TAMARACK INSTITUTE

TOOL | PEER INPUT PROCESS

TIME REQUIRED: 30-90 MINUTES

The Peer Input Process is a relatively quick and structured way to get input and insight from peers into a current challenge in your community change effort. It taps into the collective wisdom of peers in order to gain rapid feedback and new perspectives on a current challenge you are grappling with.

USING THIS TOOL WILL HELP YOU:

- Invite in new perspectives and insights to address a current problem
- Leverage the wisdom of peers to illuminate new opportunities & strategies as well as surface assumptions
- Collectively identify common patterns and themes in the work of community change

OVERVIEW

The Peer Input Process can be helpful in many situations. For a group who is about to launch an innovative initiative together, it can help to surface and test assumptions in order to build shared understanding. For an individual or group struggling with a specific challenge in advancing their work, the Peer Input Process can generate fresh perspectives and illuminate new ideas for action. And, for a group of peers engaged in similar work, hearing about and learning from each other may help to surface common patterns and themes in their work that can be addressed together.

PEER INPUT PROCESS: THE HOW-TO:

1. **Introduction** - The facilitator introduces the steps of the Peer Input Process and the person seeking peer input (5 minutes)
2. **Unpacking** – The individual/team seeking input shares key elements of their project to provide context (e.g. purpose/common agenda; key players; key strategies; and the key events and achievements to date). Use the last minute of time to pose the question you are seeking input about. (10-20 minutes)

3. **Peer Questions** – Peers now have an opportunity to ask the presenters some clarifying questions to gain a better understanding of the project and the challenge. Next, the peers are given time to ask deeper, probing questions (often starting with Why? Or How?) (5-15 minutes)
4. **Peer Group Discussion** – The Peers now talk to each other about the presenters' question. The presenter cannot speak during this discussion – their role is simply to "listen in" on the conversation about their work and their issue. (5-15 minutes)
5. **Presenter/Team Reflections** – The person or group seeking input reflects on what they may or may not have learned from the peer discussion and shares how they now plan to proceed in addressing their question based on the group's input. (5-10 minutes)
6. **Process Reflection** – The facilitator invites all participants to reflect on the process; identify commonalities; and pose new questions(5 minutes)

PRINCIPLES FOR USING THIS TOOL

- **Craft a Good Question** – The question that captures the struggle or issue you are wanting peer input on is important to the success of the Peer Input Process. Great questions are "open-ended" and generate discussion. Avoid questions that can be answered with a yes or no.
- **Provide Good Context** – To encourage helpful advice from peers, presenters should give a good, high-level overview of your project before posing your question. Specifically, your overview should include: its purpose, core strategies, key strategies & achievements and priorities for the coming year.
- **Respond Honestly to Peer Questions** – Presenters are encouraged to be completely honest in responding to the questions posed by peers. If you cannot answer any posed question, please say so.
- **Note Key Ideas from Peers** – Presenters should jot down key thoughts and ideas that are generated as you are listening so it's easier to share your reflections.
- **Tips for Sharing Reflections** – When presenters share their feedback with peers it is useful to emphasize comments that:
  - Made you think about your issue differently
  - Confirmed some of your own instincts
  - Gave you possible new ideas for moving forward

Sample Peer Input Process Question

Our collaboration is new and several funders are reluctant to fund our work because we do not have a "track record".

How can we encourage them to invest in us?

"While the thought of being questioned by one's peers can be anxiety provoking, many social innovators find the experience to be very beneficial."

- Calgary Network for Collaborative Social Innovation

THE TOOL IN PRACTICE

Depending on the overall size of the group and/or the amount of time available, there are different design options that you can use. Some examples include:

- **Peer Triads** – If time allows, you can ask the entire group (regardless of total number of participants) to divide into groups of 3. Then, you can host 3 separate rounds with each person in the group having an opportunity to bring forward an issue for peer input.
- **Small Groups** – With larger groups and/or limited time, participants can be divided into small groups of 6-8. Within each group, an interested volunteer could be invited to share their issue and/or problem. If there is time for a second round, another group volunteer could then also bring forward their issue or question.

DIVING DEEPER

- Supporting Pioneering Leaders as Communities of Practice – This paper, by Margaret Wheatley, explains the importance of supporting leaders whose work involves pioneering new paradigms and innovative approaches. Specifically, she writes that, “peers supported to learn together create a rich marketplace where knowledge and experience are shared. It also becomes an incubator where new knowledge, skills, and competencies develop.”

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