

Steps in Forming or Re-Launching a Network

(Source: June Holley's *Network Weaver Handbook*, pages 244-256)

This resource will take you through the steps that you need to take to form a new intentional network focused on an issue, problem, vision or system—or to re-launch one that has been dormant.

Any intentional network requires attention to 3 aspects:

Relationships: Do people impacted by this issue know each other? Do all the stakeholders on this issue have relationships to others in the network? Do people in the network have high enough quality relationships with others in the network so that they can engage with each other in high risk, complex activities?

Structure: Does it make sense to formalize the relationships among people working on this issue? Would they benefit from meeting together? From making agreements on how they would work together?

Strategy and action: Do people want to get together to make sense of the system their issue is embedded in? Do they want to develop a strategy or set priorities so that their actions have more impact? Do they want to help people work together collaboratively?

If you are interested in becoming more intentional about developing a network focused on a specific area, you first need to decide your formation strategy as networks can be formed in several different ways.

Let structure emerge. Virtually all successful networks start by working on the relationship and strategy aspects of networks: helping people working on an issue get to know each other and enabling them to gain a deeper understanding of the issue they are working on. Often, certain individuals act as Network Weavers and simply start connecting people in the network, two and three at a time. In other cases, a Network Catalyst – often a foundation – convenes a group of people and facilitates discussions on the issue.

The RE-AMP network, for example, which was convened by the Garfield Foundation, met for a year to understand emissions in the upper Midwest, what caused them, and what actions could dramatically decrease them. They did not settle on a structure for the network until the second year. During the following years the structure continued to evolve. This approach means that the appropriate network structure has a chance to emerge as people in the network work together and notice the structural elements that make sense for them.

When a network decides to completely determine its structure before doing anything else, it is often condemning itself to failure, since the structuring process can drag on for years and momentum for working on the issue may be lost.

Forming a Network

Forming a network includes two critical activities. Determining the **structure** of the network is one of the activities but it's more important to spend time helping people build the kind of **relationships** that will enable them to make decisions together even when they have different reasons for joining the network.

Networks that require a lot of consensus (some policy and advocacy networks, for example) will benefit from spending considerable time on building relationships and will require the most skilled facilitation to help them reach consensus. Arriving at consensus is a very difficult process, and requires those involved to have good listening skills, an appreciation of differences, non-attachment to a particular outcome, and solid emotional intelligence! In any network, relationship-building activities need to be part of every meeting. The purpose of these activities is to help members get to know and accept each other so that personality quirks do not set off discordant interactions.

Rather than spend much time on structure, some networks choose instead to make as few decisions together as a whole network as possible. This can work if the network sees its role as assisting experimentation rather than moving a specific agenda forward. Whatever the type of network structure, all networks can benefit from the development of *Ground Rules for Interaction* that hold members accountable for their behavior. These can include such items as "let each person have the opportunity to speak," "listen with respect," "treat everyone as a peer," "deal with conflicts that come up," etc. The process of developing such ground rules is a great trust building activity.

In addition to using skilled facilitators to lead important meetings, networks benefit when members are trained in facilitation as well. A good facilitator can help structure meetings so that they include processes that allow everyone to be heard and yet enable the network to make the decisions it needs to make quickly and efficiently. A good facilitator can also interrupt disruptive behavior and deal with conflicts that emerge.

Steps in Organizing Your Network

Here is an overview of the steps that your network can take in its development process. Some networks will not need all the steps. For other networks, the order of the steps will need to be modified.

Phase 1. Exploration



This phase will enable you to determine whether there is sufficient interest and leadership to start a network. Usually this phase is the work of a small group of people that gains a deeper understanding of networks, which they will then be able to share with others.

Step 1. Determine readiness

Activity: Are You Ready?

Have people interested in forming a network complete the worksheet ***Forming a New Network: Are You Ready?*** If some pieces are missing, develop a strategy for filling those gaps.

Step 2. Form an organizing group

The exploration phase may take 3-6 months, so having an organizing group ensures that the network will not be overly dependent on one person. Begin by gathering an organizing group of 5 to 15 people. It needs to represent the diversity of groups you would like to have in the network. Select individuals who are emotionally mature, open-minded, experienced collaborators – and willing to learn about networks. You may need to have several conversations with potential organizers to ensure that they will be a good fit for the catalyzing role. They need to have both the time and the commitment to play this role.

