

# Organizing First:

## *A Case for a Hybrid Version of Stakeholder Engagement*

by Alan Smith

As this article explains, “Many organizations have a very narrow or linear version of what makes for good engagement.” Others, on the far end of the engagement spectrum, provide a looser platform. Here, the author describes a hybrid of these two approaches that can be a useful model for enhancing stakeholder engagement.

**T**HE ROOSEVELT INSTITUTE IS A NONPROFIT ORGANIZATION consisting of “thousands of thinkers and doers—from a new generation of leaders in every state to Nobel laureate economists—working to redefine the rules that guide our social and economic realities.”<sup>1</sup> This breaks down into a central office of established academics attempting to drive the national

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**ALAN SMITH** is a community engagement specialist at Consumer Reports (CR), where he works with the Community Mobilization team to build power among CR’s members by distributing leadership and investing in them as educators, organizers, storytellers, and testers in their own right. Smith has a master’s in Nonprofit Leadership from the University of Pennsylvania. Previously, he was associate director of networked initiatives at the Roosevelt Institute.







May



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conversation on economics, and a network of college students on more than one hundred and thirty campuses around the country who are organized into a chapter system and who work on a diverse set of public-policy-based issues. Roosevelt is constantly engaged in a number of different experiments, but the process described in this article by which a network of students worked together to write documents collectively is a self-contained, new stakeholder-engagement model.

Roosevelt's work draws on and is informed by many other stakeholder-engagement models. Generational attitudes, new technology, and new social norms have created a "participatory society,"<sup>2</sup> and the nongovernmental organizations around the country and the world must adapt to keep up. The notion of simply listening to stakeholders no longer sets an organization apart.

### The Status Quo

Many organizations have a very narrow or linear version of what makes for good engagement. Volunteers are asked for money or for concrete actions that are designed so that anyone can do them: letter writing, representative calling, social media engagement, and other tasks that fulfill an organizational need. An offshoot of this narrow engagement is the sort of polling that organizations such as MoveOn.org do in agenda setting. These polls are democratic, in that anyone in the organization's universe can participate, and useful for accomplishing such tasks as picking two new campaigns or focus areas from a list.

From the far, other side of the engagement spectrum, there are organizations that provide a looser platform for individuals to make use of. This can take the form of tools, like survey-gathering platforms open to any cause (Change.org),<sup>3</sup> or it can take the form of a more holistic suite of services that are customizable to the needs of different campaigns (NationBuilder, Wellstone, and the like). Roosevelt resembled one of these organizations in its conception and early years.

These two extremes, which I will define here as the *narrow linear end* and the *open sandbox*

*end*, are both useful for certain stakeholder types and certain organizational needs. In its ideal form, Roosevelt exemplifies a hybrid of these two theories of engagement, and can split the difference between the two.

### Theories in Play

There are multiple theories of how to deepen engagement with stakeholders and reap the benefits such engagement can bring. Judy Freiwirth's notion of Community-Engagement Governance™ hinges on breaking down traditional barriers among nonprofit staff, board, stakeholders, and other constituents.<sup>4</sup> Her framework posits a robust set of systems for incorporating feedback and expertise into decision making, and it suggests that any organization that engages its stakeholders in such a manner will see benefits not only to decision making but also to stakeholder buy-in and connection to the organization. This plays out in the collaboration among students, alumni, and staff that happened at Roosevelt around its collective writing process, with a clear increase in organizational buy-in as well as superior outcomes. The Roosevelt example differs from Freiwirth's focus on board-level decisions, however; while the project was part of the organization's mission and goal setting and did engage board members to a certain extent, it did not focus on board-level decisions.

Other studies of stakeholder engagement focus on board governance as vital to how NGOs operate. Chao Guo and Juliet Musso define what "representation" (an oft-cited concept) means for organizations, categorizing different dimensions that representation in a nonprofit can take. The categories include *substantive*, *symbolic*, *formal*, *descriptive*, and *participatory* representation, and the article then subdivides those categories into ways in which organizations archive representation (*formal*, *descriptive*, and *participatory*), and ways in which organizations go about standing for their members and exercising that representation in terms of using power (*substantive* and *symbolic*). Guo and Musso argue that an "organization can enhance its representational capacity by establishing representative structures through which the views and concerns of

its constituents and the larger community are represented by those who speak on their behalf in the organization.”<sup>5</sup> This gives us a useful framework for discussing Roosevelt, as the organization attempted to create avenues for undergraduate college student stakeholders to hold substantive, symbolic, and participatory representation during different moments of the work.

