FEEDBACK *and* EQUITY
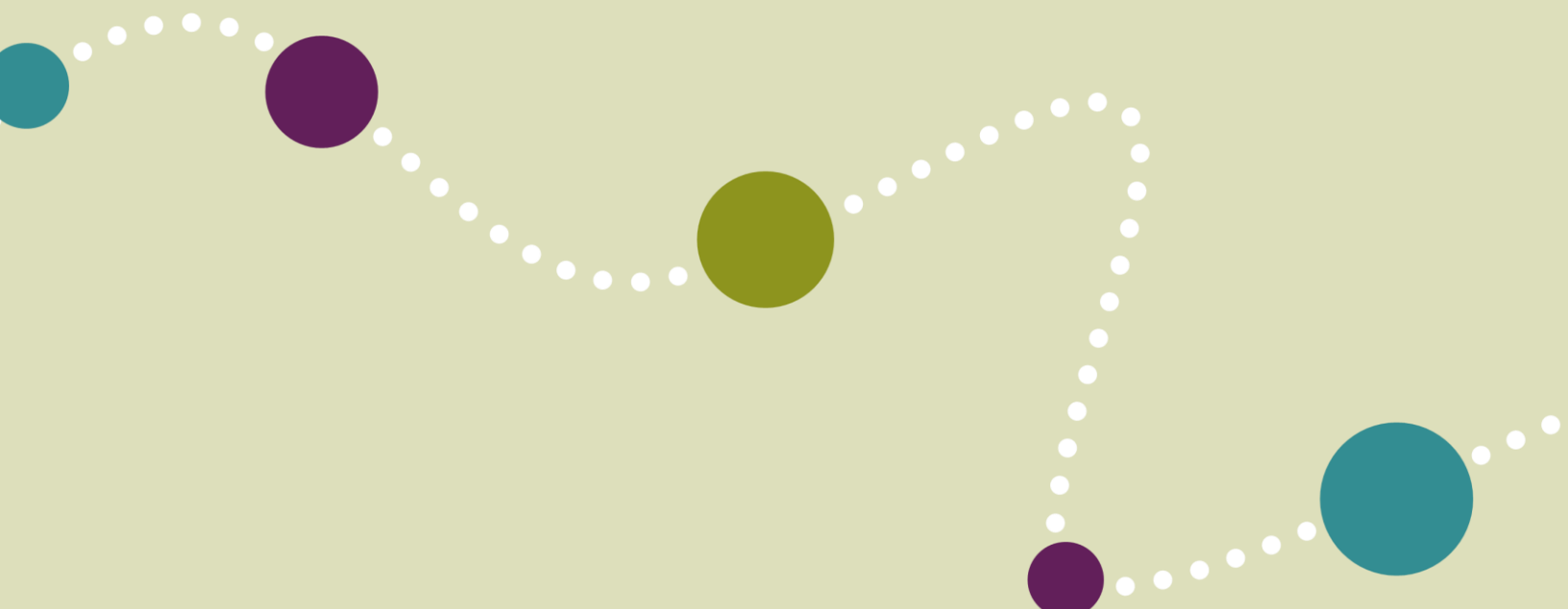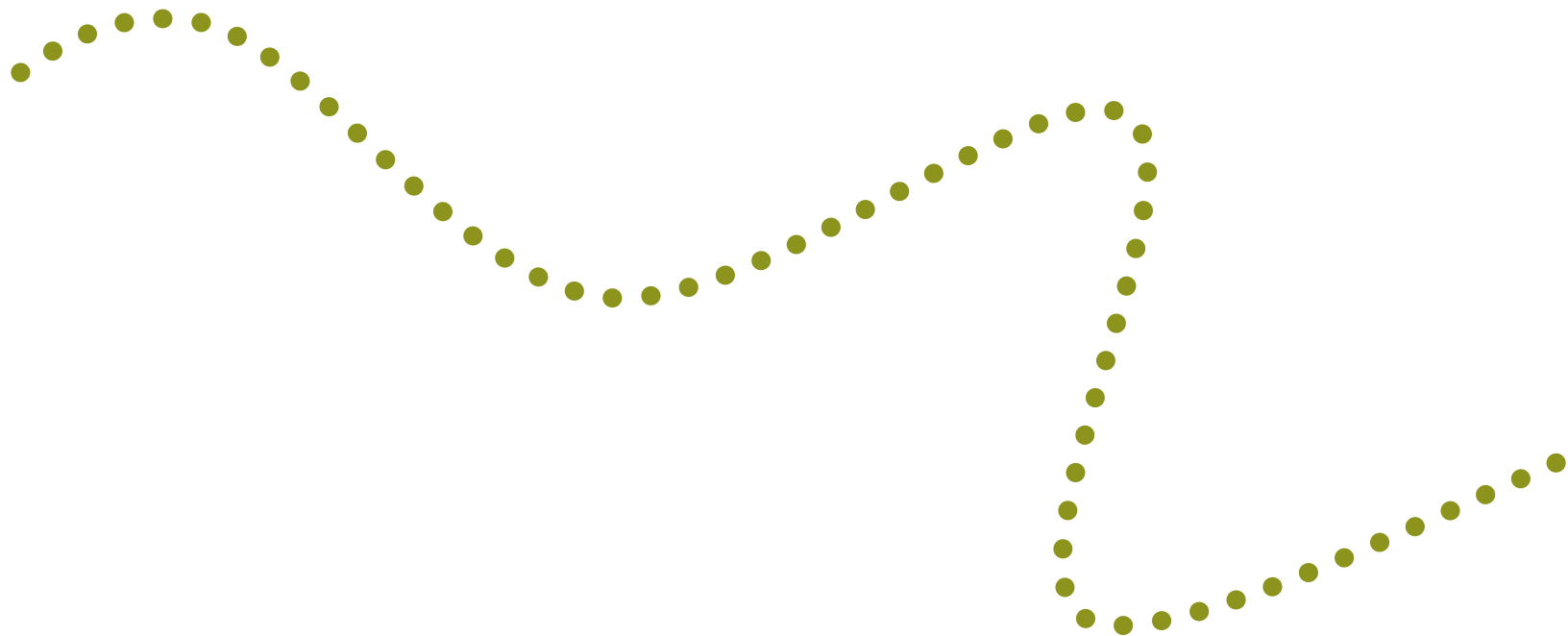## CONNECTING THE DOTS

