



# COMMUNITY RHYTHMS



# COMMUNITY RHYTHMS TOOL

Answer each question by checking the box beside the answer you believe best represents how you feel about the community.

- 1** How broad and deep is the leadership at all levels of the community (including official leaders, quasi-official, people on neighborhood blocks, connectors between organizations)—that is, leaders who understand the true concerns of the community as a whole and who hold strong credibility and trust?

  - A. Not much depth beyond some official leaders and civic leaders (if they even meet the definition above).
  - B. A core group of such leaders starting to emerge.
  - C. Core group expanding; depth within the community starting to form.
  - D. Rich supply of leaders at all levels of and throughout the community.
- 2** How strong and constructive are the community norms for public life that help guide how people and organizations act individually, interact, and work together?

  - A. Stuck in old patterns such as finger-pointing; looking for ways to place blame; turf battles; mistrust; divisive, frustrated, or non-existent community conversations.
  - B. While old patterns still exist, can see new ones starting to develop. People starting to work more toward solutions, hold more constructive conversations, take greater personal responsibility. Seeds of trust appearing.
  - C. A common sense of direction and purpose flourishes throughout community; people in the community work well together; things get done; constructive community-wide discussions are the expectation. Trust exists.
- 3** How broad and deep are the “informal networks and links” that connect various individual, groups, organizations, and institutions together to create a cross-fertilization effect of experiences, knowledge, and resources in the community—the networks through which people carry and spread ideas, messages, and community norms from place to place?

  - A. Tattered.
  - B. Forming, but not yet strong, broad, and deep.
  - C. Strong, growing, widespread, functioning really well.
- 4** How strong is the collection of catalytic organizations—those that help engage people in public life, spur discussion on community challenges, and marshal a community’s resources to move ahead? These organizations help lay the foundation for community action, often convening different groups and resources, but once an initiative is up and running, they move on to the next challenge.

  - A. We’ve got lots of organizations, but can’t really see more than one or two catalytic organizations—and I am not sure if they’re even the real thing.
  - B. We’ve got one or two true catalytic organizations but they’re often overworked and/or overwhelmed; they often tend to have a hard time keeping their focus.
  - C. We’ve got a real handful of true catalytic organizations; you can feel their presence and good work. They enjoy strong credibility and trust across the community.



# THE STAGES OF COMMUNITY LIFE

## THE WAITING PLACE

- In the Waiting Place, people sense that things are not working right in their community, but they are unable to clearly define the problem; the feeling could be described as a “felt unknown.”
- People feel disconnected from leaders and from different processes within the community for making decisions; the community itself is fragmented; discussion about common challenges is infrequent and/or highly divisive.
- Community discussion about challenges is infrequent and/or highly divisive. People want to create change, but negative norms for public life keep them locked into old patterns.
- People often are waiting—for issues to become clearer, for someone else to “solve” their problems. People in this stage often say, “Everything will be better when we get the right mayor to save the community!” So people just wait.

## IMPASSE

- At Impasse, the community has hit rock bottom, and people can be heard saying, “Enough is enough! It can’t go on like this any longer!”
- In this stage, unlike in the Waiting Place, there is a sense of urgency in people’s voices; people are tired of “waiting.” But while people want change, they lack clarity about what to do.
- The community’s norms and ways of working together keep the community stuck in an undesirable status quo. The community is mired in turf wars; it lacks leadership at different levels of the community; and people seem fixated on their own individual interests.
- People’s frustrations have hit the boiling point but the community lacks the capacity to act.

## CATALYTIC

- The Catalytic stage starts with small steps that are often imperceptible to the vast majority of people in the community.
- Small numbers of people and organizations begin to emerge, taking risks and experimenting in ways that challenge existing norms in how the community works.
- The size of their actions is not the vital gauge. Their actions produce some semblance of results that give people a sense of hope.
- As this stage unfolds, the number of people and organizations stepping forward increases, and links and networks are built between and among them.
- A key challenge in this stage is the emerging conflict between a nascent story of hope and the ingrained narrative that “nothing can change.” Even as change appears, the old narrative will still dominate people’s communication and outlook until more progress is made and trust builds.

## GROWTH

- During the Growth stage, people begin to see clearer and more pervasive signs of how the community is moving forward.
- People in the community are able to name leadership at all levels and where such leadership is expanding and deepening—from the official level to neighborhoods, within civic organizations and nonprofits. Networks are growing and a sense of common purpose and direction are taking deep root.
- People feel a renewed spirit of community. More people are working together. Efforts are taking place across the community and are targeted to more concerns.
- A feature of this stage is that you can randomly ask people on the street what kind of community they live in, and they provide similar answers. A common story has emerged about the community.

