Governance in Formation: Identifying Priorities for Action and Making Decisions

Facilitator's Guide

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Background

This guide was produced by the Educopia Institute as part of our [Community Cultivation](#) support and infrastructure. Our Community Cultivation efforts provide scaffolding and tools that help support and sustain collaborative groups, communities, and organizations. Building on the [Community Cultivation Field Guide](#), this is the second in a series of open access Community Cultivation tools, templates, and guidance documentation that we are publishing to help communities navigate common challenges encountered as they are forming.

Credits and Licensing

Introduction

This facilitator's guide documents "The How" - the way that the community organizes itself, makes decisions, and sets expectations of members and partners.

In the previous [Formation Facilitator's Guide,](#) we focused on developing a clear articulation of "The What" - *what does the community want to do together; what problem is it in the best position to solve (purpose statement)*. This facilitator's guide, "Governance in Formation: Identifying Priorities for Action and Making Decisions,'" documents "The How" - the way that the community organizes itself, makes decisions, and sets expectations of members and partners.

This guide includes instructions for planning a structured activity and templates to support this work. Using these resources, a facilitator (community manager, project director, or other convener) can determine priorities for Community Formation and how that work will be undertaken by community leadership.

"Governance in Formation: Identifying Priorities for Action and Making Decisions'" is the second facilitator's guide in a free series of facilitator guides included in Educopia Institute's "Community Cultivation" resources. Additional resources, including the "Community Cultivation Field Guide'' are freely available at [Educopia.org/cultivation.](#)

Planning and Preparation

Ideal Participants and Setting

The activity outlined in this guide is designed to be used by a facilitator with the team members who are establishing a community *or* who are key voices within an existing community. The setting could be a virtual meeting platform (e.g., Zoom) or an in-person meeting space. Educopia most often facilitates these activities in virtual settings.

Materials and Set-Up

This guide provides context, planning considerations, facilitation instructions, templates, and examples to support groups in determining the action priorities for Community Formation and distributing accountability for the completion of that work. We recommend that a facilitator schedule a minimum of one synchronous overview session to ensure that everyone understands the Community Cultivation Framework and the instructions for the group exercises. The exercises themselves can be completed synchronously in 2–4 sessions or asynchronously. The advantage of synchronous sessions for this work is that the community can make fairly substantial progress in understanding its needs in a 60 minute time period. However, all groups face unique scheduling and coordination challenges, and asynchronous work can support more equitable and inclusive participation. The templates provided for this guide support a hybrid model of synchronous and asynchronous work, however, the synchronous meeting agenda template could be adapted into a series of asynchronous activities.

Facilitator Resources

Templates in this Guide

Link to Meeting Invitation template
Link to Overview of Community Cultivation Growth Areas template
Link to Community Cultivation Self-Assessment Worksheet template
Link to From Community Cultivation Needs to SMART Goals Worksheet template
Link to Decision-making and Accountability Meeting Agenda template

External Resources

The following resources provide more information on governance and community leadership development:

1. [The Community Toolbox - Developing a Plan for Building Leadership](#) - The Community Toolbox is an extensive library of resources to support community development. The Toolbox is a service of the Center for Community Health and Development at the University of Kansas. In the section on "Leadership and Management," contributor Marya Axner provides a guide for building leadership, recommending that leadership development should start at the beginning of the community development process—bringing in individuals that demonstrate interest, enthusiasm, and consistency as active participants in their own leadership development.

2. [Nexus LAB: Layers of Leadership](#) - Developed in partnership by Educopia Institute and the Center for Creative Leadership, the "Layers of Leadership" documents the key challenge, key leadership tasks, skills necessary to address those tasks, and outcomes sought within seven "layers" of leadership, from "Leading Self" to "Leading the Organization" to "Leading the Profession. The following sections are particularly relevant to this Facilitator's Guide.
   a. p.4 Leading Others
   b. p.8 Leading the Profession

3. [How (and why) to nurture multiple thought leaders within your nonprofit organization](#) - This post by Ben Losman published on the nonprofit marketing communications blog, *The Nonprofit MarCommunity*, outlines the benefits of "group-oriented thought leadership" as well as basic guidelines on how to nurture multiple thought leaders.