Another particularly relevant case study tracks the role of how Italian bank foundations have handled community representations, and extrapolates that role to the Guo and Musso framework above.<sup>6</sup> This analysis unearths a new set of mechanisms to be used in situations in which the community is legally required to be on the board and is thus baked into the decision making of the organization. This places Roosevelt in the context of organizations that have built in representation structurally at the board level, but also shows the limited methods and outcomes that are available for board-level stakeholder engagement.

Jason Mogus and Tom Liacas studied multiple organizations and outlined four key ways that nonprofits were making effective change. Successfully networked organizations, in their rubric, *open themselves to grassroots power, build cross-movement network hubs, frame a compelling cause, and run with focus and discipline*.<sup>7</sup> Roosevelt’s collective writing processes engaged with the first, second, and fourth points of the Mogus/Liacas rubric, being driven by the grassroots power of the student chapters and featuring collaboration between chapters networked together while still providing a strong focus and direction from the central office of the institution. The view that a nonprofit that implements these theories will be more likely to build successful advocacy campaigns and make long-term change is perhaps the most utilitarian look at engagement discussed here.<sup>8</sup>

### Roosevelt as an Example of a New Version of Stakeholder Engagement

The Roosevelt networks, with their college students loosely affiliated in chapters around the country, are useful to study as NGOs emblematic of a new generation’s preferences and desires.

The theories that were applied in the collective writing processes are not new, but the application—in an age where many promise engagement, and a stakeholder’s ability to detect deception is at an all-time high—is instructive and perhaps unique. Given the limited number of people who can participate at the level of being on a board or substantively contributing to the high-level direction of an organization, these processes can be used as an example of how to blend participation and representation as well as linear and sandbox engagement techniques.

The creation of the *Next Generation Blueprint for 2016 (NGB)* is useful for understanding how this sort of decision making can unfold.<sup>9</sup> This is the third document in Roosevelt’s Blueprint series, and the organization iterated on each successive document, finally striking a balance between process and buy-in on the one hand and coherent products on the other.

The document lays out a student-created policy agenda that we hoped legislators would address, with values-based areas of focus paired with specific policy recommendations. Because, as Roosevelters wrote, “we believe that it matters *who* writes the rules, not just *what* rules are written, it includes recommendations for rethinking how young people engage in the decision-making process by increasing voter access and diversifying the pool of emerging leaders.”<sup>10</sup> The final report also includes a lobbying tool—a tearaway set of recommendations for how political leaders can engage with the millennial generation.<sup>11</sup>

The writing of the *NGB* document involved a series of back-and-forth exchanges of information between groups of Roosevelt stakeholders and Roosevelt staff. Everything in the document, including our eventual thesis, came from spaces built with our stakeholders, and the result was a high degree of buy-in throughout the student network.

The process started with a group of twenty-two alumni and students who had demonstrated a long-term dedication to and interest in Roosevelt’s work. To help guarantee that the early idea-creation phase never became completely open ended, participants were given an initial set

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of readings, which included a paper that had been written by Roosevelt thinkers. Discussion around this document, *Rewriting the Rules of the American Economy*, gave rise to the eventual thesis.<sup>12</sup>

The following, from participant student Beverly Harp, gives a sense of the early processes as students grappled with priorities and with applying some sort of structure to the document:

I also really like what Adam said about the intersection of education and an inclusive democracy. It sounds like we might have one policy about improving access to education and another on political representation, so detailing this intersection could be effective in our thesis.

I fully agree that creating real representation in our political process and figuring out a way to put people back at the center of our economy will be two of the biggest challenges our generation will face. A stronger education system and pre-K programs in particular would be the result of both, but at the same time improving access to education would strengthen participation in our democracy and mobility in our economy.<sup>13</sup>

The group brainstormed together, had a few calls, and used a collaborative tool called Loomio to come up with an initial framework for the document outlining that who rewrites the rules matters as much as what the rules are. This is, essentially, a pro-democracy idea, rising out of a space that was created as intentionally democratic. The original discussion group also attached a perspective to that thesis statement: that the unifying policy notion all our work fell under included the need for democratic access reform or a societal and legal investment in making sure that more people could be a part of writing the rules. This formative discussion was organized and shepherded by staff but not directed by us after giving them the original task.

