

Stakeholders: Building Your Community of Support

Imagine you're running a small nonprofit with a big mission. Some days it might feel like you're pushing a boulder uphill alone. In reality, you're **not** alone – your work is surrounded by people who care, help, and are affected by what you do. These are your *stakeholders*, and they are part of your nonprofit's story every step of the way. Whether you're a team of one or one hundred, understanding and engaging your stakeholders can make all the difference. It brings more hands, hearts, and minds to the table, which is crucial when you're navigating challenges on your own. In this guide, we'll explore who your stakeholders are, why they matter, and how you can build strong, collaborative relationships with them – all in a warm, down-to-earth way that you can put into practice right away.

Starting this work might feel intimidating, especially if you're used to doing everything solo. Take heart: stakeholder engagement isn't about fancy jargon or complex plans. It's about people and relationships. This guide will walk you through the basics of identifying those people, inviting them in, and working together toward your mission. **It's okay to start small** – even reading this is a step in the right direction. Now, let's demystify stakeholders and see how they can help lighten the load.

Key Concept: What (and Who) Are “Stakeholders”?

In plain language, **stakeholders are all the people or groups who have a stake in your work**. In other words, they're anyone who can **influence your nonprofit or is impacted by it**^[1]. Think of stakeholders as your nonprofit's extended family. They come in many forms, for example:

- **People you serve:** Your beneficiaries or clients are stakeholders because your work directly affects them. Their needs and feedback have a huge stake in shaping your programs.
- **Team and volunteers:** Your staff, board members, and volunteers invest their time and passion. They influence your success through their work and carry your mission forward every day.
- **Donors and funders:** Individuals, foundations, or agencies who fund your organization obviously have a stake – they care about your cause and want to see results from their contributions.
- **Partners and peers:** Other nonprofits, community groups, or local businesses you collaborate with are stakeholders. You support each other's efforts and often share goals.
- **Community and neighbors:** The broader community, local residents, or even the media can be stakeholders. They might be indirectly affected by your projects (for example, a new community garden or a policy change you advocate) and their perception of your work can influence your reputation.
- **Policymakers or officials:** In some cases, local officials, government agencies, or school boards could be stakeholders, especially if your work involves public policy or community services. They can affect the environment in which you operate.

In short, *anyone who cares about, contributes to, or is impacted by your nonprofit is a stakeholder*. Notice that this list goes beyond the usual suspects (donors and clients) – it includes folks like volunteers, partner organizations, and community members. **Why?** Because nonprofits operate in a community ecosystem. Your success isn't just about what your staff does; it's shaped by all these people around you. Identifying and engaging stakeholders simply means **recognizing that your nonprofit's work happens within a network of human relationships**.

How does this fit into your daily nonprofit work? Consider this: every decision you make has a ripple effect across others^[2]. For example, choosing to launch a new program might excite your funders and beneficiaries, but could add workload for staff or affect a partner agency's plans. If you know *who* those stakeholders are and what matters to them, you can navigate these decisions more smoothly. Engaging stakeholders means *talking with them, listening, and collaborating* so that your projects are better informed and supported. It's not about giving up control of your mission – it's about **strengthening your mission** through input and buy-in from those around you. When a nonprofit actively manages its stakeholder relationships, it builds a supportive community around itself. And for a small or mid-sized organization, that community support can be a game-changer.

Why Stakeholders Matter to Your Nonprofit

Strong stakeholder understanding and engagement make your nonprofit more effective, aligned, and impactful. Here's why investing time in stakeholders pays off:

