The term the "ground game" likely evokes different images and meanings for different folks. Within the context of this paper – **The e2 Ground Game** – it is specific to the most foundational tactics attributed within e2's Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Building and Operations Framework.

The e2 Ground Game
By Don Macke

The term "ground game" instills a sense of practical and impactful tactics, well-executed and guided by a smart strategy. Whether we are focused on a military campaign, sporting event or sales push, the ground game is where the rubber hits the road and either yields outcomes or comes up short. In entrepreneurship, the ground game is where communities reach out to their area's entrepreneurial talent, engage with them, build trusting relationships, listen and learn about their development needs and wants and network them to relevant resources and assistance.

Background and Introduction

Our strategy paper – **The e2 Ground Game** – is a must for any community pursuing entrepreneur-led community economic development. The ground game is at the heart of any well-performing and impactful entrepreneurial ecosystem. This paper is organized into the following topics:

A. Essential Context:
   a. The Case for an Entrepreneurial Ground Game
   b. Remember the Prosperity Community Change Model
   c. The Foundational e2 Basic Transaction
B. Lessons from Ord, Nebraska:
   a. Remember Bob's Advice
   b. The Ground Game and Deal Flow
   c. Transformative Change Realized
C. Entrepreneurial Strategies:
   a. Pull Strategies
   b. Push Strategies
   c. Lessons from Sirolli's Enterprise Facilitation
D. A High-Performing Ground Game:
   a. Components
   b. Key Plays
   c. Operational Considerations
E. Conclusion – Scale Up and Sustain

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e2 – Entrepreneurial Ecosystems by NetWork Kansas

ENTREPRENEURIAL ECOSYSTEMS

For nearly 45 years we have been learning from communities across North America and throughout the world about entrepreneur-focused community economic development. Over a quarter of a century ago, early thought leader Brian Dabson, then with the Corporation of Enterprise Development, made the case that entrepreneurship is the foundation of all community-centered economic development.

Essential Context

Before we dive too deeply into our primary topic, the e2 Ground Game, there is a little context helpful to committing to the ground game. In this section of our paper, we provide the following three contextual considerations:

1. The Case for an Entrepreneurial Ground Game
2. Remember the Prosperity Community Change Model
3. The Foundational e2 Basic Transaction

The Case for an Entrepreneurial Ground Game. If we have heard this statement once, we have heard it a thousand times over the years from struggling communities:

> *We offer lots of programs and provide a wide range of resources for our entrepreneurs. But few show up and take advantage of all our community offers. How do we reach entrepreneurs?*

Consider this:

- ✓ Entrepreneurs are busy.
- ✓ They are not sure who we are.
- ✓ They are not sure we can help them.
- ✓ Our programs and resources do not match up with their needs and wants.
- ✓ They want someone to understand where they are and what they are trying to do.

The ground game is an important solution to all these reasons why we are not connecting with our community's entrepreneurial talent. There are five main rationales why your community should commit to and invest in a robust and sustained e2 ground game:

1. It is your answer to smart entrepreneur outreach and engagement.
2. It is your quickest route to community economic development outcomes and impacts.
3. It creates positive reputation on the street, driving other entrepreneurs to you.
4. With success, you can generate deeper community commitment and support.
5. All other elements in an entrepreneurial ecosystem center around the ground game.

We can say more about the challenges of engaging with entrepreneurs at the community level, rooted in field-realized hard knocks. But consider how you make the case to your community for embracing and making real your entrepreneurial ground game.

Remember the Prosperity Community Change Model. Our experience at e2 is clear and compelling. When we increase entrepreneurial behavior in our community through the ground game, we set in motion a whole set of desired outcomes as illustrated in Figure 1. Ultimately, as is the case in Ord, Nebraska, this game plan drives increasing prosperity and the opportunity to support expanded ecosystem building and operation through community philanthropy.

