



KNOWLEDGE **HUB**

THE SABOTEUR METHOD

A Complete Facilitator's Guide to Running a Community Sabotage Session

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About This Guide

This practical guide gives you everything you need to plan and run a Saboteur Method session with any type of online community — from a small community of practice to a large professional network. No special facilitation training is required.

You will find step-by-step session instructions, timing guides, templates, and advice on when in your community's lifecycle this exercise will have the greatest impact.

At a Glance	Details
Session length	90–120 minutes (can be run in 60 minutes with a tighter group)
Ideal group size	6–20 participants (larger groups should break into sub-teams)
Works online?	Yes — fully adaptable for virtual facilitation (see Section 4)
Best for	Community managers, facilitators, founding members, steering groups
You will need	Sticky notes or digital whiteboard, a flipchart or shared doc, a timer

Section 1: What Is the Saboteur Method and Why Does It Work?

The Saboteur Method is a structured facilitation exercise rooted in the principle of inversion: instead of asking how to make your community succeed, you ask how to make it fail spectacularly, completely, and in vivid detail.

The resulting list of 'community murder' tactics is then flipped into a practical Success Protocol: a concrete set of conditions and behaviours your community must have to thrive.

The Psychology Behind It

Our brains are wired to spot danger more readily than opportunity. When asked 'what makes a great community?', people often produce vague, aspirational answers. When asked 'how would you destroy this community in 90 days?', the same people produce a razor-sharp, highly specific, and often uncomfortably recognisable list within minutes.

This is why the Saboteur Method works where conventional strategy exercises stall. It bypasses optimism bias and unlocks the group's lived experience of what actually goes wrong in communities.

What the Exercise Produces

- A shared diagnosis — the group surfaces real problems without blame or defensiveness.
- A Success Protocol — every sabotage behaviour, flipped, becomes a non-negotiable condition for community health.
- Psychological safety in the room — laughing about failure together creates trust.
- A prioritised action list — the group identifies which failure modes their community is most at risk of right now.

Section 2: When to Run It. The Community Lifecycle Guide

The Saboteur Method is not a one-time exercise. It can and should be revisited at different points in a community's life.

Below is a guide to the four key moments when it delivers the greatest value.

Stage	Timing	When to Run	Why It Works
Stage 1 Launching	Weeks 1–8	Run BEFORE launch or within the first 8 weeks	Surfaces fatal design flaws before habits form. Ideal for founding team + early members.
Stage 2 Growing	Months 3–9	When growth stalls or first signs of disengagement appear	Re-energises the strategy and identifies friction that has crept in as membership scales.
Stage 3 Mature	Annual review	As part of your annual community health review	Prevents complacency, surfaces blind spots, and refreshes facilitator teams.
Stage 4 At Risk	Immediately	When engagement has dropped significantly or the community feels 'stuck'	Creates urgency and a shared diagnosis without blame — ideal for rebuilding motivation.

Avoid running this session during a period of significant organisational turbulence (redundancies, restructuring).

The 'killing the community' framing can land badly when people already feel anxious about their roles. Wait until the dust settles, then use it as a rebuilding tool.

A Note on Community Type

The Saboteur Method works for every type of online community. Here is how to adapt the framing for different contexts:

Community Type	Adapt the Framing To...
Community of Practice	Focus sabotage on knowledge-sharing failure: 'How do we stop anyone ever sharing a useful insight?'
Working / Steering Group	Focus on psychological safety: 'How do we make sure no one trusts this space with a real question?'
Membership Association	Focus on value and retention: 'How do we ensure members cancel within 3 months?'
Project Community	Focus sabotage on information access and coordination failure: 'How do we make sure no one can find the latest documents or knows the project status?'
Training Programme	Focus on relevance: 'How do we make this feel completely useless to anyone's career or development?'
Document Store Group	Focus sabotage on access, organisation, and version control failure: 'How do we ensure every document is duplicated, out-of-date, and impossible to find in a search?'

Section 3: Running the Session

Step-by-Step

The session is structured in five steps. The full version runs in 90–120 minutes. A 'sprint' version can be delivered in 60 minutes by combining Steps 2 and 3 and limiting discussion time.

