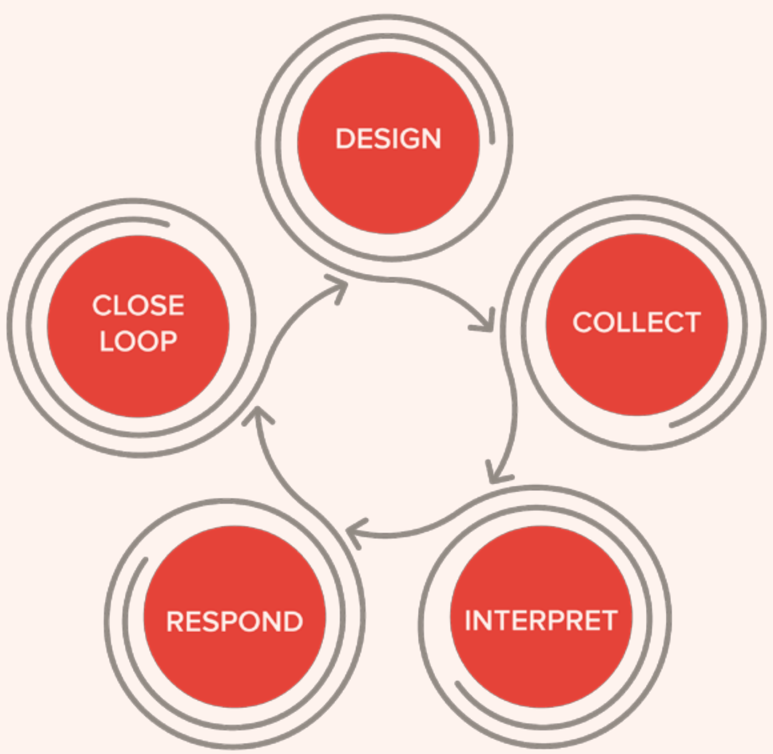
Listen4Good

When Listening Leads to Change

A practical guide for organizations on how to build high-quality feedback loops that center equity.

OUR AIM AT LISTEN4GOOD is to give organizations the tools to listen and respond to their clients' needs and experiences through high-quality, sustainable feedback loops. We also believe that high-quality feedback practices can provide an effective vehicle for centering equity within an organization's work. This guide outlines tangible practices and behaviors that organizations can pursue across the five steps of a feedback loop to ensure their approach is high-quality and centers equity.

HIGH-QUALITY FEEDBACK LOOP



This guide is **intended for nonprofit staff and feedback practitioners**, and is grounded in four key principles:

1. To be "high-quality", feedback loops **must be in service of equity**. They must acknowledge and confront issues of power and privilege.
2. Equity-driven work seeks to shift and share power—both in internal conditions as well as external systems—so that those who have been excluded or oppressed benefit and become **empowered agents** of the changes they seek.
3. Building equity-driven, high-quality feedback loops is an **ongoing journey, not a linear path**—organizations are in different places and will embed some practices in some steps sooner than others.
4. This framework provides **multiple entry points and paths** for organizations looking to strengthen their feedback and equity practices, so we hope all organizations will find something that they can build towards in this guide.

In aligning quality and equity as desired characteristics of feedback loops, we assert that the higher the quality of the practice, the higher potential that practice generally holds for promoting equity. We have layered activities and norms that organizations can adopt over time along a spectrum based upon L4G's own knowledge and experience—yet we acknowledge that the positioning of each activity may be impacted by an organization's unique context (e.g., issue area, staffing structure, budget).

Feedback loops are high-quality when they are in service of equity.

