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Putting Constituents at the Center

Emely Anico, Sydney Menzin, and Scott Warren

We are the best. The biggest. The most effective. The only. We are saving lives. We are transforming systems. We are the solution.

Check out any nonprofit's mission and vision statements: The superlatives abound. Find your way to the impact part of the website, and the trend continues. Organizations purport life-altering changes that they've produced among the individuals they serve through a dizzying display of percentage increases, interspersed with inspirational dramatic stories of individual transformation. After examining a nonprofit's promotional materials and impact reports, attending galas, and hearing pitches, it is hard to believe that we still face any social or economic challenges. We have so many organizations solving all of our many problems.

The reality, obviously, is more complex. But as a sector purporting to solve community issues, it sometimes seems that we are unable to have real, nuanced conversations about the long, hard, real, unglamorous grind of social change work. Some of this simplistic grandeur is perpetuated by social change organizations themselves. Some of this is caused by funders who demand immediate results, and seemingly hold onto the belief that their resources can change the world within a finite amount of time.

None of these solution and savior narratives, however, are propagated by the very people we are attempting to serve, who understand, all too well, the complexities that accompany any specific social change intervention. The critical question becomes how to motivate and sustain a culture of making a difference through social change work while maintaining a sense of humility about the limitations of individual organizations and people to effect change.

Any undoubtedly multifaceted answer must involve ensuring that constituents are always at the forefront, not seen solely as beneficiaries of the work of nonprofits, but rather, fundamental

decision-makers in the very process of determining how the work actually occurs. Rather than a paternalistic, savior-oriented mindset, a constituent-first approach must be foundational to the work of any social change organization.

Two of us are former democracy coaches at Generation Citizen (GC), and one of us is the current CEO. At GC, young people learn politics through taking action on local issues they care about. To this end, the entire premise behind GC is based on a constituent-first mentality. We implement a program predicated on the fact that young people have specific contextual and critical knowledge on local challenges in their community, and that they themselves can make meaningful change. Young people in New York City have a better understanding of the challenges of police-community relations than many governmental officials working on the problem from their offices. Students in Lowell, Massachusetts have a unique lens into the problems, and potential solutions, of the opioid epidemic because of their personal experience with the crisis.

Correspondingly, GC students use this local knowledge and their personal experiences to inform their proposed solutions. For example, students, reflecting on their experiences with police officers, have advocated reforms to the quota systems and for comprehensive police reform. Other students, affected by the deportation of family members, have pushed for local immigration protections.

Despite the fact that GC's philosophy puts the constituent front and center, we too inevitably fall victim to some of the traditional pitfalls of social change work. We predominantly work with low-income schools, and many of our employees grew up in much different socioeconomic backgrounds from the communities we serve. This divergent reality has inevitably informed how we have built our curriculum and training programs.

Additionally, when raising money, we have sometimes elevated the stories of individuals and overplayed our impact, in an effort to prove that we are engaging in truly transformational work. At times, we have failed to put constituents front and center in every aspect of our work and understand empathetically the complexity of their lives.

So how can we, and all nonprofits, ensure that putting constituents front and center is not a slogan and tagline, but an actual reality? We must put concrete structures into place to ensure that constituents inform our work products.

First, a constituent-centered approach requires ensuring that social change work itself becomes more democratic. The efforts of organizations, and the money directed toward programmatic activities, should be informed by those being served, rather than solely promoting technocratic solutions perpetuated by those already in power.

There are concrete ways to democratize social change entities and shift entrenched power dynamics. One necessary reform, which we have begun in earnest at Generation Citizen, is to prioritize the exploration of diversity, equity, and inclusion work internally. This challenging but critical examination requires ensuring that more of our organizational leadership represents the same demographics of the students we serve. It also requires that we critically assess power dynamics internally—examining who gets to make decisions and how, and ensuring that a robust democratic form of decision-making is formalized and processed.

