



1 Starting with Networks

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. This chapter provides a wide range of readings about networks. These readings are best digested with a small group of others interested in your focal area.

Section 1. Networks Basics

WHAT IS A NETWORK?

Networks actually have four interlocking aspects, and the most successful networks take time to thoughtfully craft each part. Each aspect complements and supports the others.

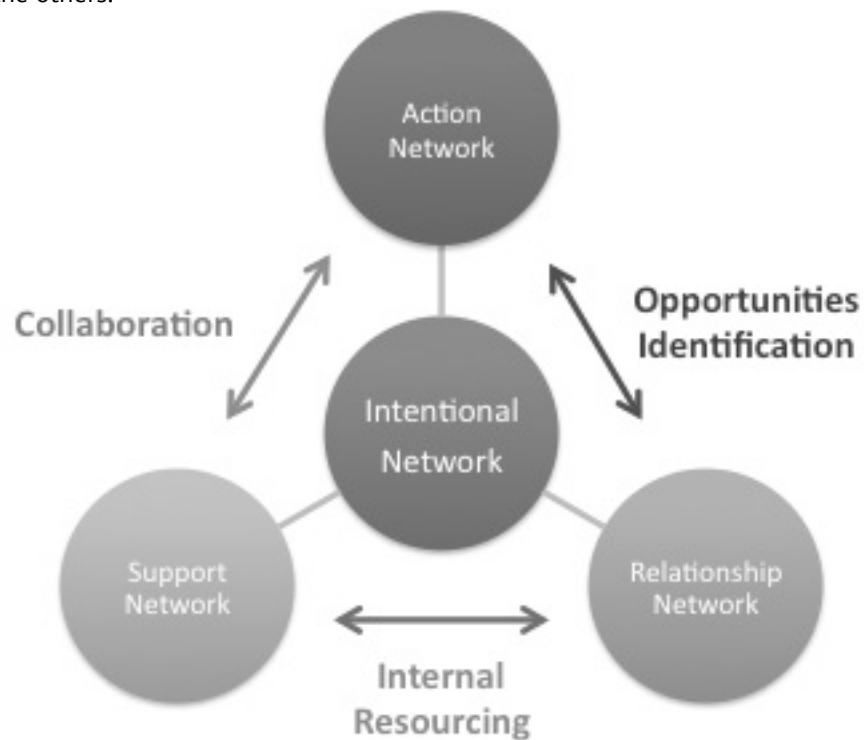


Figure 1. The 4 interlocking networks (from Viki Sonntag)

INTENTIONAL NETWORK

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.

Formal Intentional Networks

Massachusetts Smart Growth Alliance (<http://www.ma-smartgrowth.org/>) is a network of seven organizations in Massachusetts that has been extremely successful in passing policy to support sustainable and equitable development.

Re-AMP is a network (<http://www.reamp.org>) of 125 funders and non-profits in the Midwest who have been implementing a four-pronged strategy around climate change and energy use.

Informal Networks

Local Food Cleveland (<http://localfoodcleveland.org>) is a network of over 3000 individuals and organizations who share information and self-organize into action communities to work on different projects.

Land share (<http://www.landshare.net>) is a network of over 50,000 individuals in Great Britain who are looking for or have land for gardening.

Hybrid Networks

The Innovation Learning Network (www.innovationlearningnetworkk.org) is a network of hospital systems who form collaborative projects to research innovations in healthcare.

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. In this handbook there are activities that can help new networks form appropriate structures and existing networks get a “tune-up” so that the network better fits their current needs and purpose. See Part 4 for more on Intentional Networks.

QUESTIONS

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?

RELATIONSHIP NETWORK

Too many intentional networks fall apart or are ineffective because they do not pay attention to the relationship network 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 actually play, or could play, a significant role in the network.

Figure 2 shows the difference between the relationship network and the intentional network. It is critical to pay attention to both networks. As you can see in the drawing below, people in every intentional network have many relationships with people outside the formal network and those relationships are often critical potential resources that can greatly increase the success of the intentional network. You may lead a Bay Area Immigrant Rights Network (an intentional network) that meets every month, but you also need to think about the relationship network that exists among *all* the people who care about and are affected by the condition of immigrants in this country, since they can support and expand your efforts. You also need to be aware of the relationships among those who oppose immigrant rights and their connection – if any – to those who support immigrants.

