

# Case Study: On Purpose Berlin

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*Purpose:* *On Purpose* develops people to take on the greatest challenge of our time: to transform our economy from profit to purpose

*Design Trait:* Network

*Innovative Practice:* Community-Centred Network Design

## Key Facts

*On Purpose* is an international social enterprise that initiates change by training and developing leaders who transform and lead new types of organisations. Building a community of changemakers, they want to transform the economy from being profit-driven to purpose-driven.

**Established:** 2009 (London), 2015 (Paris), 2016 (Berlin)

**Location:** London, Great Britain; Paris, France; Berlin, Germany

**Founder:** Tom Rippin

**Ownership:** Limited Liability Company (GmbH) in Germany (wholly owned by a UK not-for-profit)

**Legal Form:** Limited Liability Company in Germany (GmbH)

**Employees:** 6 (2024)

**Webpage:** <https://onpurpose.org/en/>

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<sup>1</sup> Transparency note: The author was himself a participating Associate of the *On Purpose* leadership programme and is therefore an active part of the *On Purpose* community.

## Purpose, Business Model & Objectives

Purpose: “*On Purpose* develops people to take on the greatest challenge of our time: to transform our economy from profit to purpose.”

“We believe in putting purpose before profit. We’re a community that helps you find your work in the world: work that matters and work you care about. We believe that only by doing this will we have a chance of solving society’s most difficult problems.” – Tom Rippin, *On Purpose* Founder and CEO

*On Purpose* is an international social enterprise founded in 2009 in London and expanded to Paris in 2015 and Berlin in 2016.<sup>2</sup> Its mission is to transform the economy from being profit-driven to purpose-driven. The organisation is based on the belief that the current economy is human-made and can be redesigned to benefit both people and the planet. To accomplish this goal, *On Purpose* initiates change by training and developing leaders who transform and lead existing organisations towards an economy that puts the wellbeing of the people and society over profit.

The proposed transformation is primarily driven by its one-year Associate Programme, which is designed for high-potential early- to mid-career professionals. The programme combines leadership development with recruitment, connecting individuals with socio-ecological organisations or those organisations aspiring to become more sustainable. These organisations benefit from a large network and the Associates’ skills, while the Associates gain experience working on new or ongoing projects with socio-ecological goals in areas such as strategy and business development. In short, *On Purpose* offers organisations and individuals an opportunity to experiment with and debate new approaches to leadership and work.

“Using placement as a lever, to bring people into impact, to pass on knowledge, to empower them to do good for the rest of their lives.” — Lukas Marzi, Co-Managing Director

The full-time programme (figure 1) pays people to participate and starts each year in April and October. It includes two six-month work placements, supported by coaching on professional and personal development, mentoring, and weekly training sessions. Training covers impact measurement, regenerative management and leadership, systemic thinking, and personal development. After completing the

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2 In this article, *On Purpose* refers to the Berlin location and *On Purpose* International to all three locations.

programme, Associates become part of the *On Purpose* community (figure 2) as Fellows, continuing to benefit from and contribute to the community.

Figure 1: *On Purpose – Associate Programme*



Source: Own Representation based on *On Purpose* 2024.

## Insights into the Community-Centred Network Design

“We are building a community that is shaping the economy of tomorrow. A community of people who want to do things differently, supporting one another, and creating a more positive future.” — Saskia Klug, Community Manager

Hence, community building and support are central to *On Purpose*'s mission. *On Purpose* strives to empower its community to prioritise purpose over profit, working within planetary boundaries and promoting wellbeing in the understanding of enabling everyone to lead a dignified life. *On Purpose*'s vision, consequently, closely aligns with the principles of the Doughnut Economy.

However, *On Purpose* is a small organisation. While its core team manages the community and supports Associates and partner organisations, *On Purpose* strongly depends on the perspectives, commitment, and initiatives of community members, making strong relationships with them central. This community functions in a decentralised way across a wide range of areas, from climate change mitigation through reforestation to redesigning education systems to better serve children. Community members include two main customer groups, which are partner organisations and Associates, as well as the broader community of Fellows, coaches, mentors, and trainers (figure 2).

Figure 2: On Purpose Community Member Groups



Source: Own representation, based on *On Purpose 2024*.

## Partner Organisations

The organisations referred to as partner organisations come from various sectors and range in size, including both for-profit and not-for-profit entities, foundations, and social enterprises. Despite their diversity, they all seek to enhance their socio-ecological impact.

