

Fund for Shared Insight: Theory of Change Progress and Lessons

March 2016

In July 2014, Fund for Shared Insight launched with an initial theory of change for how collective funding to support feedback practice, feedback research, and foundation sharing could ultimately improve philanthropy.



INCREASING OPENNESS

Increase the extent to which foundations:

- **listen to others**, especially the people we seek to help, and respond to their expressed interests
- **usefully share** what they are doing, how they do it, and what they are learning

FUNDING IN COLLABORATION

- **Model openness** in both sharing out what we do, how we work and why we make the decisions we do and the lessons we have learned
- **Develop strong collaborative relationships** based in trust, shared interests, collective learning and strategy co-creation
- Encourage a **broad(er) set of funders** to engage in this collaboration and provide key support for strengthening the philanthropic sector



Along with the high-level visuals depicted above, Shared Insight also identified outputs and short-, medium-, and long-term outcomes for each of the three focus areas.

More than 18 months have passed since the launch of Shared Insight. In that time, two rounds of grants have been made, initial grantees have had a year of experience, and a new initiative, Listen for Good, has been developed. At this mid-point, we can make an early assessment of progress, based on data to date, and identify opportunities for refined thinking about the theory of change. This memo is intended to serve as a starting point for a discussion among the core funders about their impressions of progress, possible revisions to the theory of change, and the implications for the work of Shared Insight going forward.

The memo is organized by the original three focus areas (i.e. feedback practice, feedback research, foundation sharing), along with reflections on the Shared Insight collaborative and funder outreach, and other observations on the theory of change. For each area, we provide the data available to date,¹ as well as observations from our role as evaluation partner. We have assessed progress as “on track”, “slightly off track” or “off track”. As this is early on and specific targets were not set, these are by nature subjective and open for discussion.

In considering progress and lessons, it’s important to keep in mind that Shared Insight has taken an emergent approach to its grantmaking, acknowledging from the beginning that, unlike an approach that begins with a strong set of hypotheses about change, there is much to learn about how to improve philanthropy so that foundations better listen and share to support greater impact. Having open RFP processes, too, means that in some areas there were less targeted work than could have been the case with an invited/closed RFP process. Finally, it is important to acknowledge that this work is laying the foundation for long-term change, changes that potentially would occur outside the life of Shared Insight itself. Progress is assessed with this timeframe in mind.

¹ Data include: grantee reports, evaluation data (e.g., grantee interviews, media analyses), and existing secondary data (e.g., website reports, Year by the Numbers reports, core funder meeting materials). Data available through December 31, 2015 were considered.

Feedback Practice

The original theory of change content focused on grants to advance the practice of feedback loops in nonprofits and foundations:

1 PRACTICE Make grants to organizations to advance **PRACTICE** of nonprofits and foundations using feedback loops to listen to, learn from, and act on what we hear from the people we seek to help

OUTPUTS	SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES	MEDIUM-TERM OUTCOMES	LONG-TERM OUTCOMES
<p>Growth and improvement in existing approaches and new approaches to listening to and learning from the people we seek to help are piloted</p> <p>Nonprofits and funders collaborate on approaches to seeking and heeding feedback from people we seek to help</p>	<p>Systems for hearing from the people we seek to help are used by innovators in nonprofits AND staffed foundations</p> <p>Feedback loops from the people we seek to help generate ideas for improvement and course correction in piloted approaches</p> <p>Publication of early results of piloted approaches are distributed, consumed and debated in the sector</p>	<p>High quality systems for collecting feedback from the people we seek to help are used by and acted on by early adopters (more than just a few) among nonprofits and funders</p> <p>More dialogue in the sector about the importance of hearing feedback from the people we seek to help and application (and limits) of collecting feedback into the normal course of business</p>	<p>Systematic feedback from the people we seek to help provides valuable data and insight for consideration and informed action by nonprofits and funders</p> <p>Increased funding for the integration of high quality feedback loops from the people we seek to help in different contexts</p>

Key funding activities to date include the first round of grants for RFP1 and the development and launch of Listen for Good. Other activities of the core funders have also supported work in this area, including speaking engagements, published articles, blog posts, and Listen for Good briefings.