Figure 1. e2 Community Prosperity Change Model Illustrated
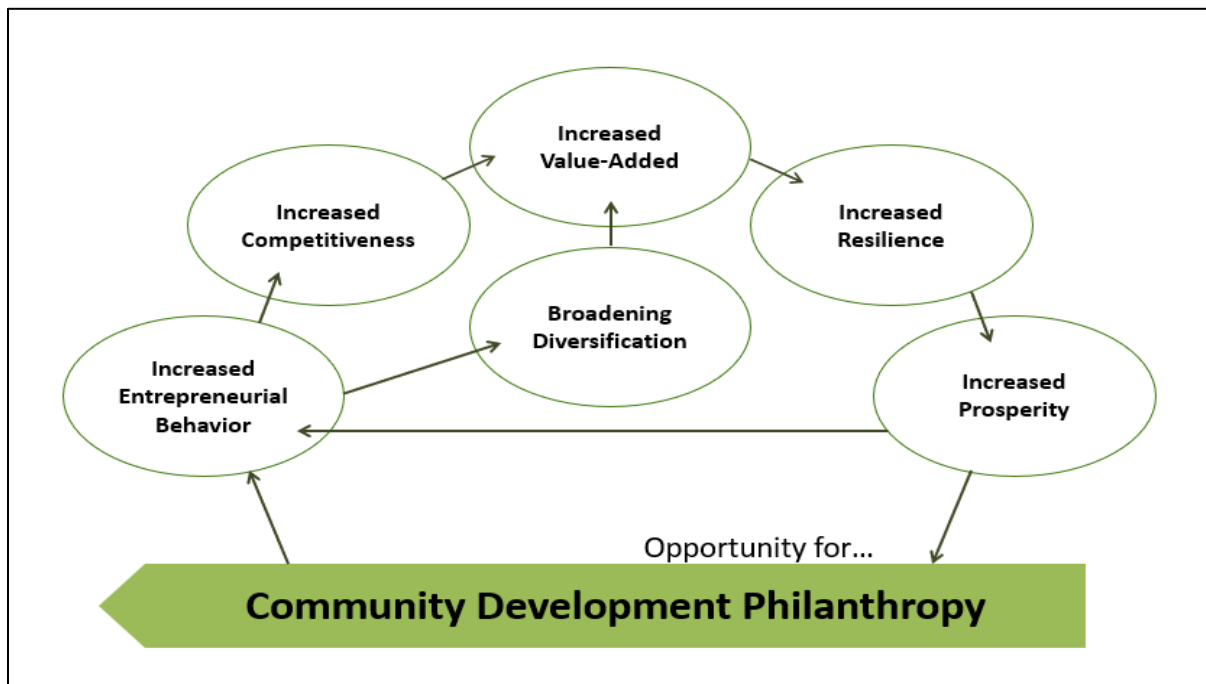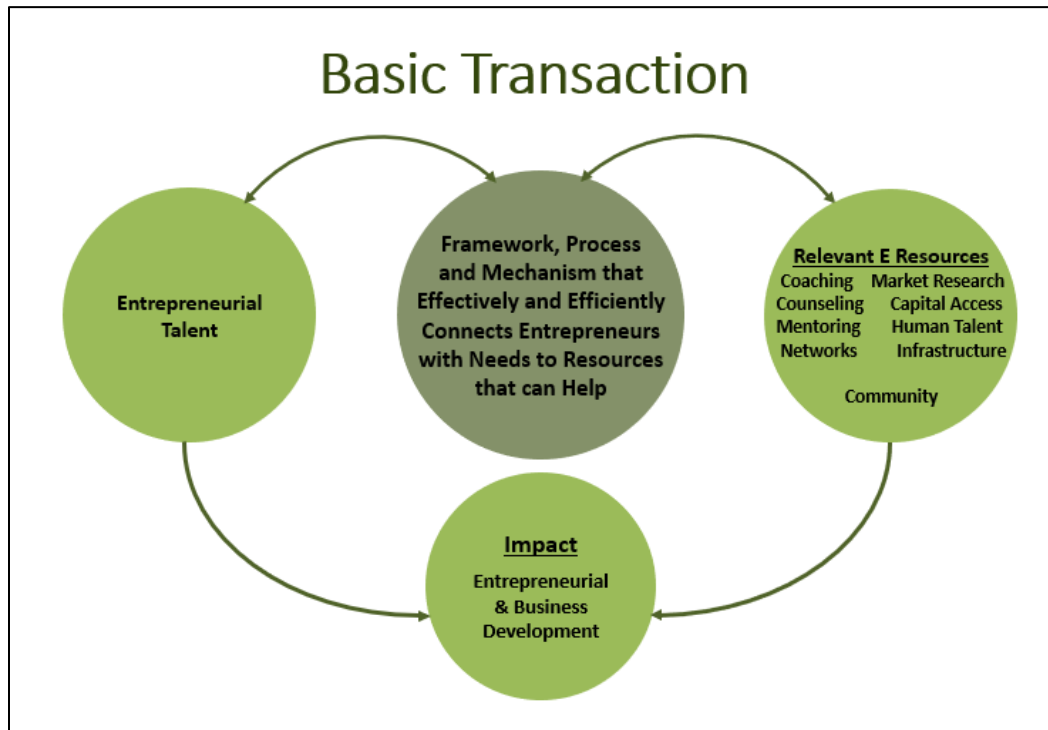

