



# Working with communities

Best practices in community outreach and communication strategies

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## Summary

Working with communities means understanding who is already connected to the space, who is missing, what barriers prevent participation, and what level of agency people can realistically have in shaping the make-a-thek space.

**This resource offers practical guidance for libraries and make-a-thek teams that want to build stronger relationships with their communities.** It focuses on outreach, participation levels, communication strategies, stakeholder mapping, shared rules, and long-term community engagement.

**The aim is not to give a single model to replicate. Each library works in a specific local context, with different communities, needs, constraints and opportunities. The goal is to help teams make intentional decisions:** whom to involve, how to involve them, what to communicate, and how to avoid promising more participation than the project can actually support.

# 1. Start from the local context

A make-a-thek does not exist in isolation. It is part of a neighbourhood, a library system, a network of users, local organisations, informal groups, schools, associations, makers, artists, families and people who may not yet see the library as a place for them.

**Before proposing formats, activities or solutions, spend time listening and observing.** Community work starts from understanding how people already use the space, what they need, what they avoid, what they value, and what they may not yet be able to express as a formal request.

**Observation is not passive: it is the first design action.**

- Who already uses the library?
- Who uses the space without necessarily joining formal activities?
- Who is absent?
- Who lives, studies, works or gathers nearby?
- Which groups already have strong ties with the library?
- Which groups may need a different kind of invitation?
- Which local challenges or opportunities are visible in the neighbourhood?
- Which existing initiatives, associations or informal networks are already active?

**Consider the library as a mirror of its surroundings.** If the neighbourhood is diverse, fragmented, dense, underserved, creative, elderly, young, migrant, student-based, craft-oriented or socially fragile, this will affect how the make-a-thek should work with communities. Working with communities is essential because the library directly reflects its neighbourhood and its social conditions.

# 2. Do not confuse attendance with participation

A full room does not automatically mean community engagement. People may attend an activity without feeling involved, represented or able to influence anything. On the other hand, a small group can have a strong participatory role if they help define needs, shape activities, test formats or make decisions.

Before designing a community activity, **define what kind of participation you are offering.**