4. [Inter-Organizational Networks A Review of the Literature to Inform Practice](#) - This resource provides a comprehensive overview of the published literature on interorganizational networks. The section below is of particular relevance to this facilitator's guide, as it highlights the distinct but common models of governance within networks as well as characteristics of network "leadership processes which can be shared, distributed, collective, relational, dynamic, mergenet, and adaptive."
   a. p.37 Network Governance, Leadership and Management, and Structure

5. Katherine Skinner, *et al*. (2018). *Community Cultivation: A Field Guide.* Retrieved from https://educopia.org/cultivation/. The Field Guide provides a tool for communities to assess their development status, identify targeted activities and tools to address their growth needs and measure progress toward their maturation and sustainability goals. The Field Guide is based on Educopia's Community Cultivation Framework which consists of four life cycle stages (Formation, Validation, Acceleration, and Transition) and five growth areas (Vision, Infrastructure, Governance, Finance & HR, and Engagement). The Field Guide also offers a

snapshot of the tools, resources, and training modules Educopia has developed and regularly uses in its consulting and community-building work.

6. [SMART Goals: A How-to Guide](#) - This guide from the University of California outlines the purpose of SMART goals (which signify Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound goals) as well as provides suggestions for scoping and writing them. Through the strategic use of SMART goals, leaders and facilitators can name, prioritize, and clarify achievable high-level objectives. While this guide is framed for employees and managers, the criteria, advice, and templates all adapt well to community development work.

7. [SMARTIE Goals Worksheet](#) - This worksheet from The Management Center adapts SMART goals to explicitly address equity and inclusion. Strategic, Measurable, Ambitious, Realistic, Time-bound, Inclusive, and Equitable, SMARTIE goals aim to "produce better outcomes for marginalized communities, address disparities, or support belonging." The template invites organizations to consider power, identity, inequity, and exclusion in their goal-setting, providing framing, definitions, examples, and other resources to support this work.

8. [Diversity and Consensus](#) - This article by Betsy Raasch-Gillman published on the Training for Change website, which is a training and capacity building organization for activists and organizers, addresses the tension between consensus and diversity. Because a consensus model of decision-making may be incompatible to a largely homogenous group, Raasch-Gillman advocates for facilitators to consider other decision-making processes and explores the ways that power, equity, and conflict exist in groups.

9. [Community Rule Governance Model Templates](#) - CommunityRule, a project of the Media Enterprise Design Lab at the University of Colorado Boulder in collaboration with the Metagovernance Project, is a governance toolkit for communities that offers a number of ways to establish governance practices. These templates serve as starting points for facilitators to engage with various approaches to decision-making, articulating shared values, membership processes, levels of authority, and broad policies required to enact those models.

Activity Overview

The activities described in this guide assume the group has established key stakeholders and articulated its purpose. The group is now prepared to assess and prioritize its community cultivation needs; translate those needs into specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART) goals; and determine the best way for community leadership to distribute accountability for those goals. In sequence, these activities constitute a process aimed at activating community leadership to articulate and assign strategic priorities for action. As the community or network continues to develop, the strategic roadmap is a powerful tool for focusing attention and resources towards purposeful action. Likewise, the network's leaders may often return to the initial list of stakeholder needs, desires, and fears (see "Vision in Formation" for this stakeholder activity) as one way to evaluate priorities for action.

> As the community or network continues to develop, the strategic roadmap is a powerful tool for focusing attention and resources towards purposeful action.

During the Formation Lifecycle Stage, community leadership can be loose and flat—a core group of colleagues that manage to coordinate action without assigning specific roles or over-specifying outcomes. Alternatively, network leadership can be one or two key individuals who make most of the strategic decisions and are also responsible for implementing most of these decisions. The process outlined in this guide starts by taking stock of existing or potential community leadership. The facilitator then guides the community leadership through a mini community cultivation assessment in order to surface Formation stage priorities for action. Then, leadership is asked to translate Formation needs and priorities for action into SMART goals that will be used to guide and focus the work of the group. In the course of this process, the leadership team develops areas of accountability that correspond to the Finance & HR, Engagement, and Infrastructure Community Cultivation growth areas.

Step 1: Gather Community Leadership & Review the Community Cultivation Framework

In the first Facilitator's Guide, "Vision in Formation," we discussed how to identify stakeholders that should be part of articulating the community's purpose. For smaller groups of stakeholders, it may make sense to invite them all to serve in community leadership roles. However, for larger groups of stakeholders, you may be better off identifying a smaller core leadership team of 5-7 individuals who are willing to participate in a synchronous session to review key growth areas, contribute to asynchronous data analysis based on key growth areas, own accountability for strategic growth areas of the group, and collectively be responsible for vision and governance.