The Foundational e2 Basic Transaction. Most communities struggle with entrepreneurial ecosystem-building and operations. In some many ways we make this work way too complicated. Core to the ground game and making this work more focused, strategic and impactful, is embracing the "Basic Transaction" illustrated in Figure 2 on the next page.

As Andy Stoll with the **Kauffman Foundation** has been known to say:

>   *Every community has entrepreneurial talent.*
>   *Every community has access to entrepreneurial resources.*
>   *But every community does not have a strong entrepreneurial ecosystem.*

The role a community plays in discovering the needs and wants of its entrepreneurs, and when possible, networking them to relevant resources at the right time, right fit and right cost is central to the ground game. This concierge or networking function is rooted in this "e2 Basic Transaction."

Figure 2. e2's Basic Transaction Illustrated

Basic Transaction

- Entrepreneurial Talent
- Framework, Process and Mechanism that Effectively and Efficiently Connects Entrepreneurs with Needs to Resources that can Help
- **Relevant E Resources**
  Coaching   Market Research
  Counseling   Capital Access
  Mentoring   Human Talent
  Networks   Infrastructure

  Community
- **Impact**
  Entrepreneurial & Business Development

When your community generates "deal flow" and desired community economic development outcomes (e.g. new investment, jobs, better jobs, broader local tax bases, etc.) and impacts (e.g. increasing marketplace competitiveness, more income, greater diversity, more rooted wealth, etc.), you have the potential to increase community buy-in and support. Real development takes robust game plans, funding, staffing and community engagement.

"If you want to be successful, it's just this simple. Know what you are doing. Love what you are doing. And believe in what you are doing."

Will Rogers

Before we go deeper into the e2 Ground Game, let's reflect a bit on Ord, Nebraska, and the lessons we have learned from this best-in-class rural community over the past 25 years.

ENTREPRENEURIAL ECOSYSTEMS

Communities from the largest – New York City or Los Angeles – to the smaller communities like Keene, New Hampshire; Hillsboro, Kansas; and Ord, Nebraska face similar ground game challenges and opportunities. e2 has worked with and tracked longer and in more detail Ord, Nebraska, compared to other communities. Ord and its Valley County region illustrate the transformative power of entrepreneur-focused community economic development and the all-powerful role of the **e2 Ground Game**.

Lessons from Ord, Nebraska

Ord, population about 2,000 anchoring a very rural frontier region of population approximately 10,000, has been our learning and innovation partner for more than 25 years. We encourage communities to **study Ord** to learn how this very typical rural community has achieved transformative success. Our section on *Lessons from Ord, Nebraska* is organized into the following three parts:

1. Remember Bob's Advice
2. The Ground Game and Deal Flow
3. Transformative Change Realized

Remember Bob's Advice. Robert Stowell is a legacy leader in Ord and this rural region of Nebraska. He is an attorney and was a guest on Pathways to Rural Prosperity Podcast: Episode 29 in February 2022. During this podcast session, e2 asked Bob to share his three most important pieces of advice for other communities. He did not hesitate and shared the following advice, summarized in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Bob's Advice to Other Communities Summarized

Empowering Leadership	**Real Investment**	**Entrepreneurship**
First and foremost, Bob believes in empowering leadership. With empowering leaders, resident agency grows, leading to diverse and powerful development agendas.	Ord has invested over $250 million over the past two decades in its development. Bob believes that it takes real investment to generate transformative development.	For rural communities like Ord, Bob is convinced that focusing on area entrepreneurs with an effective ground game generates results and grows a better ecosystem.