→ Use the following scale as a practical reference

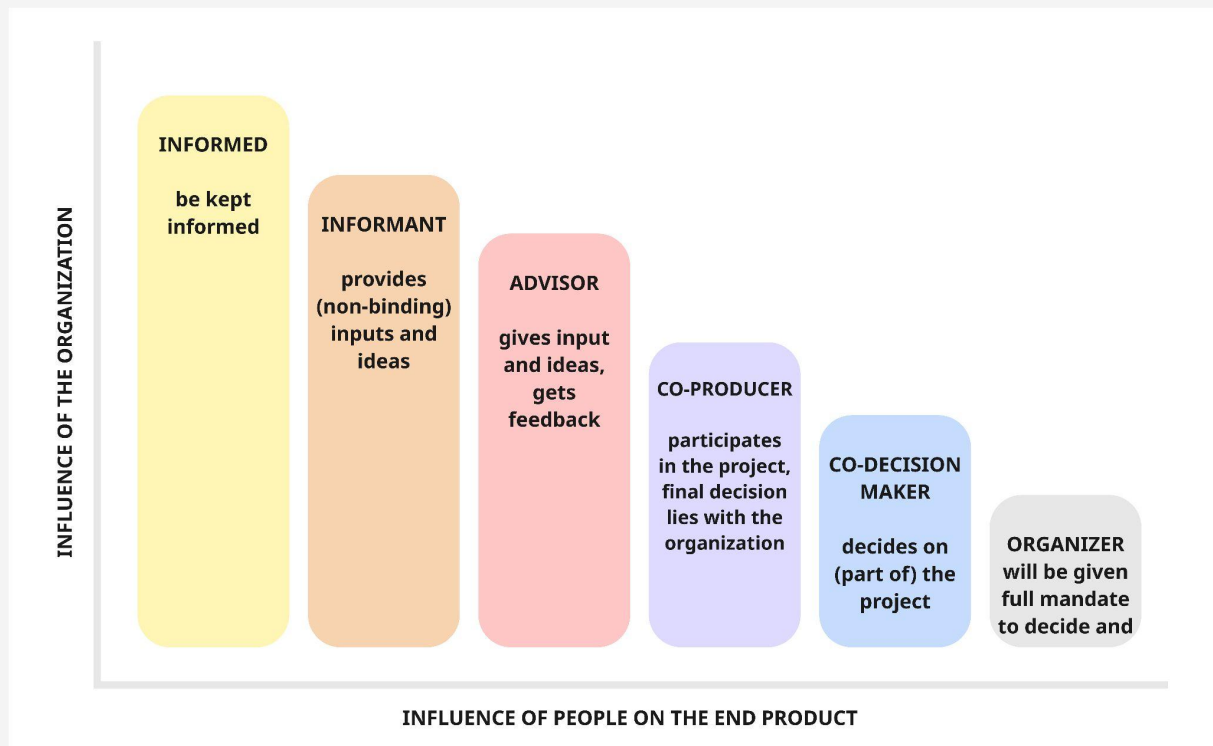
## Informed

The library or organisation decides. The community is kept informed in a way that is relevant and accessible to them.

**This is still important. Information is not neutral.** A poster, a website or a newsletter may not reach the people you want to involve. Sometimes information needs to be shared through direct conversations, WhatsApp groups, schools, local organisations, informal connectors or face-to-face invitations.

Use this level when:

- the decision has already been made
- the activity is fixed
- users need clear and timely information
- the priority is access to information, not co-design



credits: Kubus Youth Library of Bibliotheek Permeke - Antwerp

## Informant

The community provides ideas, preferences or comments, but the input is not binding. Be transparent that people are giving input, not deciding.

Use this level when:

- you are exploring needs
- you want to understand interests
- you are collecting feedback
- the final decision remains with the library

## Advisor

The community gives input and receives feedback on how that input was considered. Use this level when:

- you want more structured consultation
- you can explain what changed because of people's input
- you want to build trust over time

This level requires a feedback loop. If people give input and never hear back, trust is weakened.

## Co-producer

The community participates in developing part of the project, while the organisation keeps responsibility for the final decision.

Use this level when:

- users help create an activity, object, event, display or format
- the library provides structure, support and resources
- the final responsibility remains with the library

## Co-decision maker

The community decides on a defined part of the project. Use this level when:

- a budget, space, activity format or programme section can genuinely be delegated
- the limits are clear
- the organisation is ready to accept decisions that may differ from its initial expectations.

## Organizer

The community has full responsibility to decide and execute, with the library acting mainly as host, supporter or facilitator. Use this level only when:

- people have the capacity and desire to take responsibility
- roles, risks and resources are clear
- the organisation is comfortable with stepping back.

**The Participation Stairs used in the co-design session are useful because they show that participation is not one fixed thing. Different projects, or even different moments in the same project, may sit at different levels. The key is to know where you are and communicate it clearly.**

### 3. Be honest about agency

**One of the most common mistakes in community work is suggesting that people can decide, when in reality they can only comment.**

This creates frustration and weakens trust.

Before involving a community, clarify internally:

- *What is already fixed?*
- *What can still change?*
- *What can users influence?*
- *What cannot be negotiated?*
- *Who has the final decision?*
- *What resources are available?*
- *What happens after people give input?*
- *How will feedback be shared back?*

Then communicate this clearly.

For example:

***“We have already chosen the machine, but we want your advice on how to introduce it to beginners.”***

This is clear.

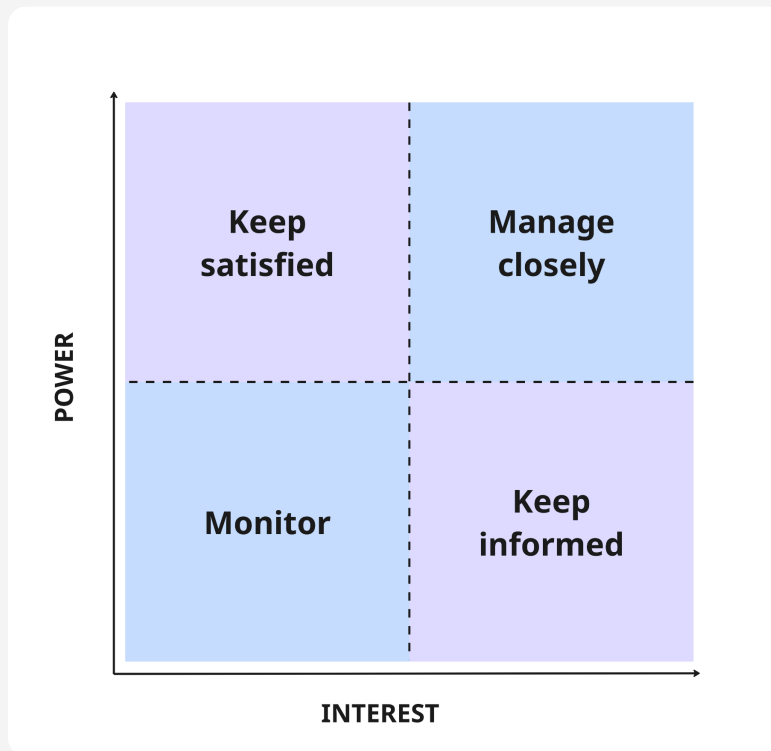
***“Help us design the space”*** is not clear if the room, machines, furniture and budget are already fixed.