- **Better results through collaboration:** When you involve stakeholders, you bring more hands and ideas to solve problems. Nonprofit challenges are often complex and intertwined with community issues. By tapping into diverse perspectives – from the people you serve to partner groups – you're more likely to design effective solutions. Stakeholders help **spot blind spots** and offer creative input that you might miss if you plan in a vacuum. In fact, many big challenges (like improving neighborhood health or education) need coordinated efforts from multiple players. Engaging stakeholders early means you're *working with the community, not just for the community*, which boosts your overall effectiveness.
- **Stronger support and buy-in:** Ever try to launch a new initiative and get lukewarm support? Often, that's because key people weren't involved or consulted. When stakeholders feel heard and involved, they're more likely to champion your cause. **Understanding what matters to your stakeholders builds trust and buy-in.** For example, if you talk with a beneficiary community before designing a program, they'll see their input reflected and be more enthusiastic about participating. If you update your donors on how you're using their contributions (and perhaps even incorporate their feedback on your plans), they'll feel valued and stay committed. Engaged stakeholders become allies who *want* to see your nonprofit succeed – they turn into ambassadors, volunteers, problem-solvers, and repeat supporters. This broad buy-in can help you rally resources and overcome hurdles that you simply couldn't alone.
- **Mission clarity and alignment:** Stakeholder engagement isn't just about keeping others happy – it also keeps **you** accountable and focused. When you regularly communicate with people who care about your mission (like clients, community leaders, or frontline staff), it's like holding up a mirror to your work. They might remind you of needs you haven't addressed or point out when something isn't working. This helps prevent *misaligned priorities* or "mission drift," where a nonprofit might chase a grant or project that doesn't quite fit its core purpose. For instance, your board and staff stakeholders can question if a new idea truly serves your mission. Likewise, listening to beneficiary voices can keep your efforts grounded in what's really needed. In short, stakeholders serve as a compass, helping ensure your plans stay true to your mission and values. This **clarity** means your organization's energy is spent in the right places, increasing your impact in the long run.
- **Accountability and trust:** Nonprofits thrive on trust – trust from the public, donors, and the communities they serve. Engaging stakeholders is a way to demonstrate transparency and accountability. When you openly share information and invite input, you're saying "we're accountable to you, not just to ourselves." This can head off misunderstandings and build goodwill. Conversely, if stakeholders feel left in the dark or ignored, mistrust can grow. Think of a scenario where a nonprofit

makes a decision without consulting those affected – perhaps closing a local program with no community input. The result might be *misunderstandings* or even anger, hurting the nonprofit's reputation. By engaging stakeholders, you create a culture of openness: people know what to expect and feel confident that you'll act responsibly. It also **balances power** in decision-making. Instead of a few people at the top making all choices, input is coming from different levels. Especially when you include stakeholders with less traditional power (like clients or junior staff) in discussions, you promote equity and fairness. Everyone sees that decisions consider multiple viewpoints, which boosts trust in your organization's leadership.

- **Greater impact and sustainability:** Ultimately, nonprofits exist to make a positive impact. Stakeholder engagement amplifies that impact because it aligns everyone toward common goals. When your stakeholders understand what you're doing and *why*, and when you understand their expectations, you can avoid the typical roadblocks of **limited buy-in or conflicting priorities**. For example, if a community coalition is one of your stakeholders and you all share information and coordinate, you won't duplicate efforts or work at cross-purposes – instead, you'll complement each other. Engaged stakeholders often step up to support your mission in concrete ways: a business might offer in-kind help, a satisfied client might recruit others, or a volunteer might take on a leadership role. These are signs of a healthy ecosystem around your nonprofit. Over time, this network of supporters makes your organization more resilient. Funding, advocacy, and community backing tend to grow when stakeholders are engaged, because people see value in what you do and feel personally connected to it. In summary, understanding and involving stakeholders isn't a "nice to have" extra – it's foundational to running an effective, mission-focused nonprofit that can weather storms and keep creating change.

How to Identify and Engage Your Stakeholders (Step by Step)

So, how do you actually *do* stakeholder engagement, especially if you're a small or stretched-thin organization? The key is to start simple and make it an ongoing habit. Below is a step-by-step guide to identifying, mapping, and engaging stakeholders. Along the way, we'll pose some reflection questions and suggest practical actions. You can adapt these steps to fit your context – there's no one-size-fits-all, but these basics apply to most situations:

1. Make a big list of who's who. Begin by **identifying your stakeholders**. This is a brainstorming exercise – cast a wide net. Write down all the individuals and groups connected to your work. To prompt your thinking, ask yourself questions like: *Who is directly served by our programs? Who supports us financially or with volunteer time? Who would notice if our nonprofit disappeared tomorrow?* List internal folks (staff, board, active volunteers) and external ones (clients, partner organizations, funders, community members, etc.). Don't worry about sorting or prioritizing yet – just get all the names and categories out there. *Tip:* It can help to involve someone else in your team (if you have one) in this brainstorming. They might think of stakeholders you overlook. **Be especially mindful to include voices that are often forgotten**, such as the very people you aim to help, or perhaps critics and skeptics who challenge you (they count as stakeholders too!). A quick gut-check question is: **"Who have we left out?"** If a group of people will be affected by your work or could influence its success, they belong on the list, even if they're not the first to come to mind.