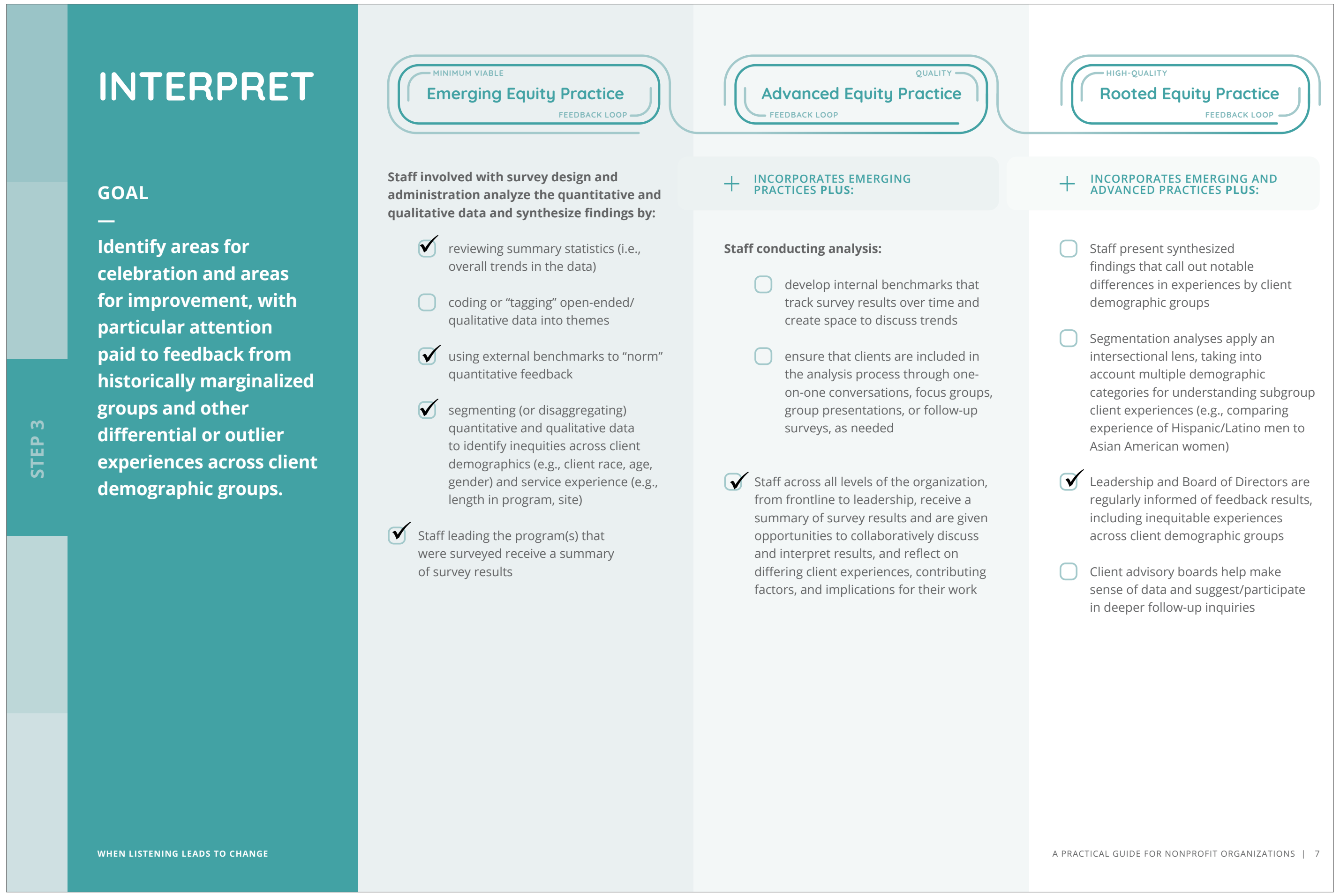
HOW TO USE THIS DOCUMENT

We encourage you to move through this document and note which practices you are currently implementing at your organization, along with those you wish to embed in the future.

If you are on your second or third feedback loop, work with your colleagues to set specific improvement targets by step. Your L4G coach can help you figure out specific strategies for moving up levels in a given step.

Building a feedback practice that advances equity is not always a linear progression. You may find that you are at a higher level in some steps than others, or you may be further along with some aspects of developing a listening culture than others. You may also “slip back” periodically.

Don’t be discouraged by this. Rather, use this document to keep improving what you do, holding the organization accountable for continually embedding and advancing equity through feedback.


STEP 3

INTERPRET

GOAL

Identify areas for celebration and areas for improvement, with particular attention paid to feedback from historically marginalized groups and other differential or outlier experiences across client demographic groups.