Step 1

Set the Scene & Establish Psychological Safety | 10 minutes

Open by explaining that this is a safe, creative space. No idea is too extreme. The wilder, the better — the exercise only works if people feel free to voice the things they'd never say in a normal strategy meeting.

Say something like:

"Today, we are going to be deliberate villains. Your only job is to help me murder this community — completely and efficiently. Nothing is off the table. The more honest and specific you are, the more valuable this exercise will be."

Reassure the group: everything said stays in the room in its 'sabotage' form. The outputs will be translated into positive actions before they leave.

Step 2

The Sabotage Brainstorm | 20–25 minutes

Divide participants into small groups of 3–5. Give each group a specific 'sabotage theme' to focus on (see the four themes below). Each group has 15 minutes to generate as many community-killing ideas as possible.

Theme	Brainstorm Prompt	Key Questions to Spark Ideas
Theme A The Door (Onboarding & Access)	How would you make joining this community as painful and confusing as possible?	How long can you make the joining process? What would you do on Day 1 to make them regret joining?
Theme B The Atmosphere (Safety & Culture)	How would you make this community feel hostile, surveilled, or unwelcoming?	Who would you invite in to make people nervous? What rules would you enforce most aggressively?
Theme C The Content (Engagement & Value)	How would you ensure that nothing posted here is ever useful, readable, or engaging?	What would you post? How often? In what format? What would you never allow members to share?
Theme D The Manager (Sustainability & Burnout)	How would you design a community management role that guarantees burnout within 6 months?	What targets would you set? What support would you remove? What would you do at 3am?

Facilitator tip: after 10 minutes, call a '5-minute warning' and ask each group to add their single most devastating idea — the thing they'd be most embarrassed to admit they've seen happen in a real community.

Step 3

Gallery Share & Collective Groaning | 15–20 minutes

Bring the full group back together. Each sub-group shares its top 5 sabotage ideas. As a facilitator, capture these on a shared board or screen in four columns — one per theme.

This is where the laughter happens and where the discomfort lives. Encourage both. When someone says 'oh, we actually do that', note it without judgment. That is the exercise working.

Watch for 'that's too real' moments — when a sabotage idea describes something currently happening in your community. Do not gloss over these. Circle them. They are your highest-priority action items.

Ask the group to vote on the top 3 most recognisable sabotage behaviours, the ones that feel closest to reality. Use dot stickers (in person) or emoji reactions (online).

Step 4

The Flip — From Sabotage to Success Protocol | 20–25 minutes

Now comes the transformation. Working through each sabotage idea (prioritising the top-voted ones), the group flips each one into a positive condition. Use this simple format:

The Flip Formula

"We would sabotage by... → Therefore we must..."

Example:

Sabotage: "Force everyone to introduce themselves publicly before they've read a single post."

Flip: "Allow new members to observe and orient for at least 48 hours before any expectation of participation. Create a low-stakes first contribution option."

Aim to flip at least 8–10 sabotage ideas during the session. These become the first draft of your Community Success Protocol, a living document that can be revisited and expanded.

Step 5

Prioritise & Commit to Action | 15 minutes

With your flipped list on screen, ask the group to prioritise the top 3 actions they want to take immediately. Use this framework to structure the conversation:

Priority Category	Criteria
Fix Now	This failure mode is actively happening. We need to act this week.
Build In	This condition is missing from our design. We need to add it in the next 30 days.
Protect	We do this well. We need to make sure we don't accidentally lose it as we grow.

Assign an owner and a deadline to each 'Fix Now' and 'Build In' action before the session closes. Without this step, the session remains a conversation rather than a catalyst.

Close the session by asking each participant to share one word describing how they now feel about their community. This brings the energy back from critique to ownership.

Section 4: Running It Online: The Virtual Facilitator's Checklist

The Saboteur Method works just as effectively in a virtual setting. Here is how to adapt each step for an online session.