2. Map out their interests and influence. Now that you have a list, the next step is to **understand each stakeholder group's connection to your mission**. For each stakeholder (or category of stakeholders), consider: *What does this person or group care about most in relation to our work? What do they hope to gain or what concern might they have? Also ask, how can this stakeholder influence us (positively or negatively)? And how do we impact them?* Answering these questions helps you see the two-way street of value and expectations. For instance, you might note that *"Local parents (stakeholder group) care about the quality of our after-school program; they need a safe, enriching place for kids. Their support influences our reputation in the community,*

and our program's success deeply affects their families." Or, "Our major donor cares about evidence that our initiative is working; they can influence our financial stability with continued gifts, and we owe them transparency on results." This exercise is sometimes called *stakeholder mapping* – essentially, you're sketching out what each stakeholder needs **from you** and what you need **from them**. You can do this in a simple table or just jot notes under each name on your list. The goal is to get inside your stakeholders' perspectives.

- As you map, **group stakeholders by priority or type** if that helps. Some people use an **influence-interest grid** (placing stakeholders on a chart of how much interest they have vs. how much influence they wield). For a small nonprofit, a formal matrix might be overkill, but the idea is useful: it's a reminder that different stakeholders play different roles. Some have high influence (e.g., a key funder or a governing agency) while others have high interest because they're personally impacted (e.g., a beneficiary). Your engagement approach will vary accordingly – and that's okay.
- **Reflection action:** For each stakeholder group, answer these quick questions: "*What does this stakeholder group most want or need from our organization? What do we want or need from them? Are we aware of any specific concerns they have?*" If you find you can't answer these, that's a sign you may need to talk to them more to understand their perspective.

3. Prioritize and plan your engagement. With a clearer picture of your stakeholders and their interests, you can now **prioritize who to engage and how**. This doesn't mean anyone is unimportant – but as a practical matter, you'll have to decide where to focus your energy first. Identify the stakeholders who are *most critical* to your mission and those who might be at *highest risk of being overlooked*. Often, these are two ends of the spectrum that both deserve attention: for example, a major funder and the beneficiaries of your program are both high priorities, but for different reasons. Once you've highlighted key stakeholders, plan *how you will reach out and involve them*. Think about the **appropriate level of engagement for each group**. One size won't fit all:

- Some stakeholders might only need occasional updates or a friendly check-in now and then (for instance, a local neighbor who is generally supportive of your work).
- Others might benefit from a deeper involvement, like serving on a **stakeholder advisory group** or participating in planning sessions (for example, a few community members or partner representatives could join a brainstorming meeting about a new project).
- Consider each group's capacity and interest. Your **staff and board** can likely commit to regular meetings – it's part of their role. Community members or clients, on the other hand, may not have the time or formal obligation to engage intensively, so think of lighter-touch but meaningful ways to include them. Maybe it's a focus group, a short survey, or a one-on-one conversation over coffee. *Match the engagement to the stakeholder*. If you ask too little of a stakeholder who actually wants to help more, you miss out; ask too much of someone who isn't able to give that time, and you might strain the relationship.
- **Think inclusively:** as you plan, ensure you're not only catering to the loudest voices or the easiest-to-reach groups. For example, you might find it easy to meet with other nonprofits or donors (stakeholders who are very motivated to talk), but harder to get input from, say, youth in your program or a marginalized group in the community. Get creative: go where those stakeholders are, make it comfortable for them to speak, or provide an incentive. If you truly can't engage some stakeholders right now (due to time or resources), keep them on your radar for the future.

Write down a simple engagement plan: something like, "*Stakeholder A (e.g., clients) – engage via quarterly listening sessions; Stakeholder B (e.g., major donor) – engage via monthly progress email and invite to annual planning meeting; Stakeholder C (e.g., partner org) – engage via regular coalition calls and occasional joint events.*" It doesn't need to be elaborate – just actionable.

4. Reach out and listen actively. Now it's time to **take action and engage**. Start reaching out to your stakeholders according to the plan. This could be as simple as sending an email update, scheduling a coffee chat, or organizing a meeting. When you engage, *frame the conversation around collaboration*. For example, you might reach out to a community leader and say, "We value your perspective as someone invested in this neighborhood. Can we chat about our new project and hear your thoughts?" or send a survey to volunteers saying, "Your feedback will help us improve – we want to make sure this experience works for you."

