Community Design Principles

Introduction

Humans need community more than ever. But instead, every year, people are spending less and less time together. For the sake of our wellbeing, our happiness, our societies and our politics, we think it's important to address that.

Our goal

As the Together By Design collective, our goal is to *"make it easier for people around the world to create & nurture healthy communities"*. Our approach is to learn from community builders, and to bring the concepts and techniques of design - such as prototyping, user research and product development - to the domain of community.

Introducing the toolkit

Together By Design's tangible output is a toolkit, consisting of three parts:

- A set of **design principles** - this document - that distil the lessons learned about community formation. If you want information about *how* to go about building community, it'll be in here.
- A **pattern library** of different kinds of community building activity. If you want ideas for *what* kind of community activity to do, it will be in this section.
- An introduction to community design **techniques**, such as measurement, mapping or ethics. This section is for practitioners who want to extend their design skills into the realm of community.

You're looking at the first of these three parts. It's offered as a gift to community builders, and is free to use under Creative Commons licence CC BY-NC 4.0. All we ask is that you give us feedback at info@togetherbydesign.org.

About the Together By Design collective

We're a volunteer group of 25 researchers, designers, artists and educators, who believe in the importance of community. At the time of writing the collective is: Julio Angulo, Jen Bartmess, Rich Blair, Judith Buhmann, Jennifer Boothby, Nik Focht, Julia Fontana, Christian Gonzalez, Sally Grant, Hilary Hengesbach, Anja Hofmann, Eva Kaniasty, James Lang, Fraser Leggat, Nina Maurer, Jess Noble, Maddy Paige, Jennifer Pierre, Dan Romlein, Ahra Stadler, Sofia Strukova, Amulya Tata, Jenny Valero, Justine Violante and Joanne Willmott.

We'd also like to thank our pilot projects: Batala Zürich, Community Home, Gather, Neurodivergent Zürich, Dykes Who Hike Zürich, Männedorf Miteinander, Immigrant Mums in the UK, and Birdlife.

More information about Together By Design, including how to participate, at www.togetherbydesign.org.

How to use the design principles

The document is organised around common challenges that community builders face. For example, how to get started? Or, how to deal with conflict? In each case, we offer advice in the form of design principles: ideas you can use to guide you, rather than strict rules to follow.

Each of the 43 principles is structured as follows:

- Short summary
- Longer description
- Examples and case studies
- Where relevant, resources you can apply

To make the document easier to navigate, the principles are numbered by section, so A Simple Shared Purpose [1.1] means that this is the first principle in the first section.

Many of the principles are connected. For example, Warm Welcome [4.1] focuses on individual events, but is connected to Consistent Onboarding [5.1] which considers community membership more broadly.

Like all of Together By Design's outputs, the design principles are a work in progress. That goes for all of this document, but particularly the principles marked as Beta. We know less about these and are actively researching them.

Finally: the content of this document is based on case studies, literature, experiments, and interviews with community builders. Without their work and support, none of this would be possible.

In the design principles, we'll be referring to a number of real-life communities that we've learned from as part of our pilot programmes, case studies and experiments:

Batala Zürich

Newly-founded samba band; an offshoot of a global musical community

Birdlife Zürich

Birdwatching group, offering courses and events in English and German

Brighton & Hove Hockey Club

Under-resourced youth team of grassroots field hockey club

Community Home

Offshoot of Burning Man in Zürich, seeking a new base for their multitude of interests

Dig It Soundsystem

Event organisers and DJs based in Brighton, using a distinctive bicycle-driven rig

Dykes Who Hike

New Zürich chapter aimed at LBTQ+ women; part of the bigger Dykes Who Hike movement

Fran's project

Building community for new mums in the UK with an immigration background

Gather

Bringing people together around the wine, ideas and the concept of hope

Hash House Harriers

Long-established running movement with a strong social element

Men’s Sheds

Places for (mostly) men to collaborate on craft projects and talk

Neurodivergent Zürich

Meetup for people who are neurodivergent, in Zürich

Nobody’s Wood

Long-running underground music event in Sussex, England

Section 1

How do we start?

Starting a community project can feel daunting, especially if you've never done it before, or have struggled in the past. In this first section, we hope to help you be clear about what you're trying to accomplish, to set off in the right direction, and to dodge avoidable pitfalls. Most of all, we hope to help you to *just begin*.

In this section, you'll notice we refer to community builders in plural. That's because we believe that this journey is best begun with a small group of founders (two or three people is ideal to start with), who you know and trust. While it takes more work to coordinate and agree on what you want, it's more than made up for by the extra energy, support and enjoyment that comes from working together.

A SIMPLE SHARED PURPOSE [1.1]

Start by defining your ideas, the needs and purpose they serve, and the sequence to get started.

Description

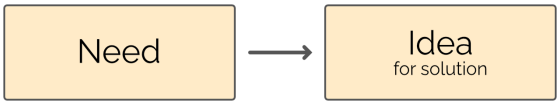
It sounds obvious, but it's easier to get started with a community building project if you're clear why it exists, and what your reasons are for doing it. Having that clarity from the beginning is helpful for several reasons:

- You'll be more focused, and less likely to get distracted
- You'll be able to communicate your concept more clearly to others
- You can be more confident that you and your co-organisers want the same thing - or, work through the differences in what you want
- Having a clear concept from the beginning will many of your subsequent decisions easier, such as choosing a name, or deciding on the details of your first event

Despite these advantages, we've found that community builders often *don't* have a clear sense of what they're trying to do at the beginning. Often, they have an idea they're excited about, a couple of people they want to work with, and so they give it a try, and see what happens. This can work, of course, but a little intentional planning and discussion can really help avoid early pitfalls.

Defining a purpose

In other forms of design, we often talk about starting with the ‘need’: the desire, wish or gap that needs to be addressed for someone. This is typically done through user research.



In community design, we’ve found that’s not always such a helpful approach. In cases where the ‘need’ may be hard to articulate; (perhaps because finding out takes time and research skills that not everyone possesses), we suggest a different method: start with the idea, and work backwards to the ‘purpose’.

The idea can be anything: *“a picnic in the park, that the whole neighbourhood is invited to”*, *“a support group for immigrant mothers”*.

Knowing the idea helps you to deduce the need *“people in the neighbourhood don’t have a way to meet each other”*, *“it’s hard to navigate life in the UK as a mother, when you weren’t born here”*.

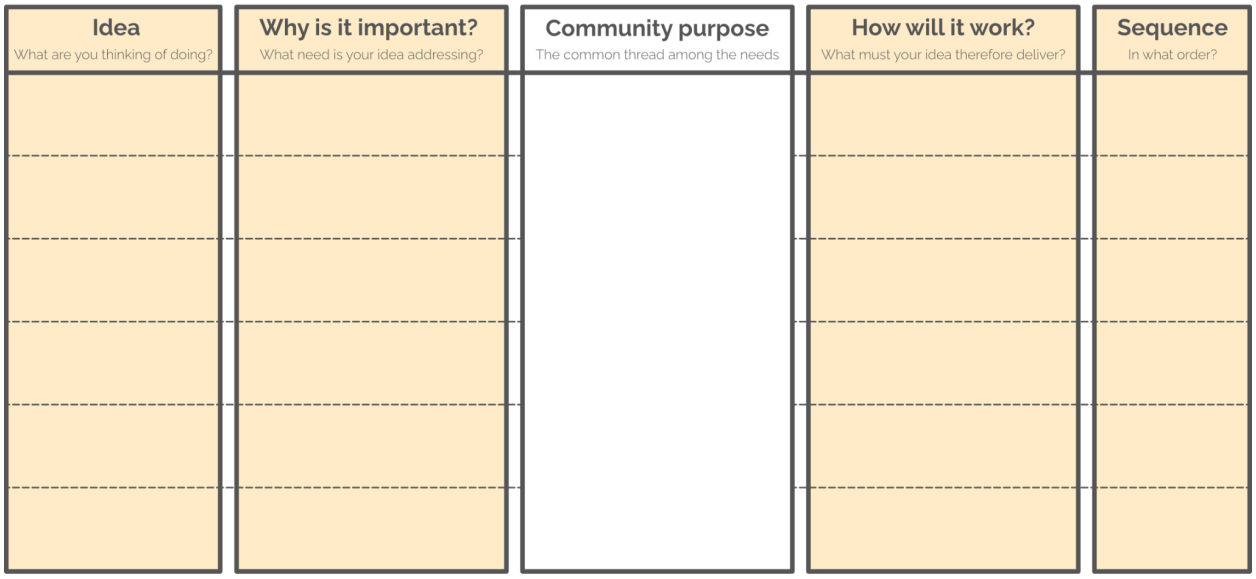
From that, you can define the group’s purpose as *“to help people get to know their neighbours”*, *“to help immigrant mothers find advice and support”*.

What makes a good purpose? The community needs to be founded around a concept that's not too complicated, that doesn't incorporate too many ideas, and that everyone in the group can identify with.

It’s also important to consider both the overt and implicit aspects. For example, a choir’s overt purpose may be to rehearse repertoire for a concert, but founders should also acknowledge the community’s implicit purpose: to support members in making new friends.

The community purpose canvas below can help you work through this process. Work left-to-right, building up your purpose from the individual ideas.

COMMUNITY PURPOSE CANVAS



Sequencing

Sometimes, the challenge with community ideas is sequencing: community builders have a coherent set of ideas, needs and a purpose, but want to do everything at once. That can be overwhelming for them, and confusing for potential members. Again, the community purpose canvas process can help: identify which idea(s) need to happen first, which would naturally follow thereafter, and which could wait till later.

Examples

Neurodivergent Zürich has a Simple Shared Purpose that's captured in its name. It's instantly clear what this community offers. In contrast, Gather is ambiguous, and it isn't clear what the Simple Shared Purpose is. While the name 'Gather' is evocative and mysterious, it doesn't tell the reader what they can expect from it: what need of theirs it might meet.

What's more, Gather contains many ideas: walking and drinking wine together, planting a vineyard, founding a co-housing project and more. To be achievable, and to make sense to potential members, the organisers needed to define their core purpose, then sequence their ideas, rather than trying to be so many things at once.

Hannah had an idea for a sharing circle for older women. She had noted that many of her yoga clients felt the need to talk about their experiences, such as menopause, or

relationships with elderly parents. The purpose of the community, then, was to create a space for older women to share their experiences with others who were experiencing something similar and could relate to them and offer advice. She started by arranging a first event, to introduce potential members to each other.

START WITH WHAT YOU ALREADY HAVE [1.2]

Building a community begins with identifying existing commonalities, assets and gaps.

Description

When building a community, it's helpful to start by taking stock of existing what's already available, before launching into solutions. In all likelihood, community organisers already have a wealth of resources to draw on.

- **Existing commonalities** are the shared circumstances, experiences, or connections that already bind potential community members. Communities rarely start from nothing - most build upon pre-existing connections. These commonalities might be a shared neighborhood or living in the same city, common experiences or identities (like parenthood, neurodivergence, or shared cultural background), or even networks from existing communities that are evolving or branching off. A community might form among people who already know each other from another context, or among strangers who share an interest or significant life experience. These commonalities provide the initial social foundation that makes community formation possible.
- **Assets** are the resources that the community can draw upon to achieve its purpose. These include the skills, knowledge, and experiences of founding members - perhaps someone is a talented organizer, a good communicator, or has deep knowledge of a subject. Physical assets might include spaces, equipment, or materials the community can access. Institutional assets encompass connections to organizations, contributions or time or skills, financial resources, or other established communities that can provide support. Cultural assets might include

shared values, traditions, or practices that create cohesion. When starting a community it's valuable to take stock of these assets *intentionally*, rather than assuming everyone recognizes what's available.

- **Gaps** represent the resources, structures, or conditions that are missing but necessary for the community to thrive. Unlike traditional design approaches that start with problems to solve, community-building works best when gaps are identified after understanding what's already available. This might involve practical needs like securing a regular meeting space, establishing communication channels, or finding funding. It might also involve process gaps like creating inclusive onboarding for newcomers or establishing decision-making methods. Addressing these gaps becomes a key focus of early community development.

The power of community-building comes from starting with what's already there rather than focusing primarily on deficiencies - which can feel critical and deflating just at the moment you're trying to build momentum and foster enthusiasm.

Examples

When setting up the Brighton & Hove Hockey Club junior team, the deficiencies were very clear: few players had experience or suitable kit. Rather than focus on the gaps, we looked for assets within the group, such as parents with coaching experience, cars for sharing to matches, and equipment for making tea and coffee to keep the spectators engaged on cold mornings.

In the case of Hannah's women's sharing circle, the commonality was a network of women with mutual connections, the asset was a venue (the yoga studio) that was available for events, and the gap was an event of this kind in the area. The picture also evolves: as time went on, one of the members lent their graphic design skills to help publicise the events. So it's worth reassessing the commonalities, assets and gaps from time to time.

DECIDE WHO IT'S FOR [1.3]

You should be intentional about who you seek to include - and exclude.

Description

Communities work best when they have a focus: the Simple Shared Purpose [1.1]. As communities are made of people, it therefore stands to reason that you should also be intentional about *who you seek to include* in your membership. This will inform not only who you invite to your events, but *how* you invite them.

Refer back to your Community Purpose Canvas (see page 10]. In this exercise, you will have defined a set of needs. As you think about who to include, those needs can give you a useful starting point.

The importance of exclusion

Because community is (superficially at least) such a warm and friendly topic, it can feel strange to talk about exclusion. But as Priya Parker notes in her 'Art of Gathering', benevolent exclusion of people, for whom the purpose of the event isn't relevant, is essential to creating a good experience for those who *do* attend.

Take the example of the woman's circle mentioned above. If it included men, or younger women, then at the very least the conversations would be different. Attendees would assume they had less in common, and likely share less and feel less comfortable.

For a bass guitar community like Bassbuzz, it makes sense that only people who are interested in learning and playing bass should be a part of it. If others - with no interest in the topic - are allowed to join, then it risks diluting a sense of community that's based on shared experiences and interests.

So on what grounds should someone be excluded or included? You can think through it with the following exercise:

- First, identify the things that the members should have in common.
  Example: the organisers of Dykes Who Hike Zürich decided that their members must identify as LBTQ+, be women, be interested in hiking, and live in and around Zürich.

- Then, identify any basis on which you would specifically exclude someone. *Dykes Who Hike Zürich decided to exclude people who aren't interested in hiking: it would not only be annoying for participants to have someone who wasn't committed to the trip, but potentially dangerous in mountain conditions. Including men - even sympathetic allies - isn't ok, because it's not what other participants will have expected when they signed up, and it will change the dynamic of the group.*
- Finally, there may be characteristics that are 'open to all' in this context. This might include race, age, beliefs, or other interests. For these aspects, diversity is welcome. After all, one of the benefits of community is to meet people with whom you share an interest, but who are different from you in other ways

Should have in common Based on your community's purpose	**Open to all** Tangential to your community's purpose	**Should exclude** Based on your community's purpose
Women Identify as LBTQ+ Like hiking Based in Zürich	Age Language spoken Interest in birdwatching	Non-hikers Men

Thinking through who Dykes Who Hike Zürich might **include or exclude**, and why

How do you exclude people, without being unkind? The best way is to be very clear about who your event or community *is* for. In this case, Dykes Who Hike Zürich would be wise to mention how technically challenging their hike is, and that people without the requisite fitness and footwear shouldn't join.

Be careful - it's easy to tip over into excluding people for reasons that are in the 'open to all' column without meaning to. When you start to promote your event, cross-check the description and imagery you're using against the table. Does it correspond to what you planned?

Deciding on focus: the 'rule of three'

As a rule, events and communities work better if they're more tightly focused. The more specific they are, the more in common that attendees can assume from the beginning, the less need to sift through the crowd to find the people with whom one *really* has something in common, and the more likely you are to see Safe Sharing [4.4].

That focus might be a combination of multiple defining characteristics. For example, we saw that Dykes Who Hike Zürich is aimed at:

- Women
- … who identify as LBTQ+
- … who like hiking
- … who are based in Zürich

That gives us four areas of overlap - its purpose is highlight focused. We can expect that people who attend will have a lot in common.

But we also need to be realistic - the catchment area for your group may not have enough people in it for this level of focus to be viable (see Anticipate Demand [2.1]). In that case, you may simply not have enough people to take part in events or make a community feel vibrant.

So how specific should you be? We've found that **three areas of overlap** is a good balance. The 'rule of three' seems to offer the sweet spot between specificity and realism. For example, if Dykes Who Hike Zürich is too specific, the organisers might consider:

- Dykes in Zürich: women x who identify as LBTQ+ x who are based in Zürich
- Or, Zürich Queer Hikers: people who identify as LGBTQ+ x who like hiking x who are based in Zürich

It's got to work for you, too

As you define the people you're creating the event for, it's easy to overlook your own needs. That's a mistake: the community will take its drive and direction - at least to begin with - from your own unmet needs. If you want to 'find your people', then taking your

own needs and preferences as a starting point in the events you host and the communications you write is a good idea.

Conversely, if you ignore your needs, then there's a risk that your motivation will fade away, as you're just serving up an experience that works for other people and not for you. In all likelihood, the approach that *you* are excited about is the one you'll actually put into practice.

So when you define your Simple Shared Purpose, and the potential members you're addressing - ensure you're taking a moment to consider *yourself*. Does what you're planning appeal to you, or are you just doing it on behalf of others? Your needs may or may not be different from the potential members', but they're just as important - especially if you're doing this as an unpaid volunteer.

Example

When they set up Gather, the organisers Kathryn and Dan knew that they would be dedicating much of their spare time to it: weekends to go on walks, evenings to plan logistics, summer holidays to scout out locations. If they didn't enjoy those things, then the community would be a non-starter. That didn't mean ignoring all the less glamorous jobs - but on balance, it had to work for them too. Fortunately - and because Gather is fundamentally based on the things that Kathryn and Dan find interesting - they get at least as much out of it as their members.

JUST BEGIN [1.4]

The most important step is starting, even when you don't have everything figured out. You'll learn along the way.

Description

Intentionality is great, but you shouldn't *over*-think it when you're starting out. Communities emerge through action and iteration, not perfect planning. It's better to

begin with what you have, learn from each gathering, and let your needs and the community's needs guide its evolution.

