



How we gather and why it's important

V2.0 July 2023

Inspired and influenced by Priya Parker's Art of Gathering



Our context

At Griffith Centre for Systems Innovation our goal is to accelerate shifts to regenerative and distributive futures.

Time is precious and there is lots to do. But we need to hold the tension between rushing through things and acknowledging that systems shifting work takes time. We believe this work is above all, relational. We recognise it happens in liminal spaces – the spaces *between* things.

We believe the art of hosting well, of bringing people together with care and intention helps us to ‘till the soil’ of strong relationships increasing our chances of moving towards meaningful change. We aim to create spaces that encourage learning and connection. And we intentionally work in ways that demonstrate our team values.

Inspired by Priya Parker's *The Art of Gathering* online course, which a team of us completed in March 2023, we have created this playbook. **While it's no replacement for the detail and insight from the course or reading the book of the same name, it combines ideas we learnt with the way we be in our Centre.**

Our intention is for all GCSI team members to apply these principles with flexibility and a deep understanding of the diversity of contexts we are working in, in a way that contributes to building trust and relationships.

Based on the course workbook, we're testing a Gathering Canvas you'll find at the end. These prompts, principles and templates can help guide you through the design/facilitation process the next time you're bringing together three or more people.

Our gathering principles

We believe *strengthening relationships is key*. Our focus is not just the *doing*, but *the way we be*.

We embrace *slow communication and ongoing learning*: our intention is to gather with the purpose of building trust and deeper connections to create the conditions for change – this takes time, and one event/gathering/meeting should lead into other opportunities for communication and demonstrating impact.

We consider context and remember the big picture: everything we do should help us work towards the GCSI Challenge-led Innovation Map and our Directional Goal. That's not say the purpose of your specific gathering needs to feed neatly into our Centre's Directional Goal, just to remember our overarching reason for contributing to work and learning opportunities.

We 'host with generosity' and recognise the power of food to bring people together – whether that's a bowl of grapes for an informal meeting or a well-considered meal, we remember the power of generous hospitality.

We host with intention. Beyond offering food we are intentional about providing the backbone, the facilitation, the structure to get things done. When we host a gathering, we intentionally weave together multiple elements, so guests feel and understand a shared experience. We recognise we need to 'get the stuff done' but can be intentional about our processes to strengthen relationships and inclusivity.

We're agile. *We sense and are open to evolving* and pivoting an activity on the spot to suit the room and the purpose.

We *centre empathy* when planning and delivering, to understand where participants are at and to meet them there.



Where we apply gathering principles and skills

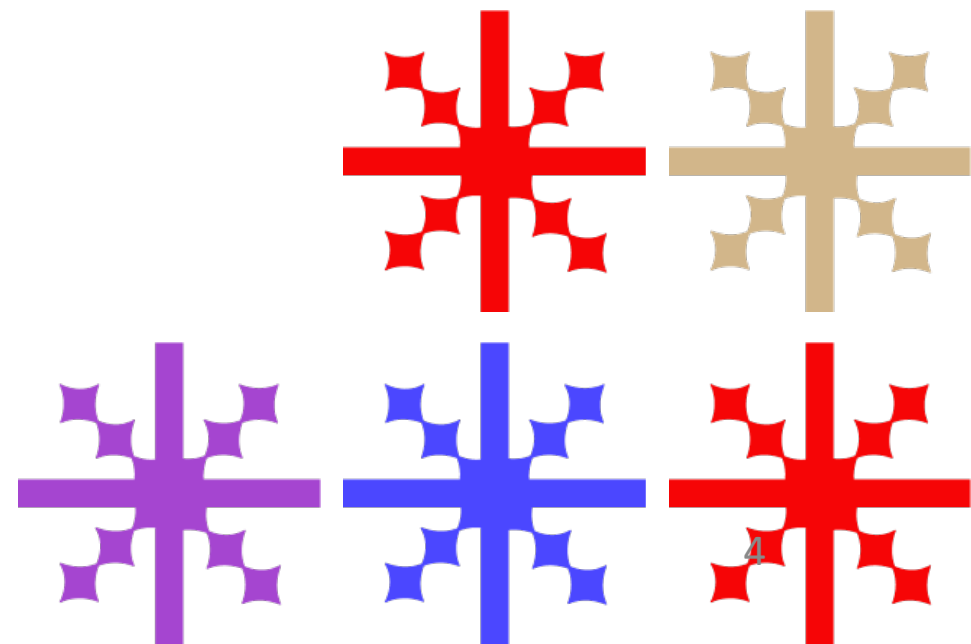
We should be practicing the art of gathering any time when three or more of us get together (within our team, with our students, with our peers, partners or invited guests).

