

Engaging people for greater collective impact

Your Guide to advancing people power in your organisation

The digital age fundamentally transforms the way in which people relate to organisations. Central to the new engagement practice is that organisations actively invite others to act, connect and contribute to the shared cause. Emerging strategies of civil society organisations (CSOs) building on this paradigm are often called people-powered strategies. They focus on facilitating and amplifying other people's and partner's actions and voices to leverage impact. This not only increases the pool of resources, skills, capacities and capabilities that CSOs can build on; it also increases stakeholder ownership and thus the chances of transformative impact.

We found interesting trends of a new and [emerging accountability paradigm](#) that fully underpins and further propels people-powered work approaches in the digital age. They include among others: ask stakeholders where you add greatest strategic value for them; share power – share responsibility; open your books for in-time transparency; move from quantity to quality relationships; ask stakeholders to continuously evaluate your impact; and be prepared to take more risk where it allows greater stakeholder engagement.

The Digital Accountability project

The [Digital Accountability project](#), initiated and facilitated by the [INGO Accountability Charter](#), aims to identify and mainstream accountability practices that help CSOs seize the digital opportunity of people-powered work approaches. Thought leaders in our group come from ICSOs such as Amnesty International, Greenpeace, Oxfam and Transparency International and digital CSOs such as 38 Degrees, 350.org, Purpose and Tactical Technology Collective in addition to several [others](#).

But what does this mean in practical terms for you as:

- [Board Member](#)
- [Strategy Director](#)
- [Chief Executive Officer](#)
- [Chief Operations Officer](#)
- [Campaign or Programme Director](#)
- [HR Director](#)

We have developed six one page action guides – spelling out what it means in practice for specific functions in an organisation to support people-power strategies in the digital age. The action guides are kept extremely short and come with a number of links to very practical examples.

Board Member

Create a conducive environment for others to thrive

Governing CSOs in the digital age of empowered stakeholders requires special skills. As a Board member you still set strategy; ensure effective structures; monitor progress; and manage risk. But decisions are no longer just based on secluded Board discussions. To govern well, you have to be continuously in touch with staff, people, donors and partners. Your key competence is to create a compelling vision and strategy; foster leadership and enabling structures for the shared cause; and manage risk in a way that allows for ownership and speed.

1. Create a compelling vision and distribute ownership

For people to take a leadership role in the co-creation of results, you need to help create a very compelling vision and ensure that it is well understood and shared across the organisation and amongst your network of partners. Good governance today is dependent on your ability to create an environment that is convincing and motivating for others to take the lead in realising a shared vision. Greenpeace wants to facilitate “a billion acts of courage to save the planet” and Amnesty International plans to “build the strongest possible global movement of 25 million people to take action for human rights every year.” The vision is short, compelling and provides a clear direction of travel.

2. Put impact before organisational growth

As a Board member you clearly have a responsibility to preserve the organisation’s healthiness and to secure impact. Sometimes, there is a tension here. Growing your social media followers, resources or reputation can be very useful in achieving your purpose. But sustained changes normally come from more complex and long term interplays. 350.org identified support to local actors who share their cause as a key strategic priority to achieve long term impact. The founder of [The Integrate Movement](https://theintegratemovement.org), working on youth mental health issues in the UK, limited his organisation’s life span from the outset to 10 years to avoid organisation-centric focus.

3. Navigate risk nimbly to allow for agility and ownership

In the digital age risks materialise more frequently; evolve faster; and have potentially multiplier effects. Without taking risks, however your impact potential is extremely limited. To meaningfully engage others, you have to let go of some control. The Board should identify the greatest strategic risks for the coming 3-5 years. Those must be addressed not merely through technology, but as an integral part of your strategy, values and standards. Beyond that - set much else free. McKinsey & Company put together an interesting report on [pragmatic risk management](#). Transparency International choose a higher risk appetite in their [Unmask the Corrupt](#) campaign to broaden ownership for the anti-corruption discourse. But they drew a non-negotiable red line around people’s safety. When determining the appropriate risk appetite you may also want to look at [Fail Forward](#) or the [Risk Sandbox](#) – a tool to explore how to foster innovation and facilitate risk-taking to scale impact.