You don't need to have everything worked out

Community building is a journey: you'll learn as you go, and you can't predict all the surprises that await you. Instead of planning out in minute detail (which will be out of date quickly and invariably be full of miscalculations), we encourage you to to treat each event as a prototype, and 'learn through doing'. This approach is very much in the spirit of design:

- **Prototype.** First, take one of your ideas for an event. Work out how you'll approach it (see section 2), and also what you want to learn from it. For your first event you may just want to see whether people will attend. You might want to phrase this as a hypothesis, for example: "If we put on a Dykes Who Hike event in Zürich, and publicise it on Instagram, at least 10 people will attend".
- **Test.** At the event, note what happens. How many people *actually* showed up? What feedback do you get from attendees? What do you observe could have worked better? What could you learn from it? What could you change?
- **Iterate.** Incorporate these lessons into your next event. What will you do differently this time? Do more people attend?
- **Repeat.** Keep going: run the prototype-test-iterate cycle until you've figured out a formula that works for you.

Using this approach, you can avoid the need to have all the answers up front, and adapt as you learn more about what works and what doesn't. You can incorporate happy accidents - things you weren't planning on, but that work nonetheless (community rituals and in-jokes often emerge from these kinds of spontaneous occurrences). Working in this way takes some of the bureaucracy out of community building, and it's more fun too.

So why plan at all?

Despite the unpredictability, there are still good reasons to do *some* planning:

- It helps to make sure that your group of founders is aligned
- It helps you be clearer about what you're trying to achieve, and what comes first
- It enables you to tell a more coherent story to other people

- It gives you an advantage in identifying resources and opportunities
- It avoids misunderstandings and revisions down the road

Let's say you've reached the stage of having agreement among your group of 2-3 founders about the purpose you're addressing, and have the makings of a first event (the means to make it happen, and an idea of what you want to learn from it). Once all of that's in place, we'd encourage you to hesitate no longer, and dive right in.

Section 2

How can we find attendees?

Of course, communities are first and foremost about the people within them. But where do you find those people in the first place? This is one of the biggest challenges facing community builders, at least initially. How do you reach not just *enough*, but the *right* people, to make your events viable and deliver an experience that will make them want to come back again.

A number of factors play into this: the conjunction of your idea and the pool of people it might appeal to (in design terms, we would call this 'product market fit'), your capacity to seed events with your own network, the way you communicate your events, and the process that curious would-be attendees go through to engage. What's more, it's about how you manage your expectations: being resilient to the potential for early disappointment, so you can keep going until you've found an approach that works.

ANTICIPATE DEMAND [2.1] Beta

Maximise your chances of a vibrant event, by calculating how many people you can realistically reach.

Description

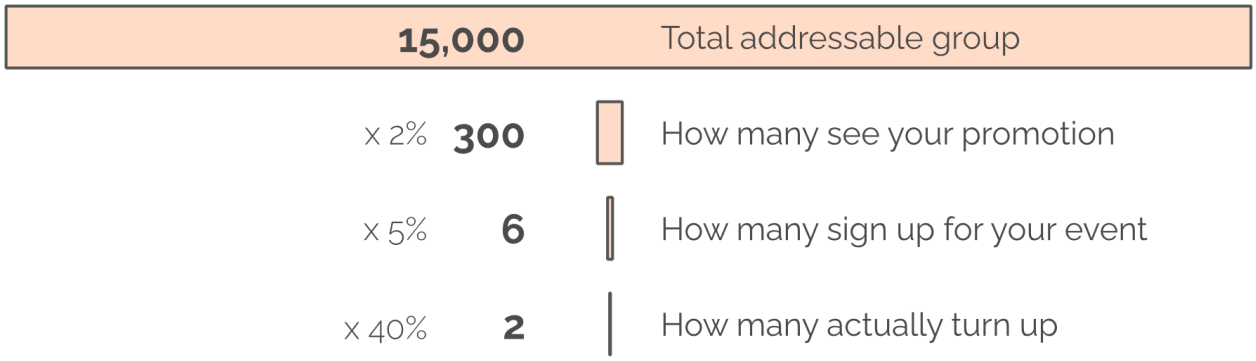
For many community builders who are starting out, their fear is not having enough people attend events. We describe this dilemma in Zero State [2.2]. As they plan their first event, they should have an idea for how many people would be needed to make it viable. For example, Dykes Who Hike Zürich believed that four attendees was the minimum required to make it an enjoyable event for attendees, while Story Walk believed that a number between six and eight was optimal. Batala needs a minimum number of attendees at rehearsals in order to practice its repertoire across all the instruments. Zooming out, most mature communities have a size that they aspire to (The Right Size [6.4]).

With that in mind, it's helpful to know whether an idea is viable: is it possible to reach enough of the people being targeted (as defined in Decide Who It's For [1.3]) to make it work.

While there's no formula that will predict the exact number of attendees for an event, there is a process that can help to estimate it:

1. First, how big is the **total addressable group** in the area: the maximum number of people who might be interested in, and eligible for, the event.
   Publicly-available information can help to do a rough calculation: for example, 1.4 million people live in the greater Zürich area, 44% of the population are interested in hiking, 5% identify as LGBTQ+ and 50% are women. Conducting a back of an envelope calculation, we arrive at 1.4 million x 44% x 5% x 50% = approximately 15,000 people. This will only be a very approximate calculation, due to the number of assumptions made and limitations of the sources, but it serves as an 'order of magnitude' starting point.
2. How effectively can potential attendees be made **aware** of the event? The best option is to find where the target group of attendees already gathers, and go there. Are there bars or venues that they frequent? Is it possible to post notices on the street? Social media is also an option to try: in Zürich, approximately 50% of people use Instagram, but that doesn't necessarily mean they'll see the event. In any event, it's best to estimate on the low side - at most, it might reach 2% of the total addressable group.
3. How many will actually **sign up**? Even among those people who are aware of it, the proportion who sign up will be low. People are busy and may be wary of joining a new group (especially one without a track record). Again, estimate on the low side, and assume a maximum 5% sign up unless there is information otherwise (for example from the analytics tools offered by social media platforms).
4. How many will **actually show up**? Finally, among signups, it's wise to expect no-shows. Meetups has a notoriously high dropout rate: sometimes as high as 60% in our experience.

Taking all those numbers into account, the actual number of attendees for a first event is likely to be low:



In practice, this means that ideas which work in some places may not work in others. For example, Dykes Who Hike London is drawing on a city of 15 million people, and Dykes Who Hike Brighton would be drawing on a city with a 10% rate of LGBTQ+ identification. In both these cases, the group may be more viable than in Zürich. In particular, it tends to mean that ideas which work in big cities may not transfer to smaller cities or towns, and that the focus may therefore need to be more loosely-focused (all LGTBQ+ hikers in Zürich, not just women).

The good news is that that this same framework can be used to help troubleshoot and improve the number of attendees:

- Increase the size of the total addressable group, by loosing the focus.
- Increase the number who see event promotions, by experimenting with different methods: try social media videos rather than just plain text or make your community more visible with popup taster events (Experiences Beat Words [2.5]. Join up with another local group to cross-promote each others' events or run a collaborative event (Movement Building [8.2]) .
- Increase the number who sign up and show up, by making the invitation more compelling (see Beacon Invitation [2.6]).

Over time, this calculation will change:

- Repeated experience will enable more accurate estimation of the numbers you're using.
- Tactics used to reach people become more effective (through trying out some of the approaches mentioned above, and iterating from event to event).
- A group of regulars is formed, among whom - if the event is delivering to their needs as it should - attendance rates will be higher than for first-time attendees.
- Promotion will begin to happen through word of mouth, as the events build a reputation, and a sense of community begins to form (see Magic Circle [5.1]. Word of mount generally produces more reliable attendees than promoting events to strangers, so the dropout rate will also reduce.

In the meantime, community organisers need to ensure their events are nonetheless a rewarding experience for them and their attendees. The Zero State [2.2] principle describes how this can be achieved.

ZERO STATE [2.2]

Expect to start small: manage your expectations and shape your early events accordingly. The reality of community building is that many "successful" first events rely heavily on the organizer's existing network.

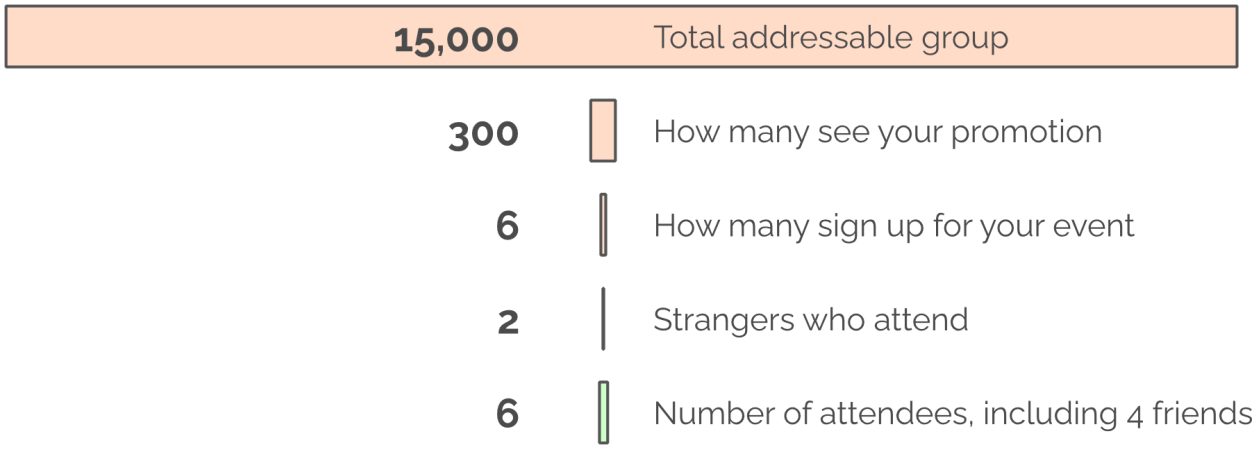
Description

While it's good to estimate demand, it's an inexact calculation at best. Early on, it's very unlikely that your communications will reach the entire audience you're targeting, or even the majority of it. Consequently, the reality of community building is: many "successful" first events rely heavily on the organizer's existing network, with true strangers rarely appearing in significant numbers for initial gatherings.

Creating a community also puts founders in an emotionally vulnerable position. They may feel like they're announcing: "I want more connection in my life, and I'm willing to orchestrate this structure to make it happen." This vulnerability requires serious expectation management - in particular, confronting these realities before the first event.

Community building is a gradual process where growth typically happens over months and years, not days. This mental reframe contextualises any early disappointment as part of a long process. Setting realistic expectations protects founders' emotional resilience and sustains their commitment through inevitable early challenges.

With expectations properly calibrated, it's possible to design what we call the "Zero State," or your answer to the question: "What should this event look like if absolutely no new people show up?" Instead of treating zero new attendance as failure, it can be considered a starting point from which any additional attendance becomes a bonus.



Consider seeding your early events with your existing network, to reach a viable size

A well-designed Zero State builds on expectation management with three practical elements:

- Firstly, founders should choose a **"Self-Sufficient Activity"** that they can genuinely enjoy doing alone, ensuring the event has inherent value regardless of attendance numbers.
- Alternatively, define a **"Minimal Viable Experience"** that works equally well with one person or ten, avoiding activities that could feel awkward with just one or two participants.
- Thirdly, activating a **"Bootstrap Circle"** of people from existing networks - friends, neighbours, family and colleagues - who can help fill out the numbers for early events. This isn't about fabricating popularity, but rather ensuring that the first brave newcomer finds a welcoming mini-community rather than just the founders, anxiously checking their phones for messages and cancellations.

Without these preparations, the emotional journey of community building can be unnecessarily harsh. But with careful expectation management, good judgement about the event and experience being created, and the addition of people from existing networks to seed the community, the first event will be worthwhile no matter what happens.

Example

When attempting to launch Dykes Who Hike Zürich, the organisers learned firsthand about the importance of expectation management and Zero State design. They were new to the city, without connections in the local queer community. When nobody showed up for their first event, they experienced the full emotional impact of that outcome.

Their expectations had been shaped by the London chapter that inspired them, which regularly had 20+ attendees. However they had not appreciated that the London chapter drew on a larger city (i.e. a larger total addressable group) and leant on an existing network rather than depending on attracting large numbers of strangers from the beginning. In Zürich, the expectation that strangers would show up in meaningful numbers for a first event led to disappointment for the organisers. It could have been avoided with more realistic expectations, collaborations with existing groups, or bootstrapping from an existing friendship network.

RIGHT PEOPLE, RIGHT UNDERSTANDING [2.3]

It’s more important to focus on building the initial core of the community than to attract a lot of people.

Description

When starting a community, there may be a temptation to measure success by rapid growth and large attendances at events. This principle challenges that assumption, emphasising instead that the early phase of community building should prioritize engagement over size, and quality over quantity. It's about creating a great experience

for a small number of well-aligned people rather than pursuing explosive growth from the beginning.

The initial members of a community play a crucial role in setting its tone, norms, and culture. These early participants become the community's core members, ambassadors, and cultural models. They drive the processes described in section 5: defining the Traditions [5.2], Shared Symbols [5.3] and Origin Story [5.4]. By focusing on creating an exceptional experience for this core group, founders create deeper alignment and stronger foundations for future growth. Conversely, by rushing to expand before these elements are at least somewhat established, they risk diluting the community's purpose and creating a less cohesive experience for everyone involved.

Taking time to ensure that these early people - those who deeply relate with the community's purpose and values - have a truly meaningful experience allows them to develop the right understanding of what the community is about. This shared understanding helps maintain community coherence even through change and growth. These initial members become not just participants but co-creators, which in turn takes the burden off the founders, and feeds energy back into the group.

Eventually, these well-integrated early members may become the community's most effective word of mouth recruitment channel, bringing in others who are likely to align with the community's purpose. Their authentic enthusiasm and clear understanding of the value membership brings to them creates more powerful attraction than generic marketing ever could. Growing through word of mouth and existing relationships also means the next wave of members is more likely to stay.

By focusing on depth rather than breadth in the beginning, community builders can create a solid foundation for later growth, ensuring that expansion happens in a way that preserves and enhances the community's core purpose rather than diluting it.

Example

A small book club that spends its first six months with just five deeply engaged members who develop shared reading practices, inside jokes, and meaningful discussion patterns before gradually expanding has applied this principle effectively. By the time they grow to fifteen members, the core culture is so well established that new members

naturally adopt the group's unique approach to literature discussion. The original members serve as cultural guides, helping integrate newcomers while maintaining the special qualities that make the group valuable.

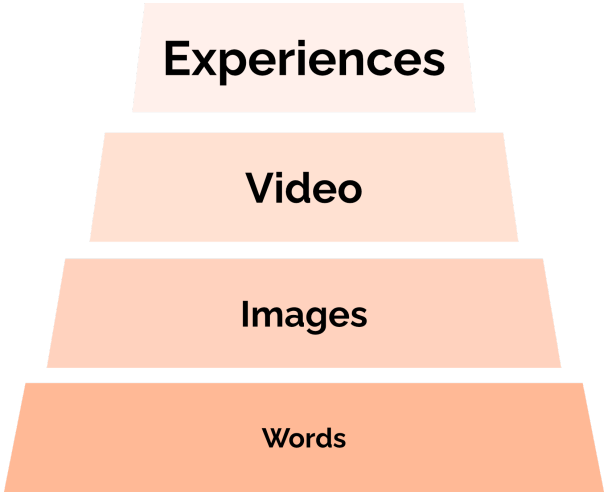
In contrast, a community that prioritizes rapid growth through aggressive marketing might attract fifty members to its first event but struggle with retention and cohesion. Without a clearly established culture and group of aligned core members who understand the community's purpose, the experience feels generic and participants don't develop the sense of belonging that drives continued engagement.

EXPERIENCES BEAT WORDS [2.4]

Experiencing being part of a community is more powerful than being told about it.

Description

What founders say about their community is much less powerful than the experience they deliver. Trying to describe what a community is about through description or explanation will always fall short compared to giving people a direct taste of the experience itself. Humans are fundamentally experiential beings: we understand and connect with things we can feel, see, and touch. Once we've experienced how a community makes us feel, we are more likely to 'sign up' for something that would otherwise have felt too vague or abstract.



Experiences beat video beat images beat words

This principle explains why outreach like pop-up events, public performances, and interactive installations can be so effective for community building. These approaches bring the experience into public space where people can encounter it directly. They enable people to experience elements of community events without requiring a larger commitment. It's also more ethical: people can make an informed decision about whether the community is right for them.

Examples

Hash House Harriers and Batala both apply this principle effectively by bringing their community activities into public spaces. When Batala's drummers perform in the streets, bystanders don't just hear about a drumming community—they directly experience the rhythm, energy, and connection that defines the group. This direct experience is far more compelling than any written description could be, allowing potential members to viscerally understand what participation might feel like.

The Gather invitation mentioned in Beacon Invitations [2.6] further illustrates this concept. Recipients reported feeling excitement and adventure upon opening it—an emotional experience that conveyed more about the community's essence than its

actual written value proposition. The physical, experiential nature of the invitation created immediate connection in ways that a simple text description couldn't achieve.

