

PARTICIPATORY CHANGEMAKING PRIMER

Participatory Change

Participatory change (PC) is a collaborative, adaptable, and flexible praxis that centers on and includes the people who will experience the results of a change effort. Moving beyond traditional top-down methodologies, it draws from collective wisdom and creativity, fostering ownership, empowerment, and trust among participants and resulting in health for individuals and community well-being. Read more about PC and its core theories [here](#).

The New School for Participatory Change provides capacity building and education offerings that develop capabilities and capacities for Participatory Change. The New School exists to unleash the power of participation in a way that builds supportive ecosystems of cooperative participatory changemakers so that people, places, and the planet experience equity, well-being, and regeneration. A supportive ecosystem of cooperative changemakers is necessary to:

- build, nurture, and sustain **changemaking movements** that do the work of changemaking toward equity, well-being, and regeneration.
- build, strengthen, and develop the **supportive, adaptable infrastructure** of change actors (leaders, organizations, community groups, networks, etc.) that supports change-making movements and the work of changemakers.

Our Participatory Changemaker Framework

The work of participatory change begins within, with each changemaker doing their own work. Before changemakers can effectively weave together movements, infrastructure, and collective wisdom and develop the capacity of other changemakers, they must develop a strong internal foundation. This foundation starts with a core belief in the power of participation and grows through interconnected elements: values that guide us, mindsets that shape our understanding, behaviors that express our commitments, purpose that drives us, and wellbeing practices that sustain us. These elements work together to create the internal conditions that enable changemakers to move skillfully between craft and artistry while fostering transformative change.



PARTICIPATORY CHANGEMAKING PRIMER

Core Belief: Participation is Power.

Changemakers believe that participation equals power, and they know this belief is necessary and fundamental to all else they are and do to cultivate equitable change. In a world that actively disempowers participation, changemaking must begin with creating conditions where people can fully engage in shaping their futures.

Participation is the energy from which power emerges. Like a current that grows stronger as streams join together, power builds through relationship and interconnection. When people participate authentically in change processes, their individual capacity combines with others' to generate collective power.

“Empowered participation” reveals how this core belief manifests in change work.¹ It shows us that power isn't simply given—we must intentionally create conditions that counter systemic disempowerment. When people participate from a place of power, or are *empowered participants*, they can both advocate for their needs and contribute to collective wellbeing. This participation brings diverse ways of knowing into dialogue, enriching our understanding through cultural wisdom and lived experience. Through these relationships, individual agency transforms into collective capacity—creating networks of power that can achieve what individuals alone cannot.

This anchor belief guides how we approach change work—always beginning with the question: How do we create conditions for empowered participation? It shapes our understanding of praxis, reminding us that true change emerges when people most affected by issues can fully participate in creating solutions.

Foundation 1: Participatory Values as a Guide for Being

Values refer to one's judgment of what is important in their practice and life. Values influence mindsets, behaviors, and decisions.

Curiosity. Participatory changemakers are curious about and learn from others. Curiosity fosters a culture of inclusivity and equips them with the diverse perspectives needed to drive equitable change.

Responsibility. Participatory changemakers are *changemakers*, not outside agitators. Actions and non-actions have consequences for the people and places they work with.

Integrity. Participatory changemakers are authentic, honest, and consistent while being accountable for their words and actions; collectively these build trust.

Humble Confidence. Participatory changemakers are humble learners and confident leaders. This ensures that power is shared, voices are heard, and actions are taken in a way that serves the collective good.

These values inform the mindsets through which we see and understand the world.

¹ See [Regenerative Capitalism: How Universal Principles And Patterns Will Shape Our New Economy](#) (John Fullerton, 2015).

PARTICIPATORY CHANGEMAKING PRIMER

Foundation 2: Systems Mindsets as a Guide for Thinking

Mindsets are habitual sets of attitudes that determine interpretation and response.

It Comes From the People. Participatory changemakers trust people—their wisdom, vision, skills, and capacity—to participate in and co-create change. They recognize the innate dignity of each participant and value their diverse perspectives, understanding the people they are working with know best what is needed and how to provide it; they have the skills, wisdom, vision, and capacity to create fundamental change.

The Long Haul. Participatory changemakers recognize they are forging change that will outlast them as one small part of a vast ecosystem. Changemakers value and build upon the lessons and contributions of those before them while working to nurture other changemakers and co-build support infrastructure that will sustain equity.

Open Mind, Open Heart, Open Will. Participatory changemakers acknowledge they must be willing to open their minds to question assumptions, open their hearts to truly connect with others, and open their will to let go of pre-set agendas, hearing from the group what is needed and possible.²

Regeneration. Participatory changemakers know they are part of all life. They commit to restoring, preserving, and enhancing people, society, and the planet. Changemakers know abundance is within reach and actively cultivate conditions for all life to thrive; conditions in which organizations flourish, ecosystems thrive, and people feel alive.

