

Resilient & motivated community initiative

Toolkit for making your community
initiative work more effectively



Introduction

This toolkit is created as a MA thesis project in Interaction Design at Estonian Academy of Arts. In collaboration with Paranduskelder, a repair space community in Tartu.

Why was this created?

Most voluntary community initiatives start with a lot of motivation, but slow down or disappear if the initial drive wears off and the group dynamic is not working as seamlessly as expected. This situation can be prevented by having a clear vision and structure for your community initiative. This toolkit should give starting communities ideas on how to structure the core group of people and organise around one united vision. It can also be used by communities already in action to get some additional ideas on how to work more efficiently.

This toolkit was designed in the process of my MA thesis work. The content is inspired by Paranduskelder's experience and work, plus the design research done during this project.

Villem Nilbe, Estonian Academy of Arts, Interaction Design MA

Content

There are two kinds of content in this toolkit:

- **Inspiration** – Get valuable tips and ideas on how to organise things in your community initiative.
- **Workshop guides** – Workshops templates included in this toolkit will guide you in running it through with your community and get results.

Workshops

During the workshops, it's essential to get all the ideas out. Yes, even the stupid ones. The point is to be creative, have fun, and arrive at a united decision that everyone had a chance to contribute to.

For a smooth workshop, you should appoint:

Facilitator – They have to familiarize themselves with the structure of the workshop in order to guide others through it. They should also monitor the time limit.

In the workshop descriptions, there are notes marked with ! for more complicated details that the facilitator should pay extra attention to.

Documenter – The one who documents the outcomes of the workshop. Ideally, they should write the outcomes down digitally and later share them with everybody that participated. It's also a good idea to take photos of the process, this way nothing gets lost.

Both – the facilitator and documenter – can participate in the workshop, but it just takes a little bit more time and focus from them.

From an idea to a small group

When starting a new community initiative, you should keep in mind that it takes time to get things going—to get people working together effectively, to set up communications, and to grow the number of active participants.

Other communities in your area

When looking for additional people to start a local community initiative with, it is a good idea to contact other active local communities and participate in their events.

- **Find people** interested in your initiative who have similar community experience.
- **Share practices** like where they get support, how they run things, etc.
- **Share contacts** because they might know people possibly interested in your idea or guide you to somebody who can help you get things running.



Starting

Once you have enough people to start planning, it's important to have regular meetings. Having regular meetings can help build:

- **Trust** between people.
- **Initial responsibility**, which is especially important in voluntary initiatives. People must understand the importance of the initiative and have responsibility to invest their time into this.

Try thinking of activities that you could do together to advance those things discussed in the meetings. People usually bond faster when doing something physical. **Don't just discuss, do.**



Core group working together

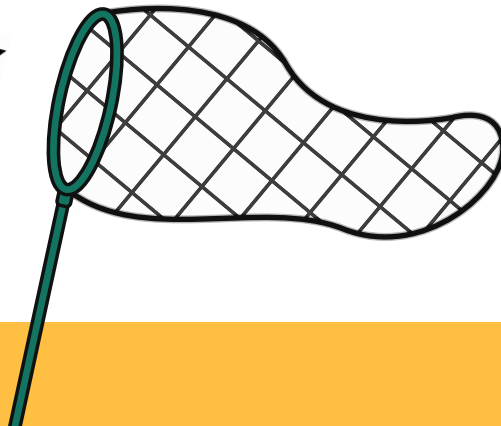
For the core group to effectively decide, act, and create together, a few things have to be set up.

Communication

The communication inside a community should be easy, honest, and frequent. For a smaller team (up to 3 people), email or messaging apps might be OK at first. Thinking ahead, setting up team communication solutions (like Slack or Trello) might be a good idea, as it allows you to create different channels for different topics, and keep all information in one place ensuring that things don't get unnoticed. Whatever platform you choose, try to keep most of the important information in one place.

Roles

In order to share responsibilities inside the core group, you should divide roles between people. Initial roles can be a combination of what needs to be done in the community and what kind of experiences and skills people already have.



Role = goal

Role shouldn't be just an activity, rather, it should be a bigger goal that you want to reach with the community. For example developing new events, organisation of the workspace, marketing, etc.

