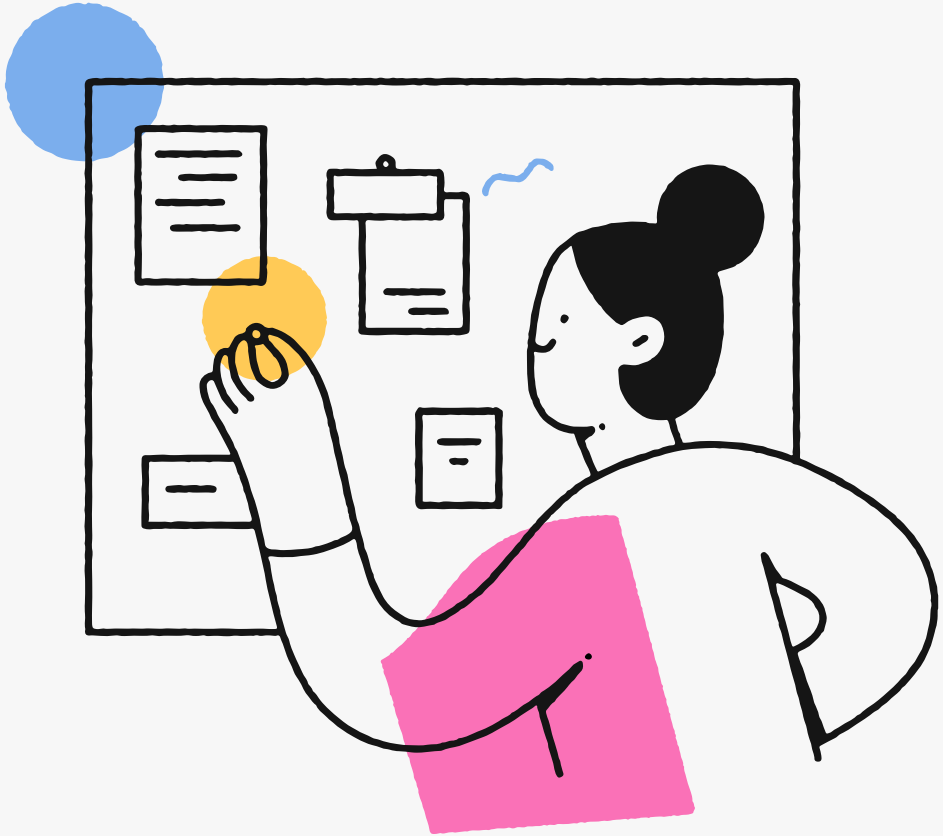
Building accessibility **community & systems** for the long haul

Devon Persing

Tech Access Oklahoma 2025



About me

- Independent digital accessibility consultant
- In the accessibility field since 2012
- Disabled, chronically ill, and neurodivergent
- Based in Duwamish Territory/ Seattle, WA

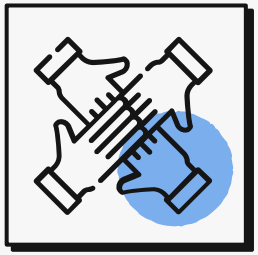
Topics

1. Why community matters
2. Why systems matter
3. Getting started with accessibility operations

1. Why community matters

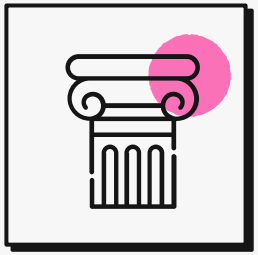
None of us can do this work alone.

What is **accessibility community** about?