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Fund *for* Shared Insight

ORSIMPACT

Introduction

More and more nonprofits in the United States are intentionally seeking proximity to the people at the heart of their work. By understanding the lived experience of their clients, nonprofit staff can ensure that their services are responsive to clients' needs and that clients themselves can identify the supports they need in order to thrive. As one nonprofit staff member expressed, "We have found that our clients do not lead us astray. They lead us towards the things that are most powerful, and when we're able to listen to them and act on those things, we are more successful." Clients' power to inform and transform organizations' work became even more evident for some during the COVID-19 pandemic: "I remember talking to the team: stay really close to young people, they're going to show us the way forward and we need to listen to what they have to say about what they need and also what we need to do differently. And that's been a real guidepost [in] navigating this time of challenge and uncertainty."

In their efforts to become more proximate to the people at the heart of their work, an increasing number of nonprofit organizations have implemented high-quality feedback practices that help them to meaningfully engage with their clients. At the same time, the philanthropic and nonprofit sectors have moved further along on a journey to understand and address systems that result in inequitable outcomes. As the feedback and equity conversations in the sector evolved, there has been increasing attention to the connection between feedback and equity, with a focus on the conceptual connection and hypotheses about what it might look like in practice.

To contribute to this developing conversation, ORS Impact engaged in an open-ended inquiry to better understand what the connection between feedback and equity looks like in practice for nonprofits. Our goal in exploring this connection is to **clarify the conceptual connection** by bringing forth practical examples and looking for patterns to support nonprofits and funders in better understanding what to look for, what to focus on, and how to create feedback practices that support equity work.

For this work, we partnered with six nonprofit organizations that have participated in and implemented high-quality feedback loops through Listen4Good, and we spoke with their executive directors and leaders, staff, board members, and clients (for a total of 32 interviews) to explore:

1. The extent to which feedback contributes to nonprofits' efforts to **understand and address inequities** that their clients face.

2. How organizations leverage feedback and listening practices to **share power** with clients within their organizations, giving them **more control over resources and decisions**.

This report provides an in-depth look at each of the following findings and provides reflections based on findings and related frameworks that aim to contribute to the field's understanding of how feedback can contribute to nonprofit organizations' equity work.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

1. Feedback is contributing to organizations' equity work in two main ways: (1) insights from feedback inform changes in programs and organizational policies that advance equity, and (2) the act of listening itself is influencing organizational change.

2. For clients, feedback is personal; their feedback includes perspectives, personal experiences, and feelings that they choose to share to contribute to organizations' understanding of their lived experience and barriers they face. While most feel heard and valued, there are still opportunities for improvement.

3. Organizations are shifting from having *power over* clients to building power with clients, and feedback and listening contributed to those practices.

4. Feedback and listening contributed in different ways to organizations' equity work; they acted as a catalyst, mirror, or compass, depending on how feedback and listening were leveraged by each organization.

5. Collecting client feedback doesn't automatically make organizations more equitable; organizations must intentionally design processes and create a culture that infuses equity into the way they gather and use feedback to understand and address the inequities clients face.

KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Equity: Shifting systems and conditions so those who have been excluded or oppressed benefit and become empowered agents of the change they seek. These shifts can improve access and quality of services for specific groups of clients, address public or organizational policies that result in disparate outcomes, or can change the relationship between clients and organizations to shift power to clients, giving them more control over resources and decisions.

Equity-focused work manifests in two areas of organizations' work: *what they work on* and *how they conduct their work*.

1. *What* organizations do to address inequities, the equitable outcomes to which they contribute through their services, and the systems they work to address.
2. *How* organizations do their work, how they relate to and share power with clients in ways that contribute to more equitable outcomes.

Inclusion: Making diverse clients with differential needs feel welcome and able to contribute.

Listening: Meaningfully connecting with clients to hear their perceptions, opinions, preferences, and needs through mechanisms other than feedback loops. Interviews, focus groups, advisory groups, and listening sessions that aim to gather input or co-create in partnership with clients are examples of practices through which nonprofits listen to their clients.