“Customers? We see the participating organisations as partners and also call them partner organisations. We don't see it as a classic service relationship, even if money is paid. The money is paid for participating in the one year. This can be repeated, but the organisation remains a partner forever.” — Lukas Marzi

*On Purpose* strives to meet diverse needs, even if the organisation is not actively involved in the current programme. For some, the recruitment service is especially valuable, and they appreciate the Associates' new perspectives, motivation, and impact, with satisfaction rates for the Associates in the 2022 cohorts being consistently high (9.2 and 9.0 out of 10, Impact report 2023). These organisations are not actively involved in the community, believing that the recruitment service is sufficient compensation for the financial investment. Despite strong relationships, interactions

between *On Purpose* and these organisations are not highly formalised, with only two mandatory check-ins per year. Other organisations prefer to be more involved, leveraging the network for outreach or staff referrals to fully benefit from the community. The core idea is that engagement, such as attending events, is required to reap the greater rewards.

## Associates

Associates form a second customer group. The programme is designed around their needs and expectations, fostering a strong relationship between *On Purpose* and them. Associates form close ties, supporting and challenging one another, learning, and sharing experiences within their cohort. Bonding the cohort *On Purpose* opens up the possibility to build deep relationships through a four-day induction at the beginning of the year, followed by a joint retreat.

*On Purpose* collects regular feedback from Associates to assess their well-being and ensure the programme meets their expectations and its purpose of driving change. Feedback helps to adjust the training programme to fit each cohort's needs. The focus remains on the individual Associate, as Lukas Marzi said: "How are the Associates doing? How do they feel empowered by the programme?"

## Community

The community serves as a "home for the leaders: a community that develops, challenges and sustains itself and others, to help bring about (a shift in our) economy" (Impact Report 2023). To achieve this and foster interaction, *On Purpose* regularly organises events that bring together current participants, Fellows, coaches, mentors, trainers, and partner organisations. Gatherings foster connections within the community and encourage sharing knowledge and expertise across industries. Regular events include summer and winter parties, content-related get-togethers, and many self-organised meetings and retreats. To integrate newcomers, the current cohort organises two events: one for all members of the community and another joint weekend with cohorts from Paris and London, strengthening bonds between international locations.

The wider community includes coaches, mentors, and trainers, many of whom are Fellows. These groups are passionate about the programme's purpose and maintain it by volunteering their time to support Associates. These groups benefit mostly from experimenting with new methods in workshops and interactions with Associates, as well as from the feedback they receive.

These relationships in the *On Purpose* community rest on at least two pillars: shared values and mutual learning and support.

## Value-driven Relationships

Shared values guide both *On Purpose* and the entire community. Over time, common and codified values have emerged, reflecting interactions between members.

“We have defined values as *On Purpose*, with the entire community, so that the values are also supported by the community. And it works!” — Saskia Klug

These community values include choosing optimism, learning together, stepping up, engaging our head and heart and acting with integrity. Besides these, Lukas Marzi mentioned values like empathy, loyalty, and the belief that a better future can be shaped. Cooperation is central as the community relies on individuals working together. *On Purpose* invites all members to act authentically, showing their whole selves rather than just their professional personas. The focus on human needs extends to working with organisations with different values, leading to more genuine, supportive relationships. As Lukas Marzi states, “Because of the relationship we have with our stakeholders (...) communication is on a completely different level than I see anywhere else.”

Trust is a key feature in relationships, both with individuals and organisations. A leap in trust is extended to all members, with the assumption of positive intent. For example, the Associate selection process looks beyond CVs to understand individuals’ motivations and alignment with *On Purpose*’s values. This leap in trust strengthens the network as the trust is repaid in numerous ways: Members contribute through feedback, ideas, and recommendations, taking on sales and business development tasks, and Fellows engage as trainers, coaches, or mentors.

In relationships with partner organisations, conflicts are resolved through dialogue rather than relying on signed contracts. Received feedback shows that *On Purpose* acts with integrity and is solution-oriented in difficult negotiations, which fosters long-term partnerships.

## Learning Together and Mutual Support

Joint learning is a key element of the community. Friday workshops focus on topics such as financing, measuring impact, and leading change at an individual, organisational, and systemic level. The workshops inspire change and motivate individuals to pursue their purpose. Notably, 99% of Associates share the learning from these workshops with others (Impact report 2022).

