What is Open Source Project Governance?
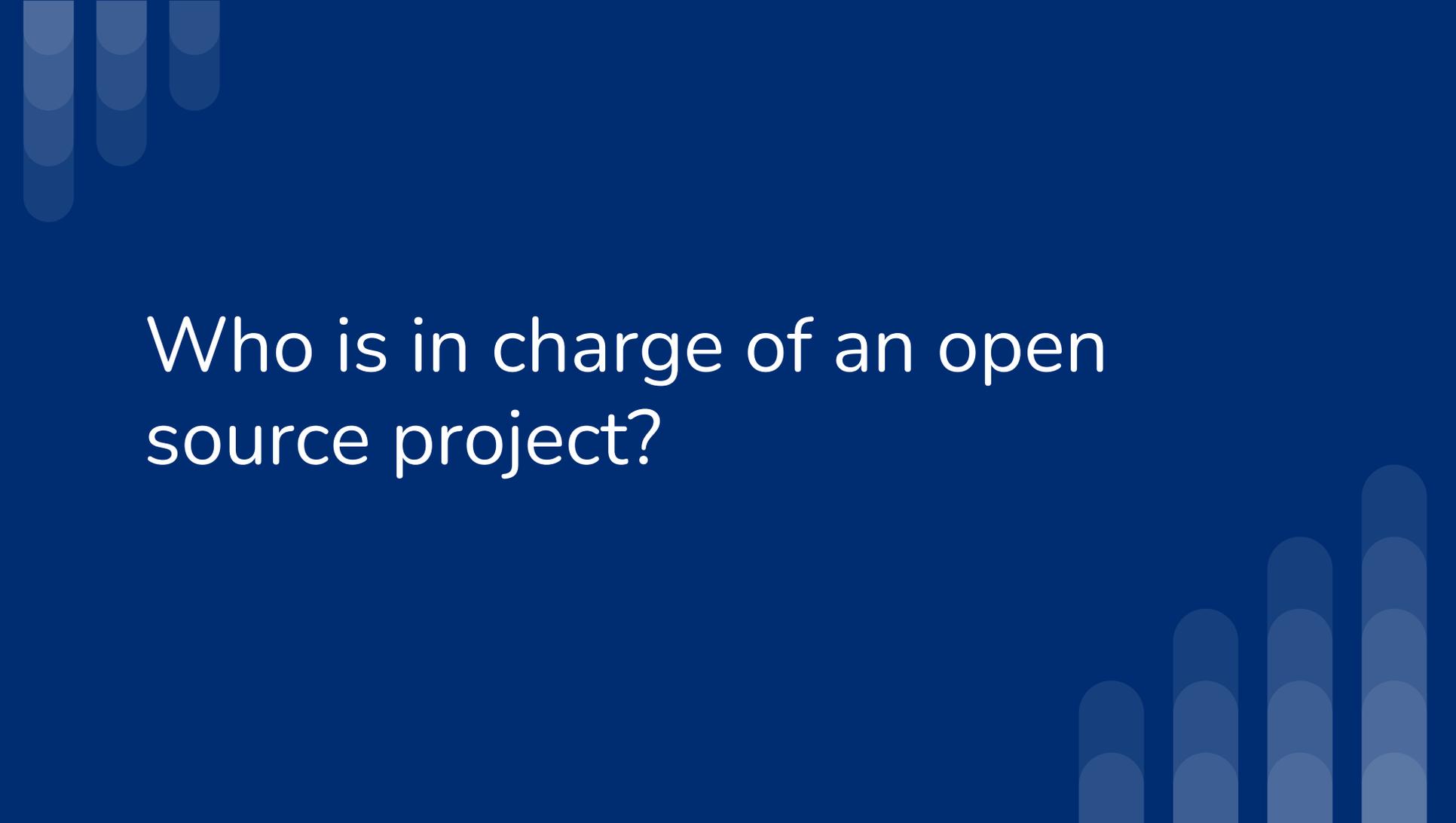
JHU Open Source Programs Office
Explainer

Open source software is software with publicly available source code that is licensed to allow use, inspection, modification, and distribution by anyone.

Who is in charge of an open source project?

"A governance model describes the roles that project participants can take on and the process for strategic and tactical decision making within the project. In addition, it describes the ground rules for participation in the project and the processes for communicating and sharing within the project team and community."

Gardler, Ross and Gabriel Hanganu. "Governance Models." OSS Watch. http://oss-watch.ac.uk/resources/governancemodels (accessed 29 March 2022).

Knowing what an open source project's governance looks like can help you understand:

- How decisions are made
- How priorities are set
- How to contribute effectively
- How stable a project is
- Who to contact
- Who is ultimately responsible for the project

Common open source governance models

- Founder-leader / Benevolent dictator
- Do-ocracy / Meritocracy
- Delegated governance
- Corporate backed

Founder-leader, or Benevolent dictatorship

One or a few founders are the final arbiters and ultimate decision makers for all aspects of the project. Community perception of the founder(s) can impact the success of the project/program.

Individual assignments may be ad hoc and functionality decisions are usually dependent on the founder-leader.

Example: Linux Kernel, Blender, Ruby

Do-ocracy, or Meritocracy

Loosely organized, rewards participants who make valuable additions to the project. Standing can be enhanced by "merit." Decisions are made by the community as a whole.

Authority is decentralized, with direction ultimately set by the community at large. Committers play a unique role in shaping the project, and community norms are essential.

Example: Apache, Python

Delegated governance

A body of leaders is chosen or elected to oversee the project, resolve conflicts within the community, modify the community norms and processes, and determine the project's core values.

Authority is centralized at the top but distributed through a chain of command. Many community members can hold some form of leadership role, and control over project direction will vary depending on how councils are selected.

Example: Ubuntu, Kubernetes, Rust

Corporate-backed / Walled-garden

"Individual companies or industry consortia may choose to distribute software under the terms of an open source license as a way of reaching potential developers and users."

"Under this model, the governing organization may not accept contributions from anyone outside it, or require a contributor agreement (CLA) to accept a contribution."

Examples: VSCode, MongoDB, TensorFlow

Red Hat. "Understanding Open Source Governance Models." Accessed July 9, 2025. https://www.redhat.com/en/blog/understanding-open-source-governance-models.

Does *my* open source project need governance?

It depends!

If you'd like to build a community and encourage contributions, a documented governance model can help.

Get your governance plan started with a few simple steps:

- Identify decision areas - what strategic and tactical decisions need to be made?
- List roles and groups - who could take responsibility (e.g. boards, councils, individuals)?
- Match decisions to roles - assign each decision area to the right person or group.
- Test with real scenarios - walk through actual situations your program faces.

"GOV P1: Choose Your Own Governance - It Takes A Village," September 20, 2022. https://itav.lyrasis.org/gov-p1-choose-your-own-governance/.

To learn more about open source governance, visit:

- ❖ Open Source Guides, https://opensource.guide/, a collection of resources for individuals, communities, and companies who want to learn how to run and contribute to an open-source project

- ❖ Karl Fogel's (free) book, *Producing Open Source Software*, available via: https://producingoss.com/

- ❖ The It Takes a Village Project, which includes a series of activities designed to help create, evaluate, and evolve open source project governance: https://itav.lyrasis.org.

Need help developing a governance model?
Ask the JHU Open Source Programs Office!

ospo@jhu.edu

https://ospo.library.jhu.edu