

# Sharing Insights

Evaluating Fund for Shared Insight,  
a Decade of Listening in the Social Sector





# Executive Summary



## **What would it look like for philanthropy to better center people and communities? For foundations and nonprofits to listen intentionally and shift power to advance equity?**

Grounded in the belief that greater impact was possible if foundations and nonprofits listened to the people they sought to help, acted on what they heard, and openly shared what they learned, Fund for Shared Insight sought to change the field of philanthropy in some big ways.

ORS Impact has been on this journey with Fund for Shared Insight, serving as their evaluation and learning partner, since the funder collaborative launched in 2014. Twelve years and \$78 million later we take stock of how their strategies evolved and what came of them. Writing this summative evaluation gave us the unique opportunity to assess Shared Insight's strategy over the 10-year period between 2014-2024, understand what its strategic approaches achieved, and examine its contributions to shifts across philanthropy and the nonprofit sector.

In this summary report, we highlight the topline results, including five key outcomes the collaborative pursued and the degree to which related changes are visible in the sector. The full report provides additional detail about the strategies employed, how they evolved over time, and the evidence supporting these findings.

## Results Toward Five Key Outcomes



Outcome:

A robust, sustainable field

**Outcome Assessment:**

WEAK   MIXED   **STRONG**

The nonprofit feedback field strengthened and further matured.

**Strategy Assessment:**

WEAK   MIXED   **STRONG**

A clearer and more focused long-term strategy, coupled with effective implementation, resulted in strong results over Shared Insight's tenure.



Outcome:

More active champions and supporters

**Outcome Assessment:**

WEAK   **MIXED**   STRONG

Philanthropy Infrastructure Organizations (PIOs)<sup>1</sup> are in greater alignment but with less progress in identifying other champions.

**Strategy Assessment:**

WEAK   **MIXED**   STRONG

There was strong design and implementation with PIOs, less strong implementation for individual champions, and less clear strategic focus early on.



Outcome:

High-quality resources and examples to support change

**Outcome Assessment:**

WEAK   MIXED   **STRONG**

Shared Insight made significant strides in building a well-recognized, highly utilized knowledge base that serves as a resource for field actors.

**Strategy Assessment:**

WEAK   MIXED   **STRONG**

Investing in staff time to create specifically aligned and well-targeted materials paid off—Shared Insight's contribution to the field in this respect is clear.



Outcome:

More leaders and staff in nonprofits listen, respond, and shift power

**Outcome Assessment:**

WEAK   MIXED   **STRONG**

Increased demand for technical support with feedback practices signals growing efforts by nonprofits to listen, and Listen4Good (L4G) successfully supported growing numbers of nonprofits.

**Strategy Assessment:**

WEAK   MIXED   **STRONG**

Creating scalable feedback models, and particularly, incubating L4G as a high-quality, capacity-building organization had strong results.



Outcome:

More leaders and staff in foundations listen, respond, and shift power

**Outcome Assessment:**

**WEAK**   MIXED   STRONG

There have been some shifts in values and understanding, but changes in actual funder practice have been limited and inconsistent.

**Strategy Assessment:**

**WEAK**   MIXED   STRONG

Early efforts were categorized as “light touch” and did not add up to more than the sum of their parts. It is too early to tell whether new strategies will result in stronger outcomes.

1. Philanthropy infrastructure organizations are also known as philanthropy support organizations (PSOs).

## Results Toward Five Key Outcomes

Over these 10 years, Shared Insight sought to make progress on five key outcomes represented in its current theory of change: a robust sustainable field; more active champions and supporters; high-quality resources and examples to support change; more leaders and staff in nonprofits listen, respond, and shift power; and more leaders and staff in foundations listen, respond, and shift power. For each outcome, we provide an assessment of the outcome status and of Shared Insight's strategy relative to that outcome. The full report provides the supporting evidence that undergirds these assessments.



### Outcome:

#### **A robust, sustainable field**

The strategy to strengthen the nonprofit feedback field has changed over time but generally included three approaches: building and strengthening feedback infrastructure; building the evidence base of feedback through research and data; and building the feedback field.

#### **Outcome Status:**

**STRONG**

Over the past decade, the nonprofit feedback field strengthened across all facets of the Strong Field Framework in aligned ways and matured as a field. There is a stronger infrastructure, a more robust research base, and an embedded commitment to equity across actors, standards, and products

#### **Strategy Assessment:**

**STRONG**

A clearer and more focused long-term strategy, coupled with effective implementation, resulted in strong results over Shared Insight's tenure. While there were other aligned field actors and efforts to work with and build upon, it is unlikely the field would have progressed in the same ways and at the same speed without Shared Insight's various contributions. Shared Insight played a key role as funder, convening actors and developing infrastructure organization—serving as an incubator for Listen4Good (L4G) and heavily supporting Feedback Labs and YouthTruth as they strengthened their position in the field over time. It also partnered with other organizations and collaborative efforts, like the Irritants for Change.