Additionally, 98% of Associates remain committed to the impact sector and creating change after ending the programme (Impact report 2022), also due to the strong mutual support within the community. The community thrives on the notion of contributing to positive societal change, characterised by a cooperative attitude

without expecting anything in return. Asking for help is encouraged, and members are glad to offer support or connect others with someone who can assist. Every interaction in the community strengthens collaboration. New members constantly introduce fresh viewpoints, which drives innovation and inspiration within the network. So, the cycle of giving and receiving trust enriches everyone.

“The idea in the network is that if everyone helps everyone, then everyone has been helped.” — Lukas Marzi

## How the Community-Centred Network Design Enables Regenerative and Distributive Dynamics

### Purpose as the Starting Point

The potential of the *On Purpose* community starts with its purpose to develop people to take on the greatest challenge of our time: to transform our economy from profit to purpose. As founder Tom Rippin explains, “we believe in putting purpose before profit. We’re a community that helps you find your work in the world: work that matters and work you care about.” Purpose drives decisions and actions. The individual takes a step back and looks at what would be good for the community or society, independently of *On Purpose*. When selecting partner organisations, *On Purpose* remains flexible, sometimes adjusting fees to fulfil its purpose, making it possible to join the programme for smaller organisations, too. Similarly, Associates are chosen based on their potential to make an impact, even before enough partner organisations are secured. “We want to create the largest possible number of connections between Associates and organisations to fulfil our purpose, not to get rich. So, purpose before profit,” says Lukas Marzi. This commitment to purpose underpins the whole organisation.

### Continuous Improvement

*On Purpose* thrives, driven by a feedback culture and constant learning and improvement, to fulfil the potential of the community. While developing how to accelerate team and programme evolution, they learn what people need to be leaders and contribute to change and prioritise cultivating a growth mindset, for example, with the weekly check-ins, where individuals are asked about their highlights and challenges of the week to give them space to express themselves. The focus on learning ensures continued inspiration for the community and beyond. It keeps everyone accountable and helps to address previous areas of development.

## Living and Vibrant Community

*On Purpose* is a dynamic organisation. One of its priorities is to evolve as a healthy organisation, overcoming traditional beliefs as about what defines success or effort. It draws inspiration both internally and from the wider sector. The connection to the sector helps drive ongoing development within *On Purpose*, aiming to lead transformation by continuously integrating new ideas. As a 'breathing system', they then allow internal changes to influence both the community and wider society. Moreover, with the programme offered and the community-centred network design, a continuous flow of new Associates and a constant further development of the community are created. Therefore, *On Purpose* also benefits from its expanding community in the socio-ecological sector, and it distributes the transformative purpose further.

## Challenges Arising from Designing Network around a Community

### Dependence on the Community

The value of *On Purpose* lies in its relationships and the exchange within its community. However, this reliance also presents challenges, as the business model is heavily dependent on voluntary engagement from its community. For major decisions, *On Purpose* involves the community, a process which, while generally beneficial, determines *On Purpose*'s actions. Lukas Marzi admits that the coaches, mentors and trainers could be more closely integrated, as previous efforts to engage them through regular meetups have seen limited attendance. While community building takes time, *On Purpose* is currently working on new ways to foster co-creation. Newly tried online and conference formats begin to make an impact.

### Financial Pressure

*On Purpose*'s greatest challenge mirrors that of the wider sustainability field. Organisations prioritising impact over profit struggle in the current economic system, which often disadvantages 'impact-focused' businesses that don't externalise costs. *On Purpose* operates independently as a limited company, funded by partner organisations. Thus, financial constraints in the sector inevitably affect it. The fundamental problem of the entire sector is that not enough money is spent on a good cause.

*On Purpose* repeatedly hears that the service offered should be free of charge to better fulfil its purpose, allowing it to match even more individuals. For *On Purpose*'s business, in turn, it is crucial not to be dependent on subsidies and to charge organisations for services. Part of the business is to show that companies like *On Purpose* can do good with the help of economic means.

Since the organisations are *On Purpose's* only source of income, the financial burden is felt across the community. Many contribute pro bono or work for lower pay than in comparable roles. This results in financial pressure that can be seen in *On Purpose's* personnel structure and salaries, which are not comparable to those in classic industries. Though the organisational culture and personal growth opportunities make *On Purpose* an attractive employer, salary increases are constrained.

