



# Meaningful Engagement Barriers and Opportunities

Part of The Meaningful Engagement Toolbox by Collective Threads Initiative

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## Barriers and Opportunities

*My dream movement would navigate conflict with accountability, striving for solidarity rather than superficial unity (like a healthy family would).*

*- Collective Threads Initiative Co-Creation Partners*

Well-intentioned organisations seeking to successfully move towards higher levels of meaningful engagement of [people with lived experience](#) may encounter barriers. Barriers may come from a place of fear and require letting go of perfectionism and committing to repair. They may come from an unwillingness to let go of power, ego, or fragility. They require that staff, leadership, board, and funders learn to decentre themselves and show up with personal and professional humility. They may involve a perception of scarcity (of [impacted people](#) with skills to engage in leadership or of funders willing to support a transformative vision), requiring creativity around development and networking. Following are some common barriers to increasing your overall levels of engagement and some opportunities to intentionally address those barriers. With creativity, we can anticipate, reduce, and overcome these barriers.



**Barrier:** People with lived experience may not know if they could do the job.

*People with lived experience may worry that they need every single skill and experience listed on the job posting. Or they may be afraid of failure if they do get hired.*

### Related opportunities

#### **Job descriptions**

- Ensure that the job description is written in accessible language, and in the appropriate language for the population you are hiring from. Include clear, plain language specifics of what the job actually entails.
  - Consider including a “learn more about this job” link in the job description that leads to a page that offers an idea of the kinds of day-to-day tasks that are part of the job and the kinds of support, professional development, and mentoring that are part of your traditional onboarding processes.
- Consider including this or similar language in job descriptions: “Don’t meet every single qualification? Studies have shown that women and people of colour (and often people with lived experience of our issue) are less likely to apply to jobs unless they meet every single qualification. At (our organisation) we are dedicated to building a diverse, inclusive, and authentic workplace – so if you’re excited about this role but your past experience doesn’t align perfectly with every qualification in the job description, we encourage you to go ahead and apply. You may be just the right candidate for this or other roles.”
- Consider linking in the job description or “learn more” page to associated professional development opportunities for the skills listed. This may help applicants get context for some of the skills that may help them recognise how their prior work utilised similar skills. It also might help them begin planning for future job applications in their field of choice by using vetted sources from trusted organisations.

### Information sessions

- Consider hosting an information session or providing an FAQ on how to apply, what you are looking for, and what the hiring process will entail.

### Hiring process

- Include and evaluate work experience (including [grassroots](#) and [informal](#) work) as well as training and mentoring experience in place of formal educational experience.
- Offer compensation for any work that is required as part of the interview process and ensure that applicants maintain ownership of work products, trainings, or workplans developed as part of the hiring.
- In rejection letters, consider including an opportunity to meet and go through the scoring process and why they were not selected and respond with compassionate transparency and [resources](#).

### For new hires

- Provide mentorships and ensure that your staff is diverse and inclusive.



### Barrier: People with lived experience may worry they will not be hired or assessed fairly

*Even when [people with lived experience](#) feel confident that they can do the job, they may worry that they will not be hired or assessed fairly due to bias. They may worry that their qualifications will not be considered official enough, or that their practical, on-the-job experience or learning will not be assessed fairly. They may worry that they will not be able to perform well during cumbersome or frightening interview processes.*

## Related opportunities

### Job descriptions

- State in the job description that lived experience doesn't mean your story is what the hiring organisation is looking for. Consider: "While we prioritise hiring applicants with lived experience, you will be assessed based on your skills and wisdom (gained through formal and informal channels), your story by itself is not what we are hiring you for, and you will not be expected to share details of your trauma in the workplace."
- When listing required skills, consider including examples that may come from volunteer or community-based projects. For example: "Experience managing workplace or community projects, such as an outreach project, awareness campaign, or community social event."

### Information sessions

- If you offer an applicant information session, include information about how applicants and interviews are assessed, and how you intentionally strive to use inclusive criteria that is broader than that of a traditional workplace.