**A good rule: do not use the language of co-design if you are only asking for feedback.**

### 4. Map stakeholders before activating them

**Not all stakeholders need the same kind of relationship.** Some people have high interest but little formal power. Others have strong decision-making power but limited direct involvement. Some are potential allies, others are gatekeepers, funders, space owners, facilitators, users, critics or connectors.

**Use a simple power-interest matrix to organize your engagement strategy.**



### High power / high interest: manage closely

These are people or organisations that can **strongly influence the make-a-thek and care about its success. Work with them regularly. Involve them in decisions,** planning, risk management and long-term development. Examples:

- library management
- key municipal departments
- core community partners
- main funders
- active local organisations
- team members

### High power / low interest: keep satisfied

These actors can **influence the project but may not be actively engaged** in the development. Keep **communication concise and strategic. Show relevance, impact and risk reduction.** Do not overload them with operational detail. Examples:

- institutional decision-makers
- building managers
- public authorities
- budget holders
- technical departments

## Low power / high interest: keep informed and engaged

These are often the people closest to the daily life of the space. They may not have formal power, but **they can shape the meaning, atmosphere and use of the make-a-thek space. Build trust with them, invite feedback, and create meaningful roles where possible.** Examples:

- regular users
- volunteers
- local makers
- teachers
- parents
- youth groups
- craft communities
- neighbours.

## Low power / low interest: monitor

These actors are not currently central, but **they may become relevant later. Keep light communication open and observe if their interest changes.** Examples:

- occasional visitors
- distant organisations
- general public
- potential future partners.

**This matrix should not replace human judgement.** Its value is to prevent treating everyone in the same way and to help the team decide where to invest time, attention and communication. The power-interest matrix is a way to connect stakeholder influence with the amount of control different actors may have over the project.

→ For more activities on this topic see also the resources

[🔗 How to map local experts and](#) [🔗 How to work on your network](#)



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## 5. Build connection before expecting participation

Communities do not automatically participate because a project is valuable.

**People participate when the invitation makes sense, when the space feels safe enough, and when there is a relationship.**

Connection is built through small and repeated gestures: greeting people by name, being visibly present in the space, noticing what people already do, asking informal questions, remembering interests, creating reasons to return, offering low-pressure opportunities, making the space comfortable, giving people time before asking them to contribute.

This is especially important for people who do not yet identify as makers, designers, experts or “creative users”. Start from:

***“What are you already doing, needing, repairing, making, learning, struggling with, or curious about?”***

**Connection is the core of the work:** not only connection between people and activities, but also between people and the library as a place, between users and staff, and between community members themselves.

## 6. Combine warmth with boundaries

An open space is not a space without rules. Community work requires both **welcome and structure**. If the space is warm but has no boundaries, it may become unsafe, chaotic or exhausting for staff and users. If the space is only strict, people may not feel invited to participate. **A make-a-thek space should define clear shared principles** around respect for people, space, tools and materials, different levels of experience, concentration and quiet when needed, care for shared resources, and responsibility after using the space.

**Where possible, develop these principles with users.** Rules created with users are often stronger than rules imposed. It is important to combine a warm welcome with strong boundaries, and co-producing ground rules so that users feel ownership over them. Ask:

- *What makes this space feel safe?*
- *What makes it difficult to stay here? What behaviours disturb the space?*
- *What behaviours help people learn together?*
- *What should everyone be responsible for?*

→ **For more specific guidance on this topic**

**see also the resource  Managing Expectations and Rules**

## 7. Align the team before expanding the community

Community work can fail if the staff team does not share the same approach. Before asking users to participate, make sure the team has a **common vision**.