PATH TO ENGAGE [2.5]

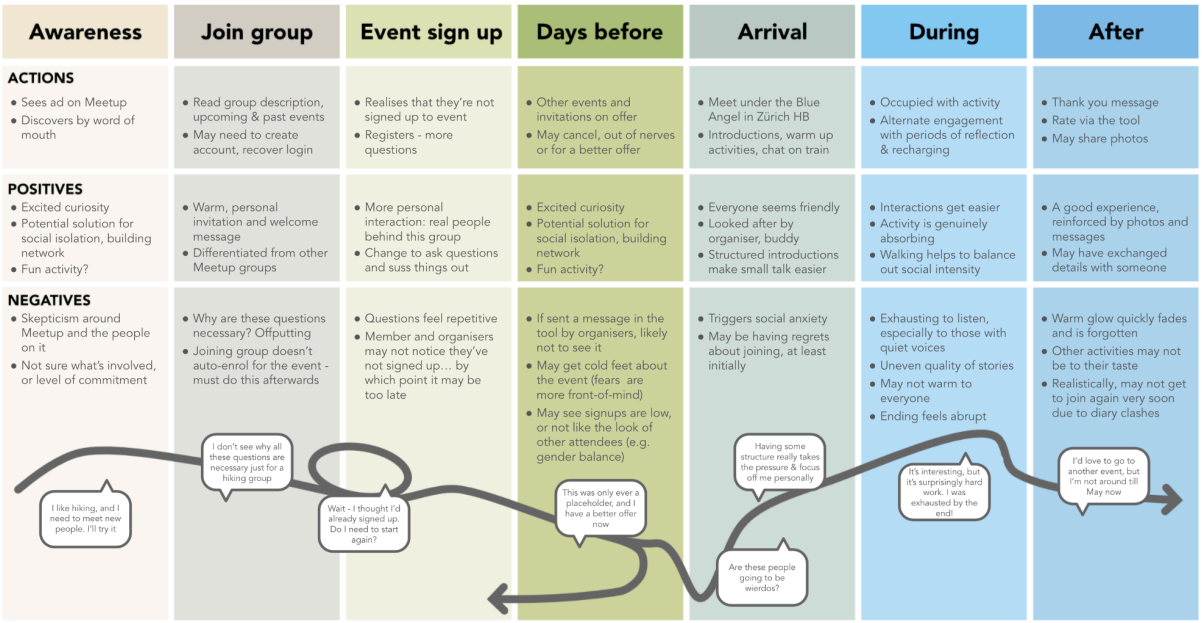
The community should show potential members how and why to engage with it.

Description

As Fabian Pfortmüller observed, at its core, community building is about giving people permission to engage with each other in meaningful ways. No matter how compelling the community's purpose or how rich the potential experience, potential members need clear paths that show them how to become involved, and make them feel comfortable doing so. This principle recognizes that uncertainty about how to engage properly can be a significant barrier to participation, even for those who are attracted to what a community offers.

These paths to engage serve multiple functions. First, they clarify the practical aspects of participation—when, where, and how to join activities. Second and equally important, they address deeper social and emotional needs by creating psychological safety around engagement. Many people hesitate to join new communities due to uncertainty about social norms, fear of rejection, or concern about fitting in. Well-designed paths to engage directly address these concerns by making the process of joining and participating explicit rather than assumed.

How do you give permission? It can be helpful to break down the journey that prospective members go on, the expectations they may have at each stage, and your opportunities for reshaping those expectations. One way to do this is to make a journey map like the one below:



An **example journey map**, from
Together By Design's Story Walk experiment

Effective paths make implicit social rules explicit, but not so rigid that they feel artificial or overbearing. When done well, these permission structures become enabling constraints that actually increase comfort and creativity by removing uncertainty about how to join in.

Examples

Men's Sheds create engagement structures designed for men who are isolated and might otherwise struggle to connect. Recognizing that older men are more likely to lack a 'third place' that enables them to engage with others (and that existing third places often exclude those who don't feel at home in sports and pub settings), this community offers an alternative - working on craft projects together - that makes interaction feel acceptable and normal.

The Gather invitation mentioned below also exemplifies a path to engage. Beyond just providing practical information about where and when to attend, it subtly communicates what 'version of yourself' to bring - signaling to recipients what kind of participation would be valued and appropriate. This guidance helps potential

participants understand not just how to physically show up, but how to mentally and emotionally prepare for engagement in ways aligned with the community's purpose.

BEACON INVITATIONS [2.6] Beta

Beacon invitations are recruitment signals that capture attention and offer a rich taste of the community experience.

Description

While most community outreach focuses on conveying information—when, where, what to expect—Beacon Invitations go significantly further. They create an immediate, tangible experience that serves as both invitation and preview of what the community offers. Rather than simply announcing an event, they invite recipients into a "call to adventure" that feels personally meaningful and emotionally engaging.

Beacon Invitations differ from standard marketing communications in crucial ways. They address needs or wishes that recipients already have, rather than trying to create demand. They offer an immediate sense of discovery and possibility—something serendipitous or out of the ordinary that invites exploration. They stand out, sometimes because of the craft and generosity that went into making them (such as hand-written invitations), sometimes because they invert expectations (such as an interactive object unexpectedly encountered in the street), sometimes because they are so personally relevant, and sometimes because they signal the possibility of real change.

Beacon Invitations work through a series of stages.

1. **Addressing a real need** in the recipient's life, often one that mirrors the community founder's own initial purpose for creating the group.
2. They create a **moment of discovery** that feels special rather than routine—perhaps through unusual materials, unexpected delivery methods, or intriguing presentation.
3. They demonstrate the **‘community in microcosm’** through the invitation itself, showing rather than telling what kind of experience awaits.

4. Finally, they provide a clear **pathway to engage** while signalling what mindset or approach recipients should bring to participation.

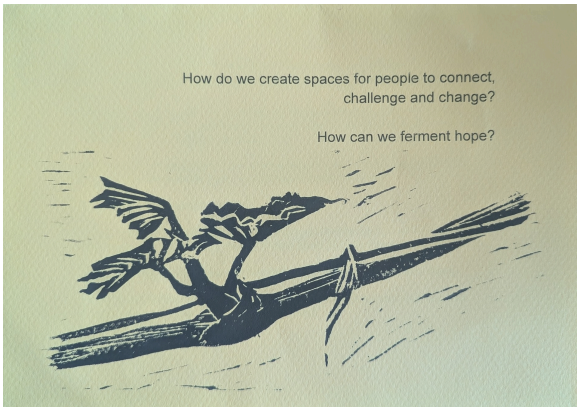
The stages can happen all at once (as in the single letter sent by Gather), or be spaced out over time, in several engagements.

Because Beacon Invitations tap into personal needs and emotions, they require careful attention to intentions and expectations. Recipients should always have genuine choice about whether to participate, without manipulation or coercion. The line between creating healthy intrigue and engaging in deceptive practices requires constant vigilance. They should be conscious of accessibility considerations.

These invitations work precisely because they're tightly targeted rather than broadly appealing. They may be rare, mysterious, or hard to find, emphasising rich, tangible experiences over thin or digitalised communications. By appealing to the senses and creating moments where recipients feel fully present, they generate the kind of specialness and care that makes people feel genuinely welcomed rather than merely recruited.

Examples

The Gather invitation creates an emotional experience—feelings of excitement and adventure, a sense of being welcomed into a new world full of possibilities. The envelope to Gather's first event is crafted from an old map, and contains a hand-made linoprint.



Slow Dance Soiree used simple chalk drawings on the steps to echo the design of earlier communications. It helped out-of-town attendees to easily find the building, and was in keeping with the down-to-earth, friendly feel of the event.

Stuffed Animal Contest flyers invited people to show up in a park to tell stories about their favorite stuffed animals.As well as logistical details, it gave a sense of the whimsical event, what to bring, and the playful mindset that attendees should show up in.

The TactIcons study showed that 3D-printed tactile icons, designed to be recognisable by touch, help blind and low-vision people interpret maps more intuitively than traditional textures or braille keys. For inclusive invitations, this idea could be adapted by pairing a small tactile token or map preview with a digital invite, giving recipients both a sensory cue and accessible event

information. Such tokens can act as memorable, low-cost orientation aids, making invites more engaging and signalling that disabled guests' needs have been considered from the start.

Section 3

How do we run a good event?

Events are the active building blocks of community. They bring people together, facilitate interaction, and create experiences and a sense of connection. Over time, continuity develops and a sense of belonging emerges.

Putting on events comes naturally to some people, but for many it's stressful and full of guesswork. In this section, we'll share lessons learned about hosting events: what to do, and how to organise yourselves. In section 4, we'll focus on the experience of your attendees: what you can do to create a sense of belonging and build community.

PATTERNS, WITH A 20% TWIST [3.1]

Using well-established community engagement patterns, but adding a twist that makes them both novel and adapted to the specific situation.

Description

There are few new ideas in community design. Humans have been gathering together for millenia, and so concepts like feasting together, dancing, making music or collaborating on a project are nothing new. That's a good thing - it means both that ideas for community design are tried and tested, and also that potential members have well-established expectations about how to engage. Our Pattern Library offers a catalogue of these community building models - such as Gaming, Seasonal Festival and Interactive Street Object - and includes examples for reference.

So why haven't we given detailed instructions for these patterns of community building, as if one were baking a cake? It's because even the most tried and trusted ideas need adaptation to make them work. Consider the 'rule of three' that we introduced in Decide Who It's For [1.3]:

- One part of this is the activity, as referenced in our Pattern Library. In the example we gave, it was a hiking group called 'Dykes Who Hike Zürich', which corresponds to pattern #32: Walking.
- The second part was a grouping based on identity: LBTQ+ women
- The third part was a location: Zürich

Together, these three elements give the event and community their character. The pattern must adapt to the other elements to be successful. For example, the way the organisers might promote or organise this hiking group might be different from how the organisers of a hiking group called ‘St Clairs School Parents Hiking Group’. Although the idea of a ‘community choir’ may be somewhat universal, the specifics of how this would work in Paris, in a small village in Mexico, or in Nairobi would be different.

Putting a twist on a long-established pattern is also a way for organisers to apply their own creativity and add their own stamp to an event. Doing so makes it more personal, and less generic. It’s also possible to combine patterns: the Story Walk events we conducted as Together By Design were a combination of pattern #32: Walking and pattern #32: Story Sharing.

In the longer run, patterns work best if they’re used together in combination to build community. An example might be:

- Start with a potluck dinner in the neighbourhood (#2 Feasting) to bring people together,
- Then organise a garage sale day to give neighbours a chance to collaborate on an event (#16 Circular Economy),
- Then see who’s interested in creating a mural on a wall in the area (#8 Neighbourhood Art),
- And hold monthly ‘clean up your neighbourhood days’ for others (#12 Community Cleanup) with a social event afterwards (#3 Revelry).

Using patterns in combination in this way offers people with different preferences a chance to engage, and people with different skills an opportunity to shine. It means events won’t get stale as they build more community connection, and it allows organisers to keep momentum going. Ultimately, it enables deeper connection via the ‘Different Contexts [5.9] principle.

Pattern Library

Our community design pattern library offers ideas for approaches you might try, singly or in combination. It's a work in progress (currently version v0.4): help us to build it.

Tr Traditions

The quintessential human patterns. Derive their power from the rich traditions and layers of meaning that they have accrued over millenia

1 Campfire
2 Feasting
3 Revelry
4 Seasonal Festival
5 Food Cycle Festival
6 Spiritual Service

Pl Place

Derive their strength from the unarguable affinity of place. Act as beacons and anchors within a neighbourhood

7 Trade
8 Neighbourhood Art
9 Interactive Street Object
10 Household Decoration
11 Nature Space
12 Community Cleanup

As Assets

Highlight the existing strengths of a community: what it can build on

13 Resource Bank
14 Lending Location
15 Workshop
16 Circular Economy

Cd Conducive

Ways in which people can be brought together, and given permission to interact

17 Community Hub
18 Street Gathering
19 Event App
20 Lifestage Connection

Af Affinity

Highlights the ways in which we're the same: whether that's identity, interest, profession or something else

21 Online Community Platform
22 Member Club
23 Thematic Salon
24 Professional Community Of Practice
25 Grassroots Community Of Practice

Py Play

Emphasises the active, creative things we do together, that bring us closer through the principles of accompaniment, repetition, shared struggle, safe sharing and the rest.

26 Collective Cultural Experience
27 Crafting
28 Making Music
29 Movement Assembly Stub
30 Team Sports
31 Gaming
32 Walking
33 Performing
34 Story Sharing

SE Shared Endeavour

Derives from the shared striving towards a common goal that expresses our values

35 Food Growing
36 Procession
37 Protest
38 Symposium

Example

Neurodivergent Zürich started as a single Meetup. Over time, it evolved into a diverse set of activities that brought members together for hiking, a book club and other excursions. These activities were run by different event hosts, and offered members alternative ways to engage that suited their mood or preferences. In each case, the organisers were mindful of the ‘twist’ they needed to introduce to the base pattern, to make it work for their neurodivergent members. That informed choices like venue, activity, introductions and more.

ACCOMPANIMENT [3.2]

Doing an activity, alongside each other (physical, creative, play or whatever). When people engage in the same activity at the same time, a sense of connectedness and community arises almost spontaneously.

Description

Accompaniment is a fundamental principle of community building - perhaps the core mechanism through which connection naturally emerges. Whether the activity is gardening, dancing, crafting, playing games, or even sitting and meditating together in silence, what matters is the fact that people are doing the same thing, in the same place, at the same time - and thereby having a similar and shared experience.

This principle works most directly through simultaneous participation, when people are literally doing the same thing at the same time. However, it can also function, albeit less powerfully, when community members engage in similar activities at different times, for example learning to play the bass guitar in their separate homes. What's essential is the shared frame of reference and common experience that allows people to feel part of something larger than themselves. The collective nature of the experience creates bonds that transcend what might otherwise be significant differences between participants.

Accompaniment becomes particularly powerful when combined with Repetition [5.6], creating what might be described as the "flywheel" of community building. Regular shared activities build layers of common experience and reference points that deepen relationships over time. These activities needn't be complex or elaborate - sometimes simple shared activities create stronger bonds, as they allow attention to focus on the connection rather than the task. Imagine chatting while peeling potatoes or shelling peas.

This principle also explains why communities often form naturally around life-stage experiences (like new parenthood), work activities, creative pursuits, or recreational interests. The shared experience creates an immediate basis for connection, even among people who might otherwise have little in common. However, the principle works best when the experiences are relatively similar. For example, parents of babies of significantly different ages may find less connection despite seemingly similar circumstances, because their immediate experiences differ too much.

Accompaniment is a remarkably accessible principle to implement, requiring little special expertise or resources beyond the willingness to create space for shared activity. Its power lies in its simplicity - we naturally feel connected to those with whom we share experiences.

Example

The Batala Samba group exemplifies accompaniment in action: members are drumming together, with the intention of producing a coherent group sound. The same phenomenon can be seen in community choirs or bands.

Another example can be found in "Men's Sheds" projects, where participants might primarily engage in woodworking or other practical crafts. Though members may initially come together for the activity itself, the side-by-side nature of the work creates space for connection that facilitates deeper relationships. The shared experience provides a foundation for trust and belonging that may eventually support more vulnerable interactions.

ROLES & DETACHMENT [3.3] Beta

All participants have a role to play, if you can help them find it.

Description

Communities function more effectively when members understand their roles and contributions within the team. The Roles & Detachment principle recognises that every participant plays some role in an event - whether formally acknowledged or not - and that intentionally designing and clarifying these roles creates stronger engagement and more sustainable community functioning.

This principle suggests that approximately 20% of participants should have explicitly defined roles that help structure the community experience for everyone (see below). By making these roles explicit rather than implicit, communities create clearer pathways for contribution and ensure that essential functions don't fall through the cracks.

Specific roles

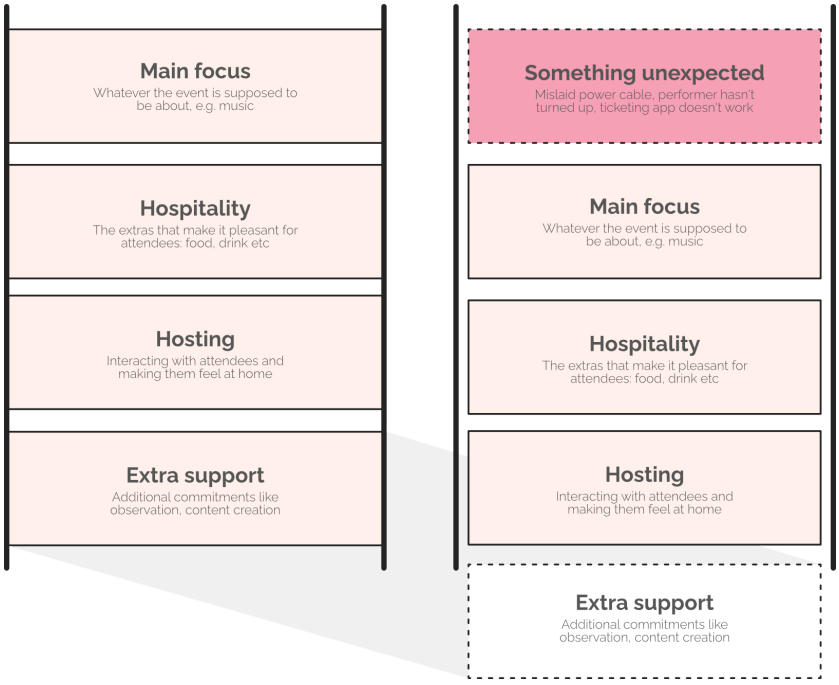
While the nature of the event will determine what tasks and roles are needed, there are a few common categories that deserve specific mention:

- **Event Manager.** In overall charge of the event. They provide direction to others as needed.
- **Host.** Introduces performers and speakers, makes announcements on behalf of the event.
- **Technical.** Responsible for setting up equipment and ensuring it's working correctly. This might be a soundsystem, projection, catering or something else.
- **Observer.** Monitors the signal that's of interest to the organisers, to see whether the event is successful in achieving its aims or not. For example, if the event is focused on creating new connections between people, this person might be observing how many people are talking to the people they came with, as opposed to someone new.

- **Content creator.** Records the event with photos, video and/or words. May conduct some interviews. Their goal is to capture the essence, in order to share back with attendees, and as part of promotions for future events.
- **Ambassador.** Supports attendees as required, for example by welcoming them when they arrive, if they are looking lost, or if they need help. Consciously exemplifies the community's values, as described in the Visible Engagement [4.2] principle.

Asking for help

The majority of community organisers we've worked with are too cautious about asking for help. It's a common mistake to not ask for enough help, to have too few people assigned roles, and to assign multiple roles to the same individual. When this happens, things don't get done, because people struggle to juggle multiple responsibilities, particularly when engaging in a fast-paced group situation. As a rule, assume that if someone is given more than one role, one of those roles won't get done.



