

10 steps to design your accountability feedback mechanism

Resilient Roots: conquering the feedback loop - Part 1 of 5: "Design"

By Isabelle Büchner (*Accountable Now*) and Belén Giaquinta (*CIVICUS*)

Are you interested in learning how feedback loops can help you improve your organisation's accountability? Then welcome to the "design" stage! In part one you start by setting your objectives and creating a course of action for your accountability feedback mechanism. This means determining:

- a) What do you want to achieve?
- b) Who do you want to reach?
- c) How and where can you reach them?

As you think through these questions, remember that the objective is to build stronger and more trusting relationships with your key stakeholders (this means within and outside your organisation). This will get you set up for the following four steps of a closed feedback loop: 2. Collect; 3. Analyse; 4. Dialogue; and 5. Course correct¹.

The following 10 tips can help you to overcome common challenges and ensure you are properly prepared to implement your feedback mechanisms!



Source: *Keystone Accountability Constituent Voice methodology*

¹ The series is based on [Keystone Accountability Constituent Voice methodology](#)

1. Make yourself familiar with what this all means

The trick to design successful accountability feedback mechanisms for your primary constituents, is to understand how feedback can be leveraged to build more trust, responsiveness and stronger relationships with your constituency.

Many Resilient Roots partners identified “understanding primary constituent accountability and how feedback mechanisms feed into the concept” as a key challenge in the design stage. Our **partner in Uganda** concludes that they did not initially understand terms like ‘closing the feedback loop’ and how it involves a continuous dialogue - instead of a one-time activity.

It is essential to move away from simply collecting feedback, to more holistic approaches that leverage feedback for dialogue, reflection and course correction. A mechanism that does not include all stages of the feedback cycle or is not seen as a process of continuous iteration will not serve its purpose. How to do this? Here is a secret: you will need to be vulnerable! While opening up to your constituents opinions and suggestions might sound intimidating, it is a crucial step towards creating stronger relationships with the people we work.

And now, how to ACTUALLY do this....

2. Set objectives and indicators to track your progress

To better set up the design of your accountability feedback mechanism, you should think about what you want to achieve in more concrete terms. Whether you want to gather opinions, hear from other’s experiences, get insights onto a working document or activity or evaluate your organisations’ work, your purpose will determine how you collect, analyse, dialogue with your primary constituents and course correct your work.

You should set an objective that is truly achievable in a set time frame, specific enough for you to work towards and measurable to determine the success of your mechanism. You might want to break down a broader objective into sub-objectives to make this more manageable.

These objectives should be accompanied by indicators to help you assess the progress of your mechanism and whether it is helping you attain your goals. Depending on your objectives, these could be the “# of positive and constructive (negative) feedback received”, “% of primary constituents that gave a score of 7 or more about the event”, etc.

3. Clarify who your primary constituents are and how you can reach them

Identifying your primary constituents can be a surprisingly tricky process depending on the nature of your work. For [FemPlatz](#), a women’s rights organisation from Serbia, the main challenge in the design stage was clearly defining their primary constituent groups. This entailed identifying how to most efficiently communicate with their constituents, as well as the motivations and pain points for each group.

Their programmes target a very diverse community of women, both individuals and organisations, therefore finding a mechanism that would tick all the boxes proved to be unmanageable. Instead, they opted for developing multiple, less complex feedback mechanism fitted to the needs and context of each constituency group. For example, for women living in rural areas FemPlatz organised informal meetings at their constituents' homes called "Coffee with a friend". The meetings were used to learn and discuss the issues rural women are facing and how FemPlatz can adapt their work to respond to those needs. Because women's rights is a sensitive topic for many of their primary constituents, it was important for FemPlatz to create a mechanism that created a safe space for their constituents to engage and give honest feedback. In sum, taking into account your primary constituents' preferred means of communications and concerns is key to creating strong accountability feedback mechanism!

4. Clarify who you are and what your organisation does and does not do!

This might seem quite obvious, but organisations are often surprised by their primary constituents' misconceptions or their lack of awareness about the work they do. Misunderstandings as such can undermine your feedback collection exercise and lead to low-yielding results. Therefore, if you want to be accountable to your primary constituents and ask them for feedback on your work, you need to make sure they understand what your organisation does and does not do.

[Poverty Reduction Forum Trust \(PRFT\)](#), an advocacy organisation, struggled with the fact that their primary constituents perceived the organisation to be a service-provider, and thus expected to receive goods and donations from them. Others resisted being associated with PRFT because they thought their advocacy work meant being affiliated with a political party. The rural areas they work in are highly polarised and political victimisation is high, so many people are sceptical of civil society gatherings. To tackle this challenge and set the scene for their feedback mechanisms, PRFT is creating a Community Advisory Committee (CAC) of local champions as a vehicle for information dissemination in the community. They are also using role play to deepen their primary constituents' understanding of the organisation and its work, with the hopes this will create more honest engagement and also bust myths about the work they do.

5. Address the concerns of your staff to generate buy-in

Your colleagues will also likely have lots of questions about how feedback mechanism can help your organisation become more accountable. As we already mentioned, opening your doors to feedback (and therefore maybe criticism) on the work your organisation does can be intimidating, and therefore providing a space where staff can raise concerns, questions and fears will help create a better environment to learn from feedback.

