Provider Perceptions of Feedback Practices

in American Nonprofit Human Service Organizations

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by

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Nonprofit human service organizations operate in an in-between world that muddies their obligations to the various groups that have a stake in their work. They are neither government agencies nor profit maximizing businesses. They are privately constituted, yet they serve public purposes, often using government money. This in-between status creates significant practical challenges for which there are no broadly accepted solutions. One manifestation of this situation is that prevailing approaches to accountability are not responsive to the complex realities of nonprofit human services work.

The uncertainty about the obligation of nonprofit organizations to their constituents stands in marked contrast to the clarity about the relationships between governments and their constituents and for profit businesses and their customers. Government agencies are democratically created expressions of the public will and the work of public servants is defined by the relationship between citizens and elected officials (and their designees involved in administration). In simple terms, constituents are citizens whose will public servants carry out. If elected officials (or their designees) do not meet the expectations of their constituents, citizens can choose to elect other leaders. In a similar way, businesses engage in exchange transactions with customers. They create products and sell them to the public; business success is determined by profitability, which directly follows from customer choice. Success is embedded in the transactional relationship between producer and consumer. To use public sector language, customers are businesses primary constituents.

Nonprofit human service organizations have a more diverse set of constituents, including the people meant to benefit from their work and the funders (both private and public) who subsidize their activities. As a result, their leaders operate with conflicting assumptions about how they relate to their constituents. Some see themselves in ways that mirror democratic governance, pursuing activities in collaboration with communities; others view their work in terms of exchange transactions, emphasizing the importance of a satisfied customer; still others see themselves as agents of institutional funders or as intermediaries, negotiating between funders and communities. Regardless of how they define their constituents and their relationship to them, nearly all nonprofit leaders acknowledge the need to receive feedback and report to their constituents about their work. Indeed, few activities have generated more discussion among sector leaders in recent years.

Over the past fifteen years, leaders in nonprofit human services have increasingly emphasized the importance of systematic data collection about constituent experiences. The United Way of America's outcome measurement program, established in the mid 1990's, led the way in this effort, but there have been many others. Nonprofit professionals have embraced a wide variety of mechanisms to collect constituent feedback, including satisfaction surveys, pre and post-tests, focus groups, and numerous other formal and informal mechanisms. In addition, workers create case notes, reports and documents in which they characterize constituent experiences. One indicator of the increasing centrality of systematic data collection in nonprofit human service organizations is the standards of their accrediting bodies such as the Council on Accreditation and the Joint Commission. Many large, professionalized nonprofit human service organizations pursue these and other accreditations as a way of demonstrating the quality and credibility of their operations. The Council on Accreditation (COA) requires all accredited organizations to meet standards related to "performance and quality improvement" in six areas: infrastructure; collaborative development of measures and goals; effective plans for data collection and analysis; reporting and using findings for improved practice; and ongoing staff development (Council on Accreditation, 2008).

As the collection and analysis of data from or about primary constituents has become more central to the operation of nonprofit organizations, many leaders have created new functions, establishing positions or departments responsible for activities such as evaluation, quality and accreditation. In this paper, we refer to the kind of data organizations collect as feedback and define feedback as the range of information organizations receive about their performance from various constituents (such as service recipients, funders and community organizations). Feedback may be formal or informal. Formal feedback refers to systematic measures of program and organizational performance, such as outcome measurement, satisfaction surveys, client data collected for quality improvement processes, and funder-initiated client surveys. Informal feedback describes efforts that are less systematic but provide useful information to organizations about their performance, such as the stories or asides of service recipients that providers share for organizational learning.

