



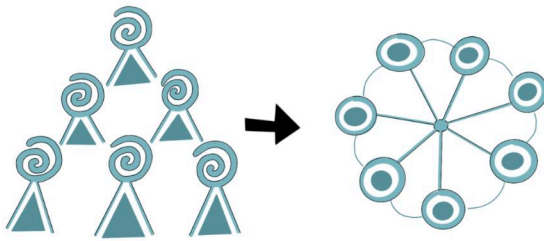
Ecosystems Don't Run on Strategy.

They Run on Behaviour.

*A practical guide
for ecosystem builders*



A Learning Guide by Eleonor Hedström
and Stefan Lindegaard



A short guide with practical lessons from WISE and working at the intersection of innovation, culture and collaboration

Ecosystems have become central to solving complex challenges. Regardless of industry, no single organisation can drive systemic transformation alone. Collaboration across companies, start-ups, research institutions and public actors is no longer optional. It's required.

Yet while ecosystems are easy to announce, they are much harder to make work.

One reason is simple. Ecosystems bring together very different kinds of organisations and actors, each with their own incentives, cultures, time horizons and ways of working. What ties them together is a shared interest in goals they all see value in. The real challenge is turning that shared interest into aligned action.

This is where many ecosystems struggle. Strategy documents may align on paper, but behaviour often does not.

Through Eleonor Hedström's work leading the WISE ecosystem at Wärtsilä, and through Stefan Lindegaard's work with leadership teams on corporate innovation, organisational culture and high-performance dynamics, we have approached this challenge from different angles but often in the same projects. This guide is written for ecosystem builders working to design, run and grow these collaborations in practice.

The six principles that follow build on the experience of developing WISE and on broader work with innovation, leadership and collaboration across organisations. They highlight what ecosystems need, how to gauge where you are, and what helps make them work in practice.

WISE (Wide and Intelligent Sustainable Energy) is part of Finland's Veturi programme, a Business Finland initiative in which leading companies build large innovation ecosystems around major future challenges. Led by Wärtsilä, WISE focuses on accelerating the decarbonisation of the energy sector through solutions for zero-emission balancing power.

Thanks, Elli & Stefan

Rethinking and Building Ecosystems:

6 Principles to Help You Make It Work

Building an ecosystem is not only about defining strategy or attracting partners. It is about creating the behavioural conditions that allow different organisations to align, collaborate and evolve over time.

1. A Clear North Star Reduces Friction

Ecosystems need a direction that is genuinely shared, not just stated. When the purpose is clear and consistently reinforced, partners can align decisions and navigate trade-offs without drifting into parallel agendas.

2. Trust Is the Real Infrastructure

Formal agreements create structure, but trust enables real collaboration. When partners feel safe to share openly, challenge assumptions and follow through on commitments, the ecosystem gains speed and resilience.

3. True Collaboration Needs Real Touchpoints

Information alone does not create alignment across organisations. Deliberate interaction points where partners engage, work together and solve real problems are what turn coordination into collaboration.

4. Ecosystems Do Not Run Themselves

Ecosystems require active stewardship. Clear roles, ongoing relationship building and deliberate orchestration ensure that ideas convert into action and partnerships develop into progress.

5. Visible Progress Builds Momentum

Engagement grows when partners can see movement. Regular signals of progress, learning and contribution reinforce confidence that collaboration is worthwhile and worth investing in.

6. Ecosystems Need to Learn, Adapt and Grow

Ecosystems operate in evolving environments and cannot be fixed models. Leaders who treat them as learning systems, open to adjustment and new insight, keep them relevant and effective over time.



Principle 1:

**A Clear North Star
Reduces Friction**

1. A Clear North Star Reduces Friction

In the early and stabilising phases, the ecosystem needs a direction that is genuinely shared across organisations with different priorities. This is not a slogan, but a clear articulation of why the collaboration exists and what change it seeks to create.

In WISE, the ambition around balancing power to accelerate decarbonisation provides that anchor. From the outset, the opportunity was clarified for different actors: corporations seeking value-chain partnerships and visibility, SMEs expanding networks and technology with large-company support, and research partners securing funding and industrial impact.

How to gauge where you are

- Can partners describe the purpose in similar terms without relying on slides?
- Do initiatives clearly link to the core mission?
- Do discussions frequently return to alignment questions?

If purpose feels interpreted rather than collectively owned, political friction will increase as the ecosystem grows.

How to make it work

- Revisit and restate the North Star regularly, not only at launch
- Ask partners to explain what the ecosystem means for them
- Clarify what is intentionally out of scope
- Connect new initiatives explicitly to the shared direction

Clarity does not remove complexity, but it prevents fragmentation.





Principle 2:

Trust Is the Real Infrastructure

2. Trust is the Real Infrastructure

Formal agreements create structure, but trust and relational depth allow ecosystems to function. They ensure collaboration goes beyond obligation and partners feel safe to share openly.

