



The Shared Power Strategy™ Rule Book

Five new rules for redistributing the power to shape your nonprofit's strategy to its stakeholders.



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STRATEGIES



Think back to the last time your nonprofit spent significant time shaping its strategy.

Maybe it was your three-year strategic plan. Or your annual fundraising strategy. Maybe it was a plan for a new program. Or a brand strategy to go along with the new logo that took your board 18 months to agree on. It doesn't matter. Any of these scenarios will do.

Who was in the room?

Were you surrounded by members of your staff, and maybe a few folks from your board? Where were the people your organization exists to serve, and those most affected by the issues you address? Were their voices and perspectives central to your big strategic discussions? Did you gather their input through surveys, focus groups or other engagement methods that were accessible to them? Or did you fail to seek their input altogether?

And what about your other stakeholders: your community partners, donors, funders, volunteers, the friends and family of the people and communities you serve? Did you involve them in the process of shaping your strategy? And if you did involve them, did you help them understand the all-important perspectives of the people you serve, and that those perspectives must, by necessity, take priority over their own? Or did you let the loudest voices among them take over, steering the strategic ship far more than anyone should?

Who made the tough decisions?

Who decided which priorities should be the focus of your organization's work over the next few years? Who weighed in when designing new programs or services for your community, or reshaping old ones? Who provided input on how to reshape your fundraising budget to better meet the needs of your stakeholders? Were the people and communities you serve consulted on decisions that could directly impact them?

Were these decisions made slowly and painfully, by consensus? Did you chip away, little by little, at dissent and disagreement, watering down strong ideas and approaches until everyone was finally satisfied enough (or just sick enough of the process) to agree? Or did you fail to make any real decisions at all, and end up with a strategy that felt more like a long to-do list?

What happened next?

After you finished documenting your strategy and started implementing it, did you share your progress transparently with the people and communities you serve, and give them the power to provide feedback on whether your work is effectively addressing their needs? Or were their opinions overshadowed by a myriad of measurement and evaluation requirements from your funders, too complex and cumbersome to provide any real barometer for how you were actually doing? Did your strategy slowly lose steam? Did it start to fall apart the moment something unexpected — like a staff change, funding shift, or global pandemic — popped up? Or did you carry it through, only to end up with everyone disappointed that it didn't drive the seismic change it seemed to hold so much potential for?

Your nonprofit deserves better than that. The people, communities and causes you're working for deserve better than that.

But there is a problem.

We've all been operating with an old rule book for nonprofit strategy work that tells us strategy is the sole responsibility of the leaders on your board and staff. The old rule book keeps the people most affected by your organization's work out of the strategy process, or involves them in ways that only create an "[illusion of inclusion](#)," rather than real, meaningful opportunities to provide input and evaluate impact. It results in strategies that are out of tune with the needs and priorities of the very people they are intended to benefit, as well as those who must come along in support of your cause.

This has got to stop. Not only is it ineffective, it's inequitable.

It's time to rewrite the rules that govern nonprofit strategy.

Imagine the next time you sit down to do important strategic work for your organization. Now, you're operating with a new rule book in hand, and everything is different. This time, you're surrounded not just by your colleagues and board members, but by the people who use your programs and services, and likely a few donors, funders and community members as well. Those who most affect - and are most affected by - your organization are all in the room, and they all have a voice in determining the shape your strategy should take.

You begin the strategic process by hearing their perspectives on where your organization stands today, and how they've been impacted by past strategies. Then, you capture their ideas and input on how your organization could best align with their needs and priorities in the future. You center your attention on the people and communities your organization exists to serve.

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However, you don't leave out other stakeholders, such as donors and community partners, because their support is also critical to your organization's success. Instead, you aim to help them tune into the priorities of the people and communities you serve, so that everyone can finally align, once and for all, around what matters most.

Together, your leadership staff, board, beneficiaries and other stakeholders make important decisions about how your organization should focus its work and meet its goals. But together doesn't mean by consensus. On the contrary. The new rule book has led you to distribute decision making power to those closest to each issue, and your organization has become more decisive than ever. As a result, you end up with the clearest, most actionable strategic plan (or communications, fundraising, or program plan) you've ever had.

