

Margins Framework

A Guide for Strategists on Connecting with Diverse
Communities

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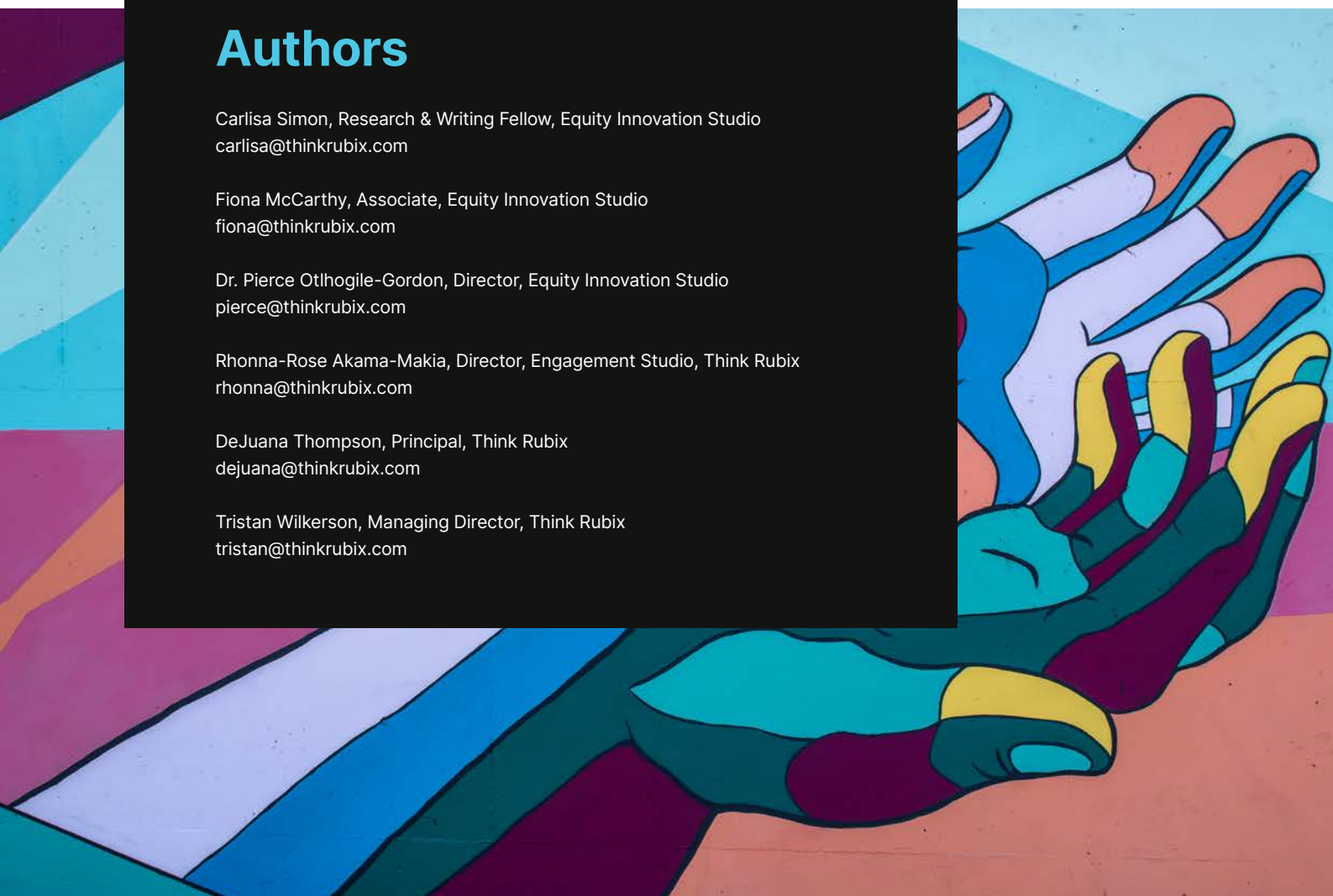


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Introduction

What is Engagement?

Engagement is and always has been an integral part of humanity - operating as the driving force for the myriad of ways with which all types of systems move. For some, it means a measurement of how many people interacted with your Facebook post. For others, it's how you measure voter turnout in your political campaign. It could even mean how you evaluate employee satisfaction for your company. The common thread throughout these forms of engagement, however, is strategy and the underlying question every strategist has answer:

“How well can we motivate and move people towards a common action?”



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In most realms, a good engagement strategy recognizes that people - the actual lived experiences of people, in fact - are at the center of the entire plan. These experiences can be tied to geographic location, non-traditional family structures, educational attainment, medical needs, accessibility needs, or historic marginalization, just to name a few. We assert that effective engagement with individuals of varied lived experiences takes [extra effort and accountability](#). However, far too often, such an investment makes strategists take the opposite approach - bypassing these individuals completely.

