Case analysis of the

A2Zero Ambassador Program

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Report prepared by
Isabella Beshouri & Maggie Cooney

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The Importance of Community Organized Climate Action

Climate change is referred to by social researchers, planners, and policymakers as a *wicked* problem.[1] This terminology signifies problems that are difficult to define, impossible to solve with any sense of finality, and have complex interdependencies that may reveal, create, or exacerbate other issues. The orbit of social and political issues entangled with the climate crisis cannot be viewed in totality from any one point of view. This web of complexity requires that any promising attempt at climate action hold a systems view, pieced together by interdisciplinary collaboration and co-design, emergent strategy,[2] relationship-building, transformative justice, and civic resilience. We find sustainability within the iterative process of solving and resolving that is powered by this cooperative ecosystem.

As defined by a community organizer with Allied Media Projects in Detroit, "Organizing is building community capacity and community leadership for folks to have access, or to create their own access, to resources that allow them to sustain their lives wherever they are."[3] Community organizing builds from self-identification of needs, drawing power from feelings of agency, competence, and capability, and running on a combination of intrinsic motivation and endurance. The hyperlocal character of this practice qualifies community organizers as irreplaceable stakeholders in effective, bottom-up sustainability initiatives. The path forward is open, inclusive, and must be lit by those who will walk it.
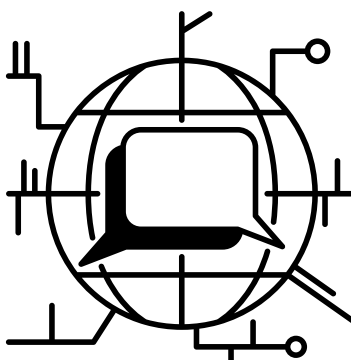
What is the A2Zero Ambassador Program?

To mobilize widespread community engagement with A2Zero initiatives, the City of Ann Arbor's Office of Sustainability & Innovations (OSI) established a base coalition of community sustainability advocates, known as A2Zero Ambassadors. A2Zero Ambassadors enroll in the program on an application basis. Over the course of a 12–week training, ambassadors build their knowledge of the climate crisis and how it uniquely affects the city of Ann Arbor. After training, they complete 20 service hours through a combination of work on community sustainability project and/or volunteering at public A2Zero events.

Purpose of the A2Zero Ambassador Program

1

Community Engagement

While community organizing is not addressed by name within the A2Zero Plan, the emphasis is on community-driven climate action. The 7 strategies require community buy-in to actualize the anticipated behavioral shifts through a just transition. Electric vehicle (EV) chargers have little impact on transportation emissions unless individuals drive EVs, creating both a need for and understanding of charging infrastructure. The A2Zero Ambassador Program offers community members an open platform on which to explore and deepen their engagement with the City's sustainability measures. This base network of community ambassadors leverages each individual's community connections, ultimately embedding support for the A2Zero Plan within rich social networks and bridging City officials and the citizens they serve.

2

Social Cohesion

One of the most powerful strategies for community resilience comes from knowing your neighbor. The shocks and stressors of climate change are more easily and effectively weathered as a community that is defined by relationship-building and solidarity. The A2Zero Ambassador Program fosters a strong sense of camaraderie and initiates the process of collective action for climate adaptation.

3

Climate Action

As part of their volunteer service, A2Zero Ambassadors design and launch actionable community sustainability projects. This component of the program creates space for community-driven climate action, peppering mitigation and adaptation efforts across the city of Ann Arbor and placing initiative ownership directly in the hands of residents. The aim is to encourage implementation of the A2Zero Plan from the bottom-up in addition to top-down governance and policy.

Methods

We collected qualitative data from observations, ad-hoc conversations, and one-on-one interviews with ambassadors that have completed the training program. Observations were gathered over a three-month period and are drawn from our experience working with ambassador project teams on a weekly basis, participation in A2Zero events where ambassadors were volunteering, and collaboration with OSI staff. The ad-hoc conversations used to guide our report occurred in the same spaces and were initiated by the ambassadors themselves.

Interviewees were selected based on recommendations from Galen Hardy, the OSI staff member who leads the ambassador program. Individuals earned a recommendation if they are known to regularly engage with aspects of the ambassador program. We contacted these ambassadors via email to invite them to participate in an interview, while taking care not to prime them in the process. To accommodate for a low number of responses from this initial pool, we decided to invite additional ambassadors for interviews based on a process of random selection, using the same email invitation template. Each interview was limited to a one hour session and covered an identical set of questions. However, the interviews were purposefully structured to be conversational in hopes of building trust between the interviewer and interviewee, thus the direction of each interview had potential to cover a unique breadth of topics.