High-quality feedback loops: Fund for Shared Insight (Shared Insight) and Listen4Good use "high-quality feedback loops" to describe feedback practices that (1) gather actionable, credible, and candid feedback with a focus on accessibility; (2) capture a large number of representative client voices using flexible data collection approaches; (3) identify areas for celebration and areas for improvement while shedding light on differential experiences across specific client groups; (4) engage organizational decision-makers (and external stakeholders, such as funders) to learn from client feedback and implement changes based on what is learned; (5) close the loop by sharing back with clients what was learned from listening to them and the specific ways that an organization is responding to their feedback.[1]

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[1] "What is Feedback?" Fund for Shared Insight. https://fundforsharedinsight.org/learn-more/what-is-feedback/

Key Findings

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Given the development of the feedback and equity journeys among nonprofits, we thought there was a ripe opportunity to really understand and clarify how feedback and equity are connected in nonprofits' work. This section shares what we learned across the six organizations who participated in this process.

Feedback is contributing to organizations' equity work in two main ways: (1) insights from feedback inform changes in programs and organizational policies that advance equity, and (2) the act of listening itself is influencing organizational change.

In exploring the connection between feedback and equity, we first sought to understand how organizations defined equity and what feedback culture and practices looked like across organizations. When describing how equity efforts manifest in their work, interviewees from all organizations mentioned creating a level playing field and supporting clients with what they need to get there, while others emphasized efforts to ensure that personal characteristics do not determine outcomes. All organizations described strong commitments and concrete ways in which they advance equity work. For example, some have formally adopted mechanisms like task forces and formal equity principles to advance their equity efforts. However, equity-related issues do manifest differently for each organization, making their individual journeys distinct.

We also explored how organizations collect and use high-quality feedback and all described well-established feedback practices.[2] Moreover, we found that the culture and ethos of feedback and listening were closely aligned among leadership, program staff, and clients. Among three of the four organizations where we interviewed board members, we found evidence that the board is also involved in feedback and listening practices and has regular opportunities to learn from clients. One board member mentioned that feedback remained more under the realm of staff in their organization.

As we explored how both equity and feedback had developed at their organizations, interviewees generally could not clearly distinguish if equity or feedback had developed first; **what was clear for them, however, was that feedback is contributing to their equity work**.

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[2] Appendix 2 provides a more in-depth description of organizations' high-quality feedback practices.

Interviewees from all organizations shared explicit examples where feedback has prompted specific changes that help them advance equity. Table 2 shows examples of how feedback and listening practices can contribute to changes in **programs and services** and inform shifts in **organizations' culture and practices**. Moreover, we found two ways in which this happens: (1) organizations learn new **insights from clients' specific feedback** that inform changes in their work, and (2) the **act of listening** to clients has become, itself, a lever for change within organizations.

We have organized the examples we heard from organizations in the format shown in Table 1, while Table 2 provides the actual examples we heard from organizations. The rest of this section summarizes our findings related to the four quadrants of the table.

Table 1 | **Format in which Table 2 Shows Detailed Examples from Organizations**

	Changes in **Programs & Services**	Changes in **Organizational Culture, Policies, & Practices**
Insights from Feedback	**Type of change** • *Example from interviews*	
The Act of Listening		

Insights from Client Feedback

Organizations' feedback practices are generally designed to solicit clients' perceptions about a specific part of their work. We found multiple examples of insights from clients' feedback that informed programmatic changes and went beyond specific programs to inform shifts in culture and practices.

Changes in Programs and Services: While not surprising, this inquiry confirmed that feedback can help organizations understand clients' experiences and address differential needs depending on clients' characteristics, needs, and preferences. The programmatic changes we heard about were more closely related to **inclusion**: as organizations find opportunities and gaps within current programs, they make changes to ensure that clients' characteristics do not determine their access or the quality of their experience with the organization. Examples that fall into this category include organizations creating new programs that address differential needs, learnings about

areas for improvement in current services, and making changes to ensure all clients feel welcome and treated with respect.

Changes in Culture and Practices: Insights from clients' feedback has had ripple effects beyond specific programs and can inform changes in organizations' culture, policies, and practices. These changes can cut across programs and **shift how the organization relates** to its clients and how intentionally it centers equity in its work and relationships. Examples that fall into this category include organizations changing practices to protect clients from added harm and intentionally discussing race and inequities openly with clients.

The Act of Listening

High-quality feedback loops are one tool for organizations that aim to listen more closely and connect more meaningfully with their clients. Beyond the potential insights from feedback, the sheer act of listening to clients has helped organizations think about their work differently and has also influenced programs, culture, and practices.

Changes in Programs and Services: Listening to clients and acting upon their recommendations is a way for organizations to shift power—clients are no longer just recipients of a service; they are now partners in designing the services that they think will best support them. By listening, organizations seek to better understand clients' life experiences and **solicit their input** to help guide the organizations' work. Feedback can be one tool for listening that leads to or is used in combination with other methods to solicit input and, in some cases, **co-create a path forward**. Sometimes input provides suggestions about the organizations' programs, but in others, clients are working hand-in-hand with organizations to shift policies and systems that address conditions in society writ large. Organizations are aiming to change public policies and narratives, but they are also changing the narrators, with clients being at the forefront of advocacy work. Examples within this category include organizations using listening practices to understand how to address inequities through current programs, co-designing programs with clients, and engaging clients in advocacy work.

