

Driver B

Stakeholder Participation

To achieve equity at scale, learning leaders facilitate robust, democratic stakeholder participation in decision-making, implementation, and improvement. This participation helps learning leaders diagnose and respond to emergent needs, intuit environmental changes, and identify and take advantage of systems change opportunities. To do this well, learning leaders accept that they alone cannot hold all the answers and situate their work within an ever-changing constellation of actors and institutions. Rejecting the dichotomy of “in here” and “out there,” these leaders understand that the borders erected around system elements—organizations, teams, stakeholder groups, even fields—are artificial and porous and that, in practice, what happens “out there” is inextricably tied to what happens “in here.”

To that end, learning leaders build a community in which stakeholders collaboratively develop stronger understandings of, learn from, and influence the systems they are part of. Unhampered by the limitations of formal organizational boundaries, these leaders build bridges across—and ultimately break down—the structural and interpersonal silos that have camouflaged innovations and stalled progress in the past. This is challenging, long-term work, so learning leaders must often be strategic, seeding and cultivating relationships today that will contribute to transformative change tomorrow.

Learning leaders act on three stakeholder participation drivers to advance transformation at scale. They:

- 1 Adopt a democratic approach to stakeholder engagement**
- 2 Architect structures that enable co-production of strategy**
- 3 Cultivate capacity to work across lines of difference**

1 Adopt a democratic approach to stakeholder engagement

“Our work [in districts] has certainly changed the way I think about the importance of and mechanisms for democracy—for real, participatory, deliberative, rich democracy, where there’s true decisional capital. Not just, ‘We’re listening to you, and thank you for telling us, maybe we’ll take it into consideration,’ but actually providing a structure for you to decide, or at least to have real, strong input into the decisions.”

— James S. Liebman

Founder, Center for Public Research and Leadership

Learning leaders use “collaborative governance”¹ to co-produce system design, strategy, and implementation with stakeholders. Planning backward from sustainable, equitable service provision at scale, learning leaders identify and tap the diverse cohort of stakeholders they will need to accomplish ambitious aims.

Learning leaders think creatively and build a broad coalition, moving beyond the well-worn, and often inherited, relational structures that have produced current conditions. They are intentional about transformative change, “[designing and planning for impact and sustainability from the beginning](#),”² as Stacey Caillier recommends. They are explicit about when and why they engage different stakeholders, and they articulate strategies for how they will, over time, seed and cultivate productive relationships with others.

There is particular importance to this work in schools and districts. For many people, their primary point of contact with public institutions is school and district participation. These processes function as an authentic, sustained, and experiential civic curriculum for students, families, and their communities—constituencies that have been structurally excluded from power in schools, districts, and educational institutions. A leader’s approach to stakeholder engagement implicitly communicates which voices are valuable both in the system and in the larger democratic context. In this way, inclusive approaches to participation can empower communities and build democratic dispositions with effects far beyond the schoolhouse door, including by fostering increased trust in the legitimacy of schools and other public institutions.

Creating the structures and conditions for ongoing and deeply integrated stakeholder participation is complex and challenging work; true democracy always is. But by ceding central control and cultivating shared responsibility for decision-making across a broad coalition of stakeholders, learning leaders forge the authentic relationships and feedback loops necessary to support durable transformation tailored to the needs of each community.

Reflect and Act

Assess whether your stakeholder engagement efforts have set the conditions for, invited, and facilitated systematic and meaningful participation from stakeholders in learning, improvement, and decision-making across your system.

- To what extent does your system design engage stakeholders in the development, implementation, and refinement of your agendas, goals, and problem-solving?
- Think about a stakeholder participation experience you’ve observed that exemplifies what you would like yours to look like. What made that experience successful? How might you incorporate similar practices into your system?
- Think ahead to a decade from now. Visualize two contrasting scenarios: (1) Your system achieves equity at scale, and (2) Your system does not achieve equity at scale. What role did stakeholder participation play in each scenario?
- When and how have you shifted your understanding of challenges, decisions, and system design based on stakeholder insight?

To support your work on this driver, build and maintain an evolving system map—a shared list or diagram that outlines the core elements of your immediate system and environment and the relationships between those elements. Your system map may be **visual** or more linear, like **[Achieve Atlanta’s change management tracker](#)**.³

2

Architect structures that enable co-production of strategy

Participatory democracy moves beyond the informal, pro forma touch points long used in education, creating instead formal and integrated structures through which stakeholders can meaningfully influence strategy and decision-making. Cultivating a dynamic, holistic view of their immediate system and environment, learning leaders “get the right participation and get the participation right,”⁴ teasing out the structures that contribute to inequitable outcomes and shifting system design so stakeholders can engage in productive dialogue that spurs improvement.

