

Understanding a Network Approach

(Source: Adapted from June Holley's *Network Weaver's Handbook*, pages 11-24)

Whether you are part of an existing network or just starting out, you will quickly find that there is much more to learn about networks than you originally thought. The first step is to become familiar with the basic concepts that are your gateway to a more useful perspective on networks.

The following sections from June Holley's *Network Weaver Handbook* provide a wide range of readings about networks. These readings are best digested with a small group of others interested in or already a part of your group.

Moving Forward Activities

Network Basics Discussion

Discuss the following sections and answer the following questions:

- What was the most interesting or provocative new ideas?
- What felt most relevant to your current network situation?
- What would you like to learn more about?

Self-Organizing Reading Group

Reading/discussion groups are a good way to go deeper into a subject. These groups also might provide the nucleus for starting a core group interested in strengthening the health of the network.

Select one of the following sections and self-organize a group to discuss it. Online, let others know what you are interested in reading. Use doodle.com to set up a time to discuss. Have each person contribute a question. Record what you learn in an online space and let others know

Finding Information about Networks on the Web

www.delicious.com is a useful platform for storing, sharing, and annotating interesting articles you come across on the web. For example, check out my delicious page <http://www.delicious.com/juneh>. On the left are all my bookmarks, starting with the most recent. On the right are categories, or tags, that I use. You can click on self-organizing, for example, and see the articles that I have bookmarked on that topic.

Go to www.delicious.com and set up your own account. Then add an article or web page you find interesting. Make sure that you add tags.

On the tools page <http://www.delicious.com/help/tools> set up a button on your browser so that when you come across an interesting page, you can simply click the button and it will save your page to delicious.

A network approach requires many people who see themselves as leaders and are willing and able to reach out to others, and with them take the initiative to organize exploratory projects and work together in new ways. It is often not just what we do but how and with whom we act and interact that brings transformation.

Major shifts taking place

20 th Century	21 st Century
Broadcast	Engagement
Few leaders	Everyone a leader
Cause and Effect	Complex causes
Told what to do	Many people initiate
One right way	Many different perspectives
Assembly line	Experimentation
Predictable	Unexpected
Control	Support
Television	Social Web

To change systems, people need to work together in new ways. For example, in a hospital fighting deadly infections such as MRSA this means that housekeeping staff are supported when they suggest new ways to increase hand hygiene. In local food systems this means helping groups of young people in housing projects grow vegetables in community gardens and then sell their products together at the farmers' market.

A Network Approach brings system change by

1. Improving the quantity and quality of relationships
2. Mobilizing more leadership
3. Providing a framework for effective intentional networks
4. Generating more actions that lead to breakthroughs

Does a Network Approach Make a Difference?

Many people have asked, “Do networks make a difference?” Do they really create change? Do they address the inequities and power imbalances we see all around us?”

Here are examples of the accomplishments of three very different networks:

Appalachian Ohio Food System

In the last fifteen years, this network has helped over 1000 food entrepreneurs start or expand businesses that grow, process, or sell local foods. In addition, hundreds of new elements have been added to the food system through collaborative efforts: a kitchen incubator, many farmers’ markets and community gardens, a youth food

RE-AMP: Policy and Advocacy

Four years ago, 125 funders and environmental organizations in the upper Midwest joined forces to create a formal network. They spent a year understanding the energy production system and identified four high leverage areas where they began to focus their efforts. Experimentation was encouraged in each area. Currently, 28 coal-fired plants have been stopped and many new policies and standards have been put in place.

International Campaign to End Landmines

The International Campaign to Ban Landmines, a network of 1400 Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) from 90 countries, convinced 146 countries to sign a treaty to ban landmines at a time when private companies and government agencies in 52 countries were manufacturing antipersonnel mines and 2.5 million new landmines were being laid each year. Since the 1997 signing of the treaty, more than 30 million stockpiled mines have been destroyed.