Planned Outputs	Actual Outputs
<p>Growth and improvement in existing approaches and new approaches to listening to and learning from the people we seek to help are piloted</p> <p>Nonprofits and funders collaborate on approaches to seeking and heeding feedback from people we seek to help</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3 Practice grantees have experimented with six feedback approaches² and collected feedback from 83,389³ unique beneficiaries 19 Listen for Good grantees (to date) will collect NPS data from beneficiaries 4 grantees have provided additional infrastructure to the nonprofit sector in support of their use of feedback loops 13 co-funders of Listen for Good grantees Fund for Shared Insight communications include 7 presentations, 10 articles, 11 blog posts, and 9 Listen for Good briefings⁴

² Feedback approaches tried include: SMS surveys, NPS survey questions, focus groups, webinars, community meetings, and interviews

³ This number does not include data from LIFT or from Habitat for Humanity because their models make it difficult for them to measure the unique number of beneficiaries reached at this time.

⁴ We did not review the content of all communications for this memo; some may also focus on openness.

While it is early to assess progress on outcomes, lessons over the past 18 months may be instructive for refining the outcomes expected from this stream of work:

Planned Short-Term Outcomes	Lessons/Observations
Systems for hearing from the people we seek to help are used by innovators in nonprofits AND staffed foundations	Infrastructure grants most directly supported “systems” in the first round of grantmaking, though Practice grantees overall had less direct emphasis on staffed foundations. Listen for Good provides additional focus on both the systems and funder engagement aspects of this outcome.
Feedback loops from the people we seek to help generate ideas for improvement and course correction in piloted approaches	While practice grantees report increased implementation of feedback loops, they still find sense making, use of feedback, and closing the loop to be challenging; these aspects will be more explicitly addressed through the TA in Listen for Good.
Publication of early results of piloted approaches are distributed, consumed, and debated in the sector	Publishing was not prioritized in the first round of grants, though more “chatter” has been produced in the sector around the topic. Compared to 2014, data showed an uptick in content in key sector venues and in content that was aligned with high quality feedback loops. ⁵ There is a sense from infrastructure grantees that there is momentum around the idea of feedback loops, but the demand for systems of tools and resources is still growing.

Originally documented assumptions:

- There is growing maturity in the constituent feedback field with a critical mass of experiments and higher profile organizations beginning to explore this issue in earnest
- Principles of human-centered design and “design thinking” are gaining momentum within the social sector
- There is an increased demand for accountability from clients (e.g., users of nonprofit programs)
- The infrastructure, technology and tools necessary to collect constituent feedback (e.g., SMS messaging) are increasingly available
- There are currently very few examples of independent funders engaged in actively listening to constituents in a rigorous or systematic way to inform their own work
- Philanthropy has historically resisted efforts to incorporate constituent perspectives due to fear about hearing what constituents have to say about the foundation’s work and an ongoing resistance to openly examine failures and missed opportunities
- The value proposition for foundations learning from constituent feedback is in formation and uncharted territory
- There are few examples of successful nonprofit business models in place related to constituent feedback

Observations:

- Funding Assumptions: In the first round of grantmaking, organizations were prioritized who had the most rigorous feedback approaches and who had national presence, with the belief that these organizations’ experiences would be most compelling to other funders. This approach also built upon the first assumption listed above, that strong feedback practices already existed and could be expanded with additional financial support. Listen for Good represents updated thinking in this practice area, seeking to explore a hypothesis that more nonprofits could collect higher quality feedback and put it to use through implementation of a simple Net

⁵ See Media Analysis, July 2014-June 2015 for additional detail.

Promoter Score (NPS) tool and SurveyMonkey process combined with additional technical support as well as financial resources. More direct engagement with foundations to support this work could potentially build engagement and use of feedback data. These shifts may indicate an evolution in the underlying theory of this work. While the first approach would suggest that, for nonprofits, having strong examples in the field of feedback loops would generate dialogue and use by others, Listen for Good's approach offers a counter argument that there are greater capacity and system needs in the field hindering broader adoption of better quality practices. From the funder side, Listen for Good suggests that finding more amenable partners to become part of the process will be impactful.

