



Learning Brief: What did we learn from the Power in Places advisory committee process?

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In June 2021, the Community Change staff and learning and evaluation consultants from Innovation Network and Grassroots Solutions began planning an advisory committee process to guide the learning and evaluation work for the Community Change Power in Places initiative. The purpose of the advisory committee was to ground the Power in Places learning and evaluation work in the experiences, wisdom, and needs of the organizations in the Power in Places cohort (PiP partners). Through the advisory committee process, we hoped to deepen understanding of base building and how to best shape the Power in Places (PiP) learning to meet the needs of the partner organizations.

The goals of the advisory committee were:

- To **explore and build shared understanding of base building concepts and practices**, grounded in the work and experiences of the PiP partners
- To **gather ideas for how we can maximize the benefits and minimize the burden** of learning and evaluation activities for the PiP partners.
- To **create a space and process that is co-creative, enriching, fun, and mutually beneficial** for everyone involved.

In this learning brief we document the advisory committee process and share reflections about the successes, challenges, and learnings about the process. This is an internal document for Community Change and the PiP learning and evaluation team to serve as a record of what we accomplished and what we learned about advisory committee processes.

What did the advisory committee process look like?

June 22	Call held with the extended PiP staff team to share the learning agenda and vision for the advisory committee process and begin getting input from the extended staff team on potential advisory committee members.
June 22- August 3	The Community Change PiP team developed criteria for selecting advisory committee members and identified an initial list of partners to recruit.
August 3	Call held with the extended PiP staff team to share the initial list of potential advisory committee members and get input and support for outreach.
August 3- September 7	Community Change staff conducted outreach to potential advisory committee members with a deadline of having a final list of members by Labor Day.
September 7	Community Change staff shared the final list of advisory committee members with the learning and evaluation team.
September 15	The learning and evaluation team sent the scheduling email out to advisory committee members for first call.
September 20	First meeting scheduled for October 8 th .
October 8	First advisory committee meeting held focused on relationship building, level-setting about PiP and the learning project, and discussing what base building means.
October 27	Second advisory committee meeting focused on defining base building success and discussing “bread and butter” base building practices.
November 12	Third advisory committee meeting focused on gathering input and ideas for three learning activities: survey, deep dives, and organizer co-op.

Who participated in the advisory committee process?

Two Community Change staff members with relationships with the organizing groups, four members of the external learning and evaluation team, and six representatives from Power in Places organizations.

What were the greatest successes of the Power in Places advisory committee process? What facilitated those successes?

Honest, open, and vulnerable conversation.	The discussions during the advisory committee calls were honest and open with advisory committee members providing critical feedback about the learning activities and speaking openly about their challenges. Advisory committee members appreciated that there was no “chest thumping” and that the discussion was not “performative.”	<u>What facilitated this:</u> At the beginning of the first call, we explicitly encouraged honesty. We modelled that by demonstrating vulnerability and openness to being challenged. In doing this, we cultivated a space that allowed organizations to share the complexities of their work without being performative.
Increased clarity on the purpose and focus of the survey, deep dives, and organizer co-op.	In the final call, we got helpful, concrete feedback about the learning activities, including how the activities will be useful (or not) for partners, the topics they are most interested in, and how we can make the learning activities more accessible and less extractive.	<u>What facilitated this:</u> We laid the groundwork for this by spending the first two calls building relationships and creating space for open dialogue. At the outset of the third call, we explicitly requested “brutally honest” feedback.
Adaptable and flexible advisory committee design and facilitation.	We went into the advisory committee process with ideas for the topics and questions we wanted to explore, but we remained flexible and allowed conversations to emerge, instead of trying to steer conversations in	<u>What facilitated this:</u> A willingness on the part of all parties – the learning and evaluation team, Community Change, and the partners – to be emergent, flexible, and ok

specific directions. As a result, the conversations in the first two calls were exploratory. We began each call with one or two framing questions and a loose structure, but we allowed the participants to pose their own questions to each other and steer the conversation in different directions. As a result, we heard interesting questions and insights from the partners about the nuances of base building practice that we wouldn't have thought to ask about ourselves.

with some ambiguity in the implementation and outcomes of the process. We are fortunate that we do not have a funder/evaluation commissioner who has rigid expectations about what evaluation processes will produce.

Creating space for organizers to connect with each other and for us to connect with them.

At the end of the third call, the advisory committee members expressed appreciation for the chance to connect with each other. We built a rapport with the advisory committee members, and as a result, they entrusted us with their experiences and knowledge.

What facilitated this: We dedicated time in the first and second calls for building personal connections and getting to know one another.

Shared ownership of the advisory committee process between the IN-GRS evaluation team and Community Change.

The collaboration and partnership between the evaluation team and the PiP team was a critical success of the process. PiP staff provided knowledge and experience as organizers to surface nuances in the conversations and help create a process that would resonate with partners, while the evaluation team provided a framework and facilitation for the process. We needed both of our teams to facilitate a successful advisory committee process.

What facilitated this: The evaluation team and PiP team have been working together for over three years, we have a deep understanding of each other's experience and expertise, and we've had shared ownership over the learning project from the beginning. There was always the expectation that this was a collaboration and partnership.