Lukas Marzi mentioned that a healthy community cannot rely solely on voluntary work, but paid resources from the team are necessary. Therefore, compromises must be made. Lukas Marzi states: "Every day (...), we always have to weigh up what to do now, how to prioritise and which (...) ideas are off the table?" Associates contribute their time and receive a modest salary of €23,000 gross per year, but the non-monetary benefits—relationships and network access—are significant. Still, these added values can only offset the low pay to a certain extent and for a limited time.

## Diversity of Programme Participants

The financial limitations also affect the diversity of participants, as less privileged groups may be unable to afford it. *On Purpose* has acknowledged its own biases and strives for greater diversity (Impact report 2023), and the paid programme seems to be more inclusive than other programmes where you have to pay to participate. However, diversity remains a challenge within the current financial framework.

## Mental Challenges in Pursuit of Purpose

People in the general socio-ecological sector deal intensively with the crises of present times and exhaust themselves for a good cause. The drive to fulfil their purpose can also lead members of this community to overwork, with work and personal life often blurring and getting lost in the end. This can result in mental distress, a challenge *On Purpose* recognises and addresses through reflection and support within its community.

## Balancing Expectations and Conflicts

Managing a broad community with varied stakeholders inevitably creates conflicts. *On Purpose*, as they must balance the varying needs and views not only of the Associates, invests significant energy in balancing interests. The human-centred approach still generates pressure and may also conflict with economically necessary interests. Tensions arise between Associates and organisations due to differences in culture, communication, or mental health concerns. *On Purpose* acts as a neutral mediator, focusing on understanding all sides and finding solutions. Yet, some con-

flicts require compromises that do not please all sides. Thus, *On Purpose* aims to set clear expectations for all parties early in the collaboration.

Preferences in the matching process can also lead to tensions, as both Associates and organisations can favour the same partners. The matching algorithm considers preferences but cannot always fulfil all requests, also relying on *On Purpose*'s experience. Over time, partnerships that were initially not preferred often prove successful.

*On Purpose* invests significant energy into shaping the Associate Programme because it aligns with its own purpose. Still, some organisations view *On Purpose* primarily as a recruitment agency, valuing the programme for its immediate benefits. However, they may not benefit from the long-term impact of Associates, as many move on after completing the programme. This results in a mismatch between what *On Purpose* offers (to society) and what organisations pay for.

Differing opinions also arise when selecting partner organisations—some Fellows believe only regenerative organisations should be included, while others are open to organisations still beginning their transformation. Such debates can create social pressure for *On Purpose* as the community closely watches and evaluates its decisions.

Overall, managing the community's expectations and diverse requirements is a priority. *On Purpose*'s approach is to behave transparently and make decisions aligned with its values, though balancing interests remains a time-consuming and challenging task.

## Interactions with Other Design Traits

### Ownership Design

*On Purpose International* operates as a not-for-profit company limited by guarantee<sup>3</sup> based in London, which wholly owns the Berlin entity and is one of two members of the Paris organisation (along with a Paris *On Purpose* Fellow). The constitution of *On Purpose* does not allow the distribution of profits to shareholders. *On Purpose International* is governed by a board comprising a Chair, a Fellow Representative from the Fellow Advisory Board, several more non-executive directors and the founder, Tom Rippin. Each board member has equal voting rights. Tom Rippin also serves as CEO, influencing the company since its inception.

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3 A Company Limited by Guarantee (CLG) is a not-for-profit corporate structure in the UK, primarily used for not-for-profit purposes. It has no shareholders or capital; instead, members act as guarantors with a limited financial commitment, and while profits cannot be distributed to members, directors and employees can receive salaries.

While Berlin is a subsidiary of London, each location operates independently yet is increasingly growing closer together. As employees foster relationships, they are seeking to apply the lessons they teach on the programme to themselves and focus on becoming more than the sum of their parts. Lukas Marzi reflects this, stating, “we are characterised by the founder Tom. However, I refer to him as a colleague and not as the founder or boss, because it also feels very different when working together.”

The ownership structure underscores the organisation's purpose. *On Purpose* is generally open to new ownership models such as steward-ownership, promoting trustful relationships from the outset.

## Governance Design – Decision-Making Processes

The network trait is evident in *On Purpose's* decision-making and new work approaches. Decisions are generally made equitably, but the process involves learning how “a team of volunteers and full-time staff can work together (...) rather than get in each other's way” (Impact Report 2023).