There's a **hierarchy of tasks** (left), that gets disrupted when something unexpected inevitably happens (right). In this scenario, **the least-important task is abandoned**, as organisers scramble to deal with the unforeseen emergency

Roles for first time attendees

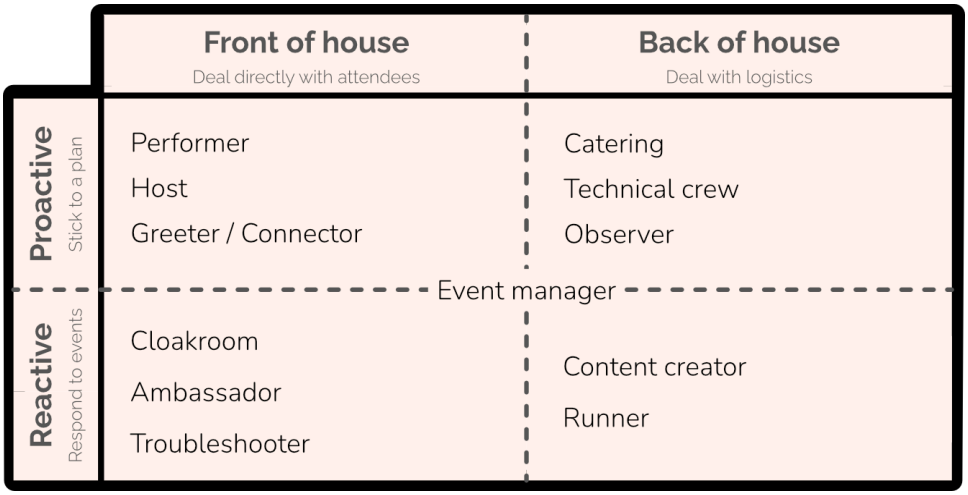
Roles shouldn't just be assigned to longer-established members or organisers. It can be particularly helpful to give roles to newcomers. For this purpose, you can compile a list of low-stakes tasks to give to new attendees (for example, sorting name badges into neat lines, putting out glasses). Having something to do will make these people feel included, particularly if they are more socially-anxious.

Detached modes

Roles can be seen as a system of proactive/reactive and front-of-house/back-of-house functions.

- Proactive roles focus on choreographing and initiating activities, while reactive roles respond to emerging needs and situations.
- Front-of-house roles involve active participation, performing, hosting, and engaging directly with members - for example, welcoming arrivals as an Ambassador, or making announcements as a Host. Backstage roles involve coordination, planning, and logistics - for example, setting up food or equipment.

All of these modes are important to a smooth-running event. It's useful to keep them separate - it's very easy, for example, for a well-meaning backstage person to be drawn into dealing with a frontstage problem, and then drop the ball on their own task



Roles can be front of **house or back of house**,
proactive or reactive

Examples

At the Communities Conference, newcomers were organised into a "squad" that handled dishwashing duties during their first attendance. While seemingly mundane, this approach brilliantly gave new participants a clear, accessible role that helped them feel part of the community immediately while also demonstrating their willingness to contribute to collective needs. It also formed the washing up squad into an informal support group of first-time attendees that continued to come together throughout the event.

At Sunday Assembly, specific roles like "the person who's distributing the tea" provide structure to community gatherings and ensure essential functions are covered. These service-oriented roles particularly focus on supporting peripheral or newer members, creating welcoming entry points to the community.

At Potluck Dinners, we would assign the newcomers to lay out the seating plan. Apart from ensuring that the layout was disrupted on every occasion, forcing people to sit next to someone new, it also gave the first timers a pretext to go around and speak to everyone, learn their names, and feel that they had a role to play.

Often, we see event organisers overwhelmed by unforeseen curveballs just as they are setting up. At an event in a music bar, a missing cable meant that the soundsystem wouldn’t work. As the organisers rushed round to address the problem, their other responsibilities were forgotten. This could have been avoided with clear role assignment that separates back of house logistics (i.e. finding the cable) and front of house hosting (which tends to be dropped when the unforeseen happens).

Section 4

How do we include and connect people?

Section 3 focused on the practicalities of running an event. In this section, we'll focus on what you can do to make people feel welcome, included and engaged, as a first step to building lasting community. This is the part that's often sidelined, as logistical considerations take priority - but if your goal is to build connection, that's a mistake. We'll show you how to avoid this pitfall, and work as a team to foster a sense of belonging among your attendees.

WARM WELCOME [4.1]

The first 10 minutes of a new attendee's experience is critical: at best, it can make them feel seen, included and thrilled to be a part of your event. In reality, it's often haphazard and underwhelming.

Description

Experienced event organisers know that first impressions really do matter. But for new community organisers, this can be one of the easiest things to neglect, as they juggle all the other jobs that need to be done (see Roles & Detachment [3.3]). It's critical because all but the most self-confident, extroverted attendees will benefit from some support as they acclimatise to the event and find their comfortable place in it.

The role of Greeters

We've found that the first 10 minutes of an event go a long way to set the tone for what follows. Focusing on this time window, there's plenty organisers can do to ensure the experience is positive: most importantly, have designated Greeters, who will welcome newcomers to the event.

The conversation with Greeters can be somewhat structured: welcoming them, asking their name, checking them in, signposting them within the venue or the event schedule, and directing them for their further needs such as a cloakroom or refreshments. The Greeter role can feel something like a triage: figuring out what the attendee needs next, and directing them.

This works best when it's something of a conversation, rather than a download of information. Not only is this more natural, it allows the attendee to feel more comfortable bringing their own identity to the fore (see Individual & Group Identities [4.3]). To go one step further, we recommend trying to find out something about the attendee, and trying to connect them with someone or something at the event that they can immediately engage with. It might be a person with a similar interest or an activity that they might enjoy. The sign of success is if the attendee is engaged shortly after their arrival, rather than standing nervously and looking around the room.

Practically, having this deeper conversation may be something that's best dealt with by a different role: the Connector. This person is located with the Greeter, but is ready to take over the conversation as new arrivals demand the Greeter's attention. Some questions that may be helpful include

- What brought you to the event?
- What are you interested in, that's happening here today?
- Do you know anyone else here?
- Have you been to something like this before?

As described in Roles & Detachment [3.3], if you're planning to assign roles to first-time attendees, then this is also a good moment to do so - it can be very helpful to give newcomers something to occupy themselves as they get used to being at the event. We've found it helpful to ask new attendees to make their own name badges on an adjacent table using crafting materials. As well as generating name tags that will be useful later, it occupies them for the first few minutes, acts as a form of individual expression, and starts up conversations between strangers who have just arrived.

Individual differences

Bear in mind that every attendee is different. Some may be gregarious, others shy. Some neurodivergent, others neurotypical. Some may arrive in a group, others alone. Greeters and Connectors should be aware of these differences, and be prepared to depart from the script as required. The key considerations are that attendees feel welcomed, informed, and have a safe entry point from which to begin to engage with the event.

Example

Sunday Assembly illustrates what happens when this principle is neglected. Despite initial success and growth, the community eventually developed a pattern where core members would stand together talking while newcomers hovered awkwardly at the back by the coffee, uncertain how to engage. The welcome for new people became perfunctory, with unclear paths for participation and little effort to help them feel included. This deterioration of the onboarding experience led to difficulty retaining new members despite continued initial interest in the community.

Visible Engagement [4.2]

Members take social proof from the Visible Engagement of other members (the First Follower principle).

Description

Communities thrive when participation is visible and celebrated, creating positive reinforcement cycles that encourage deeper engagement. Drawing on the "first follower" concept, this principle asserts that people are more likely to participate when they see others actively engaged. The first person to join an activity validates it for others; the second and third create momentum that can transform tentative interest into enthusiastic participation, as demonstrated in the famous 'First Follower: Leadership Lessons from Dancing Guy' video.

Visible Engagement has several implications for community builders:

- Ensuring that engagement opportunities are clearly observable to others. This might involve positioning activities in visible spaces, sharing stories and photos of community events, or creating recognition systems that make contributions apparent (such as badging).
- Core members have an absolutely key role to play: their Visible Engagement serves as a model for others on how to behave and what values and acts are welcomed, enabling imitative learning for other members. In particular, they have

a role to play in welcoming new members and showing them how to engage. For this reason, core members in this role are sometimes assigned an ‘Ambassador’ role.

- For community leaders, it can be more effective to encourage, support and amplify core members, than to try and do everything themselves.
- New members may be unsure how to behave in an unfamiliar setting. It can be helpful to ‘buddy’ them with core members, who can help them to engage, and who can offer Shared Symbols [5.3] and Origin Stories [5.4] as well as imitative learning.
- In ongoing community activities, it might involve highlighting member contributions (see Appreciation & Ostracism [7.3]), sharing stories of involvement, or creating ways for participation to be seen and appreciated by others. An example of this is the badging systems used by online forums, marking out Top Contributors and so on

The power of Visible Engagement lies in its ability to create permission structures for participation. When potential members see others like them actively involved and enjoying themselves, it reduces psychological barriers to joining in. This social proof proves particularly important for newcomers who may be uncertain about whether they belong or how to participate appropriately.

However, Visible Engagement must feel authentic rather than performative. Forced or artificial displays of enthusiasm can have the opposite effect, making communities seem inauthentic or cult-like. The key is creating genuine opportunities for engagement that naturally become visible, rather than mandating displays of participation. When members genuinely enjoy their involvement and that enjoyment is naturally visible to others, it creates an infectious energy that inspires others.

Example

A Zen Meditation group tasked more experienced practitioners with sitting at the front of the room where they were visible to all. Their behaviour set the tone and offered guidance for others, particularly newcomers who may have been looking for cues for what to do at different moments during the session. This transfer of information about

the community and its norms operated via imitative learning, rather than overt instructions.

At a blues dancing workshop, more experienced dancers are intended to be a highly-visible part of the group, both to allow newer dancers to watch and learn from them, but also to model engagement and provide inspiration.

INDIVIDUAL & GROUP IDENTITIES [4.3]

New members are welcomed in a way that allows them to bring themselves into the group, and also try out the group identity for size.

Description

Healthy communities create a balance between individual and collective identity. They offer a shared sense of belonging without requiring members to surrender their unique personhood. This principle recognises that people seek both connection to something larger than themselves, but also have a need to be seen and accepted. Good community experiences honour both needs simultaneously.

The group identity offered by community is a powerful motivator for humans - akin to the desire for love. That's why we define community as 'creating a sense of belonging and a desire to identify with the group'.

However, a healthy community treats this group identity as a gift rather than an imposition. It offers members a collective Origin Story [5.4] and purpose they can connect with, while still creating space for individual expression, contribution, and growth. Unlike cults or highly conformist groups that demand members subordinate their individuality to the collective, vibrant communities ensure that their members are still seen as individuals.

This balance manifests in several practical ways

- First, onboarding processes should create **space for newcomers to introduce themselves** - who they are and what they bring - not just to receive information

about the community. *In practice, that might be about how individuals introduce themselves when they first arrive, or giving them an opportunity to speak up at an early stage*.

- Second, community activities should allow for and **value personal expression** on an ongoing basis. *For example, by creating space for newcomers to express themselves and play a part (such as the newcomer tasks described in Roles & Detachment [4.3], and showing appreciation for input from newcomers, not just long-standing members*.
- Third, leadership should recognise and **validate different approaches to participation** rather than enforcing rigid uniformity, as described in Transitions [6.2]. *Example: one person may prefer to contribute behind the scenes as they have more time, while another may wish to just show up at events*.

At its core, this principle challenges the false dichotomy between individualism and collectivism. It recognises that humans are inherently both individuals and social beings, and that the most fulfilling communities honour both aspects of our nature. When people feel seen for who they are while also feeling part of something larger than themselves, they experience the deepest sense of belonging.

Example

At the Communities Conference, the event began with all attendees in a wide circle. One after another, each person was asked to introduce themselves with a gesture of their choice (such as a wave, body movement, comical mime or something else) which the rest of the group then copied. Within a group context, it invited individual expression, demonstrated that the rest of the participants had ‘seen’ and acknowledged newcomers, and put everyone on an equal footing.

SAFE SHARING [4.4]

Creating space for vulnerability and sharing provides psychological safety, and allows participants to meet as equals.

Description

Communities thrive when members feel safe enough to bring their authentic selves - including their vulnerabilities, inconsistencies, uncertainties, and personal stories. The Safe Sharing principle recognises that meaningful connection requires more than just shared activities or interests; it requires an environment where people feel psychologically safe to express themselves without fear of judgment, rejection, or unacceptable exposure.

This principle operates on three complementary levels.

- First, create the conditions where vulnerability becomes possible, by establishing norms, agreements, and practices that protect members when they share personal aspects of themselves.
- Second, create reinforcement loops by showing that sharing is seen as a positive, not something to be derided. This requires leadership: it's up to the core members to demonstrate this, in terms of being willing to share, and also modelling an accepting reaction to sharing from others.

Importantly, Safe Sharing creates a levelling effect that allows people to meet as equals, regardless of differences in status, background, or circumstances outside the community. When people share stories, creative expressions, or personal challenges, they connect on a human level that goes beyond roles or social hierarchies.

Safe Sharing spaces can take many forms: structured story circles, creative workshops where people share their work, performance opportunities with supportive audiences, or simply conversations where personal disclosure is welcomed and respected. What these spaces have in common is a commitment to holding what is shared with care and without judgment, while also maintaining appropriate boundaries around confidentiality and respect.

For community leaders, this principle presents both opportunity and responsibility. Creating safe sharing spaces requires thoughtful design, clear agreements, and ongoing attention to group dynamics. When done well, these spaces can dramatically deepen community connections; when handled poorly, they can lead to harm or breach of trust that is the opposite of the Magic Circle effect communities strive to achieve.

Examples

Batala creates an environment where members can participate without concern about their skill level - "we don't care how good at drumming you are." This approach creates psychological safety around performance and self-expression, allowing people to participate fully without fear of judgment about their abilities. This safety may explain why some members feel comfortable drumming in the group context but would be reluctant to perform individually in other settings.

Men's Sheds, a community where men ostensibly gather to do woodworking but ultimately create space for more personal connection. While the activity itself is practical and non-threatening, the side-by-side nature of the work eventually creates enough safety that "people are going to open up and confide in each other," even without formal structures for sharing. The casual conversations that emerge around tea breaks often become vehicles for meaningful disclosure and support.

Together By Design's potluck dinners experiments exemplify how sharing can blend the practical and personal—participants not only contributed food but were invited to "tell a story of the dishes," connecting the shared meal to personal history or meaning. By celebrating these contributions publicly, the community validated both the tangible offering (the food) and the personal significance behind it.

WRAPPING UP [4.5] Beta

Offer ways to engage after the event, but don't be too pushy.

Description

Just as inviting someone to an event creates permission to participate, and welcoming them shapes their initial expectations, community organisers should pay attention to the way that people exit their events, too. Otherwise, it's all too easy to allow people to simply drift away, and never follow up. For those who came, it can feel like their presence was transient, rather than being welcomed into a community. At worst, it can feel like their attendance didn't even matter.

Wrapping up well involves several steps:

- If possible, engaging with people as they leave the event. This can be assigned to the Greeters, who conduct the whole welcome in reverse: following a script to ensure that they have what they need, are signposted on their journey with public transport or a heads up about the weather outside, and asking them what they made of the event, if they'd like to stay in touch and if so if it would be ok to collect their contact information.
- These conversations are also a good opportunity to gather feedback. Most attendees won't fill out a survey unless they feel invested in the community, but a brief conversation as they leave the event can identify myriad operational refinements for next time.
- Based on this followup, organisers can follow up with attendees in the days that follow. If content was generated from the event (such as photos, video or music) then it can be good to share this with the group. Individualised post-event communications are particularly effective (a Beacon Invitation [2.6] in reverse).

Interestingly, we sometimes see event organisers try to push too fast to build community after events. For example, setting up a WhatsApp group with the attendees after one event can fall flat: aside from an initial flurry of posts, participants simply aren't ready to commit to this community yet, and the group goes silent. Rather, veer on the side of sharing content without commitment, and following up with people individually, until

peer-to-peer ties start to form naturally, and a group format that exists outside events is feasible.

Post-event communications can also be an opportunity to create positive retrospective impressions. It's good not to be over-effusive, but a few key images that capture the best of the event can go a long way to informing participants' memories of what happened.

Paths to engage post-event should also offer participants agency in how they continue to engage. In some cases, participants will fade away (and will likely not respond at all). In others, they may be open to future events. In some cases, they may wish to take on a more active role. Occasionally, you may have decided that the person wasn't a good fit for your event. In this situation, we recommend offering other pathways, with kindness, (e.g. recommendations to other events that may be more suitable).

Section 5

How can we bond attendees into lasting community?

Assuming that you are creating regular interactions between your group - whether that's through events, online forums, social media, neighbourhood encounters or something else - you are probably hoping that over time, you'll see connections forming. To some extent that happens naturally and organically, but there are actions you can take to help it along. Just as section 4 shared ways to increase connection at events, this section will focus on community building at a higher level - across the course of weeks and months, and over multiple events.

MAGIC CIRCLE [5.1]

Reality inside a thriving community feels different from 'the outside world'.

Description

Thriving communities develop their own distinct reality—a special place where the norms, language, experiences, and social rules differ from the world outside.

Magic Circle is both a description of the atmosphere and culture that emerges naturally as communities develop, and also a set of clues that signal to community builders that they're heading in the right direction. When these signals begin to appear, they suggest that other community-building principles are working effectively.

The formation of this distinct reality serves important functions:

- It creates psychological safety for members to be themselves in ways they might not be elsewhere
- It deepens bonds through shared understanding
- It provides a sense of identity and belonging.

When people step into a space where they understand the unwritten rules and shared references, they experience a powerful sense of inclusion and 'being seen'.

What clues should you be looking for? Here are some examples:

- Language: are people using words like 'community', 'family' or 'tribe' to describe the group?

- Attendance: are they there regularly? Do they show up even when it's an effort?
- Recommendations: do they bring friends? Do they spread the word?
- Sharing: is there reciprocity, generosity and trust within the group?
- Culture: are there emerging Traditions [5.2], Symbols [5.3] and Stories [5.4?
- Norms: does the group regulate itself? Do people step in to address transgressions?