- **Listening is the cornerstone** of stakeholder engagement. When you get the chance to interact, focus on asking questions and genuinely listening to the answers. You don't need to have all the answers or perfect updates; it's often more important to hear *their* insights. If you're meeting with a group, create a welcoming space for input. Sometimes just asking "*What do you think?*" or "*How do you feel about what we're doing, and how could we do it better?*" can open the door for valuable dialogue.
- **A few practical engagement ideas:** Host a casual "open house" or Zoom town hall for your community to drop in and share thoughts. Set up brief, informal interviews with a handful of clients or supporters to ask them about their experience with your organization. Start a stakeholders' newsletter to keep everyone informed and invite replies. Even picking up the phone and calling a donor to thank them and then asking for their input can be powerful. These actions show people that their relationship with your nonprofit isn't just transactional – it's a partnership.
- As you listen, **take notes and look for themes**. You might start noticing common praises or concerns. This information is gold for strengthening your work. And importantly, be responsive: if someone raises an issue you can address, let them know you're on it. If they offer an idea, explore it. You won't be able to act on *every* piece of input immediately, but people should feel that they've been heard and taken seriously.

5. Nurture the relationships. Engagement isn't a one-and-done deal – it's about building **ongoing relationships**. After the initial outreach, keep the momentum by following up. Share back what you learned with your stakeholders: "*Here's what we heard from you, and here's what we're doing as a result.*" Even if the action is "we're going to think more on this" or "we can't do X right now but we've noted it for later," communicating that closes the loop. This step is critical for trust. If stakeholders give input and it disappears into a black hole, they'll feel disillusioned. Conversely, when they see their feedback reflected (even in small changes or acknowledgments), they'll know you value them.

- **Show appreciation** often. Thank stakeholders for their time, ideas, support – whatever they contribute. A personalized thank-you note or public shout-out (with permission) in your newsletter can go a long way. People are more likely to stay engaged when they feel appreciated and recognized.
- Build routines to stay in touch. For instance, you might set a calendar reminder to check in with a particular stakeholder group every few months. This could be an email saying "just wanted to update you on what's happening" or an invite to an upcoming event. Consistency builds familiarity and trust. It also means that when you *do* need something (like support for a new campaign), it's not the only time you reach out.
- **Foster a two-way street:** Encourage stakeholders to contact *you* as well. Maybe designate a clear point of contact or open-door policy for feedback. Let them know you're available and open to hearing from them outside of scheduled engagements. Over time, stakeholders will start to proactively share opportunities or flag issues because they see themselves as part of the team.

6. Reflect and adapt over time. Finally, remember that stakeholder engagement is an evolving process. Set aside periodic moments (say, annually or at the close of a big project) to **review and adjust your stakeholder strategy**. Look back at your list and ask: *Do we have any new stakeholders we should include now? Have some stakeholders' roles changed? How effective were our engagement efforts – did we get useful*

input, and did our stakeholders feel valued? If certain approaches didn't yield much, try a different tactic. Maybe you got little response to an email survey – perhaps next time you'll try a couple of phone calls or an informal meetup. On the other hand, if you found, for example, that having a client advisory committee was incredibly helpful, consider continuing it or expanding on that idea.

- **Stay flexible:** The world changes, and your stakeholder landscape can shift. For instance, a change in local government might introduce a new official you want to build a relationship with, or growth in your program might mean there are now more volunteers or staff to engage. COVID-19 taught many nonprofits that stakeholders can even include unexpected groups (like public health departments or virtual audiences) that weren't on the radar before. By regularly reflecting, you won't be caught off guard – you'll be proactively updating your approach.
- **Keep equity in focus:** As you adapt, continue challenging yourself on whose voices might be missing or who could be more involved. It's an ongoing effort to **balance inclusion with manageability**. If you realize down the line that a particular community hasn't had a say, find ways to bring them in. For example, you might learn that non-English-speaking residents are affected by your work but haven't engaged due to language barriers – that could prompt you to translate materials or partner with a cultural liaison. These kinds of adaptations ensure your stakeholder work grows more inclusive over time.
- Document what you learn. Create a simple “stakeholder log” or journal where you note feedback received and actions taken. This helps in two ways: it keeps institutional memory (useful if staff change or boards rotate), and it lets you track how stakeholder relationships are contributing to your mission. You might be pleasantly surprised, looking back after a year, to see how many ideas and resources have flowed from your conscious engagement efforts.

