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New guidance on high-quality feedback helps boost nonprofit performance

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When a nonprofit truly listens to the people it serves, the results can be transformational. At the Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO), Brad helped design a process to systematically listen and respond to client feedback. One day,

Luis - a participant in CEO's program which supports people returning home from prison - received a simple text message asking for feedback: *"CEO treats me with respect. TEXT 0-10 (0 is strongly disagree and 10 is strongly agree)."* Luis replied with a 2. The system immediately flagged his low score, prompting his job coach to reach out and learn more. Luis shared that he was considering leaving the program due to a safety issue at his temporary job site. By taking the time to listen to Luis's concerns, CEO was able to address the problem and rebuild his trust in the program.



Brad Dudding,
Chief Impact Officer,
The Bail Project

Later, Brad spoke with Luis about his experience. Luis said that staying with CEO was a turning point, made possible by the simple act of being heard and valued. He went on to graduate from the program and secure full-time employment, a success that underscores the transformative power of listening and acting on feedback.

The need for high-quality listening and feedback

More and more nonprofits and grantmakers recognize the importance of listening to the people most affected by their programs. More than 39,000 nonprofits have shared their feedback processes on the [How We Listen](#) section of their Candid profile, and more than 1,000 nonprofits have participated in [Listen4Good](#)'s feedback capacity building programs. Grantmakers also see the importance of listening themselves and supporting their grantees to listen. In a Feedback Labs [survey](#) of more than 100 philanthropic foundations, 73% were considering offering their grantees capacity-building support to improve their listening practice.

As the recognition of the power of feedback and listening grows, nonprofits and grantmakers alike are asking what high-quality, effective, and equitable listening

looks like. Indeed, the number one request that Feedback Labs heard from attendees of the 2024 Feedback Summit was for more tangible guidance on how to ensure their listening efforts are effective and equitable. A shared understanding of what high-quality listening looks like is even more important now that [overhauled federal grantmaking rules](#) recognize that voices of people who will be impacted by federal assistance should be heard before programs are developed.



Clients of Center for Employment Opportunities share their feedback on programs

Photo credit: Center for Employment Opportunities

Core Principles guide listening efforts

To help provide that shared understanding, we've been working with the [Irritants for Change](#), a group of leading nonprofit platforms and feedback experts that are working to make high-quality listening and feedback the norm across nonprofits and funders. Many 'Irritants' are also [Leap Ambassadors](#), a community hosted by the National Council of Nonprofits, and both groups share the goal of advancing greater social impact by improving nonprofit performance. Listening - and responding! - to a nonprofit's ultimate constituents is a key driver of performance and impact.

To help nonprofits and grantmakers understand what it takes to listen well, the Irritants released the first version of the [Core Principles of High-Quality Listening and](#)

[Feedback](#) in 2018. Since then, the sector has generated a wealth of new [evidence](#) about what practices matter most for high-quality listening and feedback and the [key role](#) that equity and inclusion play in high-quality listening and feedback. Last year, the Irritants for Change worked with nonprofit and foundation leaders from across Feedback Labs' network to distill this latest evidence into a [new version of the Core Principles](#).

We'll share a bit about the Core Principles below, and you can also learn more by joining a [webinar on January 29th at 1 pm Eastern](#) with Candid CEO Ann Mei Chang, BBB Wise Giving Alliance President Art Taylor, and Listen4Good Executive Director Valerie Threlfall, to explore how the Core Principles can help your nonprofit transform its work.

Eight Core Principles of High-Quality Listening and Feedback

The eight Core Principles lay out the essential features of high-quality listening and feedback efforts. High-quality listening and feedback:

1. **Share power with the people most affected by our work:** High-quality listening and feedback processes recognize the power and expertise constituents have and support greater equity by shifting foundations and nonprofits from holding decision-making power over the people at the heart of their work to holding it with them.
2. **Center the voices of people who are least heard:** High-quality listening and feedback mechanisms are designed to be accessible to all and prioritize hearing and acting on feedback from people who are historically underrepresented in listening efforts and most affected by inequities.
3. **Commit to action:** While nonprofits and foundations may choose not to change in response to every individual piece of feedback or input, they recognize their overall responsibility (and commit) to acting on what they hear from constituents.
4. **Protect constituents** High-quality listening and feedback processes are safe for constituents, ensuring their confidential information is protected and they aren't put at risk of repercussions by participating.
5. **Lead to continuous reflection, learning, and improvement:** Systematically listening to, understanding, and acting on feedback and input as

part of regular, on-going operations creates a culture of responsiveness and learning that leads to improvements as defined by people at the heart of the work.

6. **Are transparent and participatory:** High-quality listening and feedback processes make clear how input will be used and involve constituents in designing the process and interpreting what's heard rather than extracting information without meaningful engagement.
7. **Report back to constituents:** Nonprofits and foundations “close the loop” with constituents as part of high-quality listening and feedback efforts by sharing what they heard from constituents and how they will act in response.
8. **Are systematic:** High-quality listening and feedback processes are integrated into internal systems and align with other efforts by nonprofits and foundations to center the voices of the people at the heart of their work in order to advance the systemic changes they seek.

How to use the Core Principles

The Core Principles provided CEO with a roadmap for high-quality listening and feedback that empowered program participants. Luis's story illustrates in particular the power of Principles three and five - committing to act on feedback and using it to drive continuous improvement by showing how responsive systems can address client needs in real time, rebuild trust, and drive meaningful outcomes.

The Core Principles are useful to all types of nonprofits, and using them is easy. Ask yourself: which principles do my nonprofit already practice, and which do we want to work on embodying more? Listen4Good's [Best Practices guide](#) and the [Feedback Quiz](#) can help you reflect in more detail, and by filling out the [How We Listen section](#) of your nonprofit's Candid profile you can share your reflections and improve your nonprofit's rating on Charity Navigator. Share the Core Principles with your colleagues and make a plan to strengthen at least one principle in your work. Have a conversation with your funders about what support your nonprofit needs to better embody the Core Principles to improve your listening efforts.

Finding more support is also easy: check out the [resources](#) the Irritants have compiled for nonprofits and share [grantmaker resources](#) with your funders. To go deeper, consider taking a [short online course](#) on the basics of feedback or [accessing tailored coaching and web-based tools to build your own feedback system](#). Creating

those systems can help your organization be even more effective in serving its community.

Brad Dudding, Chief Impact Officer at The Bail Project, oversees program strategy and has helped the organization scale its work nationwide.

Megan Campbell, Senior Director of Programs & Strategy at Feedback Labs, leads Feedback Labs' efforts to create the systems that support nonprofits and grantmakers to listen and respond to the people at the heart of their work in high-quality, equitable ways.