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How to start a bike kitchen

Cat Johnson | March 13, 2024

A bike kitchen is a place for people to repair their bikes, learn safe cycling, make bicycling more accessible, build community, and support sustainable transportation by getting more people on bikes. Most bike kitchens have tools, parts, mechanics, and a community of knowledgeable cyclists.

Around the world, there are thousands of bike kitchens—also known as bike churches, bike collectives, and bike coops—with more popping up all the time (see maps here). For those interested in starting a bike kitchen in your town, we've rounded up the essentials of getting started, from finding the right space and volunteers to raising money, getting the word out, defining community guidelines, and creating a space that is accessible and welcoming to all.

1. Find the right space

First things first, your bike kitchen needs a home. It doesn't have to be fancy and it doesn't have to be huge, but you'll need enough space for some essential tools and for people to be able to comfortably work on their bikes. Depending on the kitchen's offerings, you may also need space to store bike frames, spare parts, and ready-to-go bikes, but this is not necessary, especially when you're getting started.

Catherine Hartzell, co-founder of the San Francisco (SF) Bike Kitchen, advises trying to find a rent-free or multi-purpose space.

"The bike kitchen will not be used all the time," she says, "so sharing the space with another organization could work well. Basements of churches or other nonprofits are good places to start looking."

If you can share another organization's space, ideally rent-free, this minimizes expenses dramatically. Some other possible options include community centers, existing bike organization spaces, community tool sheds, or lending libraries.

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Credit: Bike kitchens empower people to fix their own bikes. Credit: SLO County Bicycle Coalition (CC)

Low-cost and mobile models

If you're unable to find a space, or if you don't want to be locked into a particular location, you can always create a mobile bike kitchen. This poses some interesting challenges in terms of hauling tools and supplies around, and letting people know where you'll be, but using this pop-up style, you can just roll into different neighborhoods and set up, increasing the visibility of the kitchen and extending its reach into the community. The reduced overhead of not having a permanent space also enables you to create more programs and initiatives for getting bikes into the community.

Common Cycle, in Ann Arbor, Michigan, began in 2010 as a pop-up, mobile bike kitchen that made regular appearances at farmers markets and on campuses. Then, in 2018 they opened up a permanent community space just outside downtown Ann Arbor. Don't rule out any potential possibilities when looking for a space, and be open to utilizing resources you may already have. For example, the Bozeman Bike Kitchen in Bozeman, Montana started in the founder's garage, moved to a "chicken coop on school district property", and now permanently resides in a building in an industrial park.

2. Tools

At the core of every bike kitchen is a collection of shared tools. To start building your collection of tools, ask bike shops and community members for donations, or do some initial fundraising events or campaigns to get enough tools to open the kitchen. The wish list of tools that would be nice to have in a bike kitchen is endless, but some of the essentials are: a wheel truing stand; a wide variety of wrenches; bearings; chain lube; grease; and clean-up supplies. See the bikecollectives.org wiki for a detailed list of necessary shop tools.

As you start to purchase tools, contact shops and dealers to get wholesale prices. Aim to get quality items that will last, because many hands will be using them.

On a related note, take time to lay out how you want the bike kitchen organized, as this will contribute to how comfortable people feel working in the space and how efficiently it runs. Think about the best workflow, most common repairs, etc.

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Connect with local bike shops and organizations to start building up a tool and parts inventory.

Credit: SLO County Bicycle Coalition (CC)

3. Volunteers and staffing

Perhaps the most valuable asset your bike kitchen can have is a committed team of volunteers. It's great if there's money for paid staff, but most bike kitchens are volunteer-powered. As Hartzell points out, committed volunteers are essential, "You need people who want to commit to being there at least once a week."

She adds that it's nice to reward volunteers with parties, food, and social events. An additional perk for

volunteers is being able to buy items at wholesale prices from distributors.

Before launching the bike kitchen, rally around a few committed people who understand the vision for the space. From there, interested volunteers will find you through word of mouth and by coming into the kitchen.