The *Nexus Layers of Leadership* provides a guide for identifying potential community leaders by providing a list of activities for which individuals leading their professions often excel:
- Practicing and communicating thought leadership
- Challenging group or organizational norms
- Ensuring scalability and sustainability
- Building relationships/forging networks across organizations within your field in order to break down silos
- Seeing and understanding organizations in your field holistically, as a single integrated ecosystem
- Interacting and partnering with organizational leadership nationally and internationally

Questions the facilitator might consider to develop the invitations for the smaller leadership group include the following:
- Who is consistently showing up and investing their time in shaping the group's direction and activities?
- Whose perspectives are missing from the group?
- Who is able to inspire the group to think creatively?
- Who is able to foster dialog among divergent viewpoints?

After determining who constitutes community leadership, the facilitator's next tasks are to determine a timeline and scope for this work, communicate clear expectations and objectives to potential attendees, and secure a commitment from potential participants.

Details to provide to invitees in the invitation include:

- Tasks and activities in which they can expect to engage (e.g., combination of asynchronous and synchronous activity)
- Expected time commitment from attendees; for example:
  - 15 minutes to complete the asynchronous survey (Step 2)
  - Minimum of two, one-hour synchronous meetings or work sessions (Step 4)
  - One - two hours of post-meeting synchronous work to refine and finalize the purpose statement
- Desired outcomes
- Link to scheduling poll or other means of determining participant availability for synchronous work (if synchronous)
- Deadline by which you expect a reply

The facilitator should always make clear to invitees that their participation is critical for accomplishing the desired meeting outcomes, and likewise will shape the eventual community or network and its activities.

The facilitator should adjust the timeline and the expected time commitment based on the particular network and stakeholders with whom they are working and the setting (in person vs. virtual) in which the group will meet. Because the Governance in Formation guide builds on the Vision in Formation guide, participating individuals likely know one another which can speed up the process. The degree of existing interest, the pre-meeting clarity of shared goals/needs, the complexity of the group's dynamics (e.g., are stakeholders from allied or competing organizations) and the context in which the group is forming will impact the time this activity will take as well.

This meeting invitation template provides an example of how to structure, format, and sequence the requisite information to maximize clarity of communication to invited attendees.

Preparing participants for these activities involves providing an overview of the Community Cultivation Framework and how to use the Field Guide. A brief slide deck template with speaker notes has been provided to review the basic definitions and concepts. For convenience a list of lifecycle stages and growth areas are provided below. A complete description of the community cultivation framework can be found in the Community Cultivation Field Guide.

Lifecycle Stages

Formation: A community organizes (or reorganizes) and develops services, tools, or shared resources to meet a need held in common by its constituents. It articulates an ethos and culture that binds the major players together.

Validation: A community demonstrates its value and validity, broadening its constituent base and sphere of influence. It focuses primarily on external validation, exploring how others may understand, join, or relate to its work.

Acceleration: A community scales its services, tools, or resources in order to quickly grow, demonstrating its stability both internally and externally. Communities in this stage sometimes grow fast; they also may fail fast and shift gears towards a spin-off or spin-down process for projects, programs, or the community itself.

Transition: A community evaluates its constituents' changing needs and engages in purposeful transition. It analyzes both external and internal changes and determines how its work can remain vibrant and relevant. Communities and their associated projects and programs may merge, spin off, or spin down.
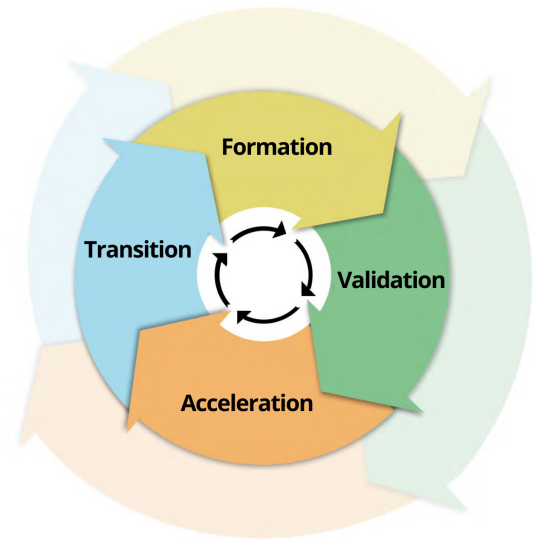
Growth Areas Activities

- **Vision:** strategic direction, goals, desired impact
- **Finances and HR:** determining staffing needs and other operational costs, processes for ensuring fiscal responsibility and compliance
- **Governance:** decision-making processes, roles & responsibilities
- **Engagement:** understanding stakeholders, key messaging, pacing and modes of engagement to keep people informed and invested in the success of the initiative or group
- **Infrastructure:** workflows, policies, record keeping, web platforms

Step 2: Community Cultivation Self-Assessment

As is stated in the Field Guide, "a key challenge in formation is that so many elements need simultaneous attention," so once you've identified community leadership, you can follow Community Toolbox's advice and involve them in their own leadership development. Facilitate this exercise with them so that they have a framework for helping to prioritize Formation-stage work. Once the work is named and prioritized you can discuss decision-making, ownership, and accountability.

