The Five Cosmic Pillars

by iGEM Latvia-Riga

These cards were created for future iGEM teams, based on both our struggles and what helped us through the season. Each one reflects a pillar — **Gravity**, **Orbit**, **Fuel**, **Stars**, and **Constellation** — that together form the foundation of sustainable teamwork.

You don't need to use them all. Pick what works, adapt as needed, and let the practices grow with your journey. Even a small change can keep your team balanced, connected, and shining together. We hope these pillars guide you through your iGEM season, reminding you that — like stars in a constellation — a team shines brightest when every part is supported.

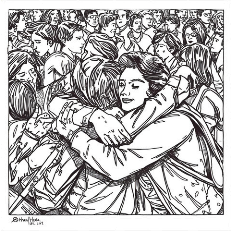
iGEM Latvia-Riga

Before We Begin: Self Check-In

Take a moment to ground yourself before starting this activity. Ask honestly:

- [ ] Have I eaten a warm meal today?
- [ ] Have I had enough water?
- [ ] Did I get some rest or movement?
- [ ] Do I feel safe and able to focus right now?
- [ ] Is there anything distracting me that I need to name or set aside?

If one of these needs isn't met, take a small step to care for yourself first — grab a snack, drink some water, stretch, or share how you feel. Only once you've checked in with yourself can you shine fully as part of the constellation.



Encourage honesty!
Save photos of the maps!

I Gravity

Responsibility Mapping

Use at the start of the project and then once every 4–6 weeks (or whenever workload shifts significantly).

Purpose: To prevent overload,clarify who owns which tasks, and make sure responsibilities are fairly distributed across the team.

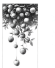
Materials needed:
- Whiteboard/sticky notes/ digital board
- Colored markers/labels for task intensity

Steps

1. **List everything.** As a group, brainstorm all recurring tasks: lab work, fundraising, outreach, wiki, meetings, social media, logistics, etc. Write each task on a sticky note or digital card.
2. **Assign ownership.** Place each task under the person responsible. If more than one person is responsible, clarify who is the lead.
3. **Check balance.** Look at the distribution -does anyone have too many high-intensity tasks? Is someone missing clear responsibilities?
4. **Redistribute.** Reassign tasks to even out the load, keeping in mind people's strengths and growth goals.
5. **Mark intensity.** Use colors or labels (High/Medium/Low workload) so the team can see where the pressure points are.
6. **Review regularly.**

*adapted from RACI

Make this a ritual: same time, same format every week!
Encourage honesty!
Rotate who facilitates the round to build shared responsibilty!



I Gravity

Team Checkpoint

Use at At the end of every weekly team meeting.

Purpose: To create a simple, regular habit of accountability without pressure or blame. This keeps tasks on track, prevents silent drop-offs, and makes support needs visible early.

Materials needed:

- Team meeting agenda
- Optional: shared tracking sheet (Google Docs)

Steps

1. **Go** around the circle. Each person answers two short questions:
    a. Did I complete what I promised last week?
    b. What's my main focus for this coming week?
2. **If something wasn't done,** the person briefly explains why (no blame, just context).
3. **Ask for support if needed.** Example: "I didn't finish because I was stuck on X — could someone help me next time?"
4. **Reset the plan.** The person commits to a new, realistic step for the next week.
5. **Keep it short.** Each update should take less than 1 minute.

- derived from Agile team "stand-ups" and accountability circles

Rotate who facilitates the round to build shared responsibilty!
If someone can’t attend, they can drop their answers in the chat.
Visualize updtaes.

II Orbit

Weekly Stand-up

Use once per week, ideally at the beginning of the week

Purpose: To keep everyone aligned, reduce misunderstandings, and make progress visible without long or draining meetings.

Materials needed:

- A timer
- Optional: a shared board (notion, whiteboard)

Steps

1. **Gather the team.** Everyone stands (if in person) or joins on camera (if online) to keep the meeting focused and brief.
2. **Each person answers three questions in max 1 minute**
   a. what did I do last week?
   b. what will I do next?
   c. what do I need? (support, information, resources)
3. **Keep the flow.** Don’t dive into problem-solving during updates. If an issue arises, note it and discuss it separately after the round.
4. **Wrap up in 15–20 minutes total.** Everyone should leave knowing what others are working on and where help is needed.