Changes in Culture and Practices: Listening to clients can also pave the way for cultural changes that enable a shift in power. An increased appreciation for the power of clients' voices and lived experience can contribute to the creation of structures that more formally shift power to clients, giving them **more control over resources and decisions**. Examples that fall into this category include organizations establishing client advisory boards; opening new avenues for existing client advisory boards to operate, learn, and inform the organization differently; and developing staff positions and job descriptions based on client input.

Table 2 | **Changes Resulting from Feedback and Listening Practices**

	Changes in **Programs & Services**	Changes in **Organizational Culture, Policies, & Practices**
Insights from Feedback	**Creating new programs**: Organizations respond to specific feedback by creating new programs that address differential needs. • *Example from interviews: One organization created a new program to serve clients from military families in response to feedback that their current programs were not serving that population well enough.* **Removing barriers**: Organizations learn from feedback about areas for improvement in current services. • *Example from interviews: One organization is considering how to better serve hard of hearing clients who currently could not take full advantage of programs. They've already removed a requirement to access their classes to make them more accessible to all clients based on client feedback.* **Ensuring inclusivity**: Organizations make changes to ensure all clients feel welcome and are treated with respect. • *Example from interviews: One organization changed their language in handouts to better represent the LGBTQI community following feedback from a client.*	**Preventing harm**: Organizations change practices to protect clients from added harm. • *Example from interviews: One organization changed donation practices to ensure clients avoid racist/harmful encounters with potential donors and used feedback about how respected clients feel to inform staff trainings about relationships with clients. One other changed interview processes to ensure an equitable and inclusive approach and demeanor from staff.* **Intentionally connecting programmatic work to race**: Organizations are discussing race and inequities more openly with clients. • *Example from interviews: One organization started a race equity assessment and established a Racial Equity and Community Safety working group to respond to feedback about connections between poverty, safety, and race.* **Developing positions and job descriptions based on client input**: Two organizations have included client feedback in hiring processes. • *Example from interviews: One client shared that "being a part of the parent advisory council, we told them that they needed a liaison between them and a national medical center; someone who would be down to earth and can relate and has gone through some of the trauma and some of the experiences of living in the inner-city life—they actually came up with that job for someone."*

Changes in **Programs & Services**	Changes in **Organizational Culture, Policies, & Practices**
Exploring how to address inequities: Organizations use listening practices to understand how to address inequities through programs. • *Example from interviews:* One organization is exploring how to scale and increase uptake of a program designed to address inequities and improving accessibility through translations and cultural competency. **Engaging clients in program design**: Organizations are designing programs in direct partnership with clients. • *Example from interviews:* One organization is "designing youth initiatives with youth voice front and center." **Engaging clients in advocacy**: At least four organizations are engaging clients in their advocacy work both by understanding what issues to engage in and working with clients so they can advocate for themselves. • *Example from interviews:* "We're changing the narrative and the narrator."	**Establishing client advisory boards if they did not exist before**: Listening work paved the way for the creation of a client advisory board at one organization and is opening the possibility in at least one other. • *Examples from interviews:* "It evolved the ability for all of our management and leadership teams and executive teams to see the value of having clients sitting at the table with us dramatically improved very quickly. I'm not sure that would've happened if we hadn't done the listening work." • "It created a wedge that allowed me to imagine a world in which that power was shared better... it could open the door to more power sharing." **Changing how client advisory boards operate:** One organization is opening new avenues for the client advisory board to operate, learn, and inform the organization. • *Example from interviews:* "We've brought our board of directors together with our Participant Advisory Board (PAB). First, we had the PAB go to a board meeting. But then we invited the board meeting to go to the PAB meeting, and it was learning together on equal footing. That's been powerful."

The Act of Listening

For clients, feedback is personal; their feedback includes perspectives, personal experiences, and feelings that they choose to share to contribute to organizations' understanding of their lived experience and barriers they face. While most feel heard and valued, there are still opportunities for improvement.

We spoke with clients who are more deeply involved with these organizations than other clients might be. In all cases, clients had participated in client advisory groups among other activities. We intentionally sought to speak with clients who could provide a deeper perspective of what listening looks like at these organizations, and they all shared deeply personal anecdotes with us.

A few clients shared explicit ways in which they've given feedback to help advance organizations' understanding of and ability to address inequities, including raising flags about how current practices cause harm and sharing lived experiences of the barriers they face in society. In addition, a large part of the connection between feedback and equity for clients relied on how the act of listening fosters new relationships and shifts power to clients. These new venues and new roles are meaningful for clients—they influence how they feel relative to the organization, and for some, the opportunity to raise their voice has impacted other areas of their life.

> *They make me feel that outside of the organization I'm able to do so much more. If someone else is hearing my voice, then that should happen throughout the rest of my life, so I don't sit silent as much as before.*

When reflecting on the extent to which they feel listened to when providing feedback, most clients spoke highly of organizations' practices while acknowledging that not all feedback received an equal response, **which can be frustrating at times**. While all clients reported positive feelings around feeling heard and valued, they also recognized that clients who are not part of these advisory groups might feel differently and have fewer opportunities to share their input than they do. Figure 1 shows a word cloud depicting clients' choice words when describing how the ability to provide feedback to these organizations makes them feel.