Learning leaders flip the top-down bureaucratic model of strategy development and decision-making. They build structures and routines that bring relevant stakeholders from within and beyond the system into planning, adapting, implementing, and improving strategy. In practice, this approach to system design activates the powerful stakeholder expertise that remains latent in bureaucratic systems. As a result, strategy in learning-driven systems is more responsive to the needs of communities, accelerating progress toward equity at scale.

Sustaining this change requires boundary-crossing dialogue and collaboration. With a holistic perspective

of their system and surrounding environment, learning leaders are well positioned to act as strategic connectors, continually identifying stakeholder relationships that can catalyze improvement. Learning leaders design their systems to cultivate equitable collaborative relationships that help surface innovative approaches to strategy and, over time, help the system anticipate and adapt to change. They draw connections between teams, departments, and actors that have been siloed, and they invite in stakeholders, like students and families, who have been excluded or marginalized. They invest time and care in the “inconvenient,”⁵ challenging relationships, finding areas of commonality to jump-start dialogue. And they think big, looking beyond their immediate system to identify allies—policy makers, innovators, experts, and advocates both inside and outside education—with whom they can build forward-looking partnerships.

A well-architected system:

- Embeds participation into strategy development and daily operations
- Diversifies participation modalities
- Facilitates fruitful conflict

Embeds participation into strategy development and daily operations

Directly including the stakeholders closest to and most affected by various strategies in planning and decision-making spaces ensures that system practice is responsive to their needs. Learning leaders structure their system to operationalize the maxim, “Nothing about me, without me.”⁶

Learning leaders actively recruit the stakeholders closest to challenges who have direct experience with and valuable insight into system failures. In High Tech High’s college-access-focused CARPE network, where students participate directly on improvement teams, the hub challenged schools to identify and recruit students who had been the least engaged with the college application process. These young people helped teams surface barriers to access that might otherwise have gone unnoticed.

And learning leaders design strategy spaces so that all participating stakeholders can engage as fully, not merely as token observers or “voices in the room.” They recruit and convene a consistent group so that rapport and trust can be established, [develop](#) and [facilitate the implementation of community agreements](#), [use protocols to support voice equity](#), [listen closely for what’s not being said](#),⁷ and most important, give all stakeholders a full vote when decisions are made.


Co-production does not end there. Learning leaders understand that sustainable pathways toward equitable service provision do not emerge from perfect strategies—even when those plans are developed alongside those experiencing challenges most acutely—but instead from the messy process of testing, refining, and tailoring practice on the ground. The system must be designed so that stakeholders implementing and affected by strategy can [apply the system’s learning methodology](#) on an ongoing basis, rather than through infrequent, post hoc feedback touch points (e.g., annual reflection and stepbacks via surveys and interviews, town halls).

Learning leaders embed routines and mechanisms for short-cycle testing and reflection into daily practice across the system (e.g., individual reflection routines) and regular [learning spaces](#) (e.g., huddles, team meetings, classrooms, regular parent-teacher-student conferences) so that stakeholder participation in local strategy refinement becomes habitual. Leaders build and support stakeholders in using strong pipelines—[andon structures](#), cross-functional reflection spaces, and [knowledge management](#) routines—that funnel local learning to those responsible for updating system strategy. Without these coherent, bidirectional communication structures, the power of the collective stalls as local learning and expertise remains trapped.

Diversifies participation modalities

In education, time is precious, and fully cross-functional, consensus-driven stakeholder participation in every strategy decision is unrealistic. Learning leaders account for this reality and plan backward from equity at scale, strategically prioritizing the participation of different stakeholders when and where it's most important.

Learning leaders toggle between participation modalities tailored to both stakeholder and system needs, moving up and down the [following spectrum](#) (ordered from more to less intensive participation)⁸ while ensuring that all stakeholders have opportunities to participate at each level:

DEFER TO	 Leaders task a cross-functional group of stakeholders with developing, testing, and refining strategic initiatives at the local or system level. Leaders may support facilitation, but they defer to the decisions made by the group.
COLLABORATE	Leaders work closely with stakeholders to co-lead and co-facilitate strategy development, implementation, or improvement. In practice, collaborative approaches may function as a capacity-building step necessary to transitioning to “defer to” strategies.
CONSULT	Leaders gather input on strategy from stakeholders using tools like surveys and empathy interviews. Unlike the use of consultation in traditional systems, learning leaders seek out feedback from stakeholders before decisions have been made and ensure that it is meaningfully incorporated into planning.
INFORM	Leaders provide stakeholders with relevant information about strategy. Implementation of this approach in learning-driven systems differs from its execution in bureaucracies because architecture is designed to facilitate bidirectional communication, in which stakeholders have the freedom to adapt strategy in their local context, offer feedback, or opt into a more actively participatory role.