Once it's time to begin bringing your plans to life, you don't simply thank your stakeholders for their time and get to work. Far from it. You keep them regularly informed of how your organization is progressing relative to the priorities you set together, and ask for their continued feedback, in a way that is respectful of their time. Your strategy continually evolves as a result of their input, becoming ever more effective as time goes on. And when it comes time to assess whether your organization is advancing its mission and goals, you won't have to rely solely on formal evaluations or sophisticated measurement tools for all your answers. The ultimate power to determine whether your organization is effective will be held in the hands of the people and communities most affected by the work you do.

This isn't a pipe dream. This is Shared Power Strategy™.

It's a new approach to co-creating your nonprofit's strategies hand-in-hand with your many diverse stakeholders, and aligning them once and for all to the priorities of the people and communities you exist to serve. It holds the potential to make both your organization — and the entire sector — more effective, inclusive and equitable.

But first, we have to recycle our old rule books for nonprofit strategy work, and subscribe to five new, simple rules for Shared Power Strategy™.

Are you ready?

Rule 1:

We Are ACCOUNTABLE

We hold our strategies up to the scrutiny of our stakeholders.

As a nonprofit organization, we hold ourselves responsible to our stakeholders — to the people who affect and are affected by the work that we do. We recognize that only they can truly determine how well we're doing at advancing our mission.

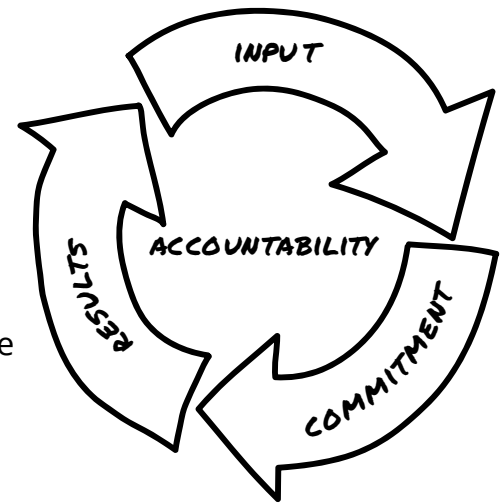
That is why we begin shaping our strategies by transparently accounting for our actions. We share openly with our many diverse stakeholders what we've been working on, where we've been struggling and where we've been seeing traction.

Then, we encourage their input. We ask our stakeholders to weigh in on how we can improve. We ask them to tell us about what they need most from our organization, and how we can better meet those needs in the future. We work hard to understand their perspectives, and to help them understand one another, as well.

Ultimately, the perspectives of our stakeholders come together to form the priorities that organize our strategies - from our strategic plans to our communications, fundraising and program plans.

But our accountability to our stakeholders does not end with the creation of a plan or strategy that addresses their needs. Instead, we work hand-in-hand with our stakeholders to determine what success really means to them. Then, we find a way to measure it, report results back to our stakeholders on a regular basis, and ask for their continued feedback.

In this way, accountability becomes more than just a one-way stream of self-reported information about our outputs or impact. It becomes a feedback loop in which our stakeholders' perspectives continually shape our organization's approach — where input drives commitment, commitment drives results, and results inspire more input.

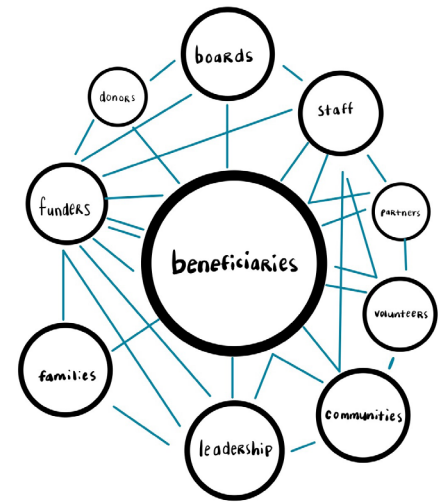


Rule 2:

We Are BENEFICIARY-CENTERED

We put the priorities of those we serve first.