Gathering and using feedback from constituents has become an expectation of professional human services management. As these developments have taken place, there has been little discussion regarding how human service providers perceive these efforts. The United Way of America has written about the success of outcome measurement (Julian, 2001; Plantz, Greenway & Hendrick, 1997; United Way of America, 2000) and there have been articles and reports about successful evaluations (Tierney & Crossman, 2000) and new measurement approaches (Brest, Harvey & Low, 2009; Center for Effective Philanthropy, 2008); however, we do not know how leaders of human service organizations perceive these initiatives (systematic and informal).[1] For example, what benefits and limitations do they see in current feedback

[1] We also have little information regarding how primary constituents (those who are the intended beneficiaries of human service programs) perceive feedback efforts. This information is equally critical in evaluating feedback efforts and an essential element in subsequent research, though not the focus of this paper.

practices and what opportunities are there to make improvements? These questions are the focus of this paper. Increased knowledge of their perceptions would broaden our understanding of the reach of feedback efforts and whether they perceive them as having the impact they intend. This research may point us in directions that can build on the valuable work of United Way and other who have focused on feedback and performance in recent years.

Literature Review

There are two ways to approach provider perceptions of constituent feedback efforts, an overview of the context within which human service organizations operate and a discussion of the disparate purposes for which feedback efforts have been developed. First, it is important to emphasize the essential role that third parties play in funding nonprofit human service organizations. This arrangement distinguishes the nonprofit sector from the public and for profit sectors. In the nonprofit sector, customers (or primary constituents) play a less central role in funding operations than they do in the for profit and public sectors. As a result nonprofit human service providers have many more direct stakeholders than for profit businesses. To understand constituent feedback in the nonprofit sector requires an understanding of those stakeholders and their expectations. Second, to assess provider perceptions of constituent feedback efforts requires an understanding of why stakeholders want feedback and whether the feedback they receive allows them to accomplish those purposes. Research suggests that funders, providers and beneficiaries pursue feedback for several different purposes. To understand provider perceptions of feedback efforts requires an analysis of these purposes and their relative importance to different stakeholder groups.

Stakeholders in Nonprofit Human Services

An analysis of major revenues sources for nonprofit human service organizations indicates what types of entities are key stakeholders for individual organizations. Institutional sources of financial support are likely to have an interest in constituent feedback, as are major individual donors. The Nonprofit Almanac (Wing, Pollack & Blackwood, 2008, p. 108) using figures taken from the 2005 information return 990, reports that nonprofit human service organizations have three primary revenue sources, fees for services and goods (53%), government grants (23%) and private contributions (16%). The "fees" number includes income generated from government programs such as Medicaid and Medicare; private contributions include support from institutional funders such as United Ways, foundations and corporations. These data are consistent with research that indicate nonprofit human service organizations operate in complex revenue environments and interact closely with all levels of government and a wide variety of institutional private funders (Froehlich, 1999; Gronbjerg, 1993; Smith, 2003; Smith & Lipsky, 1993).

Government funders, foundations and United Way as institutional funders have distinct interests and reporting requirements, often including feedback from their primary constituents. United Ways across the United States have embraced outcome measurement as a means of demonstrating accountability to their donors (Plantz, Greenway & Hendricks, 1997). Public and private funders each have their own reporting requirements, each with their own preference for some form of 'outcomes' and 'results-based' management. In addition, accrediting and regulatory bodies require organizations to report on their performance. State regulatory bodies may also require performance information. Receipt of Medicaid or Medicare reimbursement for services requires nonprofit human service organizations to have a state issued license, and licensure requires ongoing performance reporting. Individual human service organizations are likely to relate to multiple funding sources, each with its own reporting requirements.

Feedback Purposes

While feedback is an essential element in the relationship between nonprofit organizations and their stakeholders, writers rarely discuss it directly; rather, feedback is an essential but implicit means to an end. A six-element framework describes the themes that dominate research about the role feedback plays in the relationship between nonprofit organizations and their stakeholders: fund accountability, improvement, strategy development, capacity building, civic engagement, and societal education. While feedback is instrumental for all six elements, it plays a different role in each perspective. The fund accountability perspective emphasizes the relationship between organizations and their funders; the improvement perspective emphasizes an organization's internal operations; strategy development addresses the relationship between organizations (both providers and funders) and their external environment; capacity building considers the developmental impact of feedback on constituents and the organization; the civic engagement perspective focuses on the relationship between organizations and their primary constituents; and the societal education perspective emphasizes the relationship between the organization and the community at large. Table one summarizes the framework.

