

HOURSCHOOL'S PRINCIPLES
for
BUILDING SUCCESSFUL COMMUNITIES



INTRODUCTION

HourSchool's mission is to empower everyone to give back and teach. We believe in peer-learning communities where everyone teaches and learns from each other. We believe communities sustain and enrich learning, by engaging people beyond a single class.

We wanted to know: What makes a successful community tick?

We wanted to learn more about community and how it all works to uncover the best practices for building communities. So we talked to people about community: about participating in a particularly vibrant community and about their efforts in building new communities. We talked to community members, community managers, and community leaders. The people we talked to were part of online communities and communities that come together around a physical space—or hybrid communities bridging digital and analog spaces. These communities revolve around professional interests, hobbies, religion, or place. Some have been around for ages, and some were just starting out.

We know community building is both art & science, so guidelines are more important than rules, and a toolbox of frameworks that you can personalize has more value than prescriptive action plans.

We provide our insights and learnings to you as a way to get feedback and to continue our life-long learning in this arena. Do our insights resonate with your experiences, or are we missing the mark?

Send a message to **hello@hourschool.com**. We'd love to hear from you.



GUIDING PRINCIPLES

After synthesizing the common themes we heard across our conversations with community members and community managers, we created the following principles to guide us in our work.

GUIDING PRINCIPLE:

Provide value to members outside of community, and then help members integrate community into their lives.

Successful communities are sustainable communities. These communities are relevant within the larger world context and provide value to their members. The communities who thrive are those whose primary offerings (e.g. physical space or workshop series) provide financial stability, so the leaders can then focus on building community as an additional offering and a distinctive draw for new members.

“It’s important to build a healthy community but also a healthy business.”

Eventually, you want people to become regular community members. You want the community’s space and activities to be integrated into their regular lives. You want them to identify with the community, to be excited about talking about your community to other people, to refer new members into it, to use the community as a resource, and to turn to the community when they need support.

QUICK TIPS

- Make it super easy for members to figure out where to find your community. They should never have to hunt for meeting times, meeting locations, or contact info.
- Help members make showing up to the community a habit within their lives. Entice, encourage and reward consistently showing up.
- Create thought leadership, so people turn to your community for what’s new and exciting.
- Nurture a sense of community, so members want to identify and be a part of your movement.



GUIDING PRINCIPLE:

Hold space for community to grow.

Community management means trying to create community—something you have no real control over. You have no control over whether relationships will form, whether connections will be made, or whether authentic value will be created. However, you *can* intentionally create and hold a space for those things—either physical space, emotional safe space, or metaphorical space.

“We’ll see a lot of interesting things come out of [that event], but I have no control over that. It’s just putting together the right people at the right time.”

Communities need a homebase. This can be physical space or a common meeting place (e.g. a consistent event series even if it changes physical location). Members need to know: “If I go here on x day, I can find the group.” Knowing where you can go to find and connect with somebody provides consistency and safety, which are important when people are taking the risk of trying something new and haven’t yet integrated the community into the daily routines of their lives. Having a homebase also helps establish a sense of community¹. Successful communities make it easy to figure out where the group is and how to connect with the group.

Consistent events are also a type of metaphorical space. Events create a space for people to connect, have inspiring conversations, and have some fun. Ensuring high quality events that are relevant ensures you’ll continue to provide value to your community members. Successful community managers make sure their event formats fit the needs, geography, & temperament of their community.

People are skeptical about new things, and it takes courage to try something new or to meet someone new. Therefore, the variables the community manager should try to manage are: consistency, connection, support, and expectations. Successful community managers are a willing participant in the community; anything they ask of their members, they’re willing to do themselves. This simultaneously creates a safe space and models leadership.

QUICK TIPS

- Create consistent event series (e.g. “every Friday” or “every second Tuesday of the month”). The consistency will allow multiple entry points for members both old and new.
- If attendance is weak for the first couple of rounds, evaluate whether the format meets community needs. If they do, stick with it to give people a chance to show up.
- Don’t forget to send helpful reminders.
- Create an emotionally safe space for people by aligning expectations early on.
- Support members. Be a cheerleader. Provide extra support when members are tackling something new for the community.

¹ In the psychological sense of community defined by McMillan and Chavis in 1986.



GUIDING PRINCIPLE:

Use passion as a tool to inspire growth.

Successful community managers have a passion, a fire, a belief in what they're creating. They can inspire others to give to the community with this passion. People can sense when a person's belief in their community is authentic, and are drawn to both the leader and her cause.

