

# Nourishing Neighborhood Networks



Best Practices Guide  
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The City of Ann Arbor  
Office of Sustainability  
and Innovation



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# Nourishing Neighborhood Networks

“The connections among local people are what awaken the power of families and neighborhoods to weave the social fabric of an abundant community.”

–John McKnight

**Nourishing neighborhood networks are small areas of the community, usually a block or street, working together to share the resources and skills necessary to thrive.**

This Best Practices Guide will lay a foundation for building resource and skill sharing networks on a neighborhood level. *Included are guiding principles, providing a framework for approaching this work.* By integrating these principles in our neighborhoods, we can promote social cohesion and ensure durability in network management. Finally, a step-by-step guide will lay out the process for creating a pilot program in a local neighborhood

**Neighborhood networks offer important ways to cultivate meaning :**

## **Building Community Relationships**

A collaboration of residents work together to build relationships and trust within their neighborhood. This helps to combat the social epidemic of loneliness and supports the social fabric for transformative community change.

## **Becoming a Part of Something Bigger**

Residents can engage in a cause greater than oneself, becoming agents-of-change within their community. Engaging in neighborhood projects can provide a common goal that transcends and welcomes differing perspectives and experiences.



# Key Terms & Concepts

**Neighborhood:** A small unit of the larger community, usually a street or block.

**Neighborhood Network:** Connected residents within the neighborhood

**Mutual aid:** Positive interdependence, in which residents come together to meet each other's needs

**Localization:** Looking towards local sources and cultivating local relationships and capacities

**Resilience:** The ability to adapt and thrive in the face of difficulties

**Environment:** The physical, virtual, or social context in which behavior occurs

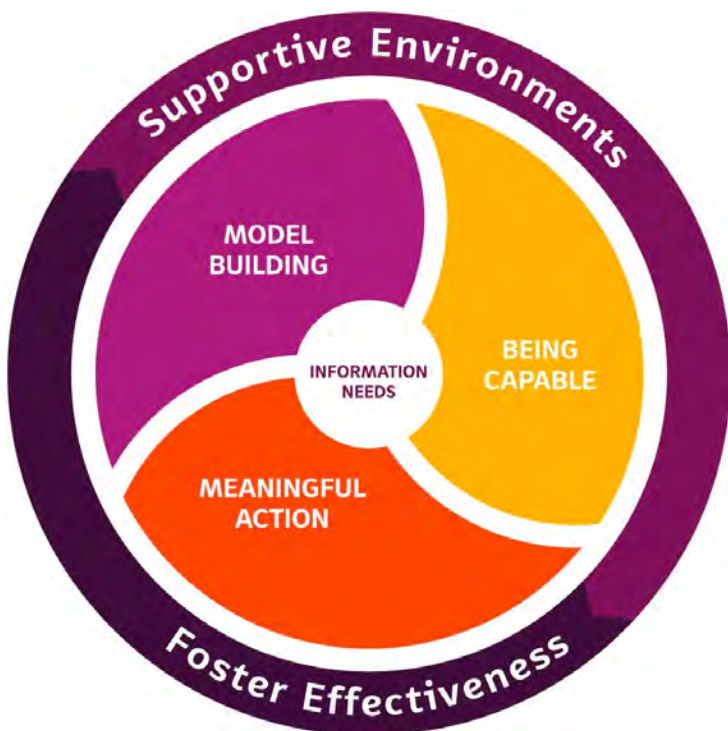
**Gift:** An ability, passion, or gratitude that each resident offers

## Supportive Environments for Effectiveness (SEE)

**SEE** is a framework that can support long-term behavior change from the perspective of our *informational needs*. Durable change can be fostered by supportive environments that promote:

- Increased understanding through exploration, individually and collectively, to help build mental models of the world around us.
- Feelings of competency and clear-headedness to complete tasks.
- Engaging in actions that have meaningful impact for ourselves and others.

Together, these elements create a supportive environment for sustainable change. The SEE framework was used to inform and shape the recommendations contained within this report.



Find more information at  
[reDirect.org](https://reDirect.org)

# Roles & Responsibilities

## Neighborhood Residents



Residents are at the core of these networks. They collectively determine network boundaries, guidelines, and shared resources. Each resident is recognized as an important contributor, possessing gifts that benefit the community, while also possessing the autonomy to choose if and how to share them. The residents are considered the experts on their neighborhood; all other actors are their allies in this work.

## Neighborhood Connector



A Neighborhood Connector is a passionate resident that has the capacity to coordinate events and be a point of contact for neighborhood residents. Connectors help guide neighborhood events to align with neighborhood principles and are aware of neighborhood procedures. Connectors schedule monthly meetings, make sure master resource documents are in order, and can help mediate conflict. Importantly, they are good listeners and welcomers within their communities. A Neighborhood Connector is passionate about building bridges and mending the social fabric of their neighborhood.

## Local Government



The role of the local government is to provide an institutional ally for neighborhood networks. Local government employees can clarify local ordinances for neighborhood events, answer questions on local issues, and build trust with residents. Members of the local government can be seen as community supporters, rather than leaders, and respectfully navigate the process of finding and training Neighborhood Connectors.



# Why is Neighborhood Action Important?

## The Innate Call to Preserve our Future

Since the beginning of our time, humans have worked together to gather and distribute resources among ourselves. In fact, community even predates family as the oldest unit of society.<sup>1</sup> This collective approach has dramatically increased our short-term efficiency, but it has simultaneously disconnected us from the land on which we stand.

While providing for our survival is an ancient and evolutionary act, it demands a profound understanding of what we need to flourish in the coming years. The climate emergency has brought our own future to a precarious tipping point, and collective action is needed now more than ever to adapt to the challenges we face.



Fortunately, humans are exceptional adapters and have consistently overcome the challenges we've faced in the past.<sup>2</sup> Now, we all must move quickly to act. We must engage in restoring our relationship with our land, our resources, and our neighbors to ensure our community will thrive for generations to come.

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<sup>1</sup> In his book, *Human Scale: Revisited*, Kirkpatrick Sale explores the human history of decentralization and ways in which we might scale our systems back to our community-based roots.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen and Rachel Kaplan emphasized the important role of our environments in shaping our evolutionary ability to process information and overcome challenges. The husband and wife duo have written prolifically on human interaction with the environment, [culminating in the development of the Supportive Environments for Effectiveness \(SEE\) framework](#).