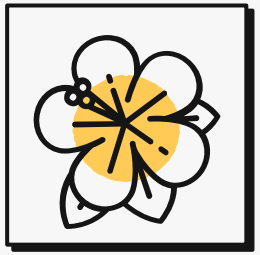
Affinity

What brings us together



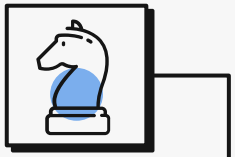
Trust

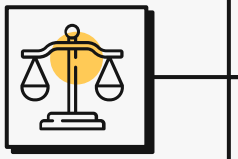
What keeps us together

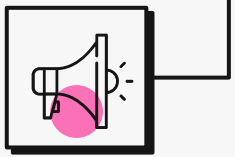


Climate

What we have (some) control over



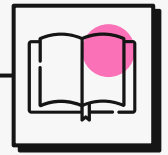




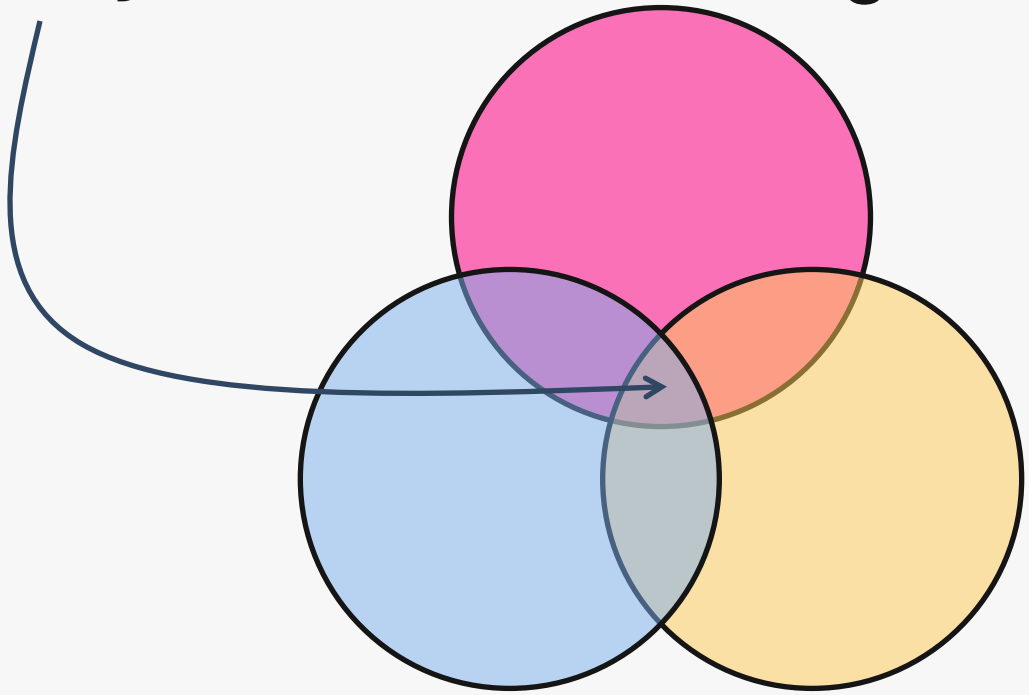
Affinity*

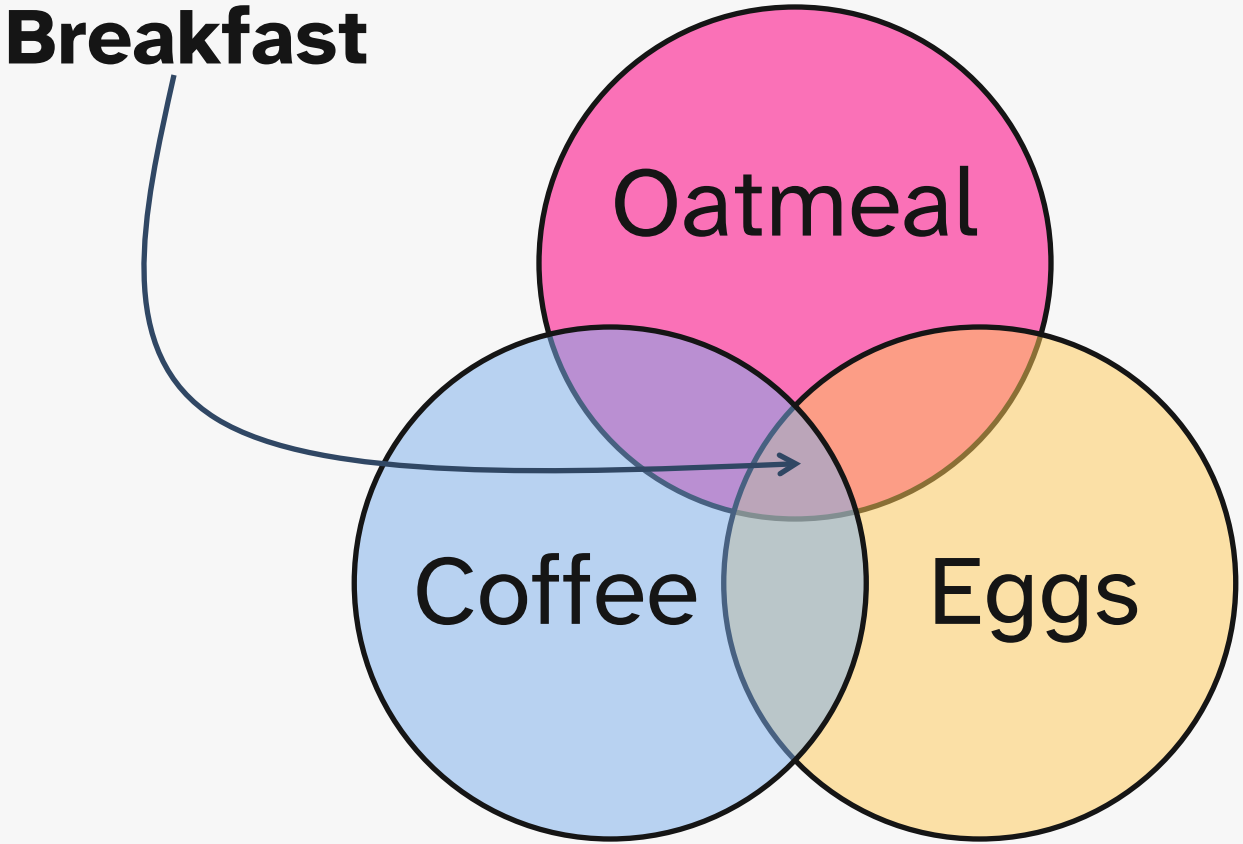
- Shared values
- Shared commitments
- Shared passions

*aka “solidarity” or “coalition”