A network can become stuck in the first phase, and never expand, if the organizing group does not also engage others in the larger network in the development process. For that reason, it makes sense for the organizing group to encourage working groups to form *from the very start* around issues and topics of interest, and explicitly recruit others to take responsibility for these groups. These individuals do not have to attend organizing group meetings but will still remind the organizing group members that the network is much larger than themselves!

Step 3. Gather Background materials

The next step is to gather and share articles on networks to help the network learn about the structure and strategies of other networks. These can be used to spark discussions (on webinars or at face-to-face gatherings). In addition to the case studies listed below, organizing group members might make phone calls to find out more details from some of the networks that seem most applicable to their situation. You'll also want the group to explore this handbook, perhaps organizing a book club that covers a few chapters each session.

The most critical outcome here is that people understand how networks differ from organizations, as people will tend to drift towards an organizational structure unless they have a clear understanding of actual network options.

Activity: Explore Network Models

Have your group read some of the resource materials on networks that have been culled from June Holley's *Network Weaver Handbook* or other documents you turn up in a Google search, then answer the questions: Which of these networks is most like what you would like to see your network become? Why? What is the structure of that network? What are keys to its success? What are some of the challenges it has had?

Sample agenda for an initial meeting of the organizing group:

1. Speed networking: what successful network have we been a part of?
2. Introductions: who are we and why are we here?
3. Agenda review
4. Basic information about intentional networks
5. Are we ready? Worksheets ***Forming a New Network: Are You Ready?*** and ***Mapping Activity for New Networks***
6. What do we see as our initial purpose?
7. First thoughts about type of network structure: use chart in *Chapter 11: Network Basics*
8. What would an organizing plan and timeline look like? What funding might be available?
9. What roles/activities can we commit to? What other people do we need to be a part of the organizing group?
10. How can we find out more about networks? What other places have a network like ours?
11. Next Steps/Next Meeting
12. Reflection

Phase 2. Know, Knit, and Nudge the Network



Step 4. Outreach

To make sure that the network develops, the organizing group needs to be continually reaching out to others, identifying their interests and finding roles they can play in network development. The group should focus especially on those with resources and energy, those who are innovators, and those often left out (those served by the network, people of color, older and younger people, etc.).

Step 5. Analyze network

The more you “know the net” and “knit the net” before you begin the network formation process and convene the whole network, the more likely the formation process will be snag-free.

Your organizing group may need to spend up to six months meeting with people in the issue or problem space. It’s a good idea to do the Mapping Activity to identify some of the people you might want to talk with.

Activity: Map drawing for new networks

With others, complete the **Map Drawing Activity for New Networks** and use this to determine whom to recruit to your network. Check out the resources for generating hand-drawn maps and using software to develop maps that are available on the Minnesota Food Charter website

Track your conversations with potential network participants on the **Network Interest Tracking** to bring more diversity and resources to the group. Which individuals would be good initial members (strong interest, central position in issue, and collaborative experience)? Who might be difficult (personality, stance on issue, etc.) and needs some additional relationship-building attention?

The organizing group also needs to identify key people who do not know each other and bring them together to identify mutual interests. The organizing group may want to set up informal gatherings, once a month, perhaps at a bar or coffee shop, so that people in the network can get to know each other.

Activity: Interest tracking worksheet

Set up interviews with potential network members to find out what they are doing in the area of interest. Use the **Network Interest Tracking** worksheet to record your Interviews. Summarize them and report back to your organizing group.

Step 6. Experiment with network action

Because the hallmark of healthy networks is that they generate action and experiments, it's important that the network generate action while the structure is developing. Using one of the clustering processes described in Chapter 9, identify several actions that subgroups in the network can implement. These may be focused on a particular aspect of your issue or problem, may be some type of support structure such as *peer assists*, may help people learn new skills (such as using social media), or may be encouraging innovators to meet each other.

Make sure that you have quarterly calls or webinars where the action groups share what they are doing and what they have been learning with the entire network.