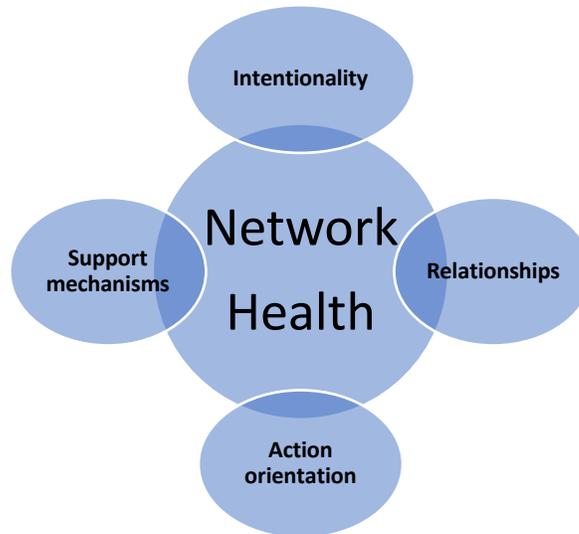
Healthy networks address power imbalances in 3 critical ways:

1. Networks encourage peer relationships – relationships based on acknowledging the value of every individual and the contribution they can make to co-creating a better world.
2. In networks, everyone is a leader, encouraged to connect to others and initiate collaborative action; power is distributed not concentrated.
3. Networks require inclusion of all stakeholders to generate effective solutions. Those impacted by the problem, in fact, are essential participants since they have the deepest understanding of how the system works (and doesn’t work).

Network Basics

What are the Ingredients of a Network?

There are four interlocking aspects of a healthy network that each complement and support the other aspects. The most successful networks take time to thoughtfully craft and continue to strengthen each part.



Intentionality

An intentional network is a network of people and organizations that are working on the same issue or vision, together with structures that have been created to mobilize the energy of these organizations. That said, the structure of intentional networks and what they do as a network can vary greatly.

Most obvious are the intentional networks that are formally organized: a set of organizations comes together and creates a new organization or a set of agreements about membership, governance, and goals. Formal intentional networks have clear boundaries and purpose.

However, other intentional networks – especially those that put an emphasis on breakthroughs, innovation, and going viral – are informally organized: they have no membership, do not meet as a whole network, and have no agreed-upon purpose. They work because many people take the initiative to organize many different projects to experiment and discover what works. Local Food Economy Networks around the country have this type of intentional network. Small groups within these networks are forming

farmer's markets, community gardens, food processing centers, and dozens of other collaborative projects.

Many intentional networks are hybrids of these two. For example, the Innovation Learning Network of hospital systems around the country has membership, a clear purpose and two part-time staff. However, it meets face-to-face only every 18 months. These sessions use an open space format where people generate future learning and research projects. These projects then meet virtually throughout the following year, bringing in experts for webinars and organizing other activities.

The specific structure of an intentional network is not nearly as important as having a structure that matches what you are trying to do.

STOP AND REFLECT

1. What is the purpose of your intentional network?
2. Is it formal, informal, or a hybrid?
3. What are its strengths? What are its challenges?

Relationships

Too many intentional networks fall apart or are ineffective because they do not pay attention to the relationships that undergirds it. The relationship network consists of the connections in the network and how people are interacting; it also includes people that they know outside the intentional network who may be missing (not connected) but who currently play, or could play, a significant role in the network.

It's easiest to understand the importance of the relationship network by looking at a network map. in Figure 3, on the following page, each square is a person. The map on the left shows members of an intentional network. The map on the right shows two subgroups or cliques that do not trust each other. You can quickly see that the intentional network is likely to have problems moving on any joint action until it deals with the lack of trust between the two subgroups.