The Ground Game and Deal Flow. Based on our Ord Story Capture, we have documented more than 100 entrepreneurial development deals representing about $150 million of new investment since the early 2000s. The vast majority of these deals are with locally-owned and operated smaller businesses where the ground game has made the difference. When Ord fielded a strong ground game, daily reaching out to and assisting area entrepreneurs, deal flow was stronger and better despite macro-economic conditions such as farm booms and busts, national recessions and expansions and even the Pandemic.

Transformative Change Realized. Figure 4 summarizes the indicators e2 employs with entrepreneurial communities across America.

Figure 4. Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Performance Indicators

Leading	**Lagging**	**Transformative**
Leading indicators, such as a smart E-Strategy, staffing and an emerging ground game indicate that a community is moving in the right direction to become an entrepreneurial community.	Lagging indicators, such as increasing deal flow, job creation and a focus on economic diversification indicate that a community is making progress toward becoming an entrepreneurial community.	Transformative indicators, including a more prosperous economy, material economic diversification and enhanced socio-economic resiliency indicate that a community is an entrepreneurial community.

Entrepreneurial transformative indicators are rooted in the ***Community Prosperity Change Model*** (refer to Figure 1 on page 3) including:

- ✓ Increasing Entrepreneurial Behavior Envisioning Development
- ✓ Expanding Community Agency Empowering Development
- ✓ Rising Individual and Venture Competitiveness
- ✓ Socio-Economic Diversification
- ✓ Increasing Value within the Community's Economy
- ✓ Enhancing Individual, Venture and Community Resilience
- ✓ Deepening Household, Venture and Community Wealth

Why is Transformative Change So Important?

For too many rural communities and urban neighborhoods there is chronic and severe decline and even crisis. A little, good community economic development is insufficient to pivot these struggling communities to pathways to prosperity. Transformative development bends and even repositions trend lines. Smart, robust and sustained entrepreneur-led development can empower transformative community change.

Our next stop is an overview of entrepreneurial strategies and how the ground game, or the primary push strategy within any entrepreneurial game plan, can drive deal flow and desired economic development impacts.

Communities, regions, states and nations can get lost in all the possible entrepreneurial programs and resources. This "supply side" orientation has a place in high-performing entrepreneurial ecosystems. But, for most rural communities, regions and even states/providences, there are basic strategy elements that drive outcomes and impacts.

Entrepreneurial Strategies

Smart entrepreneur-focused economic development requires opportunity-centered and asset-based development strategies and tactics. This section of our paper is organized into the following three parts:

1. Pull Strategies
2. Push Strategies
3. Lessons from Sirolli's Enterprise Facilitation

We begin with Figure 5 providing definitions for "pull" and "push" entrepreneurial strategies and tactics.

Figure 5. Entrepreneurial Pull and Push Strategies and Tactics Defined

Strategies "…a plan of action or policy designed to achieve a major or overall aim." Oxford Languages	Tactics "…an action carefully planned to achieve a specific end." Or realize a strategy. Oxford Languages & e2
Push Strategies and Tactics Push activities include reaching out to entrepreneurs and engaging with them as in e2's ground game.	**Pull Strategies and Tactics** Pull strategies attract entrepreneurs to assets such as access to capital, business services or other forms of assistance.

In high-performing entrepreneurial ecosystems both "push" and "pull" strategies and tactics are at work at the same time.

