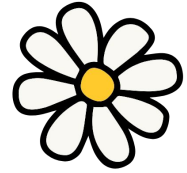
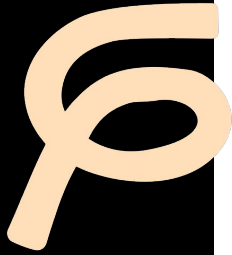


Tools to support community engagement in parks and green spaces

building common ground



**Community relationships
help develop community
identity, which is a
foundation for building
community power.**

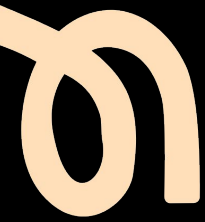


Parks create opportunities for community members to meet neighbors, build stronger connections to local culture, and get involved in their communities.

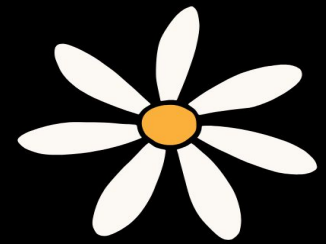
This doesn't happen by accident, and the way we design, program, and run parks matters. That's what this toolkit is for.

Inside, you'll find strategies to try new things, see what works, and build great park experiences (and community engagement skills!) with your team.

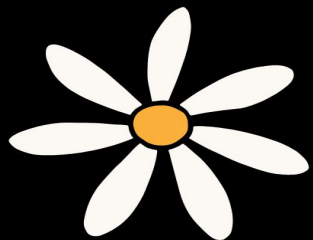
It's time for action.



**building
common
ground**







**how
to**

How to use this toolkit

The toolkit can be used at any stage of a project. First, try using it on a new project or project phase to help you get started. It can be used with a team or on your own. You will see that the contents are organized as:



Mindsets: attitudes that shape how we approach our work



Modes: ways of working



Actions: ways to get moving, make progress, and learn

For each Mode there is a brief “Note from the Field” showing what it looks like in practice. Each Action has information about what it is, why it matters, and how to get started. There are also sentence frames to help you choose the Mindsets, Modes, and Actions that fit where you are in the work.

How to use this toolkit

Try this:

1 Identify a project you are working on. Reflect on why this project is important. Who is served by the project, and how will their lives be better as a result?

2 Select a **Mindset** to guide you in this part of the project.



3 Select a **Mode** that suits where you are in the project.



4 Choose an **Action** to help you get started. You will see some suggestions. As you get more practice with the toolkit, you may want to select Actions from across modes.



Throughout a project, revisit the toolkit. Different people, projects, and phases may need different approaches at different times.

Now, it's time to get started!



theory of action



Theory & Impact

A theory is useful when it can be put into action, and this toolkit does just that! It's for park leaders who want to make their green spaces work as places where people connect, participate, and build strong and engaged communities. It can help parks teams think about what **they can do** to design the kinds of parks that:

Help neighbors meet each other and build strong connections

Reflect local identities, history, and heritage

Serve as a springboard for community participation and leadership

TPL's Common Ground Framework shows that when parks build relationships, honor local identity and culture, and share decision-making with communities, something powerful happens: communities gain the capacity to shape their own future. Local park leaders and their teams can do this by working in ways that:

Build relationships by creating fun, welcoming activities where everyone can belong.

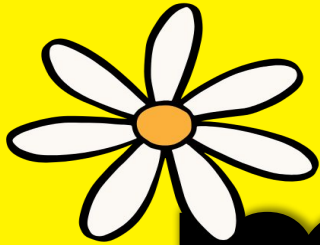
Honor identity by grounding design, planning, and feedback in local culture, preferences, and assets.

Share leadership and decision-making by creating real opportunities for community members to contribute their expertise, shape what gets built, and lead the work.

mindsets

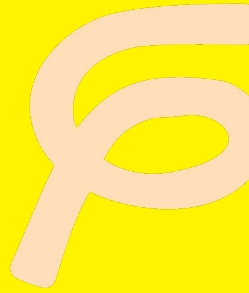
modes

actions



mindsets

attitudes that shape how we approach our work



mindsets: the set of attitudes that shape how we approach our work

Be Curious

We approach community engagement with genuine interest in understanding people's experiences, needs, and perspectives. We bring questions and curiosity and allow time for trust to build and answers to emerge.

Focus on our Purpose

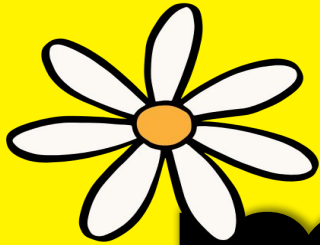
We stay grounded by remembering why our team and our community are doing this work and what we hope to achieve. When things get unclear, we return to the purpose to ground our team's decision-making.

Learn by Doing

We use our work to learn and we participate to understand. By getting involved and trying things on a small scale, we can learn what the community needs and wants, and we can often see more clearly what works and what doesn't.