Gathering for relational approaches means applying these ideas equally internally and externally.

Internally, in ways that nurture culture and emergent learning. For example, our WIPs, Team Days, Learning Circles and Chimes.

Externally that may look like anything from online, hybrid and in-person classes, to workshops, project meetings, or portfolio convening.

In all of this there's also a call to be pragmatic and realistic. **We apply the principles and skills based on the context, size and purpose of the gathering.** An informal meeting with four people is likely to need just a light consideration while a bigger event will require some deep thinking and potentially the whole canvas.

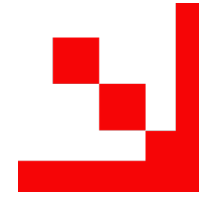


“The single biggest mistake we make when we gather is we skip defining the purpose. We assume the purpose is obvious and shared.”

Priya Parker



1. Purpose + Context



Clarifying your Purpose is key. Often people confuse their 'purpose' for a gathering with the 'category'. Having a **clear purpose** helps you decide what you will and won't include; who you will (and won't) invite; an appropriate form; and your reasons for putting energy into this.

Let's use an example of a gathering (a panel) for Reconciliation Week. 'A reconciliation week panel' is not a purpose, it's a category. Two diverse purposes could be '*to encourage dialogue and deeper understanding between participants*', or '*to show a public statement of support for the reconciliation process*'.

While both purposes are valuable and there will certainly be crossover in the guest lists, we would suggest that in option 2 you might invite and have central roles for dignitaries and systems actors who have influence and the power to attract wider attention. In option 1 you would focus more on participants who can provide viewpoints and opportunities for meaningful dialogue for students and staff. In option 1 we would recommend more intimate activities that bring participants together around the panel, while option 2 could lend itself to more of a 'show' and presentation.

As the first inklings of 'organising a gathering' appear, it's important you take a moment to consider these core questions.

1. Why are you gathering?
2. Why would people come? What is unique about this particular time, context, situation?
3. What might you and the participants/guests/students get out of this time spent together?

Starter sentences for drafting your gathering purpose:

- The purpose is to celebrate xx
- The purpose is to grow/strengthen xx
- The purpose is to spark ideas about xxx
- The purpose is to learn towards/share learnings xxx

2. Mode + event category



Design your Gathering – thinking about location, size and intended vibe is important

Once you have a clear **purpose**, it's time to design. Think deeply about: mode, event category, vibe, size, roles + location.

The following Tips from *The Art of Gathering* can help create a more engaging gathering:

- **Determine the mode:** in-person, online, hybrid
- **Consider the 'maths'.** The numbers influence the vibe:
 - 6 people: creates opportunities for deeper conversations + connections
 - 8-12 people: creates an intimate sharing vibe – opportunities for greater diversity + input of ideas
 - 30 people: creates opportunities for a 'networking' vibe – new connections + speed-dating fun
 - 120 people: the large community event, where participants have a shared experience

At GCSI we believe it's not about 'bums on seats' but having the right people in the room to create the impact you're seeking.

2. Mode + event category

Location matters! Be intentional about the spaces you choose to gather.

- **Online:** which platform are you using? What are the tech support features? How familiar are the guests with the tech? Consider whether the tech is too complex for the purpose of the event and how you will make participants feel safe + secure in this space.
- **Physical rooms matter** – they influence the vibe. Priya Parker says, “venue’s come with scripts”, people act differently in different spaces. Is the size appropriate for your group number? Does it carry any positive or negative cultural connotations? Does it reflect the purpose of your gathering? Does it embody your reason for meeting? How will the space contribute to the safe and welcoming intention that is being created?
- **Hybrid:** how can you set up the tech and support so online participants get a feel for the real space and not feel like second-class participants?

Identify the context you’re working in + explore possible structures to support your purpose.

According to Priya Parker the structure is “the temporary arrangement and sequencing of the physical, psychological, emotional, spatial, temporal, and linguistic decisions that give order and sequencing to a shape.”

Consider how this gathering could be different from the ‘usual’ types of gatherings for this context/purpose? Can you imagine the people you’re inviting being able to engage in this?

Some examples of structural decisions in our context:

- Prioritising time for 15 toasts when senior leaders join our Centre for lunch because the purpose is to deepen connection and demonstrate how we be.
- For an in-person workshop, planning in a physical activity in the ‘sleepy zone’ after lunchtime.
- Purposely upending regular power structures at a community event by elevating community voice in the running order and minimising time allocated for elected representatives.