- derived from Agile/Scrum methodology in project management

II Orbit

Feedback-ratio rule

Use during project work, after presentations, in meetings or any other situation :)

Purpose: To create a culture where feedback is constructive, motivating, and doesn't discourage team members.

Materials needed: N/A

Steps

1. **Adopt the 5:1 principle.** For every piece of constructive criticism, aim to give at least five specific positive comments.
2. **Be concrete.** Instead of saying "Good job," highlight why something worked: "Your slide layout made the explanation very clear."
3. **Phrase critique as opportunity.** Example:
   a. Instead of "This part was bad," say "This part could be stronger if we added an example."
4. **Distribute positives across the team.** Make sure quieter members also receive recognition.
5. **Check balance.** After giving feedback, reflect: "Did I acknowledge enough of what went well before pointing out what could improve?"

- Based on research by Losata & Fredrickson (2005) on positive-to-negative interation ratios in high-performing teams

Emphasize that the test is not diagnostic! It's a check-in!
Share only if comfortable. Privacy matters.

III Fuel

Burnout self-test (WHO-5)

Use once a month, or during especially intense phases.

Purpose: To help each team member reflect on their well-being, notice early warning signs of burnout, and open space for support if needed.

Materials needed:
- WHO-5 Well-Being Index
- Pen & paper or digital form

Steps

1. **Distribute the WHO-5 questions.** Each team member rates the following five statements for the past two weeks on a scale of 0 (at no time) to 5 (all of the time):
   a. I have felt cheerful and in good spirits.
   b. I have felt calm and relaxed.
   c. I have felt active and vigorous.
   d. I woke up feeling fresh and rested.
   e. My daily life has been filled with things that interest me.
2. **Calculate the score.** Add up the numbers (0–25). Multiply the result by 4 to get a percentage (0–100%).
3. **Interpret together (optional):**
   a. Above 70% = good well-being.
   b. 50–70% = watchful zone; check stress levels.
   c. Below 50% = possible risk of burnout/depression; consider seeking support.
4. **Reflect privately.** Each member decides whether to share their result with the team or keep it personal.

- taken from WHO-5 Well-Being Index

Facilitators are there to “hold space” not “fix! problems
Keep it short, so it’s not another burden
consider alternating facilitators

III Fuel

Supervision group

Use once a month or whenever facing intense stress

Purpose: To create a supportive environment where emotional difficulties, team tensions, or stressors can be openly discussed and normalized, with help from an external facilitator

Materials needed:

- A facilitator (an alumnus, mentor, other trusted person)
- A quiet space

Steps

1. **Arrange a session.** Invite an external facilitator who is not directly tied to the team’s responsibilities.
2. **Set ground rules.** Confidentiality, respect, and equal speaking time.
3. **Round one – sharing.** Each member briefly shares one positive and one difficult experience since the last meeting.
4. **Group reflection.** The facilitator invites discussion, guiding the group to listen without judgment or problem-solving unless asked.
5. **Round two – support.** Members can share strategies that helped them cope or offer empathetic feedback.
6. **Closing.** The facilitator summarizes recurring themes and encourages the team to continue awareness in daily work.

- Based on models of clinical supervision and reflective practice used in healthcare and education

Ritate who leads the minute so it feels like a shared practice
Keepit short and light

III Fuel

Mindfulness minute

Use at the beginning of weekly meetings or before stressful tasks

Purpose: To cultivate presence, reduce stress, and create a shared sense of calm before meetings or intense work sessions.

Materials needed:

- A timer
- Optional: a short guided script or app (Headspace/Mindful)

Steps

1. **Signal the start**. The facilitator says: “We’ll take one mindful minute to settle in.”
2. **Sit comfortably.** Close eyes or soften gaze. Relax shoulders.
3. **Breathe**. Focus on slow inhales and exhales. Count breaths if helpful.
4. **Notice**. If thoughts drift, gently bring focus back to the breath.
5. **End the minute.** Ring a soft bell/tone or simply say: “Thank you — let’s begin.”

