

Identifying and Understanding Your Stakeholders

Stakeholders are people or organizations that have a vested interest in your organization's success, and can help it succeed or fail. Identifying, understanding and building relationships with your stakeholders is important for lots of reasons, including:

- Helping you feel (and be) less isolated;
- Adding creativity to your work via collaboration and ideas from outside;
- Being a ready source of letters of support/commitment;
- Having the groundwork laid for creating memorandums of understanding (MOUs) and other such partnership agreements when needed;
- As an antidote to scarcity mentality;
- As sources of people to serve on advisory boards; and,
- As places to recruit board members.

The identification of stakeholders, and of ways to understand what is important to them and build relationships with them, should be part of your strategic planning process.

The basic questions to answer:

- Who are the stakeholders (or potential stakeholders) in your organization? Categories may include: clients, customers, staff, partners, board members, volunteers, organizational funders, individual donors, subcontractors, rule making bodies, political allies, other agencies/organizations/businesses that serve your clients/customers, local neighborhood/community groups, other members of your "industry," and others.
- What are the values/goals/needs of your stakeholders (as they relate to your organization)?
- What do those stakeholders want/need from you? (You get to decide whether those needs are healthy for you – and therefore whether to embrace them, but you should know what they are.)

Do as part of strategic planning:

1. Make a list of your stakeholders, by category.
2. List their core values. List what they want from you. Compare that to your mission, core values, niche and resources.
3. Mark any stakeholders for whom you had trouble answering the questions in #2. Think of three ways you could find out what you don't know.
4. Evaluate your current relationships with these stakeholders.
5. Prioritize – which stakeholders do you need to build or strengthen relationships with in year one? Year two? Year three?
6. Select strategies and assign responsibility for building these relationships, and build evaluation of these strategies into your larger evaluation process.