Because community management means having to balance the different needs and goals of various stakeholders, community managers can also use a strong vision or mission as a guiding compass for their actions.

"In building companies, I think the advice I'd give is to really care, to really give a damn."

Engaging and motivating people is hard in an increasingly competitive landscape where everybody is competing for people's limited time and attention. The community must provide value and relevancy to its members, and being able to communicate a strong vision becomes important in both one-on-one and mass-communication settings.

When community managers are passionate about their community, they should also be benefiting from the community—receiving support and experiencing personal growth as a result of being a part of the community. Passionate community managers would be active in their community even if they weren't in their leadership roles.

QUICK TIPS

- Make sure your vision is clearly stated on your website and in marketing materials.
- Embrace your passion. Don't be afraid to talk about your vision in meetings with potential sponsors, workshop leaders, and new members.
- Engage a designer or use Gamestorming methods to try and visualize your vision to increase its impact.

GUIDING PRINCIPLE:

Community management is relationship building.

Community management is relationship building. Building authentic relationships takes time. This is the main reason why it takes so much time to build a new community. In the beginning, growth happens one by one. Listening is key to understanding each person's current and future goals.

In addition to building a relationship with each member, the community manager must also activate members to build relationships with each other by making introductions and connections.

"You remember when you were in junior high, and there would be a dance, and people would be on one side of the room?...[I'm] like the chaperone going around and getting people to dance with each other."

To encourage relationship building, communities need to have both formal and informal events. Including fun events in the mix encourages people to get to know each other and talk one-on-one outside of formal events. Some of the relationship building that will occur between your members will naturally happen outside of the community context and outside of planned events. People might arrange meetings on their own, but these stronger relationships should be reflected back in the activity you see within your community.

Community managers need to continually monitor the dynamics of the group, and make sure individual needs/goals are being met or supported within the community.

QUICK TIPS

- Learn people's names. Don't underestimate the power of being able to welcome someone by name each time you see them.
- Make sure each new member is welcomed into the community. Create a ritual, or enlist help from other members, so you know everyone gets an equal orientation into the community.
- Go the extra step of inviting new members out to coffee to get to know them over a quick chat.
- Continue to check in with members and stay up to date with their goals and needs.
- Introduce members to each other in meaningful ways.



GUIDING PRINCIPLE:

Inspiration begets collaboration.

Engagement, collaboration, and growth happen when members are inspired. Community managers plant seeds, and if they're inspiring, new things will grow out of them. Members will run with it, and community managers are often pleasantly surprised by the results.

"A breakfast club led to an event led to a member spending his own money to develop a set of templates that community members can use. I sit back, and I'm shocked: oh my god, all that from a breakfast. People go and take it one step farther. It's like a seed started, and all that from one inspiring conversation."

We heard over and over from everyone that they want more collaboration within their communities. Members come into communities with this rosy vision of being able to collaborate with their peers, but they look to community leaders to kick-start the process by playing matchmaker.

Inducing collaboration is more art than science. Collaboration happens when the right connections are made and imaginations are sparked. Community managers can hold space and create opportunities for collaboration to happen through 'engineered serendipity',² but it's up to the members to follow through.

QUICK TIPS

- Stay ahead of the trends. Plan events around topics that your community are buzzing about and want leadership in.
- Continually look for ways to connect members based on similar interests or efforts.
- Keep an eye and ear out for ways to give serendipity a helping hand.
- Help members get to know about each other's projects, goals, and needs.

² "Engineered serendipity" is a phrase used to describe a tenant of hosting in Hub Global communities.



GUIDING PRINCIPLE:

Grow the community into a two-way street to sustain it. Empower members to contribute to the health of the community.

To be sustainable, communities require engagement and participation from its members. Otherwise, the community manager burns out. If members aren't willing to give back and help the community grow, the community that exists isn't authentic.

A successful community is a two-way street with both leaders and members contributing to its health. Satisfied members will naturally be advocates for the community and refer new members. If given the chance to lead, members who have benefited from the community will want to give back and support others in the ways they've been supported in the past. If members have ownership and agency within a community, they'll feel as responsible for its health and success as the leaders do — and their actions will reflect this. If given the opportunity to shape the community, they'll pitch in to evolve it to stay relevant and valuable.

"We don't want people to only be Lookie-Lous. This community will only thrive when people are active and creating classes on their own or creating their own rhythms...If we have to do all of it, the community won't last."

