

The key principles of effective stakeholder consultation for charities.



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Stakeholder consultation is the cornerstone of effective strategic planning. For charities, it is the best way to develop a strategy that is responsive to the needs and aspirations of your team and the communities you serve. We advocate for a robust consultation process that engages stakeholders in a meaningful way and provides valuable, actionable information to charity leaders.

In this article, we break down six key principles of effective stakeholder consultation and explain why they are integral to your approach.



1) Considered

Utilising frameworks to aid the stakeholder selection process.

For many charities, identifying the right participants for a stakeholder consultation project can be a significant challenge. Your charity likely engages with a diverse range of stakeholders every day. Just like with personal relationships, your stakeholders will perceive your organisation differently based on their own priorities, challenges, and experiences. Recognising these differences is essential to good consultation.

While it is important to listen to the voices of all your stakeholders, it is widely recognised that some may carry more influence than others. For example, a longstanding relationship with a major funder will have a significant impact on your charity's overall direction, and that is ok! Understanding the nuances between these relationships is an important first step which will enable you to group stakeholders thoughtfully. To begin, create a list of individuals and organisations you wish to engage in your strategy development process. These might include:

1. Beneficiaries
2. The local community
3. Volunteers
4. Internal team (for larger charities, this includes representatives from as many departments as possible)
5. Funders
6. Partner organisations
7. Supporters

Then, with input from your team, assign them a ranking out of 5 based on two key relationship elements:

1. Your perception of their level of Influence over your charity's direction and operations
2. Your perception of their level of Interest in your charity and what you do

After this process, you will have created a Stakeholder Map, an essential tool for engaging with your stakeholders throughout the process.

2) Informed

Raising stakeholder awareness of the project and its aims.

Maintaining clear and consistent communication is fundamental to your stakeholder consultation process. Set a tone of transparency and trust right from the get-go by providing stakeholders with relevant background information and context before asking for input. Regular updates regarding the project's objectives, progress, and outcomes will foster a sense of shared ownership and commitment to the strategic planning process.

Effective communication channels include:

1. Newsletters
2. Emails
3. Social media
4. Dedicated website sections
5. Press releases
6. Face to face

Enable your stakeholders to stay up to date, provide feedback, and ask questions. This open dialogue ensures that they understand the purpose of the project and its potential impact, which will encourage buy-in further down the line.

3) Understanding of power dynamics

Have insight into who is leading the consultation process and how this will influence conversations.

An effective stakeholder consultation process should acknowledge and address power dynamics. The individuals or team responsible for leading the consultation project should be aware of any power imbalances that might exist and actively work to level the playing field. They should possess strong facilitation skills, enabling inclusive and safe spaces for honest feedback.

Active listening, empathy, and the ability to ask open-ended questions to encourage stakeholders to freely express themselves are important skills. The facilitator should remain objective, avoiding personal biases and creating an atmosphere where all voices are heard.

Often, it will be the charity's own leadership team who are managing the consultation process, which makes impartiality challenging (but possible!). It is important to begin the process by asking yourself, how will I, and my position, influence how this conversation will go? Understanding that not all stakeholders will feel comfortable to

express their opinions openly to everyone is a vital first step.

By addressing power dynamics, charity leaders can bridge the gap between influential and marginalised stakeholders. This could be through commissioning an objective third party like an agency or consultancy to lead the process, or by finding ways for stakeholders to feedback anonymously, or simply by matching stakeholders to consultants with whom they will feel comfortable.

4) Inclusive

Creating a safe and welcoming environment for all participants.

Charities should embrace diversity and foster an inclusive culture where everyone feels able to share their perspective. This is particularly true of organisations who might be seeking feedback from vulnerable individuals during the consultation process.

Recognising and accommodating the diverse needs, perspectives, and interests of stakeholders ensures their meaningful participation. Integral to this is tailoring communication and engagement strategies to address individual requirements. This might include utilising multiple channels like surveys, focus groups, workshops, and one-to-one meetings. It could also involve using plain language, offering translation services, considering accessibility requirements, or accommodating different communication styles.

By actively addressing barriers to participation, the charity ensures that all stakeholders, including those with disabilities, language barriers, or limited access to resources, can contribute meaningfully.

5) Collaborative

Ensuring that stakeholder input is valued and acted upon.

The goal of stakeholder consultation is to foster collaboration in the strategic planning process. Charities should actively seek input from stakeholders at various stages and act upon the feedback they receive.

Ensuring that the strategic planning process is truly collaborative involves working with stakeholders to create a shared vision and identify outcomes that are important to everyone. Engaging stakeholders throughout the decision-making process fosters a sense of collective ownership and responsibility. Stakeholders should be aware of how their feedback will be used and the impact it will have. This transparency will encourage buy-in and commitment to the project's success.

Collaboration also encourages creativity, strengthens relationships, and builds trust between the charity and its stakeholders, increasing the likelihood of their continued support.

Closing thoughts...

There is no one 'right' way to do stakeholder consultation, but in our experience, embracing these principles is a good place to start. Engaging stakeholders in a meaningful way not only enriches the strategic planning process but also enhances the overall impact of the charity and its initiatives. If you would like some support with stakeholder consultation, get in touch. We provide tailored strategic solutions to organisations with a social purpose and would love to help.

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