## Outcome: More active champions and supporters

In its 2023 to 2026 theory of change, Shared Insight made cultivating champions and supporters of funder listening paramount, building upon the widespread field belief that funders are most likely to listen to other funders they think are like them. Strategic approaches included engaging infrastructure support and champion identification and support.

### Outcome Status:

MIXED

Overall, progress toward cultivating champions and supporters of foundation listening has been mixed, with notable positive momentum among philanthropy infrastructure organizations (PIOs) and steady visibility in field discourse, but slower advancement in building a broader bench of champions. While some allied voices have promoted related ideas, there's not yet a broader, coordinated bench of champions directly supporting Shared Insight's aims.

### Strategy Assessment:

MIXED

Shared Insight's engagement of PIOs through its Funder Listening Community of Practice (FLCP) created a foundation of shared language, understanding, and trust, challenging sector norms that often discourage collaborating across organizations. It seems unlikely that this kind of collaborative, aligned work would have happened without Shared Insight's investment in grants and staffing to resource the connections, shared thinking, and more. However, other PIOs have also shifted language and programming in ways that align with these ideas, though not always with explicit or direct connection to Shared Insight's efforts. Finally, it's less clear that Shared Insight has helped to create new or more active individual champions in this timeframe. This may be the result of less focused implementation over a shorter timeframe rather than a flow of strategy

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**Outcome:**  
**High-quality resources and examples to support change**

Through grants, contracts, and direct staff effort, Shared Insight worked to develop tools, resources, and other materials to help funders learn and shift their practices.

**Outcome Status:**

**STRONG**

Shared Insight made significant strides in building a well-recognized, highly utilized knowledge base that serves as a resource for field actors. While earlier grantmaking efforts to create tools and resources faced mixed uptake, more recent tools developed by Shared Insight show clearer signs of broader uptake, resulting in field actors' recognition of Shared Insight's role as a valuable knowledge resource.

**Strategy Assessment:**

**STRONG**

While the initial investment in partner-developed tools showed mixed results, Shared Insight's choice to develop its own tools and resources proved successful in driving broader uptake among a growing audience and contributed to the availability of more relevant tools. Investing in staff time to create specifically aligned and well-targeted materials paid off. Shared Insight's contribution to the field in this respect is clear, and opportunities exist to ensure continued availability and use of resources once Shared Insight sunsets.

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**Outcome:**  
**More leaders and staff in nonprofits listen, respond, and shift power**

The strategy to strengthen nonprofit feedback practices started with efforts to create large, scalable feedback models. Over time, Shared Insight's growing focus on equity was reflected in the language it used to describe the work—from “centering client feedback” to “listening to voices least heard and most impacted,” and most recently to “shifting power to communities.”

**Outcome Status:**

**STRONG**

Increased demand for support with feedback practice signals growing efforts by U.S. nonprofits to listen and respond to client feedback. L4G data suggests that nonprofits that engage in feedback programming experience capacity gains, see program improvements, and continue feedback practices over time. Additional research suggests that feedback can shift power. Efforts to expand feedback work to nonprofits outside of the U.S. generated valuable learning but did not yet translate into sustained expansion.

**Strategy Assessment:**

**STRONG**

Shared Insight pivoted to working with a broader array of field actors to shift norms and incentives via field building. At the same time, it developed the new capacity-building organization, Listen4Good (L4G). Strong demand for L4G's services and the organization's financial sustainability show that this strategy created a scalable model to support nonprofit feedback practice. It is unlikely that this level of progress, both among nonprofits that participated in L4G and others within the broader nonprofit sector, would have happened without Shared Insight's direct contributions through funding, thought partnership, and influence.

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**Outcome:**  
**More leaders and staff in foundations listen, respond, and shift power**

When Shared Insight began as a funder collaborative, it identified improving philanthropy as its north star. However, it took time for the collaborative to determine what aspects of philanthropic practice to focus on, define the practice, and develop strategies to influence uptake. Ultimately, its primary approach was direct funder engagement in a variety of forms.

**Outcome Status:**

**WEAK**

Shared Insight's work with funders has led to some shifts in values and understanding among those most directly engaged, but changes in actual funder practice have been limited and inconsistent, with only a handful translating learning into concrete behavior changes.