Pull Strategies. Pull strategies and tactics include:

- ✓ Relevant Resources Meeting the Needs and Wants of Entrepreneurs
- ✓ Active Access through Cost-Sharing Programs to Area Business Services and Mentors
- ✓ Access to Venture Right-Fit Capital

Push Strategies. Push strategies and tactics can include:
- ✓ Marketing and Communication Campaigns
- ✓ Venture-to-Venture Events
- ✓ Information Shared in Local Media, Websites and Resource Directories

All of these tactics are important, but do not generate the same level of entrepreneurial engagement as the ground game. Elements of the e2 Ground Game include:

Entrepreneurial Talent Mapping
  Targeting for Outreach
    Effective One-on-One Outreach
      Visitation & Surveying
        Helpful Assistance
          Relationship Building
            Creation of Trust
              Client Development
                Portfolio Creation
                  Transformative Assistance
                    e2 Reputation

The e2 Ground Game stimulates and creates entrepreneurial deal flow and development, versus more passive approaches that depend on entrepreneurs reaching out for help. The e2 Ground Game is an accelerator driving more and better outcomes and impacts.

Lessons from Sirolli's Enterprise Facilitation. Ernest Sirolli is among the pioneers of community-centered entrepreneurial development. His early work with Italian International Development in Africa evolved an entrepreneurial development framework and early ground game. Ernesto's work found its way to the United States, Canada and parts of the European Union. Sirolli's concept of **Enterprise Facilitation** preceded NetWork Kansas' Entrepreneurship Community Partnership and greatly informed e2's Entrepreneurial Development Framework and ground game approach. Enterprise Facilitation is defined by the Sirolli Institute as:

"Enterprise Facilitators are locally trained professionals who provide free and confidential support to entrepreneurs within a client community or a community of intent for as long as it takes to succeed."

A primary difference between Enterprise Facilitation and e2's Ground Game is responsive versus pro-active mapping, targeting and outreach to entrepreneurs. e2 embraces pro-active, and even strategic entrepreneurial outreach as foundational to its ground game. Learn more about **Ernesto Sirolli, the Sirolli Institute and Enterprise Facilitation TM**.

Our next stop is a deeper diver into a high-performing ground game.

Like a broken record, at e2 we are convinced that the most important strategy element in any entrepreneurial ecosystem is a professional, robust and sustained ground game. This is true of any "human development" activity, including entrepreneurship. While our desired outcomes are vibrant and growing ventures creating investment, jobs and tax bases, the key is energizing entrepreneurial talent rooted in people in our community.

A High-Performing Ground Game

We have made the case for an entrepreneurial ground game and defined it within the e2 Development Framework. In this section of our paper our content is organized into the following parts:

1. Components
2. Key Players
3. Operational Considerations

Components. The following visualization illustrates the key components of a ground game:

Figure 6. e2's Ground Game Visualized
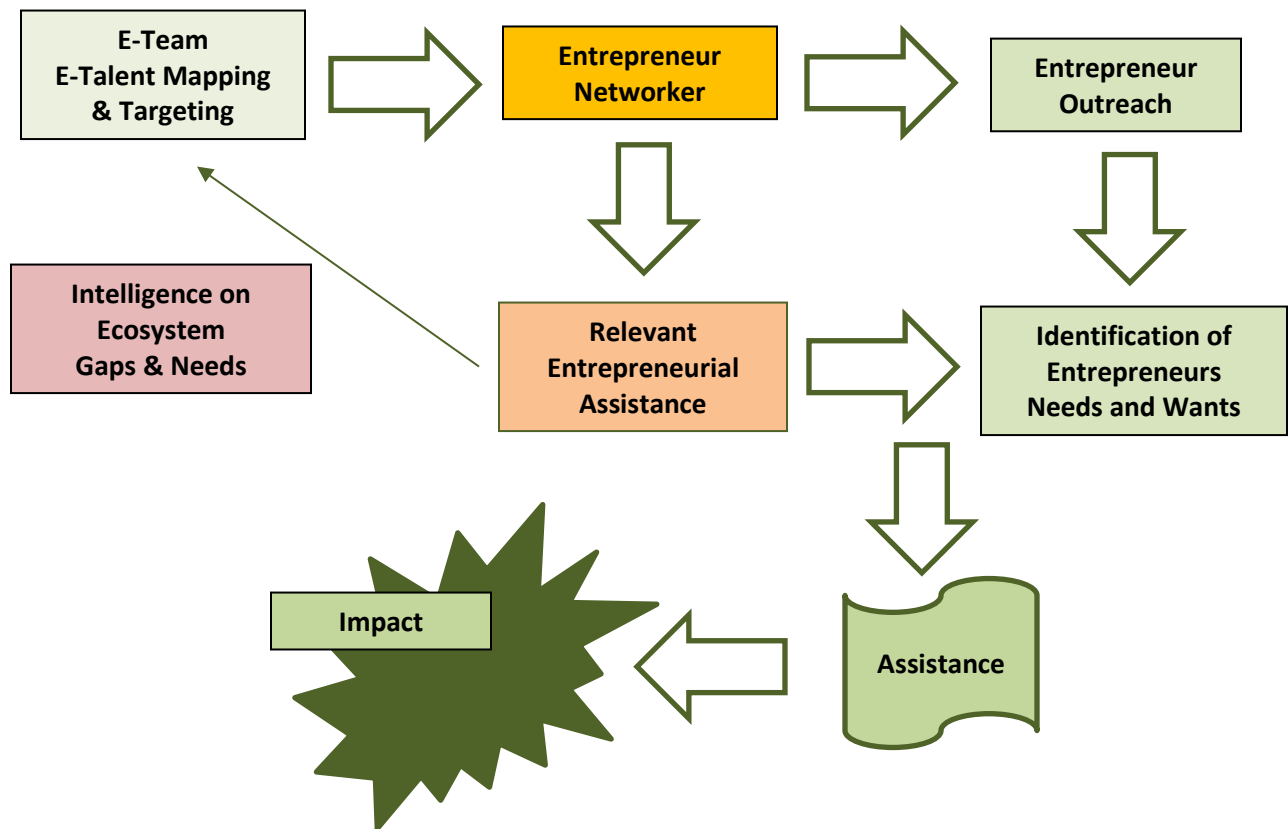
The e2 Ground Game begins with an E-Team working group aligned with the Resource Networker (See: Figure 6 on previous page). This group of volunteers, leaders and community builders connected to key cooperating stakeholder groups, provides knowledge and guidance for entrepreneurial talent mapping, targeting and portfolio management. They work closely with the compensated Resource Networker (RN). The RN, employing entrepreneur outreach targeting, connects with entrepreneurs. The RN's job is to establish trusting relationships. Employing strategic listening, the RN helps entrepreneurs clarify their most important needs and wants, and then works to connect the entrepreneur to relevant resources. This is not a "one and done" activity. Based on the E-Team Portfolio targeting, the RN maintains communication with entrepreneurial clients creating opportunities for further conversations and networking to resources. This ground game process generates deal flow and ultimately community economic development impacts. Additionally, the ground game provides critically important market intelligence around the strengths and weaknesses in a community's entrepreneurial ecosystem resources.

Key Players. Well defined, properly matched and satisfying volunteer jobs enhance a community's ability to attract and retain engagement in their entrepreneurship work. Early professional and compensated staffing is foundational to early success and sustained effort over time. This paper provides one-page job descriptions for three early stage e2 paid positions and five core volunteer positions. This list is rooted in field-tested experience from communities like yours.

The following e2 job descriptions are including in this paper:

1. Likely Paid Positions:

    a. Coordinator
    b. Resource Navigator
    c. TA Matching Grant Program Manager

Early in e2 work, a community may not have commitment and funding for these three positions. It is possible to incorporate all three jobs into one full-time position with the following allocation of time:

➤ 20% - e2 Coordinator
➤ 60% - Resource Navigator
➤ 20% - TA Matching Grant Program Manager

2. Likely Volunteer Positions:

    a. E-Team Co-Leaders
    b. E-Team Members
    c. Documenter
    d. Working Team Members
    e. Technology Coordinator

The following provides short descriptions for each of these eight key players:

e2 Community Coordinator. The community coordinator serves as a bridge between the community, the community host organization, and the community coach.

Entrepreneur Networker. The Resource Networker (RN) is a career-tracked professional position foundational for any entrepreneur ecosystem. There are other titles used including Resource Navigator, Entrepreneur Concierge and Business Assistance Coordinator. The RN is foundational to a community's **E-Ground Game**, which in turn is foundational to a successful entrepreneur-focused game plan.