### Hiring process

- Let applicants know in advance if there is something on their resume that you might want clarification on during the interview.
- Consider providing applicants with an agenda for their interview in advance with tips for interviewing well.
- Ensure that any technical assessments (having the applicant prepare a document or presentation, for example) are the last step in the hiring process rather than the first. If you use technical assessments as part of your hiring process, consider compensating applicants for their time, giving them ample time to complete it, and ensuring that they still have rights to use work created after the hiring process (regardless of whether or not they were hired).



## Barrier: Concerns about belonging and organisational culture

*People with lived experience may worry that they will feel or be treated like an outsider, or not really integrated into an [organisation](#) that is not otherwise very diverse. They may fear that they'll be tokenised or not have the support of the staff who do not have lived experience. Organisations may fear failure: "What if we mess up with the [impacted people](#) we do hire, and they leave traumatised or angry?" While many organisations have done work to address these concerns by implementing [trauma-informed](#) workplace practices, many of these practices do not account for cultural, historical, collective, and intergenerational trauma.*

### Related opportunities

#### Pre-hire and public communications

- Ensure that your public resources (website, communications, social media) highlight the ways in which you are doing internal work to prepare for increasing meaningful engagement of people with lived experience. Highlight the work you are doing on diversity, [equity](#), [inclusion](#), [belonging](#), and justice, becoming a [trauma-informed organisation](#), and building out trauma-informed supervision and mentoring practices.

#### Internships and learning placements

- Consider opportunities for paid internships that rotate through different departments to explore different kinds of work opportunities within your organisation while learning new skills.

#### Hiring process

- Incorporate coaching as a regular part of hiring and interview processes, particularly on questions applicants may not already be thinking of asking about workplace culture and dynamics.
- Be cautious of the ways gatekeeping, unnecessary barriers, and bias are often framed as "not being a good fit" in hiring decisions. Instead of asking the applicant and hiring team about whether someone is a good *fit*, ask what would be the cultural *add* of hiring diverse populations.

- Consider asking applicants to share what things about other places they've worked made it a good fit for them.

#### For new hires

- Ensure that all staff onboarding includes education and mentoring about what a lived experience-centric workplace involves and how to be a good colleague to (other) people with lived experience.
- Be more proactive during onboarding about getting feedback on what that the process might look like, collaborating with new hires to develop a customised, lived experience-centric onboarding.
- Set up opportunities to learn from new and continuing staff about what is important to them in a workplace so that you can model care.



### Barrier: Cultural differences, colonialism, nonprofit and funding power dynamics

*Often, nonprofits may work in populations where there are inherent cultural differences or power dynamics. Many nonprofits were started by (and continue to give decision-making [power](#) to) people who do not have lived experience of the challenges these nonprofits address, or who do not come from the same regions or communities where they do the bulk of their work. This can lead to a lack of organisational inclusion of people who know the problems and are close to the solutions, or a lack of awareness of variance in how different regions frame trauma and support [healing](#). Even within regions, power dynamics from oppressive systems can lead to paternalism. When you take the history of Western colonial interventions into account, the power dynamics and potential for paternalism significantly increase.*

***Remember: These power dynamics that treat one set of cultural norms as “right” and other cultural norms as “wrong” can show up in interactions between Western agencies and other regions, as well as interactions between people, populations, or communities within one region.***

**What do we mean by “Western colonial interventions”? What does colonialism have to do with our efforts to address global violence?** [Colonialism](#) is the “domination of a people or area by a foreign state or nation [in order to extend and maintain] a nation's political and economic control over another people or area.”<sup>1</sup> It relies on “the subjugation of one people to another,” which means forcing one group of people to submit to the control of another group of people.<sup>2</sup> Many problems in areas that have experienced colonisation (such as poverty, famine, or violence) are not inherent to those regions, but were created by and are the lasting impacts of Western [colonial](#) violence. For this reason, we should be conscious that our approaches to addressing poverty, violence, and [exploitation](#) do not exacerbate or replicate colonial patterns of power and control.