**Strategy Assessment:**

**WEAK**

While Shared Insight began with a mission to improve philanthropy, it took time for the collaborative to put more focused energy, effort, and resources toward this work. While broader sector efforts since 2020 aimed to produce more content and build momentum, Shared Insight's direct engagement with funders did not result in widespread changes within or across even the most engaged foundations. This lack of progress likely reflects both flawed strategy and implementation. More recently, Shared Insight launched a focused initiative to strengthen its efforts to promote strong listening practices among foundation staff, combining individual engagement with a broader field-building campaign. It is too early to assess the results of this approach.

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## Learning About Equity and Power Shifting

Throughout the years, Shared Insight encouraged exploration of important questions about how its work was advancing equity through its efforts to promote and support feedback, listening, and power-shifting practices among nonprofits and foundations.

The results of many evaluations we did showed that L4G had strong, positive impacts on nonprofits. At the same time, it prompted deeper questions:

**What about the people giving feedback? Is this approach realizing the intent of building greater connection, trust, and power between organizations and the people it serves?**

In one study across seven organizations implementing L4G, clients generally felt that their voice mattered to the organization, but they also had some questions around the impact and power of their feedback on the organization. In 2021, we partnered with six nonprofit organizations to ask the question:

“How do organizations leverage feedback and listening practices to share power with clients within their organizations, giving them more control over resources and decisions?” We wanted to go beyond whether people felt good about the feedback process to understand whether these approaches could shift power in meaningful ways.

Across the organizations, we found examples where the insights from feedback, as well as the practice and act of listening itself, led to changes in programs and services or shifts in organizational culture and practice.

**We also saw that power shifting, like equity, does not happen on its own—it requires intentional focus, effort, and design.**

Among funders, we found that engagement with communities is improving, but power shifting is often more nascent. Funders that participated in Shared Insight's participatory grantmaking initiative felt like they had ceded a lot of the power they typically held. The funders agreed to change the purpose statement, values, guidelines, and parameters of the program; double the amount of money available for grants; and limit their representation in the process.

**While the community participants appreciated these changes, they did not necessarily experience these actions and decisions as meaningful power shifts.**

In another example, we examined a group of 11 foundations that we believed to have strong listening practices in place. Most of them felt they were engaging deeply with community by seeking input from a wide range of stakeholders, including nonprofit leaders, grantees, other funders, business leaders, and city officials. However, this understanding of community differed from Shared Insight's emphasis on listening to people and communities most harmed by systemic racism and intersectional inequities.

**We also found that most of these foundations' efforts were consultative, which is an earlier stage of power shifting compared to collaborating or shifting decision-making power.**

Across these explorations, we see the importance of examining how closely intentions align with impact. These lessons are not to say efforts by nonprofits and funders to listen and shift power aren't worth it. Instead, identifying learning where a mismatch exists means resources, supports, and individual and organizational efforts can be improved and strengthened to realize power shifting and greater solidarity.

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## Sector-Level Results and Contribution



Outcome:

### Nonprofit norms and practice

#### Field Status:

##### Increased alignment in practice and norms:

While most nonprofits report collecting feedback, practices largely seem to align more with Shared Insight's aims. Norms have remained high around listening to community.

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#### Shared Insight Contribution:

##### An influential actor.

It is likely that the work advanced by field actors, including Shared Insight, has influenced the conversation, sustained momentum, and secured increased funder support for nonprofit practice.

Shared Insight was likely one influential player among many others in shaping changes in the nonprofit sector for norms and practices.



Outcome:

### Funder norms and practice

#### Field Status:

##### Improved norms, less practice change:

There is increased interest in and momentum behind funder listening and progress toward listening becoming an expected standard, but there are important gaps between discourse and practice.

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#### Shared Insight Contribution:

##### Other more visible contributions in a favorable environment.

While Shared Insight likely contributed to an increased value of listening, there were other, more visible contributors to these changes, and the work happened within a favorable environment.

Other organizations and seismic political and cultural events likely led to a beneficial convergence of related efforts and aligned actors.

## Sector-Level Results and Contribution

Shared Insight hoped to have a broader impact in the sector than just achieving results with the relatively small number of organizations they could directly fund or engage. In this section, we look at how norms and practices around feedback and listening have changed more broadly over time for the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors and assess in what ways Shared Insight has contributed to those changes.

### Nonprofit Norms and Practices

#### Field Status:

#### INCREASED ALIGNMENT IN SOME PRACTICES AND OVERALL NORMS

Shared Insight wants more leaders and staff in nonprofits to listen, respond, and shift power to those most impacted by structural racism and systemic, intersectional inequities. Field-level data, key informants from infrastructure organizations, and bellwethers with purview of the social sector suggest that nonprofits are listening and increasingly responding to the people they serve. We aren't able to say whether those efforts have yet led to shifts in power, as we don't have data about which constituents nonprofits are listening to.