## SUSTAIN AND RENEW

- In Sustain and Renew, the community is ready to take on, in a deeper and more sustained way, the tough, nagging issues that may have been tackled before but were not adequately addressed.
- Such issues might include the public schools, racism and race relations, and economic growth in all neighborhoods; change on these concerns typically requires sustained, long-term effort.
- Lessons and insights and new norms that have emerged over time now pervade the community.
- But the community may be struggling to maintain its momentum. It must find new ways to bring along a new cadre of leaders, civic groups, and active citizens, as others tire or move on.
- There is a danger that the community will fall into a new Waiting Place as it comes to rest on its laurels.

# COMMUNITY LIFE DO'S AND DON'TS CHART

Be careful not to	What to do	What to think about
<b>THE WAITING PLACE</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inflate expectations by announcing grand plans</li> <li>• Start visioning exercises that fail or don't have enough community support for action</li> <li>• Try to engage people by making them feel guilty they are not involved</li> <li>• Rely on one-shot projects</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create forums for conversation and interaction where people feel they belong and crystallize feelings of frustration</li> <li>• Connect community actions to realities in people's lives</li> <li>• Demonstrate small signs of progress</li> <li>• Keep working, despite feelings of limited progress</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you really know how committed your partners are?</li> <li>• What small things could help us move forward?</li> </ul>
<b>IMPASSE</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inflate expectations by announcing grand plans</li> <li>• Convince yourselves there are strong networks and organizations to support new civic work</li> <li>• Shut out community members because they are frustrated</li> <li>• Try to develop action plans too quickly</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Let people share their concerns and discover common aspirations for something different</li> <li>• Identify taboo issues that contribute to impasse</li> <li>• Find language that helps people imagine an alternative future</li> <li>• Look for windows to pull people into small efforts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What issues are citizens most immediately concerned about? Are those issues being worked on?</li> <li>• What is being done to bring people back into public life?</li> </ul>
<b>CATALYTIC</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coordinate activities too quickly, stifling innovation and action</li> <li>• Rush to visioning exercises before the community is ready</li> <li>• Do too much, too fast</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Try lots of small things with room for failure; emphasize learning</li> <li>• Build Boundary-Spanning Orgs. that can generate change</li> <li>• Encourage informal conversations, networks, and new engagement norms</li> <li>• Develop a new cadre of leaders</li> <li>• Tell authentic stories of progress over time</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is motivating folks to work together?</li> <li>• Where are the Boundary-Spanning Organizations in the community? Who supports them?</li> <li>• What are we learning?</li> <li>• How do we know if our work is grounded in the community's aspirations?</li> </ul>
<b>GROWTH</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Miss parts of the community left out of progress</li> <li>• Let "official leaders" drive the action</li> <li>• Neglect the need to continually strengthen networks, leaders, and organizations that can keep the community moving forward</li> <li>• Ignore underlying community issues</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use community-wide engagement activities to coalesce and spring forward from the Catalytic stage</li> <li>• Do bigger projects, building on natural progress and collaborations that have come before</li> <li>• Reinforce positive norms for working together and continue to develop Boundary-Spanning Organizations and new leaders</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Who is doing the hard work? Are community members involved?</li> <li>• Are new people getting involved in the efforts?</li> <li>• How are the new efforts connected to the work done before?</li> </ul>
<b>SUSTAIN AND RENEW</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Think "success" has been achieved</li> <li>• Assume others know the story of progress and norms for action that have been built</li> <li>• Become arrogant and feel you have solved it all</li> <li>• Start to rest on laurels</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop new leaders across the entire community and new Boundary-Spanning Organizations to create progress</li> <li>• Continue creating opportunities to bring community members into processes—especially new residents</li> <li>• Look for challenges not yet tackled to focus energies, and use lessons learned to expand progress</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Who are the new leaders?</li> <li>• Who is still missing from the community's progress?</li> <li>• How are we feeling about ourselves: pride, fully humble, or smugly self-confident?</li> <li>• How are we consciously strengthening our norms of working together?</li> </ul>

# COMMUNITY RHYTHMS

## My Community

### SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

Discuss the following questions in your small groups:

1. What stage of community life is your community in?

---

---

2. How did you come to that conclusion?

---

---

3. What will you need to think about in terms of things like:

- Knowing and sharing the community’s aspirations, challenges, and conditions for change
- Choosing a focus for action
- Setting realistic expectations for change—scope, scale, speed
- Knowing what partners you need at this stage

---

---

---

4. What are the implications of your answers (above) for the way you work and your strategies?

---

---

---