



Shifting Power

And Other Themes from Group Health Foundation's
Inquiry into Community Engagement

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The Giving Practice
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The Inquiry	2
The Why, What, and How of Community Engagement.....	3
Ten Questions from Learning Collaborative	6
Shifting Power	7
Showing Up	8
Developing Leaders	9
Helping Learning Happen.....	9
Applying Learning Collaborative Suggestions	10

“Issues come and go. You organize for power!”

Learning Collaborative participant

The Inquiry

Group Health Foundation established a project to gather perspectives and insights as it develops an emergent framework that will guide its early partnerships with communities. The learning inquiry explored the following question: *Given our focus on health equity, how can we approach engaging communities in a way that is authentic, respectful, effective, and centered on community assets?*

The first step in answering the question was a pivotal one. The Foundation decided it could best learn alongside leaders with experience in community engagement, and it formed the Foundation's inaugural Learning Collaborative. A range of talented community advocates from around Washington state were considered. The goal was to bring together a mix of participants who represented different regions, would bring deep lived experience engaging with and organizing communities, reflected diverse perspectives based on race, gender, sexual orientation and age, and were ready to be candid about philanthropy's role. The 11 leaders who were invited brought all of these qualities and more. In exchange for their insights and time, the Foundation provided participants a stipend and covered travel expenses.



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Learning Collaborative Participants

The group came together in 2018 for three facilitated sessions: in March for a launch video call, in April for a session at the Korean Women’s Association in Tacoma, and in May for a session at the Yakima Arboretum. Learning Collaborative participants generated a number of helpful ideas for the Foundation, explored in the pages that follow. And the process was significant for participants, too. They reported finding the experience valuable and shared a desire to keep in touch with each other as an informal community of practice. “Amazing people from across the state at this table,” said one participant at the end of the final session. “A phenomenal experience.” “This group is changing me,” said another. “Let’s stay connected.”



The Why, What, and How of Community Engagement

During their conversations, Learning Collaborative participants reflected on three overall questions: *Why is community engagement important? What is community engagement—i.e., what do we mean by both “community” and “engagement,” and what does it look like in practice? How can community engagement be done and supported most effectively?* The March call focused on the why. The April and May meetings covered the what and how.

The report includes a key distinction between those things collaborative members regarded as important when *doing* community engagement—i.e., from the community perspective—and those things that are more relevant when *supporting* community engagement—i.e. from the funder perspective. The Foundation approached the inquiry mindful of this distinction and listened for both.

The Why

During the launch call in March, participants were asked why community engagement was important to them. They provided a range of answers that reflected themes that would emerge throughout the discussions, including addressing power imbalances and ensuring communities are involved with leading the development of solutions to inequities.

Participants stated that engaging with communities is important to:

- Build capacity. “For groups and individuals!”
- Ensure an equitable distribution of resources, including, in Group Health Foundation’s case, geographically. “We need an idea of geographic equity.”
- Help make local interventions sustainable. “We’ve found that when an outside entity tries to create a clinic, it’s never sustained.”
- Produce stronger results across issue areas. “We see improved outcomes across silos.” “We need to look at intersectionality.”
- Promote the ownership that is essential to change. “Any positive systems change requires local ownership.”
- Reveal solutions. “Those closest to the issue are closest to the solution.”
- Strengthen representation. “Everybody at the table.” “Including youth and elderly!”

The What and the How

The April session in Tacoma explored the meanings of *community* and *engagement* distinctly, with Learning Collaborative participants discussing both the conceptual and the concrete. Shared values are an important ingredient in community, participants said. And so are things as practical as the food you provide. Engagement is about showing up, they observed, but not just physically. Identity, voice, connections, interests, and place can all be reasons to come together. The wide range of meanings generated seemed to reflect a view that the practice of community engagement must honor diverse perspectives, use an expansive mindset, prize flexibility, and pay attention to the details.

In thinking about and defining what “community” means to them, participants shared the following:

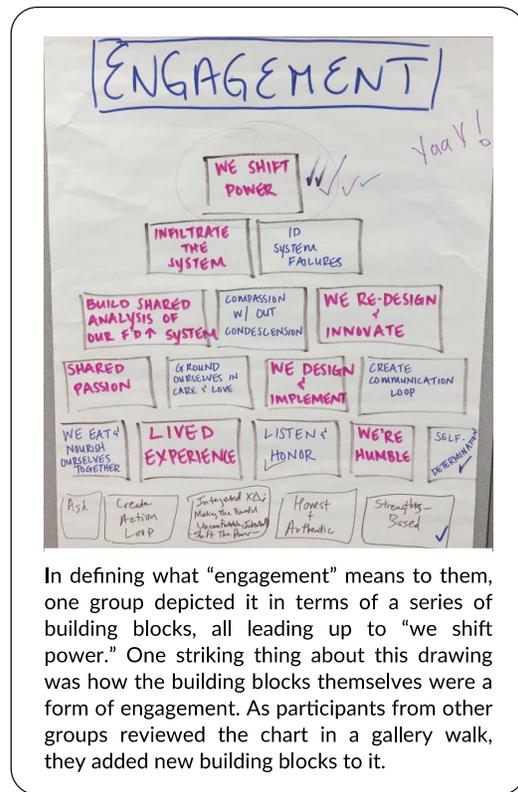
Place	Countering displacement and marginalization	Shared experience	Lots of ways to define!	Opportunity and risk
Norms and shared values	People choosing each other	Food	People who show up	Empowerment
Identity	How I see me, how others see me	Who creates the definition of community?	Avoiding labels and community being defined by outsiders	Interest
Intersectional and multiple	Leadership	Shifts in identity and community over time	Sense of belonging	Culture
Ownership				Faith