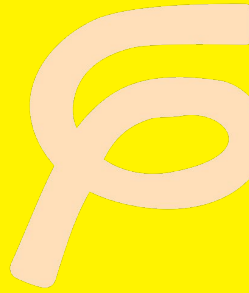
Reflect on our Process

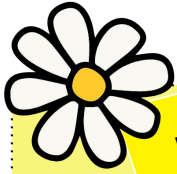
We pay attention to where we are in our project, program, and strategic timelines. We reflect on how the way we work can make community engagement more credible, welcoming, and generative.



mindsets

attitudes that shape how we approach our work

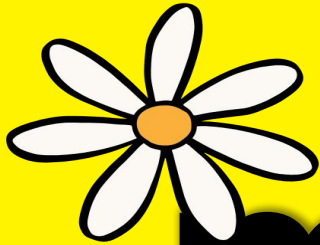




mindsets

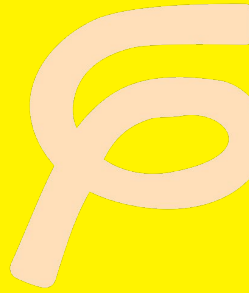
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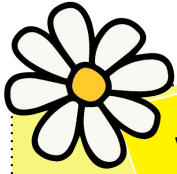
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mindsets

attitudes that shape how we approach our work

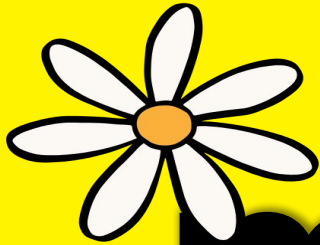




mindsets

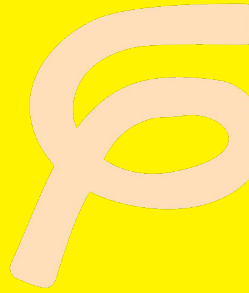
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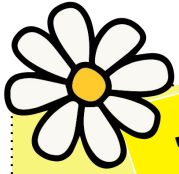
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mindsets

attitudes that shape how we approach our work

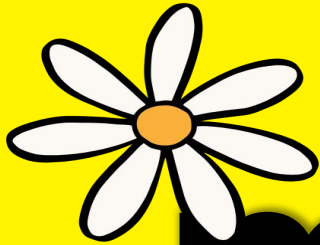




mindsets

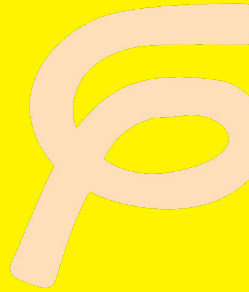
Learn by Doing

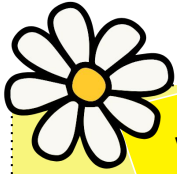
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mindsets

attitudes that shape how we approach our work

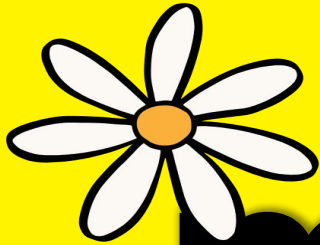




mindsets

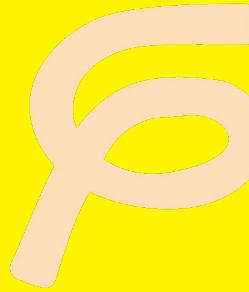
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mindsets

attitudes that shape how we approach our work



FOCUS ON A MINDSET to use when building common ground

Try these sentence frames to help you choose which mindset to use.

As we work on _____ we will _____,
(project) (mindset)

which will help us _____.
(what you will be able to do)

OR

Because we hope for our community to experience _____,
(feeling)

we'll _____.
(mindset)

OR

As a team, we'll _____ to learn more about our community.
(mindset)



modes

ways of working



modes: ways of working

Acknowledge History to Move Forward	Recognize the histories and dynamics in your community and the impacts they've had. Explore the legacies that are present. Take action to rebuild trust and share leadership.
Value & Elevate Community Voices	Make community wisdom and leadership visible and heard. Create opportunities for residents to step into decision-making roles, share their talents, and shape what gets built.
Invite & Host	Create welcoming entry points for community members to participate on their terms by providing the conditions—such as language, compensation, or childcare—that make attendance and contribution genuinely possible. Be present and actively facilitate participation.
Notice & Map	Observe your community's existing resources, gathering points, cultural practices, and relationships to understand what's already there and working well. Map these assets visually to guide where and how to engage.
Listen & Learn	Seek out or create community spaces where local voices are elevated. Listen closely, taking the time taking time to understand the full context of people's concerns, hopes, and expertise. Reflect back what you hear to ensure understanding and build trust.
Learn What's Working & What's Not	Approach what you do with the intention to learn, grow, and improve. As your work evolves, design ongoing opportunities for feedback, learning, and growth.
Make Engaging Feel Different	Transform how you show up and meet community members. Stay flexible and responsive to schedules, gathering spaces, and cultural practices of community members.



modes

ways of working



CHOOSE YOUR MODE(S) to use when building common ground

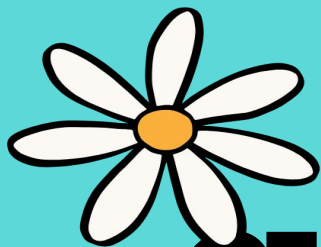
Try these sentence frames to help you choose which mode(s) to use.

I'm working on _____.
(event/opportunity/challenge)

The person/people want to feel _____.
(a feeling)

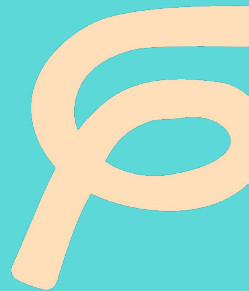
An approach might be to _____.
(mode)

Working in this mode will help us to _____.
(impact)



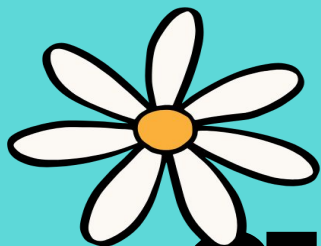
actions

ways to get moving, make progress, and learn



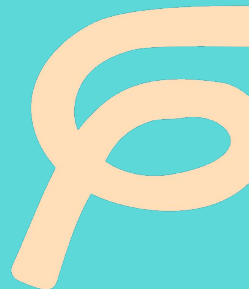
actions: ways to get moving, make progress, and learn

Rebuild Trust	Share Decision-Making	Ensure Representation	Explore Roles	Compensate
Center Identity & Culture	Activate People to People	Codesign	Immerse	Map & Explore Local Partnerships
Storytell	Celebrate	Seek Feedback, Measure & Reflect	Flex Time	Flex Space



actions

ways to get moving, make progress, and learn



CHOOSE THE ACTION to use when building common ground

Try these sentence frames to help you choose which action(s) to use.

