

# FEEDBACK LABS

Incentivizing a Culture of Feedback Among Funders

PRESENTED BY

**The Feedback Incentives Learning Group**

AUTHORED BY

**Siegel Family Endowment**

## About Feedback Incentives Learning Group

The Feedback Incentives Learning Group is a group of funders and philanthropy support organizations dedicated to exploring ways to support nonprofits and motivate foundations to listen to and act on feedback from those at the heart of their work. At the heart of the learning group is the hypothesis that when stronger rewards for organizations that listen well are in place, thousands more nonprofits and funders will improve how they listen and respond to the people they serve. The learning group was founded in 2020 and is facilitated by Feedback Labs.

## About Effective Philanthropy at Siegel Family Endowment

Siegel is a foundation focused on understanding and shaping the impact of technology on society. We believe that strengthening the nonprofit sector as a whole happens by both supporting the organizational effectiveness of individual grantees and also by engaging our peers in the philanthropic community to improve our collective practice. We advocate for practices that we think are equitable and effective, and create space for sharing successes, failures, and common problems. Our work takes many forms, including peer learning groups, trade publications, and focused convenings. We believe that promoting a culture of sharing positions all grantmakers to better serve nonprofits, and ultimately, enables all of us to be more effective together.

We believe feedback is the right, smart, and feasible thing to do. We believe that it is our responsibility as funders to solicit feedback in a meaningful way, and be willing to make changes based on that feedback to better serve our grantee partners. We are committed to regularly revisiting the way we do grantmaking and changing to meet the needs of our partners. Additionally, we amplify the importance of feedback and help our grantee partners establish feedback processes of their own to further serve their constituents. Finally, we seek to share and shape power with the organizations we seek to serve by incorporating feedback and lived experience alongside monitoring and evaluation metrics to ensure beneficiaries are at the center.



## ABOUT GRANTEE

Feedback and listening aren't nice-to-haves; they're essential practices if philanthropic organizations, nonprofits, aid groups, and governmental agencies are to deliver on their missions. That's the central argument behind [Feedback Labs](#), a field-building organization working to make listening and acting on feedback the norm in mission-driven organizations. [Feedback Labs established the Feedback Incentives Learning Group](#) for funders to learn about, strategize around, and test ideas for how to motivate more philanthropic entities to invest in better listening and feedback themselves and support their grantees to listen and respond to the people at the heart of their work.



### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ▶ **Philanthropic funders are uniquely positioned to serve as a catalyst for systems change** around feedback. They can use their power to address misaligned grantee incentives and re-center community voices.
- ▶ **The messages and tactics used to inspire peers to listen are organizationally specific and evolve over time.** In order to remain a relevant and practical resource on feedback, the group has adjusted both its internal structure and external messages to respond to shifts in the perceptions and needs of the field.
- ▶ It's challenging to measure norm changes, such as the incorporation of feedback and listening across an entire sector. Organizations can **develop clear and specific proxy measures that together illustrate whether and how a shift has occurred**, and continually review these proxy measures and recalibrate strategy accordingly.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**F**EEDBACK LABS has three focus areas. First, its **incentives** work empowers organizations to build strong feedback loops and rewards them for doing so. Second, its **tools and training** resources serve as a curated and vetted set of practices, technologies, and professional development opportunities that allow organizations to incorporate feedback into their operations effectively. Third, its **community initiatives** bring together practitioners who are committed to feedback and listening in order to discuss best practices, foster camaraderie, and build a wider movement. Together, these initiatives are creating a larger culture of feedback and listening that ultimately makes organizations more effective, efficient, responsive, and welcoming.

Through all of this work, Feedback Labs argues that feedback and listening pay dividends for organizations in a few key ways. First, adopting such practices is the *right* thing to do, rebalancing power dynamics and setting the stage for inclusive and equitable changemaking. Second, it is the *smart* thing to do, resulting in better outcomes for organizations and the people at the heart of their work. Finally, it is the *feasible* thing to do, with a growing body

of research-backed tools and resources available for organizations to deploy and institutionalize feedback and listening practices.

