Networks, Coalitions, and Leadership: 
A Brief Conceptual Overview for Advocacy Networks

by
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This brief conceptual overview is designed for advocacy networks that are working on complex policy reform efforts that require high levels of connectivity, alignment, and joint action among people and organizations to be successful. When there is confusion about how to distinguish and relate the concepts of “networks” and “coalitions,” advocacy networks may underestimate the value of investing in building cross-boundary relationships, and the facilitation it takes to align unlikely partners. This overview provides a conceptual framework for understanding what it means to be an effective network capable of joint action, the different functions that networks fulfill, the value of a network leadership mindset, and the core capacities for working successfully in coalition. Each section of the overview is followed by a series of questions for network participants to use to reflect about how these concepts apply in their networks.

Conceptualizing and Distinguishing Networks and Coalitions: Definitions

The terms “network” and “coalition” are often used interchangeably, when in fact, a more defined and nuanced understanding of these terms and how they relate is needed.

Networks
In its simplest definition, networks are the relationships that people have with each other through which information, ideas, resources, experiences, interests, and passions are shared.

Coalitions
Coalitions are “networks in action mode.” Coalitions are partnerships among distinct actors that coordinate action in pursuit of shared goals. Coalitions often have a more formalized structure, with the members making a long-term commitment to share responsibilities and resources.

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1 Claire Reinelt is an evaluation consultant focused on network and leadership development for social and systems change. She prepared this overview as part of a BLE Solutions’ evaluation of the Modernizing Foreign Assistance Network (MFAN) for the Hewlett Foundation, May 20, 2016. Thanks especially to Carlisle Levine and Robin Kane for their input and feedback.


Questions for Networks to Consider

- How does value get created and shared in your network? What is the network’s value proposition?
- What coalitions (e.g., partnerships among small groups of people who are committed to taking joint action together) have formed in your network?

Understanding the Relationship between Networks and Coalitions: Functions

Using a framework originally developed by Madeleine Taylor and Peter Plastrik, it is helpful to distinguish three network functions: Connectivity, Alignment, and Action. The graphic below shows the relationship among these functions. Alignment and action are built on a foundation of connectivity.

![Evolution of Network Functions](image)

Graphic from Taylor and Watley Webinar Presentation on “Strengthening Network Practice Through Evaluation” adapted from Net Gains Handbook

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Connectivity. Connectivity happens in networks when social spaces are created (online and offline) for people to “deliberately build, strengthen and maintain ties so that they can be activated again and again.” The primary role in building a connectivity network is weaving the network. June Holley describes network weaving as “the strategic connecting of people where there is a potential for mutual benefit.” Network weavers seek out opportunities to connect people who are likely to find value in their relationship; they value knowing people with different perspectives and from different backgrounds and help others do the same; they help people identify shared beliefs and overlapping interests; they encourage people to share information and resources without expecting anything direct in return; and they encourage and mentor others to become network weavers. When people build trusted relationships across their diversity, communication is easier, ideas and information flow more readily, and people are more likely to combine their resources for greater impact.

Alignment. Alignment is when groups of people or organizations intentionally focus their attention outward, discover where they have passions and interests in common, and explore how their collective assets create new opportunities. Alignment can be accelerated with skilled network facilitation in both virtual spaces (like social media, collaboration platforms), and in face-to-face conversations through convenings. Shared platforms for communication and organizing make it easier for people with overlapping interests to find each other and connect. Effective network facilitation creates space for relationships to form and for groups of people to explore their mutual interests, and do small experiments together to try out and test new ideas and approaches. Skilled network facilitators can create a safe space for difficult and productive conversations where people listen to one another, find common ground amid their different perspectives, and discover new possibilities.

