3 How to Introduce a Network Approach to Others

One of the hardest things to explain to others is why they might want to adopt a network approach. In what ways does this approach differ from what they have been doing? Before you can enlist people in building healthier networks, you need to convince them that networks are important. Or, they may be part of an existing formal network, but have little understanding of how their network differs from a traditional organization. The activities and handouts in this section can help you in that process. In this chapter, you will learn more about the benefits of networks, and how this approach differs from an organizational approach or a coalition.

Section 1: How Networks Are Different

Organizations— both non-profits and for-profits – have been the way that much work has been organized for the last hundred years. Organizations have clear lines of accountability: they have boards of directors who hire a CEO or executive director who then hires staff. These employees can be reprimanded or fired if they do not do their job.

Chart 1. Comparison of Organizations, Coalitions and Networks

Organization	Coalition	Network
• Boundaries • Employees • Hierarchies: everyone has a boss • Job descriptions • Departments and/or teams that organize work • Planning processes and tasks	• Sets of organizations • Peers • Boundaries • Membership narrow • Focus on issue • Consensus on issues • Consensus on action • Outcome oriented • Usually temporary	• Sets of organizations • Peers • Often no clear boundaries • Inclusive • Focus on a sector or area • Most action done by subsets • Innovation oriented • Long-term

Work is usually compartmentalized into departments and/or teams that engage in planning, generating a set of clear outcomes and a set of tasks to reach those outcomes. Planning, task lists, and reporting control the activity of the organization. The underlying assumption is that people need to be **controlled** for them to be effective.

This structure has been very successful as a method of producing products and services, even when the product is very **complicated** – such as building a rocket ship that carries people to the moon. However, single organizations are, in most cases, too small to have impact on a large scale. Coalitions, alliances, and partnerships have been used by non-profits as a way to get around these limits, especially for advocacy initiatives that involve putting pressure on legislators. Such initiatives must be composed of many groups and/or individual groups so that policymakers feel compelled to change policy.

These groups need to be seen as a strong and united front. Success in coalitions is dependent on cohesion. So it's not surprising that the most successful coalitions are much more narrow in scope and membership than networks. Coalitions need to consense on a particular viewpoint regarding a policy or issue so that the coalition can act in concert. Consensus is very difficult to reach and often causes considerable tension within the coalition and that, in many cases, has led to the eventual break-up of the coalition.

Coalitions are like organizations in that they operate by controlling the actions and agenda of those involved. There are many examples of successful coalitions, but these have usually been short-term and with a very specific outcome in mind such as pushing for passage of a piece of legislation.

Both the organizational approach and the coalition approach have been much less successful in tackling problems that are complex. **Complex** problems such as climate change, poverty, crime, injustice, immigration reform, and epidemics of obesity have no easy answers. For many years, good people working within an organizational structure have been trying very hard to solve these problems – but little has reached the scale needed to really make a difference on any of these issues.

Types of Challenges

Adapted from Brenda Zimmerman, *Getting To Maybe*, 2006

Simple **Following A Recipe**	Complicated **Sending A Rocket To the Moon**	Complex **Raising A Child**
The recipe is essential	Rigid protocols or formulas are necessary	Protocols have a limited application
Recipes are tested to assure easy replication of success	Sending one rocket increases assurance of future success; key elements are identical	Raising one child provides experience but no assurance of future success
No particular expertise is required (cooking skill can improve the success rate)	High levels of expertise in a variety of fields are necessary for success	Expertise can contribute but is neither necessary nor sufficient to assure success
Recipes produce standardized, predictable results every time	Rockets are similar and there is a high degree of outcome predictability	Every child is a unique individual with unpredictable "outcomes"

> *Many of our organizations have carved out a small piece of a complex problem and are working on that piece in isolation.*

The reason that complex problems are so hard to solve is that they result from the interconnection of many different factors: poverty is often related to disease, lack of adequate nutrition, injustice, prejudice, isolation, lack of skills, lack of jobs, and lack of power. Trying to work on just one of these factors often has little impact on the system. And, change in these systems is usually unpredictable – we can't know ahead of time what will actually make a difference in the system so planning is often not as useful as trying out many small experiments and then noticing what is shifting. No wonder working on these problems as individual organizations has had so little impact!

Many of our organizations have carved out a small piece of complex problems and are working on that piece in isolation from the hundreds or thousands of other groups around the world that are tackling a different small slice of the same problem. We seldom have an opportunity – other than short conversations in the hallways at conferences – to share deeply and honestly about what we are doing.

Networks can operate at many levels, but all are about helping us work more effectively:

1. A NETWORK APPROACH ENCOURAGES US TO START SHARING about what we are doing with others and this almost always results in new insights about and new approaches to our work. Avoiding mistakes that others have made saves us time. When communication is flowing throughout the network, we become more aware of new approaches, events that are happening, and other information that can improve our efforts.