These arguments are particularly powerful for philanthropic funders, a group whose own priorities may compete for the time and attention of the people and needs at the heart of grantee work. Funders have an opportunity—and a responsibility—to [use their power](#) to repair the misaligned incentives system that they have helped to create. Philanthropic organizations command material resources and influence that makes them well-positioned to advance the use of feedback in the organizations that they support via both direct investments, such as training and capacity, and also indirect investments, like application and reporting criteria.

Given this opportunity, and drawing on [research](#) that suggests that philanthropic professionals learn from one another, Feedback Labs established the [Feedback Incentives Learning Group](#) for funders to learn about, strategize around, and test ideas for how to motivate more philanthropic funders to invest in better listening and feedback themselves and support their grantees to listen and respond to the people at the heart of their work.

## CORE ELEMENTS: WHAT MAKES THE PROGRAM WORK?

**F** EEDBACK LABS’ WORK around [incentives](#) began from a simple observation: It was not enough to merely convene like-minded individuals and organizations who were committed to listening and feedback. “Our incentives work was borne out of the realization that a few thousand feedback champions are a tiny fraction of the nonprofits that exist,” reflects Megan Campbell, Feedback Labs’ senior director of programs and strategy. “For feedback to become the norm across nonprofits and philanthropy, hundreds of thousands of nonprofits need to be celebrated for listening and responding to the people at the heart of their work and supported to continuously improve how they listen.” To normalize feedback and listening across the entire [nonprofit](#) and philanthropic sector, Feedback Labs began working with [nonprofit platforms like Candid and Charity Navigator](#) to ensure that nonprofits that were listening to constituents were celebrated with [higher ratings and visibility](#). Nonprofits can [share how they listen](#) to the people at the heart of their work on their Candid profile and earn higher ratings in [Charity Navigator’s Encompass Ratings system](#).

Feedback Labs staff recognized that encouraging nonprofits to share their listening practice was only one part of what was needed. “If you’re asking nonprofits to listen well, but there’s no one to support them on that journey to listen better, you’re not really setting them up for success,” says Campbell. [Leading funders agreed](#) that philanthropy must do more to encourage and support grantees to listen. That was a driving force behind the decision to engage funders in the [Feedback Incentives Learning Group](#).

The group comprises a range of philanthropic entities—from community foundations, to family endowments, to some of the largest private foundations in the United States. Feedback Labs staff drew on [research](#) showing that foundation professionals were most heavily influenced by their peers. As such, the group was developed as a learning, networking, and sector-influencing opportunity shaped by members rather than dictated by or heavily structured by Feedback Labs staff. Members of the group share how they’re integrating high-quality feedback loops within their own operations, get advice and input from other group members and outside experts, and collaborate to influence their colleagues and peers across the sector.

The group’s strategy and membership has shifted since its founding in 2020, largely in response to member ideas and goals for the group. In its inaugural year, the goal of the group was for members to test different ways of implementing feedback in their own grantmaking and to share that knowledge across the group. However, what Feedback Labs heard was that focusing on specific, individual experiments was less useful than learning collectively as a group in a variety of ways.

The group now focuses less on piloting new incentive structures, and more on knowledge exchange through learning talks, working



Erik Stegman, of Native Americans in Philanthropy, and Melinda Tuan, of Fund for Shared Insight, in conversation at the Feedback Incentives Learning Talk #12, Native Americans in Philanthropy

group meetings, article sharing, and talking through feedback-related challenges together. The group has also made it easier for members to engage their colleagues in group activities, with the aim of spreading knowledge and practice.

Throughout, the group has remained true to its guiding star: making philanthropy more effective, responsive, and equitable by encouraging funders to invest in better listening.