Naturally, community managers juggle different levels of engagement and involvement: new members, engaged members, drifting members, and emerging leaders. Transparency and visibility can help community managers see the different levels of engagement and target their messaging in more relevant ways.

Although community leaders want increased engagement from their members, they can neither expect member-driven activity right away nor can they expect members to sustain the community on their own. At the beginning, community leaders and community managers will drive nearly all of the activity until members are engaged enough to start transitioning to two-way control.

Let growth happen organically. Slow and steady creates a stronger community if you really engage each new member, which beats a large number of inactive people any time.

QUICK TIPS

- Delegate. Don't do everything yourself. Solicit member help in growing the community.
- Provide multiple opportunities for members to give back in meaningful ways that require varying amounts of time, commitment, and leadership.
- Create channels for feedback and open communication between leaders and members.
- Think through your community's governance. How can members have agency (or at least have a voice) in important decisions, how the space is used, where the community is headed, or programming content?



GUIDING PRINCIPLE:

Let the community own the content while you handle the logistics.

Communities without any hierarchy are often inefficient. They go into decline when people aren't sure of their roles and their levels of responsibility in keeping the community going. Conversely, communities with too much top-down structure can become stale. They leave community leaders burnt out and train community members to be passive recipients.

We know successful and sustainable communities are more of a two-way street with contributions coming from the leaders and members, but where do we draw the line of who controls what? The sweet spot seems to occur when community members can shape content within the structures set by community leaders.

When community managers hold the space and take care of member's logistical needs, this creates a safe space where members can grow, contribute, and experiment. If community managers can reduce friction as much as possible by taking care of logistical needs, community members can get on with the more important work of building relationships and collaborating with each other.

“Even though I make a lot of decisions about structure or vision about the group, I wanted the group to be able to participate in what it looks like.”

Successful communities set the expectation early on that everyone is expected to contribute to the community in his/her own way. Successful community managers work to align members around a common mission or vision, so that contributions are relevant and strengthen the community.

QUICK TIPS

- Take care of your members by taking care of the logistics. Their interactions with the community should run as smoothly as possible, so they can focus on the people they're meeting and the content they're consuming.
- Continually involve your community in making programming content decisions—whether through surveys, conversations, or letting them take the lead!
- Keep a pulse on your community's interests and discover people's potential offerings.
- Personally invite your community members to share and give back, but respect that some people may need more time to be ready for this step.

OPPORTUNITY AREAS

During our research, we also uncovered community manager's pain points in building community. The HourSchool team hears the challenges people are facing and we're building features to address the following opportunity areas.

How can we help community managers save time on logistics, so they can spend more time on relationship building?

How can we increase transparency & visibility in ways that make the community manager's job easier?

How can we give community managers an actionable feedback loop into their community?

How can we design for serendipity?

How can we help community managers connect with existing knowledge about community building, so they don't have to start from scratch?

How can we create tools that integrate well with others?

How can we create elegant ways for partner organizations to cross-publicize & co-organize & co-sponsor events?

Which of these opportunity areas resonate with you the most?

Are there pain points our organization is experiencing that we haven't addressed here?

Let us know:
hello@hourschool.com

FRAMEWORKS

We created some frameworks to help us make sense of all the information we were hearing. These types of models can help community managers contextualize their daily actions within the larger work of community building.