Action. The action function of networks describes what is generally meant by the term “coalition.” When coalitions form to take joint action, coordination is a critical function. Coalitions often have more formal structures, with a secretariat and permanent staff, although coalition functions may also be distributed among working groups that are loosely coordinated. Formal coalitions generally require more structure and resources to manage. Effective coordination makes sure that “ground rules, operating protocols, and decision rules” are agreed to and followed. Coordination focuses on making sure there are multiple opportunities for people to lead, and that their roles are well-defined and aligned during each phase of the coalition’s work.

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6 Ibid.
8 The characteristics of a network weaver are identified in the Network Weaver Checklist developed by June Holley. A fuller discussion of how to develop a Network Weaving Support System may be found in Chapter 14 of the Network Weaver Handbook.
When knowledge and resources are shared and integrated effectively, greater success is likely.

**Questions for Networks to Consider**

- Who is included in your network? Has the network connectivity grown more diverse over time? Who are people and organizations that are in the core of the connectivity network? Who are people and organizations on the periphery? Who is missing from your network?
- Around what priorities is there greatest alignment (people and organizations defining issues, cooperating, sharing information) within your network?
- What coalitions have formed to take joint action on specific policy outcomes?
- Does your network have the leadership skills to effectively weave, facilitate and coordinate the network to optimize resources and increase collective influence and impact?

**Leadership in a Network**

One of the leadership challenges in networks is that people bring a command-and-control mindset to their leadership in a network. There are times when command-and-control leadership may be most appropriate; however, for complex adaptive challenges, network leadership is more likely to produce innovation and breakthroughs. Essential characteristics of network leadership are “cultivating shared responsibility and mutual support; growing diverse leadership; encouraging trust to take root; ensuring there are multiple avenues for people to connect and share information; helping to develop the capacity to collectively listen and learn; and rewarding experiments.”

Below is a comparison of command-and-control and network leadership characteristics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Command-and-Control Leadership</th>
<th>Network Leadership</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Position and authority</td>
<td>Role and behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Few leaders</td>
<td>Everyone is a leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broadcast</td>
<td>Engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managers set direction</td>
<td>Many people initiate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>Facilitation and support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small group in the know</td>
<td>Openness and transparency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directive</td>
<td>Emergent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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12 Ibid.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Top-down</th>
<th>Bottom-up</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Make sure tasks are completed</td>
<td>Group accountability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Small group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>Reflection and action learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning</td>
<td>Innovation and experimentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide service</td>
<td>Support self-organization</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table adapted from earlier version that appeared in Leadership and Collective Impact publication.14

The ability to lead with a network leadership mindset is not a simple skill to acquire. People may work in command-and-control organizations and think that the same mindset is needed to work effectively in a network. Shifting our behaviors to practice openness and transparency, letting go of controlling outcomes, and believing in the leadership potential of everyone may challenge our long held beliefs of what leadership is.15 Cultivating a network leadership mindset shifts behavior and language. For instance, “rather than speak about directing and managing the creation of a network, it is more appropriate to speak of fostering, nurturing and facilitating a network.”16

**Questions for Networks to Consider**

- To what extent does your network operate using a **network leadership** approach? Are intentional efforts being made to cultivate leadership with a network mindset?

**Network Development**

Networks develop, grow and change. Steve Waddell describes four stages in the network development process starting when a small number of people form a connection, to the eventual development of multi-hub, and interconnected networks.

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Waddell describes the development process of networks as having four stages.

**Stage 1.** Networks typically begin as separate initiatives working on a similar problem. They then decide to combine forces…often around a particular project, but sometimes to address the challenge in general.

**Stage 2.** As their collective activity grows, they create some common resources and establish a central coordinating function…often called a “Secretariat”. With continued growth, some sub-parts of the network start to interact relatively independently to address particular issues.

**Stage 3.** As these sub-divisions become more numerous, dominant network interactions shift from the Secretariat, and the Secretariat itself becomes simply another node in the network with some particular functions such as ensuring robust network communications platforms.