4. Build a digitally attuned governance culture

Staff, supporters, donors, partners – all have become more empowered stakeholders, demanding greater transparency and participation in governance decisions. This is a great opportunity to leverage impact. But it needs a digitally attuned culture of governance. Board meetings of [Wikimedia](#) Serbia for instance are digitally recorded, life-streamed and feedback of communities is actively invited. [Plan USA](#) has appointed a Youth Advisory Board which frequently participates in the Board of Directors’ discussions – among others to attune them to the social media culture.

5. Know what people and partners think!

Regularly ask partners, staff or donors to rate you from 1-5 on the questions below. Add one open question for qualitative feedback: for e.g. *how can we improve risk management to help you thrive?*

- 1) Do you know our vision? How well does our vision resonate with you?
- 2) Do we send clear signals that impact comes before growing the organisation?
- 3) Do you perceive our governance culture as static & restrictive or dynamic & engaging?

Strategy Director

Optimally merge bottom-up people power and top-down directives

Being super receptive to what people wish for and have to offer is great. But being nimble without a clear strategy is useless. It's your role to allow for an optimal interplay of people determining strategic decisions wherever possible and taking a stewardship approach when it is necessary to ensure overall responsibility and effectiveness.

1. Crowd source strategy - let others tell you where you add greatest value

You may want to look at a few examples of strategy processes which were based on large consultation rounds among members, supporters, donors, beneficiaries, partners, activists, etc. As part of their [Big Conversation](#), Restless Development received 5,000 online and offline submissions from 64 countries paving the way for launching their Global Strategy in 2016. Amnesty International's [Strategic Plan 2016-2019](#) followed a similar approach with consulting more than 26,000 diverse stakeholders from every corner of the globe. When developing ARTICLE 19's [new strategy](#), each office and team was asked to complete initial SWOT and PESTEL analyses that included gathering feedback and perspectives from external stakeholders.

2. Set efficient rules for people's engagement

People will only engage in strategic decision taking processes if the rules of engagement are clear to avoid disappointment later. Avaaz recently [asked](#) its members if they should take their feedback as a binding mandate or just as guidance. 75% voted for the latter option. To facilitate and aggregate a potentially very diverse range of feedback, Plan International used [Synthetron](#) when crowdsourcing for their strategy. [Idealware](#) also offers some useful tools and advice for CSO crowdsourcing.

3. Adopt a purpose that allows for diverse contributions of others

While it is important that people know what an organisation stands for; it is also important to adopt a mission that leaves room for very different actors to contribute to achieving it. Good examples include VSO's [bringing people together to fight poverty](#) or Kiva's [connecting people to alleviate poverty](#). The aim is clear but there is a multitude of ways to contribute towards the shared cause from poor people, donors, supporters, partners or the public to raise their voice against poverty. The purpose creates an environment within which many can thrive to achieve the shared cause.

4. Ensure to set success indicators for people's buy-in

Spell out concretely in your theory of change what active people engagement means and why it is pivotal to achieving your purpose. 350.org for instance aspires to build a grassroots climate movement [with the power of ordinary people](#). Success should be measured with quantitative indicators like number of followers, signatories or participants. It is crucial however to also monitor qualitative indicators like the deepening of relationships with people over time. For this purpose, Greenpeace uses the [engagement pyramid](#).

5. Facilitate continuous adaptation

The strategic plan is dead. Long live strategy, [argue](#) Dana O'Donovan and Noah Rimland Flower. They call for a new strategy model based on experiments *not* predictions, pattern recognition *not* data collection and comprehensive *not* top-down implementation. The [International Civil Society Centre](#) for instance has adopted a *rolling strategy*. It provides a broad set of objectives for the long term and is reviewed quarterly and adapted when bigger shifts happen.

6. Know what people and partners think!

Regularly ask partners, staff or donors to rate you on a scale of 1-5 on the questions below and add one open question for qualitative feedback. Compare results over time.

- 1) Do you know and share our two most important strategic ambitions?
- 2) Do they reflect your priorities to achieve our shared purpose?
- 3) Do you feel we listen when deciding on strategic priorities?

Chief Executive Officer

Foster new leaders for greater connective impact

Digital technology allows unprecedented opportunities to tap into people's skills, expertise, networks and capacities to advance the shared cause. The most effective and accountable way to leverage your impact, as CEO, is to motivate and empower staff, partners or people you work with to take leadership for the shared cause. Enable and guide multiple leadership towards optimal connective impact.