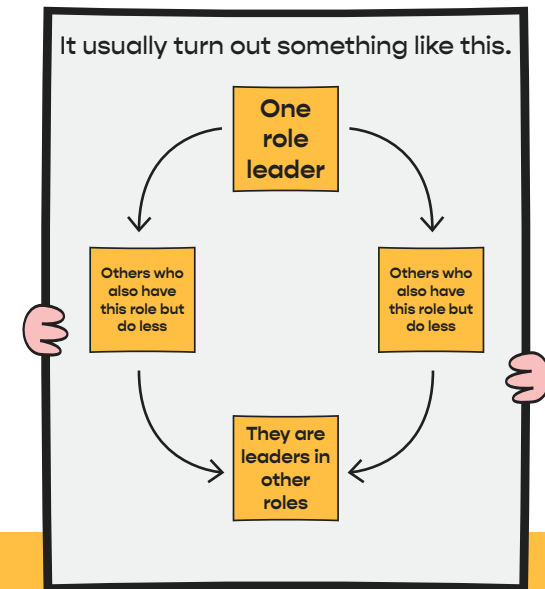
Roles usually embody different activities to reach that goal. One role can be carried out by many people.

Role = accountability

People in that role are making sure that things get done and report about their progress during meetings.

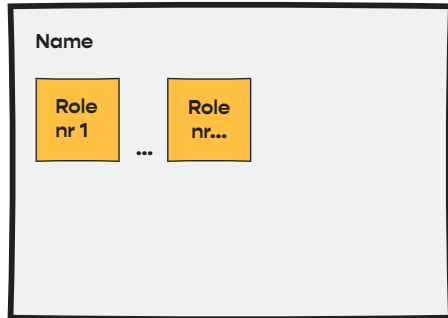
! All the roles don't have to carry the same amount of work. It differs between people how much time and energy they can invest in the community and that is OK.

! Getting the roles to work can be a bit tricky because people have to be self-sufficient, but it can bring many benefits – people feeling more accomplished, being more independent, and working more effectively as there's no one to lean back on.



Workshop: Defining roles

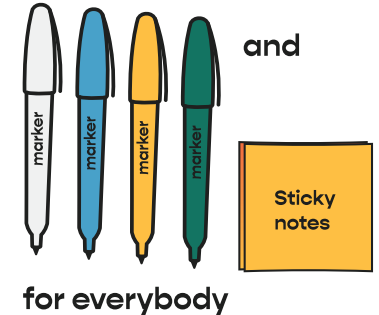
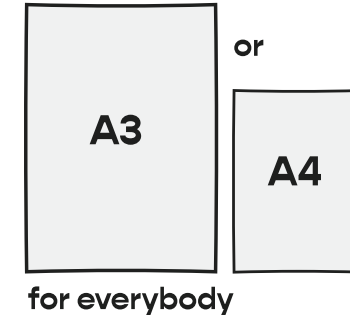
Outcome:



- Roles are decided and divided between participants.
- Every participant should have a paper with their name and role or roles on it.

What you need:

Your core group



1. Share skills and interests

Let everybody share what are their skills and interests, what their role in the community could be, and how that could benefit the community.

! Keep in mind that the role cannot be just a single activity rather a bigger goal containing many smaller activities moving the community closer to this goal.

2. Discussion

Discuss the roles - what is needed and how to use everybody's skills in the most effective way possible. Make sure that everybody is OK with the roles they take. It should be a healthy balance of what needs to be done and the interests of people.

3. Write it down

Write the roles down on sticky notes.

Let everyone write their name on an individual A3 or A4. Add the sticky notes with roles. The role can change when the needs of the community change or when activities in this role are just done.

4. Put it somewhere visible

Hang the pages where you conduct meetings or hang out. The pages will give a quick overview of everybody's roles and activities. In the Priority tasks workshop (coming up!) we will be adding sticky notes with specific actions to everyone's papers.

Meetings

It's important to structure your meetings and take measures to keep them as efficient as possible. Sure, meetings are a good place to meet your fellow community members, but it's important to keep the right balance between the two. No one should feel that the meetings are too long and pointless or it can start to seem that the whole community initiative is wasting their time. Especially in voluntary work, it's important to prevent those feelings from rising.

Things to decide

- **Facilitator** – One facilitator for all the meetings. It can be one of their roles, too.
- **Time Limit** – About the same for all regular meetings. For example 30-90min depending on the scale of your community.
- **Pre-posted topics and questions** – Posted in the online communication channel and gathered together by the facilitator before the meeting.