Learning leaders make any strategies transparent, bringing them into public forums (e.g., staff or parent-teacher organization meetings) for comment throughout the development, implementation, and improvement process. Making drafts of strategy public before they are polished is sometimes uncomfortable for leaders, but in a learning-driven system, it is critical that stakeholders have the opportunity to provide input before plans are finalized and readied for implementation.

Facilitates fruitful conflict

Learning leaders initiate, help define the boundaries of, facilitate, and participate in collaborative initiatives that advance shared goals. Collaborative work often begins by organizing stakeholders around a shared problem, which creates an impetus for frequent, sustained, face-to-face collaboration.⁹ The learning methodology and learning spaces discussed in [Driver A](#) provide a shared language and venues for this work, especially when they're developed with attention to the [principles of liberatory design](#).

Because stakeholders often work across often entrenched lines of difference, a goal must be to spur productive [dialogue](#)—what Ansell calls “fruitful conflict”¹⁰—so that the collective can draw out and address the underlying issues that are stalling progress toward equity. Leaders may select, adapt, and facilitate any number of [protocols](#) to support this work (e.g., [5 Whys](#), [fishbone generation](#), [gap analysis](#), [Kiva](#)). These protocols help ensure voice equity, and also “pull back the curtain,” allowing stakeholders to identify how

they might structure and engage in collaborative work in other spaces.

As stakeholders build authentic understandings of one another's perspectives, learning leaders help them reorient around a new, collective vision for improvement that accommodates the concerns of all involved. Learning leaders may [step in to help the group navigate challenging conversations](#) but step back to let stakeholders develop and advance a co-constructed vision for improvement.

When curated with care, these formal structures help stakeholders experience “quick wins,” recognize the value of collaboration, build trusting professional and personal relationships with new partners, and internalize the routines and rhythms of collaborative work. These strengthened relationships act as a catalyst for future efforts—both formal projects and informal self-directed collaboration.¹¹



Reflect and Act

Which stakeholders are you engaging?

- When and how have you involved in your work the stakeholders closest to various problems you're trying to solve? When and how have you excluded those individuals?
- Alternatively, are there places where your reliance on positional leaders creates bottlenecks in your learning and improvement processes? Where and when do you need positional leaders to come in and out of problem-solving processes?
- What relationships between stakeholder groups stymie productive learning and improvement? As a leader, how might you help foster more productive connections?
- What high-impact partnerships have you not developed because they seem out of reach? What adversarial relationships do you avoid that, if nurtured, might open up new inroads to improvement?
- Which innovative organizations or actors working outside your immediate field could you partner with or learn from to accelerate change?

Which of the following approaches, articulated in Facilitating Power's Community Engagement to Ownership framework,¹² have you used most often with stakeholders? When and with which stakeholders have you used different approaches? Why?

- Inform: Provide stakeholders with relevant information
- Consult: Gather input from stakeholders
- Collaborate: Ensure stakeholder capacity to play a leadership role in the development and implementation of decisions
- Defer to: Foster democratic participation and equity by bridging the divide between stakeholders and governance through community-driven decision-making

In what ways, if any, have you facilitated collaborative spaces to draw out fruitful conflict? How have you used protocols to scaffold equitable collaboration?

3 Cultivate capacity to work across lines of difference

“We are connected. What we need to do is become aware of it, live it, express it.”

—**john a. powell**

Director of the Othering & Belonging Institute at the University of California, Berkeley

To mobilize the power of participatory structures and make progress toward equity at scale, learning leaders continually strive to transform power in their systems. They foster a culture that supports equitable collaboration across lines of difference, working with stakeholders to expose and shift the underlying beliefs and behaviors that have stymied effective collaboration and contributed to inequity in the past.

Although building bonds across lines of difference takes time in a truly diverse collective, learning leaders emphasize the urgency of improvement and commit to forward progress. They help stakeholders navigate roadblocks and support them in coming to provisional consensus, reminding all parties that decisions are merely a shared hypothesis that they will have the opportunity to test and refine over time.

