

A GAME OF POWERFUL COMMUNITY TRADE-OFFS

Facilitator Script

PRE-GAME STAGE-SETTING

Before we jump into the game, we want to take a few minutes to set the stage, because how we think going in will shape what we see coming out. And I want to start by grounding us in something important. Every community represented in this room is a strong community.

People choose to live there. They raise their families there. They invest their livelihoods there.

But good communities still face hard decisions. And those decisions get harder when resources are limited, needs are growing, and everything is more connected than we sometimes want to admit.

From Good Intentions to Good Systems

Most people involved in community work genuinely care.

They show up.
They respond.
They help.

But historically, including in our own community, we often tackle needs in a way that was... honestly, suboptimal.

We addressed challenges:

- In silos rather than collaboratively.
- Reactively rather than strategically.
- One issue at a time rather than as a system.
- And often downstream, rather than upstream.

And it's not because communities don't care. It's because most systems reward reaction, not prevention.



But here's the truth we had to face: Community issues are not independent—they are **interdependent**.

- Housing affects education.
- Education affects workforce.
- Workforce affects economic growth.
- Economic growth affects public services.
- Public services affect safety.
- And the list goes on.

When we treat those things independently, we end up fixing symptoms and creating ongoing invoices, not changing conditions.

Upstream vs. Downstream

You'll hear us use two words a lot today: upstream and downstream.

Downstream work responds after something has already gone wrong. It's necessary. It's important. And it often saves lives.

But upstream work changes the conditions so fewer people need downstream intervention in the first place. Downstream work is expensive and repetitive. Upstream work is strategic and system-based.

Downstream work treats the effects. Upstream work addresses the causes.

And here's the uncomfortable part: Upstream work usually feels slower, harder, and riskier, especially when there isn't a visible crisis forcing action.

Why Communities Wait for Crisis

This is where we want to pause, because this matters. As communities, we often don't come together around big priorities until something is unraveling.

We wait for:

- A water crisis.
- A public safety breakdown.
- A workforce collapse.
- An unmanageable spike in homelessness or hunger.

Only when the issue becomes undeniable do we suddenly find alignment.

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At that point:

- The cost is higher.
- The choices are fewer.
- And the people affected, especially children, have already paid a steep price.

There's a strange paradox in community work: When things are bad enough, collaboration suddenly becomes possible. When things are manageable, alignment feels optional. But waiting for unraveling is not a strategy. It's a failure of imagination and often, a failure of courage.

The Cost of Waiting

When we wait for crisis:

- We overinvest in emergency systems.
- We normalize downstream spending.
- We accept diminished outcomes as inevitable.

We see hunger, but we don't ask why. We see absenteeism, but we don't ask what's driving it. We see workforce shortages, but we don't ask what conditions make people leave or never arrive. And slowly, quietly, the community balance sheet starts to tip.

The costs don't disappear. They just move, often onto children, families, philanthropists, and taxpayers.

The Reality of Tradeoffs

So before we play, there's one more thing we need to say out loud. Every community decision comes with a tradeoff.

Choosing one thing often means delaying, downsizing, or saying no to something else. And choosing nothing or not choosing, or waiting, is still a choice.

It usually means:

- Paying more later.
- Fixing fewer problems.
- And limiting opportunity for the next generation.

So the real question becomes: Where do our decisions matter most before the unraveling begins?

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Why a Game?

So why are we about to play a game? Because games allow us to confront hard truths before crisis forces our hand.

Games:

- Tame complexity
- Level the room
- Shift debate from opinion to evidence
- Make tradeoffs visible
- Turn agreement into ownership

They give us permission to wrestle with difficult decisions without blame, politics, or perfect answers.

This game isn't about winning. It's about *seeing*.

- Seeing how issues intersect.
- Seeing where leverage points exist.
- Seeing how one decision can intersect across an entire community.

What This Game Is — and Is Not

Let's set expectations. This game is:

- A decision simulator
- A systems-thinking exercise
- A way to surface shared priorities

This game is not:

- A test of expertise
- A competition
- A judgment of any one organization

You don't have to be an expert to play this well. In fact, curiosity and open-mindedness matters more than credentials here.

How to Think While You Play

As you play, we'll ask you to keep one question front and center: Where would a decision create the biggest intersecting effects?

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You'll see cards that represent real conditions... statistics, observations, and perceptions. Your task is not to place the card where the pain shows up.

Your task is to place the card where you believe an upstream decision could change the system that creates the pain.

Ask yourselves:

- Is this a cause or a symptom?
- What happens if we don't act here?
- Which system absorbs the cost if this goes unaddressed?
- Who benefits now and who benefits later?

About the Cards

One important note before we start: The cards are intentionally unlabeled. That's because the learning doesn't come from the card. It comes from the conversation about where it belongs.

And remember, statistics are abstract. But they're made up of real people:

- Real neighbors.
- Real children.
- Real workers.
- Real businesses.

Setting the Intention

At the end of this game, we are not looking for perfect answers. We are looking for alignment. Alignment before crisis. Alignment before unraveling. Alignment while there is still room to choose.

Because when communities align early:

- Resources go further.
- Outcomes improve.
- And fewer people fall through the cracks.

This game is not the outcome. It's the mechanism that helps us decide, together, where upstream action matters most.

With that... Let's play.



FACILITATOR LANGUAGE THAT WORKS

Use these exact phrases, they keep things grounded:

- Is this a cause or a symptom?
- What happens if we don't act here?
- Which decision reduces demand on other systems?
- Who benefits now and who later?
- How would addressing this create resources for other issues
- What would be the benefit to the individual? Community?

COMMON PITFALLS & HOW TO HANDLE THEM

If people argue categories:

Multiple answers can be true, choose where intervention which creates the most significant prevention.

If people get stuck downstream:

What would prevent this from happening in the first place?

If someone dominates:

Let's hear from someone who hasn't spoken yet.

If people want more data:

More data won't change the system, decisions will. Often we over emphasize data expansion or re-proof which slows action

THE MOST IMPORTANT LINE

The game isn't the outcome. Alignment is.