When thinking about and defining what “engagement” means to them, participants shared a number of ideas about how to do this work:



As they reflected on the various meanings generated through the exercise, Learning Collaborative participants raised questions and distinctions that they continued to explore in the following session:

- There’s a difference between *going into* a community and *being in* a community. This is also related to individual versus institutional identity, and how both influence perspectives on community engagement. “Your organization affects your role and how you’re perceived.”
- Who defines community? “Is the definition coming from the outside?”
- Think about engagement in terms of building relationships for the long term. Stay and build. Emphasize capacity and sustainability. “Don’t come in and then leave.”
- Staying power is critical. It comes from ownership, determination, and keeping eyes on the horizon. “*Oh, ain’t it awful* won’t keep people coming. You need to nourish the soul.”
- Should it be everybody in? As in, should everyone always be at the table, given the historical context we face? No, said participants. When everybody is invited in, the majority culture tends to dominate. “Bringing everybody in can lead to assimilation and colonization.” Instead, prioritize bringing the historically oppressed—those who have not had a voice traditionally—to the table.
- Be honest about failure. “Fail forward!” How can communities learn from failure rather than lose resources or feel defeated as a result of it?
- Long-term systems change is essential to advance social determinants of health. “We’re building an ecosystem that *supports* the community!”



Ten Questions from Learning Collaborative

Participants in the Learning Collaborative generated ten critical questions about community engagement when working for racial and social equity. We recognized that each of these questions can be answered from two perspectives: that of a community-based organization (such as the organizations that most Learning Collaborative participants are part of or work with) and that of a funder seeking to support community engagement (such as Group Health Foundation). The “we” in these questions can be considered representing both a CBO *doing* and a funder *supporting*. (Note the questions are in alphabetical order, not in any order of priority.)

How can we:

1. Advance transparency and accountability?
2. Apply an equity lens and equitable processes?
3. Create an enabling environment for organizations to learn from mistakes?
4. Develop leaders to sustain long-term change?
5. Listen to how communities define what engagement means to them?
6. Move beyond service provision and education to truly empowering communities?
7. Partner with communities to avoid unintended consequences?
8. Shift power from top-down to ground-up?

9. Support community engagement over the long-term and keep building on successes?
10. Understand, respect, and ally with communities as they show up?

Of the questions generated, Learning Collaborative members chose to focus on a few themes for further conversation, including shifting power, showing up, developing leaders, and helping learning happen.

Shifting Power

As Learning Collaborative participants reflected on their lived experiences as leaders working to organize for racial and social justice and as part of communities impacted by racism and other oppressions, shifting power emerged as the most significant theme of the inquiry. Participants consistently applied this analytical framework in their discussions: How can community engagement help shift power dynamics so that communities are the decision-makers rather than having things done to them? Shifting power was seen as the critical long-term aim and impact of community engagement. Learning Collaborative participants consistently tied tactics to shifting power as a larger strategy. “Issues come and go,” said one participant. “You organize for power!”

Participants generated a number of ideas about the process of shifting power:

Shifting power goes beyond service delivery and education. This was a consistent theme in Learning Collaborative discussions, as participants cautioned against a common frame of equating educating and providing services with organizing for power: “Don’t confuse educating communities with empowering them.” “Watch out for ‘trickle-down community engagement—for example, when everyone engaged already has power.” “Keep asking: is decision making being truly shifted to the community involved/impacted?”

Shifting power is not easy! Learning Collaborative participants surfaced a range of obstacles that often stand in the way of real shifts from top-down to ground-up power, from the more systemic (political and economic forces, a history of insincere engagement, long-standing divisions among communities, people not wanting to give up power, etc.) to the more tactical (lack of outcomes, time and technical constraints among residents, focusing on short-term issues versus long-term power-building, thinking being right is enough, etc.). Learning Collaborative participants consistently noted that giving up power is more easily said than done.