My team is going to _____ in order to work on _____.

(action) *(event/challenge/opportunity)*

We'll get started by _____.

(smallest possible version)

This could help us learn/do _____.

(an outcome in our community)

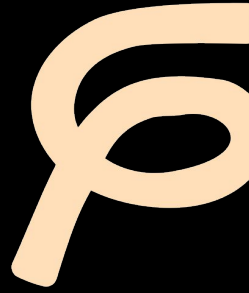
To understand more we'll need to listen to _____.

(community member/group)

1

Choose a

mode

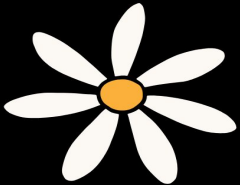


2

Then take

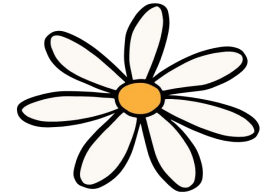
action

to use when building common ground



MODES CAN LEAD TO ACTIONS

modes	action	action	action
Acknowledge History to Move Forward	Rebuild Trust	Share Decision-Making	
Value & Elevate Community Voices	Ensure Representation	Explore Roles	Compensate
Invite & Host	Center Identity & Culture	Activate People to People	Codesign
Notice & Map	Immerse	Map & Explore Local Partnerships	
Listen & Learn	Storytell	Celebrate	
Learn What's Working & What's Not	Seek Feedback, Measure, and Reflect		
Make Engaging Feel Different	Be Flexible with Time	Get Creative with Space	



Try these pairings or mix and match for your project's needs



modes

Acknowledge History to Move Forward

Recognize the histories and dynamics in your community and the impacts they've had. Explore the legacies that are present. Take action to rebuild trust and share leadership.

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Relationship, Repair, Renewal

Many residents in the community around Methow Park felt disconnected from local government and were wary of new initiatives after decades of plans that did not deliver on their promises. When the city invited Trust for Public Land to work on a park renovation, the TPL team knew they would need to do two things if the project was going to be successful: build trust with the community and seek ways for the community to genuinely engage in the park project.

TPL started slowly by participating in local events, talking to people that call Methow Park home, learning more about the community, and gaining trust. As residents got to know and trust the TPL team, they began to engage with the process. As volunteers and paid community consultants, local residents worked as community organizers, translators, program staff, and stewardship activity leads.

The impact of this approach was shared leadership in the design process. This resulted in a park that truly meets the needs of the people who use it and an empowered residents group that continues to engage with their community.

Project: Methow Park, Wenatchee, WA. (Read the full case study in the Common Ground Framework.)

Acknowledge History to Move Forward

Recognize the histories and dynamics in your community and the impacts they've had. Explore the legacies that are present. Take action to rebuild trust and share leadership.

Rebuild Trust

Acknowledge historical harms, discriminatory practices, and broken promises the community has experienced with institutions; take concrete steps to rebuild trust and address past wrongs.

modes

actions

What to do

- Acknowledge specific historical harms and broken promises
- Document the impact of past practices on the community
- Develop concrete, measurable steps to address past wrongs
- Follow through with commitments and rebuild trust over time

Why do it?

Rebuilding trust is a necessary step in creating the conditions for a community to engage. Acknowledging and addressing past harm is essential to moving forward together.

This is why we rebuild trust.

ways to get started

Acknowledge History to Move Forward, Rebuild Trust

Research

Understand the historical relationship your institution has with the community.

Which promises were made? Which promises were kept? Which promises were broken?

Listen

Ask community members: What do we need to acknowledge before we can move forward together?

Then look for opportunities to acknowledge it in a healing way.

Imagine

Together, imagine what it would look like, feel like and sounds like if trust were rebuilt.

Take a moment just to consider what might be possible.

What steps could you take to make things right?

As you and your team prepare to try this action, ask yourselves these questions...

Imagine

- What do we hope will be different as a result of our action?

Take stock

- What are we already doing that can be leveraged as we try this action?
- What do we not yet understand?

Consider

- Who else needs to be part of the conversation for this to be honest and meaningful?
- What can we do to ensure we are not unintentionally causing (more) harm?

Plan

- What will we need to do differently to allow us to try this action?
- Where do we need to try this action first?
- Who could do it with us?

Acknowledge History to Move Forward

Recognize the histories and dynamics in your community and the impacts they've had. Explore the legacies that are present. Take action to rebuild trust and share leadership.

Share Decision-Making

Deliberately transfer decision-making authority, resources, and leadership roles to community members and organizations. Move from "doing for" the community to "doing with" the community.

modes

actions

What to do

- Identify decision-making authority that currently exists
- Transfer resources and budget control to those most impacted
- Create opportunities for community members to step into formal roles
- Move from advisory roles toward leadership and autonomy

Why do it?

Public parks belong to the public and should serve the full breadth of the community. But history, titles, networks, and traditions can sometimes mean that new voices or community members are excluded from influencing decisions that directly affect them. When we share decision-making, we can give people a meaningful voice in the decisions that impact them the most.

This is why we share decision-making.

ways to get started

Acknowledge History to Move Forward, Share Decision-Making

Write it Out

Make a list of the decisions you have to make throughout the course of a project.

Make a note of who has input into each decision, and why.

Pause

Consider an upcoming decision you or your team will make.

Ask yourselves, “Are we the best people to make this decision?”

Who else should have a say?

Start Small

Pick a decision about an upcoming event and ask a trusted member of the community to make it with you. Stand by the decision.