Of course, with accountability comes the question of “*accountable to whom?*” Our organization commits to holding itself accountable first and foremost to our so-called “beneficiaries”: the people and communities who are reached by our programs and services, and those most affected by the issues we exist to address. When it comes to shaping our strategies, we center their priorities above all others.



This might sound like an obvious choice, but for many organizations, it’s not. Historically, so many nonprofits have fallen into the trap of centering those who hold the purse strings — namely boards, donors and funders — when developing strategies and accounting for impact. Those benefactors are indeed important for our survival, but we must ask: survival to what end? Maintaining financial sustainability through the good favor of donors and funders is pointless if our work does not adequately address the needs of the people and communities we exist to serve.

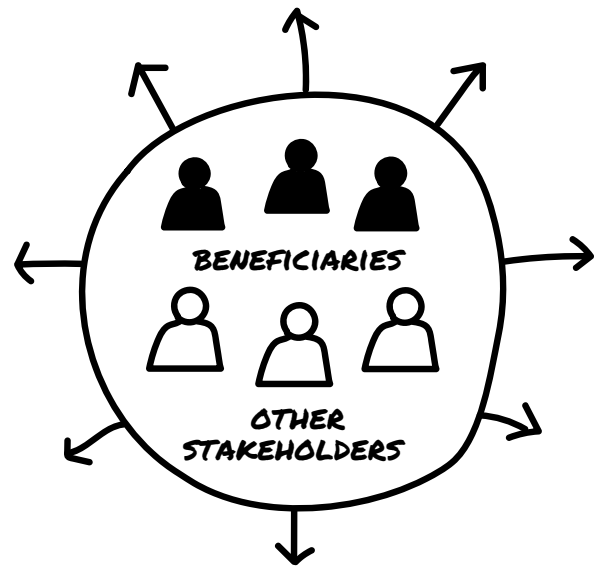
Every time we begin to shape a new strategy or evaluate an existing one, we ensure our beneficiaries are not just in the room, but at the head of the table. We elevate their voices, ensuring they are heard above all others, rather than drowned out by those of donors, board members, or other stakeholders who have historically been considered “more powerful.” We do so with sensitivity to their interest in and accessibility for involvement, using a spectrum of mechanisms for capturing their insights and input, from surveys and focus groups, to interviews to stakeholder committees where participants are compensated for their time. In cases where our immediate beneficiaries are difficult to engage for input directly (such as with youth, people living with certain disabilities, or those who have recently experienced trauma), we engage people who are in tune with their needs and perspectives, such as families, caregivers and counselors. We continually ask ourselves how our strategies can better respond to our beneficiaries’ needs and priorities, and when it comes time to measure our impact, we place more weight on their response to our work than anything else.

Rule 3:

We Are COLLABORATIVE

We bring our wide range of diverse stakeholders together to help shape our strategies.

In case you're starting to worry that centering our beneficiaries means we'll stop listening to our other stakeholders, don't. We recognize that our organization's ability to advance its mission depends on the support of a complex web of stakeholders, and we work hard to effectively include all of them in collaboratively shaping and responding to our strategies.



This requires us to understand who our stakeholders are, and how they relate to one another. Operating under the definition that a stakeholder is anyone who “affects or is affected by our work,” we recognize that we must include a wide array of people in the strategy process—everyone from our staff and board members to volunteers, community partners, legislators, friends and family of program participants, donors, funders, affiliates (in the case of federated organizations), and possibly many others.

These stakeholders all have an impact on one another, and on our success relative to our mission. If we leave any of them out, we run the risk of minimizing the role each of them can play in driving the change our organization seeks. But if we involve all of them in shaping our strategies in the right ways, at the right times, and in the right combinations, we can foster a symbiotic relationship between them that helps our organization do more good for the people and communities we serve.

Rule 4:

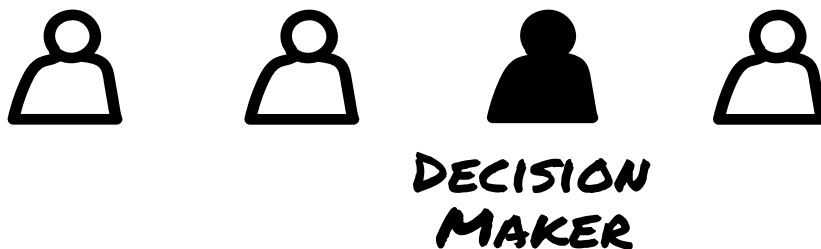
We Are DECISIVE

We make difficult choices and keep moving forward.