Phase 3. Preparation for Structure

Some groups decide to stay informally organized for a long period of time. They simply hire or designate a Network Facilitator and have regular meetings where they exchange information or decide on collaborative projects. However, other groups feel that they want to generate more action and embed action in a more integrated frame. In this case, the network needs to agree to spend considerable time determining the structure of the network. The following steps can guide your network through this process.



Step 7. Determine initial scaffolding for network

The organizing group needs to develop some broad parameters for the network – enough to help others decide if they want to fund or join the network. They can develop a draft proposal that defines the purpose of the network and, in general terms, how it will operate. The proposal should also include cooperative agreements or network principles. This can then be distributed to the larger network for feedback and discussion.

Activity: Sample cooperative agreements

Have your group find and read *Sample Cooperative Agreements* that are being used by other networks. Then have the group develop its own cooperative agreements.

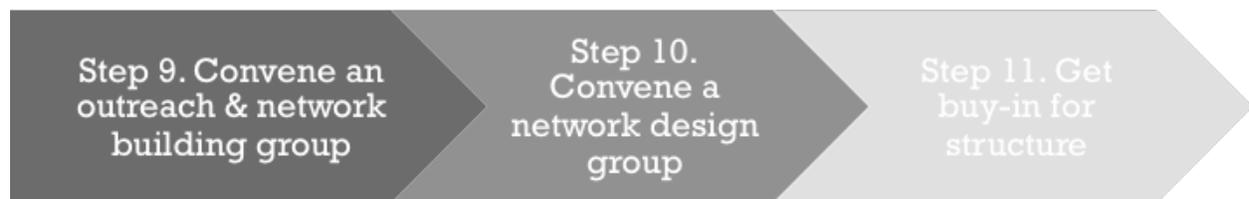
Step 8. Gather resources

Most networks will need funds for formal convenings, for a Network Facilitator, for training Network Weavers, and for a communications system (or access to resources like these that are provided by others in Minnesota). The communication system may include some combination of web site, blog, social networking site, and wiki to enable the entire network to contribute information, stay up to date with what is happening, and have discussions. The site(s) also need to help everyone in the network learn more about networks.

Designing the network will require substantial decision-making, and a skilled and experienced facilitator will make this process a lot easier. Convenings may be hosted by statewide organizations and involve fees to cover expenses for space and refreshments and, in some cases, mileage reimbursements to the convenings. The other major need for funding is to support working groups or collaborative projects generated by the network. Raising or identifying available funds early on can speed up the formation of the network. Having funders included as part of the network formation group is often a good idea.

Phase 4: Network Formation

At this point, it may make sense to divide the group into two working groups: one to continue to build the network of relationships and the other to facilitate agreement on network structure.



Step 9. Convene an outreach group to recruit people and build trust

The outreach group needs to continually reach out to people to draw them into the network. This is easiest when the network has, even at this stage, several collaborative projects underway. The other task for the outreach group is to deepen the relationships among people in the network. This can be done by closing triangles and supporting the resultant twosies. In addition, this group can make sure that any convenings include trust-building activities.

Step 10. Convene a network design group

One of the pitfalls of many network start-ups is that they overuse consensus and try to get too many people to agree about too many things. An alternative is to conceive of the network development process as a reiterative *joint design process*.

First a small design group develops a design proposal for the network structure and operations. This group then gathers feedback and suggestions from a larger group and incorporates them into the design, which becomes the working structure of the network. During the following year, the design group watches the network and gathers feedback on how the structure is working, then makes suggestions for revising the structure. At the beginning of a design session, spend some time helping people get to know each other. You'll also need to provide some background information to the group especially how other networks have been structured and how they operate.

This group then needs to decide on the network structure (see the resource titled Understanding a Network Approach). Aspects of network structure include:

- Purpose
- Goals
- Membership, including responsibilities
- Governance
- Coordination
- Plans or action
- Financial contributions and distributions

Activity: What every network needs to decide

Using the worksheet **What Every Network Needs to Decide** from the resource titled, Intentional Network Basics, have the group begin to design the network.