If this part of the activity is going to be completed asynchronously, provide a deadline by which the Community Cultivation assessment should be completed. If the activity is going to be completed synchronously in a 60 minute block of time, a suggested breakdown might be:
- (7min) Review instructions and resources for completing the assignment
- (5min) Assign pairs
- (15min) Breakout rooms for each pair or small group (all groups typing in the same document)
- (20min) Recap of needs and prioritization discussion

Using what the participants learned from the Community Cultivation Overview session and Community Cultivation Field Guide, community leadership will divide into smaller teams (pairs or teams of three) to complete a mini-assessment of their community's health, and identify action priorities in each of the five key growth areas. The Community Cultivation Framework was intended, in part, to be used as a tool for self-assessment, a way for communities to determine priorities for action based on comparing their current activities and outputs to activities and outputs that are proven indicators of health in key community growth areas. NOTE: The individuals assigned to the growth area do not need any expertise or specialized knowledge in the particular growth area in order to complete the exercise.

Example of completed pair mini-assessment

FINANCES & HR: José and Carla	
We've successfully: ● Raised initial start-up funding	**We need to:** 1. Evaluate current capacity for functions that can be owned by committee and functions that have to be owned by staff and contractors 2. Establish operating costs 3. Create a financial plan for covering costs beyond initial start-up funding
Finances & HR Discussion Notes:	

ENGAGEMENT: Brandon and Jen	
We've successfully: ● Established a regular meeting time for community meetings ● Documented who is regularly attending community meetings	**We need to:** 1. Determine the best way of helping community members build relationships between one another (they already have relationships with community leadership or co-founders) 2. Create subgroups to focus on key components of the work
Engagement Discussion Notes:	

VISION: April and Donald	
We've successfully: ● Identified the core problem	**We need to:** 1. Set initial goals 2. Establish a set of shared values that will drive the work and allow us to assess ourselves as well as evaluate opportunities and challenges facing our community
Vision Discussion Notes:	

INFRASTRUCTURE: Catherine and Mike	
We've successfully: ● Established a community listserv ● Assign a community zoom account	**We need to:** 1. Document current dependencies 2. Establish a regular pacing of communication from community leadership to the rest of the community 3. Create a set of core messaging about the community that members and participants can use to spread the word 4. Determine fiscal host and associated backbone services
Infrastructure Discussion Notes:	
GOVERNANCE: James and Moe	
We've successfully: ● Established community leadership (and still working on that now! :))	**We need to:** 1. Document basic decision-making procedures 2. Determine what types of decisions will be open for community comment and which will be voted on exclusively by community membership
Governance Discussion Notes:	

This Community Cultivation Self-Assessment Worksheet Template provides an example of how to format the self-assessment as a worksheet for community leadership.

Step 3: Translating Needs to SMART Goals

Once the Community Cultivation needs across growth areas have been identified, it is essential to parse those needs into goals that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART). Together, these goals comprise a roadmap for completing Formation stage activities.

These high-level goals are meant to clarify and establish a pathway for continued Community Cultivation. In making the accomplishments specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound, the group has a clear charge and responsibility to propel the nascent community to the next level. Working from the notes as well as the conversations generated by the mini-assessment, members of this group will be expected to adapt the assessment into an actionable plan.

> Once the Community Cultivation needs across growth areas have been identified, it is essential to parse those needs into goals that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART).

If this part of the activity is going to be completed asynchronously, provide a deadline by which the SMART Goal translation should be completed. If the activity is going to be completed synchronously in one sixty minute block of time, a suggested breakdown might be:
- (7min) Review Community Cultivation needs
- (7min) Prioritize needs
  a. Prioritization can be determined by evaluating dependencies between the needs. For example, the group might ask: "Do we need to determine what types of decisions we are likely to make in the next six months before we determine how decisions will be made?"
- (15min) Breakout rooms for each pair or small group (all groups typing in the same document)
  a. Each pair or small group is assigned a set of needs to translate into SMART goals and sent to breakout rooms
  b. This activity should be completed in the same pairs or small groups as the Community Cultivation assessment.
  c. If short on time, focus on translating the **highest priority Community Cultivation needs in each growth area**—as long as everyone understands the translation process, the work can be continued asynchronously between calls.
- (20min) Overview of all SMART goals

This [From Community Cultivation Needs to SMART Goals Worksheet Template](#) provides an example of how to organize the community leadership shared workspace and aggregate the data resulting from this translation step.