Session Element	Virtual Adaptation
Brainstorm groups	Use breakout rooms (Teams, Meet, Zoom). Pre-assign participants before the session starts to save time.
Sticky note capture	Use Miro, Mural, or a shared Online Document. Prepare a template with four columns (one per theme) in advance.
Voting on top ideas	Use the emoji reaction feature in your video platform, or a simple poll in Mentimeter or Slido.
Gallery share	Each group screenshares their section of the board for 3 minutes. Appoint a note-taker to capture highlights in a shared doc simultaneously.
The Flip	Use a shared Online Document . Display the Flip Formula on screen. Ask participants to type their flips directly into the doc.
Action commitments	End with a 'commitment round' in the chat: each participant types one action they will take in the next 7 days. Screenshot and share afterwards.
Energy management	Build in a 5-minute break after Step 3. Online sessions fatigue faster than in-person. Keep total time to 90 minutes maximum.

Section 5: Ready-to-Use Templates

Template A — Pre-Session Invitation Email

Subject: You're invited to help us murder our community (it's a strategy session, we promise)

Hi [Name],

I'd like to invite you to a different kind of strategy session. On [Date], we are running a 90-minute workshop called The Saboteur Method — and your job will be to help us work out exactly how to destroy [Community Name].

No, we haven't lost the plot. This is a proven technique for uncovering the real conditions that make communities work — by first identifying, in vivid detail, everything that makes them fail.

No preparation needed. Just bring your honest experience of what's worked, what hasn't, and what secretly worries you about our community.

[Date | Time | Location / Video Link]

See you there — and start thinking like a villain.

[Your Name]

Template B — The Saboteur Session Agenda

Time	Activity
0:00 – 0:10	Welcome & psychological safety framing
0:10 – 0:30	Sabotage brainstorm in sub-groups (4 themes)
0:30 – 0:50	Gallery share & collective voting on top ideas
0:50 – 1:10	The Flip — translating sabotage into Success Protocol
1:10 – 1:25	Prioritise actions: Fix Now / Build In / Protect
1:25 – 1:30	Closing round — one word on how you feel about the community now

Template C — The Community Success Protocol (Output Document)

Use this template to capture and share the outputs of the session with your wider community leadership team.

Community Success Protocol

[Community Name] | Saboteur Session | [Date]

Top Sabotage Findings

The three failure modes our community is most at risk of:

1. [Failure mode 1]
2. [Failure mode 2]
3. [Failure mode 3]

Our Success Protocol

The conditions we commit to maintaining:

4. [Flipped condition 1]
5. [Flipped condition 2]
6. [Flipped condition 3]

Actions agreed

Action	Owner & Deadline
[Fix Now action 1]	[Name] — by [Date]
[Fix Now action 2]	[Name] — by [Date]
[Build In action 1]	[Name] — by [Date]

Section 6: Facilitator Tips & Troubleshooting

If the group is too polite and won't go dark enough...

This is the most common challenge, especially in hierarchical or risk-averse organisations. Try these techniques:

- Ask the quietest person in the room: 'What's the thing nobody is saying yet?'
- Reference a real example from another organisation (not your own) to give permission: 'I once saw a community where the manager banned people for using the wrong font in a post...'
- Go first yourself — share a sabotage idea that is self-incriminating and slightly embarrassing. It signals that honesty is safe.

If someone takes the exercise too literally or gets defensive...

Occasionally, a participant may feel that the session is criticising their work, especially if they are the community manager. Acknowledge this directly:

"This exercise is not about blame — it's about system design. Every community has these failure modes built in by default. Our job today is to see them clearly so we can design them out."

If the group gets stuck on the 'Flip'...

The transition from sabotage to success can feel jarring. Use these prompts to help:

- 'If this is what failure looks like, what does the opposite look like in practice — not in theory?'
- 'What would a new member need to experience in their first week for this failure to never happen?'
- 'Who in this room has seen a community do this well? What did they actually do differently?'

Running it with senior stakeholders or leadership teams

The Saboteur Method works brilliantly as a or senior leadership exercise, but the framing needs slight adjustment. Emphasise the strategic intelligence value:

"This exercise is used by community strategists and organisational designers to stress-test community investments before they fail publicly. We are going to spend 90 minutes being ruthlessly honest so that we don't spend the next 18 months wondering why engagement never grew."

After the session: keeping the momentum

- Share the Community Success Protocol with all participants within 48 hours of the session.
- Post a brief summary in your community itself — members love knowing that leadership is thinking strategically about their experience.
- Schedule a 30-day review to check progress on the 'Fix Now' actions.
- Plan to run the session again at your next major lifecycle moment (see Section 2).



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