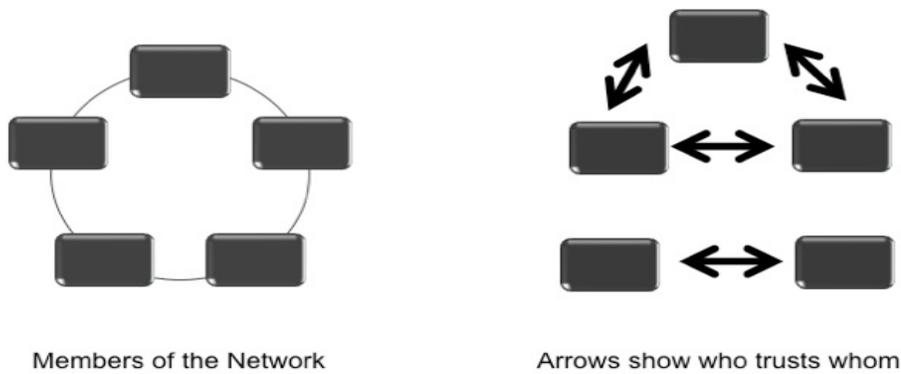


Figure 3. Comparing an intentional network with a trust network

There are simple **network mapping** activities that can help people in networks create quality connections based on appreciation of each other and acceptance of differences combined with clear accountability to each other. Analyzing and improving your relationship network is critical to the healthy functioning of all the other aspects of a network. This is because once people start making sense of their relationship network, they notice things about it that are holding the intentional network back. For example, if a poverty alleviation network doesn't include people with few resources and doesn't make use of their understanding of the system that keeps poverty in place, efforts to change the system are less likely to succeed.

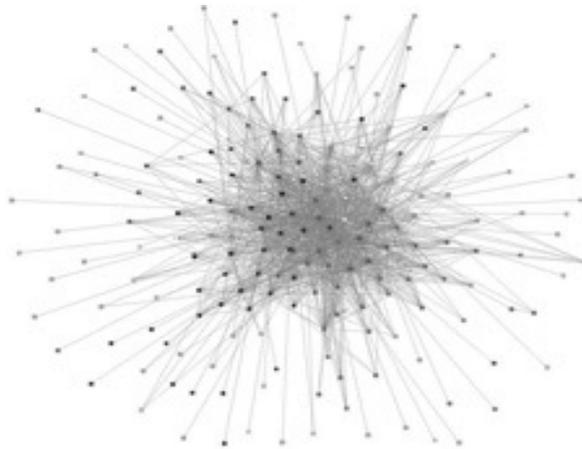


Figure 4. Smart network

Certain patterns of relationships are more conducive to good communication flow, supporting innovation and collaboration. Valdis Krebs and June Holley call these networks Smart Networks (see Figure 4).

The center of a Smart Network is a fairly dense core that consists of overlapping clusters. These clusters provide needed different perspectives. Each cluster may represent

different geographies, types of organizations, ages, backgrounds, or strategies. Everyone in the core does not know everyone else directly but are only a few steps away from everyone else in the core: people will easily be able to find others interested in working with them on any specific project that comes up.

A Smart Network also has a large periphery of individuals with whom someone in the network has a relationship. A periphery is very important because it often contains people with important resources, skills, expertise, or insights. For example, you may know someone in Africa who has tried a new approach to education. You can introduce that person or his/her ideas to your network and thus bring an important new approach that could improve your current strategies. A healthy periphery will often have 3 to 5 times as many nodes as are found in the entire core. A periphery this large will mean that new ideas and resources will continually be flowing into the network. An important challenge for networks is to make sure that people throughout the core are aware of and have access to the periphery.

STOP AND REFLECT

1. Does your network include all the types of individuals and groups that are needed for success?
2. Do people in your network trust each other enough so that they can work well together?

Action Orientation

Most networks are trying to accomplish something. Unfortunately, most networks seldom take the time to examine how they are organizing the work that needs to happen. Too often an individual or small group ends up doing most of the work, unaware of why others are not joining in with them. One explanation of these difficulties is because action in networks is strikingly different from action in most organizations.

First, instead of trying to act as a single unit, action in networks is self-organizing. Self-organization occurs when any individual or group in the network sees an opportunity to do something and pulls together others to make something happen. When self-organizing is encouraged and supported, many more people will initiate collaborative projects.