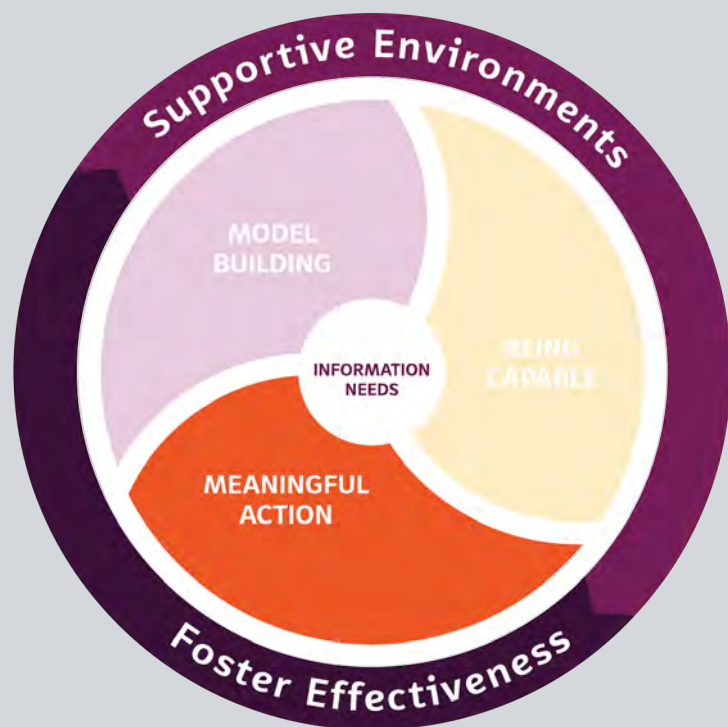
## Building a Neighborhood Story

Neighborhood action builds a neighborhood culture, which is the story of who we are. John McKnight beautifully describes culture building as a process in which we deeply connect with our place and each other:

*"We begin to see that we are the people who make this place the kind of place that is better, the kind of place where we have traditions and stories. Culture helps us remember, and at the same time look ahead."*



*It helps us realize that we are bound together in ways that say at heart, 'This is our place, and we're working out our way to be the kind of community that builds life.'"<sup>1</sup>*



## Connecting to Meaningful Action

As we work together toward a common purpose, our actions take on meaning that goes beyond ourselves. This is represented within the SEE framework as 'meaningful action.'

When we engage in meaningful action, we simultaneously build out our understanding of our individual and collective abilities. When we feel competent and clear-headed enough to take action, we are encouraged to continue doing so in the future. This creates a positive feedback loop promoting future neighborhood engagement.

<sup>1</sup> John McKnight is co-founder of [Asset-Based Community Development](#) (ABCD), a program from which many of the approaches in this document are drawn. This quote was drawn from a [YouTube conversation](#) with Cormac Russell of ABCD Europe and Great Lakes Urban.



# Guiding Principles

## Our Place

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### Place as our Context

Nurturing our sense of place is a deeply ingrained evolutionary means to orient ourselves in the world. The space in which we make our home provides a tangible, grounded context from which we can integrate new information into our current understanding.<sup>1</sup> This means that understanding where we are at can help us learn who we are and where we are going.

### Honoring Place

Part of restoring our relationship to our place includes learning to honor the land that we share. Robin Wall Kimmerer speaks of developing our relationship with the land as a key part to what she describes as becoming Indigenous, or naturalized, to place. This approach combats the deep, species loneliness that results from isolating ourselves from our world and each other. Instead, we must live in a way that honors future generations and learn the lessons the earth has to teach us. Following the strategy of the humble common plantain plant, we can learn "to be useful, to fit into small places, to coexist with others around the dooryard, to heal wounds."<sup>2</sup>

### How to Nourish our Place

- Build an understanding of the physical neighborhood
- Identify usable community spaces, such as parks, gardens, or pavilions
- Identify and care for the plants and animals in the neighborhood
- Learn how to cultivate and forage native crops
- Make decisions that honor the future of all living things

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<sup>1</sup> Pulled from a compilation of writings in [The Localization Reader](#), Robert L. Thayer wrote an essay on "Inhabiting Place" in which he talks about the importance of connection to place throughout human history

<sup>2</sup> Robin Wall Kimmerer is the author of [Braiding Sweetgrass](#), a deeply impactful book that calls for the restoration of our relationship to the land and each other, written from her perspective as a mother, scientist, and member of the Potawatomie tribe

# Our People



## Becoming Social Weavers

Recently, the Surgeon General released a declaration that we are experiencing an "[epidemic of loneliness](#)" as a society. As social beings, humans have an innate need for belonging that rivals such fundamental needs as food or shelter.<sup>1</sup> In the midst of this human crisis of connection, building social relationships becomes a critical lifeline. Research indicates that social connection helps us find everyday life events as less stressful, reduces our risk of high blood pressure, supports healing from injuries, and promotes restful sleep.<sup>2</sup> As such, this is a time to become [social weavers](#), building relationships with our neighbors and cultivating human bonds in a world of diverging artificial connection. Let us work towards communal goals that transcend our differences and mend our polarized world, all the while being mindful to draw those from the edges into our midst.

## The Value of Small

Far before there were cities, small groups of people formed social groups that worked together to gather and share food and resources. Hawley describes community as the essential "adaptive mechanism" throughout human history.<sup>3</sup> This is, in part, because small groups of people can engage in small experiments--using the resources and skills at hand to solve novel problems.<sup>4</sup> This type of everyday adaptation is essential to tackling the unique challenges presented by the climate crisis. Furthermore, this process can lead to a feeling of increased group efficacy, or the feeling that your community has the ability to overcome challenges.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Roy Baumeister and Mark Leary published an article in 1995 that described [the need to belong](#) as a fundamental human motivation, the lack of which can have dire consequences on our health, attachment, and wellbeing.

<sup>2</sup> "Social Isolation and Health, with an Emphasis on Underlying Mechanisms," published by John Cacioppo and Louise Hawkley in 2003, suggests these health risks are most prominent among marginalized populations and an increasing number of residents living alone.

<sup>3</sup> Kirkpatrick Sale, *Human Scale: Revisited*, see footnote on pg. 7

<sup>4</sup> "[The Big Idea of Small Experiments](#)" by Anne Kearney describes how to use this flexible, incremental approach to solving problems.

<sup>5</sup> Fritsche & Masson (2021), wrote that one's *impression* of group participation directly impacts how effective a group is thought to be, suggesting that seeing group members engage in neighborhood action is important to promote future action.

## How To Nourish our People

- Introduce yourself to your neighbors
- Reach out to welcome all those within the boundary
- Limit network size to around 150 residents at most
- Listen and seek to understand the story each has to tell
- Identify passionate residents who may serve as Connectors
- Identify gifts each resident has to share and find opportunities to apply them
- Schedule monthly neighborhood meals



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# Our Resources

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## Stewardship<sup>1</sup>

Developing resource sharing networks that nourish, rather than erode, our neighborhoods requires us to be good stewards of our resources. Sharon Astyk writes of the Jewish tenet of *tikkun olam* which means 'the repair of the world.' This principle compels us to repair that which is broken and leave the world in a better state than it was found. As we become good stewards over finite resources, we must only use that which we need as we 'live lightly' on this earth. Living lightly reduces the amount we consume and the waste we create. Living lightly can also mean tapping into non-material resources as a vital contributor to the wellbeing of our community. Sharing skills, stories, and gratitude, can be a powerful tool of learning and social connection. Importantly, living a simple life can cultivate a deep sense of well-being and improve one's overall quality of life. When we only take what we need, use it with care, and wisely transition it when we are done, we practice good stewardship that improves ourselves, our community, and our planet.