- Communications Assumptions: While publications and dialogue were originally part of the theory of change in this area, Shared Insight only recently brought on additional communications expertise through Spitfire Communications. The inclusion suggests an implicit belief that sector change will require a broader, more public focus on the topic. Based on the media analyses, it also appears sector conversation is increasing ahead of sharing results from grantee efforts and may have a more important role than originally reflected as a medium-term outcome.
- Possible New Strategy and Outcomes: The additional focus on convening grantees raises a question around the added value of fostering connections across grantees. Are the benefits intended to accrue across the individual organizations (e.g., strengthened practices from learning from each other) or is there benefit to the overall theory of change that is new or different (e.g., building champions to increase overall salience or awareness in the sector)?

Progress Assessment: On track.

Rationale: While it is early to see changes in the desired outcomes, there does seem to be forward momentum, particularly related to nonprofit practice and related discourse. The addition of Listen for Good helps expand the scope and scale of efforts in this area of work, while addressing some of the challenges that first round Practice grantees have experienced around application of feedback and closing the loop. Progress related to funder engagement may be less on track overall. Although there is explicit funder engagement in Listen for Good, it remains to be seen how engaged funders will be. While changes in dialogue have been more organic than targeted, annual media analysis have shown increases in sector chatter and alignment.

Feedback Research

Beyond supporting nonprofit and foundation practice directly, Shared Insight saw an opportunity to advance the research base, both to improve feedback practices and also to investigate if perceptual data can serve as a leading indicator of outcomes.

2 RESEARCH Make grants to advance **RESEARCH BASE** on integrating feedback from the people we seek to help such that the feedback can better serve funders and practitioners and serve as leading indicators of change

OUTPUTS	SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES	MEDIUM-TERM OUTCOMES	LONG-TERM OUTCOMES
<p>X research studies will be conducted that identify how feedback data may be best collected.</p> <p>X research studies will be conducted that investigate ways feedback from the people we seek to help can be linked to rigorous outcome measurement such that we can highlight perceptual data as a leading indicator in different contexts</p>	<p>Publication of early results of piloted approaches are distributed, consumed and debated in the sector</p>	<p>Quality of feedback systems are improved based on research findings</p> <p>Feedback system cycle times are shortened based on research findings</p> <p>More dialogue in the sector about the importance of hearing feedback from the people we seek to help and application (and limits) of collecting feedback into the normal course of business</p>	<p>Systematic feedback from the people we seek to help provides valuable data and insight for consideration and informed action by non-profits and funders</p> <p>Increased funding for the integration of high quality feedback loops from the people we seek to help in different contexts</p>

Key funding activities to date include grants across both types of research.

Planned Outputs	Actual Outputs
<p>X research studies will be conducted that identify how feedback data may be best collected</p> <p>X research studies will be conducted that investigate ways feedback from the people we seek to help can be linked to rigorous outcome measurement such that we can highlight perceptual data as a leading indicator in different contexts</p>	<p>Two research grants were made in 2014 to better understand how to collect high quality data from different populations, including foster youth and users of food banks.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 192 foster youth have been surveyed • 2 pilot sites have been recruited by Feeding America <p>One grant has recently been made to IPA to incorporate feedback questions and research into 7 existing studies</p>

Because IPA was just funded in December and the two research grants are in the first of three years, there is limited learning at this point. Initial lessons include:

Planned Short-Term Outcomes	Lessons/Observations
<p>Publication of early results of piloted approaches are distributed, consumed and debated in the sector</p>	<p>Chapin Hall has shared initial findings at 7 meetings and conferences in California; other research has not yet been published</p>

Originally Documented Assumptions:

- The value proposition for foundations learning from constituent feedback is in formation and uncharted territory