By redefining what it means to engage people, new possibilities arise for those at the margins, whatever those margins may be. When you do that, you end up with an engagement strategy that's more holistic, innovative, sustainable, and ultimately successful. Think Rubix calls this strategy the Margins Framework.



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Why do we believe a Margins Framework is even necessary?

Traditional strategies are not inclusive models. Considering the complexities of people's lives (i.e. employment opportunities, geographic region, socioeconomic status, education, familial set up, etc.) into the formulaic expression of engagement strategy shouldn't filter out communities. On the contrary, it should add depth and nuance to your engagement strategy. However, traditional methods of engagement operate on less interpersonal, surface level terms like income and metrics on past activity. The Margins Framework brings to light the relevance of how complex circumstances directly influence those surface level terms.

Traditional strategies support an unfair system. Not only do they exclude poor, nomadic, and black citizens, but it perpetuates a cycle where power accumulates to the powerful, because engagement specialists prioritize the status quo over a more representative democracy. This self-fulfilling method maintains a dangerous structure for the most vulnerable citizens of the country.

Essentially, **traditional strategies reflect our past - but it shouldn't be our future.**



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Engagement is an active process that requires caution before execution. Strategists, like ourselves at Think Rubix, strive to give helpful guidance on the best ways to plan for and execute engagement tactics.

Are you starting from scratch? Some are focused on building leaders without a sure plan of engaging those leaders into the community or within the organization once they are trained. Therefore, instead of building a pipeline inside your business, you build a bridge to their exit. Both can be addressed by holistically looking at your programs and strategies around engagement.

1. Read this resource as a “know before you go” type of guide - a new perspective to how you may have already been engaging your people. We believe that the inclusive and intentional nature of the Margins framework allows for all voices to be heard.

Are you looking for a new way to engage? Many organizations want to mobilize their group without realizing they lack a deep understanding of engagement as a practice. This is especially likely if they are only focused on the surface - how much it costs, which methods reach traditional audiences, and what your clients can gain in the short-term. A mindful engagement strategy makes the difference between accomplishing goals with lasting effects and simply scratching the surface of a particular issue.

2. Use this resource to audit your team’s current relationship with equitable engagement. By identifying where your organization is, you can build a plan to help either move further through the framework or reimagine what your goals might be.

Here’s the important thing: you are not alone.

If you need more support, The Engagement Studio at Think Rubix holds expertise in all forms of engagement: with any people, at any depth, with any outcome. We can’t wait [to usher you through the process.](#)



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Engagement is the act of intentionally and actively asking for and gathering contextual information, opinions, responses, and insights from groups of people to create and/or reach a goal. In other words, engagement is a charge to **“move with people”**.

Effective engagement considers the ebbs and flows of society and therein drives a competitive advantage and motivates teams to innovate in their projects and tasks. Much like companies who conduct market research before implementing a new product to their audiences - businesses, communities, organizations, and programs alike must engage the people they serve to succeed.

The act of community organizing exemplifies the science behind engagement and most importantly, serves as a base for the way we propose engagement. Community Organizing, in its basic form, is about empowering historically underrepresented groups to strengthen their stake in the policies and decision making that affect their lives. It is a testament to the idea that revolutionary work is not done in silos, but in fact it is [done collaboratively](#) - preferably through active and effective systems.

Consider the magnificent system that is your body. All the systems within systems that keep you breathing, seeing, hearing, thinking, and moving. The very simple act of blinking requires the eye to engage with the right facial muscles and brain impulses to replenish the watery fluid that bathes and nourishes the lens. These processes, although complex, are constantly in communication with each other. People within systems are no different. Each person with their specific expertise contributes to the movement of that system.

However, with every system, including the body, the way it engages determines its longevity and success. This is why we are here - to discuss best practices for how to facilitate effective engagement.

A prerequisite for implementing equity in your engagement strategy centers the person and all the components of their environment: their positionality, circumstances, social networks, community norms, policy, etc. This means that as much as leaders are engaging with teams and communities, leaders must also engage with their positionalities, norms, and policies. In the same vein, teams are also engaging with each other, other teams, and the leaders of those other teams - all entities passing along knowledge.

That is why in this model, we stress that engagement should be early and often because trust, in this kind of multifaceted structure, is built thoroughly over time.



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What Is The Margins Framework?

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Using the extensive knowledge of organizational development and political strategy, the Engagement Studio built the Margins Framework - a conceptual method that reaches outside of traditional engagement strategy to offer non-negotiable tenets for more inclusive engagement from your people. This framework does away with a “one-size-fits-all” way of engagement in which strategy is implemented without the people in mind.

The Margins Framework requires a specific orientation toward your people, as the main premise of this framework is to understand how to collectively engage people with diverse backgrounds, circumstances, and interests. To no surprise, those with intersecting identities and backgrounds and corresponding layers of oppression are also the least engaged individuals in political and community-centered organizing.

