

Submittable 

TRUST-BASED AND DATA-DRIVEN GRANTMAKING

# How to Find the Right Balance

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# Introduction

As grantmakers shape their strategies and priorities, many are looking for ways to leverage data and build collaborative relationships with grantees. But too often, this is framed as an “either or” choice: either they can follow the data or center the community.

These are not mutually exclusive frameworks. Grantmakers don’t have to choose between a [trust-based approach](#) and a [data-driven one](#).

In fact, the most effective grantmaking strategy weaves together the two approaches to ensure that community voices provide context for data, and the data captures the lived experiences of community members.

Engaging with and understanding a community’s perspective requires buy-in from the community itself. Jonathan Schwabish and Alice Feng, authors of [Do No Harm: Applying Equity](#)

[Awareness in Data Visualization](#), explain how community involvement bolsters research: “This kind of buy-in—from members of the community, policymakers, and other stakeholders—can help the research be more impactful, relevant, and embraced by a wider audience.”

In short, a balanced approach powers a virtuous cycle. Strong relationships inspire more buy-in, which improves the research. And better research strengthens community relationships.

To strike a balance, grantmakers should adopt participatory or “culturally responsive” data practices. Researchers [define these practices](#) as “models which treat communities as research partners and involve them in the process from beginning to end, from defining research questions to collecting and analyzing data.”

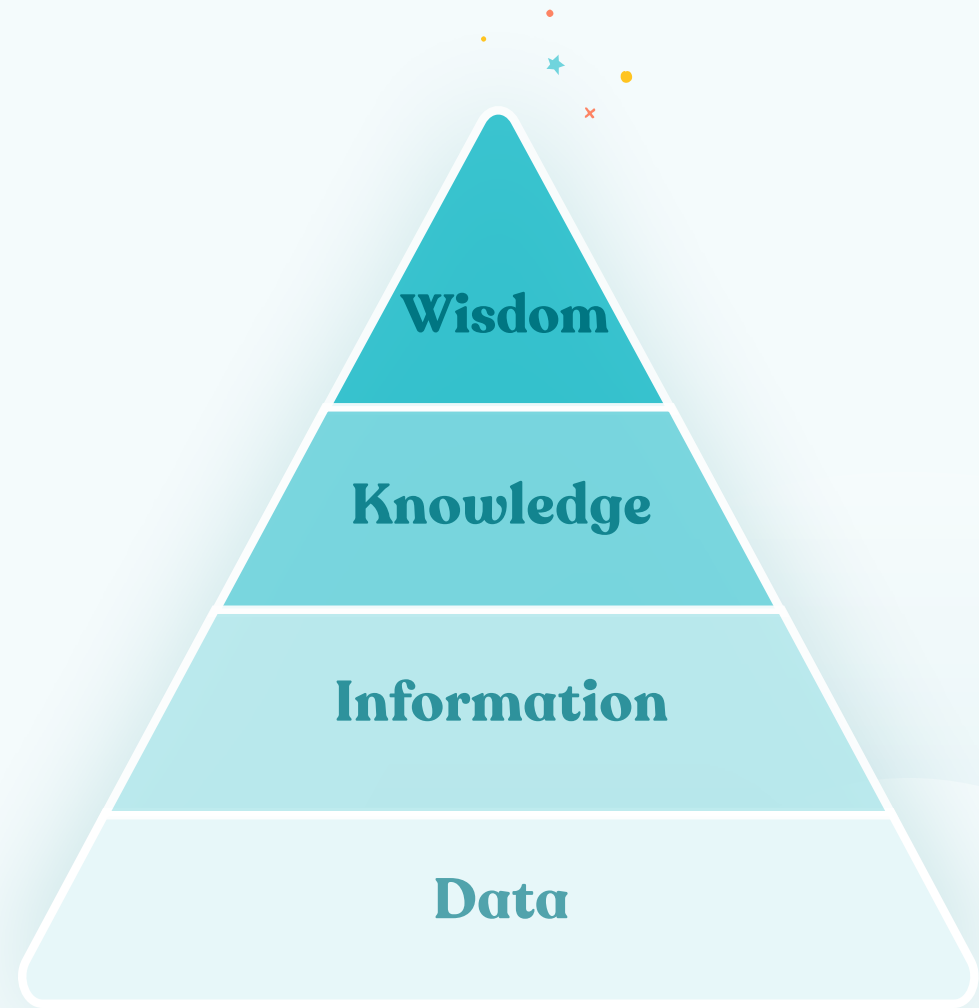
These ideas are exciting, but what does it look like to incorporate community perspective into your data strategy? Let’s dig in.