By following these steps, you're essentially creating a living map of your nonprofit's human connections and tending to them. It might feel like extra work at first, but with practice it becomes a natural part of how you operate. Start with one or two stakeholder groups if needed, and build from there. **The key is to begin and remain curious.** Ask questions, listen, and show that you care – the rest will start to fall into place as relationships strengthen.

Common Pitfalls (and How to Avoid Them)

Working with stakeholders is rewarding, but it can have its challenges. It's easy to stumble into some common pitfalls, especially when juggling limited time and resources. Here are a few typical missteps nonprofits encounter in stakeholder engagement, along with tips for navigating around them:

- **Overlooking key groups:** One frequent mistake is inadvertently ignoring an important set of stakeholders. For example, an organization might focus heavily on donors and overlook the input of program participants, or vice versa. Sometimes this happens because certain groups are less visible or less vocal. *The danger:* decisions get made without considering everyone who's affected, leading to blind spots or resentment later. **How to navigate:** Make it a habit to *check your stakeholder list whenever you plan something significant*. Ask “Who else should we talk to?” Especially consider those who **aren't in the room** – perhaps community members who lack formal power, or quiet staff members who aren't usually asked for opinions. You can even assign someone (or yourself) the role of *stakeholder champion* to think about the under-represented perspectives during planning. If you find you've missed a group, reach out proactively and acknowledge it: people appreciate the honesty of “We realize we haven't heard from you on this, and your perspective is important.” Over time, continually inviting those voices helps embed them into your processes so they won't be overlooked in the future.

- **Assuming everyone's on the same page:** Another pitfall is to assume that because *you* understand your mission and plan, your stakeholders do too – and that they automatically agree with you. In reality, stakeholders often have different viewpoints, priorities, or levels of knowledge. For instance, your board might be very excited about a new strategic direction, but some long-time volunteers or clients might feel uneasy or left behind if it's not communicated well. *The danger:* misalignment and misunderstandings can grow quietly. You might think “no news is good news” but in fact some stakeholders are just staying silent or polite, even if they're confused or concerned. **How to navigate:** Don't leave alignment to chance. **Communicate clearly and frequently**, and create opportunities for stakeholders to ask questions or express concerns. Rather than asking “Does everyone understand?,” which might yield nods even if people are unsure, try asking open-ended questions: “*How does this new plan align with what you want to see?*” “*Do you see any challenges from your perspective?*” This invites true feedback. Additionally, when kicking off any new initiative, take time to reiterate the core *why* behind it and how it connects to your mission – different stakeholders might connect different dots. If you discover a stakeholder had a totally different expectation or assumption, address it directly: “*I realize we haven't been clear about X. Let's discuss so we're on the same page.*” It's better to uncover and resolve differences early than to have them fester. Remember, **alignment doesn't mean everyone agrees 100% on everything** (that's unrealistic). It means everyone understands the plan and sees their role in it, even if they have some differing opinions. You can acknowledge differences and still move forward, as long as folks feel heard and the overall direction is understood.
- **Engaging only once (or only when you need something):** Many nonprofits fall into a pattern of doing a big push for stakeholder input or support, then drifting away. For example, you might do a community survey one year and then not follow up for a long time, or only call your volunteers when it's time for the annual event. *The danger:* stakeholders may feel used or see the engagement as tokenistic. One-time outreach can come across as checking a box (“We asked for input, done!”) rather than genuinely building a relationship. Similarly, if the only time stakeholders hear from you is when you're fundraising or need a favor, they'll sense that one-way dynamic and could disengage. **How to navigate: Make engagement a continuous process, not a project.** This doesn't mean overburdening yourself or others with constant communication – it means creating a rhythm. Think of stakeholder engagement like tending a garden: little and often. For instance, instead of a single annual newsletter to all donors, send brief quarterly updates. If you host a focus group to get input on a new program idea, circle back a few months later to share what happened with that idea, even if it didn't pan out. If you meet with community members to ask for feedback, keep their contact info and send them an occasional update or invitation so they remain in the loop. **Consistency** builds trust. Also, strive to diversify the context of your interactions: don't let every interaction be an “ask.” Sometimes just check in to say hello or thank you without any request. Show stakeholders that you value them *outside* of crisis moments or big needs. If you realize you've fallen into a pattern of one-off outreach, you can recover by acknowledging it and improving. For example: “*We realized we only reach out when we have an event coming up. We want to change that and keep you more regularly informed and involved, starting with...*” It's never too late to shift towards a more relationship-centered approach.
- **Trying to “win” everyone or avoiding tough feedback:** Another subtle pitfall is feeling you must keep every stakeholder 100% happy, or being afraid to engage certain stakeholders because they might criticize you. This can lead to either spreading yourself too thin or shying away from valuable input. *The danger:* in trying to please everyone, you can lose your focus or burn out. Or by avoiding a stakeholder group (maybe a grumpy community critic or a challenging board member), you miss the chance to address valid points and potentially turn a detractor into an advocate. **How to navigate:** Accept that **stakeholder engagement isn't about unanimous praise** – it's about involvement and dialogue. Sometimes you will hear hard truths or ideas you can't act on. That's okay. In fact, it's healthy. If a stakeholder raises a concern, it's likely something that others have noticed too, and engaging with it

