10 tips to "course correct" your accountability feedback mechanism

Resilient Roots: Conquering the feedback loop - Part 5 of 5: "Course Correct"

By Isabelle Büchner et Belén Giaquinta (CIVICUS)

In the Resilient Roots initiative, 14 organisations from all over the world are running pilot projects to test new primary constituent accountability mechanisms. In most cases, these mechanisms focus on collecting and using feedback from the key constituents of each organisation.

Feedback is an important element for improving accountability, and for this process to be meaningful, feedback mechanisms must include all five stages of a closed feedback loop. You can read more about primary constituent accountability in [this blog post](#), and learn about "closing feedback loops" in [this two minute video](#).

In this blog series, we highlight some key considerations for every stage of the feedback loop, share solutions to common challenges, and provide simple tips that can help you harness feedback to improve primary constituent accountability. To illustrate this process, we are using examples and learnings from the Resilient Roots pilot projects.

So let's get started!

In the civil society sector, where accountability is often associated with "donor reporting", placing our primary constituents at the heart of a feedback loop is a great entry point for more dynamic and progressive accountability practices. If we are ever to transform our sector beyond its compliance and reporting-focused habits, the work of civil society has to be driven by the needs and experiences of those who sit at the core of its mission.

This [five-part blog series](#) tries to break down this process as much as possible, to move beyond theoretical discussions about how to *shift power* within the civil society sector and offer practical solutions for how to *change organisational culture* through feedback. In the final step of the feedback loop, which we call "course correction", we capitalise on the learnings of the feedback process we followed, and use this knowledge to inform changes in the structures and strategic direction of our organisations (and the feedback process itself).

The following 10 tips will break down how to approach this crucial process, to foster culture change and truly put your primary constituents in the driver's seat of your work.

1. Communication must never end… even when you think you've done it already!

After you have established a dialogue with your constituents to unpack the feedback you have received, it is time to communicate to them (yes, again!) the *course correction* measures you plan to make, based on their feedback. Remember to explain your decisions and manage expectations, stating why you will not be able to address every specific concern that surfaced (from both the original feedback and dialogue phases). Whether we intend to

or not, we build expectations as we build our relationships, and it is important to always manage these!

Solidarity Now (SN) first received feedback that some of the buildings their primary constituents were temporarily using were in a bad condition. During a follow up dialogue process, SN learned that issues such as a weak internet signal and broken kitchens were severely affecting their constituents' wellbeing. With this information the staff was able to make a strong case to their managers about addressing the concerns raised, although it soon became clear that changes would only happen in a phased way over time, due to budget constraints. Through a constituent Facebook group, SN communicated how they were going to respond to this feedback and when constituents could expect these improvements, thus sending a clear signal that the feedback was taken seriously.

2. Don't rush into making drastic changes; and 3. If possible, test them out first!

By now you are probably wondering, 'okay, but what do I do with changes that are not simple or straightforward?'. And one of the best ways to introduce a "big" change at your organisation is to "fail safely". Failing safely means laying out the change you want to see in a series of steps and/or starting small (such as with a small group of constituents) to minimise the effects of things going wrong, and maximise your learning. This approach also helps you break down complex changes into a smaller set of more manageable activities or actions. Additionally, you should treat each "step of change" as a mini pilot, allowing time to assess change as you introduce it. We know this sounds more time consuming than just redesigning an aspect of your work, but ensuring that your constituents can input into the changes you introduce and help you assess their value will save you time and effort in the long term.

Climate Watch Thailand (CWT) received feedback about their workshops focusing too much on the impacts of climate change in communities, instead of discussing practical solutions. They took this feedback to heart and radically redesigned their workshops into solution-generating labs. However, in response to the new workshop style, constituents asked for more space to share personal stories about how climate change is affecting their lives. Following a more measured approach and failing safely would have helped CWT develop workshops with the right balance between impacts and solutions much more efficiently. In sum, implementing changes is a balancing act, and to be successful it is important to keep the dialogue open, take a measured approach and always show where your course corrections are coming from.

4. Assess the value and effectiveness of your entire feedback mechanism

We know the civil society sector seems to be mildly allergic to "evaluations", but this is an integral part of any learning cycle! And while monitoring and evaluation (M&E) can quickly become "expert" terrain, knowing whether a feedback mechanism is working or needs tweaking does not need to be a technical process.

A quick way is to reflect on evidence you have collected about the mechanism itself (instead of the work of your organisation), particularly its **value** (how helpful or successful the

mechanism in question has been), and its **viability** (how much money, time, staff commitment, knowledge, etc, you need to implement it), by asking the following questions:
- Is this mechanism doing what it is supposed to be doing? How do we know that?
- Is it worth the time, resources, and skills invested?
- Are there other (better) ways to get the information we need?

In the RR initiative, we have done this by first encouraging our partner organisations to ask constituents for their thoughts on the different feedback mechanisms (and other accountability approaches) being piloted, including the ways that they ask for feedback. Do constituents think these processes work well for them? With this information, we then asked RR partners to place their accountability feedback mechanisms on an axis as shown in the image below, reflect on why they placed them there, and how this should influence their approach to feedback mechanisms going forward.

5. Track changes over time to observe the real impact of your feedback mechanism

The point of the course correct step is to move beyond simply responding to a single piece of feedback, to create a system that is able to deliver ongoing feedback-driven improvements. To do this well, it is useful to track both changes in the feedback you receive and the changes you make in response to feedback, over time. Being able to see and measure your progress over time helps validate actions and identify the strategies that work best for your organisation.