- Adapted from mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) practices by Jon Kabat-Zinn; supported by WHO recommendations for stress managment

Confidentiality is key: what's shared in 1:1 stays there!
If energy is low, even a 10min walk does wonders

IV Stars

1:1 Trust-Building Check-Ins

Use every 2-3 weeks during project season, more frequent in stressful periods

Purpose: To strengthen personal connections, create openness, and reduce the risk of hidden struggles or misunderstandings.

Materials needed:

- Just a calendar and a quiet space

Steps

1. **Schedule check-ins.** Each member pairs with another teammate for a 15–20 minute chat. Rotate pairs so everyone eventually meets everyone.
2. **Keep it informal.** Coffee, a walk, or a short video call works best. This is not a "meeting."
3. **Use guiding prompts:**
   a. What's been going well for you?
   b. What's been hard lately?
   c. How can I support you better?
4. **Listen more than speak.** The focus is on creating space, not problem-solving.
5. **Switch roles.** Both partners should have equal time to share.

- Adapted from Brené Brown's trust-building practices (Dare to Lead) and peer-support check-in models.

Sharing is voluntary. People can pass.
Normalize that needs are different, not better or worse.
Encourage refrencing the cards in practice.

IV Stars

Emotional Needs Cards

Use early in the season to set the tone, and again mid-season when stress increases or team dynamics shift

Purpose: To help team members express and recognize each other's emotional needs, reducing misunderstandings and strengthening empathy.

Materials needed:

- Sticky notes or index cards (one per team member)
- Pens or markers
- A board/wall space/ digital whiteboard

Steps

1. **Introduce the exercise.** Explain: "We all have different emotional needs — things that help us feel supported. Let's make them visible so we can support each other better."
2. **Individual writing.** Each person writes down 1–2 personal emotional needs (e.g., "I need clear deadlines," "I need encouragement when I try something new," "I need space to focus without interruptions").
3. **Sharing.** One by one, team members read their needs aloud and place their card on the board/wall.
4. **Reflection.** As a group, notice patterns — are many people asking for clarity? For recognition? For quiet time?
5. **Optional update.** Revisit halfway through the project, because needs can change as pressure grows.

- Based on nonviolent communication (NVC) methods by Marshall Rosenberg and team coaching practices for emotional safety.

Keep it short (max 20 min) to prevent meeting fatigue
Rotate facilitator to share responsibility
Store notes

V Constellation

After-Action Review

Use after major activities such as outreach events, deadlines, presentations

Purpose: To systematically learn from events, projects, or milestones so the team continuously improves instead of repeating mistakes.

Materials needed:

- Whiteboard, flip chard or online doc.
- Markers or digital sticky notes

Steps

1. **Set the tone**. Remind the team: “This is not about blame — it’s about learning together.”
2. **Ask four guiding questions:**
    a. What was supposed to happen?
    b. What actually happened?
    c. What went well?
    d. What can we improve for next time?
3. **Capture answers.** Write down all responses where everyone can see them (whiteboard or shared doc).
4. **Identify actions.** Agree on 1–2 specific improvements to try next time.
5. **Close positively.** End by acknowledging what worked well to keep morale high.

- Based on the U.S. Army’s AAR framework, widely adapted for business and education teams.

Keep journals private unless members choose to share
Even one-word answers are fine - it's the habit that matters
leaders can model openness by sharing their reflections first

V Constellation

Weekly Reflection Journal

Use once a week, ideally at the end (Friday, Sunday)

Purpose: To encourage self-awareness, track energy levels, and give the team a shared language for discussing challenges and progress.

Materials needed:

- A personal notebook, shared Google Form or something of the likes

Steps

1. **Set aside 10 minutes.** Each team member finds a quiet moment to reflect.
2. **Answer three prompts:**
   a. What gave me energy this week?
   b. What drained me this week?
   c. What did I learn about myself or the team?
3. **Optional sharing.** At the next team meeting, each person can share one insight if comfortable.
4. **Look for patterns.** Over time, note recurring themes (e.g., deadlines causing stress, presentations boosting morale).
5. **Use insights.** Apply lessons to adjust workload, celebrate what works, or address recurring drains.

- Reflective practice methods in education and healthcare (Gibbs' Reflective Cycle, Johns Hopkins teamwork reflection frameworks).