openly can improve your work and credibility. When conflict or differing opinions arise, approach them with a learning mindset: *"I see you're frustrated about X; I'd like to understand more and figure out how we can improve."* Not every stakeholder request can be fulfilled, and occasionally, you may have to make a decision that some disagree with. The key is to communicate *why* and show that you considered their input. Most people will respect a well-reasoned decision even if it's not the outcome they wanted, especially if you've been transparent. **Set boundaries and be honest:** If a stakeholder demands something outside your mission scope or capacity, explain what you *can* do and see if there's a middle ground. On the flip side, don't discount someone as "against us" too quickly – by inviting them in (perhaps asking them to serve on a committee or help craft a solution), you might transform an opponent into a partner. Many nonprofits have seen skeptics become their strongest allies once they feel heard and invested. Engaging stakeholders means taking the good with the challenging and continuing the conversation.

In short, the antidote to these pitfalls often comes down to **mindset and communication**. Stay humble and open to learning. If something goes awry – say a group feels ignored or a communication causes confusion – use it as an opportunity to improve. Apologize if needed, correct course, and keep going. Stakeholder relationships, like any relationships, will have ups and downs. What matters is showing commitment to the process and treating people with respect and sincerity. By navigating these common challenges thoughtfully, you'll build more durable and equitable stakeholder relationships over time.

Putting It Into Practice: Stakeholders in Action

Understanding the concept of stakeholders is one thing – putting it to work in daily nonprofit life is another. Fortunately, stakeholder engagement isn't a separate task on your to-do list; it can be woven into **everything** you already do, from planning to evaluation. Here are some practical ideas for infusing stakeholder awareness and involvement into key areas of your work:

- **Planning and Strategy:** When you're developing a new strategy or plan (be it an annual plan, a strategic vision, or even a grant proposal for a project), bring stakeholders into the process. This could mean **inviting a few external voices into your planning meetings** or conducting brief outreach before you finalize plans. For example, if you're drafting a five-year strategic plan, you might hold a listening session with community members to gather input on needs and priorities, or include a couple of client representatives or volunteers on the planning task force. Their perspectives will help ensure your plan is grounded in reality and community needs, not just internal assumptions. Even on a smaller scale, say you're planning the next year's program calendar – try running a draft by a friendly stakeholder (like a partner organization leader or a beneficiary) and ask, "Does this align with what you see as important?" Not only will you get valuable feedback, but those stakeholders will feel more ownership in the plan. **Pro tip:** During planning, explicitly discuss stakeholders: *"Which stakeholders would be affected by this goal, and have we factored in their perspective?"* This will become second nature and lead to more robust strategies.
- **Program Design and Delivery:** When creating or improving programs, treat your stakeholders (especially the participants and frontline implementers) as co-designers. For instance, if you run a job training nonprofit and want to design a new workshop, start by talking to the people you intend to serve: *What skills do they feel they need? What barriers do they face?* Incorporate their ideas into the program design. You could set up a *community advisory panel* that meets early in the design phase to brainstorm features. Or pilot the program with a small group and gather their feedback to tweak it. Similarly, engage your staff and volunteers – the folks who deliver the program – since they have on-the-ground insight. Ask your volunteers after a session, "How did it go? What could we do better for participants *and* for you as a facilitator?" This inclusive approach leads to programs that are more

relevant and effective because they're shaped by those who know the issues firsthand. It also makes stakeholders feel valued and heard. For example, participants might be more committed to attending a program they helped shape, and volunteers will be more dedicated when they see their suggestions implemented. In short, **build programs with people, not just for people.**