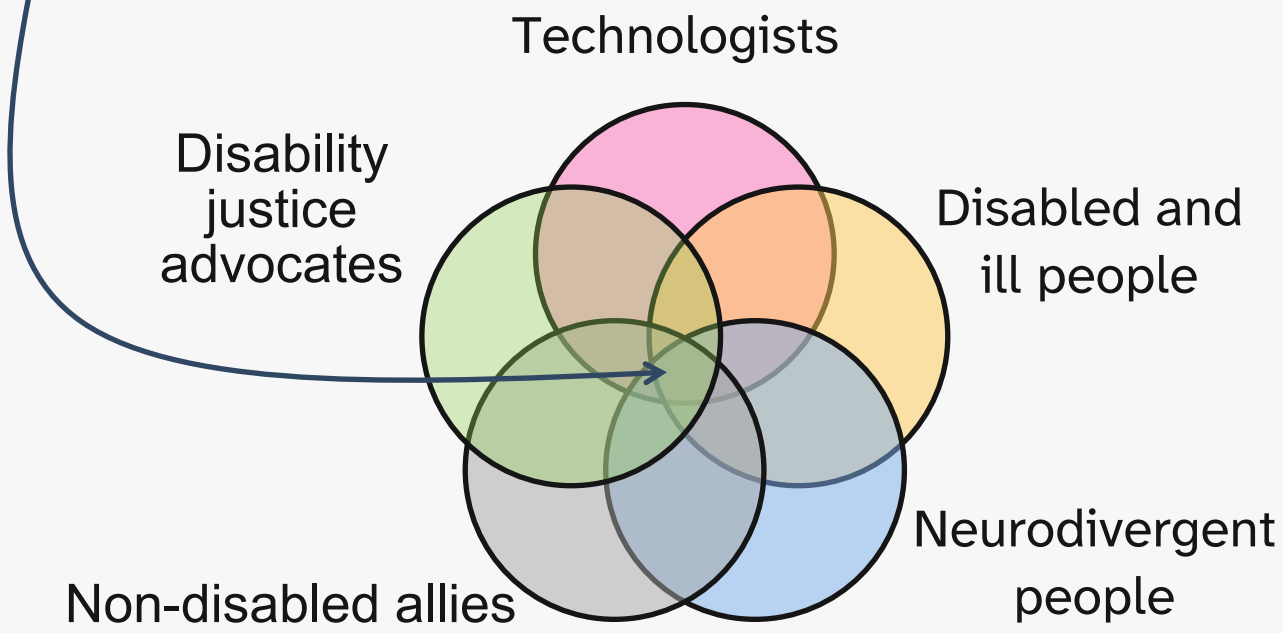


Affinity is like a Venn diagram

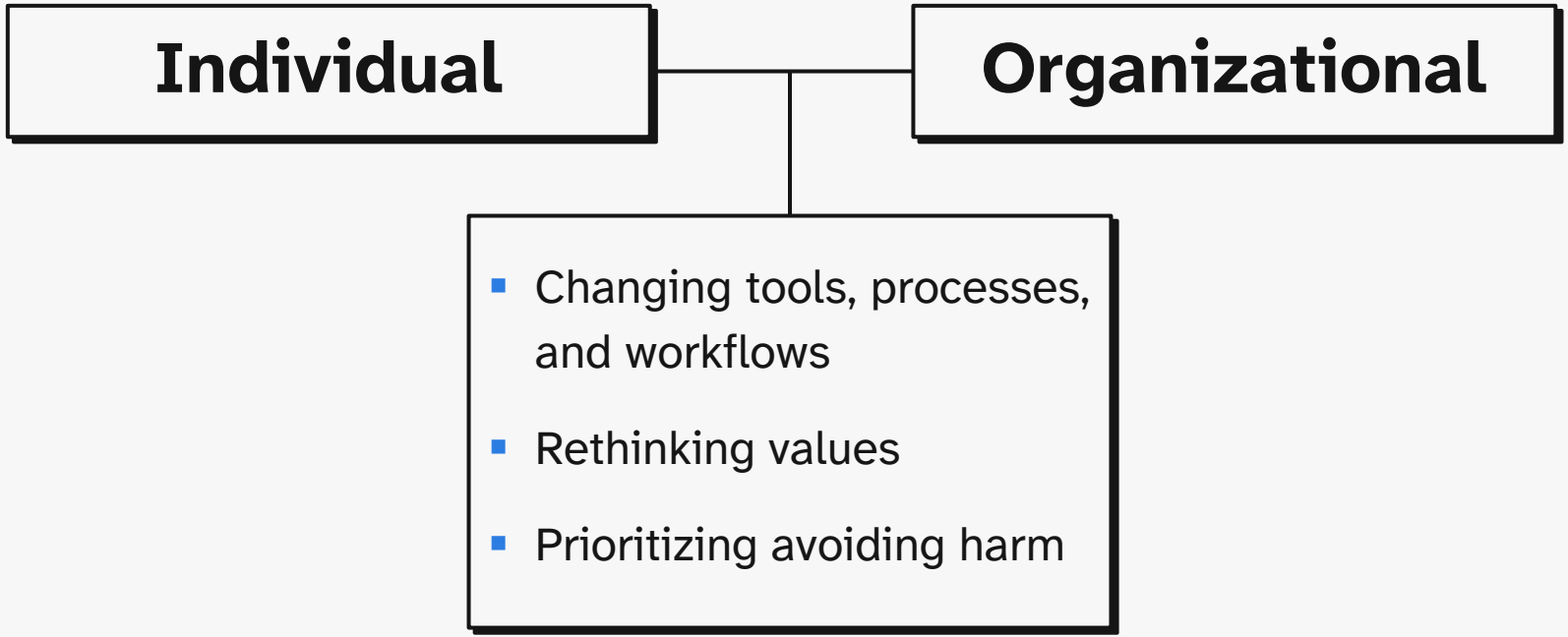



Breakfast
Oatmeal
Coffee
Eggs

Accessibility community



We’re asking a lot



“Trust is the currency of change.”

—Lily Zheng in *DEI Deconstructed*

Levels of trust

High Accessibility is normalized and just like any other program

Medium Accessibility requires building coalition + program management

Low Accessibility is starting at zero with coalition + program management

Culture versus climate

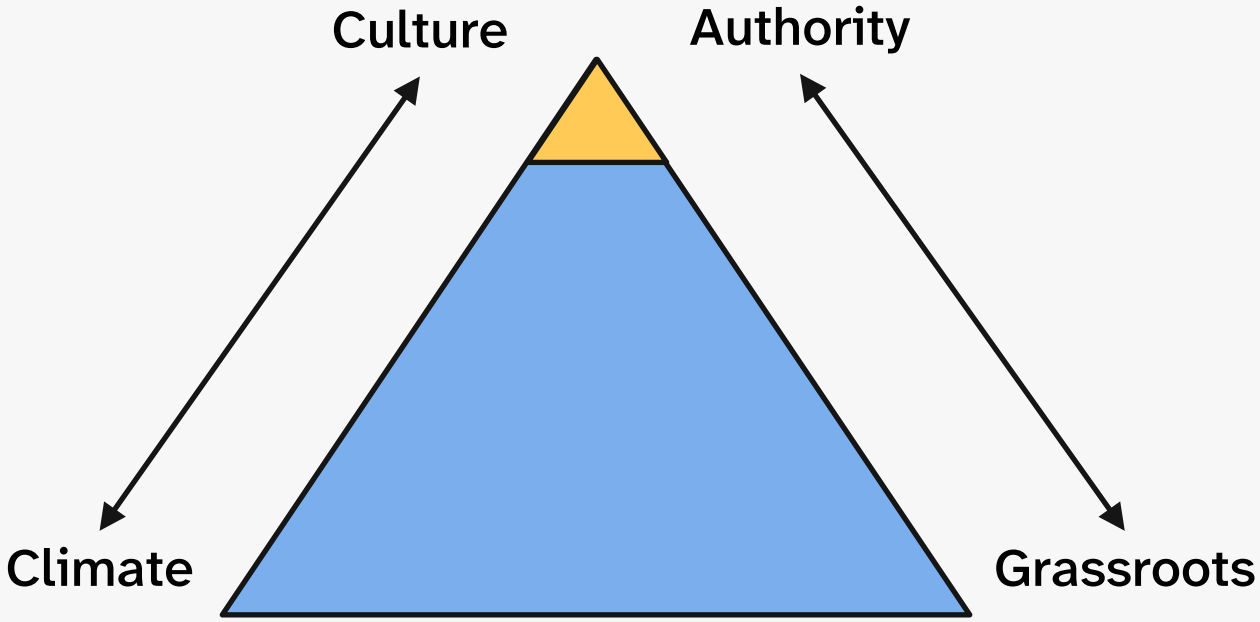
Culture

- Set by leadership
- Official missions, values, and goals
- Official policy, process, and procedure

Climate

- Set by the majority
- Unofficial missions, values, and goals
- Unofficial policy, process, and procedure

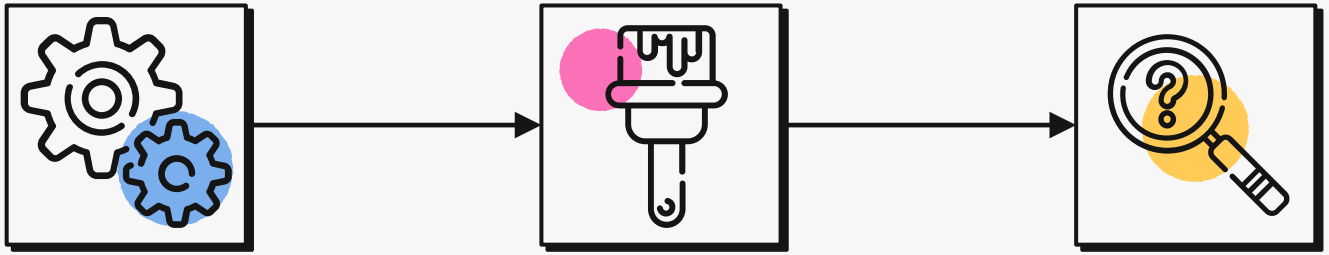
Culture and climate



Shift the climate.

2. Why systems matter

What are **accessibility systems** about?



