



How to Use Feedback Loops to Engage your Community

Community engagement is crucial to systemic change, but we often don't know how to involve diverse voices within our communities. Too often we hear the same, loud voices, while others are disconnected or marginalized from our community-level decision-making.

Implementing a Feedback Loop (FBL) Process is one way to engage multiple stakeholders within a community. A recent article in the *Global Journal of Community Psychology Practice* by Jackson et. al, *Community Engagement: Using Feedback Loops to Empower Residents and Influence Systemic Change in Culturally Diverse Communities*, provides a case study of how the FBL process was



Figure 1 Photo by Sustainable Sanitation Alliance Used under CC2.0

implemented and perceived by diverse community members in a resource-challenged city.

“Too often in meetings and forums we only hear the same few voices. Feedback Loops allows for more voices to be heard.” -study participant (p. 14)

The FBL process can engage residents, particularly in groups where marginalized voices are not typically heard/considered.

Highlights

Involving marginalized voices in the community can be difficult.

The Feedback Loop process is one way to more authentically engage more folks.

Change is slow and must be accompanied by cultural understanding within the group and with its leaders.

Goals of the Feedback Loop Process are:

- Intentional and consistent efforts to seek out diverse perspectives by holding a variety of meetings and forums
- Providing space and time (e.g. synchronous and asynchronous) as well as opportunities verbally and in writing where people can identify their own needs free of judgement from others. (e.g. “humble listening”)
- Determining a fair process for evaluating the community’s needs
- Gathering support to meet as many of the needs as possible

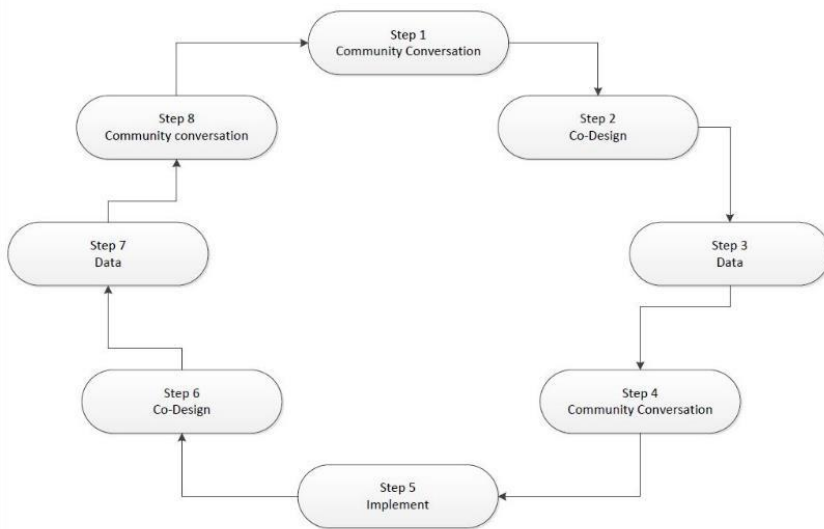
PRO TIP

When getting community feedback, focus on 3-5 action oriented issues at a time.

Process

Participants are asked questions to build on other responses, clarify comments, push for more elaborate answers, or engage in thinking about the conversations multiple times throughout community conversation. Extended feedback loops are used to support residents’ elaboration and to have them contribute to extended conversations. They are characterized by consistent use of feedback/probes that encourage deeper/more meaningful discussion.

Jackson et. al. used the following 8 steps to show the iterative nature of the FBL process.



1. Hold a community conversation about neighborhood priorities.
2. Co-design a way to get community feedback on these priorities.
3. Collect the data from the community about the priorities.
4. Have another community conversation about the data to determine the appropriate actions based on the identified priorities.
5. Implement the chosen action(s)/solutions(s) and keep the group

updated on the progress.

6. Co-design a second way to collect feedback on how the solution is going.
7. Collect this data.
8. Facilitate a community conversation about the successes and failures of the project as well as the feedback process.

Evaluation Methods

Jackson et. al. used a qualitative case study in a neighborhood in Southeast Mississippi, that has been challenged by racial divides, economic challenges, and recent natural disasters. They collected data using rapid interviews of neighborhood representatives, more in-depth interviews with a wider group of stakeholders, and participant observations during neighborhood meetings. Documents were analyzed to identify strengths and challenges of the FBL process.

Results

- The number of neighbors involved in the community process rose from 13-18 once FBL was implemented
- For each neighbor attending the meetings, attendance rose by 70% across the meetings
- Neighbors reported more in-depth conversations within the groups

But progress is slow...

- Participants felt that they were beginning to make progress in “closing the loop” on community conversations by building on each other’s ideas, pushing for more elaborate answers, and have more meaningful dialogue, but did not reach ideal levels of engagement.
- The environment must change before or with the FBL process for people to feel comfortable engaging in more authentic ways.

“I think feedback loops can be [standard operating procedure], but we must make adjustments. We have to understand who we are serving and how to keep them engaged.”
-study participant (p.14)

What Does This Mean For the Practice of Community Psychology?

The FBL is one way to engage the community and get multiple opinions. It involves 8 steps and participant engagement can grow with each step. FBL is time consuming and counter cultural when it violates norms of certain (well-intentioned) groups defining the needs and appropriating solutions for others.

Original Citation: Jackson, K. T., Burgess, S., Toms, F., & Cuthbertson, E. L. (2018). [Community Engagement: Using Feedback Loops to Empower Residents and Influence Systemic Change in Culturally Diverse Communities](#). *Global Journal of Community Psychology Practice*, 9(2), 1-21.

Summary and Discussion by A. Simons-Rudolph. All omissions and errors are the responsibility of the author.

Resources: The [December 18, 2018 issue of the American Journal of Community Psychology](#) delves deep into how people on the ground create opportunities for transformation.

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