Fund Accountability

The fund accountability perspective emphasizes organizations' obligations, generally to the third parties who provide resources to them (government, private institutional funders, and individual donors). These resources are not given freely; they are intended to lead to a meaningful result defined by a contract, grant agreement or other statement developed by an organization on its own or in collaboration with a donor. Fund accountability is about verifying that recipient organizations used the resources they were given to do what they said they would do and/or accomplish what they said they would accomplish (Benjamin, 2008; Carson, 2000; Coastal Enterprises, 2008; Easterling; 2000; Fischer, 2001; Hoefer, 2000; Jordan, 2005; Oxfam, 2008). This tradition provides the rationale for the United Way and other funders' emphasis on outcome measurement, as a means of documenting what happened as a result of a funder's investment in an organization. Feedback from recipients of service is the primary source of information used to determine what happened in an activity or program paid for by the funder. While feedback comes from individual service recipients (or those otherwise directly engaged with the organization in its work), the fund accountability perspective emphasizes that third party funders are the primary audience for the feedback the audience collects.

Table 1: Feedback Purposes Framework

Feedback Perspective	Relationship of Interest	Role of Feedback
Fund Accountability	**Funder/Grantee**	**Verifies and Reports Accomplishments**
Improvement	**Provider/Internal Systems**	**Provides Data to Improve Operations**
Strategy Development	**Provider or Funder and External Environment**	**Provides Data to Improve Strategy**
Capacity Building	**Provider/Primary Constituent**	**Empowers Primary Constituents to Act**
Civic Engagement	**Provider/Primary Constituent**	**Facilitates Responsiveness to Primary Constituents**
Societal Learning	**Provider/Community**	**Communicates Learning to the Larger Community**

Improvement

The improvement perspective emphasizes that the primary value of feedback is to provide organization leaders with critical information for strengthening internal operations (Behn, 2003; Nicholson & Crotty, 2006), maximizing critical management values, such as efficiency, (Liner, Dusenberry & Vinson, 2000, Sawhill & Williamson, 2001), improving organizational learning (Chemlinsky, 2001; deLancer & Holzer, 2001; Minett, 1999; Moynihan, 2005; Oxfam, 2008; Sterman, 2006) and assessing the overall effectiveness and impact of an organization's work (Herman & Renz, 1997, 1999, 2002, 2004, 2008; Sowa et al., 2004; Thayer & Fine, 2001). Feedback from constituents provides organizations with information they can use to learn about and improve their performance and effectiveness. Writers who emphasize the importance of organizational learning identify feedback from primary constituents (service recipients) as the main source for that learning (Chemlinsky, 2001; deLancer & Holzer, 2001; Minett, 1999; Moynihan, 2005; Oxfam, 2008; Sterman, 2006). While primary and secondary constituents are likely to benefit from improved performance (and shape management values), the focus of data collection and analysis is strengthening internal operations.

Strategy Development

Feedback data can be used to adjust program strategy. It can inform not only how an organization works, but also what other program activities it chooses to pursue. This purpose highlights the different uses that providers and funders can make with the same feedback. Providers and funders can use the data to develop a better understanding of the external environment within which they operate which in turn informs both how they work and what they choose to do. Because providers and funders do different things, they may focus on different issues. A funder, for example, may explore feedback from service clients to identify weaknesses in its current portfolio of grants, understand how it could develop new programs of non-monetary support for its grantees, or even how to interpret and share learning across different parts of the grantmaker's organization (Alliance Online, 2007).   In the same way, governments use feedback from social service recipients as critical data to inform their understanding of social problems and their approach to addressing those problems, leading to new or modified service activities. In general, the more an organization considers the other actors in the ecosystem in which it operates, the more it uses constituency feedback to inform its strategy (Keystone, 2008).