A way to structure meetings

- **Reflection** – Few minutes for everybody to reflect on their roles. How's it going, what's bothering you, and are there any changes that need to be done?
- **Progress** – Everybody talks about what they have done since the last meeting and what are the next tasks.
- **Questions/topics** – Going through posted topics and questions. Posted topics should be categorised by types >

Meeting topic types	Time-frame	Outcome
Discussion	Limited	No need to arrive to a decision
Decision-making	More flexible	Decision has to be made
Sharing information	Depends on the topic	Keep everybody up to date on developments. Minimal discussion.

Vision, principles, and strategy

In this part of the toolkit we are trying to decide and document your community's vision, principles, and strategy.

Vision / Why?

How do you want to change the current situation? Imagine a future where your community initiative has been or is successfully dealing with the problem you want to tackle. What does it look like?

Once the vision is decided on you can always fall back on it. Are the activities you are doing actually serving that vision?

Principles / How?

What are the guiding principles you can employ when acting in this community? What are the things you do all the time or things you should consider when making decisions?

Strategy / What?

Looking into the near future of a few months to a year, what are the steps you have to take in order to achieve your vision? Also in what order you have to implement those steps? Guiding the additional activities and decisions that have to be made.

Culture & vision of the community

WHY?

- **Why is this community needed?**
- **Why are our actions important?**

HOW?

- **How we do things in this community?**
(for example: everything is open sourced, reused, at every event we take photos etc.)

Strategy

WHAT?

- **Goals to reach** (traceable back to the initial WHY?)
- **Usually time-based**
- **Consists of concrete actions and deadlines that are connected with corresponding roles.**

Workshop: Why?/How?

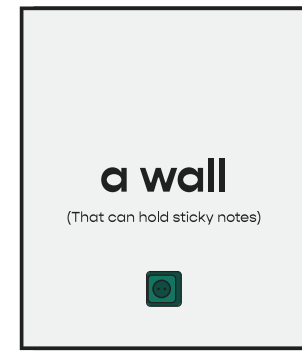
Determining Why? and How? of your community. Done once, it can and should be revised from time to time!

Outcome:

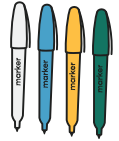
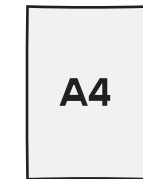
- Come up with the vision (why?) and the principles (how?) of your community together.
- Document the united vision and principles of your community. Why you work on the issues that you do and how do you take decisions and act?

What you need:

Your core group



A timer



for everybody

1. Future visioning

5 min: Everyone writes and draws a quick overview of what your community initiative looks like in 3-5 years in a perfect world. What are you doing, what does it look like, what does it smell like, what's already done... First, do it individually.

2 min for each: Everybody can share a quick future vision.

2. Why?

7 min: Individually write on sticky notes as many reasons as you can: Why is our community initiative important? Why is it needed right now? Why is the current situation bugging us? One reason per one sticky note.

Place all of your sticky notes on a wall.

Facilitator reads them out loud and then, together, group similar sticky notes.

3. Why? sentences

10min: Individually create Why? sentences using and combining reasons from last round. Try to write one sentence per one sticky note or combine a few together.

Can follow this example: **We created (insert community name) because (reasons) and we believe that (positive effects or assumptions about future).**

Next, everyone should share their sentences.

4. Voting

Vote on what you think is the Why? sentence best describing the vision of your community. Give 5 sticky dots for voting to everybody. Let all the participants vote in silence at the same time. You can vote many times on the same sentence if you like it so very much and you can vote on your own sentences.

Rank the sentences by votes. If needed, reword or combine. If not, use the most voted sentence or do a second round of voting with the most voted sentences (if there's a tie or very close number of votes) from the first round.

! It's also OK to leave the voting for later (if it's all written down people can reword them at home and the final voting can take place online or during next meeting). The vision is important. Take time to do it right.

