Purpose-to-Practice

Idea In Short

When an initiative is starting or losing coherence, align the conditions that let people work together. Purpose-to-Practice (P2P) helps a group define five elements: purpose, principles, participants, structure, and practices. Include everyone with a stake in the work, and use small-group discussion before consolidating each element in plenary. Treat the five elements as connected: changes to purpose may alter who needs to participate or how the group should organize. The process takes about two hours. End by agreeing on a first set of actions and a date to revisit the shared design, so the framework guides real work rather than becoming a poster.

An initiative can begin with enthusiasm and still lose direction once participants encounter trade-offs. People may agree that the work matters but hold different views about its purpose, who should be involved, or how decisions will be made. Purpose-to-Practice (P2P) helps a group define five connected elements before moving into execution: Purpose, Principles, Participants, Structure, and Practices. The process creates a shared foundation that can help an initiative adapt when challenges arise. It reflects the Liberating Structures principle “Never Start Without Clear Purpose(s).”

Establish the five elements

Purpose asks why the work matters to the group and the wider community. Principles identify rules or commitments participants agree to follow as they pursue that purpose. Participants clarify who must be included and engaged. Structure examines how the group will organize and distribute control. Practices specify what the group will do and how it will do it. Together, these elements explain the initiative’s direction and the way it intends to operate.

The elements should not be treated as five isolated boxes. The purpose influences who needs to participate. The participants shape what structure will work. The practices may

reveal that a principle needs to be more precise. A group may need to revisit an earlier element after it develops a later one. This is a sign of thoughtful design, not indecision. The template should remain a working draft until participants can see how the elements fit together.

Start with purpose

P2P begins with an invitation to imagine the work as an expedition: the group needs a direction and principles that help it correct course when it loses its way. Participants use individual reflection and small groups to generate ideas about purpose, then share and consolidate them in plenary. A clear purpose should explain why the initiative matters, not merely list its activities. “Run a monthly workshop” describes a practice; “help local teams coordinate earlier to reduce avoidable delivery delays” expresses a purpose that can guide different practices.

The host should make space for stories and examples. A purpose that sounds compelling but means something different to each participant will not help resolve trade-offs. Ask what need the work serves, who benefits, and what would be different if the initiative succeeds. Keep the statement concise enough to use in decisions. The group can refine the language as it examines the other elements.

Agree on principles and participants

Principles are the commitments that guide how the group works. They might include sharing information early, inviting people affected by a decision, or testing assumptions before scaling a change. Participants should be specific about what a principle requires in practice. “Respect” is a value; “ask people closest to the work before finalizing a process change” is an observable commitment.

The participants element asks who must contribute or be engaged to achieve the purpose. This includes people with authority, relevant expertise, implementation responsibility, and lived experience of the issue. The group need not include every stakeholder in every meeting, but should know whose input it needs and how it will obtain it. A missing perspective can weaken both the design and the legitimacy of later decisions.

Design structure and practices

Structure describes how the group will organize and distribute control. Participants can clarify decision rights, roles, communication patterns, and how the work will connect to the larger organization. A good structure supports the purpose without concentrating all initiative in one person. It also makes clear how the group will respond when a decision falls outside its authority.

Practices describe what the group will do and how it will do it. They may include service activities, research, experiments, convenings, or delivery steps. Participants should link practices to the purpose and principles. If a proposed activity does not advance the purpose or violates a commitment, the group can reconsider it. Practices can change over time while the purpose remains stable, or the group may discover that its purpose needs revision.

Use staged participation to build ownership

The standard process uses 1-2-4-All to develop each element. Participants reflect individually, discuss in small groups, and share proposals in plenary. This progression gives more people time to shape the content before it is consolidated. The host should capture ideas visibly and invite corrections before moving on. A template on a wall or shared digital canvas helps participants see connections and identify contradictions.

P2P can take about 125 minutes, so the group should plan adequate time. Rushing through all five elements may produce polished but shallow statements. If time is limited, the team can focus on the most urgent elements and schedule a continuation. The host should clarify what decisions can be finalized in the session and what requires approval elsewhere. Shared ownership is weakened when participants assume that they are deciding something that leaders have not delegated.

Purpose-to-Practice is useful for launching a coalition, service, project, community initiative, or cross-functional team. It gives a diverse group a way to surface expectations and build a common frame. Research on collective impact and team charters describes the value of shared goals, agreed principles, clear roles, and coordinated activity. 1, 2, 3

Turn the framework into practice

After the five elements are visible, participants step back and review the whole draft. They can use What, So What, Now What to prioritize next steps. The group should decide what

needs to happen first, who will take responsibility, and what information or decision is still missing. It should also set a date to revisit the chart. A review rhythm allows the initiative to respond to new conditions without losing sight of its purpose.

P2P is complete enough to use when participants can explain why the work matters, how they will act together, and what they will do next. The framework should be accessible to members and easy to update. If a new participant joins or the initiative changes direction, the group can return to the relevant elements. This flexibility helps preserve shared ownership as the work evolves.

- 1Collective impact
- 2The discipline of teams
- 3How to write a team charter

Summary

Purpose-to-Practice gives an initiative a shared starting point. It clarifies why the work matters, the principles that guide it, who needs to be involved, how the group will organize, and what it will do. The elements influence one another, so a group may need to revise earlier choices as it develops later ones. Participants should leave with a usable draft, clear next steps, and a plan to revisit the design. P2P does not guarantee agreement or remove external constraints. It gives a diverse group a way to make its assumptions explicit and coordinate its work with greater shared ownership. Revisit the conversation as the work changes and new evidence becomes available.