# Why community input matters

No data exists in a vacuum—this is a mantra in the world of data analytics. When it comes to drawing insights from the data, context is essential. Ignoring context can lead researchers to draw false connections, assume causality, and advocate for ineffective solutions.

Case in point: data without context has helped to perpetuate the criminalization of Black Americans. Black Americans are incarcerated in state prisons at nearly [five times the rate of whites](#). For centuries, statistics like these have been used to uphold the false narrative that Black people are more likely to commit crimes than white people. But the context tells a different story.

In reality, the discrepancy in incarceration rates stems from racist policies like [Jim Crow, the War on Drugs, and “stop and frisk”](#) policing. Without understanding this context, researchers might focus their work on personal behavior rather than systemic change and in turn help to support more racist policies.



In the world of social impact, community input is an important lever to provide context for data. No matter how much data you collect, without community input, it might not mean much. You want to understand how the metrics you track fit into a broader story. For instance, it's community voices that have helped illuminate the true lived experiences of Black Americans and the systemic racism that shapes their interactions with the criminal justice system.

Without community voices your team might struggle to ensure that the data you collect:

- Reflects the **lived experiences** of community members
- Fully captures the success or failure of a program or initiative
- Accurately connects conditions to broader systemic forces

Plus, if the community feels included, there's a much higher chance that they will embrace new programs informed by your data insights.





# How **community perspective** can help you understand your data

Structuring your data strategy to include community input is essential to **advancing equity**. It allows you to center the lived experiences of the people you serve, which enables you to make real, lasting change. Here are five ways incorporating community perspectives can help you make a bigger impact.



# 1 Provide context around an issue

No one better comprehends the complexities of how problems intersect and overlap than the people most directly impacted.

Community members can help grantmakers better understand the social, political, historical, and personal contexts of issues. They can also articulate the ways systemic oppression and injustice impact their daily lives. Without that perspective, funders might overlook the root causes of a problem and invest in programs that only address its symptoms.

Taking time to understand the complexities of the problems communities face is the only way funders will craft solutions that support lasting progress.

## COMMUNITY FEEDBACK IN ACTION

### City planning in Wisconsin

[Comprehensive neighborhood planning in the city of Madison](#) started with community feedback. By consulting with neighborhood residents, city planners learned how racial disparities between neighborhoods created barriers for communities of color. This context helped the city team craft plans to address these disparities directly. In response, they created more complete neighborhoods with access to affordable housing and community resources like public transportation, parks, schools, and libraries.



Photos courtesy of the City of Madison.

## 2 Clarify attribution

No matter what causes your organization seeks to address, other forces are at play making and preventing change. If you don't account for those forces, you might misinterpret the data that ties your work to specific outcomes.

For instance, an organization battling food insecurity might measure their impact partly based on anonymous community surveys that ask about food access. But what if Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefit requirements suddenly shift to become more stringent? Food insecurity might go up, but that's not because the organization's programs are suddenly ineffective. On the flip side, if local schools shift from a needs-based free lunch program to one that's available for all students, food insecurity might go down, but the organization can't take all the credit.

Misinterpretations like these can have real consequences. Many grantmakers shape future programs and funding priorities around solutions that have proven to be effective. If funders aren't getting a clear picture of how their work fits into broader efforts to make change, they might prioritize programs that aren't effective and underfund programs that are.

Community members can play an integral role in helping funders understand the complex relationships between efforts to make change and their results.