**Stage 4.** At a final stage, these multi-stakeholder networks themselves start to interact more often with other multi-stakeholder networks.”

Waddell notes that often networks get stuck transitioning from Stage 2 to Stage 3 because they get comfortable with the status quo. Shifting to Stage 3 often involves “the Secretariat and Board ‘letting go’ of their traditional control and the rest of the network ‘letting go’ of traditional dependence upon the Secretariat.”

One of the dangers in network development is focusing prematurely on network structure. Mendizabal cautions “there is no ideal governance structure that will guarantee successful

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18 Ibid.
networks…. [T]he network’s degree of formality and other governance characteristics ought to be closely linked to its building blocks (members, skills, resources), history and objectives.”  

Questions for Networks to Consider

- What is the stage of development of your network? How well connected are different stakeholder groups? Are there gaps in the network that need to be bridged?
- Is the current network governance structure responsive to the current purpose and functions of the network?

Capacities of Successful Coalitions

The TCC Group has identified five core capacities that are essential for coalition success. They are:

- **Leadership capacity**: the ability of a coalition to create and sustain the vision, inspire, model, prioritize, make decisions, provide direction, and innovate.
- **Adaptive capacity**: the ability of a coalition to monitor, assess, and respond to internal and external changes.
- **Management capacity**: the ability of a coalition to use its resources effectively and efficiently.
- **Technical capacity**: the ability of coalitions to implement organizational and programmatic functions necessary to complete the work.
- **Cultural capacity**: the ability of coalition members to foster trust; demonstrate respect through word and action; engage in respectful dissent; adhere to decisions and speak with a unified voice; and manage effects of power differences.

TCC group has developed a Coalition Capacity Checklist with specific indicators for each capacity.

While all the capacities are important to cultivate, coalitions and the organizations that comprise them would do well to pay special attention to cultivating adaptive capacity and cultural capacity which are often undervalued.

Tanya Beer, in an unpublished paper, identified the following characteristics of an organization (or coalition) that practices effective adaptive capacity.

- Conduct regular needs and resources assessment, ongoing environmental/systems assessment, and risk and opportunity assessment;
- Regularly appraise targeted change agents, allies, potential allies, and the opposition;
- Seek diverse perspectives and perceptions of the system;

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21 Ibid. See Appendix A, page 38.
● Put learning processes in place to reflect regularly on the implications of external scans for strategy;
● Adjust actions in an on-going way to respond to the environment;
● Build connections and collaborate with strategic allies;
● Recognize the complementarity of assets between partners;
● Put processes in place for collecting and reflecting on metrics for progress;
● Create decision-making structures to support the quick redeployment of financial resources and staff time;
● Have access to significant amounts of unrestricted funds;
● Encourage risk-taking, experimentation, and creative thinking;
● Balance emergent strategies and planned strategies; and
● Act proactively, not just reactively.

Cultivating cultural capacity is extremely important for advocacy networks as they seek to engage multicultural partners with different perspectives, beliefs, frames, language and cultural values. John Everett Till describes strategies for building an effective multicultural coalition.

● Listen and learn from those whose experience are different from your own
● Engage leaders to support intentional efforts to undo cultural biases and deal directly with cultural conflicts
● Put processes in place to address cultural conflicts both inside organizations and in the network
● Establish norms and rules together, and clarify roles and decision-making
● Expect values conflicts
● Loosen control over branding, and enable partners to communicate values, issues, and action ideas in ways that resonate with their constituencies so they will help disseminate messages more broadly

Questions for Networks to Consider

● Do coalitions within the network demonstrate mastery of adaptive and cultural capacities for success?
● How effective are coalition partner organizations in practicing adaptive and cultural capacity in their own organizations?

Conclusion

We hope this overview has clarified key concepts about networks, coalitions, and leadership, provided useful resources, and posed questions that advocacy networks can use to catalyze and support well-connected and aligned networks with a capacity to form and coordinate successful coalitions,