

Bootstrapping a Product Council

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<https://www.noordenduurzaam.nl/productcouncils>

This method is based on the congress paper 'Value Excavation', presented during the NBM 2023 congress in Maastricht, The Netherlands. An extended abstract of the paper can be downloaded from the NBM website. The full paper as well as this method description is open access (CC-BY-SA 4.0) available on <https://www.noordenduurzaam.nl/productcouncils>.

Introduction

Circular economy is urgent but progress is slow. To accelerate, new forms of collaboration are needed. One such form is '**task democracy**', a theory for parliamentary transition management, in which 'transition chambers' are added to parliaments. These transition chambers are divided in five sectors with equal voting power: science, citizens, government, businesses and nonprofits. The five sectors have non transferable transition tasks that need overall coordination for synergy and maximum impact. See <https://www.noordenduurzaam.nl/taakdemocratie> for a general introduction.

Applying the task democracy theory to circular economy leads to establishing independent '**product councils**' that focus on a specific product family (like clothing or office furniture) within a governmental region (like a province or a municipality). These product councils perform a threefold duty cycle. First they prioritise circularity and sustainability issues in a shared agenda. Second they initiate area wide transition campaigns for prioritised issues. Third is creating feedback by measuring capitals, trends and impacts.

Given the urgencies, it is crucial that experimenting with new forms of collaboration is relatively easy. To facilitate this, the 'Bootstrapping a Product Council' method provides a **stepwise plan, starting from scratch**. Its purpose is to assist in establishing a regional or local product council that coordinates societal efforts for a circular economy. The bootstrapping method may produce a publicly visible proof of concept and may generate support for next steps in creating a functional product council.

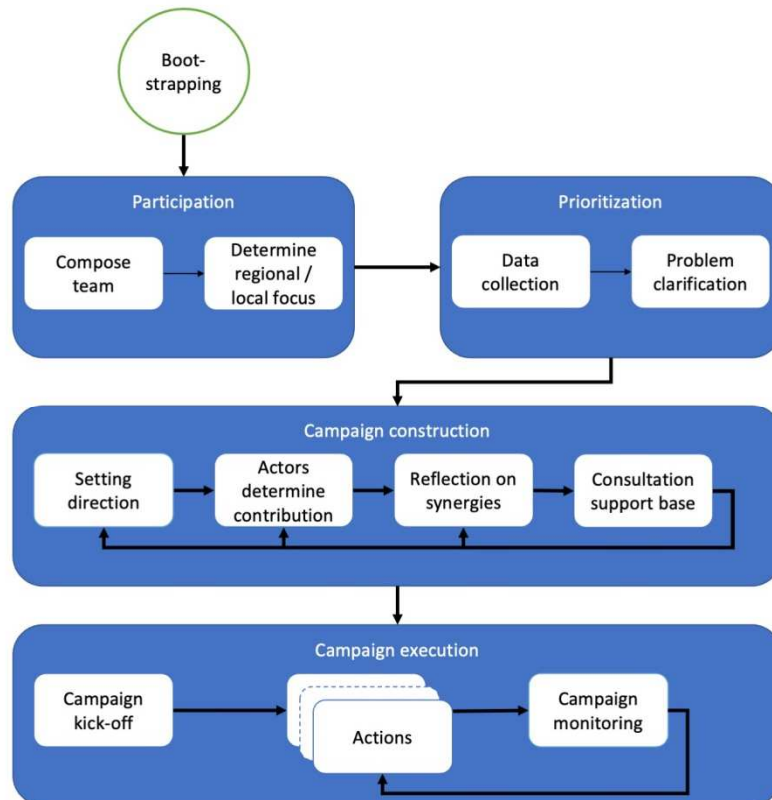
A single product council may be crucial for awareness and change within its geographical region and product family, but its impact will be limited if parts of the upstream or downstream product chain are outside the region. Also, the global economic system won't change much from a single effort in one region. If the concept of product councils is to have significant impact, it will need to spread to many product families and many regions. In order to proliferate, the method should be *integrative* towards top down and bottom up efforts to join these forces. Also, it will need to be *scalable* from local to international, to accommodate for both relatively uncomplicated local chains like food and biobased materials, and for extremely complex globalised products chains like electronic appliances, cars, ships and aeroplanes. Furthermore, it needs to be *diplomatic* as it deals with power distribution between science, citizens/consumers, public administration, businesses and societal provisions. Lastly, the method needs to be *intuitive*. The Groningen based research group developing the product council method elaborated on these proliferation criteria in a NBM 2022 congress paper about proliferating circularity efforts, and presented a **template for a product council manifesto**, that summarises the essence of a task democratic product council in a two page document. The bootstrapping method presented here takes this manifesto template as a starting point.