How does it feel?

As you and your team prepare to try this action, ask yourselves these questions...

Imagine

- What do we hope will be different as a result of our action?

Take stock

- What are we already doing that can be leveraged as we try this action?
- What do we not yet understand?

Consider

- Who has power now on this project?
- Who will be most impacted by this project?
- How might more people be invited in?

Plan

- What will we need to do differently to allow us to try this action?
- Where do we need to try this action first?
- Who could do it with us?



modes

Value & Elevate Community Voices

Make community wisdom and leadership visible and heard. Create opportunities for residents to step into decision-making roles, share their talents, and shape what gets built.

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Neighbors as Trusted Listeners: A New Way to Hear the Community

When the City of Chattanooga was developing their Parks and Outdoors plan, leaders quickly saw that their surveys weren't reaching the full community. They were missing the voices of immigrants and working-class families who could benefit most from better access to green space.

So they tried exploring new roles and providing compensation. They hired and trained 12 neighbors as "Park Listeners." These friends and neighbors became trusted ambassadors, allowing people to speak openly, honestly, and in their own languages. They also translated the surveys into the languages and dialects of their neighbors.

The program amplified previously unheard voices. Those residents then saw their needs for basic amenities, cultural connections, and accessibility represented in Chattanooga's official plan for park improvements.

Project: Park Listeners, Chattanooga, TN

Value & Elevate Community Voices

Make community wisdom and leadership visible and heard. Create opportunities for residents to step into decision-making roles, share their talents, and shape what gets built.

Ensure Representation

Actively seek out and create pathways for voices that haven't been at the table before. Use culturally appropriate channels, languages, and messengers to ensure decisions reflect the full diversity of the community.

modes

actions

What to do

- Identify and actively recruit voices from historically excluded groups
- Use culturally appropriate channels and trusted messengers
- Provide multiple languages and accessible formats for participation
- Verify that decisions actually reflect the diversity of the community
- Be prepared to address potentially conflicting perspectives and desires from across the community

Why do it?

Only by understanding the full range of community perspectives can we create places and programs that meet the community's needs. When community groups see that their voices are valued, they are more likely to engage, leading to the success of the program.

This is why we ensure representation.

ways to get started

Value & Elevate Community Voices, Ensure Representation

Map Participation

Map the community your park serves. Who takes part? Who has a real voice? Who do you need to better understand?

Gather Resources

Begin to locate the people and resources that can help with translation, messaging, and building trust.

Listen

Ask folks about how and where they get their information. What are their trusted sources and which perspectives are important to them.

As you and your team prepare to try this action, ask yourselves these questions...

Imagine

- What do we hope will be different as a result of our action?

Take stock

- What are we already doing that can be leveraged as we try this action?
- What do we not yet understand?

Consider

- Who else needs to be part of the project that we haven't heard from?
- What will they need to be able to participate fully and feel belonging?
- How might we ensure meaningful participation and resist tokenism?

Plan

- What will we need to do differently to allow us to try this action?
- Where do we need to try this action first?
- Who could do it with us?

Value & Elevate Community Voices

Make community wisdom and leadership visible and heard. Create opportunities for residents to step into decision-making roles, share their talents, and shape what gets built.

Explore Roles

Help community members discover and develop leadership capacities by offering opportunities to facilitate, organize, teach, and make decisions in gradually expanding roles.

modes

actions

What to do

- Offer graduated opportunities (facilitating, organizing, teaching, deciding)
- Provide training and mentorship for new leaders
- Create space for building skills and confidence
- Recognize and celebrate emerging leaders

Why do it?

Expanding roles and responsibilities helps interested community members move from simply “volunteering to help out” to taking ownership and being recognized for their leadership.

This is why we explore roles.

ways to get started

Value & Elevate Community Voices, Explore Roles

Observe

Notice what roles community members already hold (officially or unofficially).

Ask for help and see who you're directed to.

Prepare

Review your department's capacity to deliver, partner, or sponsor to offer leadership training or mentoring to interested community members.

Collaborate

Ask community members to help you draft a role description for helping with an upcoming event. Notice what skills and responsibilities they highlight.

As you and your team prepare to try this action, ask yourselves these questions...

Imagine

- What do we hope will be different as a result of our action?

Take stock

- What are we already doing that can be leveraged as we try this action?
- What do we not yet understand?

Consider

- How is leadership developed in our community?
- What roles are being filled that we could officially recognize?
- What new roles might we think about for community members to play?

Plan

- What will we need to do differently to allow us to try this action?
- Where do we need to try this action first?
- Who could do it with us?

Value & Elevate Community Voices

Make community wisdom and leadership visible and heard. Create opportunities for residents to step into decision-making roles, share their talents, and shape what gets built.

Compensate

Pay community members for their time, expertise, and participation in meetings, surveys, focus groups, and planning—a material recognition that their knowledge and contributions have value.

modes

actions

What to do

- Pay fair rates for all community participation and expertise
- Make compensation accessible (with multiple payment methods, timing, offering in-kind support, etc.)
- Be transparent about payment structures and rates
- Compensate in a way that is truly valuable to your community—it may not always be money

Why do it?

Volunteering to help support your community is a rewarding part of civic life. But it requires balance. An over-reliance on volunteers, especially for specialist service or work that others are paid for, can feel like exploiting good will and lead to burnout. Volunteer positions can also exclude those who must make tradeoffs around work, childcare or other responsibilities, limiting who can participate. Recognize that compensation is a material sign of valuing community members' contributions.

This is why we compensate.

ways to get started

Value & Elevate Community Voices, Compensate

Assess Current Policy

Get familiar with your agency's policy for compensation and work with your supervisor to understand how to implement it. Consider what is possible for you under your current funding model.

