



hall strategic partners

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY STRATEGIST

# The Proximity Problem

The Whitepaper

## Before You Scroll Too Fast...

Let's be honest:

At some point, many well-meaning organizations became skilled at discussing the communities they serve without actually **engaging with them**.

[Click to edit text](#)

We held meetings in inaccessible locations, created plans without seeking feedback, and developed “community-informed” programs without including community representatives. Oops.

This isn't a call to blame; it highlights the **proximity problem**.

This whitepaper isn't meant to guilt-trip you. Instead, it aims to help you **get closer** to the people you serve, the voices you may have overlooked, and the decisions that require more than just good intentions. Impact isn't about being perfect; it's about **being present**.

You'll find real examples, practical tools, and a straightforward explanation of what proximity means—and what to do when it's lacking.

So grab a snack, bring your highlighter, and if you have paper cutouts of people, even better!

Let's **rethink how we listen and start leading with closeness instead of distance**.

Let's close the gap.

### Disclaimer

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- The background of the page features a series of paper cutouts of people in various colors (orange, grey, and white) holding hands in a line. They are positioned on a dark, textured surface that resembles a wooden table. The cutouts are slightly out of focus, creating a sense of depth. The overall color palette is muted, with the cutouts providing a subtle contrast against the dark background.
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# What is the Proximity Problem?

The Proximity Problem refers to the disconnect that happens when decisions are made far from the realities and experiences of those most affected. It occurs when leadership is too removed from the communities they serve — whether socially, economically, geographically, or emotionally — resulting in ineffective solutions and missed opportunities for meaningful impact.

## Break it down:

**Proximity** = physical, social, emotional, and operational closeness to the community you serve.

**The Problem** = when decision-making is shaped by distance, assumptions, or privilege.

## Now, Reflect:

- Who is your organization for?
- How do you stay connected to their real, current needs?
- When was the last time someone with lived experience co-created a solution with you?

This workbook helps you identify where gaps exist and what to do about them.


*“Change happens at the speed of trust, and trust happens at the speed of proximity.”*

— BRYAN STEVENSON





# Signs You Might Be Distant

 Red Flags to Watch Out For:

Statement	True	False	Not Sure
We design programs for people, not with them.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Most decisions come from leadership, not community.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
We haven't updated our assumptions in years.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Our staff doesn't reflect the demographics we serve	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
We compensate community members for their time and insights.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

# Map Your Current Position

Create your Proximity Map.

Group	How Close Are You? (1=Distant   5=Deeply Connected)	Why?
Example: Low-income families	2	We rely on secondhand data, not direct voices





# The Proximity Audit

**Score:**

- 0–2: 🚩 You’re leading from a distance
- 3–4: ⚠️ You’re in earshot — but not yet close enough
- 5–6: ✅ You’re moving with proximity power

Statement	Score
We regularly co-create with community members.	
Our leadership reflects the communities we serve.	
We fund or compensate people for their input.	
Feedback loops exist beyond one-off surveys.	
Our leadership team reflects the race, class, and lived experience of the communities we serve.	
Community members have meaningful decision-making power within our organization.	
We actively recruit staff and board members from underserved or underrepresented communities.	
We engage stakeholders in multiple languages and accessible formats.	
Community members are involved from the beginning of program or service design—not just at the end.	

*Tip: Aim for honest reflection, not perfection. This audit is meant to reveal opportunities, not assign blame.*

This quick audit will help you uncover hidden gaps. If you scored mostly 1s and 2s, don’t panic — you’re not alone.  
But it’s time to get closer.

# The Listening Lab Approach

One of our most effective tools for proximity-building is the **Listening Lab** — a structured, inclusive feedback practice that invites the community to shape solutions, not just react to them.

## Key Principles of a Listening Lab:

- Invite people most affected by the work
- Pay them fairly for their insights
- Facilitate with humility, not ego
- Listen without defensiveness
- Share back what you heard — and what changed as a result

## Case in Point:

A regional nonprofit launched **Listening Labs** with formerly unhoused clients. In three months, they revised intake forms, adjusted staff training, and improved client retention by 27%. No fancy tech. Just deeper listening.

To learn more:

[www.hallstrategic.com/listening-lab](http://www.hallstrategic.com/listening-lab)





# Why This Matters Now

Organizations face increasing pressure to prove their impact, build trust, and advance equity, all while navigating complex challenges. But the solution isn't a flashier dashboard or a louder marketing campaign.

It's proximity.

When you move closer to the communities you serve — *and invite them to move closer to your decisions* — you create better strategy, stronger programs, and real, lasting change.



## Ready to Change the Way You Move?

We created a Workbook for Proximity-Driven Impact to help you turn insight into action.

**The full workbook includes:**

- ✓ A full organizational proximity audit
- ✓ Listening Lab planning templates
- ✓ Integration Tracker & sample timelines
- ✓ Proximity mapping exercises
- ✓ Tools to embed community voice into leadership, strategy, and operations



## Resources & Case Studies

### Recommended Reading:

- Palaces for the People by Eric Klinenberg
- Mutualism by Sara Horowitz
- Emergent Strategy by adrienne maree brown

### Example in Action:

A youth services nonprofit replaced focus groups with paid Youth Design Teams who shaped program content. Retention rose by 40% in one year.

## Recommendations:

1. Make Proximity a Practice — Not a Project
  2. Budget for Community Voice
  3. Audit Your Decisions — Who's In the Room?
  4. Train Your Team to Spot the Distance
- Reach out to learn more

## Next Step

Download the Full Workbook: [hallstrategic.com/proximity-workbook](https://hallstrategic.com/proximity-workbook)

**Work With Us:** Need help embedding proximity practices into your organization? Hall Strategic Partners offers workshops, consulting, and facilitation to help you close the gap between intention and impact.