With an initial thesis set, Roosevelt turned to the entire network of students. Using an online survey, Roosevelt recorded students' priorities vis-à-vis a series of different issue areas. Questions were designed to get both objective rankings of and subjective opinions on seven different

policy areas: civil and human rights; education; economic development; energy and environment; healthcare; democratic access; and foreign policy. The survey was designed with assistance from the original steering group and then forwarded to the entire network. The one-thousand-plus results defined Roosevelt's political priorities, delineated the top three issue areas that the network believed were important in 2016 (education, economic development, and human rights), and dug into each of the seven policy areas to define how respondents believed the country should tackle important priorities in each area. For example, 28 percent of respondents identified an overhaul of how we fund K–12 education as the most important education issue to address in 2016, and 24 percent identified decreasing the burden of student debt.<sup>14</sup>

Using this data, Roosevelt staff built discussion groups of student and alumni experts in the top three issue areas. That meant guided two-hour video calls organized around education, economic development, and human rights, in which students and alumni reacted to the survey results and sketched the framework for concrete policy recommendations that accomplished the lofty goals put forward by the survey.

It was particularly exciting when these conversations moved us into the cutting edge of what was happening on the ground around the country. In late 2015 and early 2016, when the document was being constructed, there was an important conversation happening nationwide around human rights in the form of the Black Lives Matter movement. Two students who were engaged locally in that work joined our human rights working group and led an interesting discussion critiquing our first draft and bringing in examples of how current policy was failing people with whom they were working.

This gave rise to a philosophical discussion to complement the public policy one we'd been having. On the one hand, this resulted in a more robust set of recommendations of alternatives to incarceration, as well as a recommendation that the nation create more spaces for community oversight of police—things that have mirrored other groups working in human rights since then

and proven relevant as the conversation has unfolded. On the other hand, one of the participating students wrote, “I think that focusing on holding police accountable doesn’t really get at the core. What we’re really asking for is a reduction in the mass criminality of black and brown bodies.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, our discussion was both practical and theoretical, which we attempted to reflect in the eventual document. The student discussions here did more than give folks a chance to participate: they taught many participants new things and changed their perspectives, as well as actively improved Roosevelt’s final paper.

The iterative process continued with staff writing up the conversations and the same groups meeting again to critique and improve the product. This yielded concrete recommendations, like the following regarding how to achieve the goals in economic development: “Utilizing the tax system to reduce actions that are overly risky by passing a financial transactions tax (FTT) and creating a Financial Infrastructure Exchange. This would limit some of the worst market distortions created by rapid trading and realign incentives away from short-termism.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, feedback from participants on those calls became the core of the eventual document, with staffers integrating advice down to the level of wordsmithing each of the top three sections and developing individual policies. Finally, the document highlighted the successes of individual chapter projects or star students over the course of the year, and was supplemented by quotes that individuals had delivered as a part of the long-form answers requested in the survey. The final text was turned over to a set of editors and designers to achieve its final layout and construction.

This process, while lengthy, illustrates a fine line between the narrow linear end of engagement strategy and the open sandbox end of creating truly distributive leadership with no form of institutional oversight. As one can see, these discussions had aspects of collaboration and discussion on the one hand and gave each group a coherent set of inputs to react to on the other. This process was able to be engaging *and* resulted in a readable final project, because the document found a balance in having been written both by staff

and by many disparate voices with no common thread. By setting achievable goals for each of these iterative levels of engagement, Roosevelt created spaces that were not too wide in scope yet allowed people to bring in their own expertise. Participants were left with a feeling of meaningful engagement while creating work that Roosevelt could easily use.

There was, of course, plenty of nudging, corraling, and reminding that went into this document. Some students left their working groups along the way, while others became excited by a particular idea and jumped in late in the process. However, it was remarkable to see the ways in which students *did* take ownership of the process, and how they embraced their cohort. Two years later, I’ve had students reference the discussions as the high point of their college experience, and connections were formed during these discussions that have resulted in interesting organizing collaborations like EveryDistrict (a political action group) and a student-run data-visualization project.