To reliably use the Margins Framework, you must first understand **who is on the margins and why.**

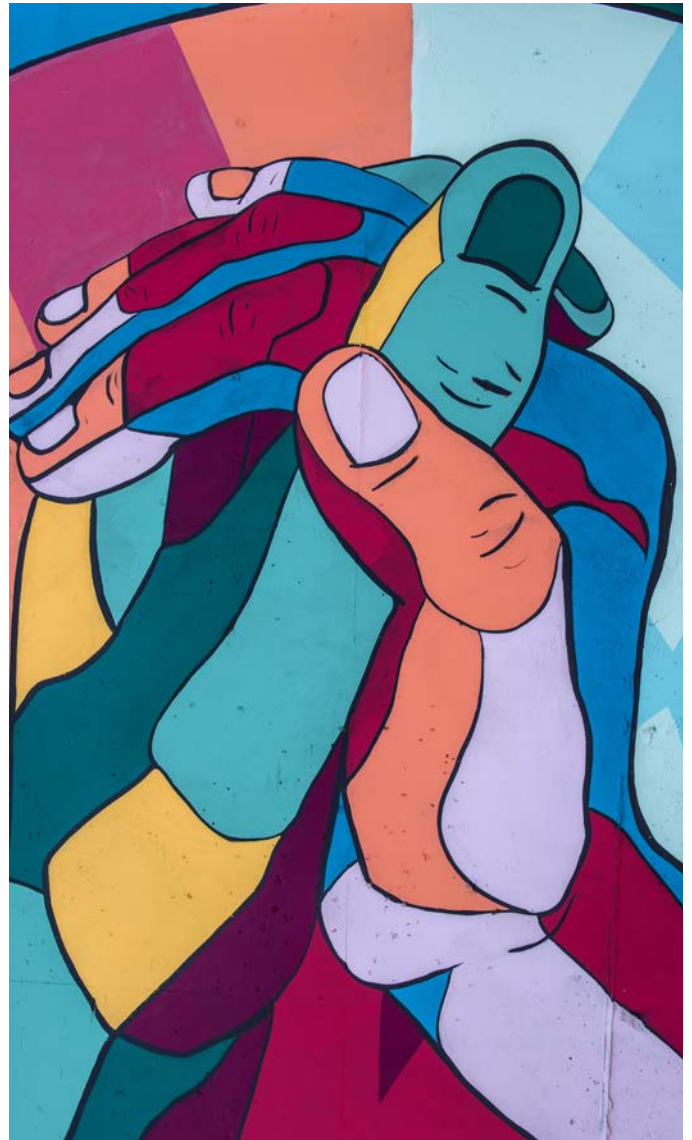


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In electoral politics, for instance, traditional organizing strategies around electoral campaigns operate on the widely accepted strategies that focus on **voter propensity scoring**. A [voter propensity score](#) represents how many times an individual has voted in a certain amount of elections over a number of years. Traditional methods say investing in groups of people with a higher voter score is the most effective way to turn out an election in favor of a particular candidate.

However, this method focuses on individuals with higher voter scores so heavily that it fundamentally blocks voter engagement with lower voter propensity scores - which to no avail also happens to include the historically marginalized.



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Here are a few communities this affects:

Black and Brown Communities.

Recorded disengagement in Black and Brown communities is affected by two main reasons: political figures make promises they can't keep, which erodes generational trust, and political campaign teams use a language style that doesn't captivate these communities. Black and Brown communities are collectivist - meaning they rely on trusted connections with others and value the act of "practicing what you preach".

The Margins Framework suggests [engaging with Black and Brown communities](#) using culturally relevant communication and resourcing this community to influence others in the same communities. This means tasking the work of empowerment and education to those with specific community ties.

Nomadic communities.

Nomadic communities don't receive fair voter propensity scores because voting score data is measured by the act of voting at the same voting precinct over the same amount of time. If you're someone who has moved multiple times for school, job opportunities, or to help family members, you might have voted at five different precincts over 10 years, which would be considered untraditional voting habits/behavior.

With nomadic communities, using the Margins Framework requires building a tailored strategy that emphasizes the lifestyle circumstances of this community. This means meeting nomadic communities where they are and validating their pursuits to follow opportunities. However, because traditional methods of gathering data on voter propensity doesn't acknowledge this group as a target community, it is important to understand who is actually in this community. A strategic way to identify nomadic communities is to investigate who would commonly be seeking various avenues of upward social mobility.



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A state with alternative party representation.

If you come from a state that is typically classified as a “Red state” or “Blue state”, the opposing party is not going to prioritize engagement in that state or even collect data on effective engagement strategies in that state.

Using the Margins Framework means you prioritize not only engagement in these states, but also education on your party’s aims and goals.