The bootstrapping method is described in a NBM 2023 congress paper, see <https://www.newbusinessmodels.org>. The manifesto and the bootstrapping method are available as **open access** under the CC-BY-SA 4.0 licence on <https://www.noordenduurzaam.nl/productcouncils>. The authors welcome feedback and provide support through a community of practice.

The bootstrapping method is **intended for use by initiators**, either bottom up actors in a specific product chain or its direct context, administrators of networks such as industry branch organisations and consumer groups, or government officials such as MP's, policy writers and public administrators. There may be a single initiator, or a small homogeneous or heterogeneous group. It is assumed that the initiators are familiar with and appreciate the notion of the value–actor matrix, that asks for full value awareness by all stakeholders. Also, basic insight is assumed in the task democracy theory, that builds on equality and task division between five societal actor groups. Suggested reading: Proliferating circularity efforts (Faber, Bootsma, Pennink, 2022), Value excavation (Faber, Bootsma, Broecks, Pennink, 2023), Task Democracy Summary (Noorden Duurzaam, 2023).

Method steps

The process unfolds according to the steps described in the diagram below. For each step, we describe preconditions, actions to take and deliverables. Single and multiple steps may be iterated. The steps are formulated as a prescription to the initiator, to keep the text concise. In practice, however, deviations from this single pathway may be necessary.



[to be adapted to the text below]

1. Be the first mover

Precondition: As the initiator of a Product Council experiment, you consider yourself capable of getting prominent people in your area together for a joint circularity experiment.

Actions:

- a. **Personal decision.** Study this method carefully and estimate your personal costs and the probability and impact of success. In case of doubt: see d.
- b. **Preliminary scoping.** Choose a product family (like clothing or office furniture) and a governmental region (like a province or a municipality). This choice is preliminary and will be fixed or refined later on. Check: your objective now is to establish a product council for this product family within this region, or at least to research its feasibility. Get a Product Council Manifesto template, fill in your choices and modify the text as needed.
- c. **Expand the initiator team.** Find like minded others so your team has 3 to 5 members. Choose people with useful competences, like strategic thinking, communication, networking and event organisation. Ask them to read up on product councils and to check out the manifesto. Get the team together and discuss your objectives and this method.
- d. **Join the Community of Practice (COP).** Consider joining the Product Council Initiators Group. In this community of practice you can share case stories, ask questions and help others. Mail a request to info@noordenduurzaam to get your team introduced in the LinkedIn group and invited to web events. Include your manifesto if you like. No costs involved.

Deliverables: a manifesto concept, a motivated initiator team, COP-membership (optional).

2. Gather influentials for a Product Council think tank

Precondition: As the (first) initiator you are familiar with the concept of a product council and you have a customised version of the product council manifesto.