Discuss internally:

- What does participation mean for us?
- What kind of community role can we realistically support?
- How do we respond to conflict?
- What behaviour is acceptable or not acceptable?
- Who welcomes people?
- Who follows up with partners?
- Who supports volunteers?
- Who makes final decisions?
- What are staff afraid of?
- What tools or training do staff need?

Staff alignment is not only about efficiency. It prevents contradictory messages. Without a shared approach, one staff member may encourage openness while another closes down the same behaviour, creating confusion and a “good cop / bad cop” dynamic.

## 8. Speak a shared language

Community work often fails when institutions, facilitators and users use the same words with different meanings. Terms such as co-design, participation, workshop, prototype, circularity, makerspace or open call may be clear to the project team but unclear or intimidating for others.

**Before asking people to participate, make sure the language is understandable. Replace technical jargon with concrete examples, explain project terms, and check whether people interpret them in the same way.** A shared language does not mean simplifying the project; it means making participation possible.

**The creation of a shared language and vision with the team and the community is critical for consistent responses, especially when working with more complex community dynamics.**

→ For more specific guidance see also the resources [make-a-thek Manifesto](#) and [make-a-thek Glossary](#)

## 9. Design formats that lower the threshold

Sometimes people do not participate because the format is wrong, not because they are not interested.

Common barriers can include registration required too early, activities hidden in separate rooms, fixed start and end times, expert language, unclear expectations, fear of not being skilled enough, cost, lack of childcare, activities that do not match real interests, communication channels that do not reach the intended users.

To lower the threshold, consider:

- open-door formats
- visible activities inside the library
- **drop-in sessions**
- **small first tasks**
- activities people can join late or leave early
- no-registration formats where possible
- clear beginner labels
- informal demonstrations
- **community hosts or buddies**
- activities starting from a question rather than a predefined output

## 10. Start from questions

A strong community activity does not always start with a workshop title. It can start from a question. Examples:

- What do people want to repair?
- What materials are already circulating locally?
- What skills are hidden in the community?
- What does “home” mean here?
- What makes this space feel safe?
- What would make people come back?
- What would people like to learn from each other?
- What should this make-a-thek help preserve, transform or make visible?

**Questions create space for interpretation. They allow people to bring their own knowledge, stories and priorities into the activity. The purpose of asking questions is not to make the activity more abstract, but to reach the real need behind it.** A community may ask for a workshop, but the underlying need may be confidence, social connection, repair skills, access to tools, visibility, or a safer place to gather. Focus first on the reason; the format comes after.

This is especially useful in make-a-thek, because making is not only about producing objects. It is also about **learning, identity, repair, memory, circularity, experimentation and shared knowledge**. The  **make-a-thek Glossary** defines making as a learning process based on exploration, discovery and skill development, not just production.

## 11. Work with Partners Strategically

Partnerships are not only useful for promotion. They can help you reach people you would not reach alone, build trust, provide expertise, mediate relationships, support facilitation and strengthen long-term impact.

Potential partners include schools, youth organisations, senior centres, migrant associations, craft groups, repair cafés, cultural organisations, museums, social cooperatives, disability advocacy groups, local makers, artists, informal community leaders, municipal services, neighbourhood initiatives.

**Start with one clearly defined audience and work with it carefully before trying to reach too many people at once. Building trust, understanding needs, testing formats and creating meaningful relationships with a specific group is often more effective than launching broad invitations that remain too generic.**

Before involving a partner, clarify:

- What community do they know well?
- What trust do they already have?
- What do they need from the make-a-thek?
- What can they contribute?
- What should not be delegated to them?
- What role will they have before, during and after the activity?
- Are they bringing their own community, or are they expecting the library to recruit participants?

**A distinction: some partners are content experts, while others are community connectors.** A partner can be excellent at delivering a workshop but weak at reaching people. Another may not be a technical expert but may be essential for trust and participation.

## 12. Support community roles, do not just extract input

If people contribute ideas, time, knowledge or energy, the make-a-thek should support them in return.

Support can include budget, materials, space, facilitation, mentoring, communication support, technical help, production support, documentation, public recognition, training, feedback, access to networks.

If people are expected to organize, they may need project management support. If they are expected to facilitate, they may need facilitation tools. If they are expected to decide, they need clear information about budget, constraints and responsibilities.