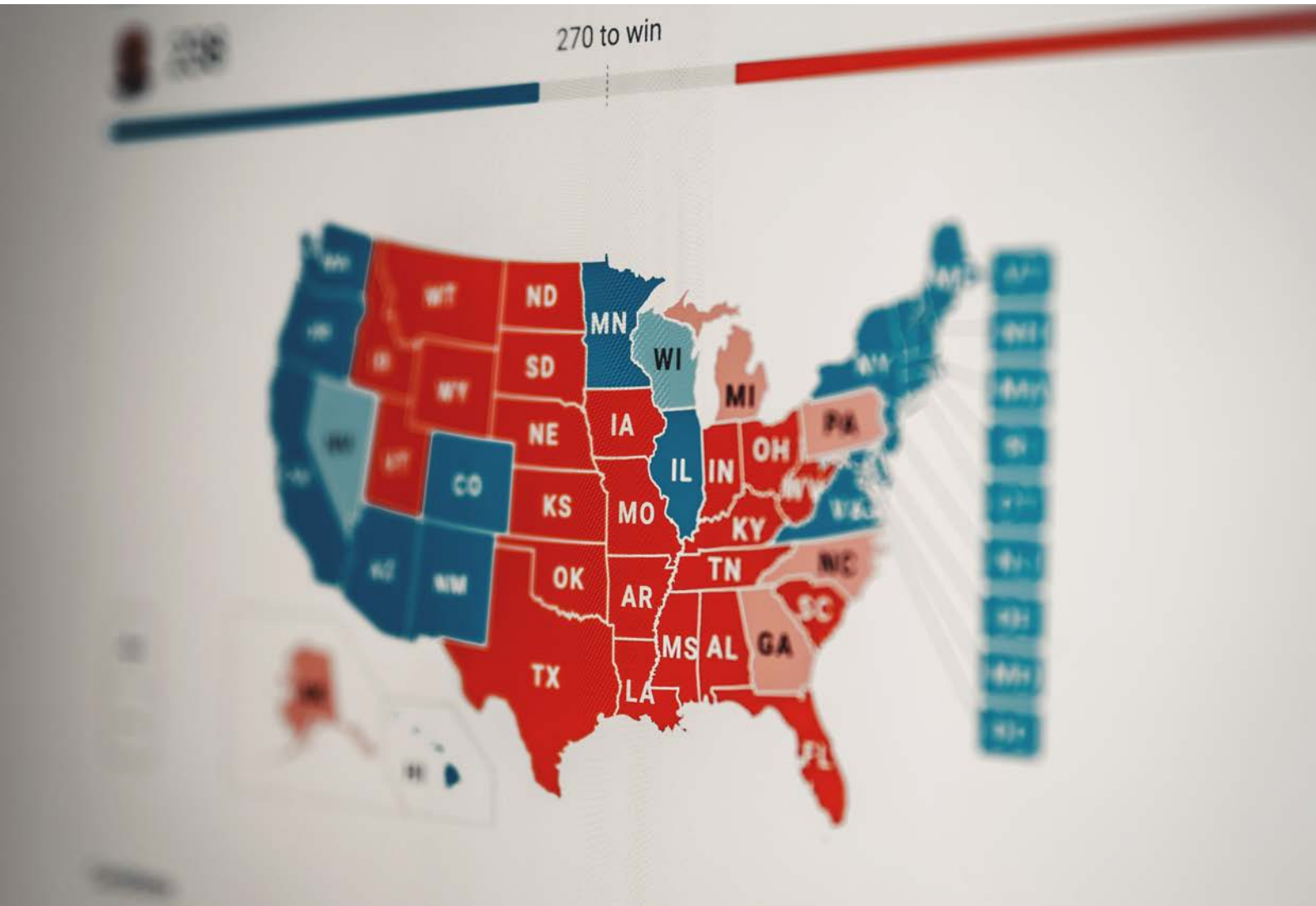


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Communities with less education.

A savvy grasp of American governmental structure, electoral methods, and political jargon is the basis for knowing how an election is run as well as how votes are counted. It is not within the scope of traditional engagement strategies to use accessible language to communities with less than a post-secondary education.