### COMMUNITY FEEDBACK IN ACTION

#### Improving sustainability in Rajasthan

The [Foundation for Ecological Security](#) focuses on “helping local communities successfully manage their resources in ways that build livelihood security for even the most poor and marginalized.” Seeking feedback from community members in Rajasthan, India, the foundation team learned that some of the barriers to progress were government agencies. Based on these revelations, they shifted from focusing on livestock practices to more systemic levers of change such as building coalitions with government agencies and private corporations.



*Photo courtesy of Foundation for Ecological Security.*



### 3 Explore what can't be measured

Quantitative data is essential for tracking progress. But often there are aspects of impact that don't fit neatly into metrics. Seeking out community perspectives can give your team a fuller picture of how your programs are making an impact.

One example of an insight that's difficult to quantify is the community attitude towards your efforts. Do they trust your organization? Do they support your mission? If they don't, it might mean you need to be more intentional about creating space for dialogue and investing in outreach.

Community input can also help illuminate the unexpected impacts programs may have. You might be surprised by the ripple effect of your work. Making space to explore these unexpected outcomes will help funders get a more complete picture of how their work makes a difference.

Prioritizing qualitative data alongside the quantitative will help grantmakers capture the full effect of their programs.

#### COMMUNITY FEEDBACK IN ACTION

### Providing post-harvest loans in Nigeria

[The Taimaka Project](#), which works with rural communities to address hunger and malnutrition, sought feedback from women who took part in their post-harvest loan program. This qualitative data provided unique insight into some aspects of their impact that weren't captured in quantitative data, such as the emotional and mental effect of financial stability.



Photo courtesy of the Taimaka Project.

## 4 Connect inputs to outputs and outcomes

Your data might not show clear [connections between inputs, outputs, and outcomes](#). It's important to understand how the investments you make lead to lasting change, but this can be hard to track from quantitative data alone.

Community members are well poised to understand how a grantmaker's funding contributes to long-term outcomes. They are closest to the issues and they have the historical and cultural insights that can help clarify causal relationships.

Tying inputs to outputs and outcomes is an important piece of measuring impact. Community perspective is invaluable in making these connections.

### COMMUNITY FEEDBACK IN ACTION

#### Assessing anti-drug campaigns in Minnesota

[The Minnesota Prevention Resource Center](#) used a community forum to evaluate the effectiveness of programs to prevent drug abuse in their rural community. Community members gathered to discuss impacts of anti-drug campaigns. This open forum allowed for constructive dialogue and provided clarity about how programs were making an impact, where, and for whom. Stakeholders from different sectors shared their perspectives. For instance, spokespeople from within the school system shared how drug prevention efforts were playing out specifically on school grounds.



Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Prevention Resource Center.

## 5 Identify inaccurate or missing data

Sometimes you don't know what you don't know. This can be a big problem for funders. It's easy to assume your data captures the full story when it doesn't. And you might not have any way of knowing if you don't have community input.

Community members can provide an essential gut check. They can speak to whether data reflects the realities they see in their lives as well as in the lives of people around them. Without their input you might be relying on metrics that severely misrepresent what's actually happening.

Funders shouldn't overlook the role community members can play in ensuring data is accurate and thorough.



Photos courtesy of the Urban Institute.

### COMMUNITY FEEDBACK IN ACTION

#### Hosting data walks across the U.S.

[The Urban Institute hosts a data walk](#), an event to engage community stakeholders in the research process. This is a great way to involve community members by creating space for dialogue and providing residents the tools they need to “ground their own personal experience and observations in data from the larger community.” It also allows researchers to tap into the unique insights that community members can provide.

During one of the Urban Institute's data walks, participants had a strong reaction to a poster that highlighted how many adults struggled to put and keep food on the table for themselves and their families. Multiple people spoke up to share that the data struck them as inaccurate. They believed that some survey respondents were likely nervous to admit they struggled with food insecurity and underreported their need. In response, service providers did more outreach to community members and adjusted their approach to delivering aid.