Capacity Building

Capacity building suggests that the purpose of feedback is to create spaces for primary constituents to contribute to the empowerment of disenfranchised communities (Fetterman, 2006) by providing new means of access to decision-making, and contributing to healthy, competent and self-determined communities (Coombe, 2004). This perspective also emphasizes the empowerment of program participants as reflected by the power of the feedback they provide to the organization. Service recipients, who find that their feedback makes a difference, invest more time to it. At times, the process of engaging in feedback and other evaluative activities may directly advance the objectives of the intervention or organization. One famous example comes from the addiction treatment regime of Alcoholics Anonymous, "I have been sober for x number of days." This metric is embedded in the ordinary functioning of AA meetings, and is both a measure of progress that is closely monitored by the addict and the organization, and it is an affirmation of forward resolve.

Civic Engagement

In broad terms, civic engagement is about mobilizing citizens of a community to become involved in democratic governance so that their voices are part of decision-making processes. Applied to nonprofit organizations, civic engagement becomes constituency voice, ensuring that the primary constituents of an organization, those who benefit from its services, are powerful in organizations; in other words, it is about mobilizing citizens as an organization's constituents. From this perspective, the relationship between organizations and their primary constituents is essential, and the purpose of feedback is to engage with constituents in a way that "[puts] beneficiaries first" (Keystone, 2006, p. 1). This approach emphasizes transparency and responsiveness to service recipients; it uses feedback to address inherent imbalances in the relationship between organizations and their constituents (Bonbright, 2005; Kiryttopoulou, 2008). Feedback is a critical mechanism for ensuring equality between organizational and individual partners.

Two other dimensions are also important to this perspective. First, getting and using feedback legitimizes organizations with their primary constituents (Oxfam, 2008). In this context, the learning that comes from getting and analyzing feedback is defined in terms of its value to primary constituents and reflects their engagement with the organization. Second, public administration researchers suggest that offering citizens the opportunity to define what feedback is important and participate in evaluation efforts increases trust in public institutions (Yang & Holzer, 2006) This approach may be applicable to non-governmental organizations as well; it emphasizes that those most affected by the community problems organizations seek to address are most likely to know what works well and what does not (Kiryttopoulou, n.d.).

Societal Education

The feedback purposes discussed so far emphasize the relationships between distinct groups of stakeholders (human service providers, their primary constituents—service recipients—and funders, secondary constituents). The societal education perspective emphasizes that the work of human service organizations involves a fourth stakeholder: the communities within which that work takes place. Feedback plays an important role in determining what those involved in service delivery (providers and their constituents) have learned as a result of their work together. In this way, the final purpose of feedback is to share with the public the knowledge stakeholders create together. What they learn teaches community members about how to address complex social problems and contributes to changed attitudes, policy reform, and more rapid diffusion of improved practices (Bonbright, 2003; Wadell, 2005). This approach is reflected in the work of the organization Keystone Accountability, which asserts in its theory of change that "systematic and effective stakeholder dialogue that flows into public dialogue" is central to social change (Keystone Accountability, 2004).

The feedback purposes framework provides a way to analyze provider perceptions of feedback practices. In fact, this study uses the feedback purposes framework to guide an investigation into provider perceptions of feedback efforts. Viewed through the lens of nonprofit human services provision in the United States, the framework suggests certain obvious challenges. Given different feedback purposes among many stakeholders, it is difficult to determine how organizations accomplish multiple purposes. The central role that feedback plays in the accreditation standards of nonprofit human service organizations reflects the integration of feedback into the culture of nonprofit human service organizations. Despite that integration, multiple purposes present great potential for misalignment among stakeholders (funders, providers and primary constituents). The variety of funding sources among human service organizations raises questions regarding the capacity of those organizations to manage those requirements effectively.

Research Methods

The focus of this study is provider perceptions of feedback practices. To get at these issues we worked with two national membership organizations, the Alliance for Children and Families and United Neighborhood Centers of America because most of their members are large organizations (with annual budgets exceeding one million dollars) with significant infrastructure and they use a wide range of feedback practices. A 2001 internal analysis of the revenue profile of the Alliance for Children and Families was very similar to the 2005 profile of human services organizations across the United States referred to earlier. Finally, the Alliance for Children and Families is one of the founders of the Council of Accreditation and many Alliance members are accredited by the Council. As such, this population of organizations was likely to involve providers with significant experience with constituency feedback. Collectively, the two organizations include over 500 members.