Actions:

- a. **Identify societal leadership.** Identify prominent persons in five societal sectors (science, citizens, government, businesses and nonprofits) in your area who are involved in your product family. Select persons (i) who represent a majority or large groups in their respective sector, (ii) who occupy positions of influence, (iii) who are interested in contributing to circularity, (iv) who are known for their focus on social, ecological and/or economical aspects of sustainable development, and (v) who are open and sensitive to perspectives and opinions of others. Fill in their names in a value-actor matrix and make sure every cell has names.
- b. **Reach out.** Prepare a pitch and get in touch with people on your list individually, to ask their involvement in the intended product council experiment. You would typically ask for a one time commitment involving one or two strategic brainstorming sessions about upscaling circularity efforts in your area. The sessions will result in a campaign proposal for an area wide joint effort in which science, citizens, government, businesses and nonprofits divide tasks. The minimum number of participants is five, one from each sector. If you choose a larger group, consider selecting people from all 15 cells of the value-actor matrix, or subdivide the five sectors into what appears logical in your product family and area.

Deliverables: commitments of prominent people to join a Product Council think tank.

3. Ask the think tank to decide on the preliminary manifesto and the experiment plan

Precondition: commitments of the initiator teams and brainstorm team members.

Actions:

- a. **Invite the think tank members for a first meeting.** Provide an agenda (something like b, c, d) and ask everyone to read the customised manifesto concept.
- b. **Start the meeting with an informal introduction of both the think tank members and the initiator team.** The role of the initiator team is facilitation of the think tank. The role of the think tank is to test the feasibility of a product council. Present and discuss objectives and expectations, without getting in detail.
- c. **Explain and discuss your manifesto concept, including the choice and exact wording of the product family and the governmental area and any deviations you made from the original.** In case of consensus the manifesto becomes fixed for the duration of the experiment. Once a preliminary manifesto is fixed, check if the think tank wants it to be published.
- d. **Explain and discuss the steps ahead.** The first experiment step A) will be selecting a circularity issue. Since this is not yet a real Product Council, the process of prioritising issues will be done briefly and preliminary, just to test the procedure. This will be followed by B) a brainstorm about the content of an area wide transition campaign that will address a single prioritised issue. Again this is to test the procedure, not to start a real campaign. Next will be C) writing up a campaign proposal. This will be D) discussed with selected respondents from the five sectors, to get feedback and to probe potential support. The feedback may lead to redesign. In a real product council the next step would be the actual campaign kick off, but the experiment will end here with E) an evaluation of the process and a proposal for further development of the product council. The question to answer now is whether the think tank wants to go ahead in this experiment procedure.

Deliverables: an agreed manifesto and optionally agreement to publish it, and agreement about the steps ahead.

4. Step A) select a circularity or sustainability issue

Precondition: an agreed upon manifesto stating a product family and a governmental area.

Actions:

a. **Ask the think tank to name circularity or sustainability issues of the chosen product family that may be addressed within the chosen geographical area.** In case of local products and services this may include product design, upstream and downstream logistics and recycling. In case of industrial products made elsewhere this may focus more on awareness, education, chain transparency, and retail product ranges, and consumption patterns and consumer behaviour.

b. **Discuss and decide which of these issues will be the topic of the experiment.** Alternatively, cluster the issues into a shortlist of maximally eight issues and use a task democratic voting system¹ to determine a priority order. Yet another alternative is elaborating this step and asking the initiator team to gather data and clarify the issue(s). See next step. After this, decide or vote again.

c. **Brainstorm about values involved in the chosen issue.** Fill in one or multiple issue specific and sector specific values in each of the 15 cells of a value-actor matrix.

Deliverables: a prioritised list of issues of circular or sustainable development in the region that could be addressed by a product council.

¹ Members of the Noorden Duurzaam association have access to a five sector online voting system.

5. Optional intermezzo: gather data to the clarify issue(s)

Precondition: one or some circularity or sustainability issues chosen by the think tank.

Actions:

- a. **Ask the initiator team to research issue indicators and trends.** Helpful are economic, social and ecological indicators about the issue within the region, giving insight into the status quo and into trends. Furthermore: historical records, relevant governance policies and regulations, prior efforts to address the issue, benchmarks, public opinion, etc.
- b. **Ask the initiator team to research stakeholders.** What organisations exist in the five sectors that are affected by the issue or are able to help address the issue? Representative democratic networks are especially interesting as they may be willing to ask their members to contribute to a society wide campaign.
- c. **Ask the initiator team to present their findings to the think tank.** Choose a suitable form, e.g. a plenary powerpoint presentation, poster presentations (for a walk around study break), or a reader.