APPROACH	LOCATION	DETAILS
Observations	Ambassador team meetings, A2Zero volunteer events	• Drawn from our experience in these spaces
Ad-hoc conversations	Ambassador team meetings, A2Zero volunteer events	• Informal conversations initiated by the ambassadors regarding their experience
Interviews	Facilitated on Zoom; 1 hour in length	• Selected from a list of recommended ambassadors as well as by random selection • Representing all 3 cohorts

We coded the entire set of interview transcripts to systematically categorize our findings and identify themes and patterns in the data. After this initial step of qualitative analysis, we layered over our own observations and takeaways from ad-hoc conversations to develop a list of areas for intervention. We refined this list by feasibility and our own scope of work. The following recommendations reflect our final list.
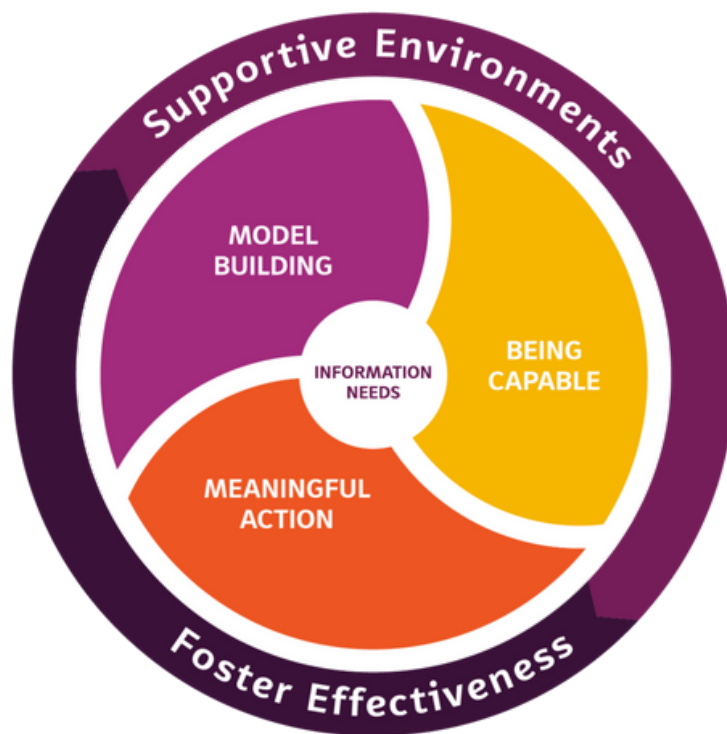
The SEE Framework

Introduction to Supportive Environments for Effectiveness (SEE)

The SEE framework forwards insights from environmental psychology to help organizations realize the potential of their employees, initiatives, and communities. Lessons from the SEE framework emerge from three domains of human functioning: model–building, being capable, and meaningful action.[4] Model–building is the process by which we make sense of our surroundings and gain understanding through exploration. As we gather new knowledge, we have to feel competent and capable in order to utilize it effectively when working towards our goals. In the work of finding, learning, and sharing information, we do our best when we are working on things that matter. Meaningful action helps us feel more accomplished, connected, and valuable in our everyday lives. This report leverages aspects of the SEE framework to provide tailored recommendations for the future of the A2Zero Ambassador Program.

Fellowship Context

This report represents the culmination of work occurring under a collaborative fellowship program between reDirect and the City of Ann Arbor's Office of Sustainability & Innovations (OSI). The fellowship program is a direct channel from academia to practice, wherein the fellow utilizes aspects of the SEE framework to address challenges with OSI's implementation of the A2Zero Climate Action Plan.

Recommendations

A note on format:

For the purposes of this report, we chose to organize our recommendations by the relevant area of the Ambassador Program rather than grouping them according to the adjacent component of the SEE framework (e.g. model-building, being capable, meaningful action). This organization style reflects our interest in making applied, non-academic recommendations that are legible within the program's context so that they may more easily flow into actionable next steps. We organized our recommendations according to four primary touchpoints at which the ambassadors interface with the program: curriculum, training, projects, and ongoing movement-building through future endeavors.

Curriculum

Background: Interviewees portrayed widespread favor for the range of topics and speaker expertise showcased on the syllabus. The curriculum effectively framed the climate crisis as a wicked problem by establishing its complex scope through introduction to the spectrum of municipal and infrastructural approaches to sustainability. Several interviewees communicated their appreciation for the wide exploration of sustainability topic areas and commented that it deepened their understanding of the A2Zero Plan beyond its best-known carbon neutrality goal. The interviewees ran into trouble at the line between topics of interest and those of utility.