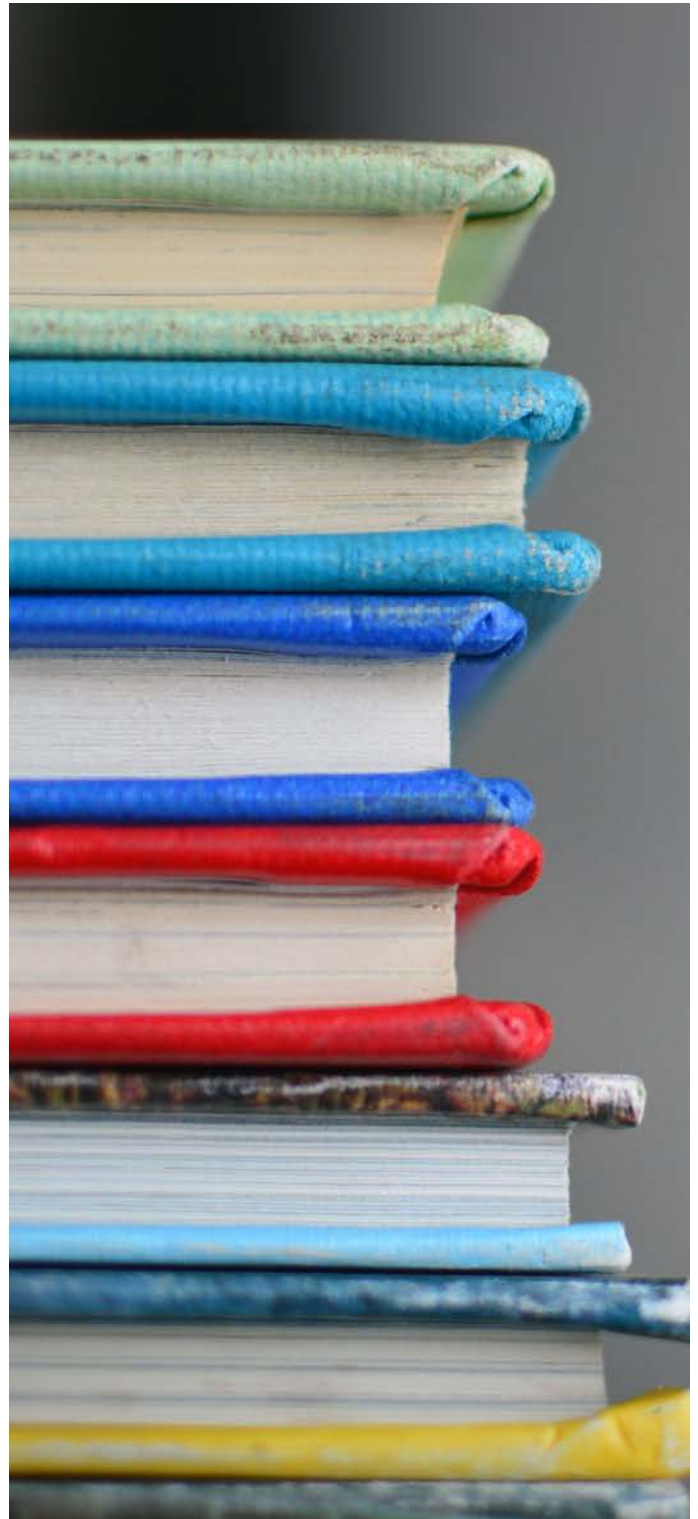
On the contrary, the Margins Framework focuses on the information communicated and the way that information is communicated. The value in using appealing visual graphics and straightforward language goes a long way with trying to engage communities with less education because it makes your engagement strategy more approachable and accessible, which is an ideal place to start.

In the political realm, the Margins Framework is a concept that deals with voter capacity as opposed to traditional voter propensity. In this way, engagement is centered on heavy relationship- and trust-building with different communities, tailored materials, and community empowerment that spark individuals to reach and engage others.

The Margins Framework offers strategists and engagers three main benefits:

1. richer and more comprehensive insights from communities,
2. a fuller understanding of how to address, plan for, and reach your goal, and
3. a better understanding of how those insights influence your goal.

From your internal power structure to your external contact, The Margins Framework grounds its work with the people in mind. This means building an internal infrastructure to support it but also a continual engagement process that is able to grow alongside your group and community.