Two sources of data were used to address the research questions, a membership survey and focus groups. The membership survey asked about current feedback activities, including sources of comparison for the data they collected. The focus groups, which took place after the initial survey data were collected, allowed deeper exploration of the perceived strengths and limitations of current feedback practices. The membership survey was organized into three parts, demographics, current practices and comparative activities. The demographic sections addressed respondent role, agency budget size, location and the agency's quality management function. The current practices section asked about what leaders seek to learn from feedback activities, the kinds of activities they currently undertake, how agencies report their results and attitudes about feedback. The focus in the comparative dimension portion of the survey was current sources of comparison and leaders' interest in comparative data.

The survey was distributed to executive directors in Alliance for Children and Families member agencies via e-mail and through direct outreach to leaders in that organization. Executive directors were invited to forward the survey to the person in the organization who was most familiar with its feedback activities (in most cases senior staff responsible for functional areas related to feedback). There were 75 survey respondents, roughly twenty percent of the Alliance. Respondents represented a cross section of member agencies and staff roles, including executive directors (51%), quality managers (26%) and senior program staff (23%). More than 50 percent of respondents came from organizations with annual budgets over $10,000,000; another thirty percent had budgets between two and a half and ten million dollars, and fifteen percent had annual budgets less than that amount. Respondents came from 26 states. The survey sample reflected the geographic diversity of the Alliance's membership; the annual budgets of survey participants skewed slightly higher than the organization's membership as a whole.

Focus Groups

The focus groups were designed to generate a more in-depth understanding of the perspectives of Alliance and UNCA members regarding feedback. While the survey explored the broad outlines of feedback practices in agencies, the focus groups emphasized critical issues that emerged as a result of the survey, including goals, use, interpretations and limitations of feedback data. There were six focus group sessions. Each focus group included between six and ten participants and lasted between ninety minutes and two hours. Five criteria were important in selecting focus groups. First, we sought diversity in organizational role; it was important to consider feedback not only from the perspective of executive directors, but also from senior program staff, and particularly, senior staff responsible for quality management or evaluation activities. Of the five provider oriented focus groups, two were largely executive directors, two involved other senior program staff and one was a mix of both. Second, we sought groups that had a history of collaboration and high levels of trust among members on the assumption that such groups were more likely to speak candidly about their experiences. Third, we wanted geographic diversity to reflect the variation in feedback practices across the United States; two took place in the Northeast, two in the Upper Midwest and two in the Southeast. Fourth, we sought representation from both Alliance and UNCA members. Finally, we conducted a focus group of public funders (who met the mutual trust and collaboration criteria) to learn about the issues providers raised from the funders' perspective. This session followed the five provider focus groups and drew on the results of those sessions.

This study is exploratory. Descriptive statistics were used to provide a broader understanding of the extent and nature of feedback practices. Focus group discussions were transcribed and analyzed using the qualitative data analysis software QSR NVivo (version 7). Data were sorted into text blocks to identify themes to generate a deeper understanding of agency leaders' goals in using feedback and how they interpret and use feedback data. Discussions of the purposes of feedback were compared to the feedback purposes framework described earlier.

Findings

The findings of this study are organized into two parts, first, a description of the feedback landscape, largely taken from survey results; second, a description of providers' perceptions of current feedback practices. The findings tell a clear story. They indicate that formal feedback is a core activity of the work of the respondent organizations, but that the feedback members receive is of inconsistent value. This inconsistency is attributed to disagreements between agencies and their funders (largely from government) about the purpose of feedback. Agency leaders perceive that they use their limited management capacity to meet funder expectations for feedback—expectations that they consider less valuable than other approaches, such as more in-depth engagement with primary constituents.

Feedback Practices

Survey respondents described feedback practices that indicated systematic data collection and analysis were a well established and integrated management function in Alliance member agencies. Several measurement activities were present in nearly all of the organizations represented in the survey, including outcome measurement (99%), satisfaction surveys (97%), program evaluation (88%), quality assurance (86%) and standards compliance (81%). Further, 58% of respondents noted that their organizations had evaluation departments or units.