To this end, [Solidarity Now](#) used an ongoing dialogue with their staff to understand where hesitation was coming from and directly address the concerns staff raised, whether they were about implementing accountability feedback mechanisms or the broader implications of giving and working with feedback. Their staff became more open to the approach when they saw how they could use accountability feedback mechanisms to surface long-held challenges.

More importantly, feedback mechanisms that capture the perceptions and experiences of your key constituents can help generate the required buy in at the management level to address existing challenges. [Poverty Reduction Forum Trust \(PRFT\)](#) for example, sensitised their Board of Directors about their accountability feedback mechanisms, clarifying how this could help clarify the organisation's mandate and positively transform their relationship with their constituents. Likewise, other pilot project partners have designed strategies to engage their senior leadership teams, regional coordinators and field officers alike to strengthen capacities for leveraging feedback for organisational learning and growth.

6. Co-create the mechanism with your colleagues

Once you have set the scene, developed objectives and gotten your teams on board, it is time to involve them in designing your mechanism(s). This will create greater ownership of the feedback loop and make it easier to implement, while also ensuring the feedback you collect is used to drive internal decision making and change.

Climate Watch Thailand used workshops and staff meetings to unpack the concepts together and what they mean in the context of the organisations' work. Then they designed together approaches that would fit the existing plans and activities of various team members, instead of starting from scratch or radically transforming their ways of working. This has been fundamental to not overwhelming their staff with changes and ensuring they feel empowered to use feedback mechanisms to improve their work. And in order to do this well, you might also have to....

7. Strengthen your staffs' capacities

A general training session for your staff can be useful to make sure they are not just motivated and on board, but that they count with the right knowledge to collect, analyse, and respond to feedback from your primary constituents. This also gives staff a wider understanding of the concepts, processes, and benefits of feedback mechanism for accountability, such as understanding how feedback will inform decision-making and what "closing the feedback loop" entails.

[OVD-Info](#), a human rights media organisation working against political prosecutions in Russia, quickly realised that a change in mindset, skills, and capacities is not achieved via a one-off meeting or training, but rather requires continuous dialogue and iteration. When implementing any new features of their mechanism they liaise with all involved staff members, through 'Expert Boards', responsible for a specific constituent group and mechanism. They also carry out staff-wide training to ensure everyone's capacities are strengthened on the subject matter and the staff feels confident in their ability to learn from feedback. Ultimately, this will help create the culture shift that becoming a more accountable organisation begs.

8. Think about resources and sustainability right from the beginning

Implementing accountability feedback mechanisms is not only a matter of capacities or plans, but also a question of money and time. In the design stage, you should already reflect on the resources (financial, skills, time, etc.) required to implement your mechanism. It is likely these will significantly vary based on the mechanism, your context and the ways you engage with your constituents. Sustainability is another key question, and as you develop your mechanisms, consider your capacity to sustain dialogue with your constituents even when the funding stream ends. Most importantly, you need to weigh the costs of your mechanism against its impact and ability to strengthen your relationship with your constituents.

[Kusi Warma](#), a children's rights organisation from Peru, has already started to account for the time and type of resources needed to continue their accountability feedback mechanisms, so that their cost can be included as a discrete budget line in other funding proposals. In this way, feedback mechanisms do not become an add-on to the other work that you already do, but get integrated as a core part of all programmes expenditures and plans (in terms of time, costs and resources) right from the get-go.

9. Sense-check your mechanism with your primary constituents

To make sure your feedback mechanism is fit for purpose, the people who are actually going to use it need to be engaged in creating it and adapting it.

[FemPlatz](#) used a multi-step process to designing their mechanism with their constituents' input. Firstly, they informed their primary constituent groups about the project and its objectives, inviting them to actively participate. Then, they organised a kick-off workshop with the staff and primary constituent groups (including women organisations, women with disabilities, LGBTQI activists, etc.). In this workshop, they collectively defined the various ingredients of their feedback mechanisms, such as what communications channels were most appropriate to reach different primary constituents, how often they would interact, what feedback the mechanism should collect, etc.

This step is crucial, not only for creating more engagement from the conception of your mechanism (which in turn means more positive results), but because it forces you to check your assumptions about what your constituents need and want.

10. Don't overcomplicate the design of your mechanism - pilot it first!

Organisations implementing accountability feedback mechanisms for the first time often fall into the trap of thinking they need to radically transform their ways of working to achieve success. Resilient Roots pilot projects started off with numerous exhaustive mechanisms that combined various feedback collection tools (such as questionnaires, online surveys, focus group discussions, individual in-depth interviews, etc) and applied them to as many constituent groups as possible, to then explore what would be the best fit.

However, this process can become overwhelming and burdensome very quickly. So what is the solution: start slowly and small. Using familiar and readily available methods, such as online surveys or phone calls, can allow you to play around with different tools while getting more relevant and valuable results in a shorter amount of time. The beauty of piloting is

learning and course-correcting, and you should not be afraid to fail or try a few different approaches and methods before you find something that works for your constituents and your organisation. It is likely you will not get it right the first time, but even that can be a learning process for how to use (and not use!) feedback mechanisms to build trust and improve relationships with your primary constituents. No experience is a bad experience after all!