Processes

How we're supposed to do things

Practices

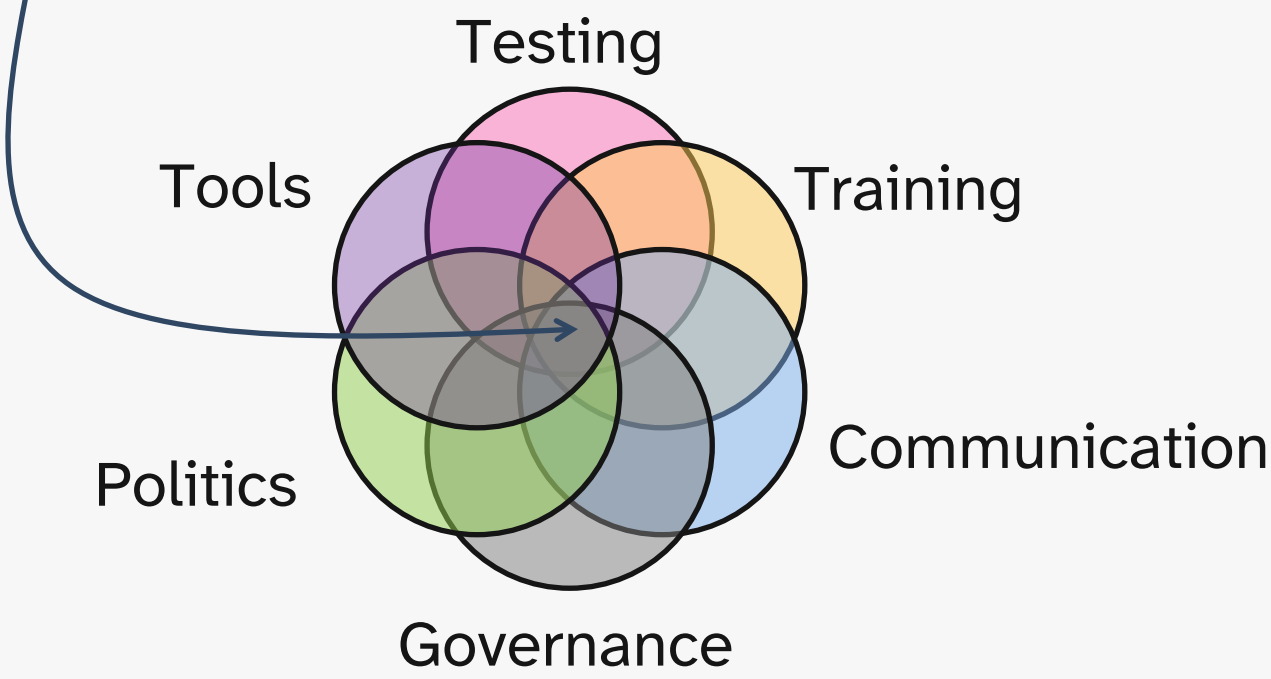
How we actually do things

Patterns

What we can observe

We have a lot going on.

Accessibility programs



Processes versus practices

Process

- How things are *supposed* to get done

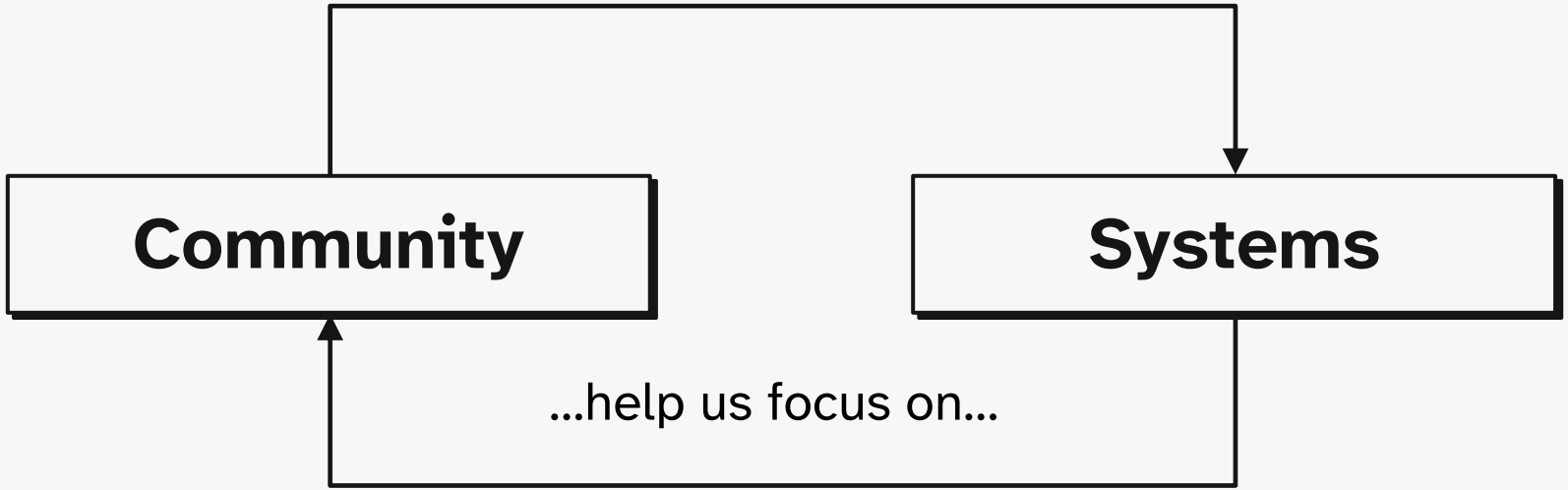
Practice

- How things *actually* get done

Practices demonstrate patterns

- ❑ Who has power?
- ❑ Who is trusted?
- ❑ Where are resources spent?
- ❑ What initiatives succeed?

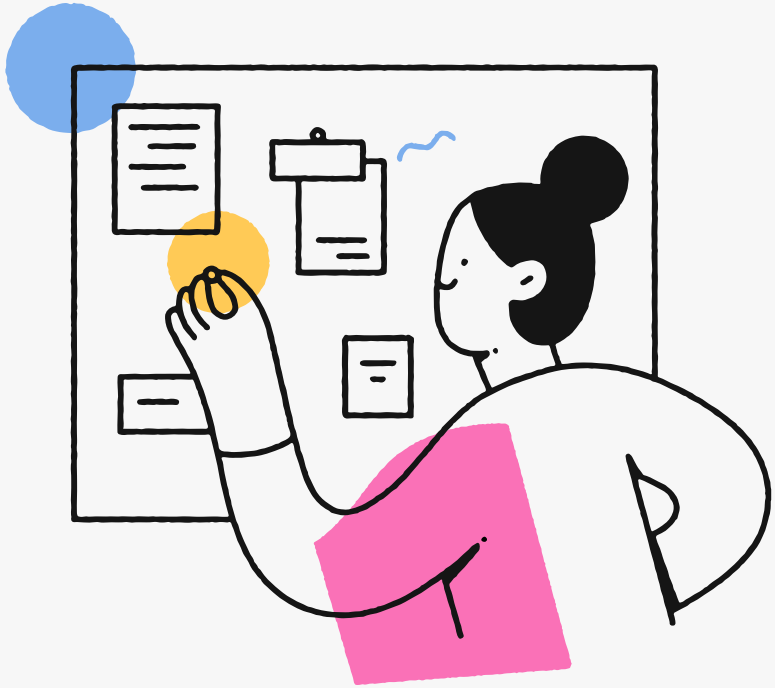
Systems help us manage our energy, time, and effort.