Keep communication open and expectations for staff and volunteers clear. A great way to do this is to create a volunteer handbook that lays out the vision, rules, and requirements of the organization. Rules may include: don't take tools out of the shop; no drugs or alcohol in the shop; safety first; respect the space; respect the tools; respect each other; and have a senior member check work.

Numerous bike collectives, including the SLC Bicycle Collective, the Des Moines Bike Collective, Free Ride Pittsburgh, and the Fort Collins Bike Co-op have shared their handbooks so you can see how other organizations handle their guidelines. The main thing is to communicate expectations clearly to volunteers and lay out how rules are enforced.

You will also want to have regular meetings to address issues that come up, brainstorm ways to support, strengthen, and grow the kitchen, and do community-building. Work parties, where people can socialize and get to know each other, are a good idea as well. Hartzell stresses the importance of having both meetings and social events.

"Have monthly staff meetings so everyone knows each other," she says. "Provide time to discuss issues, but also time to socialize and eat food," which she points out, should be paid for by the bike kitchen.

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The community is the heart of a bike kitchen. Credit: Sopo Bicycle Coop by TimothyJ (CC)

4. Organizational models and governance

What's the organizational vision for your bike kitchen? Is it a cooperative? Is it a collective? Is it run by one or two people with an extended team of volunteers? Decide on your model, then research best practices.

Shareable's guide on starting a worker co-op can help you get started with the creation of a coop. The Sustainable Economies Law Center is a great resource for all things cooperative, including their Think Outside the Boss manual for creating a cooperative.

Here are the seven principles that guide cooperatives around the world:

1. Voluntary and Open Membership
2. Democratic Member Control
3. Member Economic Participation
4. Autonomy and Independence

5. Education, Training, and Information

6. Cooperation among Cooperatives

7. Concern for Community

A collective is a group of people who share a common interest and/or vision. They differ from worker cooperatives as they are not necessarily focused on economic benefit. When you're starting out, this may be a good model for your bike kitchen, but you can use cooperative principles and tools, such as democratic decision-making and concern for community as a guide for creating a healthy community.

Thinking about becoming a nonprofit? Here are some pros and cons.

Legalities

Do you need a business permit? Mission statement? These are things to research before you get started. The answer to these questions will depend on the size of the project, the vision for it, and whether you're working under an already established organization. Although not particularly fun, getting these things taken care of early will save you headaches down the road.

Be sure to get liability insurance for the kitchen. If someone gets hurt in the shop or on one of the bikes and decides to sue, it could be the end of the kitchen or worse. Check out the Bike Collective wiki's guide to bike kitchen insurance and why you should have it.

Challenges

As with any organization, challenges will arise. They may be rooted in finances, difficult personalities, lack of clear communication, varied expectations of what the bike kitchen is, commitment levels, theft, laziness, or a hundred different things. The key here is to catch these challenging situations before they get blown out of proportion. An ounce of prevention...and all that.

Regular meetings give people an opportunity to express grievances and get things out in the open. Beware, however, of the unending meeting. These are frustrating and will drive people away quickly. If something needs to be taken from a meeting to a more personal level, do so.

If the issue remains after you've exhausted your communication skills and strategies, consider bringing in a mediator or unbiased third party to help resolve things. Many issues, however, will just need to be dealt with as they arise. As Hartzell says, "I think these are just things you will learn to deal with through experience."

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Keeping bikes and parts out of the landfill is an important aspect of a bike kitchen. Credit: Gabriel Amadeus (CC)

5. Funding

Like most things, the bike kitchen will need money. You can keep this need relatively small, or you may have a big vision that requires a steady flow of cash. Either way, funding the bike kitchen is one of the first things you'll need to address. Fortunately, bike kitchens are one of the more financially sustainable sharing projects because they have a ready market. They offer the community a needed service that is expensive through conventional counterparts, such as service at bike shops or buying all the necessary tools oneself.

Funding will likely come from a variety of sources including community fundraising, support from local bicycle businesses, organizations and advocacy groups, bike kitchen memberships, and bike sales. Hartzell advises getting 501(c)(3) status, or getting another nonprofit to sponsor the kitchen.