Shifting power requires engaging communities in decision-making. Many of the Learning Collaborative participants shared methods they had employed to involve communities in decision making. The message to the Foundation was to ensure its decisions were informed and influenced by communities and to identify grantees who used an equity lens at the board and staff level to ensure programs, services, and organizing actively included community members who have historically been excluded.

Build funder trust—and, in some cases, restore it—with community-based organizations. As part of the final session, small groups of Learning Collaborative participants brainstormed ways that funders could support shifting power and overcome obstacles that stand in the way. They then were asked to choose one idea to further develop. One question that arose was: How can funders overcome a history of insincere investments and engagement? In response, they suggested funders do the following:

- Use trust-building approaches such as long-term investment, co-development of RFPs, funding through transitions, and general operating support.
- Ensure that boards of funder organizations include representatives of impacted communities.
- Use collaborative rather than command-and-control approaches.
- See community-based organizations as “subjects rather than objects,” principals rather than agents.
- Work with the community to develop outcomes and measurements.

Showing Up

Showing up, or how you engage in and with community, was another consistent theme to emerge from Learning Collaborative discussions. “Engagement is about showing up,” said one. Who shows up, how they show up, and where people gather can be key factors in community engagement. There was consensus on the importance of this theme but diversity of opinion on what it means in practice. “How do you define what showing up is?” “Any showing up is engagement.” “But is it an indicator of engagement? Not necessarily.” “You need to be present and not bring an agenda.” “For me, community *is* who shows up.”

Participants identified a number of ways to show up with authenticity:

- Give credit for contributions.
- Honor people’s expertise.
- Ensure transparency in motivations and process.
- Respect people’s authentic selves and different styles.
- Communicate clear expectations about ownership.
- Provide incentives for people to show up.

Collaborative members pointed to additional ways funders and Group Health Foundation in particular could show up in a way that supports community leadership in advancing racial and social equity:

- Analyze power dynamics, community issues, and relevant investments.
- Meet with partners in their spaces.
- Take a local more than statewide perspective.
- Think creatively about staffing models and co-locating staff with communities.
- Work with diverse communities across the state and avoid perceptions of being Seattle-centric.

Developing Leaders

Learning Collaborative participants also explored the role of leadership development in community engagement efforts. In particular, they focused on how organizations can identify, train, and sustain leaders from communities of color. The following ideas were identified as important ways that leaders can be developed and supported:

- Identify clear paths in leadership.
- Invest in long-term leadership development efforts.
- Invest in relationships.
- Prioritize different forms of leadership.
- Prioritize historically marginalized communities.
- Recognize multiple levels of leadership development (individual, organizational, community).
- Shift from funding programs to developing people.

They also identified the following as potential obstacles and issues in leadership development:

- Holding leaders from marginalized communities to different/higher standards.
- Imposing paternalistic leadership models.
- Offering minimal or no mentoring.
- Limiting opportunities for leadership in communities of color.
- Managing burnout.
- Not recognizing barriers to resources and access.
- Assessing who decides when communities and leaders are worthy and ready?

Helping Learning Happen

Learning Collaborative participants asked a series of questions about learning in community engagement:

- How to learn and pivot when some of the most useful learning derives from failing, yet there is little tolerance for failing from funders?
- How can we be more like other types of long-term investors who expect a certain portion of their investments to fail—as a sign that they’re taking the appropriate amount of risk?
- In “failing forward,” how can communities learn from failing and make forward progress rather than be defeated by it or lose resources because of it? “Be willing to fail,” reflected one participant. “It’s how you learn. It requires institutional courage!”

They identified these ideas for how funders can best support learning in community engagement efforts:

- Be flexible and course-correct in program implementation.
- Build evaluation capacity.

- Create space for sharing mistakes and learning from them.
- Encourage innovation and embrace or at least tolerate the risk that often comes with it.

Applying Learning Collaborative Suggestions

How best to keep the themes raised and explored during this inquiry alive? Three questions might be helpful prompts for the Foundation's staff and board as they move forward:

1. What are we learning about shifting power to our partners and communities? What is Group Health Foundation doing to commit to this practice and how is the Foundation influencing grantees and peers to do more to shift power as well?
2. Is Group Health Foundation showing up in a way that creates trust by building authentic relationships, sustaining commitment over time, and allowing for risk and failure? Equally important, has the Foundation accepted the communities' ideas for change even when it is different from the board or staff's ideas?
3. As Group Health Foundation engages with communities, what steps are being taken to ensure equity is applied to the Foundation's understanding of who to engage and how solutions are co-designed?

Foundation staff observed that this project was extremely rewarding, meaningful, and influential. This early inquiry helped to amplify and illustrate the ways Group Health Foundation's values and mission can be realized.

Group Health Foundation is grateful to Learning Collaborative members for sharing their time and expertise and for their willingness to speak candidly about what it means for the Foundation to support the leadership and knowledge of communities to achieve health equity.