Purpose: the north star of a convening’s design

Crafting a purpose for your convening might sound like a check-the-box exercise. Yet it actually serves the very functional role of providing you with a north star to guide you through the many practical choices that follow. A convening that enables participants to innovate will not need the same design as one designed for participants to develop foresight. Even two convenings that enable innovation will have distinct purposes. And while it may feel tempting to write a purpose that spans two or even three of the four types, a purpose that is clear, focused, and specific gives you the rudder you need to make each of the practical choices in a way that serves exactly the goal you have in mind.

The purpose should drive your choices, but it should also be shaped by new realizations. The remainder of this guidebook shares a set of general principles that apply across all four types of purposes. Once you have a first draft of your purpose, keep it handy as you work through the remaining stages of the design process, and use it as a lens for interpreting those principles for your particular situation. Then look for the set of principles specific to your type of purpose in the final chapter, Tying it All Together. As you make your design decisions throughout the process, keep testing them against your purpose. If it fails to help you arrive at a clear answer, or when the answer it points to doesn’t feel right, turn back to the purpose and try to sharpen it—or revise it.
DEFINING
Your Purpose

First, cover the fundamentals

**ENGAGE A DIVERSE** range of participants, reflective of different facets of the problem. Help them connect with one another, build trusting relationships, and discover shared areas of commonality.

**BUILD NETWORKS**

**SHARE LEARNING**

**ENABLE PARTICIPANTS** to exchange information, expertise, and points of view in a form that benefits their individual and collective practice.

Then, choose a primary purpose

**INFLUENCE**

**INNOVATE**

**DEVELOP FORESIGHT**

**ALIGN & ACT**

**SHAPE THE ATTITUDES** of key stakeholders and the public by inviting thought leaders and decision makers to discuss your initial proposals, use their perspectives to sharpen the ideas, and then use the resulting product to promote broader conversation and action.

**EXPLORE NEW APPROACHES** and enable creative disruption by reframing, reimagining, or recombining different elements and perspectives. Use these inputs to prototype transformational new processes or services and develop ideas for their adoption and scale.

**ANTICIPATE POTENTIAL CHALLENGES** and identify new opportunities for intervention, by collecting indicators of how the world is evolving today and diverse perspectives about the directions that it could take in the future.

**MOBILIZE STAKEHOLDERS** in different parts of a system to act in concert. Help build a shared understanding of the system and the problem, develop consensus around a common vision, align strategies around it, and support one another in the execution.

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A simple way to clarify your purpose is to answer these five questions. You may want to start with general answers, and then return later to make them more specific, as you make additional choices about your design.

"In order to create change, this convening will help participants...

...BUILD NETWORKS by:

...and SHARE LEARNING by:

"Beyond that, it’s PRIMARY PURPOSE is to...

☐ INNOVATE ☑ INFLUENCE ☑ DEVELOP FORESIGHT ☑ ALIGN AND ACT ☐ OTHER

...which it WILL DO by:

"Its purpose WILL NOT include:

"
Now that you’ve determined your purpose, you need to figure out how to achieve it. This is your “design stance.” A traditional stance, for example, tends to be a good fit for convenings that only touch lightly on a purpose beyond the two fundamentals of building networks and sharing learning, and results in a format closer to a standard conference. A co-creative stance tends to be more effective at achieving shared goals but will require more thoughtful design and preparation. Use these spectrums to sketch out your stance:

**Traditional**

- Convey Insight
- Designed by a Leader
- Instructional
- Delivered by a Leader or Leaders
- Achieve a Specific Goal
- Engage the Mind Alone
- Include Homogeneous Perspectives
- Use Expert Knowledge

**Co-Creative**

- Discover Insight
- Co-Designed by Participants
- Participatory
- Co-Delivered by Participants
- Have an Open-Ended Outcome
- Engage the Full Self
- Include Diverse Perspectives
- Use Collective Pattern Recognition