...shows us how people work, which
we can use when we create...
Community
Systems
...help us focus on...

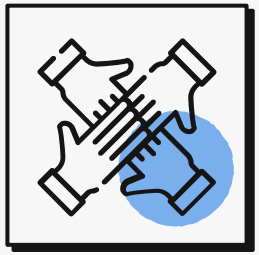
3. Getting started with accessibility operations

What is accessibility operations?

Accessibility operations is the philosophy and practice of connecting **people**, **technology**, and **processes** to create, maintain, and improve accessibility for products and services.



Foundations of accessibility operations



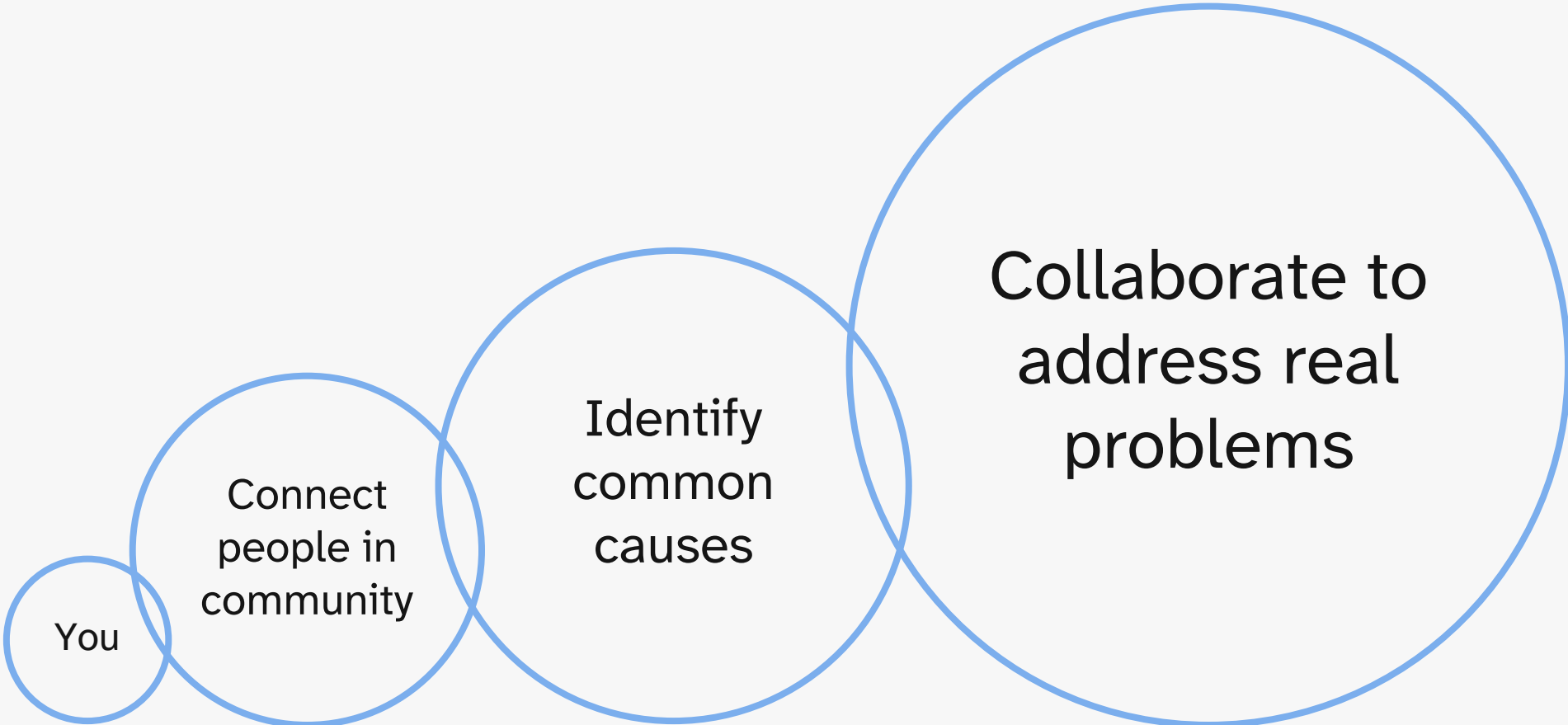
Affinity

Find common cause and grow trust by working together

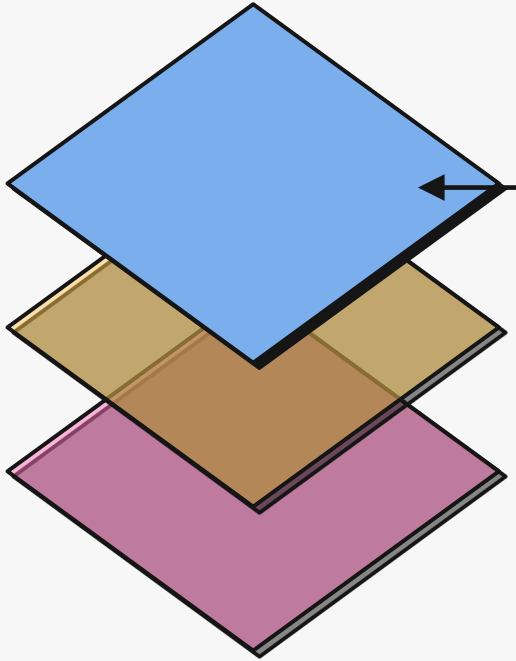
Enablement

Reduce friction and change climate by helping people help themselves

Affinity snowballs



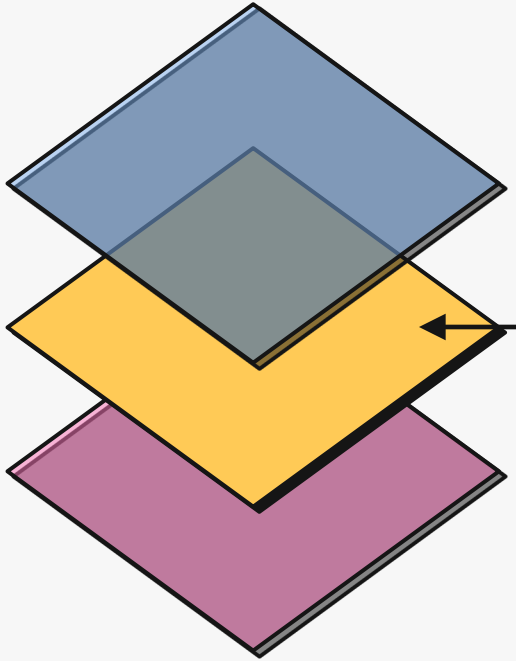
Communities of practice



People

- Relationships
- Diversity
- Social complexity
- Community maintenance

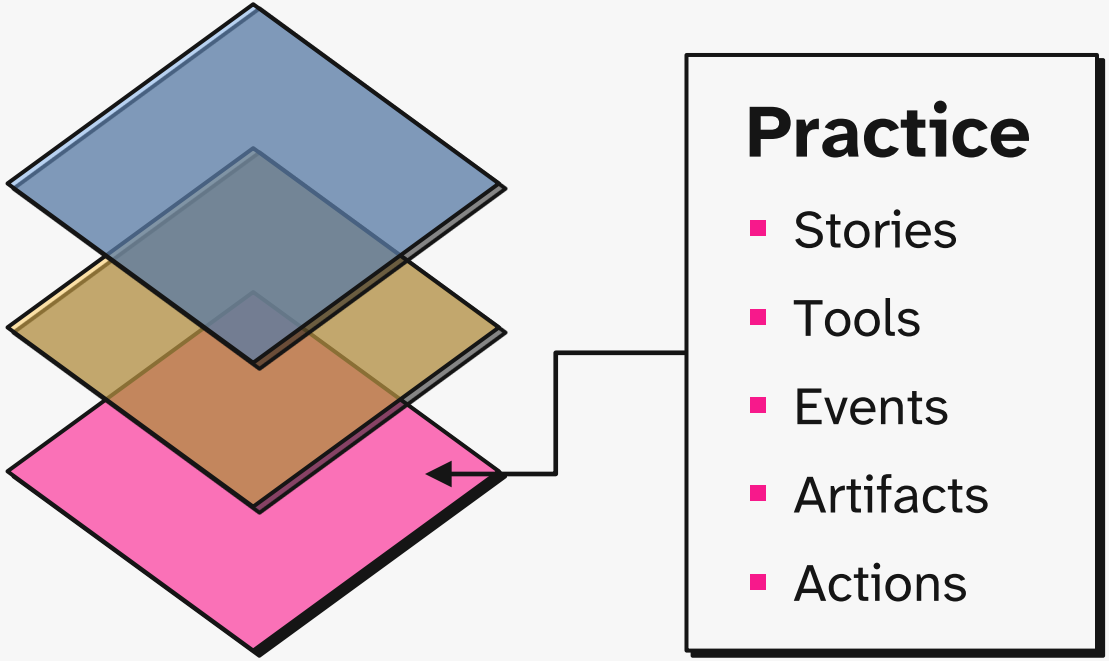
Communities of practice



Purpose

- Affinity
- Mutual accountability
- Negotiation
- Interpretation