COMMUNITY JOURNEY: *

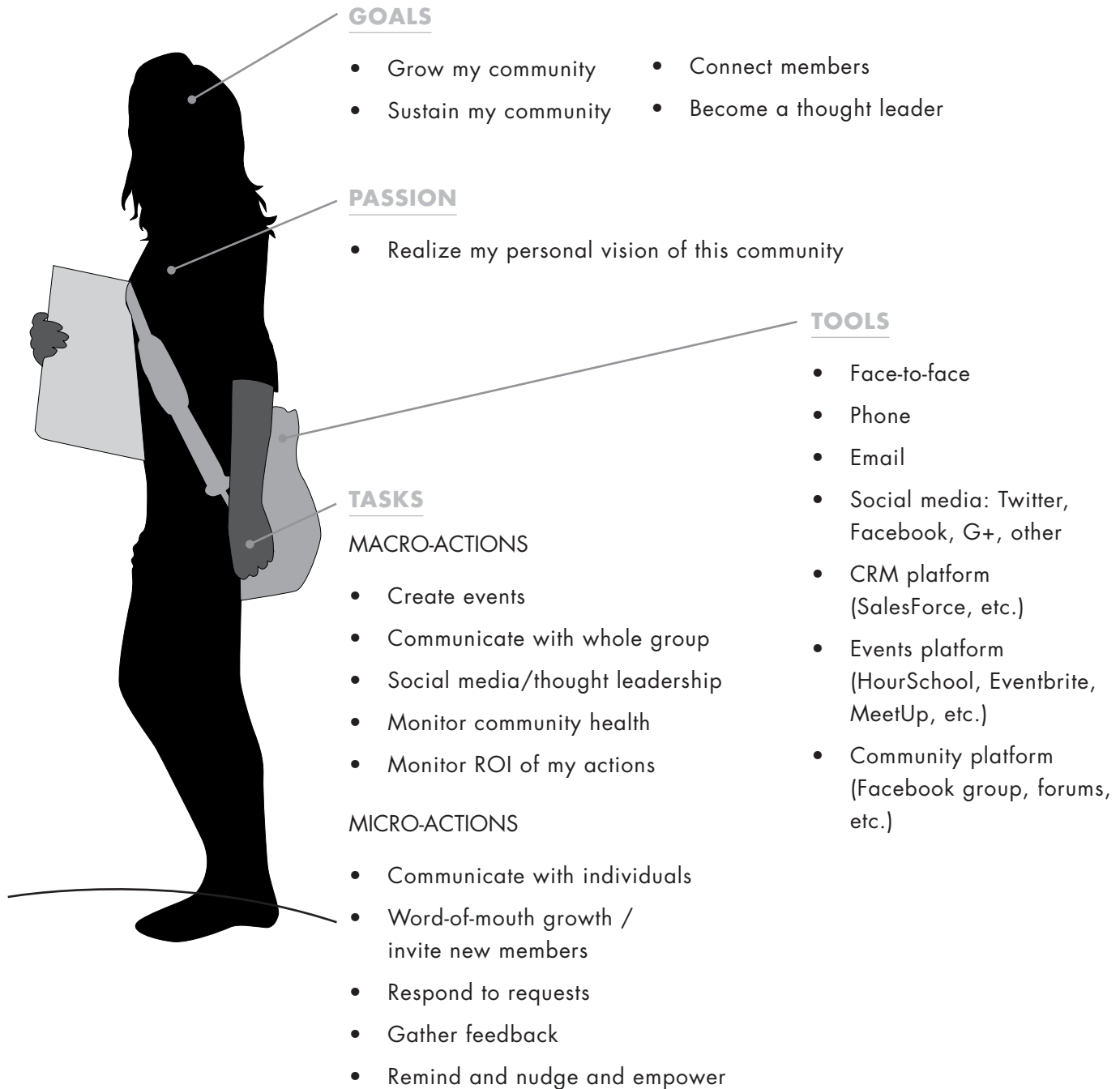
A community manager's tasks map to their goals for an ideal member journey.

MEMBER STAGES	FIRST HEARS ABOUT YOU	FIRST ACTION	COMMITMENT	"REGULAR" (MEMBERSHIP)	ADVOCATE/VOLUNTEER	LEADER	LEAVES	
MEMBER ACTIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Via social media; might start following you• Via word-of-mouth• Might join a mailing list• Checks your events calendar	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Attends an event, happy hour, or open house• Takes a tour	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Pays for something• Becomes a member	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Customer of the business function (e.g. using space or buying goods)• Identifies with community culture• Views community as a resource• Comes to community for support when needed	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Community an integrated part of life & identity• Refers new members bc views community as a resource & sees value• Talks about community & spreads the word in new contexts• Welcomes new members• Treats community as thought leader	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Giving back• Planning events and helping with logistics• Feels stakes in the game• Wants to see group succeed and active in helping it grow	Possible reasons: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Moved location• Outgrown community• Needs not being met	
CMGR BIZ GOALS	Increase leads	Increase attendance	Conversion	Retention + Re-engagement	Increase referrals	Increase collaboration	[Feedback]	
CMGR ROLE	ENGAGE >>		ACTIVATE >>		EMPOWER >>			
CMGR GOALS & TASKS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Be a thought leader• Be an evangelist/advocate for the type of people in your community• Create many ways to get involved	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Be friendly, approachable, personable• Build relationships• Be responsive to member needs & goals• Create quality events that are relevant and provide value to members• Provide formal & informal opportunities for members to get to know each other• Set & manage expectations• Scaffold new member's introduction into community by making connections	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Play matchmaker between member needs and potential member offerings• Engineer opportunities for people to engage at different levels in different ways• Double up on support for new leaders• Keep community relevant; continue to adapt; stay flexible• Give credit & celebrate successes					<i>*Actions in chart are less linear than they appear.</i>

