

## **JUST LISTENING:** Principles and Practices for Advancing Equity through High-Quality Listening and Feedback

Adopted July 2021

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### INTRODUCTION

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Fund for Shared Insight believes that high-quality feedback and high-quality listening can advance equity in processes and outcomes throughout the social sector. For that reason, we are committed to building a culture and practice of equity-centered feedback and listening that more explicitly deliver on the social impact defined in our theory of change, that “those most impacted but often least consulted by philanthropy and nonprofits are better off in ways they define for themselves.”

#### **Creating the #Listening4Equity space gives us a place to:**

- find inspiration and guidance;
- articulate ideas and practices;
- share stories and learnings; and
- engage, expand, and embolden a community of funders and nonprofits committed to listening in service of equity.



Visit Fund for Shared Insight website to learn more about [#Listening4Equity](#)

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## OUR EQUITY PRINCIPLES

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Shared Insight adopted a set of equity principles in July 2020, codifying a commitment to hold equity as an explicit and centered value, priority, and goal. We intend to look to the principles as a guidepost in all that we do, internally and externally. And we invite others to engage with the principles in their own listening efforts, not as a checklist or a standard for perfection, but as a tool for setting actionable goals and tracking meaningful progress on the journey toward equity and justice.

### 1. High-quality listening and feedback must be in service of equity to be high quality.

- There must be clear understanding of equity (i.e., distinct from diversity and inclusion, with an explicit focus on power and thus on race as a defining power structure) in both processes and outcomes.
- There must be some intentionality about driving toward equity. Because equity is not the norm, it is unlikely to be achieved by accident. Race- or power-neutral approaches actually exacerbate inequity; lack of bad intent is insufficient to counter structures that are designed for inequity. However, there is room to engage at various levels of skill and experience with equity.
- There must be continuous, disciplined practice – for example, engaging the full feedback loop, including and especially the final steps of responding to feedback and reporting back to the people who provided it – with equity lenses and actions embedded at each step.

### 2. High-quality listening and feedback in service of equity centers the voices and perspectives of people who have been most impacted and made “least heard” by structural racism and other systemic inequities.

- Believing that people are the experts of their own lives and that nonprofits and funders will make better decisions and help deliver better outcomes and more meaningful and durable impact by listening to people.
- De-centering the comfort and habits of funders and nonprofits and their definitions of effectiveness, progress, and success.
- Disrupting norms and “best practice” by amplifying voices from the “margins.” Common approaches to data analysis and evidence-based decision-making aim for the middle or averages, which will continue to keep the margins invisibilized and under-served and can actually widen gaps.

**3. High-quality listening and feedback in service of equity not only lifts up ways to improve nonprofit programs and services but also positions nonprofit constituents to define for themselves what outcomes they want and what social progress looks like.**

- Engaging constituents at all stages of organizational decision making – whether about strategy, grantmaking or programs, or governance – and not only as inputs or recipients of information, but as designers, deciders, agents, and owners of those processes (and resourcing and compensating them for this).
- Revealing what constituents want and need for themselves, their families, and their communities and what nonprofits and funders should do to be ethical and effective partners.
- Exposing how power is operating and needs to be shifted, both inside the organization and in the larger context in which it sits.

**4. High-quality listening and feedback in service of equity leverages larger changes inside nonprofit and philanthropic organizations and the broader society by building more meaningful and equitable connection between constituents, nonprofits, and funders.**

- Explicit structures for people participating in programs and services to influence and make decisions about them (e.g., participant advisory boards, participants serving on governing board or other decision-making bodies, following the lead of community decision-making tables, regular reporting and accountability to constituents).
- Nonprofit practitioners and funders using the institutional and personal power they have to proactively close the power disparity with constituents from both ends – i.e., relinquishing their over-advantage and acting in ways that expand power for constituents.
- Nonprofit and philanthropic organizations becoming agents of equity and justice, no matter their mission.