### FUNDER POWER CAN CATALYZE SYSTEMS CHANGES

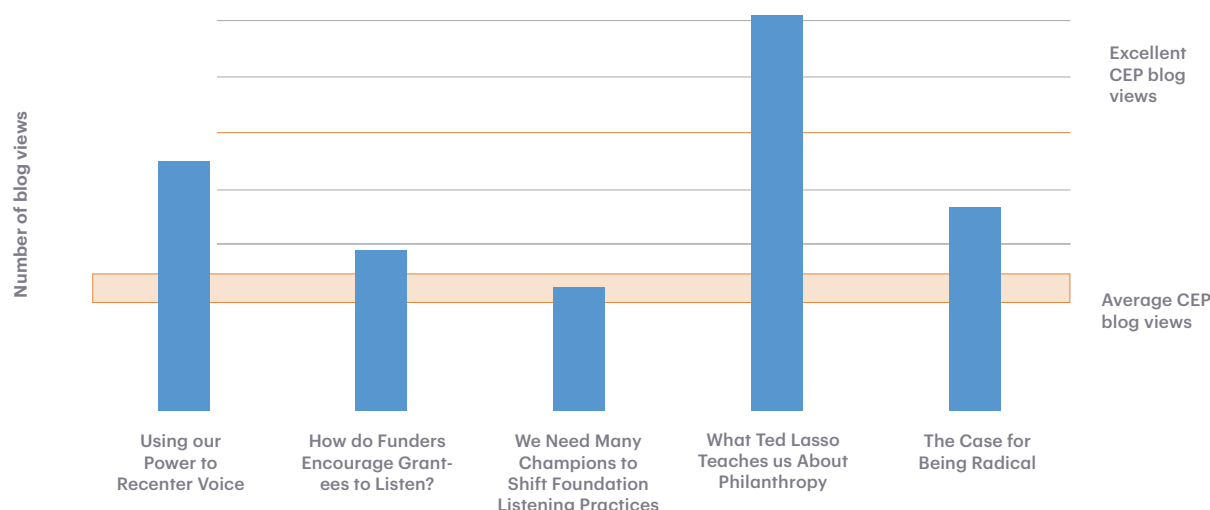
AS FUNDERS, connectors, and champions, philanthropic organizations have enormous influence on nonprofit organizations. This privileged position allows them to support and encourage nonprofits to engage in feedback and listening, and to incorporate feedback and listening into their own practice to disrupt traditional power dynamics. [Research](#) shows that effective philanthropy practices can emerge from the influence of peer foundation professionals, adding an additional impetus for creating a standalone group for funders.

Campbell reflects, “The members of the Feedback Incentives Learning Group are really interested in listening better in their own right, but also interested in *influence*—how to get colleagues and peers to understand that it is important for funders to listen well and support grantees to listen well too.” Together, these influences can have a profound impact on the entire system.

To date, group members have worked together on a range of ways to nudge the field toward better, high-quality listening and feedback. They’ve engaged with peers at conferences, leveraging panels, such as unpacking the power dynamics and opportunities for funder listening at [Grantmakers for Effective Organizations’ 2023 member learning conference and workshops](#), such as [Become a More Responsive, Effective & Equitable Grantmaker](#) at [The Funders Network’s 2023 conference](#).

They’ve also focused on writing industry publications, including a [series](#) encouraging funders to use their power to [re-center community voices](#) that was featured on the Center for Effective Philanthropy (CEP)’s blog. The series had well above average readership compared to CEP’s baseline (see graph). Indeed, [one of the blogs](#) from the series,

## BLOG VIEWS FOR CEP SERIES



**BLOG POST VIEWS WERE TAKEN BETWEEN ONE MONTH AND FOUR MONTHS POST-PUBLICATION.**

“What Ted Lasso Teaches Us About Philanthropy” was in the top ten most-read CEP blogs of 2022, leading the group to conclude a minor, more cheeky finding: referencing pop culture will get you more clicks. Overall, these efforts appear to be working; [articles by Feedback Incentives Learning Group members have been referenced by other foundations](#) that were *not* a part of the group at the time.