# How to incorporate community perspective into your data strategy

Combining a trust-based approach with a data-driven one requires intention, strategy, and iteration. Here's how to get started.



## 1 Build relationships with community members

Data should not be something your organization extracts from the community. Instead, your team should work to build relationships rooted in collaboration and dialogue. This requires you to involve community members from the very beginning.

To involve community members early on you need to understand how they communicate. For instance, if you're trying to connect with rural community members, relying exclusively on email might not be the best tactic. In rural areas, about [1 in 4 Americans don't have access to reliable home internet](#). It might be worth

attending (or hosting) a community gathering or event to connect with people directly. Community members are much more likely to engage if your team makes the effort to meet them where they are.

Before you start collecting data, your team should work to open up lines of communication with community leaders. Ask them about what their priorities are and how they see your organization fitting in. Be transparent about your intentions and invite community members to share their feedback and concerns.

KIM BUI, A JOURNALIST WITH THE *ARIZONA REPUBLIC*, [PUTS IT THIS WAY](#):

**“It is important to tell stories with a community rather than on behalf of them and to seek out what they would want to learn and what would be useful for them along with their concerns.”**



## 2 Understand community needs

Your research should work to address community needs. If it doesn't, you run the risk of creating an extractive relationship with the communities you seek to serve.

Make time to learn about what the community values and what priorities they view as the most urgent. These findings should shape your program's goals. Your team should be able to clearly articulate how the community stands to benefit from your research.

Be sure to balance long- and short-term goals. You may have long-term research goals, but you also want to be able to offer something of value for the community members now. It will be hard to get people on board if the research won't make an impact for decades.

Part of understanding community needs is being mindful of historical context. If community members have had negative experiences with institutions in the past, that might influence their willingness to engage with your work.

That doesn't mean you shouldn't include them. It means that your team needs to learn more. What issues did community members have in the past? What was missing from relationships with funders and researchers? Answering these questions will keep you from repeating others' mistakes and will help your team better understand what their actions represent to the community.



### 3 Consider how you organize and label the data

The communities you serve should be able to [see themselves in the data](#). First and foremost, use language that reflects how the community self-identifies. If you're using names or labels that don't align with how a community describes itself, their relationship with the research might feel contentious from the start. If you're not sure what these names and labels should be, ask community members.

You should also make space for identities that intersect and overlap. It may seem like a small tweak in terms of data

collection, but letting people identify as more than one race or ethnicity can be important in honoring their full identities. No one wants to erase some portion of who they are to fit into a box on a survey.

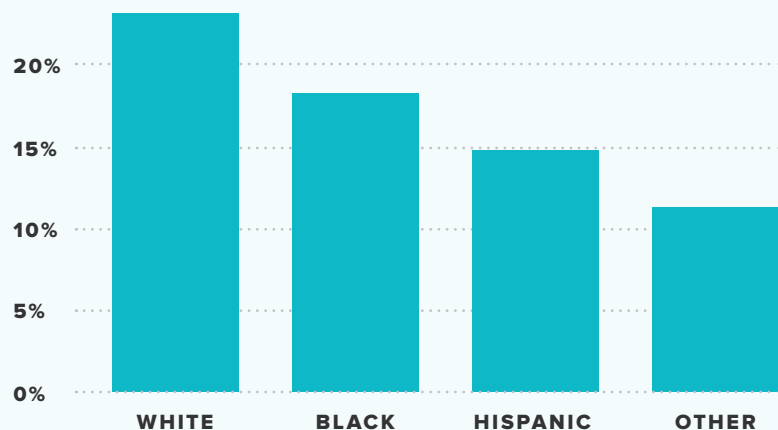
Though it can be tempting as a catchall, be careful of lumping people into an "other" group. That label can be very alienating and can show that you're not all that interested in investigating a group's experiences.