While survey and focus group respondents raised concerns about current feedback practices, most expressed strong support for the systematic collection and analysis of feedback data from participants in their service activities. They indicated that feedback can provide useful information to organizations. For example, a large majority of survey participants (74%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "evaluation is an agency priority. Evaluation data are systematically analyzed to improve organizational performance."   In contrast, none of the survey respondents expressed agreement with the statement "Evaluation is funder driven and does not provide useful information for agency management."

Provider Perceptions of Feedback Practices

While organization leaders offered positive answers regarding their use of feedback practices and its value as a management function, their perception of current practices was less positive. Three issues were dominant in the analysis of surveys and focus groups. First, leaders perceive feedback practices as underdeveloped; that is, while they have great potential, current practices do not realize that potential. Second, as suggested by the feedback purposes framework, there is a disjunction between the purposes for which funders and agency leaders solicit feedback. Third, organizations have some capacity for systematic data collection and analysis, but it is limited; those limitations force leaders to choose among competing interests in determining the activities on which to allocate resources.

Perceived Value of Current Practices

Participants in this study expressed concern that the data they get and the tools they use to collect data are of inconsistent value. One indicator of the perceived value of feedback is the frequency with which feedback results in organizational change. The survey asked how frequently feedback leads to changes in respondents' organizations. Respondents split their answers between sometimes (40%) and often (54%); less than five percent indicated that feedback always results in organizational change. One can interpret these results as a glass half empty or half full; however, with forty percent of respondents expressing ambivalence about how feedback affects organizational performance, there are legitimate concerns that they do not perceive that the feedback they are receiving is as useful as it could be.

Focus group discussions generated several themes which may account for the perceived ambivalence about feedback practices, all of which emphasized concerns about the types of data that organizations collect. First, study participants indicated that quantitative methods organizations used to collect data (such as client surveys dictated by funders) are imprecise and do not provide useful information. Surveys tend to ask close-ended questions, using yes/no or Likert (five to seven point) scales. The most common objection was that agency leaders cannot interpret them effectively. For example, simple satisfaction questions may not provide sufficient variation or specificity to provide guidance to workers trying to understand how to improve their programs. Averaging five out of seven points on a satisfaction scale does not give a leader the information needed to make changes in an organization's activities. Notably, there is no context to understand what the score really means. For example, a fever thermometer would have little value as a measure of one's health if it were not known that 98.6 degree is "normal." This interpretation problem is normally corrected by comparative data, but no participants described using externally available comparative feedback. The only comparisons they used were internal and longitudinal, which provides a baseline but no meaningful standard.

Second, some focus group participants suggested that data collection methods are not sensitive to cultural differences and affect the reliability of responses to survey questions. The comment of one focus program participant was typical of this perspective:

> New immigrants may not be familiar with American evaluation and customer service paradigms. There may be problems in survey data collection because clients may not respond honestly to evaluation questions, based on their perception of evaluation expectations.

Third, participants indicated that they would value more qualitative data collection approaches, such as interviews and focus groups. These approaches were perceived as providing elaboration that moved beyond the limited information close-ended surveys provide. More in-depth conversations with primary constituents regarding their experiences would enable workers to develop a deeper understanding of what works and does not work for service recipients. Participants described using these approaches less frequently because they were high cost and not the preferred methods for funders.