- **Communications and Storytelling:** Your communications (newsletters, social media, reports, etc.) are prime opportunities to engage stakeholders and acknowledge their role. First, **tailor your messaging to different stakeholder audiences.** Different groups might be interested in different aspects of your work. Donors might love to hear about big-picture impact and success stories, whereas the local community might want to know about events or changes happening in their neighborhood, and program participants might be eager for news on how the program is developing or expanding. Segment your communications so each group feels the message speaks to what they care about. This can be as simple as having one section of your newsletter "For Our Volunteers" highlighting an outstanding volunteer (showing you value them), or sending a specialized update to partners about collaborative achievements. Second, use communication as a two-way street: invite input. For instance, end your updates with a question: "What do you think of this new initiative? We'd love your feedback." On social media, ask followers (many of whom are stakeholders) to share their stories or ideas related to your cause. Feature stakeholder voices in your storytelling. You can quote a beneficiary's experience, highlight a donor's reason for supporting, or let a volunteer do a takeover of your social media for a day. This not only makes your communications richer and more authentic, but stakeholders who are featured will feel a stronger connection. Plus, it demonstrates *collaboration* – your story is not just "ours" but "all of ours." Lastly, always circle back in communications to **gratitude and inclusion:** e.g., "Thanks to input from community members like you, we've accomplished X," or "This achievement belongs to everyone involved." Such language reinforces that stakeholders are part of the team.
- **Advocacy and Public Engagement:** If your nonprofit does advocacy or public policy work (or even if it doesn't usually, there may be times you need to rally voices for a cause), stakeholders are your built-in network of supporters. **Engage them in advocacy efforts to amplify your influence.** For example, suppose you're campaigning for a new city ordinance that benefits your mission. You can encourage and train your stakeholders – be it clients, volunteers, partner organizations, or donors – to speak up. A client sharing their personal story at a town hall or with a legislator can be far more powerful than just your staff making the case. Likewise, a coalition of local nonprofits (stakeholder partners) uniting on an issue sends a strong message that the community is together on it. Provide stakeholders with the tools and information to advocate: talking points, letter templates, opportunities to testify or meet officials. This not only advances the cause but deepens stakeholders' commitment to your mission – they become advocates and champions, not just passive supporters. **Collaboration is key:** Working side by side with stakeholders on an advocacy campaign builds camaraderie and shows that your nonprofit is inclusive in leadership, willing to share the spotlight for the greater good. And remember advocacy can also mean standing up for your stakeholders. For instance, if your beneficiaries face a stigma or misunderstanding in the community, you can advocate on their behalf to other stakeholder groups, educating and bridging gaps. In doing so, you fulfill a role as a connector among your stakeholders, which strengthens the entire community around your mission.
- **Evaluation and Learning:** After you've implemented programs or at regular intervals, involve stakeholders in evaluating how things went. Often nonprofits measure success with numbers and internal assessments, but **stakeholder feedback is an invaluable part of understanding your impact.** Consider creating feedback loops like surveys, suggestion boxes, or debrief meetings for different groups. Ask your beneficiaries, "Did this program meet your needs? What changes would you suggest?" Ask your staff and volunteers, "What worked well, and what was challenging for you?" Ask partners, "How was the collaboration from your perspective? Any improvements for next time?" And ask

donors, “Do you feel informed about the results of the project you funded? Is there other info you’d like to see?” By posing such questions, you get qualitative insight that data alone might miss. Make it routine – for example, after each event or project, gather key stakeholders for a quick evaluation session (could be virtual or in-person). Importantly, **use the feedback** to make adjustments and let people know you did. This closes the loop and reinforces a culture of continuous improvement and respect for stakeholder input. Also, stakeholders can help *define* what success looks like. Your definition of success for a program and a participant’s definition might differ; hearing from them can enlighten you to outcomes that matter most to them (maybe they found confidence and friendships, beyond the job skills you taught – that’s valuable to recognize). Finally, involve stakeholders in celebrating successes and learning from setbacks. If an initiative met its goals, share that victory with everyone who contributed – it’s their win too. If something fell short, be honest about it and share what you learned and how you’ll improve, which maintains trust. Over time, this inclusive evaluation practice means your stakeholders become co-creators of your nonprofit’s learning and growth. It strengthens mutual respect – you’re showing that their perspective is part of determining the way forward, not just an afterthought.