1. Lead by vision – not organisation-centric objectives

Ensure that a compelling narrative of your organisation's vision is known, understood and shared by staff, partners and people you work with. Be clear that everyone's *primary* accountability is to optimally contribute towards this vision – not to advance silo assets. [May Boeve](#), ED of 350.org argues that *organisations make decisions that focus, often, on the organisation: its own growth, its budget and revenue, its liabilities, its pursuit of its mission. But for real change it needs a movement of aligned organisations and people contributing in an optimal interplay towards the shared cause.*

2. Leverage impact by growing new leaders. Go beyond the usual suspects!

Offering an enabling environment for staff, supporters, partners, communities or volunteers to self-organise is key to success. Take a look at the excellent book on self-management called [Reinventing Organizations](#). Restless Development has [16,000 Restless Development alumni](#) worldwide connected via an online network to further their personal and professional development. Over the next years, Restless Development also plan to provide support to [250 youth-led CSOs](#) to build capacity. The [Creative Facilitation network](#) at Greenpeace includes over 250 global staff and volunteers co-creating ideas with allies, students, donors, etc. on solving management issues, generating fundraising ideas and volunteer activities. Avaaz is a good example for building capacity beyond the usual suspects - 25% of its members are grandparents!

3. Effectively navigate the dynamic boundaries of your organisation

Carefully outline, navigate and re-calibrate the dynamic boundary between external actors and your organisation. Not every collaboration is effective and not every stakeholder suggestion is helpful. Clarify the boundaries of your purpose and adopt a succinct set of values guiding collaboration. Ensure good technology and processes to facilitate, aggregate and optimally align different activities. In [Campact](#) members can decide what to campaign on, but only within the limits of their [codified value base](#). [UAViators](#) has formulated a [code of conduct](#) that ensures minimal mutual accountability of all participants in the network but sets most else free. Along with the technical [UAV training](#) in Nepal, they also trained people on attitude, behaviour and philosophy and the brief guidelines they had to follow. The [Brooklyn Community Foundation](#) invites 300,000 people annually to [vote](#) on 356 projects that would improve their neighbourhoods.

4. Lead by example to develop a collaborative spirit

Mirror the behaviour you want to see from others. Take transparency for example. "NGOs are great at demanding transparency. They're not so hot at providing it", [says](#) the Washington Post. The first decision of [Anne-Birgitte Albrechtsen](#) as new CEO of Plan International was to open her calendar to all colleagues to see her activities and schedule times without going through a gate-keeper. If you want your staff to develop a service mentality towards staff, people and partners – lead by example.

5. Know what people and partners think!

Regularly ask partners, staff or donors to rate you on a scale of 1-5 on the questions below and add one open question for qualitative feedback. Compare results over time.

- 1) Do you feel welcome to meaningfully contribute to a shared cause?
- 2) Do we have the right balance of externally and internally initiated activities?
- 3) Are we smart when scanning and building collaboration potential?

Chief Operations Officer

Build culture and infrastructure that is fit for digital engagement

To make your organisation fit-for-purpose, you need to challenge your operating model. In the digital age, partnering with other actors to contribute to a shared cause is part of your core competence. In order to do that, more investments have to be directed to your digital infrastructure and to your human capital.

1. Fundamentally challenge your operating model

By default the amount of skills, expertise and capacity to achieve your purpose is larger *outside* than *inside* the organisation – no matter how big you are. But building an effective ecosystem of like-minded actors to achieve more than the sum of the parts, requires much more than IT investment to connect. It needs your boldness to fundamentally rethink the operating model by which you create value. Adapt your current business model or incubate one of the [new emerging CSO models](#) such as the online brokerage or the social enterprise model. A study by the Boston Consulting Group on [Navigating a World of Digital Disruption](#) and a superb book on [Digital Adaptation](#) for CSOs by Paul Boag provide interesting advice for this journey.

2. Make alliance building the default option

Foster a culture that accepts alliance building as the default option for greater and more sustained impact at all levels of the organisation. Plan's CEO Anne-Birgitte Albrechtsen announced at the Global Perspectives conference in Bangkok in 2015 that building alliances – in particular beyond the usual suspects – will be a key priority for Plan to achieving impact in the future. This [short video](#) maps the key building blocks to achieving collective impact. Set accordingly targets and monitor performance. Amnesty International has set itself [clear objectives](#) around alliance building and the empowerment of others to support an externally focused culture and practice.