3. Roles

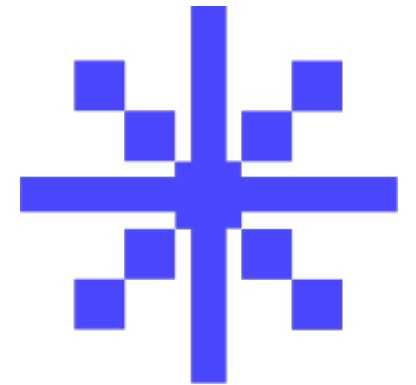
Take time to **agree who's doing what**

Just like we have Project Teams + Convenors, the Art of Gathering for Systems Innovation requires us to identify roles we'll each take throughout the gathering process and agree what each role will be responsible for. Here's a list of titles and roles to consider. You may hold multiple roles or just one depending on the context and purpose of your gathering. Equally you may not require all of these roles:

- Designers (plan session content)
- Hosts (hold the space and energy, set up space, refreshments, support host, resources, AV bookings)
- Facilitators (deliver content)
- Timekeepers
- Tech support
- Coach
- In-person usher (welcome, time keep to breaks, manage pop-up rules) or Online Usher (for online/hybrid to manage online experience)
- How might other team members and participants be given a role to help them /engage in the gathering ?



4. Event name

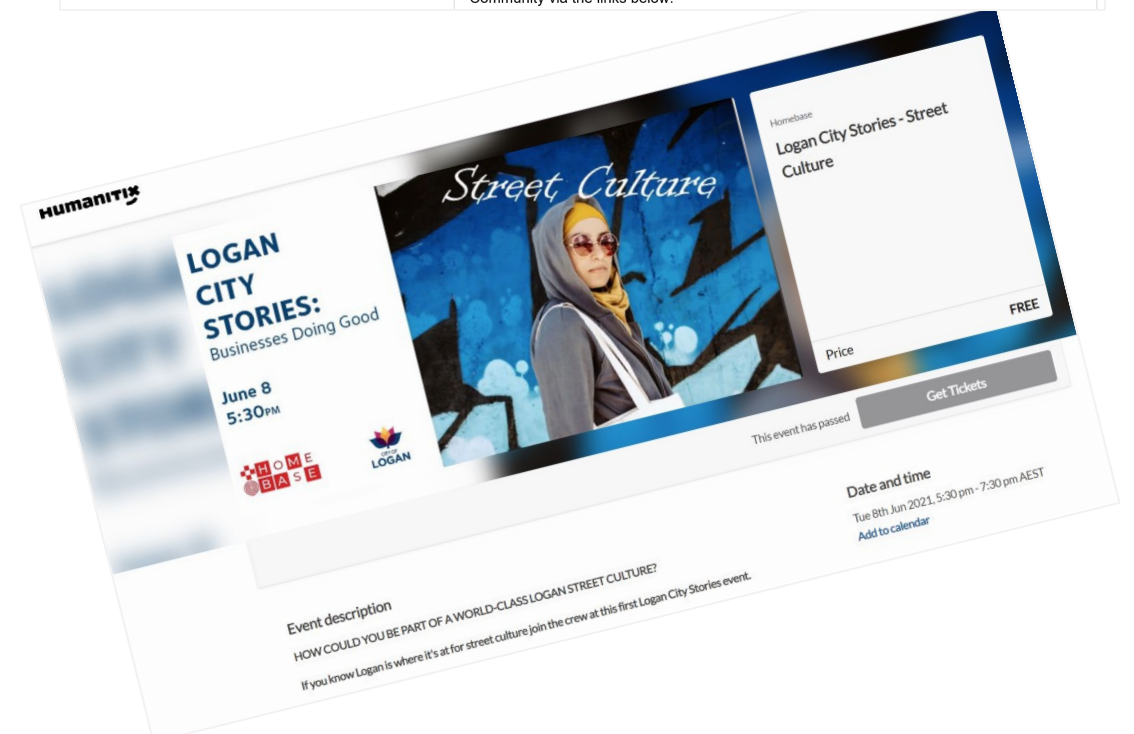


What do we call it and why does it matter?

What you call your gathering describes the type of event you are hosting and orients your guest to what this thing is and what 'self' to bring.