Figure 1 | **Word Cloud of Clients' Feelings about Providing Feedback**

engaged joyful motivated wanted blessed
cared happy **supported** emotional expressive
involved enthusiastic **empowered** stability progress
courage change-maker **valued** frustrated friendship

Nevertheless, clients did identify challenges with giving feedback including:

- Sensitivity to giving feedback in a manner that doesn't offend staff and needing to give feedback in a way that the organization views as "appropriate" or "professional."

- Feelings of discomfort, awkwardness, and vulnerability.

- Bringing up and/or advocating for new issues, especially in group feedback settings.

Organizations are shifting from having *power over* clients to building *power with* clients, and feedback and listening contributed to those practices.

One of the key elements of equity work that we wanted to explore was power. Usually, power to shape and implement services within nonprofit organizations lies with staff and the board, creating a system where, through the services they provide, organizations have *power over* clients. In this study, we explored who has power within these organizations; what role clients play and to what extent they have power to shape organizational decisions; and what role, if any, feedback has had in shifting power toward clients. Specifically, we sought to unpack shifts from organizations having *power over* clients to wielding *power with* clients.[3] As Just Associates explains, while *power over* represents instances where "those who control resources and decision-making have power over those without and exclude others from access and participation," *power with* has to do with "finding common ground among different interests in order to build collective strength." Applied to nonprofits, this distinction is about who is at the table and who can shape and make decisions about organizations' work. Wielding *power with* clients bolsters the inherent *power within* clients—"their

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[3] "Making change happen: Power. Concepts for revisioning power for justice, equality and peace," JASS Just Power, August 4, 2020. https://justassociates.org/all-resources/mch3-power-concepts-for-revisioning-power-for-justice-equality-and-peace/

self-worth and self-knowledge"—and their *power to*—"their unique potential to shape their life and world."

We found various examples of how organizations are building *power with* clients—all of which came about from the act of listening to clients rather than from direct insights from feedback (Table 2). Organizations are including clients in exploring how to address inequities through current programming and engaging them in program design and advocacy practices. One organization where a client advisory board already existed is now bringing together the client advisory board with the governing board to facilitate "joint learning on an equal footing." While these shifts did not come about as a direct result of feedback practices, the act of intentionally listening to clients has informed how they do their work and how they share power with their clients.

However, in some specific cases, feedback work has paved the way for the establishment of structures that help shift power or has at least opened the door for such a structure:

> *It evolved the ability for all of our management and leadership teams and executive teams to see the value of having clients sitting at the table with us dramatically improved very quickly. I'm not sure that would've happened if we hadn't done the listening work.*

> *It created a wedge that allowed me to imagine a world in which that power was shared better... it could open the door to more power sharing.*

Feedback and listening contributed in different ways to organizations' equity work; they acted as a catalyst, mirror, or compass, depending on how feedback and listening were leveraged by each organization.

From the examples we learned about, it is clear that feedback and listening are contributing to ongoing equity work. However, it is helpful to more explicitly understand the different ways in which feedback can contribute to equity, and among these examples, we saw how feedback acted as a **catalyst**, **mirror**, and **compass** in organizations' equity work (Table 3 presents a summary of this typology):

Catalyst: Feedback can shed light on **tangible changes and new opportunities** to address inequities within or through current programs or by designing new solutions that better serve clients. For this to happen, organizations intentionally centered the margins; they listened deeply to clients to understand how their contexts and characteristics influenced their experience with organizations and responded to those

differential needs to ensure access and high-quality experiences. In some cases, insights from client feedback catalyzed concrete changes in organizations' programs, while in others, the act of listening to clients opened up new opportunities to engage them differently through client advisory boards. Examples that fall into this category include organizations creating new programs that address differential needs, intentionally connecting programmatic work to race, and establishing client advisory boards.

Mirror: Feedback can act as an **accountability tool** to help keep organizations vigilant for potential gaps and oversights that result in inequities. Through their feedback, clients can identify these gaps and alert organizations of the need to change current programs and practices that are or could cause harm. This contribution type happened as a result of insights from feedback and required enough trust between organizations and clients for clients to feel comfortable providing honest and candid feedback. Organizations also had to be humble and nimble enough to recognize the issue and change as needed. Examples that fall into this category include organizations changing current programs to better address gaps in service for specific client populations, ensuring all clients feel welcome and treated with respect, and changing practices to protect clients from added harm.

Compass: Feedback and listening can help organizations **explore and set direction** for how to address inequities, helping set priorities in their work. Within our interviews, these examples came about as a result of broader listening practices, beyond feedback loops. The act of listening to clients helped organizations intentionally leverage that expertise in different ways, namely by soliciting input to inform future strategies rather than feedback on past efforts. Examples that fall into this category include organizations using listening practices to understand how to address inequities, to co-design programs, and to include clients in advocacy efforts.