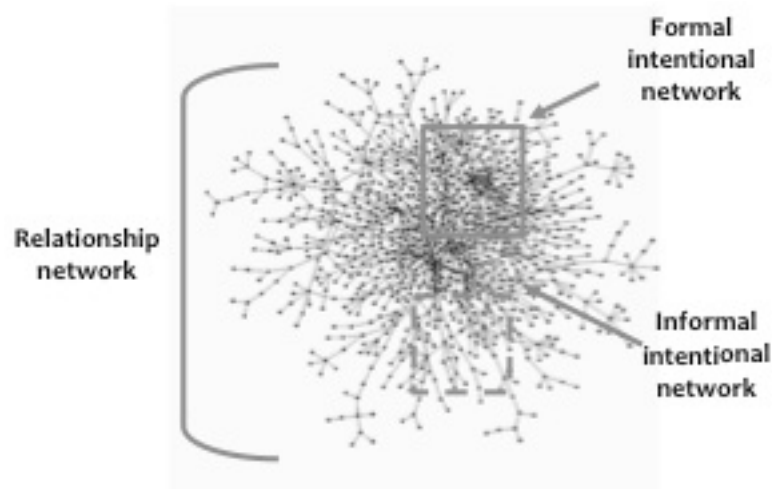
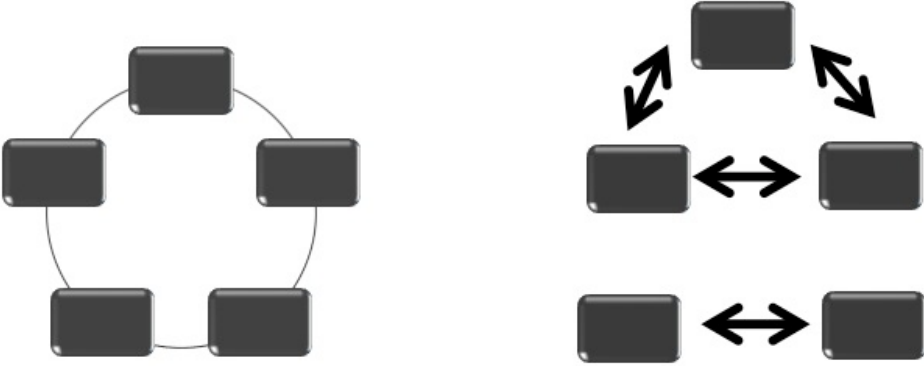


Figure 2. How relationship network and intentional network relate

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.



Members of the Network

Arrows show who trusts whom

Figure 3. Comparing an intentional network with a trust network

There are simple 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.

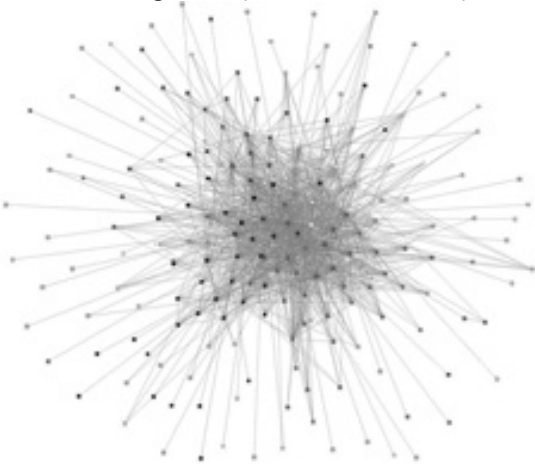


Figure 4. Smart network

Certain patterns of relationships are more conducive to good communication flow, supporting innovation and collaboration. Valdis Krebs and I (in the paper *Building Networks* in Appendix 1) 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.

Parts 1 and 2 provide activities that you can introduce to your network to help participants see and understand the relationship network and take concrete steps to make that network of relationships healthier and more effective. Spending time building a Smart Network is an investment that will dramatically increase the impact of your network efforts.

QUESTIONS

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 NETWORK

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.

Case Study

RE-AMP: Work organized around leverage points

RE-AMP spent a year understanding the energy production system in the upper Midwest and identified four high leverage areas where they began to focus their efforts. A \$3 million fund was set up to support a set of collaborative projects in each of the four areas. Organizations can decide in which working group or groups they want to participate.

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.

Case Study

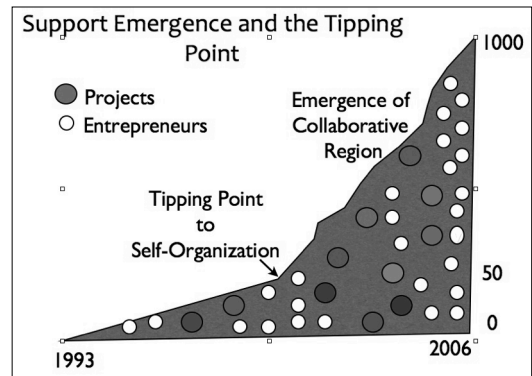
Yellowroot Fund: Provide incentives for collaborative action

The Foundation for Appalachian Ohio's Yellowroot Fund offered small (\$50-\$3000) grants to encourage tourism and arts organizations to work with area entrepreneurs. For example, the Nature Conservancy and Ohio Arts Council worked with farmers and small businesses to create Quilt Barn Trails. Artisans painted quilt squares on the sides of area barns and driving maps showed not only the barns but local artisan shops, restaurants, and locally-owned lodging options.