We know that when we share power in the strategy process, conflicting priorities will arise. For example, an approach that's seen as beneficial to a donor may be perceived as harmful to a program participant, or a staff member on our program team may be at odds with a board member. When this happens, our role is not to mediate or negotiate. We're not interested in fostering a consensus culture, where nothing gets done unless everyone agrees, nor an authoritarian one where all the decisions are made by our ED or board chair.

Instead, we're committed to developing a clear decisionmaking framework for our organization that helps us determine who is responsible for which decisions. We're also committed to ensuring decisionmakers seek input from all affected stakeholders before making major decisions, especially our beneficiaries.

That might mean, for example, that our HR director gets to make the final decision about which roles we'll commit to hiring for in our strategic plan, while our director of development has final say over our fundraising budget. Who decides what will be unique to our organization. But as long as the decisionmakers consulted everyone else who their decision might impact, no one else can override them. Any time we're struggling to make a difficult strategic decision, we quickly identify who is ultimately responsible for deciding, and hand the power over to them. This ensures that our desire to share power doesn't turn into an endless exercise in establishing consensus, and allows us to keep moving our most important work forward.



Rule 5:

We Are EVER-EVOLVING

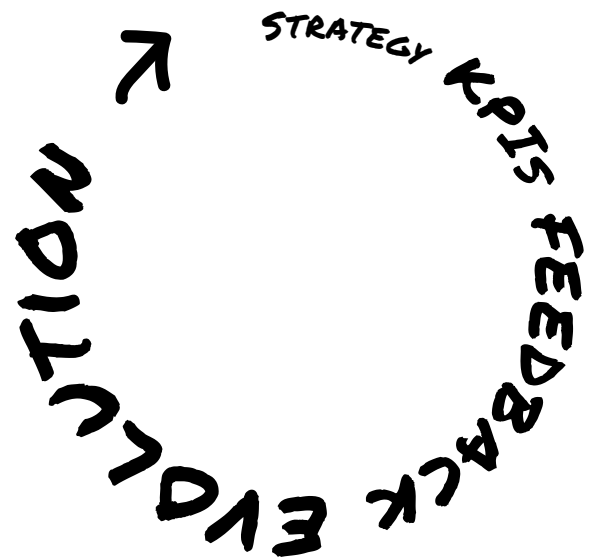
We seek ongoing input from our communities and continually hone our approach according to their feedback.

We recognize that strategy work is never really “done.” Neither is the process of seeking and responding to feedback from our stakeholders. Once we’ve put the finishing touches on our strategic plan (or fundraising, communications or program plan), the truly hard work begins.

This is when we must commit to measuring our work against the performance indicators our stakeholders have agreed upon. Then, we must begin regularly reporting the results not just to our donors and funders, but to everyone who affects and is affected by our work. And we must make it easy for them to give us real-time feedback.

It is ultimately up to our stakeholders, and most importantly to our beneficiaries, to determine whether what we’re doing is really working. And when they tell us it’s not, we know we cannot wait until we get to the end of our three or five year strategic plan to do something about it. Instead, we must act immediately, refining or in some cases even pivoting our strategies to respond to their feedback.

It’s hard work to have a strategy that is continually evolving in response to what we learn from our stakeholders. But it is the only way we can ensure that the work we do every day is truly in the best interest of the people and communities we serve.





Is your organization ready to make Shared Power Strategy™ part of its DNA?

Making the leap won't be easy.

The sector has been built around old rules and inequitable power structures that amplify the voices of boards and funders, while drowning out those of the people your organizations exist to serve.

But it's absolutely essential.

Sharing the power to shape your nonprofit's strategy with its many diverse stakeholders is the only way to truly ensure your organization is truly working for the people.

So recycle that old rule book, the one that has kept your nonprofit's thinking small, and its impact smaller. Start following these new rules to build a better future for your nonprofit, for the good of all.

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