Observations

- Implicit Assumption: The current theory of change suggests that if research helps to improve (a) the quality of feedback loops and (b) the dialogue about feedback, while simultaneously (c) feedback practices are increasingly used in the field, funders will increase their own use of feedback data and fund the use of feedback loops by nonprofits. It is too soon to know if this hypothesis will play out; it may be a useful time to revisit and confirm that this is still the expected trajectory toward longer-term outcomes.
- Funding Assumptions: As with Feedback Practice, original grant decisions prioritized name recognition and rigor. Shared Insight also chose to fully fund fewer studies rather than spread money across a greater number of smaller studies.
- Broader Opportunities for Improving Practice: The two original Research grantees focused on research related to how to best collect feedback. Due to the action research orientation of the projects and the rigor with which some grantees are experimenting with their feedback approaches, there is more overlap in Practice and Research than was originally expected.

Progress Assessment: On track.

Rationale: The research grantees are on track at this point. With the addition of the IPA grant, the two areas of research in the theory of change are now being covered by Shared Insight. Given the timeline of the projects, it will be awhile before we know what findings result from the research.

Openness

Increasing the extent to which foundations listen to others, especially the people we seek to help, responding to their expressed interests, and usefully sharing what they are doing, how they do it, and what they are learning is an integral aspect of how Shared Insight believes philanthropy will increase effectiveness.

3 SUPPORT Make grants to nonprofit organizations supporting the philanthropic infrastructure and that are aligned with our openness goals – can be new innovations/ efforts or to support growth of existing efforts

OUTPUTS	SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES	MEDIUM-TERM OUTCOMES	LONG-TERM OUTCOMES
Funded organizations innovatively broaden and/or deepen their existing efforts for increasing openness in service of effectiveness	<p>Increased sharing among foundations about what they do and how</p> <p>Increased sharing among foundations about lessons learned from successes and failures</p>	Beginning to move toward new norms of openness in foundations in even more “sticky” ways including more innovative methods, more useful formats and more use of shared work	<p>Openness in foundations is rewarded and pursued proactively by foundations</p> <p>Nonprofits and foundations pay attention to what is being more openly shared</p> <p>Nonprofits and foundations draw upon the lessons of others to accelerate their journey to impact</p>

Key funding activities to date include the first round of grants for RFP 3.

Planned Outputs	Actual Outputs
<p>Funded organizations innovatively broaden and/or deepen their existing efforts for increasing openness in service of effectiveness</p>	<p>5 grantees have created:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 9 “Philanthropy Lessons” videos; campaign website and two videos currently released • 8 new “cause” write-ups [Open Philanthropy Project] • 1 set of principles for Open Knowledge Sharing as well as blog posts, webinars, hosted conversations, and a peer-reviewed article • 1 report on Transparency released by CEP <p>3 foundations adopted new open licensing policies with the support of Creative Commons, out of 16 reached in 2015</p> <p>1 foundation is working on a comprehensive open knowledge strategy with IssueLab</p>

The initial expectation around this body of work has been to see changes in practice directly:

Planned Short-Term Outcomes	Lessons/Observations
<p>Increased sharing among foundations about what they do and how</p> <p>Increased sharing among foundations about lessons learned from successes and failures</p>	<p>Because much of this work will have a long tail, it will take time to see changes based on videos, reports, manifestos and even foundation policies.</p> <p>Shared Insight itself is a strong model of openness, sharing on its website both what they do, how they do it, and lessons learned</p>

Originally Documented Assumptions

- Philanthropy has historically resisted change
- The value proposition for foundations learning from constituent feedback is in formation and uncharted territory
- Philanthropic infrastructure organizations may see this as a competing effort that diverts resources rather than adds to the pie

Observations

- Implicit Assumption: Because of a longer-term philanthropic sector focus on transparency, albeit with a more narrow focus than desired for openness, there has been an unstated assumption that building awareness of and prioritization for openness was unnecessary and that efforts in the philanthropic sector needed to focus on practice changes. The original logic model also presumed that organizations were already engaged in this work and that additional funding could help these existing efforts have greater depth or scale. In actuality, of the five grants, one could be argued to have deepened or broadened existing efforts (i.e., IssueLab) while most (i.e., CEP, Exponent Philanthropy, Creative Commons) supported new efforts.⁶

⁶ The grant to GiveWell supported their ongoing work which could be described as modeling openness through their Open Philanthropy Project but did not explicitly seek to change practices of other philanthropic organizations directly.