While the Magic Circle effect can be thrilling to be a part of, and validating for community builders who feel their hard work has been vindicated, it requires thoughtful management. A Magic Circle that becomes too impenetrable or self-referential might make it difficult for newcomers to join, potentially leading to insularity - it's the opposite of 'feeling included' for new members. An extreme version of Magic Circle can feel cult-like: it should never get to the point where members doubt outside reality. Effective communities maintain permeable boundaries, allowing new people to gradually learn and adopt the distinctive culture, while still preserving what makes them special.

Example

At Brighton & Hove Hockey Club, community builders noticed that members were beginning to behave differently from other parent supporter groups. They would bring cakes to share, turn up early and stay at the end to chat, and meet in other contexts. Recognising these emerging differences as clues that the Magic Circle effect was taking shape, the community builders intentionally highlighted and celebrated these differentiators, and used "we" language to reinforce the sense of shared identity. This created a further positive reinforcement loop: not only were the members behaving this way, they were also adopting a group identity and establishing these behaviours as norms for new members.

TRADITIONS, NOT RULES [5.2]

As far as possible, norms are conveyed by example-setting, imitative learning and storytelling rather than formal, codified regulations.

Description

Communities thrive when their values and norms are transmitted through organic, experiential methods rather than through formal, codified regulations. The Traditions, Not Rules principle recognises that people take on community expectations more deeply and authentically through observation, participation, and narrative than through reading handbooks or memorising policies.

This principle doesn't suggest that written guidelines have no place in community structure - they can provide necessary clarity and accountability, particularly around safety or legal issues. Rather, it emphasises that whenever possible, the preferred method for establishing and maintaining community norms should be through living examples, modelling, and storytelling.

When community members learn how to participate by watching respected members, joining in established traditions, and absorbing stories that embody core values, several important benefits emerge

- First, this approach integrates newcomers more naturally into the community's culture, allowing them to gradually absorb expectations rather than facing an overwhelming list of requirements.
- Second, it creates deeper emotional connection to the norms, as they're experienced rather than simply read.
- Third, it allows for nuance and contextual understanding that written rules often struggle to convey.

This principle connects closely with the Experiences Beat Words [2.4] principle, as both recognise the power of direct experience over verbal or written explanation. It also complements the role of exemplars and ambassadors discussed in Roles & Detachment [3.3] and Visible Engagement [4.2], as these individuals often serve as the living embodiments of community traditions and values. Sometimes it’s because they have

been nominated ‘Ambassador’ or tasked with welcoming new arrivals. At other times, they may simply be living and demonstrating the community’s values.

Implementing this principle involves being intentional about creating opportunities for imitative learning and storytelling. This might include pairing newcomers with experienced members who model community practices, creating regular occasions for sharing stories that embody community values, and designing experiences that naturally demonstrate norms in action rather than explaining them abstractly.

For community builders, this principle suggests focusing more energy on highlighting exemplary behaviour and creating memorable traditions than on drafting detailed policy documents. When members need to understand how things are done in the community, the first response should be to show them and let them experience it rather than to direct them to a written resource.

Example

Hash House Harriers has distinctive songs, unique terminology, and special rituals that new members of the running group learn - not by reading a manual but through direct experience when they attend events: "you don't read a manual, you just kind of learn it when you first get there, which is quite an overwhelming experience in some ways.”

This initial overwhelming quality actually contributes to the powerful experience of joining the community. New members feel they've gone through a meaningful initiation process as they gradually learn the traditions, and this experiential learning creates stronger attachment than simply reading guidelines would.

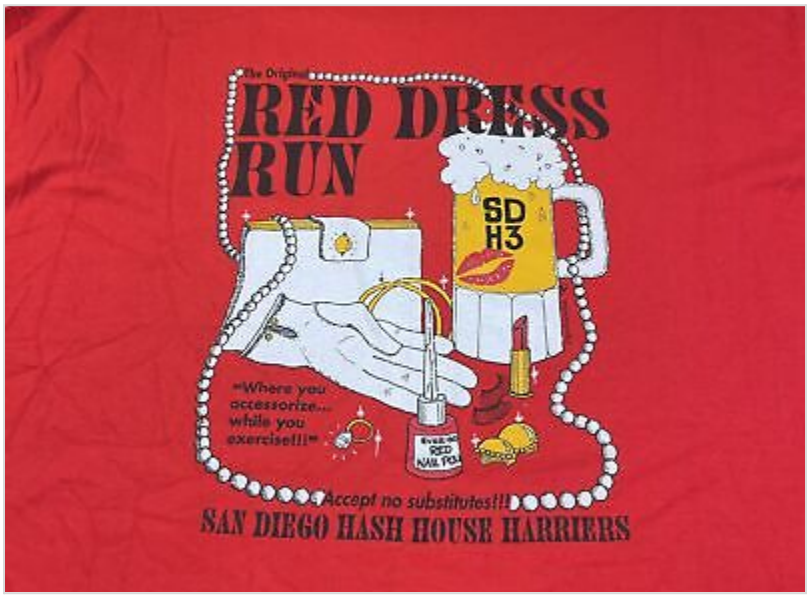
SHARED SYMBOLS [5.3]

The community shares cultural artefacts like songs, imagery, stories, sayings that become shorthand for deeper meanings and experiences.

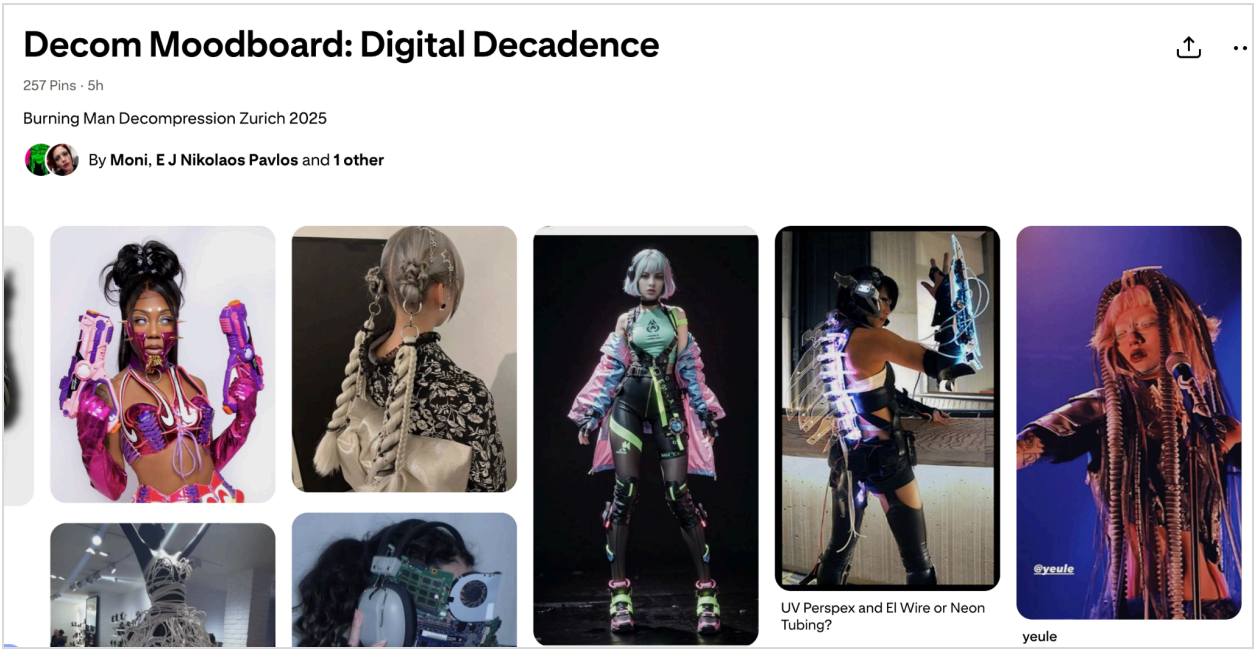
Description

Through shared symbols, communities develop their own rich web of connection and meaning. The symbols themselves can take many forms: songs, jokes, memes, stories, t-shirts, bumper stickers - regardless of the format, they become shorthand for deeper meanings and experiences. They serve as the medium through which community identity is expressed, transmitted, and reinforced. They define the inside of the Magic Circle.

Shared symbols often emerge organically from community experiences, and seem to work best of all when they arise bottom-up (i.e. from interplay between members) rather than top-down (i.e. being imposed by leaders) - this ties into the principle of Visible Engagement [4.2]. Leaders' role is then to identify and amplify these emergent symbols. When members create songs, develop inside jokes, design imagery, or share stories, astute community builders recognise these as potential symbols and help establish them as part of the community's cultural fabric. This process of highlighting and celebrating what emerges naturally often proves more effective than imposing pre-designed cultural elements.



A Hash House Harriers tshirt, covered with insider references, in-jokes and symbolism that only members would understand



Burning Man's Zürich community even provide a moodboard, to help attendees fit with the event aesthetic

The relationship between symbols and other community principles deserves attention. Shared symbols interweave with Origin Stories to create narrative meaning, with Traditions Not Rules to establish cultural practices, and with the Magic Circle effect to

deepen the sense of a distinct community reality. They provide the cultural vocabulary through which community values and experiences are communicated.

For community builders, cultivating shared symbols requires attentiveness to what emerges naturally from the group whilst being intentional about preservation and transmission. Documenting symbols and creating opportunities for repeating them, perhaps as part of Marking The Seasons [6.8] or Consistent Welcome, builds on the principle of Repetition and signals their importance to community identity.

Example

Hash House Harriers exemplifies this principle: their values and norms are transmitted through songs and in-jokes that can feel baffling to first-time attendees but provide a sense of connection and being ‘in the know’ to long-standing members. The process of being inducted into the group is in large part the process of absorbing these stories, songs and symbols, and accepting the values embedded in them. The learning process itself becomes part of the initiation experience.

ORIGIN STORIES [5.4]

The community's purpose is contained in its Origin Story; each member has their own personal Origin Story of their engagement with the community that converges with the shared story.

Description

Every community needs a founding story that explains not just how it began, but why it matters, and where it’s going. These narratives encode the community's purpose and values, and provide shared mythology that bonds members..

Story is the natural medium of community. We use storytelling to bring us closer together, transmit our values, share cautionary tales, and create a shared symbolism

A powerful Origin Story makes the community itself the hero of the narrative. Rather than focusing on a charismatic founder, effective Origin Stories emphasise how the collective came together to address a need or create something meaningful. Brighton & Hove Hockey Club's Origin Story - *"we were rubbish, but we didn't care because we had fun, and then eventually we've become better and started to win matches"* - captures this perfectly. In this story, we can see the key elements that make it work:

- Starting point: often a place of adversity or need, or a shared asset
- Who: we, not I, emphasis on the group struggling and progressing together
- How: style, method or culture that marks this group's way of being together
- Goal: whether or not it's fully achieved yet

Origin Stories often emerge from the group's early experiences. They're particularly resonant when the group has been through Shared Struggle [5.8], and achieved an initial win - indeed, this is a good time to identify the Origin Story and start to transmit it within the group.

Once it exists, the story becomes a touchstone that's woven into onboarding processes, cited during induction of new members, referenced in celebrations, and used to remind the community of its core identity during challenges or transitions. Sometimes, it can be helpful to imagine what the story might be, before it's fully realised - like the "press release from the future" exercise.

Equally important is how individual members' stories connect to the collective narrative. Each person has their own Origin Story of how they came to the community - their personal journey that led them to this particular group. When individual Origin Stories resonate with and reinforce the collective narrative, it creates powerful alignment and belonging. Members see their personal journey as part of something larger, understanding how their individual contribution fits within the community's broader purpose.

For community builders, developing and maintaining Origin Stories requires both initial intentionality and ongoing cultivation. Creating opportunities for members to share their personal Origin Stories, regularly retelling the collective narrative, and ensuring new members understand how they fit into the ongoing story all help maintain this vital

aspect of community culture. The Origin Story should highlight the collective, not the individual - it's about how the community did something that made things better.

CONSISTENT ONBOARDING [5.5]

New members are inducted into the community in a structured, systematic process that remains consistent over time.

Description

The initial experience a person has when joining a community profoundly shapes their sense of belonging, understanding of community norms, and likelihood of ongoing engagement. However, as communities grow and evolve, this crucial onboarding process often deteriorates unless it's intentionally designed and maintained. The Consistent Onboarding principle addresses this challenge by emphasising the importance of creating structured, repeatable processes for welcoming and integrating new members.

When communities first form, onboarding typically happens organically through the founders' enthusiasm and personal attention. New additions receive warm welcomes, detailed explanations of community purpose and activities, and personalised introductions to existing members. They also have more opportunity to input and shape the community in its early stages. This high-touch approach works well in the beginning but becomes increasingly difficult to sustain as the community grows, founding members become busier, and established members naturally form social bonds with each other.

Without intentional design, this deterioration creates a striking contrast between the experience of early joiners and those who arrive later. Newcomers can find themselves marginalised, while established members cluster together in comfortable conversations, unaware of how uninviting this appears. Even well-meaning communities can develop this pattern, with core members simply forgetting what it feels like to be new, nervous and uncertain how to take part.

Consistent Onboarding addresses this challenge by systematising the welcome process rather than leaving it to chance or individual personalities. It could involve

- Establishing **clear steps for onboarding new members**: what should happen when, and who's responsible.
- Designing **rituals or moments that mark a person's entry** into the community. For example, giving them a symbol (a branded t-shirt) or name.
- Developing **materials that communicate the community purpose** and norms.
- **Feedback loops** and check-ins with new members.

Crucially, these processes should remain consistent regardless of who is implementing them or when someone joins.

By investing in consistent onboarding, communities maintain their welcoming character as they grow and evolve. They avoid the common pattern where early joiners have a rich, fulfilling experience while later arrivals feel perpetually like outsiders. Instead, they create pathways for new members to become fully integrated participants who enrich the community with their unique contributions.

REPETITION [5.6]

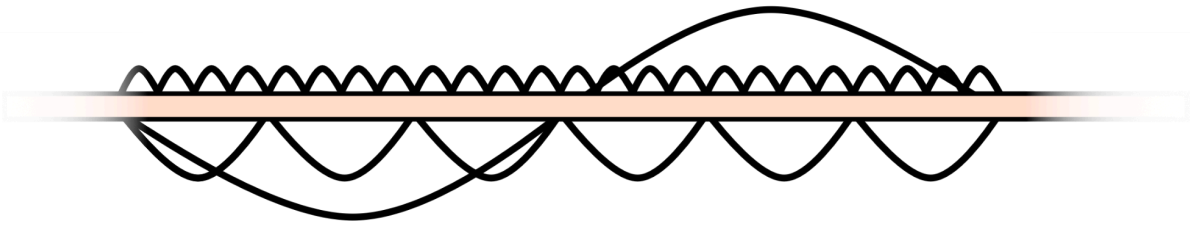
Repeated actions, on a regular cadence, are better than one-off or irregular actions. Community is built through consistency and familiarity.

Description

Community is based on trust, which in turn is created through consistency and familiarity. Therefore activities that occur repeatedly, on a predictable rhythm, are more effective than one-off or irregularly-scheduled events. The Repetition principle recognises that community bonds develop through shared experience accumulated over time, rather than through isolated moments, no matter how memorable those moments might be.

Different types of activities naturally lend themselves to different cadences, and robust communities often establish multiple rhythms operating simultaneously. Weekly events

might form the backbone of community life (for example, Batala's weekly rehearsals), while monthly special gatherings provide opportunities for deeper engagement or different types of interaction (such as Batala's performances or weekend retreats). Annual celebrations or retreats can mark significant moments in the community's calendar, creating traditions and milestones that reinforce collective identity (see Marking the Seasons [6.8].



Communities work best if they establish **regular, repetitive rhythms**,
giving a variety of opportunities to engage over weeks, months and quarters

The frequency of repetition should be calibrated to match the nature of the activity and the community's purpose. Communities centred around deep practice or skill development might meet frequently (daily or weekly), while those serving busy professionals or geographically dispersed members might establish less frequent but longer or more intensive gathering patterns. Finding the right rhythm requires attentiveness to members' lives and capacities, as well as to the community's core purpose. Once established, these rhythms should try to remain consistent over time.

The power of repetition explains why many communities struggle when they rely too heavily on special events or irregular gatherings. Without the sustaining rhythm of consistent activity, connections fade and collective identity weakens. By contrast, even relatively simple activities, when repeated regularly, can create remarkably resilient communities that endure through challenges and changes.

Example

Fran's community project aimed to deliver different but complimentary rhythms of engagement to members. On a weekly basis, she would publish a podcast for her members. A couple of times a month, she would schedule an online call. Once every few months, she would arrange a weekend-long in-person get-together that members

would need to travel longer distances for. She planned to build up the different rhythms gradually, starting with weekly, and working towards the higher-commitment in-person events.

RADICAL GENEROSITY [5.7]

Members - especially leaders - should model generosity, by giving more than they take.

Description

Radical Generosity highlights that generous acts are a strong driver of connection in communities: building trust and reciprocal bonds, and establishing norms of abundance rather than scarcity. When core members consistently demonstrate this principle, they create a ripple effect that influences the broader community culture, and produces the Magic Circle effect.

The "radical" aspect of this generosity lies in its departure from typical transactional relationships. Rather than carefully measuring and balancing what they give against what they receive, members prioritise the community's flourishing over personal benefit. This might involve contributing time, skills, resources, or emotional support well beyond what would be "required" for membership.

Core members have a particular responsibility to model this principle, as their behaviour sets the tone for the wider community (see Traditions, not Rules [5.2]). Their visible generosity serves multiple functions: it demonstrates commitment to the community's values, establishes cultural norms for others to follow, creates an atmosphere of abundance that attracts participation, and builds trust that the community is genuinely oriented toward collective rather than individual benefit.

Importantly, this principle extends beyond material resources to include less tangible forms of generosity. Sharing credit generously - highlighting others' contributions rather than seeking recognition for oneself - is particularly powerful. Similarly, generosity with

attention, knowledge, connections, and opportunities all contribute to a community where members feel valued and supported.