London does not make decisions for Berlin. Two city leads manage key decisions while consulting their teams. Decision-making is role-based, similar to the Associate collaboration process.

Various stakeholder groups are engaged differently in decisions. At the strategic level, Fellows participate through the Fellow Advisory Board, which comprises two Fellows from each city who invigorate the fellowship and support self-organisation. These six alumni agree that a member represents Fellows at the board, allowing them to influence the organisation's direction and voice community concerns.

Fellows and Associates are informed of decisions via Slack and participate in regular discussions about strategic matters such as organisational values and communication structures. However, some decisions, such as determining an individual's continuation in the programme, are made by *On Purpose* without community input. “If we were to involve the Associates, we would have a very strongly influenced decision and (...) that is not necessarily the best decision considering all voices and opinions” (Lukas Marzi).

Although the exchange with partner organisations is not as intensive as with Associates and Fellows, their feedback also influences the programme. Beyond that, they are informed about significant monetary changes, such as inflation-related salary increases.

## Governance Design – New Work Methods

*On Purpose's* internal dynamics are shaped by its external environment and the community, necessitating the adoption of new approaches to create change. Consequently, *On Purpose* continuously refines its internal structures, testing new salary

and reward systems (Impact report 2022), role-based decision-making, and self-organisation. *On Purpose* experiments with new ideas, consciously implementing or discarding them.

“We benefit greatly from the relationship with the outside world, with our community, we experience things there that we do ourselves and take things into the team.” — Lukas Marzi

## Recommendations for Adopting a Community-Centred Network Design

In addition to the aforesaid leap of trust that goes hand in hand with a positive image of human beings, two other factors helped *On Purpose* to establish a community-centred network design:

### Use Systems Thinking in Shaping Your Business Strategy

A core element of the Associate Programme is recognising the world as a complex system.

“Systems theory is a different way of understanding the world: instead of analysing the world by separating things into ever-smaller parts, systems thinking recognises the importance of how parts are connected and attempts to understand the whole” (Impact Report 2022).

This understanding allows one to recognise how our current economy is functioning and how global risks are nested and reinforcing. This knowledge makes it easier to question previous beliefs and values and change the status quo.

### Invest in Inner Work and Development to Realise the Full Potential of Your Employees

Another critical factor for *On Purpose* is inner work. The programme emphasises the need for personal development as a foundation for societal and business transformation. To lead, show empathy, and build trust, self-awareness and confidence are essential. This process involves recognising one’s patterns, addressing personal issues, and unlearning past beliefs, creating a more reflective and responsive approach to others.

Inner work is also essential for navigating trade-offs and compromises amidst today’s crises:

“Being healthy in an economy that has not yet transformed requires a constant balancing act between ambitious idealism and practical realism. We want to challenge ourselves to live with that tension” (Impact Report 2022).

*On Purpose* invests time with Associates and leaves space for relationship building, offering coaching, individual sessions, and collaborative approaches like check-ins, and sharing weekly highlights and challenges. Informal dialogue in various settings, including nature retreats, strengthens connections and fosters deeper conversations.

Though personal work happens individually, *On Purpose* provides inspiration for inner development, which is key to driving change in the community. This focus on inner work is validated by 94% of Associates committing to continuous self-development post-programme (Impact Report 2022).

## Inspiring Redesign Beyond the Business

*On Purpose* influences the economic system at the organisational and individual levels, focusing primarily on the personal transformation of Associates. The programme’s impact on individuals can be life-changing, with participants decanting their learning to create wider change.

“Our programme aims to transform Associates so that they, in turn, can help lead the wider transformation we need – in the organisations within which they work and the economy as a whole” (Impact Report 2023).

The impact at the organisational level is more limited. Although *On Purpose* sets high standards for the needed transformation, these levers have not been actively addressed by the organisations. The programme’s goal is long-term participation, not rapid organisational transformation. They prefer Associates to carry these standards back to their organisations rather than addressing them directly, which could strain relationships. In this regard, 99% of Associates bring their learning back to their workplaces (Impact Report 2023).

Additionally, most organisations are in the sustainability field, a niche within the economy, and further systemic change would require another programme or expanded participation.

The value of the *On Purpose* community can be summarised by the following quote:

“I truly believe that a network is more than the sum of its parts, then [...] the main driver for our healthy community is the warm, open, and authentic interaction

with each other. [...] And in the end, it's just a great pleasure for us to be able to create this connection between people.” — Lukas Marzi

## References

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