5. Personal Why?

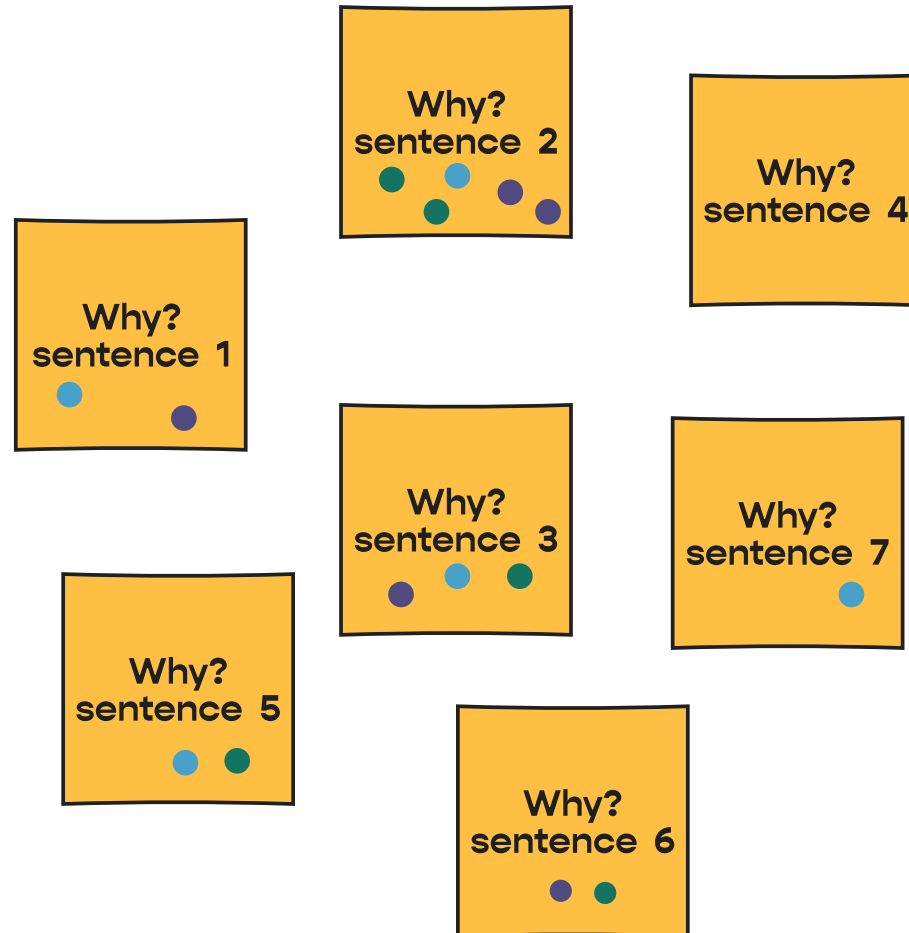
3min: Everybody creates their own personal Why? sentences: Imagine a day, a year from now, when you don't have any motivation to do something for this community. Thinking about what could keep you motivated? What would you say to yourself?

Share for wholesomeness.

6. How?

5 min: Individually write down principles on "How we do things in our community?" on sticky notes.
(for example: "We always take pictures of our events." "We reuse everything that's possible to reuse.")

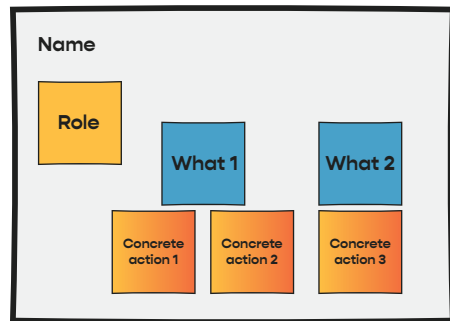
10 min: Share & group – write down everything that you agree on and the new things that rise from the discussion.



Workshop: What?

Finding out priorities and making them actionable for next 3-12 months (you choose the exact timeframe, it can vary for different communities).

Outcome:



- Decide on what specific actions need to be done in your community.
- Add the actions relevant to your role(s) to your role paper from Defining roles workshop.

1. What?

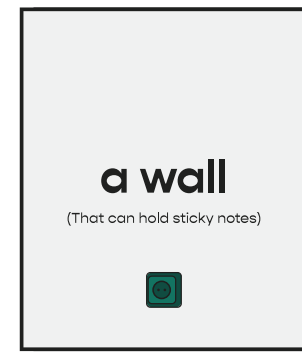
8min: Individually write down on sticky notes general themes of the activities you will do in our community in a next 3-12 months and think about how they connect with the why and how. For example finding a bigger space, setting up social media or finding contacts for organising events. Everybody shares their activities and explains how they connect with the why and how.

2. Vote

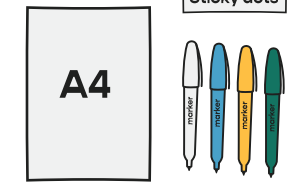
Put all the sticky notes on the wall and vote on what seems the most doable and needed activities for the next 3-12 months. Depending on the number of ideas, 5-7 sticky dots to vote for each participant should be enough.