### INTERNAL GROUP GOALS CAN SHIFT OVER TIMES

INITIALLY, the Feedback Incentives Learning Group was largely a space for members to devise, develop, and report on incentives projects in their own organizations.

Over time, the group shifted away from pilots and toward building connections and knowledge that could together serve as the basis for encouraging better feedback and listening across the sector. The group brought in outside speakers and research, a practice now codified in its Monthly Learning Talks. Past speakers include advocacy groups focused on inclusive listening (such as the Disability Rights Fund and Native Americans in Philanthropy), practitioners with technical expertise (such as evaluation specialists and technologists), and even game designers specializing in incentives and identity.

The group also sponsored original research that socialized feedback and listening in the funder community, including a [survey of foundation professionals](#). All of these activities were designed to use the collective influence of the funders in the group to impact the *sector*, not just the *individual members*.

That shift from individual experiments to shared knowledge-building and influence came from the members themselves. Feedback Labs kept the structure open enough—and responded

to ongoing member feedback—to allow for this shift in emphasis. Feedback Labs’ staff continues to support by identifying presenters to help members build knowledge, and creating opportunities for members to share what they were learning with the field through conference presentations and writing opportunities.

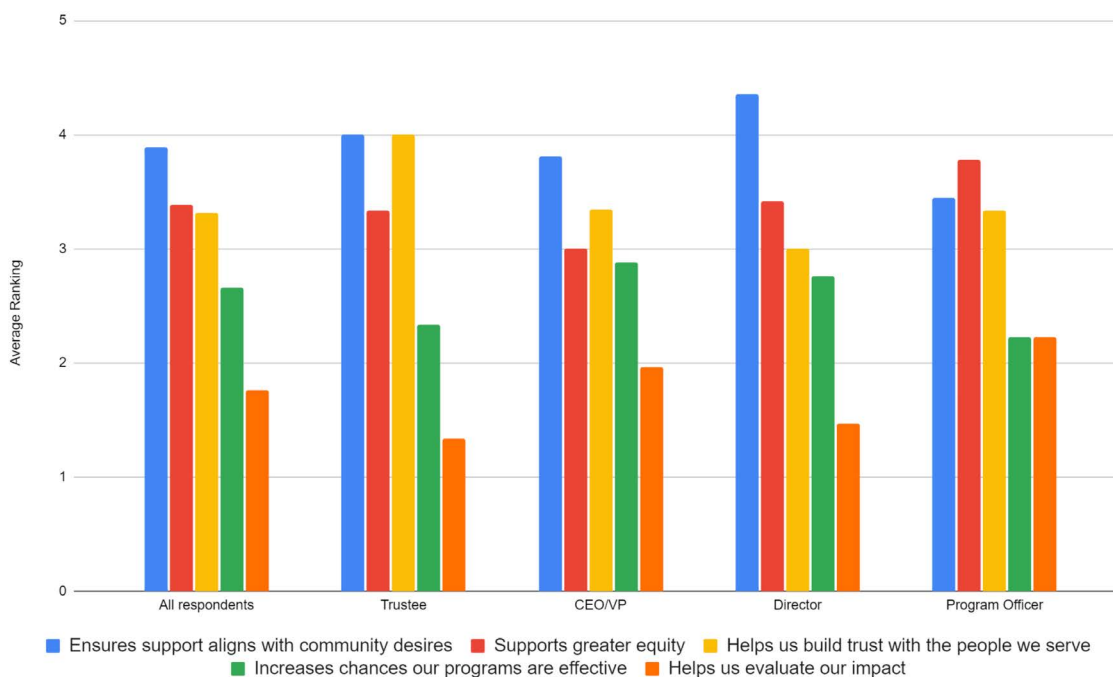
### EXTERNAL INFLUENCE REQUIRES AN EVOLVING AGENDA

AS THE GROUP seeks to influence the broader funding community beyond itself, it must stay plugged into how the motivations of the broader funder community are changing.