Examples of this might include:

- Strategies that require people to reframe their experiences in line with an external narrative in order to receive support.
- Approaches that reduce violence to “red flags” without looking at the social and economic context in which violence happens or building relationships with those seeking help.
- Models that require strict divisions between helper and beneficiary in communities that are reciprocal.

*In order to meaningfully engage lived experience leadership, we must be aware of and take steps to mitigate or strategically leverage power dynamics to uplift the needs and leadership of those closest to the issue. While some of the opportunities in this section directly address how we engage with impacted people as leaders, most address rethinking the assumptions that are the foundation for our work.*

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/colonialism>

<sup>2</sup> <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/colonialism/>



**Why is it important to rethink our assumptions about how exploitation and abuse happen and what [healing](#) means?** We create prevention programming, policy recommendations, and interventions based on our assumptions about how [exploitation](#) and abuse happen and what people with lived experience need. When we hire people with lived experience to work with us, they may notice the ways in which our assumptions do not reflect the fullness of how violence happens or what impacted individuals need. Often, we lack the cultural humility to recognise how our assumptions are subjective and reflect our culture and identities. For example, we may see an intervention as standard practice without recognising the ways that intervention was normed and tested on only one population. While staff with lived experience can educate us, they may feel as if they regularly get pushback, which is exhausting and can lead to burnout. We can alleviate this burden by doing our work in advance to learn about and mitigate these power dynamics.

## Related opportunities

### Internal organisational priorities

- Meaningful work requires meaningful relationship-building. Prioritise intentional people-first relationship-building. Your leadership, staff, funders, board members, stakeholders, partners, and participants are all people with hopes, dreams, and values.
- Prioritise getting feedback from the local regions and populations you're working with in the development of your internal processes to ensure you have their [buy-in](#) and support and that the way you do your work reflects an understanding of their needs.
- Have diverse board members and work on creating a safer, braver space so that their participation can be equitable and meaningful, which might require mentoring board members on power dynamics, privilege, and positionality.
- Local [grassroots](#) organisers, staff with lived experience, and recipients of your work often feel like they are “on display” for staff, board, or funders. Shift towards meaningful relationship-building by developing mutually beneficial relationships. For example: If your board or staff from other programmes want to get to know the recipients and see the work in action, rather than inviting them for a walkthrough or to just “come and observe,” find out how they can engage in some of the programme's work. If a board member has skills in public speaking, consider having them engage folks who do public speaking to provide tips on dealing with nerves. If your human resources staff wants to meet the impacted individuals contracting with you, see if they can spend time helping some of those contractors develop their resumes and learn how to interview well. Find ways to engage that benefit the impacted individuals without putting them on display.

- When offering people with lived experience opportunities to provide feedback, remember that people may be more engaged in some spaces than in others. Consider offering multiple ways to provide feedback (meetings, surveys, document review) that ensure people have ways to participate that work well with their communication style and comfort level.
- Develop and implement participatory design processes to hear what implementers hope to do and how, and then work with them to co-create and refine programmes together.
- Maintain humility around Western frameworks for nonprofit organisational operations and global development best practices.

### Partnerships

- Conduct stakeholder mapping for your organisation to identify who is doing the work on the ground in areas you hope to support.
- Build relationships with people doing [grassroots](#) work in the region or the population you plan to work with. Assist them with conducting stakeholder mapping so that they can build existing partnerships and shared power with other grassroots groups on the ground to align strategies and share [resources](#).
- Any organisations that will be funding projects in specific regions or populations should conduct a “scoping process” during which they can conduct meetings to hear from folks doing the work on the ground about needs and service gaps *before* launching funding solicitations for research projects or grant programmes. Working with local research and programmatic partners can support this.
- Remain mindful of sustainability. Many communities or populations have been harmed by outside organisations coming in to do work during a grant project, setting up systems and resources that individuals come to rely on, and then leaving when the funding or grant period ends, with no plans for sustainability. Partnerships with local grassroots organisers can ensure continuity; ensure that building grassroots organisers’ capacity to continue or expand their work is a priority of any programme you carry out in populations your organisation does not belong to.