While closely related to Collectively Contributing [6.5], Radical Generosity focuses more on the spirit and extent of giving than on the distributed nature of contribution.

Example

The first Gather event centered on a meal cooked by the founders, Kathryn and Dan. It was lovingly prepared, and the thought and attention to detail were tangible. By offering this meal as a gift - with no expectation of getting something in return - the Gather founders set the tone for participation among members in events to follow.

SHARED STRUGGLE [5.8]

Members bond through struggling with, and ideally overcoming, a shared challenge.

Description

Struggles experienced and overcome bring communities closer. When a group faces a real challenge - such as preparing for a performance, tackling a local issue, playing a football match, or learning a difficult piece of music together - the relationships that form run deeper than those built purely on good times.

That said, it can be counterproductive to focus on the outcome from the start. It's a mistake some communities make, especially those focused on performance (e.g. sports teams or theatre groups). If you focus on the challenge before you've built trust and connection, the pressure might mean that your group stresses and fractures, rather than bonds.

For Batala, it was the intense preparation for the Caliente event: months of rehearsal building to a moment of public performance. That shared journey becomes part of the group's Origin Story [5.4]. This example also highlights how struggle is episodic: once

overcome, it's time for a new one. In that sense, it works together with the Marking The Seasons [6.8] and Moments of Renewal [8.4] principles.

For Gather, the struggle is longer-term and more literal: planting and tending a vineyard over seasons and years. It's physical work that demands consistent collective effort. Not everyone's cup of tea, but for those who stick with it, the shared investment in something that will take years to bear fruit promises to create deep commitment to each other.

The key is calibrating the challenge to your community's capacity. Too much struggle too soon and people will back off. Too little and you miss the bonding that comes from overcoming something meaningful together. Start with connection and fun, then gradually introduce challenges that feel achievable with collective effort. The struggle should stretch the group and give it a point on the horizon to aim for, without breaking it.

Example

At Brighton & Hove Hockey Club, the team focused first on having fun together - eating cake, sharing jokes, and making small but steady steps. They measure progress through enjoying the experience, rather than results. Only once those foundations were solid did they put any weight on the shared challenge of competition.

DIFFERENT CONTEXTS [5.9]

Engaging in different contexts brings richer connection. Communities deepen their bonds when members encounter each other across varied settings and activities.

Description

Relationships often form in a single setting: a club or workplace, for example. When people see different sides of each other through varied activities and settings, they often develop a more rounded appreciation, and forge stronger connections.

This principle manifests practically in how communities structure their activities. Batala doesn't just meet for rehearsals but performs in different locations, travels together, and shares accommodation during events. These varied contexts - from the focused intensity of practice to the excitement of performance to the casual intimacy of shared travel - allow members to get to know each other more fully. Meeting only at rehearsal wouldn't build the same connections as when people encounter each other in other contexts as well.

The power of different contexts lies partly in how they reveal different aspects of people's personalities and capabilities. Someone who seems quiet in one setting might emerge as a natural leader in another. The person who struggles with one activity might excel at something else. These revelations help members see each other as complete humans rather than limited to single roles or characteristics. It's a bit like the ‘team away day’ concept - going somewhere different to see a different side of people.

Creating different contexts doesn't require elaborate planning or resources. It might be as simple as adding social time before or after main activities, organising occasional special events in new locations, or creating subgroups focused on different interests within the broader community purpose. The key is ensuring these varied contexts remain connected to the community's core identity whilst allowing for different modes of participation and interaction.

Example

Many larger and longer-established communities operate on this model. For example, Neurodivergent Zürich operates as an umbrella organisation with different activities like book clubs and hiking groups, allowing members to connect through varied interests whilst maintaining their shared identity. This model demonstrates how different contexts can serve the same community purpose whilst offering varied modes of engagement.

Section 6

How can we operate sustainably?

Over time, the task of leading a community can become a burden. As the initial excitement of growth fades, access to resources becomes harder, or issues start to arise, it can seem like a lot of extra work - and bureaucratic work at that!

Burnout for community organisers is real. Even when the work is rewarding, and you're making a tangible difference to people, it can be hard to keep going, week after week, for years at a time. To give yourself the best chance of creating a sustainable community, it's important to take time to put operations in place - processes, structures, principles, rules and the rest - that will lighten and share the burden.

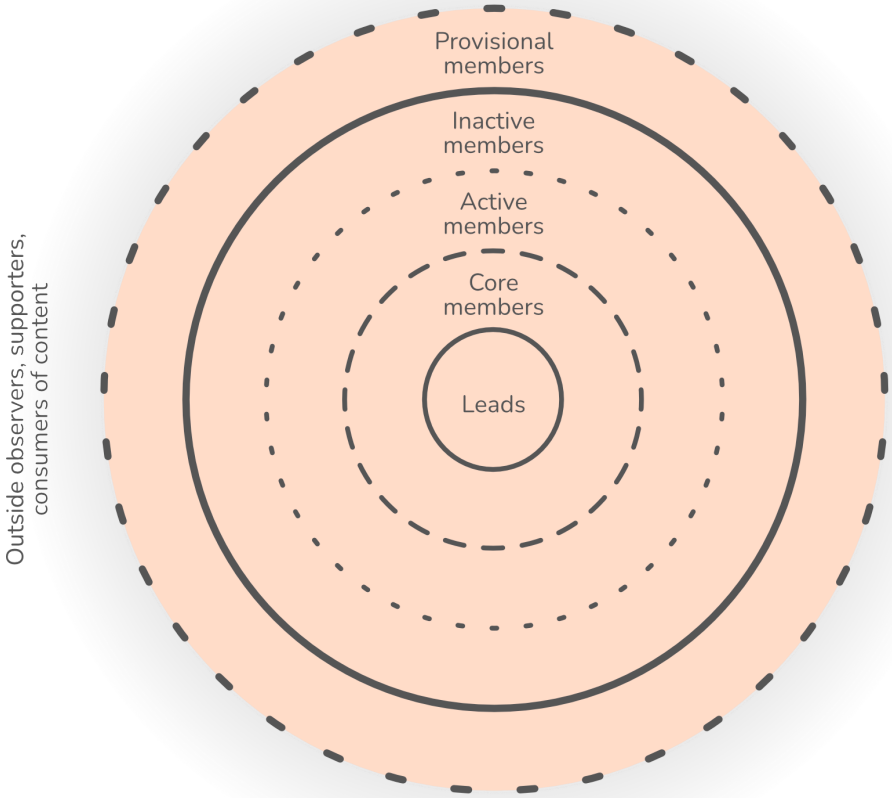
INTENTIONAL STRUCTURES [6.1]

Boundaries are necessary, but they must also be thoughtfully defined.

Description

As communities grow and evolve, they often take on structures: ways in which relationships, activity levels, power and information are distributed. For instance, it's common to see communities that have developed a 'concentric circles' structure:

- At the centre, a 'leads group' who take most of the decisions
- A circle of 'core members' who do a lot of the work and are heavily invested in the community
- A circle of 'active members'
- Finally, circles of peripheral, disengaged, prospective or non-members

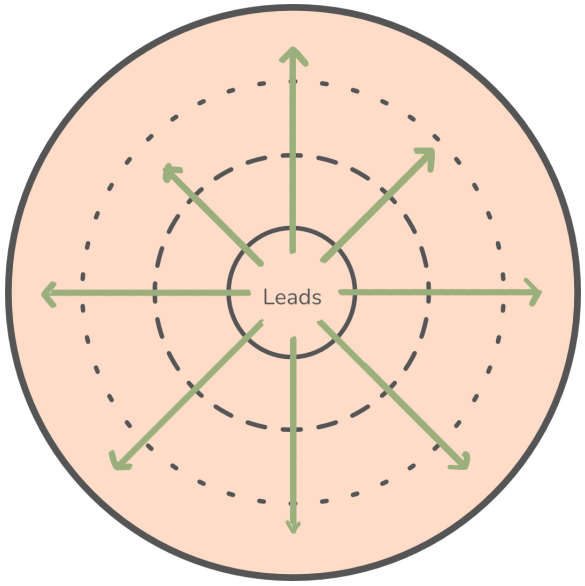


An example **'concentric circles'** community structure,
with more engaged members at the centre and less engaged at the periphery

This isn't static: the circles change over time as people move in and out of them. They may change in size. As big events come up, the peripheral members may become more active.

While the concentric circles structure is common, it also has some issues.

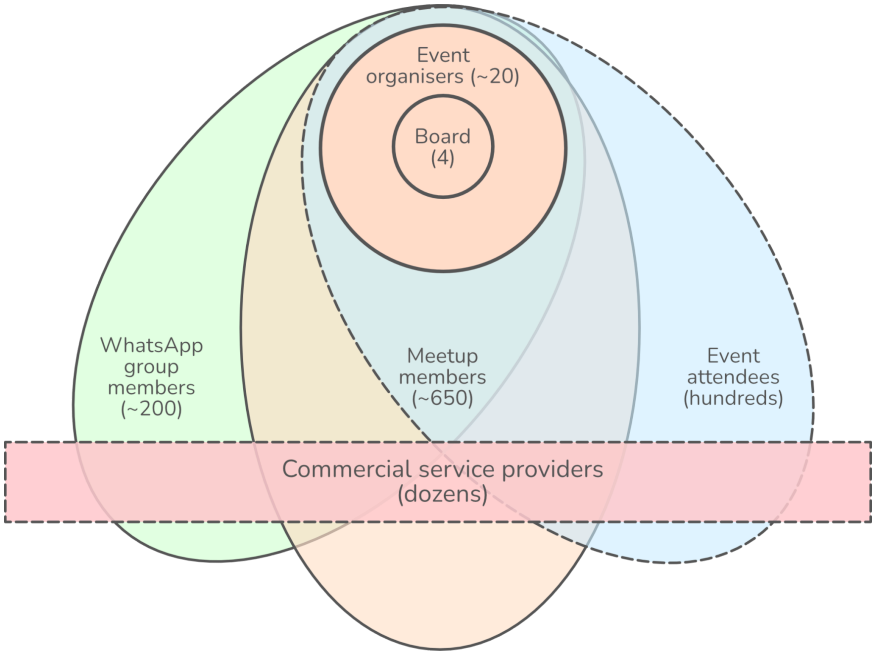
- It can also reflect a ‘hub and spoke’ model, where information flows from the centre to the outside, but people in the same circle don’t speak to each other.



A **‘hub and spoke’** structure: information is passed from the centre to the periphery, but members in each circle aren't really engaging with each other

- There’s a danger that it becomes a hierarchy, where being "more core" is inherently better.
- At the extreme, it can become cult-like - especially if the inner circles are mysterious, if resources flow from the periphery to the centre, or there are high costs to transitioning in or out of circles.
- As the Together Institute’s thinking on this concept emphasises, the goal of a community is not to move everyone toward the centre, but rather to allow people to have the experience that works best for them in the current moment.

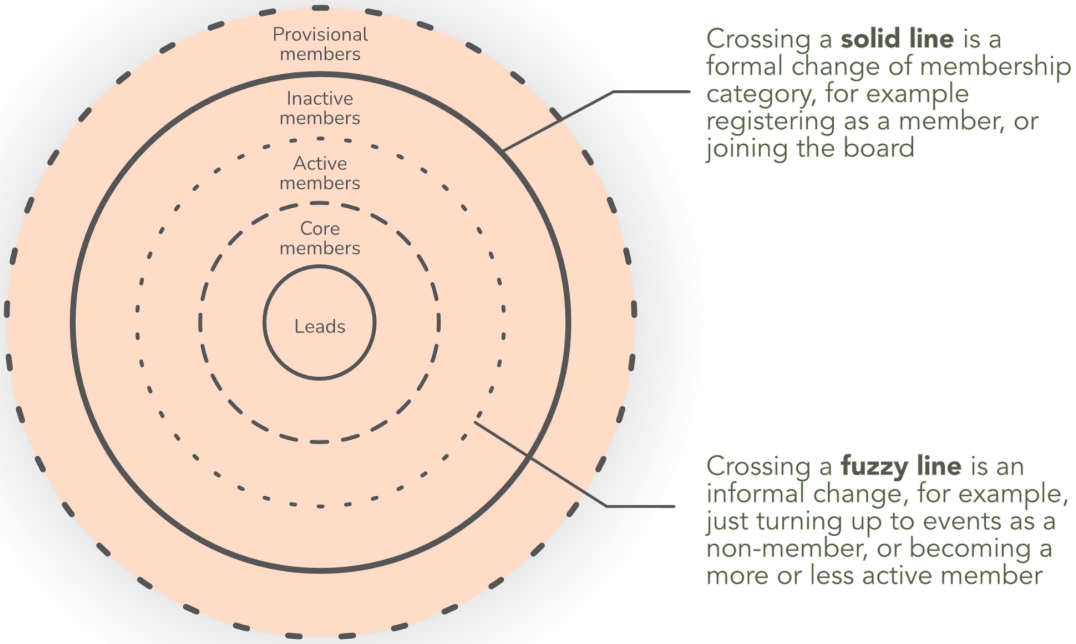
The concentric circles model is also a simplification. In reality, structures are messier: circles may be overlapping, boundaries may be unclear, and multiple communities may intersect with each other.



As this diagram of the Neurodivergent Zürich community shows, it can be challenging to even map structures as communities get larger.

Although community structures emerge quite naturally, it's better if they're thoughtfully designed

- Which roles should be defined by solid lines, and which by fuzzy lines? Solid lines (i.e. boundaries that are clearly defined: either you're a member of the board, or you aren't) optimise for productivity and expectation-setting, while fuzzy lines (i.e. boundaries that are vaguely defined, but have no formal criteria - perhaps you're a 'member' or not, but it's subjective) optimise for engagement and fluidity.



Solid lines and fuzzy lines define how members transition between roles within the community

- How are people within the same circle able to interact with each other? How about people in different circles?
- What are the costs (in time, commitment or resources) required to be within a particular circle? For example, is it clear what's expected of someone who becomes a 'core member', and what they should expect in return?
- Too few circles create jarring transitions between very different commitment levels; too many create unnecessary complexity.
- Different communities need different structures based on their purpose, size, and activities. For example, a small neighbourhood group might need just two or three levels of engagement, while a large organisation might benefit from more graduated steps between casual participant and central organiser.

Examples

Close Encounters Theater network demonstrates effective implementation of the core-ness principle by creating tiered participation options for different skill and

commitment levels. They offer beginner ensembles with minimal time commitments, intermediate groups with more intensive rehearsal schedules, and advanced performance troupes for those ready to dedicate significant time. Clear progression paths show how members can advance from one level to another when they're ready.

The paths between these levels are transparent—students understand what skills and commitment are needed to move to more advanced groups. Importantly, movement in both directions is normalised; someone might join an advanced group but then step back to an intermediate level during a busy semester without losing their place in the community.

TRANSITIONS [6.2]

Members can change roles and commitment levels over time. Alternative ways to participate are clear, not mysterious.

Description

Community membership is constantly in flux, as people join or leave, change roles or take on new responsibilities. As a community leader, this can be tiring to administer, and so there's a strong argument for keeping transitions as simple as possible. That said, there are also reasons why you should be intentional about moves, to ensure that you're supporting members' wishes, while also preserving your culture and the safe space that you've created.

Consider some of the common transitions that take place in communities As we've already seen in Intentional Structure [6.1], these transitions can take place across solid or fuzzy lines:

- **Members become more or less 'core'**. This might be because they're busy with a new job or change in their personal life, and have less time on their hands. Or the opposite may be true: they have just retired and can help out more.

- **Member changes how they interact with the community**. This might be because they want to sample different options, for example joining the ‘Latvians in Zürich book club’, rather than attending the ‘Latvians in Zürich hiking group’.

Both of these changes are **across fuzzy lines**, and so we would try to make them as easy as possible. That means eliminating friction (for example, by not requiring notification or formal processes), encouraging change (or at least avoiding judgement), and making the available options as clear as possible.

- **Probationary membership moves to full membership**. This applies in situations where full membership has a solid line, but probationary membership may not: for example, Hash House Harriers allow prospective members to turn up to two events for free, before they are required to make a decision to join the group formally. At that point, an induction ceremony is held.
- **Taking on a defined role**. This might be a formal role (such as board membership), or something less well-defined (such as ‘event organiser’). Nonetheless, the person taking it on should be clear about what’s expected of them.
- **Member is ejected**. Unfortunately it’s sometimes necessary to remove someone from the group, if they’ve crossed lines that are unacceptable. This is easier in some contexts (for example, ejection from an online platform that requires login, or in-person events), than in others (for example, an open access forum).

These transitions are **across solid lines**: it should be clear to both the member and the decision-maker that it’s happening, and sometimes to the wider group too. In these cases, you will want to operate a deliberate, consistent and well-defined process: for example, welcoming the person to full membership (see Consistent Onboarding [5.3]), assessing them for and then briefing them on their new role, or being clear why they’re being asked to leave. In these cases, you are introducing friction, rather than removing it.

- **New member joins**. Depending on the community, this may simply mean they start showing up to events, and consider themselves part of the community, or in other cases that they have signed up formally to be a member.
- **Member leaves**. Sometimes this means a formal opt-out, but more often members simply ‘ghost’ the community.

These transitions could be across both solid or fuzzy lines, and so it comes down to the nature and design of your community. For instance, if you run events where anyone can turn up, then it's hard to know if someone's 'joined' or not. But if you also operate a WhatsApp group, then it's clearer - they're either a member or they're not. The same is true when someone leaves: it can be unclear whether someone is inactive, truly checked out, or has actually left. In this situation, Moments Of Renewal [8.3] can help: for example, if you require members to pay a nominal membership fee each year, it becomes clearer who's still a member and who has left.

For community builders, facilitating Transitions requires:

- Defining which Transitions take place across solid lines, and putting in place processes for these changes: assessment or qualification criteria, onboarding and welcoming process, and clear expectation-setting.
- Creating regular opportunities for moving between circles. It can be helpful to have regular rethink or refresh points (perhaps aligning to Moments of Renewal, like the start of a new year) where people can change how they're able to contribute.
- Normalising movement between roles, celebrating members who step back gracefully, and ensuring that reduced involvement doesn't mean reduced belonging.

