or to cut back.
- ◇ **Collaborative opportunities.** Most organizations have regular opportunities to work collaboratively with others. Sometimes missions overlap, or customers are shared, or efficiencies can be achieved by pooling resources. Grant-making agencies and foundations are increasingly interested in supporting collaborative or coalition efforts. A stakeholder assessment is a clear way of discovering what other groups are working on, what they understand about your organization, and what barriers might be standing in the way of effective working relationships between your agency and others.
- ◇ **Conflict Resolution.** Sometimes people disagree with each other. Even well-intentioned, open, and accessible people can find themselves in direct or indirect conflict with others. Assessment tools can be used among board members, staff, sister agencies, customers, and others to delve beneath stated positions to determine what common or complementary interests exist. When conducted confidentially, a stakeholder assessment can create the conditions for spelling out specific areas of disagreement, thereby allowing the assessor to determine whether mediation, facilitation, or another consensus-building process is needed or likely to be successful.

Asking stakeholders what they would like to see the organization accomplish in the next year or two helps leaders decide what services to grow or to cut back.

- ◇ **Levy Campaigns.** Long before heading in to any kind of electoral effort, it is wise to discover what the community expects of you and your organization. The 30- or 90-day period before Election Day is no time to be re-educating the public about your mission or what services you provide. If your community or its leaders have misperceptions about your organization, those need to be surfaced early so that you can begin to turn that around long before you are on the ballot. Feedback tools can help you learn what your community's "opinion leaders" believe and whether they are likely to favor your levy request.

If your community or its leaders have misperceptions about your organization, those need to be surfaced early so that you can begin to turn that around long before you are on the ballot.

Match the Method to the Purpose

Before deciding what method or methods to use for developing feedback information, careful consideration should be given to what the intended uses of the data are. Some purposes, such as product testing or electoral positioning, require scientific sampling of a large number of people and hard data that is developed using quantitative methods. Other purposes, such as organizational strategic planning, involve a smaller number of respondents, sometimes known as "key informants." In these cases, a soft data collection process is employed that allows stakeholders more latitude to give qualitative responses. Quantitative studies tell us that 40% of our customers identify "the staff" as a key strength of our organization. Qualitative studies tell us what customers particularly appreciate about the staff.

Each of the following feedback mechanisms has its unique benefits and limitations.

Surveys and Polls. Surveys are the most common form of generating feedback and are used in a variety of contexts, including product testing, market research, and preparing for an electoral campaign. Surveys are used whenever there is value in getting your questions out to many, such as to all parents in a school system. Whenever a set of respondents have "self-selected" themselves by being among the few to return a paper or electronic survey, the respondent pool is likely to be tilted to the very unhappy or the very happy. While "ax to grind" responses can be very interesting, and make useful nuggets for follow up, these probably do not represent the general opinion of that stakeholder group.

Quantitative studies tell us that 40% of our customers identify "the staff" as a key strength of our organization. Qualitative studies tell us what customers particularly appreciate about the staff.

Polls and surveys are also used when it is necessary to scientifically randomize a subset of many, such as in an election district. For example, if the opinions of 10,000 people are sought, a pollster might randomize a sample of 300 which scientifically replicates the demographic or geographic characteristics of the whole. If the sample were held to have a 95% degree of certainty, then any other randomized sample of the same group would yield the same results within a 5% margin of error.

Polls and surveys are conducted in a number of ways:

Paper. Every member of a group can be asked for their views by way of a mailed paper survey, comment card, or post-event evaluation. Paper surveys and evaluations are most valuable as a cost-effective means of communicating "your opinion matters" to a large group of people. They also have the potential to point leaders in the direction of new areas to research. Because the resulting respondent pool consists entirely of "self-selected" individuals, however, rather than an actual cross-section of the whole, such surveys do not yield diagnostic hard data and care should be taken before making strategic decisions based on opinion collected in this manner.

Internet. Web-based surveys can be very valuable with certain limited sets of people who all have email addresses. For example, to survey all staff in an organization about quality of work life issues, an internet survey would work just fine, assuming confidentiality could be guaranteed. As with paper, whenever there are fewer than 30 responses in any one category, the results should be seen as indicators for further study but should not be taken as scientifically representative of the whole. Focus groups and qualitative interview studies can be used to further explore any interesting information generated this way.