Inquire

Find out what would be meaningful compensation to the community by asking a community member or sharing some suggestions and getting feedback. Remember in-kind support and gifts, such as gift cards, diapers, and transport cards.

Notice

When you offer a choice of a few different thank you gifts, notice which ones are most popular.

As you and your team prepare to try this action, ask yourselves these questions...

Imagine

- What do we hope will be different as a result of our action?

Take stock

- What are we already doing that can be leveraged as we try this action?
- What do we not yet understand?

Consider

- How are you allowed to compensate in your setting?
- What would be most appreciated?
- What would be most fair?

Plan

- What will we need to do differently to allow us to try this action?
- Where do we need to try this action first?
- Who could do it with us?



modes

Invite & Host

Create welcoming entry points for community members to participate on their terms by providing the conditions—such as as language, compensation, or childcare—that make attendance and contribution genuinely possible. Be present and actively facilitate participation.

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Bringing Communities Together to Play Builds Bridges and Relationships

The challenge in a Cleveland neighborhood was silos. Newcomers, including refugees, immigrants, and asylum seekers who had settled in Cleveland, lived close to U.S.-born residents, but the groups rarely mixed or connected.

A local foundation used soccer as a bridge. They set up free soccer programs for youth and adults from across the community. They hired coaches who reflected the communities they served and intentionally created diverse teams.

The impact was felt both on and off the field as players became friends, sharing their culture and becoming part of one another's networks.

Project: Cleveland Soccer Group Foundation, Cleveland, OH. (Read the full case study in On Common Ground Case Studies.)

Invite & Host

Create welcoming entry points for community members to participate on their terms by providing the conditions—such as language, compensation, or childcare—that make attendance and contribution genuinely possible. Be present and actively facilitate participation.

Center Identity & Culture

Ensure park design, programming, and governance reflect and celebrate the specific identities, histories, languages, and cultural practices of the community using that space.

modes

actions

What to do

- Seek to understand the specific cultural identities and histories present
- Reflect community languages, traditions, and practices in design and programming
- Partner with cultural leaders (formal and informal) and community members to create authentic representation
- Continuously update based on community feedback

Why do it?

When people feel like something is made for them, it fosters a sense of belonging, and belonging encourages engagement. Seeing ourselves reflected in the world around us helps us know that we're meant to use a space and engage with what's there.

This is why we center identity and culture.

ways to get started

Invite & Host, Center Identity & Culture

Learn

Learn which cultural communities present in your park's service area.

What languages are spoken? What traditions are practiced?

Listen & Consider

Ask community members: Does this space feel like yours?

What would make it feel more like home?

Then consider what actions you can take to make it so.

Notice & Reflect

How do the choices being made reflect dominant culture?

How might you adjust to make them more reflective of the local constituents' cultures?

As you and your team prepare to try this action, ask yourselves these questions...

Imagine

- What do we hope will be different as a result of our action?

Take stock

- What are we already doing that can be leveraged as we try this action?
- What do we not yet understand?

Consider

- What aspects of culture are community members most excited to share?
- Whose voices and traditions have been heard here, and how can we bring them forward?

Plan

- What will we need to do differently to allow us to try this action?
- Where do we need to try this action first?
- Who could do it with us?

Invite & Host

Create welcoming entry points for community members to participate on their terms by providing the conditions—such as language, compensation, or childcare—that make attendance and contribution genuinely possible. Be present and actively facilitate participation.

Activate People to People

Create programming, events, and shared activities that bring neighbors together around common interests. Build up loose ties that strengthen the social fabric and cross-group connections, and have community members be the ones to share with other people.

modes

actions

What to do

- Design programming around shared interests and values in the community
- Create multiple entry points for different comfort levels of connection
- Build in informal gathering time, not just structured activities
- Activate people to bring in more people

Why do it?

Stepping aside to ensure community members' contributions are not mediated solely by staff or officials activates social networks. New connections spark new opportunities that would not otherwise be envisioned and empower new leaders to step forward.

This is why we activate people to people.

ways to get started

Invite & Host, Activate People to People

Observe

Notice what brings people together already. What are they doing? Who is gathering?

Host

Create low-pressure opportunities for neighbors to meet—a cookout, game night, community work day.

Request

Ask attendees to invite a neighbor next time. Ritualize bringing a +1.

Keep it active

Create opportunities for people to participate in small groups with people they don't already know.

As you and your team prepare to try this action, ask yourselves these questions...

Imagine

- What do we hope will be different as a result of our action?

Take stock

- What are we already doing that can be leveraged as we try this action?
- What do we not yet understand?

Consider

- How might you get people working directly with each other so you (or the team) can step aside?
- Who in your community is great at getting people involved?

Plan

- What will we need to do differently to allow us to try this action?
- Where do we need to try this action first?
- Who could do it with us?

Invite & Host

Create welcoming entry points for community members to participate on their terms by providing the conditions—such as language, compensation, or childcare—that make attendance and contribution genuinely possible. Be present and actively facilitate participation.

Codesign

Invite community members to co-create solutions, from park design to programming to governance structures. Ensure their vision—not just input—shapes what gets built.

modes

actions

What to do

- Establish codesign teams with community members from the start
- Design processes where community vision directly shapes what gets built, not just input on pre-decided plans
- Iterate together through sketches, models, prototypes
- Maintain community leadership in decision-making throughout implementation

Why do it?

Codesign values community members for their experience and expertise, recognizing it alongside that of professional design teams.

It ensures participation is meaningful—not takenism—and creates a real opportunity to shape experiences that benefit the community.

Codesign builds belonging across difference.

This is why we codesign.

ways to get started

Invite

Invite community members to be part of the design team, not just reviewers of it. Define the problem together in the earliest phase and generate ideas collectively.

