

## **Five Thoughts on How Networks Work and One on Ownership**

### **1. Networks take time**

How much time can you allocate to the network? A functioning network takes time to build, to generate trust, and to begin working as a whole, rather than as a group of individuals.

In the beginning, people in a network often need to spend time to learn about each other and each other's expectations. Early meetings can be boring for some, especially if some people or organizations have greater capacity or experience with the topic of the network. Nonetheless, this time spent at the beginning is extremely valuable later when the network faces pressure (whether from outside or inside, as in an effort to deliver a product).

Networks are about relationships as well as topics. It takes time to get to know other people and to develop a level of trust with them before being able to work reliably with them. Effective networks thrive on trust.

Networks almost always take time away from other things. People participating in a network should expect this and prepare for it. Organizations should be aware of this and provide resources and a mandate to staff in order to alleviate the pressure staff will feel.

### **2. Coordination is necessary and has certain characteristics**

Who coordinates your network? Coordinators work for the network, not only for a member organization. A network coordinator does more than schedule meetings. S/he is the network's cheerleader. S/he motivates the members to and pushes them to do more. S/he is the one who keeps the greater vision and purpose of the network in mind at all times and keeps the members moving toward those goals.

A person or a small group of people need to take responsibility for coordinating the network. They need to have well-defined roles and responsibilities. In large networks, a dedicated person is necessary. In small networks, a structure or set of procedures can take the place of a dedicated coordinator.

### **3. Networks need a purpose**

What is your goal? Networks exist for a purpose beyond communication. A shared goal or sense of purpose is usually what brings a network together. It is what directs the activities and gives shape to the structure of the network. Sometimes networks achieve their goals and disband. Sometimes, the purpose of a network changes over time. But people must have a reason to come together and a reason to stay together.

#### **4. Networks need shared definitions and expectations**

Does everybody in the network have the same idea about where it's heading and how it's getting there? This conversation must be had in the early days so that every member has input. Failing to agree on the definitions will lead to drop outs. Expectations need to be made explicit. Everyone needs to know what to expect from the network and what the network expects from them.

#### **5. Drop outs make you stronger**

People and organizations drop out of a network because they aren't getting something out of it, don't agree on the definitions, or don't have time, or some combination of all three. This is not a bad thing. Networks that do not provide what you want or need, where you disagree about the fundamental purpose, or take too much of your time are not worth it. On the other hand, a network will be more effective if all of its members share a similar level of commitment. When less committed or less available members leave, the overall level of commitment to the network increases.

#### **Ownership means paying for what you get out**

What do you get out of the network? Knowing people and sharing issues are not enough. Commitment means putting in the time and resources, but true ownership comes from building something with the time and resources. Members need to feel that they share in the network's collective accomplishments, and that they have contributed to its products. They need to see these as shared benefits in which all network members have a stake.

Ultimately, a network is a mechanism to get something back for your contribution that is greater than what you could have accomplished on your own.