

99

CONSULTING

Good thinking

Service User Feedback

What service users know that you need to know too

Many businesses, services and organisations have a corporate vision and values based on achieving something that their constituents or funders want or need.

Well-managed entities routinely review how well they are delivering for their constituents. A deeper enquiry is to also examine whether the stated values of the organisation are actually being expressed through the services offered and experienced by constituents.

Increasingly the human services and community sector are obliged to review their performance for quality system or accreditation requirements.

For some businesses, it's very easy to gauge how well they deliver because their products sell – people queue overnight to buy their concert tickets for example. For others feedback is much less direct for various reasons, such as:

- they are in a not-for-profit environment where there may not be competitors
- there is little benchmarked data available to compare performance
- there is no tradition of asking constituents for opinions
- it is assumed the service provider is doing the right thing.

Challenges

In some environments, obtaining service user feedback is challenging because the process is not straight forward, for example when:

- constituents are illiterate, don't speak English, are non-verbal or intellectually impaired
- constituents have limited experience of alternative services and therefore expect only what they've already encountered
- constituents are hard to reach, such as homeless people on the move or older people who are socially isolated, or people not currently using a service
- constituents are hard to engage – they may be time poor, uninterested, feel threatened by being questioned or be ignorant of the goals of the organisation
- the basis of service provision is relational – feelings of trust and respect are needed before service provision is effective so imposing a client feedback regime onto these relationships may bring fears that trust will be eroded by such institutional arrangements
- constituents who depend on a service from an organisation may fear they will be "punished" for giving negative feedback.

Things to consider

Designing an effective way to get feedback may also have challenges such as:

- making sure the questions or interactions produce responses that will be illuminating
- finding ways to engage constituents that will be effective. For example, some people won't open up if confronted with a clipboard and tick and flick questionnaire
- analysing and communicating the results so that the findings can be substantiated and are useful to the organisation's planning or review processes
- keeping logistics manageable and cost effective
- allowing for qualitative feedback so you understand why people have rated your service the way they do – this means some open ended questions as well as those with yes/ no or numerical scale answers.

Tips from 99 Consulting

Based on some of 99 Consulting's work with our clients in this area, our tips are:

It's worth doing

- the history of service provision is littered with examples where assumptions about the quality of services led to serious problems or injustices
- it's a great opportunity to test whether new approaches or initiatives are making a difference
- even negative feedback is useful – as long as you are prepared to do something to address it
- think about whether you can repeat your research periodically to analyse improvement – for example QCOSS surveys members and stakeholders each year.

It's worth doing well

- if you want or need to do it, then don't just go through the motions - make it a valuable exercise that is useful to your organisation's decision makers
- have a clear plan - think about what information you need, how you will gather it through the year and how you will use it, to help you design the processes and questions
- test your approach to see if it works before investing time or money in rolling it out
- consider whether gathering feedback is best done by a third party who can preserve anonymity for those giving their views
- think through the logistics of analysing and reporting your findings – it's easy to send out a survey but harder to analyse it and render the information useful
- some feedback can be gathered routinely at low cost, which means not having to set aside a big chunk of time later on
- think about partnering with some like organisations so you can get some economies of scale and possibly some comparisons for your findings
- think about how you can "feed back the feedback" – how could you let your stakeholders know you have heard what they said and are doing something about it?

Getting help

If you are just getting started on this part of your work, here are a few resources available.

For a resource kit that goes beyond service user feedback to their participation in decision making check out the Consumer Participation Resource Kit for housing and homelessness assistance services - A partnership project of HomeGround Services and Rural Housing Network Ltd supported by Council to Homeless Persons http://www.chp.org.au/public_library/cpkit/
99 Consulting has helped organisations like QCOSS, Brisbane Housing Company and Queensland Centre for Intellectual and Developmental Disability with obtaining feedback from users and stakeholders. Talk to us about how we can help you.