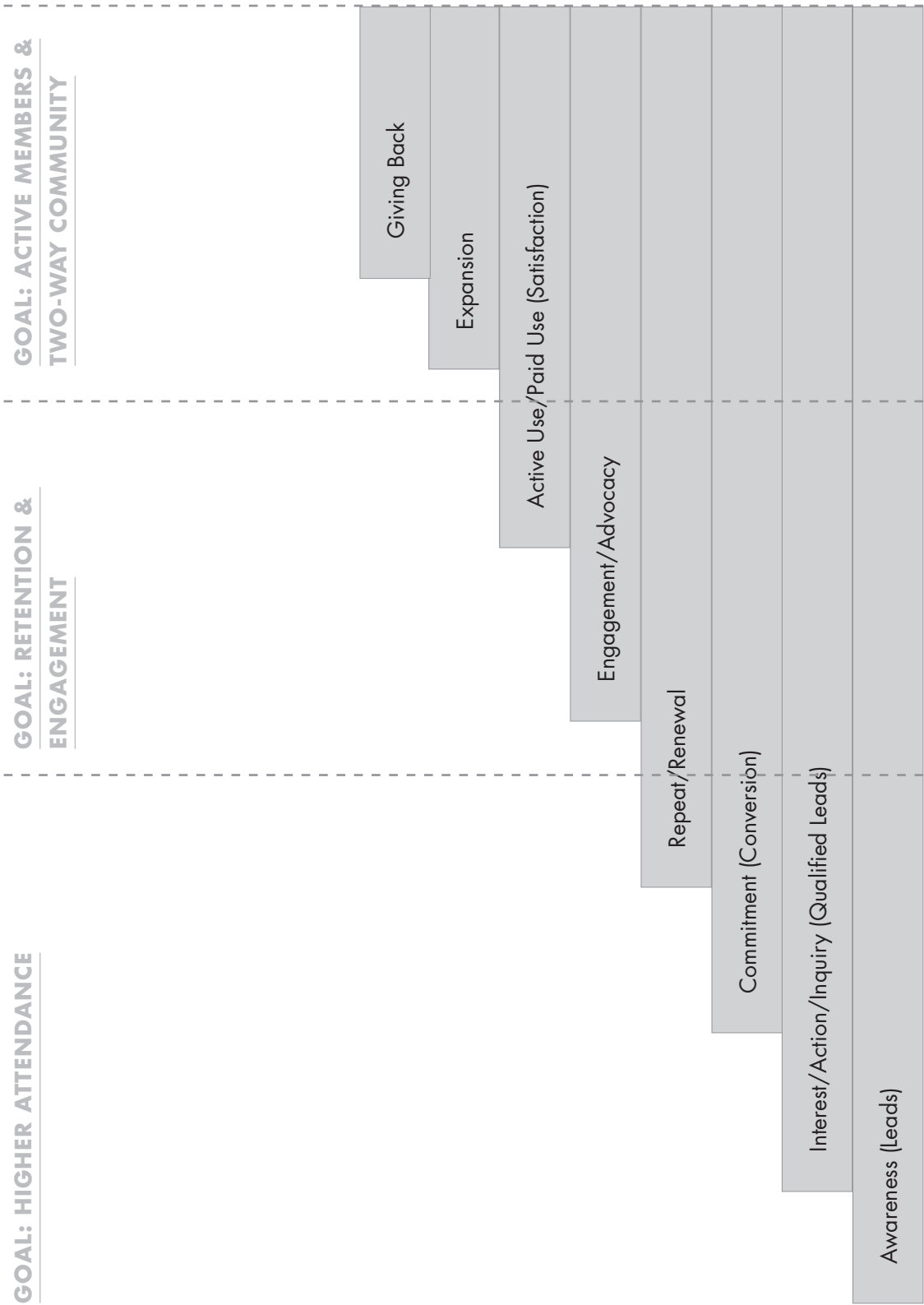
*Actions in chart are less linear than they appear.

PERSONA OF A COMMUNITY MANAGER:

Logistics may consume their days, but their passion drives the heart of their work.



CUSTOMER FUNNEL:
Your goal for your community determines how deep your conversion funnel goes.



THANKS FOR YOUR TIME!

We are still learning and experimenting, and we welcome your feedback.
Do our insights resonate with your experiences, or are we missing the mark?
Please let us know at **hello@hourschool.com**.