**Do not assume that expertise only belongs to professionals, facilitators or technical staff. Community members may hold practical, cultural, relational, craft-based or lived expertise that is essential to the project. Working with communities means creating situations where people can both learn and teach.**

Community-led does not mean unsupported. In an ideal programming model, people receive individual support, budget and skill development, while the continuation of projects depends on the participants' own decision and capacity. The focus is placed on process rather than product.

## 13. Communicate through the right channels

**Communication should match the community, not the institution.** Do not assume that a website, poster or newsletter is enough. Use a mix of in-person invitations, direct conversations in the library, WhatsApp or messaging groups, where appropriate, schools and educators, local associations, community leaders, flyers in simple language, social media, existing events, visible signs in the space, partner networks, word of mouth.

**Adapt tone and format.** For some groups, a formal invitation works. For others, a direct personal invitation is more effective. For some, Instagram is useful. For others, a printed card, a phone call, a parent contact, a teacher, a social worker or a neighbour may be the real access point.

**Good communication is not louder communication. It is more situated communication.**

## 14. Create visible feedback loops

Community engagement loses credibility when people give input and never see what happens next. After consultation, feedback or co-design, always communicate what was heard, what will change and what cannot change, why some decisions were made, what the next step is, who is responsible, when people will hear back. Use simple formats:

- “You said / we did” boards
- short recap posters
- visual notes
- follow-up emails
- community meetings
- public prototypes
- informal updates in the space
- before/after photos
- activity documentation sheets.

**If nothing can change, say so clearly. Transparency is better than vague optimism.**

Treat community input as part of an iterative process. Do not wait for a perfect final version before showing something back. Share drafts, prototypes, tests and partial results, then improve them through dialogue. Participation becomes more credible when people can see the project changing over time.

## 15. Document the process, not only the outcome

Community work is often invisible if it is only documented through final events. Document:

- who was involved
- what question started the process
- what assumptions changed
- what barriers emerged
- what decisions were made by whom
- what role the community had
- what worked and what failed;
- what should be adapted next
- what should be shared with others.

**Documentation is not only reporting. It is a learning tool. It helps the team remember, improve, replicate and explain why certain decisions were made.**

The documentation should happen while the process is ongoing, not only at the end. Documenting mistakes, milestones, issues and decisions helps others understand and replicate the work.

→ For more specific guidance see also the resource

 **Activity Documentation Template**

## Community engagement canvas

Use this template before starting an activity or partnership.

- ☐ **1. Community**  
Who are we trying to involve?
- ☐ **2. Existing relationship**  
Do we already know them? Do they already use the library? Who is trusted by them?
- ☐ **3. Real need**  
What need, interest, question or opportunity are we responding to?
- ☐ **4. Participation level**  
Are they informed, informants, advisors, co-producers, co-decision makers or organizers?
- ☐ **5. Decision power**  
What can they actually influence?
- ☐ **6. Constraints**  
What is fixed? Budget, space, timing, tools, staff, safety, institutional rules?
- ☐ **7. Support**  
What do they need to participate meaningfully?
- ☐ **8. Communication**  
How will we invite them? Which channels and language will work?
- ☐ **9. Feedback loop**  
How will we show what happened with their input?
- ☐ **10. Follow-up**  
What happens after the activity? How can the relationship continue?

## Before - during - after checklist

### Before

- ☐ Map the local context.
- ☐ Identify who is present and who is missing.
- ☐ Define the participation level.
- ☐ Clarify what can and cannot change.
- ☐ Select partners based on trust and reach, not only expertise.
- ☐ Align the staff team.
- ☐ Choose communication channels that match the community.
- ☐ Prepare clear rules and support structures.
- ☐ Decide how feedback will be documented.

### During

- ☐ Welcome people personally.
- ☐ Explain the purpose and limits of the activity.
- ☐ Make roles visible.
- ☐ Support different levels of confidence and experience.
- ☐ Observe who speaks and who stays silent.
- ☐ Leave space for informal input.
- ☐ Adapt the activity if barriers emerge.
- ☐ Document decisions, tensions and unexpected insights.

### After

- ☐ Share what was learned.
- ☐ Communicate what will happen next.
- ☐ Explain which input was used and which was not.
- ☐ Thank contributors visibly.
- ☐ Offer a next step.
- ☐ Reflect internally with the team.
- ☐ Update the stakeholder map.
- ☐ Decide whether the relationship should continue or change.