Roosevelt’s flat organizational structure or lack of hierarchy was useful with regard to how this project unfolded. That is not to say that every moment of engagement was democratic—it wasn’t. Rather, we didn’t give preference to any set of ideas, part of the organization, or hierarchical system with respect to how we chose the different groups.

The process of collective document creation must begin far ahead of collecting the data one intends to use, to avoid any top-down decision making that might feel forced or not organic. It begins with organizers listening and talking with constituents, gathering up and (sometimes) dismissing ideas, starting over, and building things together. It looks like the slow build of a campaign. The clearest signals we’ve received at Roosevelt have been when we assign projects without collaborative input: students don’t say no—they just fade away.

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It is clear that Roosevelt is an organization with many of the theories of Community-Engagement Governance™ baked into its organizational DNA. Within the network, there have never been

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## Applying a Hybrid Model of Stakeholder Engagement Elsewhere

The writing of *Next Generation Blueprint for 2016* was specific to Roosevelt's needs and audiences. However, there are stakeholder engagement theories that can easily be applied to other types of organizations.

### *Community Foundations*

Due to their inherent mission, community foundations can and should be playing a leadership role in the community. They are, in fact, chartered to do so. This hybrid model of stakeholder engagement can be applied to making sure a foundation's grant giving is focused on issues that are relevant to and connected to the needs of the community. As participatory budgeting and other democratic-focused projects suggest, the result of such an approach would stretch beyond simply more relevant grant giving (an important prize unto itself) and into improving the foundation's relationship with the community it represents. Building trust between an institution and its constituency is important.

### *Membership Nonprofits*

These groups can be taking better advantage of their supporters and gaining more in terms of buy-in and loyalty. Taking advantage of an engaged membership allows a nonprofit to punch above its weight class, having outsized effects on its mission work. The extra resources that must be spent in creating a hybrid level of engagement pay off when you consider successful organizations that are taking advantage of their membership—from 350.org to the National Rifle Association (NRA). The challenge, however, is having enough knowledge about one's own stakeholder set to source the right people and put them in the right positions to succeed.

### *Networks of Organizations That Have a Similar Issue Area or Goal*

Collaboration among different organizations can be difficult, as each group has a unique mission and a need to establish its own brand as relevant and important to funders and constituents alike. The flat hierarchy of the Roosevelt writing process can be useful in this context for building a process of collaboration among organizations.



governance structures other than this flat, stakeholder-driven model. Within the larger Roosevelt organization, the stakeholder-driven model of the networks has often run counter to the more top-down structures of the economic-focused think tank. Clearly, the networks have embraced some aspects of Freiwirth's framework, while others remain untapped: planning and advocacy are strongly represented, while fiduciary care and evaluation responsibilities are less robust.

In addition to membership organizations, Roosevelt can be a useful model for groups working in coalition. Building a small group of passionate individuals from different organizations (like the core group of students and alums from different chapters who opened the *NGB* process) can work as a frame for a coalition. This, followed by large numbers of rank-and-file members of each organization contributing in small ways (via survey or the like), can also be engaged toward a common goal in a similar manner. Many coalitions fail because one organization holds dominance due to history, resources, or the like—creating an unequal playing field. The Roosevelt model helps to ameliorate this problem.

Conversely, however, if a major selling point is that the stakeholder is engaged with building the project or the idea, this can make long-term campaigns difficult. In this context, stakeholders learn to have the expectation of being involved from the ground up and thus do not join in or continue something that is already up and running. We saw this in the Roosevelt case—students who came to the network late in the *NGB* process or after publication were interested in the fact that the document existed but not as excited to use it as a jumping-off point for their own work. In an organization where turnover is built into the system, with constant matriculation and graduation, this represents a serious problem. For long-term engagement, we need other methods of bringing stakeholders into a project or organization already at full speed.

## NOTES

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13. Beverly Harp, in response to a question posed by the group via Loomio, on May 22, 2015: "What is the greatest economic/social challenge our generation faces?"

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15. Ibid., 21.

16. Ibid., 16.

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