



The Meaningful Engagement Toolbox Quick Start Guide

Part of The Meaningful Engagement Toolbox by Collective Threads Initiative

We have occasionally heard feedback that The Meaningful Engagement Handbook and tools are so comprehensive that they're overwhelming. It may be helpful to think of the toolbox like a buffet rather than like a single meal with a dozen courses. Not all tools will be appropriate for all organisations and if you try to take on too much at once it may be overwhelming.

This Quick Start Guide has been developed to assist you in determining a simple starting point for your meaningful engagement work. While the ideas presented here are by no means a comprehensive guide, they can be useful for moving beyond the feeling of "Help, I'm stuck! Where do I start?"

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I'm not sure what my organisation needs or how to start. Meaningful engagement is relatively new to us or has been limited in the past.

- Start with our Organisational Readiness Self-Assessment and What is your WHY? tools, found in the toolbox. Not only can they help you identify areas to improve before diving in, but it can also spark essential conversations among staff and leadership.
- Contact Collective Threads Initiative to request support from a trained consultant who can support your process.

My organisation is significantly underfunded and struggles with capacity, but is led by people from impacted communities, is grassroots, or otherwise exemplifies meaningful engagement of people with lived experience.

- Review indicators from the relevant surveys and identify which indicators could easily be improved with adequate [resources](#). Include this information in grant applications and reporting to highlight that you are already using many promising practices and thus uniquely positioned to lead in this area, but that resourcing remains a barrier to further progress.
- Share CTI's meaningful engagement resources with your funders to support their deeper understanding.
- Contact Collective Threads Initiative to learn of other Meaningful Engagement partners in your region.

My organisation is significantly underfunded and struggles with capacity, and this has impacted our ability to engage meaningfully with impacted communities.

- Have your leadership team and/or board complete the What is your WHY? activity to help think through potential barriers and conflicting priorities.
- Start small and simple. Identify two to three items on the *Inform* level of the survey that can be addressed with a simple language change on intake forms, outreach documents, or social media. If you're already doing well at *Inform* (or if you finish these items and want to move on), see what "low hanging fruit" you can find on the *Ask* level.
- If you already regularly survey clients, choose a few questions from the Participant Survey to include in your regular participant surveys to help identify which indicators are the biggest priority for your participants.

My organisation has dedicated funding (or adequate redirectable funding) and we have a small budget for meaningful engagement. We want to improve.

- Have team leads read through The Meaningful Engagement Handbook and dedicate a few meetings to group discussions of easy improvements that can be implemented in the near future without needing additional funding. Consider using the questions in the Abbreviated Survey to guide these discussions.
- Work with an [evaluation](#) consultant or one of CTI's technical assistance providers to select and adapt the Abbreviated Survey for your organisation's work and priorities, and conduct an assessment of relevant staff across programmes. Use the analysis to develop a workplan for the coming year.
- Gather feedback using relevant questions from the Participant and Abbreviated Surveys from participants in your existing meaningful engagement or lived experience leadership programming (like community advisory boards, consultant pools, etc.) to assess if existing initiatives are having the desired effect and how they might be improved.

My organisation has prioritised meaningful engagement and has dedicated funding, and we are committed to using promising practices.

- Work with an [evaluation](#) consultant or one of CTI's technical assistance providers to develop and implement an evaluation plan to direct your organisation's next year of work.
- Implement a monthly book club in which staff members read a section of The Meaningful Engagement Handbook each month and join together to discuss. This can be for interested parties across the organisation or could be structured in team-specific book clubs so that participants can determine simple actions that could be taken in their specific programme.
- Many organisations that have done considerable work at the *Consult* or higher levels may have not invested in consistency at the *Inform* or *Ask* levels. While the higher levels of the spectrum are essential to fostering leadership from impacted communities, the lower levels of the spectrum emphasise issues like accessibility and respectful engagement of current programme participants. If you do not intend to do a full assessment of those levels, consider reviewing the surveys for "low-hanging fruit" – simple tasks that are easy to address.