Movement between circles should never be mysterious or opaque. When someone wants to move toward greater involvement, the path to do so should be clear and accessible. How does one take on more responsibility? What steps lead to more central roles? Without this transparency, communities risk developing unhealthy power dynamics where inner circles become exclusive clubs with invisible entry requirements.

Equally important is ensuring that movement away from the centre comes with no social penalty or excessive cost. When leaving a more central role requires significant emotional labour or results in social ostracism, a community has crossed into cult-like territory. Healthy communities allow for graceful exits from core roles, maintaining relationships even as involvement levels change.

The goal is creating a community where members can find the right level of engagement for their current life circumstances without feeling guilty, excluded, pressured or trapped.

Examples

The Together By Design collective has gatherings every six months. At these events, members are invited to take a seat on the board, lead a project, change their focus, but also to step back into a less demanding role, go into ‘pause mode’ for a while, or leave the collective.

Similarly, in the Nobody's Wood community, people can move into central organising roles but also retreat to more peripheral, helping roles depending on their interest and other life commitments. At each stage, there is informal vetting where newcomers to a more central role would be supervised by existing core members to check for reliability, competence, collaboration skills, and values alignment. The group also maintains relationships with "ex-core alumni" who had moved to more peripheral roles but can step in temporarily when needed - for instance, if a core sound engineer had a baby and needed to step back.

RATIOS [6.3] Beta

Healthy ratios of key groups within the community (which will vary, but might include new:established, active:passive, introvert:extrovert, gender or other demographics).

Description

Communities function best when they maintain balanced proportions between different types of members and participants. The specific ratios that create health vary significantly based on the community's purpose and culture, but attending to these proportions brings vibrancy and supports inclusive participation.

You might want a healthy ratio of new to established members, or active to passive participants, or considerations around gender balance. Each community's crucial ratios

will be different. There's usually a 'tipping point' in community dynamics when ratios reach certain points - although the exact percentage is context-dependent.

- Once you have **too many first-timers**, the transmission of values via imitative learning (i.e. Traditions, Not Rules) doesn't work properly. You need either more investment of time from existing members to transmit those values, or more documented, formalised writing on values - neither of which is ideal. Conversely, having no first-timers can also make a community feel stale and stuck.
- **'Bridging members'**, who are both established enough to have credibility with existing members, but also welcoming and receptive to new people, are particularly important for helping to smooth the absorption of new members.
- Keeping an eye on **demographic ratios**, such as gender or age balance, can avoid communities feeling or acting oppressively to minorities.
- Ensuring that unwarranted **hierarchy of membership** is not institutionalised in your community, for example by explicitly welcoming participation 'regardless of age, culture, ethnicity, gender identity, race, religion, sexual orientation, or socio-economic status'.
- Monitoring whether your community events are truly enabling new participants to **engage and bring their own identity** (the Individual & Group Identities principle), while making space for them to **explore and adopt the group's identity** (for example, via Origin Stories).

Keeping an eye on these ratios is part of the role of the organiser. You want new people who are going to refresh things and bring diversity of background and perspective, without losing the community's essence. The most successful communities achieve a balance: 'dynamic cultural continuity' - maintaining core values while updating practices. It's about finding the balance between stale (too many established members, not enough new energy) and chaotic (too many newcomers, losing cultural coherence).

For community builders, this principle suggests developing awareness of which ratios matter most for their specific context and creating mechanisms to monitor and adjust these proportions. This might involve simple observation at events or tracking participation patterns.

Example

Nobody's Wood considers the balance of ticket-payers to non-ticket-payers, children to adults, and regular attendees to first-timers. Neurodivergent Zürich might focus on maintaining two organisers per event, with events needing to be a certain size to be cost-effective. These various ratios matter for different reasons - practicality, viability, or community culture and dynamics.

THE RIGHT SIZE [6.4]

There's an optimum size for any community.

Description

This principle asserts that any community has an optimal size, for its purpose, setting and functions. Growth beyond these limits often diminishes rather than enhances the community. It takes inspiration from Dunbar's number - the idea that humans can maintain peer-to-peer relationships with only around 150 people at once, and that group dynamics change as group sizes increase.

There are several implications for community building:

The right size will be different for different communities and events. For example, for Story Walk events, the right size is 8-10 people because of the difficulty of hearing in a larger group. For potluck dinners, it's constrained by the size of the space and kitchen facilities. As the size increases, you should expect other changes too. For example, Nobody's Wood is limited to about 450 people because the organisers found that a larger event started to lose the sense of reciprocal generosity and care between attendees.

On the positive side, you may find that you are better able to fulfil your core purpose with a larger group: Batala needs a minimum size that allows for duplication of instruments and having more than one caller - which equates to 20-30 people - but beyond that, bigger doesn't necessarily mean better.

It's much easier to navigate this situation if you have a clear idea what 'better' means, and how to measure it. For example, if you believe that reciprocal interactions are the sign of a healthier community, you can continue to monitor this as it expands

It can be very tempting to keep growing - and therefore all the more important for community builders to resist internal and external pressure to do so for the wrong reasons.

When your group exceeds its optimum size, there are difficult decisions to make. However you have several options:

- **Propagate**: start a new group, with principles, processes and cultures that mirror the original. It can be particularly helpful if your community is spread across multiple locations, as you can begin a new 'chapter' in a different city
- **Limit attendance**: if demand to attend exceeds the size limit you are prepared to accept, you may need to rely on ticketing or a lottery system. In this case, you may want to offer alternative ways to connect alongside your event (such as an online forum or chat space).
- **Proceed, with caution**: allow the event or community to expand, but keep a watchful eye on signals that your culture is breaking down or purpose is being undermined.

Example

Nobody's Wood believed that their event could only grow to a certain size without the culture and behaviour of attendees changing. As a smaller event, it was noticeable that attendees would pick up litter without being asked, based on the example of core members (Traditions, Not Rules [5.2]). As the event expanded, they monitored this behaviour to see if this prosocial behaviour would disappear.

Dykes Who Hike was established in London, and now has chapters across a number of cities. As the organisers supported the growth of their community through propagation, they shared materials with new chapter leads, to help them learn from their own lessons, and ensure that there was a consistent experience for attendees under the 'Dykes Who Hike' brand.

STABLE RESOURCING [6.5] Beta

A secure foundation (venue, funding and staffing) frees communities to focus on people instead.

Description

For many communities resourcing becomes their biggest challenge as they scale. That happens for three reasons:

- An expanding community needs bigger resources (a larger venue, for example). Resourcing that worked initially will need to be replaced, which takes time and effort.
- Initial reserves of goodwill resourcing - time, money and facilities - may run out. As the honeymoon period comes to an end, contributors reassess their willingness to chip in ‘at a loss’.

This can catch organisers in a pincer movement: just as their community is taking off and expanding, their resources are being squeezed. Securing long-term, stable resourcing is therefore one of the most important tasks of a community organiser as their group matures. In general, the most important resource is a venue - it acts as an anchor, defines the character of the community, and without it very little is possible. At the very least, mature communities should seek to have an ongoing relationship with a particular venue that they can rely on.

It’s sensible to have multiple sources of funding, and not to rely too much on any one source. These could include sponsorships from sympathetic brands, membership fees, food and drink sales, fundraising events and public grants. However each of these is inherently unpredictable, and so ideally the cost base is kept to a minimum. This makes it easier to navigate ups and downs of funding, and also reduces the exposure of the organisers themselves should there be a shortfall.

Organisers also have a difficult decision to make about whether to increase their commercial focus or not. The argument for doing so is that it provides a revenue stream that can help to cross-subsidise other activities. For example, a cafe can subsidise a community meeting hall. The arguments against are firstly increased complexity, and

secondly that some contributors may be more reluctant to offer their services if they perceive the community to be a ‘money making’ exercise. It’s easy for misunderstandings to arise about this, and so community organisers should be proactively transparent with their finances, to show that they are not, in fact, personally benefitting.

Incorporating as an official nonprofit (a charity or voluntary organisation) can be helpful in reducing costs, for example by accessing free or low-cost tools and venue hire.

Finally, resourcing can operate on a number of cycles, and synchronising these can be a challenge, especially when physical premises are involved. A lease on a building might be 10 years, while a funding grant may last for 3, and membership revenue may change from year to year.

Examples

A coworking space took a 10 year lease on a venue. However they soon realised that their funding would run out in three years. As a result, they transformed part of the venue into a cafe to give them a secondary income source, and rented out the space for third party events in the evenings.

Nobody’s Wood deliberately stuck to a ‘no profits, excess given to charity’ model. As all of the workers at the event were volunteers, it avoided complications about who should or shouldn’t get paid. Maintaining an overt public stance as a charitable event allowed the group to ask sympathetic performers for their time.

COLLECTIVELY CONTRIBUTING [6.6]

If everyone can contribute according to their willingness & ability, then everyone feels a part of it.

Description

Communities thrive when everyone contributes, because it creates a feeling of ownership and belonging. This principle stands in contrast to models where a single benefactor or small group provides everything for others. While such an approach might be viable in a community's early stages, sustainable communities ultimately need

broader participation in resourcing. When members contribute according to their distinct abilities and circumstances, they become stakeholders rather than just consumers of the community experience.

Importantly, collective resourcing doesn't mean everyone contributes identically or equally. The principle emphasises contribution "according to willingness and ability," recognising that members have different capacities, skills, and resources to offer. Some might provide physical spaces, others might share expertise, while still others might contribute time for coordination or materials for activities. Ideally, this generates a rich ecosystem of resources that no single member could provide alone. It also allows members to express their individual identities, and addresses the psychological need to feel like they’re contributing.

For community organisers, this principle involves two key responsibilities.

- First, they must create clear pathways and invitations for contribution, helping members understand how they can participate in resourcing the community. People need to know what's needed and how they can help.
- Second, organisers should intentionally recognise and celebrate these contributions, making them visible to the broader community. This recognition not only acknowledges individuals' generosity but also demonstrates and reinforces the collectively resourced nature of the community.

This principle is closely related to Radical Generosity [5.7], as both involve members giving to the community beyond what they directly receive. However, Collectively Contributing specifically focuses on the distributed, participatory nature of meeting the community's needs, while Radical Generosity emphasises the spirit of giving.

By implementing this principle effectively, communities create a self-reinforcing cycle where contribution builds ownership, which motivates further contribution. Members transition from asking "What does this community offer me?" to "How can I help sustain what we're creating together?" - a fundamental shift that can strengthen community resilience and sustainability.

Examples

Potluck dinners are a clear example of collective resourcing in action. Rather than having hosts provide all the food, each participant brings a dish to share. This distributed approach not only practically shares the work of feeding everyone but also creates a more diverse and interesting meal than any individual could provide alone. Contributions needn't just be dishes - we invited people to "tell a story of your dish" and by "parading the desserts," thereby celebrating each person's offering.

Nobody's Wood exemplifies the Collectively Contributing principle: *"Everyone is asked to bring something to share, whether that's food, drink, music, help with construction, a game... At least initially, we didn't have tickets but instead asked for contributions."* This approach was pragmatic as well as focused on community-building: *"On a practical level, we lacked resources for security, bar workers, litter-picking and so on, and wanted the whole group to take responsibility for the commons."*

MINIMUM VIABLE OPERATIONS [6.7]

Operations required to administer the community and run events are the minimal viable option, preferring principles and distributed decision-making to committees and bureaucracy.

Description

Most communities are run by amateurs in their free time, for the love of it. They are generally under-resourced and learning on the job. Consequently, operational efficiency isn't just desirable, it's essential. This principle advocates for the lightest possible administrative structure that still allows the community to function effectively, recognising that excessive bureaucracy can drain energy from the actual purpose of coming together, and burn out organisers in the long term.

Balance is important. If you're charging fees, you need some administration. If you're running events, it helps to have agreed roles and ways of operating. Of course, you need to have safeguards in place if there's any element of danger to what you're doing and in

particular if you are working with children or vulnerable people. The key is finding the minimum viable level of structure that supports rather than constrains community activities.

To keep documentation light, and give your team autonomy, it's usually better to work from principles that they can interpret, rather than highlight documented, rigid ways of operating. That's particularly important if you're running distributed events or propagating your idea (see The Right Size [6.4]). It also allows different branches or chapters to adapt to their local contexts whilst maintaining connection to the core purpose.

Communities that thrive long-term find ways to minimise operational overhead whilst maintaining necessary functions. This might involve:

- Using existing digital tools rather than adopting new ones (i.e. noting what people already use, even if it's sub-optimal, rather than trying to push for alternatives). In Together By Design, we use WhatsApp for messaging, not because we like it or think it's the best tool, but because it has high adoption and is familiar. It rarely requires someone to download another app.
- Preferring distributed decision-making: setting principles and giving individuals autonomy to interpret them, rather than highly-documented, rigid ways of working.
- Where that's not appropriate, creating reusable templates for processes, or adopting those used by other organisations. This can be particularly helpful for taking the load off founders, as they can effectively delegate these roles to processes run by others.
- Automating repetitive tasks, or using AI to support them.
- Distributing small tasks among many people rather than consolidating administrative burden on a few.

Example

Neurodivergent Zürich's leadership team were overburdened by the need to vet every new event host personally. To make it simpler, they created a set of principles and applied these to new applicants:

- New hosts should co-host an event with someone else before being allowed to host their own
- Attendees' event feedback in the Meetup tool should always be above a certain level
- Specific complaints would be followed up and the event host put on probation in the meantime

Applying these principles gave space for the community to expand, while reducing the workload for administrators and maintaining guardrails

MARKING THE SEASONS [6.8]

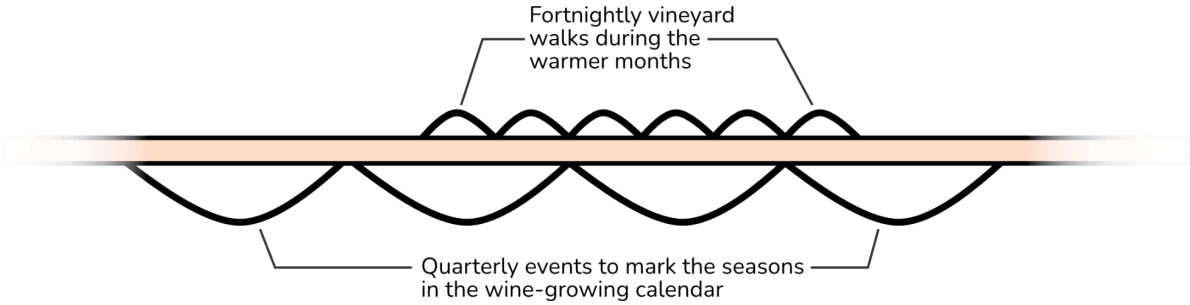
Interlocking, repeating cadences of activity across time, that reflect the community's Simple Shared Purpose & Origin Story.

Description

Communities create meaning and rhythm through patterns of activity that connect to natural seasons (for example, summer events), the cycles of external life (for example, New Year holidays) and their own purpose and story. It's not just about scheduling regular themed events: at its most powerful, Marking The Seasons creates meaning, reinforces community identity and provides structure.

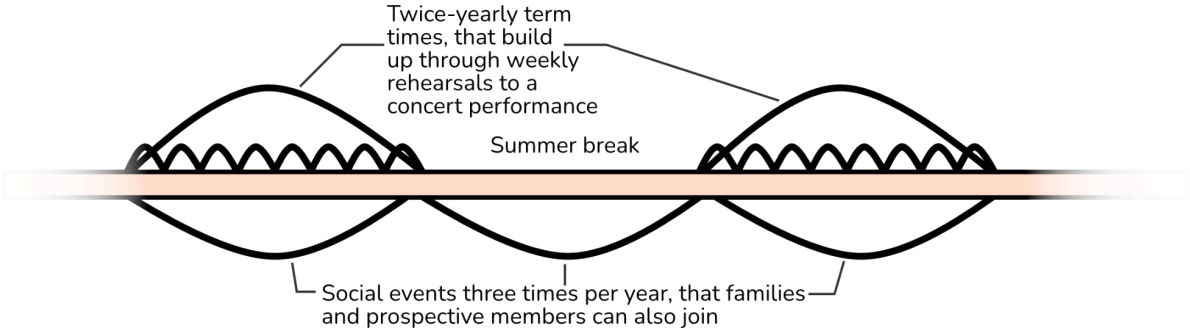
Gather provides an excellent example of this principle in action. The seasonal rhythms of wine production enable a calendar with events that work in the summer, events that work in the winter, and events that focus on the planting of vines and the wine production cycle. This not only creates a regular drumbeat of dates in the diary, but also

inspires events that echo the community's purpose and Origin Story. It connects members to the idea they're part of something meaningful, not just attending random events.



A calendar for Gather could **reflect the wine-growing seasons**, and take advantage of better weather for outdoor events

Batala demonstrates seasonality around outdoor events in the summer and rehearsing through the winter. This natural rhythm creates anticipation and variety whilst aligning with practical considerations.



A calendar for a community choir can be built around twice-yearly work of **rehearsing for a concert** (see Shared Struggle [5.8]), and an independent cycle of social events

Different communities find different seasonal rhythms. Some might have intensive periods balanced with times of lighter activity and recovery. Others might build toward annual celebrations or performances that become traditions. These patterns create a sense of journey and progression rather than endless repetition of identical events. Regular members begin to anticipate certain seasonal highlights, whilst the varied calendar offers different entry points for people with different interests or availability.

For community builders, implementing this principle means thinking beyond individual events to design yearly arcs that tell a story. It involves identifying natural rhythms in both the community's purpose and members' lives, then creating event patterns that honour these cycles. The key is ensuring these seasonal patterns connect to and reinforce the community's Simple Shared Purpose and Origin Story, making the rhythm meaningful rather than arbitrary.

Section 7

How do we deal with tension and disagreement?

Over time, it's inevitable that conflict, misalignment and disagreements will crop up in your group. You shouldn't necessarily try to avoid it, either. Rather, see it as the inevitable growing pains of a group that has life in it, and seek to work through it in a way that moves the community forward while respecting the individuals within it.

THE RIGHT DECISION-MAKING FRAMEWORK [7.1]

Adopting processes and structures of decision-making that are appropriate to the culture of the community and scale of the decision.