Valuing the time, experience, and wisdom of the advisory committee members.

We provided each advisory committee member with \$3,000 compensation, paid to their organization, for sharing their time, wisdom, and experiences. In doing this we are disrupting common evaluation practices that don't value the time and engagement of the people who are the "subjects" of evaluation. By providing compensation, we are demonstrating how valuable their time and engagement is in the advisory committee process.

What facilitated this: The evaluation work has flexible funding which allows us to use resources as we deem necessary. We have an evaluation team that sees this not as a "nice to have" if resources allow, but necessary to appropriately value the time and contributions of participants. To set the rate, we communicated with the Institute for Community Health about their experience facilitating a similar advisory committee for their project with Community Catalyst (which Community Change is on the steering committee of). They shared their compensation rate, which we then matched.

What were the greatest challenges or shortcomings of the advisory committee process?

Getting full attendance in the advisory committee calls.

In no session, did we have all six advisory committee members present for the full call. During the first call, five members were there. All six members were in the second call, but one had to leave halfway through. During the third call, four members were there. We realized that six would have really been the ideal number to keep conversation engaging and to get more perspectives on the discussion topics.

Underestimating the time needed to identify and recruit advisory committee members.

We initially thought that identifying advisory committee members would only take a few weeks, but it took about two and a half months. This meant that once we did start the calls, we had a shorter window of time to do them than we expected as we were trying to complete them before the Thanksgiving holiday. In particular, the evaluation team wishes we had another week between second and third calls to create the agenda and content for the third call.

Balancing gathering information that we need for the learning and evaluation project while also creating space for conversation that interests the advisory committee members.

After the second call, we realized that there was a mismatch between the questions we posed (questions about concepts and definitions) and the questions that most interested the advisory committee members (questions about strategy and tactics). We had to balance gathering information about the broader conceptual questions while also leaving space for the advisory committee members to ask questions and engage on topics of interest to them. As a result, we didn't gather all the info we initially wanted to gather.

Not enough time to gather concrete feedback and guidance on learning activities.

While we have more clarity about the interests and needs of the advisory committee members, we wish we had more time in the third call to gather more concrete ideas about the deep dives and organizer co-op.

If we were to do this again, what would we do differently?

- **Convene the advisory committee in-person** over course of one day (pandemic allowing). Invite people to a meal together the day before without an agenda to get to know one another and facilitate dialogue and fellowship. Spend the next day workshopping the content.
- **Provide media like readings, podcasts, or videos** for advisory committee members to engage with before or between calls that they can then make sense of together and that can help contextualize the calls.
- **Hold one-to-one calls** between the lead facilitator(s) and each participant before the first call to set expectations and build rapport. We think doing this could also help boost participation.
- **Don't schedule advisory committee meetings on Friday afternoons.** Energy and participation are low on Friday afternoons.
- **Streamline the selection process and refine the criteria for advisory committee participants.** The selection process for this advisory committee took longer than anticipated and relied on the participation of many different staff at Community Change. If we were to do this again, we would want to create a process for identifying and recruiting advisory committee members that is more streamlined and doesn't involve so many people. We also want to create more specific criteria and guidelines to help partner organizations choose which staff to participate in the advisory committee.
- **Experiment with giving gifts cards or stipends to individual members** of the advisory committee rather than a stipend to their organizations.
- **Allow more time (about three weeks) between advisory committee meetings to create agendas and produce materials.** Because we were trying to be flexible in the advisory committee content and design, we waited until after calls were held before planning the next. Our experience was that two weeks was short for collaboratively planning the agenda and producing materials for the following meeting.
- **Expand the number of advisory committee members from six to seven or eight** to provide some buffer when advisory committee members are unable to attend.

What did we learn about what it takes to have a successful advisory committee process?

- **When planning the advisory committee process, be explicit about:**
 - **The purpose and motivations for the advisory.** Why is an advisory committee being convened? What purpose will the advisory committee serve? Share the purpose and motivations for the process from the outset and be open to accountability.
 - **How much power you are willing to cede or share over the evaluation.** How will the discussion and input from the advisory committee members be integrated into the evaluation plans? Who holds the power to decide what information and feedback is valid and valuable? The extent to which you are willing to share or cede power will influence the shape the advisory committee process (or whether you should have it at all).
 - **The rational and experiential goals for the advisory committee.** Decide not only what you concretely want to accomplish (the rational goals), but also what experience you want people to have (the experiential goals). These goals will help guide the content and facilitation of the advisory committee.
- **Be radically transparent** and share all of the above with the advisory committee members.
- **Compensate people for their time.** If you are convening an advisory committee, it is likely because you need additional perspectives, voices, and insights that your team lacks. Compensate people appropriately for the value they are adding to your project.
- **Set and model the tone and engagement you want to see.** Model and embody the behavior you want to see from the advisory committee members. If you want honest and vulnerable conversation, you have to embody and model it.
- **Be flexible and open to conversations being emergent.** Set some guardrails for the conversation but don't be too directive about content. Facilitation should be loose. Don't be tied to a particular set of outcomes.