If membership dues are part of your bike kitchen model, consider offering people an opportunity to volunteer in exchange for membership, so those who can't afford membership aren't excluded.

One common way to sustain a bike kitchen is to sell bikes and parts. If you plan to finance the kitchen this way, keep in mind that the goal is not to become a bike shop, but to be a community resource where people can pick up affordable bikes. Many bike kitchens sell affordable used parts and basic new parts.

Other funding sources can be capital campaigns including: microloans; grants; in-kind donations; local, state or federal support; crowdfunding; or large fundraising events with your membership. The SF Bike Kitchen has hosted a large fundraising event called Tour de Cupcake, where they ride to different locations and eat cupcakes. This event filled up well in advance and raised thousands each year for operations costs. You can also generate funds through the kitchen with classes, membership fees, shop rentals, and paid repairs.

For reference, here's a rundown of the SF Bike Kitchen's monthly expenses from its third year:

- Tools – \$200
- Consumables – \$100
- Volunteer Appreciation – \$100
- Liability Insurance – \$100
- Space – \$1450
- TOTAL – \$1950

Donations

Donations of bikes, tools, and parts can come from a variety of sources including community donations, bike shops, bicycle organizations, unclaimed bikes that local police are holding, city recycling, and dumps. Connect with these organizations to see what's available in your area.

Drives

You can also host bike drives and tool drives to encourage the community at large to finally take that bike or those tools that have been sitting untouched in the garage for years, and pass them on to someone who can use them. Drives are also a good way to spread the word about the bike kitchen, clarify the vision for the project, do some outreach, and build community around the project.

Keeping used parts and bikes in circulation is an important aspect of a bike kitchen. Keeping usable resources out of landfills by repairing and reusing them should be a core part of your kitchen's mission. Save

Bike kitchens should be open to all in the community. Credit: Sopo Bicycle Coop by TimothyJ (CC)

6. Programs for underserved communities

A bike kitchen, at its best, is an open, community-driven enterprise that is accessible and welcoming to all. This might just be a space that communicates that it is safe and open to all. Or, you may choose to have your bike kitchen focused on a particular community.

For example, FenderBender in Detroit operates as "a women-, queer-, and trans-centered bicycle workspace, rooted in justice principles." ColectiVelo in Oakland is an example of a no-cash, bilingual, community bike kitchen/collaborative made up of people from diverse backgrounds.

The idea behind these spaces is to create an environment where marginalized or underserved people feel welcome and empowered to learn about cycling, fix their bikes, and meet like-minded people. Many bike kitchens make a point of openly inviting and welcoming underserved and marginalized people into the space. The importance is that people who may be used to feeling unwelcome can find a community and cycling resources.

As ColectiVelo founder Morgan Kanninen put it, "A focus on marginalized people's experiences can allow you to reduce barriers to the important services and resources that collectives provide."

"Once you have that kind of inclusiveness," she says, "it becomes possible for people to develop human connections in meaningful ways despite class, color, and other social divides."

Kanninen stresses that once underserved people have shown an interest in your bike kitchen, be sure to draw them into the community.

"Just because people come to the shop doesn't mean they'll keep coming," she says, "much less take on leadership that keeps it a vibrant, creative, healthy space for community."

To be inclusive, make sure that the bike kitchen's volunteers and staff represent the diversity you'd like to see in your community. Once the kitchen is up and running, have themed days, evenings, or events that cater to the specific needs, concerns, and interests of marginalized communities. For example, many bike kitchens have a femme, queer, and trans night because of the inherent gender discrepancies in access to knowledge of mechanics. This container gives them an opportunity to ask questions openly and also a place where they are more likely to feel safe in general.

Earn-a-bike program

One program you'll want to consider offering is earn-a-bike, a program through which those who can't

afford to buy a bike can earn one by volunteering in the shop. You can modify the program to fit your particular needs. The [bikecollectives.org](https://www.bikecollectives.org/wiki) wiki has a resource to get you started.