Ambassadors are eager to learn new information about climate change and sustainability. The desire to explore and gain knowledge is a fact of human nature and is reinforced by the Ambassador Program's self-initiated application for entry. The current curriculum activates the ambassador's model-building process by encouraging exploration and understanding in such a way that excites them about climate action, but it stops short of forming a clear picture of the role they play as ambassadors in this work. Interviews and ad-hoc conversations portrayed a sense of "What do we do now?" following commencement. The ambassadors feel ill-equipped with the skills to channel their knowledge, passion, and climate anxiety into actionable projects. To build competence and confidence during training as well as preempt unclear expectations and roles after graduation, we recommend the following adjustments to the curriculum:

Curriculum

1 Identifying specific applications for each session topic

Interviewees could easily recall the sessions they found most interesting, but had more difficulty identifying the sessions that were most useful to their current work as an ambassador. To **bridge the gap between fascination and application**, we recommend that each presentation conclude with at least one slide connecting the subject matter to ambassadorship. By explicitly identifying implications for civic engagement, the industry expert charts a mental map from instruction to practice, unpacking their expertise for the ambassadors to use in grassroots community organizing.

2 Adding a session on project management

The Ambassador Program promotes a high level of community-building, which nurtures connections between ambassadors and spurs dedication to their cause. For some ambassadors, the issue of undefined expectations and roles grew into a fear of letting their team down. For example, several ambassadors expressed feelings of distress when their projects grew beyond their initial expectations. Ambassadors responded to this outsized growth either by taking on more responsibility than they could handle or stepping back from the team. In both ways, their contribution to the project, relationship with their team, and overall experience with the Ambassador Program were negatively impacted. A session dedicated to building project management skills would provide the **procedural knowledge for ambassadors to lead more productive and effective team working environments**. Such a session should cover asset-mapping, assigning roles and responsibilities, establishing group norms, working across different communication styles and levels of digital literacy, workload management, engaging stakeholders, managing fluctuations in engagement when team members move out of town or step back from the project, and succession planning.

Training Format

Background: The training format speaks to the actual and experienced structure of each session. While the curriculum refers to *what* is being taught in session, it was also brought to our attention that *how* the information was presented made a significant difference to ambassadors. In this category of recommendations, we delve into certain environmental psychology concepts that we feel would be useful to define here:

Directed attention: A form of attention utilized by humans that requires a great amount of concentration and energy to focus attention on one particular topic, event, etc.

Directed attention fatigue: The state resulting from reaching your directed attention capacity, usually caused by an overuse of directed attention for a sustained period of time and characterized by mental fatigue, impatience, forgetfulness, and irritability.

Mental map: A network of mental models created within the subconscious that individuals build and expand through experience, understanding, and exploration of related concepts and/or ideas

Training Format

1 *Dividing training into asynchronous information sessions and synchronous discussion sections*

Interviewees communicated that despite their interest in the topics presented, the weight of the information distributed in training made it difficult to stay engaged throughout the entire session. This exemplifies a concept known as *directed attention fatigue*, wherein it becomes harder and harder to stay focused after intensive effort to do so. It is a normal outcome of effective functioning and is especially triggered when dealing with emotionally sensitive or anxiety-inducing material. Coupled with a call from several ambassadors for a more flexible schedule, these insights propose the success of a "flipped classroom" format to **preempt information overload and leave space for mental fatigue** and attention restoration. Shifting to asynchronous, recorded video lectures allows flexibility to pause, replay, and watch the video when it best suits their directed attention capacity. This format gives the viewer agency to manage the rate of information processing and supports deeper comprehension of the material. When we are suffering from directed attention fatigue, studies show we tend to be less civil, have trouble listening, and are more likely to seek conflict. The asynchronous lecture will create space for more productive reflection during a later group discussion, facilitated synchronously by OSI.

2 *Uplifting small discussions*

Interviews and ad-hoc conversations during project team meetings revealed a high priority for small group discussions throughout training, so we want to take space to reemphasize their importance going forward. These more intimate, safe spaces allow ambassadors to **collectively process the weight and dimensions of subjects covered** in the curriculum. They give the ambassadors an opportunity to co-build a mental map of leverage points for civic resilience, which they can later work off of during project team meetings. Depending on the circumstances framing the next ambassador training program, small group discussions could take the form of in-person roundtable discussions, virtual breakout rooms, or extracurricular social gatherings to deepen cohort camaraderie (e.g. climate book clubs).