Program Manager(s). When a community has defined entrepreneurial programs, there is a need for program management including engaging and supporting necessary volunteers. Likely early stage programs include:

- Mentors
- Technical Assistance Cost-Sharing
- Gap Financing

E-Team Co-Leaders. We recommend co-leaders for the E-Team. These leaders convene the group, guide action planning, recruit members to provide leadership for key activities. With co-leaders we have greater capacity and duplication. The co-leaders work together to ensure the E-Team is high performing and engaged in doing the E-Work.

E-Team Member. The core team is the primary leadership team, composed of committed and passionate champions. Core team members serve as an executive leadership team working to ensure that the community's game plan is designed, developed, and executed. Core team members help the community create a vision for this work, engage others, and then lead and guide to ensure coordination and effective execution. Core team members do *not* do all the work themselves.

Documenter. The role of the community documenter is to capture the evolving story of the initiative – key activities undertaken, commitments made by individuals and organizations, and testimonials/stories from entrepreneurs of the impact the community has had on their businesses. In addition, the documenter helps to gather agreed upon metrics – measures of success – that describe the overall impact of the work and that can be shared with stakeholders and the community more broadly. Note: This role can be more than one person.

Working Team Members. Team members are recruited based on their willingness and ability to help achieve the outcomes of these groups (described below). The plan is that these working groups are temporary and ultimately their work finds a permanent home. For the E-Outreach working group, the work of identifying and reaching out to entrepreneurs should become the mission and role of a stakeholder or group of stakeholders coordinated by one organization. The E-Resources working group evolves into the community's Entrepreneur Resource Network (ERN), comprising both private and public entrepreneur resource providers managed by a host organization.

Technology Coordinator. Using a hybrid community engagement approach involving community site visits and technology (e.g., web-based information sharing folders, conference calls, video calls, and webinars) to enable remote meetings and communication is essential. Both the sponsoring organization

and the community should have a technology coordinator who can facilitate these remote connections and help to build the capacity and comfort level in the community for accessing resources remotely. While the technology coordinator will help to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of community engagement related to this specific initiative, this experience should help the community feel less isolated from innovation and resources that might be useful in other aspects of the community's development.

Operational Considerations. We strongly recommend that every community first commits to entrepreneur-focused community economic development, and then commits to an *Entrepreneurial Ground Game*. We offer the following operational considerations as your community moves from commitment to action to impact:

1. Serious Commitment to Entrepreneur-Focused Community Economic Development
2. Robust Commitment to the Entrepreneurial Ground Game
3. Create a Ground Game Working Team
4. Hire an Entrepreneur Networker
5. Complete Entrepreneurial Talent Mapping and Targeting
6. Design and Implement Entrepreneur Outreach
7. Begin Networking Entrepreneurs to Relevant Resources
8. Learn from Working with Entrepreneurs to Identify Ecosystem Building Priorities
9. Grow Entrepreneurial Clients, Generate Deal Flow and Create a Portfolio System
10. Evolve Your Resource Network

Next, let's explore in detail each of these actions in our 10-point action plan:

Step 1 - Serious Commitment to Entrepreneur-Focused Community Economic Development. The starting point is a serious commitment by your community, its development stakeholders and a leadership team to entrepreneur-focused community economic development. Commitments stated become real when smart goals are set, investments are made and substantial execution is undertaken.

Step 2 - Robust Commitment to the Entrepreneurial Ground Game. The second most important community commitment is to an entrepreneurial ground game as the heart of your community's entrepreneurial game plan. Pro-actively engaging intelligently with your area's entrepreneurs is the bedrock of any high-performing and impactful entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Step 3 - Create a Ground Game Working Team. This ground game activity is so important we recommend that your community's E-Team create a dedicated Ground Game Working Team to advise and support this activity.

Step 4 - Hire an Entrepreneur Networker. While the ground game can be undertaken with just volunteers, sustaining a highly effective ground game is challenging without dedicated, professional trained and career tracked staff. The Entrepreneur Networker is the number one hire we recommend for an early-stage entrepreneurship initiative.

Step 5 - Complete Entrepreneurial Talent Mapping and Targeting. Use our tools and conduct twice annually for smaller and slower changing communities and quarterly for larger and more dynamic communities, entrepreneurial talent mapping and targeting. Use of these tools and processes by the Ground Game Team and Resource Networker(s) creates more efficient and effective entrepreneurial outreach.