My organisation has engaged with meaningful engagement initiatives in the past but has received feedback that some of our approaches may have been harmful or tokenising.

- Have your leadership team and/or board complete the What is your WHY? activity to help think through potential barriers and conflicting priorities.
- Coordinate training and ongoing professional development on identifying and addressing biases related to “[benevolent prejudice](#).” Work with staff across levels and programmes to identify ways these biases may have crept into service provision, research approaches, funding, or meaningful engagement initiatives.
- Implement a monthly book club in which staff members read a section of The Meaningful Engagement Handbook each month and join together to discuss. This can be for interested parties across the organisation or could be structured in team-specific book clubs so that participants can determine simple actions that could be taken in their specific programme. Commit to measured change before re-engaging communities that may have been [harmed](#) through past practices.
- Create an emergent space that allows for acknowledgment of past mistakes without cancellation (“love with accountability”) – unlearning and learning anew are essential to repairing past harmful practices, and openly acknowledging past mistakes is essential to rebuilding trust.

My organisation is relatively new and we want to build a solid foundation for meaningful engagement from the start.

- Have your core founding team read The Meaningful Engagement Handbook or view/attend one of CTI’s Meaningful Engagement foundational trainings. Discuss how you can incorporate meaningful engagement from the beginning of your work, and how to weave it throughout rather than silo it into its own department.
- Use the questions from the *Inform* level of the Comprehensive or Abbreviated Surveys to guide your initial communications strategy.

- Use the questions from the *Ask* level of the Comprehensive or Abbreviated Surveys to guide your initial strategy for continuous quality improvement through regular feedback from participants and community members. Consultants who are years out of their specific experiences of violence can provide insights. That said, current participants can tell you what is working and what is not, and impacted community members can tell you what barriers they face to engaging with your organisation, services, or materials.

Setting realistic goals and timelines

- Meaningful engagement is like “personal wellness,” “health,” “growth and development,” and other long-term processes of transformation. Just as those issues are lifelong processes across the life of an individual (and are limited by unique circumstances, opportunities, and limitations), meaningful engagement is a lifelong process across the lifespan of an organisation. It is not a quick fix, and the issues raised in *The Meaningful Engagement Handbook* and associated tools would take years to address in most organisations, and that timeline will be impacted by shifts in funding and leadership.
- Similarly, meaningful engagement, like the issues listed above, are not linear processes, but are often cyclical. Over the lifecycle of an organisation (and in its context of community, funding ecosystem, and government limitations) there will be periods of expansion, growth, and improvement, and there will be periods of contraction, inner work, and challenge. This is why repeating processes of assessment and [evaluation](#) are important. It does not mean your organisation is “failing” if you have to revisit things you had already addressed; it simply means you are staying responsive to needs as they arise or reoccur.
- If completing the full survey feels overwhelming, consider working on one level at a time. Administer the survey questions for that level and work on the workplan for that level in your first year. Do not feel rushed to move to the next level in the following year; move to the next level when your results indicate readiness.
- If time or budget constraints suggest a need for efficiency, consider having relevant team members address some of the indicators from the surveys as a “to do” list prior to completing any assessments; in other words, address “low-hanging fruit” before implementing a full organisational survey.
- Develop a regular schedule for whatever evaluation plan you determine. This might look different from one organisation to the next. One organisation might plan to repeat a full, organisation-wide evaluation every five years. Another might plan to evaluate at the *Inform* level in the current year and then evaluate at a different level each year before repeating. One

organisation might agree to survey all staff every five years, but one department or programme per year in the off years. Another organisation may not use the surveys at all but may choose to maintain an ongoing monthly meaningful engagement book club as a way to keep the topic at the forefront of decision-making. The goal isn't to blast through the improvements as quickly as possible – it's to build lasting culture change for long-term sustainability.



Questions or ideas? Reach out to us at meaningfuleengagement@collectivethreads.org or review the other documents in our Meaningful Engagement Toolbox at collectivethreads.org/meaningfuleengagement.