6. Step B) brainstorm to co-create campaign content

Precondition: a chosen issue.

Actions:

a. **Prepare the brainstorm.** Study the campaign canvas (instructions included). Choose to work on an A1 print of this canvas, or in an (online) brainstorm tool (like Padlet, optionally using the canvas as background), or all by hand on a flip chart. Fill in the issue as chosen in the previous step. Fill in the geographical focus area from the agreed manifesto. Fill in core values from step 3c. Fill in representative organisations from step 4b, or leave this empty for the brainstorm session. The canvas is now ready for brainstorming.



Empty Campaign canvas

NB: Opnemen van het campagne-canvas, als instrument binnen de stap 'Setting direction' binnen 'Campaign construction'. Deze geeft vorm aan het proces. De actor-value matrix is een monitoringsinstrument voor het gehele stroomschema.

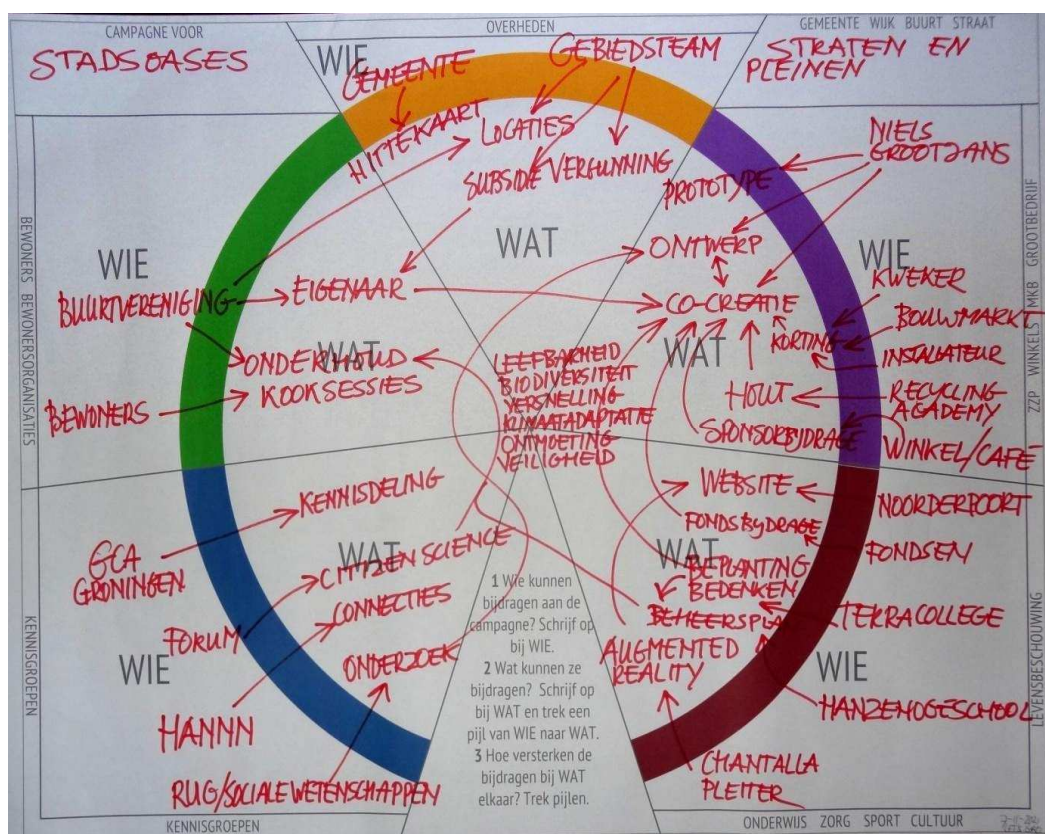
b. **Explain the objective of this step and explain the brainstorm canvas.** The objective is to create a rough plan for a society wide campaign to address the issue, consisting of voluntary contributions from five societal sectors. The challenge is to find possible contributions and to relate these to each other so potential synergy

becomes visible. In general, the more synergy is found, the more support the plan may get.

c. **Walk through the five sectors and ask the think tank to name organisations that may contribute to the campaign.** Or to add organisations to those filled in already.