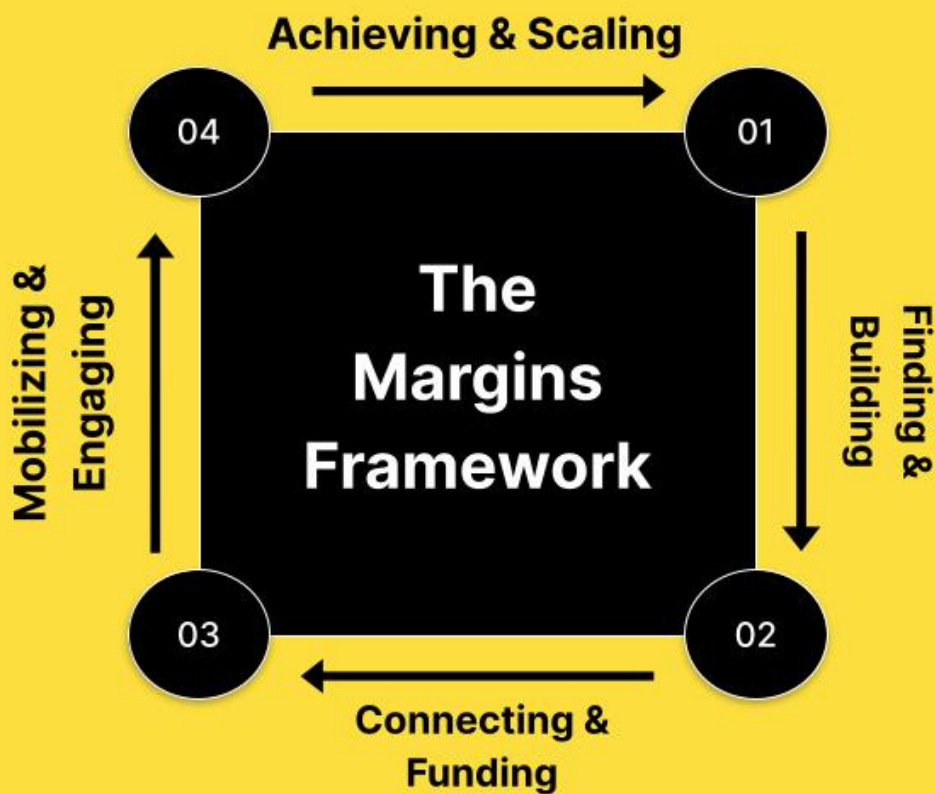


Figure 1.1

In our practice [from major company consultation to grassroots electoral campaigns](#), we have experienced a methodology that is compelling to those familiar with the practice of mobilizing groups. This dynamic has sifted into the foundation of our work around and with Engagement.

We have built a framework of how to engage explained in a four-phased approach (See Figure 1.1):

1. **Finding and Building:** Groups must intentionally commit to engaging leaders that represent a variety of personal identities, lived experiences, and skill sets. These individuals will bring valuable insight into the challenges and opportunities within their communities and therefore into the broader ecosystem of the community or company. It is important to build rapport with leaders as they are a connector between your message and goals and the community you're seeking to engage.
2. **Connecting and Funding:** Groups must build intentional relationships with communities. This means that donors play a role in ensuring that those in the most direct line of services are more focused on creating and empowering movements, rather than working to secure funding for their efforts.
3. **Mobilizing and Engaging:** Only with connection to the communities and solidified funding can groups provide strong support for those in need. It is crucial for communities to be engaged around issues most relevant to them before any plan is devised to provide support. At Think Rubix, we understand this under the principle that "those closest to the problem, should be a part of the solution."
4. **Achieving and Scaling:** In order to achieve scale, groups must invest in sound operational excellence for third-party organizations that engage or lead civic engagement broadly. That translates into hiring organizers, year-round, to support this work at full-time rates. It also means investing in the professional development of those individuals to grow into responsibilities that would expand the work. Secondly, there is a need to establish goals to support an infrastructure capacity year over year.

The Engagement Studio prizes The Margins Framework as the foundation for how we approach client work. An exemplar case study of The Margins Framework in practice is demonstrated in our work with political campaigns.

Outcomes of this framework have shown great impact per the [Analyst Institute](#), an organization that evaluates and produces reports on the validity and reliability of political strategy. The Analyst Institute found that our [engagement strategy](#) was 20% more effective than other voter engagement programs like [Rock The Vote](#) and in less than eight weeks, we turned out over 100,000 Black voters in Birmingham, Alabama and have had these same outcomes in other cities.

Our Engagement Studio at Think Rubix also sees traditional - and harmful - engagement methodologies utilized in organizational development as well. Companies commit to boosting engagement but rely on [comfortable and immediate](#) solutions to deep systemic issues. The Margins Framework starts with the willingness to engage the segments of society that traditional engagement strategy neglects because of a biased, selective criteria.



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The Margins Framework offers an engagement strategy that caters to a full range of people - not by being general with metrics of past activity, but by being specific and attentive to the people, instead of the outcome.

Here are some critical principles to consider when building out your strategy to include the Margins Framework:

1. **The Framework requires you to understand your personal relationship with the community you're influencing.** Before you can successfully build any engagement strategy, you need to be clear on who you are trying to serve. Often when we think/train about engagement, we only talk about the "external" mechanics, not the internal work - foundation building as critical preparation. You have to also discuss your internal relationship with the community you are wanting to mobilize whether that is an electoral base, a department, or a community.

