

The Blueprint

the
Neighborhood
DesignCenter



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The Blueprint began as a facilitated dialogue with organization development practitioner and cultural worker Jess Solomon, during which the NDC Staff identified basic frameworks for the organization's community engagement work.

Following this process, writer and social designer Merrell Hambleton met individually with NDC staff members to collect and collate best practices and principles. In collaboration with graphic and social designer Becky Slogeris, this content was developed into the Blueprint.

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The Blueprint

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Introduction

What It Is

The Neighborhood Design Center Blueprint is a collection of best practices and basic principles. It's not explicitly a training guide, nor is it just a collection of ideals. It's somewhere in between: a loose roadmap of the NDC process, supported by the knowledge we've gathered about how to conduct meaningful engagement during community-led design projects.

How to Use It

While the Blueprint can be read and understood as a standalone document, it's designed to be used in conjunction with training and dialogue with the NDC staff. We hope that you'll use the Blueprint to get a big-picture understanding of how NDC works, to guide questions for and conversations with your NDC colleagues, and as a real-time reference for the work that you do with the organization.

How It Was Created

The Blueprint was adapted from a series of in-depth conversations with NDC staff members during the fall of 2017. It's a reflection of our team's learnings and know-how, collected over years of community engaged design. After reading through the book, we hope you'll feel like you've listened in on the best of these conversations and are equipped to start some of your own.



Mission and Beliefs

Before you dive into the text, take some time to review NDC's mission and values. The practices and principles documented in the Blueprint are designed to support our mission, the “why” behind all the methods and ideas you'll encounter below.

Our Mission

Founded in 1968, the Neighborhood Design Center is a nonprofit organization that facilitates the development of healthy, equitable neighborhoods through community-engaged design and planning services. By providing the tools, expertise, and partnerships necessary to realize neighborhood visions, we support broad participation in the evolution of the built environment.

Our Work

NDC Projects are collaborations between residents, community stakeholders, design professionals, local government agencies, fellow nonprofits, and our staff. Together we lay the groundwork for improving blocks, renovating parks and school grounds, reclaiming abandoned structures for community use, and revitalizing commercial districts.

We believe that these unlikely partnerships provide mutual benefit, offering invaluable on-the-job training and exposure to members of the design community and positioning historically disinvested neighborhoods to attract future investment.

Our Values

At NDC, we believe:

- The more inclusive and community-driven the process, the better the design.
- Healthy places are built with consideration of social justice, environmental sustainability, and the true character of a place and the people who live, work, worship, and do business there.
- Everyone deserves access to good design.
- Well-designed places enhance healthy cultural and democratic life in our neighborhoods.

 intake

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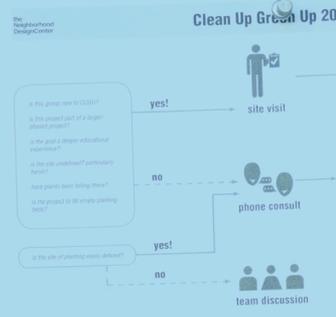
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Project Roadmap

Depending on the NDC program you're working with, the specific steps of individual projects will change. You'll work with your NDC staff point of contact to understand exactly how their individual program works.

Below is a loose chronology of steps that are, generally speaking, part of most NDC projects and who is involved in each step. Think of it as a menu from which you'll select actions as needed.

1. Imagine

- Initial Meeting
- Scoping Meeting
- Written Agreement

2. Partner

- Team Building

3. Engage

- Kick-off Meeting
- Engagement Meetings

4. Design and Revise

- Initial Design
- Design Review
- Design Revisions

5. Launch

- Close Letter



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1. Imagine

Potential partners organize around a project that relates to their built environment and approach NDC. If the project is a fit, NDC and the community partner will outline the scope of work and put it in writing.

Initial Meeting

Since NDC provides a unique service, it's crucial to meet and assess potential community partners to determine (a) if it makes sense for NDC to work with them and (b) if so, which program is appropriate.

Any NDC Staff

Scoping Meeting

Once we've taken on a project, NDC staff and the community partner meet to outline the scope of the project and establish expectations. This is when you'll talk through budget, timeline, project goals, and what's expected of the community partner in terms of engagement. Clarify what the community partner can expect from NDC and what NDC needs from the partner.