Culture supports democratic stakeholder participation when leaders:

- Cultivate belonging and interdependence while celebrating difference
- Shift power from the inside out
- Lead humbly and honor democratic decisions

Cultivate belonging and interdependence while celebrating difference

Effective communities are led by leaders who help members set a powerful shared vision and understand their interdependence in achieving it. As learning leaders facilitate boundary-crossing learning activities across the system, they make the connections between that work explicit and visible to stakeholders. Through this process, the community builds a sense of collective momentum by, as John A. Powell writes, [“co-constructing a larger ‘we.’”](#)¹³

Learning leaders support these processes by continually drawing stakeholders to their North Star: creating conditions that will allow students, families, and communities to thrive. Anchoring efforts to this goal need not be complicated. For example, in one multi-institutional adult learning community, a learning leader used a simple verbal nudge when members expressed hesitancy about making data transparent. The leader stepped in and offered to make his system’s outcomes public immediately, offering a gentle reminder: without transparency and collaboration, the group would be slower to learn—and if even a single student was served better through transparency, any discomfort would be worth it. The reminder was quick and humble and helped redirect the group immediately.

To weave together streams of work, learning leaders co-create and continually anchor work to evolving shared documents that make connections explicit (e.g., driver diagrams, theories of improvement) and, critically, articulate how leadership-level learning efforts are integrated into the tapestry. This mobilizes buy-in from ground-level staff, like teachers, who have long been the subjects of improvement efforts without seeing similar introspection from positional leaders.

At the same time, learning leaders recognize differences and uplift the strengths and perspectives that each stakeholder brings to collective work. Heterogeneity in perspective and experience is what allows communities to build nuanced understandings of inequities and make progress toward addressing them. The collective “we” does not require that members assimilate, but instead that the boundaries of the community become more expansive, flexible, and inclusive.¹⁴ To this end, and especially in long established communities, leaders push the group to constantly unpack norms and ways of being (e.g., “This is how we do things here”) to accommodate new perspectives and ideas.



Shift power from the inside out

“Institutions are us. . . . The shadows that institutions cast over our ethical lives are external expressions of our own inner shadows, individual and collective. . . . If we are even partly responsible for creating institutional dynamics, we also possess the power to alter them . . . to identify and examine our own shadows.”

—**Parker J. Palmer**

Founder and Senior Partner Emeritus of the Center for Courage & Renewal

Learning leaders draw in stakeholders in part to challenge and transform the arrangements of power that have spawned inequities. Structural redesign is the foundation of this effort. But for those technical changes to truly take hold, they must be accompanied by efforts to reshape individual and collective mindsets, beliefs, and relationships to power.

The [National Equity Project’s Leadership for Equity framework](#) suggests that the work to build “liberatory and resilient systems” begins with self-awareness. As learning leaders advance equity-driven system redesign, they consistently look inward, considering their own role in creating and perpetuating inequities and helping those they lead do the same.¹⁵ Through this work, individuals across the system recognize their own agency in affecting transformative change.

This internal work is never finished, but learning leaders ensure that the work does not stall at this stage. They closely link self-reflection with the collaborative relationships and tangible improvement efforts happening across the system. They scaffold dialogue that allows stakeholders to listen to and learn from one another’s perspectives, in particular challenging those who have traditionally held more power in the system to step back, listen, and lead through learning. And then learning leaders catalyze those relationships into action, supporting stakeholders at each layer of the system as they contribute to improvement.

Lead humbly and honor democratic decisions

Learning leaders foster relationships with and between stakeholders that fundamentally diverge from traditional, consultative approaches to engagement. Both learning leaders and those they lead abandon the “[myth of the complete leader](#)”¹⁶—the idea that leaders alone can or should hold all the answers to system challenges. To support this shift in mindset, learning leaders communicate respect for the expertise and capacity of stakeholders. They ask questions before offering answers, constantly seek out insight from stakeholders, and make clear how they’re acting on it.

offering answers, constantly seek out insight from stakeholders, and make clear how they’re acting on it.

But most of all, learning leaders honor democratic decision-making, accepting that they will not always be able to control the course or outcomes of the work. They may participate in and express disagreement during democratic processes, but once provisional consensus is reached, the leader commits to helping implement, measure, and track outcomes. In this way, leaders cede power to the collective.¹⁷

Reflect and Act

As a leader, how are you building capacity to work across lines of difference?

- To what degree have you, as a leader, reflected on how you’re implicated in inequities across your system? When and how have you linked that self-reflection to action to improvement in your leadership practice and system conditions?
- In what ways, if any, have you demonstrated your respect for others’ expertise? Have you moved beyond verbal expressions of support toward genuine efforts to cede power?

Much of stakeholder work is rooted in humble leadership. Don Berwick recommends asking yourself, each day, “**What could I learn today? What do I not know that I could know?**”¹⁸ Making this a public routine can help others pick up the habit.

Endnotes

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