Table 3 | **Typology of Feedback's Contribution to Equity**

TYPE	DEFINITION	CONDITIONS FOR THIS TO HAPPEN
Catalyst	Feedback can provide a spark to get things going. It can shed light on **tangible changes and new opportunities** to address equity.	Most likely to come from specific insights from feedback that identify opportunities for tangible change. Organizations intentionally centered the margins to understand and address differential needs.
Mirror	Feedback is an **accountability tool** that can help organizations identify gaps or ways in which current practices or policies are causing or could cause harm.	Most likely to come from specific insights from feedback and required trust for clients to feel comfortable providing honest and candid feedback. Organizations also had to be humble and nimble enough to recognize and address the issues.
Compass	Feedback and listening can help organizations **explore and set direction** for how to address inequities, helping set priorities in their work.	Most likely to happen in relation with the act of listening to clients, where organizations intentionally leverage clients' expertise in different ways that help set the direction for current and future efforts.

The examples we found show a variety of ways in which feedback and listening contribute to equity work. They provide practical illustrations that help materialize what have thus far been conceptual connections that hypothesize about what the connection could or should look like in practice. One of these conceptual frameworks are Fund for Shared Insight's equity principles[4] and their corresponding indicators. When we cross-walked the indicators with the examples we heard from interviewees, we found clear illustrations of most indicators within the third and fourth principles. Appendix 1 shows the equity principles with their corresponding examples from our inquiry.

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[4] "Our Equity Principles," Fund for Shared Insight, July 2021. https://fundforsharedinsight.org/learn-more/listening4equity/

Collecting client feedback doesn't automatically make organizations more equitable; organizations must intentionally design processes and create a culture that infuses equity into the way they gather and use feedback to understand and address the inequities clients face.

In addition to understanding how feedback contributed to equity work, we explored what it takes for this connection to come to fruition within organizations. The first step might be obvious, but our interviews confirmed that to make the connection between feedback and equity, organizations needed to have both high-quality feedback and intentional listening practices and an explicit focus on equity work in place; these two areas of work can reinforce each other. In some cases, feedback provides a way to strengthen equity work, and in others, a focus on equity can initiate or improve feedback practices. Furthermore, organizations identified some key factors that facilitate and strengthen feedback and equity practices: an organizational culture that centers clients, a commitment to learning and changing, and supportive external conditions and relationships. Figure 2 shows these conceptual relationships.

Figure 2 | **Elements that Enable a Connection Between Feedback and Equity**

Putting these concepts into practice has been a complex, transformative, and ongoing process for all the organizations we spoke with. As organizations learn what it takes to connect feedback with equity, they identified the following key practices to pay attention to when setting up these organizational elements (Table 4).

Table 4 | **Practices Contributing to a Connection Between Feedback and Equity**

High-Quality Feedback Practices	Equity-Focused Work
• Integrate feedback mechanisms into existing processes • Provide consistent spaces or processes for clients to give feedback • Build infrastructure and technical capacities for feedback practice • Gather feedback from a diverse and representative sample of clients • Allow clients to lead feedback processes, including deciding which questions are asked and how feedback is collected • Make feedback mechanisms easier and accessible for clients to engage, including language translation and disability accommodations • Analyze and interpret feedback accurately, including reconciling diverse and/or contradictory feedback • Implement accountability mechanisms to complete feedback loops	• Acknowledge that inequities and power dynamics exist, both internally and externally, and seek to uncover and address them through feedback • Aim to share power with clients through feedback • Involve clients in advocacy and systems change • Have a shared critical understanding and knowledge of race, history, equity, etc. • Use an equity lens when analyzing data (e.g. disaggregation by race and other socioeconomic indicators) • Be present and connected in communities

Client-Centered Culture	Commitment to Learning	External Supports
• Be authentic in a desire to empower clients and hear and act on feedback • Have humility and trust in clients' lived experiences • Take the time to build relationships with clients, so that clients feel respected and comfortable giving honest feedback • Reduce burden for clients to engage, such as providing childcare and compensating for participation • Clearly articulate centering clients as an organizational shared value • Integrate a client-centered culture into organizational practices, e.g. in hiring and decision-making	• Invest in dedicated capacity and resources to complete feedback loops and act in response to feedback • Establish buy-in from leadership and throughout the entire organization • Build staff's emotional skills to listen to difficult feedback, handle conflict, and embrace change • Act on both short-term and long-term (and often more difficult and/or higher risk) changes	• Funders who provide financial support for feedback, evaluation, and equity-related work • Funders who prioritize and champion race equity and client-centered work, both with their grantees (sometimes through accountability mechanisms) and with the broader field • Increased availability of best practices, tools, and resources in the field • Peer organizations to learn from and share experiences • Broader community understanding and prioritization of race equity, as well as local community's receptiveness

Although organizations emphasized the importance of all these factors, they described some tensions among some of them. For example, organizations described confronting white-dominant norms of perfectionism and urgency and struggling to balance the need to build relationships, ask the right questions, hear from a variety of clients, and accurately interpret feedback—requiring increased time—with the urgency to be responsive and take action—requiring decreased time. In addition, organizations grappled with the importance of being responsive to feedback with the potential limits to what the organization can change both internally (due to scope and budget) and externally if feedback relates to bigger systems that they can't fully control.