Any NDC Staff



Make connections.

Who do you already know? Who do you need to know? Who else is already working there? Who are the decision makers and gatekeepers we should engage? This is the partner and gather phase.



Get to know the site.

Visit the project site and the surrounding area. In addition to conversations you're having with the community partner, do research: Pull maps, census data, articles and other materials that will help orient you.



Explain the NDC process.

Be as clear as possible about what we do and what we don't do. Our parameters are set by a combination of mission, capacity, and funding. Understand and communicate what is possible and not possible within these constraints.



Make space for back and forth.

When there is latitude for scoping, conduct a dialogue with the community partner and let them say when the scope of the project is final.

The written agreement between NDC and the community partner should establish parameters for subsequent review and revision.



Clarify the role that NDC staff will play.

Depending on the nature of the project, the NDC staff role may vary. In some cases, the staff member(s) are the designers. In others, the staff may serve as project managers or project mentors.

Written Agreement

Based on conversations with the community partner and knowledge of the site, outline the goals of the project for the engagement process, the design, and the deliverables. Then put it in writing. In some cases, you'll draft a formal letter defining the scope of the project, to be signed by all participants. In other cases, this might take the form of an email exchange or documentation of a vote.

NDC Program Staff



2. Partner

NDC staff collaborates with the community partner to recruit the appropriate team members for the project.

Team Building

Whether you're working with NDC staff or in partnership with volunteers, you want to assemble the right mix of skills, experience levels, and backgrounds. The goals of the project should determine who you need. Work with your community partner to assemble a community team with the local knowledge, history and insights required by the project. When relevant, identify agencies and funders who can make or break the implementation of your project.

NDC Program Staff

Community Partner



3. Engage

NDC design team and the community partner meet to design and execute the engagement process. The goal is to listen and build consensus around the community vision before design begins.

Kickoff Meeting

The design team, community partner, and core stakeholders meet in person, at or near the project site, to review project constraints and goals. An initial timeline for the rest of the project is determined.

NDC Program Staff

Community Partner

NDC Volunteers (CDW only)



Review project goals.

Walk through the written agreement with the design team and community partner and identify the goals; make sure that the goals of the project are reflected in the design deliverables. Encourage the community partner to reframe the scope of work in their own words.



Sketch out the engagement process.

Let the goals of the project help you identify the right engagement. A community garden will require a very different process than a transportation corridor, and have different stakeholders. Does a dedicated workshop make sense? Or will you present during existing community meetings? Maybe on-the-street interactions are important. Discuss different options for engagement, as this will give the community partner the opportunity to think through which groups need to be engaged.



Share engagement tools.

Ensure that volunteers, community partners, interns, and new staffers have access to and training in NDC's engagement tools.



Make sure less-than-obvious stakeholders are at the table from the start.

Even if your community partner is just a few people, there are host of other people who can make or break the project. Your process needs to create buy-in amongst the potential future owners—both the people who will make the project happen now and those who will maintain it after NDC's role ends. If you're planting trees at a school, maybe it's the groundskeeper; if you're changing the design of a park, talk to the local police officer.



Establish direct relationships.

Make time for the community partner and design team to meet and connect. If you're working with volunteers, make sure the volunteers hear directly from the community partner. Direct relationships are the path to warm relationships, and warm relationships help build trust.





This is a soft skill, it's a craft.
We practice it. Sometimes it
goes well, and sometimes it doesn't,
and we do it again.

— Allie, NDC Staff



Be present at volunteer-community partner meetings.

Go to all meetings until you trust your team. If you choose not to go, make sure it's a conscious decision. NDC Staff provide the continuity and expertise that ensure project success beyond the design decisions.



Establish a timeline and communication protocol.

Let the design team and community partner determine how they'll work together (will they use email or phone? Will they share documents via Google Drive or Dropbox?), but be the one to establish the project schedule.



Find a pace that fits the project.

NDC can work slowly and deliberately, depending on the needs of the project. If it's a community-initiated project, make it clear that we can go at their speed and do a lot of engagement work.

Engagement Meetings

The type, number, and site of your engagement meetings will depend on the goals and scope of the project. It might be limited to a few one-on-one conversations, or as broad as a series of Community Visioning Workshops.