Our mindsets shape how we show up and act in service of change.

Foundation 3: Just Behaviors as a Guide for Doing

Behaviors are one's actions toward others.

Practice Anti-Oppression. Participatory changemakers refuse neutrality. They work for a just, equitable future. They invite and celebrate diversity, build equal power relationships, and show up in solidarity with people and places while interrupting systems, patterns, and structures of oppression, including patterns of language, attitudes, and behaviors. They work for justice and equity.

Be A Balanced Person In The Room. Participatory changemakers listen deeply, fully, and actively to others while trying to understand various viewpoints and working to find inclusive, equitable solutions.

Show Up As A Co-Creator. Participatory changemakers live and act as a part of change processes, showing up as part of the effort by cultivating conditions for others to be empowered participants in creating change that will affect them. This involves openly sharing learning, wisdom, and connections.

Radical Imagining. Participatory changemakers empathically imagine the world as it ought to be: healthy, equitable, and teeming with joyful entanglement. They bring possibilities back from the future to inform our present vision and build solidarity for collective work. They draw on the past, telling of how the world came to be, honoring how yesterday's struggles live on now, and envisioning how the world will come to be.

² Scharmer and Kaufer (2013). *Emerging Future: From Ego-System to Eco-System Economies*.

PARTICIPATORY CHANGEMAKING PRIMER

These behaviors flow from and are energized by our deeper sense of purpose.

Foundation 4: Authentic Purpose as a Guide for Living

Purpose is the guiding force that energizes changemakers in cultivating conditions for change. Purpose is deeply personal—emerging from unique, authentic, and aligned life goals—and innately linked to the collective good. A changemaker's purpose guides their praxis, draws them into a changed future, and answers the *what* and *why* for their life.

Self-Realization. Participatory changemakers continuously work to uncover and live out their fullest potential and individual genius—recognizing that each of us holds vast potential, deep abundance, and distinctive gifts. This self-discovery is not a solitary pursuit but is deeply intertwined with community and collective growth.

“...YOU REALIZE THAT ALL ALONG THERE WAS SOMETHING TREMENDOUS WITHIN YOU, AND YOU DID NOT KNOW IT.” PARAMAHANSA YOGANANDA

Meaning. In participatory changemaking, meaning encompasses how we make sense of our lives, our roles within the larger system, and the significance of our actions. It's about recognizing and creating a sense of what truly matters, both personally and collectively. Meaning connects our personal fulfillment to collective impact.

Authenticity. Participatory changemakers consistently endeavor to live into their favorite selves and fullest potential so that they can show up as their authentic selves, bringing their unique wisdom and valuable perspectives to the table. It requires changemakers to show up genuinely in their work, embracing vulnerability and fostering trust.

Aligned Action. Participatory changemakers work diligently to align one's outer actions with inner values and truths. Changemakers use reflexivity to approach situations and relationships in alignment with who they are and the world they want to create.

Sustaining our purpose and the work it takes to carry that out over our lifetimes requires practices that nurture our holistic wellbeing.

Emergent Condition: Holistic Wellbeing that Sustains

Wellbeing is a state of health and joy. Holistic well-being allows changemakers to thrive in their work and in their life and maintain their energy, resilience, and effectiveness over the long haul.

Nurturing Relationships. Participatory changemakers cultivate caring and authentic relationships within their communities. They recognize that changemaking work is not done alone and that individual wellbeing and efficacy as changemakers is intimately tied to communal wellbeing and structures of community care.³

Embodied Wellness. Participatory changemakers know their bodies are not separate from their work: they are the vessels through which we connect, commune, and change. Changemakers develop an awareness of:

- how our physical health influences our thoughts, actions, and emotions;
- what our bodies need to care for us and others;
- how to care for our emotions in order to address de-energizing experiences;

³ The Care Collective. (2020). *The care manifesto: The politics of interdependence*. Verso.

PARTICIPATORY CHANGEMAKING PRIMER

- how to nurture regenerative practices, recognizing that personal well-being is intimately entangled with ecological health.

Intentional Preparation. Changemakers consistently and consciously cultivate conditions for effective changemaking—proactively planning, regularly reflecting, assessing our skills and resources, setting clear intentions and goals; refining tools and practices; adapting and responding to emergence while remaining focused on goals of change.

Rest and Recovery. Participatory changemakers know periods of retreat, renewal, reconnection, and recovery are vital for periods of active changemaking. Rest and recovery is a rhythm in our growth and work that allows our wellbeing to emerge, replenishes our energy, and sparks joy and creativity. Participatory changemakers practice boundaries to preserve their energy and honor natural cycles of activity and rest, mirroring regenerative processes in nature. Participatory changemakers also know that time for rest and recovery can be taken because of the interdependent community they have cultivated in which others can share the work.⁴

⁴ brown. (2017). *Emergent strategy*. AK Press.