- Identity

Communities of practice



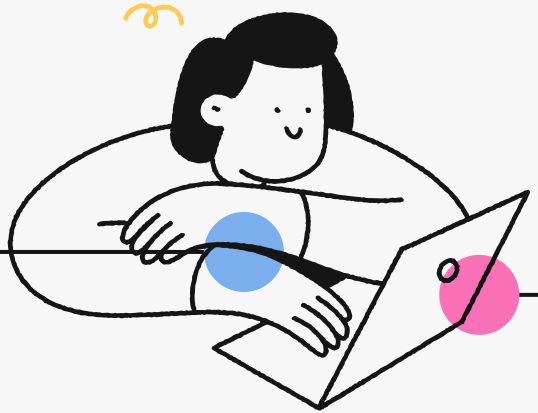
You probably already have these!

Resource groups

Assembled to help folks with similar experiences navigate systems

Champion networks

Assembled to scale learning and practice



A connection point

“Communities of practice are the locus of ‘real work.’ Their practices are where the formal rests on the informal, where the visible counts on the invisible, where the official meets the everyday. Designing processes and policies is important, but in the end it is practice that produces results, not the processes and policies.”

—Etienne Wenger in *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*

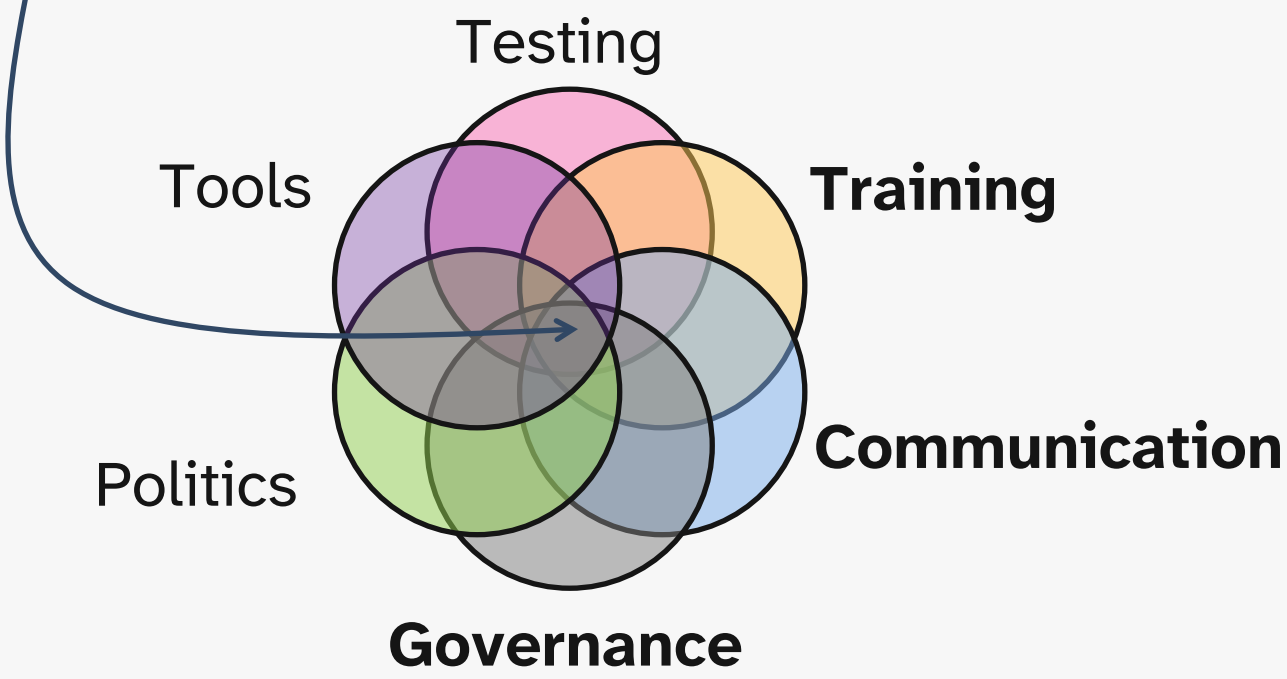
Accessibility communities of practice

- Attract people who are in the weeds of advocacy, technology, and policy work
- Membership is usually self-selected
- Members are looking for:
  - Real, practical solutions
  - Collaborators, sponsors, and allies
  - Mutual support and accountability