## Consent

A key facet of a sharing community is the acknowledgement that all individuals have the autonomy to choose when and how to share themselves and their resources with others. An individual maintains the right to alter their availability over time, as they deem appropriate. Shifts in individual lives and situations are eventually inevitable, and it is important that the neighborhood offers flexibility and respect during those transitions.

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<sup>1</sup> This section draws heavily on readings from *The Localization Reader*, including Sharon Astyk's writing on "Abundance and Fulfillment" and Dr. Raymond De Young's essay on "Motives for Living Lightly." You can find more information on finding wellbeing through pursuing a more simple, local life at [LocalizationPapers.org](http://LocalizationPapers.org).

## How to Nourish our Resources

- Only take the things we need
- Only offer legal items
- Only borrow items with permission
- Only use borrowed items within the permitted timeframe
- Return borrowed items in the same or an improved state
- Practice wise end-of-life care for physical items
- Recognize gratitude, stories, and skills as powerful community resources
- Regularly conduct check-ins during group skillshares to see how to best support others



# Our Community



*“I've traveled enough to realize there are brilliant people in every community who know solutions. They don't need saviors, they need allies.”*

*~ Wab Kinew*

## Mutual Aid<sup>1</sup>

Mutual aid is the idea of positive interdependence, where each person has important gifts to contribute towards a shared vision. In neighborhood networks, we can cultivate solidarity through creating spaces all can come together to create a shared vision of our neighborhood. Dean Spade describes this process as one that offers the opportunity to learn from each other's various lived experiences, building solidarity across these differences while addressing real problems in the community. This is a decidedly anti-hierarchical approach, where all residents share in decision-making processes while institutions step back and act as allies, rather than experts.

## Localization

In a world of finite resources and fragile supply chains, it is increasingly critical to turn towards local sources to supply our needs. Localization is the process of social change that turns toward our local neighborhoods, while taking into account the limits of the natural system in which we live.<sup>2</sup> This is an approach that values decentralization and collective agency, promoting the community as an adaptive mechanism that can be used to overcome real local challenges.

## Resilience Today for an Uncertain Tomorrow

Importantly, building everyday adaptation into our neighborhoods improves our ability to adapt and overcome future challenges. By developing neighborhood systems, our connections with each other, and our awareness of the strengths and challenges held by each, we are better prepared to act when calamity strikes. This frees up capacity for first responders in times of crisis so efforts can be focused where they are needed most.

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<sup>1</sup> Dean Spade writes extensively on the topic of mutual aid and how institutions and individuals can partner as allies in solidarity. Read Spade's essay, "[Solidarity, not Charity.](#)" for a brief introduction to the concept of mutual aid.

<sup>2</sup> Find more information on localization at [LocalizationPapers.org](http://LocalizationPapers.org). See footnote on pg. 12.

## How to Nourish our Community

- Look within the neighborhood for skills and resources before looking elsewhere
- For what cannot be found within the neighborhood, explore community sharing sources like the local library, tool sharing programs, or community gardens
- Partner with local institutions for mutual support and collaborative learning
- Set up a regular group discussion meeting with other Neighborhood Connectors to provide group support and learning opportunities
- Develop a neighborhood crisis action plan
- Do not put eligibility stipulations on residents, as some may only be in a position to offer gratitude for neighborhood resources.
- Recognize gratitude as an essential contribution to your neighborhood.



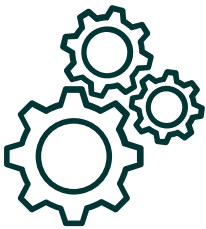
# Our Governance<sup>1</sup>

## Clear Boundaries



In order to effectively manage neighborhood resources, it is important to know what is being managed. Where are neighborhood boundaries and what resources are being shared? It is important to name that there is a tension that lies with drawing lines that either include or exclude. As such, neighborhoods should partner with neighboring streets as mentors in developing surrounding neighborhood networks. Pay special attention to drawing in those on the edge-- both physically and metaphorically--so that none are left out of the social fabric. In special instances in which an exception needs to be made, a network can elect to temporarily take on an additional resident, as capacity allows.

## Congruent Rules



Each network must collaboratively agree on rules regarding the timing and place for the exchange of resources and skills, as well as how to best communicate with one another. If an online platform works well for most members, it is important to also provide a physical alternative. Network members must also decide on rules for labor involved in neighborhood activities, length of resource borrowing time, and how to replace/repair broken items. It is important that neighborhood rules mesh well with the local context and existing laws to reduce friction and promote durability. These rules must also serve as "living arrangement" that the neighborhood is able to collectively alter as needed.

## Accessibility



The strongest networks include all neighbors within their boundaries no matter how much or little they contribute to the network. Network structure and maintenance activities should be accessible for all physical, mental, and emotional needs and capacities. Make accessibility an open conversation in your neighborhood discussions. Note that people may not feel comfortable openly discussing their needs, but this can change as relationships are built and diverse avenues of communication are encouraged, such as email contacts or one-on-one discussion. See the pilot program Neighborhood Walk and Talk activities (Pg. 18–25) for examples of making events accessible.

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<sup>1</sup> Elinor Ostrom, a [Nobel Prize winning economist](#), studied resource sharing communities to identify essential elements that promote sustainable, self-governing systems. Many of the following principles of governance have been adapted from Ostrom's work to provide a foundation for enduring and autonomous neighborhood networks.

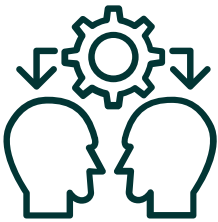


## Accountability



A neighborhood commitment pledge can increase accountability within sharing networks. It is advised that all residents sign a commitment pledge to abide by neighborhood rules prior to engaging in exchange. Neighborhood residents are able to act as monitors, noting when rules are not appropriately followed. Often, intrinsic motivation to uphold a pledge and retain neighborhood respect is enough to encourage members to abide by the rules of exchange. If regular disregard for rules occurs that is not due to severe extenuating circumstances, residents can bring the issue before the Neighborhood Connector for conflict mediation.

## Conflict Wisdom



Rather than approaching conflict with the goal of resolution, conflict wisdom seeks to listen, understand, and welcome feedback as we learn to navigate conflict together. Cultivate safe spaces for conversation, as well as listening and perspective-taking skills. It is critical for residents and local officials to have rapid access to local arenas to navigate conflict, such as setting up a meeting with a Neighborhood Connector or calling a neighborhood meeting. Individual conflicts can be brought to the Neighborhood Connector for mediation. Neighborhood members can collectively decide on specific conflict guidelines that best suits their own neighborhood. All neighborhood conflict mediation avenues must be exhausted before seeking external mediation through local government or other institutions.

## Transferability



In order for a network to stand the test of time, it must be adaptive to change. One way to reduce the amount of change experienced is to include introductory training for Neighborhood Connectors. This can ensure that Connectors know their role and how to complete the tasks expected of them, reducing uncertainty and turnover. Sometimes change is unexpected or inevitable, but there are ways to prepare for this. Every Neighborhood Connector must mentor 2-3 additional residents in the policies and procedures in that network. In the event that a Neighborhood Connector must step away or move out of their role, a mentored alternative can take their place or manage the network until a new Connector has completed the training process. The presence of alternative Connectors in a neighborhood ensures a smooth transition and continued resident interaction throughout these shifts.