Step 6 - Design and Implement Entrepreneur Outreach. Your community has numerous tactical options for undertaking entrepreneur outreach. In Step 6 your need to explore the options and craft your own entrepreneur outreach game plan, and then begin to execute it religiously.

Step 7 - Begin Networking Entrepreneurs to Relevant Resources. There is no point in doing entrepreneurial outreach unless you are prepared to network entrepreneurs to relevant resources. Remember Sirolli's counsel (inset below). Pairing your outreach with standing up your resource network is core to generating deal flow and impacts.

Ernesto Sirolli's Advice

Ernest Sirolli and his Enterprise Facilitation ground game provides some important advice for all communities in their entrepreneurial ground games. Sirolli counsels that venture success rests with a community's entrepreneurs and we are here to provide meaningful help. It is not our responsibility to find solutions for every need and want of the entrepreneurs with whom we are working. He continues that we should strive to bring value in our assistance where we can, learn where we have gaps and use this to both advance the entrepreneur and the development of our entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Step 8 - Learn from Working with Entrepreneurs to Identify Ecosystem Building Priorities. We advocate "demand driven" entrepreneurial ecosystem building. Focus on those repeating areas of needs and wants based on the entrepreneur you are working with. Remember most of their immediate needs and wants can be met with area business services, mentors and venture-to-venture peer counseling events.

Step 9 - Grow Entrepreneurial Clients, Generate Deal Flow and Create a Portfolio System. Over time your engagement with targeted entrepreneurs will create clients, stimulate deal flow and require an information management system (IMS). At e2 we have a basic resource you can use to not only manage your clients, but also to empower your Entrepreneur Networker and Ground Game Team to prioritize outreach and engagement efforts using our simple scoring system. Remember, there are both commercial and public advanced IMSs available for larger communities.

Step 10 - Evolve Your Resource Network. Be intentional and collaborate regularly with those in your community developing your resource network. Your work with entrepreneurs provides high quality and grounded market intelligence that can inform where you invest into your ecosystem.

Repeat Forever

Community economic development is a 24-7-365 forever community commitment. The ground game has the same reality. The more robust and sustained ground games generate more development opportunities empowering more deal flow and development impacts. This ground game process is not a "one and done" activity. The more a community completes the basic transaction (refer to Figure 2, Page 4), the better your community will become in connecting with your entrepreneurial talent, networking them to relevant assistance and resources and driving more and better deal flow.

Some Recommended Resources

Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Building

https://www.energizingentrepreneurs.org/library/theme-papers/subjects/entrepreneurial-ecosystem-building.html

Community Capacity Building

https://www.energizingentrepreneurs.org/library/theme-papers/subjects/community-capacity-building.html

Ord Story Collection

https://www.energizingentrepreneurs.org/library/theme-papers/subjects/ord-nebraska.html...

Likely Entrepreneurial Development Opportunity Strategy Guides

https://www.energizingentrepreneurs.org/library/theme-papers/subjects/likely-edev-opps.html

Related Podcasts

https://www.energizingentrepreneurs.org/podcast/

For additional resources check out: https://www.energizingentrepreneurs.org/

Time to wrap up and move to conclusion.

Our world and our communities are ever changing. Many would argue that the pace of change is fast and accelerating. Communities either continue to pivot and develop, or risk falling into stagnation and even decline. Committing to an e2 ground game that is active 24/7/365 forever is inherent in impact driving entrepreneurial development.

Conclusion – Scale Up and Sustain

At e2 we have often made the case that even the greatest countries, communities, organizations and corporations often struggle to remain great. There is active churn with the rise and fall of even the best-in-class. Every community in the United States is responsible for its own future and development. The case for entrepreneurship is increasingly clear as the foundational game plan for all community economic development. Evidence from the Ord Case Study and Stories illustrates how entrepreneur-focused development can move a community from deep decline and crisis to vibrancy and greater prosperity. The **e2 Ground Game** is the heart of any entrepreneur-led development. With a smart, vigorous and sustained entrepreneurial ground game, entrepreneurial ecosystems can both perform at a high level, and inform and guide the development of a more relevant and responsive resource network.