### Programmatic concerns

- Maintain humility around Western frameworks for healing, mental health, trauma, poverty, and root causes.
- Remember that the communities you are working with may process grief or experience trauma differently. While trauma creates a physiological response when an experience is deeply distressing, some communities may find certain things to be deeply distressing that others do not, and vice versa. Let go of your assumptions about how people process and heal from trauma. Remember that using different approaches doesn’t mean someone is “doing it wrong.”

- Be conscious of some of the harmful history of the West exporting mental health categories and treatment practices that do not reflect or incorporate different cultural perspectives. See: [Crazy Like Us: The Globalization of the American Psyche](#)
- Similarly, do not assume that the communities you are working in use the same definitions and frameworks for understanding “survivorship” or “lived experience.” See [Engagement of lived experience in international policy and programming](#) for specific guidance.



## Barrier: Funding norms and donor positionality and expectations

*Funding for non-governmental [human rights](#), social service, and community development work relies on funding from donor organisations. The distance between funders (including donors as well as fund/grant managers) and impacted people is often a barrier to increasing meaningful engagement. The closer one is to impacted people and targeted problems, the more insight one has into the effectiveness of solutions. Funders may prioritise programmes based on their own assessments of importance and urgency, rather than long-term impact. Additionally, assessments of importance often don't consider cultural differences in priorities and needs, and outside assessments of urgency often lead to short-sighted solutions that do not address root causes. These challenges mean that organisations often struggle with a lack of dedicated resources for the visions they're trying to implement. Funders may want to support actions that create quick results that can be reported (“low-hanging fruit”) or may not understand the need to support ongoing relationship-building. Organisations may feel pressured to justify the need for infrastructure expenses (staff salaries and benefits, for example). An emphasis on numbers served may mean minimally-impactful interventions are prioritised over the higher quality engagement of fewer people.*

## Related opportunities

### Donor selection

- Identify and build relationships with donors who align with your organisation's approach to funding norms and engagement of people with lived experience.
- Learn and understand where donors are coming from in terms of their political guidelines and funding limitations – and cater your pitch to their needs.

### Donor engagement

- Showcase some of the work you hope to do in the future, and how you are using in-person, on-the-ground engagement in those regions or communities to build relationships and co-create relevant strategies.
- Ensure that donors have opportunities to talk to programme staff along all levels of the organisational hierarchy to understand both the broader vision and the day-to-day work.
- Build relationships between donors and [impacted communities](#) in ethical ways that support programmatic goals. For example, rather than have donors come to observe the work on the ground, ask donors how they might contribute meaningfully to it. A donor with a background in finance could co-facilitate a budgeting session for grassroots organisations. A donor with art as a hobby could co-facilitate an art workshop for people with lived experience alongside a clinician.
- Engage in regional movement-building to integrate community development efforts across multiple movements and sectors, using shared risk and protective factors as a model for sharing power, funding, and programming to increase the impact of funds received.

### Ethical storytelling

- If using quantitative data is necessary, add qualitative aspects to humanise and individualise the numbers we're presenting.
- Be clear on your approach, structures, and values so that you can convey this with ethical [storytelling](#) in donor communications. Remember that storytelling does not have to be individual, linear, and narrative – it can be collective or organisational, creative, and in mediums other than written anecdotes.
- Create compelling stories about how funding focused on relationship-building, [capacity-building](#), and lived experience leadership transforms local organisations, shares power more equitably with lived experience-led organisations, and makes our work more effective by increasing our capacity to create lived experience-centred solutions.

