Community

Building

A short introduction

Who is this guide for?

This guide offers an introduction to the craft of community building - or as we prefer to say, "community weaving", since we believe community is first and foremost a web of relationships. It is meant for **people who want to grow a regenerative community around an impact-driven project**.

The content of this guide is based on an early draft of a community framework that was co-created through a series of dialogues with seasoned community weavers from around the world. It will be published later in 2023 on www.community-weaving.org.

What is community?

Community has become a buzzword and people are using the term for all kinds of groups. For us, a **community is a group of people who form relationships of mutual care around a shared dream.** In the context of an impact-driven project, this means people who care about the mission of the project and support each other in making it happen.

You can **think of a community as concentric circles** (see graphic). In the
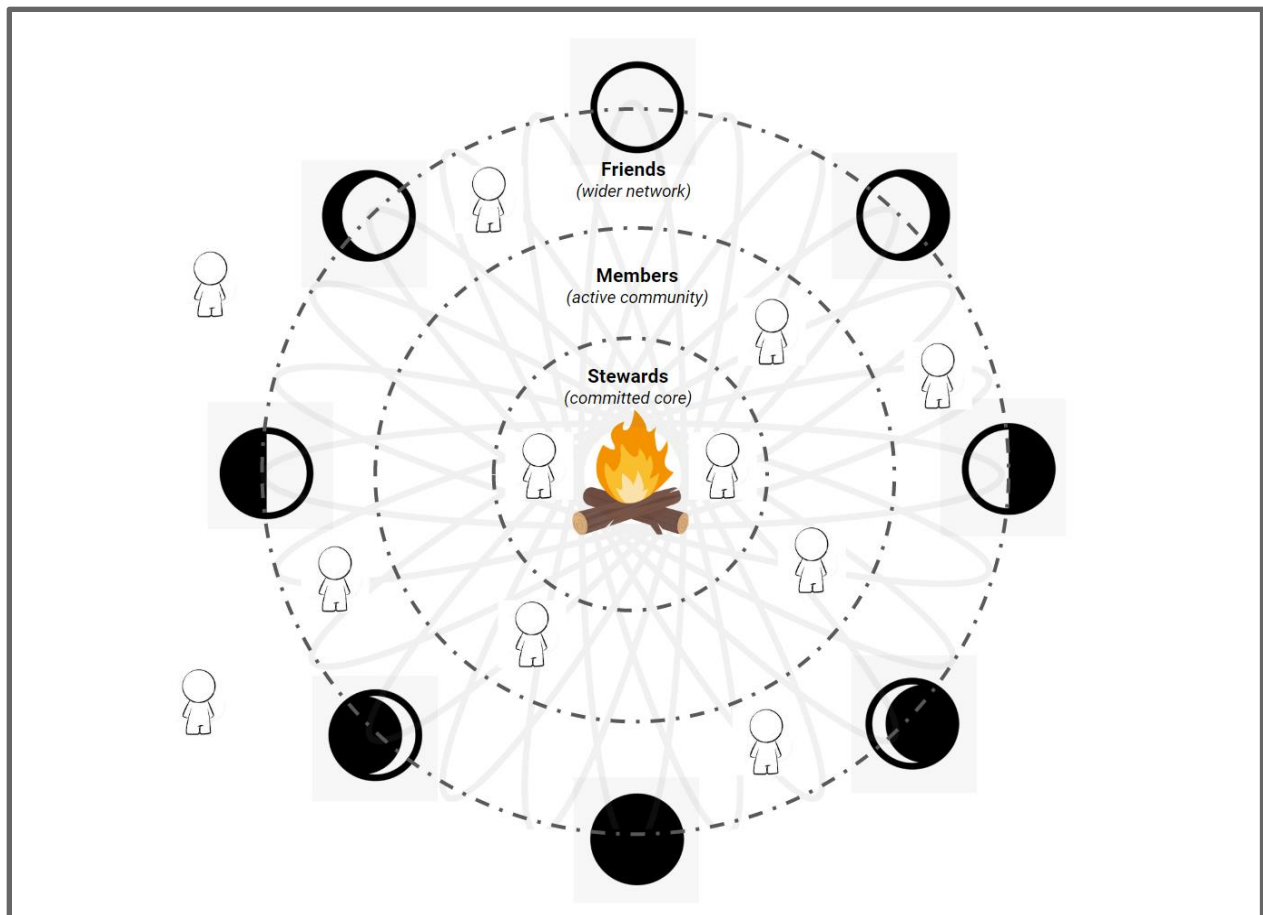
center there is a fire representing the shared dream that brings people together. Around this fire is an inner circle of **Stewards (committed core)** who are in service to making the dream come alive by hosting a steady rhythm of activities, represented by the moon phases. The mid circle is made up of **Members (active community)** who regularly participate in the community's activities and bring in their gifts. The outer circle is populated by **Friends (wider network)** who want to be more loosely connected and show up in sporadic ways.