## Right to Organize



While it is not necessary for a neighborhood to organize to be effective, it is important to recognize and protect the right of a neighborhood to organize should they choose. Recognizing and supporting neighborhood-level efforts is promoted within the [A2Zero Climate Action Plan](#) as an important element of social cohesion.

## How To Nourish our Governance

- Meet with other residents to determine what boundaries make sense for your network. Keep in mind that these boundaries should not follow lines of gentrification or red-lining practices, but instead be guided by a short walking distance and a manageable number of residents.
- Collectively create neighborhood guidelines that best suit your neighborhood situation. Allow guidelines to adapt as your neighborhood evolves.
- Allow for multiple forms of group and individual communication (in-person, online, and paper) and plan activities as a group to ensure they are accessible to all residents
- When engaging in neighborhood action, reflect on whether the activity aligns with current neighborhood guidelines. If not, reach out to your Neighborhood Connector to discuss other avenues of approach or whether a collective reassessment of current guidelines is appropriate.
- When conflict arises, welcome the opportunity to build relationships through learning from differing perspectives and engaging in meaningful conversations.
- Provide a safe space for conflict mediation
- As a Neighborhood Connector, take notes on your experience to pass on to future Connectors. Keep careful records of events, contacts, resources, and procedures.



# Putting it all Together

Now that we've laid a foundation for how to approach building a neighborhood network, where do we start? Robin Wall Kimmerer writes that, when it comes to repairing our relationship with each other and the land, the answer is simple:



## START WITH FOOD

Food brings people together. In fact, humans are unique among primates in their affinity for shared meals.<sup>1</sup> By centering food in a neighborhood network, it ensures the following:

- Resilience planning is long-term and ongoing. Food provisioning is not a one-off project, but requires continuous neighborhood investment.
- Social interaction is built in to community food initiatives, as food is more easily grown, harvested, and preserved in collaboration with others.
- By engaging in local food provisioning, we become intimately involved in caring for our land.

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<sup>1</sup> Kirkpatrick Sale, *Human Scale: Revisited*. See footnote on pg. 7.

## Pilot Program

The following pilot program provides the structure for implementation, using food as an integral and grounding factor. This same framework can be expanded to include additional resources, skills, and neighborhood projects. The following guide is written for a Neighborhood Connector, but can provide an important overview for residents and institutional allies, as well.

# A Neighborhood Network Pilot Program

A neighborhood pilot program gives us the opportunity to conduct a small experiment before expanding further. A pilot program can teach important lessons about what works well in a neighborhood, as each neighborhood is unique.

A pilot program starts out with a Neighborhood Walk and Talk. The ABCD approach describes this as a chance to "use what we have to secure what we need" (see footnote on pg.8).

It is also an opportunity to get to know one another and identify potential Neighborhood Connectors, if one does not already exist. An interested resident can facilitate this event, which is the first step to creating a neighborhood network.

## Overview

Prior to the event, the resident facilitator knocks on doors throughout the neighborhood to distribute invitations.

During the Neighborhood Walk, the facilitator leads neighborhood residents through the streets to identify neighborhood resources.

During the Neighborhood Talk, residents gather to discuss their experience and identify other skills they can offer. This is also a great time to identify potential Connectors, build neighborhood relationships, and create a shared vision.

The Neighborhood Walk and the Neighborhood Talk can be completed on the same or different days, as time and capacity allows.

## NEIGHBORHOOD RESOURCE WALK & TALK

*The following steps will be covered more in depth in the coming pages.*

Reaching out to neighbors

Network building discussion



Neighborhood Walk throughs

Neighborhood follow-up meeting

# Preparing for a Walk & Talk Event

## Planning

Check your calendar for a date about a month away that doesn't also fall on a holiday or city event. Plan a time earlier in the day, when attention is fresh and schedules are usually more flexible. Locate a convenient meeting spot within your neighborhood, which could simply be your own front yard. Grab a stack of invitations and fill them out with all the details, making sure to include your contact information and a short description of your goals, such as "Join your neighbors as we walk around the block, identify resources that can be shared, and find ways that we can come together to provide more food for our families within our own neighborhood."

When inviting neighbors, bring a friend, a dog, or your family along! It can be a great way to break the ice when meeting new people.



## Outreach

This step is where the most important, and the most rewarding, work takes place: Meet your neighbors! The hardest part can be that first step out the door. However, you'll often find that each step gets easier once you get going. In a world where more and more of our communication is through screens, face to face connection is vital to building trust and relationships in a neighborhood. So, knock on every door on your street, distribute your invitations, and greet each neighbor with a smile! And remember that outreach does not end after the invitations are gone; reaching out to those around us is a way of life. Sitting on your front steps, gardening in your front yard, taking walks and saying hi to those you meet are all great ways to continually welcome connection with those around you.

# Leading a Neighborhood Walk



## Welcome, Neighbors!

When all have gathered, take time to welcome your fellow neighbors and invite residents to introduce themselves to the group. This is an important step for your neighborhood, so make sure to thank each for their time and contribution to building a neighborhood network!

### Introduce Activity

The primary goal of a Neighborhood Walk is to identify resources that can be shared among neighbors. When thinking specifically about food, these resources may include water sources, universal gardening space, or places where community fruit trees might be planted. Residents will walk the length of the street, or around the block, and note each location with a short description on their paper. It is alright, and encouraged, for each resident to have varying interpretations as to what may qualify as a neighborhood resource, as unique perspectives may offer new ideas.



### Items Needed:

Clipboards  
Paper  
Pens/Pencils  
Neighborhood Sign-Up Sheet  
Personal Contact Card

### Things to note:

Questions to think about as you walk may include the following:

- Where could food be grown?
- Are there foraging opportunities?
- Is there access to space for food preservation or community meals?
- Are there tool storage spaces?
- Where is the nearest water source?

## Invite Participation

Find inclusive ways to engage all residents by offering a ride through the neighborhood or encouraging residents to share a map or resource list drawn from experience

Encourage residents to bring out potential sharing items to the roadside so it can be widely seen and documented.

While you're on the walk, invite other residents in the neighborhood who may be outside. Others may be motivated to join when they see neighbors engaged as a group, so make sure to bring along a sign-up sheet and a card with your contact information.

**By seeing others in the neighborhood engaged in collective action, residents can experience an increased sense of collective agency**

(see footnote on pg.7)

### Three things to walk away with:

- A deeper understanding of the physical resources within your neighborhood (See "Our Resources," pg. 12)
- New or strengthened relationships with your neighbors (See "Our People," pg. 10)
- A set date for the next neighborhood gathering

## A Neighborhood-Led Food Forest

The Leslie Park Food Forest in Ann Arbor, MI offers a potential model for neighborhoods with access to space for collective food initiatives. The Food Forest was created through a coalition of community members to expand food access and increase community resilience, while also regenerating our relationship with the land. All residents are invited to participate or simply enjoy the fruits of the earth and the sanctuary that the space provides.