MINIMUM VIABLE Emerging Equity Practice FEEDBACK LOOP

Staff involved with survey design and administration analyze the quantitative and qualitative data and synthesize findings by:

- [x] reviewing summary statistics (i.e., overall trends in the data)
- [ ] coding or “tagging” open-ended/ qualitative data into themes
- [x] using external benchmarks to “norm” quantitative feedback
- [x] segmenting (or disaggregating) quantitative and qualitative data to identify inequities across client demographics (e.g., client race, age, gender) and service experience (e.g., length in program, site)

- [x] Staff leading the program(s) that were surveyed receive a summary of survey results

QUALITY Advanced Equity Practice FEEDBACK LOOP

+ INCORPORATES EMERGING PRACTICES **PLUS:**

Staff conducting analysis:

- [ ] develop internal benchmarks that track survey results over time and create space to discuss trends
- [ ] ensure that clients are included in the analysis process through one-on-one conversations, focus groups, group presentations, or follow-up surveys, as needed

- [x] Staff across all levels of the organization, from frontline to leadership, receive a summary of survey results and are given opportunities to collaboratively discuss and interpret results, and reflect on differing client experiences, contributing factors, and implications for their work

HIGH-QUALITY Rooted Equity Practice FEEDBACK LOOP

+ INCORPORATES EMERGING AND ADVANCED PRACTICES **PLUS:**

- [ ] Staff present synthesized findings that call out notable differences in experiences by client demographic groups
- [ ] Segmentation analyses apply an intersectional lens, taking into account multiple demographic categories for understanding subgroup client experiences (e.g., comparing experience of Hispanic/Latino men to Asian American women)
- [x] Leadership and Board of Directors are regularly informed of feedback results, including inequitable experiences across client demographic groups
- [ ] Client advisory boards help make sense of data and suggest/participate in deeper follow-up inquiries

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Example page in use.

Finally, this guide can also be helpful for reminding others that all feedback practices are not equally good, nor do they all advance equity. But done well, they are a core practice for centering and shifting power within your organization.

STEP 1

DESIGN

GOAL

—

Create an accessible, inclusive, and relevant feedback collection approach.

MINIMUM VIABLE Emerging Equity Practice FEEDBACK LOOP

The survey:

- [ ] is short (i.e., 20 questions or less)
- [ ] includes questions that allow disaggregation of feedback by subgroups (e.g., client race, age, gender, and/or length in program, site) to identify inequities in service delivery
- [ ] uses language that is simple and understandable, written at an appropriate literacy level
- [ ] is translated into languages spoken by clients
- [ ] includes at least one question that will yield data the organization is able to act upon or has the capacity to respond to today
- [ ] is reviewed by frontline staff before administration
- [ ] includes questions pre-tested by clients to check for comprehension, relevance, and any missing topics

QUALITY Advanced Equity Practice FEEDBACK LOOP

+ INCORPORATES EMERGING PRACTICES **PLUS:**

The organization's:

- [ ] survey prioritizes questions that gather client experiences, needs, and preferences, with reduced emphasis on self-reported outcome data. The primary goal of the survey is to improve client experiences and support organizational learning (over funder requirements or other compliance needs)
- [ ] frontline staff and clients propose areas for inquiry and questions to be asked

HIGH-QUALITY Rooted Equity Practice FEEDBACK LOOP

+ INCORPORATES EMERGING AND ADVANCED PRACTICES **PLUS:**

The survey:

- [ ] includes equity-focused questions that align with organization's broader equity goals (e.g., questions about themes like belonging, inclusion, how power operates or should operate within the organization)
- [ ] is designed in a way that maximizes organization's ability to respond to what is heard (i.e., aligns with organization's strategic priorities/plan, budget, and/or fundraising goals)
- [ ] is iterated over time, based on learnings from previous surveys, on-the-ground or word-of-mouth learnings from clients, and/or other organizational experience
- [ ] is co-created, vetted, and designed by formal client-led structures, such as client advisory boards

STEP 2

COLLECT

GOAL

—

Implement survey in a way that promotes accessibility, captures a large number of representative client voices, and minimizes courtesy bias, resulting in credible, candid feedback.

MINIMUM VIABLE Emerging Equity Practice FEEDBACK LOOP

- Organization attempts to survey as many clients as feasible with the time and resources it has available

Staff and/or volunteers are trained to reiterate:

  - clients will not lose access to services based on their feedback
  - the purpose of the survey is to learn how the organization can better serve clients
  - how data will be used as well as when and how results will be shared

- Clients are able to complete and submit surveys anonymously
- Clients are able to respond to the survey in a way that is flexible and fits their schedule
- Every client receives an opportunity to respond to a feedback survey at least once per year

QUALITY Advanced Equity Practice FEEDBACK LOOP

+ INCORPORATES EMERGING PRACTICES **PLUS:**

The organization:

- sets a goal for response rate and monitors response rate during administration
- monitors the demographics of survey respondents before the survey is closed and takes specific steps to increase representativeness of respondents
- distributes survey, taking into account client comfort levels and access to technology (e.g., if clients lack consistent internet access, surveys are also offered via paper, phone, mail)
- requires staff and/or volunteers to proactively engage clients to increase participation rates (e.g., one-on-one outreach, offering incentives)