All three circles are present in every community. It's a natural distribution of how people show up in groups. **The art lies in weaving each circle in a way that feels healthy and in right relationship with each other**, ensuring a balanced reciprocity and creating fluid pathways for people to flow in and out.

Why community?

Coming together as a community changes how people relate with each other. Many projects are structured in a way where they seek to sell a product to a passive consumer ("we create value for you"). In a community, people are invited to show up as active co-creators and find ways to create value together ("we create value with and for each other"). This is a deep **mindset shift from a primarily transactional to a co-creative relationship**.

The benefit of cultivating a co-creative relationship is that people feel ownership and naturally want to bring in their gifts, thus taking an active role in supporting your project. It taps into a deeply **human desire to "learn, earn and belong"** as Margaret Wheatley reminds us. And so, if you create an environment where people feel safe to bring themselves in and find ways to meaningfully support each other, things begin to flow and you can unlock a massive potential of generosity, solidarity, resilience and transformation.

How to start a community?

If you want to grow a community around your project, we suggest thinking of it as a process of **weaving from the inside out**:

1. Ignite the fire

At the heart of a community lives a dream of what's possible when people come together to support each other, represented by the fire in our model. In the beginning, this is often just a spark and needs a lot of care to grow into a magnetizing flame.

One thing you can do to ignite this fire is to invite people who embody the diversity of your desired community on a journey to explore what's possible together, e.g. through a [Dragon Dreaming](#) or [Theory U](#)

process. The key in this process is to [Start with Who](), i.e. becoming very clear about who you are, who you want to become together and who is missing to make it happen.

2. Build a core

Once you have a clear sense of the possibility you want to bring to life together, it is vital to see if there are people ready to commit to help make it happen. Without commitment, communities often stay in the dreaming stage and fall apart with disappointment before ever coming into a state of flow. So make sure you have a core of dedicated people willing to nurture the fire and explore how to weave a web of meaningful relationships around it.

3. Find a rhythm

Once you have a core group in place, the next step is to explore what really creates

value for people and start hosting a rhythm of regular activities that allow people to come into meaningful relationships with each other. People who show up regularly can often be activated as co-creators in these activities and asked to take on small roles in helping shape the community together. This way, you start distributing the work of making the community come alive and can grow a healthy base of active members.

4. Come into right relationship

Once you have a rhythm of meaningful activities in place, you will notice that people show up differently. Some are committed to taking care of the core ("stewards"), some are actively bringing in their gifts ("members") and others are engaging more sporadically at the periphery ("friends").

This is completely natural and the question is not how to make everyone

Core elements for weaving regenerative community:

- **Cultivate belonging**: What brings us together?

- **Nurture care**: How do we develop genuine care for each other?

- **Foster co-creation**: How do we create real value together?

- **Form cycles**: How do we form healthy rhythms?

- **Strengthen reciprocity**: How do we come into right relationship?

engage actively but rather how to honor the various ways of showing up in your community, making sure people who invest themselves more deeply feel recognized for doing so and that there are transparent pathways for flowing in and out of deeper levels of engagement.

How to deepen a community?

We see five core elements that you can cultivate to deepen the relationships in your community and help it become truly regenerative:

1. Cultivate Belonging

People want to belong to something that's bigger than themselves. Consequently, one key role as a community weaver is to cultivate a shared identity and nurture people's sense of what brings them together. You can do this through the following activities, among others:

- **Share your origin story**. Telling the story of how your community started and how it evolved creates a sense of lineage that anchors everyone in the original spark.

- **Crystallize your identity.** Having a shared sense of who you are (people), why you come together (purpose) and what you stand for (principles) are critical ingredients for belonging - best captured in a powerful name and

symbol that transmit the essence of your community.

- **Set boundaries.** Healthy communities have clear boundaries that need to be respected to become a member, clarifying the criteria for joining and how to show up in the community.

- **Cultivate rituals.** Thoughtful community rituals can strengthen people's sense of belonging, e.g. how you welcome someone new into the community or how you celebrate important moments together.

- **Connect with your place**. Communities don't exist in a vacuum and connecting with the bigger web you are part of (other communities, ancestors, the land etc.) can generate a much deeper sense of belonging.