NDC Program Staff

Community Partner

NDC Volunteers (CDW only)

Project Stakeholders



Introduce the project and the goals.

At the start of any meeting or interaction, let people know: Here's why we're here, and here's what we want to accomplish today. Draw a clear connection between the engagement activities and these goals.



Establish a mindset for engagement.

When you convene a group of people for a visioning activity, keep in mind that everyone brings individual concerns, judgments and preconceptions to the table. You can encourage open-mindedness around engagement activities by establishing a set of mindsets up front. For example, "Step into someone else's shoes," might help participants broaden their input; and "Embrace your inner child," might allow participants to let go of judgments around crafting or mapping activities.



Tailor your engagement tools.

The structure, tools, and approach you use will be different with each group and project. Think about which activities and what tone best suits the group you're working with: one-on-one engagement vs. group activity? Hand-written vs. printed materials?





Offer a range of ways to engage.

Don't assume that everyone will be comfortable with all types of engagement. Bring activities that are passive, active; intended for a large group and small group; verbal and visual.



Consider the type of data you need.

Take time to adjust your engagement tactics to meet the needs of the group. Sometimes you may need deep engagement with a few people, other times you may need a breadth of engagement from many people. For example, if your goal is to assess support for a streetscape plan, you probably don't want to talk to one person at a bus stop for an hour.



Be nimble by being prepared.

It often happens that activities take longer than you expect, or simply aren't appropriate for the group. Prepare, be ready for it, and adapt the exercise(s) to fit the time you have. If you identify the goals and intended outcomes of the engagement ahead of time, it's much easier to adapt on the fly. Treat your approach to engagement like a flexible framework that will shift and evolve as you go.



Make use of best practices.

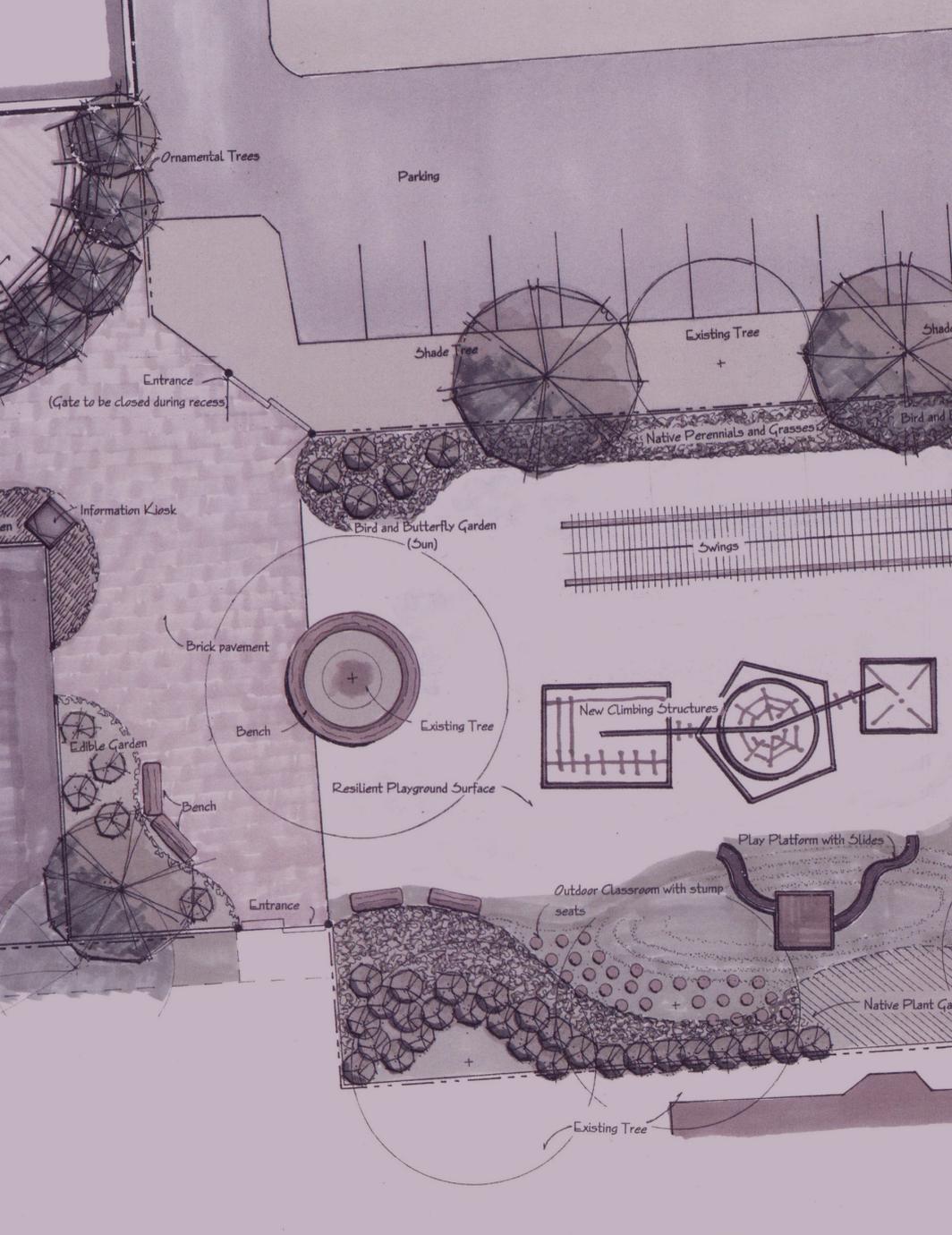
Small things, like wearing a name tag or serving food, can have a major impact on how a conversation or workshop goes. We've identified tried and true tactics that can be used in a range of engagement settings.