Reflections

Stepping back from this study, we also want to take a higher-level view of the connection between feedback and equity. In these reflections, we offer considerations for nonprofits and funders supporting feedback and equity work that build upon these findings as well as other frameworks and experiences.

1. **How organizations design their feedback and listening practices can influence how and the extent to which they influence equity work.** Not all feedback and listening practices are created equal, and their design influences what they yield. As the Aspen Institute explained, nonprofits can engage clients for different reasons: informing them, gathering feedback or input, and co-creating.[5] Moreover, Ekouté Consulting differentiates feedback from input by explaining that the design of the practice affects the information that it yields for organizations.[6] While each of these ways of listening to clients is valuable, each one is better suited for different objectives and can contribute to equity in different ways. For instance, feedback is likely to yield valuable information to improve current programs, while input provides perceptions on a proposed plan. As they relate to equity, this study found that feedback is better suited to yield findings that act as catalysts or mirrors, while input and co-creation can serve as a compass in organizations' equity work. Because form follows function, organizations can intentionally design their listening practices in ways that best respond to the type of client guidance they seek depending on what is most helpful for where they are in their equity journeys. All listening practices have the potential to inform equity work, but an intentional design and timely application that correspond to organizations' current reality can make the connection stronger and more impactful.

2. **Listening practices are an important lever that can influence organizations' equity work in a variety of ways, and high-quality feedback can be a first step in that direction.** The organizations we interviewed are far along in their feedback practices—we intentionally selected organizations implementing high-quality feedback loops and designed our sample to showcase how feedback can contribute to equity under these practices. For these organizations, insights from

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[5] "Meaningfully Connecting with Communities in Advocacy and Policy Work, A Landscape Scan Commissioned by Fund for Shared Insight." Aspen Planning and Evaluation Program, April 2019. Fund-for-Shared-Insight-Landscape-Scan-Final-for-Public-Release-4-11-2019-003.pdf (fundforsharedinsight.org)

[6] Perceptual Feedback: What's it all about? Ekouté Consulting, May 2021. Perceptual-Feedback-2021-final.pdf (fundforsharedinsight.org)

feedback acted as catalysts and mirrors in equity work, and in some cases, paved the way for more power sharing with clients; listening practices aimed at gathering input and co-creation were developed from positive initial experiences with high-quality feedback. As Listen4Good and other supporting players in the feedback field aim to make feedback feasible for more and more organizations, these practices can serve as an initial step for organizations in shifting practices and power. Over time, organizations can experiment with different ways of engagement, and ultimately having a mix will likely yield results that more concretely help advance equity within organizations.

3. **A key aspect of equity is power; organizations are shifting power, and listening has influenced some organizations' practices, but there is still opportunity to go further.** One of the key elements of equity work that we wanted to explore was power. In this study, we sought to unpack shifts from organizations having *power over* clients to wielding *power with*[7] clients, and we found several examples of these shifts. However, we also found two organizations that identified ways in which to share even more power with clients. One organization is bringing together the client and governing boards to facilitate joint learning, while another is rethinking the role of the two boards altogether and exploring what it would look like for a client advisory board to make strategic decisions while the governing board fulfills the duties mandated by law. These structures are important ways of shifting power and changing how organizations do their work, but they are not a silver bullet to address inequitable outcomes; they could still perpetuate inequities in the absence of clear and intentional work to address those inequities or if the structures do not result in real power shifting but rather stop at a tokenistic structure that does not, in fact, share power.

4. **Feedback and listening are contributing to greater inclusion, client participation in advocacy and systems work, and power shifting within organizations—while all are important, they are interim outcomes that can lead toward systemic changes that address inequities in society.** In this study, we saw changes to drive greater inclusion, protect clients from harm, intentionally address race as a determining factor of equity, and wield power with clients rather than power over them. All of these are important components of more equitable and inclusive practices. We've seen clear examples of how feedback and listening have supported these changes in *how* organizations conduct their work. Some organizations are also turning their attention to broader systems work by

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[7] "Making change happen: Power. Concepts for revisioning power for justice, equality and peace," JASS Just Power, August 4, 2020. https://justassociates.org/all-resources/mch3-power-concepts-for-revisioning-power-for-justice-equality-and-peace/

advocating for more equitable laws or changing the way they and their partners understand, talk about, and address inequitable outcomes. Feedback and listening are contributing to this work by helping organizations understand and prioritize issues, shaping not only *how* organizations work but *what* they work on in their partnerships with clients to contribute to a more equitable society.

5. **Listening and equity work requires supportive structures, including funding; foundations play a key role in ensuring organizations have the resources they need to engage in this work.** The organizations we partnered with in this study are high-capacity organizations with well-established feedback and equity-related efforts. While the ethos behind these efforts is built into how most of these organizations work, developing concrete practices and mechanisms has required time and financial resources. In addition, organizations explained that having other organizations to learn from, documented best practices, and a shared vision that prioritizes equity work are external conditions that support their own internal practices. All of these supportive conditions correspond to different elements of Bridgespan's Strong Field Framework[8], one of which is funding and supporting policy. Applied to nonprofit practice, and particularly to feedback and equity work, creating funding and policy structures that both incentivize and support this work is crucial; given their role within the ecosystem, foundations play a key role in ensuring organizations have the resources they need to engage in this work.