# How you label your data shapes how your audience perceives it

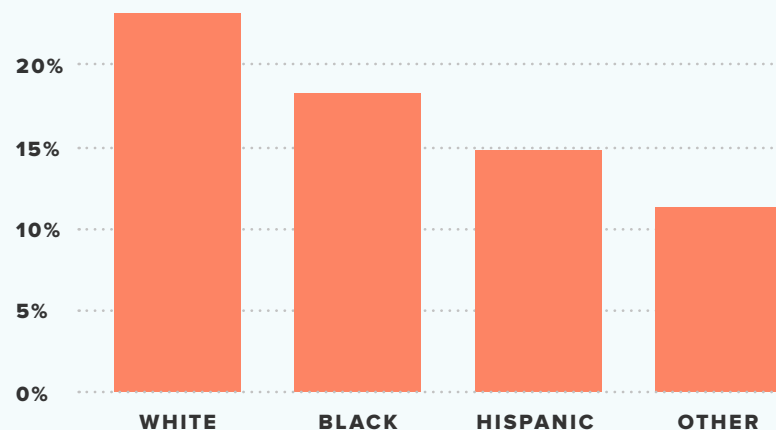
## MENTAL HEALTH IN JAIL

Rate of mental health diagnosis of inmates



## RACISM IN JAIL

White people get more mental health diagnoses



Keep in mind that the metrics you collect and analyze often represent people. Use language that centers their humanity. The phrases you use to describe the data can also do a lot to frame (or neglect) the systemic forces at play. For example, look at these two iterations of the same graph exploring the racial disparities of mental health diagnoses for incarcerated people. In the first, “people” are reduced to “inmates”, and the generic title obscures the findings of the data. In contrast, the title of the second graph names the systemic injustice at play and provides a clearer takeaway.

As you collect and organize your data, you need to consider how you represent small populations. If you use big units of measurement, you might reduce some populations to 0%. For example, Native Americans are often invisible in many state

and federal data campaigns. The [NCAI Policy Research Center](#) explains it this way:

“American Indians and Alaska Natives may be described as the ‘Asterisk Nation’ because an asterisk, instead of data point, is often used in data displays when reporting racial and ethnic data due to various data collection and reporting issues, such as small sample size, large margins of errors, or other issues related to the validity and statistical significance of data on American Indians and Alaska Natives.”

Being intentional about how you collect, organize, and label your data to reflect the communities you serve and make space for their full identities will go a long way in helping community members stay engaged.



Chart Source: D’Ignazio and Klein (2020); Data from Fatos Kaba et al., “Disparities in Mental Health Referral and Diagnosis in the New York City Jail Mental Health Service,” *American Journal of Public Health* 105, no. 9 (2015): 1911–16.



## 4 Prioritize data justice

**Data justice** is a principle that encourages researchers to consider data as a resource the community owns rather than something that is extracted. Instead of dictating how data will be collected and used, funders work collaboratively with communities to align goals, ensure privacy, and root out flawed data.

Part of embracing data justice is **avoiding the scarcity mindset**. You can't use data up. Too often organizations **extract data and hoard it away from communities** as if sharing the data diminishes its power. But this approach is misguided. In fact, viewing data as a joint resource can help boost community engagement and strengthen the integrity of the data.

This collaborative approach speaks to a key tenet of data justice: ownership. Community members should retain ownership of the data. Nothing should be shared publicly without their consent. Adopting data justice practices means researchers work with community members to decide which aspects of the data will remain private and what can be published.

When data is shared widely, it should be done thoughtfully, without putting community members' privacy at risk. Researchers should also avoid publishing data about a community just to bolster researchers' careers and publications. Sharing the data should offer a clear benefit for the community.



## 5 Share insights with the community

Before you publish insights you gained from the data collected, circle back to the community. Get their perspective on whether the conclusions you've drawn capture reality. To make space for this feedback, consider creating a forum to share the results of your research and open up dialogue.

Be sure to make your research accessible to a wide audience. If only people with a background in data analytics can participate, a lot of folks will be left out of the conversation. Give updates in clear, straightforward language, and provide resources to help community members engage with any portion of the work that is more technical or relies on a lot of jargon.

[Data Days CLE](#) is an all-day event that brings together data experts and community advocates to explore how data can be “an engine for building equity, reducing bias and creating accountability.” With training for people new to the world of data and presentations from government officials, research institutions, and nonprofits, the event creates a chance for residents to engage with data about their community.