Perceived Provider/Funder Disjunction

Lack of agreement between funders and leaders of provider agencies regarding the purposes for which feedback data were collected was a persistent theme across focus groups. This disjunction manifested itself in two ways, in the kinds of data that each wished to collect and in the relationship between funders and providers. Focus group participants indicated that funders, particularly those in the public sector, request feedback from primary constituents that providers do not consider valuable. Many of the feedback tools funders require providers to use emphasize compliance over outcomes. Compliance gets at outputs, such as the number of units of an activity an agency provided, and standards, whether the agency carried out its activities in the way the funder (or licensing body) required. While this information may be useful to funders—it verifies, and as such is an example of the fund accountability purpose—providers indicated that it was of little of value for them. For instance, focus group participants wanted to know whether their activities led to any meaningful change for those who participated and what worked or did not work for their primary constituents. Government funders' tools do not generate that information. One person argued "funders want numbers: output and availability. It's 'make work' and meaningless." Another echoed that concern

> All government sources want to do something, when it comes to measurement, but most data mean nothing. The bar is too low. Data are not meaningful. They are making compliance work. We report outcomes, but there is not a lot of learning. The data provide us little to deal with.

A third participant summed up this perspective arguing that government measurement efforts amounted to “hoop-jumping” and “paper-pushing.”

Other participants argued that the outcomes government funders seek are either the wrong outcomes or are not really outcomes. This concern reveals a deeper chasm between government funders and agencies. In each of the focus groups, participants noted that with some programs, what they were seeking to accomplish was not the same as what their funders were seeking to accomplish. As a result, agencies solicit feedback to measure outcomes that are not meaningful to them, and the data the outcome measurement tools generate is not useful. One focus group participant commented

> We follow funder prescriptions for collecting feedback, but they don’t measure the change that would make a difference. We’re measuring the wrong things. It’s a systemic problem. It’s a disconnect between organizations and funding systems.”

In one particularly telling example, an agency representative indicated that a program serving at risk youth measured changes in behavioral choices but not changes in the underlying condition contributing to those choices, in that program, the underlying conditions were immigration status. For the staff from that agency, data on challenges associated with immigration status would have been more useful than the data they collect about behavior change; however, funder requirements focus their feedback efforts on behavior.

The relationship between focus group participants and their funders—generally from the public sector—reflected disagreements about the purpose of feedback. They indicated that feedback tools are “cookie cutter” and that government funders are not attentive to the local context in deciding what measures are important. This issue was of particular concern with respect to the cultural differences among the primary constituents served by government funded programs. Providers noted that feedback tools that do not solicit information that is reflective of the shared cultural understanding of the agency worker and the primary constituent are not useful. In addition, in several focus groups participants indicated that government funders do not consistently share the results of feedback efforts with contracted agencies, or they share results so long after the data are collected that they are no longer meaningful. This perspective suggests that government funders view feedback data as valuable only to them, for fund accountability purposes, and not to agencies or service recipients. It re-enforces the idea that the goal of feedback is compliance with government mandates and not learning or performance improvement. Finally, throughout the focus groups, participants indicated that there was little partnership with funders. Their characterized their discussions with government funders as emphasizing the process of measurement, such as ensuring timely data collection, more than its content. Agency leaders perceive that government funders value receiving data more than analyzing and using it. They perceive that many government funders pursue measurement as an end in itself, as a means of demonstrating fund accountability. As a result, one executive noted that government funders do not work with contract agencies to pursue approaches to feedback that reflect providers’ goals such as organizational learning and civic engagement.

Capacity Limitations

As noted, there is considerable measurement activity in Alliance and United Neighborhood Center agencies; yet, many agency leaders indicated that they have too little capacity to accomplish what they wish to accomplish in their measurement efforts. For example, 70%

percent of survey respondents expressed agreement or strong agreement with the statement "evaluation is an agency priority but resource constraints limit our ability to use it as much as I would like." Focus group participants elaborated the capacity challenge in two ways. Some argued that they lacked the resources and infrastructure to carry out measurement activities effectively. They indicated that without capacity it is difficult, if not impossible, to make measurement activities, such as data analysis and review, a priority. Several expressed frustration that government funders who prioritize measurement do not provide resources to create capacity in funded agencies. This perspective was particularly common among representatives of agencies with smaller budgets.