The person who represents a sector is to talk first. Write down new organisations in the outer perimeter of the canvas. Step back through the cycle if new inspiration comes up.

d. **Walk through the five sectors again and ask the think tank to name possible voluntary campaign contributions from each organisation.** The person who represents the sector is to talk first. Write down new contributions in the inner circle. Ask two questions for each new contribution: from what other contributions will this new one benefit, and to what other contributions will this new one add value? Draw synergy arrows between the contributions to visualise. Ask what values are supported by this new contribution. Draw light arrows (to differentiate from the synergy arrows) or add a small mark to the value, so support for left alone values is triggered. Step back through the cycle if new inspiration comes up.



A completed Campaign canvas

Deliverables: a completed brainstorm canvas including many synergy arrows and lots of check marks on core values, preferably enthusiasm about the synergy found.

7. Step C) write a campaign plan (iterate 7 & 8 if needed)

Precondition: a filled in brainstorm canvas.

Actions:

a. **Appoint a plan editor and provide a plan outline.** Here's a possible outline:

- *Summary.* The plan in a nutshell for public communication.
- *Introduction.* Why this experiment, who are involved, what objectives, etc.
- *The manifesto.* Make clear this initiative is society wide and copyable.
- *The issue.* Scope. Data. Urgency. Stakeholder analysis. Core values at stake.
- *The campaign objective.* Desired outcome and impact. Monitoring indicators.
- *The campaign ingredients.* Assumed voluntary contributions.
- *Synergy.* Why the campaign may work once five sectors join in.
- *Campaign coordination.* A five sector team appointed by the product council.
- *Campaign communication.* A skeleton communication plan.
- *Campaign timetable.* Brainstorm, plan, kickoff, execution, evaluation.
- *Campaign budget.* Income and expenses for coordination and compensation.
- *Questionnaire for feedback.* Reflect on feasibility in case everyone joins in.

a. **Set up a production line.** Assign tasks in the facilitator team and possibly the think tank. Set milestones. Plan meetings.

Deliverables: a draft campaign plan.

8. Step D) test the campaign plan (iterate 7 & 8 if needed)

Precondition: a draft campaign plan.

Actions:

- a. **Get feedback from the think tank members and update the plan.** Here's a possible outline:
- b. **Ask the think tank members to select influential respondents in their sector and to invite these respondents to reflect on the plan.** The respondents will be asked to read the plan and reflect on its overall feasibility and on the likeliness of voluntary contributions from within their own sector, assuming all sectors join in. The questionnaire should ask a crucial question twice. First: how likely is the assumed voluntary contribution. And then: how likely is the assumed voluntary contribution in case the other four sectors provide their assumed contributions as well.

Deliverables: improvement suggestions and a feasibility indication.

9. Step E) evaluate and plan for further development of the product council.

Precondition: filled in questionnaires from five sectors and a revised campaign plan, based on this feedback. Possibly a few iterations.

Actions:

- a. **Ask both the think tank and the initiator team to reflect on the process and its result.** Will this method of co-creating transition campaigns work? What should be improved?
- b. **Ask the think tank for their conclusions.** Is their advice to the five sectors in their region that a real product council should be developed? In that case, what would be the next step? What personal commitment could they offer to advocate these steps?
- c. **Ask the think tank members what should be done with the campaign plan.** The plan was developed as a try out of the product council duty cycle. It may be discarded to start fresh in a real product council. Or should it be handed over to a real product council for further development.

Deliverables: improvement suggestions and a feasibility indication.