Experiences over the previous decade had led Feedback Labs to believe that technocratic or effectiveness arguments for feedback were still needed before foundations would get on board. So when the group began proposing sessions for philanthropy conferences in 2022, it largely focused on making the case for feedback—that is, why foundations should be investing in listening and supporting grantees to listen. However, they quickly learned that people were *already* convinced. Instead, foundation professionals wanted answers to practical questions: How should I budget for a listening tour? How do I bring my board around to feedback? How do I think about when it makes sense for my foundation to listen to the community directly versus listen to our grantees?

In response, the group has since pivoted to creating and presenting practical tools and examples. One of the most notable is the “Choose Your Own Adventure Guide” to help funders identify listening approaches that best fit their goals and answer practical questions about those approaches. The group has been evolving the tool in real time, collecting feedback from group members and [presenting it at philanthropy conferences](#), to ensure it matches the

## WHAT MOTIVATES YOU TO CHANGE YOUR FOUNDATION'S LISTENING PRACTICES? (ANSWERS FROM 70 RESPONDENTS, 2021)



evolving needs of the funding community.

To further uncover funder motivations to invest in better listening, in 2021, the group partnered with philanthropy-supporting organizations to survey representatives from more than 112 foundations to ask how they were supporting grantees to listen well and what was motivating them to change their foundation’s listening practices. It found a range of motivations, with “ensuring support aligns with community desires” and “supporting greater equity” the top two. It also found that motivations differed by role in the foundation; CEOs were likely to choose “ensure support aligns with community desires” and “build trust with the people we serve,” whereas program officers were more likely to cite “supporting greater equity” as the primary reason for changing listening practices.

The survey was an “ah ha” moment for the group. Not only did it learn that equity was now a greater factor in influencing feedback adoption overall, but it also could more effectively refine and tailor its message to different audiences within the funder community. “As you learn what people need to be influenced, you have to build those things,” said one representative of the group.

### A CONSTRUCTIVE SPACE TO WORKSHOP CHALLENGES AND SHARE WITH PEERS IS VITAL

PERHAPS ONE of the most unique and beneficial things Feedback Labs has done is cultivate a safe space for philanthropy staff to share

openly and honestly about challenges, failures, and strategies to improve. “For as much as we aspire to be cooperative and collaborative with other foundations, it’s so hard to actually find the time to sit down with peers and discuss what’s working and what we need help with,” remarked one member. “That kind of professional development often takes a backburner to the thousand other tasks that need more immediate attention.”

That sharing has taken many forms. Some meetings focus on tactical interventions like sharing grant application questions and reporting templates, reviewing one another’s grantee surveys, or responding to specific feedback challenges brought by individual group members. Other meetings are open-ended discussion forums, such as mapping the potential biases and unforeseen consequences that may arise in the design of a specific feedback loop. A member noted that “after we presented our feedback survey, the group pushed us to think about how we might include feedback from organizations we decide *not* to fund. The culture of constructive feedback and tough questions is really helpful.”

In another example, Omidyar Network developed a set of principles for staff around meaningful relationship-building. One goal of the guidance is to promote listening to partners and communities that are at the heart of Omidyar’s work. The Feedback Incentives Learning Group was a space where Omidyar’s staff could invite comments from other funders and also plant the seeds for similar experiments in other organizations. And the feedback they received from the group significantly contributed to what was ultimately shared with Omidyar staff.