See Best Practices document.



We have to be nimble.
It's like biking down a bumpy hill—
to maintain control,
you have to loosen your grip.

— Allie, NDC Staff



ROUNDS

PROJECT OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD

DESIGNERS:

4. Design & Revise

NDC design team creates an initial design for the project based on the engagement process and their own research. This design is then presented to core stakeholders for feedback and revisions are made.

Initial Design

Design team creates an initial design for the project based on information gathered from core stakeholders, research and, if applicable, engagement meetings.

NDC Program Staff

NDC Volunteers (CDW only)



Aesthetic preferences may be culturally specific.

When designing, consider the aesthetic, style and overall vibe of the community with which you're working. What works in one place may not work in another. Materials, textures, and colors should reflect the local culture and be sensitive to the surroundings.



Remember who you're working for.

It's crucial to remember to support the community partner (our client) and what they need and want over the designer's agenda. Remind ourselves and our volunteers that community design is co-design.



It's our job to find the design solution,
even when the constraints seem prohibitive.

If there are a bunch of shapes
you can't change, find the negative space.

Where are the solutions in the
in-between spaces?

—Briony, NDC Staff



Keep designs simple with obtainable materials.

Whenever possible, choose local, sustainable materials. Opt for low-maintenance materials that won't put an unnecessary burden on community members. Suggest materials, partnerships and solutions that drive investment into the local (and even hyperlocal!!) economy and support small businesses and local entrepreneurs.



Design for inclusivity.

Children, elderly and differently abled people will access and use a space in ways that others do not. Plan for a diverse group of users, even if they are not present in the design sessions.

Design Review

The design team and community partner meet to review initial conceptual designs. In some cases, this is preceded by an internal design review with NDC staff and volunteers.

NDC Program Staff

Community Partner

NDC Volunteers (CDW only)



Value conversation over confrontation.

If a community partner strongly objects to something the design team feels is “good,” there are likely important values embedded here. Ask questions that help you understand their perspective. Work to find a solution and a middle ground.



Evaluate feedback.

Once a design has been shared, evaluate the outcomes with the team and community partners to decide what needs to change. Small tweaks may just require a phone call or two. Substantial changes may mean that something was missed by the design team, or perhaps a key stakeholder was not heard. In that case, another core stakeholder meeting may be required. In some instances, another public meeting may be necessary.



The no's are just as important as the yeses.
We want to know what community partners
don't want as much as we
want to know what they like.

—Johnny, NDC Staff

Design Revisions

NDC design team makes changes to the deliverable based on feedback. This step may also involve a Public Design Review during which multiple design options are presented to determine which best represents the community vision.

NDC Program Staff

Community Partner

NDC Volunteers (CDW only)

Project Stakeholders



5. Launch

NDC design team makes any final revisions, then hands the agreed-upon deliverables off to the community partner and finalizes the completion of the project with a written statement.