Projects

Background: The cohort projects offer an opportunity for ambassadors to use knowledge gained during training to make a difference in their community. Ambassadors tend to be very excited to start independent projects and bring what they have learned to their communities. As author James Clear has said, **"You do not rise to the level of your goals. You fall to the level of your systems."** Leaving training, the ambassadors have visionary goals for climate action. Once they start their projects, they are confronted by an impressive workload and an uncertainty of where to begin.
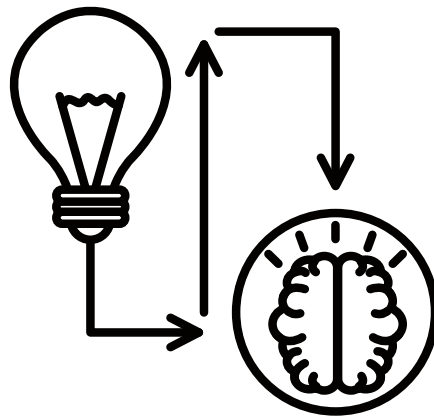
1 Creating a volunteer project group

Several ambassadors recalled unclear expectations of what program commitment would look like in the future. There is a common hope to stay connected with the program, but uncertainty regarding the ability to sustain participation at the project team level. For some ambassadors, this workload concern starts from the beginning of project work. In order to maintain the support of all ambassadors as valuable emissaries of the A2Zero Plan, we suggest the addition of a separate track for a volunteer project group. Such a project group with focus on smaller, more structured projects for OSI that are **more adaptive to different schedules, capacities, and interests**, namely in the realm of volunteering at public A2Zero events. By concentrating volunteer pools within such a group, we anticipate **greater accountability in event sign ups as well as more honed community engagement skills** with devoted practice.

Projects

2 Establishing open channels of communication between cohorts

An overwhelming concern that emerged from observations and interviews was a lack of cohort connectivity. Several interviewees commented that the separation restricts their ability to **foster a strong community as the program grows**. Most interviewees were excited for the work they would be doing in their project teams, but felt they were missing the sense of purpose that comes from being part of a larger community of like-minded individuals. While the community does exist, the visibility of a social network would **enhance the feeling of belonging as well as support the long-term impact** of ambassador projects. A social platform like Slack would facilitate communication and coalition-building between cohorts, allow ambassadors to stay informed about other projects, and initiate a system of mutual aid to fulfill gaps in project team expertise, all the while alleviating OSI's role in facilitating these connections over email.

Projects

3 Building future projects from within existing support structures

Many of the project teams feel ill-equipped with the project management skills and institutional support to create a successful project. This lack of confidence in their endeavors stalls project development and discourages some ambassadors to the point of disengaging from the project entirely. We recommend that future projects be built into existing support networks, such as ambassador teams from previous cohorts or community partners with a history of working with OSI initiatives. By giving the projects more structural support from the beginning, we anticipate ambassadors will find a greater sense of purpose and be encouraged to stick with the work moving forward. Projects that are situated within pre-existing support systems will achieve **greater impact as they take advantage of the experiential knowledge and expertise** from the change agents already in this space.

One example of this is the Plant-Based Challenge, which launched a collaboration in partnership with VegMichigan, a non-profit organization that has partnered with OSI previously and has significant experience in this subject area. As a result, the combined forces produced a bigger and more impactful event.

Movement-Building

Background: In the same way that the A2Zero plan is a living document, lifelong (term-long) learning should be emphasized for the ambassadorship. It should be acknowledged that there are limitations to a single 12-week training, and that much of what they will learn about grassroots sustainability will be developed on-the-ground during project implementation. With their expectations adjusted to a continually-building mental map, ambassadors will feel more comfortable with what they do not yet know and take a growth mindset that makes them more effective at leveraging their present competencies.
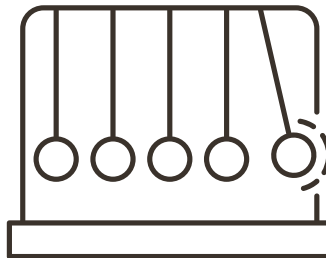
1 Hosting biannual A2Zero Ambassador town halls

It is the nature of the A2Zero plan that the initiatives are ongoing and build momentum. Several interviewees communicated feelings of distress and isolation arising from the dissonance between their role as a community representative of A2Zero and their ability to share up-to-date progress when asked. The interviewees traced this role conflict back to the messaging channels available to them after completion of the training program. Aside from contact with OSI through consultations regarding their projects, the ambassadors were limited to general communications through public channels, such as newsletters and press releases. The ambassadorship suggests that those holding the position should have information beyond what is publicly available in order to interface with their communities on a deeper level than media outlets can take them. In order to **support durable, relevant grassroots advocacy**, OSI may consider hosting biannual A2Zero Ambassador town halls to share programmatic updates. The briefings not only support ongoing model-building by updating knowledge and accurate information, but also instill meaningful action by demonstrating to the ambassadors that they are a valued and important part of the process.