A second group indicated they use the limited capacity they have to be responsive to the measurement demands government funders make. Those demands are a priority because government funding is a primary source of agency resources, and compliance with measurement demands is necessary for them to maintain good relations and secure contract renewals. The lack of capacity re-enforces the notion of agency frustration with the norms of measurement. All agencies have some capacity, but the representatives we spoke with were dissatisfied with the ways in which they used that capacity. As one executive put it, "we are not capable of measuring the right things." Investing limited evaluation capacity in measures that agency leaders found of questionable value frustrated them. They would have preferred to use their capacity in more meaningful ways and to accomplish different goals, for example in reflective practice, participatory evaluation or learning dialogues with their primary constituents about how to improve the services they provide.

Discussion

The results of this study have important implications for research and practice. For research, it suggests that one dimensional perspectives on feedback are incomplete. The multiplicity of feedback purposes and the interplay of stakeholder interests in the performance of nonprofit organizations demand further study. Further, this study suggests we know too little about stakeholders perceptions of current feedback practices. For practice, this work, while exploratory, identifies a challenge, provider concerns regarding current feedback practices, and provides preliminary guidance (based on those critiques) regarding how to respond to it. A more complete understanding of stakeholders' perceptions of current practices, however, would provide more satisfactory guidance.

The goals of this study were exploratory, to identify provider perceptions of current feedback practices. As such the study's findings provide a valuable foundation for future research. The findings suggest that despite the considerable utilization of systematic data collection and analysis among professional nonprofit human service providers, there is significant dissatisfaction about the state of practice. One way to understand that dissatisfaction is to acknowledge the multiplicity of stakeholders in the nonprofit sector and the wide range of purposes for which those stakeholders seek feedback about the experiences of service beneficiaries. This study indicates that providers perceive current practices are of inconsistent value and that their interests in collecting feedback are different from others, particularly public funders who drive discussions about feedback. They perceive that funders value fund accountability over other purposes, notably improvement, which providers value. In the same way, where there is agreement between funders and providers on purposes, such as improvement, there may be disagreements regarding what they want to know, as reflected by competing definitions of what outcomes are most important for programs. As such, this study suggests that feedback practices that focus exclusively on one purpose of feedback, such as improvement or fund accountability, are incomplete. In addition, definitions of the goals of feedback by a single stakeholder to the exclusion of others, is equally unhelpful. Such approaches privilege one feedback purpose and one interest over others.

To understand these issues better we need more data about stakeholder perceptions, specifically, from funders and clients. While the focus group data are particularly helpful in identifying the feedback purposes and interests that matter to providers, we would benefit from more systematic data collection among all stakeholders in nonprofit human services, to learn what purposes are most important for each stakeholder group in the collection and analysis of feedback data. In addition, we do not know enough about funder or client perceptions of current practices and whether or how those perceptions differ from providers. Greater knowledge of purposes and perceptions would provide a more complete foundation for developing approaches to feedback that all stakeholders experience as satisfying.

For practitioners, this study provides an opportunity to approach feedback differently. Provider dissatisfaction with feedback practices appears rooted in the inflexibility and asymmetrical nature of the current system. Agency leaders and funders might benefit from approaches to feedback that acknowledge the multiplicity of feedback purposes and stakeholders. For example, providers may consider convening key stakeholders in the provision of service (including public and private funders and clients) to discuss feedback purposes and measures that address those purposes. Agreement on purposes and measures of success may provide more useful information about organizational accountability, facilitate comparisons among organizations and contribute to improvements in service provision. This kind of collaboration, while complicated, has the potential to navigate more effectively among the many stakeholders involved in nonprofit human services.

Conclusion

While systematic data collection and analysis has proliferated in the nonprofit human services sector in recent years, there has been little discussion of providers' perceptions of these practices. This study investigated those perceptions It found that in one population of large, professionalized human service organizations feedback practices were widespread and well integrated. At the same time, providers expressed dissatisfaction with those practices. In particular, data gathered from feedback were found to be of inconsistent value and providers indicated that the purposes for which they sought feedback were not aligned with those of their funders. In addition, capacity limitations prevented many providers from pursuing feedback efforts that diverged from the interest of funders. This study is exploratory in nature and provides a foundation for future research about feedback practices. Such efforts should consider perceptions across provider groups, particularly regarding feedback purposes and the potential for collaboration across those groups.

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