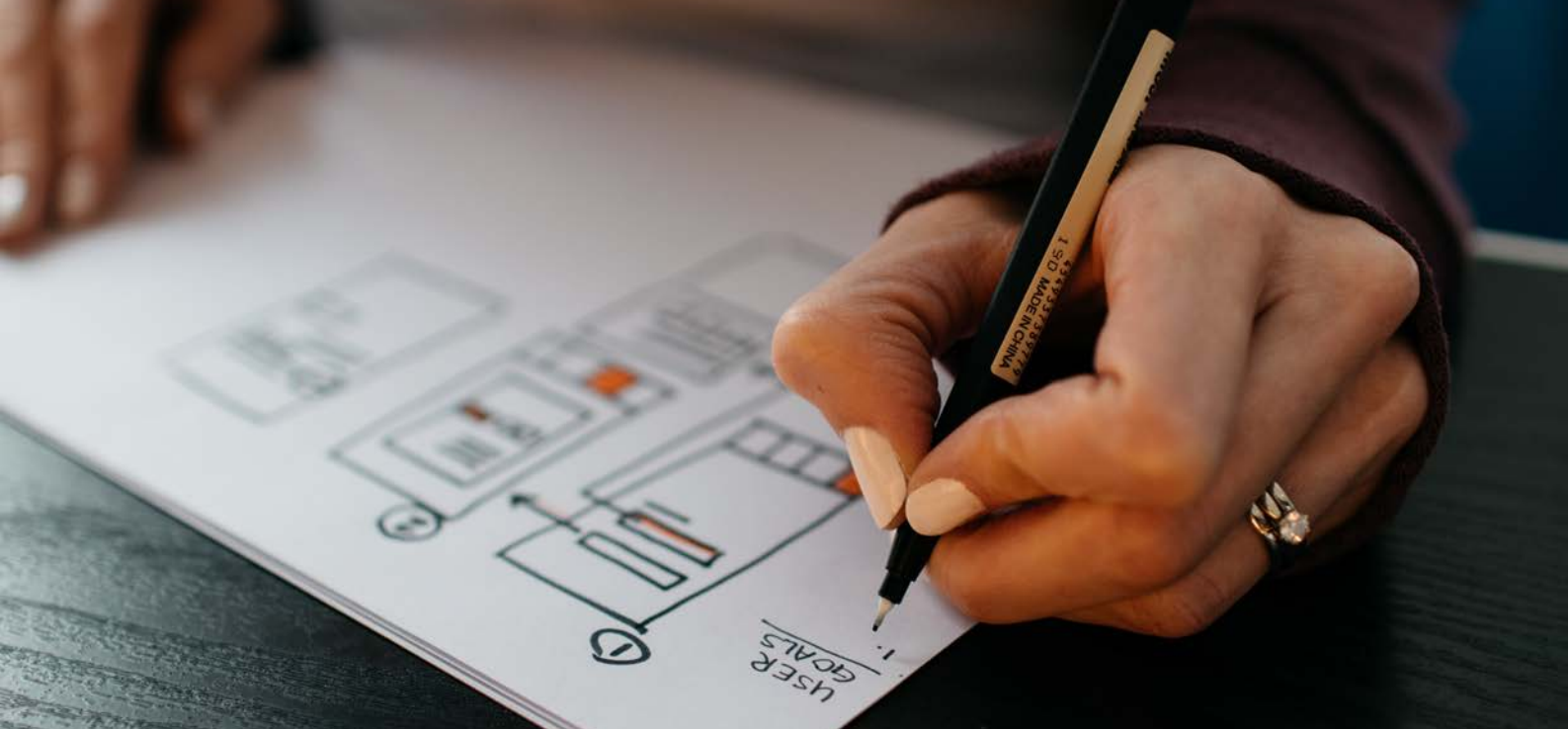


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2. **The Framework requires you to be clear and transparent with the goal + process.** While the process to achieve your goals can be flexible and involving, you have to be clear on your intended purpose and how you imagine achieving that purpose. We discuss this in regards to [work-from home strategies](#).
3. **The Framework deems trust as a requirement to success.** In traditional forms of engagement, especially within the nonprofit industry between communities and “pop-up shops” like organizations, you see the seeds of distrust - when organizations approach community spaces, gather the knowledge, and leave. Our framework requires early and intentional investments to build sustainable things not only within the teams but the communities they may serve.
4. **The Framework recognizes everyone's context and relationship with the work.** People do not show up through simply one of their identities. Therefore, when people interact with you and your group, you have to make sure that you all are having a conversation that considers positionality.
5. **The Framework reaches + activates people where they are.** Top American political strategists believe the safest and most reliable way of securing an election is to invest resources into the groups that have the highest and most consistent voter turnout rate; however, low propensity voters are left unengaged and under-resourced - further continuing their low propensity voter score status.

The Margins Framework is a very powerful tool to comprehensively engage with your community of note. However, like any tool, it has its limits.

As mentioned before, the Margins Framework centers relationships as its core principle for engagement. However, it takes **invested time, resources, and transparency** - all elements that require specific infrastructure to execute. Admittedly, it is not easy to come up with an engagement strategy that feels individualized but addresses common issues.



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Many beneficiaries of social programs experience something called “compassion fatigue”, which is an indifference to charitable appeals for those who are suffering with little material benefit. This happens because so many entities appeal without a genuine and invested interest.

In the corporate world, “compassion fatigue” happens when your HR department consistently receives reports of microaggressions directed toward Black employees. If the solution to this issue is inadequate interventions (focus groups among Black employees, for instance), you'll probably notice they don't want to engage because your people have grown tired of showing up.

Without your full commitment and genuine interest, no true engagement will ever incite change.



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You Might Not Currently Have the Internal Capacity

Many organizations take on the feat of addressing their engagement processes without realizing what it could mean for the organization. This is why it's good to have strategic partners like [Think Rubix](#), in order to provide an understanding of what you need to move forward.