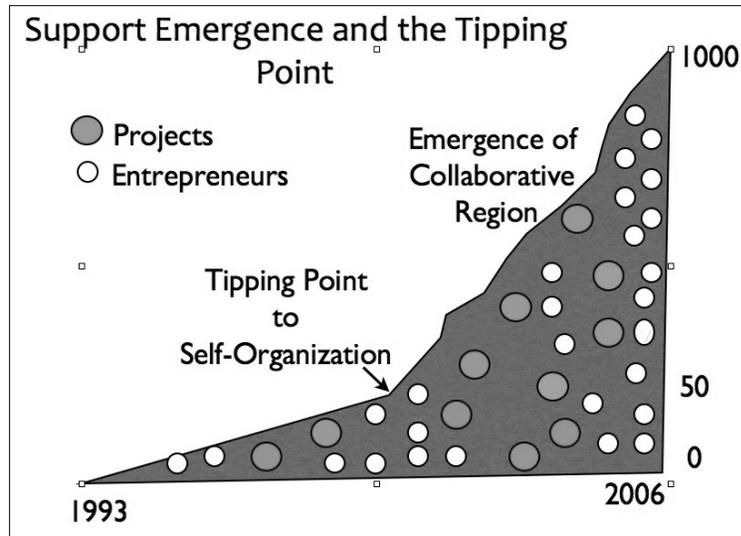
Especially when working in inter-organizational networks, the capacity to act independently and quickly is critical. This is one of the many benefits of a network approach – much more can be accomplished through self-organized projects.

In highly developed Smart Networks, individuals are often in a dozen different self-organized projects at any one time. Most are small: researching what other communities are doing, initiating a pilot project, organizing a small event or gathering, setting up a collaborative blog, or organizing a Twitter chat.

Small projects, however, are critical building blocks. Small self-organized projects:

- enable people to get to know each other and build trust
- offer a venue for trying out new collaborative skills and practices
- encourage “testing the waters” and learning more about what works and what doesn’t

Because people are in more than one collaborative project, innovation generated in one project (for example, using a web meeting tool such as www.doodle.com) often spreads rapidly to the other overlapping projects. If the network has the capacity to reflect on these small collaborations and shares the insights about “patterns of success,” it can reach a



tipping point where the community starts operating in a qualitatively different way: people working together to co-create a community that is healthy for all becomes the norm. This occurred in Appalachian Ohio where organizations not only helped many low-resource individuals become entrepreneurs, but supported them to join with area organizations, banks, government, and schools to organize festivals, brands, farmers markets, loan funds, and arts districts. Now, hundreds of innovative projects are organized each year. The region is amazingly collaborative – and a wonderful place to live!

Next, action in networks is focused on opportunities and leverage points that have the greatest chance of making a difference. Spending time on drawing and understanding the system you are trying to change and then identifying areas where focused action would make the most difference right now can lead to substantial change in a short period of time.

STOP AND REFLECT

1. How is action organized in your network?
2. Does your network identify opportunities where it will focus efforts for greater impact?

Support Mechanisms

Networks are different than organizations: there is no boss who can fire members if they don't do their job, there are no weekly staff meetings to ensure that communication and learning are taking place, and there are no teams or departments to organize the work and distribute funds. This means that networks need to create an explicit support network that ensures accountability, makes sure communication is happening, and supports leadership and action.

The *Network Health Scorecard* is a tool for your network to analyze and improve its communication systems, set up training and support for Network Weavers, assess network progress and outcomes, and make sure that needed resources are available to support network coordination and self-organized projects.

STOP AND REFLECT

1. Does your network have a communication system that supports engagement and participation?
2. How do you assess and reflect on network progress?
3. Do you have resources to support Network Weavers and self-organizing?

Four Aspects of Networks in a Nut Shell

Network	Characteristics
Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connecting people • Building trust • Bringing new people into the network
Intentionality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focusing on an opportunity, problem, or issue • Engaging people to develop strategies and/or actions in this area
Action Orientation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encouraging people to take initiative • Clustering people interested in same project • Fostering collaboration
Support mechanisms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Setting up communications systems and platforms • Helping people use social media and the social web • Restructuring resources to support networks and collaboration • Setting up evaluation and reflection • Support Network Weavers