Consider the different impression each of these event names evoke:

- Party
- Working bee
- Networking
- Learning Circle
- Symposium
- Workshop
- Office hours
- Class
- Project check in
- Imaginarium
- Hootenanny
- Keynote
- Festival
- Impact Slam



5. Invitation Checklist

Treat the invitation as the beginning of your gathering. It sets the tone, and in fact can often trigger the decision as to whether or not guests attend.

Consider these helpful tips to design a welcoming invitation:

- Be mindful of your guests' contexts – why would they come? **What's the purpose? Make this clear. Do they understand your context and ways of being?**
- Consider who should come (and not come) to this gathering. If appropriate let invitees know who else will be there.
- Set the scene and create the vibe (spark interest, creativity, excitement, motivation).
- Give invited participants an understanding of the ask, and yes, the specific logistics.
- Give invited participants a sense of their role, and the mindset to bring. Help them decide if this is worth their time.

What invitation format suits the event?

- Is a priming, exploratory phone conversation appropriate?
- If working with an external partner, have you discussed the approach to GCSI invitations?
- How might you creatively send an email / calendar notification / event page?
- Is the language engaging and does it prompt excitement?
- Is there something creative you could do or ask of your participants to begin the experience? There are inspiring examples shared in *The Art of Gathering* such as drip-feeding text messages, or hand delivered notes but a well selected pre-read can be just as purposeful.

6. Activities

Only once you've considered all the initial steps should you starting thinking about your running order. Dedicate planning time to design intentional activities that support your purpose, the vibe you have outlined, the Centre's way of being and commitment to building relationships as a basis for deep systems innovation.

Consider sequencing activities as if creating a narrative arc. Use these questions to shape an engaging, safe, and coherent gathering.

- How much time do you have for the whole gathering + for each activity?
 - What's the activity? How long will it take to set it up + let people fully experience it without being rushed? Note – we find you need to plan fewer activities in online events that you would in-person for the same time scale.
 - What's the purpose of *this* activity?
 - How is this activity supporting your **overall purpose** (i.e. connecting, informing, strengthening relationships, providing space for contesting ideas?)
 - Who is playing what role?
 - What vibe or emotion are you aiming for? (curiosity; confidence; excitement; contemplation)
- How might energy levels influence the flow?
 - **Example:** after lunch we experience low energy; use a physical activity to keep everyone engaged + focused
- How might dynamics influence interactions and how could intentional activities help create positive energy or share power?

6. Activities

Creating a running order or even a loose agenda for more informal gatherings helps to focus your mind on how you plan to create a welcoming space that supports learning and/or engagement.

The running order should include how you plan to usher people into the space + use the time before event kick off to create a warm, safe, welcoming vibe that primes them for the experience.

Here are some GCSI gatherings you can use for inspiration when creating engaging, interactive activities. Search the TEAMS channels or better yet, talk to one of the designers.

- Chimes + Team Days
- CEDA budget address side sprint
- Problem-Framing Canvas Workshop for GU Staff
- Regenerate Australia movie screening
- Homebase Kick-off at NTG Gym



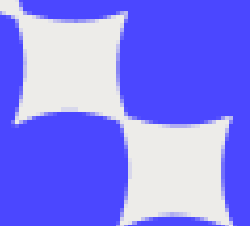
7. Thresholds

The 'threshold' of your gathering is the pre-time, the pre-activity, the warmer or the entrance that welcomes people to the experience. This can be set up as early as the invitation but doesn't have to.

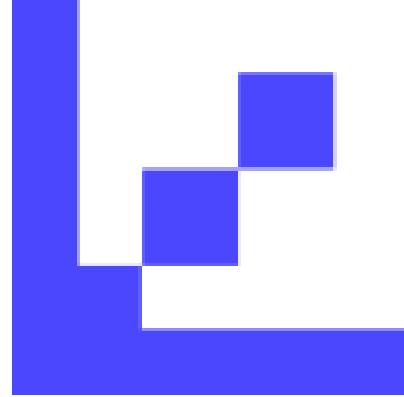
How might you help create a temporary space, alternate world that helps arriving participants **transition** from their previous engagements, mindsets, moods to being at this gathering?

- Examples in real life could include:
 - visual displays that create promote reflection, connection, curiosity
 - connecting activities: "find someone who..."; "match your flag to a project name"
 - food/drinks
 - ushering (for ticketed events that can start with online reminders, calendar holds etc. prepared earlier)
- Examples for online could include:
 - playing music as people enter
 - asking people to answer some simple questions in the chat as they arrive
 - beginning with a simple stretch or breathing exercise

GCSI team, find more examples in our Gathering Folder in SharePoint



8. Openings



A successful threshold creates a sense of anticipation. Follow through with a strong opening statement that orients guests to the purpose and the 'rules' of the gathering.