The bottom line is that you don't just need more resources, you need diversity of expertise. Here at [Think Rubix](#) we leverage the transformative power of culture and our vast range of expertises to help organizations, businesses, communities, and governments achieve equity in the ways they challenge and seek change from the "norm".

The Engagement Studio at Think Rubix challenges traditional engagement practices by centering those at the margins - those whose intersecting identities fall out of the criteria the traditional strategy sets as a priority.

The Engagement Studio started with the neglected and underserved: whether [Black and Brown communities who are marginalized in society](#) due to systemic racism or rural White communities marginalized because of their geographic location; the Margins Framework offers a strategy that caters to a full range of people - relevant to any entity, organization, or group that engages people to motivate or mobilize them to a desired goal.

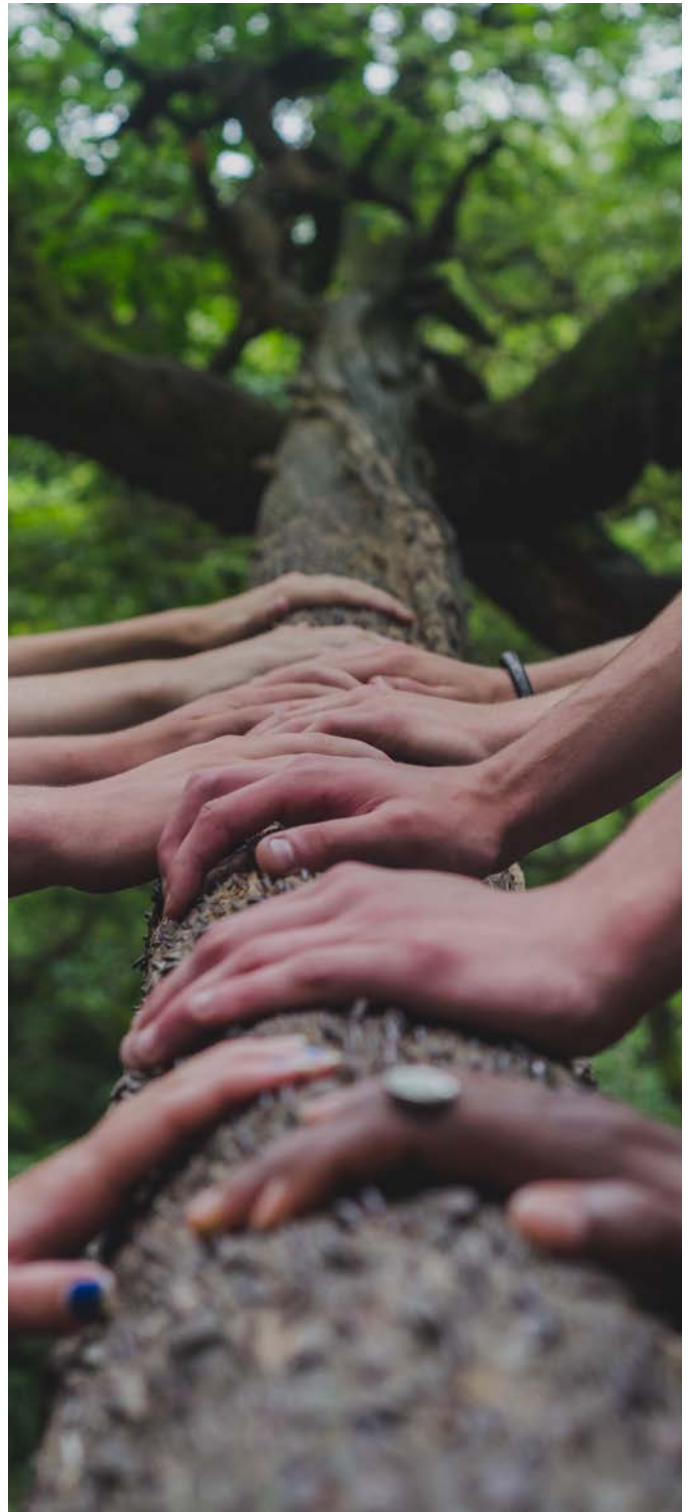
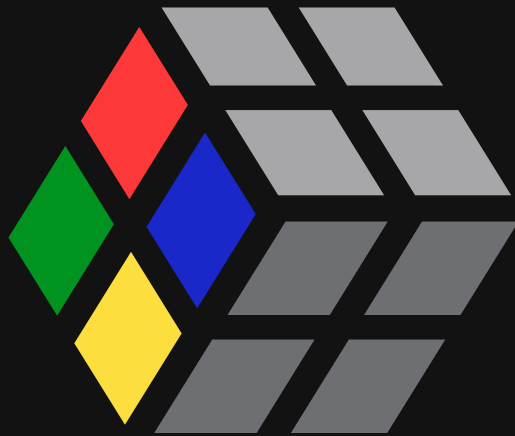


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