Communities of practice enable

- A view into how teams work
- An audience for informal learning
- Collaborators in experiments with tools, processes, and workflows
- A high-level view to identify patterns and pain points
- And incubator for solutions that come from actual needs

Accessibility programs revisited



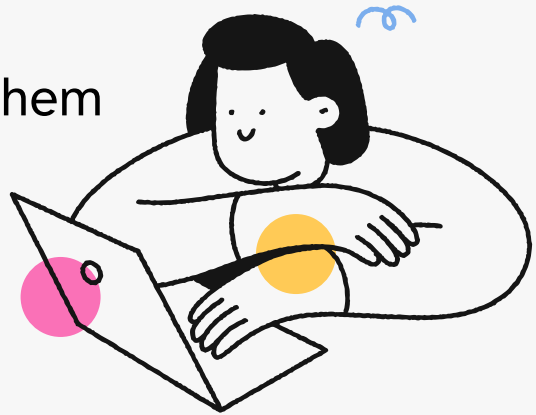
Make it easy to find you.*

*Your resources

- ❑ Slide decks
- ❑ Recordings
- ❑ Documentation
- ❑ Training materials
- ❑ Reports

- ❑ Office hours
- ❑ Community meetings

(And **please** make them **all** accessible.)



Meet people where they’re already going for information

Make allies with

- Learning designers
- Knowledge managers
- Librarians
- Project coordinators

Contribute to

- Role-specific handbooks
- Process documentation
- Department newsletters
- Annual training cycles
- Just-in-time learning

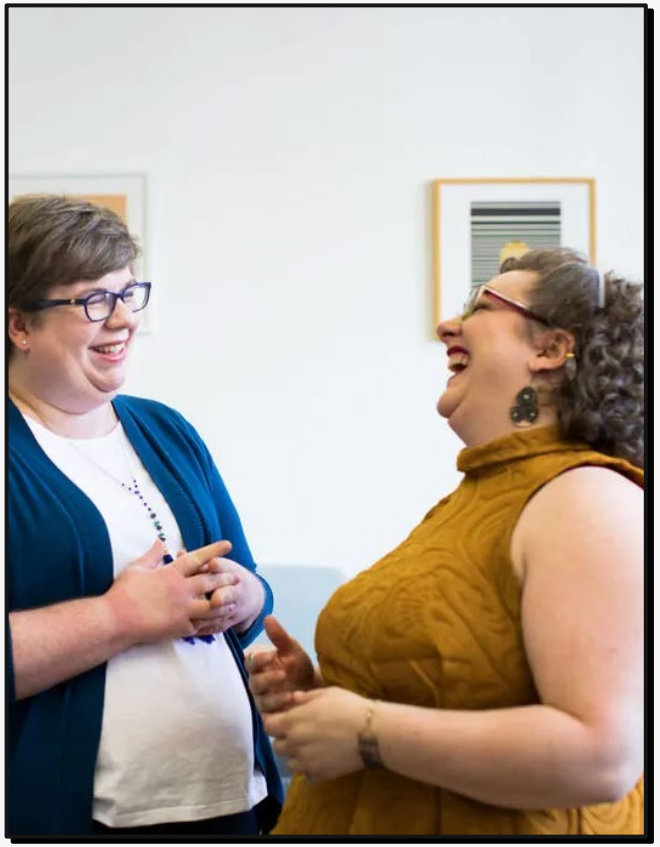
Being anti-ableist in our work

- ❑ Collaboration
- ❑ Accommodation
- ❑ Flexibility
- ❑ Intersectionality
- ❑ Anti-perfectionist
- ❑ Working joyfully, not compulsively

Enable community members to **learn on their own**, in the context of their work, and at their own pace.

Enable community members to **learn from each other** in the context of real problems.

Reward community members for **creativity, critical thinking**, and **sharing**, and **collaboration**, not for compliance.



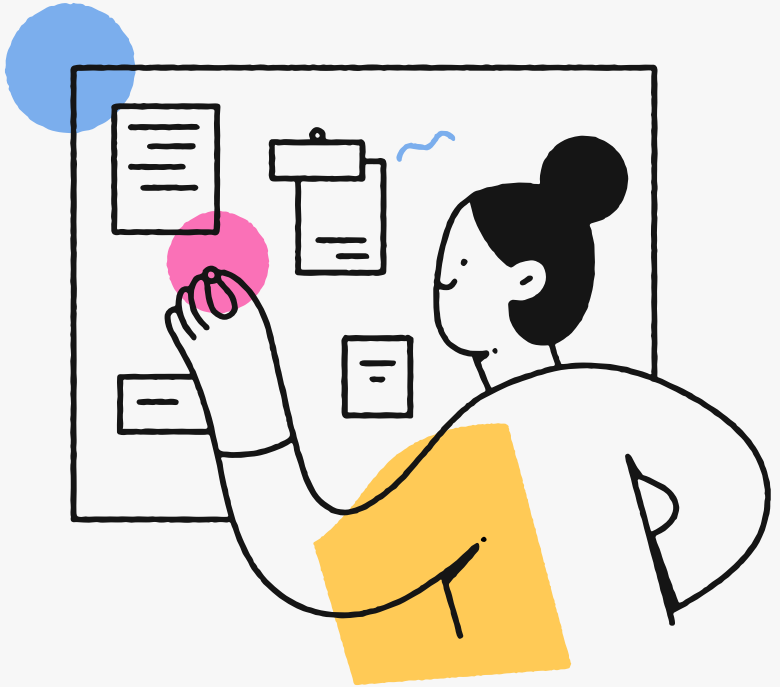
Remember information literacy 101

- ❑ When and where is it from?
- ❑ Who made it?
- ❑ Why was it made?
- ❑ Who benefited from it when it was made?
- ❑ Who benefits from it now?

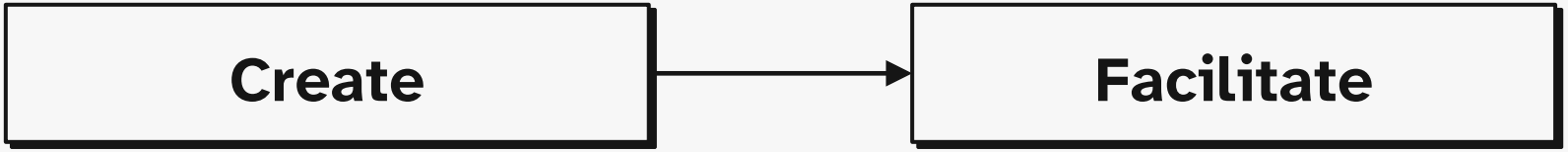
Help people answer these questions

- ❑ What guidelines and practices apply to me?
- ❑ Who can I trust in the space? Why?
- ❑ What tools and resources are available to me?
- ❑ Where and how can I learn more when I need to?
- ❑ Am I reducing harm to people with disabilities?

Mentor, don’t manage.