- **Funding Assumption:** For this focus area, the open RFP resulted in a less coherent set of grants, and Shared Insight decided to fund a handful of approaches that had been recommended through the review process. As noted in the materials from the November 2014 meeting, “No one of these five grants alone would be likely to change the field, but taken together, we hope they become an influential constellation to help shift the culture and norms around foundation openness.” It is not clear that the set of grants has had an effect on the sector broader than the direct outcomes accruing from their individual efforts.
- **Central but Less Developed:** Openness is a central word on the high-level theory of change, resulting from efforts across feedback practice, feedback research, and foundation sharing. Looking across these grants and given conversations Openness Workgroup members have had in the field, there are multiple perspectives on the best points of entry, motivations for change, and ways to talk about what an ideal state of openness really looks like in foundations. It has been difficult to settle on an updated approach in this area. Additionally, it has been less clearly articulated how the feedback practice and openness work relate to each other and are jointly contributing to a broader openness goal.

Progress Assessment: Slightly off track.

Rationale: While grantees individually seem to be meeting expectations, it does not appear there have been synergistic effects. Unlike other focus areas, Shared Insight has not augmented its approach since the first year grants to address early gaps or new opportunities. To address this gap, Shared Insight is releasing a new open request for proposal to increase foundation openness in March, 2016.

Funding in Collaboration

In addition to its grantmaking areas, Shared Insight included in its theory of change a focus on modeling openness, developing strong collaborative relationships, and encouraging a broader set of funders to engage in this collaboration.

Planned Outputs	Actual Outputs
Model Openness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 19,527 unique users of the website in 2015 (75% new, 25% returning) • 1,850 file downloads from the Shared Insight website in 2015 • Fund for Shared Insight communications include 7 presentations, 10 articles, 11 blog posts
Develop strong collaborative relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 75 hours spent meeting together on Fund for Shared Insight • 3 sets of Shared Insight field trips • Ad hoc workgroups formed around specific topics (e.g., Evaluation, Communications, Openness)
Encourage a broader set of funders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 8 core funders • 3 side-car funders • 13 co-funders through Listen for Good

Unlike the other areas of the theory of change, there were not explicit assumptions captured for this area.

While the current theory doesn't rely on actions of the participating core, sidecar, or co-funders outside of their involvement in Shared Insight work, there may be opportunities to see how engagement does create other ripple effects. For example, we recently learned that Ford Foundation funded some Openness related work that was not funded in the first round of grants.

Overall Theory of Change Considerations

When ORS Impact first became the evaluation partner of the Fund for Shared Insight, one of the first things we wanted to do was review and refine the theory of change. At that time, the Evaluation Sub-Committee strongly felt that it was too soon. The work of Shared Insight was emergent, and there was no new data or updated understandings to develop different or more specific hypotheses about the work than had been originally documented.

Now, about 18 months into the work, it is worth revisiting questions about the theory of change again:

- Given the lessons from initial grants and activities undertaken, does Shared Insight have an updated or different point of view about how they can support improvement in the philanthropic sector through a focus on openness and feedback? Are you trying to build a movement? Are you trying to diffuse innovation in the sector? Something else? If there is coalescence around a more focused theory, it could suggest new or different outcomes or assumptions to watch as the work proceeds? Alternately, is the goal of Shared Insight to foster and identify promising practices for others to take up? To catalyze a field that it will then leave for others to support and scale? If so, there again may be outcomes and assumptions about how this happens that would be useful to articulate and track.
- Are there shared understandings about how the pieces of Shared Insight (i.e., practice, research and openness) fit together? Are there ways those connections could be strengthened or clarified?