7. Getting the word out

Once everything is in place, it's time to tell the community about the bike kitchen. Here's where creativity, your network, your hustle, and any artistic talents the community may possess come into play. To get the word out, you'll need to get information about the bike kitchen in front of people. Start with a web presence, an email address, and social media accounts. You can set up a free blog using a content management platform like WordPress. You can also talk to local bike advocacy groups, distribute fliers, create a newsletter, and ask friends and supporters to tell their networks. But no need to stop there.

Get creative. Is there a local band whose members are cycling enthusiasts? Hit them up to mention the bike kitchen. Is there a great poster artist among your group of friends? A nicely done poster will hang for longer, on a wider variety of walls, than a photocopied, black and white flier. Is there a community wiki or bulletin board for your town? List the bike kitchen with these types of things. Dip into existing resources and connections that the community already has and be specific with your ask. Do you want people to come into the space? Do you want people to donate time, bikes, or tools to the kitchen? Do you want people to come get a free bike? Let them know.

Bringing awareness to the bike kitchen is an ongoing job. Is there a volunteer or community member who is particularly adept at marketing, social media, press, etc? Make them your go-to PR person. Communicate the importance of keeping up on community outreach and communication. Make sure everyone knows that exciting news, interesting community tidbits, and great photos should be forwarded to this person so they can share them.

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When spreading the word about your bike kitchen, get creative, use existing resources, and tap into the unique gifts and ideas of the community. Credit: Santa Cruz Bike Church

8. Building community

Now that the kitchen is set up, word is out, and your local cycling scene is one resource richer, it's time to build and strengthen the community. A great way to do this is by hosting fun events to bring people together, create buzz, raise money, get media attention, create new connections, and put the new community into action.

Kanninen says that community-building can take many forms and requires both personal and organizational work.

"It's about relationship-building between organizations and developing the identity of your group in the context of the populations it serves," she says. "Be participatory and transparent in the way the shop is run, and allow the kitchen to seek bigger goals than just getting bikes fixed." She continues, "Develop partnerships with those other projects in the community that the kitchen sees as admirable and good at

community building.”

Here are a few community-building ideas:

- host a concert in the space
- organize a group ride (themed or otherwise)
- set up skillshares for people to share what they know
- invite local authors, activists, city leaders, etc., into the space to talk about what they’re up to and how the cycling community can help
- throw a potluck
- plan a neighborhood beautification project
- have an art or design contest to create materials and merchandise for the space.

These are general ideas to get the ball rolling, but the most successful ideas are the ones best suited to your space, so dial into those events that cater to the unique needs and desires of the local community.

Hartzell explains that community-building has to come from the community already involved in the bike kitchen. People will invest time in organizing events they care about, like the Tour de Cupcake. SF Bike Kitchen also provides food to its volunteers on shifts, to get them to stick around and make friends.

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The goal of a bike kitchen is not just to get people in the door, but to keep them coming back and contributing to the community. Credit: TimothyJ (CC)

Big picture

Both in the creation stage and the up-and-running stage, keep the mission for your bike kitchen visible and known to all who participate. This will help guide your choices and inform the community of exactly what your priorities are. And have fun! After all, you’re creating a valuable resource to get bikes into the community. “I like organizations like the bike kitchen,” says Hartzell, “because they empower people to be self-sufficient. I like when people learn that they have the power to easily solve a problem that seems insurmountable.” She continues, “I like the community that builds around something like the bike kitchen, and the culture that develops around a volunteer-run organization.”

She adds that, through collaboration, embracing diversity, and playing to people’s strengths, a bike kitchen can shine. “People have different motivations for being involved, and they contribute different things and to different extents, and somehow it all works out.”

Additional resources

- Bike Collective Network is a hub for not-for-profit bicycle projects to connect and share knowledge
- Bike Collectives Wiki
- View the Bike Collective’s Think Tank Archives

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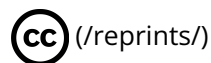
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