3. Invest in digital infrastructure and people capacity

While you do not need the latest fashion of IT technology, you will need robust digital infrastructure and staff capability to use it. It's a large investment but unless it is made, your organisation is likely to be disrupted by the speed of digital connectivity in a very short period of time. Speak to donors like [Sida](#) and [Oak Foundation](#) who understand that they need to invest into the infrastructure of CSOs. Look for pro-bono suppliers like [TechSoup](#). A good example for pro bono support is [Purpose](#) helping Oxfam establish the [Worldwide Influencing Network \(WIN\) platform](#) with the WIN team providing services to Oxfam country offices and partners to enhance their campaigning capacity. It's not a one-off investment. Technology and people's communication habits, change fast. The Bernie Sanders campaign quickly moved from e-mail and phone calls to text messaging to [stay](#) connected with young supporters.

4. Push for transparency – invest in protection where really important

Identify key issues of safety, privacy or legal obligations. Invest heavily to protect data in these areas. Although transparency builds trust, it is still only in its infancy within most [CSOs](#). As part of their [open data project](#), Greenpeace released two years of chemical research hoping that it is useful to other change-makers. [ARTICLE 19](#) plans to provide donors with access to the first level of their internal online project management and reporting system to allow them to track progress.

5. Stay nimble - stay close to people and partners

There is an inherent danger that successful CSOs institutionalise and become internally focused. Consider 350.org which grew from a small [initiative](#) by seven university students into a global climate movement. When deliberating to set up national offices, they looked into options such as running them virtually or being hosted by other CSOs. The [INGO Accountability Charter](#) is hosted by the International Civil Society Centre to keep the organisation as lean as possible.

6. Know what people and partners think!

Regularly ask partners, staff or donors to rate you on a scale of 1-5 on the questions below and add one open question for qualitative feedback. Compare results over time.

- 1) Have we fundamentally reviewed the opportunities of value creation in the digital age?
- 2) How well-suited is our infrastructure to support stakeholder engagement?
- 3) Is our operating model sufficiently lean to stay close to people and partners?

Campaign or Programme Director

Scale meaningful people support for sustainable impact

As a campaign or programme director of a people-powered CSO, you want to run activities that harness other people's contributions to achieve the common cause. Your role is not primarily to produce the best campaigns or programs with your staff, but to facilitate like-minded people's actions and contributions to leverage collective impact.

1. Nurture your eco-system of actors

Instead of *first* developing a campaign/programme and *then* looking for good partners – take the reverse approach. Actively scan the huge multitude of people who share your cause. Understand what *they* want and have to offer. Develop clear principles on *who* to align with in *which* way and what for. The [Global Impact Investment Map](#) is a good example for a web-based, dynamic and collective mapping of an ecosystem in real time. Be opportunistic in choosing allies, but don't miss the outliers, who may add the greatest value. Monitor which collaborations *do* or *do not* work and why. Be prepared to also invest in long term relationships. Sometimes we have to do things that are inefficient at first but meaningful in the long term, says [Eric Gordon](#) of [Harvard's Berkman Center](#).

2. Design activities around people's interests

Identify where people's energy and needs are in regard to the shared cause. Take *this* (not just your own idea of what's important) as a starting point when developing a campaign or programme. Adopt success indicators that measure if *people* are content with the project and not just if your organisation grows its membership, visibility or income. 38 Degrees regularly surveys social media to see what members care about. When identifying some energy around national forests in the UK, they started the [Save our Forests campaign](#). Within 6 months they mobilised half a million people and stopped the government from selling it. [Dalia](#), a Palestinian community foundation ensures communities set their own priorities when allocating funding.

3. Leverage peoples' input for collective impact

Tap into the huge potential of skills, capacities, capabilities and expertise of people who share your cause. "ICSOs must shift from prescribing actions to provisioning supporters so that they can take action on their own terms," [argue](#) Virginie Coulloudon and Jed Miller. Greenpeace ran a [hackathon](#) with designers and developers to produce a software that tracks super trawlers on the oceans. Médecins Sans Frontières and Accenture developed interactive [Missing Maps](#) asking people to map needs directly after a disaster. Greenpeace asked people to contribute to content and tactics of the [Detox Campaign](#) and created the [Mobilisation Cookbook](#) with staff recipes for crowd-sourced campaigning. Amnesty works with people across the world who help interpret satellite imagery with a [micro-tasking approach](#) to detecting human rights' violations.