Telephone. Usually done by professional polling firms, high quality telephone surveys produce apples-to-apples data that is considered highly accurate as long as the sample is well-randomized. To generate consistent information, questions are asked exactly the same way of each respondent, and are never interpreted by the interviewer, who is often a worker at a phone bank. Each question on the list is asked no matter what any previous response may have been and responses are generally limited to numerical ratings, yes/no answers, or multiple choice from a set list. Open-ended questions are kept to a minimum in order to limit the amount of data that must be interpreted for the client, which can be time-consuming and expensive.

Whenever there are fewer than 30 responses in any one category, the results should be seen as indicators for further study but should not be taken as scientifically representative of the whole.

Tips for employing surveys:

- ◇ Remember your goal: if you want to communicate to your constituents that they matter to you, send a survey to your whole list and see what comes back. If you need hard, quantitative data, consider hiring a professional pollster.
- ◇ If using paper or the internet, send the survey with a letter from the sponsoring entity outlining the significance of project, how data will be used, and assuring confidentiality.
- ◇ When using paper, include a self-addressed envelope to boost the response rate. It is not necessary to pre-pay the postage.
- ◇ Whenever a small portion of a larger pool is surveyed or polled, the data is not considered valid unless scientific randomization is done by those with specific training in scientific sampling.

Qualitative Interviews. When the number of potential respondents is more limited, such as with an internal assessment, only soft data is needed. That is, the goal of qualitative interviews is to allow individuals within a group an opportunity to provide feedback on issues that are important to them, often in an open-ended way, with the interviewer tracking with each respondent as their story unfolds. The resulting feedback is hugely valuable in that it provides a greater sense of how an organization's key informants feel about it, and is often more specific. While confidentiality is important to all feedback methods, it is particularly important here. In a good qualitative interview study, top consideration is given to creating a safe space for respondents to discuss private matters with significant emotional impact. The benefits of this method are:

- ◇ In-depth interviews give each respondent a greater sense of their own importance to you. Everybody likes to be asked for their opinion.
- ◇ It is a more respondent-driven process than even a telephone survey in that it allows the interviewer greater freedom to follow "markers" – those bits of conversation where a respondent mentions something that is important to them, even though it was not specifically asked.
- ◇ These are especially useful in resolving conflicts, which tend to result from highly-emotional issues. The opportunity to tell one's own story, or version of events, to someone who is truly interested and does not argue, will in and of itself often help relieve tension.
- ◇ Qualitative interviews can be performed by telephone or in person and both can be more cost effective than professional quantitative studies.
- ◇ It is possible to generate actionable data without the use of an outside neutral to conduct the interviews, however, the rules for collecting feedback must be followed. See "Where to get More Information" for books and articles related to the art of generating high-quality feedback.

The opportunity to tell one's own story, or version of events, to someone who is truly interested and does not argue, will in and of itself often help relieve tension.

Focus Groups, or constituent caucuses, allow individuals from a group to interact with each other's views in a way that replicates more real-world experience than interviewing does. The basic procedure is to gather 8-15 invited guests to engage in a facilitated discussion of pre-selected issues. By presenting previously-developed interview data or by asking a series of questions designed to stimulate thought and conversation, a focus group leader facilitates discussion around one or more issues important to members of the group. As group members consider each other's ideas, they teach and influence each other, often resulting in group consensus. A good facilitator can help the group focus on solutions to perceived problems, thereby yielding information to the client which has already been sorted and prioritized by group members themselves. The benefits of focus groups are:

- ◇ Discussion of issues often yields common answers where individual interviews do not.
- ◇ Can be used for 'data normalization' after individual interviews. For example, say that in individual interviews, 2 of 8 members of a stakeholder group identify "Service A" as an existing gap. In conversation, the 2 may convince the others, generating a priority where one would not otherwise have been obvious.
- ◇ Unlike other methods of gathering feedback, focus groups provide no possibility for confidentiality as there are several people hearing each individual speak. This can have the effect of making people more circumspect about what they choose to say, less prone to flinging out accusations that cannot be proven, etc.

Most people will choose to keep their views to themselves if there is even the slightest risk that offering it will offend someone with whom they have an ongoing connection. In fact, many of us are so reluctant to hurt someone else's feelings that we will not share our opinions even when asked.

Importance of Confidentiality

We all know people who are free with their opinions despite any damage it may cause to their relationships with others. But these represent only a small segment of your stakeholders. Most people will choose to keep their views to themselves if there is even the slightest risk that offering it will offend someone with whom they have an ongoing connection. In fact, many of us are so reluctant to hurt someone else's feelings that we will not share our opinions *even when asked*. To overcome this hesitation and to generate the most useful information, it is helpful to use a method that allows for anonymity such as by employing a neutral outsider to conduct the research.