Decrease friction



- One-to-many communication
- Learning in context
- Many small changes over time

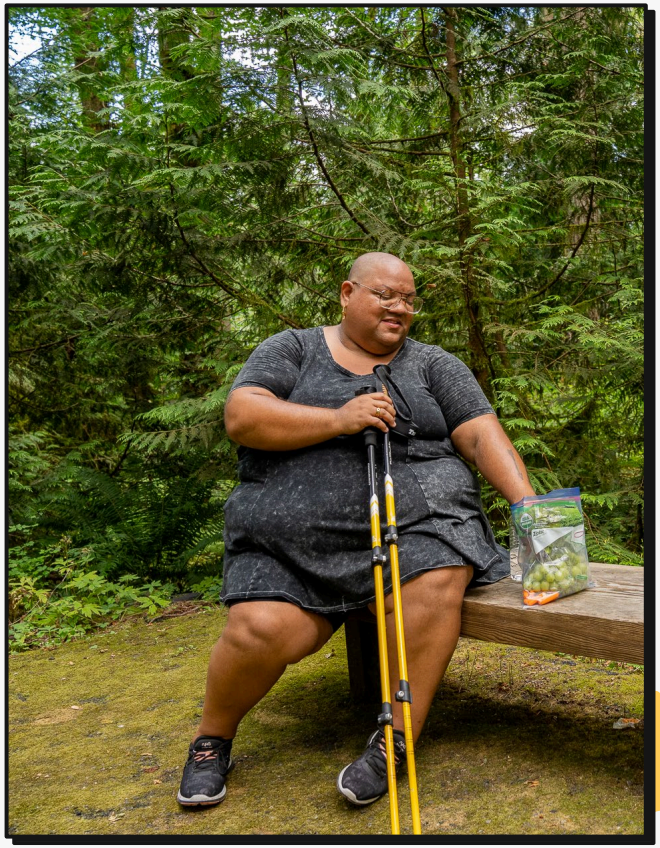
- A lot of people knowing a little, instead of a few people knowing a lot
- Critical thinking
- Realistic goalsetting

Prioritize what will reduce harm the most.

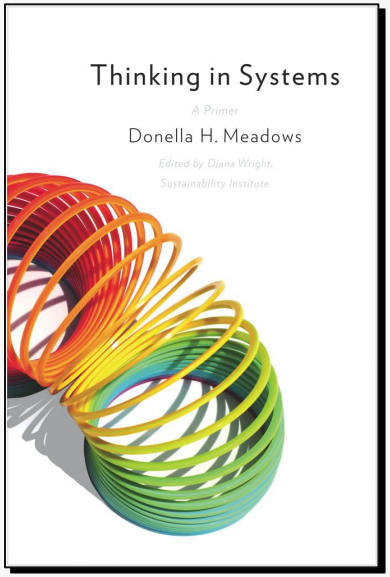
Don’t wait for leadership.

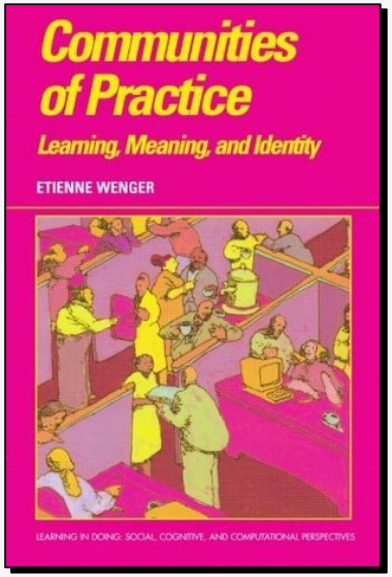
Take a rest, then get back to the work.

We need you, and we’re all in this together for the long haul!



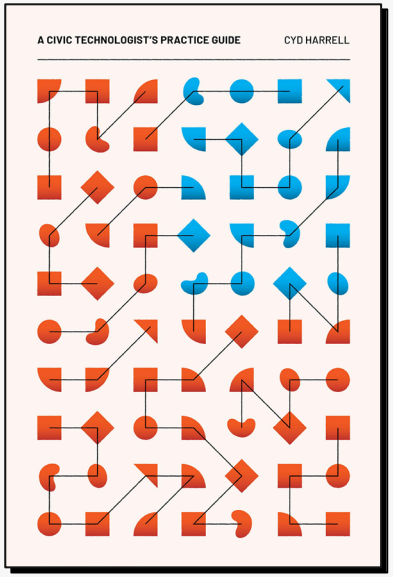
Thinking in Systems
Donella H. Meadows

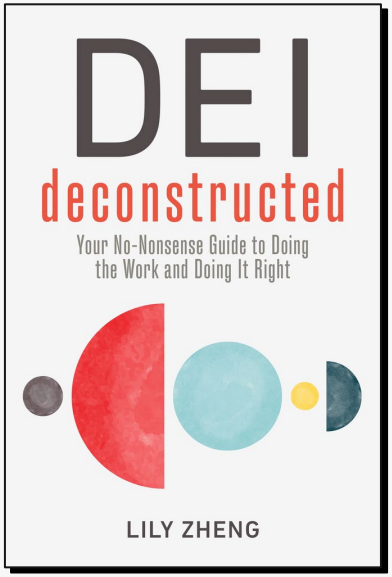




Communities of Practice
Etienne Wenger

A Civil Technologist's Practice Guide
Cyd Harrell





DEI Deconstructed
Lily Zheng

Thank you!

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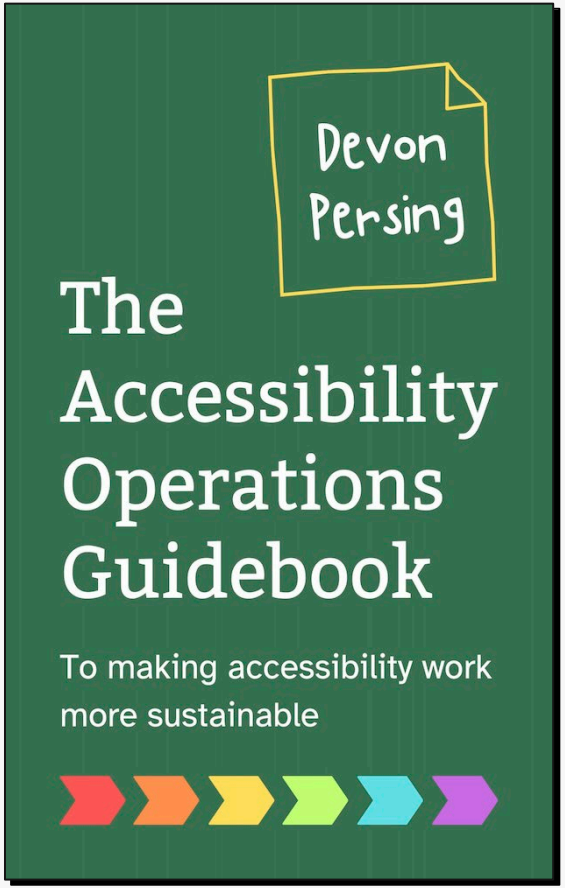
Ebook

Paperback