Find more information at [www.TrueEarth.org/food-forest](http://www.TrueEarth.org/food-forest)



# Leading a Neighborhood Talk



## Pt 1. Discovering Gifts and Skills

This is a great opportunity to come together over a shared meal. Find a neighborhood spot with some shade and tables, or a house that's easy to access, and bring a dish and some ideas to share!

### Introduce Activity

Following the walk, meet at a universal location that is easily accessible to all within the neighborhood. Ideally, this would be a place that offers a comfortable place to sit for each person. Spend some time getting to know each other over food before starting the activity.

Next, follow the step-by-step guide: [Tools for Discovering Individual Skills and Gifts](#) (see Appendix pg. 36). This is a time for neighborhood residents to uncover and uplift the passions and abilities that each brings to the table.

### Items Needed:

Poster Paper  
Pens/Pencils  
Markers  
Sticky Notes

### Things to note:

Each person has unique gifts and skills that can benefit the neighborhood, which can be loosely grouped into four categories.

**Gifts of the hand:** Physical skills, such as the ability to lift and move heavy items, pruning, weeding, etc.

**Gifts of the head:** Knowledge about gardening, plant identification, preservation methods, record keeping, etc.

**Gifts of the heart:** Passions that inspire action and advocacy such as environmentalism, social justice, etc.

**Gifts of human connection:** Ability to bring people together, coordinate social events, be a welcomer to those around, etc.

### Three things to walk away with:

- A deeper understanding of the gifts and skills your neighbors have to offer (See "Our Resources," pg. 12)
- A better knowledge of your own abilities and an avenue to engage them (See "Our Community," pg. 14)
- A date set for the next neighborhood gathering



# Pt 2. Creating a Shared Understanding

## What do we have within our neighborhood?

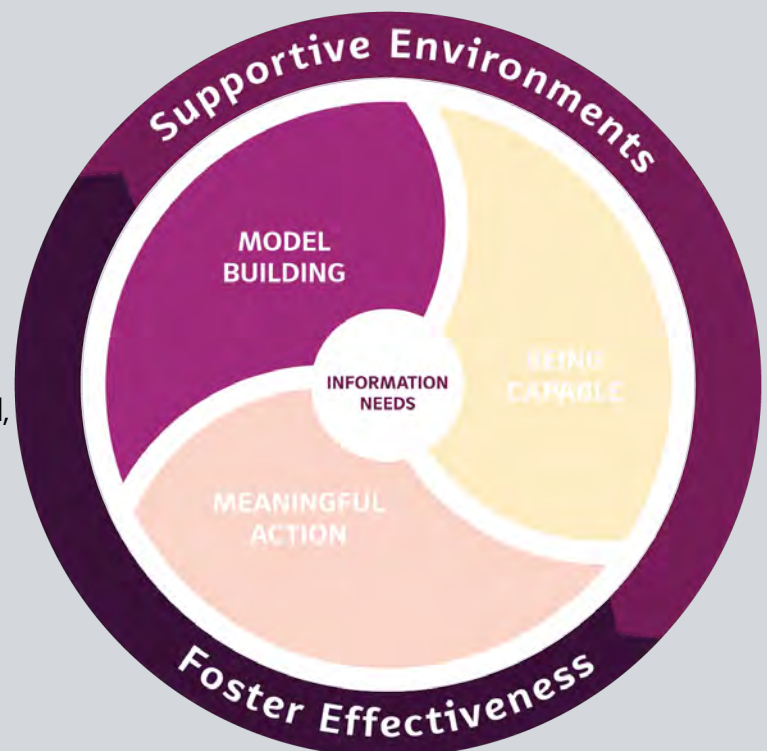
Once everyone is settled, build a summary of what was observed during the walk. If possible, use a large sheet of paper where residents can contribute their observations to build a map of neighborhood strengths. What physical resources did residents find? What were some opportunities that residents noted? From there, move to cataloguing residents' skillsets. Shared values can also be added to the picture to capture a more holistic view of the neighborhood.



Although broader in scope than a typical neighborhood map, the image above gives an idea of how one might approach drawing a neighborhood map. Mapping out a future vision, as seen in this image, will be discussed further on pg. 26.

## Building a Shared, Neighborhood Model

In the SEE framework, 'model building' describes the automatic process of compiling information from your lived experiences, and forming a 'model' in order to better understand the world around you. As neighbors work together to better understand their neighborhood, and share with one another their own *individual* models, a collective model is built. This facilitates a shared understanding of where you live, as well as your role within that context, and can serve as a reference map to help us navigate future challenges together.



## What do we want our neighborhood to look like?

Next, think about what you want your neighborhood to look like ten years from now. Use a second large sheet of paper to allow each resident to add an idea or two for something they would like to see in their neighborhood. The image on the previous page offers an idea of what this might look like. To increase accessibility (see pg. 14), offer an anonymous card that could be dropped in a box on the way out or an online version that could be completed at home. Donella Meadows refers to this process as "[envisioning](#)," in which a shared vision is created of a sustainable future that operates within our natural systems.<sup>1</sup> For example, imagine a neighborhood that grows or obtains all their food from local sources or a neighborhood in which no person feels alone. What would that look like? While this must be grounded in reality, try not to be limited by current conceptions of what is possible. Instead, what would you love to see your neighborhood become? Discuss what you find.

## How do we get there?

The next step is to draw the connection from where you are at to where you would like to be. This can be a great opportunity to think creatively about how neighborhood skills and resources can be used to pave the way to a better future. How could your neighborhood initiate deep work for more transformative change? How could you lean on your shared values in a way that leverages your differences? Keep in mind that including the perspectives of all neighbors is essential for holistic change, and that change can only happen at the speed of trust.



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<sup>1</sup> Donella Meadows was a co-author for the groundbreaking piece "Limits to Growth," which called attention to the dangerous trajectory of our future based on our current levels of consumption. Meadows was a proponent of using envisioning to build a shared vision of the future, as well as big-picture thinking to identify how things fit together. Her book, *Thinking in Systems*, describes this approach in more detail.

# Wrapping Up & Next Steps

As you wrap up your Walk & Talk, talk with your neighbors about how to best facilitate future events.



## Who Should Facilitate Future Events?

An important part of activating a neighborhood network is to find someone willing to take on the task of reaching out to fellow residents and coordinating social events.

Ask the following questions of neighborhood residents:

- Who is a good listener?
- Who is a periodic social coordinator?
- Who is a welcomer?

These qualities can be used to identify potential Neighborhood Connectors, which can include more than one motivated resident. Multiple Neighborhood Connectors within on neighborhood can increase transferability (see pg. 15) in case one needs to step back. Neighborhood Connectors can serve as a trusted, visible catalyst for change within the community.

## How Should your Neighborhood Communicate?

Decide what works best for your neighborhood to record resources and resident contact information. Is it an online spreadsheet or a neighborhood booklet? Keep in mind that it should be accessible to all within the neighborhood. Also note what form of communication works well for future events. Try to stay away from social media and instead focus on more inclusive and direct avenues, such as door to door flyering and email.