- Use different framings and talking points with different donors to highlight how meaningful engagement of people with lived experience aligns with their funding priorities.
- In standardised donor communications, highlight the different elements of your approach.
- Develop talking points about the ways your strategies are also [sharing resources](#) to support people with lived experience to engage in our sector in power-sharing and decision-making ways, and local grassroots organisations to strengthen their organisational infrastructure. Both of these build organic sustainability of lived experience leadership and community development interventions.
- For more information, see [A toolkit for ethical antislavery work](#) by the Anti-Slavery Knowledge Network or [Trauma-Informed Storytelling](#) by the National Survivor Network.



## Barrier: Leadership buy-in and evaluation challenges

*Often, there is a lack of dedicated [resources](#) for the visions we are trying to implement. We may experience challenges when leadership is not fully aligned or bought-in to the changes that are necessary to increase meaningful engagement of [people with lived experience](#). When this happens, it can increase the emotional labour expected of participants, consultants, and staff with lived experience. Additionally, current funding structures often reinforce an obsession with numbers, leading organisations to want to stretch resources further at the risk of harming people. It can be challenging to get leadership (or funders) to understand the value of deeper quality engagement and ongoing relationship-building with a smaller number of people over superficial engagement with a higher quantity of people.*

*“We put the effort into tracking the things to which we assign value.”  
- Kim Samuel in *On Belonging**

## Related opportunities

### Funding concerns

- Many leadership concerns revolve around the financial health of the organisation, which can often be addressed through careful consideration of funding practices. See the section on funding for opportunities for overcoming this barrier.
- Have strong, concrete monitoring and evaluation of internal processes to ensure and demonstrate that your organisation is careful with unrestricted funding. A move towards unrestricted funding (which is essential for relationship-building and supporting lived experience-led initiatives) shifts the burden of accountability and proof to the organisation receiving the funds and requires having adequate guidelines and transparency in place.

### Evaluation of the success of our efforts

- In older models for funding, [evaluation](#) was aligned to donor expectations, leading to donor-driven evaluation. Work on building [buy-in](#) from donors from bottom-up, community-driven evaluation. Getting buy-in from donors (and, by extension, your leadership) requires clarity on what your organisation is doing and who your organisation is becoming.
- What do impacted communities, our project partners, or people receiving services see as success? Consider collaborative development of evaluation criteria and reporting. A [co-creation](#) process of indicators and evaluation means that even though your organisation (or your funders) may have some of your own indicators, you can also track progress on meeting your participants' primary concerns.
- Evaluate processes as well as impact and outcomes, and include lived experience engagement processes in your evaluation.
- Guide project partners and different organisational departments on how to do a qualitative evaluation to highlight how de-emphasising numbers does not mean we cannot evaluate the impact of our programming or funding.
- Work with project partners to support them in developing their own internal evaluations as part of [building the capacity](#) of grassroots organisations to evaluate and plan for continuous quality improvement.
- Evaluate the success of your organisation's collective efforts toward goals (including lived experience engagement goals) using organisation-wide assessment.

### Board engagement

- Have set criteria for the board that aligns with what your organisation is trying to accomplish, aligning board members' passion and interests with how they show up in the role.

- Work towards a shift from top-down to bottom-up leadership. Find ways for the board to engage beyond the leadership team, with opportunities to interact with organisations, partners, and staff doing the work. This allows them to better understand what the work looks like on the ground.
- Similarly to donors, find appropriate opportunities for the board to engage with the work beyond observation. When appropriate, facilitate mutual (rather than observational or extractive) learning opportunities between the board and participants. For example, a board member who is also a licensed clinician might lead a workshop on how to offer support to peers in crisis.



Questions or ideas? Reach out to us at [meaningfulengagement@collectivethreads.org](mailto:meaningfulengagement@collectivethreads.org) or review the other documents in our Meaningful Engagement Toolbox at [collectivethreads.org/meaningfulengagement](https://collectivethreads.org/meaningfulengagement).