Additionally, a constituent-oriented approach involves prioritizing constituent voice and input in program development. Rather than assuming that practitioners know what works best, informed by statistically sound best practices, the people we are trying to serve should be part of any efforts to form, or reform, impact strategies. They cannot solely be seen as beneficiaries, or as people we are trying to help.

In Generation Citizen, we have formed a Student Leadership Board, comprised of young people from all across the country who have gone through our program. These students are beginning to advise GC on curricular and training approaches, and weighing in on organizational strategy. To date, students have provided feedback on how our curriculum can sometimes come across as paternalistic, that the conferences they attend as spokespeople for us are too old and too white, and that our volunteers are not always culturally competent in the classroom.

It is challenging to ensure that these students are not tokenized, but rather, viewed with authentic and real expertise. As part of this quest to prioritize constituents, we will be bringing youth voice to our national board of directors, ensuring that the young people we serve have a seat at the decision-making table. We have also just started a Teacher Leadership Board to advise us in similar ways, focusing on pedagogical and curricular priorities.

It is not just organizations that need to elevate constituents. Philanthropy must consider its practices as well. There are obvious sociological and psychological challenges behind the act of giving. It is assumed that donors, since they earned the money, should unilaterally control how their money is spent. But to what extent should populations on the receiving end of social innovations have a say in how money is spent on them? In determining philanthropic priorities, foundations and individuals should do more than consult experts and practitioners. They should actually listen to the people on the ground they are intending to help. This should involve focus groups, and frequent site visits, not just to see the best and glossy parts of an organization, but to understand the trickier and challenging components as well.

At GC, we have ensured that all of our board meetings and staff retreats are place-based, situated within the communities we work. Our stakeholders meet with constituents, ask questions, and reflect upon our work, not to prove that we are engaging in transformational work, but rather, to truly understand our strengths and challenges in the distinct communities where we work.

A repercussion of the importance of a constituent-first approach is a recognition that real and lasting change takes time. There is sometimes, implicitly or explicitly, an expectation, from organizations or funders, that one organization can transform an entire system. The aforementioned savior rhetoric perpetuates this narrative. Organizations propose missions that aim to close entire educational gaps, or ensure that every young person in this country will be able to attend college. Even GC's mission states that, one day, every young person in this country will receive an effective action civics education.

Ambition can be good. But these visions can also breed unrealistic expectations. This mentality is worsened by the fact that limited resources are available to the sector, breeding competition. As a

result, they often must present themselves as the best and most effective recipients of the donations, producing the most "change" per dollar spent in order to get more funding. Rather than worrying about solving the problem, organizations focus on proving that they are the best.

A potential solution to this cycle lies in a broader social and cultural shift toward more honest conversations between donors and organizations, and most importantly, with the target populations, about realistic changes each group can expect to see. Most often, the flashy and quick solutions are not the ones that will lead to long-term sustainable change in the field.

GC is ultimately trying to improve our democracy by engaging young people in the political process. The change will not occur overnight. Reforming our democracy through empowering young people is difficult to measure on surveys or test scores. We are not attempting to make excuses, and know that there are indicators along the way that can help to demonstrate forward progress. But, at the same time, it is challenging to have an honest conversation about the real limitations of our work (we cannot solve the problems with our democracy on our own), elevate constituents to the forefront, and still effectively bring in dollars.

In current times of unprecedented economic and political inequality, there may be no more important work than attempting to solve societal woes. And there are so many examples of organizations that are truly making a difference, in issues ranging from education to poverty to climate change to criminal justice. But no organization, on its own, is solving our intractable problems.

And that realization, that no organization can solve all of the inequity that has pervaded society, calls for a deep dose of humility. Paramount in a constituent-first philosophy is a recognition that we all must be more humble. We must be humble about our ability to effect change. We must be humble about the time frame in which change can happen. We must be humble about the extent to which we can bring about change on our own. Regardless of how we effect change, putting constituents first must be part of any solution.

About the Authors

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