# Ecocycle Planning

## Idea In Short

When teams review a portfolio, they often focus on what to start or scale and overlook mature work, stalled initiatives, and activities that have outlived their purpose. Ecocycle Planning maps activities or relationships across four phases: birth, maturity, creative destruction, and renewal. Invite people from the functions and levels involved in the work. Have each person map the portfolio, compare placements, and identify bottlenecks and opportunities. Treat disagreement as information about different experiences, not as a mapping error. End by selecting concrete actions to invest, adapt, retire, or reconnect, and decide when to revisit the map. Use participant questions to guide what the group explores next.

A portfolio review often asks which initiatives to start, fund, or scale. It may pay less attention to projects that have become routine, relationships that have weakened, or activities that continue mainly because they are familiar. Ecocycle Planning helps a group map the full portfolio across four development phases: birth, maturity, creative destruction, and renewal. By seeing these phases together, participants can identify bottlenecks, resource gaps, and opportunities to move work forward. The structure embodies the Liberating Structures principle “Invite Creative Destruction to Enable Innovation,” which asks a group to make room for new possibilities by questioning what should end or change.

## View the portfolio as a cycle

The Ecocycle is a visual model for the development of activities and relationships. In birth, people are exploring and building something new. In maturity, an activity has a dependable rhythm and may deliver value efficiently. Creative destruction is the phase in which obsolete practices are rethought, stopped, or repurposed. Renewal connects people and resources in ways that prepare the ground for future work. Different groups may use slightly different language for these phases, but the important distinction is that a portfolio needs more than growth and efficiency.

The facilitator introduces the map and offers familiar examples. A recurring meeting may be in birth if the group is still learning how to work together, in maturity if it has a clear rhythm, or ready for creative destruction if its purpose has disappeared. A business relationship may be developing trust, functioning reliably, in need of renegotiation, or opening a new form of collaboration. The examples help participants understand how to place their own work without suggesting that every item follows a neat or predictable path.

## Map before judging

Participants list major activities, projects, or relationships that occupy time and resources. Each person places the items on an individual Ecocycle to represent the current situation. Participants then compare their maps in pairs or trios and discuss differences. The group should describe where work is now, not where it hopes the work will be. If one initiative appears in two phases for different people, that can be a useful finding. It may reveal a meaningful distinction among teams, customers, or parts of the activity.

The group combines its perspectives in a shared map. This collective view should retain disagreement rather than erase it for the sake of visual neatness. If participants cannot agree on one placement, they can split the activity into more specific elements or leave it in more than one phase for later discussion. The map is a prompt for inquiry. It is not a performance rating or a scorecard of individual teams.

## Notice the traps

Two common traps appear between phases. The rigidity trap lies between maturity and creative destruction: an organization continues to support established work even when evidence suggests it should be reconsidered. The scarcity trap lies between renewal and birth: there are promising ideas but not enough investment, connections, or attention to help them develop. A map can show where time and resources are concentrated and which activities may be blocking movement.

Participants can ask which mature activities should be redesigned or ended, and which emerging ideas deserve more support. These choices often touch identity, power, and commitments. A project may have visible sponsors even after its purpose weakens; a promising idea may lack an advocate. Facilitators should keep the conversation focused on the work and its value rather than blame the people who created it. A group can respect

past effort and still recognize that conditions have changed.

## Turn the map into portfolio choices

Small groups identify a first action for activities in traps. The action may be to free a resource, test a new idea, change a relationship, or schedule a decision about an activity's future. "Invest in innovation" is too broad. "Assign two people to test the customer onboarding prototype for three weeks" is a concrete start. Similarly, "stop waste" needs a named activity and an explicit decision path. The group should record owners and dates so that the map informs resource allocation rather than simply illustrating it.

The sequence can take about 90 minutes, including individual mapping, comparison, whole-group analysis, trap identification, and action planning. Online, movable digital notes can recreate the shared map. The host may want to begin with either activities or relationships, especially if the portfolio is large. A group can map the other dimension in a later session. The purpose is to make the whole pattern visible, not to catalogue every task the organization performs.

## Revisit as the work changes

An Ecocycle is a snapshot. An activity may move from birth to maturity, or maturity to creative destruction, as customer needs, technology, or strategy changes. The group should decide how often it will revisit the map and what conditions would trigger a review sooner. A quarterly discussion may fit a fast-moving portfolio; a slower relationship network may need a different rhythm. The review should ask what changed and whether the organization is balancing exploration, delivery, renewal, and release.

Ecocycle Planning is useful in strategic planning, organizational development, product portfolios, and relationship reviews. It helps leaders examine what consumes attention and whether resources match current priorities. Research on portfolio management and organizational renewal highlights the need to make trade-offs across existing and emerging work. 1, 2, 3

The map does not make difficult choices on its own. It gives the group a shared picture from which to make them. When participants identify a trapped activity, a neglected idea, or a relationship that needs attention, the next question is practical: what will we change, who

will act, and when will we check whether the portfolio has become healthier? That cycle of seeing, choosing, and reviewing keeps the Ecocycle useful over time.

- 1The ambidextrous organization
- 2Strategic agility and organizational renewal
- 3Portfolio management

## Summary

Ecocycle Planning helps a group see its portfolio as a living system. Activities need different forms of attention as they emerge, mature, become obsolete, and create conditions for renewal. Mapping the full portfolio can expose scarce investment in new work or a rigidity trap in which resources remain tied to familiar but low-value activities. The group should use the map to ask what must change and who can take a first step. Revisit the Ecocycle as conditions evolve; placements are snapshots of current experience. The aim is a healthier balance of work, not a permanent classification of each project. Revisit the conversation as the work changes and new evidence becomes available.