What you need:

Your core group



A timer



for everybody

3. Think of actions

3min: Individually write down on sticky notes activities you think our community should do in the next 3-12 months. Make the previous exercise more specific. For example take "finding a bigger space" and break it down – searching for vacant places in your area, contacting the real estate agents, creating a social media post about it, etc.

Introduce your activities to others and group similar ones together.

4. Vote and choose

Vote on priorities, everyone has 5-7 votes.

Rank priorities by votes and choose the priorities that the group agrees are doable in your chosen timeframe.

5. Match actions with roles

Divide top priorities between people – whose role goes with what. Some priorities should have more than one person as many people could share the same role.

6. In the role group

Form groups of people with the same role.

! Try to arrange groups so that people with many role can participate in both discussions. That may mean doing this step twice.

15 min: With the people who share your role write down: What the priority means and what is the outcome of doing it in the timeframe?

! Discussions in a group take more time and people might have to form smaller groups to talk it through. Make sure that there's time for that and grant extra if needed.

7. Concrete actions

15 min: Write down actions that have to be taken to carry this priority out. Set deadlines and responsibilities.

Share with other groups & get feedback

Discuss if everybody is happy with how the activities got divided. You can switch the priorities if needed, add actions or take some away.

For example:

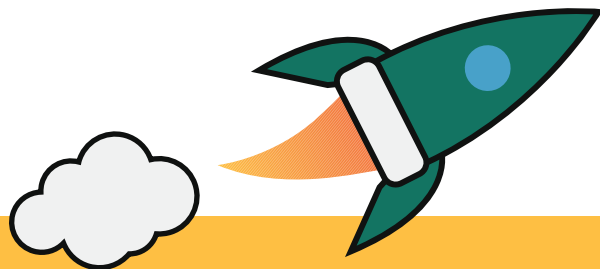
Role	Developing our workspace				
What?	Maintenance of our space			Interior design	
Concrete actions	Get equipment for our kitchen	Setting up the recycling	Make rules of procedure document	Decide on and make decorations	Furniture and its placement

Growing your community

Most of the potential participants are probably not actively looking for your community initiative. You have to attract them and show them the value that they can get here. At some point it might be a good idea to assign a role of community manager who will actively look for new participants, communicate with them, and work on projects that can grow your community.

Make it easy to join

- **Communicate your values clearly** – The vision and how you do things should be displayed in the physical space, on your social media, and website.
- **Be approachable to newcomers** – You can think with the core group about how you pitch your community initiative to people who haven't heard about you. Make it easy to understand how your initiative works and what you guys do.
- **Start with activities** – It's easier to join and feel welcomed when participants have something to do together. Creating and accomplishing something together is the best social glue.
- **Make regularity a priority** – Hold regular events. That way, people know what to expect and if they see something they are interested in, they can plan to participate.



Hold it together and keep growing

It's important to care for the participants you already have. Having events only for existing participants gives you a good opportunity to get to know them better. Maybe they have skills you had no idea about. Those things can boost the productivity of your community by putting unused skills to good use and give participants further opportunities for self-actualization. And if we leave the productivity mambo-jambo to the side, it's also great for building friendships for life.

Somebody wants to join the core organising group?

Some of the participants might be interested in joining the core group and invest more time and energy to your community. Even though they are most likely doing so on a voluntary basis, it's important to know if they are a good fit or not. It might be a little awkward to put so much pressure on people offering help, but knowing if it's going to work or not might come up during the discussion. Being thorough at the beginning will make everything go smoother later.

You should schedule a 30 min to 1 hour meeting with this person to:

- **Introduce them Why?/How?/What?** of your community.
- **Introduce how you work** – Meetings, decision making, etc.
- **Introduce them the roles** – What would they want to do? How much time can they put into this? What other skills or interests they might have?
- **Agree on the role** they would take and let them accept the responsibilities that come with this role.

Sometimes it doesn't work out as planned and people just move on and don't or can't be part of your community anymore. That's totally OK! Always focus on the ones that stay and keep on giving.

End note

Thank you for going through the entire toolkit. I hope it helped or it's going to help you. Furthermore, thank you for engaging in a community-led initiative—you are making the world a better place.

Work in progress

This toolkit does not represent the only way to make communities sustain over a long time. This approach is based on the experience of a few communities and the design research done for my master's thesis. If you use it in your community or have experience with different approaches to same problems I encourage you to contact me. This toolkit is in no way set in stone. I want to keep iterating and feedback helps me to shape it into a better tool for future communities.

Waiting for your thoughts and ideas!

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