## Most Importantly, an Easy Last Step!

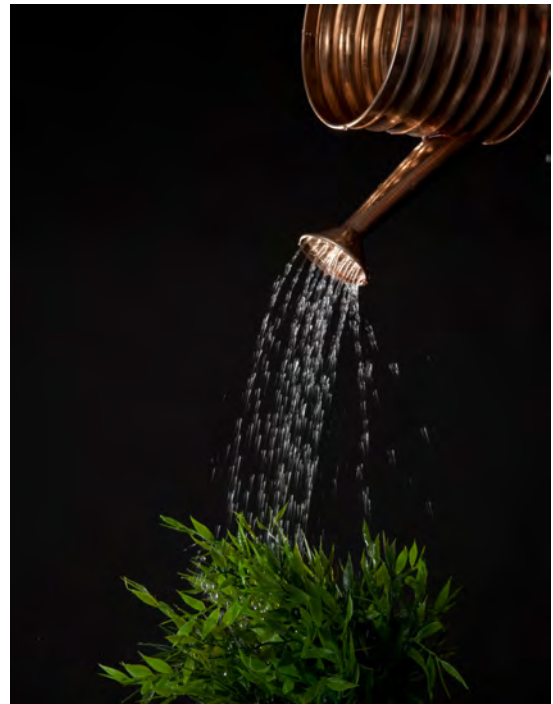
Before making your way back home, set a date for the next neighborhood event. This maintains forward momentum within your neighborhood networks and is easier to do with everyone gathered together. This can also provide important feedback on what timing works best for the majority of residents.

# Maintaining an Effective Network

## Nourishing our Attention

As we engage in neighborhood work, Dean Spade (see footnote on pg. 14) reminds us that we must honor the capacities of ourselves and others. Our ability to share ourselves and our resources may shift over time, requiring flexibility to be built into a neighborhood network. Residents must always feel welcome to clarify the availability of their skills and resources with fellow neighbors and Neighborhood Connectors. This can be done through word-of-mouth, or with an additional "Availability" column on a neighborhood resource spreadsheet. In this way, residents maintain autonomy over consent (see pg. 11), retaining the ability step back at any time.

Just as the land holds a balance of giving and receiving, we must cultivate an awareness of our own internal balance. The SEE framework includes our capacity to pay attention as an important element of 'being capable'. Our attention is in high demand in our fast-paced world, and can quickly be depleted. So, it is critical to take the time to restore our attention and mental capacity. For most, spending time in nature is the best way to do this.



Activities that reduce the demand placed on our ability to focus, by instead directing our attention to things that are "softly fascinating" (e.g., bird songs, or wind rustling through the trees) can help us achieve this restoration, and return to our tasks with renewed energy and effectiveness. These activities can sometimes leverage what some refer to as flow, becoming completely immersed in the fascinating aspects of our environments.<sup>1</sup> Whether simply sitting under a canopy of trees or taking a slow walk around the block, be intentional about carving out that space for the sake of yourself and your community.

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of flow was developed by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. Research has shown that engaging flow can provide many positive benefits for our wellbeing. Find more information at <https://positivepsychology.com/mihaly-csikszentmihalyi-father-of-flow/>

## The Importance of Clarity

Humans search for clarity in their environment, and the SEE framework recommends leveraging this innate drive. Communicating neighborhood information in a clear and succinct manner supports how we process information and encourages engagement. Clarity also provides a sense of pleasure and makes it easier to pursue a goal or purpose. Importantly, a lack of clarity can lead one to feel overwhelmed and mentally exhausted. Make sure neighborhood communications, procedures, and expectations are clear, simple, and easy for residents to access.

## The Role of Feedback

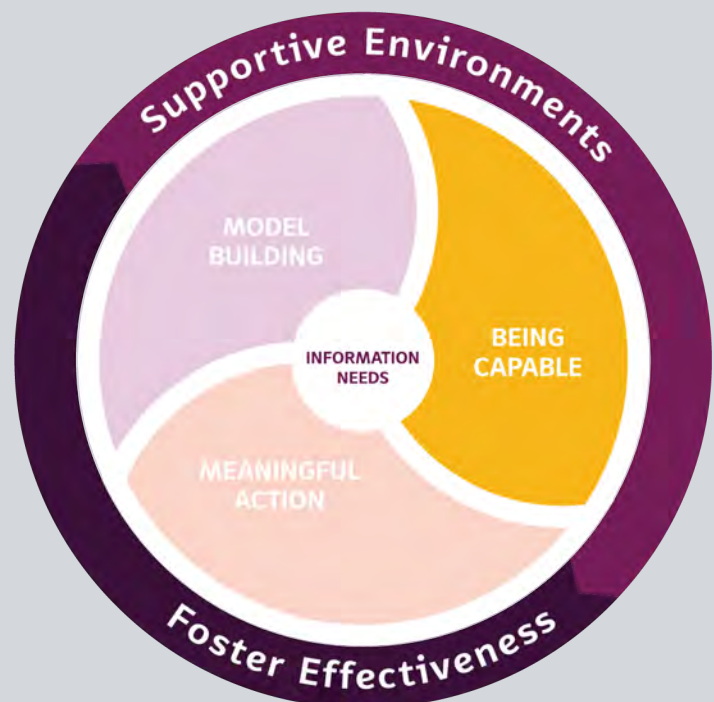
Feedback is critical to increasing clarity within a network. Listening to the experience and ideas of others can help us understand where other residents are coming from. It is also a great opportunity to see where clarity may be lacking in the network. At each group meeting, offer a time for building relationships and reflection, and ask:

- What is working well?
- What could be improved?
- What are the next steps?

According to work done by economist Elinor Ostrom (see footnote on pg. 16), conflicts can serve as an important opportunity to see how past and future efforts have disproportionately affected residents. Many times, clarifying boundaries, roles, and expectations can prevent or resolve these conflicts.

## How does this relate to being capable?

The SEE framework describes being capable as feeling competent and clear headed. Creating a space that respects our limited attention can help us focus on the tasks at hand. Providing clear guidance and expectations allows us to better explore creative solutions without feeling overwhelmed by ambiguity. Giving, receiving, and acting on feedback further shows us where adjustments can be made to refine these elements, and to foster a more supportive environment for our residents within each neighborhood.



# Appendix

## Neighborhood Network Informational Resources:

### Asset Based Community Development (ABCD)

Learning Course:

<https://learning.weavers.org/action/asset-based-community-development>

Toolkit:

<https://resources.depaul.edu/abcd-institute/resources/Pages/tool-kit.aspx>

### Supportive Environments for Effectiveness

[www.redirect.org](http://www.redirect.org)

### Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation

<https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>

### Neighboring Resources

The Hopeful Neighborhood Project:

<https://www.hopefulneighborhood.org/>

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## Local Ann Arbor Resources:

### **Ann Arbor Tool Borrowing Program**

Community access to tools and much more!

