

Dr. McDermott has helped launch hundreds of communities. Here are the key



steps he takes to give a community vitality right from the start. Communities can easily fail to thrive. There are many reasons for this, one of the most common is that the organization pays too little attention to the details of starting communities. Any community building, whether it is in a local neighborhood or in a global corporation, requires a lot of “back room” networking and planning, no matter how spontaneous the community start appears.

Community Builders' Toolkit

Dr. McDermott has developed a comprehensive toolkit for community development. It follows the stages of community development See articles. Lifecycle. The toolkit has well over 50 tipsheets, tools and workshops to help you through every stage of community development. It is a guide for both community leaders and organizers and covers both building an individual community and launching a company-wide community development initiative. The toolkit has tipsheets, tools and/or workshops for each of the following steps.

Community Development Process

Of course, every community is different, but starting a community typically involves the following steps.

Prepare

Even launching a single community involves considerable preparation if you want to insure its success. People often think that just by building a website or inviting people to a meeting will launch a community. It typically involves:

1. Identify the focus or domain. If you are first starting communities – and trying to “prove” the concept – it is best to start with topics that are close to the core work of the business, matter to the potential community members, and where knowledge about the topic is distributed among throughout organization.

Following these criteria helps insure that the domain can itself invite involvement from community members.

2. [Build a case for action.](#) Because middle and senior managers typically need to fund communities and encourage people to participate, it is important to build a case for action. One way to express this potential value is to collect information on the cost of poor knowledge management, such as time lost looking for information, the speed with which competitors share technology, or opportunities missed by failing to share technology. Expressing the case for action in this way gives visibility to a problem that the communities will be able to resolve.
3. [Establish a community leader.](#) The most important factor for community success is the engagement of the community leader. Since so much of people's sense of community hinges on relationship, it is important to get a potential leader involved in the very early stages of community development.
4. [Identify thought leaders.](#) Involving thought leaders early helps legitimate the community.
5. [Interview potential members.](#) Interviewing potential members is a very useful way to discover the issues they share and the opportunities to leverage knowledge. Interviews are also a time to start introducing the notion of community. This is the first opportunity to discuss the community's potential value to individuals and the organization. Frequently, these interviews are much more discussions than traditional interviews since you often need to explain the concept of communities of practice and how they are different from personal networks.
6. [Engage stakeholders.](#) Whether you begin the community visibly or quietly, identify who has a stake in the community's success. These could be senior managers or mid-managers with a large number of potential community members in their department.
7. [Connect community members.](#) Interviews are great opportunities to begin developing connections. Rather than treating interviews as purely data collection activities, whenever someone mentions a problem, concern or issue that others share or have a potential solution for, link them together.

8. Identify the cultural values the community will build on. Successful communities embody some key aspect of the organization's culture. In engineering companies, for instance, technical prowess is often a core value and communities that allow people to think technically are easily legitimated by the core culture. It frequently takes some deep reflection to identify core organizational values that will effectively drive the community.
9. Create a preliminary design for the community. Having some ideas and models of how the community might work is particularly useful. This usually includes the scope, structure, roles, process for connecting and sharing ideas, who is included, key topics to create new knowledge about, etc. The straw model should be detailed enough to begin community activity, but not complete. .
10. Identify potential knowledge to share. Not all ideas and information are worth sharing. During preliminary interviews, community members often identify knowledge that would be helpful to share. Of course, this needs to be narrowed down as the community develops.
11. Decide on an initial technology platform. Most communities need an IT platform for sharing ideas and/or storing documents and they generally need it right from the beginning of the community.

Start-up

Starting a community is also not a single event but a set of activities.

1. Launch the community. Many communities begin with an event in which community members or leaders determine the scope of their domain, what practices to share, who to include, how to connect, roles and responsibilities, what events to have, their expected value, and the behavioral norms that will govern members.
2. Initiate community events & spaces. Events anchor communities in time. Immediately after the launch, most communities start to implement knowledge sharing events, such as weekly meetings, teleconferences or web events. It is usually important begin these right after the launch, so they can tap the energy generated in the launch.
3. Legitimate community leader. Much of the work of leading a community involves talking with people one-on-one, making connections outside the

community, protecting it from skeptical managers or overly zealous “friends” who would take it over. Most of this work is invisible to both the community and the organization.

4. [Build a core group.](#) When a community first starts, leaders are often tempted to spend their time recruiting new members or involving those less active. However, we have found that one of the most important things a community leader can do is develop the connection between a small core group of members who are very interested in the topic. It is through the collaboration, thinking and sharing of the core group that the community discovers its value. A “hot” discussion among core members often lights a fire that attracts others.
5. [Find the knowledge worth sharing.](#) As communities develop they typically discover what knowledge and what level of documentation are genuinely worthwhile. Helping a community identify the knowledge worth sharing involves digging for the application of knowledge shared, its value, and potential. Communities approach this in many ways. Some commission teams to develop procedures. Some post material from their personal files in a common community space. One very useful way is for community members to begin helping each other solve everyday work problems. See articles. Planned Spontaneity.
6. [Identify useful ways to share knowledge.](#) Communities differ widely on the methods for sharing knowledge. Early in the community’s life try different methods for sharing knowledge, teleconferences, local meetings, threaded discussions.
7. [Collect examples of value.](#) You will at some point be asked to demonstrate the value of the community. As soon as you can start collecting these stories. See articles. Measuring the impact of communities.
8. [Document judiciously.](#) Because community members generally have so much unorganized information, they sometimes think documenting the community’s knowledge is key. But at the start community members often don’t know what knowledge is worth sharing. Heavy documentation responsibilities can easily kill the community’s energy. For this reason communities frequently emphasize networking at the beginning and incorporate more documentation as the bonds of community increase.

9. **Engage managers.** Senior and mid-management support can be very helpful to starting communities. They can protect growing communities from the need to show immediate value, legitimate community participation, and direct communities to issues of long-term organizational importance.

Collaboration

While Dr. McDermott can lead this start-up process, it is much more powerful if the community development team and he work as partners, collaboratively conducting interviews, planning, and developing communities. In fact, Dr. McDermott's overall consulting philosophy is to stay in the background as much as possible.