Step 11. Get buy-in for structure

Once a draft design has been developed, the result can be distributed to the larger network for feedback. Once collected, this feedback can be incorporated into the design by the small design group.

Phase 5: Implementing Structure



Step 12. Understand the system and develop priorities

The network needs to understand the system it wants to transform and identify several strategic directions or key leverage points to focus action (see Chapter 16 for more on this step). This may happen at a large group convening, though much preparation work will need to be done to help the larger network understand the system in which the network is embedded. Once strategic directions are determined, the group may want to help people self-organize into several working groups.

Step 13. Designate a Network facilitator(s)

The network needs to identify a Network Facilitator(s) to coordinate the activities of the network. This person can develop agendas for meetings, facilitate meetings, take notes and distribute them to the larger network, develop an email list, produce newsletters to keep the network up to date with activities, and set up a web page or other web presence.

Step 14. Set up working groups (or teams)

The strategic directions should have identified several areas that can become the basis for working groups or focus areas. Working groups will need volunteer or paid coordination. Each working group should identify a small number of collaborative projects, each experimenting with a somewhat different approach.

Phase 6: Setting up the Support Structure



Step 15. Set up communications system

A working group needs to be convened to develop a comprehensive communications system for the network (see the resource Building Network Capacity for steps in this process).

Step 16. Set up training and support

A working group also needs to be set up to plan a training agenda for the network. This includes general training in networks for the larger network and more targeted training for those who

want to develop their skills as a Connector, Project Coordinator, or Network Guardian. It may involve finding out what training is available across the state.

It's critical that as many people as possible obtain some training and support in network weaving. This investment will greatly accelerate the impact of the network.

Step 17. Revise network structure

The initial structure may be incomplete or may need to be revised as the network gets underway and certain aspects of the structure become cumbersome or obviously inappropriate. Make sure that some group in the network is tasked with regular review of the network structure.

Resources

Worksheet: Forming a New Network

Worksheet: Network Interest Tracking

Activity: Map Drawing Activity for New Networks

Worksheet: Forming A New Network: Are We Ready?

1. Is there a network of relationships already in place among people/ organizations working on this issue?
2. Have any of the people in this field worked together on collaborative projects?
3. How would you rate the skill level of people in this area in facilitation, listening, initiation of activities, and conflict resolution?
4. Have you tested the water by bringing up the idea of a more intentional network to key people in the field?
5. Do you (or someone else key in the network) have time to do the start-up work to get the network going?
6. Do you know of resources or funding you could tap to support the network?

Worksheet: Network Interest Tracking

Interview Protocol (by phone or face-to-face)

Name of Person _____

Who met with them? _____

Date _____

1. We are interested in building a network to deal with _____. What has your organization done in this area already?

2. What do you see as your major challenges in dealing with this problem or issue?

3. What are your organization's strengths in this area?

4. Are you interested in being part of a network to work on this issue?

5. How would you like to be involved? What do you see as your organization's role?

Activity: Map Drawing Activity for New Networks

Think of the issue, problem, or area around which you are thinking about organizing an Intentional Network. On a 9 x 11 paper or chart paper, have each person in your organizing group draw a circle for themselves and label. Then draw circles for all those organizations, government agencies, community constituencies, influential individuals, funders, policymakers, etc., who are important parts of this field (even those who have different opinions about this issue).

Then think about which organizations are most critical to change in this area and mark them with a specific color. If you know individuals in those organizations, add them. Next, draw lines between any of the people in the network who know each other.

Finally, around the outside edge, put circles for individuals or groups you don't know but who could add value to the project if they were involved. These might be people with expertise, people from other communities who have been innovating in ways that would be of value to your initiative, or people who are often left out of projects (people of color, low-income individuals, individuals being served by the initiative, young people, elders, etc.).

Then answer the questions:

- a. Who are the 10 individuals who are both influential and cooperative? Are they interested in helping to form an intentional network? Will they volunteer to be part of an Organizing Group? Who knows them and can ask them?
- b. Who has connection to resources for networks or funders? Who can talk to them about supporting a new network?
- c. Who in the periphery or potential network would add most value to your project network if they could become better connected to you?
- d. Who could help you get to know key people who are currently not connected to you?