<https://aadl.org/catalog/browse/unusual>

### **Common Cycle**

Community bike repair co-op

<https://commoncycle.org/>

### **Project Grow**

Identifies under-developed land, arranges for its use, and maintains it as part of our network of community gardens

<https://www.projectgrowgardens.org/>

### **The Stewardship Network**

Engaging residents in land stewardship practices within their community

<https://www.stewardshipnetwork.org/>

### **SnowBuddy**

Neighborhood-led program to support sidewalk access

<https://snowbuddy.org/>

### **True Earth**

Community oriented organization and founder of the Food Forest at Leslie Park in Ann Arbor

[www.trueearth.org](http://www.trueearth.org)

# Mutual Aid in Practice

The following charts include ways to further incorporate elements of mutual aid (pg. 12) in Neighborhood Networks. The resources on pages 32-34 are drawn from Dean Spade's book, *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During this Crisis (and the Next)*

## Helpful Qualities of Group Cultures

Reliable, responsible, punctual, follows through

Welcoming to new people

Flexible, experimental

Collaborative

Realistic work load, sustainable work flow, real culture of wellness and care

Direct feedback and growth

Sticks to values

Humble

Fun, celebratory, appreciative of each other

Forgiving

Able to have generative conflict and learn, repair

Clarity about procedures

Human pace with clear priorities and realistic expectations

Transparency

Generous

Sharing work well



## Cooperative Leadership Qualities

Supports the growth of decision-making processes that include everyone affected by the decision

Wants to find out how others are doing, what they need or believe, what they want

Willing to admit mistakes

Humble and dignified

Good at communicating; sharing and listening

Wins support by being supportive, consistent, trustworthy

Open to influence and changing their opinion

Concerned about the group's material impact--does it alleviate suffering and increase justice?

Fosters compassion and a desire that no one is left out of the group

Generous and open to newcomers while holding clear principles and boundaries

Holds steady to the groups' decisions and purpose; reliable

Can tolerate people being different in a lot of ways; sees potential in people to become part of the work for change and helps them develop skills and abilities

Cares most about what those on the bottom of hierarchies think and know; works to cultivate authenticity

Can take the risk of being seen, can step back so others can be seen

Avoids advice-giving unless asked, interested in supporting people to make decisions that align with their values

Sees the long view and holds to values

Gives direct feedback in a compassionate way

Open to feedback, interested in how they impact others

Can delegate, can ask for help, wants more people's participation rather than more control

Supports processes with integrity that lead to more people participating in decision-making

Interested in what can be learned from discomfort, from changing roles or being out of place, from conditions transforming

Self-accepting and steady in sense of self, and so able to take risks or hold unpopular opinions

## Basic Steps to Consensus Decision-Making

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**Step 1:**

Discussion

**Step 2:**

Identify emerging proposal

**Step 3:**

Identify any unsatisfied concerns

**Step 4:**

Collaboratively modify proposal

**Step 5:**

Assess degree of support

**Step 6:**

Finalize decision **OR** Circle back to  
steps 1 or 3

# Discovering Gifts and Skills

For use in activity on pg. 22.

Downloadable PDF with active links and videos can be found at:

<https://www.imls.gov/sites/default/files/2022-07/tool-asset-mapping-individual.pdf>



**Powerful, sustainable community change occurs when neighbors combine their strengths to act together upon what they most care about.** Communities are at their strongest and safest when neighbors are well connected and actively contributing their skills and talents. Rooted in these principles, Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) offers a lens for seeing communities and neighborhoods as filled with assets rather than defined primarily by their needs.

Research led by ABCD founders John McKnight and Jody Kretzmann identified six categories of local assets commonly drawn upon by residents in their change efforts: individual gifts, associations, institutions, physical space, economy and exchange, and stories/culture.<sup>1</sup> The creative processes local groups have developed for discovering, documenting, and activating these assets have become known as "asset mapping."<sup>2</sup> Research has also shown that these efforts consistently center the individual gifts of local residents, especially marginalized neighbors whose gifts have become hidden under labels of deficiency such as "poor," "at risk," "homeless," or "disabled."

The following **4-H Gifts** and **Know, Teach, Learn** tools offer two simple, energizing ways to begin revealing, celebrating, and activating the individual capacities within any group while also collectively putting on an "abundance lens" for seeing one's community through new eyes to better utilize the many untapped resources already present in every neighborhood.

1. Kretzmann & McKnight, *Building Communities From the Inside Out*. (1993).

2. For more on ABCD and asset mapping, see this [Asset Mapping Overview & User Guide](#).

## Tools: 4-H Gifts and "Know, Teach, Learn"

benefits and uses:

- Practice putting on an "asset lens" when seeing our selves, group, and community
- Builds trust and relationship between participants
- Enables a team or group to clearly see and activate its collective gifts, talents, and priorities, which it can use as "ingredients" in planning projects, solving local problems, or organizational development



Feel free to adapt these exercises to your own place and culture. Be creative, play, and have fun!

## 4-H GIFTS EXERCISE

**Time Required:** 10–45 min (depending on variations)

The 4-H Gifts Exercise is an excellent introduction exercise for a group of neighbors, committee, or organizational team. It builds a sense of community among group members, empowers the team to recognize its collective gifts, and moves them from needs thinking to strengths thinking.

### PREPARATION

#### 1. Gather materials.

- Sticky notes
- Colored thin/fine-point markers
- Printed gifts handout (one per person)
- A pleasant-sounding bell or timer (optional)



#### 2. Prepare the space.

Set out sticky notes and markers on the tables that will be used.

Create the “Gifts Wall,” an area on a wall (or large standing whiteboard/hard surface if no wall is available) with four sections. In large letters, label each section: Head, Hands, Heart, Human Connection. You can give it a name like “Our Gifts Inventory,” “Our Gifts,” “Abundance Wall,” or something else creative! When determining size, the larger the group, the larger the space. Estimate that you will need space for each participant to post approximately three to five sticky notes.



### PROCESS

#### 1. Introduce the process to the team, group, or committee. (5 min)

Explain that we all bring special gifts to any group of which we are a member. And if we recognize each other’s gifts, we can creatively combine them to make the team stronger and more successful.

#### 2. Describe the gift categories, asking the group if they need any clarification. (10 min)

**Gifts of the Head:** Knowledge that you have in a particular area like child development, health care, or history of the neighborhood. Includes abilities associated with learning, knowledge, organizational capacity, or numbers, and skills related to thinking and planning. **Examples:** art, movies, history, birds.

**Gifts of the Hands:** Any gift, talent, or ability having to do with the hands or body. Physical skills you would be willing to offer or teach. **Examples:** carpentry, photography, painting, bicycle repair, athletic skills.

**Gifts of the Heart:** What are your passions? What stirs you to action? What would you walk across hot coals for? **Examples:** the environment, civic life, children.

**Gifts of Human Connection:** How are you good at connecting with people or connecting people to each other? What are the things you do to stay connected to our community? **Examples:** starting conversations, keeping in touch with/checking on people, remembering peoples’ names or details, throwing parties, joining an interest group, working behind the scenes to support events or gatherings.



Image Source:  
April Doner

### 3. Think about individual gift inventories.

(5 min)

Propose silent time to allow everyone the opportunity to think about and write their own gifts of the head, hands, heart, and human connection on their handout.