Across all these areas, a common thread is **intentionally integrating stakeholder voices** rather than treating stakeholder engagement as a separate silo. By doing so, you enrich your organization’s work with real-world perspectives, and you nurture a community of people who feel deeply connected to your mission. It can start small – maybe just one planning meeting with a guest participant, or one story from a stakeholder in your next report – and grow from there. The more you practice it, the more natural it will become to say “Who else should be part of this conversation?” in everything you do.

And remember, putting it into practice also means being patient and adaptable. You might try a certain engagement tactic that doesn’t get much response – that’s okay. Stakeholder engagement is a learning process. Maybe your community forum was poorly attended; you can learn from that (was the timing wrong? did people need personal invites? would a survey work better?). Or perhaps bringing a stakeholder onto a committee slowed things down; that’s a chance to improve how you orient and support stakeholder participants rather than giving up on the idea. Keep experimenting and evolving your approach. **Revisit your stakeholder strategy regularly** (for example, in an annual review) to update who your stakeholders are and how you’ll involve them in the coming year’s activities. This way, your stakeholder engagement grows and adapts along with your nonprofit’s needs and context.

Conclusion: Relationships at the Heart of Your Mission

As you can see, working with stakeholders isn’t a single task or box to check – it’s an ongoing, relational part of nonprofit life. And that’s good news! It means you don’t have to have it all figured out from the start, and you don’t need a fancy title or a big team to do it. **You can begin right where you are, with the relationships you already have.** Stakeholder engagement is essentially about caring and connecting, values that are already at the core of why you do what you do.

Start small and build: Maybe your first step after reading this guide is to call one long-time volunteer and ask for their honest opinion on a project, or to invite clients to share stories in your next staff meeting. That’s a success. Then keep going – make another connection next week, try a group conversation next month. Over time, these little actions create a culture of engagement. You’ll likely find that your stakeholders become more responsive and involved as they see you reaching out regularly. Don’t worry if it’s not perfect; relationships rarely are. If something feels awkward or falls flat, it’s okay to acknowledge it and try a different approach. What matters is the genuine intention behind your efforts. *Stakeholders can tell when you truly value them*, and that sincerity is far more important than having the slickest presentation or the most elaborate plan.

Remember that **stakeholder work is a two-way street**. It's not just you doing something for them or them for you – it's a partnership. Sometimes you'll be giving support or information; other times you'll be receiving advice, feedback, or a helping hand. In all cases, approach these interactions with gratitude and humility. Nonprofit work is tough, and it can feel lonely if you carry it all on your shoulders. But when you engage stakeholders, you're effectively saying, *"We're in this together."* You'll likely discover allies in places you didn't expect and uncover new resources or ideas simply by opening up and involving others.

Keep equity and empathy at the center. Each stakeholder relationship is, at its heart, a human relationship. Be mindful of power dynamics – for example, the power differences between a donor and a service user, or between an executive director and a junior staffer. By being aware of these, you can consciously create space for those with less power to speak and influence decisions. Something as simple as actively soliciting input from quieter voices in a meeting, or providing an anonymous way to give feedback, can empower those who might hesitate. Showing empathy – trying to see things from your stakeholder's point of view – will guide you to engage in ways that are respectful and meaningful. If you treat everyone with respect and as a true partner in the mission, you'll build a reputation as a trustworthy, community-rooted organization.

Lastly, **celebrate the journey**. Stakeholder engagement doesn't yield a trophy or a final endpoint; it's a continuous journey of relationship-building. So celebrate milestones along the way. Celebrate when a stakeholder gives you a tough critique, because it means they cared enough to be honest and you grew from it. Celebrate when a collaborative effort with stakeholders leads to a win, like a successful event or a funded project – make sure to give credit all around. And celebrate the intangible things: the feeling of solidarity at a community meeting, or the look of appreciation from someone who felt truly heard. These moments are signs that you're cultivating something powerful: trust and community.

In the end, **stakeholders are about people, and people are at the heart of every nonprofit mission**. By investing in those relationships, you're investing in the long-term health and impact of your cause. No matter your nonprofit's size or stage, you can start strengthening stakeholder connections today. As the saying goes, *"If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together."* With your stakeholders by your side – informing you, challenging you, championing you – there's no telling how far your organization can go in pursuit of your vision. So take a deep breath, reach out, and keep the conversation going. You've got a community ready to help, and together you'll keep making the world a better place, one relationship at a time.

Footnotes

1. [Nonprofit stakeholders: Who they are and why they matter | QuickBooks](#)

2. [Nonprofit stakeholders: Who they are and why they matter | QuickBooks](#)