Close Letter

At the conclusion of a project, a “close letter” is sent. It should state clearly, “We are letting you know that the tasks identified in our scope of work (MOU, email, initial conversation) have been completed and delivered, and we are therefore closing this project.”

*NDC Program Staff
Community Partner*



Ask follow up questions.

As you finish an engagement process, ask, “What did we forget? What other thoughts do people have? Who did we leave out of this outreach strategy? Should we schedule another meeting to get on the same page?”



Revisit the value of the work.

State or summarize leveraged hours. Include the total number of hours that were contributed to the project, and the estimated market value. The estimated value can be used by the community partner to demonstrate investment in the project when seeking future funding or support.



It can be difficult to walk away
from a community partner,
especially in communities where
there is a lot of need. Figure out what
you can do project by project.

—Johnny, NDC Staff





Universal Principles

No matter where you are
in the process, keep these values
and behaviors in mind.



Get out and about!

Spend time in the communities where you work. This is the best way to get to know people and places. Look at the types of meetings and events community members are having—green team meetings, community board meetings, and more—and attend when you can.



Host meetings close to home.

Try to hold all meetings, conversations, and interactions at a public place in the community or at the site. Walkthroughs and site visits are critical, and it can be a lot more productive to talk about a place when you can see it.





Who cares for this space?
Who's impacted by this space?
Whose involvement is necessary
to the success of this space?"

—Jennifer, NDC Staff



Conversations.
That's what neighborhoods
are built on.

—Johnny, NDC Staff



Meet in person.

Face-to-face meetings help you get to know the community partner and helps the community partner know you. In many areas where NDC works, there's a history of distrust between communities and local government. An in-person connection goes a long way.



Practice critical listening and avoid making assumptions.

Listen closely to how a community partner describes what they want. If they express interest in a community garden, ask key questions:
What activities do you want to see happen there?
Who will use/run/maintain the space?
It might turn out that what they want isn't a vegetable garden, but a place for a similar kind of community activity.



Don't over promise.

Even though it feels good in the moment, it can destroy trust and do years of damage. Don't promise things you can't deliver on. If you're not sure, do the research and come back with a definite answer.



Avoid jargon.

Using simple, common language helps avoid misunderstandings. People may feel uncomfortable asking for definitions. We don't want to position ourselves as the "expert" through use of professional-sounding words.

**Our community partners
are our experts, always.**



Articulate the value of the design process for everyone involved.

For the staff and community partner, the benefit of the project may be obvious. When projects involve volunteers, clarify that part of NDC’s mission includes fostering community-engaged design.

Our volunteer program is where this learning happens: Volunteers have the opportunity to test a skill set they may not get to use at their full-time position. They also get on-the-job training in the NDC model and the chance to work on a project from start to finish.



Your title comes with you, but it doesn’t differentiate you.

For various reasons, not everyone can “leave their title at the door.” Instead, make it clear that your title doesn’t give you more say at the collaborative table.





Model vulnerability.

Start to break down perceived walls by modeling vulnerability. Be honest about what you don't know. Be present. Keep your body language open. Ask questions. Acknowledge that you're not the expert.



Document, document, document.

When possible, take notes during all engagement. If you're actively facilitating, designate a notetaker. Save relevant data to the server while the project is active. Documentation is crucial, since it's how we tell the story of why the plan or design we create reflects the community's vision.



Be clear about how you'll use data.

When collecting feedback, thoughts, concerns and (especially) personal information, make it very clear how you're planning to use it and how long you'll keep it.



Make room for all concerns.

If you're working on a park design, and someone says, "I want this design to solve world hunger," make a point of acknowledging the concern: "I hear you, and you're not wrong." Hear the concern, take note of it, and clarify if it's outside the scope of the project.



Listen. Interpret. Share back.

Listen first, then ask, "This is what we heard from you, and from that we distilled these goals. Did we get it right?"



Value the community partner's time, always.

Make sure the design team is leveraging the highest quality work and applying it properly. The design solution should be one that the community partner can actually use. Check back to the initial goals of the project—are we still meeting them?



Design is often not the
thing that matters.
It's the 'Yes, I hear you,'
that really matters.

—Allie, NDC Staff



Seek real input, not just approval.