2. A NETWORK APPROACH IS ABOUT BEING MORE INCLUSIVE and reaching out to everyone who is impacted by the problem or opportunity. When this is done in a way that builds trust, the diverse perspectives can lead to new approaches to our work that are much more effective. This diversity also helps us see the system that the problem or opportunity is embedded in, and seeing this bigger picture can help us become aware of leverage points where our action can be directed for greater impact.

3. A NETWORK APPROACH IS ABOUT EXPERIMENTATION AND REFLECTION. When people collaborate on innovative projects, several benefits result. First, people are sharing the work so no one becomes overburdened. Next, having people with different perspectives in a project often result in a better design for the project. And finally, when people from clusters of these innovative projects share what they are experiencing in their projects, they move to a meta-level where breakthroughs and insights tend to occur. When they apply these insights to the next set of projects, networks can bring rapid transformation of the system.

For tackling complex problems that require ongoing innovation, experimentation, and processes for scaling successes, organizations and coalitions are too rigid. Well-structured networks have the diversity and flexibility needed to deal with complex problems or situations.

STRATEGY FOR WORKING ON COMPLEX PROBLEMS

What is the best strategy for working with complex problems? Scientists and practitioners have identified key factors:

1. Build a network that includes all types of people who are part of this system (people living in poverty, people from non-profits who care about this issue, policymakers, people who help people set up community gardens, people who support individuals starting businesses, technical schools, etc.)

2. Identify key leverage points in the system where small actions are likely to shift the system.

3. Encourage people with different perspectives to share their ideas for solutions.

4. Encourage people to create collaborative projects with diverse participants to experiment with a small solution.

5. Have people working on these experiments share deeply about their experience to identify what they learned so they can begin to jointly identify patterns of success.

6. Identify new leverage points that emerged as a result of this reflection.

7. Reach out to new groups of people and invite them into the network to provide new perspectives and to become pathways for the spread of new approaches.

8. Generate a new set of projects and continue learning and reflection processes.

9. Generate policy from the results of these projects that supports the ongoing spread and improvement of strategies, approaches, and practices.

We call the capacity of network approaches that lead to transformation a NETWORK EFFECT.

- A Network Effect is about changing the way we interact with others so that it is more innovative and collaborative.

- A Network Effect occurs when our experimentation leads to breakthroughs that cascade and spread rapidly throughout our communities, shifting policy as well as practice.

ACTIVITY: WHY NETWORKS?

The first handout is more comprehensive. The second focuses more on the benefits of networks related to innovation.

> Print out and share one of the following handouts -- *Why Networks*? or *Why Networks? (2)*. Encourage people to think how a network approach might increase the effectiveness of their efforts.

ACTIVITY: WHEN A NETWORK LENS IS USEFUL

> Think of the project or initiative you are currently working on and the strategy you are developing for that initiative. Go through the checklist *When A Network Lens Is Useful* and determine whether each question applies to your initiative.
>
> Once people have completed the checklist have them share the questions that they felt applied most significantly to their initiative. Discuss ways that a network approach could help them in their work.

ACTIVITY: ORGANIZATION~NETWORK

> Sometimes it helps people to think about organizational and network approaches as different lenses. The worksheet *Organization ~ Network* helps people think about the ways that organizations operate and how networks operate differently. However, it's important to emphasize that most initiatives include a mix of both approaches.

ACTIVITY: COMBINING ORGANIZATIONAL AND NETWORK APPROACHES

> Have the group think about the initiative they are planning to undertake. For each item on the continuum in the worksheet *Combining Organizational and Network Approaches,* have each person check the items in each column that best describes their project or initiative. When completed, have people share their results with a neighbor.

Section 2. How Do We Share What We Know?

As Network Weavers, we need to be able to talk about the value of a network approach to everyone around us. You will know that you have really integrated information about networks when you can give an elevator speech – a one or two sentence version of why network are so important. However, the best way to help someone else integrate these ideas is to tell some stories about efforts that used a network approach to generate important outcomes. After you have read some of the case studies described in Chapter 1, decide which would be most appropriate for your network efforts.

ACTIVITY: ELEVATOR SPEECH

> The first step in explaining networks to others is to develop and practice your "elevator speech" about networks. In small groups, have each person write a short paragraph explaining how a network approach differs from an organizational approach and articulating the benefits of a network approach. Then practice giving the "elevator speech" to each other. To inspire people, show them the powerpoints (see http://www.slideshare.net/group/network-weaving-be-rhizomatic) that a group of people created to explain networks and network weaving.