This links back to the invitation where you mentioned why they're here. Why is this event, on this day, unique? Why are these particular people in the room? How can you make them feel special?

Priya Parker's biggest tip here is to NEVER start with logistics.

Here are two different examples of how you could start a workshop. Compare the experience each one elicits:

[chime / soft bell to gain attention]

"Welcome. We are so glad you are part of . . .

[purpose + tone]; to bring us into our space we're going to...[starting activity] + acknowledge

[Acknowledgement of Country connected to place and story]... Followed by required logistics such as evacuation plan and toilets.

Vs

"Ok everyone we're going to get started! Before we do, note the toilets are out to your left and in the unlikely event of an evacuation our meeting spot is ..."

9. Closings

This is the opportunity to reinforce the meaning your guests take with them. **Close intentionally.**

- Just as with your opening...never close with logistics: do this before you close.
- Thank you's also should come **before** the closing. Make them meaningful + authentic by honouring the specific thing you're thanking them for with a (quick) story if possible.
- **Your Closing:** Think about the concept of "turning in" and "turning out". Reflecting on what has happened during your gathering + ways you can share this with others when leaving this gathering.

Examples of Turning In:

- Ask participants to tune in. What are they hearing, what are they seeing, and what are they feeling.
- "Share in the chat a concept that stuck with you or you'll experiment with" (online class);
- For a longer session get someone to take notes of quotes / aha moments / side comments that you might like to share back to the group as a close.

Examples of Turning Out:

- "Write a postcard to yourself – we'll send this to you in 3 months".
- "Set aside time in your diary to reflect back, work on these tasks".





10. Gathering + connecting ways

As a host or facilitator there are certain skills / ways / traits that support impactful gatherings.

Priya Parker speaks of Hosting with **Generous Authority**. This is about the hosts' use of their *authority* or power to help guide the group to achieve the gathering's purpose. While these words can conjure negative connotations, especially in regenerative spaces, when held with generosity it can help the host to connect people and protect the purpose.

It can be done by using explicit (pop-up rules) + implicit (setting a respectful tone or keeping to time) tools and influences the whole of the gathering. Importantly, if this is not present, it can lead guests to disconnect from each other and the purpose.

Some examples of generous authority and connecting in action:

- Giving participants roles to connect them to the purpose (for example, timekeeper, scribe, filler of water glasses)
- Ensuring everyone, including the quieter people have an opportunity to share their thoughts
- Respecting everyone's time – requiring late comers to do a fun pop-up rule
- Considering potential barriers for participation and intentionally planning and hosting to overcome these

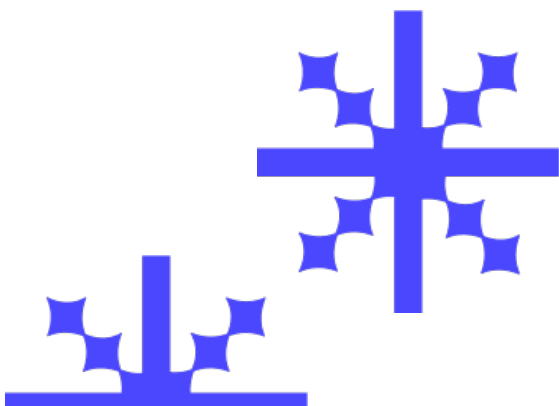
“When you don’t steer the ship as the host, you create a vacuum for others to fill, and they might not do it in the way you want.” Priya Parker

10. Gathering + Connecting ways

You can think of **'pop-up rules'** as the code of conduct, behaviors and rituals for your specific gathering. They are designed to connect participants and protect the purpose of the gathering.

Examples of pop-up rules are:

- Holding time with respect in relation to others and the agenda (for example, GCSI uses a duck timer or chime to signal time's up or uses the 'parking lot' for discussions adjacent to the agenda)
- Requesting a tech-free session where people leave their laptops at home or go mobile-phone free.
- The most senior person in the room must speak last.
- Fun rules to good-naturedly keep people on task like:
 - we request any late-comers to Team Day do a yoga sun salutation;
 - no one can pour their own water at a lunch;
 - last person to volunteer their answer has to sing it!



11. What's next?

As we shared at the beginning, we believe systems innovation is above all, relational. So, the art of hosting well, of bringing people together with care and intention helps us to 'till the soil' of strong relationships increasing our chances of moving towards meaningful change.