A "research partnership" can be established when an interviewer guarantees respondents that their words are confidential, that they will be reported to those who commissioned the study anonymously, and therefore that no harm will come to them as a result of their participation in the research process. Most people in this situation are willing to share their views forthrightly and completely, and assist the researcher in every way possible. So, whenever possible, respondents should be assured that it is safe to talk. Of course, trust is a key element, and some people never develop that.

Once made, a pledge of confidentiality is important to the respondent. That's clear. It is also important to the researcher whose ability to engender trust is a fundamental component of successful outcomes. Confidentiality is also critically important to the subject of the study, whose relationships are being tested and who cannot risk breaking a promise of this magnitude. That said, it should be noted that an exception must be made in cases of health and safety. Whenever a researcher or interviewer becomes aware that someone may be in danger, it should be reported to the client or to the proper authorities. Such cases are rare, but they can happen.

Potential Questions

Quantitative or hard data is generated through the use of survey or poll questions that are closed-ended, yes/no, numerical (“On a scale from 1 to 5...”) and the like, with little opportunity for respondents to provide additional commentary. Qualitative interviews and focus groups on the other hand, allow for more open-ended questions that yield outstanding information, but can be more costly to analyze and use.

No matter what method is used, order the questions from general to specific.

No matter what method is used, order the questions from general to specific. Get baseline information at the beginning, how the organization is viewed overall, before getting into more details about individual services. This gives people a chance to warm up and “enter the research partnership.”

Here are some of the questions we have found to be most illuminating. As you can see, some are closed and others are open. When designing questions, take care to project how you would use the information that is developed.

SWOT Analysis. There are four questions in a basic SWOT analysis. You can ask these of anyone.

- ◇ What would you say are the internal strengths of ABC Organization?
- ◇ What are the internal weaknesses? In other words, how is the organization vulnerable?
- ◇ What external opportunities are available, or likely to become available in the next few years that would help ABC Organization achieve its mission?
- ◇ What external threats exist or could exist in the next few years that could hinder ABC Organization in achieving its mission?

General Questions. These work equally well for any type of stakeholder and can yield very important information:

- ◇ What in your own words should be the mission of ABC Organization?
- ◇ On a scale from one to five, with one meaning extremely dissatisfied and five meaning extremely satisfied, how satisfied are you with how well ABC Organization is performing that role? Why do you say that?
- ◇ Who are ABC Organization’s customers? (In other words, whom should the organization serve and who benefits from its work?)
- ◇ Are you familiar with and do you understand ABC Organization’s programs and services?
- ◇ What three things would you like to see ABC Organization accomplish in the next two years?
- ◇ What are important needs in the community where ABC Organization could make a difference?
- ◇ Do you have any other advice the ABC Organization should consider as it develops its plan for the next three years?

For Board Members: When moving from general to specific it is important to tailor questions to the specific segment. Board members, of course, play a critical role in the life of an organization. Finding ways to let them safely speak their mind can be crucial to you success.

- ◇ Do you understand what is expected of you as a board member?
- ◇ Do you have the information you need to do your work as a board member well?
- ◇ At board meetings, does your opinion seem to count?
- ◇ Does the ABC Organization administration communicate effectively with the board?
- ◇ Do people at ABC Organization seem committed to doing quality work?
- ◇ Are you proud to talk with family, friends, and colleagues about your service as an ABC Organization board member?

For Staff: In the 1999 book *First Break all the Rules: What the World’s Greatest Managers Do Differently*, Gallup Researchers reported on interview research with hundreds of thousands of American workers. According to them, the following 12 questions predict employee satisfaction and productivity, which relates directly to the bottom line. These can be used as a means of identifying where communications have broken down within

an organization or where employee dissatisfaction is threatening to derail mission achievement.

- ◇ Do you know what is expected of you at work?
- ◇ Do you have the materials and equipment you need to do your work right?
- ◇ At work, do you have the opportunity to do what you do best everyday?
- ◇ In the last seven days, have you received recognition or praise for doing good work?
- ◇ Does your supervisor, or someone at work, seem to care about you as a person?
- ◇ Is there someone at work who encourages your development?
- ◇ At work, do your opinions seem to count?
- ◇ Does the mission/purpose of ABC Organization make you feel your job is important?
- ◇ Are your coworkers committed to doing quality work?
- ◇ Do you have a best friend at work?
- ◇ In the last six months, has someone at work talked to you about your progress?
- ◇ This last year, have you had opportunities at work to learn and grow?