ACTIVITY: TELLING STORIES ABOUT NETWORKS

> Think of networks of which you have been a part. What was successful about them? Write down stories about those networks so that you can talk about them with others.
>
> If you haven't been a part of successful networks, draw from the case studies in this handbook (Chapter 2).

Section 3. Using the Social Web to Make the Case for Networks

Introducing people to social media that helps people network and work together is a good way to convince people of the benefits of a network approach. The platforms that prove their usefulness most quickly are skype, which offers free calls between two to five people at no cost, and Google docs and Google spreadsheets which are perfect for jointly developing agendas, papers and grant proposals.

If you are not familiar with these platforms, find someone in your network who is and have her or him walk the rest of your network through them. It's best if you immediately begin to use the platform for a project.

As you use these platforms, make sure that you point out how it is making your network effects easier. Have people suggest other ways they could use the platforms in other projects.

Resources for Chapter 3

Handout: Why Networks?

Handout: Why Networks? (2)

Checklist: When a Network Lens is Useful

Checklist: Organization ~ Network

Worksheet: Combining Organizational and Network Approaches

Reflection: Thoughts on Network Approach

HANDOUT

Why Networks?

1. Effective networks improve information flow

Effective networks **enhance the flow of information** so that people are aware of events that are happening, new resources, and new ideas. When people know each other, they are more likely to share information. With more information, people can often improve their programs, projects, and services.

2. Effective networks increase communication and awareness of relationships

Effective networks **improve communication and increase the productivity of interactions**. People tend to limit their interactions to people like themselves. An effective network helps people connect to people from different types of organizations, different backgrounds, or different parts of the world. As a result of these new relationships, people gain broader perspectives and often generate better solutions.

3. Effective networks open new resources

Effective networks **open new resources**. There are often many hidden resources in any network. When you take time to identify needs of individuals and organizations in the network, you can then introduce the individual with a need to someone who can fill that need by providing information, funding, space, etc. In addition, you can encourage people to reach out on their own to build new relationships that will provide resources in an ongoing manner.

4. Effective networks expand and support leadership

Effective networks **build and enhance leadership**. Networks contain many hidden leaders — people that others look to for ideas or information or those who are connecting people in separate communities but who are not recognized as leaders. Once identified, you can help such individuals think about their role and encourage other leaders in the community to recognize the important role these hidden leaders are playing. With additional leadership, the community will be more resilient and less vulnerable to the loss of any one leader.

5. Effective networks encourage collaboration, innovation, and learning for breakthroughs

Effective networks **encourage collaboration and innovation** that result in action that makes a difference. Individuals in effective networks identify opportunities where joint action could make a difference, then bring people together to cook up a project. Once network participants have seen or been part of successful collaborations, they begin to generate new collaborations without assistance. Eventually people are part of many joint projects at

any one time, which enables them to spread innovations generated in one project throughout the network. Also, being part of so many collaborations tends to expand people's perspectives and generate breakthroughs.

6. Effective networks increase inclusion and bridge divides

Effective networks **build bridges** across traditional divides. Network maps enable people to identify sub-groups that are isolated from the parts of the network that have resources and access, then identify and work with individuals who can help bridge the divide by bringing together people from both groups.

7. Effective networks result in better outcomes

Effective networks result in **better outcomes** for individual change: behavioral change occurs most often when an individual is embedded in effective networks. Preliminary research shows that people dealing with complex, intractable problems have more success in effective networks.

8. Effective networks facilitate scale and impact

Effective networks enable us to bring together large numbers of people and organizations to impact a problem or create a new opportunity. Effective networks mean we can experiment with new approaches and then share the results of those approaches with many others. In this way, we can identify **patterns of success** and share those aspects of our approaches with many others so that their strategies contain some of these same elements.

HANDOUT → Why Networks? (2)

Network approaches focus our attention on relationships and help us connect people who haven't been connected. They encourage self-organization so that novel solutions are generated. Network approaches are particularly useful when:

1. **The problem or opportunity is big**.

   Networks work especially well when what you want to do will require more than just a few organizations in a partnership. Dealing with large, intractable problems (such as poverty or urban blight) or moving in ambitious new directions (building a green economy) requires the engagement of many individuals and organizations. Network mapping helps identify who is interested in or already working in this area, and a network weaving strategy enables you to engage them effectively.

2. **You need new ideas.**

   Most big problems require fresh thinking. For this, you need to draw new ideas from all over the world and identify and draw in people likely to have those new ideas. Network mapping enables you to identify local people who know innovators outside your immediate area and network strategies offer ways to engage these resources locally.

3. **The solution is not clear or you need to build a new system.**

   When a lot of experimentation, innovation, or system building needs to happen, a network strategy is appropriate. Partnerships or coalitions are fine for well-defined projects or actions. Networks are appropriate for situations where the solutions are unclear. Networks encourage self-organizing to explore the problem or situation.