### 4. Have gift conversations/interviews.

(10-20 min)

Split the group into pairs or groups of three to five. Ask everyone to share with their partner/group which of their gifts of the head, heart, hands, and human connection they have written down that they consider to be the most valuable or that they most enjoy giving in community. These “most valuable” gifts should be listed on the sticky notes, one per note, in marker along with the gift-bearer’s name. Encourage everyone to choose partners they know the least in the room as a way of gaining new relationships and of practicing hospitality (“welcoming the strangers” into our lives and community). Here are some questions that can help surface these gifts:

*What activity do you find yourself losing all track of time when you are doing it?*

*What talent or skill does it give you the most joy to give?*

*What do others tell you they most appreciate about you as a friend, colleague, or family member?*

It can be helpful to let people know when you have reached the halfway point, so pairs can be sure to switch or groups can make sure everyone has a chance to speak.



#### TIPS:

**Pairs or Groups?** Grouping people in pairs can allow more in-depth conversation in a shorter time period of 8-10 minutes. Using small group of three to five can allow people to learn more gifts more quickly, but it takes more time—10-20 minutes.

**Pair Gift Interviews.** If in pairs, have one partner interview the other about their most valuable gifts and write down one gift per sticky note, along with the person’s name.

### 5. Regroup and reflect. (Round 1)

(5-15 min)

Bring the group’s attention back to the whole. (You can use the bell as a friendly signal.) Briefly ask a few people to share about their partner and their partner’s gifts. If you have time, you can also invite others to call out gifts they heard that they found particularly surprising, inspiring, or interesting.

Next, ask for reflections on these questions:

*What was it like to talk about your gifts?*

*What was it like to ask about someone else’s?*

Source: April Dohner



watch



for INSPIRATION / DISCUSSION

### An Indigenous Perspective on Gifts

In this 3-minute video, Malidoma Some from Burkina Faso in West Africa, shares a powerful indigenous paradigm of personal gifts. Use this video to spark conversation about the connections between gifts and pathways to both personal and community growth, resilience, and liberation. An excerpt:

*“Dagaaba people believe that no one comes into this world for no reason. That we come into this world carrying a gift and with a purpose to deliver that gift in the brightest way possible. Life in community is necessary to bring out those gifts. It takes community to see the beauty, the gifts that the person is carrying.”*



## THINGS YOU CAN DO WHEN YOU KNOW SOMEONE'S GIFT

1. Locate opportunities in the community or within your group, committee, or organization where the person could give their gift.
2. Remind them of their gift on a regular basis in passing and in specific situations where you are helping them figure something out. Catch them off guard.
3. Tell people who are in regular contact with the person about their gift. Encourage them to acknowledge it when they see the person give it.
4. Ask the person to tell you a story about a time they used their gift and something good happened for someone else.
5. Introduce the person to others by first describing their gift.
6. Help the person identify times during their workday when they are giving their gift.

**MORE** at ["20 Things You Can Do When You Know Someone's Gift"](#) by Community Animators



### TIP:

Groups will often share how awkward it is at first both to ask about others' gifts and to talk about their own, but that it became more natural with practice. While knowing and using our neighbors' skills, gifts, and passions used to be common, we have fallen out of practice. So it is natural for it to feel awkward, but the reward for pushing through the discomfort is discovering the hidden abundance in each other and our community while also deepening our relationships!

## 6. Group posts gifts on the Gifts Wall. (10 min)

Now, it's time to collectively celebrate all of the gifts in the room and create your group's first "abundance inventory"! Ask everyone to go up to the Gifts Wall and post their gift sticky notes there. (This is a good time to remind everyone to write their names on each sticky note and be sure that they listed all of the "most valuable" gifts, one per note.) Encourage everyone to also "browse" the wall take a moment to look at what gifts others are putting up and, if they have a few moments to spare, connect with someone about a gift they posted that they find interesting or useful.

## 7. Regroup and reflect. (Round 2) (10 min)

After everyone has had a chance to add their gifts to the wall, come back together and reflect as a large group on the assets you have uncovered, and how they could be beneficial to the group or team with questions such as these:

*Is there anything we are missing?*

*Do we have some similarities here? Differences?*

*What did you learn from this introduction exercise?*

*How might we be able to utilize some of your gifts with this group in the future?*

*How might we use others' gifts?*

*Any other comments or feedback?*



**TIP:** If you have a very large group and limited time, hold this conversation in groups of three to five for 5-10 minutes, then spend 5 minutes hearing highlights from various groups on their discussion.

## 8. Closing and next steps. (5-10 min)

Thank everyone for taking the time to explore their gifts. You can mention any theme or phrase that has emerged as particularly inspiring or important for the group through

Source: April Doner



## STORY of PRACTICE

### Free Library of Philadelphia



The Free Library of Philadelphia Community Catalyst Grantee team incorporated the 4-H Gifts Conversation into their IMLS-funded project enlisting residents to uncover and connect gifts and assets in their neighborhood. The conversations and gatherings that resulted had a profound and lasting impact on the way that neighbors, library staff, and organizational partners view the neighborhood and each other and activated fresh opportunities for collaboration, relationship-building, and problem-solving in the community.

*"I think the ABCD approach created an opportunity for people to present their authentic self. The questions about the gifts of the head, hands, and heart gave a more positive focus and helped people open up. When I start my own business, I will use these questions for my interviews."*

LaShon Jackson, Neighborhood Ambassador and Resident Consultant Team Member

LEARN MORE: [Paschalville Partnership's Toolbox for Library Community Catalysts](#)

this exercise, or your own personal statement of what this process has meant for you, and how you see it being of value to the group, committee, or larger work you are doing.

Next, explain or (if you have time, brainstorm with the group) any "Next Steps." (You could also propose that the next time you meet, "next steps" on how to use your gifts and learning be a topic of discussion, and leave people with a printout of the below ideas to thinkspark their brainstorming between now and the next time you meet.

## 9. Collect and document!

(10 min)

After the session, be sure to capture all of the gifts that were named and keep this as an ongoing asset for your work. See below for ideas.



## VARIATIONS



**OPTION A:** If you're working with a group that knows each other well, ask them to name one another's gifts in each category.



**OPTION B:** After the exercise, encourage everyone to interact with the Gifts Wall. They can make "matches" for themselves or for others based on the gifts they see. (It could be for personal use or an opportunity they see for that gift to be useful in your group, neighborhood, or organization.) People who like to categorize things can rearrange the gifts in a way that might make them more useful and meaningful to the group.



**OPTION C:** For a shorter version of this exercise, skip Step 3 and move people into pairs with 8-10 minutes to interview one another about their four or five most valuable gifts (at least one per category). Then, bring it to the large group and ask several people to share with the group their partner's most interesting, inspiring, or surprising gift. Leave Step 6 (putting sticky notes on the wall) as an action people can take after the session.



**OPTION D: Feeling artsy?** Choose sticky notes shaped like a head, heart, hand, or symbol that means connection, or different colors for each gift category.

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