2. Nurture Care

A healthy community is a relational web of mutual care, creating an invisible field that holds everyone together. When there is a genuine sense of care and trust between people, things begin to flow. Here are some practices for what you can do to nurture this quality:

- **Connect people 1:1.** Trust is built in 1:1 connections and there is nothing more powerful than people getting to know each other more deeply.

- **Share life stories.** Creating a space to listen to each other's life stories is a

very effective way to nurture trust and care between people.

- **Host gatherings.** There is no replacement to meet physically where people can connect in person and simply be together.

- **Create fractals.** People connect best in small groups and finding ways for people to connect in a pocket of intimacy (e.g. a "[pod](#)") can deepen the care for each other.

- **Model generosity.** Generosity is contagious and can set the tone for building a field of mutual care.

3. Foster Co-Creation

Communities thrive when there are multiple ways to come into meaningful connection and people can easily bring in their gifts to create value together. Here's what you can do to foster this:

- **Onboard carefully.** When people feel safe and know how to navigate a community, they tend to show up much more actively.

- **Surface needs & gifts.** When it's transparent what members need, others can easily offer their gifts, e.g. through [SuperHive](#).

- **Offer value-adding formats.** Simple formats that can be repeated on a regular basis are very effective to create value together, e.g. [Case Clinics](#).

- **Invite self-initiative.** A powerful way to foster co-creation is inviting people to step into leadership if they want to see a change.

- **Simplify channels.** In a time of general overload, it's critical to meet people where they are at so they can connect easily with each other.

4. Form Cycles

Nature moves in cycles and so do healthy communities, following natural rhythms such as the [ecocycle](#) of birth, maturity, destruction and renewal. Here are some important elements to pay attention to when thinking about the cycles of your community:

- **Create a heart beat.** Having a regular rhythm of core activities gives stability and helps the community deepen their relationships.

- **Align rhythms.** Synchronizing your rhythms with the world around you (seasons, festivities, work etc.) is helpful to come into a natural flow.

- **Allow for pause**. Having periods of stillness and reflection is just as important as actively growing the community and doing things together.

- **Ask for recommitment**. Having a regular cycle for people to review which role they want to play and asking them to recommit (or step out) creates clarity and renews the energy.

- **Mark transitions.** Having dedicated moments for starting or closing a chapter together is important to maintain the integrity of your community, e.g. a generational shift in leadership or going through a process of death/rebirth.

- **Reconcile tensions.** Many communities fall apart because they lack the capacity to deal with conflict in a restorative way, so it's critical to build that muscle early, e.g. with Non-Violent Communication and Ways of Council.

5. Strengthen Reciprocity

Healthy communities embody a balanced flow of giving and receiving where people feel in right relationship with each other. Here are some key practices to strengthen reciprocity:

- **Clarify roles & pathways.** Making it clear what give/receive relationship different roles entail (e.g. steward vs member vs friend) and how people can flow in and out helps ensure everyone is in the right place.

- **Show appreciation.** People want to be recognized for what they bring in and simply saying thank you can go a long way, e.g. through gratitude circles where people appreciate each other.

- **Resource the core.** Volunteering can only go so far and you need to find ways to resource key roles, e.g. through membership contributions on a platform like Open Collective.

- **Distribute power.** Making decisions together in an equitable way is an art of its own and tools like Sociocracy, Cobudget and Loomio can support you in doing so.

Further Resources

What is community

[What does "community" even mean? A definition attempt & conversation starter](#)

[Networks connect, communities care](#)

[Four Stages of Community](#)

[Community: The Structure of Belonging](#)

[The Soul of Place](#)

How to start a community

[Start with Who](#)

[10 Principles for creating a healthy community](#)

[Community Canvas](#)

[Microsolidarity](#)

How to deepen a community

[The 3 circles model](#)

[Community Principle: Weaving from the Inside out](#)

[Co-creation is crucial. But most communities still fall and rise with the leadership of a few](#)

[Hierarchy is not the problem, it's the power dynamics](#)

Author

Michel Bachmann

Michel has 20+ years experience in community weaving and facilitates the co-creation of planetary communities around the world. He co-founded Impact Hub Zürich and is a partner at Together Institute.

Acknowledgements

One Planet Lab, Deutschschweiz
Patricia Matzdorf
patricia.matzdorf@wwf.ch
044 297 22 84

Leitung One Planet Lab, Romandie
Ingrid Fumasoli
ingrid.fumasoli@wwf.ch
021 966 73 84