We plan gatherings that look towards the next engagement. The next opportunity to work towards demonstrating impact.

During your planning ask yourself **'How might this gathering evolve to create further opportunities for strengthening relationships + demonstrating impact?'**

What is the 'what's next?' you can offer participants?

Some examples include:

- A follow up call to understand how they're engaging with and using concepts
- An office-hours consultation or 'ask-me-anything' session
- Further reading material from the Centre
- A working bee with passionate volunteers towards change
- A monthly generative conversation to uncover learnings



Our canvas

At Griffith Centre for Systems Innovation we've been known to like a Canvas or two to bring together key concepts and help people sketch out their thoughts.

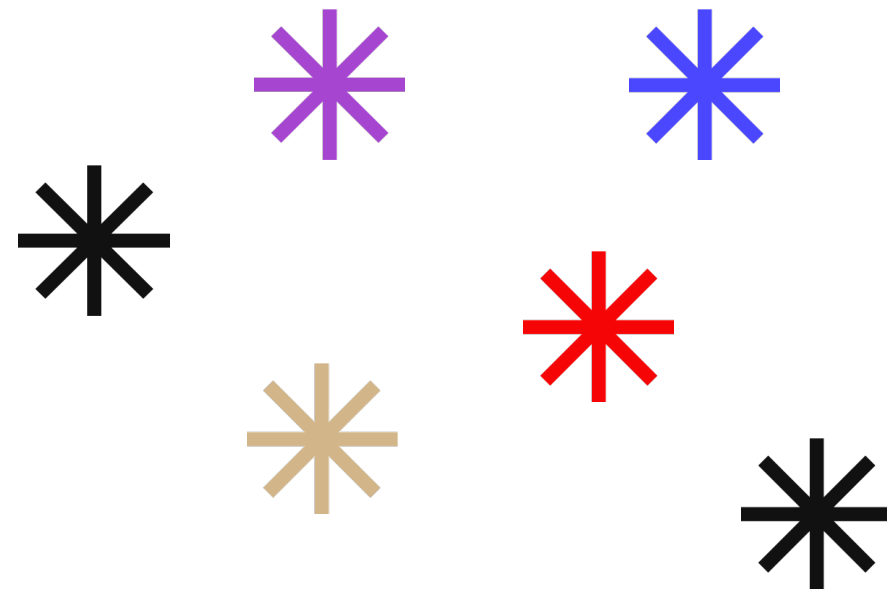
So, it was a natural step for us to take these prompts and pull them together in a [GCSI Gathering Canvas](#).

The principles and Canvas are intended as a guide for thinking and conversation. You may decide your particular context only requires some quick thought about the purpose, threshold and what's next.

Or you might use the full Canvas as a discussion prompt with your project partner as you co-create a meaningful gathering.

We intend for this to develop and iterate over time, so we invite your feedback.

Happy gathering!



GCSI Gathering Canvas

(inspired by Priya Parker: *The Art of Gathering*)

1. Purpose + Context

*The why:
The category is not the purpose.
Is it specific? What's your desired outcome? What else is happening/happened that relates to the gathering and could influence who / when / where / why /how?
Who should and should not be invited?*

2. Event Category & Mode

Morning tea or workshop? Hybrid or online?

Location & Size

Room set up, number of people (size does matter)

Vibe

What feeling do you want people to start and end with?

3. Roles

Who is on the team? Who's taking responsibility for... designing, facilitating, setting up, ushering, hosting, supporting. Does everyone know their role, including participants.

4. Event Name

A title that sparks interest, imagination + purpose

5. Invitation

(What's the process and form that supports your purpose – phone call? Email? Video? RSVP etc)

7. Threshold

*A temporary space/moment/ alternate world helping participants **transition** from previous engagements to this gathering*

6. Activities

Runsheet, Connection to Purpose, Vibe

8. Opening

Let's participants know the event has started. It's a highly anticipated moment. Needs an opening statement that connects participants to the purpose and each other. Don't start with logistics.

9. Closing

Close intentionally, create meaning for participants to take with them. What have they learned, what's next from here.

10. Other things to consider

*What Generous Authority can you bring to protect the purpose + participants?
What are the participants' responsibilities for co-creating this gathering?
Are there potential blockers to "connecting" to plan around?
Will you include any pop up rules?*

11. What's Next?

How might this gathering evolve to create further opportunities for strengthening relationships + demonstrating impact?

“The most sacred thing we have is our collective and shared time together. How should we actually spend it?”

Priya Parker