Movement–Building

2 *Facilitating continuing education opportunities*

As projects build momentum and/or ambassadors move on to other areas of environmental advocacy, they will need additional skills and competencies to be effective. To **reiterate the emphasis on lifelong learning and encourage the ongoing development of parallel mental models**, it would be useful to create a space for continuing education opportunities on subjects such as writing grant applications, public speaking, meeting facilitation, conflict resolution, etc. These workshops can be a combination of peer–led, where ambassadors sign up to teach from within their expertise; taught by an OSI staff member; or led by an A2Zero partner.

Movement–Building

Background: Ambassadors are in a unique position to be an agent of movement–building and reciprocal learning between the City and community members and organizations, as well as within the Ambassador Program across cohorts.
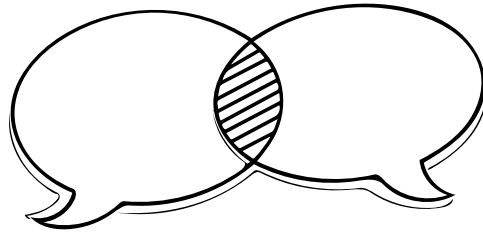
3 Incorporating process guides into the project lifecycle

In order to create enduring sustainability initiatives, succession planning must be built into the project management structure. It is important to **take stock of collective knowledge in order to move forward without repeating lessons already learned.** To this end, ambassador project teams should be encouraged to unpack their expertise and hand down lessons–learned through process guides. These guides can act as a transition plan to smoothen individual changes to team membership as well as entire shifts of project ownership between cohorts. Adaptable insights can also be drawn from the process guides for application to projects in other areas of sustainability (e.g. advice on stakeholder engagement from school composting initiatives useful to initiate restaurant partnerships for a plant–based challenge). The process guides should cover team workflow (meeting frequency and format, role assignment, relevant expertise and connections), project mission and vision, stakeholders (name/organization, role, engagement status, contact info), challenges, areas for improvement, advice to future cohorts, and relevant templates for project components (e.g. first contact for bringing in new partners, information to gather when reserving with Parks, how to present to classes with young students, writing engaging emails, event marketing).

Movement-Building

4 *Networking with other community organizations*

Beyond A2Zero and Ann Arbor, the Ambassador Program should be treated as the bottom stair or next step in an activist's career. Ambassadors should be introduced to Ann Arbor's climate action ecosystem through their involvement in the program. This may look like a list of A2Zero partners and/or resources for **building community sustainability momentum after project completion**. Partners should opt-in or be notified that ambassadors will be inquiring about volunteer opportunities so that they can most effectively utilize the knowledge and community engagement competencies developed during ambassadorship.

Closing

As fellows, we had the opportunity to analyze the Ambassador Program from a unique vantage point. The relative independence of a fellowship gave us the space to view the program from one step back and dwell on the implications from a specialist perspective. The above recommendations represent what we found in that space: SEE-informed leverage points where a small programmatic shift could set off large strides toward a just transition.

In closing, we must highlight the importance of the work that is being done through the Ambassador Program. It is an innovative approach to municipally-led climate action because it invites community members to take charge over their future. The above recommendations are drawn directly from the feelings, ideas, and input of the ambassador cohorts in an attempt to keep suit with A2Zero's core value of community engagement. As such, these recommendations aim only to constructively support the existing program, because if the path is to be lit by those who walk it, they must first have the knowledge, capability, and confidence to kindle a shared flame.

As is the nature of leverage points, the above small changes will have benefits that ripple out to support the overall success of the A2Zero Plan. The A2Zero Ambassador Program is at its core an opportunity for Ann Arbor residents to take ownership of the City's carbon neutrality efforts. Sustainability is demanding; it asks for a breadth and depth of lifestyle shifts. These demands are much better received coming from a neighbor than a government official. When residents are commissioned to own the plan and spread the word of a just transition throughout their circles, the work of community-driven sustainability is set in motion and initiates a process of trust-building that extends across City initiatives. The A2Zero Ambassador Program takes it a step further, creating space for residents to drive the work through sustainability projects that are built by the community, for the community.

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Acknowledgments