No one is being told or sold anything. Move away from design presentation as sales tactic. Make room for community input early in the design process, and make it clear that you see and value this input. Welcome people to tell you what they don't like, what they don't want—in a constructive way.



Treat participants' data with respect.

When you're collecting data, make sure it's for a reason and don't keep participants personal information once it's no longer needed for the project. If NDC synthesizes data in a way that may be of use to the community, share it back.



Keep the frustration at NDC.

Working with government agencies can be complicated and overwhelming. Evaluate when it's possible to insulate the community partner from this work vs. when it's important for them to learn to manage those relationships directly.



That time management piece, that's very important. Sometimes that's what a community may lack. They may not be people who live their lives by a calendar or a clock, so project management—what it takes to get a project done, what is the real cost of things, etc.—can be just as important.

—Johnny, NDC Staff



Take the temperature of the project as you go.

Asses the involvement level and tone of communication. Are all the people that you think should care about it showing up to the meetings? When you send key stakeholders an email do they respond quickly and have an accessible tone in their communications? Or are they withdrawing? Know people's communication patterns. Some people may be happy and silent (vs. sending lots of positive feedback).



Spend NDC's resources in ways that benefit the community partner.

Positive feedback goes far with agency partners, but the community partner may not have the bandwidth or ability to do this work. Understand how projects move through a bureaucracy—for instance, a lot of the agency people prefer calls to email.



**Be available. Be real.
Be someone people trust.**

If you spend twenty minutes on the phone with someone and they walk away with a sense that they've been heard and valued, that's huge. Working with people to build their own sense of agency is vital.



**Continue to check the project against
NDC's mission.**

If there's not community support or community sentiment for a project, we make sure they have the agency to say no. What may come out of a project is, "We don't want x." We don't want to be part of implementing solutions that don't reflect the community's desires. We're not trying to sell someone something that isn't in their best interest.



It's NDC's job to keep all the parties' needs in mind, finding the place where things overlap. I look for that space where everyone wants to accomplish the same thing

—Jennifer, NDC Staff



Best

Practices

How to Host a Great Meeting

Be the first to put on a name tag.

Offer one to everyone, but expect it of no one. To let someone know your name is to give them power.

Identify special guests.

If special invitees, official or experts are invited, make this clear up front. Offer context for their involvement.

Make eye contact.

When possible, provide food.

Taking a minute to pause and be social helps build warmth and trust. Research that says that if everyone shares the same meal, you're more likely to reach consensus.

Make it reciprocal.

Plan for a workshop that participants get more out of than they are asked to put it (i.e. it's fun, there's social time built in, people get to make connections, great snacks, etc.)

Use icebreakers.

They help participants make interpersonal connections and loosen up the group.

Respect everyone's time.

Use a timer for activities and/or dedicate a time keeper.

Be prepared.

Always have post its, sharpies, name tags, and extra paper. And pens, always pens.

Dedicate a note taker.

This person shouldn't have other responsibilities, but instead be focused on documentation.

Establish shared values at the beginning.

Be transparent about information gathering.

Explain what data you're gathering and what you will do with it.

Be clear about next steps.

What will you do with the information you collect? How will you follow up with participants?

Invite everyone to sign in.

Housekeeping Items

- Locate bathrooms and water fountains.
- Honor time limits.
- Ask participants to please use phones only at breaks.
- One conversation at a time.

Guidelines to Share with Participants

Make space, take space.

If you are a talkative person, take breaks. If you tend to be more reserved, step up and share.

“Yes, and ____.”

Instead of saying “no,” acknowledge the value of others perspectives, and build on them.

Lift every voice.

Everyone’s voice is valuable and everyone brings their own expertise.

Constraints = Opportunities.

It’s easy to get frustrated by limitations (of time, resources, participation). Instead, try to see your constraints as opportunities to get creative and think outside the box.

Trust the process.

We are co-creators. An open exchange of ideas leads to better outcomes. Be open to unfamiliar ideas and activities.

Be 100%, be present.

Respect your own commitment to being here, and to listening to others.

This room is a safe space.

Give honest and caring feedback. Discuss and critique ideas, not people.

Ask questions.

It's OK to not know. Ask for clarification on unfamiliar terms, and feel comfortable exploring new ideas.

Credits & Notes

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