HOW TO ACTIVATE YOUR NETWORK
SPEAKER'S NOTES
NETWORK WEAVING WORKSHOP 1
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Have you wished Q could be more action-oriented, collaborative, or adaptable?

Many ways that we organize for action experience periods where talking is more the norm than taking action. Networks are not immune to this as there is always a need to gain a better understanding of the nature of the problem being experienced in our communities. It is important to learn from those experiencing problems and those who are fighting those problems in community. Its important to understand the centers of power and leverage and the forces that impact vulnerable populations, enact policies and strive to maintain the status quo. This learning before action is imperative in order to identify potential solutions. This kind of productive talking, learning, and sharing is the necessary precursor to action.

There are periods of time in all forms of organizing for action where talking, rehashing, and immobility can drag on for long periods of time, well beyond what is necessary to take action. This can be unproductive and lead members to leave the network or the planning process due to frustration. Most volunteers give their time in order to make a difference . . . to act instead of sitting in long committee meetings.

If your model is to bring people around the table, learn, share and plan it may be time to rethink the model. Remember, only so many people can get around any table . . . and the larger the table is (i.e., the larger the number of participants), the less chance there is for individuals to have an equitable opportunity to voice their opinions and ideas. In networks, as the "table" grows it is necessary to map the interests around the table and begin to create "working groups," or centers for innovation. Creating smaller groups focused on the interests of those in the group will keep members engaged and able to move more quickly to action.

Moving into working groups allows the network to begin addressing the multiple dimensions of "wicked" or overly complex problems such as food insecurity, affordable housing, equitable access to care and coverage, mental health stigma . . . an so on.

Why do we struggle to solve "wicked" problems

Complex problems require complex solutions that engage many different sectors, stakeholders, thought leaders, and persons with the lived experience of the problems. It is simply not possible for a single organization to solve these kinds of problems. But, it is certainly possible for hundreds of volunteers, organizations, local and regional governments, industry, and human services agencies to begin working together to find, test, and scale promising innovations.

Unfortunately, efforts that use coalitions, alliances, and even collective impact rely on models of engagement and leadership with hierarchical approaches – a single organization serves as the leader/convener/accountable party and everyone else is invited to bring their expertise. The installation of a single entity in the prominent role of "leader" immediately sets up power dynamics, turf issues, and differential levels of commitment and engagement from others. Hierarchical leadership approaches have the potential to silence voices from the most vulnerable and marginalized residents as the "authority and expertise" of the big organizations and their leaders are "seen as more important or valuable" than the voices of volunteer residents. This is particularly true if the model is "around the table" or meetings. Volunteer residents will find the back row, observe, keep quiet, and defer to the "powerful" voices sitting at the table. What is lost is the lived experience of the problem from those who will have "solutions" foisted upon them --- often with little effect --- because their voices weren't there to suggest, shape, and tailor potential solutions.

We Need to Work in a Way that Engages Many More People in Action that Generates Insights and Learning

Complex solutions require a diversity of thinkers who bring new insights, lived experiences, training, and energy to solve problems. Not everyone will engage at the same level – and that is okay – we want to invite all who are passionate and interested in improving the conditions in their communities. Its important to recognize that organizing people for action begins with connecting two people and grows from there to bringing others who share their interests and passions together to being to learn and share.

Sometimes people are activated by an urgent event like a disaster. Other times, you have to be prepared to help people become more activated and involved. So how you engage people in the network and in self-organizing activities is foundational network "work." It is useful to understand this framework - the ladder of self-organizing -- as a process through which you can engage people in small activities as a way of bringing them into the network. All of the activities are important to the network and its fundamental purpose of building relationships that create opportunities for action.

So, Where Do You Begin

First, in an emerging network its essential that a big, broad vision of change is established. So that all who care about the vision can join and contribute to finding solutions. If the network's vision is about improving the health and wellbeing of all residents in a country or region then it behooves the network to think in multi-sectoral ways – bringing in passionate volunteers and professionals from all walks of life and from all sectors. We know through the social determinants of health that most areas of life end up impacting the health and wellbeing of humans.

Because networks function to accomplish four specific actions, those who are leading in a network and are trying to move to action need to focus on these four specific actions:

1, To connect individuals, organizations, projects, sectors
2. To align diverse actions to advance toward a desired vision
3. To act – to move from talking to action as quickly as possible
4. To support the work of network members and the workgroups

So within the Q Community here are some specific ideas for moving from talking to action:

Connect: Invite network members to make new connections and grow their own professional network; connect two people who have the same interests and help them explore how to take their interests to the next level;

Align: Try to reinforce network values and behaviors (from the Workshop Slide Deck) so that all of us are working with the same mindset – we don't need to agree on everything . . . except our values and behaviors;

Act: Help each other initiate and act with others (self-organizing) SIGs need to create clear opportunities for every member to propose small projects, experiments, and pursue learning opportunities for the SIG;

Support the network: SIGs pursue "seed funds" or "activation dollars" to support its members to pursue projects that will advance the purpose of the SIG

Share SIG leadership; rotate facilitation; each SIG member has a role in leading the SIG.