OVD-Info has been approaching this through a dashboard that allows them to track qualitative and quantitative data about their work in real time, and also log how the organisation is responding to feedback from different constituents. Thus, the dashboard provides a history of OVD-Info's feedback, and how this informs organisational decisions, that lead to changes in its approach, which in turn generate new feedback. For a more low tech approach, your organisation can develop "critical learning questions" that allow for

3

discussion and inquiry into how you achieve your outcomes. For example, "how effective are our feedback collection and response mechanisms?", or "what is the impact of feedback mechanisms in the work of our organisation?". You can find more examples in CIVICUS's Development Evaluation framework, and whatever the approach be sure to consistently measure progress over time!

6. Think about how you can sustain learning by formalising your feedback mechanism

Now that you have completed a full feedback loop, it is time to start thinking about how you can formalise and sustain the uptake of your mechanism, and continue to capitalise on the related learnings. Several things can help you here, such as internal policies and guidelines, updating organisational priorities and annual plans, new M&E indicators, and beyond. Whatever the format, it should clearly lay out what steps you and your staff should follow to adopt your mechanism more widely. In addition, your constituents should also know what to expect from these processes - publicising your commitments and objectives will also help your constituents hold you to account! ;)

Many RR partners have tried to institutionalise their feedback mechanisms by creating internal policies and guides, drafted in consultation with their primary constituents. The Palestinian Center for Communication and Development Strategies convened a series of workshops to co-design their organisational feedback guidelines, which were then shared on their Facebook group to gather additional inputs from wider constituents. Other organisations like Kusi Warma have followed more creative approaches, designing elements of their feedback policy (as part of their broader approach to accountability) through thematic theater workshops. Whatever the approach, it is important to sustain the dialogues you have established and formalise feedback systems, to help drive a new culture of accountability.

7. Integrate your accountability efforts into your organisational structures!

Probably one of the easiest ways to tell if your organisation has a culture of accountability, is to see whether the ways of working and systems that determine how you operate reflect the values of transparency, responsiveness and voice. Having a clearly laid out accountability feedback mechanism is one part of that equation, but this needs to be supplemented by open communications and distributed decision making power. We illustrate how to balance these dimensions in this case study, but the bottom line is ensuring that your organisation doesn't treat feedback (and other accountability efforts) as a "checkbox exercise", rather seeing it as an essential way of working to deliver impact and stay relevant.

For example, Video Volunteers and Avanzar are institutionalising accountability by introducing a new layer of governance at their organisation in the form of "Advisory Councils". Similar to steering committees, these councils are comprised of a small(ish) sample of their primary constituents, and are divided into working groups that sit in decision-making structures within the organisation, to provide advice and recommendations from a constituent perspective.

8. Ensure you have the necessary resources to see this work through

When planning how to institutionalise constituent feedback-driven decision making, you also need to think of the internal capacities and resources available. This means skills and technical knowledge, staff time, budget and all the puzzle pieces needed to see this work through. While having a neatly written policy is great, not having the abilities required to implement it is the same as having no policy at all!

One way FemPlatz is developing their capacity, is by including the steps of a feedback loop (design, collect, analyse, dialogue, and course correct) in the job description of every employee. This guarantees staff time to support their accountability efforts, promotes internal buy-in, and makes efforts more sustainable. They have also gotten more communications support to make sure they are able to engage and communicate with their constituents very intentionally and on a regular basis.

9. Influence donors and other stakeholders to shift power in our sector

Eventually, we hope to reach a point where we don't only implement feedback activities, but where accountability processes underpin every single bit of work we do, including how we forge and maintain partnerships, evaluate and learn from our work, scale our initiatives, and ensure the sustainability of our organisations. Refocusing the culture of your organisation towards feedback-driven decision making is already a huge step towards the power shift we hope to attain, as it has implications for how we relate to the rest of our sector (from our interactions with other stakeholders to how we tell stories about the change we try to achieve). Being vocal about our learning and bringing other stakeholders (including donors!) on that journey will accelerate the pace towards a more effective and inclusive civil society.

Educo Nicaragua is currently in the process of formulating project proposals that incorporate accountability (through feedback mechanisms and other approaches) as an innovative element of their programming. They are not only doing this at the national level, but also at the core of its collaboration across other regional Educo offices, who are themselves also advocating for donors to support this work. Educo is also organising exchanges with other teams and local partners to share the feedback methodologies they have developed and how primary constituent accountability has transformed their organisation.

10. Course Correction is not the end - make it a continuous cycle

We have made this point several times before, but it is worth highlighting again: only if your mechanisms include continuous feedback collection, analysis, dialogue, course correction, and re-design, you can talk about a functioning primary constituent accountability feedback mechanism. We often talk about closing the feedback loop, but rather than seeing this as an endpoint, it should be an opportunity to discover and embed new forms of continuous dialogue, and to build stronger relationships with your constituents. This is a hallmark of civil society legitimacy, which is especially important in a world where civic space continues to close.

This blog series aims to support you along the iterative steps of the feedback cycle, with concrete examples of how other organisations have approached them. The feedback loop is a way to understand and plan this process in practice, but in reality you will probably find yourself going back and forth between the different steps and adapting your approach as

you go... and this is perfectly fine! Remember, the objective of a feedback mechanism is to assess the work of your organisation from the perspective of those at the core of your mision, and learn from these experiences. Feedback does not equal accountability, but our approach to collecting, using, and responding to this information is an integral part of becoming more accountable organisations.

If you liked this series and want to find other similar resources, you can check out the Resilient Roots Resource Package, sign up to our mailing list or write to us at resilientroots@civicus.org.