Your team will also need to account for diversity of thought. As you seek out community members' perspectives, you'll find that the community does not have a singular voice. Your team will be responsible for balancing the range of input with the need to make final, actionable conclusions. Share these thought processes with the community as well, explaining how your team accounted for the diversity of thought you encountered, and how it informed your overall takeaways.



## 6 Build a feedback loop

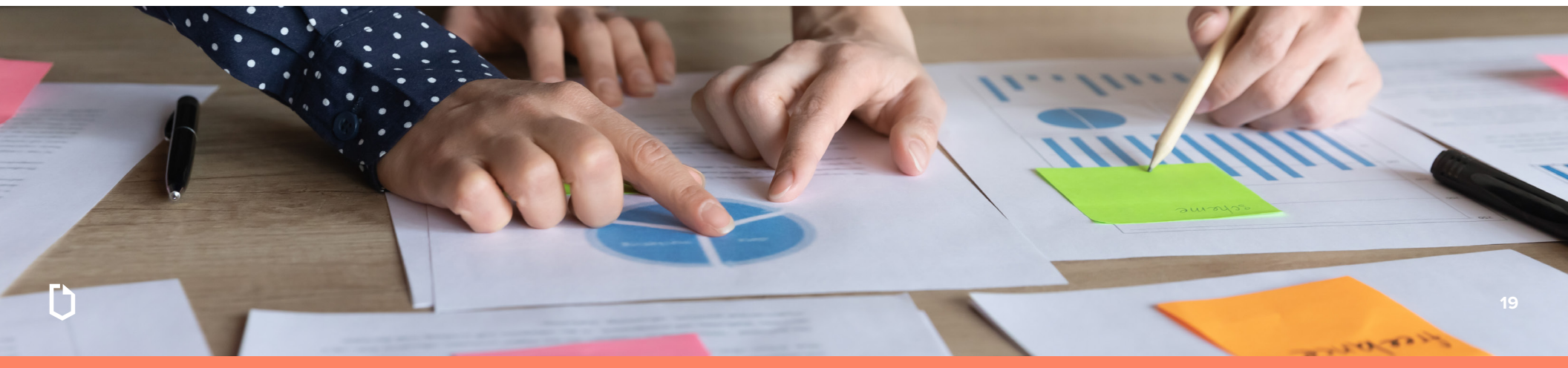
Data should never be used to discount or override community voices. As you look to move from insights to action, you want a feedback loop that takes into account community voices and keeps lines of communication open.

Just saying that you're open to feedback isn't enough. You need to build a mechanism for community feedback that fits how community members tend to communicate. A few options to consider:

- A dedicated email address
- Direct outreach to talk to people in person
- Partnering with local institutions, such as universities, hospitals, or nonprofits, to help you maintain these relationships

You're not only aiming to collect feedback. You also need to be responsive to feedback you receive. Community input should influence not only data collection and analysis, but also how you create new programs or initiatives in response to those insights.

**Don't think of community input as a one-time thing. Rather, view it as an ongoing process.**



## Embracing a data-driven, trust-based future

Grantmaking organizations can't ignore the power that data holds. Data science and analytics can transform how grantmakers understand their impact and reduce the burden on grantees. But without a balanced approach that centers community voices, your data strategy will likely come up short.

For some funders, part of the work will be stepping out of the binary way of thinking. [Participatory practices](#) and data-driven decisions are not mutually exclusive. It's time to embrace a new combined approach.

As you look to incorporate community voices into your data strategy, be sure you choose the right tools to support your work. Pick [a grant management software](#) that allows you to collect meaningful data and build deep relationships with your grantees.



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laura Steele is a Content Producer and Editor at Submittable focused mostly on the world of grantmaking and corporate giving. Her work often explores the connection between technology, equity, and social good. She also writes fiction and nonfiction. You can read some of her stories and essays at [laurapricesteele.com](http://laurapricesteele.com).

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