A mix of closed and open questions moving from general to specific often serves to remind customers what services they use while also giving them room to reflect on what is important to them.

For Customers: You'll want to know both their level of satisfaction with specific services and also their satisfaction with the characteristics of service, such as timeliness, value, etc. A mix of closed and open questions moving from general to specific often serves to remind customers what services they use while also giving them room to reflect on what is important to them.

- ◇ I am going to go through a list of the different services of ABC Organization. On a scale from one to five with one meaning extremely dissatisfied and five meaning extremely satisfied, please tell me how satisfied are you with each. Explain.
 - Service 1 1 2 3 4 5 NA
 - Service 2 1 2 3 4 5 NA
 - Service 3 1 2 3 4 5 NA
 - Service 4 1 2 3 4 5 NA
 - Service 5 1 2 3 4 5 NA
- ◇ Of the services you receive from ABC Organization, which to you are the most important? What would the top priorities be?
- ◇ I am going to go through a list of specific characteristics of service. On a scale from one to five with one meaning extremely dissatisfied and five meaning extremely satisfied, how satisfied are you with each of the following:
 - Timeliness 1 2 3 4 5 NA
 - Value 1 2 3 4 5 NA
 - Quality 1 2 3 4 5 NA
 - Friendliness 1 2 3 4 5 NA
- ◇ Of the characteristics of service list above, which to you are the most important? What would the top priorities be?
- ◇ Do you have the information you need to choose your services correctly?
- ◇ At meetings with ABC Organization staff, do you feel that your opinion counts?
- ◇ Does ABC Organization communicate with you effectively?
- ◇ Do people at ABC Organization seem committed to doing quality work?
- ◇ Overall, does your family have a good relationship with ABC Organization?

For community partners: Most groups and organizations work collaboratively or share customers with other groups, have governmental regulators or funders, and operate in a community context. Some of the most illuminating feedback comes from these casual observers whose support you rely on.

- ◇ Do you personally have any regular contact with individuals who receive services from ABC Organization? (This sets up the mission question.)
- ◇ Do you have the information you need to assist members of the public (or customers of yours) who

- may need to access services and supports from ABC Organization?
- ◇ When you share experiences, issues, or concerns with ABC Organization staff, do your opinions seem to count?
 - ◇ Does ABC Organization communicate with you effectively?
 - ◇ Do people at ABC Organization seem committed to doing quality work?
 - ◇ Overall, does your agency have a good relationship with ABC Organization?
 - ◇ Think of a time when you or someone you know went the extra mile to deliver what the consumer wanted or needed. What made that possible?

We can limp along, and probably be successful enough without really ever knowing what others think. But to have sustained excellence requires soliciting and acting on candid feedback.

Conclusion

Ebenezer Scrooge probably never thought too much about how he was perceived by others – or about how their opinions of him were affecting his own quality of life – until his old friend Jacob Marley organized an intense night of feedback. Faced with the expressed views of so many in his life, Scrooge was able to make adjustments in his thinking and behavior that paid big dividends for his family, his co-workers, and his customers.

Unlike Scrooge, most of us do wonder from time to time what others truly want or need from us and sometimes we think we have a pretty good handle on that. But do we? The act of asking for honest feedback – and creating the conditions for genuinely receiving it – is an incredibly courageous thing to do. We can limp along, and probably be successful enough without really ever knowing what others think. But to have sustained excellence requires soliciting and acting on candid feedback.

Where to Get More Information

Bean, Martha, Larry Fisher and Mike Eng. "Assessment in Environmental and Public Policy Conflict Resolution: Emerging Theory, Patterns of Practice, and a Conceptual Framework," *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*, Volume 24, Number 4, Summer 2007, pp. 447-468.

Goldsmith, Marshall. *What Got You Here Won't Get You There: How Successful People Become Even More Successful*. New York, New York: Hyperion, 2007.

Susskind, Lawrence and Jennifer Thomas-Larmer "Conducting a Conflict Assessment" in *The Consensus Building Handbook: A Comprehensive Guide to Reaching Agreement*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage, 1999.

Weiss, Robert S., *Learning from Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies*, New York, New York: The Free Press, 1994.