The facilitator and community leadership will find that these growth areas are intentionally interconnected. In articulating the needs and aspirations for the five growth areas together, community leadership will have a holistic view of the building blocks necessary to develop the community. It is through this conversation, assessment, and documentation that community leadership begins to form a plan that prioritizes and implements the many actions required to provide a strong foundation for the community.

The facilitator's role in this process may involve guiding leadership by providing context, reviewing examples of potential models (the topics of these models can range greatly, e.g., internal decision-making strategies, formal governance practices, or fiscal planning), and articulating any dependencies that may impact their process of prioritizing their goals. This workshopping period is also an integral moment for the facilitator to make sure that the next steps are in alignment with the community's shared purpose.

Step 4: Decision-Making Ownership and Accountability

The following questions, activities, and suggestions presume that the majority of the leadership group has committed to serve the community for a longer period of time in a governance capacity. Community leadership and the facilitator will begin to address the questions and considerations that will help the group to determine which members of community leadership will be accountable for which aspects of the Formation work—and how the group as a whole will make decisions in this early stage.

The questions the facilitator might consider to refine the meeting agenda for this discussion are similar to the questions asked at the beginning of forming the smaller leadership group:

- Who is consistently showing up and investing their time in shaping the group's direction and activities? In activating leadership, how committed have members of this group been so far? If the facilitator established a specific time frame for these activities (e.g., three weeks), have there been members in this group that expressed interest and capacity in continuing this work?
- Whose perspectives are missing from the group? As the group begins to make pivotal foundational decisions and increase their scope of work, is this a good time to expand the group or bring in key partners?
  - This may generate more conversation around expected participation and responsibilities of a newer member, and may also address the question of capacity raised in the first bullet point.
- How have members of this group interacted with each other throughout this process?
  - If the group has already navigated conflict, made lower-stakes decisions, or established a routine or process, the facilitator may want to address those observations.
- Are there other roles and responsibilities that the facilitator can begin to distribute amongst the leadership team as they begin to discuss their decision-making protocols?
  - Depending on the nature of the group and the particular needs of the community, distributing roles is a way to formalize buy-in and further clarify expectations. Even if the commitment of this leadership group ends by instituting formal governance laws and procedures, a chair or a person in a similar role can be immensely helpful in bringing the group together, modeling the group's shared values and commitments, and building capacity by supporting the group in their leadership skills.

After determining the patterns that have already emerged in community leadership meetings and synthesizing the work that the group accomplished through these assessments, the facilitator's next tasks are to organize a conversation around decision-making. There are many variables in this

conversation, dependent on the ways of decision-making that have naturally occurred throughout this process.

This Decision-making and Accountability Meeting Agenda Template provides activities, suggestions, and discussion topics around collaboration, accountability, and decision-making. The facilitator may determine that this conversation needs to occur over multiple meetings, especially in relation to enacting the SMART goals, but it is important to formally address what has been achieved and decided in that period and to reiterate clear next steps at the end of each meeting. The possible focus and sequence of the meeting are summarized below:

Topic #1: Grounding Our Work
Building shared understanding of the work completed to date by reviewing frameworks, scoping statements, and other documents, including the self-assessment and the SMART goals.

Topic #2: Articulating the Responsibilities
Building shared understanding of the kinds of decisions that the leadership group will make. These decisions can range from overall strategic direction to potential partners and funders to specific key pieces of work.

Topic #3: Collective Problem-Solving
Building shared understanding of possible decision-making processes and strategies for addressing and resolving conflict as well as establishing a decision-making model or method.

Topic #4: Enacting SMART Goals
Bringing all the pieces together and determining the specific people responsible for the SMART goals. These decisions build on conversations around accountability, transparency, and decision-making, setting community leadership up for success by articulating clear expectations (e.g., working through next steps, establishing schedules for smaller team meetings, or setting a deadline for their first progress report).

Next Steps

By conducting self-assessment, writing SMART goals, discussing the role of leadership, and setting decision-making protocols, community leadership has a documented set of actionable next steps and priorities. This stage in the process is an exciting one! These meta-conversations and agreements serve as a guideline for addressing the many decisions that the leadership group will make as it begins its work around the five growth areas. In the long run, the work that has been done through these activities does impact the health and growth of the community. From decisions around documenting formal governance procedures to engaging with the community to establishing necessary infrastructure, the SMART goals are signposts to keep leadership accountable and to support the facilitator in moving the community forward.