4. **You need to engage people from different backgrounds.**

   For big problems or opportunities, you need to bring people together who may not have worked together before. Network mapping helps identify connectors – those individuals who already have relationships across these divides – and engage them in bringing groups together.

CHECKLIST → # When a Network Lens Is Useful

Think about an initiative or project and your strategy for impact. Which of these questions below apply to your initiative? Check all those that apply.

☐ 1. Are you trying to solve difficult problems?

☐ 2. Are innovations needed?

☐ 3. Do you need to make breakthroughs?

☐ 4. Do you need to explore and experiment to figure out next steps?

☐ 5. Do you need more people involved?

☐ 6. Do you need more people to initiate and coordinate action?

☐ 7. Do you want to get many people involved in discussing and interacting around this issue?

☐ 8. Do you need new and different perspectives?

☐ 9. Do you want to be more inclusive?

☐ 10. Do you need buy-in from many people?

☐ 11. Do you need to bring together people or groups who haven't tended to interact before?

☐ 12. Do you need to discover or attract more resources or expertise?

☐ 13. Do you need better communication?

☐ 14. Do people involved in this initiative NOT know each other or not know each other well?

☐ 15. Is trust an issue? Is trust critical to the success of this initiative?

☐ 16. Do you have the feeling that learning and deep reflection could make a difference for this initiative?

☐ 17. Are you trying to create a new system or way of doing things?

☐ 18. Do you want to have significant impact on this issue?

CHECKLIST ➔ Organization - Network

Which elements of each lens are likely to make sense in this initiative?

Organizational Lens

- ☐ Useful when it is clear what actions need to be taken
- ☐ Hierarchical structure provides clear chain of command and accountability
- ☐ Works best for single organization or small group
- ☐ Knowledge needed for effort is contained within organization
- ☐ Focus on clear plans and timelines
- ☐ Set outcomes and move towards them through set of tasks
- ☐ Tracking progress towards outcomes key to success
- ☐ Requires sticking to plan to reach outcomes
- ☐ Good for developing programs and services that will not need to change very much
- ☐ Role of leader to designate jobs and roles and hold people accountable
- ☐ Scale through replication of program
- ☐ Broadcast media to inform larger audience

Network Lens

- ☐ Useful for difficult problems or when creative solutions are needed
- ☐ Peer-based relationships, peer accountability, action starts anywhere by anyone
- ☐ Best when partnerships and collaboration are needed
- ☐ Require different perspectives to be sufficiently innovative
- ☐ Act on opportunities that arise
- ☐ Often make breakthroughs as a result of errors or unintended consequences
- ☐ Learning and deep reflection key to making breakthroughs
- ☐ Requires many small experiments and projects to explore solutions; continually changing action based on insights gained
- ☐ Essential when creating new systems
- ☐ Role of leader to catalyze, facilitate, connect, and lead reflection
- ☐ Scale through networks, sharing, and learning
- ☐ Social media: spread word through discussions and feedback

WORSHEET Combining Organizational and Network Approaches

For each of the following characteristics, circle ONE number from 1 to 5 that best describes where your efforts fit. The more 1's, the more an organizational approach makes sense; the more 5's, the more a network approach is appropriate. Most initiatives have qualities of each.

Outcome:

A clear plan is required   Exploration, trial and error required

    1   2   3   4   5

Required actions are clear   Innovations emerge from working on complex problem

    1   2   3   4   5

Need for change:

Not much change required   New system and ways

    1   2   3   4   5

Existing perspectives sufficient   Need new and diverse perspectives

    1   2   3   4   5

Leadership Structure:

Clear chain of command needed   Peer to peer interaction generates buy-in, creativity

    1   2   3   4   5

Role of leader: to designate tasks   Role of leader: to catalyze, facilitate, connect

    1   2   3   4   5

Leadership well-developed   Need to develop new leadership

    1   2   3   4   5

Collaboration:

Single organization or small group of orgs   Many orgs working together, buying in

  1   2   3   4   5

Established group is sufficient   More diversity needed

  1   2   3   4   5

Intellectual resources:

Primarily situated in the org/group   Drawn from many orgs/groups

  1   2   3   4   5

Already aware of most resources in area   Need to unearth more resources

  1   2   3   4   5

Communication Approach:

Traditional communication for publicizing   New media for discussing and sharing ideas

  1   2   3   4   5

Have established channels for information Need to share information across organizations

  1   2   3   4   5

REFLECTION

Thoughts about Introducing a Network Approach

1. What did you learn from this chapter?

2. What actions did you take as a result of this chapter?

3. What else would you like to learn about a network approach?