Open the Door

Bring your earliest ideas—rough and unfinished—to community members before they're polished. Meet people where they are and ensure they can see the value of their contributions.

Inquire

Showing unfinished work builds trust. Ask: What would you do? What are we missing?

As you and your team prepare to try this action, ask yourselves these questions...

Imagine

- What do we hope will be different as a result of our action?

Take stock

- What are we already doing that can be leveraged as we try this action?
- What do we not yet understand?

Consider

- What do people need in order to join your design or planning team?
- How can you ensure that community experience and expertise is valued alongside technical expertise?

Plan

- What will we need to do differently to allow us to try this action?
- Where do we need to try this action first?
- Who could do it with us?



modes

Notice & Map

Observe your community's existing resources, gathering points, cultural practices, and relationships to understand what's already there and working well. Map these assets visually to guide where and how to engage.

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Building a Shared Understanding to Move Forward

The Recreation and Park Commission for the Parish of East Baton Rouge (BREC) wanted their new 10-year master plan to address park inequity and better serve the communities across the parish.

Once a representative advisory council was in place, they needed a shared and accurate understanding of the park system. They toured the entire parish, visiting over 175 parks and other facilities, and explored the cultural and historical significance of these spaces. Along the way, they learned how parks facilities had been sites for segregation and hurt, but also of peace, empowerment, and activism.

Through this process, the advisory council built a shared understanding of the parish as a whole. This created a strong foundation for working together, and with the broader community, to reimagine the parish's future.

Project: Imagine Your Parks, East Baton Rouge Parish Parks and Recreation Department.
(Read the full case study in On Common Ground Case Studies.)

Notice & Map

Observe your community's existing resources, gathering points, cultural practices, and relationships to understand what's already there and working well. Map these assets visually to guide where and how to engage.

Immerse

Spend consistent, unstructured time in the community—visiting local businesses, joining existing events, becoming a regular presence—to understand culture, build relationships, and demonstrate genuine commitment.

modes

actions

What to do

- Spend consistent, regular time in community spaces (weeks/months, not one visit)
- Become a regular at local businesses, events, and gathering spots
- Build ongoing relationships through repeated presence and genuine interaction
- Document observations about how people actually use places and spaces based on your experience and through inquiry

Why do it?

Immersion is the best way to really understand what is happening in a park, a town, a city, or a region.

It sparks insights by revealing the many activities and dynamics beyond parks and how they connect to programming or planning.

This is why we immerse.

ways to get started

Notice & Map, Immerse

Head out

Commit to spending time away from your usual workspace and in community spaces regularly—not for a meeting, just to be there.

Join in

Eat at a local restaurant. Sit in the park. Attend a neighborhood event.

Take time

Find a way to spend “a day in the life” in the context you’re trying to understand.

Notice & Reflect

Notice who you see and what you learn by just being present.

As you and your team prepare to try this action, ask yourselves these questions...

Imagine

- What do we hope will be different as a result of our action?

Take stock

- What are we already doing that can be leveraged as we try this action?
- What do we not yet understand?

Consider

- How will it feel to show up in community in places we haven't gone before?
- How will it feel to show up as a worker in a place we're also residents?
- How can we show up in ways that feel comfortable to everyone?

Plan

- What will we need to do differently to allow us to try this action?
- Where do we need to try this action first?
- Who could do it with us?

Notice & Map

Observe your community's existing resources, gathering points, cultural practices, and relationships to understand what already exists and functions well. Map these assets visually to guide where and how to engage most authentically.

Map & Explore Local Partnerships

Connect community members with existing trusted organizations, leaders, and resources in their neighborhood—extending impact beyond the park to address broader community needs.

modes

actions

What to do

- Identify existing trusted organizations and informal leaders
- Document existing resources, programs, and relationships already serving the community
- Create partnerships that extend impact beyond the immediate project scope

Why do it?

Understanding what's happening across the community brings hyper-local knowledge into planning and development, creating opportunities for new connections. Mapping a wide range of community dynamics can reveal unexpected opportunities for learning and collaboration.

This is why we map and explore local partnerships.

ways to get started

Notice & Map, Map & Explore Local Partnerships

Journey Map

Look closely at a specific need and map the journey from beginning to end (e.g., How do people here access quality child care?)

Inquire

Ask community members: Who do people trust around here? Where do they go for help?

Connect

Meet with local organizations to learn about their work.

Notice & Reflect

Look for ways to connect your work to what's already happening. As you map, look for ways to connect people to resources.

As you and your team prepare to try this action, ask yourselves these questions...

Imagine

- What do we hope will be different as a result of our action?

Take stock

- What are we already doing that can be leveraged as we try this action?
- What do we not yet understand?

Consider

- What are we most hoping to understand? Process? Place? People?
- Which tool or approach will help us uncover the new insights we need?
- What would make us a good partner for others?

Plan

- What will we need to do differently to allow us to try this action?
- Where do we need to try this action first?
- Who could do it with us?



modes

Listen & Learn

Seek out or create community spaces where local voices are elevated. Listen closely, taking the time taking time to understand the full context of people's concerns, hopes, and expertise. Reflect back what you hear to ensure understanding and build trust.

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Sharing Stories for Connection

In a park that spans two cities with two very different community demographics, there were divisions in how each half of the park was managed and used.

A network of parks organizations, neighborhood groups, and community partners envisioned something different—a park shared and enjoyed by people of all races, income levels, and neighborhoods.

They hosted "fun days" that brought people together and invited residents to share their stories, memories, and hopes for improving Forest Hill Park, working with a partner that provided a mobile recording studio.

The project team heard directly from residents in their own words, preserving local stories and wisdom while building connection across communities.

Project: Forest Hill Park, Cleveland, OH. (Read the full case study in *On Common Ground Case Studies*.)