Description

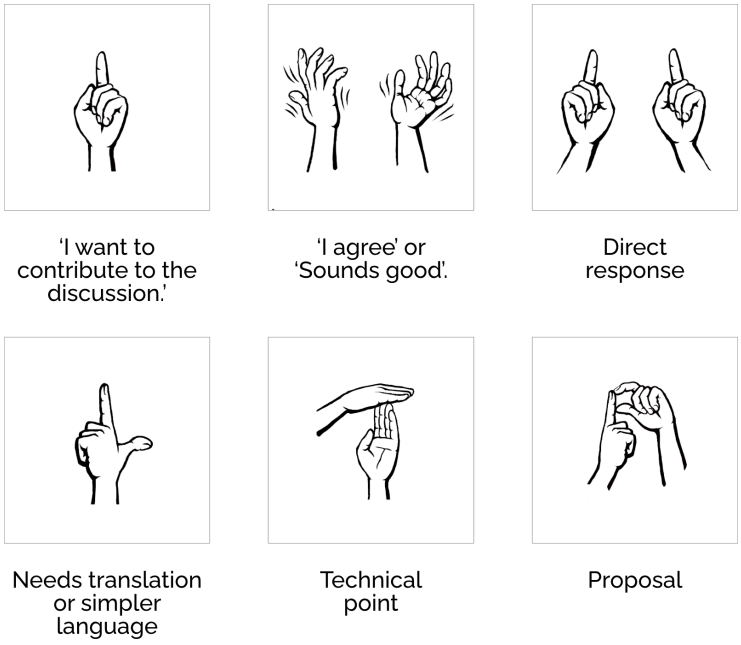
Communities must navigate the complex terrain of collective decision-making, finding approaches that offer both efficiency and inclusivity, but also reflecting their unique culture and values. There's no universal solution - different communities need different approaches, and these needs evolve as communities grow and mature. That said, a principle of 'minimum viable bureaucracy' seems preferable.

Most communities begin with informal decision-making, often centred on one or two founders who initially drive the vision and handle practical choices. This approach can be entirely appropriate in early stages when the community is finding its identity and establishing basic operations. However, as communities develop and more people become invested in their direction, decision-making structures typically need to evolve toward more democratic and distributed models.

Which decision-making approach to use? It really does depend:

- For one-off decisions, The Decider app is helpful for identifying the option that's right for the moment.
- For more mature communities, Sociocracy or its variants are often popular.
- For developmental processes, Participatory Design techniques and processes can be useful for engaging the community, arriving at a solution that works for them, and ensuring a sense of ownership.

- In particular, community decision-making often differentiates leadership dictat and majority-vote (our most familiar forms of decision-making in many European and American settings) from consensus and consent-based systems.
- Communities that are used to making decisions together may develop more sophisticated feedback and deliberation methods, for example Enspiral's models for collaboration, Earthsong's coloured card system for discussion and decision-making, and hand signal systems that enable multiple people to express their reaction, without drowning out the speaker.



Seeds For Change's **hand signals** are one of many practical systems for collaborative decision-making

The framework chosen should reflect both the community's culture and the nature and scale of decisions being made. A jazz collective might use consensus for artistic direction but delegate logistical decisions to individuals. A neighbourhood group might use formal voting for major initiatives whilst allowing working groups autonomy for their specific areas.

This principle particularly matters when communities face transitions or conflicts. Challenges around ownership and direction can emerge when decision-making frameworks aren't clearly established or don't evolve appropriately. Founders often struggle to move from being involved in every decision to trusting distributed

decision-making processes - a transition that's essential for community sustainability but emotionally challenging for those who've nurtured the community from its beginning.

For community builders, implementing this principle means explicitly discussing and documenting decision-making processes rather than leaving them implicit. It means regularly reviewing whether current approaches still serve the community's needs and being willing to adapt as circumstances change. In particular, it challenges leaders to let go of decision-making authority that’s rooted in power, relationships or their role as founder.

Finally, decision-making frameworks are tools to serve the community's purpose, not ends in themselves. Communities that become bogged-down in bureaucracy will quickly lose their appeal to volunteers. Instead, we advocate Minimum Viable Operations [6.7], and only expanding on the decision-making architecture when it’s time to do so.

DISCOVERED BOUNDARIES [7.2]

Boundaries, and the rules associated with them, are discovered as the community evolves rather than attempting to anticipate and legislate every possible scenario from the beginning.

Description

Rather than attempting to anticipate and legislate every possible scenario from the beginning, healthy communities develop their boundaries and rules through experience and necessity. Whilst communities might begin with broad, general agreements about behaviour and values, specific rules and boundaries should emerge organically as situations arise that require them.

This approach offers several advantages over trying to create comprehensive rules from the start.

- Communities that begin by creating dense sets of rules or lengthy handbooks can feel over-bureaucratic, overwhelming and impenetrable to newcomers. Remember: community values are best transmitted through cultural pathways (story, symbols, imitative learning), rather than hard-coded rules.

- It allows rules to be crafted in response to real situations rather than hypothetical ones.
- It creates opportunities for community dialogue about values and boundaries as issues emerge, strengthening collective understanding rather than imposing predetermined structures. In doing so, these rules can emerge from a participatory process, not a top-down mandate.

The principle doesn't mean communities should have no initial boundaries. You could probably have a very general "we will not tolerate antisocial behaviour" type rule from the beginning. Instead, it suggests that specific interpretations and applications of these broad principles should develop through actual experience. As issues arise around no-shows, payment problems, or resource use, communities can develop targeted responses that address real rather than imagined challenges.

For community builders, implementing discovered boundaries requires comfort with some initial ambiguity and strong facilitation skills when issues arise. Conducting pre-mortems might be useful - thinking through potential scenarios without necessarily creating rigid rules for each one. The key is maintaining flexibility whilst being prepared to act decisively when boundaries need to be established, always ensuring that new rules serve the community's purpose rather than simply controlling behaviour.

APPRECIATION & OSTRACISM [7.3]

Recognise pro-social behaviours; exclude anti-social actions.

Description

Communities maintain their culture and values through complementary mechanisms of celebrating positive contributions and addressing anti-social behaviour. Healthy communities need both carrots and sticks - ways to reinforce desired behaviours and discourage destructive ones - whilst being thoughtful and intentional about how these mechanisms are applied.

Appreciation involves actively recognising and celebrating members who exemplify community values through their behaviour, as described in the Visible Engagement [4.2] and Traditions, Not Rules [5.2] principles. By highlighting exemplary behaviour,

communities create positive models for others to follow whilst making valued members feel seen and appreciated.

The ostracism aspect - partial or full exclusion for antisocial behaviour - represents necessary boundary-setting that protects community wellbeing. This might range from temporary exclusion from certain activities to complete removal from the community. Regular Moments Of Renewal [8.4], such as breaking between seasons and restarting WhatsApp groups, can provide natural opportunities to not re-invite problematic members without requiring confrontational exclusions.

For community builders, this principle requires courage and clarity. Celebrating positive behaviour is generally easy and enjoyable, but addressing problematic behaviour - especially from otherwise valued members - can be emotionally difficult. Creating structures that make these processes less personal, such as seasonal breaks or clear criteria for different levels of response, helps communities maintain their values without burning out their leaders.

Example

In Together By Design's potluck dinner experiment, it became apparent that some participants invested more effort than others. While the event wasn't intended as a cooking competition, we wanted to signal that the effort put in by those who cooked was seen and appreciated. For that reason, the organisers would ask people who had clearly put a lot of effort into their dish to tell the story of it, or ask about some part of the process. We were often short of desserts, and so we experimented with a 'parade the desserts' feature of the event, where we would make a particular fuss of the dessert dishes in order to reinforce that - next time - we would like more of them. It worked!

Section 8

How can we plan for the long term?

When communities have been around for years, or even decades, their challenges and priorities change. Such communities begin to outlive the involvement of any one person, and instead aspire to become embodiments of their own values, evolving for each new era. To do so takes thoughtful, selfless and ongoing planning.

Even before then, it's a good idea to be thinking about the long arc of your community. What does progress look like? What sets up a community for long-term health and sustainability? And how should it play a part in the wider network of communities, of which it is a part?

INTENTIONAL LIFECYCLE [8.1]

Mapping out the phases of the community's life, and planning what comes next.

Description

Communities move through predictable phases of development. This principle encourages communities to consciously map these phases, anticipating how needs, challenges, and structures will evolve over time rather than simply reacting to changes as they arise.

For any given community, we might expect:

- The **beginning**: a time of excitement and rapid development;
- Becoming **established** with stable membership;
- Reaching **maturing**, and working through stability, stagnation and change;
- Finally, **winding it down**.

Each phase brings different requirements for leadership, structure, and energy. What works in the enthusiastic early days may become constraining during maturity; what sustains mature communities might have stifled early creativity. At each phase, you also need to think about where you're going next, about what 'better' looks like and how you would achieve it, and about how to make it sustainable for you.

Planning for lifecycle transitions includes crucial succession considerations. Key roles that initially cluster around founders need to be distributed and transferred over time. It's

important to plan for succession of these key roles well in advance - it ensures continuity and avoids the ‘founder dependence’ that can first create bottlenecks as communities scale, and even sow their demise when original leaders burn out or move on.

The lifecycle lens also helps communities understand their changing relationship with the world around them.

- Early phases are more internally focused: establishing identity and building internal culture towards the goal of a ‘Magic Circle’ feel. External relationships are likely to be about resourcing, or growing membership.
- Middle phases can emphasise network and movement building, deepening impact and perhaps spreading influence.
- Later phases might involve propagating new communities, merging with others, or gracefully concluding when the original purpose has been fulfilled or is no longer relevant.

For community builders, thinking in lifecycle terms means regularly assessing which phase the community currently occupies and preparing for what's next. You can plan it out and map for it. This means having different strategies for different phases rather than assuming what worked before will always continue to work. Most importantly, it means normalising evolution and even completion as natural parts of community life, rather than viewing endings in terms of failure or decline.

Example

Community Home was at a crossroads: the venue that they had used as their meeting place and activity hub for many years was at risk, and the potential loss of this vital resource focused their minds on what the next stage of their evolution might be. They ran a consultation with members, and involved them in a creative exercise to draw their vision for the future of the community, and then explain what they’d produced. The outputs showed areas of agreement and misalignment amongst the members, which offered a starting point for further planning and negotiation about what the new base needed to offer, to meet everyone’s needs.

MOVEMENT BUILDING [8.2]

Negotiating and maintaining healthy relationships with other adjacent, similar or overlapping communities, which may include boundary-setting, resource sharing, conflict resolution or collaboration.

Description

Communities rarely exist in isolation. More commonly, they're part of an ecosystem of other groups with overlapping purposes, memberships, or geographies. Mature communities must figure out how to navigate this gracefully - whether it means collaborating toward shared goals, managing competition for resources and members, or defining distinct identities within a crowded landscape.

This principle is particularly important in complex community settings such as neighbourhoods. In a city district, town or village, there are almost always multiple overlapping communities in existence, online and offline - and residents will likely be members of several, conscious of others, and unaware of many more. This presents both the potential for collaboration and supporting each others' efforts, and on the flip side, the dangers of duplication or excessive time spent managing relationships to avoid friction.

For example, Neurodivergent Zürich might need to consider relationships with other support groups or mental health organisations. These relationships might involve boundary-setting to maintain a distinct identity, resource sharing to achieve common goals, conflict resolution when interests clash, or collaboration when purposes align.

Successfully navigating movement building requires clarity about one's own community purpose and values, diplomatic skills for negotiation and collaboration, and strategic thinking about when to cooperate versus when to maintain independence. When done well, movement building strengthens not just individual communities but the entire ecosystem of connection and belonging.

What can community builders do to navigate this?

- Create a map of *adjacent* communities: how closely related are they, what are their areas of overlap?

- Also try to identify '*twin* communities'. These are communities that are very similar to yours, but operating in a different space or on a different theme. *Example: Neurodivergent Zürich might identify a community in London that has the same goals, and build a mutual support relationship.*
- Be proactive in reaching out to organisers of adjacent communities. Create trust and open communications, to get ahead of possible future challenges.
- On the other hand, set limits. Don't expend excessive energy on inter-community relationships, at the expense of your own.
- Don't be territorial. Accept that membership of different communities will likely overlap, and that members may get something different out of each community they're a part of.
- Ask for help. Related communities can be a great support, for example in getting advice or mentorship (twin communities) or pooling resources for bigger efforts that are beyond the means of a single group (adjacent communities). *Example: Neurodivergent Zürich might exchange tips about how to find sponsors with their London twin, but collaborate with another Zürich community to put on an event.*

  This is also an advantage of the propagation approach: different chapters of the same organisation can offer mutual support, or advice from a position of shared understanding.

MOMENTS OF RENEWAL [8.3]

Embracing the possibility and need for change, and building in specific moments where it can happen naturally.

Description

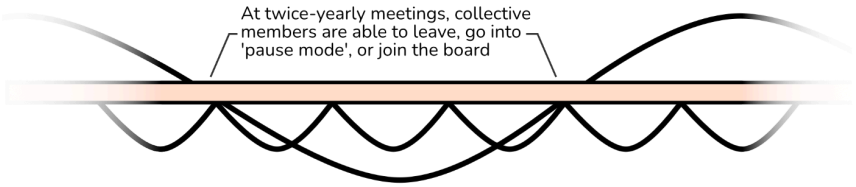
To endure in the long run, communities need periodic renewal rather than rigid consistency. This principle advocates for building specific opportunities into the community's rhythms and lifecycle, where fundamental questions can be asked, directions can be adjusted, and energy can be refreshed.

As you go through your intentional lifecycle, you need to build in moments of renewal, for several reasons:

- They provide opportunities to reassess whether the community still serves its original purpose, or whether there's a better way to achieve it.
- They allow for recognition and appreciation of contributions whilst also addressing problematic patterns that may have developed (see the Appreciation & Ostracism [7.3] principle).
- They create natural points for leadership transitions and role changes. In this way, community builders can make sure that they're not concentrating power over time in a way that's unhealthy (see Breaking With The Past [8.5]).

Paradoxically, regular questioning and potential change actually create stability by preventing the brittleness that comes from rigid adherence to outdated structures.

Renewal moments might coincide with natural transitions - annual planning sessions, seasonal breaks, or significant anniversaries. These breaks provide psychological permission for change that might feel difficult during continuous operation. They offer a chance to step back and ask whether current approaches still serve the community's needs.



The Together By Design collective has
two built-in Moments of Renewal in its year

For community builders, implementing renewal moments requires both scheduling and courage. It means building regular reflection points into the community calendar and being willing to ask difficult questions about what's working and what isn't. It means creating safe processes for honest feedback and being prepared to make significant changes when renewal reveals they're needed. Most importantly, it means viewing change not as failure but as a natural and necessary part of community evolution.

Example

Together By Design collective has a six-monthly cycle of renewal. At these times, people can drop out of the collective, go into ‘pause mode’, or be elected to the board. It also offers an opportunity to vote on new approaches to our project, establish new norms, announce changes and be intentional about what to move forward with and what to leave behind.

BREAKING STRUCTURES [8.4]

Structures are taken apart and remade before they become stale. When power over-accumulates, it's redistributed. Description

Long-lived communities must periodically dismantle and rebuild themselves to prevent institutional sclerosis and concentrated power from undermining their purpose. Even well-designed organisational patterns eventually become constraining, and power naturally accumulates in ways that can harm community health if not actively redistributed.

This principle addresses a fundamental challenge: the structures and leadership patterns that enable communities to function can eventually become barriers to their evolution. Decision-making processes appropriate for ten members may not work for fifty. Leadership concentrated in founders who provided early vision and energy may prevent new voices from emerging. Traditions that once created meaning may become empty rituals. Without intentional disruption and new energy, communities risk becoming frozen versions of their earlier selves.

Breaking With The Past doesn't mean chaos or constant instability. Rather, it means consciously examining whether existing patterns still serve their purpose and being willing to dismantle even successful structures before they become stale. Are your decision-making conventions still appropriate, or are they holding you back? The same goes for structures, core principles, and other foundational elements.

For community builders, this principle requires regular monitoring for signals of over-concentrated power or stale structures. For example:

- Are the same people making all decisions? Or is it possible for others to be part of the process?
- Have operational processes become bureaucratic rather than enabling?
- Are there rules and regulations that no longer make sense?
- Do newer members feel they can influence the community's direction? Or do they quietly drift away and tune out?

When these signals appear, leaders must have the courage to give away power they've earned and break structures they've built, trusting that renewal will strengthen rather than weaken the community.

In some cases, it may also be necessary to revisit the Simple Shared Purpose defined at the early stages of community development. This is a process that the whole community should be involved in - but it can offer a chance to address what's changed over the course of time, make explicit goals that have perhaps become hidden by accumulated traditions, and give those who are no longer on board a chance to opt out gracefully.

Succession planning

It's healthy if community membership roles change regularly. As noted in Transitions [6.2] changing role should be celebrated and facilitated where possible, because it allows members to engage in the way that's right for them at any given time in their life. However it also benefits the community, by bringing in a fresh influx of ideas and energy, and ensuring those who are jaded can disengage without dragging down the experience of those around them.

This is particularly relevant in leadership positions, or specialist technical roles. In these cases, succession planning is particularly important because newcomers need time to pick up on the intricacies and context that they need to be effective. For this reason, we recommend that leadership and technical roles

- Plan to hand over every few years, plan for succession 1-2 years beforehand.
- Have at least two or three 'cycles' (whether that's events, quarters of operation or meetings - it depends on the role) of shadowing before the handover takes place.

- Begin to delegate low-stakes tasks before the handover takes place, so the newcomer can get used to owning responsibilities and working with others in the group.

Even if the handover takes longer, at least the group has built in some redundancy that can help with unexpected absences or extra work.

For those in a role who are finding it hard to let go, it's also a good time to reflect on why that is: reasoning like 'there's no-one who could replace me' or 'it won't be done properly' might be indicative that power is over-concentrated, and makes the need for building a wider base of skills and planning for succession even more important. It's also important to accept that a newcomer will do things slightly differently, and to be OK with that rather than over-interfering, once the handover has taken place.

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