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[8] "The Strong Field Framework: A Guide and Toolkit for Funders and Nonprofits Committed to Large Scale Impact." The Bridgespan Group for The James Irvine Foundation. June 2009.

Conclusion

We were deeply energized by this study and by our findings. Understanding that feedback is, in fact, contributing to organization's equity work, and clarifying how that connection manifests in practice can contribute to the field's efforts to advance feedback and equity practices. While we realize the that this small number of organizations is not a representative sample, our findings are illustrative of what can happen when organizations meaningfully engage their clients and have the necessary resources and support to do so. As we reflect on implications for the future, we see opportunity for more intentional design and implementation of feedback and listening practices that help organizations share power with the clients at the heart of their work. Foundations and the broader field have an important role to play in how they support this work moving forward in ways that intentionally enable and support efforts that contribute to a more equitable and just society.

Equity Principles in Practice

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As we designed our inquiry we found strong alignment with Shared Insight's Equity Principles, which were still in development when we started this work in early 2021. While there is strong conceptual alignment across all four principles, the examples we learned about through the interviews aligned more closely with the third and fourth equity principles:

Principle 3: High-quality listening and feedback in service of equity not only lifts up ways to improve nonprofit programs and services but also positions nonprofit constituents to define for themselves what outcomes they want and what social progress looks like.

Principle 4: High-quality listening and feedback in service of equity leverages larger changes inside nonprofit and philanthropic organizations and the broader society by building more meaningful and equitable connection between constituents, nonprofits, and funders.

Table 5 shows practical examples of how these principles manifest in organizations' work.

Table 5 | **Shared Insight's Equity Principles in Practice**

SHARED INSIGHT'S EQUITY PRINCIPLES	EXAMPLE FROM INTERVIEWS
Principle 3: High-quality listening and feedback in service of equity not only lifts up ways to improve nonprofit programs and services but also positions nonprofit constituents to define for themselves what outcomes they want and what social progress looks like.	
• Engaging constituents at all stages of organizational decision-making – whether about strategy, grantmaking or programs, or governance – and not only as inputs or recipients of information, but as designers, deciders, agents, and owners of those processes (and resourcing and compensating them for this).	• One organization's client advisory board writes and analyzes their client feedback survey. • Working with clients, one organization is exploring how to scale and increase uptake of a program designed to address inequities and improving accessibility through translations and cultural competency. • One organization is "designing youth initiatives with youth voice front and center."
• Revealing what constituents want and need for themselves, their families, and their communities.	• At least four organizations are engaging clients in their advocacy work both by understanding what issues to engage in and working with clients so they can advocate for themselves.
• Exposing how power is operating and needs to be shifted, both inside the organization and in the larger context in which it sits.	• One started a race equity assessment and established a Racial Equity and Community Safety working group to respond to feedback about connections between poverty, safety, and race.
Principle 4: High-quality listening and feedback in service of equity leverages larger changes inside nonprofit and philanthropic organizations and the broader society by building more meaningful and equitable connection between constituents, nonprofits, and funders.	
• Explicit structures for people participating in programs and services to influence and make decisions about them.	• There were many examples of client advisory boards, and at least one case in which feedback work paved the way for the creation of the board.
• Nonprofit practitioners and funders using the institutional and personal power they have to proactively close the power disparity with constituents.	• One organization is opening new avenues for the client advisory board to operate, learn, and inform the organization: *"We've brought our board of directors together with our Participant Advisory Board (PAB). First, we had the PAB go to a board meeting. But then we invited the board meeting to go to the PAB meeting, and it was learning together on equal footing."*
• Nonprofit and philanthropic organizations becoming agents of equity and justice, no matter their mission.	• At least four organizations are engaging clients in their advocacy work both by understanding what issues to engage in and working with clients so they can advocate for themselves: *"We're changing the narrative and the narrator."*

Description of Organizations' Feedback Practices

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All organizations collect high-quality feedback, but the methods and extent to which they are institutionalized across the organization vary.

- All organizations collect feedback through a variety of methods, including the feedback surveys they implemented in their partnership with Listen4Good. However, feedback efforts go far beyond the surveys and include interviews, focus groups, and client advisory groups.

- All organizations reported closing the loop with clients, albeit with different remarks on their practices. Two described improvements in how they close the loop over time, one reported simplifying practices in response to COVID-19, and one other expressed challenges in closing the loop in authentic and constructive ways (rather than one-way information sharing), given the number of clients they serve and the nature of their client interactions.

- Feedback as a concept is fully institutionalized and reflects the ethos and values of these organizations, but only some have institutionalized and centralized feedback collections and use; others are still in the process of standardizing practices across programs or teams.

- The organization's board is also involved in feedback and listening practices in three of the four organizations where we interviewed board members; they have regular opportunities to learn from clients either directly or through staff's reports on insights from feedback. However, one board member mentioned that feedback remained under staff's responsibilities.

- Organizations employ feedback and listening practices for a variety of purposes, from collecting feedback on projects that are already underway, to soliciting input on future work, to co-designing programs with clients. In addition, at least four organizations are engaging clients in their advocacy work both by understanding what issues to engage in and working with clients so they can advocate for themselves.