4. De-brand where appropriate and close the feedback loop!

When [Scope](#) was approached by a young man with Down Syndrome they helped him start his own [campaign](#) without the Scope brand. That supported its credibility and it was enormously successful. When collaborating ensure data-feeds with aggregate info on activity in real time. Evaluate data with people and partners, iterate and adapt where needed. Engage in social listening and assess stories of successes and failures that are shared in your network. [Wiki Development](#) allows to share lessons learnt amongst development practitioners to sustain their efforts of adaptation. Take time to debrief with *all* participants focusing on impact and where to take it from here. Publicise successes and [failures](#)!

5. Know what people and partners think!

Regularly ask partners, staff or donors to rate you on a scale of 1-5 on the questions below and add one open question for qualitative feedback. Compare results over time.

- 1) Do you trust us?
- 2) Do we offer you an opportunity to leverage your activities for the shared cause?
- 3) Did your involvement with our organisation feel empowering?

HR Director

Spot and grow *convenors, facilitators & amplifiers* of other people's actions

As an HR Director, you are absolutely critical to the success of any people-powered strategy. It is all about people inside and outside of the organisation and how they relate well and effectively to one another. Your staff's key competence needs to be built around excellent service provision to other actors and a high skill to foster alignment and connective impact for the shared cause.

1. Hire and train *convenors, facilitators and amplifiers*

The expertise you are looking for when hiring and growing staff is their ability to build relationships in a way that advances the shared cause. In this [letter](#) to senior staff candidates, Ricken Patel, Executive Director of [Avaaz](#), calls for manager's capability to ensure that members, their priorities, views, and desires are central to what Avaaz does. In 2015 several Greenpeace offices [elevated](#) mobilisation and engagement staff into senior leadership positions such as Chief of Engagement or Deputy Program Director. To ensure staff comes from and stays close to the communities they shall further relate to, CIVICUS hires young *local* people and trains them. 350.org allows people to continue working part time in their old organisation or movement. Invest heavily into training staff and volunteers which is traditionally one of CSOs' chronically underinvested areas. For it is people and their ability to grow, reach out and align that will create impact!

2. Ensure dynamic HR practices - foster staff leadership

Digital and non-digital networkers need a lot of freedom to act. The [Accenture Technology Vision report 2016](#) calls for a reconfiguration of long established employment norms. Young talented employees look for more agile ways of working, across ecosystems composed of looser partner-based collaborations and continuous investment into their development. Be rigorous in choosing the best people. But then set a lot else free. Attendance clocks are out - people are in!

3. Build HR incentives around successful people/partner engagement

HR incentives should support external relationship building. You could for e.g. regularly ask staff: *Who did you meet that you did not know before? What happened as a consequence of your interaction? What did you do to help others do their job better? When did you last celebrate a partner's success?* Amnesty International has developed a set of minimum project standards that include an assessment of how external stakeholders would benefit from and shape AI's work. 350.org fosters a service mentality of staff towards volunteers in the network.

4. Put feedback loops: right, left and centre

Ensure feedback loops for *all* you do. Develop quick and easy tools to have a simple tested view from staff, beneficiaries, boards, volunteers, supporters, members or local actors. You don't need to ask many people; Feedback Labs found that [five is usually enough](#). Ask people after every meeting to just put down one word on how they liked it. It will give you the most honest response on which to build a much better formal debrief. We also see platforms for collective feedback developing like Transparency International Kenya co-piloting [Integrated Public Complaints Referral Mechanism](#), a hub for feedback and complaints by 40 CSOs and local government bodies. They hire people specifically to make this possibility for feedback well known and used among communities.

5. Know what people and partners think!

Regularly ask partners, staff or donors to rate you on a scale of 1-5 on the questions below and add one open question for qualitative feedback. Compare results over time.

- 1) Does our staff listen to you?
- 2) Do we support you effectively in advancing our collective purpose?
- 3) Do you as staff of our organisation feel enabled to optimally contribute?