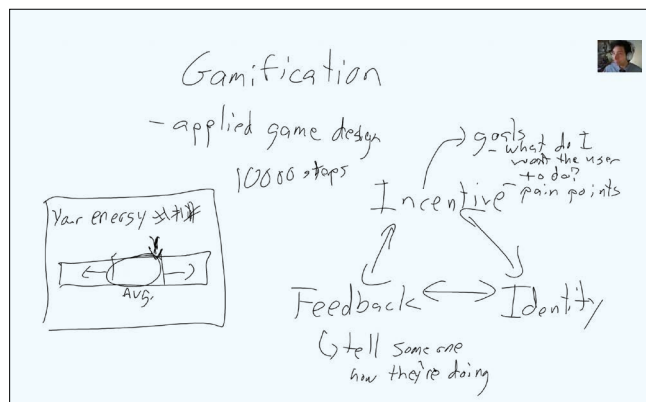


## IMPACT

**M**EASURING SYSTEMS change is notoriously difficult. As Britt Lake, CEO at Feedback Labs puts it, “It would be great if we could say that our metric of success is that philanthropy is listening 20 percent better or some figure like that. But that kind of outcome is not possible for us to measure.”

Instead, Lake says that Feedback Labs looks to smaller, proxy measures for understanding how well the Feedback Incentives Learning Group is delivering on its mission to change social norms across the philanthropic, nonprofit, aid, and governmental sectors. These proxy measures have changed over time, as the work has become deeper and more sophisticated. Collectively, these proxy measures can paint a picture of how well the Feedback Incentives Learning Group is making progress toward systems change over time:

- Initial measurements focused on **membership** in the Feedback Incentives Learning Group. As Campbell puts it, “We were just counting whether people were showing up for meetings.”
- Over time, Feedback Labs has tried to measure the **cohesion** of the group. Participants have cited connections and community between like-minded funders as a key benefit of the group. Group member Veronica Olazabal, chief impact and evaluation officer at BHP Foundation explained that “connection to other foundations” was one of the most important aspects of the group.
- Feedback Labs surveyed participants in the Feedback Incentives Learning Group to understand their **goals and the particular ways they wanted to accelerate feedback work in their own organizations**. Periodically, Feedback Labs checks-in with participants to see whether they have achieved those goals and tweaks learning opportunities to correspond with the cited goals.
- Most recently, Feedback Labs also began trying to measure the **influence** that the group was having on the larger sector. For one proxy, Feedback Labs tracks engagement with articles and other collateral produced by or documenting the work of the group. For another, members discuss their presentations and engagement at conferences, sharing impressions of how their messages are being received and spread with the wider community. As another proxy, Feedback Labs tracks metrics around its [funder resource page](#), which launched in February 2023. During its first five months, it had nearly 350 unique visitors, with an average visit time of 5 minutes—well above the average time of [less than one minute](#).
- Feedback Labs is **responsive in its approach** based on



At the Feedback Incentives Learning Talk #1, game designer expert Nicholas Fortugno talks about the building block of gamification – incentives, feedback and identity.

what it is learning from the metrics it tracks. For example, at conferences and through responses to published pieces, Feedback Labs staff have heard that funders appreciated practical guidance on how to implement listening and feedback practices. As a result, it has emphasized tools and resources for operationalizing feedback and listening.

## NEXT STEPS

THE FEEDBACK INCENTIVES LEARNING GROUP is built on community, and there are numerous ways for philanthropic organizations and other stakeholders to engage with the Group’s work:

- 1 Professionals from interested funding organizations [can reach out](#) to the coordinator of the Feedback Incentives Learning Group to discuss joining the group. Funders can also access [other resources](#) about feedback and listening in philanthropy, including the Funder Action Menu, developed by [Fund for Shared Insight](#).
- 2 Participate in the Feedback Labs community by taking part in a [LabStorm](#) problem-solving session, applying for a [fellowship](#), becoming a Feedback Labs [member](#), or taking part in a [Feedback Summit](#).
- 3 Access [tools, training sessions, and other resources](#) to promote feedback and listening practices in your organization.
- 4 [Reach out](#) to Feedback Labs to learn more about the organization’s work and to see other ways to get involved.

To learn more and contact Siegel Family Endowment, visit [www.siegelendowment.org](http://www.siegelendowment.org)