Listen & Learn

Seek out or create community spaces where local voices are elevated. Listen closely, taking the time taking time to understand the full context of people's concerns, hopes, and expertise. Reflect back what you hear to ensure understanding and build trust.

Storytell

Create opportunities for community members to document, share, and teach their own knowledge, heritage, and lessons learned. Position them as educators and wisdom keepers.

modes

actions

What to do

- Create safe, dedicated spaces for community members to share their stories
- Use multiple formats (oral history, video, written, art) to capture knowledge
- Position community members as educators teaching others their history
- Document and preserve collective narratives to share and spread
- Bring in new media or other formats that engage different groups and their sharing styles

Why do it?

Data is useful, but stories are often what bring people in and move them to action. Stories are the way humans connect. When people share stories, they learn about one another, but also about themselves, providing opportunities for connection. Seeking and sharing stories is a way to honor people, communities, and histories.

This is why we storytell.

ways to get started

Listen & Learn, Storytell

Request

Ask a longtime community member to share the history of this place with you.

Gather

Create an opportunity for elders to teach younger generations about the neighborhood.

Share

Find ways to capture and share the stories you hear. Be ready to share your own story, too. Collaborate on how they will be shared.

Pop-up

Sit at a park with a posted question and listen to people as they stop by to share. Immediately amplify their stories through socials or written mediums.

As you and your team prepare to try this action, ask yourselves these questions...

Imagine

- What do we hope will be different as a result of our action?

Take stock

- What are we already doing that can be leveraged as we try this action?
- What do we not yet understand?

Consider

- When and where are local stories told in your community? How are they shared?
- When and where could you host opportunities for storytelling?

Plan

- What will we need to do differently to allow us to try this action?
- Where do we need to try this action first?
- Who could do it with us?

Listen & Learn

Seek out or create community spaces where local voices are elevated. Listen closely, taking the time taking time to understand the full context of people's concerns, hopes, and expertise. Reflect back what you hear to ensure understanding and build trust.

Celebrate

Center and amplify community culture, stories, and achievements through the design and programming of spaces. Use art, language, traditions, and narratives that reflect the community.

modes

actions

What to do

- Make celebration ongoing, not a one-time event
- Amplify community stories and achievements through visible channels
- Use art, language, and cultural traditions in space design and programming
- Be sure celebrations reflect the breadth your community

Why do it?

If we are neighbors, celebrating together helps us become friends. We share in the joy of our successes together and have the opportunity to witness one another's humanity. Celebratory rituals bring people together across a variety of dimensions of difference and build cohesion.

This is why we celebrate.

ways to get started

Listen & Learn, Celebrate

Observe

Notice what the community is proud of.
What do people celebrate already?

Make it Visible

Find ways to make community achievements visible—through art, signage, events.

Make it Frequent

Make celebration a regular practice, not just a grand opening.

Start Small

Look for the small things that can be celebrated easily!

activation questions

Listen & Learn, Celebrate

As you and your team prepare to try this action, ask yourselves these questions...

Imagine

- What do we hope will be different as a result of our action?

Take stock

- What are we already doing that can be leveraged as we try this action?
- What do we not yet understand?

Consider

- Is there an existing celebration that needs to be rejuvenated?
- What's new to celebrate in our community?

Plan

- What will we need to do differently to allow us to try this action?
- Where do we need to try this action first?
- Who could do it with us?



modes

Learn What's Working & What's Not

Approach what you do with the intention to learn, grow, and improve. As your work evolves, design ongoing opportunities for feedback, learning, and growth.

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Digital Tools to Learn and Gather Feedback

When creating a new master plan for the city's 150 parks, the Fargo Park District wanted to hear diverse perspectives and reflect the vision of the full community.

To reach a wider range of voices, they developed an online engagement tool that invited residents to “Show Us” ideas on a map, “Tell Us” through a survey, and “Dream” by sharing ideas for parks, facilities, and programs.

The system received hundreds of submissions, with people sharing ideas, feedback, pictures, and videos about specific parks and places. Because the submissions were public, others could explore, like, and comment in their own time. This approach gave the parks district a richer, more diverse set of insights to inform the development of their plan..

Project: Interactive engagement website for the Park System Master Plan, Fargo, ND (See <https://connect.fargoparks.com/park-system-master-plan> for more information and the feedback tool.)

Learn What's Working & What's Not

Approach what you do with the intention to learn, grow, and improve. As your work evolves, design ongoing opportunities for feedback, learning, and growth.

Seek Feedback, Measure and Reflect

Gather feedback and observations about what's actually landing with community members and what isn't. Listen to successes, challenges, and unmet needs. Take time to reflect, impact, and adapt your approach accordingly.



modes

actions

how it works

Learn What's Working & What's Not, Seek Feedback, Measure, and Reflect

What to do

- Establish regular feedback loops (not just end-of-project surveys)
- Create formal and informal ways for community to share feedback
- Look for evidence of the quality or impact of your work in what people do, not just what they say
- Analyze feedback for patterns and themes, not just individual comments
- Close the loop by showing how community input shaped what changed

Why do it?

In the busyness of daily life and work, it's easy to fall into familiar patterns—doing things simply because we always have, or because they feel comfortable. Taking time to gather data, seek feedback, and reflect helps us learn and improve.

Reflecting on feedback and data from multiple sources gives a clearer picture of what's working and what's not, so we can adjust where needed.

This is why we seek feedback, measure, and reflect.

ways to get started

Learn What's Working & What's Not, Seek Feedback, Measure, and Reflect

Identify your outcomes

Be clear about your intended impacts at the start of the project so that you can ask the right questions when you're evaluating your impact.

Start a rhythm

Ask your team weekly: What are the signals that tell us we are heading in the right direction? Which signals are telling us we should pause or pivot?