In WISE, relationship-building is treated as core work. Workshops, events, one-to-one conversations and ongoing dialogue help create the openness needed for real collaboration. Trust is earned through consistency. WISE collects project ideas via the ecosystem webpage, reviews them regularly, and provides feedback on a weekly basis.

How to gauge where you are

- Do partners share challenges and constraints openly?
- Are disagreements surfaced directly in conversations?
- Do collaborations emerge organically between members?

If interaction remains cautious and transactional, the trust base is still developing.

How to make it work

- Invest in smaller working groups where candour is easier
- Create opportunities for informal exchange alongside formal sessions
- Make collaborative behaviour visible and recognised
- Support roles that actively connect partners and reduce friction

Trust accumulates through consistent behaviour, not declarations.





Principle 3:

True Collaboration Needs Real Touchpoints

3. True Collaboration Needs Real Touchpoints

When ecosystems bring together very different organisations, alignment does not happen through information flow alone. They need touchpoints where partners engage, align and solve real problems together.

In the first year of WISE, 500 introductory meetings turned interest into real collaboration, showing that ecosystems are built through consistent human interaction. Today, WISE's touchpoints include hackathons, workshops, one-to-one meetings and the annual ecosystem gathering, all designed to deepen collaboration rather than simply share updates.

How to gauge where you are

- Are interactions mostly collaborative rather than informational?
- Do meetings result in new connections, actions or just new slides?
- Are partners building relationships beyond formal sessions?

If interaction feels passive, the ecosystem risks becoming a communication platform rather than a collaboration space.

How to make it work

- Design sessions around shared challenges, not status reporting
- Use formats like workshops or hackathons that require joint work
- Maintain regular one-to-one conversations with key partners
- Provide shared visibility through platforms such as roadmaps, projects and ecosystem updates

Real collaboration grows from shared work, not presentations.





Principle 4:

Ecosystems Do Not Run Themselves

4. Ecosystems Do Not Run Themselves

Ecosystems require active stewardship. Participation alone is not enough; someone must continuously connect organisations, shape initiatives and maintain momentum across the network.

In WISE, the ecosystem plays this role, working to build relationships, connect actors and collaborate with partners such as VTT and universities to help initiate projects.

How to gauge where you are

- Is there clear responsibility for maintaining the ecosystem's health?
- Are partnerships actively nurtured or mostly reactive?
- Do ideas convert into action, or remain conversations?

If stewardship is unclear, progress becomes uneven and opportunities are missed.

How to make it work

- Define clear roles for ecosystem orchestration
- Dedicate time and resources to relationship building
- Partner with research institutions and external actors to shape initiatives
- Increase transparency around project progress and ecosystem activity

Ecosystems need stewardship to move from connection to impact.





Principle 5:

Visible Progress Builds Momentum

5. Visible Progress Builds Momentum

When partners from different organisations can see progress, engagement strengthens. Even incremental movement reinforces confidence that collaboration is worthwhile.

In WISE, dedicated communication resources help make progress visible. This happens through webinars, articles, newsletters, blog updates and transparent information on the ecosystem webpage.

How to gauge where you are

- Is progress visible beyond the core team?
- Do partners know what has moved forward recently?
- Are contributions and learnings shared across the ecosystem?

If work is happening but not visible, engagement will slowly decline.

How to make it work

- Establish a predictable rhythm of updates and communication
- Share both achievements and lessons learned
- Highlight partner contributions and joint outcomes
- Provide transparent project information and ecosystem updates

Momentum depends as much on perception as on activity.





Principle 6:

Ecosystems Need to Learn, Adapt and Grow

6. Ecosystems Need to Learn, Adapt and Grow

Ecosystems operate in evolving environments where partners, technologies and priorities change. They must be treated as learning systems that adjust as new insights emerge.

In WISE, the ecosystem team create awareness, facilitate matchmaking, identify gaps and initiate the preparation of new R&D projects through collaboration with ecosystem partners.

Leadership involves convening, listening, seeking inspiration and adapting rather than locking the tactics too early. This keeps the ecosystem relevant as opportunities evolve.

How to gauge where you are

- Are reflection moments built into the ecosystem's rhythm?
- Is feedback influencing direction and priorities?
- Do partners feel safe proposing changes or new approaches?

If the ecosystem feels fixed rather than evolving, adaptability may be at risk.

How to make it work

- Build regular reflection and learning moments into the calendar
- Encourage partners to share insights and feedback openly
- Adjust priorities as new opportunities or constraints emerge
- Treat evolution as progress rather than deviation

Ecosystems that keep learning remain useful. Those that stop adapting become symbolic.



Get in touch if you have any questions or comments.
You're also welcome to connect with us on LinkedIn.

Thanks!

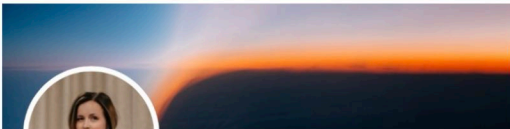
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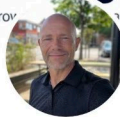
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