Shared insight also wants listening, responding, and shifting power to become an expected standard among nonprofits. Ongoing use of feedback among nonprofits suggests that feedback continues to be an expected practice. Increases in frequency of nonprofits responding to feedback alongside sector conversation focusing more on improved quality of practice suggest that expected standards for how nonprofits operate have moved into greater alignment with Shared Insight's aims.

#### Shared Insight Contribution:

#### AN INFLUENTIAL ACTOR

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## Foundation Norms and Practices

### Field Status:

#### IMPROVED NORMS, LESS PRACTICE CHANGE

Shared Insight wants more leaders and staff in foundations to listen, respond, and shift power to those most impacted by structural racism and systemic, intersectional inequities and for this to become the expected standard for funders. Collectively, data suggests increased interest in and momentum behind funder listening and that progress has been made toward funders in listening becoming the expected standard.

However, there seems to be a gap between discourse and practice, with sporadic evidence of individual- or organizational-level change. Less progress has been made in funders listening to those most impacted by structural racism and systemic, intersectional inequities; the degree to which they respond; when and how they shift power; and how embedded practices are in organizations.

### Shared Insight Contribution:

#### OTHER MORE VISIBLE CONTRIBUTORS IN A FAVORABLE ENVIRONMENT

Shared Insight had implemented its strategies in a generally favorable environment until 2020, with tailwinds that propelled its work forward or at least generated favorable conditions for the type of changes it sought among funders. Specifically, the philanthropic sector's increased focus on equity, diversity, and inclusion opened windows of opportunity to examine and address power dynamics in the sector and question the extent to which communities had any influence on what foundations decided on their behalf. Listening and working in stronger partnership with community representatives was one way in which foundations operationalized their focus on equity, which became stronger in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the racial reckoning and uprisings in 2020. Since then, aligned efforts such as Trust-Based Philanthropy and the Equitable Evaluation Initiative became more prevalent in the sector, leading to a beneficial convergence of related efforts and aligned actors.

While it is likely that Shared Insight contributed to an increased value of listening in the sector through its efforts to develop tools, expand its reach, and elevate discourse, interviewees identified other factors and influential organizations as key contributors to these shifts. In addition to the factors external to the sector such as the COVID-19 pandemic and racial reckoning in 2020, which interviewees identified as catalytic events that influenced changes in the sector, interviewees also mentioned a variety of organizations in the sector that have promoted aligned practices over the past decade and have influenced philanthropic practice. These organizations included Trust-Based Philanthropy, the Equitable Evaluation Initiative, the Emergent Learning Community Project, Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, Center for Effective Philanthropy, and peer foundations championing the practice, among others. Shared Insight was not among the top-mentioned organizations contributing to these shifts. Given Shared Insight's lack of focus on funder listening in the earlier years and the recent shift in the short term, it's not surprising that there has been less progress and they have been a less strong contributor to the changes seen around listening to shift power in the philanthropic sector.

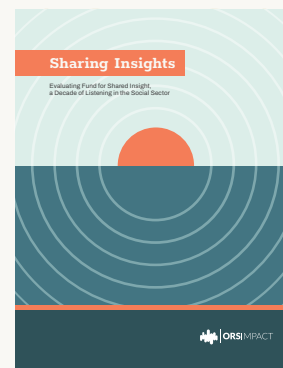
## Conclusion

In its early years, Shared Insight set out to promote feedback and listening—and to make the case that these practices were the right, smart, and feasible approaches across philanthropy and the nonprofit sector. Over a decade of investment, the collaborative made meaningful progress toward that vision.

Shared Insight concludes its work at a tumultuous time in the United States, when engaging with community may matter more than ever. The vision that guided the collaborative remains compelling: people from impacted communities, nonprofits, foundations, and public- and private-sector organizations bringing their expertise, perspectives, and resources together to solve problems, absent the power dynamics that too often stand in the way. Through such partnerships, relationship building, and collaborative efforts, solutions and implementation are more likely to be addressed in lasting and equitable ways. Listening, responding, and shifting power can help turn this vision into reality.

Please see the full evaluation report to learn more or dig into any of these findings along with opportunities that remain and overall observations about the work.

See the [full report](#) for more information on opportunities that remain and overall observations about the work.



ORS Impact is a woman-led and woman-owned evaluation and strategy consulting firm based in Seattle. For more than 35 years, we have partnered with philanthropic, nonprofit, and public-sector organizations to clarify strategy, assess impact, and apply insights from data to support more equitable outcomes. Our team has served as Shared Insight’s learning and evaluation partner since 2014.

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