Compare

Compare the before and after. Ask: What was the challenge we were working on? How have we addressed that challenge so far? How do we know?

activation questions

Learn What's Working & What's Not, Seek Feedback, Measure, and Reflect

As you and your team prepare to try this action, ask yourselves these questions...

Imagine

- What do we hope will be different as a result of our action?

Take stock

- What are we already doing that can be leveraged as we try this action?
- What do we not yet understand?

Consider

- What are the changes in behavior that will help us know we're succeeding?
- What are some ways that we can measure this without increasing the workload for ourselves and the community?
- How might we build in time to pause and reflect on our impact?

Plan

- What will we need to do differently to allow us to try this action?
- Where do we need to try this action first?
- Who could do it with us?



modes

Make Engaging Feel Different

Transform how you show up and meet community members. Stay flexible and responsive to the schedules, gathering spaces, and cultural practices of community members.

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Flexing Space and Time to Enhance Engagement

Many neighborhood groups enjoy spending time in Prospect Park's 142 acres, but residents rarely interacted with people who were different from them.

The parks and recreation team worked with TPL to try something different. They reimagined how space was used by hosting activities like community litter pick-ups that moved up and down the length of the river by foot, bike, and canoe. They built on this with unstructured play time in an area of the park accessible to all communities.

These efforts created natural opportunities for conversation and connection, helping people meet, engage, and play together. Building on this success, the City of Des Moines further adapted time and space by bringing the unstructured play equipment directly to local park deserts in the Des Moines Mobile Recreation Vehicle.

Project: Des Moines Parks and Recreation (Read the full case study in *On Common Ground Case Studies*.)

Make Engaging Feel Different

Transform how you show up and meet community members. Stay flexible and responsive to the schedules, gathering spaces, and cultural practices of community members.

Be Flexible with Time

Adapt engagement timing based on community needs, work schedules, cultural practices, and feedback—remaining responsive and flexible rather than rigid. How long? How often? Consider time of day, days of the week, weeks in the year, holidays, cultural celebrations, and local events and traditions.

modes

actions

how it works

Make Engaging Feel Different, Be Flexible with Time

What to do

- Gather data on actual community schedules (work hours, school pickups, cultural events)
- Offer engagement at multiple times, including evenings and weekends
- Honor holidays and cultural celebrations in your scheduling
- Stay responsive and adjust based on attendance and feedback
- Create a staffing plan that allows for events at a variety of times and locations

Why do it?

We can get locked into the schedules and rhythms we've always used. Flexing time can refresh our approach, invite different people to the table, explore new modes of being together, and spark creativity.

This is why we are flexible with time.

ways to get started

Make Engaging Feel Different, Be Flexible with Time

Inquire

Ask community members: when is actually a good time for you?

Mix it up

Offer the same event at different times. Or flip it and offer an evening event in the morning. Notice who shows up to each and how the events feel.

Use Data

Use registration and attendance data to identify which programs are well attended and which are not. Experiment with new times for programs with low attendance.

Rethink It

Consider repurposing existing times that people gather. How might time together be used differently? Can new activities be added to engage?

activation questions

Make Engaging Feel Different, Be Flexible with Time

As you and your team prepare to try this action, ask yourselves these questions...

Imagine

- What do we hope will be different as a result of our action?

Take stock

- What are we already doing that can be leveraged as we try this action?
- What do we not yet understand?

Consider

- How does our team decide when to plan events?
- How comfortable are we with flexing our own time?

Plan

- What will we need to do differently to allow us to try this action?
- Where do we need to try this action first?
- Who could do it with us?

Make Engaging Feel Different

Transform how you show up and meet community members. Stay flexible and responsive to the schedules, gathering spaces, and cultural practices of community members.

Get Creative with Space

Adapt engagement locations and formats to be responsive to physical abilities, the needs of a community, where people live and work, cultural practices, and the feedback you receive. Remain flexible rather than rigid

modes

actions

how it works

Make Engaging Feel Different, Get Creative with Space

What to do

- Assess where people actually gather and go to those spaces.
- Consider physical accessibility and cultural comfort when choosing locations and formats
- Create a staffing plan that allows you to host events in different places
- Provide options, for example having an indoor and an outdoor space.

Why do it?

Space is a powerful cue for human behavior. Changing it can signal possibility, opening the door to new outcomes and welcoming community perspectives in new ways.

This is why we flex space.

ways to get started

Make Engaging Feel Different, Get Creative with Space

Pop-up

Find out where people already gather—the coffee shop, the community center, churches, the corner store. Go there. Set up where they are instead of asking them to come to you.

Inquire

Ask: Where would you feel most comfortable meeting? Where would be the most fun to meet?

Flip It

Switch it up! Take it outside, stand instead of sit, or walk instead of stand.

As you and your team prepare to try this action, ask yourselves these questions...

Imagine

- What do we hope will be different as a result of our action?

Take stock

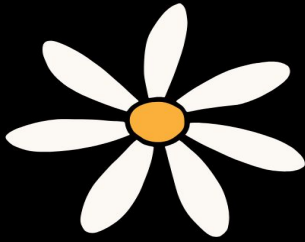
- What are we already doing that can be leveraged as we try this action?
- What do we not yet understand?

Consider

- What are the spaces we use most?
- What could make these spaces feel different?
- Other than availability, how do we design for space now?

Plan

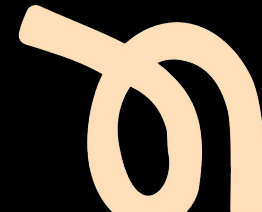
- What will we need to do differently to allow us to try this action?
- Where do we need to try this action first?
- Who could do it with us?



It's time for action.

Let's build community power through parks and green space

Download this toolkit at
tpl.org/community-strategies



Tools to build community power through parks and green space

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