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.

Part 3 explains how to help cluster people into action groups and support those who coordinate the resulting projects. Part 6 includes ideas for incorporating a system analysis into your network.

QUESTIONS

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

Case Study

Building a Support Network

In a learning network of 8 local networks that were working on Healthy Eating projects, we followed every training session with a session where we tried out a particular social web platform that participants could use with their network immediately.

For example, after a tour of the learning network's ning site (a social networking site www.ning.com), one individual set up several ning sites for groups with whom she was working. When she shared the success of these sites with others in the learning network, several of them also set up ning sites for their networks.

SUPPORT NETWORK

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.

Part 5 offers ideas on how to analyze and improve your network's communication systems, set up training and support for Network Weavers, evaluate network progress and outcomes, and make sure that needed resources are available to support network coordination and self-organized projects.

QUESTIONS

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

Chart 1: Four Aspects of Networks

Network	Characteristics
Relationship Network	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connecting people • Building trust • Bringing new people into the network
Intentional Network	<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 Network	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encouraging people to take initiative • Clustering people interested in same project • Fostering collaboration
Support Network	<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

ACTIVITY: NETWORK BASICS DISCUSSION

Discuss **Network Basics** and answer the following questions:

What was the most interesting or provocative new idea in the article?

What felt most relevant to your current network situation?

What would you like to learn more about?

ACTIVITY: CASE STUDIES

Read and discuss one or more of the following case studies.

1. Re-AMP www.monitorinstitute.com/reamp/
2. Lawrence Community Works
http://www.barrfoundation.org/usr_doc/Lawrence_Community_Works_case_study.pdf
<http://bit.ly/757bOt>
3. Networks, Self-organizing, Breakthroughs and Scale: A Case Study
See Appendix 2
4. Massachusetts Smart Growth Alliance <http://bit.ly/jwJZiL>
5. KABOOM http://kaboom.org/category/blog_tags/case_study

ACTIVITY: SELF-ORGANIZING A 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 Network Weavers catalyst group (see Chapter 2).

Select one of the articles 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.

ACTIVITY: 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 of 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.

Section 2. Using the Social Web to Support You and Your Network

WHY THE SOCIAL WEB?

Increasingly, the Web offers platforms that support networks. Platforms that encourage interaction and self-organizing are part of what is being called the *social web*. You are probably familiar with Facebook, but there are many other platforms that can enable networks to be much more effective. The most useful platforms for networks will be introduced throughout the handbook, but you can begin your exploration with those platforms listed in Table 1 and the examples of network building sites in the activity, Exploring the Social Web.

One of the most important behaviors needed for a successful network approach is learning how to learn. New platforms are being developed every day, and at least some of the people in your network will need to be continually scanning for new platforms that might be useful to your network, trying them out, and then showing the rest of you how to use them.

Table 1. Useful Platforms for Networks

www.google.com/docs for collaborative meetings and projects
www.skype.com for free group calls and screen and document sharing
www.ning.com for group discussions
www.teamworkpm.net for collaborative project management
www.twitter.com for finding innovative ideas
www.anymeeting.com for webinars
www.wordpress.com for blogs and web pages

INCORPORATING THE SOCIAL WEB INTO YOUR NETWORK

Network Weavers need to think first about the **needs** of their network and how combinations of technologies, platforms, and tools can be utilized so that their network becomes transformative.

Etienne Wenger, Nancy White, and John David Smith in their book *Digital Habits: stewarding technology for communities* (highly recommended and found at <http://amzn.to/bllxaY>) suggest that we need to first figure out what our network does or wants to do (have meetings, form projects, hear from experts, etc.) and then identify and link a set of platforms and tools that can support those activities.

Another person to follow is Beth Kanter, who has a wonderful blog www.bethkanter.org on the social web and has written a valuable book *The Networked Non-profit*.

ACTIVITY: EXPLORING THE SOCIAL WEB

Visit each of the following sites to see creative ways that the social web is supporting networks and opening new possibilities for self-organizing.

Websites to Explore
www.localfoodcleveland.org
www.landshare.net
www.energyshares.com
www.meetup.com
<http://www.carepages.com/forums/cancer>
<http://www.linkedin.com>
<http://www.facebook.com>
www.wiserearth.org

ACTIVITY: BE PART OF A NETWORK WEAVER LEARNING NETWORK

Visit www.networkweaver.ning.com and join in the discussions. Ask other members about their experience with networks. Ask participants any questions you have about forming and supporting networks.



Worksheet: Reflections on Starting with Networks



WORKSHEET

Reflections on Starting with Networks

1. What readings were most helpful to you? What particular insights did you get? What will you try to apply to your network?

2. Were you able to form a reading group? How did it work?

3. What social web platforms did you look at? Which seemed most useful?

4. What questions do you have about Starting with Networks?