HIGH-QUALITY Rooted Equity Practice FEEDBACK LOOP

+ INCORPORATES EMERGING AND ADVANCED PRACTICES **PLUS:**

The organization:

- sets a goal for and achieves a response rate that exceeds previous response rates or is higher than the average response rate of other L4G organizations using the same survey administration methods; gaps in response rates are critically examined
- intentionally oversamples and prioritizes outreach to clients who are underrepresented—including both historically marginalized groups as well as client groups underrepresented in prior listening efforts
- allocates resources to ensure outreach strategies target historically marginalized or underrepresented groups
- uses administrative staff, volunteers, or clients to collect feedback, rather than frontline staff who have closer relationships with clients. If frontline staff must collect responses, survey administration processes protect client privacy and ensure staff do not have access to individual survey results
- encourages candor by reinforcing that critical feedback is welcomed and by promoting psychological safety (i.e., processes for ensuring anonymity are clearly explained and reinforced through practice)

INTERPRET

STEP 3

GOAL

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Emerging Equity Practice

FEEDBACK LOOP

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☐ Staff leading the program(s) that were surveyed receive a summary of survey results

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Staff conducting analysis:

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☐ Leadership and Board of Directors are regularly informed of feedback results, including inequitable experiences across client demographic groups

☐ Client advisory boards help make sense of data and suggest/participate in deeper follow-up inquiries

RESPOND

GOAL

—

Engage internal and external stakeholders (including clients) to learn from client feedback and implement changes based on what is learned.

STEP 4

MINIMUM VIABLE Emerging Equity Practice FEEDBACK LOOP

- [ ] Staff leading the program(s) that were surveyed discuss findings and develop a plan to respond

At least two to three tangible changes are implemented in response to survey findings. This means:

  - [ ] "low-hanging fruit" changes, which take less time/effort/resources are quickly advanced
  - [ ] changes that require more time/effort/resources are simultaneously pursued (e.g., the creation of new program features or offerings) even if they are presented as incomplete/in-progress when closing the loop

QUALITY Advanced Equity Practice FEEDBACK LOOP

+ INCORPORATES EMERGING PRACTICES **PLUS:**

- [ ] Staff at all levels, especially those with less formal decision-making authority, engage in discussing findings and developing a plan to respond
- [ ] Program and/or organizational leadership create action plans with timelines, milestones, and clear accountability to pursue changes
- [ ] Feedback from marginalized or under-represented demographic groups, or other groups with below-average experiences, are prioritized in proposed organizational responses
- [ ] Client advisory boards (or equivalent structures) help inform organizational responses to feedback

HIGH-QUALITY Rooted Equity Practice FEEDBACK LOOP

+ INCORPORATES EMERGING AND ADVANCED PRACTICES **PLUS:**

- [ ] Funders and other external stakeholders (e.g., partner agencies) are engaged in developing a plan to respond in order to gain additional resources and advance a coordinated response
- [ ] Program and/or organizational leadership intentionally pursue resource-intensive changes (e.g., requiring shifts in staff time, roles, additional budget). Staff collect follow-up feedback to understand effect of changes made and track data over time to ensure any surfaced inequities are addressed by changes
- [ ] Client advisory boards (or equivalent structures) are given authority to lead development of organization's response to feedback
- [ ] Organization's response to feedback intentionally shares power with clients by shifting conditions within the organization in ways that leave clients empowered and better positioned to obtain the life outcomes they seek

CLOSE THE LOOP

GOAL

—

Communicate back to clients what was learned from listening to them and specific ways that the organization has responded (or intends to respond) to the feedback.

STEP 5

MINIMUM VIABLE
Emerging Equity Practice
FEEDBACK LOOP

- [ ] Organization thanks clients for participating in the survey and shares findings opportunistically with most or all clients, including respondents, non-respondents, and new clients
- [ ] Communication includes both positive feedback and areas for improvement
- [ ] Communication is easy to understand and user-friendly

QUALITY
Advanced Equity Practice
FEEDBACK LOOP

+ INCORPORATES EMERGING PRACTICES **PLUS:**

- [ ] Organization shares survey findings with clients in ways that are accessible to all clients and that work for clients' varying contexts, (e.g., age, literacy level, preferred communication style/method, language spoken)

Communication includes:

- [ ] tangible changes that are being made to address clients' feedback
- [ ] findings that show inequities in experience

HIGH-QUALITY
Rooted Equity Practice
FEEDBACK LOOP

+ INCORPORATES EMERGING AND ADVANCED PRACTICES **PLUS:**

- [ ] Organization creates ongoing mechanisms for clients to have active voice in continuing to shape the organization's response to feedback (e.g., if clients disagree with the response, they have an opportunity to log their reactions)
- [ ] Leadership is visibly involved in closing the loop so that clients know senior leaders are involved and invested in the process (e.g., sending or signing the "closing the loop" materials themselves)
- [ ] Client advisory boards (or equivalent structures) are utilized to help close the loop, both by advising on how to close the loop and in assisting with the act of closing the loop

BUILDING AN ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT TO LISTENING THAT ADVANCES EQUITY

GOAL

—

Equitable feedback practices lay the groundwork for sustained shifts in how an organization listens to and shares decision-making power with its clients.

Achieving sustained changes in culture and norms requires the continual implementation of the practices shared throughout this guide. It also helps to institute formal structures, such as client advisory groups, which are integrated into organizational decision-making processes.

By developing participatory practices, while continuing to solicit ideas from an organization's larger client base through feedback, organizations create multilayered practices that advance equity. In this final section, we lay out protocols, norms, and practices that organizations can follow to advance their commitment to building an enduring, equity-centered participatory culture.

BUILDING AN ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT TO LISTENING

Emerging Listening Culture

- Feedback expertise is developing but resides with one person or within a single department, and/or there is no clearly documented process for transferring knowledge internally
- Feedback surveys are utilized ad hoc and episodically
- Clients are engaged as respondents but not as co-implementers of feedback practices
- Organization is still exploring opportunities for deeper listening engagements and collaboration with clients
- Leadership refers to client feedback data during key decision-making processes, or initiates client survey efforts to inform major decisions

Advanced Listening Culture

+ INCORPORATES EMERGING PRACTICES **PLUS:**

- Feedback protocols are well-documented and institutionalized. Feedback responsibilities are distributed across multiple staff who all have access to survey technology (e.g., SurveyMonkey)
- Organization allocates budget (including staff time) to feedback and client engagement efforts
- Leadership holds teams accountable for gathering and responding to clients' feedback (e.g., creating reporting mechanisms that track feedback work and monitor fidelity of practice)
- Client feedback is used routinely to inform program improvement and is gathered more than once per year (e.g., quarterly or semi-annually)
- Organization has former clients as full-time staff
- Leadership regularly asks for client input to inform organizational decisions outside of regular feedback cycles, engaging clients in ways that go beyond surveys (e.g., focus groups, short-term advisory panels, town halls)

Rooted Listening Culture

+ INCORPORATES EMERGING AND ADVANCED PRACTICES **PLUS:**

- Multiple team members share the knowledge and commitment to implement feedback, with feedback work written into the job descriptions of one or more staff members
- Organization has client engagement and feedback champions at senior leadership and/or Board of Directors levels
- Survey feedback is integrated with existing client performance management tool(s) to improve accessibility of data while still maintaining client anonymity
- Feedback is viewed with equal legitimacy to other outcome data, is collected on a regular schedule, and is triangulated regularly with other data to enrich overall impact measurement approach
- Leadership and program staff systematically engage clients to share their views when strategic planning, creating new programs, or measuring success of initiatives or programs
- Client advisory boards (or equivalent structures) are regularly consulted by organizational leadership to collaboratively make strategy decisions, help sense-make feedback results, and/or shape goals of organization
- Client advisory boards (or equivalent structures) are given formal and meaningful decision-making power and resource allocation responsibility
- Organization has multiple former clients on its Board of Directors

ABOUT LISTEN4GOOD

Listen4Good helps organizations build and sustain systems that gather direct high-quality feedback from the people and communities they serve.

Since 2016, we have provided over 675 organizations with capacity-building services and expert guidance on how to build equity-grounded feedback loops that improve program effectiveness, impact, and service delivery while facilitating sustained power shifts between clients and organizations.

675+	125+	190k+
ORGANIZATIONS SUPPORTED	FUNDING PARTNERS ENGAGED	INDIVIDUAL VOICES HEARD

Visit us at **www.listen4good.org**

Listen4Good is an initiative of Fund for Shared Insight, a national funder collaborative seeking to improve philanthropy by promoting high-quality listening and feedback in service of equity.

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